A SCA Girl In Middle-Earth

by Natasja

Summary

You know those stories where people from the 21st Century fall into Middle-Earth and can instantly understand the language, seamlessly fit into strange cultures and communities who aren't even slightly suspicious about mysterious strangers during wartime, and are generally loving it?

Not This Time.

Dropped into a save-the-world quest with a Mary-Sue, a friend and a random annoying stranger, THIS girl would generally love to get back to plumbing, daily hot showers, a lack of things trying to kill her, and reading material in ENGLISH, please.

Notes
Since the discovery that one of my OCs and a well-known individual in my local group share a Mundane name, and that a few people in said local group actually read this, I feel that it is time for a general disclaimer:

Other than the shameless self-insert of Mairi and the occasional referenced name, none of the non-Tolkien characters featured in this fic are based on any real-life people, and any similarities are entirely coincidental.
In Which They Arrive In Middle-Earth, And Only One Person Is Happy About It

It is generally taken as fact that anyone who willingly and enthusiastically participates in Historical Re-enactments is at least a little off in the head.

Some of the aforementioned Re-enactment participants take offense at this view.

Those in the Barony of Rowany, in the Kingdom of Lochac (otherwise known as the greater Sydney area, NSW, Australia), particularly the Collages of St Ursula and St Augustine, take a very great deal of pride in being seen as total whack-jobs. Even the more level-headed will smile, look smug, and thank the observer who has just called them a complete nutcase.

Still, there is madness, and there is madness. Natasha (better known as Mairi of Kilravok) and Rowan had the sinking feeling that they had just crossed the line.

There was really no other explanation for why they had been talking at fighter practice/A & S one moment, and on a grassy hill in the middle of nowhere the next.

It also didn't explain the presence of two random strangers that they both knew hadn't been with them before, but one of whom looked suspiciously like the ringleader to the small group that had parked themselves outside the Town Hall where fighter practice was being held.

The other one had blonde hair that was making an impressive effort at outshining the sunlight, eyes bluer than a clear summer sky, and a supermodel's figure. If she hadn't been desperately trying to fool herself into thinking that this was just an elaborate hallucination, Mairi would have thought it was a textbook cliche of a Mary-Sue yanking people into whatever fandom they lurked in.

Mairi, who had been seated and whose chair had not made the transition with them, fell rather ungraciously on her behind, dropping her sewing as Rowan looked around. He reached down to help her up, and both caught sight of the newcomers at the same time.

Rowan promptly forgot that you needed to keep a grip on someone to help them up. Mairi sent all three of them an evil look as she fell down again.

The other youth was easy to recognize.

The stall at the University Fete two weeks ago had been interrupted by a few of the more dedicated members of the University Christian Youth Group, who had carefully asked just what kind of 'singing, dancing, crafts, workshops and demonstrations' took place at the annual Festivals and
Assorted Events.

Myfanvy, who had been dressed as a Roman Priestess of Hecate, hadn't totally understood the question and wasn't really listening to the tone, said that it varied depending on the theme. Jess, who had only heard part of the explanation, joined in, explaining that it was mostly concentrated on the Dark Ages to Renaissance and Tudor times, but often dipped into other time periods, such as Viking and Ancient empires as well.

Mairi wasn't entirely sure how the Youth Group had reached their vastly mistaken conclusion of witch-craft, especially as the Renaissance and Dark Ages were periods where Church influence had been strongest, but they had somehow got the idea that the SCA was a cover for some evil pagan cult that was trying to take the world back into the sin of the Dark Ages.

They had been trying to stage protests outside regular meeting places ever since.

If nothing else, Mairi had to give them credit for persistence, even if she did think that standing outside for three hours in the middle of a winter night marked them as even stupider than she had originally thought.

The first stranger looked around, gave a vaguely amusing (and somewhat girlish, for a guy probably in his twenties) shriek, and went into hysterics. "What happened? We were supposed to be sending the demons you lot were worshiping back to The Abyss with the exorcism ritual our newest member provided! How did we wind up here?"

Rowan, who had stepped forward in a token effort to calm them down, stopped abruptly. "I know Jess called us Hell-spawn when the soccer ball nearly knocked over the paints for her Illumination project during the warm-up kick-around, but that hardly calls for an exorcism." He paused for a moment, "And what ritual?"

Despite the circumstances, Mairi had to fight down a totally inappropriate sense of amusement. "You remember the Christian Youth Group at the stall a few weeks back? I think he's one of them."

Rowan frowned. "You mean the ones who got hauled off by Campus Security when they started shouting about demon worship and the New Age guys got upset? One of them called you a harlot when Benjamin said that posting a pretty girl in costume at the front of the stall was a good marketing strategy?"

That had been the first time anyone had called Mairi a 'pretty girl', and she still maintained that the crowd had more to do with the fact that one of the people manning the stall was also filling in at the animal farm, and the children and female half of the campus had flooded in to coo over and pet the kid in her arms.

Which, in turn, prompted the people with them to start exploring the stall just for something to do while they waited for their companions. "Yeah, those ones. I think he's with them."

The stranger picked this as a good time to jump in. "David tried to say that you were just a bunch or
D&D freaks and we should just let you go back to Lord of the Rings or whatever, but no one ever listens to him."

Raised with the knowledge that her youngest sister did enough swearing for all three siblings, and having worked as a Nanny once or twice (kids really did repeat everything they heard), Mairi almost never cursed.

Jess, another SCA member, had a vast repertoire of Hungarian insults, and did not share Mairi's reluctance. Mairi had picked up several, even if she had no idea what they actually meant, and right now, she was barely stopping herself from using them to turn the air blue.

Rowan preferred more modern, action-inclined fantasy, but remembered the bare basics of Tolkien's works from a lively debate a few weeks back. Mairi decided that she preferred the 'Going Totally Mad' theory from before.

Fan fiction was a guilty pleasure of hers, and she had read plenty of '21st Century Person Falls Into Middle Earth' stories, usually feeling quite sorry for the protagonist. Now, not only was she supposedly in Arda, but it looked like she was going to be accompanied by a religious geek and a Mary-Sue of the 'Bloody Annoying' sort, and she was counting the minutes before she had a nervous breakdown.

He fears were confirmed when the woman laughed prettily and spoke. "I know that. I'm Suzi-Maria, and it was a perfect opportunity for me to bring friends with me into Middle-Earth, so I sort of interfered with the ritual and brought you here."

The nervous breakdown was quickly taking second-seat to the desire to strangle the girl. Well, no use complaining about it until it happened. "Since it looks like we're going to be stuck together, I'm Mairi of Kilravok, and of House Llewod Bachder. This is Rowan, of the Collage of St Augustine, or UNSW. Call me anything other than Mairi and I'll ignore you, because this whole situation is confusing enough already, without mixing up names."

The stranger huffed, somehow managing to make it seem righteously indignant. "I'm Sam, and don't act like you want to be friends! Just undo whatever you did and take me home."

If the chances of surviving alone were even slightly higher, Mairi would have told him exactly where to shove his superior attitude. For now, however, she should probably just tolerate it until they found somewhere populated.

Right, good points and bad points: on the good hand, there had been a garbed picnic earlier that day, and a 13th century travelling dress would blend in a lot better than jeans and a t-shirt. Similarly, Rowan was in leather armour, and had been holding his sword and shield while they were talking. Granted, both were made of wood, but SCA weapons were identical to their medieval counterparts in weight and force of impact (just without the sharp or pointy bits), and so at least one of them was armed.

Finally, Mairi had a foot looped through the strap of her waterproof backpack, containing three books (Mairi had never gone anywhere without at least one book since she was old enough to have
her own library card), a notebook, her wallet, keys and a large Ziploc bag of stuffed rolls left over from the picnic. She wasn't the best of cooks, but at least they had something edible, if slightly bland. Oatcakes had started out as a staple food for soldiers on long marches, though, so the lack of flavouring was hardly her fault.

Also, she had been at work before the picnic, and when you had to catch public transport from the suburbs to the city at five-thirty in the morning, it was much easier to just eat breakfast on the way, keep a comb and a spare toothbrush with you, and duck into a bathroom before reporting to the boss (Mairi knew for a fact that she wasn't the only one, and that most of her co-workers wore beat-up old sneakers to work, discreetly changing shoes when they arrived). Anyone on the train at the time was too busy trying to wake up to care if a fellow passenger was a bit rumpled, and it offered an extra ten minutes of sleep.

She wasn't sure which category her Arts and Sciences bag, filled with wool, needles, embroidery thread, plain cotton and a pair of scissors, having been in her lap and therefore brought with her, fell into, but at least she would have something to do.

On the downside, no-one had a change of clothes, or anything resembling outdoor-sleeping gear, and unless Sam had a map and compass on him (unlikely) they were still lost. Oh, and Mairi really, really hoped that her doctor had been serious when he said that she had probably outgrown the need for medication to keep her epilepsy under control.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of hoof-beats, and she sent up a most-likely-futile prayer for it to be someone non-hostile.

Non-hostile was probably a matter of opinion, but at least the group of dwarves didn't seem likely to hack them to pieces without provocation. Provocation that Sam were sure to give them, if someone didn't get in something polite first. "Greetings, my Lord Dwarves. I am Mairi of Kilravok, at your service. I apologize in advance."

The pre-emptive apology took them slightly by surprise, but the Dwarves recovered quickly, with a small bow to return the greeting. At least, that was what she thought, since she didn't understand a word of what they were saying. She had forgotten that Middle-Earth spoke Westron, rather than English.

Lovely, now they could add 'Serious Communication Issues' to the list of problems.

Getting back at annoying siblings who called you a 'total geek in stuff that isn't even useful' can be an excellent motivation, which was why Natasha was coherent in writing Dwarvish runes. Needing a fictional dictionary to translate Natasha's next three letters hadn't changed her youngest sister's mind, (her twin found it amusing, but tiresome) but it had at least convinced her to shut up about it.

The quick explanation of 'Greetings. Lost. Come from far away.' written with a stick in the dirt wasn't exactly the best opening, but it served the purpose. Mairi really hoped that Rowan, who was good with languages, could pick something of Westron up fast.
The Dwarves exchanged looks, before the leader responded in the same fashion. "I am Gloin, son of Groin, at your service. Who are you?"

The Dwarves from the Lonely Mountain did not understand English, but the general context of 'Oh, shit' is almost universally understood. The lack of Gandalf and Bilbo Baggins, and that they were a company of only five Dwarves, rather than thirteen, suggested that they were not in The Hobbit, but likely just before the council of Elrond. If they didn't find a way home, and fast, someone was almost certainly going to get hurt.

Mairi would have replied, had Sam not opened his mouth and proved her precaution a wise one. Luckily, the Dwarves didn't understand him, either. "Why are you talking to those little men, and what are they saying? Is this more of your devilry?"

Mairi ignored him. This was worse than the time a bunch of Religious door-to-door recruiters had somehow mistaken a friend staying overnight for two women living in sin and disturbed half the street with their ranting. She curtsied again, pressing a hand to her chest. "Mairi of Kilravok," she indicated Rowan, "Rowan", and pointed at the final members in turn, "Sam and Suzi-Maria."

The fact that the Dwarve at Gloin's side was his son, Gimli, strengthened the probability of when they were. Rowan, after Mairi had translated the gist of what the Dwarve told her into English, was about to ask her to write if there was any chance of travelling together, when Gimli said it first, suggesting that if Elrond was unable to help them, then Gandalf would probably visit Rivendell at some point soon, and they could ask him. At the least, they could leave Sam with the elves to enjoy each other's' superior attitude.

Ah, yes, it was sometimes easy to forget the rivalry between elves and dwarves. A Rivendell elf had made a joke about one of the company's beards in The Hobbit, hadn't they? Suddenly, she felt sorry for the elves. Sweeping a foot through her previous writing to make room for more, she wrote "Thank you. I'm very grateful for your assistance."

Gloin bowed politely, and led them down the hill, toward a forest. Rowan threatened to gag Sam with one of his own socks if he didn't shut up and stop complaining, and the three humans (and one Mary-Sue, whose species was probably some unbelievably bizzare combination that would cause a headache that Mairi would endure later) followed them, all with the same sinking feeling.
Mairi woke the next morning with a pounding headache and sore feet.

The sore feet were easily explained: walking for hours straight in non-sports shoes would do that to anyone. While the headache could have been from the shock and stress of being dumped here, she had missed her medication a few times before (due to either the chemist being out, or her twin forgetting whose turn it was to buy that fortnight's medicine), enough to recognize the symptoms. She didn't think it would come to a full-blown seizure, at least not for a day or so, but she wasn't looking forward to it.

Sam, once he had calmed down a bit, was discovered to be a fairly level-headed young man, if still more than a bit pompous and self-righteous, and had caught on to the fact that unless he wanted to be left to fend for himself, he should probably at the very least try to be civil to those he was travelling with.

Suzi-Maria had yet to arrive at such a conclusion (in a more humorous mood, Mairi might have made a snide comment about needing to stop and ask for directions to reach any conclusion involving something that was Bloody Obvious to everyone else) but apparently Honour meant that the Dwarves couldn't just leave her by the side of the road, despite being repeatedly assured that Rowan and Mairi wouldn't hold such an act against them in the slightest.

No, really, they wouldn't.

At all.

Seriously.

Rowan, once he was awake, was also a lot calmer than the previous day, which left him more or less his usual self. As his usual self, Rowan was a college student with an actual brain, who had a basic knowledge of Lord of the Rings, but his grasp of the finer details had come from a lively debate about books the first time he and Mairi had met. If they were stuck here, then he had probably better get what details he could. And set up some kind of cover story. Besides, Mairi wasn't looking well, and he was concerned for a friend.

Wanting to lighten the atmosphere, he started with a joke. "Damn, I thought this was a food-poisoning induced nightmare. Of course, if that was the case, we'd probably be in the middle of a Twilight crossover. Then they could do the sparkling and angst quota, rather than being forced to endure it from Suzi over there."

Catching the reference and knowing their shared distaste for the series (when a canon character is known as the ultimate Mary-Sue, the writer is doing something wrong, and there are only so many times you can stomach the words 'perfect' or 'beautiful' in a sentence) Mairi gave a wicked giggle. It wasn't quite the hearty laugh he had been aiming for, but at least it worked. "How are you holding
The laughter faded. "Well enough, but I'm worried. I haven't had a real seizure since I was thirteen, but I haven't gone more than thirty-six hours without medication since then, either. I'm feeling very lucky that I'm only a mild case of epileptic. So far it's just really bad headaches, and probably some shakiness later, but we'll see."

Rowan didn't have the faintest idea of what epilepsy really entailed, but a friend and room-mate of his had been in Medical Science, and had done a project on it recently. "But it's possible to grow out of it if you're diagnosed early, right? Ben said something about that, and you're twenty-five."

Mairi pinned him with a look. She was only a few days away from twenty-seven, a fact that she tried not to pay attention to, even if it hadn't been rude of him to mention a lady's age. "Not 'grow out', as such, but more no longer need medication to keep it under control. Sarah and I were diagnosed when we were four, and my doctor has been making noises in that direction, but right now really isn't a good time to be testing that theory."

No arguments there. Rowan yanked the conversation back to safer topics. "Any ideas where or when we are? And what do we tell people if they ask where we are from? Do we let people draw their own conclusions, or come up with something ourselves. What would be the general reaction to a boy and a girl travelling together as friends?"

Mairi tried to arrange her thoughts. "We're headed toward Rivendell and Gloin said that we were lucky that we were already out of the Misty Mountains. I think that puts us between a week and a fortnight from Rivendell, depending on how fast we move and if we run into trouble. None of us speak Westron, unless we can convince the Dwarves to teach us and pick it up very quickly, but be prepared to lie our heads off if we have to explain. Telling the truth would probably see us called insane or possibly spies."

That wasn't unlikely, in either the real world that they reluctantly inhabited, or in the fictional world in which they were now stuck. "So say what? We are refugees from somewhere so far away they've never heard of it? We heard tales of Rivendell and thought we could find safety? Have you burst into croc tears if they ask for details? Are you my sister, or just a friend?"

The second-last sentence earned him another Look. "Travelling alone, we'd better be engaged friends if you don't want someone calling you out for compromising my honour. Tolkien was born back when being alone and unsupervised with someone of the opposite gender could generate a massive scandal, and the books are set in the Middle Ages. You've got armour, and I don't think Lord of the Rings had basket hilts, so it would be best if we pretended your sword was a short staff and go with you being my protector."

That would explain the pointed questions from the Dwarves the night before, which had largely gone over his head, since they had clearly been trying to keep Mairi out of it and couldn't use her as a translator, which meant that all of them had been forced to resort to Mime. Acting as a protector would be fine, except for one issue. "I'd better say my real sword was lost and I was forced to fashion something from wood, then, since I doubt proper weapons were made with wood, and I
don't have any instruction with a staff. Is there some Period thing for how a protector is supposed to act?"

An amused roll of her eyes. "You've given your sworn word to keep me safe. Pretend that Justin will come after you if anything happens to me, and you should be fine."

Justin was Mairi's favourite cousin, a six-foot-ten-inch wall of very solid muscle who worked as a bouncer. Mairi could protest that he was really a gentle giant until she was blue in the face, but everyone else still found him to be bloody intimidating. "Thanks for the nightmares."

Mairi graced him with a proper laugh this time, which drew the attention of their companions. "Hey, you two do re-enactments, so you'd know how to cook over a fire. Come make breakfast."

Suzi-Maria, who had somehow decided that Mairi was her Handmaiden (apparently, 'side-kick' didn't sound lady-like enough for the idiot girl) joined in the demands. "Handmaiden, help me brush my hair out. I want to look perfect for when we arrive."

Properly-raised girls did not belt people over the head with frying pans just for sheer stupidity, prejudice and lack of basic manners, no matter how tempting it was. Her father would be disappointed in her, and Mairi was a peacemaker at heart, not to mention a certified Daddy's Girl. She was just going to have to tolerate them at least until they reached Rivendell, and probably longer than that. "Screw the theory about Middle-Earth, this has got to be some new sub-section of Hell."

It was Rowan's turn to laugh.

Mairi had never been an athlete, but she was a good walker, and Dwarves appeared to dislike running as much as she did. On the other hand, that could be because running usually meant being forced to run away from something, and Dwarves liked that even less.

Right now, she was just glad for a chance to rest her legs. The terrain was mostly flat, which was another good thing, because if they had been hiking, her legs would have committed mutiny several days ago.

She looked up when Gimil, who had been testing the extent of Rowan's fighting skills (limited, as he had only started a few weeks ago), approached. Having picked up one or two words as they rode, while one of the Dwarves whose name she didn't know tried to teach Rowan and Sam, she thought it was something along the lines of "Can you use a weapon, lass?"

She was hoping that wouldn't be an issue for a while yet. Besides which, Indoor Archery was frowned upon by the owners of the hall they rented for fighter practice, so Mairi's bow and arrows were back in her apartment in an entirely different world. Back to using runes, then. "I am archer. Not fight in combat before."

That was true. Her participation in the wars that frequently cropped up between SCA Collages and Baronies had been limited to setting things up, transportation, and, on one memorable occasion, bribing a group of Collage students with free food for the duration. College students were hardly about to turn down someone else's cooking, and in exchange, they had agreed to fight under Mairi's banner. She waited until after they agreed before revealing that fighting under her banner was shown
by neon-pink shield covers featuring the black outline of Hello Kitty.

They had forgiven her eventually, largely because their opponents had been too busy laughing to form a proper defence, let alone an attack, and they had won. It was still a frequently mentioned event on pub nights.

Gimli frowned and said something. Sam, who had approached un-noticed, translated "He said that's a problem, but it can't be helped. You'll just have to try and stay behind us if there is trouble."

Even an independent, 21st century, adult woman couldn't complain about being treated like she was helpless when she essentially was helpless, so Natasha only nodded, and went back to tossing a meal together and ignoring Suzi-Maria while Rowan got tripped by an axe-shaft, the Dwarve currently sparring with him laughed, and the rest set up camp.

They didn't have the ingredients or the time to make proper bread, but there was enough to make damper, to go with the dried meat that the dwarves carried with them. Ordering Sam to find her a pot to cook it in, or, failing that, several thin sticks, Natasha ignored Rowan reassuring the dwarves that while Natasha's cooking might look a bit strange at times, it was edible and usually tasty. Mairi was actually a very good cook, but since she generally used Fighter Practice as an excuse to try out new recipes on willing victims who had worked up an appetite, there were bound to be a few culinary failures here and there.

Mairi supposed that she should be glad that the council that would result in the formation of the Fellowship would be at Imladris, and that the Dwarves would probably rather avoid Mirkwood, and not just for the lack of poisonous and hostile creatures that flooded the home of Middle-Earth's Most Lusted. Otherwise they would really have been in trouble.

King Thranduil would most likely have thrown the unfortunate fiction travellers straight into the dungeons, which would be unpleasant no matter how well prisoners were (from what Mairi had picked up and recalled from The Hobbit) treated.

Sam had been filled in on the details of the Trilogy by Mairi, who didn't want him to land all of them in trouble they couldn't explain by saying the wrong thing, and was actually very good with languages, as they had discovered when the Dwarves, sick of having to mime or write everything, had tried to teach them the basics of Westron. As the one with the best chance of being understood, he had taken point when they encountered the elves who guarded the borders of Rivendell.

Before either of them could stop her, Suzi-Maria, having suddenly become fluent in elvish, which she either hadn't known or hadn't thought to use before now, had pushed forward and tried to take over.

Mairi had not moved fast enough to gag her, and Suzi-Maria had dodged, announcing that they (meaning her, Sam, Rowan and Mairi, the Dwarves having issued apologies to Mairi and Rowan and sped up to get away from Sam and Suzi-Maria once they were within a day's travel of Imladris. While inconvenient, Mairi wouldn't have held it against them if they had chosen to sneak away.
during the night, rather than bother with fair warning) had come to attend the Council of Elrond and to aid Frodo Baggins.

That was bad enough, before she made it worse by saying that there should be no argument over this, because Suzi-Maria had been born with the anguish of always knowing that it was part of their destiny to help in the quest to destroy Sauron's Ring.

Precisely how they had expected the elves to react to this, especially the open knowledge of what was supposed to be a secret, was unclear, but Mairi took a certain amount of vindictive pleasure in that they probably hadn't expected to be quickly escorted to a plain and windowless but at least comfortable room, and locked in. Listening at the keyhole indicated that a guard had been posted, as well.

Mairi stopped being so pleased when she and Rowan were escorted in after the annoying two.

Sam was not amused with the situation, or taking it nearly as calmly as the other two - three, once Suzi-Maria had stopped throwing a tantrum. "What do they think they are doing, locking us in like this? They should be welcoming us! This is the last Homely House, supposed to be a sanctuary!"

Oh, so he had been paying attention when Mairi had given him a run-down on the books while journeying to Rivendell with the Dwarves. Mairi didn't know if she should be happy or depressed about that. Luckily Rowan saved her from being forced to reply. "Suzi over there blurted out sensitive information that most of Elrond's people probably don't even know. Of course they're going to be suspicious! They probably think we're spies for the Enemy."

Sam looked indignant. "I just said that we had been abducted from our home and would help them if they helped us."

Oh, so that was the protest in shaky Westron as the Elven guards marched them off. Natasha rolled her eyes. "And from what you told us you said to them, it sounded like a very bad, on-the-spot cover story that you hoped they would be foolish enough to accept. I suppose we should be glad that we're in a locked room, rather than a dungeon."

Food was delivered periodically, but that still left them with very little to do. Throwing riddles from the Hobbit and, when they ran out, from Brian Jaques' Tales of Redwall series at Sam and Suzi-Maria and seeing how long it took them to figure it out was entertaining, but quickly grew old. With a lack of windows and very little in the way of furniture, 'I Spy' also very quickly lost any of its meager entertainment value.

The elves had confiscated her novels and notebooks, probably to see if there were any plans by the enemy hidden in there, but had at least left her A & S kit alone, as they clearly believed that there was very little that could be done with two needles, a few balls of wool, a sewing kit, some cloth and some embroidery thread. Anyone who had spent more than two minutes at a stitch-and-bitch circle could easily tell you otherwise/
Mairi knew it had become Really Bad when Rowan, bored out of his skull, had actually asked if there was anything in her A & S bag that he could do. Most A & S projects included calligraphy, artwork, or some kind of needlework, and he knew it. He also knew that textiles and art were very much not his strong point. Luckily, Mairi's bag of many, many tricks included the hemmed pieces of a tunic she had been sewing for the next time she managed to guilt/drag/beg one of her male friends or relatives to accompanying her to an Event. Picking out some sewing thread, pins, and a needle, she handed it over.

By now Rowan had managed to sew one side of the tunic together, and was carefully starting to pin the other, and Mairi was busy with luceting a ball of wool into a long cord, which would then be used as an armor or face-guard tie by a fencer or heavy fighter when whatever they were using broke. Mairi and the other A & S people often did a roaring trade in little things like that, during or shortly after one a war or Crown Tourney, where equipment went through hard use.

Both were ignoring their unwilling companions, who had nothing to entertain their minds. Mairi would be quite willing to dispute that either of them had enough of a brain capacity to have any thought to spare for boredom in the first place, but that was a problem that had yet to come up.

As a result, they were the last to notice when the door opened, letting in light and a few elven guards.

Looking up from where she was carefully untangling her thread, Mairi scrambled to her feet and curtsied politely. She hoped that Suzi-Maria still spoke Sindarin, because the guards probably wouldn't take to well to what verbal Dwarvish she had picked up on (mostly swear-words), and she had nothing to write on.

The talk with Lord Elrond was a bit of an experience.

Mairi thought that perhaps it was the fact that Suzi-Maria was used to people automatically believing whatever she had to say and falling at her feet that shocked the girl so much, since Lord Elrond did neither. In fact, he stared at all of them with outright suspicion, which Mairi and Rowan found reasonable, but Sam and Suzi-Maria did not.

Finally, Mairi got fed up. "Look, Suzi, just stop being fancy and repeat what I say. We'll finish much faster and then you can go look at the pretty elves. Otherwise, let one of the boys do the talking."

Suzi-Maria shot her a nasty look, but agreed. Mairi gave thanks for small blessings. "Repeat after me: We are sorry to have caused you trouble, My Lord. We were abducted and found ourselves abandoned in the plains between here and the Misty Mountains, where we encountered Master Gloin and his company. They were kind enough to allow us to travel with them in the hopes that you might be able to offer your wisdom."

Suzi-Maria repeated that, looking sulky, and conveyed Lord Elrond's response. "He asked how we came to know of the ring, and why I thought I should be part of any quest whatsoever."
Mairi let out a breath. At least they weren’t being thrown back into the room or tossed out of Rivendell entirely. Rowan provided the answer this time. "You and Sam come from a different village to me and Mairi. Some of your captors mentioned it before they took us, which explains our ignorance. You have a fanciful sense of adventure and have long dreamed of traveling and helping to save the world from darkness."

Suzi-Maria shot him an even nastier look than she had Mairi. Rowan had been on the wrong end of nastier looks from scarier girls, several of whom could wield blunt but heavy weapons, however, and remained unruffled. Scowling, Suzi-Maria did as she was told.

Lord Elrond still looked skeptical, and said something in return. Suzi-Maria translated. "He says that he will have to discuss this with a council, and in the meantime, we will be taken back to our rooms."

Mairi curtsied and Rowan bowed, elbowing Sam before he could say something rude, and the two SCA visitors dragged their companions with them as they were escorted out of the study.

At least this time she had her books back.
Precisely why anyone would think it was a good idea to involve Suzi-Maria in anything important or secretive was beyond Mairi, but perhaps it was something to do with the Logic-defying powers of the Mary-Sue. Perhaps the Dwarves had mentioned some of the (largely superficial) spectacular feats Suzi-Maria had pulled off during the Journey. Perhaps someone was being optimistic and thought that the Mary-Sue could put her supposed secret knowledge of things to come to a good use.

Mairi and Rowan favoured the less-kind theory that it was simply the desire to be rid of her and the hope that one of the dangerous things they would meet along the way would be obliging enough to kill her for them.

However it happened, Suzi-Maria was being sent off on the Quest to Destroy the One Ring, while (as the only people capable of putting up with Suzi-Maria, or, at least getting her to shut up) Sam, Rowen and Mairi were being sent along since no one had any idea of what to do with them.

Better still, they had precisely two months to convince the Fellowship not to accidentally-on-purpose leave them at the top of a mountain half way through the journey, and learn to fight or at least defend themselves with real weapons.

On the other hand, Mairi was very, very much looking forward to getting out of their room, where they were still confined when not at meals or being escorted by someone highly trusted by the Lord of Rivendell.

...and possibly the chance of shoving Suzi-Maria off of Caradhras along the way.

Mairi was possibly the only one who could put up with Suzi-Maria (and was usually distracted enough that she was the last to object about being her guardian/keeper) long enough to keep her more or less under control, and had experience at apologizing for other people. Rowan had met the youngest of Mairi's two sisters at an Event, and once was enough. Mairi had spent the night apologizing for her sibling, rather than dancing.

As a result, Mairi was most often stuck on 'guard duty', which mostly boiled down to making sure that Suzi-Maria didn't accidentally insult anyone badly enough to get them prematurely kicked out of Rivendell.

Today, however, she had become fed up with the entire thing, somehow forced Sam to take over custody for the day, and was taking out her frustration on the archery range. Legolas had been conned into helping her refine her technique, mainly due to the elf owing Mairi a very large favour for keeping Suzi-Maria away from him so far.

Having been briefly cornered by the younger woman before Rowan rescued him (implying that something was wrong with Suzi-Maria's hair had sent her running to find a mirror, though Sam and Rowan had been amazed that Mairi's suggestion had worked, even if it had been copied from Buffy: the Vampire Slayer) the Elven Prince had agreed.
The first few hours of Archery Training with a totally unfamiliar recurve bow - very different to Mairi's usual longbow - and a lack of clean dresses that didn't have the flowing sleeves favoured by the elves, had resulted in a suggestion that if she was ever in a fight, Mairi should aim for the person beside whoever she was actually trying to shoot, mostly from the impaired movement of having to tie the ends of your sleeves behind your back, and working through a lack of medication.

Fortunately, after several days of shaking that had led to constant inquiries of if she was cold and needed a shawl and a migraine serious enough for Mairi to be taken to Lord Elrond in his role as a healer, the worst of it was over and she was functioning a lot better, though she still had to be very careful about testing her limits.

From the sound of increasing accuracy that Rowan could hear from the sword ring, however, her grip and aim were improving at a good pace.

Rowan's practice was not going so well, as he kept glancing over to where Mairi was practicing. It wasn't that he was jealous, but he had been around during the Lord of the Rings craze, and he didn't want to see a friend get her heart broken if she was one of the many to develop an unrequited crush on the elf. After the fifth time the instructor shouted at him to 'stop staring at the maidens and focus, for Manwe's sake!' he put it aside and planned to talk to her later.

The shared quarters were surprisingly quiet that night. Suzi-Maria was sulking because she had tried to follow Mairi's example and ask Legolas for Archery Lessons.

Legolas was quite a lot smarter than many fan writers gave him credit for, and had cheerfully encouraged such an idea, and promptly handed her over to Elrond's Captain of Archers, who had ignored her complaints that she wanted one-on-one lessons, and placed her in the elfling Archery class.

Mairi was not so good-natured or fond of Suzi-Maria that she had bothered to try to hide her amusement.

As a result, Suzi-Maria was refusing to acknowledge Mairi beyond frequent glares, somehow oblivious to the fact that Mairi was happy with that turn of events, as she couldn't have cared less what Suzi-Maria thought of her, and ignoring Rowan and Sam, who were just staying out of it.

Mairi was slowly working through a book in Quenya, largely out of sheer desperation for something new to bloody read! A swift reader, she had already all but memorized the books transported from her world, and having to occasionally check against the Quenya-Westron-English dictionary that Sam had managed to put together was proving an interesting challenge.

Sam had also asked an elf to help him learn how to use a sword, putting aside his insistence that he didn't belong here and wanted to go home. Unfortunately, he had asked one of the guards that they had first run into when they arrived at Rivendell, who had been angered by his then-arrogant attitude. Sam had been very thoroughly put through his paces, and was now refusing to move from his bed or even open his eyes.

Rowan had not fared quite so badly, but had taken his share of falls thanks to his distraction, resulting in some very sore and tense muscles. He wasn't quite so far gone as to whimper in pain, but he was certainly moving slower than usual, and finding it difficult to concentrate on the tunic he was trying to finish. Finally, Mairi put her book down long enough to notice. "Right, come over here."

Rowan found that a bit confusing, and responded to the brusque statement with a very eloquent "Er, what?"
Mairi rolled her eyes. "I'm no professional, but I can give a massage, and you look like you need one if you want to be able to move in the morning."

Mairi's slender hands were stronger than they looked, and more talented than Rowan had expected as she worked out the knots. It probably had to do with all the baking she did. "Where did you learn to do that?"

Being face-down, he couldn't see her face, but the amusement in her voice was obvious. "You remember I told you about my twin, right? How we were born far too early, how she nearly didn’t make it out of the hospital, the multitude of health and development problems that resulted, etc.?"

It was difficult to nod in his current position, especially when all he felt like doing was melting into a puddle from a combination of skillful hands and lulling voice, but Rowan managed, used to Mairi's roundabout way of talking. "Well, the medical bills, special needs and education, and so on added up, so Dad was away on business conferences a lot, working his way up so that they could afford it. Medication for epilepsy was a lot more expensive back then, and it didn't help when I was diagnosed with a less severe case before we were five. That meant Mum was at home with three kids under five, one precocious and two with special needs, often with Dad out of the country. We saw Dad giving her a massage one night, and wanted to learn. It did wonders for her stress levels, at least."

Rowan grunted, forcing away the mental images of when his parents had explained what married activities might best described to a five-year-old as a 'massage', even though the massage Mairi had described probably was just a massage. "Thanks. I hope you don't mind doing this a lot, because I don't seem to be getting much better any time soon."

Mairi's expression was recognizable as the 'You're being ridiculous but I won't come out and say so' tone, which he admitted to being a bit too familiar with. Then again, so were most fighters, especially when they had been hit in the wrong place yet still insisted to their consort that they were fine. There was a reason that Arts and Sciences had been referred to as the 'Stitch and Bitch About Consorts/Fighters' circle. Someone had suggested that they do a study on the ratio of gossip to complaining to actual A&S talk, but no-one was sure if they really wanted to know the results. It would probably be bad for the collective ego.

He forced his attention back to Mairi, who was speaking again. "You're being ridiculous and a Defeatist. Most of the people you're practicing against have decades or centuries or even millenia of experience fighting, and are among the best that there is. The fact that you lasted as long as five minutes is frankly amazing."

Oddly, that did help put things in perspective, as did the soothing hands. It took surprisingly little time for him to fall asleep.

Rowan had thought of Mairi as a friend, but not really as pretty, though he admitted that she did usually look like she belonged in historical clothing whenever they held events.

Oh, he freely and cheerfully acknowledged that putting her outside a stall with embroidery or a baby animal of some kind drew attention, but she always seemed to be overshadowed by others. Vivacious Illona, charismatic Isabail, striking yet demure Lilivati or large Tatya were overwhelming personalities in their own right, as well as Mairi's usual companions, which didn't help.

Plus, the two displaced SCAdians were friends, so Rowan couldn't think of Mairi that way.

It wasn't that her features were unattractive; it was just that they had overshot the mark a bit. Mairi was tall and long-limbed to the point of being lanky, with too many freckles to be described as 'cute'
or 'fetching', high cheekbones in a face that was already a bit too long, and a mass of long auburn
hair that was actually lovely – when Mairi had bothered to spend two hours making it lie flat.

She was also a bit ambiguous about her chest, believing that while her breasts might be well-
proportioned, she would prefer something that had people looking her in the eye, rather than the
chest. Mairi did have a very nice smile, but it was rare, and she didn’t have the vivacious manner that
many of the other girls did, which meant that she tended to fall under the radar.

However, watching her in a practical dress loaned to her by the elves, hair drawn back on one side to
stop it from tangling in the bowstring as she practiced archery, made him re-consider the idea of
Mairi being largely unremarkable. After all, being stuck with Suzi-Maria was enough to make
anyone re-consider beauty as a predominant virtue, and while ‘a nice personality’ might be a damning
compliment most of the time, there was something to be said for a ready smile, a kind word and a
listening ear.

It didn’t really help that Elrond’s twin sons had encountered Suzi-Maria, and promptly adopted
Legolas’ tactics of using Mairi as a shield. He still wasn’t sure how she managed to find the whole
thing amusing, rather than being depressed that they weren’t interested in her as anything but a kind
of guard. Rowan calculated the chances of being punched if he mentioned that perhaps she was just
resigned to it by now, and decided that they were far too high for his liking.

When he eventually found a more diplomatic way ask her, however, Mairi only shrugged and said
that she was used to not being noticed, and at least she knew for a fact that the elves were spending
time with her because they wanted to, rather than using her as a stepping stone to one of her friends
or sisters, which was usually the case with any male attention. She found it flattering, in an odd sort
of way.

Rowan didn’t try to make sense of that.

If it wasn't obvious that she was genuinely, miserably, sick, Rowan would have wondered if perhaps
Mairi was doing it on purpose, to get out of putting up with Suzi-Maria for the months it would take
until they got back to their own world.

On the bright side, they got out of the room, as being cooped up was judged as unhelpful to Mairi's
recovery, and not even the most dedicated healer wanted to deal with Suzi-Maria if she managed to
fall ill as well.

Apparently, the Elves thought that such an ordeal was something to be banned by the Middle-Earth
equivalent of a Geneva Convention, though how much of that was due to lack of any real experience
with illness was up for questioning.

It was a good thing that Elves were not affected by common human ailments, because Legolas and
the Sons of Elrond, still Suzi-Maria’s targets, weren’t giving up their shield that easily. However, it
did mean that Mairi had someone to fetch, carry and read to her, and who had the tact not to
comment on the fact that she sounded half-dead.

Sam, who clearly was an only child, as siblings would have taught him better sense, had made such a
remark, and found himself on the wrong end of a baleful glare that actually made him whimper,
despite the effect being lessened by red-rimmed eyes and a runny nose.

It looked very much like it had been patterned off the look that the Baroness dished out when she
had discovered that someone had scheduled the first Court of Festival at 6:30 a.m. last year, thanks to
a typo. People are less inclined to be tolerant and reasonable when they feel as though they are
coughing up a lung every time they breathe deeply.

Once she was back on her feet and reassuring everyone that she was fine and that Lord Elrond had cleared her to be up and about, Mairi's lessons had moved onto speed and accuracy, and then onto moving targets, which she was getting fairly good at, to her trio of teachers relief.

There had been a bit of worry that she might wind up 'getting in her own way' while drawing a bowstring, a risk for any woman who didn't care for a mastectomy, but it turned out all right.

Suzi-Maria, on the other hand, was getting on the Archery-Master's nerves. For one thing, she insisted in going around in dresses with a wide skirt, a train and ridiculously flowing sleeves, no matter how many times someone pointed out that something more streamlined, with fitting sleeves would be far more practical.

And it didn't stop there. Totally convinced that she should automatically be good at everything, she had somehow developed a selective memory in regards to how many times she actually hit the target. Or, more specifically, how often she didn't hit it. The fact that the elflings, who were roughly the same in years but far younger in terms of physical development, and who had barely even held a bow before regularly did a lot better than Suzi-Maria did really said quite a bit in terms of skill.

Rowan and Mairi hadn't known that it was possible for an entire community to breathe a simultaneous (and audible) sigh of relief, but as soon as the Fellowship was out of sight, they did so.

There was a slight falter from Aragorn, Boromir, Gimli and Legolas, who had been in situations when you lived or died by picking up on the small sights and sounds, but they discerned the cause as easily as the two SCA-diens had, and let it go. Suzi-Maria had missed it, thanks to the fact that she was already complaining about how red silk and high heels made for horrible travelling clothes.

Given that every one of them had already pointed this fact out (several times over several days) before they left, the Fellowship did their best to ignore her. There were a few hesitant glances toward Mairi, who had the foresight to bring a spare pair of boots, but those were met with a 'not-in-this-lifetime' glare, and the problematic fact that Mairi was at least three shoe-sizes bigger than Suzi-Maria's dainty feet. The Quest to rid Middle-Earth of the One Ring of Sauron had been in progress for ten minutes…

...and the secondary part of the Fellowship's Quest – getting certain unwanted and reluctantly tolerated members back to Earth – could not come soon enough.
In Which Most People Are Miserable

Chapter Summary

Suzi-Maria discovers that Middle-Earth road-trips are not as fun as the movies make it look, SCAdians are smug, awkwardness abounds, and someone nearly gets punted off Caradhras.

Having presumed that Suzi-Maria had received the message and given up on him (she hadn't), Legolas apparently felt safe in letting down his guard and teaching Mairi how to use long knives for closer combat, since archery became less reliable the closer the enemy got.

The Elven twins had given her two beautifully crafted knives, possibly in thanks for keeping Suzi-Maria away from them, and had started to teach her while they were in Rivendell, as another excuse to avoid the elf-stalker. Mairi still wasn't good enough to actually beat the elf, and probably never would be, but she had managed to hold him off for a full five minutes before he disarmed her, and Legolas had been training for centuries. She had even merited a genuine 'well done'.

