Finding Home Again

by kuhleesi

Summary

After the War, the Fellowship attempts to settle back to their normal lives. Ellie gets to meet Legolas' family, and Aragorn has to quickly learn how to battle without the use of his sword as he traverses the tricky waters of court politics. Scheming, betrayal and lots of weddings await those left behind in Minas Tirith. This is the final part of Ellie Grayson's journey.

fanfic trailer - meril | pinterest board - little rose | a character playlist for ellie grayson

Notes

I'm back, fam! I miss writing Ellie! Liv's story over at Lost Lives is taking a much darker tone and Ellie's is full of fluff at the moment. We'll be meeting Legolas' brother and sisters in this story! As well as getting to know Legolas more. He has been a mysterious character and I haven't really dealt with fleshing him out as much as I should have but we'll get to know
more about his personality as we go along here.

There won't be as much action in this story (Although I'll make sure to add some!) and I'm excited to bring out my headcanons for how Gondorian politics are, as well as Mirkwood politics.

So, without further ado, on we go!

As always, I own nothing except poor Ellie Grayson who is as confused about Middle-earth life as ever. This is the last tumble, Sir Tolkien. Hang on there.
Welcome, King of Gondor

Chapter Summary

The Fellowship returns to Gondor after a month in enemy territory. A New Age begins.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Aim." Imrahil calls.

The archers pull the strings of their bows back. There is total silence, and I see the soldiers whispering excitedly amongst themselves, their eyes on the elves standing in total darkness several feet from their targets.

"Fire!"

Three arrows fly, the moonlight glittering off the edge of the steel. A bell tinkles, and the crowd claps in appreciation.

Legolas turns to me with a smile, while I clap appreciatively.

To keep the soldiers entertained, Legolas and the sons of Elrond have agreed to hold an archery competition. Legolas is by far the superior archer, which is surprising given he is actually younger than the twins. Apparently, Elladan and Elrohir are far better swordsmen.

We've been granted a night of freedom before we have to ride back to Minas Tirith after a month of clean-up skirmishes. The men are excited and ready to go back to their families to share the good news. For a month, all the soldiers did was tend to the wounded, bury their dead comrades and drive back stragglers--the very last of the desperate enemies. None of it was pretty. Some still died during these skirmishes. The Easterlings and especially the Haradrim has deep hatred for the people of Gondor, and they showed no mercy, not even in the final fight.

Even I had to go with the Dúnedain to subdue Easterlings and Southrons the moment my wound healed. Elladan and Elrohir led the final sack on the fortress in Mordor, and it was them and their army that returned last to the encampment. I don't envy them for their task. I would never want to go back to the Black Gate. There is horror that lingers there, horror that still visits me in the night, that leaves me screaming and unable to differentiate reality from nightmares.

I still can't hold a sword as well as I used to. My right arm aches if I use it for very long. Elrohir assures me that the wound is healed, although the effects of the orc poison would stay longer--perhaps even permanently. Orc blood is nasty, or so I've been informed and I certainly do not disagree. I've had extra work with doing laundry just washing the blood of those foul creatures off my clothes.

On top of that, life in the encampment does get lonely for me.

I'm desperate for female company. I've seen more of men's habits than I care for. The drinking, the petty fighting, the spitting, the peeing everywhere, the smoking. One time, I could have sworn I walked in on Merry and Pippin comparing their dicks behind a tree. I ran as far from them as
possible when I had realized. And the men steered clear of me for at least a week after that. They're kind enough to set up a separate latrine for me so I wouldn't have to be subjected to more of men's lack of hygiene than I had to. The only catch is that I have to clean it out myself, but I prefer that over having to deal with some random guy finding me squatting behind a tree. It was embarrassing enough with the Fellowship, I won't be able to handle thousands of them.

And apparently, they think a woman on her period is a ticking time bomb. It was funny the first time when a soldier panicked when he saw the bloody fabric I was taking to the river to clean. He thought my wound had opened up again. When I explained where the blood came from, I swear he was ready to run away then and there. And then men were gasping and pointing at the back of my pants and asking when I got injured. Then it became annoying and embarrassing.

"If one more person asks me why I have a fucking leak one more time, I'm throwing a bloody rag at them!" I stormed into Aragorn's tent one time just to rant about it. To my horror, he was with Elladan and Elrohir, who looked at me as though I had sprouted a third head.

The three had blinked at me nervously. "It's just blood. Why is it different when it's mine?! Jesus!" I could have almost torn my hair out.

I want Salabeth.

I miss her. I hope she'll be in Minas Tirith for Aragorn's crowning. I would rather be spending a day with her right now.

Instead, I'm here, surrounded by more male energy than I care for. The hobbits are the ones I can tolerate on most days, especially Sam. They, at least, know not to scream like a child at the sight of blood in places where blood is usually not found.

In fairness to the men, other than the whole deal with my period, they are gallant in their treatment of me. They offer me a place to sit with them and they are polite when I am in their presence. There is respect automatically given by the soldiers to a member of the Fellowship, and even more so when I am both close to the King and has fought by their side. That I am a woman seems to gain only more respect instead of less, which to be quite honest, was what I was expecting first. But they treat me either as their equal or someone more, and I appreciate that they think I am someone important. I didn't use to be important to anyone else but my family until I fought in this war. I feel as if I had made my own mark on this world.

Spirits are especially high tonight. It's our last day in Ithilien. Tomorrow, we'll be on the road back to Minas Tirith. We sent out messengers as soon as we could, and reinforcements came days later from Gondor with new supplies and food and horses. And for almost a month, life at camp actually became more bearable.

"I was expecting one of you to at least know where the bell was." Legolas says, smugly as he, Elladan and Elrohir return to the weapons rack.

"A silver dagger says Imrahil threw it that way deliberately to give the elfling advantage." Elladan says.

"Do not blame me for your inability to aim better than an orc." Imrahil drawls.

Elladan scoffs, affronted. "You wound me!"

"You'll get over it." I say, approaching them with Aragorn beside me while Imrahil's eyebrows furrow in annoyance.
The moment I approach them, Legolas leans down for a quick kiss on my cheek. He does that a lot these days, showering me with kisses and soft touches. The feeling I had when we first kissed never truly goes away when he shows his affection. I suspect they never will.

"Ack." Elladan pulls a face.

"Get a tent." Elrohir turns away.

"There are sore losers in the vicinity." Legolas teases.

Here's what I've learned about Elladan and Elrohir, the more I get to know them: They are always serious. They rarely smile, though Elrohir is kinder than Elladan, and I can never quite tell if they're joking until Legolas reacts. They do get mischievous--they are Arwen's older brothers after all--but most of the time, the two keep to themselves.

And maybe for a good reason.

I had no idea the elves would not be welcomed by the men. There is tension sometimes, between the men of Gondor and the Sons of Elrond. After Elrohir healed me of my wound, apparently, a rumor went around camp that some sort of elven magic was used and that I would not have been healed without it. Elrohir assures me the only elven thing he used was miruvor. The rest was pure luck and herbalism taught by his father. Even if he did not explain it to me, I know more than anyone else that he tried his hardest and that it wasn't magic that kept me alive but his skill.

Aragorn did his best to qualm the discontent among the Men. We are all tired, staying in the land of the enemy, and many have lost their friends but we cannot turn on each other when we have just achieved victory. After all, the elves helped us. They certainly did not treat Legolas any differently. Perhaps it was simply the twins' personalities that some of the Men did not like.

In any case, Elladan and Elrohir had stopped caring. There are far more people who have only respect and trust for them than there are of people suspicious of them. They've led a force that successfully stomed the fortress in Mordor. Whatever is being said about them did not affect them in the least.

"You two need to rest up if we are all to go to Minas Tirith early." I say to the twins.

"Us? Is it not past your bedtime yet, tithen meril?" Elrohir says, teasingly.

"Only I get to call her that." Aragorn interrupts.

"You can heal your pride, Elrondion. Ellie and I have somewhere else to be." Legolas says, tugging me towards him. He gives his bow to Elrohir, who scowls at him, and we bid the rest goodbye.

We have been doing this every night since the Army decided to camp in Ithilien. The land has been ravaged by Sauron's forces, but there are still hidden places untouched by any evil in this land. Tall trees where the only things littered around them were flowers and fallen leaves.

And roses. Ithilien has a lot of roses, we've discovered. Legolas likes to joke about how it was like a sign.

"Ithilien would be the perfect land to settle in. After Aragorn is crowned, this could be the best place to live in. It's close enough to Minas Tirith and near the Anduin. My people would make the land glow again. For a time, until we leave for the Undying Lands." He told me once. He also turned to me with a smile at that time, and added, "We could build a home here."
We.

The possibility of the two of us rebuilding, making a home and settling down is both exciting and terrifying. My fear after this war is that I will have nothing and nowhere. Aragorn will be in Minas Tirith, the Hobbits will return to the Shire, and Gimli and Legolas plan to go back to their homelands. I'll have nowhere.

Yet, here he is. Offering me a home--a home we can build together. And I'm terrified something will go wrong again because it all sounds too good to be true.

Still, we've begun to explore the land, finding the places that needed the most attention, sneaking off beneath a hidden canopy of leaves, or finding the perfect spot to watch the stars. This time, however, we don't stray too far from camp. The army is camped in what is called the Fields of Cormallen, and beside it is a stream near a waterfall. We can still hear the activity of the camp behind us, but we find a spot with some privacy given by bushes near that waterfall.

"I was thinking..." Legolas begins. He's lying on my lap while I twist his hair around my fingers. I pause and he looks up at me, "Remember when I said you should come with me and Gimli through Fangorn? The road there will lead to Eryn Galen... I was wondering if you would like to join me there?"

"To Eryn Galen?" My heart skips, "To your family?"

His smile widens, "To my family, yes. My sisters would love you."

"You don't think they'll go into cardiac arrest once they find out their baby brother left home for months on a dangerous quest and comes back with a nobody?" I say.

He sits up and turns to me. "You are not a nobody. You are a part of the Fellowship, a hero. You will be treated with honor there."

I feel unease. It's not that it's unexpected. He's expressed how much he wants me to meet his family, and I do want to meet them. But... I have no family of my own. And I'd be an idiot to assume King Thranduil would just let Legolas live the rest of his days in Ithilien with me. I never existed in Middle-earth until the War of the Ring. I have no family to introduce, no past to tell. I'll feel like an empty shell in front of the Elvenking. I don't even know who he is--a good Elf, definitely, because Legolas admires him so--but I can already feel his presence from miles and miles away. He intimidates me and I don't even know who what he looks like.

"The decision is still yours, of course. Take all the time you need to think about it." He says. I smile at him, grateful that he's giving me more time. He settles back on my lap, where he has a good view of the stars.

"So, who's second place in the archery competition tonight? Since, let's admit, Elladan and Elrohir kind of ate your dust."

Legolas laughs, although he tries to hold it, which only makes him laugh harder.

"Let them fight over that. They never had the patience to learn archery. Glorfindel hated teaching them how to aim with a bow."

"To be fair to the twins, their aim is flawless."

"Not quite as flawless as mine, however." He says, proudly. I laugh as well, but don't deny it. After how I've seen him fight, he definitely deserves to be proud of himself.
"You have a beautiful laugh, *meleth.*" He says.

My heart leaps. "Are you going to keep doing that?" I sound breathless.

"What? Call you and every part of you beautiful?" He asks, sitting up so he can face me, "I will do it every day if I have to. You will get sick of me saying it." He says.

I never will. Whenever he says it, I feel like the luckiest girl alive that someone so good could love me. I lean forward and kiss him, and his hand goes to the back of my head. Beneath the stars, there is only us, and the scent of roses, and the cool breeze against our skin.

We fall asleep on that spot, and I wake up gasping for breath. I had the momentary fear that I was captured by orcs again. That fear has never gone away, not after months of escaping them. Sleeping in the open does that to me. If I'm not in a room or a tent, the dread never fails to come back. The time I was captured by the Uruk-Hai continues to haunt me, though I still barely remember any of it--only the fear, and the pain.

That fear eases as soon as I hear Legolas sigh beside me. Seeing him there, at peace, helps ground me back to reality. As always, his eyes are open and unblinking, unfocused in Elven sleep. I wrap my arm around his waist and lay my head on his chest, letting the steady beat of his heart calm mine. It's still early--the skies are still grey--and I don't want to wake him.

My effort to be quiet is for naught, however. I can hear the crunch of leaves beneath heavy boots, and Legolas wakes from his sleep.

"Forgive me for interrupting, miss, but the Army is preparing to leave for Minas Tirith." A soldier informs me when I look up to see who it is.

"Thank you for letting us know." I say as Legolas sits up and rubs his eyes. The soldier bows and turns back to camp, where they are indeed unraveling the tents and saddling the horses. Some of the Grey Company are already on horseback and the Hobbits are all at one corner, eating whatever food they can get their hands on.

"I need to bathe." I announce.

"Is it not too early for that, El? You might get a cold." Halbarad's son, Halon says.

"Not to mention, it would be pointless. You will get dirty on the road, anyway." Arahael, Halon's brother, adds.

"I can't hear, suddenly." I say, walking away from them.

These two are a touching sight. I've heard the two of them don't get along at all, but after Halbarad's death, the two have begun working on their differences. They bond over mercilessly teasing me.

"Can't resist it." Arahael once said, "Your forehead makes the most delightful wrinkle when we do it."

I try to move past them, but they step in front of me. "No time, El. You still have to find a horse."

"I was just thinking of sitting behind one of the twins."

Arahael laughed, "The moment you convince either Elladan or Elrohir to let you ride with them is the moment I turn into an elf."
"As part of the Fellowship, for ceremony's sake, you will need to ride on your own." Halon said. "You will be greeted like a hero. The days of hiding in the shadows are over, Lady Ellie."

I groan. "Legolas, save me." I say, dramatically.

He chuckles, "They're right, Ellie."

"You're supposed to be on my side, remember?"

"Go pick a horse, meleth."

I glare at the three of them and finally relent, "I'm doing it because I want to, not because you told me to."

I find a white steed that is actually very gentle, which had belonged to one of the fallen Dúnedain who had died in the Black Gate. After gathering my things from my tent, I find the entire army already getting into positions. Some of the soldiers usher me in the direction of the King's Company, right at the very front of the army. Like before, those on horseback ride in front while foot soldiers march behind us. Aragorn is there, wearing the armor he had worn out of Minas Tirith. His cape flows in the breeze behind him. Imrahil and Eomer are on either side of him and Elladan and Elrohir are right behind him, flanking him, with Elladan holding the standard that Arwen had made: the symbol of a white tree with seven stars above it on a black background.

Behind them rode the Hobbits, then Gandalf, then the Grey Company, led by Legolas, Gimli and I. Behind me are Halon and Arahael.

"I reckon that we'll be going on a nice, steady pace, yes?" Pippin says cheerfully.

"Define 'nice' and 'steady'." Legolas says.

"Nice and steady like a waterfall over crashing rock, maybe. The soldiers miss their family, Pippin. They would want to get to Minas Tirith as soon as possible." Gimli says, roughly.

"How come Gimli gets to ride behind Legolas?" I ask Halon.

