

The Meadow
By Emily Stringer

The elfling charged through the woods. The whispers of the trees, the cries of the birds, the call of the wind – its magic was all new to him; to stop and just look at everything seemed idiotic. It was his first extensive woodland adventure and he wanted to *feel* it all, to smell the fresh pollen in the air, taste the freedom in the wind, and touch the fleeting branches to his fingertips. As he ran, the colours blurred together to create a magical rainbow only his eyes could discover.

The elfling loped and pranced with the grace that only blessed his kind. Though the woods were thick and there was no trail to follow, he didn't falter once. He'd been running for quite some time, leaving his father far behind him who, by now, had little hope of catching up. No amount of experience could allow an elf in his prime to keep up with the haste which propelled a curious child.

Through the thick foliage, a glimmer of light up ahead caught the little elf's attention and he answered its beckon. He jumped a fallen tree with a fleeting touch of his hand, and scurried through the underbrush beyond. As he neared the light's source, the elfling slowed his flashing pace to an easy step. He paused at a line of trees and peered beyond their branches. A wide clearing met him on the other side. The field was perfectly framed on all sides with a drop at one end, and trees clustered around the outer edges, like guards. He hugged the nearest tree, wondering at its beauty. Then the mischief in him grinned: what could this meadow be hiding?

The elfling stepped into the deep puddle of sunlight that flooded the entire area, and as he did so, a strange feeling overtook him. He knelt down to study the grass, and in doing so noticed a strange anomaly that turned his eyes to the meadow's edges. He was fascinated: not one tree's shadow infiltrated the field's barrier – not from any angle! Yet, his own shadow was there. He stood to face it, and waved; it waved back. Bubbling with joy at this discovery, the elfling took off sprinting – racing his shadow across the clearing towards the cliff. As they neared, his shadow picked up speed, overtaking him. The elfling laughed musically and charged ahead, determined to win.

Just as the edge came closer, the elfling slid to a hasty stop. He could only watch as his shadow sprang up and into the air, and swung away on the gusting wind. He wanted to join it, but knew better. Reality kicked in and had to settle for standing at the edge, searching the skies for his envious shadow.

Then, a sudden wind came up. It lifted all sorts of glorious objects into the air: leaves, petals and pollen all whooshed past the young elf, and up into the sky, following the path his shadow had cleared. He reveled in the feeling, and spread his arms wide to let the wind carry him as well. It complied, and as the wind lifted him to his toes, it pulled at his braided hair and played with his thick autumn clothes, rippling them with its force. There, on the edge of the cliff with the strong wind supporting him from behind, the sensation between balance and fall intoxicated his senses.

As the wind sighed back and returned him to a steadier footing, the elfling gazed out over the landscape the cliff opened up to, and took in the wondrous view for the first time. He saw the rivers criss-crossing as they cut their way to the open sea, the distant mountains piercing the far-off sky, and the forests spreading as far as could be seen; one day he would visit the sea – and learn to sail atop it, he would climb the mountains and, standing on the highest peak they had to offer, tickle the sky above him, and he would explore every inch of the

sprawling forest, and chase out all the secrets that hid there. He saw all this, but in his search he could not find his shadow. *Where had it gone?*

His sharp eyes caught a dark patch in the sky. Bending his neck back, he squinted into the blue abyss, the bright sun hard on his young pupils.

The shadow danced downwards, twirling and spinning on the stage of the wind. As it came, he realized the form was not that of his shadow at all. Curiously, he continued his audience.

Continuously falling, it tumbled and turned. With the aid of one final twist, it landed delicately on the bridge of his nose. Surprised, the elfling crossed his eyes, attempting to identify this foreign object. His eyes grew irritated quickly, however, and he was forced to un-cross them. He flared his nostrils instead, but what his nose told him left him confused – this was no creature of flight, so why did the object's scent match that of a bird?

Tentatively reaching up, he plucked the thing from his nose and examined it more carefully. The soft edges tickled his fingers and made him giggle. He waved it around and was awed by how it would slice through the air at one angle, yet resist at another. Finally, the elfling concluded that the purpose of this object was to aid birds in their flight! He wondered where this feather's bird was, and hoped the creature could still fly without it.

It must be an exquisite bird, he thought to himself, for its colouring and pattern was unlike any his father had ever shown him back in the forest. It appeared to be a primary feather, for it was wide and precise. Mottled near the end and dotted throughout with tiny navy specks, the feather gradually became deep green in colour, and at the tip twin blue slashes ran at an angle, both outlined in white; all the colours were lush and deep.

Absorbed in the feather as he was, the elfling was startled out of his examination when his sensitive ears picked up the sound of a voice calling out in the distance:

“Soll’ith! Soll’ith, where are you?”

The elfling's eyes widened in recognition. *Atar!* He had completely forgotten. He turned from the cliff's edge and sprinted across the meadow and through the trees, following his father's calls right to him. The woodland warrior heard him coming from a ways off, and was standing, arms crossed and waiting, as the young elf neared. The elfling burst through the shrubs and stopped, panting, in front of his father with a wide grin on his face. But that smile fell, upon reading his father's tense body language. Both elves were silent: one with the tried experience of parenthood (this elfling was not his first), and the other with the guilty knowledge that he was suddenly in a lot of trouble.

“I-I'm sorry Atar,” the elfling, Soll’ith, started, “I just wanted to see everything at once...”

His father couldn't hold the stern face any longer and a gentle smile melted onto his lips. But it was missed by the young elf who was absorbed in the action of curling his toes in shame. A few short strides brought the father in front of his son, and he knelt before him. The elfling's chin was lifted by a strong finger.

“The forest is often more dangerous than you can imagine Soll’ith,” his father explained, “that, you must never forget.” Experienced eyes met innocent ones and in the silence following, an understanding was shared. He kissed his son's forehead lovingly and rose, both elves now smiling. He turned to take his son back home – they had seen enough adventure for one day – but a small hand held him back. He looked down and met Soll’ith's son's expressive face.

“What is it?” he asked.

A bright smile greeted his query. From behind his back, Soll’ith pulled the most unique feather his father had ever seen, and exclaimed, “Look what I found Atar!” as he presented it. His father took the feather into his hands and studied it with the same fascination his son had. He'd

never seen any bird in this forest that would carry such a feather, and what a feather!

“Where did you find this, utinu?” he asked, awed.

“In the clearing back there,” came the reply.

His father blinked, bemused. He looked at his son quizzically, but parental realization dawned on him then, and he smiled again.

“What an imagination you have Soll’ith,” he said, handing the feather back to his son. He ruffled his blond locks affectionately. “There is no meadow here,” he explained. “This forest goes on much farther before any such clearing would appear.” As he said the last line he eyed the mysterious feather and his certainty waivered momentarily. He glanced in the direction his son had come from and made a mental note of it in his head, then, he turned and started off towards home.

Soll’ith looked back in the direction he had come from. A bright strand of sunlight winked secretively at him through the trees, and then disappeared. Grinning, he waved back then followed quickly after his father, the feather clutched securely in his small hand and his shadow trailing behind.