Going through a quick warm-down that she had seen the fighters do a thousand times before, Mairi ran her fingers through the untameable hair that had come flying loose during their practice, trying to come up with a method of braiding that would keep it out of her face. "So, theory is all very nice, but what do I do when we get into an actual battle?"

To his credit, Legolas did not try to reassure her, as only an idiot would expect to get through the quest without running into some kind of trouble, no matter how well they had planned. Moving one of her hands aside, he began to swiftly braid one side of her hair into the same style he wore, a style favoured by archers to keep their hair out of the way. "Here, this has always been effective for the archers. When we meet our foes, you stay by me. Two archers together are better co-ordinated, and I have more experience with the style of fighting that you've been learning. I'll do my best to ensure that we both come out alive."

Mairi appreciated that he had not said that he would protect her, as that would have been an empty promise, since the original fellowship had been formed to protect Frodo and stop the One Ring from falling into enemy hands. Living in Mirkwood, Legolas was also more aware than most of just how dangerous the Enemy was.

Boromir came from Gondor, which shared a border with Mordor, but, like Aragorn, had fought mostly the soldiers of the Dark Lord, whereas Legolas had grown up in a forest filled with Giant Spiders, and in the shadow of the Necromancer.

From what Mairi could remember of the supplementary books and notes, the Necromancer was the name Sauron had used as an alias before gaining his current strength. Mairi smiled at the elf in gratitude. "I appreciate that. Oh, look out."

Suzi-Maria had gathered her forces for another try. In this case, her forces were a thoroughly impractical and very revealing dress that made Mairi happily count the minutes before the other girl was freezing and miserable, in the hopes that it might teach her a lesson about appropriate clothing.
Night was falling, and it was still chilly, and if she remembered correctly, it wasn't long before they would be trying to scale Caradhras.

Legolas hastily finished the braid, put his twin knives away and muttered something about going to keep watch, scaling a nearby tree with even-more-impressive-than-usual speed. Suzi-Maria tried to follow, but her dress made it impossible to even get a foothold, much less start climbing.

Elbowing Rowan to make him stop looking quite so openly amused, Mairi hid her own smirk and went to find something to be busy with before Suzi-Maria noticed her and wanted someone to complain to.

Mary-Sues had to have some kind of power that helped them stay looking beautiful, because the ridiculously complex hairstyle that Suzi-Maria had been sporting since they left Imladris had stayed in place. Further evidence lay in the fact that her dress was still more or less in one piece, though by rights it should have been muddy and in tatters from catching on sticks and low-hanging branches, rocks, and some of the wet ground they had crossed.

The Fellowship had been nice enough to let Mairi walk at the rear so she could take off her dress and hike up her chemise as they crossed a broad stream, her modern-day underwear saving her from walking around in sodden clothes for the rest of the day.

The Men were tall enough, their boots waterproof enough that their clothing took little damage, and it was a lot easier for them to duck behind a tree and change, and the Hobbits got to be carried across, but Mairi was still going to have to make a few repairs when they had time to sit down.

Miraculously, Suzi-Maria's Court-Styled dress had survived with only a few tears that Mairi stubbornly refused to spend hours mending, no matter how hard Suzi-Maria begged, and despite being made of silk brocade, it was mostly undamaged even after the water. At the moment, Sam-the-Hobbit was cooking, Sam-the-nuisance and Rowan had joined Merry and Pippen for fighting lessons from Boromir, observed by Aragorn, and Legolas was indulging in a quick nap, having been on dawn watch the previous night. Suzi-Maria had resigned herself to attempting to fix a large tear in her gown, courtesy of a particularly stubborn bush.

Gimli and Gandalf were smoking, and Mairi was using the last of her red and dark green thread to embroider a small stylized holly design on an oilskin cloak. A bough of holly, above a large white rose, were part of her SCA coat of arms, and it was easier than having her cloak constantly mixed up with Rowan's.

Sam had somehow convinced her to sew a small white cross on his, having had the surprising forethought that if the only person who really grasped what was going on was carrying around a small sewing kit, then there was probably a reason, and letting her use a spool of white thread.

Well, not exactly 'let', as Mairi had flatly refused to use her own precious resources, making him cough up his own supplies, but that was beside the point.

The actual reason was that Mairi's last camping trip had been with her third-oldest cousin, whose son managed to tear about every item of clothing he owned in only a few days, and Mairi didn't want to take chances.

Thread, needles, and something to do during their brief rest periods didn't take up much room, and certainly less than if she had tried to bring a book or two.

Finishing the last stitch and tying it off, Mairi looked over to where Suzi-Maria sat. The other girl
was not having nearly as much success, and had probably never even held a needle in her life, if the wide, uneven stiches were anything to go by. Those stiches would never hold more than a slight tug, and would probably only wreck the dress further. Sighing, Mairi walked over, examining it. "You're sewing too far apart and too loose. Those will come undone at the first tug."

She was surprised when Suzi-Maria looked up, almost tearful in frustration. "How, then? You keep complaining that I'm perfect, but you can sew and know how to talk and everyone likes you! I'm supposed to be the heroine, but I can't even fix my own dress! Strong Female Characters shouldn't even be sewing in the first place!"

One day, Mairi really needed to learn how to resist someone in distress; it caused her far too much extra work. "They should if the story takes place in a setting without a readily-available tailor or seamstress. I'll bet you anything that even Aragorn knows a few things, because you can't duck down to the shops in the middle of the wilderness! I happen to like sewing and embroidery, that's all, and I spent a long time learning it, and I'm still not beyond mending, accessories, and some of the simplest embroidery styles. People like me because I don't act as though they should bow down and worship me, or fall in love with a single glance. Perfection is annoying, because it is our flaws that make us beautiful."

Mairi picked up the needle and dress that Suzi-Maria had thrown aside in anger. "Now, look here. You need to make the stitches smaller and closer together. It's all right if they cross over each other. Slow down, and take your time, because it'll only take longer if you have to keep doing it over and over again because of a rush-job." She finished one of the rips with small, neat stitches, then handed it back. "Now try again."

Suzi-Maria wiped her eyes and accepted the help. Annoyingly, being told what she was doing wrong made her suddenly a better seamstress than some of the experienced Laural Guild Mistresses. Biting back a harsh remark, Mairi walked over to where Legolas was starting to move again, bounding over the rocks to try and make out something barely visible in the sky.

Suspecting what was to come, Mairi hastily packed away her sewing and picked up her cloak, just as Sam Gamgee (blast, this was getting confusing) followed Legolas's gaze. "What is that?"

Gimli dismissed it. "Nothing, it's just a wisp of cloud."

Boromir, with the paranoia of a life fighting the evil of Mordor, was not so casual. "It's moving fast... and against the wind."

The 'cloud' was approaching too fast to be natural, given the current wind-speed, and was now close enough to be made out by elf eyes. "Crebain from Dunland!"

Rowan's rather inventive curse was drowned out by Aragorn's equally loud "Hide!"

Mairi and the not-Hobbit-Sam dived under a bush, throwing their brown cloaks over their bodies. Rowan sighed and yanked Suzi-Maria under a rocky overhand. The Fellowship grabbed various items that had been left out and ran for their own hiding places.

The birds flew over without stopping, but Mairi couldn't stem the worry that they had noticed something. She elbowed Sam off her and rolled back out as Gandalf stood back up, his grey robes helping him blend in with the rocks, brushing herself off. "Spies of Saruman, the passage South is being watched."

Rowan and Suzi-Maria untangled themselves and re-joined the group. Boromir helped Aragorn up from where they had been concealed beneath another bush, and Pippin wriggled out from the bottom
of the Hobbit pile. "What do we do, then?"

Suzi-Maria opened her mouth, but shut it again in favour of glaring at Rowan, who she had just discovered had managed to put another tear in her fancy dress when he grabbed it in the rush for cover. Gandalf ignored the by-play. "We take the pass of Caradhras."

As a girl who could count on her fingers the number of times she had even seen snow (two ski-trips, a New York winter when her family was there for just over a year when she was five, twice on vacation and once in a freak storm), thanks to living in sub-tropical Australia, Mairi looked toward the looming mountain with an acute sense of impending misery, echoed by Rowan and Sam.

Damn it.

It was worse than the storm when she lived in New York, which had left everyone snowed in for two days.

Struggling through, and managing through sheer force of will not to glare daggers at Legolas, who was walking on top of the snow without problem, Mairi managed to keep her voice low. "How inappropriate would it be to say that we've clearly died and gone to snowy Hell?"

Suzi-Maria looked absurdly pleased. "Very, and do you know, I'm suddenly very glad that we had snow for at least a week where I lived. It's actually kind of fun to see you struggling, for once, instead of acting like everything is perfectly natural to you."

Mairi glared, too cold and too busy struggling through the drifts to do anything more. "If you pull some 'special power' that lets you remain unaffected by cold and grants the sudden ability to walk on snow like Legolas is, I can't promise to overcome the temptation to thump you. Be told."

Suzi-Maria ignored the threat, leaping on top of the snow just in time to get flattened by a mini-avalanche, courtesy of Saruman.

Rowan fought back an entirely inappropriate grin at the comedic timing, whispering under the cover of Gandalf casting his own spell. "At least you aren't fighting your way through the snow and carrying a Hobbit. It could be worse."

Too cold to be reasonable, Mairi glared at him, too, just as Legolas dragged Gandalf back against the cliff before he could be hit by the stronger avalanche that buried the entire group.

Mairi had given up on swearing during her three years working with young children who repeated literally everything you said, but this quest was seriously testing that resolution. At least she had finally found an advantage to being so tall and lanky, as her arms, thrown up in a useless effort to shield herself, were just under the top of the snow, letting her slowly work her way out.

Muffled yelling somewhere near where Aragorn had just emerged allowed her to locate Sam the Nuisance. Suzi-Maria had managed to get out of the snow by herself, not a hair out of place, and reluctantly began helping Rowan and Natasha dig the fourth of their number out.

Sam sounded like he was trying to compete with Rowan for coming up with the most inventive foul language. Mairi was very close to joining in when they finally extracted him, only to look up and see the Fellowship turning around and heading back down the mountain. Suzi-Maria looked thoroughly
relieved. "Yes! We're getting off this mountain!"

Sam started humming what sounded suspiciously like 'She'll be coming 'round the mountain' but withered under the power of three combined glares. That song was annoying at the best of times, especially when they were actually on a mountain. "Sorry, I'll be quiet now."

Mairi snarled something unkind under her breath, resisting the urge to shove him and Suzi-Maria both off the mountain, and fixing him with a patronizing stare, as if talking to a three-year-old. "Yes, we are going down off Caradhras. Can you remember where we go to next?"

It was easy to tell when each of the others arrived at that conclusion, by the speed at which their faces fell. "Moria. Oh, shit."
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CHAPTER SIX

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Legolas hastily finished the braid, put his twin knives away and muttered something about going to keep watch, scaling a nearby tree with even-more-impressive-than-usual speed. Suzi-Maria tried to follow, but her dress made it impossible to even get a foothold, much less start climbing.

Elbowing Rowan to make him stop looking quite so openly amused, Mairi hid her own smirk and went to find something to be busy with before Suzi-Maria noticed her and wanted someone to complain to.

Mary-Sues had to have some kind of power that helped them stay looking beautiful, because the ridiculously complex hairstyle that Suzi-Maria had been sporting since they left Imladris had stayed in place. Further evidence lay in the fact that her dress was still more or less in one piece, though by rights it should have been muddy and in tatters from catching on sticks and low-hanging branches, rocks, and some of the wet ground they had crossed.

The Fellowship had been nice enough to let Mairi walk at the rear so she could take off her dress and hike up her chemise as they crossed a broad stream, her modern-day underwear saving her from walking around in sodden clothes for the rest of the day.

The Men were tall enough, their boots waterproof enough that their clothing took little damage, and it was a lot easier for them to duck behind a tree and change, and the Hobbits got to be carried across, but Mairi was still going to have to make a few repairs when they had time to sit down.

Miraculously, Suzi-Maria's Court-Styled dress had survived with only a few tears that Mairi stubbornly refused to spend hours mending, no matter how hard Suzi-Maria begged, and despite being made of silk brocade, it was mostly undamaged even after the water. At the moment, Sam-the-Hobbit was cooking, Sam-the-nuisance and Rowan had joined Merry and Pippen for fighting lessons from Boromir, observed by Aragorn, and Legolas was indulging in a quick nap, having been on dawn watch the previous night. Suzi-Maria had resigned herself to attempting to fix a large tear in her gown, courtesy of a particularly stubborn bush.

Gimli and Gandalf were smoking, and Mairi was using the last of her red and dark green thread to embroider a small stylized holly design on an oilskin cloak. A bough of holly, above a large white rose, were part of her SCA coat of arms, and it was easier than having her cloak constantly mixed up with Rowan's.

Sam had somehow convinced her to sew a small white cross on his, having had the surprising forethought that if the only person who really grasped what was going on was carrying around a small sewing kit, then there was probably a reason, and letting her use a spool of white thread.

Well, not exactly 'let', as Mairi had flatly refused to use her own precious resources, making him cough up his own supplies, but that was beside the point.

The actual reason was that Mairi's last camping trip had been with her third-oldest cousin, whose son managed to tear about every item of clothing he owned in only a few days, and Mairi didn't want to take chances.

Thread, needles, and something to do during their brief rest periods didn't take up much room, and certainly less than if she had tried to bring a book or two.
Finishing the last stitch and tying it off, Mairi looked over to where Suzi-Maria sat. The other girl was not having nearly as much success, and had probably never even held a needle in her life, if the wide, uneven stitches were anything to go by. Those stitches would never hold more than a slight tug, and would probably only wreck the dress further. Sighing, Mairi walked over, examining it. "You're sewing too far apart and too loose. Those will come undone at the first tug."

She was surprised when Suzi-Maria looked up, almost tearful in frustration. "How, then? You keep complaining that I'm perfect, but you can sew and know how to talk and everyone likes you! I'm supposed to be the heroine, but I can't even fix my own dress! Strong Female Characters shouldn't even be sewing in the first place!"

One day, Mairi really needed to learn how to resist someone in distress; it caused her far too much extra work. "They should if the story takes place in a setting without a readily-available tailor or seamstress. I'll bet you anything that even Aragorn knows a few things, because you can't duck down to the shops in the middle of the wilderness! I happen to like sewing and embroidery, that's all, and I spent a long time learning it, and I'm still not beyond mending, accessories, and some of the simplest embroidery styles. People like me because I don't act as though they should bow down and worship me, or fall in love with a single glance. Perfection is annoying, because it is our flaws that make us beautiful."

Mairi picked up the needle and dress that Suzi-Maria had thrown aside in anger. "Now, look here. You need to make the stitches smaller and closer together. It's all right if they cross over each other. Slow down, and take your time, because it'll only take longer if you have to keep doing it over and over again because of a rush-job." She finished one of the rips with small, neat stitches, then handed it back. "Now try again."

Suzi-Maria wiped her eyes and accepted the help. Annoyingly, being told what she was doing wrong made her suddenly a better seamstress than some of the experienced Laural Guild Mistresses. Biting back a harsh remark, Mairi walked over to where Legolas was starting to move again, bounding over the rocks to try and make out something barely visible in the sky.

Suspecting what was to come, Mairi hastily packed away her sewing and picked up her cloak, just as Sam Gamgee (blast, this was getting confusing) followed Legolas's gaze. "What is that?"

Gimli dismissed it. "Nothing, it's just a wisp of cloud."

Boromir, with the paranoia of a life fighting the evil of Mordor, was not so casual. "It's moving fast... and against the wind."

The 'cloud' was approaching too fast to be natural, given the current wind-speed, and was now close enough to be made out by elf eyes. "Crebain from Dunland!"

Rowan's rather inventive curse was drowned out by Aragorn's equally loud "Hide!"

Mairi and the not-Hobbit-Sam dived under a bush, throwing their brown cloaks over their bodies. Rowan sighed and yanked Suzi-Maria under a rocky overhand. The Fellowship grabbed various items that had been left out and ran for their own hiding places.

The birds flew over without stopping, but Mairi couldn't stem the worry that they had noticed something. She elbowed Sam off her and rolled back out as Gandalf stood back up, his grey robes helping him blend in with the rocks, brushing herself off. "Spies of Saruman, the passage South is being watched."

Rowan and Suzi-Maria untangled themselves and re-joined the group. Boromir helped Aragorn up
from where they had been concealed beneath another bush, and Pippin wriggled out from the bottom of the Hobbit pile. "What do we do, then?"

Suzi-Maria opened her mouth, but shut it again in favour of glaring at Rowan, who she had just discovered had managed to put another tear in her fancy dress when he grabbed it in the rush for cover. Gandalf ignored the by-play. "We take the pass of Caradhras."

As a girl who could count on her fingers the number of times she had even seen snow (two ski-trips, a New York winter when her family was there for just over a year when she was five, twice on vacation and once in a freak storm), thanks to living in sub-tropical Australia, Mairi looked toward the looming mountain with an acute sense of impending misery, echoed by Rowan and Sam.

Damn it.

It was worse than the storm when she lived in New York, which had left everyone snowed in for two days.

Struggling through, and managing through sheer force of will not to glare daggers at Legolas, who was walking on top of the snow without problem, Mairi managed to keep her voice low. "How inappropriate would it be to say that we've clearly died and gone to snowy Hell?"

Suzi-Maria looked absurdly pleased. "Very, and do you know, I'm suddenly very glad that we had snow for at least a week where I lived. It's actually kind of fun to see you struggling, for once, instead of acting like everything is perfectly natural to you."

Mairi glared, too cold and too busy struggling through the drifts to do anything more. "If you pull some 'special power' that lets you remain unaffected by cold and grants the sudden ability to walk on snow like Legolas is, I can't promise to overcome the temptation to thump you. Be told."

Mairi ignored the threat, leaping on top of the snow just in time to get flattened by a mini-avalanche, courtesy of Saruman.

Rowan fought back an entirely inappropriate grin at the comedic timing, whispering under the cover of Gandalf casting his own spell. "At least you aren't fighting your way through the snow and carrying a Hobbit. It could be worse."

Too cold to be reasonable, Mairi glared at him, too, just as Legolas dragged Gandalf back against the cliff before he could be hit by the stronger avalanche that buried the entire group.

Mairi had given up on swearing during her three years working with young children who repeated literally everything you said, but this quest was seriously testing that resolution. At least she had finally found an advantage to being so tall and lanky, as her arms, thrown up in a useless effort to shield herself, were just under the top of the snow, letting her slowly work her way out.

Muffled yelling somewhere near where Aragorn had just emerged allowed her to locate Sam the Nuisance. Suzi-Maria had managed to get out of the snow by herself, not a hair out of place, and reluctantly began helping Rowan and Natasha dig the fourth of their number out.

Sam sounded like he was trying to compete with Rowan for coming up with the most inventive foul language. Mairi was very close to joining in when they finally extracted him, only to look up and see
the Fellowship turning around and heading back down the mountain. Suzi-Maria looked thoroughly relieved. "Yes! We're getting off this mountain!"

Sam started humming what sounded suspiciously like 'She'll be coming 'round the mountain' but withered under the power of three combined glares. That song was annoying at the best of times, especially when they were actually on a mountain. "Sorry, I'll be quiet now."

Mairi snarled something unkind under her breath, resisting the urge to shove him and Suzi-Maria both off the mountain, and fixing him with a patronizing stare, as if talking to a three-year-old. "Yes, we are going down off Caradhras. Can you remember where we go to next?"

It was easy to tell when each of the others arrived at that conclusion, by the speed at which their faces fell. "Moria. Oh, shit."
The return trip down Caradhras was a relief in that it got them out of the bloody snow, but not so much in that they were now headed to Moria, where they would be encountering an army of orcs and a Balrog. The (mostly) unwilling visitors from Earth knew the basics of how to fight, but had never yet been in a real battle. At least, not one where someone was seriously trying to kill them.

The various Collages and Baronies taking up to a week out of their lives to declare war on each other every few months didn't count. In those wars, the worst that would happen was some severe bruising and occasionally a sprain or fracture. Here, the worst that would happen was that they would end up dead.

And not in the 'lie down and pretend to be dead - unofficial prizes for the most dramatic, endless ribbing if you ruin it by tripping over someone' sense.

Sitting outside to Doors of Durin and feeling thoroughly bored as Gandalf tried to open them, Rowan counted up a rough estimate. "Back home, we'd probably be half-way through May Crown at the moment."

Boromir looked over with interest. "Oh? What is May Crown? What would you be doing?"

Mairi shrugged. "A contest of arms to determine the rulers for the year after next. I'd be a wallflower watching the other dancers and waiting for either a group dance or for someone to take pity on me and ask."

Rowan copied the gesture. "There's always someone who feels sorry for those who lose in the first round; I'd probably be accepting a drink on them and trying to work up the courage to ask a girl to dance, since she'd have to teach me on the go. Most girls don't like looking stupid because their partner keeps tripping over their own feet."

Boromir rose to his feet, putting his sword down. "Well, we do not seem to be going anywhere for the moment, so perhaps my lady will oblige us with a lesson?"

He bowed and extended a hand to the girl in question. Mairi smiled as she stood up, enjoying the novel sensation of someone asking her to dance, rather than the other way around, when she was usually refused on the grounds that they either didn't know how to dance, or already had a partner. "Pretend you're doing a drill."
She lifted her skirt to just below her ankles, letting them see her feet, but mindful of propriety. Suzi-Maria trying to bend anything that breathed into falling in love with her was bad enough, not even helped by the fact that Suzi-Maria seemed to be failing miserably. Mairi didn't want Boromir's honour forcing him into the same thing just because he'd accidentally seen more than was appropriate. It was the same reason they had let her go last when crossing the river.

She sighed inwardly; you knew that you were a history nut when you could look at low-cut gowns and not bat an eye, but got uncomfortable at the sight of bare ankles and elbows.

She focused on how her own teachers had explained dancing to her. "We have a lack of girls to partner, so I'll stick with a group dance for now. The most important steps are doubles and singles. A 'single' is like this," She stepped to one side and brought the other foot to close. "A double is basically two singles; one, two, three, close. You try."

Feeling slightly ridiculous, Boromir and Rowan did so, joined by the Hobbits, who had been watching. Mairi nodded, a lot more confident in teacher mode. "Good. Now, the Cassandre Branle – no, I don't know why it is called that – is the first and simplest. It's easier to keep time with music, but we'll just have to do our best. So, double-left, double-right, double-left, double-right, double-left, single-left, double-right.

She walked them slowly through the steps. "Then we repeat that as the musicians speed up every round." She smiled faintly. "That's why we call it a branle, because people drop out as it goes faster, and the last one standing wins. Again, it is better with music, but the only other one I can really hum to is the Officer's Branle, and that needs partners. Shall we try it properly?"

Her singing voice was next to non-existent, but 'da-da-da-da-da-da' to the beat wasn't too bad, and Branle's were easy to keep count of, and this one didn't require partners, so there was no arguing over who was stuck pretending to be the opposite gender. That was one argument that she was glad to avoid, even if she did have the excuse of physical strength as a deciding factor.

To the side, Suzi-Maria watched. It wasn't fair. Boromir had asked Plain-Jane Mairi to dance, but avoided beautiful Suzi-Maria like she had the plague. Gimli and Legolas had even taken a break from bickering to join in the dance lesson. There was much tripping over each other when someone misjudged a step, the Hobbits being the size of children and the Men not used to making their steps smaller to compensate, or when Boromir stepped too far to avoid being bumped into and trod on the hem of Mairi's dress, sending her stumbling. But she laughed it off, probably thanks to her self-admission of growing up 'one-of-the-guys', and kept dancing, while Suzi-Maria, whose stunning looks should have seen her as the center of attention, stood on the side-lines.

It wasn't fair! Suzi-Maria was supposed to be the one that all the hot guys fawned over, not some sarcastic, mousey woman who didn't even seem to know what romance was!

She was supposed to be an accomplished warrior, to sing and sew and play music beautifully, but no-one would teach her to fight, though they were perfectly willing to train the others, and unless it was to ask her to mend something, no-one cared that she had suddenly developed perfect needlework skills!

Suzi-Maria was supposed to be the one to save the day, despite not being a Canon Character, but it was obvious that none of the Fellowship believed her capable of saving a kitten from drowning, much less save them from danger!
Angrily, she kicked a rock, which bounced off another and landed in the water with a small plop. She threw another, watching the ripples spread. That made her feel a bit better, but it didn't change the fact that someone who wouldn't even be in Middle-Earth without Suzi-Maria's help, was now ruining everything for her.

It was even a relief when Gandalf snapped at them to be quiet and let him concentrate on figuring out the password. Well, not in so many words, but the intent was there.

Well, here was a chance to prove that she could be useful! Trying to look wise and mysterious, she walked over to where Gandalf had just sat down, looking annoyed and muttering darkly to himself. "Look, it's a riddle – oof!"

Suzi-Maria glared at Mairi, who had 'accidentally' bumped into her, stopping her from completing the sentence. The older woman glared right back, voice pitched low as she started on a lecture about the travesty and un-originality of 'line-stealers', under the guise of helping Suzi-Maria up. Meanwhile, Frodo, who had been examining the inscription when Suzi-Maria tried to assert herself, finished off the lines. "'Speak friend and enter'. What's the Elvish word for 'friend'?"

Gandalf's face took on the carefully blank expression of one who is either trying very hard not to laugh, or refusing to show that they are kicking themselves for missing the far-too-obvious. "Mellon."

With the grinding sound of stone on stone, the Doors of Durin slowly opened, to nearly everyone's relief. Suzi-Maria bounced forward, hoping to show off her boundless compassion by comforting Gimli when he discovered the corpses, whether he wanted her to comfort him or not, but Mairi, Rowan and Sam hung back, exchanging glances and keeping well off to the side.

Um, why was Mairi unslinging her bow, and why did the boys look so grim?

Meanwhile, her attention was drawn back to the Fellowship by Boromir, who was looking grim and lightly pale. "This is no mine; it's a tomb. We make for the gap of Rohan, we should never have come here! Now get out of here, GET OUT!"

His words were punctuated by a scream from Frodo, who had been grabbed by a slimy tentacle that had emerged from the lake. The Hobbit's scream was echoed by Mairi, whose pre-emptive shot, while the Fellowship was drawing their weapons, had drawn the Watcher's attention to her, as well. She ducked a tentacle, which the boys were now hacking at, firing off another shot as Frodo was hoisted into the air. An arrow from Legolas followed less than a second later, connecting with a nerve that made then tentacle drop away.

Boromir and Aragorn were fighting the other limbs, when dozens more suddenly exploded from the water, along with the Watcher itself. Mairi screamed again, faltering, and the Watcher grabbed this annoying human who dared to fight it. Sam and Rowan ran to her rescue as Gandalf, Legolas and Gimli concentrated on the Watcher itself and the two Men tried to get Frodo free.

If it had been Suzi-Maria, she would have fallen gracefully into someone's waiting arms, but Mairi only managed to knock both boys down as she landed on top of them, rolling as she hit the ground and springing back to her feet. The boys untangled themselves from each other and scrambled upright as Aragorn caught Frodo, not even waiting for Gandalf's yell before they ran for the entrance to Moria.
The Watcher did not seem eager to let them get away that lightly, however, and they were forced to dodge several more falling rocks as the Doors were brought down behind them, trapping the Fellowship plus four in the pitch-black, corpse-strewn darkness of Moria.

The darkness was illuminated by Gandalf's staff as he picked himself up. "We now have no choice: we must face the long dark of Moria. Be on your guard, there are older and fouler things than orcs in the deep dungeons of the world."

Suzi-Maria tried to remember what came next, gulped, and decided to stick to the Wizard like glue, at least until they got to the bit with the Balrog. Behind her, Rowan and Sam tried to lift Mairi, who was white, cold and shaking uncontrollably, clearly going into shock. Very shaken themselves, they met with very little success until Legolas came over, wrapping a slender arm around Mairi and steadying her, carefully pulling her fingers from the death-grip she still had on her bow. "Here, I'll find something to dry your bowstring with."

Ironically, the matter-of-fact statement did more to shake Mairi back to reality than any amount of empty reassurances that Rowan and Sam had been attempting to think up (they certainly were not safe now, no matter how comforting the statement was intended to be).

Hearing him, Boromir also approached. This reaction was not uncommon in the newly-recruited soldiers he led, once their first taste of the realities of battle sunk in. His upbringing suggested that a lady was to be treated more delicately than he would normally treat a soldier, but the principle was the same. They needed someone to be there, and willing to listen when they were ready to talk. As Legolas searched his pack for the soft cloth he used to treat his own bow-string, Boromir took his place supporting the woman who had become a friend.

He just hoped that the elf finished drying the bowstring and returned before the tears came.

Chapter End Notes

I hope I handled the Watcher in the Water all right.

As for the last line, trust me, very few things scare grown men like a girl crying. I asked the guys I know what their first reaction would be if they saw a girl burst into tears. The overwhelming response went along the lines of 'hope for/find someone else who can deal with it'.
Chapter Seven

Chapter Summary

In which Moria does not offer a warm welcome

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

To Boromir's very sincere relief, Rowan took over before Mairi broke down, and he respected that she did her best to keep her mild hysteria quiet, given that they still didn't know what dangers lurked in Moria.

Making camp on a ledge, they settled down for the... night? Still-Dark-But-More-Than-Earlier? Whatever. Sam, who had been making an effort to get on Rowan and Mairi's good side, finally broke the silence. "Hey, Mairi, what's the difference between the Officer's Branle and the Sargent's Branle?"

Mairi looked up from where Boromir had managed to scavenge some broken pieces of wood into a small fire, sheltered in an alcove, doing some much-needed mending. The fight with the Watcher and trying to navigate through caves with very little light to go by was very hard on everyone's clothing. "Girls jump in the Officer's Branle, boys jump in the Sargent's. Otherwise, absolutely nothing."

Legolas, just coming off his turn at taking Watch, came over to where she sat, as Suzi-Maria was still avoiding the other woman. "How do you dance that one?"

Mairi set her mending to one side, standing up again with his aid. "It's not hard." She took his hand, glancing around the small space. "Not enough room to dance it properly, but we'll make do. First is double-left, double-right, double-left, double-right, which is the start for every Branle, with one or two exceptions. Then eight single steps, then an optional twirl," Mairi spun under the elf's arm, "now put your hands on my waist."

Legolas hesitated. Tolkien had been born in the Victorian Era, which had very strict rules on inter-gender contact, and that was very much reflected in his writing. Mairi managed not to sigh in exasperation. "It's nothing inappropriate, relax. Now I jump, and you direct me to your other side."

She smiled reassuringly as he did so, continuing the lesson. "Rowan, come here a moment. Now, eight singles again, optional spin, jump and turn."

This time, Rowan lifted her, staggering slightly. They had been slightly out of synch, and while Mairi could hardly be called fat, she wasn't a twig, either, and the weeks of walking and learning to fight had caused her to build up a lot of muscle. "Oof. Sorry, you're – "

Mairi cut him off with a vaguely lethal look. "No comments on my weight, please, or go partner Suzi-Maria, she's lighter than I am. That's why one partner jumps and the other one merely directs."
Legolas seized the opportunity to direct the discussion away. "That would certainly make sense in the second dance, where the ladies would direct the men."

Mairi smiled and nodded. "Yes. Have you ever tried to lift a grown man in full armor? It's not exactly easy, even when they're wearing normal garb. Plus, archery is more shoulder and back muscles than arm muscles, so that doesn't help me."

Rowan lifted an eyebrow, still a bit sheepish over the miss-step. "You did all right with Yorick."

Mairi lifted an eyebrow right back. "Yorick is on the lighter side, wears leather armor, and we had music to go to at the time. Besides, I'm the only girl he knows who isn't either likely to be facing him on the field, or a consort to someone else. Don't read so much into it."

Rowan smirked. "So I'm imagining things when he asked after you when you were away sick those two weeks, or how he always looks to see if you are watching and somehow lasts a lot longer when you are? Or how you turn pink when he comes over to talk, or how everyone knows you aren't the person to talk to about fixing armor, but he asked you anyway, so you could wait together until the armorer showed up?"

Mairi was turning a lovely shade of pink at the present moment, too. "He's nice, and attention of any sort isn't so common that I'm going to tell people to go away when they actually seek me out, instead of including me just to be polite."

Rowan was grinning openly as he teased her. "So does that mean I can tell him that you're just shy when he's agonizing over whether or not you being quiet means you want him to go away?"

Mairi picked up a small rock and threw it at him, picked up the mending again, and returned to sewing, her cheeks still tinted red. "He's too polite for his own good, and isn't likely to make a move on me until he works up the courage to find out if the girl he is romantically interested in likes him back. Besides, he is moving away soon." She caught Rowan's look of surprise, "He was talking to Adam about it last fighter practice. Jess and I heard him while we were at the Sign-in table, and he apologized to me in case he had raised expectations."

Somehow, the fact that Mairi could also suffer from unrequited crushes was a great relief to Suzi-Maria.

In Suzi-Maria's opinion, there was no need for so much drama as Gandalf increased the light from his staff, illuminating a huge, cathedral-like cavern. "Behold! The great realm of the Dwarve City of Dwarrowdelf!"

It was more magnificent than any of them had the words to describe, though littered with rubble and fallen pillars, though Sam-the-Hobbit came the closest. "Now there's an eye-opener, and no mistake."

Mairi looked ready to swoon at the sight, fangirling the scenery, rather than the characters, her eyes glowing with almost child-like wonder, which Suzi-Maria found absurd. The woman could hold conversations with some of the hottest beings in existence without even a hint of a swoon, but became weak in the knees over scenery and architecture?

Some people were just weird!
Besides, it definitely stopped being so wonderful when the very next thing they saw was a room filled with corpses and a large stone coffin.

The last echoes of the dead Orc and the bucket falling down the well and beyond slowly died away, replaced by the sound of many, many running feet, and a strange chittering noise. Abruptly, Suzi-Maria remembered what came next.

She and her friends had paid more attention to the extreme sexiness of Men and Elves in a pitched battle, so the details were a little fuzzy, but this was the first big fight scene that Suzi-Maria would have the chance to take part in! Ha, now she could show everyone that Natasha wasn't the only one who could hold up her end in a fight, and Suzi-Maria wasn't about to let herself be grabbed and swung around by a big squid!

Suddenly, she was very glad that she could inexplicably acquire new skills at a whim, despite not being able to do so until three minutes ago. With an army of Orcs and Goblins on the way (and that Ugly Thing that Legolas had looked so Hot fighting in the movie), suddenly having Mad Fighting Skillz sounded like a very good thing. She might even finally have the chance to impress a certain Elvish Prince!

For now, she avoided looking at her Supporting Sidekick Companions, so as not to distract herself, drawing the sword that she hadn't been carrying five seconds ago. Sam and Rowan were sticking close to Aragorn and Boromir, who had just avoided getting his head shot off and muttered something about a cave-troll, while Mairi was lurking near Legolas.

Unusually near, come to think of it, especially for someone who claimed to be above lusting based solely on looks.

Then there was no more time for thought.

Gimli brandished an axe, grief turning to battle-rage. "Let them come! There is one dwarf yet in Moria to still draw blood!"

In a rare moment of mental synchronization, the four visitors from Regular Earth wished that they could be so enthusiastic.

Given how tightly packed the goblins were as they rushed through the shattered doors, it didn't really matter if Natasha's arrows didn't hit exactly the Orc she was aiming for. Frankly, she could have been meters off target, and still hit someone.

For now, her main concern was to stay alive.

This actually worked, passably. That large cut on her hip, which had somehow missed anything vital, glancing over her hipbone thanks to a sudden and very uncomfortable twist, was definitely going to leave a mark, but at least it wasn't anything too debilitating.

Abandoning her bow for a moment as she dodged a blow from the Troll's massive club, Mairi drew her twin blades. A sincere reluctance to get close and stay close was why she had never become a Heavy fighter, but Archers and Rapier fighters all valued the 'Attack-and-Swift-Retreat' method. Mairi valued it even more, since long limbs and quick feet topped the twisted, deformed build of an Orc, and she could freak out over having killed another living being once the fight was over with.
Rowan would have felt a lot better about running away if they were not being very swiftly pursued by even more Orcs, swarming like ants out of every available gap and crevice in the walls, floor and ceiling, who not only out-numbered them, but were very quickly out-pacing the Fellowship.

Then again, he would take being surrounded and massively out-gunned by thousands of Orcs, rather than the Orcs scurrying away from the ominous red glow and smell of brimstone. Boromir's tone suggested that he knew very well what was coming, but would rather not have it confirmed, despite his question. "What is this new devilry?"

The query was punctuated with a loud roar and a very unhappy expression from Gandalf. "A Balrog. A demon of the ancient world. This foe is beyond any of you… RUN!"

Sam couldn't let it go. "He couldn't have said that last bit first?"

Rowan grabbed the other youth's wrist, dragging him on. "Shut up and move! Mairi can explain the rest later!"

The woman in question, freckles standing out vividly against her pale skin, picked up her already swift pace. "Keep going, or there won't BE a later!"

The jump over the gap in the stairs wasn't too bad, all things considered, though she staggered several steps on the landing, pulling her bow off her shoulder again. She didn't have a prayer of hitting anything at this range, but at least she could help keep their heads down. She was better at long-distance shooting, either way. Mairi backed out of the way as Gandalf followed, then Gimli, Rowan, Boromir, Sam, Merry and Pippin. Suzi-María proved herself useful at last by sailing over the gap, now a lot larger thanks to part of the stairs breaking off, pulling Sam with her.

Somehow, she had missed the minor fact that it would have been a lot better for her to bring Frodo, as harsh as that sounded, but too late for that.

Suzi-María's strength was flagging, despite her Mary-Sue stamina, by the time they reached the bridge of Kazad-dum, and it was only the presence of the twelve people behind her (at least three of whom probably wouldn't mind running her over if they had to) that helped her make it across.

Despite the need to get out of there as quickly as possible, the entire Fellowship turned to watch as Gandalf stopped half way across the bridge, drawing Glamdring and facing the Balrog head on. "I am a servant of the secret fire, wielder of the flame of Arnor. Dark fire will not avail you, Flame of Udún!"

The Balrog decided to test that theory by bringing forth a sword of its own, glowing with the heat of a forge. It was a very apt simile, as the two blades clashed in a shower of sparks, not unlike a hammer against an anvil.

The Balrog came off second-best, and Gandalf slammed his staff onto the bridge as the Balrog took its first step onto the narrow stone. "Go back to the Shadow! You shall not pass!"

The bridge cracked, bringing the Balrog down, but Gandalf did not re-join them, as the fiery whip that the Balrog had also been holding wrapped around his ankle, dragging the Wizard down with the demon.
Frodo screamed his denial, struggling as Boromir bodily dragged him away and out of Moria. The Orcs, with their impeccable timing, returned almost as soon as the Balrog was gone, and it was only a matter of time before their sheer numbers found another way out.

Suzi-Maria didn't get the chance to enjoy the sunlight and fresh air before she was dragged off to the side. The Fellowship ignored the other four, almost crippled with grief, but a lack of personal sentiment didn't make the Visitors any less distraught. The two boys were pale; the shock of the fight and of losing Gandalf clear in their faces, and it was only a matter of time before the close encounter with Death hit them.

Suzi-Maria wasn't very good with sympathy or saying the right thing, no matter how hard she tried. "Well, at least we made it out. I mean, no one else died, and Gandalf was a self-sacrifice."

Unobservant as she sometimes was, Suzi-Maria realized her blunder of words about the same time that she realized that Sam's personal policy of not hitting girls was about the only thing stopping him from actually punching her. Mairi's eyes were bright with fury and unshed tears. "Now do you see what Middle-Earth is like? It isn't a game where the pretty girl gets the handsome boy! It's war and death and suffering, and almost no-one really gets their Happily Ever After! Why did you have to bring us here?"

The older woman lost the battle with tears, almost collapsing as Rowan tried to support his friend, Sam stood helplessly, Shock starting to set in, and Suzi-Maria could only stare.

It wasn't like she had expected Middle-Earth to be like this! She had just wanted the fantasy of the beautiful heroine having the handsome prince fall in love with her as they both saved the day and their sidekicks cheered. They couldn't blame her for wanting a fantasy that every girl in the world had shared at some point.

Was it really so much her fault that the sidekicks were real people, instead of the abstracts that were there to make her look even better, or that they weren't enjoying themselves without her Mary-Sue advantages?

Chapter End Notes

A bit of Fighting, a bit of down-time, and some harsh wake-up calls. 'Mary-Sue Advantages', in case anyone was wondering, is basically anything thoroughly unrealistic that helps a character bypass reality, such as months of hiking in a ball-gown, being able to fight off an army with exactly zero combat training etc.
Chapter Eight

Chapter Summary

Lothlorien, annoyance and an important-yet-cliched discovery

When all you want to do is fall down and either sleep or cry after a battle for your lives and the loss of a comrade, the threat of Orcs chasing you is not the happiest idea, even if it is about the only thing that gets you up and moving.

Despite shaking legs that Mairi was sure was going to give out on her with every stride, the Fellowship made it to the borders of Lothlorien. Even only on the outskirts, the Golden Wood was beautiful, far more beautiful than even a person's most vivid imagination could conjure. Of course, it would be even nicer if the Fellowship were not currently being held at arrow-point by a smug-sounding Marchwarden. "The dwarve breathes so loud we could have shot him in the dark."