"You take ages when bathing and the army was already moving so we had to say something." Arahael admits, not even ashamed that he had lied. "And we won't be riding for long. We just have to get to Cair Andros. We're taking ships to Osgiliath."

"These are the infamous, honorable Dúnedain." I say to Sam, rolling my eyes.

The journey after that was uneventful. The only thing that truly bothered me was how crowded the ships were. With the horses housed below deck, space is cut in half. But the journey is only for a day, and we arrive in Osgiliath early the next morning. After that, we're back on horses and riding towards Minas Tirith.

I'd be blind if I didn't see Legolas hesitating and slowing down, turning around to the ships on the harbor.

"I did not think it would be so hard to part with the music of the Sea." Legolas says to Gimli, "I have been so used to it in the past month that it pains me to know I will not wake to the sound of it tomorrow."

"You will see it again, Legolas. Sooner than you think." Gimli assures him.
After that, it's another day's journey on the Road, and we break ranks to go at a much slower pace. I end up riding beside the hobbits, with the White Tower shining in the distance, beckoning us closer to home. I can feel the shift in the air, the anticipation of the soldiers who will finally return to their families, the excitement for the arrival of the new King, and the joy of victory. There is laughter in the air, and the soldiers are eager to return.

"Well, here's our heroes." I say, cheerfully when I manage to ride beside the Hobbits. We've all been given horses on the way to Minas Tirith, for formality's sake. "There'll probably be lots of noise and flowers when we get there."

"And screaming people." Pippin interrupts.

"Screaming is such a harsh word. They would most likely be singing. Very loudly." Frodo says.

"And food, don't forget the food." Merry reminds.

"The food..." Pippin and Sam sigh at the same time.

"We really should have a competition on who can eat spicy chicken wings the fastest." I suggest.

"That sounds messy." Merry injects.

I snort, "Who cares? You saved Middle-earth. You're allowed to eat as much as you want, however you want."

"Remember Bilbo's birthday party, Pip? All the ale we had! I remember dancing on top of a table but that's about it."

"You remember you comedians set off one of my fireworks inside a tent." Gandalf says, evidently listening in.

"It was Bilbo's birthday! You would have set them off, anyway." Merry cries, defensively.

"Not inside a tent." Gandalf mumbles.

"Miss Ellie, that reminds me. We don't know when your birthday is!" Sam says.

I blink. We've been so close these past few months and I didn't even realize they didn't even know this one fact about me. We've been bonding over so many things but I failed to mention it.

"I was born on a leap year."

Four pairs of eyes squinted at me in confusion.

"Uh, in our calendar, the second month only has twenty-eight days. Every five years, however, they call it a leap year for when the second month has twenty-nine days. I was born on the twenty-ninth of the second month." I pause, realizing something.

So do the hobbits.

"More than two moons ago?" Pippin said, his voice small.

Wow.

My birthday passed and I didn't even realize until now. I wouldn't have wanted to anyway...
"That would be around the time the Rohirrim rescued us." Merry realized. I fidget uncomfortably. I wouldn't want to celebrate my birthday if it meant remembering that day. Not because I'm ungrateful, but because anything that had to do with my time being captured by the Uruk-Hai leaves a sick feeling in my stomach. Even now, I feel nauseous and want to barf.

Merry and Pippin understand the silence, and Frodo looks sympathetic. He, too, was captured by orcs and stripped of his things, after all. I still remember the hopelessness I felt when the Mouth of Sauron showed us his mithril shirt in an attempt to demoralize us.

"Well, this won't do at all." Gandalf says with that gruff voice. "We're giving you a new birthday. When was that time Aragorn found you, again?"

"It was when we met Frodo at the Prancing Pony. Remember that?"

Frodo chuckles, "Do I remember it? I thought Strider was going to rob me blind. He just yanked me into another room!"

"Oh, he gets that from his ancestors. Flair for the dramatics, I tell you." Gandalf says.

"Ha! You should have seen him when we first met! Dude held a sword to my throat going, "Halt! What are you doing, O Spy of the Enemy." My voice goes down to a baritone, and I puff my chest out in imitation of Aragorn as Strider when we first met. I remember being terrified of him, then. Now, I don't know who else I could trust with my life.

"Aragorn doesn't talk like that." Gandalf says, indignant for the future king of Gondor.

"Gandalf is right, Ellie." Frodo says, grimly, but I see him wink at me at the last second, "He sounds more like, "You're not nearly frightened enough. I know what hunts you." He says this in a low, dangerous growl that is a surprisingly accurate, if not cartoonish, imitation of Aragorn's voice.

This coming from Frodo makes the rest of us laugh. Gandalf rolls his eyes, "Heroes of Middle-earth, indeed." He mutters like the grumpy old man he is, and rides ahead of us. Even Shadowfax throws his head back in indignance.

"Gandalf is even less fun than he used to be when he was the Grey. At least when he was the Grey, he had some sense of humor." Pippin whispers, while we try to hide our giggles.

"Yet my hearing is as keen as ever, Peregrin Took!" Gandalf calls, not turning around. We snort again as Pippin's face turns red.

"Gandalf had a good idea, though, Ellie. From now on, we celebrate your birthday on September 29th." Frodo says.

"Frodo has spoken it into existence. Thus, it is so." I say, dramatically, flourishing my hand.

Our laughter is drowned out by the sound of trumpets. One trumpet at first, then another answers its call, and another and another as we approach, coming closer and closer to Minas Tirith. I didn't even realize we were so near.

And as we come closer, the singing becomes audible, then loud, then deafening. A huge crowd has formed in front of the Gate, and white flowers are being waved in the air to welcome us back.

In front of them all is Faramir, smiling and looking so much like Boromir that I do a double-take. For a moment, it seemed the Fellowship is complete again. But the moment passes, and I see Gimli hum in pleased surprise beside me. Bells are ringing, and Frodo was correct about the loud songs. There
was not one face that was unsmiling. Beside me, I hear soldiers sniffling with happiness.

It hits us then, how sweet our victory is. Despite the countless sacrifice, the unbearable memory of the Black Gates, here we stand in the White City, welcomed by the people of Middle-earth. *The Free People*. Now that Sauron's gone, they will no longer live in fear. This is what we did.

This is what I did.

What I fought for, have shed blood for.

This, the laughter, the waving children, the promise of a brighter dawn... This makes it all the more fulfilling. I finally feel like I've done something worthwhile, something the world will remember.

And as the large crowd in front of the Gateway cheers at our approach, I feel as if I have fulfilled the promise of a secure future for Gramps and Rory and even Donovan. The Gate, which had been torn down during the Battle at the Pelennor Fields, is still open, and soldiers of both Gondor and Rohan stand beside it.

The noise gradually dies down, until there is only sheer silence and the army parts for Aragorn, who walks toward Faramir, no longer hiding but holding his head high with pride. Behind him is what remains of the Grey Company, and Éomer, Imrahil and Gandalf.

And the four hobbits. They look so small and insignificant next to the noble heroes they stood with, but they are the greatest of them all. The smallest people who have changed the course of the future.

Faramir's voice seems to carry out through the huge crowd, the entirety of Gondor, "Here is Aragorn son of Arathorn, chieftain of the Dúnedain of Arnor, Captain of the Host of the West, bearer of the Star of the North, wielder of the Sword Reforged, victorious in battle, whose hands bring healing, the Elfstone, Elessar of the line of Valandil, Isildur’s son, Elendil’s son of Númenor. Shall he be king and enter into the City and dwell there?"

My heart swells with pride at the titles that Aragorn, the humble man I have come to love as family, now bear with pride. When I first met him, he was a mere Ranger in hiding, known only as Strider. Now he is a King, respected by all. The response to Faramir's question is unanimous and deafening, "Yea!"

Guards stepped forward, holding a casket open for Faramir, who held up a tall crown, fashioned like the helms I remember the Guards of the Citadel bearing. This one was bigger, though, and pure white with wings of pearl and silver, and seven gems set on the circlet that shone in the light. At the top of the crown was a large jewel, the light of which seemed to blaze.

"It was our custom that the King shall receive the Crown from his father, the King before him. Or that he shall take it from his father's tomb. But it would appear that changes have to be made, and with the authority of the Steward, I brought the crown of Êarnur, the last King, from Roth Dínen."

Aragorn took the crown from Faramir's hand as though he was holding a living thing, gently and with steady hands. I have the very inappropriate thought that he if he drops that thing and it shatters, it's going to mess everything up big time. But thankfully, he doesn't.

Instead, he holds it up for all to see, and shouts, "*Et Êärello Endorennan utilien. Sinome maruvan ar Hildinyar tenn’ Ambar-metta*!"

"Out of the Great Sea to Middle-earth, I am come. In this place will I abide, and my heirs, unto the ending of the world." Halon beside me whispers for my benefit.
"Those were Elendil's words when he first stepped on Middle-earth from the sea." Arahael says, reverence in his voice.

But Halon made a surprised noise, a sharp intake of breath through his nose, as Aragorn gave the Crown back to Faramir.

"I did not come to this inheritance alone, but by the labor of many. In token of this, I wouls have the Ring-bearer bring the crown to me and Mithrandir to set it upon my head, for he is the mover in all that was accomplished and this is his victory as well."

Merry nudges Frodo, who looks up with pride that he shall be honored with this. Aragorn walks to the very edge of the Gateway, just outside the first entrance into Minas Tirith, and Frodo takes the crown from Faramir. With Gandalf beside him, they walk towards Aragorn and Gandalf takes the crown and places it on top of Aragorn's head.

At once, the cheering erupted—a celebration of a new King, and the defeat of Sauron. Beside me, Halon tries to wipe away a tear of pure joy and I can hear the soldiers behind me stamping their feet on the ground in joy. Aragorn turns to us, his army and loyal soldiers, and he looks like a great king of fairytales—tall and majestic. He holds his hand out to us, and the rest of the Fellowship, as well as the Dûnedain, Elladan and Elrohir, Imrahil and Éomer follow. People throw flowers our way, and we are met with shouts of victory as we walk into Minas Tirith.

"Look, Ellie!" Pippin says, proudly as he shows the bouquet of flowers that one of the women gave to him. Sam looks astonished to be there, and Merry and Pippin walk side by side. I look up as more flowers rain from above, wondering where it could be coming from.

Faramir addresses the crowd, "Make way for the King of Gondor."

The crowd parts as though Aragorn is Moses and they are the Sea. I catch up to him, but keep my distance for ceremony's sake. He ignores this, however, and puts an arm around my shoulder in the same protective dad way he always does.

Some things just never change.

"Look at you, rockstar." I joke, nudging him.

"Did you just call me a rock?"

"No! A rockstar! It's someone many people aspire to be and idolize. They make music." I shout over the noise of the crowd.

"That is a compliment, I assume?"

"Just smile and wave, my king." I say, pulling away from him to find Legolas. He, too, is receiving bouquets of flowers and some of the older women stop to introduce him to their daughters. Legolas, polite as ever, bows and introduces himself to each of them. The women blush right down to their necks. I can relate.

"Melethenin." I say, only a tiny bit protective. He turns to me and chuckles at my arched eyebrow. He's way too nice to reject all the women after him, though. But he reserves that smile, soft and loving, just for me, giving me no reason to feel insecure. He takes my hand and we walk beside Gimli, who looks pleased with himself for having a wreath of white flowers on his head.

"The children love me." He says, motioning at the small flowers in his beard.
"What is not to love, my friend?" Legolas says, squeezing Gimli’s shoulder.

"You let them touch the beard?" I gasp in fake surprise.

"They were adorable. I couldn't resist." Gimli says, with no shame as we rejoin the company, where the Dúnedain sing along to the song of the crowd.

"We have prepared for the ceremony. This will be a day remembered by many." Faramir says to Aragorn as guards line our path back towards the Citadel.

"The crownless again shall be King." Elladan says with a small smile.

"Hold the ceremony for now, Faramir. There shall be a perfect moment for it." Aragorn says.

"You do not want the crowning ceremony to happen today?" Faramir sounded incredulous.

"Not today. But by all means, let the feasting commence for however long you want. Three, four days? Let the markets be festive, let the people rejoice. The ceremony is but a formality. I am already King, and tomorrow I shall begin my duties. But tonight, I think I would like to rest. The Ceremony shall happen when the time is right."

Faramir bows, although he looks confused, "Of course, my King."

I look forward, and behind us I can hear the thunderous footsteps of thousands of people who would watch their new king take the throne.

All hurt is forgotten, at least for now, as the trumpets blow and the people cheer behind us, and not even the great door of the Citadel closing behind us could muffle it.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Tithen meril ~ little rose
Meleth/melethenin ~ love/my love
Quiet Parties

Chapter Summary

Ellie is glad to be around women again. Gondor celebrates the victory of the war, but some choose to escape the memory of it all.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I let myself be whisked off by the servants the moment we step foot inside the Citadel. The black banners are unfurled to reveal the symbol of Gondor and already there is so much activity happening, silks being hung, streets being cleaned, food being cooked.

I'm only too happy to be among women again.

"Aedelind!" I practically sob when I see her in the crowd of women around me. She pushes some of the girls away and we squeal like children when we hold each other, jumping up and down in a circle.

"I knew you would make it! I knew it!" Aedelind laughs. She takes both of my hands and examines the dirt under my nails and the cuts on my knuckles. She fusses over the various cuts I have all over my body and face.

"This won't do at all!" She says, her hand then expertly goes up my arm, finding the bulge that is the dressing on my shoulder.

"What happened here?"

"Poisoned. It's better now, though. I still feel stiff but it's not infected."

Her eyes narrow, "Aedelgar said you got injured. Hildraed is with him right now. Lady Éowyn has also been worrying about you."

"I wish she came now. You have no idea how much I missed you guys!"

"She's very hands-on, the Lady Éowyn. But she also wanted to see Lord Éomer--sorry, King Éomer--as soon as the trumpets rang. We can all meet later during the feast. But for now, take a bath!"

I close my eyes in pleasure, "Music to my ears. Almost as good as elven song, I'm telling you." I say. Aedelind snorts, "Come, then. I can't imagine how nasty your drawers are from a month of being with men."

She loops her arm through mine while I look affronted. Hey, it's not as bad as when I travelled from Bree to Imladris. Now that was foul, even I would admit.

I let myself be pampered by the gentle hands of the servants around me. They help me out of my dirty clothes. I see one of them looking highly offended at the state they are in, and I don't blame her. They could be riddled with Mordor diseases for all I know. I think I even heard one of them whisper something about burning it all, to which I say, "Those garments are gifts. I would love to have them
"No, Lady Ellie. We shall take it to be cleaned ourselves."

There are three women with me left. One is Aedelind, the other is setting up the bath and another I presume would have my clothes ready. She is the tallest in the group, her cheekbones sharp and her eyes icy blue. A stark contrast against her dark hair. She smiles politely as I lower myself in the bath, and I actually moan.

"Shit, this is so good." I sigh. The tall woman is behind me, brushing my hair and coating it in oil and whatever it is they use to get the dirt out of it. The water turns murky from all the dirt and grime that seeps off me. Aedelind tends to the wound on my shoulder.

"The bite has healed." She says, softly, her fingers grazing over the bite I got from the Uruk who captured me. I flinch away, without wanting to. I look up at her apologetically. It didn't hurt, but the discomfort I felt made me nauseous. Aedelind understands, "I'm sorry. I will make sure not to touch it again." She points to the slice on my bicep, "May I?"

