

An unfamiliar voice interrupted Sawkin, one that sounded harmonious and lilting. “Welcome to Alfheim, Helge of Hanlin Forest. Welcome, Squire from another Land. Welcome, members of the company. I am Freyr, king of the Elves of Alfar Wood.”

Then an elf appeared in front of Helge. She had not seen where he came from, but his appearance was unmistakable. He was of a similar height to Vinny and Squire and wore a cloak of green. A gold crown adorned his head, and an aura of light surrounded the top of his head like a halo. His fair face resembled that of a beautiful young woman.

Helge lowered her head and bowed. The others followed suit. “Thank you, King Freyr, for your welcome. We are privileged to find ourselves in this place and that you see fit to invite us into the sanctuary of your wood.”

King Freyr turned to his left and indicated the rope ladder hanging from the house that Sawkin had identified as the king’s. “Ascend,” he said. “I will join you shortly. Don’t worry about your mule. He will be well looked after.”

Helge, whose eyes had followed the direction of the king’s arm, turned back towards the spot where the king had stood and saw that he had disappeared.

“Let’s go,” said Helge, stepping towards the rope ladder. She led them to the ladder and then began her ascent. The others followed. With only one good arm, it proved quite a struggle for Helge. As she hauled herself through the opening where the ladder entered the floor of the house, she saw tables covering the floor laden with all kinds of food – meat, fruit and vegetables, and bread; also juices, wines and ale. King Freyr sat on a throne on a raised dais at the far end of the room.

“What happened to your arm, Helge of Hanlin Forest?” the king asked.

Helge explained the events that had led to her arm being broken at Tir fo Thoinn.

“My physician shall attend to your arm,” said the king. With a sweep of his own arm, he indicated the tables covered with food. “Eat your fill,” he said. “Tomorrow we will talk. Tonight my servants, Byggvir and Beyla, are at your service. Ask them for anything you need, but don’t ask them any other questions. I will answer all your questions tomorrow.”

No sooner had the king finished talking than he vanished once more. Soon afterwards, two young Elves entered by way of the rope ladder and joined them.

Many weeks had passed since the members of the company had eaten so sumptuously. After just a few minutes, their bellies were full. Then the male Luchorpan enjoyed huge tumblers of ale while Vinny and the twins got quite tipsy on the wine. Soon Squire, Vylín and Helge were the only ones still sober.

“Enough drink,” cautioned Helge. “You’re not used to it, and the king wants to talk to us in the morning.”

“But...” Vinny looked wide-eyed into Helge’s face.

“No, that’s enough.” She turned to the two servants. “Where can we sleep?” she asked.

“The king has set aside three rooms for you and your companions,” Beyla replied. “When you are ready, we will show you.”

Helge glanced around the room and glared at her companions. “We’re ready now,” she said.

Byggvir and Beyla led them to their rooms.

A few minutes later, Helge heard a knock on the door of the room she shared with Vylín.

“Who is it?” Vylín asked.

“I am Leasi, elf-doctor. The king sent me to tend to the tall woman’s broken arm.”

Vylín opened the door a crack and peered out. A wizened, old elf woman stood at the door.

“Come in,” she said.

Leasi appeared shorter than most of the Elves, her lack of height exaggerated by her old, bent back. She gave a wrinkled smile and shuffled into the room.

“Well, my dear,” she said to Helge, “the king tells me you have broken your arm. Let me have a look.”

After she had examined the arm, she spoke again, “Though it has been set, it is not yet fully healed. Do you have any méli?”

“Méli,” said Helge, “why, yes, there’s a bottle in our mule’s saddlebag. But how can méli be useful to mend a broken bone?”

“Have you not realised yet that méli can be a cure for all kinds of sickness, even broken bones?”

“I’ll go and fetch it,” said Vylín.

Vylín found Faithful near the base of the treehouse, untied, enjoying a meal of grain.

She returned after a few minutes with the bottle of méli.

“Now,” said Leasi, taking the bottle from Vylín, “remove the bandage and the cast from Helge’s arm.”

Vylín obeyed.

Then the ancient elf poured some of the liquid onto the palm of her shrivelled old left hand and massaged Helge’s arm. For several seconds she rubbed backwards and forwards down the length of the arm until Helge felt a warm feeling of healing as the bone knitted together. The combination of the healing ingredient inside the méli and the healing touch of the old woman had fused together Helge’s broken bone.

When she had finished, Leasi handed the bottle back to Vylín. “Keep this well,” she said. “You will have need of it again.”

“Thank you,” said Helge. “I have one question, Leasi.”

“Yes?”

“How old are you?”

“I am older than the wood, older than the Land itself. Before the Rivening of One, I was already a youth.”

As if to prove the point, the old elf woman glided effortlessly towards the door and departed.