Coming right on the heels of Gimil's statement that he had the eyes of a hawk and the ears of a fox, the dwarve in question only glared, letting out what sounded suspiciously like a growl. Sam kicked Suzi-Maria in the ankle when she looked as though she were about to make a snide remark. Aragorn stepped in, trying to smooth things over, while Sam translated for the non-elvish speakers. "Haldir of Lorien. We come here for help. We need your protection."

Gimli was not so enthusiastic, keeping a sharp eye on the arrows less than six inches from his face. "Aragorn, these woods are perilous, we should go back!"

Unfortunately, not an option. "You have entered the realm of the Lady of the Wood. You cannot go back."

They were taken to a platform high into the trees, over much protesting from Gimli, Sam, and to an extent, Mairi, all of whom were far from fond of heights, and even further from enthusiastic at the idea of climbing up a flimsy rope ladder into possibly the highest tree any of them had seen. Still, they did eventually get up there, after Haldir gave his oath that they would not let any of the Fellowship fall. Mairi planted herself firmly in the centre of the platform and refused to budge, even if it did make for something of a silly picture as Haldir addressed them.

Legolas, as a fellow elf, was first to draw the Marchwarden's attention, both speaking in Elvish. "Legolas Thranduilion, welcome. It has been long since we laid eyes on our Mirkwood kin."

Mairi thought that she saw a faint tightening around Legolas's mouth at the title of Mirkwood, but his tone remained civil. "Our Fellowship stand in your debt, Haldir of Lorien."

Haldir nodded and moved past Boromir, glancing briefly at the Man, before settling on Aragorn. "Ah, Aragorn of the Dunedain. You are known to us."

Aragorn tilted his head in acknowledgement. Haldir was looking curiously at the Hobbits when Gimli interrupted, proving that Elf-Dwarve hostility was running as strong as ever. "So much for the legendary courtesy of the Elves! Speak words that we can all understand!"
Haldir glared, his tone icy. "We have not had dealings with Dwarves since the Dark Days."

Mairi didn't bother trying to translate Gimli's reply, though Rowan and Sam looked impressed, while Suzi-Maria, her ability to automatically understand any language still working, blinked in wide-eyed shock, looking almost comically appalled. Aragorn put a hand on Gimli's shoulder. "That was not so courteous."

Finally, Haldir's eyes landed on Frodo, widening slightly. Mairi wasn't about to openly suggest that he looked almost fearful, even if it was the closest description. "You bring great evil here. You can go no further."

Aragorn and Haldir were arguing softly in Elvish, two other guards were pretending not to eavesdrop, Legolas was keeping an eye on the surrounding woods, and everyone else was sitting around looking edgy. Finally, Mairi stood and walked over to where Legolas stood, trying to keep as far from the edge as possible. Seeing her try to simultaneously move closer to him and stay away from the edge, Legolas gave a faint smile. "You do not like heights, my lady?"

Mairi frowned. "What was your first clue? Either way, you look upset about something, and it's more than the loss of Gandalf."

Legolas also frowned, leading her to sit against the tree-trunk, to Mairi's obvious relief. "You spent a great deal of time in the Rivendell Library before we set out on the Quest. What do you know about the History of Mirkwood?"

Mairi shrugged. "It was originally Greenwood the Great, but was re-named as the elves who lived there fought a rear-guard action against the forces of Darkness. Current ruler is the Elvenking Thranduil, of the House of Oropher. Supposed to be a very intimidating personage."

That drew a faint smile. "Father has been called that, yes. My home was re-named Mirkwood by the Elves of the other realms, who are kept safe and hidden by the Rings of Power that their rulers wear, but we still call it Greenwood. We have no special magic, and we live under the shadow of the Necromancer's tower, yet we have managed to keep our home mostly safe and under Elvish control, by no means other than ourselves. It is... aggravating, to hear my home called Mirkwood, with the unspoken implication that we have somehow failed in our defence of our realm."

Mairi nodded, sympathetic, then froze at the sound of pounding feet below them. They were too heavy to be an elf, especially as the Lothlorien Elves tended to travel through the trees when patrolling. That meant that the Orcs of Moria had followed them.

Most of the other Elves melted into the trees, and Haldir and Aragorn instantly shut up. Rowan clapped a hand over Suzi-Maria's mouth before she could ask what was going on, and Boromir, also sitting close to the trunk, placed a hand on Mairi's shoulder, a warrior offering support to a comrade. Risking the loss of any respect that she may have gained as a sibling-in-arms, Mairi promptly buried her face in the Man's shoulder, shivering in fear.

She would apologize in the morning, when she was no longer terrified of the fact that only a few feet of platform and a very steep drop lay between her and an army of Orcs.

Morning could not have come soon enough, as far as Mairi was concerned, but at least the incident had prompted a message to bring the travellers to meet the Lord and Lady, even if they did have to go blindfolded.
Originally, only Gimli would have been blindfolded, but the Dwarve justifiably objected to being the only one singled out, and Aragorn finally announced that all of them would go blindfolded.

The 'now shut up and get moving' went unsaid, but the general sentiment was very clear.

Even though she seemed to be tripping over every single twig or pebble in Lothlorien, Mairi couldn't quite bring herself to disagree with the Ranger.

As a whole, Elves were stunning creatures, but Galadriel of Lothlorien took it to all new heights. Clad in glimmering white, with long golden hair and surrounded by a kind of ethereal glow, the Lady of Lothlorien far eclipsed even Tolkien's most flattering description.

Her husband, Celeborn, was also impressive, but in a more understated way, silver to his Galadriel's gold, his face stern and proud as he looked at the Fellowship. "The Enemy knows that you have entered these lands, what hope you once had in secrecy is now gone." His brow furrowed for the swiftest moment. "Eight there are here yet thirteen there were set out from Rivendell. Tell me, where is Gandalf, for I much desire to speak with him. I can no longer see him from afar."

Galadriel provided a partial answer. "Gandalf the Grey did not pass the borders of this land. He has fallen into shadow."

Celeborn gave his wife what Mairi had long ago termed a 'Couple Look', accepting the reply and promising to speak about it later. There was a long moment of grieving silence among the Fellowship, before Legolas finally spoke. "He was taken by both shadow and flame, a Balrog of Morgoth, for we went needlessly into the net of Moria."

Galadriel shook her magnificent head. "Needless were none of the deeds of Gandalf in life, we do not yet know their full purpose."

It was not hard to pick up on Gimli's grief and self-recrimination, and Galadriel's distant face grew compassionate. "Do not let the great emptiness of Kazad-dum fill your heart, Gimli son of Gloin, for the lands of this world grow full with peril, and in all places love is mingled with grief."

Though Boromir was blocked from Mairi's sight, she could hear what sounded a lot like a choked sob, which Celeborn thankfully spoke over, perhaps sensing that the Man of Gondor was on the edge of breaking down with the grief that they had all been fighting to control until they had reached a safe place to let it out. "What now becomes of this Fellowship? Without Gandalf hope is lost."

Though he gazed at the Fellowship, Mairi got the impression that the question was at least partially directed to the Elf Lady beside him, who obliged with an answer. "The Quest stands upon the edge of a knife. Stray but a little, and it will fail, to the ruin of all."

Beside her, Mairi could see Rowan grip Sam-the-human's arm to keep him upright at the Doom-and-Gloom announcement. Galadriel also seemed to notice, trying to lighten the atmosphere as her gaze turned to Frodo. "Yet hope remains, while company is true. Do not let your hearts be troubled. Go now and rest, for you are weary with sorrow and much toil. Tonight, you shall sleep in peace."

"You know, it's not what I thought it would be like." Mairi looked up from where she had been checking over her weapons, and yearning for nothing more than a hot bath, which she had severely underappreciated before starting on the Quest. She had been feeling a very small amount of pity toward Suzi-Maria, who was clearly out of her depth, even though she was still furious over bringing the four of them in the first place, and even moreso after Moria. "Pardon?"
Suzi-Maria looked very relieved as she explained, as everyone else had taken to pretending she didn't exist, no matter what she said. Even Sam, who often sided with her for solidarity's sake, had been quiet since the outburst when they finally escaped the mines. "Middle-Earth. The Fellowship Quest. Everything. It isn't like I thought it would be. I dreamed of coming here and saving the day, but it's much harder than I believed, and I know that everyone thinks that I'm just dead weight."

Mairi rolled her eyes, not in the best of tempers. "We don't think you're dead weight; you are dead weight, and of course it's hard! Did you think you just had to randomly wave a sword around, without a clue how to use it, and armies would fall before you?"

From the uncomfortable look on Suzi-Maria's face, that was probably exactly what she had thought. She wasn't about to actually say so, however. "If only that spell…"

She trailed off dramatically. In the middle of sharpening a knife, Mairi put down the whetstone. "If you tell me that you or Sam have had a way for us to go home all this time, and didn't mention it, I shall thump you. Hard. Be told." Suzi-Maria squirmed. "Well, you see…" Mairi jumped to her feet, gripping the dagger and with wild fury in her eyes. Suzi-Maria's words suddenly tumbled out in a rush. "I-know-a-way-to-go-home-but-it-won't-work-until-after-we-finish-the-Quest! I promise, I would have sent you back months ago, if only because you kept getting in the way! I don't know if Sam knows anything!"

Suzi-Maria was very lucky that Sam and Rowan returned at that point, and could hold Mairi back while Legolas took her knives out of reach.
Chapter Nine

Chapter Summary

In which Lothlorien is peaceful, and the Fellowship is not

Lothlorien was peaceful, a small place of serenity in the chaos that was engulfing the rest of the world, but that did not mean that the Fellowship's stay did not have its share of upsets.

In fact, they didn't even make it a full day before the first interruption.

After several weeks on the road, Mairi had waited just long enough to set up where they would sleep before going off in search of a bath, also hoping that it would distract her from the desire to strangle Suzi-Maria.

She found it in the form of a small hot-spring and settled in to relax. Unfortunately, she relaxed so much that she lost track of time, and was gone long enough for the others to become concerned and go looking for her. This, in turn, meant that Legolas found her neatly piled clothes, then half-turned to find Mairi rising from underwater, where she had been rinsing her hair, wearing little more than underwear and a smile.

The elf practically sprinted away to inform the others that he had found her and she would be along soon, then spent two days not looking her in the eye.

That wasn't entirely bad, however, since he took the opportunity to show Gimli around the elven haven while avoiding her, slowly leaving their animosity behind as the days passed.

Mairi's dress was one rip away from being beyond repair, and even the power of the Mary-Sue wouldn't be able to keep Suzi-Maria's dress in one piece for much longer. Unlike the race of Men, it was commonplace to see female elves as warriors, and there were several among those who guarded Lothlorien's borders. A quiet word to one of them resulted in enough woven cloth to make practical dresses for both girls, since there was no way that Mairi was going to make another ball-gown, especially without a sewing machine. It would be a rush to get it done anyway, even with a few of Galadriel's ladies volunteering to help.

As it turned out, the female half of Lothlorien's population didn't mind Suzi quite as much as the male half did. Mairi was confused as to why until one of Galadriel's maidens confided in her over sewing the bodice. "I have to thank you all. In Imladris, the Elfling Archer master was the only one who would tolerate her for any period of time. Most of them wouldn't even sit within three seats of her at meals."
One of the ladies giggled. "Oh, it's a bit silly, really. Most of us are married, and that is unbreakable by anything short of death. Suzi-Maria's attempts at flirting drove my Rumil to prove just how much my husband he was, so if anything, I'm almost inclined to thank her."

After a moment of confusion, Mairi caught the hidden meaning, blushing vividly as she returned to her sewing as another lady laughed outright. "I wasn't sure whether to be flattered or offended when my betrothed decided to move the wedding forward, but at least it stopped our mothers arguing over the details. The race of Men have this custom called elopement, and we were on the verge of trying that, rather than continue to listen to them fight."

This time, Mairi couldn't help a smile as she finished hemming a sleeve. "Well, at least Suzi-Maria is helping somebody's love-life, even if it isn't her own!"

But no matter how beautiful or serene Lothlórien was, resting there was not going to see the One Ring destroyed, nor the Scadians (plus two) back home.

Mairi was alternating between smoothing the new cloak they had each been given, mentally calculating when she would have an hour or so to spare for sewing her crest on, admiring the longbow that replaced Legolas's re-curve that had been damaged somewhere in Moria, and ignoring Rowan, whose expression suggested that he was trying desperately to hold back a bawdy and euphemism-filled remark.

They all looked up in great interest as Lady Galadriel asked what Gimli would wish as a gift. For one thing, it was probably the first time in a few Millennia that such an offer had been made to a Dwarf. (Lord Elrond might welcome Dwarves into the Last Homely House, but there was still a strong note of over-formality and an air of Strictly-Business on both sides)

For another, she freely granted his request for a strand of hair, giving him three, which caused Mairi to let out a choked, almost-inaudible gasp. Gimli managed to wait until they were in the boats and on their way down the river. "You seemed startled at my request to Lady Galadriel, my lady. May I ask why?"

It was a small relief that Legolas was between them, and that Gimli was uncomfortable enough in boats that he wouldn't risk turning around to look at Mairi's face. She took a gamble, really hoping that the information actually was in a history book somewhere. "I did quite a bit of reading when I was in Rivendell. Did you know that Feanor, the creator of the Silmarils, once asked for a strand of Lady Galadriel's hair, and was refused?"

There was a long silence from the other side of the elf. "I did not. I am doubly honoured, and will cherish the gift all the more for that knowledge. Thank you."

Even knowing what would eventually happen at Amon Hen did not make it any easier.

Actually, it made it harder, since it meant not only worrying about what would happen to them personally and mourning the impending loss of a man who had become a close friend, but also the need to keep a sharp eye on Suzi-Maria, who was probably chomping at the bit to interfere. The bad part was, while the girl was improving (albeit slowly), she still hadn't caught onto this little thing known as a 'Ripple Effect', where any change, however small, would cause bigger changes.
Even explaining it using small words of two syllables or less, repeated over and over, did not seem to be working.

Of course, that could also be affected by the fact that none of the other three could summon up much enthusiasm to argue. While many fans painted Boromir as weak or inherently bad, rather than a demonstration that even the bravest and most honourable could be tempted, the four from Earth had come to know him well over the months, and had no desire to see him dead.

Speaking of which, Mairi's musing was interrupted by Aragorn quietly storming past, an impressive physical feat. Mairi traced his path back, and winced. Standing, she walked over to a livid Boromir. Cursed by nature to be the kind of person that others instantly start telling their troubles to, she had barely sat down before the Man let loose. "How can he speak like that? He is a Man, hoping to become a King of Men, yet he has no faith in his own people, and speaks of his kingdom as if it is nothing to him! There is weakness in Men, as in all of the Races, but there is also courage and strength! How can he so belittle that?"

Mairi knew what he was talking about, but there was no way for her to reveal that. A lifetime of listening to other people's woes had given her a certain amount of tact, when she chose to use it – when people will tell you their problems anyway, the best thing is to try and find a solution, or they'll just keep coming back – and she found a slightly more diplomatic reply. "Could you go back a bit and elaborate on that?"

As Mairi had hoped, that managed to calm him a little. "I cannot be easy at the thought of taking the Ring toward Sauron, nor the idea that my people are dying and living in fear, when I have the chance to save them. I tried to tell Aragorn this, and he only said that he would not take the Ring 'within a hundred leagues of your city'." Boromir made a noise that was very like a growl. "Your city, as if he does not even count himself as a Man, yet still wants to be king!"

Mairi sat back. Ouch. Not only 'ouch', but anything she said now held the danger of causing a ripple effect of its own, and Mairi hadn't spent so long keeping Suzi-Maria in check just to turn around and commit the very error she had been forbidding. "I suppose we all speak in haste, or have our words come out the wrong way, in times of stress. Aragorn did spend most of his life as a Ranger, trying to protect all of Arda, and you do tend to refer to Minas Tirith as 'my city'. Perhaps he meant it like that?"

Boromir grumbled something under his breath, not quite agreeing, but softened slightly when Mairi tried to stifle a yawn. "Get some rest, my Lady. The road will only become more difficult as we go."

Mairi smiled at him and turned away, the smile disappearing when she almost tripped over her pack while searching for her blanket.

This stretch of the journey could not be over soon enough.
Chapter Ten

Chapter Summary

Amon Hen and consequences

To her mild embarrassment, Mairi woke up leaning against Boromir, who looked rather more peaceful than he had last night.

Shooting a glare at Suzi-Maria, who had been the one to wake her and was now smirking knowingly, Mairi nudged the Man awake and stood up, walking down to the river and splashing the icy water on her face.

They would not be staying beyond the Quest, and Boromir would be dead before the next day dawned. It would be foolish to get attached. She wanted to get home, and a girlish crush on a man thirteen years her senior would be stupid and counter-productive.

Somehow, no matter how many times Mairi repeated the mental litany; she had trouble convincing even herself.

While their final day of river travel was uneventful, the atmosphere held no little tension, and not only from the feeling that someone was watching them and apprehension that things were going perhaps a little too quietly.

Finally, they guided the boats into a small cove not far from a great waterfall; they pulled out the barest essentials for setting up camp, where they would rest for a few hours before continuing.

Well, most of the company was hoping to rest a little. Aragorn was pacing. "We cross the lake at nightfall. Hide the boats and continue on foot. We will approach Mordor from the North."

Having been stuck in a boat with Sam and Suzi-Maria all day, Gimli was not in the best of moods. "Oh, yes, just a simple matter of finding our way through Emyn Muil? An impossible labyrinth of razor-sharp rocks! And after that, it gets even better! Festering, stinking marshland as far as the eye can see!"

Aragorn had been sharing a boat with Boromir and Sam, the tension between him and the Steward's son not at all faded from the previous night, so he was not in much better shape. "That is our road. I suggest you rest and recover your strength, Master Dwarf."

Gimli spluttered in outrage at the implication that he might need rest at all, especially with Legolas only feet away. He went back to setting up camp, muttering darkly under his breath. Sam, who had been avoiding the other three from his world for reasons unknown, joined him, happy for someone to commiserate with.

Mairi was collecting rocks from the shoreline, to line a small firepit. Glancing over to where Rowan was sorting through pots and supplies, she spotted Legolas and Aragorn talking quietly. The elf
looked agitated. "We should move on, we cannot linger here."

Aragorn shook his head, keeping his voice low. "No, orcs patrol the eastern shore. We must wait for cover of nightfall."

Legolas did not look reassured in the slightest. "It is not the eastern shore that worries me. A shadow and a threat has been growing in my mind. Something draws near, I can feel it."

Merry returned to the small camp, carrying firewood. His brow furrowed as he looked around. "Where's Frodo?"

Mairi dropped the stone she had knelt to pick up, standing and mentally cursing herself for not paying attention to the Ringbearer's whereabouts. She followed Aragorn's gaze to where a shield and bedroll lay against a tree, and cursed in Ukrainian. For once, it was Suzi-Maria who was the tactful one. "Coming to that, where's Boromir?"

Even without knowing what was about to happen, Mairi had no intention of going anywhere unarmed, and paused to grab her bow and quiver before chasing after the Hobbits, who had still been wearing their weapons and hadn't waited around before running to find their missing kinsman.

She didn't find Frodo, but almost tripped over Boromir, who was looking shell-shocked and highly distressed. He started when she lightly touched his shoulder. "Be glad I'm not an orc! What on earth has you so dazed?"

Mairi knew the answer, of course, but she couldn't say so. Boromir gave a bitter laugh. "Would that you had been! An Orc would have cured me of my shame and foolishness!"

He looked up at the startled woman, closing his eyes as he admitted what had happened. "I left camp with the intention of helping Merry collect firewood, thinking that today would be the last hot meal for a while. I met Frodo, who was wandering in thought, and a madness took hold of me. I tried to take the Ring for my own!"

He looked up, meeting Mairi's eyes, and she read the shame and anguish in the clear orbs. "I would have killed him, in my desire for the power it held. I see now what Aragorn and the elves meant when they said that none of us could wield it, and that it was no gift. My arrogance and folly has brought dishonour on myself and my line, and placed us all in even greater danger."

Someone up there clearly hated Mairi, to constantly put her in these positions. "Even the bravest and most honourable can be tempted, though they start with the best intentions, and the One Ring has had an age to practice corrupting the minds of others. The Ring caught you in a single moment of weakness, but I have no doubt that if any of the others had come upon Frodo alone, they would have also been tempted."

Boromir did not look any less in turmoil, but there was a glint of humour in the tiny smile that briefly touched his lips. "How is it, my lady, that you always know what to say to soothe a troubled spirit?"

Mairi's smile was a little wider. "A very great deal of practice, I suppose… DUCK!"

She shot the first Uruk-Hai that crested the hill, one of the small groups that had spread out from the main force, and Boromir's dagger brought down the next.
Mairi's quiver held thirty arrows, but she was down to two dozen when the last of the small Uruk-Hai force fell to Boromir's sword, and they ran toward the sound of battle. If Mairi got out of this battle alive, she was re-designing this dress into something she could bloody well run in!

If Rowan and Sam, who only tolerated each other at the best of times, fighting back-to-back was unexpected, Suzi-Maria was the biggest surprise.

Though she had very little weapons training, and Mary-Sue Mad Skillz tended to fade after someone actually stopped being awed long enough to point out that it was implausible at best, she now tore into the advancing Uruk-Hai and, most amazing of all, didn't immediately skewer herself on a sword.

With a ferocity born of months of having her nose rubbed in the fact that, rather than being the perfect heroine, she actually was of no use and didn't have the first clue of what she was doing, not staying in one spot for more than a few seconds, and shrieking to frighten a Nazgul, she ran at Saruman's forces. Her long knife didn't do much besides a few minor injuries in inconvenient places, but it distracted them enough for Suzi-Maria's more competent companions to deal with them properly with more speed than they otherwise would have.

Inwardly dancing with glee as Legolas gave her a grateful nod for body-slamming an Uruk-Hai that had been sneaking up on him and feeling absurdly pleased with herself, Suzi-Maria froze as three deep notes rang out, accompanied by a faint yet discernible war-cry in the form of a shockingly creative insult in English.

Sam and Rowan were standing a few feet away. "Is that last bit even physically possible?"

Sam's question came at the same time as Legolas paled slightly, "The Horn of Gondor!"

Rowan's reply of "Who cares, let's move!" coincided with Aragorn's quiet exclamation of "Boromir!"

And of course there were yet more Uruk-Hai between them and the other fight.

Mairi's arrow took down another Uruk-Hai that was getting too close as Boromir raised the Horn to his lips again, keeping Merry and Pippin (and the well-aimed rocks they were throwing) safely behind them.

An Uruk-Hai without a helmet, who carried a bow instead of a sword, roared at the others. "Find the Halflings! Get the woman!"

It didn't take a genius to work out the sudden additional command.

Under any circumstances, Mairi would have loudly protested being likened to Suzi-Maria in any way at all, but to be mistaken for the other girl in what was probably an attempt at gratuitous Angst over being captured and taken to Saruman, was just too much.

Even if Saruman went completely OOC and was stunned by Suzi-Maria's beauty and overall Mary-Sue-ness, Mairi was a regular woman averaging on the side of plain. Well, a regular woman who
was going to give Suzi a clip around the ear for this, but there was still nothing special about her that would stop Saruman from feeding her to a Warg, along with whoever returned bringing back the wrong female.

Well, no use worrying until it happened, and staying alive was the greater concern. She aimed an arrow at the Uruk in charge, but another one got in the way at the last second, taking her arrow in the neck while a black, crude arrow found its mark in Boromir’s shoulder. She scowled and used her last arrow to shoot down an Uruk-Hai who had realized that trying to get over the small bridge was both futile and fatal, and was trying to get past them through the trees, instead.

Dropping the bow, she pulled out her twin dirks as a second arrow took Boromir in the side. Somehow, he forced himself to his feet, taking down two more Uruk-Hai before a third arrow stopped him.

Seeing this, Merry and Pippin drew their little swords and charged, only to be swept up by the Uruk-Hai and carted off. Mairi killed one more, and then managed to conceal one dirk in her wide sash before she too was captured. Screaming in anger and true fear, the last thing she saw was Boromir’s agonized face as he tried to summon the strength to stand, and the lead Uruk-Hai drawing back the bowstring less than two metres from the kneeling Man.

It was one of the few times Boromir would admit to being glad to see Aragorn, but when the black arrow went wide as a result of the uncrowned King tackling the Uruk-Hai, it could not be avoided.

What he hated most was that his attempt to stand and help only succeeded in his falling backward, forced to watch helplessly as the brief but furious fight raged. He knew the consequence of trying to fight with three arrows precariously near major organs and arteries, but he counted his attempt to protect the Hobbits worth the sacrifice.

Aragorn was more than a little beat-up, but in one piece as he ran over to where Boromir lay, clinging to life.

Boromir was fading fast, but trying to hang on long enough to explain what had happened to Aragorn, who was more interested in trying to check Boromir's chances of survival. "Leave it! It is over."

Taking advantage of Mairi's current absence, Suzi-Maria pushed Aragorn aside. "The Hell it is! I can heal him."

The two young men exchanged glances behind her. Rowan was worried about what kind of a ripple effect this would create, if Suzi-Maria pulled it off. Sam was frankly terrified of what Mairi might do with a darning needle and five minutes alone (not all that much, but it sounded ominous and worked as a threat if certain people didn't stop whining) if she found out that they hadn't tried to intervene. "Are you sure that's really – "

They had spoken in English for privacy, and Suzi-Maria responded in kind, trying to concentrate. "Miss Bossy Mairi isn't here, and I am supposed to be the heroine! I can do whatever I want, and you can't stop me, and I want Boromir to live! SO THERE!"

Those four native to Arda had no idea what was being said, but simply stared as Suzi-Maria's hands started to glow with a dramatic golden light.
CHAPTER TWELVE

Suzi-Maria probably could have healed Boromir in a second, without the light-show, but she wanted to make sure that she did it properly, with no chance of an inconveniently-timed relapse. Besides, a mere snap of her fingers would have made less of an impact, and she was perfectly aware that the Fellowship, and those of her own world, viewed her as more of a burden than a blessing.

Rather than the joy and glory she had hoped for, Suzi-Maria had discovered too late that her attitude did not endear her to anyone and by now she had even abandoned jealousy and petulance for loneliness and misery. The chance to defy Mairi when the other woman was not around to stop her and the chance to finally shine were part of why she wanted to heal Boromir, but the greater motivation had been the desire to help, and finally prove her worth. To say so would sound like making excuses, but all Suzi-Maria wanted at that moment was for someone to look at her like she wasn't useless.

Boromir's breathing eased, and his wounds closed, the black poison oozing out before the torn flesh mended before their eyes. Even much of the blood vanished, reabsorbed into the body to save Boromir from dying of blood loss.

But, even if Suzi-Maria's motives had been unselfish, this time, there was still a price to be paid. The use of Mary-Sue powers demanded a Mary-Sue finale, and Suzi-Maria gracefully fainted. Rowan was the only one not too astonished to move swiftly enough to catch her.

Elf, Dwarf and Men had been staring in astonishment, and now Aragorn spoke slowly. "Perhaps, Boromir, it would be a good idea for you to return to the White City, after all. If Suzi-Maria truly possesses such a gift for healing, then perhaps the best place for her is the Houses of Healing, where her gifts can be utilized to the fullest. We others can track the Uruk-Hai."

The look shared by Rowan and Sam was not as eloquent as those that frequently passed between Rowan and Mairi, but it said enough. Much as Suzi-Maria could try the patience of a saint, it was best to have her where they could keep an eye on her. "I fear that would not work, Aragorn."

All attention turned to the two youths. "Why do you say that?"

Rowan hated trying to think up stories on the fly, and usually left the creative explanations to Mairi, who had a stronger knowledge of the Tolkien-verse, but now he had no choice. "It is no easy feat, what Suzi-Maria just did, and she has no other training in the Healing arts."

Given a window of time to think, Sam took over as Rowan searched for words. "It is also largely untested, even by Suzi herself. There is no telling how many – or how few – lives she could save before becoming so weak that she would be the one in immediate need of healing!"

In war, however, even a few lives could make the difference, so Rowan brought out the trump card. "The only thing we know for sure is that she must reach a person's side and act within a small, exact space of time," (the moment when it would make the greatest Dramatic Impact, actually, but he was hardly about to say that) "in order for it to work. In a House of Healing, with many in need of care, it will be all but impossible to judge that moment."

Aragorn sighed, but conceded the point. "A pity, but it cannot be helped."
He helped Boromir to his feet, doing a quick self-diagnosis of his own injuries (mostly superficial, and nothing that would need any serious attention) as Legolas strode to the boats, pushing one toward the river. "Hurry, Frodo and Sam will have reached the eastern shore!"

Aragorn wrapped a makeshift bandage around his most serious wound, on his upper bicep, as the elf's expression of concern became one of realization. "You mean not to follow them."

Aragorn shook his head. "Frodo's fate is no longer in our hands."

Gimli scowled, born more of frustration at being unable to do anything than true anger. "Then it has all been in vain! The Fellowship has failed!"

Exactly 99 seconds (for incomprehensible symbolism) after passing out, Suzi-Maria woke back up, in time to hear the last line, and interject her own. "Not if we hold true to each other."

She felt a small thrill of delight run through her as Boromir bowed and extended a hand to help her up. "Thank you, my Lady. I am in your debt."

She smiled in return as Rowan and Sam came up to them, thinking that at least now they wouldn't have two people answering whenever they addressed Sam. Boromir turned back to Aragorn, "I will follow you my brother, my captain. My King. If we do not follow Frodo and Sam, what now do we do?"

The answer was obvious, and the question more of an acknowledgement of authority, and neither paid attention to Suzi-Maria's suddenly confused look. "Brother? But I thought that – "

Rowan cut her off, absurdly grateful for the small indication that she hadn't completely changed. "Brother-in-Arms, a person that you have fought beside and respect, someone you would be willing to die beside. I'll explain later."

Aragorn clapped Boromir on the shoulder, careful to aim for the one that had not been pierced by an arrow not ten minutes past. "We will not abandon our other companions to danger and death."

He retrieved the dagger given to him by Celeborn, cleaning it of Uruk blood and re-sheathing it. "Leave all that can be spared behind; we travel light. Can you run?"

The last three words were directed to Boromir and Suzi-Maria, both of whom nodded in determination as small smiles spread over the other faces. "Then let us hunt some Orc!"

Suzi-Maria made a mental note to ask Mairi about adapting the dress into something that she could properly run in when they caught up to her, Merry and Pippin. Gimli's scowl transformed into a fierce grin, echoed on Legolas's fair face, "Yes!"

Sam and Rowan, suddenly remembering that it would be three days of running over uneven ground before they encountered the Rohirrim, tried not to look pained as Aragorn set a swift pace through the heavily trampled undergrowth.

There was a silver lining to every monsoon cloud. You just had to find it without getting struck by lightning.

In this case, she supposed that being an Uruk-Hai captive was a semi-good thing, because at least she was being carried. If she had been forced to run the last three days, she would be dead from exhaustion or what remained of the Fellowship would have been forced to leave her behind. On the other hand, being slung over an Uruk-Hai's shoulder meant that she constantly had a face-full of their
stench, too, and while it wouldn't make much of a difference, odour-wise, they would probably get angry if she threw up all over them.

The other good thing was that 'The Master' wanted to know how she, Rowan and the other two had come to Middle-Earth, and therefore wanted her (or at least 'the women') alive and untouched, just as he wanted the Hobbits alive and unspoiled, which spared her the greatest danger of being a female captive from any Uruk-Hai who wanted to keep living.

There were no promises about what would happen to her when/if they reached Isengard and Saruman discovered that she knew nothing of Suzi-Maria's methods, however.

Still, for now she was safe, as were Merry and Pippin, as long as Suzi-Maria hadn't done anything that might have unexpected consequences.
Chapter Twelve

Chapter Summary

In which there are consequences

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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At least the trail wasn't hard to follow at the moment.

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Chapter End Notes

Something I have always wondered about is why, when Boromir is saved through some special power, no one ever suggests the obvious: that someone who can bring someone back from the verge of death would be wasted on a rescue mission that Aragorn, Gimli and Legolas can complete by themselves. If the 'Sue in question wasn't charged to remain with Boromir to make sure he doesn't relapse, then anyone with half a grain of sense would send her straight to the nearest hospital. Boromir had originally planned to return to Gondor with aid, and if he didn't bring the Ring, he could do a lot worse than returning with a miracle healer.
Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Summary

In which we start to see the results of changes in the storyline...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Disclaimer: I do not own Lord of the Rings, or any of the associated characters. All credit goes to the wonderful Professor Tolkien.

Summary: See Previous Chapters

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

There were some laws of physics that not even a Mary-Sue could defy, as Suzi-Maria was currently finding out.

In this case, it was that being 'top-heavy' did horrible things to your balance while running, and the sweat generated by running in a dress made them chafe on top of it. Mairi and/or the Lothlorien maidens might have had the foresight to sew in extra support, but even then there was only so much they could do. Why had it taken until the 1970's for mankind to invent sports bras?

And there was no way in hell that she would be able to actually explain this sort of thing to any of the males she was running with, so Suzi-Maria was forced to just grit her teeth and bear it.

When they found Mairi, Suzi-Maria was going to beg her about re-making the dress into something she could run in, even if she had to get down on her knees. Her motivations for packing Mairi's abbreviated sewing kit along with the lembas and water that they had divided up had not been entirely unselfish, even if it did add extra weight. Rowan had been about to do the same thing anyway, so Suzi-Maria could hardly be faulted for it.

Apparently, SCA Ladies could do wondrous things with a needle… but they could also do really, really horrible things with the same implement if they felt provoked.

Suzi-Maria tried not to groan as Aragorn stood up from where he had been listening, ear literally to the ground. "Their pace has quickened… they must have caught our scent."

She still felt the urge to swoon whenever she laid eyes on Legolas, and she was sure that he would fall in love with her if he just spent more than a few seconds around her at a time, but if he called for them to hurry up once more…

Two small objects lay in the trampled mud.

One was the leaf-brooch used to fasten the cloaks the Fellowship had received in Lothlorien. The other was a small silver pendant on a green-and-white braided cord: a laurel wreath surrounding two trees on the sides of a hill. The token of the Barony of Rowany, which Mairi had made into a
Aragorn picked up the broach, almost smiling. "Not lightly do the leaves of Lorien fall. They may yet be alive. Less than a day ahead of us, come!"

Rowan grimaced, trying to keep his legs steady as Sam leaned on him. Suzi-Maria whimpered and tried not to glare at the elf and the Ranger as Legolas called back to them. "Come Gimli! We are gaining on them."

Gimli was having at least as much trouble as Suzi-Maria, with the double disadvantage of shorter legs and being weighed down by armor and axes. "I'm wasted on cross-country. We dwarves are natural sprinters. Very dangerous over short distances."

They crested a hill and paused, gazing across the plains. If Suzi-Maria hadn't hated the very sight of anything that she would be forced to run over, she would have called the land beautiful. The tone of Aragorn's voice said it for her. "Rohan. Home of the horse-lords. There's something strange at work here. Some evil gives speed to these creatures, sets its will against us."

Legolas, infuriatingly light of foot and able to sleep on the run, darted up the nearest hill, straining his eyes toward the column of dust rising in the distance. Aragorn called up to him, "Legolas! What do your elf eyes see?"

Legolas called back, but it was not necessarily good news. "The Uruks turn northeast. They are taking Mairi and the hobbits to Isengard!"

The connection was obvious, and gained mixed reactions. Boromir and Rowan swore under their breath. Sam and Suzi-Maria blanched, though how much of that was due to their companions' language was up for debate. Gimli growled quietly. Aragorn hissed a single word through gritted teeth. "Saruman."

On the bright side, Orcs and Uruk-Hai didn't seem to like each other very much, despite serving the same master. The Orcs claimed superiority through having been around longer and being Saruman's principal servants, but had yet to come up with an argument for the fact that the Uruk-Hai could hand them their backsides on a mithril platter. It didn't take Canon-knowledge to know that sooner or later, there would be a blow up.

As night drew nearer, so did the inevitable clash. Finally, the Uruk carrying Mairi threw her to the ground, where she barely avoided being landed on by Merry and Pippin. "We ain't goin' no further 'till we've had a breather!"

Luckily, the head Uruk-Hai, who Mairi had heard addressed as Uglûk, agreed. "Get a fire going!"

Pippin, on the other side of Merry, wriggled toward his cousin, as Mairi slowly wriggled around in an attempt to get at the knife hidden in her sash. Concern was clear in the youngest hobbit's voice as he whispered as loud as he dared. "Merry! Merry!"

Merry, still drifting in and out of consciousness, lifted his head, managing a grin. "I think we might have made a mistake, leaving the Shire, Pippin."

Planting her feet flat and resting her weight on her shoulders, Mairi slowly bent herself into a low arch, stifling a semi-hysterical giggle. Anything seems funny when you know that you might die at any moment. She stopped laughing very quickly when the trees began to creak and groan, despite the absence of any wind.
Pippin also froze. "What's making that noise?"

Merry didn't look any happier. "It's the trees." At his cousin's fearful and puzzled expression, he elaborated, "You remember the Old Forest? On the borders of Buckland? Folks used to say that there was something in the water that made the trees grow tall, and come alive."

Pippin did not look in any way reassured. "Alive?"

Merry nodded, managing to keep his voice in an undertone as Mairi tried to stretch her bound hands far enough to reach behind her. "Trees that could whisper, talk to each other. Even move."

Further conversation was stalled by a disgruntled Uruk. "I'm starving. We ain't had nothing but maggoty bread for three stinking days!"

For once, any statement from an Uruk-Hai did not prompt immediate argument from the Orcs. To the contrary, and Orc by the name of Snaga actually backed him up. "Yeah! Why can't we have some meat?" His cruel eyes rested on the three captives, who instantly froze, trying to pretend that nothing was happening. "What about them? They're fresh!"

Mairi lay on her side, trying even harder to get at her dirk as Uglúk pushed his way through the gathering Orcs. "They are not for eating!"

That was a relief, but not much of one. Another Orc, Grishnák, was unwilling to let the idea go. "What about their legs? They don't need those. Ooh! They look tasty!"

Uglúk shoved him out of the way. "Get back, scum! The prisoners go to Saruman. Alive and unspoiled."

Grishnák tilted his head, the prisoners now a curiosity rather than a potential meal. "Alive? Why alive? Do they give good sport?"

Uglúk snarled at him, clearly unhappy at being questioned. "They have something. An Elvish weapon. The master wants it for the war."

Understanding dawned on Pippin's face, though it was clear that he didn't find it comforting. "They think we have the Ring."

Merry was also less than reassured, but his thoughts had run even further. "Shhh! As soon as they find out we don't, we're dead."

They were interrupted by Snaga, who had crept closer while Uglúk was preoccupied with Grishnák. "Just a mouthful. A bit off the flank."

Uglúk lunged forward, black sword drawn, and cut of Snaga's head with chilling nonchalance. "Looks like meat's back on the menu, boys!"

The Uruk-Hai swarmed over the headless body, entrails flying, as Mairi finally got hold of her dirk, wedging the hilt between her knees and cutting through her bonds as the Hobbits started wriggling away. They were almost terminally interrupted by Grishnák, who was interrupted in turn by the arrival of Eomer and his Rohirrim.

In the resulting chaos, Mairi lost track of the two hobbits, especially when the Uruk-Hai tried to get to their captives, and discovered that at least one was armed and moving. Luckily, the distraction of the riders made the odds slightly less hopeless than they would have been if it was just Mairi and her dirk against the armoured, sword-wielding Uruk-Hai, which was the other reason she had not tried
anything until that point.

As it was, she managed to kill two before the third died from a combination of her dirk through its neck and a Rohirrim spear through the back and into the heart, knocking Mairi down. Her scream of pain as she either fractured or dislocated her shoulder was lost amid the other cries and screams.

Thankfully, the Uruk-Hai and Orcs had been caught by surprise, so the battle was short-lived. Even so, by the time that the Rohirrim were piling the bodies for burning, Mairi had nearly passed out from the weight of armor and body mass on top of her. And that was without the smell. She had never been so relieved as when several hands lifted it off her, though they nearly dropped it again when they discovered Mairi lying underneath.

One of them instantly called for Eomer, who strode over. "What would a young lady be doing among a band of Uruk-Hai? Speak quickly."

Mairi supposed she couldn't blame him for the paranoia, but the pain in her shoulder made her snappish. "My name is Mairi, and they said something about taking me to 'The Master'. They didn't feel like mentioning why."

There was a muffled snicker from one of the riders, and a nasty glare in that general direction from Eomer before he turned back to her. "I apologise for my abrupt manner, but you will understand if I'm suspicious at the idea of a woman travelling alone in these times."

Mairi understood very well; a sense of paranoia could always be useful. "Of course I understand. Actually, I was travelling with several companions when the Uruk-Hai attacked us. I do not know their fate, but I hope they survived."

The Rohirrim relaxed, one of them noticing how she favoured her shoulder. "Are you injured, my lady?"

Mairi nodded, gritting her teeth. "When the Uruk landed on top of me, I fell on my shoulder. I am no healer, so I do not know the extent of the injury."

The Rider nodded, pausing for permission before sliding her dress over her shoulder, examining it carefully. "It looks to be a simple dislocation. If you will allow us…?"