This time, I let her touch me. Though, I still feel sick from the memory of the Uruk bite.

"Say something to distract me. Anything." I say, trying to keep myself grounded as Aedelind checked how the stitches on my wound was doing.

It isn't her that answers, though, but the woman cleaning my hair.

"How do you find the Lord Faramir?" There's something about the way she spoke...

"Faramir? He's alright, I guess. I met the guy for only, like, five minutes. And he was unconscious for four of them. Definitely smiles a lot more than Boromir, though."

Even mentioning his name hurt.

The wound of his death is still fresh, after all. How long has it been? A month? Two? It felt like a lifetime ago but also like it just happened yesterday.

"Yes. Boromir does reserve his smiles..." Is it just my imagination, or did the woman behind me sniffle? I can't turn around to check. I'm just about to ask her if she's okay when she says, "Faramir is softer. He likes books and songs and archery. Boromir was the perfect son for Dénethor. He was strong and gallant and responsible."

Okay, for a servant, she seemed very familiar with the brothers. I guess she's been in their service for a long time. But, she looked young, still. Around late-20s. I don't question it.

"How did he die?" The woman behind me asks.

This time, I do turn around, realizing something.

She doesn't speak like a servant. That accent... It sounds like Faramir, or Imrahil whenever they speak Westron. And like Legolas, she speaks in a way that makes me sure she is more used to giving orders than taking them. I observe this woman, her back straight and her eyes never once faltering, piercing, even.

"What's your name?" I ask, warily.

"Avorniel, my lady." She must have realized then that her disguise had been compromised and is
now trying to rectify it.

But no amount of acting would have convinced me... Not after learning her name.

Avorniel.

I know that name.

I've heard Boromir say it longingly, the name that gave him comfort, that made that gentle smile appear on his face.

My heart reaches out for her.

"He died bravely. He died fighting to save Merry, Pippin and me. He was so strong and brave, and he fought even when he was greatly injured. He's a hero." I say, wanting her to know that her lover--God, the man who said he would return to wed her--was a great man.

Not the man who tried to steal the Ring from Frodo, but the man who fought to save his people.

She swallows, and nods.

"I know he is. He is a good man." Avorniel whispers.

"A great man."

Avorniel smiles, "The greatest of them all."

There is silence for a moment, where I debate if I should reach out to her but she breaks it first, "Turn around. Allow me to scrub your back."

I shift uncomfortably again, "That's okay. Really. I can do it." I say, quickly.

I was not gonna let anyone touch the scars there. Aedelind has been quiet through all of it. I guess she knows who Avorniel is and let us talk. She merely applies a poultice on my arm and wraps it with a fresh bandage. It stings for a bit, then goes numb.

She and Avorniel help me out of the bath and the other servant presents a new gown to me. I make a face at it. I remember the gowns that is custom for the nobelwomen of Gondor to wear. The belts are pulled tightly to cinch in the waist, and usually two layers of dresses were worn. First the underdress, a simple grey cotton one for me, then the much heavier surcoat made of velvet with a fuller, heavier skirt and long, curtain-like sleeves that trailed on the floor if I put my hands down. My surcoat is a deep shade of blue. And the belt.

The godforsaken belt. It was a fabric wrapped several times around the waist then pulled from both sides by two people, and securely tied at the back to make sure the cinch won't move.

I'm in actual agony here.

"Could you...like...not break my ribs, if that's okay with you?" I whisper weakly to the servants.

"But..."

"I'm dying. Someone save me." I moan.

"Oh, just loosen the belt. We have to get to the kitchen before Lady Éowyn does." Aedelind hisses to the servants, impatiently.
"On second thought, I'll fix it myself." I say, taking Aedelind's hand so we can get to the kitchen as fast as we could. Éowyn and food preparation are not a good mix, after all. Bless her, but she does keep trying.

"Lady Éowyn!" I call the moment I catch sight of her. It's hard to miss her. She alone in the room has light blonde hair, and she is taller than most of the women around her. She turns at the sound of my voice, with a huge smile on her face.

I've never seen her so carefree. Her smile reaches her eyes. We hug each other tightly, and I gasp for breath because my belt is still cutting off air to my lungs.

"I'm so glad to see you all better!" I say to her, as she takes my hands in hers.

"Me? I heard you received a poisoned wound."

"We're talking of poisoned wounds now? Who is the awesome badass who stabbed the Nazgûl boss right in the face, again?"

Éowyn laughs, though her smile slips, "Oh, how I've missed you, Ellie. And the way you talk."

"Is that all you miss about me? Damn, I haven't been away long enough." I joke.

"I missed your voice, your humor and your stories."

"Boy, do I have a lot of those. I'll tell you about the things I had to go through at camp."

"We should find a seat in the Hall of Feasting." Aedelind pipes in, and I take the hint. The farther we are from the kitchen, the less likely it is for Éowyn to wanna be hands-on with the activities there. Not like she can, anyway. She later explains as we walk to the Halls that they never let her go near a stove.

"It's different here in Gondor. They're very...rigid here. Everyone has a role, and they're expected to only do the task assigned to them. A lot of the nobles do not agree with each other as well. Especially after the Army left." Éowyn says in a low whisper.

"Why, what happened?" I ask.

"The better question is what didn't happen?" Aedelind sighs, "They fight over land, over business, over their daughters. It was bizarre, they fought over such petty things while their king and half of the kingdom fought against Sauron."

"Wait, land? Their daughters?" I'm beyond confused. Here I was, thinking the nobles left here in Minas Tirith would defend the people and instead, they're arguing amongst themselves.

"Who gets to marry who, who gets to keep this or that part of the land for farming. The people here are never satisfied with what they have." Éowyn keeps her voice down as she says it.

"And they are not too fond of Lady Éowyn." Aedelind adds.

"Okay, who do I have to fight?" I hiss, looking around in annoyance.

"Shush, shush. It's fine, Ellie, truly. I can handle whatever it is they are saying. But let me warn you, do not trust easily here. It is not like Rohan. People here have agendas."

"Great. Court politics." I drawl. "Orcs are looking more attractive. At least with them, you know exactly what to do to get rid of the problem."
"I, personally, don't think you should worry about it, though. Especially not tonight." Aedelind says, her voice returning to normal as we approach the doors leading to the Hall of Feasting. People are already inside the Hall. I can already hear them singing and shouting in glee.

"For one thing, you and the King are close friends. For another, tonight is one of the rare occasions where the people here are all excited about the same thing. The feast is a celebration of not only Gondor's victory, but of families reuniting! I don't think the party is going to stop at all."

"Oh, alcohol and food!" I sigh, "Someone please stop me when I get on my fifth tankard. I don't think I'll be able to handle another hangover."

"Why not get drunk, though? You deserve to celebrate however you want." Aedelind says. Êowyn nudes her.

"Ignore Aedelind, Ellie. She is young and has not actually been drunk." Êowyn says.

"Mead is usually what we drink for dinner." Aedelind says, defensively.

"Watered-down or sweetened mead does not count as alcohol." Êowyn snorts as the doors to the Hall of Feasting opens for us.

There's something here I am not prepared for. I guess I overlooked it back in camp because there were other things to worry about. Or maybe it was just the lack of armor worn by the men that made it all to obvious...

They wear smiles, but there are men missing body parts. Soldiers with one arm, or a bandage over an eye, or sitting down because of a broken leg that was still healing. Without armor, it becomes much more obvious. Because it all looks out of place. It's a vivid reminder of how brutal the battles we have fought in have been.

I look down at my bruised and cut hands. My knuckles are still raw from the many times I have punched orcs. And the bulge on my arm--the dressing on my wound--seemed to grow. I am all too aware that I am one of those affected by the battles.

And God, what horrible battles they were.

"Ellie?" Aedelind's voice is a whisper. I can barely hear her over the roaring in my ears, the deafening sound of my blood rushing to my head.

God, how did that man lose his arm?

I remember Déorwine. My poor horse, a gift of Lady Êowyn, with bloody stumps in place of his legs because some monster cut all his limbs off.

I remember Halbarad, his blood pooling as he lay on the ground dying. I remember severed heads and arrows in eye sockets and corpses rotting.

"Ellie!" It's Éowyn now but it doesn't help. It makes it worse.

There's only the seizing fear of seeing her on the ground, her face paper white. Éomer holding her in his arms thinking she was dead, his scream of anguish echoing in my head.

"Ellie." Aedelind takes my shoulders, and I jump, panting for breath.

My throat feels tight. I need to breathe. I need air, I need to get away and why is this belt so fucking
"I'll... I'll be back." I manage to gasp out as I tear my eyes away from the room, and walk as fast as I can to a more deserted hall or chamber or something, anything.

I find my way to the Hall of Kings, which is gloriously empty save for the guards who stand by the double doors. It's a long hall, that rise to steps leading to the thrones made of white stone. At the foot of the steps is a smaller chair. It, too, is made of stone but is simpler. I sit there and put my face in my hands as I try to breathe, try to forget.

I claw at the belt around my waist, pulling it away from me and letting the fabric fall to the ground.

Okay, Ellie, keep it together. One minute, you're fine and the next you're panicking over nothing. Just let yourself enjoy one night. Just one night...

"Is it a habit of yours to talk to yourself?" A soft voice asks.

I look up to find Avorniel. She's out of her servant's clothes and now looks every bit the regal noblewoman that she is. Elaborate blue gown, perfectly brushed hair, and even make-up. She looks concerned. I didn't realize I've been talking out loud.

"I'm sorry. It's just..."

"Do not apologize. I know what you are going through. I've tended to wounded soldiers and it happens more than you realize. Try to breathe slowly." She says, keeping her distance.

I close my eyes, and when that fails, I try to focus on the gems in her headpiece as I breathe in and out, until I settle for a pattern that slows my heart rate.

"Who needs a recorded video when you've got death and destruction playing on loop in your head, right?" I try for a morbid joke.

She gives me a weak smile, but offers no words.

"So..." I say, still trying to calm myself by talking to Avorniel as a distraction, "what's a girl like you doing in a place like this?"

Her eyebrows furrow in confusion. Again, she doesn't respond.

"It's a little joke. I'm trying to keep my mind off things."

Again, only a stare.

"Am I speaking Westron right now?" I mumble. I never can tell what with Eru blessing me with innately understanding the Common Tongue here if I'm speaking Westron or English. It all sounds the same to me. I still don't get how it works. Lady Galadriel's mirror didn't actually explain it.

"You speak in Westron but your words..." Avorniel shakes her head. "Are you feeling better? Do you need something to drink?"

"No!" I yelp, "No. Really. I'm fine. Don't mind me. I'm just being an overdramatic mess. It'll pass. I'm just tired."

Avorniel crosses her arms, "That is usually what the soldiers say when I talk to them about their pain. Although, usually, they leave it at one dismissive explanation and not three."
I throw my hands up and slump back in the chair.

"I'm sorry. I really do think I'm just tired." I say.

"Hm. Well, if you are, a bed is much more comfortable than the Steward's chair."

I yelp again and jump off the chair.

Bad juju right there. The last person that plonked his sorry ass on that thing tried to burn his son alive then jumped off the highest point of the city.

"Are you quite sure you're okay?" Avorniel asks, with not a little concern in her tone.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm okay now... I think..."

"Do you want to rest?"

Bless her heart, she's so sweet and we barely even know each other.

"Um. My friends are waiting for me." I say, motioning in the general direction of the Hall of Feasting. She nods, not pushing.

"What about you, Lady Avorniel? Should you not be enjoying the party?"

She looks down, "I do not feel comfortable around large crowds. And I still..." she sighs, "I still mourn those we have lost in the war."

Ouch. Okay. The hurt in her voice is hurting me, too. I know she's thinking about Boromir, again.

"But they are expecting me. So, I will have to go in sooner or later." She continues, her voice stronger now.

"We can keep each other's company for a while. Until we're both ready to face..." I motion to the Hall of Feasting again. This time, a genuine smile does appear on her face. We end up sitting at the bottom steps that led up to the throne. I sit with my feet stretched in front of me, she sits with a bit more grace.

"Your name is Ellie, yes? A beautiful name, if foreign." She says.

"Yes. Foreign. Heh." I laugh nervously. Any talk that has to do with my origins makes me just a tiny bit nervous. For one thing, I can't just explain where I'm actually from. But then, I also feel horrible about lying to people.

"How about you? Tell me something about yourself, Avorniel. Or should I say, Lady Avorniel?"

She nods when I do a little bow, "Lord Angbor is my uncle on my mother's side. My father comes from a long line of blacksmiths, and we have many armories both in Lamedon and here in the City. Almost all of the weapons and armor that the Army uses are made by my family, and of course, by the many people in our employ."

"So, you're loaded."

That earns me yet another confused look.

"Uh. Rich."
Her lips thin, "Yes. But my brothers will be taking over the business."

"Well, what about you, then?"

"Me?" She snorts, "I just want to set up a library. I spend most of my time in the city library, actually. Or with Ioreth."

"There's a city library?"

"Minas Tirith has the largest collection of writings on history. It's all very interesting! There are hundreds of scrolls on the Royal Family, right up to Elendil."

Huh. My interest is piqued. I am, after all, though thousands and thousands of years removed, still a descendant of this Elendil guy. And Aragorn never actually explained who Elendil or Isildur are to me. It would definitely be interesting if I could look up my own family history, as well as get to know Gondor's history. If I'm gonna be staying here indefinitely, I may as well learn about it.

"Could you take me with you?"

Avorniel looks surprised, "Of course but that would require you to learn how to read."

I try not to look offended, though I don't think I do a good job at it because Avorniel quickly rearranges her expression to an apologetic one.

"I can read!" I say, defensively.

"Forgive me for offending. It's not common for women to be able to read." She says.

"Not common for--what?"

"I see it is different where you hail from. Those not born of noble blood are more likely unable to read and write compared to those who are. You must have a very influential family if you could afford tutors."

I laugh, "Influential. Right. I wish."

I worked my ass of just to be able to afford college. On bad days, we could only afford one meal a day and that was with food stamps. We've never been rich, not even when mom and dad were alive. But Gramps was adamant that I finish my education, especially after Donovan ran away. A twinge in my heart makes me feel awful again that I had to leave Gramps behind. I didn't want to, but I still left him and my little brother. I shake myself out of my thoughts before I start thinking too much about them again. I turn to Avorniel and smile nervously.

Avorniel doesn't respond. She's very quiet, which surprises me because Boromir described her more as adventurous and even sassy. Given how he talked about her during their first encounter, I thought she would be like Éowyn--wanting to break free from court duties to do her own thing.

This does remind me of one thing, "Aren't you supposed to be with a hand maiden or two?"

She blushes. For the first time, her calm and quiet demeanor cracks, "I...uh...I ran away from them."

"They dote. And I can't turn for a moment without one of them asking if I wanted to go back to my chambers. It's exhausting being around them."

Ah. There's the Avorniel Boromir told me about.

"You don't like your chambers?"
"It's stuffy. And boring. All those needlework." She shivered. "I'd rather eat dead frogs. Uncooked. Than do needlework."

This brings out a surprised snort from me. Our gazes meet and she does this ridiculous giggle which makes me laugh, as well.

