

Loriwen pulled out a small piece of parchment, not even bothering to use a quill. Grabbing the nearest piece of charcoal, she scribbled a quick and simple note: *Will be out late after work, at the Pony. Will be talking with Uncle, don't worry about waiting for me. Love you, L.* She folded it once and put a bold and simple 'T' on the front. Settling it on the table, she tilted her head and put her hands on her hips. It felt...boring. Struck with what she thought was genius, Lori took the charcoal and drew a little heart next to the 'T.' *There, perfect.* Nodding to herself and tossing the charcoal the five feet into her study, she trudged out the front door and into a full day's work.

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Lori wiped her forehead with the back of her hand, stain and wax both leaving their mark on her face. Gingerly laying her fingers across her left cheek, she winced almost immediately and softly trailed her fingers along her cheekbone. That bruise was going to take a long time to heal. What possessed her to try and put new candles into the fixture above the table during lunch? That was the stupidest thing she'd done in a long time! She fell right off, smack dab on the floor face-first. Sighing, she pulled her hair back and let it fall down along her back. *I really need to remember to get that trimmed before winter...well, either way, time to go see my uncle.*

Lori smiled and patted her horse before swinging easily into the saddle. “C'mon, Rojer. Time to go for a long talk.” The horse gently but quickly trotted along, eager for some exercise. As she rode along, Loriwen let her thoughts drift. She tried to imagine her mother, what she looked like. This would be her third meeting with Thurwald, and he spent much of the last one speaking of her mother, explaining everything she never understood. Now she knew she wore her mother's face, almost to an exact match. Her eye and hair color were a mixture of her parents, both fiery red hair and golden blonde; deep green eyes and piercing blue. Apparently her stature, her personality, her ears (of all things!), were her father's. Absentmindedly guiding Rojer along the main road, Loriwen built a woman in her mind: strong, tall; her face framed by long blonde hair that shone like gold in the sun, with eyes so blue they rivaled the summer sky, an expression graceful and proud. Smiling softly, she hoped that is what her mother looked like. Her reverie was brought up short by a flash of an image – that same woman fighting to the death. It was just a quick picture, but it was still enough to ruin the warm feeling.

She always wanted to learn about her mother, but...well, knowing her mother died fighting to protect her made it all the better and all the worse. At least she knew her mother didn't run away, knew her mother didn't abandon her. She loved her, enough to die protecting her babe. A large sigh escaped Lori, and she leaned forward to rest her forehead against her horse's neck. Nuzzling with the unbruised side of her face, she sighed again. “Guess I'll have to name a pet after her as well, then, huh?” Trusting the horse she named after her father to take her toward town, she closed her eyes and tried to block the image of that beautiful woman fighting to her last breath.

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She walked into the room, carrying a regular mug of ale carefully. Silently thanking the fireplace for being on *that* side of the room, Lori sat down and smiled softly as her uncle stood to give her his flourishing bow. Knowing he was a storyteller, a keeper of stories, explained how he was so theatrical in his movements. It tickled her pink, really. She loved it. Just as she opened her mouth to speak, his heavy baritone voice rumbled, thick with his accent and full of concern.

“What has happened to your face?” A scowl appeared across Thurwald's face, giving his thoughts away clearly.

Loriwen's hand flew up to her cheek, wincing as she didn't stop quite in time to keep from smacking herself in the face. Her eyes wide with concern, she gently laid her fingers across the rather impressive bruise on her cheek. "Ack! This...this isn't what it looks like. Well, I mean, it is. It's a bruise, on my face. But it's not a...well, I did it."

The scowl on her uncle's face didn't diminish. She began to panic a little. Maybe she shouldn't have come...no, that would've been worse, because he would've come to look for her and found her bruised, that would've been even worse! Maybe she should have covered it up...no, no, that'd be bad, too. Ack, he was still waiting for an explanation! Hopefully he'd believe the truth...

"I was changing some candles in my home today, and fell off the table."

His head tilted, the scowl fading a little in the face of curiosity. "What is this kind of candles that requires a table on which to stand?"

Closing her eyes and offering a silent prayer to whoever would hear her thanks, she began to explain about the candle holder she had on the ceiling, how it was so long since she'd used it because the old candles in it were no longer working. As she explained, even going as far as to stand on the table there to show how she fell, she saw him slowly begin to accept her answer. Sitting back down with his help, she gave him a rather lopsided smile. "That's one thing I haven't told you about yet, it's a rather big part of my life, too. I'm clumsy. My, uh, feet...they don't listen to my brain. I fall over a lot."

Sitting back and crossing his arms, Thurwald studied his niece quietly – much to her chagrin. She knew that whenever he did that, he was about to ask a question she didn't want to answer. They'd only spoken for two meetings, but already she knew it. "You are clumsy of foot, yes?"

Loriwen quietly nodded in response.

"Why, if you are clumsy of foot, would you stand atop a table to change candles?"

She flushed, sheepishly sinking in her chair. A few moments later, she responded quietly, "Well, I need to be able to do things for myself."