Mairi nodded, and the man wrenched the limb back into place, causing her to turn white with pain and let out a stream of curses in Rohirric, before remembering her audience and stopping mid-word, blushing. It had caught the attention of all within earshot, who looked either shocked or impressed.

The healer was the only one to keep a straight face. "You are well-educated in our tongue, Lady Mairi."

Mairi fixed her eyes on the ground, mortified. "Someone mentioned that it was a good language to curse in. Forgive me."

Legolas had said that to Elladan, mentioning that the Elvenking Thranduil preferred it over Dwarvish, the main language of choice for insulting or cursing people. Luckily, the Rohirrim found it amusing, rather than insulting, and laughed as the healer offered her a flask. "This will numb the pain, at least."

Mairi accepted it, three days of little to no sleep finally catching up with her.

Suzi-Maria had paid little attention to anything in the movies that didn't involve Legolas, but she really hoped that they encountered the Rohirrim soon; she didn't even care about how hot Legolas
looked when he threatened to shoot the lead horseman, as long as she could stop running.

Thankfully, she didn't have long to wait, as she was suddenly yanked off her feet and behind a boulder as a few hundred horsemen galloped past. Aragorn waited only long enough to be sure that he would not be trampled by any straggler before he stepped back into open view. "Riders of Rohan! What news from the Mark?"

Sam paled at the sight of the horsemen suddenly turning and riding back toward the small group, clearly intending to surround and – if they were lucky – question them "Um, are you sure that was really the best idea."

For once, none of them could really rebuke him, as they were now surrounded by a circle of very sharp spears. A man with a plume of horsehair on his helm moved his horse forward. "What business would an elf, a dwarf and – Lord Boromir!"

As the oldest – and favourite – son of Gondor's Steward, Boromir had occasionally led envoys to King Théoden's hall, to discuss Trade and other matters. As the King's sister-son, Eomer had sometimes travelled to Minas Tirith, for the same reasons. While they were not close enough to call themselves good friends, they did know and respect each other, and Eomer knew that Boromir would have cheerfully died before leading agents of the Enemy anywhere. Eomer did not lose all suspicion, but he did dismount and give the signal for his men to raise their spears. "It is strange company you travel in, and far from your home."

Boromir heard the question beneath the neutral tone. "It is a very long story that I would share with you at a later date. A party of Uruk-Hai have taken three of our company captive, and we are tracking them west."

Eomer's brow furrowed. "We came across the Uruk-Hai in the night, and slaughtered them, but we found only one captive." He whistled, and a horse came forward, an unconscious Mairi fastened to the saddle, "She was injured, and we gave her something to numb the pain while we treated the more serious ones, but it knocked her unconscious."

Mairi was alive, at least, but they needed her awake to tell them what had happened. Eomer made a gesture of helplessness. "The best we could think of was to let it wear off, and in the captivity of such vile creatures, I doubt that she would have slept easy. Perhaps it is just her body catching up."

Rowan stepped forward, having the longest association. "I might know a way."

He climbed onto a large rock, bringing him more-or-less level with Mairi's drooped head, and whispered something in her ear. Mairi jerked upright, her face a mask of vengeful fury, which quickly faded into confusion, before she fixed Rowan with a baleful look. Luckily for him, she spotted the others and instantly turned her attention to untying herself, practically flying to embrace first Boromir, then the others.

The Rohirrim, who had tried everything they could think of to wake the tall woman, looked at the youth with some hint of admiration. Straightening up from jumping back down from the rock, Rowan shrugged. "I told her that Theodolphus had found the pie fillings. It has never failed to get any of the cooks awake and moving yet, though you have to be ready to dodge a crack from a ladle."

Mairi's main participation in the various Baronial Wars had been in background roles such as cooking – which often included chasing off hungry fighters who thought that no-one would miss a few berries from an entire dish, or didn't mind that the muffins were still hot enough to burn fingers. The automatic reflex of the cooks was always amusing to watch. As long as you stayed out of range of whatever paring knife, rolling pin or ladle the cooks had close to hand, anyway.
Mairi's main dishes might leave something to be desired, but anything she baked, especially muffins, was worth spending the next few hours scrubbing pots under her keen eye, as the alternative to explaining to the rest of the camp why the dinner menu had changed from lamb stew and pie to boiled tripe, with bread if you were lucky. Now that was a threat that never had to be issued twice.

Recovering from her surprise at Suzi-Maria actually hugging her and awkwardly patting the other girl's shoulder, Mairi looked to where Aragorn stood. "Merry and Pippin made it into Fangorn Forest, but the Uruk-Hai I killed fell on top of me before I could follow. I do not know their fate."

Boromir placed a hand on the woman's shoulder, ignoring the smirks from Rohirrim who were worse than matchmaking mothers at seeing romance in everything. Several of the soldiers under his command as Captain-General had been just as bad. "Then we will follow them, and learn for ourselves. Lord Eomer," he turned his attention to the Third Marshal. "You know these lands better than we. How far would you make the distance on foot?"

Eomer gave a short whistle, several riderless horses trotting toward him. "On foot, I could not say, but not more than a few hours riding. May they bear you to better fortune than their last masters."

Boromir nodded in gratitude. "My thanks. Give my best to your cousin and sister."

Eomer's face turned dark. "Theodred is dead, killed by Saruman's Orcs, and I fear for my sister, who I can no longer protect from the worm who haunts her every step."

The Lord of Gondor frowned. "Forgive me, I did not know. Surely Lady Eowyn can protect herself from any unwanted follower, trained Shieldmaiden that she is?"

Théoden's sister-son shook his head. "I would have thought so, once. But Grima Wormtongue speaks in Saruman's voice, and has poisoned the mind of the King. Any who try to speak or stand against either of them is removed in some way, even the King's own kin. My company and I are loyal to Rohan, and for that we are banished. My sister can match any man with a sword, but Wormtongue does not use a sword, and his power over my uncle is strong."

Boromir's frown deepened as the other man hesitated then continued. "Once you have found your friends, I ask a boon, Lord Boromir. Stop at Meduseld, and take my sister away from there. For the friendship and alliance between our people, give her sanctuary in Minas Tirith, out of Grima's reach."

Boromir nodded, once. "If it is within my power to do so, I will. You have my word."

Eomer nodded once, sharply. "Thank you, my friend." He raised his voice, calling to his men. "We ride north!"

The eored streamed around the Fellowship, galloping onward. Aragorn broke the concerned silence as they mounted the horses. "These are grave tidings. If Saruman has bewitched the King, he will not be easily shaken."

Boromir nodded. "No, for Eomer to even consider sending his lady sister away from the Golden Hall, the situation must be dire indeed. When we find Merry and Pippin, I will part company if I must, to discover what is happening."

He mounted a bay mare as Suzi-Maria swung up behind Mairi – or at least tried to, turning it into something of a scramble as her dress got in the way. "By the way, I swear I'll do whatever you want for a week if you can do something about this dress."

Mairi nodded, ignoring the stern looks from Men who didn't understand and thought she was only
concerned about appearances. "When we next make camp, I'll teach you how to modify it into culottes. After the last few days, I want something I can properly fight and run in, fashion be damned!"

Sam paid careful attention to how the others mounted, before he tried to do so himself. He found the action a lot harder than it looked. "What are culottes?"

Rowan steadied the other youth before he could fall off the other side of his mount. "Pants wide enough to look like a skirt, especially useful for physical activity like riding. I really wouldn't argue about it."

Chapter End Notes

Now you start to see the consequences of Boromir remaining alive. Gondor and Rohan are allies, so Boromir and Eomer probably would have at least met, and known each other as honourable men. If he hadn't been dragged out and banished, I firmly believe that Eomer would have done anything to protect Eowyn from Wormtongue, now that he knew of the obsession. To my mind, the only reason he didn't do so is because returning would mean execution, and he couldn't help her if he was dead. If Eomer makes the request, as the King's sister-son and potential heir, Boromir can take Eowyn away from Grima's reach.

You also get another reason why 'Female Tenth Walker in TT' annoys me.

It may not sound like much, but breasts add extra weight, which not only throws off balance, but can also cause discomfort, which is why female athletes wear bras specifically designed for extra support and to reduce breast motion. The sweat from running pretty much all day combined with constant motion rubbing them together would cause really unpleasant irritation.

Sorry, boys, you probably didn't want to know that.
Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Summary

In which they arrive at Edoras and meet some interesting people.

Mairi had lingered behind the others for a moment, reluctant to enter Fangorn Forest. Boromir stopped beside her, holding out something small and silver. "You dropped this."

Mairi lit up at the sight of her token, attempting to tie the cord behind her neck without tangling any of her long hair – which had long since fallen out of its bun – at the same time. Finally, Boromir took the cord and did it for her, while she held her hair up. "It seemed to hold some meaning for you, with the way you would play with it all the time."

Mairi retrieved a knitting needle from the salvaged sewing kit, which the others had returned to her as soon as they dismounted, using it as a makeshift hair stick and relishing the feel of a cool breeze on her neck. "It does. It's a little piece of home."

Boromir touched her shoulder briefly, before leading her after the others. It was nice to know that he wasn't exactly enthusiastic about going into the forest, either.

Gimli touched a dark stain on a leaf, briefly tasting it and spitting it out almost instantly. "Orc blood!"

Aragorn was paying more attention to some very large and very oddly-shaped marks on the ground, next to an Orc corpse that looked as though it had been flattened by something very heavy, despite the lack of any such object. "These are strange tracks."

His voice had been soft, as though he had been speaking to himself, so Gimli could be forgiven for focusing on other facts. "The air is so close here."

Legolas agreed, though he sounded far more comfortable in the surroundings. "This forest is old. So old that I almost feel young again, as I had not felt since the start of our journey together. It is full of memory… and anger."

They all could have done without the last part, especially as the trees started to creak and groan, sounding remarkably like deep, bass voices. Gimli raised his axe in readiness against an unseen foe, rather more proactive than Suzi-Maria latching onto Rowan, Sam going very pale and closing his eyes, or Mairi clutching Boromir's arm as she jumped and looked around wildly.

Legolas sounded alarmed, and since he argued had the most experience with ancient forests, this only made everyone else worry more. "The trees are speaking to each other!"

Aragorn spotted the potential problem first. "Gimli! Lower your axe."

Gimli started and quickly did so, and the trees settled back down, to everyone's relief. Legolas looked back toward him. "They have feelings, my friend. The Elves began it: waking up the trees, teaching them to speak."

Suzi-Maria looked pained from where she still clung to Rowan. "In the most respectful way possible,
how much of a good idea was that, exactly?"

For once, Gimli did not ignore her, but actually nodded agreement. "Talking trees. What do trees have to talk about, hmm? Except the consistency of squirrel droppings."

Rowan glanced over at Sam, who had stopped, his eyes shut and mouthing what (from his very limited lip-reading skills) looked like the Lord's Prayer. Rowan fell back to walk beside him, letting the two girls draw ahead slightly, along with Gimli and Boromir. "You're being unusually quiet. Is something wrong?"

Sam opened one eye, his voice the flat, dull tone of one who has disassociated themselves from everything around them, but knows they are going to be dragged into the situation anyway. Rowan had used that tone a lot when his younger siblings were in a mischief-making mood. "My faith is being tested. I have been dropped into a world where I have no place, in the company of the Godless, but I will persevere."

Rowan resisted the urge to roll his eyes; at least Sam was smart enough to say that in English. Hopefully the Valar were paying attention to something else at the moment. "And how were you planning on doing that, in the event that I pretend that what you just said made even the slightest bit of sense to me?"

Sam managed a smile. "God can be found everywhere and in everything, if you look, and to all things He has a purpose. Perhaps I am here to guide and support you, or perhaps there is a lesson that I need to learn."

Legolas suddenly darted forward, calling back to them in Elvish. Aragorn came up behind him, replying in the same language, to which Legolas gave a tiny jerk of his head to the right. "The White Wizard approaches."

Aragorn looked as though he wanted to swear, but restrained himself. "Do not let him speak. He will put a spell on us!"

The four men reached for their swords, while Gimli tightened his hold on his axe. Mairi's bow had been left behind, as no-one had been up to carrying an extra longbow, but she drew her dirks from
where they had been tucked in her belt (Rowan having returned the one left behind), Suzi-Maria mirroring her actions.

As one, they turned to attack the figure that suddenly blazed with white light, but didn't get very far. Gimli's throwing axe and Legolas's arrow were knocked aside, and the others found their weapons suddenly burning red-hot in their hands. They were forced to shield their eyes from the glare as the glowing figure spoke. "You are tracking the footsteps of two young Hobbits."

Aragorn was in no mood to bandy words. "Where are they?"

The wizard held an amused note that did not warm anyone's feelings toward the one they perceived to be Saruman. "They passed this way, the day before yesterday. They met someone they did not expect. Does that comfort you?"

Not really, no, it didn't. Aragorn's voice hardened. "Who are you? Show yourself!"

The light finally dimmed, revealing Gandalf, dressed in white. Legolas bowed before him, Gimli copying the motion. The others merely stared, with Aragorn recovering first. "It cannot be!"

Legolas was slightly more eloquent. "Forgive me. I mistook you for Saruman."

Gandalf only smiled enigmatically. "I am Saruman. Or rather Saruman as he should have been."

If that made sense to anyone, none of them showed it. Aragorn was faring a little better than the others, in that he was capable of coherent speech. "You fell!"

Gandalf nodded. "Through fire. And water. From the lowest dungeon to the highest peak, I fought him, the Balrog of Morgoth."

Boromir grumbled and knelt to pick up his sword, the four unintended Fellowship members doing the same. "And this is why Faramir gets in trouble for being a 'Wizard's pupil' all the time."

"Father prefers people to be straightforward in their dealings. Gandalf has never given a short or direct answer without some kind of dramatics, and keeps much of his business to himself. In this troubled time, Father treats such an attitude with suspicion, yet it never does to be discourteous to an Istar. Faramir would be a scholar if he had the choice, and admires Gandalf for his wisdom and knowledge. It is one of the many disagreements between them."

Denethor also had no reason for hiding his opinion of the Istar, and might have even seen Faramir's support of Gandalf as a minor betrayal. Mairi picked up her blades, carefully brushing off the dirt and leaf litter. "On the bright side, at least we know that Merry and Pippin are safe, and we won't be spending days searching through this forest."

They stopped for the night in a small shelter of rocks, and Mairi took the chance to make some much-needed clothing adjustments. One more day of attempting to ride or run in a skirt, and she or Suzi-Maria were going to kill someone, probably by accident when they tripped over their own clothing at an inopportune moment.

Culottes had only been worn by women in the Nineteenth Century onward, and so were not strictly period. They also would have been infinitely easier to make if they had a bit of extra fabric, but Mairi and Suzi-Maria made do. Unpicking the waist-seam took longer when you were trying to keep the thread as unbroken as possible, but they did it, and then it was simply a matter of cutting two long, thin, equilateral-triangular strips from the skirt, and sewing those seams together. The extra fabric was sewn around the waistline to give the impression of a short tunic, and the addition of a wide belt covered anything else.
The other benefit of being forced to sew in your undergarments was that the male Fellowship members were bound by honour and propriety to focus their attention just about anywhere else, giving Mairi and Suzi-Maria the opportunity for a quiet talk, which Suzi-Maria had been successfully avoiding until that point.

Mairi switched back to English, not wanting to be overheard, even though the others were far more interested in the balm that Aragorn was mixing to soothe the blisters, chafes and cramped muscles gained by a day of hard riding after three more of near-constant running. "Is there something you need to explain to me, by any chance?"

Feeling oddly like she was attempting to explain a foolish misdeed to her mother, Suzi-Maria tried her best not to squirm. "I wanted to make a difference, to be a help just once. Boromir was dying, and this time I could stop it!" She tried to shove away the memory of Mairi crying as she shouted at Suzi-Maria after Gandalf fell in Moria, her expression stopping just short of a defiant glare. "You can't honestly tell me that you wanted him to die!"

Mairi sighed. "I cannot make that claim, no, but were you listening at all to what we were telling you about ripple effects?"

To be honest, no, Suzi-Maria hadn't listened, indignant at the thought that she might not know best. She tried to defend herself. "Nothing bad has happened so far, and maybe he can convince his father not to be such an idiot!"

Mairi stabbed her needle into the fabric with rather more force than was strictly necessary. "Or he might be even more determined to fight Aragorn's claim, because the return of the King would mean that his favourite son would no longer inherit Gondor's rule! Think of how hard he fought when he believed that only Faramir would be affected after his death, and times that by about fifty!"

Oh. Well, Boromir would still be there to back Aragorn up, if needed, and surely that would be the end of any inconvenient changes.

Right?

The next day dawned clear, but the lovely weather did not make up for the fact that they were riding again, and fast.

It was early afternoon by the time they came in sight of Edoras, and Suzi-Maria had long since decided not to get involved, just so it could be over quickly and she could sit down for a while. Gandalf pulled Shadowfax to a temporary halt, gazing toward the home of the Lord of the Mark. "Edoras and the Golden Hall of Meduseld. There dwells Théoden, King of Rohan, whose mind is overthrown. Saruman's hold over King Théoden is now very strong."

The people of Edoras were suspicious and unwelcoming, most likely with good reason. As depressing as his phrasing was, Gimli had the right of it. "You'll find more cheer in a graveyard."

If Wormtongue and Saruman had their way, Edoras would soon be a graveyard, yet several of the people visibly cheered up a little when they saw Boromir, which Sam couldn't help but remark upon. Boromir looked slightly shamefaced. "I passed by Edoras on my way to Rivendell for the Council. Wormtongue could not pass up the opportunity to make a few cutting remarks about Gondor in general and my family in particular, and I reacted a bit physically."

Suzi-Maria blinked. "Smaller and clearer words, please?"

Boromir sighed. "I was talking to Theodred about how Rohan was affected by the Enemy's forces,
and Worntongue offered a few insults. I punched him in the face."

Mairi made a spluttering sound that bore a suspicious resemblance to muffled-yet-gleeful laughter, and the Man defended himself. "I'm a soldier, not a diplomat! There was more than one reason that I protested that Faramir should be the one to go to Rivendell!"

Suzi-Maria, Rowan and Sam were successful at supressing their amusement. Mairi wasn't, though she managed to contain herself to a brief burst of giggles.

Eowyn had perhaps recognized Boromir, having seen him ride with her brother and cousin often enough, and came down to greet him. The rest of their party started toward the Hall, but Boromir touched Eowyn's shoulder to stop her leaving to prepare rooms for them, as the acting Lady of the Hall. "My Lady, your brother asked me to take you away from here and offer you sanctuary in Minas Tirith. Apparently, he has grave concerns for your safety. I will not force you, but I ask that you consider it."

Eowyn must have been even more shaken from her latest encounter with Wormtongue than she had let on, because she did not instantly protest. "I – I have a duty to my uncle… but I cannot deny that I fear for myself, also."

Boromir nodded, his eyes resolute. "Then gather what you will need for a few days, and be ready. Mairi, will you go with her?"

Mentally cursing Suzi-Maria and her gift for interference was becoming a very bad habit, but Mairi nodded, and Eowyn led the way to what was probably a servant's entrance. They hadn't made it very far before the sound of shouting and a brawl came from the throne room, and Eowyn practically flew down the corridor to where the fighting was going on, Mairi hard on her heels.
For someone in a heavy dress, Eowyn moved surprisingly fast, and they reached the throne room to find Gandalf advancing relentlessly toward Théoden, and a scuffle between Sam, Rowan, Suzi-Maria and the Fellowship, and a collection of men who looked far more like your average tavern thug than guards or Riders.

Gandalf had at least stopped trying to play 'Harmless Old Man' as he kept a steady pace, ignoring the chaos around him. "Théoden, Son of Théngel. Too long have you sat in the shadows."

Not very good with hand-to-hand, Suzi-Maria was making very good use of the knitting needle that Mairi had loaned her to keep her hair out of the way.

Knitting needles might not be very sharp, but being jabbed by one, especially in soft tissue, still hurt a lot. Watching another thug swear and jerk away, Mairi felt almost proud of the other girl.

Spotting Wormtongue frozen in terror under Gimli's boot, Eowyn looked just a little too pleased, though no-one would really blame her for taking pleasure in the sight of Grima being the helpless one, for once.

Gandalf raised a hand and closed his eyes; a stance Mairi had seen him use to cast a spell more than once. "Harken to me! I release you from the spell."

Théoden laughed, his tone somehow wrong, as though someone else were speaking through his mouth. "You have no power here Gandalf the Grey."

Gandalf's flair for dramatics kicked in again as he threw aside his grey robes, revealing the blinding white underneath. Théoden jerked back with a startled cry, and Gandalf's face grew even sterner. "I will draw you, Saruman, as poison is drawn from a wound."

He pointed his staff at Théoden, who writhed in his throne, groaning in pain. Eowyn rushed forward to try and reach her uncle, but Aragorn caught her by the arm as Mairi walked to stand between Boromir and Suzi-Maria, checking that the younger girl was more-or-less unhurt.

Mairi had never met Saruman or heard his voice, but she had a good idea of who now spoke through Théoden. "If I go — Théoden dies."

Gandalf aimed his staff at Théoden again, knocking the King back in his seat. "You did not kill me. You will not kill him."

Saruman was not giving up so easily. "Rohan is mine!"

Neither was Gandalf, who thrust his staff forward one last time. "Be gone!"
Théoden slumped forward, and Eowyn jerked away from Aragorn, running to support him. Mairi wondered if the hopskip over Grima that landed Eowyn's heel directly on his groin was intentional, but put it aside as Théoden visibly grew less aged before their eyes. "I know your face. Êowyn — Êowyn."

Next to Mairi, Boromir muttered something that Mairi assumed was rude as Théoden gained his bearings, looking around the room. "Gandalf?"

Gandalf managed to not look too pleased with himself. "Breathe the free air again, my friend."

When not under a spell that made him look less alive than some corpses, Théoden still had a habit of making every sentence a kind of minor declaration. "Dark have been my dreams of late."

He flexed a hand, as Gandalf observed him closely for any lingering ill-effects, leaning on his staff. "Your fingers would remember their old strength better — if they grasped your sword."

Háma, who had been making sure that no-one interfered with Gandalf or with Grima's thugs being beaten up, approached, holding a sword. Théoden drew it, examining his sword, and then turned his gaze towards a cowering Gríma.

Hama and another guard took perhaps a bit too much pleasure in unceremoniously throwing Gríma out of the door and down the steps, far from gentle about it. Wormtongue tried to pick himself up, but settled for scrambling backward as Théoden advanced on him, looking livid. "Argh! I've only ever served you my lord."

Théoden had been swayed by Grima's words in the past, but not now. "Your leechcraft would have had me crawling on all fours like a beast!"

Perhaps Gríma realized that he likely had nowhere else to go, the position of power that he had carefully built crumbling around him. "Send me not from your side!"

In Rowan's opinion, as far from Théoden's side as possible would be the safest place for Grima, as the King of the Mark raised his sword high, but was stopped by Aragorn at the last second, to more than one person's disappointment. "No my lord! No my lord. Let him go. Enough blood has been spilt on his account."

Aragorn held out his hand to Gríma, who spat on it, scrambling to his feet "Get out of my way!"

He shoved Mairi aside, knocking her backward off the steps, though thankfully she only fell a few feet, and tried to push past Boromir, who was a much sturdier target, and had taken the opportunity to retrieve his sword on the way out of the Hall. He shoved Gríma back, and when Wormtongue tried to get past him again, ran him through.

There were several hastily muffled cheers, followed by a very awkward silence, which Aragorn broke "Hail, Théoden, King!"

All those present knelt before Théoden, who looked around to try and find someone who was very obviously not there. "Where is Théodred? Where is my son?"

Cue another, even more awkward silence.

Eowyn had broken the news a second time, though that made it no easier on either of them. Théodred's body was prepared for a funeral, while Boromir and Aragorn stepped off to the side, the
others forming as a discreet barrier to their whispered argument. "I had just stopped Théoden from killing him and said to let him go! It does not help when you turn around and do exactly the opposite!"

Boromir was a little more practical about these things. "And he would have gone straight to Saruman, with every detail of Théoden's defences, weaknesses, and current deployment of soldiers! At the least he should have been imprisoned until Saruman is dealt with!"

While every point of that was perfectly true, it didn't really help. Mairi shot Suzi-Maria a pointed look, and the other girl winced sheepishly. Boromir had spent his entire life fighting a rear-guard action against the Shadow, developing the policy that enemies, spies and traitors should only be allowed to return to their masters in the form of a corpse. Grima might be Rohan's problem, but Denethor and Théoden had corresponded enough that Boromir was unwilling to risk that Grima would find a way to press Gondor's defences even further.

Aragorn was about to continue when Legolas, Rowan and Sam all meaningfully cleared their throats at once. A guard of the Golden Hall was approaching the small group, looking faintly uncomfortable. "My Lord Boromir, will you and your company be present at Prince Théoden's funeral?"

Knowing that people would have to get used to Aragorn becoming King of Gondor and Arnor at some point, Boromir very obviously looked toward the Ranger for his answer. Aragorn nodded, answering the guard. "We would be honoured."

The Rohirrim gathered for Théodred's funeral, his body is carried toward the tomb on a bier made of shields and spears. Her eyes and voice blinded and choked with sorrow, Êowyn began to sing while the men carrying the bier passed the body to the women who stood lined on either side of the entrance to the tomb. Slowly, with reverent ceremony, the women placed Théodred's body inside the tomb, sealing it.

Slowly, the people of Edoras returned to their homes, leaving Théoden to stand with Gandalf, Aragorn, Boromir and Mairi, who was staying close to the Captain of Gondor in the hopes of stopping or minimizing any more diverges, at his son's shut tomb. The King of the Riddermark picked a small white flower. "Simbelmynë. Ever has it grown on the tombs of my forebears. Now it shall cover the grave of my son. Alas, that these evil days should be mine. The young perish and the old linger. That I should live to see the last days of my house."

There was no real way to offer comfort over that, but Gandalf tried. "Théodred's death was not of your making."

His words did nothing to ease the anguish on Théoden's face as he began to weep. "No parent should have to bury their child."

No one would have reproached him his tears, and Mairi slipped her hand into Boromir's, seeking comfort. She had not lost a child, but she had seen, and still saw, the same grief on her parent's faces when her twin had died, leaving Mairi and her younger sister behind. Right now, condolences would do nothing but annoy, as she had seen more than once in her job as a Mortuary Receptionist. Nevertheless, Gandalf tried again. "He was strong in life. His spirit will find its way to the halls of your fathers."

Mairi couldn't help herself as Théoden looked even worse. Her voice was soft, but held the same tone that had broken up countless arguments and sent the participants to the corner, no matter how old they were. "Gandalf? Really, not the time."
Luckily for Mairi, any reply was stopped by the sound of a horse's whinny and the sight of two children cresting a hill, looking as though they had not slept or eaten for days. Even as they watched, the older child, a boy, slowly slid from the horse.

Boromir and Théoden ran to where the other, a girl, had burst into tears in fear for her brother. Mairi turned around and ran for the kitchens. She didn't know if Rohan had discovered smelling salts yet, but she knew a wide variety of spices that would have a similar effect, if only by waking the child up by explosive sneezing.

No-one used their nose to poke through Mairi's spice jars twice.

Mairi had just found the pepper when Eowyn entered the kitchen, ordering that food be brought up to the Hall, where Théoden was holding council with the Fellowship.

After the boy, whose name turned out to be Eothain, was returned to consciousness with a sneeze that made his entire body jerk and had his eyes streaming for almost a full minute, Eowyn managed to coax the story out of them between bites of food.

Finally, she stood up, walking to stand by her uncle. "They had no warning. They were unarmed. Now the Wildmen are moving through westfold, burning as they go, every rick, cot and tree."

The girl, Freda, had a more urgent issue, now that her brother was awake and they were safe. Their mother had promised to come and find them. "Where's mama?"

Éowyn hushed her as Gandalf spoke to Théoden, "This is but a taste of the terror that Saruman will unleash. All the more potent for he is driven mad by the fear of Sauron. You must ride out and meet him head on. Draw him away from your women and children. You must fight."

Aragorn joined in, putting down his pipe. "You have two thousand good men riding north as we speak. Éomer is loyal to you. His men will return and fight for their king."

Théoden was trying to deal with being broken out of a spell to find immeasurable problems waiting for him. It was not conductive to politeness. "They will be three hundred leagues from here by now! Éomer cannot help us. I know what is that you want of me. But I would not bring further death to my people. I will not risk open war."

And there was the problem, as Aragorn pointed out. "Open war is upon you, whether would risk it or not."

Théoden did not appreciate that, either, though he did have something of a point. Many of his people had lost their hope while he had languished under Grima's spell, and Théoden would not exchange one person's honeyed suggestions for another's. "When last I looked, Théoden, not Aragorn, was king of Rohan."

Gandalf put down his own pipe. "Then what is the king's decision?"

Whatever one might think of Théoden, none could deny that he moved decisively, and got things done. Barely a quarter hour after Théoden had heard the children's story; Háma was gathering the people of Edoras and issuing commands. "By order of the King, the city must empty. We make for the refuge of Helm's Deep. Do not burden yourself with treasures. Take only what provisions you need."

Not everyone was entirely pleased with this, of course, Gandalf and Gimli in particular.
The Dwarve was indignant. "Helm's Deep! They flee to the mountains when they should stand and fight. Who will defend them if not their king?"

The Dwarve and the Wizard entered the stables, accompanied by Aragorn, all three heading for the stall where Shadowfax waited. Aragorn tried to be the voice of reason. "He is only doing what he thinks is best for his people. Helm's Deep has saved them in the past."

Gandalf was not so optimistic. "There is no way out than that of ravine. Théoden is walking into a trap. He thinks he is leading them to safety, but what he'll get is a massacre. Théoden has a strong hold but I fear for him. I fear for the survival of Rohan. He will need you before the end, Aragorn. The people of Rohan will need you. The defences have to hold."

Aragorn nodded, slightly more convinced than the Istar. "They will hold."

Gandalf turned to mount the white horse. "The Grey Pilgrim. That is what they used to call me. Three hundred lives of men I've walked this earth and now, I have no time. Good luck. My search will not be in vain. Look to my coming, at first light, on the fifth day. At dawn, look to the East."

Aragorn nodded as Gandalf urged Shadowfax on and the horse shot forward like an arrow from a bow. Legolas barely dodged out of the way in time, dragging Sam and Rowan with him, an example followed my several others between the stable and the gates.

The Fellowship plus four had little that was not already packed, so all that Mairi really had to do was make sure that everyone had their weapons back from where Hama had confiscated them upon entering the Hall. Checking that the other three were staying out of trouble, she returned to Boromir. "What do you think of Théoden's decision?"

The Captain of Gondor looked at her. "Do you mean Personally or Professionally? I am sorry that it has come to this point, but when Saruman stops receiving reports from Wormtongue, Edoras will be the first place he looks. Théoden's decision to take his people to safety is the best choice he can make, under the circumstances."

Given the facts that Théoden had available to him, it was really the only choice he could make that was the least likely to involve a massacre. With Wormtongue no longer able to predict Théoden's every move to Saruman, perhaps it would turn out all right.

Chapter End Notes

I don't know why Aragorn thought it would be a good idea to let Wormtongue go, but I don't see Boromir following his lead there. In Boromir (and Faramir)'s experience, you do not let a traitor run off and return to their master. Yes, Saruman will realize that something has happened when he no longer hears from Wormtongue, but at least he won't be getting step-by-step instructions on how to bring down Rohan.

Further effects of this will be seen in upcoming chapters.
Chapter Sixteen

Walking without the constant fear of spies or wild animals, at a pace that let her able to talk to people if she wanted, rather than saving every breath, left Mairi feeling as though she were in heaven.

Rowan and Boromir were happier on horses, as was Suzi-Maria, now that she had found some kind of ointment for the chafing that had resulted from three days of running and another two on horseback. Sam didn't care either way, but Mairi was happier on foot.

It was harder to fall off and while your feet might hurt, at least you could sit down at the end of the day. It was slightly harder to keep up a conversation, since you were the one doing all the work of moving, but Mairi still preferred walking over riding.

Besides, Suzi-Maria could keep a conversation going all by herself, especially when Sam or Rowan disagreed with her and tried to argue the point, which left Boromir and Mairi to metaphorically sit back and be amused. Watching Sam wave his arms trying to emphasise something, and nearly fall off his horse as a result, the SCAdian Lady and the Man of Gondor exchanged smirks. "They have improved as company since we started our journey, but I wonder if they will ever stop being so entertaining to watch."

Mairi laughed. "I do not think so. But being an entertaining annoyance is much better than the original sentiment of wanting to push them off a cliff."

It really was strange to think of how far they had all come.

Camping for the night was not unlike most other nights since arriving in Middle-Earth, except with far more people. Well, and the entertainment value of watching a woman who had probably never cooked in her life try to make stew in order to impress someone. When travelling as the Fellowship, they had figured out early on who should not be let near cooking ingredients, and adjusted camp chores accordingly.

Apparently, everyone had either not been brave enough, or simply not considered the need, to tell Eowyn that. It made Mairi think wistfully of Potluck feasts and Fighter Practice, where she could try out experimental recipes on other people who would be willing to give her a straight answer. And, occasionally, look mournful when she showed up without food. Mairi had yet to master the art of making food look impressive, but it almost always tasted good.

There had even been a fight over the last honeycake, once, and while how much of the scuffle was due to a need for sugar after three hours of fighting, rather than taste, was still under debate, it remained one of Mairi's proudest food-related memories.

Eowyn was not at that stage, the latest evidence being when she offered the stew-pot to the nearest passing Fellowship member. "Gimli?"

Gimli took one look into the pot and paled beneath his beard, hastily making excuses. "No, I couldn't. I really couldn't."

Laughing to himself as Lady Eowyn trapped Aragorn with a pot of... something; Boromir joined Mairi near one of the many cook-fires, just as she was removing a stone dish of bread cobs from the coals. Having been on the wrong end of a startled reaction before, he was deliberately loud, and Mairi briefly glanced up. "The stew needs to simmer for a few more minutes, but please, sit down."
Having long since learned that it paid to be on the good side of whoever was doing the cooking, Boromir did so. "How are you faring, Lady Mairi? It has been a long day's march."

Mairi smiled, wrapping the edge of her cloak around one hand and using it as protection as she took a stew-pot off the flames. "Well enough, though I have to admit I'm a little worried."

The rest of their company - minus Aragorn, who had been trapped by Eowyn - appeared as if by magic before Boromir could reply. Mairi took a cob, pulling off the top and inside to make a kind of bowl, and filled the middle with stew, placing the rest of the bread on top before she passed it to Boromir and started repeating the process with the rest of the bread.

The meat was a little over-cooked, the bread a tiny bit burned at the base, but it was hot and, at the end of a long day's travel, simple fare was appreciated, which allowed Boromir the chance to finish his question. "What are you so worried about, Lady Mairi?"

Mairi shook her head. "How long will it take Saruman to realize that something has happened to Wormtongue? Was he the only spy reporting, or will Saruman have other ways of following our movements? Helm's Deep might be the safest refuge, but we are vulnerable until we get there. Will Saruman risk a full attack, or will he send scouts, instead?"

Legolas swallowed a mouthful of stew. "This is very good, Lady Mairi. Wormtongue's followers seemed like the kind of thug who follow a powerful leader, but not clever enough to be spies and the rest of Théoden's men are loyal."

Rowan grinned. "You should see her with a proper kitchen, a few hours and a spice rack. I think that he'll send scouts first, especially since Grima was likely more focused on keeping the king in Thrall and on the political situation, before launching a proper attack."

Mairi beamed at them both, which prompted Boromir to add his own opinion. "Since we are on a swift march, we should reach Helm's Deep in another two days. With the distance between Isengard and Edoras, it is likely that we will make it there before any of Saruman's forces can reach."

Mairi's smile to Boromir was gentler, but no less sincere, and the usually-stern Man found himself returning it.

Rowan had been right; Saruman did send a scouting party.

It was not as large as it could have been, only three Orcs mounted on Wargs, but that was enough. The Wargs attacked the middle of the column, where the warriors were thinnest, and if not for the insanely lucky co-incidence of Mairi's startled instinctive reaction with an iron cooking pot and Eowyn's access to a sword (which she had neglected to tell her uncle about) to hold them off until Boromir and Legolas killed the rest, the casualties could have been much worse.

As it was, an older man was killed and four women wounded in varying degrees of severity.

The march became a forced one, the women and children moving ahead with a small guard, while the Riders spread out as advanced warning. The Riders were still three hours from Helm's Deep when the Crebain found them, and a council was called as soon as King Théoden rode through the gates of the fortress.

The first thing to do was set up a patrol of scouts to watch for whatever Saruman might send next. As a ranger, it made sense that Aragorn might be among those scouts, and it was he who brought...
back the news.

Théoden was sitting inside, talking with his senior Riders when Aragorn pushed the doors open and entered. Mairi, in the middle of some much-needed mending as a way to keep her mind off the upcoming battle and talking with them members of the Fellowship currently not on patrol, took one look at Aragorn's face and put her work aside.

Boromir had been on the receiving end of far too many messengers bearing bad news to not recognize the gravity of the situation. "What is it, Aragorn?"

Aragorn's expression was grave. "Saruman's army moves slowly, but in numbers too great for them to be stopped by riding out. It is a greater host than I have ever seen."

Théoden frowned, digesting the information. "A great host, you say?"

Aragorn nodded, clearly wishing that it was otherwise. "All Isengard is emptied."

Théoden nodded slowly, thinking of possible tactics. "How many?"

Aragorn, if possible, looked even graver than before. "Ten thousand strong at least."

Théoden spun to face the Man, shock and dismay clear to see on his face. "Ten thousand?!"

Aragorn nodded. "It is an army bred for a single purpose: to destroy the world of Men. They will be here within days."

An army so large could only move so fast, especially if they had supply wagons and siege engines, but that still left them little time. Théoden turned again, walking out of the room, followed by Gamling. "Let them come."

Most of the Fellowship exchanged looks of dismay, swiftly following the Lord of the Riddermark as he began issuing orders. "I want every man and strong lad able to bear arms, to start readying themselves for battle by nightfall. We will cover the causeway and the gate from above. No army has ever breached the Deeping wall or set foot inside the Hornburg."

Not for the first time, Mairi wished that there was some way for her to reveal knowledge of the fictional future. But so much had already changed that it was unlikely to do any good, so she remained silent as Gimli tried to reason with the King. "This is no rabble of mindless orcs. These are Uruk-Hai. Their armor is thick and their shields broad."

The advice did not go down as well as it could have with Théoden, who replied with an impressively icy look. "I have fought many wars, Master Dwarf. I know how to defend my own keep."

Aragorn and Boromir exchanged frustrated looks behind the King's back as they continued walking, thankfully un-noticed by Théoden. "They will break upon this fortress like water on rock. Saruman's hordes will pillage and burn, we've seen it before. Crops can be resewn. Homes rebuilt. Within these walls, we will outlast them."

Aragorn broke composure enough to make an angry gesture with his arms. "They do not come to destroy Rohan's crops or villages. They come to destroy its people. Down to the last child!"

It was hard to blame him for the outburst, but also hard to blame Théoden as he lowered his voice, "What would you have me do? Look at my men. Their courage hangs by a thread. If this is to be our end, then I would have them make such an end as to be worthy of remembrance!"
An idea that was fun to read about in books, but not so enjoyable when you were actually in the situation. Aragorn's voice was as passionate as any of them had ever heard. "Send out riders, my lord. You must call for aid."

He had a point, but again, so did Théoden. "And who will come. Elves? Dwarves? We are not so lucky in our friends as you. The old alliances are dead."

Aragorn tried not to grit his teeth. "Gondor will answer."

Théoden's temper finally snapped, his eyes flashing. "Gondor? Where was Gondor when the Westfold fell? Where was Gondor when our enemies closed in around us!? Where was Gon — No, my Lord Aragorn, we are alone."

Boromir cleared his throat, reminding Théoden that even if he viewed Aragorn as a Ranger rather than a future king, at least one Man of Gondor was still very much present. "Gondor was waiting for aid to be requested, before we marched across the borders in force. Can you claim that Wormtongue would not have instantly accused us of invasion, or that Saruman, as head of the White Council, would not have backed him up and called for the other races to step in? We could not fight a war on so many fronts."

Left unsaid was the insinuation that Théoden would have gone along with Grima's claim of such, at the time trapped under Saruman's influence. The Lord of the Riddermark flinched, but Boromir had already turned his attention to Aragorn. "How much time do we have before they reach Helm's Deep? It would take at least three days to reach Minas Tirith, and longer for any aid to return, but likely some men could be spared from the border patrols and various Garrisons, and they could be here in a few days."

Rowan frowned. "Wouldn't they have to apply to the Steward either way? That might make them arrive to meet nothing more than a lot of corpses."

Boromir shook his head. "I am the Captain-General of Gondor's army; I would only have to seek the Stewards permission for a full-scale campaign. Besides, Gondor might as well find out that the King is returning now, rather than during a lull in a battle."

Mairi smiled, catching on. "And even if it starts out as only rumour, your support will get the people of Gondor to listen, and lend credibility to Aragorn's claim. They would believe the news more readily if it came from someone they trusted, than if it came from a stranger."