"There you are!"

We both look up at the sound of someone approaching. Éowyn walks up to us, with Aedelind right behind her.

"We've...been worried..." Aedelind gasps, "Goodness, this dress is heavier than I thought." She looks at her dress with a bit of contempt.

"Legolas was worried when he couldn't find you. Do you think you're ready to go back?" Éowyn asks.

I sigh and attempt to get up. This dress does feel like concrete, so it bewilders me when Avorniel manages to stand with grace. She holds her hand out to help me up.

"You can always say you're tired." Avorniel whispers to me. I smile at her, gratefully.

"It's okay. I'm fine now."

"But can you handle..." She motions to the Hall of Feasting. Already, I can hear the festivities from here. I don't know if I'll ever be ready. Part of me is afraid I'll never be able to stop seeing the battles I've been in whenever I look at the soldiers. But I have to. I can't live the rest of my life being terrified. After all I've been through, I will not allow that to happen to me.

"Yeah." I say, softly. Éowyn holds her hand out for me and I take it, grateful for this gesture of support.

"If you ever need to get away, just tell me." Aedelind says, "I'm very good at getting away without people noticing. Aedelgar actually told me not to go to the feast."

"He did? Why?"

Aedelind shrugs, "He has this insane notion that it's how he can protect his little sister from the scary war stories."

I walk in to the Hall to find it already bursting with activity. Men are singing, serving girls are running back and forth with jugs of alcohol, and there are already people dancing.

Faramir walks up to us with a smile, and Éowyn's hold on my hand tightens. I turn to her in alarm but she only has a huge smile on her face.

"Darling."

"Darling?" I echo when Faramir takes Éowyn's free hand and kisses it.

I look from one to the other, dumb-founded. All they do is laugh at the look on my face.

"Um, hello? Confusion." I point at myself.

"We... That is, I--I mean. She--" Faramir stutters, trying to find the right words.
"Glad to see both of you recovering from your ordeals." I giggle, poking Éowyn's side. She bats my hand away, trying not to laugh.

"He kept me company when I needed it." Éowyn explains, practically glowing.

"I see..." I turn to Aedelind, who also has a smile on her face.

"Long, private conversations, walks around the garden, Lord Faramir always volunteering to give Lady Éowyn her breakfast. You would think we were not under high alert and facing unimaginable evil." Aedelind laughs.

"Oh, quiet, you. Before I tell Aedelgar exactly where you are," Éowyn teases. Aedelind laughs but I notice her hiding half her body behind me, though I don't know how that could help. She's already as tall as me in her young age, and her blonde hair is like a beacon in the sea of brunettes.

"Speaking of romantic walks..." I say, as my own Prince Charming makes an appearance. Legolas' presence also pulls for attention, though I think that's just me. His hair is brushed but he keeps it unbraided. There's a silver circlet on his head, and he walks in with Elladan and Elrohir. Like their father, they dress in elaborate robes of rich fabric out of their armor. Legolas opted for a silver tunic.

He beams when he notices me, and I excuse myself from Éowyn, Aedelind and Faramir to meet him. Elladan and Elrohir push him away before he could kiss my cheek, though.

"Ellie! Just the woman we were looking for!" Elrohir says, a little too enthusiastically.

"Are you drunk?" I say, suspiciously. They're not usually this animated.


"If I could just--" Legolas starts, but Elladan shushes him, "Ellie, beautiful Lady Ellie, little rose. We-that is, me and Elrohir--were wondering. If you were ever to receive a ring--"

"This is only hypothetical, of course--" Elrohir injects,

"--Yes, hypothetical. If you were to receive a ring and you were to keep this ring for at least a year--"

"But more would be desirable! More years--"

"Can the both of you please just be silent?" Legolas' moan goes unnoticed,

"--what kind of stone would you prefer on it? An emerald? A sapphire?"

"Sapphire goes with your eyes."

"But green symbolizes--"

I'm trying to keep up with the twins speaking over each other but Legolas tackles Elladan before the older elf could finish his sentence. His hand is on Elladan's mouth while his arm has a vice grip around Elladan's neck. Those who see their scuffle laugh. It's not everyday you see the playful side of Elves. Or, at least, I think they're being playful.

I look at all three of them with great concern.

"Have you all lost your minds?" I say, as Legolas yelps and extracts his hand from Elladan's mouth. I spy a clear bite mark on his palm and he shakes his hand, hissing.
"No, no. Just very curious." Elrohir strategically places himself between Elladan and Legolas before either could tackle the other. "So. Stone. Color?"

Annoyed, I say, "I want a glittering rainbow."

That sobers all three of them down.

"A what?" Legolas says, weakly.

"You heard me. I want a gem that captures different colors."

"Why?" Elrohir is dumb-founded.

"Because this is clearly some bet or competition between the two of you and I refuse to feed either of your egos and let you win."

"But," Elladan is pale now, "theoretically..."

"Theoretically, I want to spend a nice, quiet time with the blonde." I point to Legolas.

"Theoretically, she wants the Arkenstone." Elrohir mumbles, though not quietly enough for me not to hear.

"I don't know what that is but I bet it's heavy and I can hit you with it."

Elladan looks offended, "She just threatened to hit us with a unique jewel!"

"I would hold your arms back while she does it." Legolas alone has reeled from my answer, and he takes my hand and kisses it.

"The ingratitude!" Elladan scoffs. "We do him a favor and this is how the child repays us."

"Wait. Elladan. Where is Gimli? He should know about this rainbow stone she speaks of." Elrohir tugs at his twin's tunic.

The two bow and walk off to find our dear dwarf and I look at Legolas with a raised eyebrow.

"It's like they were possessed by the ghosts of Fred and George Weasley." I laugh.

He frowns in confusion, "Who?"

"Never mind. What was that about?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing for you to think about. I was worried when I couldn't find you. Come, let me show you the buffet table. They have prepared a lovely feast."

I let it go because he clearly wants me to, though I plan to poke him more about it later. After getting our food, we try to look for a familiar face and seat ourselves in front of the hobbits.

"Whoa! What is this?" I say, seeing the mound of chicken bones on a platter between Merry and Pippin while they devour the piles of chicken in front of them.

"They're betting on who can eat the most chicken wings in sixty seconds." Halon beside me says as Sam counts down for them.

"My bet's on Pippin!" I announce, making the crowd near Pippin cheer.
"I bet Merry." Legolas says.

"If I win, you're dyeing your hair black." I say.

"If I win, you will wear Gondorian dresses for the next two weeks." He retaliates.

"Peregrin Took, you eat that chicken like your mother's life depends on it."

Pippin chokes, and turns to me with a pleading expression.

I widen my eyes threateningly at him and point at his chicken pile, while Legolas giggles like a child, massaging Merry's shoulders.

"And...Time!" Sam calls. Pippin groans and spits the chicken still in his mouth on the table.

Merry looks at him smugly, and Legolas has the exact same expression on his face.

"Merry wins!" Sam announces.

Those on Merry's team cheer and whoop, some giving Merry an approving pat on the shoulder.

"Bad call, El. Legolas was already counting before you bet on Pippin." Halon says. I'm two steps ahead of him. I should have known. Legolas doesn't bet unless he knows he'll win.

I sigh and turn to him, "Where's Arahael?"

He stiffens, "Resting." Is all he says. "He doesn't... He's piss drunk."

"Already?" It was still pretty early.

His mouth forms a thin line, "He's been drinking since he got here. Went through half a barrel."

I open my mouth to say something but Halon gives me an uncharacteristically cold glare, "Can we not talk about my brother? I don't want to ruin the mood."

I nod, "Sorry." I mumble, before Pippin makes a commotion about Merry's chicken count. Halon slips away without another word. I realize he alone is not holding a tankard.

"Hey, where's Frodo?" I ask Sam.

"Asleep, Miss Ellie. He said he was tired. I didn't want to force him to come down here."

"And Aragorn? Gandalf?"

"They have many important things to discuss—the repair of the city, appointing the Royal Council, all the duties Aragorn would have." Legolas answers. "They chose not to come."

"Strider said something about making up for the absence the next time." Sam adds. "Although I don't rightly know what he means by that. You know Strider, always being vague."

"Hm." I say, accepting a goblet of wine that a servant offers.

I spend the rest of the night with Legolas and the hobbits on that table, and men come and go introducing themselves to us. Hoo boy. This is what I feared the most. Meeting the soldiers is hard, not because I hate them, but because I can't help but be reminded of the battles we've fought together.
I'm gonna need a lot of wine, and wine was exactly my excuse for when it became too overwhelming. The stories are still too fresh, the wounds still raw.

Whenever the men decided to turn the conversation towards talk of the war, I would excuse myself from the conversation and get a goblet of wine somewhere.

What's that? Oh. You lost your arm to a mumakil. Nice. The nausea I'm feeling is probably just from the wine.

More wine is the solution.

Later into the night after four goblets of wine, the minstrels played lively tunes as the men danced with their wives and I drag Legolas to the dancefloor--a huge mistake given I was only emboldened by the alcohol and my already clumsy self could not be trusted to dance when inebriated. Nevertheless, he took every step on his foot with grace. I also vaguely remember someone shouting Celine Dion lyrics at the top of their lungs. I have to remember to ask them how the heck they know about Celine Dion.

Oh, let me just get that jar of wine...

The longer I stay and the more war veterans I am introduced to, and that rising panic and the dim images of battle replay in my head. The alcohol washes it all away temporarily.

Legolas did stop me by my seventh goblet. I don't know whether to thank him or curse at him.

"Miiiiine!" I reach out but he side-steps away from me easily.

"Time for bed." He says, taking hold of my wrist when I reach out for one of the serving girls.

I stamp my foot, "This is Aragorn's job! I wanna drink!"

He remains deaf to my protests, "This way."

I groan in annoyance but let him drag me out into the hallways. Hm. This isn't so bad if you consider how slippery the floor is.

Heey... It's pretty darn slippery.

"Ellie!" I hear him warn as I slide my feet on the shiny floors. My dress swooshes, and I laugh as I slide through the halls.

"You are going to hurt yourself." I hear Legolas say.

Too late. I lose my balance mid-slide and fall to the floor in a heap of heavy fabric.

That makes me laugh. Hysterically.

"Look! The floor is so shiny, I can see every pore on my face." I say, glancing at my reflection on the floor. I feel Legolas' hands on my arms as he helps me up. My head lolls to his shoulder, and my legs feel like jelly.

"Mm. Carry me." I whine, hooking one leg around his waist and pulling at the front of his tunic.

"Oof." He puffs out as he is weighed down by my dress and limbs. I hear him laugh as my arms wrap around his neck and both of my legs wrap around his waist.
He stumbles and adjusts to my weight, and he pulls me up so I can more comfortably rest my head on his shoulder while he carries me.

I am vaguely aware I look like a monkey, clinging to his front like this. If anyone were to walk in on us in the hallway, I'm sure they'll be very confused.

The thought makes me laugh.

"What is funny?" He asks me. I lean back, so my eyes can meet his while he adjusts my weight again.

"I'm a panda." I say.

"A what?"

"Big, cuddly bear. Eats bamboo."

"Eats what?"

I laugh again. "Someday, you'll know what they are."

I go back to resting my head on his shoulder.

"It's like carrying a huge baby." He mumbles. I'm swaying. I guess he's walking me to my room like this.

"Can I not sleep?" I say, though my eyes feel heavy.

"You have to."

"Don't wanna." I sigh, clinging tighter to him.

"You need to rest, Ellie."

"Mm. Stay with me."

"Always."

"Love you."

He chuckles. "I love you, too. Losto vae."

I fall asleep, knowing no harm will come to me so long as I'm in his arms.

Chapter End Notes

Wow, this was a long ass chapter.
I regret everything. I regret even being born.

My head is *throbbing* and my throat feels so dry. I actually hiss when one of the servants came into my chambers and opened the curtains to let the light in.

The poor girl runs out of the room in alarm. I would have said she was overreacting had I not seen my state immediately after in the mirror. My hair is a mess, my dress is askew and I am as pale as a vampire.

Aedelind later walks in with a suspiciously wide grin.

"Ooow." I moan in greeting. Her teeth are blinding me.

"*Rise and shine!*" She shouts, and I roll off the bed in utter shock.

I'm surprised my head hasn't exploded yet. I untangle myself from my sheets and find her looming over me with a goblet in her hand.

"I told you to stop me on my fifth tankard." I say, hoarsely.

"You were not, in fact, holding any tankards at all last night."

"You're evil. Get that away from me." I say trying to swat the goblet she's offering.

"It's Lady Éowyn's tonic. Works wonders." She says. I shudder. I'm all too familiar with Éowyn's hangover cure. I know, based from experience, that it's effective. But it also tastes like ass.

"You will have to get up. You are expected in the Hall of Kings."

"Uuuugh."

"Come. Up you go." Aedelind pulls me up in a sitting position and hands the goblet to me.

I look at her sullenly, but all she has to say is, "It is not my fault you got drunk."

"Weren't you the same girl encouraging me to get drunk last night?"

"You remember that but do you remember that song you were singing last night? It was quite entertaining."

"I will take that as a 'no'. It was something about nights being cold and winds being strong and a lot of babies."

She has got to be pulling my leg. My mouth hangs open in terror.

"Do not give me that look. I swear, you were volunteering to sing. It went something like, *It's all coming back, it's all coming back to me now*. None of us actually understood what you meant."

Oh God. *I* was singing Celine Dion and I don't even remember any of it.

"What else did I do?"

"Nothing much. Lady Éowyn had to restrain you from removing your dress, though."

"She what?!"

The horror! The shame! What the fuck happened to me?

"Oh, it's alright. Not many people saw you. Just Hildraed and Prince Imrahil. And one of the other lords. And Ioreth, too. And Lord Faramir. Oh, and--"

"I get it. *I get it.*" I flap my hand at her to make her shut up. She pushes the goblet she's holding towards me yet again. I finally relent and take the damn thing and take the dose up in one gulp.

It almost comes out again, though I do my best to keep it down.

"It tastes like ass." I complain.

"To the bath!"

"Give me a second, kid. I'm on the brink of death here." I push myself up to my feet, feeling as if the room is spinning. Aedelind leaves to get herself something to eat, and I wait for Éowyn's tonic to take effect while I try to clean myself. I swear to God it didn't take this long when I took it in Rohan. But maybe that's because I didn't drink nearly as much as I did last night. How I managed to bathe myself and get in a dress all by my lonesome remains a mystery. My hair, on the other hand? I have no time to fix it so people would have to make do with it being tied back in a messy braid. That's the best I can do at my current state.

Also, because Eru hasn't had enough of playing jokes on me, I get lost on the way to the Hall of Kings.

"Fantastic. This is wonderful. Utterly spectacular." I groan as I poke my head through every open door or archway, trying to remember how I got there last night.

The Citadel looks different in the daylight. Everything is just so white and bright and it's doing nothing for my hangover. And then there's the constant flurry of people hurrying to get to places. I have the stark reminder of New York. This is how my life used to be: hurrying to get to the subway in the morning, and then hurrying out of campus after classes and straight to work. And this is exactly what a hangover feels like during hectic days, except I don't have any aspirin to help with the headache.