"Would you not ask your betrothed to do such a task? He is a sailor, no? He will have good reflexes for footwork."

"He's been busy with work lately...and for the last time, he is *not* my betrothed." Lori sat back up, crossing her arms.

"One who has promised to become betrothed has become betrothed, Loriwyn. If you promise to promise a man to carve him a lute, have you not just promised to carve him a lute?"

Knowing she would not win this argument, Lori sighed and shook her head. "It's not important. I didn't come to talk about that."

His deep laugh echoed in the small, wooden room. "It seems to me you have come to talk about that, my niece. This is the night you have promised to speak of your life, so that I may bring news to my mother."

Her shoulders slumped, then slowly set themselves straight as she began to give him her flawed logic. “You're right. You're right, you're right. Fine, let me just...put this out there, first, then. I didn't *promise* anything, he asked if I'd encourage him *asking* me in the winter. Encouraging a question and promising an answer are two *very* different things.”

His keen eyes crinkled with humor beneath his light eyebrows. “Ah, but will you agree once you are asked?”

“Well...,” a thoughtful but short pause broke up her sentence, “...yes, of course.”

Thurwald didn't answer with any more than a smile that made his beard twist. It's all he needed to do, though, for Loriwen responded with a “hrmpf” and crossing her arms again. He laughed loudly again, a musical and deep sound. Mercifully, he changed the subject for her once he was finished. “What is your learning? You have said you are a carver of wood, as your father. Is that all you are knowing?”

She answered the question slowly, eventually warming up as they left the subject of her being wrong. “Well...my Grams insisted I'd learn my letters, and whatnot. They made sure I went to some schooling, and all that, so I could take care of myself, if I'd needed it. My Dad's the one who taught me how to carve, I even still use his knife.” Loriwen pulled the small knife from its pouch, holding it up in the fire's light. “It's a good knife, and it's my trade, as you said. 'Carver of wood.'”

His eyebrows raised slowly. “You are knowing of writing and reading? This is unexpected. Do many women know of these things in the land of Bree?”

She shook her head and re-pocketed the carving knife. “No, not really. But you know my Grams raised all her sons by herself, so she wanted me to have everything I could need if it happened to me, too. Even reading.”

“I am unable to read or write, myself, but we have friends in Edoras who are able to do so. It is how I know of the letters from your father, they were read. You are most fortunate to have such a wonderful gift of knowledge.”

“I, uh, I know. I try not to waste it. I try to buy books when I can afford it. And write letters to friends, when they can read, too.”

Nodding quietly, he tilted his head. “Were the years of your childhood glad?”

Loriwen blinked. “That's, uh, a rather...big question. Yes, I'd say.” She nodded sharply. “Yes, they were. It was a bit odd, not having a mother, but Dad always made sure I was cared for and knew how much he loved me. It was quiet, and peaceful. I've got...a lot of really good memories.”

“Ah, good. It seems Roh-jar did well with your raising and teachings. Did he...” Thurwald looked to Loriwen uncertainly, pausing to think. That made her nervous. “...Did he seek to dissuade you from pursuing young men?”

“What? No! No, not at all. What kind of a question is th – oh.” Her temper flared up quickly, then instantly fizzled away as she realized what he was really asking. Pausing herself, she shook her head slowly. “No.”

“I ask you to please forgive me for asking, for you seem to dislike to speak of it, but you understand my mother will ask as well.”

Loriwen nodded again, silent.

“Why have you not wed? Many woman are looking forward to the promise of seeing a child wed in the years coming, not the promise of their own marriage.”

She shrugged slowly and answered with the ease of one used to this question. Her question did hold a slight note of uncertainty, though. “I guess I was just too picky, and waiting for the right one. No harm in that, right?”

He attempted to reassure her. “I am not here to judge you, my young niece. As long as your choice is a steady and a happy one, everything will be well. My mother is full of questions and worries. She fears you are bitter and unhappy; for what reasons, I can not understand. But you do not seem so to me. Is it so?”

Loriwen tilted her head, then leaned back and turned to look into the fire. She thought for a few long minutes on her answer. With the fire's golden glow drowning out her red highlights, and with her bright eyes darkened in the evening, she seemed to be a perfectly short Ceolwyn to Thurwald's eyes. He pursed his lips beneath his bushy beard as he waited for the answer, not trusting himself to speak.

Eventually her voice broke the silence, broke the illusion that she was ever Ceolwyn. The Bree accent was thick, and her voice was much more melodic than her mother's. She didn't look away from the fire, only spoke with a private smile. “I'm happier than I've ever been...which is saying a lot, because I was damn happy before, too.” Her eyes shifted over to study him.

All he did was nod. “So tell me more, if you are willing. Of anything you would share.”

She nodded, thinking of other key parts in her life: her father dying, her Grams dying, that flood, the drunken year in the Shire... Shrugging, she started at the earliest and just worked her way forward.

“When I was almost nine, I got real sick. Fever in the spring, chills and all.. it was so bad, I actually lost my voice...”