Boromir smiled in return. "That was the idea, yes. I mean no offense, Aragorn, but it wouldn't be the first time that some impostor has shown up claiming to be a descendent of Numenor."

Legolas dragged the conversation back on topic. "Gandalf already rides to seek out Eomer, and he will return to fight by your side."

Théoden frowned, clearly not so sure, but nodded his head in consent. "I will arrange for a messenger, then, Lord Boromir. Write your request."

Slipping away to find Eowyn and see what she could do to help, Mairi couldn't stop a faintly hopeful smile from tugging at her lips. Maybe it would work out all right, after all.
Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Summary

In which the storyline can go and screw itself...

It would be very nice, Mairi thought, if the horns would either arrive all at once, or arrive a few hours apart.

Not the most realistic point of view, and she should be happy that they showed up at all, but still. First it was the silver trumpets of Gondor, heralding a hundred men who would need to be fed and billeted within the limited resources. Eowyn and the captain of Helm's Deep had barely finished working out the logistics of that, while the Gondorians were being briefed by Boromir and Aragorn, when a column of Elves arrived from Lothlorien, though if the pained look on Legolas's face was any indication, there were some Mirkwood elves scattered in there, as well.

Galadriel and/or Celeborn had been possessed of enough foresight to have the elves bring supplies of their own, and Elves did not sleep the same as Men, their rest more of a semi-aware trance, which meant that billeting them would not be as much of an issue, but Mairi thought that Eowyn still looked ready to curse at the sound of a third horn. Probably the only reason she didn't was the fact that it was accompanied by the sound of several hundred horses in full gallop, suggesting the return of her brother.

Mairi left the Shieldmaiden to it as Eowyn ran to greet Eomer, walking out the door just in time to nearly get run over by Legolas, who was looking defiant as he spoke with Haldir, who looked amused, and a stern-looking elf who Mairi didn't recognize, though that didn't really narrow things down much.

It was understandable that Eowyn resented the patronising attitude and phrasing when she was informed that she would be spending the battle in the caves, but Mairi did see the reasoning behind King Theoden's decision.

The only problem was convincing the fuming Shieldmaiden of Rohan to see the same logic, which was proving far more easily said than done. Reaching out, Mairi touched Eowyn's arm. "My Lady, how many of the other women in the caves know how to use a sword, beyond which end goes in the enemy?"

Eowyn looked faintly disapproving at Mairi's phrasing, but didn't comment as she replied. "Few, and fewer with any degree of proficiency."

Mairi nodded, still keeping her voice soft. "We have a saying, where I am from: They also serve, who wait in vigil. If the army is as great as Lord Aragorn claims, if they do somehow bring down the wall, if even one finds a back way in – don't look at me like that, it is not impossible! – then the women and children will be left defenceless, if you go to fight with the men."

She had a point, which only made Eowyn more frustrated. "You and your companions will be fighting! Why can you tell me to stay, yet take your place with the men? If a defender of the women and children is needed, why can it not be you."
Mairi shook her head. "If you wish it, I will remain in the caves with you, but I am not known to your people, and cannot command them." She pulled a face, "Whether I like it or not, my companions must do as they will, and I cannot order them otherwise."

Besides, if Mairi wasn't there, then Suzi-Maria would probably sneak in a few non-Canon saves, just to be defiant, as she had with Boromir, and if that kept even one of the boy-soldiers alive…

Well, Mairi could dwell on that later. The people she knew and cared for were going to be fighting for their lives (and certain of them looking far too bloody cheerful about it!), and Mairi did not intend to let them run off to die without making sure that they were as prepared as possible. The second lady of House Llewod Bachder had done armour checks before – most notably when Mathias the Bear had decided to fight with a broken arm – and she needed something to occupy her until the Uruk-Hai arrived.

"You know, this wouldn't be the first time I've put my own armor on, Mairi."

Mairi tightened a greave, scowling at Rowan. "We're about to be attacked by an army of Uruk-Hai, resulting in a battle in which I will be the only one not taking part. Let me fuss a little."

Rowan batted her hands away as she started to straighten his chainmail for the third time. Mairi huffed and looked around for Sam and Suzi-Maria, who had abandoned Rowan when Mairi first started fussing, and were safely on the other side of the room by now.

Mairi almost rolled her eyes when she caught Suzi-Maria stealing glances in their direction, but was glad she had stopped herself when she caught Rowan stealing another glance back. To those who knew him, Rowan was depressingly easy to read. "I'd question your taste, but each to their own. Just don't let it distract you during battle!"

Rowan briefly considered denying everything, but decided that it wasn't worth the effort. "It's probably nothing but my imagination running wild. Suzi is – or was – a Mary-Sue. Making people fall for them is as natural as breathing! How do I know if it's real, or if she still has her heart set on – someone else?"

Mairi shrugged, trying not to think about how close to home her friend's words had struck. "You don't, though I'll point out that Suzi-Maria never had any luck to speak of in that department. Ask her, and if it works, it works."

Rowan caught something deeper in her would-be casual tone, and glanced at his friend, following her gaze to where Boromir stood, talking with a few of his officers. Mairi's voice was wistful, almost sad, as she completed the thought. "At least Suzi will still be there when all this is over."

Rowan had no intention of going near that one with a ten-foot-barge-pole, and they shared a moment of thoughtful silence, broken when a small hand tugged on Mairi's arm, "My Lady, can you help?"

A few of the younger boys had been watching Rowan with no small amount of amusement, and had finally decided to help him out. Or some of them were just in need of reassurance. Only one or two actually needed the help. Mairi knelt down next to the closest, adjusting an arm-guard and turning him so she could fasten a loose side-tie. "Lift your arm a moment – forgive me, I don't know your name."

The boy smiled at her. "Léofcild, son of Beorn. Is it true, what the men say?"

With as many male friends and relatives as Mairi had, she had become very careful with such statements. "I don't know, what are the men saying?"
Another youth came forward, his helmet at least two sizes too large for him. "They say that it is hopeless, and that we will not last the night."

Mairi growled under her breath, spotting a piece of oilskin that had probably been used to keep weapons dry during transport. She folded it into a long rectangle, wrapping it around the boy's head as padding before replacing the helm. "Men say a lot of things, dear. Most of the time they're wrong, or at least just being dramatic."

The next had only come forward to spare Rowan, but quietly submitted to a bit of fussing. "Your sister says she will be fighting. Is that true? Would you let a woman fight."

Sister? Oh. It felt somehow strange to be the one defending Suzi-Maria, rather than the one trying to keep her under control. "The Shieldmaiden of Rohan were once held in great renown," there was a slight rebuke in Mairi's tone, "and at least a third of the warriors amongst my people are women. Suzi-Maria might not be the best fighter I know," – far from it, actually – "but she is willing to take up arms for a people not her own. There is no shame in that."

By now, the Rohirrim riders were leading the young and old men to their stations, and Eowyn had come looking for the last of her 'charges'. "Lady Mairi, it's time."

Mairi stood up, but didn't instantly leave. "There is no shame in fear, only in letting your fear control you. Look out for each other, and do your best to come back in one piece."

Deep within the Caves, listening intently for any noise that suggested the start of battle, Mairi worried.

The changes only continued to grow, and she doubted that even Lady Galadriel would have been able to see how this would end.

Boromir had killed Wormtongue, which meant that he had not been able to tell Saruman of the weakness in the Deepening Wall, or predict what route Theoden would take.

That, in turn, meant that Saruman had been forced to send out small groups of scouts to find out what was going on, and the army of Uruk-Hai were moving slower and under cover of night.

That had allowed their numbers to be winnowed down a bit by the hit-and-run attacks of Rohirrim patrols, aided by Elves and Men of Gondor, who had come to Theoden's aid.

Likewise, they were reduced to ladders and battering rams in their attempts to gain entrance, as they were unable to aim trebuchets with enough accuracy to hit a brazier, and no-one with working brain cells was about to light something on fire without knowing what it was.

That meant that sooner or later, they would have to start looking for alternate ways in, when a frontal assault failed and the Uruk-Hai casualties from the battering ram became too high.

Uruk-Hai were strong and did not tire swiftly, but even they had to rest at some point, and they had brought no extra provisions beyond what was necessary to make the journey to Helm's Deep, nor any supplies that would allow them to lay siege to the fortress. That would force them to break off groups of fighters to hunt or forage, neither of which they were likely to be very good at.

One of those parties, well in advance of the main force, had struck lucky, however, when they found a passage that lead from a small mountain pass into the caves beneath Helm's Deep, a last-ditch retreat should the fortress be taken. The entrance was small, allowing only two or three armored men at a time, but it was enough. Eowyn took down the first three, and Mairi picked off the last two, but
neither of the women held any illusions that there would not be more, when that group failed to return and others were sent to follow their tracks.

Perhaps the battle would keep the Uruk-Hai commander too busy to think about it, or at least too busy to keep track of how many scouting groups had returned and when they were due. Mairi only hoped that the others were faring better than she was.
Mairi was in the caves, passing the time by demonstrating and describing some of the formation moves that had made the Ancient Empires so effective - there were benefits to being in a household where at least half of the members had made an in-depth study of military history - and waiting for the next attack.

She couldn't believe that she was actually looking forward to it, but the SCAdian Lady had always done best when she had something productive to focus on, and it was better than running through the many ways that she was going to say 'I told you so' when she caught up to Suzi-Maria again. The Rohirrim women seemed to feel much the same way, and were taking to the basic maneuvers like dropping and bracing into a spear wall with surprising skill.

If it kept up, Eowyn might even get her dream of being able to train a new generation of Shieldmaidens, if the glean in the eyes of some of the girls was any indication.

She only hoped that the rest of her companions were faring so well.

Boromir was in his element. He had always been at his best when he was leading men in battle, and near-impossible odds were hardly a new thing with him. Aragon and Theoden were giving the orders, finally acting as the king he was supposed to be. It was about time; Boromir had started to think it would take a dramatic deathbed wish to make the Heir-turned-Ranger step up.

Eomer and most of his riders had left to prepare a flanking maneuver, knowing where they would be of best use. Of course the archers were getting all the action right now, but that would change soon enough. Orcs had little head for strategy, but with such vast numbers, they could simply throw themselves at the walls until the bodies piled high enough to form a bridge. That had been how they had taken Osgilieth the first time, and Boromir's reinforcements had only succeeded in helping Faramir re-take it because Faramir and his rangers had taken such a toll on their numbers that the Orcs did not have the strength to hold it.

Try telling Denethor that, though.

But now was not the time to wonder how his brother was faring without him, or make comparisons about rulers who didn't always listen. Boromir did not relish being Eomer or Theoden once the battle was over and Lady Eowyn had the chance to speak with them about the decision to allow untrained boys into battle, but not a qualified Shieldmaiden. He wondered how Mairi was managing, stuck in the caves with the Lady of Rohan, who was doubtless prowling like a caged animal.

But now ladders were rising against the Deeping Wall, and the elves and men who were skilled with the bow were falling back, providing cover for those who were best suited to close combat.

There was a collective flinch from everyone who saw Gimli chop an Uruk directly between the legs as it prepared to leap over the wall, and Boromir would swear he saw several nearby Uruks pause for a moment, even in the midst of their crazed bloodlust.

Legolas knew that he was going to hear about the last few months from Tauriel.

Not just the last few months, but also about Gimli. After giving her such a hard time about Kili, over sixty years ago, Legolas knew that his oldest friend was only restraining herself from calling Gimli a
deformed Orc because she was still waiting for a moment to cause minimum diplomatic difficulties and maximum awkwardness for the prince.

And Tauriel would be nothing compared to what his father was going to say about it.

Still, it felt good to be commanding his own people again, even in such a dire situation. Even if they did insist on treating him with the honours that usually only came out on formal occasions or when other races were around - Legolas had a feeling that they were indulging in a bit of quiet one-upmanship of the haughty Lothlorien elves - his people had answered the call to arms, and there was no longer faint muttering about the Eldar leaving when the going got tough. The elves of the Greenwood were living up to their reputation as superb archers and being the 'more dangerous' of the realms.

Ladders began to rise from the Uruk-Hai army, and Legolas called for those with a slower draw to switch to swords or knives. He was not the only elf capable of archery in close quarters, but his father was not the only one to prefer melee weapons in a pitched battle. He glanced swiftly around to see

Sam, oddly enough, was not going for the Uruk-Hai themselves. Instead, he was attacking the ladders that they were using to scale the walls, hacking at the rungs high enough to be seen over the wall. After the third time he narrowly missed being beheaded, Rowan finally shouted in frustration. "Will you pay attention? What are you even doing?"

An Uruk-Hai grabbed for one of the rungs, which snapped under his grip, sending him plummeting back down. Sam looked triumphant and grabbed the side of the ladder, using all his weight to drag it to the side. "If we take out the ladders, they have to find another way to get up! Help me!"

Rowan stabbed another Uruk-Hai, pushing it off the wall, then helped Sam pull. If it didn't work, at least Sam would get back to actually fighting!

But it did work, and they only had to get so far before the ladder started to fall of its own accord, taking three more down as it went, all smashed beyond convenient or safe repair. Rowan blinked. "OK, I admit that worked, but can we get back to actual fighting now? Let the other areas take care of their ladders, and focus on staying alive!"

Since her arrival, Suzi-Maria had dreamed of being surrounded by men praising her for her skill at arms, or for saving their lives in battle when all seemed lost. Three days after her arrival, she discovered that such a thing would be very unlikely, especially if she wanted to enjoy the praise without getting dragged away for a severe lecture from Mairi. This, however, was more likely to see Mairi keeled over laughing than scolding.

Somehow, Suzi-Maria's imagination had never covered a scenario where the 'Men' were actually 'boys of the race of Men', whose ideas of 'skill at arms' were vastly different than that of seasoned warriors.

Besides, this battle was one where even Mairi wouldn't complain about changing a few things so that more people came out alive.

A few of the boys had bows, and even untrained, were probably better at using them than she was. She raised her voice. "Aim for the ropes on the rising ladders! If you can't hit them, aim for the Uruks near the top or the ones operating the engines!"
That was a lesson learned the hard way by nearly everyone. There will be a set number of people capable of operating something. If those people are absent for whatever reason, that something won't work. It was a great motivation to learn how to make your own damn coffee in the morning, but could easily be applied to siege engines, too.

Uruk-hai were smarter than Orcs, and had sent two or three of their number to scout for another way in. Thanks to few well-aimed arrows, an opening too small for more than one armoured Uruk-Hai to pass at once, and a close encounter with Eowyn's sword, Saruman's army would be waiting a long time for the scouts to report.

That had cheered Eowyn up quite a bit, as she had been feeling more than a bit useless, and therefore quite angry. Actively protecting her people, which had been her main motivation for becoming a Shieldmaiden in the first place, was much better.

Taking precautions had been a wise move.

Helms Deep was living up to its reputation of impenetrability, and Saruman's army was starting to get desperate. Under Aragorn's orders, a combined group of Gondorian Scouts and Rohirrim had pulled off a sneak attack on their Supply line, meaning that they no longer had enough food to hold a long siege, and much of that food was now in the Caves, boosting the resources of Helm's Deep. Finding another way in was the only real option.

Even as the great Horn of Helm Hammerhand resonated through the mountains, and the Rohirrim made their final charge as Gamling organized the woman and children to make for the mountain pass, some of the sheer overwhelming number of Uruk-Hai closed ranks behind the few dozen riders that remained, charging through the keep in search of less well-armed people to kill.

They were met with a nasty shock.

The caves that served as a refuge also served as a place to store weapons and equipment that there was no room for in the in the main keep. Eowyn took up her guard at the first sound of footsteps as Mairi organised the women onto a semi-cohesive defense. It actually wasn't that different to organising a kitchen for an Event, and while she didn't have much experience at that, either, she had helped out enough times to know the theory.

Grandmothers and the injured, too old or infirm to be of help, led the way further into the caves. Mothers passed their infants and young children into the arms of older daughters and took up what weaponry they could. Yet despite their willingness to take arms, most looked uncertain, even fearful, of the weapons in their hands.

Inspiring speeches to rally warriors was something that Mairi had always left to the Heralds, who were good for far more than horrible puns, even if they didn't always seem like it. Giving comfort, however, was a field in which she had much practice. "Back home, I have a good friend. His wife hates the very idea of fighting, and was reluctant to even hold a weapon. One day, those under her care were threatened, and she killed the perpetrator with a single shot."

Des the Potter's wife had hated learning to shoot, but when a fox had crept through the bush scrub to kill her chickens, it hadn't even made it to within sight of the coop. Those details, however, were best left vague. Mairi laid a hand on the shaking arm of a woman not much older than Suzi-Maria, absently noticing that others were listening in. "Men fight until one of them falls, but women end the threat, and lack of aggression should not be confused with unwillingness to inflict violence. You have family to protect, and that counts for quite a lot."


As the women moved back to their preparations, Eowyn came over, keeping her voice low. "That was well-said, though I think that I would have spoken differently."

A Shieldmaiden who had fought hard to be allowed even that training, the fire in her soul suppressed under the long years of Wormtongue holding the ear of her King, Eowyn would have advocated a more passionate defence, rather than quiet reassurance. But most of these women were from outlying villages, and most or all had never aspired to more than to love and raise a family. Mairi shrugged, "To most of them, war is the providence of men. Protecting their family, on the other hand, stirs an instinct older than Tradition or common custom."

The Shieldmaiden smiled grimly. "An instinct that they may be forced to use far too often, in the coming days." She abruptly changed the subject, "Your companion fights among the men, does she not?"

Trying not to cringe, Mairi nodded. "I often wish otherwise, but yes. With Suzi-Maria, I must pick my battles, and there are times that I cannot restrain her. Much as I may wish otherwise, this is one of those occasions." Her smile turned pensive and a touch bitter, "It is strange. Only months ago I would not have minded if she fell over a cliff; now I find myself praying that she makes it through the battle unscathed."

Mairi organized the archers (a surprising number of women had learned archery in order to hunt or to defend their homes while the men were at war) and built up a small barricade of arrow-riddled Uruk-Hai, meaning that their fellows had to climb over them, or waste time pushing them out of the way, before they could attack.

This left them open for several women with spears to make things even harder for the attackers, and all of them had taken Mairi's words about efficiently ending the threat seriously. When the Uruk-Hai gained enough ground that spears became unwieldy, the women did not stand their ground, but parted and let them through, some attacking from behind and others reforming to bar the exit.

When the forces of Saruman paused in confusion, far more used to facing men who refused to give way, Eowyn and the few women who could use a sword moved in, taking their own turn to wreak devastation while the archers and spearwomen picked off those who tried to escape.

Eomer and his command had hit Saruman's army like the wave that had drowned Numenor, trapping them between their charge and the sheer cliff on the opposite side of the valley. The Uruk-Hai had nowhere to go but back when Theoden led a charge out from Helm’s Deep.

Flushed with the taste of near-certain Victory, Rowan, Sam and Suzi-Maria joined the other Defenders in pursuing the last of the Uruk-Hai as they fled away from Helm's Deep. They came to a halt in front of a forest that Rowan was sure hadn't been there when they arrived, and all of them were very glad that they could not see what happened when several trees further in started shaking, as though they danced to a chorus of terrified Uruk-Hai screams.

Shaken, they were happy to be among those leading the way back to the fortress, but far less happy to see the first of a group of Uruk-Hai appearing from an open door that led to the caves.

Legolas brought down the first, but more were pouring out.

The group of Uruk-Hai instantly turned and retreated, only seconds ahead of Eomer, who had guessed the location of his sister and ran down the passage with an anguished cry. Rowan paused only seconds longer to glance at the other members of the Fellowship. "Mairi!"
The sound of shouting and metal on metal could be heard well before they even made it inside the cavern.

"Drop and brace!"

Lady Eowyn's voice rang clearly just as the men made it into the cavern and skidded to a halt, dumbstruck.

As one, a line of ten women dropped to one knee, bracing their hunting spears too late for the Uruk-Hai to stop. The first rank impaled themselves, causing mass confusion as the second and third ranks tried to turn around, colliding with those behind them. A second rank of ten stepped around them, repeating the same action in a move designed to push the attacking force back.

Two lines of archers stood behind the spear women, taking aim at the confused Uruks. "First rank, shoot! Reload! Second rank, shoot! Reload! First rank"

The first line released their arrows, then knelt as they reloaded, giving the second line a clear shot. They knelt as the first line rose again, repeating the maneuver twice more before they parted, taking up flanking positions as the spear women ran around the conflict to reform on the other side, trapping the Uruk-Hai between a line of spears and ten women wielding an assortment of blades, headed by Eowyn and Mairi.

Two of the women had fallen injured when the quick but bloody skirmish ended with the last Uruk beheaded by Eowyn. Rowan tried not to laugh as he looked to Aragorn. "I presume this means we can tell the children and elders that it is safe to return?"

Eowyn stifled a laugh at her brother's expression, giving a signal for the other women to lower their weapons. "They are further into the caves. Come, Mairi, you can tell me more of your people as we go." She raised her voice. "Find medicine and bandages! There are wounded to treat. Freida, tell those guarding the exit that it is safe to return."

It was Rowan's turn to stifle a snicker. He clapped Eomer on the shoulder, stopping himself just in time to avoid doing the same thing to the Lord of the Riddermark. "Sounds like Mairi has been entertaining them with tales of SCAdian ladies. I wish you the very best of luck, my Lord."

Eomer had seen Mairi take down an Uruk-Hai in the skirmish where Merry and Pippin escaped into Fangorn, and while he did not like the thought of his sister in battle, he had resigned himself to the fact that Eowyn had, on occasion, knocked him flat when she convinced him to match swords with her. Theoden had been under Grima's thrall for most of Eowyn's development, however, and had yet to see Mairi in action. "Your pardon, Master Rowan?"

The memory of the past minute would mark Rowan's dreams for some time, so he was not as tactful as he could have been. "Between a quarter and a half of our women take arms beside the men. The rest are like Mairi: they take arms only when forced, but are utterly vicious, and have a thousand other ways of making life a misery outside the battlefield, when angered."

One of the Mirkwood elves actually smiled. "If she were not of the race of Men, I would ask her father's permission to visit and come to know her better. We Greenwood elves find such qualities desirable in a lady."

Tauriel smirked, then inclined her head toward Legolas. "By your leave, your Highness, we will start aiding the wounded."

Several elves darted back up the passageway to retrieve supplies as Boromir and Eomer signalled for
the battlefield medics to follow suit.
Eight chapters uploaded in a day, aren't you lucky?

Suzi-Maria might not be the smartest person ever, but she could see the obvious, and was looking forward to getting Mairi alone long enough for a few remarks about making changes to the storyline.

That would have to wait, though. The more seriously wounded were seen to by healers, while those less injured (ie. not requiring stitches, bone-setting or specialist knowledge) were seen to by the women, most of whom had raised enough children to have a basic knowledge of patching up minor injuries.

Mairi, to Suzi-Maria's amusement, was busier than most, trying to bandage the arm of a young boy who was far more interested in relating his exploits to anyone who would listen than in sitting still. On top of that, she was stuck attempting to answer questions from women who had found themselves with nothing truly pressing to do and wanted to know more about the tactics that had allowed an untrained force to hold off a horde of creatures bred to kill. As unobtrusively as she could (not very), Suzi-Maria caught the attention of a young woman who she vaguely recognised as having been one of the spear women. "Why are you all so curious?"

The young woman shrugged. "A number of reasons, really. First, too many of us have died, or seen loved ones die, because of a raid where we fought individually against a superior number. Second, this attack proves that The Enemy is preparing for a major strike. If we know enough to defend our homes, that frees our husbands and brothers to take the battle to Him, rather than staying in our villages to protect us."

Suzi-Maria blinked, not having thought of that, and added another fact to her list of remarks to throw at Mairi. She didn't get the chance to respond as another woman chimed in. "After all this, my eldest daughter has her heart set on becoming a Shieldmaiden. I want to know enough to give her the best chance of surviving a battle."

Eowyn arrived just in time to hear that, and looked very pleased. "I would be honoured to teach her. Much of the written history of Shieldmaidens and the old alliances was 'confiscated' by Wormtongue during the King's... ah... Illness, so the background of Shieldmaidens might be a bit vague, but we can work on that."

Boromir, Rowan and Sam had come searching for them, too. "Gondor has accounts of the Shieldmaidens of Rohan, though doubtless not as complete as your own. I am sure that copies could be made and gifted to your House."

The conversation had caught Mairi's attention, and she finally finished with the youth and stood up. Boromir gave her a warm smile. "Aragorn says that we will continue to Isengard to find the Hobbits. We leave in an hour."

Rowan chipped in. "I already packed for you, though I wonder why you had sewn the linen kerchiefs together into a pad like that."
Mairi sent him a flat look, while the Rohirrim women tried not to look at the young man. "Unless you've developed a sudden interest in female biology and it's less pleasant aspects, you don't want to know."

It was interesting to see a man try to blush and turn green at the same time. Suzi-Maria and Mairi exchanged amused looks. "We'll meet you at the stables.

Fangorn was not any more welcoming on the second visit, especially after witnessing what the Hurons had done to the remnants of Saruman's army. Thankfully, everyone was considerate enough to pretend not to notice if everyone else was unusually jumpy.

Mairi stuck close to Boromir, hoping that no-one would remark on it. Rowan and Suzi-Maria had too much self preservation, and Sam wasn't that observant. Others might tease Boromir about it in private, but had too much concern for a lady's reputation to say anything in public.

That was one of the best things about the SCA and Middle-Earth, as far as Mairi was concerned; men kept crude or impolite remarks to themselves unless they knew that the people around them wouldn't be offended by a dirty joke - or if Mairi's household were trying to see who could make her blush the hardest, which Mairi knew was in good fun and would stop if she actually minded.

(As it was, such competitions usually ended with Mairi waiting for an opening and injecting a straight-faced remark of her own, which tended to make people stop, stare in shock that polite and proper Mairi had actually said that, and burst out laughing because she ruined the delivery by blushing crimson.)

Unlike most of the Mundane world, it was possible to walk around a SCA event without hearing catcalls, and a compliment was actually a compliment, rather than a suggestive remark that someone was stupid enough to consider flattering. The costuming collective even had a running joke that hen people were staring at your chest, most of the time they were admiring the embroidery or other detail, or trying to mentally pattern out the adjustments needed to make it their next project.

On the bright side, it only took a few hours to reach Isengard, where Merry and Pippin were seated, eating and smoking. Not for the first time, Mairi wondered exactly what was in pipe weed, as both Hobbits were sounding suspiciously like her cousin when she had been high on painkillers after giving birth. "Welcome, my lords, to Isengard!"

Gimli was not so cheerful, as all of the Fellowship had been worried out of their minds about the Hobbits. "You young rascals! A merry chase you've led us on, and now we find you drinking and...and feasting!"

Mairi was a bit more tactful as she squeezed Boromir's hand. "I'm glad to see that you're both safe."

Boromir nodded, the traces of guilt that he still carried from his failure to protect the two at Amon Hen visibly easing. "Very much so."

Pippin nodded cheerfully. "We are unhurt, and sitting on a field of victory enjoying a few well-earned comforts. The salted pork is particularly good."

Rowan rolled his eyes. "Just wait until you hear the time we've had of it."

Gandalf merely shook his head, speaking volumes in a single word. "Hobbits."

Merry didn't look offended. "We're under orders from Treebeard, who's taken over management of
Isengard.

Suzi-Maria grinned as Sam raised an eyebrow. "I bet Saruman is less than pleased about that."

Sam looked at her. "Was that sarcasm or stating the obvious?"

Suzi-Maria returned an annoyed look. "Never mind." she held a hand down to Merry. "Jump up and let's get this over with."

Gandalf sent the younger woman a somewhat more impressive irritated scowl as Aragorn hauled Pippin onto Brego. "Be careful. Even in defeat, Saruman is dangerous."

As the only one present who had not seen Ents at least from a distance, Mairi stopped in surprise when she saw Treebeard. Most of the others had only seen the Hurons from a distance that, in their opinion, was still far too close. While undoubtably strong and imposing, Treebeard at least didn't inspire running and screaming at the sight of anything larger than a bush. "Young Master Gandalf," both Ent and Istar ignored the muffled chokes and cackles. "It is good that you have come. Wood and water, stock and stone, these I can master, but there is a Wizard to manage here."

Mairi sighed. "Is there a reason we can't just kill him and get it over with?"

Gandalf shot her another irritated scowl. "We need him alive. We need him to talk."

Rowan looked unconvinced. "If Sauron is even half as bad as you tell us, I doubt that Saruman will say anything for fear of retribution."

Sam agreed. "Even if that wasn't the case, I would sooner expect him to remain silent out of spite. Even if he douse talk, I am reluctant to trust the words of one who would betray their divine master as Saruman did."

Mairi looked at him in surprise. "That was unusually profound, certainly for you."

Sam gave her a haughty look, Mairi having been one of the more vocal commentators on the divine wisdom of standing outside on a winter night instead of coming in where it was warm and joining in the illumination and religious song classes. "I wouldn't expect you to understand, but if one will betray his god, will he not also betray thee."

Legolas glanced back at them, "Why would Lady Mairi not understand?"

Mairi shrugged, eager to cut that off. "Religious differences; it's complicated and not important right now."

They turned their attention back to the tower just in time to see Saruman a ball of fire about the size of a minivan, engulfing Gandalf and Shadowfax. Fortunately, they simply brushed it off, Gandalf acting as though it were little more than brushing away an annoying fly. "Saruman, your staff is broken."

To Saruman's obvious surprise and fury, his staff shattered in his hand. Gandalf tried to continue talking to his obviously derranged former friend. "Saruman, you were deep in the enemy's council. Tell us what you know."

Saruman only snarled at them. "You withdraw your guard, and I will tell you where you doom will be decided. I will not be held prisoner here!"
He raised something that looked far too much like the black powder that four of the party had seen in the movies. While that had not happened this time, the rest of them had no intention of taking chances with anything Saruman was holding and aiming at them. Legolas drew an arrow and shot Saruman in less than three seconds, hitting him straight in the heart. Having done cloud- and long-distance shooting before, Mairi was impressed.

Saruman plummeted off the tower, his dead body landing on the spoke of a large wheel. If it wouldn't have been entirely inappropriate for the current situation, Mairi would have called it appropriate.

Gandalf sighed almost imperceptibly. "Send word to all our allies, and to every corner of Middle-Earth that still stands free. The enemy moves against us. We need to know where he will strike."

Treebeard watched as the still-turning wheel drew Saruman under the water, distracting everyone from Pippin sliding down from behind Aragorn. "The filth of Saruman is washing away. Trees will come back to live here. Young trees, wild trees."

Rowan shuddered. "And thank you for confirmation that nothing short of the apocalypse will ever get me back here again. Seeing Hurons once was more than enough."

There were subdued mutters of agreement, as no-one really wanted to offend Treebeard, before Suzi-Maria frowned, "Pippin, what do you have there?"

Treebeard blinked as everyone's attention was drawn to the glowing orb in Pippin's hands. "Bless my bark!"

Gandalf moved Shadowfax over very quickly. "Peregrin Took, I'll take that, my lad. Quickly now!"

Pippin reluctantly handed Gandalf the orb. Gandalf covered it up in his cloak, and with a sidelong glance at Pippin, turns away.

Mairi, Sam, Rowan and Suzi-Maria exchanged glances as the party turned their horses to make their way out of Isengard and back to Edoras. This wasn't over yet, but what would be the repercussions if they tried to do something about it?
Mairi found herself between Eomer and Boromir as they set up camp for the night.

Suzi-Maria had turned green when Mairi had started chopping up a rabbit, and been banished with the two boys to collect water and firewood. Eomer was washing up after being on the wrong end of Mairi's "you catch it, you clean it, I cook it" policy. Drying his hands, he looked up at Mairi's quiet comment. "I wonder what it would have been like if Wormtongue hadn't been killed and was at Isengard."

Eomer shrugged. "Probably Uncle would have made an issue of the fact that he was once a man of Rohan and invited him to come down and be free of Saruman."

Boromir and Mairi both blinked. "Are you serious?"

Eomer raised an eyebrow. "Getting him to talk about whatever plans he knew of would have been a lot easier than trying to wring answers out of Saruman. Besides, being free of Saruman doesn't necessarily mean that he would be free to wander around as he did before."

Mairi gave the Third Marshal a sunny look, missing the annoyed look Boromir shot Eomer behind her back. "I like the way you think, my Lord."

Boromir shrugged. "I suppose that the Battle of Helm's Deep would have gone a lot differently if he had lived, for certain."

Suzi-Maria dropped a armful of firewood nearby. "If who had lived?" She aimed a mischievous smile at Mairi, "And speaking of Helm's Deep, are we going to talk about that? I keep waiting for you to bring it up."

With the number of times Mairi had told Suzi-Maria off for interfering or trying to change the storyline, the Mary-Sue had been looking forward to the conversation, even rehearsing a few careful remarks about how the women of Rohan certainly hadn't known how to fight in formation in Tolkien's version.

Mairi scowled at her. "No, because I don't feel like admitting to hypocrisy, any more than you like listening to me lecture you about staying out of trouble. Did you manage to find water?"

Suzi-Maria supposed that she should have expected that. No-one liked actually admitting to being wrong, after all, and for all Mairi's good points, she was worse than most in admitting mistakes. "Sam and Rowan are fetching it, after the Hobbits warned them away from the water in Fangorn. Something about Ent-Draughts, and no-one felt like risking it."

Mairi rolled her eyes, selecting several long stick and putting them aside as she started to mix flour, water and salt. "Wise decision. Can you look in my saddle-bag and see if you can find a few vegetables, please. I'm cooking for a dozen people and two hobbits."

While the reinforcements from Gondor and the Elven realms had brought rations for a forced march, each warrior had also brought along a few other supplies, in case of a protracted siege. A little from many adding up to a lot meant that Eowyn had been able to add a small bag of vegetables to Mairi's bags, with the justification that someone needed to make sure her brother was eating properly, in her absence.

With the amount of fussing Mairi's parents did whenever she went somewhere for more than two
days, the SCAidian Lady recognised the concern for what it was, even if she chose not to tell Eomer his sister's exact words. Grumbling, Suzi-Maria did as she was asked, just in time for Rowan and Sam to return with a large pot and several water skins. Lowering the pot onto the hook, Sam shook his arms out. "I hope that was worth it. Lugging that water back was harder than it looked."

Mairi sent him a frosty look. "My cooking is always worth it, especially since no-one else seems to be cooking tonight."

Rowan cut in and changed the subject before Sam could get indignant. "Fair point. How long until we get back to Edoras?"

Eomer calculated. "Late afternoon tomorrow, probably. I admit, I'm going to enjoy sleeping in a proper bed again, at least for a few days."

A feast was in the works by the time they reached Edoras, and Mairi was actually glad that she hadn't been there for the preparations. Having cooked for eighty over a weekend and been a kitchen minion for one hundred and twenty (both times ending in two days feeling exhausted once the event was over) helping to cook for a few hundred was not at the top of her list of things to do.

Luckily, most of it was done by the time they had stabled the horses and changed clothes. In a crimson gown borrowed from Eowyn, Suzi-Maria standing beside her in white, Mairi stood solemnly as King Theoden raised his cup. "Tonight we remember those who gave their blood to defend this country. Hail the victorious dead!"

The gathered assemblage raised their own. "Hail!"

Suzi-Maria kept her voice low as the chatter resumed. "Victorious dead? How does that work?"

Mairi's tone was equally soft. "Because they gave their lives to ensure that we would have our victory, and thus share in it."

The respectful address and business over, the feast quickly started to turn rowdy. A drinking contest started up with Gimli, Legolas and several soldiers. Most were betting on Gimli, but from their first and only experience with Elven wine, Mairi and Sam were betting on the elf.

Suffice to say, Sam was more convinced than ever that Hangovers were God's punishment for indulging.

A rather inebriated Rohirrim warrior offered her a mug. "Will you not drink, my Lady?"

With an almost non-existent alcohol tolerance, Mairi would rather not. She lifted her goblet of wine, mentally thanking Eowyn. "I am well-settled, I think."

Sam rolled his eyes in a very exaggerated fashion, also on his way to 'drunk', despite his previous resolutions to never touch the stuff again. There were not a huge number of options, though, so he could be forgiven. "You never drink anything stronger than wine. Live a little!"

Mairi gave him a chilly look, joined by Suzi-Maria, who had decided that looking impressive didn't make up for the very much acquired taste. "I prefer wine, thank you. Besides, do you know the kind of blackmail material you can pick up when you're the only one sober?"

Nearby, Rowan choked. Mairi smirked. The Rowanites generally didn't drink enough to start drunk-babbling (Matthias's home-brewed Bearbait ale excepted – that could knock you out after a second glass) but it always got a good reaction if they thought that they might have, and started trying to
think of any incriminating stories that might have come up.

Of course, it didn't take long for someone to request a song from the SCAdians, which caused the other three to instantly look at Mairi. She glared, and Rowan shrugged, "Hey, all I know is "A Wizard's Staff Has A Knob On The End". Or the song you glare at me for singing. Unless you want me to sing that..."

They jumped as a Gondorian soldier spoke from behind them. "Well, they do have knobs on the end, so either it is a homage, or..."

Mairi interjected, "Or something likely to get the singer turned into something small and easily squishable. Which it will."

Eowyn joined in, smiling mischievously. "What's the song that you get glared at for singing?"

Mairi rolled her eyes. "If you have a common name, there is likely to be a song that mentions it, or even has it in the title. If there is a song with your name in it, there is going to be someone who thinks it is funny or clever to sing it at every opportunity. In my case, it's called 'Mairi's Wedding'."

Sam interrupted before anyone could risk a limb by requesting it. "Um, do any of you know some period appropriate drinking songs? The best I've got is '99 bottles of beer'."

Mairi gave both of them an evil look. "I don't sing, and you can't tell me you're completely clueless! I cannot be the only one who knows the cultural side of things!"

Suzi-Maria shrugged. "I know 'The Drunken Sailor', and one about a tree in a bog, but that's about it."

Mairi sighed. "If you mean 'The Rattling Bog', then both are fine. Rowan, I know that you're musical, so go help."

Rowan sighed. "Only if you do 'Push A Laurel Off' later. You actually know all the verses."

The three of them wandered off, and Mairi sat back down to watch. Eowyn joined her before long, looking quite happy about something. "You do not like to sing?"

Mairi pulled a face. "I know exactly two kinds of song: lullabies and drinking songs where enthusiasm is valued over talent. Lullabies because children go to sleep rather than listen to me, and drinking songs because by the time someone gets me up on stage, everyone is too plastered to care what I sound like."

Eowyn giggled. "One of your companions, Sam, mentioned the Hedgehog Song, but Rowan ordered him not to. Is a song about an animal really so bad? What is it about?"

That one was not only that bad, but in fact worse. Thank heaven Sam hadn't mentioned the rest of the title. "Crimes against nature, and please don't make me elaborate."

Eomer joined them, just in time to hear her reply. "Now this I must hear."

Mairi sighed, "Not from me you won't. Put it this way: some songs are only sung while drunk. The Hedgehog Song is sung while the kind of drunk where you wake up the next morning in someone else's bed feeling like Oliphants are dancing on your skull and with no idea how you got there."

Suzi-Maria wandered over, her Mary-Sue-Perfect voice having stunned the listeners into silence for a while, cheer giving her a bit of a loose tongue. "Speaking from experience, are we?"
That earned her several disapproving looks, as Sam and Rowan approached. Mairi frowned. "Do you know how many times I've had to drag warriors of the other Households out of our camp and direct them back toward their own, because they'd been celebrating too hard? One even thought my tent was his, once, and I had to get Mathias to extract them! Yes, I speak from experience."

Meanwhile, Merry and Pippin were filling in the gap with a lively dance on a tabletop, much to the amusement of onlookers.

"Oh, you can search far and wide
You can drink the whole town dry
But you'll never find a beer so brown
As the one we drink in our home town.
You can keep your fancy ales.
You can drink em by the flagon
But the only brew for the brave and true…"

Comes from the Green Dragon!"

As the two hobbits drank down their ale, Rowan popped up again, looking gleeful. "Your turn!"

Mairi sighed. Might as well get it over with. "First, some background. A Laurel, in our society, is a person recognised as a master craftsperson. The song basically is about pushing anyone and everyone else off, with the chorus: 'But you cannot push a laurel off a bridge/ you cannot push a laurel off a bridge/ no, you cannot push a laurel, for that is quite immoral/ you cannot push a laurel off a bridge.' New verses are added all the time, so I may miss a few, but it's all in good fun."

Rowan grinned. "Sam, you may want to cover your ears for the first few verses. Collages are named for saints, and they enjoy poking fun at each other."

That was an understatement. Mairi took a deep breath, trying to remember the tune. "You can push a reigning Crown off a bridge, you can push a reigning Crown off a bridge! You can push a reigning Crown, watch them scream as they fall down, you can push a reigning Crown off a bridge!"

Talking to Gandalf nearby, Aragorn did a double-take as Mairi launched into the chorus, accompanied by a roar of laughter and a few tentative voices joining in. Next came the collegian verses. "You can push a damn Collegian off a bridge, you can push a damn Collegian off a bridge! You can push a damn Collegian, throw a carrot first to lead them, you can push a damn Collegian off a bridge!"