I poke my head into yet another room only for men dressed in elaborate, dark robes to come out. I retreat immediately, sending my head into another dizzying spin.

"My lady, is anything wrong?" One of the men says as I massage my temples. I'm surprised when I
look up and find that the man in front of me is not only young, but also quite attractive.

"Um. No. I'm fine."

"You seem lost." He says. "Are your ladies-in-waiting not with you?"

"Me? Have ladies-in-waiting? No. Ah, I'm not really important. Well, I mean, I am. Just not that important." I laugh nervously. "Actually. Funny story. I'm really late and I need to get to the Hall of Kings."

"We are headed for the Hall of Kings right now. Come, join us."

I look over his shoulder at his company. They're all looking highly impatient and slightly disapproving. I don't think they want me anywhere near them.

"Those are just my staff. Treasurer, a landowner, personal assistant. They work for me. Do not worry about them." He whispers so only I can hear him.

I know nothing about the Gondorian monarchy and what, exactly, noble people do or who keeps their company so I just smile and hope he doesn't ask me any questions about land or money because I have neither.

"I'm Ellie." I extend my hand, intending to shake his. Instead, he bows and kisses the back of my hand instead. I keep forgetting shaking hands is not an actual thing in Middle-earth.

"I know who you are, Lady Ellie. It is a pleasure to be in the company of one who is a member of the Fellowship." He says. In hindsight, I should have known he knows about me when I did parade around Minas Tirith with the rest of the Fellowship. "Come. You say you are late, yes?" He says, motioning for me to walk ahead of him.

"Thanks, dude. Nice of you." I say.

"I am Eniredir. Cousin to Lord Duinhir of the Blackroot Veil."

"Hey, we went there once." I exclaim, grateful for the conversation.

"Did you?"

"Yeah. We came out from the Paths of the Dead, went out into some valley in the Blackroot Veil or something."

"Ah. That was what the villagers were going mad about. They said they saw the Dead rise to wipe out all whom the New King saw as an Enemy. It must have been frightening to have been in their presence."

"Once you get over the rotting skin or severed limbs, they're actually okay company. Gave you chills if it was ever too hot."

He laughs at this, "The King must be a strong man indeed to have led them."

"Strong? The guy has balls of steel!"

This earns me a raised eyebrow. Whoops. I forgot. Formality and all. Éowyn did warn me that the people here are more traditional and rigid.

"Uh. No offense to the King, of course. But, truly, he is a very strong and capable man." I say.
"He is the heir of Elendil, from a long line of kings. No one is more worthy of the throne. You should be proud to have been in his company."

"I'm very proud indeed, thank you."

It's heart-warming to hear such praises about Aragorn. When we first met, he was avoiding people just as much as they were avoiding him. Now, he is appreciated and loved by his subjects--nobles and commoners alike.

We enter into a familiar hallway where a long line of people has formed, some excitedly talking to each other. Many carried various items with them. Golden jars, silver canvases, heavy trunks. I could have sworn I heard something bark in one of the baskets, too.

"Is One Direction in there or something? What's with the line?" I mutter, trying to push past the people to get to the Hall of Kings. Somehow, they all part for Eniredír and his posse but completely forgot about me. I already have too much of a headache to be offended.

Eniredír seems to notice my struggle to get through, so he positions himself right behind me so that the people making room for him would automatically have to make room for me, too.

"The King is accepting petitioners and well-wishers. It is going to be a long day. There will be leaders from every town and fiefdom of Gondor. Before all that, however, the king would be having a meeting with his Council. I suppose if he is asking for you, then you are to be a part of it."

I swear to God, I'm going to throw up right then and there. I freeze in my tracks, making Eniredír run into me.

"Me? But I don't--I--wow."

Okay. Dizzy. Very dizzy. If I passed out right now, I wouldn't be surprised. In fact, I'd be thankful.

"Or maybe not! Forgive me. I should not have made such an assumption."

"Swear to God, I will pass out if that happens." I mutter, as the guards standing by the double doors to the Hall of Kings open.

I blink rapidly.

God, the lights! They burn! There are sparkling chandeliers in the high ceiling that capture the light of the sun from the windows high above. A lush, red carpet is laid out leading from the double doors to just at the edge of the steps up to the Hall of Kings. There is a huge difference from last night: there are now bleachers lining the walls, covering half of the length of the huge Hall of Kings. There are already men robed in the same dark fabric as Eniredír huddled together on the carpet around someone.

More specifically, Aragorn.

Though I wouldn't have recognized him at first glance had he not turned to face me when the doors opened. His hair is brushed and shiny, his beard trimmed, and a long, red cape was draped over his shoulders, with his crown glinting in the atop his head.

His face lights up as soon as he turns and recognizes me, and I walk up to him without hesitation.

"You look like you have seen better days."
I try to brush it off by saying, "It's just a headache."

"Gondorian wine kind of headache?" His eyebrow quirks upward.

I bite my bottom lip, sure the guilt is painted on my face.

But he looks sympathetic, as though this time, he understands why I had a need to drink.

"Sleep well, Ellie?" Imrahil pipes in. He is among those that surrounds Aragorn.

"Very well, actually." It hits me that it has been one of the very few nights that I slept through.

"Elrohir should be here. And Legolas and Gimli should be here soon with the Hobbits, as well. It appears that you were not the only one who had enjoyed the festivities last night." Elladan says. He alone in the small crowd around Aragorn is not wearing dark robes, but instead wears the same layered tunics of velvet and satin similar to the style worn by the ellyn in Imladris. "I'm glad to see you managed to come early. You did not get lost?"

"I did, at first. But Lord Eniredír helped me here." I wave my hand at the general direction that Eniredír and his company went to.

"Eniredír?" Imrahil frowns, "How is it that Duinhir did not come?"

"He lost both of his sons in the War. It's understandable he would want to mourn them." Aragorn whispers.

"But why send Eniredír? That boy has not been in Gondor since he was five years old. And he is not versed in Gondorian court politics. The other nobles would eat him alive." Imrahil says.

"Which is what I wanted to talk to you about, Ellie." Aragorn turns to me, just as the doors open and in flocks Faramir, Elrohir, and the Hobbits.

They join our circle, and as the doors close, I can hear the excited chatter of the people behind them after seeing Frodo. The lords in our circle all bow at Frodo, who still isn't used to the reverance that people give him.

"Where is the elfling?" Elladan frowns, observing those who have just walked in.

"He will be here." Elrohir, apparently hearing Elladan, answers. "A letter arrived from his brother."

Aragorn and Elladan nodded at the same time, and they both had significant, knowing looks on their faces.

"Something wrong with Legolas?" Pippin asks.

"Nothing he has not dealt with before."

Soon enough, Legolas and Gimli walk in, with Aedelgar, Hildraed and Aedelind behind him.

I don't even think about it, I just bolt towards Aedelgar and Hildraed, giving Hildraed a huge hug.

"Wow! I feel like I haven't seen you in ages! How's your injury? Have you been resting?" I say, making him and Aedelgar laugh.

"Were you not moaning about a headache when I last talked to you?" Aedelind smirks.
"I guess Éowyn's tonic finally kicked in."

"It's good to see you again, Ellie. And I am completely healed. Actually, I helped organize King Théoden's...arrangements while you were all gone." Hildraed says. The crooked grin he gives me shows the dimple on his cheeks.

"He took charge of the guards and made sure the King's body would not be defiled during our darkest times." Aedelgar is almost glowing.

And they're holding hands. Something that Aedelind doesn't seem to be surprised about but which many of the lords in the room look at with suspicion. Neither Aedelgar nor Hildraed seem to care.

"Will you ever teach me that song you were singing last night?" I feel a breath from behind me, brushing against my ear. A gentle hand wraps around my waist and I turn around to see Legolas smiling at me with mischief in his eyes.

"Why, good morning to you, too." I say, "And no, sir. No songs from my home will be taught to you."

"Either you two will get a room or you will come with me. I see Gandalf glaring." Gimli interrupts.

"Someone's nursing a hangover." I sing to our grumpy dwarf friend.

He looks up at me with a vicious smile, "Ellie. I had no idea you had it in you to be a minstrel. You would fit right in a dwarven party. All those hip movements... all the thrusts..." He was already walking away before he could finish the last trail of his sentences.

I look up at Legolas in alarm, "Hip movements? Thrusts?" I say, weakly.

I hear Aedelgar behind me bark out a laugh, but when I turn to him in confusion, Hildraed drags him to the Rohirric side of the bleachers, shaking his head in exasperation while Aedelgar's shoulders shake with laughter.

I turn my eyes to my last remaining ally, but all Aedelind has to offer me is a body roll with circling arm movements. And then she, too, walks to the other side of the room with a bounce in her step.

"I will explain later." Legolas, too, is laughing, though he's trying to hide it.

"What?" I ask, half-afraid.

"Nothing, nothing."

"What?!" I insist.

He just laughs again and leads me towards the Fellowship's side of the bleachers. Legolas, Gimli and I take our seats beside Gandalf, with the Hobbits closest to the throne.

"My lords and ladies of the Council. If you would kindly take your positions, please." Faramir calls. People flock towards their seats, and I catch a glimpse of Avorniel looking bored and annoyed with the whole thing.

"I think Aragorn was trying to tell you something earlier, Miss Ellie. He was looking for you before he had to get up on the throne." Sam says as greeting, leaning across Gandalf so I could hear him.

"Oh, yeah. He said that's why he called for me in the first place."
"You will find that Aragorn would have less and less time for any of us nowadays." Gimli says.

"Except for Gandalf." Pippin mutters.

"Quiet." Is all Gandalf says.

"My lords and ladies. Today marks a new Age of peace and prosperity under the leadership of none other than Isildur's heir, The King of the Reunited Kingdom of Gondor and Arnor, Aragorn, Son of Arathorn." Faramir announces from his position at the bottom of the steps leading up to the throne, "Today, he will be receiving petitions and tributes, and will announce the members of his new Council. Open the doors."

The guards open the doors, and in flocked the people who had excitedly lined to see him. They carried exotic fruits, chests made of gold, jewelry, rich rugs and tapestries. There were villagers, as well, who offered songs and dances. People of class and color. Aragorn graciously accepted all of their offerings. But it isn't even close to being over.

After that came the proceedings for petitioners: nobles petitioning for land, merchants asking for a place to trade in Gondor's market and, most surprising of all, enemy leaders expressing their desire to make peace with Gondor. Embassies came from far and wide. Legolas would whisper to me where they came from.

"Those are Dunlendings... And those are from Umbar... And..."

"Harad."

I know because the symbol on the man's cape is the same symbol that was on the banners of the Haradrim army. A black serpent on red land. The color of blood. The conversations die down until there is only a tense silence where the Haradrim envoy kneels and Aragorn straightens up in his chair.

"The Haradrim wishes a long life to the new King of Gondor and hope for peace both for his people and ours from now until the end of days." He says, his voice deep and cool. I can only describe his voice as still water. Calming, but it's as if there's something more dangerous lurking beneath. He sounds like a predator luring its prey in with gentle words. Like the Wolf telling Red Riding Hood to come closer.

Aragorn can see that this is all for show. If I can sense it, he surely can. The Haradrim have been Gondor's enemy for a long time. The hatred between those people cannot be mended simply by flattering words, and not overnight. But Aragorn knows that the country has just been through war, and Sauron is gone. So he smiles, and says, "I have hopes that from this day forward, Gondor and Harad may finally be at peace with each other. We welcome the Haradrim and hope to one day forge an alliance with Harad." He announces.

There are whispers of discontent but those are drowned out almost immediately by applause. We're all still recovering from a war, after all. Any act to avoid conflict is a good act. Though, I can tell some people aren't happy with Aragorn's decision to make peace with the Harad, but it's for the best.

The Haradrim representative stands and the two men behind him step forward to place a heavy chest made of pure gold at the base of the marble steps leading up to the throne. "Arnuzîr of the Harad offers Aragorn, King of Gondor and Arnor, these gifts as a token of our good faith." He announces.

The chest contains lovely robes of deep shades of gold, red, green and blue. There are also bars of gold and rubies in the chest, and a goblet made of glass that has intricate designs on it. Some people
nearby gasp in appreciation and Aragorn bows gratefully, "Thank you, Arnuzîr."

The Haradrim bows and turns away. My blood runs cold when he looks up at our side of the bleachers and he, too, seems to stop in his tracks. We both recognize each other.

He moves his head very slightly and nods, something only I would have perceived because I am the only one who is watching him so intently. Everyone else's eyes are in the direction of the double doors, where a new representative is walking towards the throne.

But Arnuzîr and I recognize each other. It would be hard not to. You never forget the face of the person whose life you held in your hands, where you had the power to take it away. And how could he forget me, the only woman in the Army of the West--and the one he taunted to kill him as the Battle in the Black Gates ended. My hands clench at the memory. Him on his knees. Me, weak and bloody. His sword out of his hands but the tip of mine at his throat.

He turns away first and walks away as though nothing is wrong.

"Ellie, is something the matter? You've gone pale." Gimli says to me.

"Nothing... Just the hangover." I say, my eyes still following Arnuzîr until he leaves the Hall of Kings. I sink back in my chair, unable to shake off the hatred in his eyes. And it was all directed at me. It's unsettling, knowing there is a person out there with the capability of killing me that hates me.

I turn back to the representative in front of Aragorn, a spokesperson for those enslaved by Sauron. Unlike the Haradrim, she is not clothed in rich fabrics. Just peasants' clothing that I'm sure she washed herself, and had worn several times.

"We have no treasure to offer the King of Gondor. All we have is a request. My people have long suffered under the dominion of the Dark Lord Sauron. We served him because we had no choice. We ask for pardon... and for help. We do not know how to rebuild after all this. Our people will starve with no lord to watch over them." She says, bowing low.

"Stand, good lady." Aragorn says, and the woman does so, hesitantly.

"I believe your people can choose its leader. You know each other well enough to know who will lead you well. What I can offer is land. Land for you to build your homes in, to farm and start a settlement in. All your lives you have toiled in the lands that surround Lake Nûnîn. Your efforts will not be for naught. The lands about Lake Nûnîn are yours. No longer shall you toil on land for anyone else but yourselves."

The woman's eyes grow wide, and she stands there in shock. I can only imagine how she feels, to have been born knowing your life is just someone else's property, now to be offered freedom and land. She mumbles a thanks to Aragorn, still in shock, and backs away and out of the Hall, a free person by all meanings of the word.

The next person up leads to more whispers, especially from the Gondorians. A soldier in the familiar guards' armor walks up to Aragorn, with the Captain of the Guard beside him, and bows.

He's a criminal.

The first criminal that Aragorn must pass judgment to. Faramir stands up from the Steward's chair and gives the guard's shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

"Beregond, of the Guard, asks the King for judgment." The Captain of the Guard says.
Aragorn takes his time to speak. But when he eventually does, he sounds most sure of himself, "Beregond, by your sword blood was spilled in the Hallows, where that is forbidden. You left your post without leave of Lord or of Captain. For these things, of old, death was the penalty. Now therefore I must pronounce your doom."

I look up at him in alarm. He wouldn't. He wouldn't put someone to death for something like that. Whose blood did Beregond spill to deserve such a harsh treatment? I try to stand from my seat as the Gondorians began whispering again, but Legolas pulls me back down. "There is nothing you can do, Ellie. These things must happen." He says.