That was St Ursula, the University of Sydney, whose unofficial symbol was the carrot, owing to an unfortunate Festival incident that saw them with several hundred carrots, which wound up garnishing shields, helmets and anything else to get rid of the leftovers from a weeks-worth of carrot stews, sides, soups and snacks. Next was St Malachi ("just sit back and watch them fly"), St Herman the Blessed Cripple, ("You can push a blessed cripple, they won't even make a ripple") and St Augustine ("listen for the desperate scream"), by which point everyone was either laughing or singing along.

A few warriors even contributed their own verses, starting with a very drunk rider. "You can push a Gondor knight off a bridge, you can push a Gondor knight off a bridge! You can push a Gondor knight, hear them yell as they take flight, you can push a Gondor knight off a bridge!"
A Gondor soldier retaliated. "You can push a horse and Rider off a bridge, You can push a horse and rider off a bridge! You can push a horse and Rider, see which one's the lighter, you can push a horse and Rider off a bridge!"

Mairi headed that off by starting on the combat ranks; White Companions ("or even off a canyon"), belted knights ("you know you're in the right") and fencing dons ("you won't notice that they're gone"). Last was Baronies and individuals, including the infamous exception of Master Drakkar written two festivals back after an incident that Mairi still didn't have the full story of. ("You can't push Master Drakey, he's thrown himself off by mistake-y!")

There were a few more verses, but Mairi's voice was threatening to give out, so she bowed and sat down. The applause was punctuated by a loud thump as Gimli keeled over unconscious. Legolas shrugged as everyone turned to look at them. "I win."

Mairi managed to excuse herself not long after, supporting Suzi-Maria back to Eowyn's room, which they were sharing with the Lady of Rohan. It took very little time to fall asleep.

It took even less time to bolt awake and run for the hall when Pippin started screaming, cursing themselves for forgetting about the Palantir. They arrived just in time to see Gandalf finishing his interrogation of Pippin. "There was no lie in Pippin's eyes. A fool… but an honest fool he remains. He told Sauron nothing of Frodo and the Ring."

The Wizard sighed. "We've been strangely fortunate. Pippin saw in the Palantir a glimpse of the enemy's plan. Sauron moves to strike the city of Minas Tirith. His defeat at Helm's Deep showed our enemy one thing: he knows the heir of Elendil has come forth. Men are not as weak as he supposed; there is courage still, strength enough perhaps to challenge him. Sauron fears this. He will not risk the peoples of Middle-Earth uniting under one banner."

Boromir nodded. "Just the kind of unfortunate intelligence we've come to expect. Give me a stupid enemy any day. From Pippin's vision, it isn't hard to guess what his first move will be,"

Gandalf agreed, looking only slightly irritated at the interruption. "He will raze Minas Tirith to the ground before he sees a King return to the throne of men. You, Boromir, must return. If the Beacons of Gondor are lit, Rohan must be ready for war."

Théoden was either not properly awake yet, or still holding a grudge. "Tell me… why should we ride to the aid of those who did not come to ours? What do we owe Gondor?"

Suzi-Maria sighed. "Didn't we go over this in Helm's Deep? And Mairi, didn't you mention something about a guy called Eorl and an oath?"

Aragorn interjected before anyone could react badly beyond Theoden starting to turn red. "They must be warned!"

Boromir stepped forward. "They will be, but not by you. I will go. You must come to Minas Tirith by another road. Let me be the one to ease my father into the knowledge that he is going to be replaced. He will take it better than coming from you or Gandalf."

Gandalf couldn't argue with that. "Understand this: things are now in motion that cannot be undone. I ride for Minas Tirith." He glanced at Pippin, "And we won't be going alone."
Mairi had always been good at last-minute packing (usually because of procrastination, very early flights or someone adding things at the last second), but that was turning out to be a good thing, since she was good at attending to fine details in a hurry.

Urgency or not, the path leading from the city of Edoras to the plains of Rohan was a rocky one, and only a fool would take it in the dark, no matter what horse they were riding. Therefore, they were waiting until at least pre-dawn, still about half an hour away, before riding to Gondor.

This gave them time to at least pack, and for Mairi to run to the kitchens and pack some food. She met Boromir in the stables, where he was organising a horse for himself. Not even Shadowfax could ride for three days straight, but messenger horses, bred for speed rather than battle, required only a brief respite between runs of up to four hours.

Mairi handed him the bundle of food as Boromir finished saddling his horse, spotting Gandalf heading down the hill toward them, followed by Merry and Pippin. "I wonder who this will be harder on."

Boromir followed her gaze. "You mean the Hobbits? I think it will fall hardest on Merry. He is older and supposedly had been the semi-responsible one."

Mairi stifled a laugh at his choice of words. From the tales the fellowship had shared in their lighter moments, 'responsible' was a term that Merry and Pippin had only recently formed even a passing acquaintance with. Boromir matched her smile for a fleeting moment, before growing serious again. "Now he faces his younger cousin going into danger without him, and no certainty of when they will see each other again."

Mairi matched his seriousness. "You sound as though you speak from experience."

Boromir nodded. "Given the choice, my brother would have been a scholar. Faramir has little liking for battle, though he is a good tactician, and that makes our father reluctant to listen, fearing that Faramir will advocate a more peaceful approach, when decisive action is needed. I worry how Faramir will fare without me to distract our father."

Well, that put a new spin on the character that most fans loved to dislike. Mairi laid her hand on his arm, hearing voices coming closer. "I'll keep an eye on Merry, if you'll look out for Pippin."

She knew that he would do that anyway, but the atmosphere was becoming far too heavy. Boromir gave her another fleeting smile, and Mairi did something impulsive. She leaned up and kissed him on the cheek. "I apologise if that was too bold. If it makes you uncomfortable, you may simply consider
it a wish for good luck."

Perhaps it was selfish of her, to act without knowing if her feelings were returned, but they were heading toward the ultimate showdown, and perhaps Boromir was already living on borrowed time. Nothing was certain, and she had missed out on many things because she had been afraid to take the first step. For once, Mairi was willing to be reckless.

Boromir caught her hand as she started to turn away, spotting a very grumpy Gandalf stalking over to where Shadowfax was stabled. "It was not too bold, but perhaps now is not the time to talk about it. We will meet again in Gondor."

Mairi smiled, drawing a visibly upset Merry back from Shadowfax as the mighty horse cantered out of the stable, followed by Boromir's new mount.

Merry took off toward the guard post, nearly bowling Aragorn over, and Mairi left for the Hall, hoping to find something that would keep her mind off what was to come.

Of course, it didn't work.

For someone with a tendency toward obliviousness, Suzi-Maria could spot 'it's complicated' love from a mile away, and Eowyn had her own romantic woes to be distracted from. Mairi didn't even make it through the throne room before they cornered her.

Suzi-Maria threw an arm around her shoulders. "Somebody's got a crush! Come on, tell us all about it."

Mairi glared as Eowyn looked confused. "You are injured? Crushed by what?"

Mairi shook her head. "A turn of phrase where we are from. It means to feel affection which may or may not be returned, and the risk of crushed hopes, hence the term."

Eowyn's expression cleared. "Ah. You are missing Lord Boromir, then?"

Mairi buried her face in her hands. "Am I really that obvious?"

The Lady of Rohan smiled gently, not having had the chance for this kind of conversation since she was a young girl. "It is obvious that you hold him in high regard, and that he admires you greatly, which is more obvious because everyone seemed to think he was a confirmed bachelor, married to the army."

Suzi-Maria grinned. In a way, it was reassuring to know that Mairi could make errors of judgement or do silly things on occasion. It certainly made the blonde feel a lot better about some of her earlier actions, which she could admit in hindsight were monumentally stupid. "Is it really the wisest thing, though? All things considered."

Mairi looked up long enough to glare at her, before dropping into a chair and burying her face in her crossed arms. "No, in fact I’d call it a foolish and even selfish thing, considering that Sauron is about to hit Gondor with everything he has; that we don't even know if we are staying here or going home on the off chance that we even survive the war; that no-one is going to like the eldest son of the steward being involved with a random women that came out of nowhere; and a dozen other things that I haven't thought of."

To make matters worse, Sam's voice interrupted whatever Eowyn was about to say. "What's going on with Lord Boromir? I assume that's who we're talking about, since this is the first time I've seen
Mairi look this close to dramatic angst."

Everyone turned to stare at him. Rowan, coming up behind him, blinked. "You'd know, of course. Please tell me I'm not going to actually have to step up as your protector."

Mairi spluttered wordlessly as the other youth flushed at the jibe toward his own dramatics. "I'm not totally un-observant! It's obvious that they have some kind of chemistry, even if she's been trying to deny it since Amon Hen!"

Mairi's response was a muffled groan as Suzi-Maria smirked. "Yes, I remember that. I have to say, this was probably the last thing any of us were expecting."

Eowyn finally took pity on the brunette. "Oh, leave her alone, I'm sure it isn't quite that bad."

Mairi sat up. "Thank you, Lady Eowyn. I'm going to check on Merry and shoot something. Get the gossip over with before I get back, please."

Chapter End Notes

Ok, short chapter, I know.

Question, should I stick with what's happening to the four from earth, or branch out to what is happening in Gondor, as well? I debated a lot on whether or not to include any romance, so opinions on whether you liked it or not are much appreciated.
Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Summary

In which Elves are annoying, Mary-Sues panic, and there are small amounts of romance

After a session on fighting with long knives from Tauriel, cut short when the Captain of Mirkwood has to break up a disagreement between a few Mirkwood elves and what looked like Haldir’s brothers, Mairi was left alone to shoot.

Pausing to re-adjust her bracer, she nearly fell over when Legolas stepped out of the shadows, where he had been standing, apparently still trying to avoid Tauriel. Trying to slow her heart back down, she smiled. "Who won the drinking game last night? I know Rowan dropped out, because I had to drag him back to his room. He couldn't even walk in a straight line."

Legolas smiled. "I did. Elven wine is a lot stronger than ale, so we have a higher tolerance."

Mairi managed to keep a straight face. "Wonderful. I have absolutely no tolerance or liking for alcohol, so you can finish mine off the next time someone tries to give me more than needed for toasts."

That provoked a brief laugh, before the elf grew serious. "What do you think you will do when this is over? Eowyn has practically adopted you, Aragorn could offer you a place once he re-takes the throne, and you would all be welcome in my home." He caught the brief look of horror. "I would welcome you, and I care not for the opinion of others."

Mairi's look of horror turned to one of apology, especially as he had managed to extend the invitation despite the weeks of Suzi-Maria all but stalking him. "Oh, no, it's just that I am absolutely terrified of spiders. I panic when I see one as small as my thumbnail, so you can imagine how I would react to some of those in your home."

Legolas laughed again. "The woman who faced down a troll, orcs and Uruk-Hai, who fiercely defended me from your companion, fears insects? I cannot envision it."

Mairi huffed. "Ask Rowan, if you don't believe me, he has most of the stories. Half the camp came running to see who was being murdered when someone slipped a non-poisonous one into my sleeping bag last Festival. You'd think I would be used to it by now. I'm brave when I am fighting for my life, but I have plenty of fears the rest of the time."

He frowned, placing a hand over hers. "When Sauron is dead, many of his creatures will fall with him, and Mirkwood will be Eryn Lasgalan again. As my comrade and friend, I would protect you, and you would have no need to fear."

It was a nice sentiment. "I do not think I would fit in. I am Edain. We are born, and the flame of our lives burn brightly, but we are not meant to live forever, and a bright flame is also a brief one. I don't know if I'll even live to see the end of this war, much less what will happen after. I will not make a commitment that I do not know I will be able to keep."

Legolas placed a gentle hand on her arm. "If I have anything to say about it, you will survive. I
Mairi threw up her arms, making the elf duck to avoid getting hit by her bow, and causing Tauriel, who had just returned, to laugh. "Not you, too! I didn't think I was that obvious!"

Tauriel laughed again. "He is noble, strong-willed man with a good heart, pleasant to look upon, and quite easy to admire. I knew such a one, once, sixty years ago. He made quite an impression."

Was that a flash of sorrow, or even grief for a missed opportunity in the elf-lady's eyes? Legolas clearly thought so, because he dragged the discussion back on track. "But Boromir was not so practiced at hiding his feelings as you. It was obvious that he held strong feelings for you, and we thought that there might be a spark between you when we overheard the discussion at Amon Hen."

Mairi resisted the urge to swear, but was saved from having to say anything else when Suzi-Maria appeared, looking panicked. "Mairi!"

Mairi managed not to curse as she turned around. What was it now? "What happened this time?"

It came out far less charitably than she had planned, but Suzi-Maria was too upset to comment on that. "King Theoden wants to send a messenger to Gondor to let Boromir know that Rohan will support them if needed, but most of his messengers are being sent to muster the army outposts, so he wants to send me to catch up with Gandalf, Boromir and Pippin!"

Mairi took a moment to translate the breathless babble. "Well, I suppose that makes sense, since you've proven that you can protect yourself until you join them. What's the big issue?"

Suzi-Maria was lighter than a grown man in full armor and, as a Mary-Sue, could bend the laws of Physics to catch up with them in a day. Besides, she may know how to fight, but she was the youngest of their quartet, and not so skilled that her absence on the battlefield would be a huge loss. Acting as messenger made more sense.

Suzi-Maria did not agree. "But I won't have any of you there to explain when I say or do something wrong, and we'll be in the middle of a siege and I'll be alone and I'm scared and I don't want to leave you and -"

She burst into hysterical tears as Mairi and the two elves exchanged awkward looks. Mairi stepped forward and pulled Suzi into her arms. "Hey, calm down. Boromir will be there, and you won't be expected to be on the front lines, and we'll follow as swiftly as we can."

Suzi sniffled. "But what about when I mess up, like I always do? You won't be there to smooth things over, and a battle is a bad place for misunderstandings."

That was true, but there was nothing to be done about it. "You'll just have to think before you speak, and you have been doing a lot better. I know you can do it, if you try."

Suzi wiped her eyes on her sleeve, "I don't have much of a choice, do I? Someone needs to tell them, and I'm the easiest to spare."

Rowan had reacted about as well as Suzi-Maria, which was to say, badly. However, he couldn't argue that it did make the most sense.

That didn't stop him from fussing as he helped her saddle the messenger horses and made sure she had everything she would need.
The Mary-Sue and modern-day woman in Suzi wanted to burst into a rant about how being female didn't make her helpless, but she had witnessed his interactions with Mairi enough times to realise that fussing was his way of expressing worry, and that there was no shame or weakness in having people who cared about you. That was a trait that he and Mairi had in common, and the insecure girl in her wanted to be jealous, but her slowly-growing mature side reigned it in. Mairi and Rowan were friends, but it was obvious that they would never be anything more.

Instead, she tried for a brave smile. "I'll be fine, I think. I'll see you in Gondor."

Rowan leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek. "Try not to get killed until I get there. We'll join you as soon as may be."

Suzi-Maria kissed him back, on the lips, trying to hide a giddy smile, and swung herself onto the first horse in a suitably dramatic fashion. "Until then. Hyah!"

Having been actively avoiding using her powers for the last few weeks, Suzi-Maria was a bit rusty, and it took her longer than expected to catch up with Gandalf, Boromir and Pippin.

She finally managed it a half-day out from Minas Tirith, after two days of catnaps and eating in the saddle, and focusing all her power on speeding up the journey had left her very nearly messy, as far as appearances went.

They had paused for a horse-change, and both Gandalf and Boromir had drawn their weapons at the sound of a swiftly-approaching rider, but sheathed them again when she drew close enough for them to see who it was. "Has something happened at Edoras?"

Suzi-Maria nodded, catching her breath. "King Theoden has sent out word for the Rohirrim to stand ready for war, and to keep an eye on the beacons of Minas Tirith. When Gondor calls, Rohan will answer."

Boromir nodded. "I will assess the situation at Gondor first, but I am glad to hear the King's decision. I do not doubt that they will be needed."

That went without saying, really, but standing around was unlikely to be good for their continued good health.

They urged their horses onward, cresting a hill. Suzi-Maria Drew a breath in awe. Tolkien's description, made visual by Peter Jackson, had been breathtaking, but didn't hold a candle to the real thing. For once, she didn't even think twice about Gandalf's habit of making grand un-necessary proclamations. "Minas Tirith. City of Kings."

Boromir seemed to relax, as if he had been carrying a burden since before any of the Fellowship had ever met him. "Home."

The cheer when Boromir rode through the gates was almost enough to knock them back a step.

The Man's clear relief at being home again was enough to provoke a pang of Homesickness in Suzi-Maria, and most likely in a very overwhelmed Pippin, but there was no time to think on that as they sought out the Steward.

The buildings changed as they rode between levels, from common housing of families who probably worked outside the walls, to merchant shops and warehouses, to gardens and a series of buildings that Boromir pointed out to be the Houses of Healing, to what were almost certainly military
barracks, to significantly fancier housing, and finally the citadel itself.

At the Seventh Gate, Boromir paused to speak with the guard, inquiring as to the presence of Denethor. The guard nodded, "Yes, Lord Boromir, though he was due to meet with the captains later."

Boromir nodded and was about to continue through the tunnel, when the guard shifted in place, hesitating for a moment, "Er, with the greatest of respect, my wife, who is in service in the citadel, warned me that he is not in the best of moods this morning, though perhaps that will wear off with your Lordship's return."

With the news they brought, that was unlikely, but Suzi-Maria and Pippin knew better than to say so. Instead, Boromir only thanked the guard and rode on.

They left their horses with a few servants just before the courtyard with the White Tree, with instructions to take them to the stables, and continued on. Outside the great oaken doors, Gandalf stopped them, addressing Pippin. "Listen carefully. Lord Denethor is Boromir's Father, but he is also the Steward of Gondor, and we do not bring good news. To mention his impending replacement will be unwise. Say nothing of Aragorn either. Or of Frodo and the Ring."

Boromir sighed. "Father isn't overly-fond of you, either, Gandalf, and I've been handling him for years. Leave the talking to me until I say otherwise."
Boromir was not looking forward to this conversation with his father.

He was very aware of how much easier his relationship with Denethor was than Faramir's, with Boromir being both the eldest and not reminding Denethor so much of their mother. That was likely to change, now, with his declaration of support for Aragorn.

Despite what Gandalf said, Lord Steward Denethor of Gondor would know about Aragorn by now. Soldiers gossiped worse than old fishwives, and the men who had come to Helm's Deep would have had plenty of time to tell their friends about the ranger Aragorn, descendent of Numenor who wore the ring of Barahir.

Any captain with half a brain eavesdropped on his soldiers, especially if they were posted somewhere unpleasant, and the Captains would have reported it to their Majors, who would have reported it to their Generals, until it reached Lord Denethor.

Even if he had no desire to be Steward himself, Boromir hadn't spent so many years working his way up to Captain-General (and keeping a close but discreet eye on his Captain of Rangers little brother) without picking up a few things about how information spread.

Denethor was an ageing man, set in his ways, and would not be happy at the idea that after so many years ruling Gondor, he would be cast aside in favour of an unknown, unproven ranger.

But Pippin and Suzi-Maria looked even more apprehensive than Boromir felt, so he hid his feelings and projected an air of confidence, as he would the night before a battle when reassuring younger soldiers. He placed a hand on each of their shoulders, nodding at the guards to open the doors. "I know my father, so let me do the talking. Everything will be all right."

The doors opened, and Boromir led the way in.

Denethor abandoned protocol to hurry down from the Steward's Chair and embrace his eldest child. "My son returns! What news do you bring?"

Boromir stepped back and bowed. "The One Ring was indeed found, and is on its way to be destroyed." If Frodo and Sam ran into the Ithilien Rangers, that would spare Faramir from their
father's anger. "King Theoden has agreed to send help if we call for it, in accordance with the Oath of Eorl and as thanks for the help we gave them at Helm's Deep."

As expected, Denethor did not seem at all pleased, and the next question came through gritted teeth. "Gandalf I know, but who are your other companions?"

Perhaps it was a good thing that Suzi-Maria had come, and was staying determinedly silent, rather than Mairi. Now was probably not the time to break the news that Boromir had marital hopes towards a stranger, whose best political recommendations were her connection to Elven royalty and that she was trusted by the Rightful King of Gondor.

He gestured first to Pippin, then to Suzi-Maria. "This is Master Peregrine Took, a Hobbit of the Shire and grandson of the Thain," (even if he seldom acted like it) "and Lady Suzi-Maria, whose healing saved my life on our Quest."

That would put at least one of them in the Steward's favour, even if Boromir was temporarily out of it. Denethor inclined his head, ever so slightly, in gratitude as Suzi-Maria managed a graceful curtsy, murmuring something polite and inaudible. "I cannot say I am pleased that the Ring has not come to Gondor with you, to be used as a weapon in the war, but the news of support is welcome. For now, rest and refresh yourself. You may tell me the rest in detail tonight."

Boromir bowed again and led his companions out, internally wincing as Gandalf lingered inside the doors. There really was no talking to Wizards, but nor was there any talking to Boromir's father when he was annoyed about something, both facts that Boromir knew from experience. Instead of trying to dissuade the wizard, he led the other two further into the citadel, sending a page to find the Seneschal and tell him about the three honoured guests.

Boromir wasn't sure of the fine details about hosting a young, unwed lady who was a close friend and had saved his life, so he intended to leave that problem to someone more qualified while he met with the Captain of the Guard and the commanding officers who were currently stationed in Minas Tirith.
Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Summary

In which Gondor prepares for war.

Suzi-Maria disappeared into a guest suite as soon as a serving maid promised the possibility of a hot bath, leaving Pippin to follow Boromir to his meeting with the available Senior Officers. Hobbits easily went un-noticed, and Pippin could keep Gandalf updated, without Boromir running the risk of openly courting his father's anger by keeping the wizard informed. It would be less trouble than leaving Gandalf to his own devices in order to get information, anyway.

Everyone had known that undertaking a trip to Imladris alone was a perilous undertaking, and the Quest even more-so, and as Boromir expected, stories of the Battle of Helm's Deep had already started spreading through the Army. Thus, his appearance was greeted with some cheer and back-slapping before they got down to business.

As with all meetings, they started with the small things, like supplies and routine reports from quieter outposts, and worked their way up. Boromir gestured at Pippin. "This is Peregrine Took, better known as Pippin, of The Shire. He was one of my companions in the Ring Quest, and is here because he discovered knowledge of the Enemy's plans."

Several of the officers looked curiously at the Hobbit, but took Boromir at his word. The Commander of the City guard stood to give his report. "There have been a few minor brawls that needed to be broken up, mostly due to high tensions and too many drinks. It is obvious that we are nearing the end of this War, one way or another, and our people can sense it."

Boromir nodded, turning his attention to one of Faramir's rangers. "Try to keep everyone calm, and let the hotheads cool their heels in a guardhouse cell for the night. What word from Osgiliath?"

The ranger bowed. "More orcs arrive every day, and grow bolder in their attacks. They have taken the eastern shore, but we are holding them at the river, for now. If the Enemy's forces do cross the river, we won't be able to hold it."

Boromir considered that. Osgiliath was the last barrier before Gondor itself, but no men could be safely spared from any of the other nearby outposts, and troops from further away would not arrive in time. The Pelennor Fields offered no cover for an army, and the walls of Minas Tirith could hold at least a few days. "Tell Captain Faramir to defend Osgiliath as much as his forces can, and to set up traps on the bank and repel any skirmish parties, but if the orcs manage to cross the river in force, retreat to Minas Tirith."

The ranger bowed again, replaced by a General. "The Prince of Dol Amroth is leading what few reinforcements he can spare, but they are also under siege from the Umbar Corsairs, and his support will number in the few hundreds, at best. They will arrive later today. What is the situation in Rohan?"

Prince Imrahil was Boromir's maternal uncle, as well as ruler of the Principality that owed fealty to Gondor, but Boromir could appreciate that he had his own problems, and owed protection first to his
own people. "Saruman's death and the Enemy's defeat at Helm's Deep means that Rohan is quiet, and with the end drawing near, He does not have the time to send his forces through that country. King Theoden has promised aid should we call for it, and I intend for the beacons to be lit as soon as we finish here."

There was little more to speak of, other than instructions to make sure the defences were in perfect working order and to think on plans for the upcoming battle, which they would compare and discuss tomorrow. Standing up to leave, a Major cleared his throat. "Um, my lord, a few soldiers saw a Lady accompanying you, Gandalf and Master Took when you arrived. Speculation is that she is one of the two who fought at Helm's deep." He paused, looking uncomfortable, "Er, there is also gossip that you and one of the ladies are… potentially involved."

Boromir huffed in exasperation. Honestly, you would think that the soldiers would have something better to do than gossip about their Captain-General's love life. Still, it was better to clear things up now, rather than let rumours run wild and damage reputations. That wouldn't go down well with Mairi's father, or with Rowan, whichever of them Boromir needed to ask permission for a courtship.

At least it gave him a chance of avoiding a similar conversation with his father. "The Lady is Suzi-Maria, who fought with the main army. The Lady Mairi is the one who worked with Lady Eowyn to rally the women and hold back the Uruk-Hai who had planned an ambush from behind. Lady Mairi and I have decided to make no promises until the War is won and Aragorn is crowned King."

He turned and left the room, heading for the beacon tower, pretending not to notice Pippin hiding a grin.

Boromir had expressed confidence to his officers, but there was a potential problem that he had not mentioned. He kept his voice down as he and Pippin walked through the halls, reaching the base of the beacon tower. "There is a chance that my Lord Father has ordered that the beacons not be lit without his express command. If that is the case, I need you to sneak around and light it while I distract the guards. Can you do this?"

Pippin nodded instantly. "Easier than stealing mushrooms. Er, do I need to call you sir or my lord, now that we're in Gondor?"

Boromir laughed. "No, my little friend, that will not be necessary. Stay in the shadows, now."

He walked up to the two guards. "Light the beacon. We are in need of allies."

The guards shifted uncertainly, confirming Boromir's worry. He held command of the army, an authority that extended to the citadel guards, but his father was the Lord Steward, and could, technically, overrule him. "Forgive me, Lord Boromir, but Lord Denethor has commanded that none other than he may light the beacon."

If he hadn't spent several months around Hobbits, Boromir would have missed the small figure in the elven cloak slipping around the guards and toward the beacon. Even looking for Pippin, he nearly missed the youngest hobbit, which meant that the guards certainly had. Boromir shifted a little to the side, the guards copying his action. "We do not have time to wait! Mordor's army approaches, and we cannot hold them alone!"

The guards looked miserable, suggesting that they agreed with him, but couldn't do anything about it. Luckily, they didn't have to, as Pippin was now scrambling down the lit pile of wood and down the cliff that the beacon stood on, climbing back in through a window. Boromir let out a breath. "Very well, I will not ask you to disobey the Steward."
He left as quickly as he dared, clapping Pippin on the shoulder as soon as they were out of sight. "I'll have to add you as a guard of the citadel, to give that at least a bit of legitimacy. Is that acceptable to you?"

Pippin beamed. "I would be honoured. How do we know if Rohan will get the message?"

Boromir pointed out of the next window they passed, where Amon Din was barely visible. "There are many beacons, spread out from Minas Tirith to within sight of Meduseld. If the guards at Amon Din see the beacon lit here…"

Sure enough, a fire blazed on the nearest mountain peak, accompanied by a loud curse from the unfortunate beacon guards, who would have to explain things to Denethor.

Far away, bent over a small pile of mending, Mairi and Rowan looked up sharply as Aragorn burst through the doors. "The beacons of Minas Tirith! The beacons are lit! Gondor calls for aid."

Theoden, who had been in discussion with his Marshals, turned as the future king ran up to the throne. For a long, long moment, it seemed that everyone held their breath. Theoden inclined his head ever so slightly. "And Rohan will answer. Muster the Rohirrim!"

Mairi hastily tied off her thread, hurrying back to her room to pack. Despite the fact that they were about to head into near-certain death, *again*, she couldn't help smiling.

She hoped that Boromir, Suzi-Maria and Pippin were faring as well.
Chapter Twenty-Five

Eowyn approached Mairi and Tauriel aside as soon as King Theoden walked out, followed by Aragorn, Eomer and the other Marshels. "I need your help."

The other two casually dropped back, moving off to the side. Eowyn was not given to needless dramatics, and Mairi, at least, had a good idea of where this was going. "With what."

Eowyn took a deep breath, seeming to brace herself. "You will think it strange, and probably selfish of me, but I need you to help me remain with the army beyond the encampment."

Tauriel blinked. "Why would we consider that selfish or strange?"

To her credit, Eowyn recovered from her surprise quickly. "With my Uncle and brother riding to war, they will expect me to stay behind and prepare for the return of the warriors, if they manage to prevent Sauron's victory. It is an honour that the King would trust me so, but Edoras has been preparing for the aftermath of war for three days already, and the townswomen are more than capable of running things without me."

Mairi nodded. "Good arguments, but I get the feeling that there is more?"

Eowyn sighed, her face grave. "I have spent years watching my brother and cousin ride away, waiting for their safe return and fearing that Worntongue would grow too bold in their absence, or arrange some treachery to make their absence permanent. I cannot do so again, even were the doom of the world not at stake."

Mairi didn't know if it would be welcome, but she immediately hugged Eowyn. She knew what it was like to ignore the bawdy remarks from passing drivers, and to be hyper-aware while walking home by yourself, and that was bad enough. She couldn't imagine what it must have been like for Eowyn to live with that constant fear for years, knowing that the two barriers that Worntongue had been too afraid to cross were only a lucky orc away from never returning, and that the Uncle who should have been her protector was too much in his advisor's thrall for her to rely on him.

Tauriel was not so demonstrative, but placed a hand on Eowyn's shoulder. "Is there anything else?"

Eowyn sighed as Mairi released her and stepped back. "This is where you may think it strange. For the past four nights, I have had the same dream. I am dressed as a Rider, in the middle of a great battle, with the city of Minas Tirith in the distance, and standing between my uncle and a great shadow. I am meant to ride to Gondor's aid, and I will."

Tauriel and Mairi exchanged a brief glance. The Captain of Mirkwood gave Eowyn a rare smile and a nod. Mairi's smile was a bit more open. "I'll do my best to distract people from noticing that you don't seem to be planning to go quietly back to Edoras."

Eowyn said nothing, but her eyes conveyed her gratitude and relief as she hurried to help organise the muster.

Mairi was back in culottes, and didn't care how many odd looks she got. It was nothing compared to forgetting her towel while swimming in a chemise that one Festival and having to get back to her
campsite in soaking white linen, anyway. She met up with the boys as they were leading their horses out into the yard, Sam making random observations to distract himself from nerves. "I'm surprised that Lady Eowyn would carry a sword, if she's only riding to the encampment."

Sam was getting better at being subtle, but still had a tendency to blurt things out at the most inconvenient times. Mairi covered with a shrug. "I'm not. It's unlikely that everyone in the Riddermark would know her by sight, and we don't want any unfortunate misunderstandings if they notice that her hands are not work-roughened."

Eomer looked more than a little offended, passing the small group with narrative-comedic timing. "Even so, I doubt that my sister could ever be mistaken for a camp follower!"

Mairi curtsied. "I mean no offence against Lady Eowyn, my Lord, merely that carrying a sword and obviously knowing how to use it is a good way to avoid misunderstandings."

Sam cut in before Eowyn's brother could respond. "What's a camp follower?"

There was a very uncomfortable pause, which Mairi broke first. "Who wants to explain that one? Because I'm not going to, and it's someone else's turn."

Eomer and the main Fellowship disappeared as quickly as if they had turned invisible. Merry, fresh from being accepted into Theoden's service as esquire, looked almost as confused as Sam. Rowan sighed and took the other youth's arm, leading him off to the side and speaking in a low voice as the war party began to mount up. Eomer moved his horse to the front, spear in hand. "Now is the hour! Riders of Rohan, oaths you have taken! Now, fulfil them all, to Lord and Land!"

With the thundering of hooves, they galloped out of Edoras, and the Mustering of the Riddermark was begun.

Pippin was trying not to let his nerves get the better of him, and feverently wishing that he could swear himself to Boromir, rather than Denethor. Seated outside the doors to the Throne Room, alongside Boromir, he finally asked a question that had been bothering him. "Why would Lord Denethor command that only he could light the beacons?"

It was a fair question, and one with many answers, but they had time. Boromir sat down next to the nervous Hobbit and still-silent lady. "It has been that was for a long time, that only the King, when there was one, the Steward, or sometimes the Heir, could command the beacons to be lit. The beacons can send a call swifter than any other method, but they are also very hard to un-ignite if there is a mistake."

A familiar voice cut in, lifting a weight off of Boromir's heart. "It happened once about four hundred and sixty years ago, and turned into a diplomatic nightmare when a messenger arrived at Edoras halfway through the king's war council to explain that it had been a mistake."

Boromir leaped to his feet, embracing his little brother. "Faramir! I am glad you made it back safely. Osgiliath is fallen?"

Faramir nodded grimly. "Yes, the orcs crossed the river at night. We laid traps on the riverbank, that took care of several dozen, and one barge overturned because they crossed without lanterns, but we would not have been able to hold out." The younger of the brothers grimaced. "Father isn't going to be pleased."

That was an understatement. "I gave the order to retreat if you could not win. I will take responsibility. Anyway, Pippin, another reason Father may not have wished the beacons lit is that it
was not long ago that Theoden was still taking advice from Wormtongue. If the beacons were lit and Wormtongue persuaded the king that aid should not be sent, we would have not only mass panic, but also a broken alliance to deal with."

That was a worst-case-possibility, but far too likely only a month ago. Boromir tried not to think about it as Faramir offered a final point. "Beyond that, Boromir has always achieved a fortunate outcome in battle, and most of the Enemy's attacks have been the back-and-forth occupation of Osgiliath, and skirmishes as my rangers try to prevent re-enforcements from reaching Him, rather than large battles that are impossible to miss. With Boromir safely returned to Gondor, perhaps Father does not view the situation as being as serious as it was before."

The door behind them started to open, and Boromir supressed a grimace. "I imagine that we are about to find out, one way or the other."

As it turned out, Denethor was not pleased in the slightest at the news of Osgiliath, even though Boromir taking responsibility stopped him from coming down like an avalanche on his long-suffering sons.

Only like a highly inconvenient rockslide that takes out the only traversable path to your destination. At least Pippin was sworn into service without too much extra drama and was promptly sent to escort Suzi-Maria to keep an eye on Gandalf, as Faramir was the only one who trusted him not to go poking around, and the Men sat down to an extremely chilly lunch. Denethor fixed his gaze on his sons, who were trying to mimic the air of semi-invisibility that the servants had mastered. "I do not think we should abandon Osgiliath so lightly."

Boromir gritted his teeth. "My Lord, it was not lightly abandoned, and we would lose too many men trying to re-take it now, while we should be concentrating on shoring up our defences in preparation for the Enemy's attack."

Faramir tried not to dwell on the fact that if he had made such a statement, Denethor would have instantly shot him down, but Boromir's word was accepted with less than a minute of further arguing. Still, it wasn't all sunshine and roses in his brother's camp, even if Faramir did find it amusing to watch his older brother be interrogated. "Now, the rumours of this girl..."

Boromir barely managed not to choke on his wine. He was fairly sure that Merry and Pippin, and Legolas and Gimli had bets going as to when he and Mairi made an announcement, and of course he would need to discuss it with his father eventually, but it was still not a conversation he was looking forward to. "What rumours would those be?"

Faramir's smirk indicated that Boromir's attempt at striking a casual tone had fallen far short of the mark. Denethor only glared. "It is good to see that she knows that it is not her place to interfere, but a shy little nobody whose only attributes seem to be her looks will not make a fitting wife! If you had been less pre-occupied, perhaps the ring would have come to Gondor by now!"

Now Boromir actually did choke on his wine. His father thought he had designs on Suzi-Maria? And since when was that girl described as shy? Admittedly, Boromir didn't expect the officers to include the name of the woman Boromir was interested in when writing their weekly reports, but still! "The Ring is a curse, my Lord, and I would not chance it within ten leagues of my beloved city! I honour Suzi-Maria for saving my life, but I have no such designs on her."

Faramir faced the choice between being helpful or watching Boromir squirm, and like younger siblings all across the multiverse, he chose the latter. "Yes, my ranger said that your lady's name was
Mairi, or some such? Taller, dark hair, diplomatic sort of woman?"

Boromir sent him a swift glare. "We agreed to make no promises until Sauron is defeated, and she is close friends with Lady Eowyn of the Riddermark and highly esteemed by the inhabitants of Rivendell."

Mentioning Aragorn at this point would do no-one any good, nor would mentioning that the Elves respected Mairi for her ability to keep Suzi-Maria under control in the early days. The implication that Mairi was important in her own right, and the possibility of good relations with Rohan would be more useful in persuading Denethor than any kind of indignation on her behalf.

Denethor did not seem especially mollified. "And her family? Where does she hail from?"

That had only come up in conversation once, back in Rivendell. "Landed, somewhere in the North, I believe. Well-off enough to retain a guardian for their daughter, and one skilful enough to get them out of captivity by Orcs."

Boromir had heard of the four being captured by Orcs from Gimli, who had heard it from Mairi through the use of written communication, when they met on the way to Rivendell. He hadn't brought the subject up with Mairi herself, because if she had been taken captive, then the fate of her family was either unknown to her, or not nearly so kind. Even if Rowan hadn't been the one to orchestrate their escape, it did no-one any harm to pay him the compliment.

Denethor grunted, which was at least not a criticism, and Boromir returned to his food, hoping desperately for the time to move faster, so that he could be spared any further discussion.

The army gathered at Dunharrow was huge.

Mairi had never been to Pennsic War, an annual gathering that was reportedly visible from satellite photograph, but even the largest gathering in the Known World (and a running joke in several puppetry plays) probably paled in comparison.

Mairi did her best not to show how overwhelmed she was, though having Eowyn and Tauriel nearby certainly helped her focus.

Joining the camp also served as an embarrassing reminder of how terrible she was at putting up tents. Camping at events usually meant that there was probably someone around to offer assistance, but here, everyone was busy. Eowyn had watched for a few minutes, genuinely surprised that she hadn't at least picked up some skill during the quest, then took pity on Mairi and offered the sharing of her own tent.

Mairi accepted very gratefully, and offered to handle the cooking. Eowyn was aware of her own shortcomings in that area, and considered it a fair trade. They had just re-joined Aragorn, Rowan, Sam, Gimli, Legolas and Tauriel when a deferential voice came from behind them. "Excuse me, my Lady."

Mairi, Eowyn and the members of the Fellowship turned around to see a group of several dozen men, presumably from the Western Marches. The ringleader looked nervous, but rallied. "Are either of you Lady Mairi?"

The woman mentioned stepped forward, and the entire group bowed, to everyone's increasing confusion. "We owe you our thanks, my Lady."

That didn't really clarify anything. Mairi tried to keep the confusion off her face. "Whatever for?
Forgive me, but I don't believe we've ever met before."

One of the men stepped forward, with a forceful nudge from the others electing him spokesman. "We haven't, but you taught my wife how to defend herself at Helm's Deep. She organised group practices with the other women when we returned to our village, and I'm not nearly so fearful for her safety as I would have been, else."

That was extremely nice to know. Genuine compliments about making a difference were not something that Mairi experienced very often, and tended to leave her walking on air for days, much to some people's annoyance. She managed to contain herself to a gracious smile. "I am glad to have been of service."

Another man looked around to see if Theoden or any of the Marshels were within hearing range. "We were considering not answering the summons, and claiming that we had arrived too late, so that we could return and defend our homes." He smiled fondly. "My Sigrid threatened to impale me on my own sword if I did any such thing. Said my place was with the army, and she and the other women could handle things at home."

That explained a lot about the diminished numbers of the Rohirrim at the battle of Pelennor Fields. Men would have wanted to remain and defend their homes and families, not leave them helpless to face a possible attack. With mothers, sisters and daughters who knew a bit about defending themselves, and had proved that they could work in unison to fight if necessary, then men would have been less reluctant to join the Muster.

Although, if Mairi ever needed an example of the ripple effect to throw at Suzi-Maria, this would be perfect. On the other hand, Suzi-Maria might throw it back at her as proof of interference being a good thing, so maybe it wasn't such a perfect example.

Chapter End Notes

In Canon, we aren't really given a reason for Eowyn's decision to dress up as a Rider and go with the army. Taken at face value and in light of Theoden's request that she remain behind and prepare to receive the wounded, this could be perceived as incredibly selfish, so I wanted to flesh out possible motivations. As I mentioned in a previous chapter, Eowyn has trained as a Shieldmaiden, but spent far too long forced to wait behind and hope that her loved ones return safely. On top of that, she has a severe aversion to waiting passively for things to come to her. Recurring prophetic dreams also seem to be an acceptable motivation for doing things in LotR. Boromir has a dream and goes to Rivendell, a trip that would have taken over a month without the Quest, in the middle of a war. I don't think it is too far-fetched that Eowyn could have something similar happen, especially if she was originally considering following Theoden's orders.
Also, in the books, there are a lot of people who don't show up at Dunharrow. I think this is because they saw the Battle of Helm's Deep, and don't want to leave their families unprotected. With the changes to the storyline, this is less of an issue.
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

The shadow of war

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Boromir had taken the precaution of luring his father to the Houses of Healing and convincing the head healer, Ioreth, that he was suffering from a severe malady and needed to be quarantined.

He didn't have the slightest delusion that she actually believed him, but they were starting to run out of room in the Houses of Healing, so she went with it, and ordered the Steward to be put in isolation.