I sit, shaking my head, "He won't do it. He won't kill him." I'm sure of that. Aragorn is not blood-thirsty. I know he won't kill someone if it can be avoided. The talking among the Gondorians ceases, and Aragorn continues, "All penalty is remitted for your valour in battle, and still more because all that you did was for the love of the Lord Faramir. Nonetheless you must leave the Guard of the Citadel, and you must go forth from the City of Minas Tirith."

I release a sigh of relief, though I notice Beregond's face go pale. He's being exiled. He's not dying but he can never serve Gondor again. Those of us who know Aragorn well keep our eyes on him, where a small smile plays on his face. Beregond turns to go, but Aragorn stops him, "You would have to leave Minas Tirith, for you are appointed to the White Company, the Guard of Faramir, Prince of Ithilien, and you shall be its captain and dwell in Emyn Arnen in honor and peace, and in the service of him for whom you risked all, to save him from death."

Beregond is still in shock, and I grin. Gandalf leans forward on his staff, smiling. Not one of us in the Fellowship doubt Aragorn's heart, but this would be an unexpected move to anyone who doesn't know him as intimately as we do. He is nothing if not honorable.

Beregond walks up the steps to the throne, kneels, and kisses Aragorn's hand in thanks. No one will ever forget this act of mercy and honor by the King of Gondor. He leaves, greeted by his wife and children, as Faramir stands before the King.

"Prince of Ithilien?" He asks, amused.

"Ithilien is yours to protect now. And you shall abide in Emyn Arnen, within sight of the City. For Minas Ithil in the Morgul Vale shall be destroyed, and no man shall live there for years to come. But you know Ithilien well."

"Thank you for your generosity, my king." Faramir bows, and settles back on the Steward's Chair as the Gondorians clap appreciatively at the turn of events.

The last person to speak to Aragorn is none other than Éomer, and as he walks in, the Rohirrim stand in respect for their King. Éowyn walks beside him, equal in respect to her brother, and both bow before Aragorn. Éomer walks up the steps to stand side by side with Aragorn, while Éowyn stands beside Faramir.

"Between us there can be no word of giving or taking, nor of reward; for we are brethren." Aragorn says to Éomer, "In happy hour did Eorl ride from the North, and never has any league of peoples been more blessed, so that neither has ever failed the other, nor shall fail. Now, as you know, we have laid Théoden the Renowned in a tomb in the Hallows, and there he shall lie for ever among the Kings of Gondor, if you will. Or if you desire it, we will come to Rohan and bring him back to rest with his own people."

"Since the day when you rose before me out of the green grass of the downs I have loved you, and that love shall not fail. But now I must depart for a while to my own realm, where there is much to
heal and set in order. But as for the Fallen," Éomer answers, "when all is made ready, we will return for him. For now, let him sleep here."

Wait. The Rohirrim are leaving... That means...

I turn to the Rohirric side of the bleachers, and Aedelind gives me an apologetic look from across the Hall. I should have expected this. The Rohirrim would need to go back to their lands, of course. But me and Aedelind and Éowyn have all gotten so close. I couldn't imagine staying in Gondor without them. They've been my support.

The petitions finally end after that, and servants come in to take the gifts offered to Aragorn to the treasury.

"I'm starving." Gimli and I say in unison.

"Cheese sandwiches sound good." He says.

"And strawberries dipped in chocolate."

"And one of those delectable little berries that came for Aragorn."

"You think we can ask for the fruit he was given?" I ask, as Aragorn is surrounded by lords once again.

"Surely, he can't finish all of them before they rot." Gimli hums.

"Let's goooo!" I pull him up so we can approach Aragorn.

"Excuse us, Fellowship of the Ring members, coming through." Gimli announces as we make our way toward Aragorn.

"You want the fruit?" Aragorn asks us, amused.

"Yeah, you can't eat all of them. It's, like, impossible to finish all of that before it rots. You won't be able to fit in your armor if you try." I say.

"Besides, you do not like berries, laddie." Gimli adds,

"I have always liked berries!" Aragorn protests.

"Not these ones, you don't." Aragorn sighs, "Fine. But leave some for me. And for the Hobbits."

Gimli and I try to hide our delight as we return to the rest of the Fellowship.

"I swear, sometimes it feels like I am taking care of seven children."

Imrahil laughs, "As someone who has had four children, I can assure you, your friends are tamer."

"It's good practice, though!" I call, turning to the group with a smirk. "You, Arwen, mini Arwen."

Elladan and Elrohir laugh as Aragorn blushes and I turn back in time to see Gimli recruiting the hobbits and Legolas.

"Those yellow things did look intriguing..." Legolas mutters, always the health buff. He's talking
about the mangos that those from Umbar brought.

In the end, Sam, Merry and Pippin decide to join us, while Gandalf and Frodo remain behind. We spend the rest of the afternoon together, with Frodo, Gandalf and Aragorn joining us just as the sun is about to set with tea.

"Faramir told me there will be a Market Festival in a week's time. There will be merchants coming from Harad and Umbar to celebrate the peace between Gondor and its former rivals." Aragorn informs us.

Legolas frowns, "Or it could be an excuse for those who still have a hatred for Gondor to stir trouble."

Ah, yes. This side of Legolas never fails to come up when Aragorn is concerned. He's always been distrustful for Aragorn's sake, always looking out for him. I understand it more now, as I've gotten to know both him and Aragorn. Aragorn is such an honorable person, but this leads him to believe other people would act as honorably as him. He's not gullible--no warrior would survive as long as he has if he always trusted everyone--but he wants to see the best in people, even when they're irredeemable dirt bags.

And Legolas... Well, Aragorn is still young in Legolas' eyes. Apart from Gandalf, all of us in the Fellowship are young in his eyes, but it's different with Aragorn. I know he was there through Aragorn's childhood. He's been a constant in Aragorn's life, so I understand why he would be protective of him even now that Aragorn is King. And I know Aragorn sees this. Deep down, Legolas still sees the young boy whom he taught how to shoot his first arrow in him.

"We have to establish trust in some way between our people and the Haradrim. If it is security that worries you, there will be guards on patrol. The people will not be left vulnerable if anything were to happen." Aragorn says. He pauses briefly, "There will be merchants selling jewelry, as well. Stones of exotic colors."

Legolas freezes, while Aragorn gives him a little smirk.

"Ellie, pass the mangoes." Legolas nudges me.

"Merry, pass the mangoes." I say, because the basket of fruit is too far from me.

"Pippin, pass the mangoes." Merry is too busy with his kiwi.

"Gimli, pass the mangoes."

"They're right in front of you, pipsqueak!"

"Oh, just take my mango, Legolas, just take it." I pass my fruit to him before Pippin and Gimli could argue.

"Pipsqueak?" Pippin repeats, indignantly.

"It's genius. I don't know why I never thought about it first." Gandalf mutters under his bushy beard. Except he says it loud enough for Legolas and I, who are sitting next to him, to hear. This makes both of us laugh.

"What?!" Pippin demands, which makes us laugh harder.

"Pipsqueak." Legolas whispers. I snort and hit his shoulder with the back of my hand. "Don't be
mean!” I warn.

We spend that afternoon together with our friends, and when the time for dinner came, we're back to the Hall of Feasting. I'm getting used to the weight of Gondorian gowns. And it's not like I have a choice but to wear them. Legolas, ever competitive, just so loves to remind me that I lost a bet during the party. I don't remember it but I do vaguely remember watching Pippin gagging on a chicken wing.

In the Hall, the tables are formed so that it looks like we're just in a fancy restaurant with marble floors and very heavy wooden tables and cushioned chairs. Like everywhere in Minas Tirith, the walls are white, but the windows are large enough to let the cool, night breeze in. Upon the white walls are the banners with Gondor's symbol on them: A white tree surrounded by seven stars. As always, the King's table is set on a platform, positioned higher than the rest of the tables, and it's covered in a red tablecloth of a rich fabric. I think it's velvet. The table is large enough to seat twelve people. That's where the Fellowship sit, as well as Elladan and Elrohir. The last two to sit at the table are Éomer and Imrahil.

Servants come in like waiters with entire pigs for the rest of those eating in the Halls. They eat buffet-style but those of us in the King's table have to wait for plated food. Legolas tells me it's necessary for the cooks to plate the food themselves, and they all had to have Faramir's approval before being served. All the plates had to be tested for poison, after all. A thought that is very unsettling.

Every single person on this table is worth protecting from poison--that's how you know you're in deep shit. This is like the modern day equivalent of being famous and having a bodyguard or two. Speaking of bodyguards...

"Aragorn, aren't you supposed to have bodyguards?" I ask, while waiting for our plates to be served.

"No." He answers, the same time Legolas, Elladan and Elrohir all say, "Yes."

"I do not." Aragorn insists.

Elrohir purses his lips. "You look like Arwen when you do that." Aragorn points out.

"Perhaps I should keep doing it, then. She is the only elf you listen to." Elrohir retorts.

"I do not need a bodyguard. If you haven't noticed, I led an army into Mordor and came back alive. I can take care of myself."

"Estel, even my father has bodyguards by his side, and he has been through countless battles." Legolas says.

"Did he ever need them?"

"Well, no. But that is beside the point."

"You have bodyguards back in Eryn Galen, elfling, do you not?" Elladan pipes in, maybe in an attempt to convince Aragorn to allow bodyguards for him. This backfires spectacularly, however, when Elladan either failed to see Legolas shaking his head or chose to ignore it.

Aragorn latches on to this fact, "Precisely! Legolas knows more than anyone else here how troublesome it can be to have bodyguards."

"You should have a bodyguard, though, if even just for formality's sake." Merry says.
"Ah, yes! Merry! You see here, Estel. Merry is an esquire of Rohan, still! He knows how important safety is."

"Speaking of that." Éomer injects, "The Rohirrim will be coming back to Rohan, Merry. You are welcome to join us, if you would like."

Aragorn, grateful for how the subject has changed, picks up his wine goblet and wisely keeps his mouth shut.

Merry considers this, looking around at Frodo, Sam and Pippin. At last he answers, "It was King Théoden who appointed me as esquire. And now his body lies here. If I could make a request, I would like to serve my lord by keeping watch over his body here in Gondor to make sure he rests peacefully while you are away in Rohan, King Éomer."

Éomer considers this for a moment. Then he nods and smiles, "I could not ask for a warrior more loyal than you, Meriadoc. I leave my uncle's body in your care while I am not here to watch over him."

"Mm. Speaking of leaving, I ask that you allow me to return to Dol Amroth, my king. Even for just a fortnight. My wife and children await my return, and the people there look to me for guidance to rebuild." Imrahil cuts in.

As their conversation goes to matters of land and restoration, my attention wanders to the guests already gleefully eating. The nearest table is where the King's Council is seated, where Faramir sits at the head of the table. I turn just in time to catch Eniredír's eye.

He slipped off earlier before I could thank him for accompanying me to the Hall of Kings. Now, he gives me a warm smile, and raises his goblet of wine to me. I raise my goblet as well and we take sips at the same time. He puts his goblet down and lowers his head in a playful bow, then returns to his conversation with the people at the table.

I turn my head slightly and find Legolas looking at Eniredír with a frown. Actually, he looks like he's visualizing the points on Eniredír's body where he can land arrows.

"Melethenin," I squeeze his hand beneath the table, "what's wrong?"

"I do not trust him." He says.

This makes me laugh, "That doesn't surprise me."

He turns to me, sharply, "What does that mean?"

The smile slips from my face. "Just that you do not trust easily. What's wrong?" I repeat, this time confused.

He turns back to Eniredír, "I just do not trust him."

It takes a moment for me to realize what's happening. And I giggle as it dawns on me, "You're not jealous, are you?"

He whips around to face me, while a blush forms on his cheeks, "I am not! I mean, I am but--never mind."

"You're jealous..." I say in a singsong voice, my fingers letting go of his so I can tickle his side.
"I am not!"

"Hm. So, if Eniredír ever walks up to me and asks for a dance, you will feel absolutely no twinge of jealousy?" I tease.

Legolas laughs, "I would, but that would be quickly overwhelmed by the twinge of pity I would feel for his toes. You can be quite heavy-footed."

I pinch his side and he makes a surprised noise between a yelp and a giggle.

"Children, we are at the dinner table." Elladan patiently scolds us like a doting mother.

Like the children we supposedly are, we stick our tongues out at him. Because that's how you behave in front of a king and his court.

"For goodness' sake, you are adults. Behave." Elladan sighs, exasperated.

"Oh, pull that stick out of your butt every once in a while, Elladan." I laugh.

"Pull--what?"

"She means don't be so uptight, laddie," Gimli says.

"I know what she--you know what. The food is here. I do not have to continue this conversation. And do not call me 'laddie'. I am thousands of years older than you." Elladan pointedly looks away from us as the plates are served in front of us. Our goblets are filled with wine, and Gimli and the hobbits stare woefully at their plates.

"This won't even fill a mouse's belly." Gimli says.

"You're complaining?" I raise an eyebrow at him. Their plates already have more servings than the rest of ours but for some reason, I have less on my plate than everyone else.

Aragorn signals for one of the servants, "Give us six more plates of food. And put more on Lady Ellie's."

"Yes, my lord." The servant bows and looks at us at the table, as though wondering if they forgot to bring out all of the plates. She shakes her head, and backs away towards the kitchen, taking my plate with her.

When they came back, the hobbits cheer in appreciation and we finally got to eat. A pile of plates later, and one of the nobles stands and everyone in the Hall turns to him.

"I would like to raise a toast to the King Elessar. We missed you at the feast last night, so I would like to take this opportunity to wish you all the best. Long may you reign, my king. I am confident that Gondor will once again rise in glory with you as our leader." He raises his goblet, and those in the Hall shout, "Hear, hear!"

Aragorn himself politely smiles, and we all take sips of our wine.

"It's begun..." Imrahil says, just quietly enough for us to hear while the noble returns to his seat.

"What do you mean?" Frodo asks, "I thought that was a lovely toast."

"Oh, it was. That is precisely the point. It is only the first day of Aragorn's reign, and already, the noblemen are trying to gain his favor." Elrohir explains.
"Do not worry about me, I can watch out for myself. It's Ellie I worry about." Aragorn nods at me. "I called your earlier in the hope that I could warn you. As the only woman in the Fellowship, you offer...great opportunity. Nobles marry into power, after all. It is rare for a noble to marry for love. They might start wooing you."

"Wooing me?" I laugh "I don't think they'll try to pull the moves on me. It's pretty obvious that Legolas and I aren't just friends. We don't try to hide it."

"No, but that is exactly the point. Legolas is an Elf." Imrahil says.

"And that is all they see him as. Legolas does not exactly let everyone know his father is the King of Eryn Galen." Elladan pipes in.

Éomer looks up in surprise at Legolas, "You are a Prince?"

"Not an important one." Legolas looks pointedly at Elladan in warning.

"Your father is the only Elven king left in Middle-earth. Of course, you are important." Elrohir says.

"Keep your voice down!" Legolas hisses, through gritted teeth.

"Hey, now that I think about it..." Pippin says, "you never told us you were a Prince, as well."

"I did not need to, for it would not have helped us with the Quest. I am not even the first-born son. Quite the opposite, in fact. But you all know me as myself. Is that not enough?" Legolas asks.

"It is more than enough." Gimli steps in to defend Legolas, "Can we get back to the point?"

Elladan raises his hands in surrender, and Imrahil continues, "They know him only as an Elf."

"Which is exactly what I would prefer..." Legolas mutters,

"They do not know he has a powerful father, and I do not think Legolas would want to exercise any authority or power."

Legolas looked indignant just at the mention of it. I still don't get their point. Imrahil recognizes the confusion on my face.

"Nobles can be...quite entitled. They would think that they would be more suited for you than an Elf from a faraway land."

"He's a member of the Fellowship!" I snap. "That alone makes him more important than any noble, Prince or no."

"They would conveniently forget that. Power blinds those who already has it. They would try to convince you that you would be better off with a mortal like yourself, that they have enough money for you to live lavishly in Gondor. All that so they can get closer to the king." Gandalf says.

I laugh, derisively, "They'll be very disappointed to find I don't care about money or luxury."

"That will not stop them. They will be insistent. You must be vigilant. They don't know you like we do, lassie. I'm starting to understand what Imrahil and Gandalf mean. Be careful with the nobles. They will think you are easy to manipulate." Gimli says.

"The women of Rohan are very strong-willed, Éowyn especially so. And yet, Grima Wormtongue still thought he could have her if he played his cards right. A court will always be filled with snakes
with honey-coated fangs. Be careful of men greedy for power, Lady Ellie.” Éomer warns.

I lean back in my chair, and look over at Legolas helplessly. He looks at me with sympathy and takes my hand, a silent sign of support. "You don’t expect me to close myself off from everyone, do you?" I ask.

"No, not at all. Just be careful and follow your instincts." Aragorn says.

I look around at the men surrounding me. "You know, this sucks. Worry about the hobbits. People mistake them for children a lot."

"Pippin is a guard of the Citadel. He will be with Aragorn but he will not have the same influence as you would have, in their eyes. Merry is an esquire of Rohan, and is therefore under Éomer's command. Not much room for opportunity to get closer to the King of Gondor there. And Frodo." Gandalf explains. He looks over at Frodo, who smiles. Even Frodo knows what's up.

"Well, Frodo keeps to himself. He is never seen without Sam by his side. And he is a Ring-bearer. Going for him, when he is the most important member of the Fellowship, is still too ambitious and could prove dangerous. Besides, they are Hobbits. They will have to go back home at some point, and any opportunity they may present will go with them when they do."

I sigh impatiently, "Why is it dangerous to go after him but not me?"

"Because he is under my protection." Gandalf says with utmost confidence.

"And I'm not? I'm hurt. I thought we were pals." I can't believe I have the time to joke.

"You are under mine." Aragorn says, "And that's what makes it dangerous for you. That is the perfect opportunity for them."

"Do not worry, Ellie. They will either give up or you will get a proposal you cannot refuse." Gimli says, breezily.

Legolas, who has been quietly drinking his wine, slurps loudly and begins to cough.

"Is the wine not to your taste, my lord?" A servant comes up to help him as he tries to clear his chest.

"No, no. The wine is good. I just...choked." Legolas wheezes.

"Are you alright there, elfling?" Elrohir says. He and Elladan have matching smirks on their faces.

"Oh, I'm fine. I'm fine." Legolas says, quickly. The conversation goes to something else, and as dinner ends, people begin leaving the Hall. Though some of the nobles did come up to talk to Aragorn; some to confirm last minute changes about the market festival, while others came to talk about the repairs of the city.

A surprising number of them come up to casually ask how we were doing, Eniredír being one of them.

"Lady Ellie. I hope to see you in the markets next week."

"If anything there catches my eye, sure." I smile.

"If you are not there, I am sure nothing would catch mine." He smiles.

I laugh. "Nice try. That was cute, though." I say.
"Goodbye." Legolas snaps.

Eniredír looks taken aback, which makes me snort. He turns to Aragorn, who looks stone-faced. It's a striking similarity to how Gramps looked when I used to introduce him to boys back in high school.

"Forgive me, my king. I only came to say that should the Heroes of the Free People choose to come to our stall during the market festival, we have many lovely jewelry and fabrics that are free of charge to them. A token of gratitude for saving our beloved country." Eniredír explains, "I did not mean to offend."

"Thank you, Eniredír. That is most gracious of you." Aragorn says.

"I am at your service, my lord."

"Jewelry, you say?" Elrohir asks. "You will have bracelets, necklaces, rings?"

"Those are what jewelry are, after all, my lord. Excuse me." Eniredír bows low, and leaves at Aragorn's nod.

"What do you know of him, Imrahil?" Gandalf asks.

"Eniredír? He's always been a friendly lad. Believe it or not, he's always been giving and trusting. The last time I saw him was when I visited their manor in the Blackroot Veil. He was fifteen and could not comprehend that such qualities are very easily taken advantage of. He dislikes court politics, which is why he does not visit Minas Tirith. Besides, his mother shelters him. She does not like it when he leaves their manor. The boy does not even know how to hold a sword."

"Why is that?" Éomer asks, surprised that someone of Eniredír's age does not have the ability to defend himself.

"He was sickly as a child. The only time he came to Minas Tirith was with his mother and several guards when he was five years old, and that was so he can be treated for an illness that the healers at their manor knew nothing about. He was never as strong as boys his age. His mother insisted that he should not train as a warrior, for fear of his health. If there is anyone who would not have political ambitions, it would be him."

"Oh, cool. One person not to worry about." I say.

"And fifty others that you should worry about. Perhaps it is you who needs bodyguards." Elladan suggests.

"Legolas is enough to scare them off, in all honestly." Sam says, which surprises those at the table. He barely speaks up during these kinds of matters. "Begging your pardon, but Eniredír looked ready to flee just then with how you were looking at him, Legolas."

"Sam is right. The less attention Ellie has, the better." Aragorn says. He stands, and the rest of us stand as well in respect. "I shall retire to my bed chamber. Tomorrow will be... unpleasant." He says, and the mood around the table shifts.

We follow after him when he goes, and I'm left the rest of the night wondering about what would happen tomorrow that would be unpleasant.
My chapters just keep progressively getting longer and longer lmfao I'm so sorry.

And I apologize for the One Direction reference. Technically, Ellie left Middle-earth back in 2015 when One Direction was still A Thing.
What Comes After the War

Chapter Summary

It's time to face the side of war that they don't put down in songs and tales. It's time for closure.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I now understand what unpleasant things Aragorn was talking about last night. I've broken down in tears twice now and it's only been the thirteenth petitioner.

They're not nobles praising the king and bringing gifts. They're women, children, the elderly. All begging for their fallen sons' bodies, or asking for help to rebuild their homes, or simply asking for food. The last request came mostly from those who lived in the lower levels of Minas Tirith. Worst of all were families bringing their sick and wounded children, desperately going to the king because there was no one else to turn to.

It's horrible. I can hear some of the nobles retching at the stench of the refugees. I feel contempt for them. They worry about petty things such as land and the king's favor while the common-folk cry for food and their loved ones. While we celebrate parties here and drink until we forget ourselves, they ration their food and pray that their loved ones live another day.

But the first time I actually get angry during this entire, agonizing court petition is when one of the noblewomen behind me says, "If she has nothing to live for, why does she not just get it over with? Surely, that would be better than suffering diseases."

It was the most disgustingly insensitive thing I have ever heard, and the thing is, I was ready to tackle the bitch behind me, but Avorniel was quick to tell her off, "If you cannot be a decent human being, Hinneril, I suggest keeping your mouth shut. Or you will suffer something far worse than a disease."

"At least, I will have the gold to pay for a healer. Look at her, she's pathetic." Hinneril laughs, and some of her little minions laugh along with her.

That's when I turn around, "Either take Avorniel's advice and shut your trap, or I'll shut it for you."

"Or you can take my advice and stop clinging to the elf. It makes you look desperate, dear."

Legolas snaps around in anger. He's been patient this entire time, though I have seen him clenching his fists several times during the petitions. No doubt his elvish hearing has picked up more unpleasant insults from the nobles than I have heard. He opens his mouth, ready to retort, when I put my hand on top of his to stop him. If I can defend myself against a horde of orcs, I can defend myself from the low insults of some entitled rich girl.

"I'm going to pummel you."

"Oh, and violent, as well. How did someone like you ever gain the king's favor?"

My jaw drops, and I rise from my seat. I'm halfway through climbing the bleachers to get to her
when Gandalf pulls me down.

"Stop. Making. A scene." Gandalf warns. I breathe hard, and turn around only to realize the Hall had stopped its activity to look at me and Hinneril. The woman Hinneril had insulted was standing there, looking confused. She came to ask the King to allow the Houses of Healing to accept her sickly father. The problem was, they no longer had the money to buy the medicine they needed from the apothecary, especially after the war devastated Gondor's supplies and the price of medicine skyrocketed.

I stand there, and Legolas loyally stands beside me.

Aragorn clears his throat as the Hall quiets down, and the people turned to him, dutifully.

"I will send for Ioreth to see if she has any of the medicine your father needs. We will go to your home and inform you when she does."

"My king." One of the nobles stand, and Aragorn turns to him, frowning at the interruption. "With all due respect, if we start accepting petitions of charity, more and more peasants will come into the Citadel expecting help."

"And how is that a problem?" Frodo asks, annoyed. The Hall goes entirely quiet. Over the days we've stayed in Minas Tirith, Frodo has made an effort to keep as little attention on him as possible. He tended to stay in his chambers with Sam and Gandalf, and only comes out when the entire Fellowship is needed. I don't blame him. He wants peace, quiet, and time to heal from the horrors he faced on his journey to Mount Doom. So for him to speak up in court like this is surprising.

And you know shit is real when it's Frodo who's mad. I have never seen him pissed off, ever. Sad, guilty, occasionally entertained, and grateful--yes. Angry? Never.

"The problem, Master Baggins, is that Gondor does not have enough supplies for every single peasant in need. Would it not be unfair if we were to help one but not the others when we no longer have the resources?" The nobleman continues.

"You sit there in your pretty robes, with jewelry on every finger, and you tell us you have nothing to spare for the needy?" This time, it's Gimli who speaks.

The nobleman pales. I guess he didn't anticipate the entire Fellowship speaking against him. I don't know if he's brave or stupid for continuing, "Jewelry and robes will not feed or heal them."

The woman petitioning begins to cry. Faramir stands from the Steward's chair to comfort her. I look up at the nobleman with disgust. The fact that he is so blinded by his privilege enrages me. I know what it's like to have to scrape for food and medicine. These people melt gold and turn it into plates they wouldn't even use. Their blatant disregard of those they deem to be from the lower class is insulting.

I get up from the bleachers and walk towards the center of the Hall. I stand in front of the crying woman, and look up at Aragorn. There's a mixture of worry and pride on his face. This is gonna bite my ass, but I hate a lot of people in this Hall right now, and I want to piss them off even more.

"My king." I make sure to follow the courtesy. I bow low, going on my knees. After a moment, Aragorn signals for me to stand.

"I would like to petition for an organized charity. Everyone who has a heart or a shred of human empathy," I put a lot of emphasis on the last part of my statement, "can help those in need if they have the money to do so."
"How, exactly, do you want to do this, Lady Helen?" Aragorn asks. Okay, we're not only using formalities, we're also using my full name. I squint my eyes at him, something only he will see. He smiles. Boy, Aragorn must be so bored that he's now making inside jokes. He knows I hate being called Helen. But then again, whoever has to speak to the King in the Hall of Kings has to be addressed with their full titles, so I'll let that one slide.

"A feeding program, and I humbly ask for those who have gold to spare to donate. All of the gold will be used to buy food supplies and medicine from the Market Festival next week, and I will accept any and all volunteers who would like to help me feed and heal those from the lower levels of Minas Tirith. The ones who were affected most by the war. Most of the damage done to the city is there, and people need our help. Just because they're not rich doesn't mean they don't deserve to live under decent conditions."

Aragorn leans back in his chair, thinking about it. Whether I admit it or not, though, the nobleman is right about us not being able to feed every hungry soul that's been affected by the war. But every gesture counts. I'd like to help as many people as I can, and I'm sure Aragorn cares for them. Especially them. "Alright." He says, after a while, "But you will have to organize everything. Faramir, does the treasury have any castar to spare?"

There are whispers of discontent from the Gondorian nobles, and I can see some of the Council shaking their heads in disapproval. Aragorn ignores them all. "We could have castar to spare, but only if we do not restock on Dorwinion wine for about a month."

"Dorwinion wine is a luxury. The court will have to make do with Gondorian wine, then. Lady Helen, to show my personal support for your cause, I will pledge a hundred castar to you. And you may have access to whatever you need in the Citadel that would help you."

"But, my lord--" The same, annoying nobleman speaks up yet again.

"Your king has made a decision." Faramir says, patiently. "And quite frankly, we here at court have a responsibility to take care of our own. The right thing to do is volunteer."

The noble sits down, looking peeved.

"My king, if I may speak?"

Aragorn turns to the Council. Eniredír has his hand raised, politely.

"Speak." Aragorn says.

"I would like to help Lady...Helen. I have spent many days of my childhood in the infirmary, and am a far better healer than warrior. I would like to offer my knowledge on medicine, as well as twenty castar for the charity."

I sigh in relief. I have someone on my side. I'm not familiar with the monetary system of Gondor, or even of Middle-earth, but a hundred and twenty castar already sound like a lot.

"I would like to offer fifty castar, as well." Avorniel stands from the bleachers, "And, if Lady Helen would permit it, I would like to help her with managing finances."

"I offer thirty castars." Someone from the Council stands beside Eniredir. More nobles stand to offer their donations, though I notice a lot more looking at their colleagues with displeasure.

As the nobles return to their seats, Aragorn smiles down at me. "Anything else?"
"Yeah. Make these belts illegal. They might be the cause of my death someday." I say, referring to the tight belt around my waist. That earns appreciative laughter from those in the hall, considerably cutting the tension.

I turn around to face the woman whose tears have now dried, "Tell your neighbors that the king has not forgotten you. You will be taken care of, I will make sure of it."

"My lady, bless you. Thank you, thank you." She bows, and I place my hands on her shoulders, reassuringly.

"Don't thank me yet. Is your father's supply of medication completely spent?"

"We--we have three days worth of the root."

"Then I will make sure it is replenished before then." I say. Her lower lip trembles, and she pulls me in for a hug so suddenly that the guards stationed nearby raise their spears in alarm. I hug the woman back, and look over at Faramir. He motions for the guards to stand down.

She lets go, whispers, "Thank you, my lady, I will always be grateful." and happily goes.

I turn back to Aragorn and bow once more. He inclines his head, and he gives me a smile that says he has never been prouder of me than that moment. I return to my seat, where Legolas is beaming at me as well.

"Well, that's one way to take care of things." Gimli mutters. It would have turned out for the better after that. Until the next petitioner walks in.

Or rather, it was supposed to be a petitioner. But whoever walked in is clearly important. They are wearing fur coats, after all. And, most surprising of all, they were...

"Dwarves!" Sam exclaims. Gimli is on his feet immediately.

"An embassy from Erebor." Legolas, being the one with the keenest eyes, says.