Denethor hadn't liked it, and had started raving about betrayal and weak-minded sons. Luckily, that only made everyone more convinced that he was suffering from something, and needed to be away from the general population for everyone's good, which left Denethor's sons to get on with the business of organising the defence of Gondor, with the assumption that the Rohirrim wouldn't get to Minas Tirith before the forces of Mordor did.

It was an old army saying: "Hope for the best, plan for the worst, and be leave room to adapt for whichever one you get."

Suzi-Maria was still shy and quiet, though she had taken time to explain that she was scared of saying something wrong and offending people. Currently, she was sticking close to Gandalf, with Pippin assigned as a guard to both of them.

Boromir could only hope that the rest of the Fellowship were faring as well, and pray that Mairi managed to stay safe in the battles ahead.

A few hundred miles away, at the Rohirrim encampment, the same air of wary anticipation hung over the Riders and the rest of the Fellowship.

Legolas gazed around at the people who spoke in whispers and the uneasy animals. Even Mairi's humming as she brought over food for Eowyn, Tauriel and herself seemed forced, and far less cheerful than the jaunty tunes she usually favoured when she lost herself in thought. "The horses are restless, and the men are quiet."

Éomer spoke from nearby, where he was unsaddling his horse. "They grow nervous in the shadow of the mountain."

That made sense. None of the Fellowship had any prejudices or pre-formed opinions about the place, but something about the mountain disturbed them. Gimli pointed to an opening in the mountainside, a small valley path. "That road there, where does that lead?"

Legolas had heard of it, but only in the vaguest of terms. Having lost his grandfather, Oropher, in the first War of the Ring, it had made sense to learn all he could about the war, to avoid any similar mistakes, but there had been little recorded on the topic. "It is the road to the Dimholt; the door under
the mountain."

Éomer also knew little, but the little he did know was not promising. He had learned it as a warning, not from curiosity. "None who venture there ever return. That mountain is evil."

Aragorn stared at the path for a long moment before Gimli brought him out of the trance. Somehow, he had the sinking feeling that the Dimholt was exactly where his path would lead.

As night fell, inside a tent, Éowyn helped Merry dress for battle while Mairi made some last minute adjustments to the elven armor she was borrowing. The Hobbit's exposure to fighting had been very limited until that point, and although they weren't close, Éowyn felt oddly proud of him for stepping up to help his friends, when he had the option of staying behind in safety. She settled the helmet on his head. "There. A true esquire of Rohan."

Merry beamed at her, drawing his sword in what he clearly hoped was an impressive fashion. "I'm ready!"

Éowyn leaned back from the blade that came a little too close for comfort, startled but amused, and Merry looked abashed. "Sorry. It isn't all that dangerous. It's not even sharp."

Éowyn smiled at him reassuringly, knowing that he was probably nervous enough. "Well that's no good. You won't kill many orcs with a blunt blade. Come on! To the smithy, go!"

Merry left the tent, taking practice swings with the sword as he headed for the smithy. Éowyn followed, laughing quietly to herself. He clearly had a general idea of what he was doing, though she decided to give him some pointers as they rode, and his eagerness was catching. Éomer and Gamling sat at a nearby fire, eating. Éomer looked up as they passed. "You should not encourage him."

Éowyn frowned at her brother's disapproving tone. Most likely it was born from a desire to protect them both, but Éomer had no idea how frustrating it was to be treated like a helpless child when you were in a position to help, if only those who professed to love you would stop doing their best to keep you powerless. Even when Theoden was under Wormtongue's influence and forbade him from doing more than patrol, no-one questioned Éomer's worthiness to fight. "You should not doubt him."

Éomer was practiced at detecting his sister's ire, and attempted to lighten the mood with a jest. "I do not doubt his heart, just the reach of his arm."

Gamling chuckled at the joke, but he was the only one, and stopped when he was hit by Mairi's glare. "You've clearly never fought a child. Lack of height can be an advantage, sometimes."

As could the fact that you could slip under someone's guard and your natural height of strike was your opponents' groin. (Boffer vs Heavy battles at Festival were very instructive) but Mairi wasn't about to put it in such blunt terms. Éowyn had a more immediate grievance with her brother's opinion. "Why should Merry be left behind? He has as much cause go to war as you! Why can he not fight for those he loves?"

Why should anyone be forced to stay behind, useless while their family and friends rode into danger without them? Why should Merry, or Éowyn, or Mairi, or anyone who could bear arms if they wished, be forbidden to fight because they were not men? Mairi was a reluctant warrior, learning out of necessity, but she had spoken several times of female warriors being common in her homeland. The women of the Riddermark were willing to fight to defend their homes, freeing their menfolk from that responsibility, and their husbands and fathers clearly hadn't protested!

Éomer stood to face his sister, his expression serious. "You know as little of war as that Hobbit.
When the fear takes him, and the blood and the screams and the horror of battle take hold, do you think he would stand and fight? He would flee, and he would be right to do so. You did well at Helm's Deep, but War is the province of men, Éowyn.

Listening to grumbling about stubborn idiots was not a new thing for Mairi, as there was a reason Arts and Sciences was occasionally known as Stitch, Bitch and Pitch. (Arts, gossip about the latest thing a consort or relation had done, and singing) Most of the time it was justified, though Mairi had never yet come across a Scadian man foolish enough to say that women didn't belong in the fighting arts.

Countess Eva had recently become Lochac's first female knight, and while male fighters did outnumber the female ones, there was nothing that held them back.

Éowyn might be complaining about her brother, rather than a two-year-old with scissors or paint and an almost-finished dress, or a consort who forgot to stay hydrated until he nearly passed out from heatstroke, but Mairi couldn't bring herself to disagree as the Lady of the Riddermark ranted (though quietly, since tent walls were not soundproof) about what it would take for men to see her as an equal and how someone had to read over the reports and make decisions when their uncle was incapacitated, and it certainly hadn't been Wormtongue, not that Éowyn would have let the advisor near such decisions.

Sam and Rowan had taken themselves elsewhere very quickly. Knowing that Éowyn needed to vent more than she needed Mairi's opinion, the dark-haired lady listened with half an ear, before she was distracted by the now-familiar sound of someone saddling a horse. Éowyn heard it too, and they left the tent to see Aragorn preparing to leave.

Éowyn paled, and darted forward, knowing how much of the men's hope rested on the ranger. She ran out of the tent, confusion and disbelief making her voice shriller than it would have been. "Why are you doing this? The war lies to the East. You cannot leave on the eve of battle!"

Aragorn paused to look at her, and Éowyn struggled for words that would make him explain. "You cannot abandon the men."

Aragorn looked regretful but resolved. "Éowyn…"

Éowyn carried on, regardless, desperate not to allow her people to lose what hope they had. "We need you here."

Aragorn interrupted her. "Why have you come?"

Éowyn stared at him. Surely, he could not be ignorant of her reasons for continuing with the Riders. "Do you not know?"

Aragorn looked uncomfortable now. "It is but a shadow and a thought that you love. I cannot give you what you seek."

Éowyn resisted the urge to roll her eyes. She had been attracted to the Man who had been the first to openly express admiration for her as a Shieldmaiden, rather than acting like he was indulging a whim on her part. If she had to marry someone, as Theoden had hinted on the night they honoured the fallen of Helm's Deep, there were certainly worse people to settle for, but it was little more than that, and even less than the slight flutter in her chest when she first met Boromir's brother.

Lord Faramir had looked admiring, the one time he had visited Rohan as his father's envoy, but they had barely been introduced before Boromir pulled Éowyn aside to confide in her about his father's
suggestions for a marriage alliance, and then Eowyn had been side-tracked by convincing her male relatives that she and Boromir were entirely unsuited to each other.

Regardless, Eowyn was no love-struck girl, to ride heedlessly into battle just so she could gain the attention of a man who was clearly in love with someone else. Mairi had told her about Lady Arwen, and the fact that they were engaged, that Aragorn was willing to take up a throne he had spent his life avoiding for Arwen's sake, was clear evidence that the Heir of Gondor had already made his choice. Eowyn was hardly about to make a fool of herself in a battle she had no chance of winning.

She stared at Aragorn incredulously as he continued what sounded a lot like a rehearsed rejection. "I have you wished you joy since first I saw you."

He touched her face then turned away from Éowyn's shocked expression, approaching the Dimholt road alone.

Eowyn stalked back into the tent to get Mairi, in the hopes that someone closer to Aragorn could talk sense into him, and missed Gimli standing up from where he had been hidden in the shadows. "Just where do you think you're off to?"

Aragorn sighed to himself, having no desire to drag his companions into danger. The Oathbreakers might allow the Heir of Isildur to pass unhindered, but the others would have no such protection from death or worse. "Not this time. This time you must stay, Gimli."

Legolas appeared from behind a row of tents with his horse, followed by Sam and Rowan. "Have you learned nothing of the stubbornness of dwarves?"

Rowan shrugged. "Merry swore service to Theoden, so he and Mairi are staying with the Rohirrim, so that they don't get the impression that we're abandoning them. We don't have the time to waste arguing."

It had been the logical conclusion. Mairi hadn't been very fond of dark, enclosed spaces before Moria, though she had hidden it well, and that part of the Quest had turned dislike into a proper phobia. Besides, if anyone had an issue with women riding into battle, Mairi could ride with Tauriel and the elves, who numbered both male and female, easily enough.

Gimli smirked. "Might as well accept it. We're going with you, laddie."

Rowan had been right in that there was no time to argue, and the five set off on the Dimholt road, as the few soldiers not sleeping looked on in shock, murmuring to each other.

One was louder than the rest as the riders disappeared into the darkness. "Why does he leave on the eve of battle?"

Gamling answered, the worry and stress of the last few months finally coming to a head. "He leaves because there is no hope."

Théoden, who had been told of Aragorn's plans, corrected him. "He leaves because he must."

Mairi nudged Eowyn, who stepped back into the shadows and behind Tauriel as Mairi took a stand beside the King. "We bring our aid to Gondor, but he must seek out other allies, if we are to have Victory in the war."

Tauriel stepped forward, motioning her warriors back to their tents. "I do not like it when my Prince, the brother of my heart, goes where I cannot follow. I do not despair, however. They will meet us again in Gondor."
The two women turned and left, heading back to the tent when Eowyn waited.

It was a long several hours until dawn.

As the sun rose, Eowyn stood on the edge of the mountain, as she had often done back in Edoras, gazing over the vast plain below. Mairi and Tauriel were locating a disguise and set of armor for her, as they would draw less suspicion, leaving Eowyn to work through the turmoil in her mind. She started as her Uncle Théoden approached from behind. "I have left instructions. The people are to follow your rule in my stead."

Eowyn had hoped that he would not actually say the words that would turn her future actions from 'creative misinterpretation' to 'outright disobedience of her King'. Unable to see her face, Théoden continued with the instruction she dreaded. "Take up my seat in the Golden Hall. Long may you defend Edoras if the battle goes ill."

Éowyn managed to smooth her face of any hint that she intended to do no such thing. "What other duty would you have me do, my lord?"

*Any duty but wait behind with the healers, who knew their trade far better than Eowyn, while the last of her kin rode to their doom, I beg you...* Théoden smiled at her, sadly, believing her reluctant tone to stem from his abandonment of her when Saruman and Wormtongue held him in thrall. The betrayal of his duty and love for his niece, betrayal that she forgave before he even had the chance to beg her forgiveness, cut him deeper than any of his other manipulated actions. "Duty? No. I would have you smile again. Not grieve for those whose time has come."

The bright smile of the girl she had been, before she was orphaned and left alone. Théoden tried to reassure her, even though he knew she would take cold comfort in his words. "You shall live to see these days renewed. No more despair."

There had been despair enough already. If anyone could restore hope to Rohan, it would be Eowyn, who would drag the entire country, kicking and screaming if she had to, into a more optimistic outlook, and lead them into battle if Sauron turned his attention their way.

Chapter End Notes

*Sorry for the delay in updates, Real Life has been getting in the way*
Chapter 27

The path to the door of the dead was as desolate as a supermarket carpark, and Sam had the nasty feeling that it would also prove to take even longer to get out of.

Gimli appeared to share the sentiment. "What kind of army would linger in such a place?"

Legolas did not show and signs of nervousness, but his voice was softer than usual. "One that is cursed."

Sam gave the elf a sharp, wary look. "Define 'cursed', please?"

Legolas did not look at him directly, grey eyes scanning the bare crags. "Long ago the Men of the Mountain swore an oath to the last king of Gondor, to come to his aid, to fight. But when the time came, when Gondor's need was dire, they fled, vanishing into the darkness of the mountain. And so Isildur cursed them, never to rest, until they had fulfilled their pledge."

Rowan winced. He didn't know about Middle-Earth, but the legends of ghosts back home rarely made mention of a spirit who had been cursed being very friendly to anyone they came across, especially when they were related to whoever had cursed them in the first place. "Makes sense, and it's certainly helpful for us, but it makes me anticipate a hostile reception."

Legolas ignored him, chanting softly. "Who shall call them from the grey twilight? The forgotten people. The heir of him to whom the oath they swore. From the north shall he come. Need shall drive him. He shall pass the door to the Paths of the Dead."

They approach a door that appeared cut into the mountain, adorned with skulls and strange writing. Presumably, this was the Dimholt, the door to the path of the dead.

Gimli shivered. "The very warmth of my blood seems stole away."

Legolas examined the hieroglyphs above the door, apparently able to read them. "'The way is shut. It was made by those who were dead, and the dead keep it. The way is shut.'"

Wind and noise came out of the door. Rowan shivered, "Well, that isn't at all creepy and foreboding."

The horses seemed to agree with his sarcastic tone, because they reared and bolted back to the relative safety of the Rohirrim Muster. Aragorn tried to grab their reins, but missed. "Brego!" He turned back to the entrance rather than chase after their mounts, "I do not fear death!"

Perhaps relying on annoyance to drive him forward in the face of freezing terror, Aragorn stalked toward the door and entered the mountain. Legolas soon followed, but Gimli hesitated, as did the two men who didn't have a sword of ghostly command to protect them. Gimli puffed himself up. "Well this is something unheard of! An elf will go underground where a dwarf dare not! Ah, I'd never hear the end of it!"

With that unusual self-pep-talk, Gimli ran into the tunnel. Rowan and Sam exchanged reluctant looks. "Isn't there a biblical passage about a situation like this?"

Sam looked reluctantly amused. "Yes. 'Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, for thou art with me.' You are about the farthest thing from the Lord, but I'm glad you're here."
Rowan clapped him on the shoulder. "I never thought I'd say this, but me, too. Come on, this is the last place that I want to be left behind."

Morning rose on Dunharrow, bright and clear against all narrative law and expectation. The Rohirrim prepared to depart, with Mairi and Tauriel taking care to be very visible away from Eowyn's location as she bade her uncle farewell, gave instructions to another woman, and ducked behind a rocky outcropping to change into her purloined armour. For a moment, she wished for something that highlighted her figure, as Mairi had mentioned some of the women fighters amongst her people did, but that would have defeated the purpose.

She wound her hair into a coiled fold, pinning at the halfway mark and tucking the end into the main roll. It wouldn't hold for long without more pins that Eowyn had with her, she knew from experience, but her helmet and the two pins would hold it in place enough that what hair fell loose would not appear much longer than many Rohirrim warriors wore theirs.

The Shieldmaiden of Rohan quickly checked that her horse was properly saddled, smiling at the sight of Merry determinedly saddling his pony, and pausing as she saw her uncle approaching him. Théoden's voice was kind but firm as he looked down on the Hobbit, "We must ride light and swift. It's a long road ahead. The men and beast must reach the end with a strength to fight."

Merry looked horrified when he realised where this was going, and Théoden softened a very little. "Little hobbits do not belong in war, Master Meriadoc."

Merry's face took on a familiar, stubborn cast, "All my friends have gone to battle. I will be ashamed to be left behind!"

Théoden shook his head, voice hardening again. "It is a three day gallop to Minas Tirith and none of my riders can bear you as a burden."

Merry stared up at the King in helpless frustration. "I want to fight!"

Théoden turned Snowmane to where Gamling, Grimbold and Eomer waited, ready to summon the muster. "I will say no more."

Théoden rode away, determinedly not looking back at the devastated Merry as he watched riders stream past him. It was a hard thing, to watch your loved ones ride away, the King knew, especially when he had only recently sworn Meriadoc into service as a squire. But his words to the hobbit were true; the pony would not keep up with the warhorses, and even the best of their horses would falter under the weight of an armoured Rohirrim and a hobbit.

Even if Theoden had not desired to protect Merry, as he had failed to do with so many of his people, bringing him to Gondor was simply not currently a possibility. Eowyn would bring the Hobbit with her when she came for Aragorn's coronation, if they were somehow victorious, and that would have to be enough.

Merry fought back tears of despair and frustration. He had let Pippin be taken to Gondor without him, and worried every second they were apart. Now Gondor was under siege, and Pippin would be there alone. Well, not alone, but not with Merry at his side, either, as they had promised each other long ago. He watched the Rohirrim stream past, desperately hoping with each horse, that one of them would see him and offer a lift.

He felt a flicker of hope as he saw Tauriel and Mairi, lighter than a Rohirrim warrior and able to
carry him without tiring their horse, but that hope faded to crushing defeat when they also rode by, not even glancing at him. Well, it made sense. They would have been under scrutiny anyway, so he would have been found out and sent home quickly enough, if he had gone with one of them.

Then, when Merry had almost given up hope, he felt a sudden jolt as he was lifted into the air. One of the riders had snatched Merry up onto his horse. The hobbit looked up into his saviour's face, grinning broadly as he recognised the rider as Éowyn, disguised as a male Rohirrim.

Éowyn kept her voice low, gripping the reins with one hand as she wrapped the other around him. "Ride with me. You are no burden."

Merry almost felt as though he could fly. "My lady!"

Keeping her head down and her face concealed, Eowyn aimed a triumphant look at the front of the muster, where Éomer's voice echoed through the camp. "Form up! Move out!"

Théoden's deeper tones joined that of his nephew, "Ride! Ride now for Gondor!"

Out on the vast plain between Osgiliath and the White City, a large army of orcs moved implacably towards Minas Tirith. Trolls lumbered alongside them, keeping the orcs in formation with the threatened possibility of being trodden on, beating drums as the orcs marched, pushing large siege towers.

Watching from the walls until the Guards felt it necessary to send her inside, Suzi-Maria hoped that her friends, especially Rowan, were safe, and that they would all live through what was to come.

Deep within the Dimholt, Aragorn's party moved through the Paths of the Dead, past piles of skulls, trying not to look at the scattered mortal remains. Or, in the case of the two who did not have such good night-vision, trying desperately not to run into said piles of bones.

Gimli, despite being one of the Children of Stone, was clearly uneasy, watching Legolas's eyes dart here and there as they moved. "What is it? What do you see?"

Legolas's voice was calm, but it carried a note that told those who knew him that he, also, was far from at ease. "I see shapes of men and of horses. Pale banners like shreds of cloud. Spears rise like winter-thickets through a shroud of mist. The dead are following. They have been summoned."

Unsurprisingly, Rowan, Sam and Gimli found that far from reassuring. "The Dead? Summoned? I knew that. Very good. Very good. Legolas!"

The three ran to catch up with Aragorn, and especially the torch he was carrying. Wisps of shapes of arms appeared to surround Legolas and Aragorn, who brushed them aside. Gimli did his best to ignore the ghosts around him, blowing at the wisps as though they were smoke.

Aragorn suddenly spoke, "Do not look down."

Of course, they all instantly did so. Despite the saying, children and teenagers weren't the only ones who instinctively did exactly what they were told not to. Gimli instantly spotted hundreds of skulls scattered over the floor of the cavern. Every step they took made a crackling sound, much to everyone's unease and dismay.

Finally, the passage opened up into a great underground hall with a large doorway, a sinister voice echoing through the darkness. At a guess, it was the King of the Dead: "Who enters my domain?"
A ghost appeared, green and glowing and looking like a half-rotted corpse. Absurdly, Rowan wondered if it had been part of Isildur's curse, or just a matter of timing, if the king had died before Aragorn's ancestor laid down the Oathbreakers' damnation.

Aragorn, somehow, managed to look confident. "One who will have your allegiance."

The King of the Dead sneered at him, "The dead do not suffer the living to pass."

Aragorn's expression (or what little they could see of it, hardened. "You will suffer me!"

The King laughed as the ghostly image of a dead city appeared, equally dead soldiers walking out of the city to encircle the living. The King of the Dead's papery skin stretched into what might have been a cruel smile. "The way is shut. It was made by those who are dead. And the dead keep it. The way is shut. Now you must die."

The King of the Dead glided toward Aragorn, the future King of Gondor. Legolas tried to shoot at the ghostly King, but the arrow passed right through his head. Aragorn tried very hard not to shiver, wishing that he had more to go on than just Anduil. "I summon you to fulfill your oath."

The King of the Dead grew angry at what he perceived as a terrible presumption. "None but the King of Gondor may command me!"

Aragorn drew the shards of Narsil, reforged into the sword of the King. The ghost swung at Aragorn, who parried the blow with the Sword of Elendil, much to the ghost's surprise.

The King of the Dead hissed in a combination of fury and shock. "That blade was broken!"

Aragorn, also not in a good mood, hissed right back. "It has been remade!" He shoved back the ghost, "Fight for us, and regain your honor. What say you?"

Aragorn surveys the dead soldiers, seeking any hint that they might be willing to rally behind him, rather than remain in this terrible half-life. None of them moved, and Aragorn repeated himself. "What say you?"

Gimli, for the first time itching to get out of the cave, scoffed. "You waste your time, Aragorn! They had no honor in life, they have none now in death."

Aragorn did his best to ignore that, trying to press his argument as the King of the Dead spared a few moments to glare at the dwarf. "I am Isildur's heir. Fight for me and I will hold your oaths fulfilled! What say you?"

The Dead King laughed as his army began to fade, seeing Aragorn's growing desperation. "You have my word! Fight, and I will release you from this living death! What say you?"

Gimli was much less polite about it, "Stand, you traitors!"

The ground started to shake, the piles of bones and skulls falling apart to roll on the floor. A doorway on the other side of side of the cavern, near the exit, cracked and broke, thousands of skulls flowing out of it.

Aragorn wasted no more time trying to convince the ghosts, ushering his companions before him, "Out!"

They ran for the faint glimmer of light, but were nearly swept away by the flood of skulls. Sam yanked Rowan to his feet as he stumbled and would have fallen. "Keep going, or I'll tell Suzi how it
happened in detail."

No man wants to be embarassed in front of a girl he finds attractive, even if it is only tarnishing his memory, a fact that Rowan had seen Mairi use to great effect with her Godbrothers. He kept going.

Finally, the party managed to fight their way through the sea of skulls and escape to the outdoors.

The sight that awaited them, however, was no relief. Rowan might even venture to suggest that being buried under a wave of skulls would almost be better. Emerging from the doorway in the mountainside, they saw the black ships of the Corsairs of Umbar, and the burning ruins of the cities they had sacked on the way to Gondor.

Slowly, Aragorn fell to his knees in despair.

Hearing a sound behind him, Aragorn rose and turned around. The King of the Dead appeared before the heir to the Gondorian throne, inclining his head in what was almost a bow. "We will fight!"

Rowan quickly stepped on Sam's foot to stop him from actually vocalising the cutting remark that they were all thinking. While an army of ghosts would be an excellent thing to point at other people, none of them trusted the Oathbreakers enough to provoke them a second time.
Chapter Summary

The Battle for Gondor begins

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Suzi-Maria was walking through one of the upper rings, (geography, up to and including her exact location in a strange city was not Suzi's strongest point) with the Head Healer, Ioreth, and Boromir. She was also trying very hard not to draw attention to herself as they argued. "He is in control of his mind. I have no recourse to keep him there, especially when we are anticipating large numbers of casualties when Mordor finally attacks!"

Boromir threw up his hands. "He is fixated on reclaiming Osgiliath, won't listen to any advice about the defence of Minas Tirith, and there is only so much I can do without him noticing and stepping in to over-rule me! I respect him as my father and my Steward, but we need him out of the decision-making process!"

Suzi-Maria glanced out over the Pelennor Fields as they approached the Great Hall, where Denethor was back in the Steward's chair at the foot of the King's throne, and froze as the last of the morning mist cleared. "Er, I hate to interrupt, but I think we have bigger problems."

She wasn't wrong. Almost as far as the eye could see, battalions of Orcs, and a scattering of siege weapons pulled by trolls, all but covered the ground between Gondor and Osgiliath. Boromir swore creatively, and then again, even louder, when Denethor, alerted by the commotion, came rushing out.

The Steward stared out over the plains, some emotion that Suzi-Maria couldn't work out in his eyes as he mumbled in disbelief. "Rohan has deserted us!"

Suzi-Maria muttered a few unrepeatable things of her own as she saw the catapults of Mordor's forces let loose, and the walls of the lower city began to crumble. Far below, she could see chaos as people tried to run away from the falling rubble.

Denethor's voice grew steadily louder, but no more rational. "Theoden's betrayed me! ABANDON YOUR POSTS! FLEE! FLEE FOR YOUR LIVES!"

The guards looked confused, but, slowly began to obey the orders of their Lord. Denethor turned around and was promptly met by his son's fist in his face, stunning him long enough for Suzi-Maria to latch on like a spider monkey, one hand over his mouth and the other arm crossing over his windpipe, clinging grimly as the steward flailed, trying to dislodge her.

Boromir left her to it as he turned to the guards. "My father is not well, and his orders should be disregarded. Prepare for battle, and send a runner to the garrisons, if they have not yet been alerted."

The guards obeyed this order far more readily, one stripping off his leg and arm guards in order to be able to move faster. "Orders, my Lord?"

Boromir's expression did not show any of the tension visible in the set of his shoulders. "Defend the
walls and prepare the catapults. A detachment to evacuate non-combatants to the fourth level and organise them as support. Another to collect rubble as ammunition and clear access between the barracks and the defences. Gandalf, keep the Nazgul off us as much as possible. Rohan will be here soon, if we can hold out until then."

The soldiers returned to their posts as the messenger ran to obey. Gandalf, who had been about to hit Denethor himself before Boromir stepped in, rode Shadowfax up to the wall and looked out, sending the occasional burst of light when a Nazgul swooped too close to the walls.

Denethor finally slumped to the ground, unconscious, and Suzi-Maria disentangled herself. "What about me?"

Boromir considered his father's prone form, gesturing to another guard. "Help get my father to his rooms, and post a guard at the door, then come and find me. When the battle is over, I will accept the consequences for my actions, but for now, contradicting orders are the last thing we need."

Well, he wasn't wrong. Suzi-Maria and another guard made their way back into the citadel while Boromir walked to the edge of the peak, joined swiftly by Faramir, to get a better idea of the odds they faced and how to combat it.

By the time Suzi-Maria made her way into the city at a slightly-encumbered run, having paused to don a chainmail shirt and grab a bow and quiver, it had been ten minutes of both sides lobbing boulders and masonry at each other. Suzi spared a moment to be very impressed at the skill of Gondor's combat engineers and mechanical technicians, as a piece of wall large enough to crush a few dozen orcs soared through the air.

The biggest problem for the defenders, at least for the moment, was the Ringwraiths. Gandalf was doing his best to keep them at bay, but the light he used to drive them off only worked in a single direction at one time, which was less helpful when they split up. Suzi-Maria intercepted a squad of archers heading for the wall. "Defend the catapults. Aim for the Nazgul's mounts when they try to attack."

Mary-Sue powers meant that, in a moment of high dramatic suspense, the archers conveniently ignored the fact that not only was Suzi-Maria not in their chain of command, but that she wasn't even part of the Gondorian Army. Hopefully the same plot convenience would last long enough to keep her alive when she found Boromir.

It probably wouldn't let her actually kill any of the Nazgul (and no way was she going out there to usurp Eowyn's role), but it should allow her to keep them busy.

Boromir, Gandalf and Faramir had split the defences between them, bellowing orders as towers were slowly pushed toward the walls. Gandalf could be heard shouting for the archers to aim for the trolls. Suzi-Maria nudged Boromir as discreetly as she could, before aiming at a Nazgul who was preparing for another swoop. "Are there any torches around?"

Faramir obviously had a similar idea, as one of the towers in his section abruptly went up in flames. The problem was that the towers were large enough that they needed a concentrated effort from every archer to set them on fire enough to be effective before they reached the wall.

Boromir nodded, raising his voice to a battlefield roar. "Light your arrows! Aim for the most distant first! Prepare for direct combat!"

Gandalf took his attention off the Nazgul long enough to send a fireball that incinerated one tower,
before another got close enough to drop a bridge onto the battlements. Half the archers retreated, continuing their assault on the trolls, while the rest drew swords and other close-range weapons.

Suzi-Maria kept up her assault on the Nazgul, cursing whatever laws of narrative or physics, or just bad aim, kept her barely missing her targets. It wasn't as though they were small, just evasive.

The Great Gate was under siege by a battering ram, but since Boromir had mentioned, long ago in Lothlorien, that nothing short of a localised earthquake could bring down those gates, Suzi-Maria focussed her concern elsewhere.

She revised that opinion when a massive, wrought-iron construction was slowly pushed toward the Gate, amid chants of 'Grond!', backed by the Witch-King, holding aloft a sword in a manner distinctly similar to Gandalf when he was about to blow something up.

Damn.

Rowan and Sam's relief at being out of the Paths of the Dead was muted by the sight of Corsair ships sailing up the river, almost overcrowded with mercenaries.

The army of Oathbreakers were hidden, for now, and Aragorn shouted a challenge, backed by the other four.

Personally, Rowan wondered if the challenge had been designed to fail, since no ship-full of hardened fighters would be intimidated by three men, an elf and a dwarf. Aragorn didn't seem concerned, however, and hopefully he knew what he was doing. "You may go no further. You will not enter Gondor."

There was a roar of laughter from the nearest ship. "Who are you to deny us passage?"

Sam glared at the corsairs. "The King of Gondor, unwashed scum!"

That earned him an annoyed look from Aragorn, and a disbelieving one from Rowan, who clearly thought that he should have come up with something better than hygiene with which to insult them. Still, if it made even the last of the ships turn back to Umbar with tales of a Gondorian King who could destroy whole ships with a word (and a ghost army), it would be worth it.

Aragorn opted to ignore him. "Legolas, fire a warning shot past the bosun's ear."

Legolas's shot not only took off the tip of the bosun's ear, but also went through the eye of the corsair behind him. Sam shrugged, "Well, that's one less to deal with."

The other four collectively blinked in surprise at his attitude. Sam scowled at them. "What? I read up on pirates during the Bloom/Depp craze a few years ago. Better that they die now than that we have to deal with them out for revenge later!"

That made little to no sense to anyone except Rowan, but Gimli shrugged it off, "That's it, right, we warned you! Prepare to be boarded!"

Admittedly, that did sound a bit ridiculous, and earned another round of laughter from every ship within hearing range. The bosun, ignoring the blood trickling from his ear, challenged them back. "Boarded? By you and whose army?"

It was pure comic relief, but Aragorn's reply was perfectly timed as the Ghost King materialised from the rock behind them. "This army."
A few miles from the Pelennor Fields, the Rohirrim were stopped beside a lake. Merry and Eowyn were lurking near enough to Theoden to hear what was going on, but far enough away to blend into the crowd. Mairi and Tauriel, who were talking quietly with the men of the Westfold whose womenfolk had taken up a warrior's role in order to detract attention from anyone else who might not be quite as masculine as the majority of the Rohirrim, fell silent as Eomer galloped up at the head of a few scouts.

Eowyn's brother had barely reined his horse in before he was reporting. "The scouts report Minas Tirith is surrounded. The lower levels in flames. Everywhere, legions of the enemy advance, and the Nazgul are with them. They are led by the Witch-King."

Mairi, a Scadian woman of the 21st Century with an unfortunate habit of assuming that what was obvious to her was obvious to everyone else, paled several shades. "Blast. Tauriel, do me a huge favour and stick close to me, please."

The men around them, who had less of a tendency toward gleefully exploiting misogynistic loopholes, looked at her in confusion, as did Tauriel. Mairi sighed and gestured to herself, where the flexible leather armour had been worn long enough to adjust to her shape. "Obviously not a man."

She gestured to Tauriel, whose wicked smile showed that she was beginning to catch on. "Neither male, nor of the race of Men, and if Aragorn shows up with the Oathbreakers, then we get an abundance of Men who are very much not of the living."

Eomer ran a hand through his hair. "No offence to you, my Ladies, but I am suddenly regretting telling my sister that she had no place in war."

Mairi was either too nice, or too stressed to make an issue of the statement. She didn't deal well with sudden pressure, and while she was reasonably sure that Eowyn would be on hand to kill the Witchking, she didn't particularly want to take the chance that Sauron, a Maia, would be as aware of loopholes and potentially warn the leader of his Nazgul to single her out. Trying to feign bravery, she waved a hand. "I'm sure she'll find a way to make you regret it later."

Theoden also looked concerned, but turned to his Marshels. "Time is against us. Make ready!"

Eowyn, quietly eavesdropping, scrambled to gather her things and check the girth on her horse, doing her best to hide her fears. "Take heart Merry. It will soon be over."

Merry, likewise scrambling to gather his things, looked up at her seriously. "My lady. You are fair and brave and have much to live for."

Eowyn blinked, unsure of why he was pointing that out, and Merry continued. "... and many who love you. I know it is too late to turn aside. I know there is not much point now in hoping. If I were a knight of Rohan capable of great deeds but I'm not. I'm a Hobbit. And I know I can't save Middle Earth. I just want to help my friends; Frodo, Sam, Pippin. More than anything I wish I could see them again."

Eowyn smiled in what she hoped was reassurance and placed a wordless hand on his shoulder, quickly turning her head as Eomer rode past their lurking place, shouting orders. "Prepare to move out!"

The blowing of horns signalled movement, without the necessity of breaking camp. If they lived, they would return for the tents later, or leave them as temporary housing. Eowyn covered her face with her helm, once more lifting Merry onto the horse. "To battle."
Merry nodded grimly as she swung up behind him, slipping his own helmet on. "To battle."

The catapults had switched from plain boulders to ones coated in pitch and set alight, and the huge contraption was now close enough to the Great Gate to begin pounding at it.

The fact that this was achieved by several trolls pulling back on chains that drew the huge wrought iron contraption back, before releasing it to slam into the gates was not reassuring. Nor was the fact that as the trolls released, the Witch-king shouted something in a terrible voice.

The gate shuddered with the first impact, and Gandalf led half of his force down from the wall and toward the gate. "Back to the gate! Hurry!"

With a glance at Boromir, who nodded, Suzi-Maria ran to join them, nearly tripping over Pippin. The gate shuddered, and Gandalf called for the soldiers to hold their ground. "Steady! Steady!"

For a moment, Suzi-Maria dared to hope. Then, with a mighty crash, the head of the battering ram broke through the centre of the gate. Suzi-Maria could almost feel the shock of the soldiers at the sight of the Great Gate, un-breached by enemy forces since it's installment, broken by Grond. Unfortunately, the shock was swiftly followed by the hope beginning to drain from them.

Gandalf spoke sternly, his implacable voice giving them strength. "You are soldiers of Gondor. No matter what comes through that gate you will stand your ground."

For the third time, Grond struck the Great Gate, accompanied by a great shout from the Witch-King. Three armored Cave Trolls burst through, roaring, followed by orcs. Gandalf didn't waste time. "Volley! Fire!"

To their credit, the archers and soldiers reacted well, firing into the Trolls as the infantry lowered their spears in defence. Orcs advanced on them, wave upon wave as the Trolls followed up, swinging their maces from side to side and all opposition flying.

Desperately hoping that this also counted as a moment of dramatic tension, Suzi-Maria darted closer, since the troll's build seemed to limit them to either downward swings, or horizontal ones that went no lower than hip-height on a man. If there was one thing she had learned, it was that long-range weapons became a lot less useful if your opponent got past your guard. Another thing she had learned was that certain pain pathways were universal, no matter what species you were.

Sliding past the troll's legs, she stabbed upward, rolling out of the way as the Troll buckled, the other trolls pausing for a moment.

In the distance, horns sounded, and Suzi-Maria thanked the Valar, every god from every pantheon in her own world, and whatever other spiritual presences might be listening.

Rohan had arrived.

Chapter End Notes

Aside from a description of the first level and the locations of the Houses of Healing and tombs of the Kings, there is very little about the layout of Minas Tirith, so I'm pretending
that the levels are organised according to profession. First through third levels are merchants and tradespeople, forth and fifth are military, sixth is Healing and government that doesn't require the direct involvement of the Steward or King.

On a happier topic, I won an Australia-wide medieval arts competition (with specific catagories tallied up over the course of a year, so maybe not that impressive), and I've been published again.

My books can be found on Amazon . com under the pen-name Natasja Rose. Some were posted in 'first-draft' form on this website, then edited and improved by a professional before publication. Teasers can still be found for the most recent ones on my profile.
Mairi and Tauriel had ultimately ended up beside Eowyn and Merry in the ranks. Mairi stared, wide-eyed, at the seething mass of Mordor’s Army on the plain before them, trying to focus through her fear. Tauriel reached over to lay a hand on her shoulder, eyes narrowed slightly as she studied the Orcs.

Eowyn was far steadier, but at least was unlikely to judge as she wrapped an arm around the pale hobbit in front of her. “Courage Merry. Courage for our friends.”

Someone in Sauron’s forces was obviously in charge, because the orcs were slowly forming solid ranks to face the Rohirrim. Theoden turned to his marshals. “Eomer, take your Eored down the left flank. Gamling, follow the Kings banner down the centre. Grimbold! Take your company right after you pass the wall.”

The three in question turned to their forces, shouting commands, and Theoden faced his people. “Forth, and fear no darkness! Arise! Arise riders of Theoden. Spears shall be shaken, shields shall be splintered, a sword day, a red day ere the sun rises!”

Thousands of spears lowered, ready for a charge. Eowyn leaned forward, hiding her face from her uncle as she whispered to Merry, “Whatever happens, stay with me. I’ll look after you.”

Theoden rides across the front of the men, running the flat of his sword along all their spears in what Mairi assumed was some kind of tradition. “Ride now, ride now! Ride! Ride for ruin and the worlds ending! DEATH!”

The army roared back at him, repeating the last shout, a defiance against whatever their fate in battle might prove to be. On the last repetition, Mairi lifted her bow, reigns already wrapped around the saddlehorn, as Tauriel had showed her. “DEATH!”

Theoden turned Snowmane to face the armies of Mordor. “Forth Eorlingas!”

Horns sounded along the ranks as the riders urged their mounts forward, first at a walk, then slowly increasing to a trot, a canter and a gallop. The Orcs set pikes in a half-crouch, a rank of archers behind them. More than one Rohirrim and/or horse went down, a pincushion of arrows, but they were moving so fast that the front ranks were on the inside range.

Theoden lifted his sword as several of the front rank of orcs began to break, trying to shove their way back. “CHAAAAAARGE!”

The Rohirrim hit the Orcs like a battering ram, trampling the first rank or so underfoot, then cutting a swathe through the ones behind them. Mairi guided her horse with her knees, picking out the orcs who looked like they were in charge. Take out the leaders first, and chaos follows.
Going from the brink of defeat to hope of victory had Gondor pushing back.

Squads of archers were running into houses for a better vantage points, taking out Wargs and Trolls. Soldiers were adapting their formations to take advantage of the less open streets, led by the Ithilien Rangers, who were far more used to it.

Suzi-Maria still stuck close to Boromir, switching from bow to sword, hoping that the powers of narrative manipulation would continue to protect her. So far, it was working, and she hoped that the others were having similar luck, wherever they were.

Mairi was starting to feel almost hopeful as the Orcs fell before them like harvested grain, their ranks crumbling into disarray. Snatching a brief moment, she exchanged adrenaline-fueled grins with Tauriel. They had lost track of Eowyn and Merry, but nearby, she could hear Eomer shouting orders, “Drive them to the river!”

Theoden was further away, but still within earshot. “Make safe the city!”

A strange sound, not quite the trumpet of an elephant to Mairi’s ears, echoed by horns, drew their attention. Distracted from the Orcs, attention turned to the line of Haradrim and Mmakil moving to re-enforce Mordor’s ranks.

Tauriel swore loudly, echoed by Mairi and several others. Theoden shouted orders again, echoed by the Marshals. “Re-form the line! Re-form the line!”

To their credit, the Rohirrim did not hesitate, organising themselves and rallying behind the King. “Sound the charge. Take them head-on. Chaaarge!”

In theory, it should have worked, but the Rohirrim were not used to fighting the Haradrim, or the Mmakil they brought with them. Mairi tried to remember the discussions about Elephants as used in warfare, shouting as loud as she could, “Aim for the tendons in the legs, and take down the Haradrim who drive them! Mmakil need direction like any other mount!”

It was still easier said than done. The sheer size of the beasts and the spiked chains that ran between their tusks, constantly swinging side to side, made them very difficult to dodge. Some managed to veer through where the tusks were not, but many did not, and more than one rider was trampled under massive feet.

Eomer aimed his spear at one driver, hitting him perfectly in a deadly throw. The driver slipped to the side, and the chain that attached him to the Mmakil’s ear yanked the beast sideways into another, making both easier targets for the Rohirrim. The Haradrim were used to their Mmakil carrying the day, and while they were not incompetent fighters in their own right, their effectiveness was lessened, and the remaining drivers grew more cautious.

Eowyn rode at one of the few without a chain between it’s tusks, passing the reins to Merry and snatching a second sword off an Orc. “Take the reins, pull him left. LEFT!”

They wove between the Mmakil’s legs, slashing the backs of the knees. The sharp rohirrim sword opened the flesh, while the jagged edge of the Orc blade tore mercilessly through the hamstring tendon.
Tauriel held her ground in front of a charging Mmakil, aiming her bow at its open mouth. “Aim for the heads!”

The massive beast reared up on its hind legs as Theoden roared, “Bring it down! Bring it down! Bring it down!”

The remaining archers copied her example, and the Mmakil overbalanced, falling backward.

Unfortunately, it fell backward toward Eowyn and Merry, whose horse reared and bolted, leaving its riders behind. Mairi spurred her horse toward them, shooting the Haradrim who had somehow survived the fall. One fell to a weapon not her own, followed by another and several Orcs, and the Scadian smiled in relief.

With one section of the Haradrim down, Theoden shouted for a second rally. Before any great number could reach him, the Witch-King swooped toward him on his Fell Beast, seeking targets with less of an ability to match him.

The fell beast struck both king and horse, sending them flying, both badly injured.

The Witch-King loomed above them, “Feast on his flesh.”

Trapped under Snowmane, Theoden could only watch his doom approach… until a slightly-built Rider stepped between him and the Nazgul. “I will kill you if you touch him.”

The Witch-King had no visible face, but the sneer in his voice was very audible. “Do not come between the Nazgul and his prey.”

Behind the Witchking, Eowyn could see Mairi running toward her at a sprint.

That was something of a relief. Shieldmaiden or not, it was difficult to fight while also protecting a fallen comrade, and Eowyn felt much better about her odds of success against supernatural strength and immortality if she had back-up.

The White Lady of Rohan ducked another blow from the Witchking’s morningstar, which was big and heavy enough to crush anything short of an Oliphaunt. The only blessing was the size of the weapon made it easier to dodge. It was a weapon for brute force, not skill.

He began to swing the weapon again, readying for another strike, when Mairi stepped inside his range, swinging a sword taken from a fallen orc at the chain. It was surprisingly effective, because the formerly-taut chain wrapped around the blade, causing the head to nearly hit the Witchking in the shoulder.

Unfortunately, the Nazgul had the sense to duck and let go of the morningstar, which spun off to hit two orcs that had been sneaking up on them. The Witchking drew his sword (of course he would be one of the few smart enough to bring a second weapon) and turned on Mairi. Eowyn grabbed her own sword, trying to ignore the pain in her shield-arm, and went for the Nazgul’s exposed back as Mairi dodged and drew her second knife.

By remaining on opposite sides of their foe, he was forced to wear himself out by constantly turning, and adapting his fighting style from sword-on-sword to sword-on-dagger, and both opponents favoured a far more mobile technique than most male fighters.
Even the best fighters Mairi knew had trouble shifting from one technique to another during combat, and she knew that the constant change was mentally wearying. Finally, a lucky hit sent Mairi flying, even luckier in that she had been hit with the flat of the blade. The Witchking mistook Eowyn’s concern for her friend as fear, and used her momentary distraction to knock her sword away. “Fool, no man living can kill me!”

Apparently, the Witchking had gone a long time without having to distinguish gender by voice. Or really thinking about loopholes in the Prophecy at all. Certain aspects of Mairi’s figure were such that her gender was obvious even in armour, but Eowyn had disguised herself to appear as masculine as she could.

Being several feet away didn’t affect Mairi’s aim, and a knife sunk into the Witchking’s sword arm, just as Merry, who had been slashing the hamstrings of any orc who got too close while slowly making his way toward Eowyn, stabbed him in the leg, hanging on grimly. Thoroughly fed up with the assumption that gender should determine ability, Eowyn yanked off her helm, revealing flowing hair and unmistakably feminine features. “I am no man!”

She didn’t know if she could pierce his armor, even at such close range, but a headshot would be just as effective. The Witchking died noisily, and Eowyn had seconds to savour victory before she was thrown back by a burst of dark energy, tumbling over Snowmane and landing next to her uncle.

From the river, Elf, Dwarf and Men could see smoke rising from the lower levels of Minas Tirith. Still, they did not break cover as the ships glided into the harbour. Orcs were gathered on the dock, and one, slightly larger and somewhat uglier, shoved its way to the front. “Late as usual, pirate scum. There’s knifework here needs doing. Come on you sea rats, get off your ships.”

Aragorn, Gimli and Legolas jumped off the ship, followed with a touch more caution by Sam and Rowan. “Do you think that ‘big and ugly’ are what passes for leadership qualifications with Sauron’s lot?”

The Orcs looked surprised at the lack of pirates, giving the new arrivals precious time to close the distance between them and the Orcs. Gimli raised his axe, giving Legolas a sidelong look. “Theres plenty for the both of us, may be best Dwarf win!”

The Dead Army materialised behind them, unencumbered by things like walls or thin air beneath their feet, over-running the Orcs before the living members of the army managed much more than to lift their assorted weapons.

Aragorn accepted this with a philosophical shrug. “Make safe the city, then meet us to aid the Rohirrim.”

The Dead Army flowed through the walls of Minas Tirith as those who were still among the living ran around to the pitched battle on the Pelennor. Within the walls, the screaming intensified for a moment, before a familiar voice could be heard, raised in a battlefield roar, commanding the people of Gondor to pull themselves together.

Rowan was tempted to roll his eyes as Gimli and Legolas continued their competition of who could kill the most enemies, but he was sensible enough to know that he could ill-afford the distraction. Orcs and Haradrim or not, he couldn’t be easy with treating them as numbers in a game. The Haradrim, at least, were following the orders of their leaders, far from their homes and families. He and Sam had spoken about it on the black ship, the other youth showing a surprising amount of
insight. Perhaps the competition was more of a coping mechanism, but it was not one Rowan could adopt himself.

After a few moments lying stunned, Eowyn managed to drag herself to her uncle, still trapped beneath a dead Snowmane, dazed and badly wounded. She reached him, gently touching his face, the only part of him she could be confident of not injuring further. Slowly, he lifted one hand toward her, the small gesture clearly taking a frightening amount of energy. “I know your face, Eowyn.”

Eowyn managed to smile, as he had requested only a few days ago. It faded as her uncle continued to speak, every word a great effort. “My eyes darken.”

Eowyn shook her head, knowing the truth but refusing to accept it. “No, no. I’m going to save you.”

He smiled again, awareness already fading. “You already did. Eowyn, my body is broken. You have to let me go. I go to my fathers, in whose mighty company; I shall not now feel ashamed.”

He met her eyes and whispered something that could have been her name. Then the light in his eyes faded, his raised hand fell, and Eowyn wept.

With the Armies of Mordor soundly defeated, Suzi and Boromir made their way to where the ghosts gathered in front of Aragorn, joined by Gandalf and Pippin. Legolas and Gimli were already there, as were Sam and Rowan. Boromir felt a flash of disappointment that Mairi had not yet joined them, but supposed that he could get the full story off her companions later.

He couldn’t restrain a shudder as the King of the Dead spoke, a whispering, hissing rasp. “Release us!”

Gimli was of a different mindset, perhaps hoping to keep their trump card until Sauron was entirely defeated. “Bad idea! Very handy in a tight spot these lads, despite the fact they’re dead.”

Personally, Boromir wasn’t sure that the benefit of the ghosts would outweigh the effect on the morale of the living, or the number that would refuse to march with them. Besides, a broken oath was what had brought the Army of the Dead to their current state, and would set a very bad precedent for Aragorn’s reign. Fortunately, the King of the Dead seemed to feel the same way. “You gave us your word!”

Aragorn nodded gravely. “I hold your oath fulfilled. Go. Be at peace.”

The King of the Dead smiled, letting out a great sigh of relief that turned into a great wind, seeming to blow the Army of the Dead into whatever afterlife awaited them. Gandalf bowed low, echoed by the rest of those watching, and Aragorn smiled faintly. Boromir clasped his arm, then turned to Rowan, speaking in an undertone. “Have you seen Mairi?”

Rowan shook his head. “Not so far. A rider I spoke to said she came with the Rohirrim, and that he saw her alive and fighting. In all likelihood, she’s either among the wounded, or trying to wrangle the survivors into helping those who can be saved.”

Boromir nodded, refusing to think of the alternative, and turned his attention to what remained of the Gondorian forces, organising the search for survivors, the removal of their own dead for burial, and
the disposal of their enemies. The sheer number of dead Orcs, and how they would even move the Oliphants, was a problem that he could barely even begin to tackle. Perhaps Gandalf could see fit to lend some magic, since they hardly needed to worry about secrecy now.

The worst part of battle, as far as Boromir was concerned, was the cleaning up afterward.

In the heat of combat, you didn’t hear the cries of the wounded or dying, when all of your focus was on surviving the next few seconds. Afterward, when he had to look into the empty eyes of your dead comrades, or stand at their bedside while a healer made them comfortable for their last hours, or when he had to inform families that their husband or father or son was not coming home, was far worse.

Still, it was not the first time he had organised such efforts, nor would it be the last. He ordered tents erected for the less serious cases, organising the Rohirrim healers and the elves that had remained with the army after Helm’s Deep to look after the less serious cases. Everyone in Minas Tirith capable of washing wounds, rolling bandages or gathering herbs was ordered into the temporary service of the Houses of Healing, to free the regular healers to deal with the more serious cases.

In the brief reprieves, he looked for Mairi, hoping that her apparent absence meant that she was helping someone else. Finally, he saw her, walking slowly and carrying a small, makeshift sling on her back. Flooded with relief, he ran toward her. “Mairi!”

When she saw him, her face broke into a radiant, if exhausted, smile. “Boromir! I am glad you came through safely.”

Boromir’s relief faded as he recognised the figure in the sling. “Merry! What happened to him?”

This time, Mairi’s smile was one of giddy pride, the grin of a novice soldier who had achieved something great, and was about to collapse from exhaustion now that the fire of battle had left them. “He helped Eowyn and I kill the Witchking! It was amazing! I threw a knife at his sword arm and Merry stuck a knife in his leg and Eowyn stabbed him in the face after he patronised her!”

Her face fell abruptly as Boromir eased Merry out of the sling, relieving her of the weight, “But I’m very sure I’ve done something to my ribs, and Merry and Eowyn both collapsed, probably because they were so close to the Witchking when he died, and I couldn’t carry her, so I brought Merry back and hoped that I could find someone to help me with Eowyn before - “

A cry of pain and despair rang out over the battlefield, audible even in Minas Tirith, sounding very much like Eomer. Mairi cringed, “ - Before her brother finds out. Damn.”

She took off at a swift jog, clutching at her side. Boromir followed, hoping that she would listen if he ordered her to a healer after they calmed Eomer down enough to move Eowyn to the Houses of Healing.

Boromir tried very hard to ignore the amused looks from the Gondorian soldiers as he tried to get Mairi to slow down enough to at least get her injuries looked at properly. Tauriel had wrapped what turned out to be several cracked ribs and re-laced Mairi’s dress as tightly as she dared to restrict movement, but she was still covered in scrapes, bruises and other minor injuries.
Aragorn was tending to those wounded who needed immediate care before they could be moved, and had yet to even enter the city. Now that most of those had been moved to the Houses of Healing, replacing the wounded judged stable enough to recover in the barracks or their own homes, Boromir was trying to convince him to be seen by the people he would soon rule, with limited success. Mairi, still moving gingerly and in a far less diplomatic mood, offered Aragorn a flat look. “You’re going to remain out here until you’re king, when the most seriously injured cases are in the Houses of Healing, and you have the perfect chance to prove your kingship by going to help them? Did you receive a head injury that you didn’t tell anyone about?”

Aragorn’s look of consternation suggested that he hadn’t thought of it that way, and he left the tent, followed by Legolas. Mairi sighed, “I suppose someone will need to drag Eomer out from under the Healers’ feet, too, before he ends up a patient himself. Let’s go.”

Boromir couldn’t help but feel skeptical. “You think you can get him away from his sister’s side?”

Mairi shrugged, wincing as the movement jostled her ribs. “Once Eowyn opens her eyes and I spin a sob-story appealing to his honour and duty, perhaps.”

Chapter End Notes

Wow, it’s been a while.

I wish I had a better excuse than writer’s block, but the last few scenes simply refused to co-operate. On top of that, I’m back to full-time work, and working part-time as a writer. My work that pays the bills happens to be shift-work at a 24-hour facility, which lends to a certain amount of disorganisation in my non-work life, especially when I’m working an overnight.

On the bright side, this story is nearly finished. I’ve decided to do two epilogues, one for each of the potential endings. I’ll try not to take too long with the next part.

As always, constructive criticism is much appreciated, and flames would be a welcome change from the heatwave Australia is currently experiencing.

Thanks

Nat
As much as he would have liked to hover over Mairi until he could confirm that she was healed, Boromir had other responsibilities. Instead, he assigned a page to the quartet and sent a message to have them housed in the Steward's Wing.

His original plan, once his responsibilities for the day were over, had been to check on Mairi and see that she didn't need anything while she was resting until her ribs healed. Instead, he found himself going from place to place, always one step behind the woman who clearly had no concept of putting her own well-being first in times of crisis. It wasn't necessarily a bad trait, but if Mairi didn't rest, she wouldn't heal.

The Healers had been grateful to have someone to roll bandages, heat water and fetch things, freeing them to attend to the wounded. They directed him to the kitchens, who directed him to Sam, who had been drafted to escort her to her room to rest. That had been the first place Boromir had looked, so he sought out Rowan, instead.

Rowan had been met with rather more success keeping Suzi-Maria in one place and letting her injuries heal. Hearing the dilemma of his missing friend, Rowan sighed. "She always does this, I suppose I should have expected it. If there is something to volunteer for, that's where she'll be. Where have you looked so far?"

Boromir rattled off the list, and Rowan nodded thoughtfully. "All right, where else is in need of extra hands but doesn't require excessive movement? I suppose I should be glad that she's paying that much attention to her injuries."

Boromir considered the question. "Possibly the administration staff. I'll show you the way."

Fortunately, Mairi was there, having joined several clerks in steadily ploughing through a slowly-diminishing mountain of paperwork. Rowan sighed again, with the air of one who has repeated something too many times. "Mairi, we've talked about this. You are not the only capable person and do not need to do everything yourself."

Mairi sighed back at him, also with the air of an old argument. "And if I don't take some time for myself, you are not above sitting on me to make me rest. But they needed help!"

Boromir was starting to sympathise with Rowan's plight. "You have helped, but if you damage your ribs by working too hard, that won't be an option. Rest for a while, and you may come back tomorrow."

Mairi sighed and levered herself to her feet. "Oh, very well."

Rowan's mouth dropped open, before he scowled. "Oh, sure, for him you listen to reason!"
Mairi accepted Boromir's offered arm. "More like I know exactly how far I can push both of you, and when to cut my losses and give in gracefully."

The harried clerks looked sad to lose her, but also oddly eager to have them out of the room. "We will see you tomorrow, then, my lady."

Mairi smiled at the speaker. "As soon as I am cleared to come down. Thank you for letting me assist."

Rowan waited until they were out of earshot. "That was an odd mix of emotions."

Boromir winced, knowing that even this minor interaction was going to be the topic of endless discussion in the Mess, and wishing that it wouldn't be counter-productive and an abuse of power to put the lot of them on latrine duty. "Clerks are second only to the army in their tendency to gossip, and the soldiers from Helm's Deep have been quite talkative."

Mairi looked thoughtful. "Then perhaps the fine details of these rumours should wait for a more private setting."

Boromir had long since resigned himself to the line of the Stewards passing on through Faramir, no matter how much their father complained.

All of his adult life had been spent as a soldier for Gondor, in decisions that had to be made with little or no time for reflection, no time to consult with advisors or books. There had been battles that he had survived with instincts honed to the point that he had once drawn his sword on an unfortunate servant who had knocked over a marble bust, the sound of stone shattering stone too close to the sound of ballistae bringing down a building, and the soldiers trapped beneath the rubble.

A noblewoman of Gondor would never understand that, for even in war they were raised to be gentle and meek, and to follow the direction of their husband or father. With such a wife, Boromir would find himself leading Gondor as he would have lead an army, and politics required an entirely different mindset that warfare.

Denethor had once considered a match between Boromir and Lady Eowyn, Theoden of Rohan's sister-daughter, despite the Shieldmaiden being almost twenty years his junior, but nothing came of it.

Boromir was relieved, thinking that both of them would have been miserable in marriage to each other. Boromir was too hard-headed and stubborn to give way in the face of Lady Eowyn's fierce independence, and the lady herself would greatly resent becoming a political match, rather than being honoured and respected as the Shieldmaiden she had become.

Given the choice, Boromir would have said that Faramir should be the next Steward, and happily remained a general for the rest of his life. He had even been planning a speech where he abdicated in favour of Faramir, and felt guiltily thankful that Denethor would be dead and unable to throw a spectacular protest.

Now, it was all looking to become a moot point.

When Aragorn had been revealed as the Heir to the kingdoms of Gondor and Arnor, Boromir had been angry, because here was a man who could fight, who could lead and inspire hope, but who identified more with elves than with the Men he would one day rule, who stayed hidden and did not
want the power that he must wield if Sauron was ever to be defeated.

Now, reluctant as Aragorn might be, it was becoming clear that he was a leader of men, a king worthy of Gondor, and that, Boromir could accept. Faramir could become a scholar and maybe an advisor, as he had always wished, and Boromir could remain in the Army, never worrying about being forced to put down his sword in order to take up the rod of Stewardship.

It was a happy idea.

A happy idea made happier by having met possibly the only woman he could see himself calling wife, and – if he chose to take his little brother's teasing seriously – the only woman who could put up with calling him husband.

Mairi may have been only a few years older than Eowyn, closer to Eomer's age than his own, but the difference did not seem such a large obstacle. Mairi knew how to fight, and knew the realities of war, as no pretty noblewoman would, yet she was not a Shieldmaiden, with no wish to win renown on a battlefield. Boromir would not hesitate to call her one of the bravest women he knew, but it was the subtle bravery of one who fought when she had to, and was happier to be the safe harbour to which a warrior returned and found peace.

Perhaps it was selfish of him, but Boromir preferred to keep his life as a soldier as separate as possible from his private life. He saw enough of war on the battlefield, and didn't need it to be the main thing he had in common with his hypothetical spouse.

First, he had admired her for managing to put up with Suzi-Maria and Sam, both of whom had slowly become far more bearable. Mairi had become a friend and someone who was always ready to listen, and he had found himself helping Legolas comfort her in Moria, when she slipped into Shock in the aftermath of her first real battle.

She had listened and often agreed with him in the many aftermaths of a clash with Aragorn, pointing out both points of view in a gentle way that was equal to, but far less annoying than, any diplomat. Then again, Faramir had once found himself confined to his rooms for observing – a bit too loudly – that diplomacy was just a fancy version of getting people or governments to stop shouting and play nicely together.

Boromir wasn't sure when he had started to fall in love with her, or if she felt the same way, but he hoped that perhaps she might be persuaded to stay in Minas Tirith, instead of returning to her village, when Sauron was defeated for good.

Boromir wanted it to be Mairi's choice, but a compromised reputation would complicate things. He had no intention of forcing her hand, but that was ultimately up to Rowan at this point, and the youth was managing an impressively stern look. "So, these rumours."

Boromir ran a hand through his hair, feeling oddly like a young lad receiving a lecture. "We do not have Shieldmaidens as Rohan does, so women who fight are something of a novelty. My men also have a disturbing obsession with my personal life and speculated about a potential connection."

Mairi pulled a face, a little more aware than her companions of the potential consequences of a damaged reputation. "Not that I'm necessarily objecting, but how did you respond?"

Even more than Rowan, this was the opinion that mattered most. "I told them that we had agreed to make no promises until Sauron's defeat, and that they had bigger problems more deserving of their
Rowan rolled his eyes, "If they're anything like the gossips back home, that won't stop them."

Mairi nuded him. "Perhaps not, but Boromir made a statement, and now there are limits to what they can say without contradicting him. Anyway, there is no changing it now, Boromir acted with honour and it could have been a lot worse. Now, I'm going to actually take your advice and go to bed."

The two men watched her go, before Boromir departed again. There were still a number of things that needed to be done, not the least of which was a meeting with the remaining officers. Introducing them to Aragon would also be a good idea, assuming that the king could be extracted from the Houses of Healing, and still had the energy to stand.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the long delay between chapters. Between Work Problems, working overtime, preparing for the two-week event that is Pennsic War and original writing, I've barely had time to breathe.

This one is a bit of a filler, but attending Pennsic for the first time seems to have kick-started my creativity, and hopefully the next chapter won't take as long. Thanks to everyone who is sticking with the story regardless.
Chapter Thirty-One

Chapter Summary

The Calm before the Storm

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mairi was up with the dawn, a habit formed over several years of shift-work and 6:00am starts.

Sitting up in bed, she reluctantly admitted that Rowan may have had a point about pushing herself, and the negative effects thereof. Her ribs ached, though not more than they did the previous day, and yawning brought a sharp spike of agony. Ruefully deciding that she wasn't getting dressed without help, Mairi lay back down to wait for a maid to show up.

After a quick wash from the hand basin and talking a young maid through the process of dressing someone with limited mobility (thank you, years of volunteering in disability care), Mairi joined the others for breakfast.

Mairi was the last to arrive in the throne room, where a small side table had been set up with a few breakfast dishes and a long bench to sit on, most of those present having already finished eating. Merry was absent, likely still in the Houses of Healing, which explained Pippen's absence, too. Nodding to Rowan and Sam, the former of whom had Suzi-Maria dozing on his shoulder, she sat down next to Gimli, filling her plate.

There was little noise as everyone watched Gandalf, who appeared to be concentrating hard. Finally, the wizard opened his eyes, though his news was not cheerful. "Frodo has passed beyond my sight. The darkness is deepening."

Aragorn shook his head, less of an outright denial than a hope of mitigation. "If Sauron had the Ring we would know it."

Gandalf made a sound that was not quite a scoff. "Oh, it's only a matter of time. He has suffered a defeat, yes, but behind the walls of Mordor our enemy is regrouping."

As far as Mairi was concerned, the further away Sauron was, the better. Gimil seemed to agree with her unspoken thoughts, "Let him stay there! Let him rot! Why should we care?"

Gandalf glared in the dwarf's general direction, while Eomer, Legolas and Boromir nodded a brief greeting. The Istar's voice was a far cry from his usual gruff calm, "Because 10,000 Orcs now stand between Frodo and Mount Doom!"

Gandalf deflated as swiftly as he had flared up, grief and regret infusing his words as he lowered himself into a chair, suddenly looking very much the old man. "I've sent him to his death."

There was an awkward pause before Aragorn stood up, something decisive and determined in his bearing. "No. There is still hope for Frodo. He needs time and safe passage across the plains of Gorgoroth. We can give him that."
The rest of the room exchanged dubious glances. Their united force had barely defeated Sauron's army only days ago, and then only with the help of the Oathbreakers, now released from the oath that bound them to the world. They could not be called upon again. Gimli finally voiced what everyone else was thinking. "How?"

Aragorn smiled, though there was no cheer in his voice. "Draw out Sauron's armies. Empty his lands. Then we gather our full strength and march on the Black Gate."

Rowan, who had just taken a swig of whatever he was drinking, spluttered into his cup. Mairi absently flicked a few drops off her dress and passed Suzi-Maria a napkin, staring at Aragorn in barely-concealed horror. Yes, she had known what was coming, but knowing and actually being present for the events were very different things. Sam gaped, speechless, matched by the others in the room.

Eomer finally broke the silence. "We cannot achieve victory through strength of arms."

Aragorn shook his head in complete agreement. "Not for ourselves. But we can give Frodo his chance if we keep Sauron's eye fixed upon us. Keep him blind to all else that moves."

The significant look and emphasis on the last sentence was unmistakable. Legolas raised his chin, a slight smile playing about his lips. Gimli stared at his friend in naked disbelief as the elf spoke. "A diversion."

There was something to be said for the pragmatism of dwarves, as Gimli shrugged. "Certainty of death, small chance of success, what are we waiting for?"

Gandalf shook his head, pointing out a large flaw in the plan. "Sauron will suspect a trap. He will not take the bait."

Aragorn's smile was grim, and almost predatory. "Oh, I think he will."

Of course, it wasn't quite as easy as all that.

Preparations had to be made for a march of several days to the Black Gate. The men had to be assessed to see who was fit to march and still fight once they reached their destination, and who was injured enough to stay behind. A battle strategy beyond simply "Keep Sauron Distracted By Banging On His Front Door" needed to be formed.

Sending several pages to alert the relevant people, Boromir pulled Mairi aside, bracing himself for a potential argument. "Lady Mairi, just to be clear – "

She cut him off with a wry smile, "I am in no condition to march to Mordor and take part in battle, I know. Just don't ban me from doing something productive while I'm here, or I really will go out of my mind."

Eomer joined them. "That seems a fair bargain. Would you mind helping me convince my sister of the same thing?"

Mairi let out a burst of laughter, swiftly cut off as she pressed a hand to her ribs. "Of course, I've been wanting to check on her anyway."

Eowyn was not happy about her last remaining family heading into almost-certain death, and even less happy about the fact that he would be doing so without her. Fortunately, she was also aware
enough of her injuries to realise that she couldn't repeat her Dernhelm stunt and sneak away, since doing so would make her more hinderance than help.

Several briefings with Captains and Marshals later, Boromir returned to his chambers to don his own armor. He ran into Rowan, who was escaping the rooms he shared with his three friends. The commander raised an eyebrow, "I'm surprised that Mairi isn't fussing over you still."

Rowan grimaced. "I asked Aragorn to tell her not to; I'm nervous enough."

Boromir managed not to wince; he knew that everyone found different ways to manage stress, and Mairi's way was to fuss over others. Lacking a target, her worries were sure to only mount. "Would you ask her to come and assist me? It's easier and faster with a second person."

Mairi had been perfectly willing to take the opportunity to fuss over someone, and Boromir hadn't been lying when he said that it was easier to armour up when someone else was available to help with some of the awkwardly-placed straps. It was nice, having her fuss over him, and Boromir had no idea what Rowan was complaining about. When Mairi started to check the straps on his breastplate for the third time, Boromir finally caught her hand, distracting her. "Do you think you will stay here after Sauron is defeated?"

Suzi-Maria had claimed that the end of the Quest was the earliest anything could be done about returning the four to their own world, but none of them had really talked or thought about it. There were several layers of meaning to Mairi's quiet, serious reply, even if Boromir only heard one or two of them. "I don't know."

Boromir reached out and touched Mairi's chin, raising her eyes from their examination of the armour until they met his own. "What if you had a reason to stay?"

Mairi's pause was even longer. She wasn't sure when her admiration for the fictional character had turned into love for the man, and had they been of the same world, she never would have hesitated. There was the rumours apparently running rampant through the Kingdoms of Men about the two of them, but that, too, was not insurmountable. "I suppose I will have to find something to do with myself once the quest is over, but I have the feeling that wasn't what you meant."

Boromir smiled as he shook his head. "I am no good with long, fancy speeches, Mairi, unless it is a short speech to rally my men. When the quest is over, I am asking you to stay here, with me... as my wife."

For a moment, Mairi froze. A fangirl would have seen this as a dream come true. If Mairi knew that they were in Middle-Earth for good, she probably would have accepted. But so many things were still far too uncertain. Boromir took her hesitation entirely the wrong way. "I do not ask merely for honour, due to the rumours spreading, or even out of duty -"

Mairi smiled and held up a hand to stop the sudden torrent of words, and took a deep breath. "When all of this is over, when Aragorn is crowned King and everything has settled down... ask me properly."

If Suzi-Maria was wrong and they never found a way to go home, then Mairi could accept without reservation. But if something happened to pull them back to their own world, she did not want to give false hope, only for both of them to be disappointed.

Boromir read Mairi's reasoning of the uncertain near-future in her eyes, even if he did not know the exact reason, because he nodded. No woman wanted to be a widow before she had the chance to be a wife. "I will await your answer then. Meanwhile..."
He moved slowly, giving Mairi the chance to refuse him as the Steward's Son leaned down and kissed her.

Ignoring the marks that steel armour would doubtless leave on skin that bruised at a bumped shin, Mairi wrapped her arms around Boromir's neck and returned it.

Who knew when - or if - she would be able to do so again.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Yeah, I have no excuse.

The chapter was mostly written, but I was struggling with the transition. Then one of the people in my local group discovered the story, and told me how much they enjoyed it. That sent me into a bit of a spiral of "oh god, oh god, what if I screw up? Wait, that one knight and former King's mundane name is Rowan? Bugger, I thought it was just a generic name when I started this, what if he think's that the character is based on him? Crap crap crap, maybe I should just pretend I never wrote this…"

Anyway, I will try not to take so long next time, and I hope you enjoyed it.

If you want to know the other reason I've been taking so damn long to finish this, I've completed a few more novellas. Check them out on Goodreads or Amazon, under the pen-name Natasja Rose.

Thanks,

Nat
Chapter Thirty-Two

They met in the throne room for a final strategy session, the non-Gondorian members of the Fellowship lurking around the edges, while Aragorn and Boromir clustered with the other Generals around a large map. Boromir pointed out the swiftest route. “Even at a hard march, it will take us at least a day to reach the Black Gate.”

A general whose name Mairi kept forgetting shook his head. “Make it two. We can’t arrive and launch straight into battle while exhausted from a forced march.”

Aragorn nodded his agreement. “It will take at least that long for Frodo and Sam to cross the plains, as long as Sauron knows to expect our coming and moves his forces to the gate.”

Gandalf leaned on his staff. “Two hobbit can move without detection. It will be when they reach Mount Doom that we must keep Sauron’s eye elsewhere.”

Another general nodded. “Then we plan our tactics to draw out the battle. Not to win, but to distract.”

Mairi moved closer, looking at the greater area. “Then you’ll want to look at splitting your forces for ambush and strike warfare.”

A captain who would probably regret his hasty tongue, one way or another, sneered. “What good is an ambush if we’re trying to gain their attention and distract them. Leave warfare to the men.”

“You’re not going to be a distraction for very long,” Mairi pointed out with no little asperity, something quietly dangerous in her raised eyebrow. “Not if you meet Sauron’s forces in open combat.”

Boromir sent both Mairi and the captain a quelling look. “We don’t have the numbers to sustain a drawn-out confrontation. Particularly since we have no true knowledge of what forces Sauron still holds within Mordor. The Battle of Pelennor Fields was composed of Haradrim as much as Orcs, and the planned Umbar Corsairs. We must plan for being heavily outnumbered.”

Mairi didn’t argue - she had been rude to the captain in a council where she was technically a guest, even if she was right - and Rowan intervened before the captain could dig himself any deeper into a hole. “Can’t you engage, then pull off some kind of fighting retreat, leading to an ambush point?”

The first general nodded. “That would increase the number of warriors we can field. We have walking wounded who are not fit for active combat, but could trigger an ambush easily enough.”

The days between the last of the Armies of the West marching to Mordor and their (hopefully) triumphant return were some of the most nerve-wracking of Mairi’s life.

Someone had to keep Gondor running while the King, the Steward, the Steward’s brother, and all of the Military Command structure were absent. The natural choice would have been Denethor, but the former Steward of Gondor was… not recovered. He was not an active danger to anyone, but still had
outbursts when he shouting despair to anyone within hearing range.

It didn’t inspire confidence in his ability to provide sound leadership, to say the least.

That led right back to the problem of the entire command structure being absent, and needing someone to make the decisions. Inexplicably - or perhaps not so much - half of the administrative staff kept seeking Mairi out and getting her to deal with the decisions above their paygrade. Mairi was still deciding if this was because Aragorn was less likely to throw her in the dungeon, or because of her not-quite-official relationship with the new Steward(-under-protest) Boromir.

Trying to reassure herself that it would be a matter of days before the people who knew what the hell they were doing returned (or it ceased to matter when the world was plunged into the Tyranny of a Dark Lord), Mairi did the best she could, and hoped that it was enough.

At least she had company. Eowyn was keeping the messenger birds busy between Minas Tirith and Edoras, in contact with whoever she had left in charge. Both women agreed that keeping busy was the best way to keep from letting worry consume them, and with Eomer and Faramir both off with the army, Eowyn had her own reasons.

Mairi knew the other source of Eowyn’s worry from reading the books, but she couldn’t say that. Instead, she joined the Lady of Rohan at the window, gazing out toward Mordor, though the armies had long since vanished from mortal sight. “Your brother is a fine warrior, he will be as fine as any of us can be.”

Eowyn avoided her eyes. “I know, and I know that Lord Faramir would not have survived as leader of the Ithilian Rangers if he was not skilled, but…”

Mairi raised an eyebrow at hearing that admission - she hadn’t though that it would happen quite so quickly, without both of them being stuck in the Houses of Healing with no-one else to talk to. “That was fast. You must have really struck a spark.”

That had not come out the way Mairi had intended, and Eowyn’s eyes flashed defensively. “And how long did you know Lord Boromir before you fell in love?”
Mairi blushed. It had taken all of a week before Mairi had fallen head over heels, an unfortunate trait of hers in regards to relationships. It had taken until Amon Hen before she had even hinted at making a move, though. “Longer than that before I actually did anything about it. I apologise, that came out wrong.”

Eowyn reached out, taking Mairi’s hand and giving it a comforting squeeze. “We are both missing loved ones. I understand.”

With the Armies of the West, matters were equally tense, with an added sense of impending doom.

The warriors knew that this was not a battle that they were expecting to win. They knew it was a last, desperate hope, that the fate of the world hung in the balance. It did not make for a merry setting.

To add to it, the desire in a stressful situation is to get it over with as fast as possible, but when at least half of your forces are walking wounded… well, an army marches at the speed of the slowest, and those slowest were not up to a forced march at speed. Later, when it was all over and they were safe, Rowan and Sam would swear blind that they spent more time breaking up squabbles between tightly-wound soldiers than they did fighting the forces of Mordor. Suzi-Maria willingly admitted to
blatant abuse of her Mary-Sue powers to make people forget what they were fighting about in awe of her beauty.

(Mairi, upon hearing this, merely informed Suzi-Maria that the blonde was in charge of rejecting any subsequent spontaneous marriage proposals.)

Half of their forces were left at the point just before the mountains ended, where shifting rock made for uneasy footing and excellent ambush opportunities. The rest, the most important, prominent and bale-bodied, waited until dawn, and then marched on the Black Gate.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Hi, all, sorry for the delay in updating. Again, this is more of a filler chapter to keep you going while I re-locate my sources after a computer crash, but I hope you enjoy it. My writing time went downhill a bit, thanks to work being absurdly under-staffed (three of the full-time people left, two for a new job, one on indefinite medical leave… so much overtime…) and other commitments.

In other news, (mostly for other SCA peeps) I am now a Protege! My friend and quasi-mentor was made a Pelican over Easter, and told me that while she would understand if I chose to accept another offer, if I was still free when she had given herself six months to settle into the role, she would like to have me as her first Protege. Sorry for babbling, I’m still reeling a little over the whole thing.

Anyway, I’m working on the next chapter now, and it should be up soon.

Thanks,
If you asked anyone what the Battle of the Black Gates was like, they wouldn’t be able to tell you. The air of darkness and malice, unearthly and all-encompassing… it was indescribably to anyone who hadn’t experienced it. Rowan was going to have nightmares for months about what could have happened if Frodo and Sam hadn’t managed to destroy the Ring in time.

But, they had. Gandalf and the Eagles had got to the two hobbits before the were consumed by the eruption of Mount Doom (Volcanos were another thing that Rowan was going to take a while to look at like he used to) and flown back to Gondor and the Houses of Healing. The combined armies had marched back, and the White City was less than half an hour’s distance away.

Riders had met them, apparently to ensure that they were actually themselves, and not Sauron’s forces in disguise. They were swiftly followed by all the healers that could be spared to be sent out to meet them, along with carts to transport the worst of the wounded. Sam was included in that number, with Suzi-Maria fretting over him and doing everything in her non-inconsiderable power to assist the Healers.

It was perhaps the closest any of them had come to actually dying, so Rowan didn’t blame her for being upset.

Boromir was doing a terrible job of concealing his pleasure at the idea of seeing Mairi again. Rowan had no doubt that she was either pacing on the walls, or distracting herself by organising everything that could be organised to ensure a smooth homecoming. He hoped that non-army-ration food was among those things.

Mairi wasn’t waiting for them, but appeared at the doors to the Citadel shortly after the main party of important people arrived. Boromir beat Rowan to sweeping her up in a relieved hug, and promptly winced as the action pulled at the stitches holding a wound on his side together. He didn’t hide his reaction quickly enough, because Mairi’s eyes narrowed. “Do you need a healer?”

Boromir shook his head, not actually removing his arms from around her. “They’ve done all that they can. There’s only time and rest to do the rest.”

Mairi gestured, smiling in a way that Rowan absolutely did not trust. “Good.”

A gaggle of servants swept out, gathering everyone up and bundling them off to prepared rooms and hot baths. “Celebrating can wait until you’re not likely to fall asleep or pass out in the main course.”

Rowan groaned; surprise, ruthless efficiency and deceptive meekness… he would have been tempted to make a Spanish Inquisition joke, if it hadn’t been guaranteed to fly over the head of nearly everyone present. Besides, Mairi had a better recollection than he did for things she enjoyed, and
i jokes were ruined when someone had to correct your phrasing.

Aragorn’s Coronation went smoothly, though the actual Wedding to Arwen would take longer to organise. Denethor’s sons hadn’t made any official statements, but no-one doubted that the King and future Queen were only the first of many ceremonies to come. Part of the issue was that both brothers had expressed a desire to continue in their previous roles, Faramir in Ithilian and Boromir with the Army. While Gondor had been ruled by a Steward for centuries, with the return of the King no-one had a solid answer of whether or not the office was still necessary.

The Citadel already had servants and a Seneschal that oversaw the running of things not related to State Affairs, and a council that advised in regards to everything else. A steward was largely unneeded. On the other hand, Faramir and Boromir were both very well respected, and no-one wanted the trouble of the general populace grumbling about them being ‘forced out’.

Boromir dealt with that issue by loudly and frequently saying how nice it would be to return to his old position as Captain-General, for all the good that did. Apparently, some kind of visible reward for his actions was in order, and apparently ‘Not Being The New Steward’ didn’t qualify. The injury gained at the Black Gate was nearly healed, and another issue was weighing on his mind.

Unfortunately, getting Mairi alone to talk was far more difficult than it should have been.

If it wasn’t her three companions needing her advice on something, it was someone from the relief efforts or the Houses of Healing, or one of a dozen administrative branches that had taken a surprisingly short time to get used to reporting to her. (That was another reason to get the new government sorted out; Mairi had made it very clear that she would like to stop being the person everyone looked to for answers, please)

Even now, when they weren’t busy with various matters and had some leisure time, he couldn’t get her alone. Mairi laughed as she half-led, half dragged him through a lively reel. With Rowan and the hobbits scattered through the line, it wasn’t a complete disaster, though the co-ordination was somewhat lacking. Court dances tended to be quite different.

Boromir couldn’t help smiling as Mairi went into a huddle with the younger two, trying to figure what dances they all knew under different names. That half of the dancers were injured to some degree and could only dance for a limited time before needing to rest was unfortunate, but led to a greater variety of partners.

Boromir was also very sure that at least half of his men were only taking part to annoy him, by stealing Mairi away from him, if only temporarily.

Finally, they dispersed, and Boromir stopped Mairi before she left the room to help Suzi-Maria ‘convince’ Sam into resting until his injuries had finished healing. “Walk with me a while.”

Mairi happily accepted his arm, slowing to a more leisurely pace than her usual brisk walk. He led them toward a private garden, pretending not to see the knowing looks exchanged by literally everyone they passed. “Do you remember the conversation we had, before we marched on the Black Gate?”

She smiled up at him, moving a little closer. “I recall many, but I assume you mean the one when I was helping you with your armour?”

He nodded, trying not to let nerves get the better of him. “Yes, that one. Are you still of the same
Mairi raised an eyebrow. “That you would ask me properly and I would give you an answer? Of course.”

Oh, right. That. Curse it, fancy words were hard! “Mairi, Lady of Kilravock, Quest Companion and my much-admired friend,” That should cover the flowery greetings, “I have admired you for a long time, for your strength, your courage and your wisdom as much as your beauty. I have loved you for nearly as long. Will you do me the great honour of being my wife?”

He hadn’t actually expected the spectacle most Gondorian Ladies would have thrown if they had been the recipient of such a question, but somehow the way she smiled and slid into his arms, rising up to kiss him before resting her head under his chin, was even better. “Freely and gladly, my love.”

Perhaps the Hobbits had the right of it: stories could have happy endings.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, I'm terrible at updating on schedule...
There will be two epilogues; one where the four interlopers return to our world, and one where they stay in Middle Earth.
Those, at least, are mostly written, and shouldn't take another 8 months to complete.

For anyone interested, I've also posted a SCA/MCU crossover fic. It's a bit silly and mostly written for a laugh, but check it out if you want to. Clearly, hanging out with other nerds at Events is good for my creativity...

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!