"They held the line at Dale. Theirs was a crucial battle and victory. Them and the People of Dale." Gandalf says to us.

"Dís." Gimli gasps in awe.

"Dís?" I'm confused. I don't know much about Gimli's people and know even less about Dale.

"Dís! She's the sister of King Thorin Oakenshield, who took back the Lonely Mountain from Smaug." Gimli answers.

Thorin Oakenshield, I know about. Bilbo has talked about his adventure with Thorin's Company. He had a short but glorious rule, and from what I remember, he fought a battle with the Men of Dale and the elves of Mirkwood. He died there, along with his heirs, Fili and Kili. And his throne was succeeded by Dain Ironfoot, who was the entire reason for Gimli even being part of the Fellowship. King Dain ordered Glóin and Gimli to go to Rivendell to ask for advice about messengers asking about Bilbo Baggins, and that was how Gimli came to be on the Council of Elrond.

"I thought the dwarves rarely let the women be exposed to the world?" Pippin asks.

"We don't let our women do anything, they decide for themselves. There is very few of them that exists anymore and many of them do not like dealing with other races." Gimli explains. "I don't
believe this."

"King Elessar." The female dwarf's voice is smooth, but commanding. She wears a long, purple robe with white fur. Her hair is a deep shade of red, and her beard is almost as long as Gimli's, and braided with golden ribbons. Behind her are two other dwarves.

"An embassy from Erebor. This is an honor. I would like to congratulate King Dain for the victory at Dale. The battle was crucial to the war, and the Men of Dale and the Dwarves of Erebor are heroes in your own right." Aragorn stands to show his respect, and Dís bows slowly.

She seems to be a very old Dwarf now. But she still looks tough and I bet she can still kick my ass in hand-to-hand combat.

"That is what I came for. The cost of victory was...staggering. Both King Brand and King Dain Ironfoot died in battle." Dís says.

"No." Gimli gasped. There were others murmurs of surprise. Dale, Gondor knew about. It was a kingdom of Men, after all. But once again, Gimli finds himself alone in his despair at the thought of his kin dying. He lowers his head, completely frozen.

"Gimli." Legolas whispers beside me, placing his hand gently on Gimli's shoulder. Gimli doesn't respond. Merry leans forward to touch his elbow, and my hand, as always, takes his. He squeezes my hand. That's the only sign of movement he's shown, and I look up to listen to the Dwarven embassy send their congratulations to Aragorn, to inform him that there were now new kings ruling over Dale and Erebor, and that they were rebuilding as they speak, and apologize that they cannot send in more people or gifts. Aragorn is quick to say gifts are not needed, and if the Men of Dale and the Dwarves of Erebor needed anything, that Gondor will come to their aid.

"And the Elves of Eryn Galen, as well." Legolas speaks up. Gimli looks up at him, gratefully. "It does not escape me that my home would have been one of the first destroyed had the line not been held at Dale. Our people will forever be grateful, and if we could set aside any animosity between Elves and Dwarves, I am sure the Elvenking would offer help."

"You have authority to speak for the Elvenking?" Dís's voice is cold, skeptical.

"I do. I have connections to the royalty in Eryn Galen, and they will respond to me should I bring up the needs of those in Dale and Erebor."

Dís turns to her companions, and share hurried words with them in Khuzdul. She looks up at Legolas, thinking his offer over, then sees Legolas' supporting hand on Gimli's shoulder, and nods. "I am sure the King of Erebor and the King of Dale would appreciate the sentiment, elf, and we will let them know of this offer."

"My father." Gimli's voice cracks.

That is the only time Dís shows emotion. She has been stoic until now, but a crack in her façade forms as she looks at Gimli, the only dwarf surrounded by Men. She gives Gimli a small smile. "Glóin lives, Gimli, and he misses you so. He also told me to let you know how proud he is of you, and begs you to come home, even for a while."

Gimli nods, his shoulders relaxing. He bows stiffly and sits back down, and Legolas quickly turns to him to see how he's doing. I see Gimli dab his eyes with a gloved hand, but otherwise he seems to be okay.

"I'm hungry." Is all he says to let us know he'll be fine.
The dwarven embassy is the last of the petitioners, so Aragorn stands to dismiss everyone, and the people soon file out for lunch. Aragorn walks down the steps from his throne, with Faramir behind him so they can talk to the dwarven embassy.

"Let's get you lunch, Gimli." Legolas says, cheerfully.

"Actually..." Gimli lags behind the rest of the Fellowship and glances at Aragorn and the dwarven embassy. "I would like to stay."

Legolas nods, understanding Gimli’s need to hear about what has happened to his people. Erebor is his home, after all. It's understandable that he would be worried.

"We'll save some dessert for you." I say.

"Save more than dessert for me, lassie. I want to fill my belly later." He calls after me as we exit to the Great Hall.

Let me tell you, the looks I got the moment I enter the Great Hall is almost as venomous as the poison that cut into my arm.

"Look at all my fans." I say, breezily, to brush off the hostility that is entirely new to me. I'd actually prefer it if the nobles just get it over with and charge at me with swords but no. They step aside to let the Fellowship pass but let me know with their cold glares that the least they want to do is trip me so I can faceplant into the marble floor.

"You would think they'd be happy for being offered a chance to show the king they are decent people." Gandalf mutters.

"Begging pardon, but the people here are too fixated on gold. Empathy is a foreign language to them." Sam muses.

"What's funny is that I'm sure when those from the lower levels start praising them, that they'll all pretend they're doing it from the bottom of their hearts." I roll my eyes.

"You forced no one to donate their treasures." Frodo says.

"I pressured them."

"You appealed to them." Frodo continues, "What would Bilbo say if he saw people clinging to their jewels like so? If more people valued home above gold, the world would be a merrier place, he would tell me."

I find comfort with the Rohirrim. Theirs are friendly faces among the crowd, and Aedelind waves me over in her direction. I excuse myself from the rest of the Fellowship so I can eat with her instead. She leads me towards a table where Éowyn, Hildraed and Aedelgar sat, along with Éomer and, surprisingly, Avorniel. There is already a plate there for me, and there are meats and sandwiches prepared, as well as mead.

"If it isn't my favorite trouble maker." Is Aedelgar's greeting to me.

"Welcome to the misfits table." Hildraed stands and does a mock bow. "We have here the men attracted to each other, a child who cannot help herself from bossing adults around and a woman who dressed as a man and later stabbed the Witch-king and now has enchanted the most eligible bachelor in Gondor." He motions to himself and Aedelgar, then Aedelind, then Éowyn.
"And what is Avorniel and Êomer doing here?"

"Me? Oh, I am just tired of having to deal with the other Gondorian nobles. They hate me almost as much as they hate you for enabling your little charity work, do you know?" Avorniel smiles.

"And I am only here because Êowyn is my sister." Êomer pipes in. This earns him a push from Êowyn. "I jest, I jest! Hildraed and Aedelgar have been receiving more and more curious looks, and I am here to make a silent statement. I have to protect my best warriors, after all."

"Protect how?" Avorniel asks. "I can assure you, you are not the only men in relations with other men in this Hall."

"None of them taking each other's hands in public, I note." Hildraed says, which makes Aedelgar raise their linked hands so he could kiss the back of Hildraed's hand.

"Protect them by letting them know if they attack my warriors in any way, it is me they have to answer to." Êomer says.

"Wow, we're really starting with the heavy conversations, huh?" I say as I pull a plate towards me.

"Avorniel, you need to let me know which men would actually be attracted to me." Aedelind says.

"And why," Aedelgar snaps, "would she need to tell you?"

"Have you seen these Gondorian nobles? They are quite attractive. So, that Eniredfír fellow..."

Avorniel laughs, "I do not think Eniredfír will be able to handle you. He's quite...fragile. And shy."

"Ooh, a challenge. I like it." Aedelind rubs her hands together, which earns her laughter from the rest of us. Aedelgar splutters in indignance.

"You are to stay fifty feet away from any Gondorian noble!"

"I can't hear you." Aedelind waves her hand, lazily.

"You know, brother, since we are talking about blossoming relationships, are you not supposed to be seeking a queen?" Êowyn turns to Êomer, who has been quiet this entire time.

He laughs, "Not here, I do not. I prefer the women of Rohan. Straight-forward and care-free."

"As opposed to what, King Êomer?" Avorniel raises her eyebrow.

"As opposed to uptight and conniving. They hold too many mysteries." Êomer says, ever the brutally honest.

"But you need a little bit of mystery in your life, Êomer. It keeps your life from being boring." I say.

"After all the excitement I have been subjected to, I would welcome a boring life."

"You are not with the right person if your life with them is boring, my lord." Hildraed says.

"Well, if I am ever lucky enough to find a woman that is both exciting and offers stability, I will let you know. For now, I would like to eat my bread in peace. Or would you rather, sister, that I ask when Lord Faramir plans to ask for your hand in marriage?"

"You will ask him yourself, for he has not asked me yet." Êowyn responds. "Otherwise, eat your
"At the cost of making this conversation boring, Lady Ellie, I want to talk to you about our financial matter." Avorniel says. "So far, I have had offers of donation, in good faith, by some of the nobles. I tallied our budget and, along with the King's offer, we would have around five hundred castar."

"I must admit I'm not familiar with the system of money here in Gondor. How much would that buy us?"

"We could buy a hundred sacks of oat, a hundred eggs, maybe clothes as well."

"How many would that help?"

"We could feed the entirety of people living in the lowest residential district, but that's it. We will not have enough to feed those in the higher levels of the city."

I lean back in my chair and frown. "That is truly all?"

Éowyn leans toward me and takes my hand, "Ellie, there are hundreds of people in need in the lowest district and you will be able to feed and clothe them. This would help a great deal of people. Do not be so hard on yourself for not being able to help everyone."

"I apologize if the Rohirrim cannot spare anything at the moment, Ellie. I have to focus all our resources on rebuilding Rohan, after all." Éomer says. "If it would help, I can order my men to help with the manual labor."

"We would be glad to help!" Aedelgar says, "You should have seen the indignance at our side of the Hall of Kings earlier. That the nobles of Gondor could sit by and do nothing as their own countrymen suffer is inexcusable."

"I must apologize if Gondor has left a bad impression on you. I promise the people of Gondor are honorable people. The nobles are just blinded by privilege, and fear. We have a new king, our city was just destroyed. Their first instinct is to look out for themselves. But I promise you, we are not like that. The more outspoken ones are just..." Avorniel looks for the right word,

"Selfish assholes?" Aedelind supplies.

"As your king, I order you to not be impolite and use horrible language while we are eating." Éomer snaps. Aedelind bows in apology. "But as myself, I say carry on."

"Should you not be defending your fellow nobles' reputation?" Hildraed asks Avorniel. This is typical Hildraed, always wanting to see both sides. He's not like Aedelgar and Aedelind who are quick to make judgments, he always has to see the situation from every angle first.

"They would just as sooner drag my name through the dirt. I do not feel the need to defend them." Avorniel says.

"Perhaps that is the problem. You are all focused on political games and stepping on each other's toes with no care for each other that you have all become unaware of how we all need to help one another in order for us all to progress." Éowyn observes.

Avorniel thinks this over, her lips pursed, "You are not wrong. Court politics has made many nobles narrow-sighted. Gondor did not use to be like this. We are a proud and honorable city, descended from Númenoreans who came to the aid of their friends. The years have clouded our judgement and priorities. Our great deeds have been recorded in books and songs, but I worry if that is the last
record of valiancy from our people."

"You have heroes living among you now, Lady Avorniel. Have faith in your country-men."

"I would if they ever start taking women seriously here." Avorniel mutters to which Éowyn, Aedelind and I laugh at.

"Oh, I just remembered! You talked about a library in the city, right? Do you think you can take me there?"

"I could take you there the day after tomorrow, if you would like. There will be a memorial tomorrow for all those who died in the War. I do not think you would want to see the city then. There is too much sorrow."

"What do they do in the memorial?"

"It is the common-folk's practice. Every house will light a candle in front of their homes, one for every loved one they lost, and they will have a procession all the way down to the Pelennor Fields so they can light more candles there for every soul lost to the War with no mourners left for them. And they will share stories of their loved ones amongst themselves." Avorniel explains.

"And I'm guessing the nobles are not part of it."

Avorniel purses her lips, "The nobles do not usually attend memorials. It's crowded and tiring to walk all the way down to the Pelennor Fields, and there they will have to stay until the dawn rises. You know how nobles love their soft beds and warm blankets."

"Will nobles be allowed, though?"

"Of course. They allow anyone who has lost someone to join the memorial." Avorniel's voice is softer, now.

A lump forms in my throat. I'm compelled to go, though for a different reason. Despite the fact that the War is won and I know a good future is out there for my family, I still miss them terribly. They are still lost to me, as I am lost to them. How long has it been since I came to Middle-earth? How long have they been looking for me? God, if I could just have this one last moment to mourn them, without fearing for my life or theirs, I would take it. Just for the sake of my peace of mind. I've accepted that I will never go back to the modern world, but I deserve closure, at least. I deserve to mourn my loss in peace.

"Faramir plans to go." Éowyn says, softly. Avorniel looks down.

"I know. He told me, as well. Him and Eniredfr."

They don't need to mention his name for me to know why they plan to go. And he deserves at least that. He deserves to not be forgotten.

"I'll go." I mumble. "If you wanna go, I'll be with you, and I'm sure the Fellowship will go, as well."

Avorniel smiles at me, gratefully.

The next day, the Citadel is closed to petitioners. King Elessar has gone with Lord Faramir, they say, on important business. But those in the kitchens will note that Peregrin Took and Meriadoc Brandybuck have not snuck in for their second breakfast, or that Frodo's chambers are not locked, but open and empty, with Gandalf and Sam nowhere to be found. There will be no elf and dwarf and
young woman teasing each other.

The Fellowship is away, wearing the clothes they had worn on their travels. The hobbits were back in their grey cloaks, and Frodo's mithril shirt gleamed from beneath his vest. Strider has re-emerged as Aragorn replaced his rich, velvet robes for his worn-out gear and muddy leather boots. Legolas is back in his green garb. Gimli's helmet and chainmail clinks as he moves. And the cream-colored cloak is fastened at my shoulder once again, with my legs back in trousers and my feet no longer crushed by uncomfortable shoes and heels, but rather the light, sturdy Galadhrim boots given to me as gifts by the Elves of Lorien. Even Gandalf had chosen to wear a grey cloak over his white robes.

This is us, back when we were still complete. This is us as Boromir remembered us. And being back in these clothes feel freeing, somehow. It's amazing what fabric and a change of hairstyle can do to a person. Somehow, we have blended in. We get curious looks from the common-folk when we join in the procession, silently, not wanting to bring notice to ourselves. But they somehow understand our need for invisibility. Because right now, we are not important heroes. We are just travellers who lost a friend along the way. Faramir stands stiffly between Frodo and Aragorn, and Avorniel clings to my hand as she tries not to cry.

They never did find Boromir's body. They found his horn, cleaved in two and found on separate parts of the Anduin. But his body was borne on a lightboat from Lorien. And these elven boats carried their passengers safely, concealing them from prying eyes. His body is forever lost at sea, and this is the most we can do as a Fellowship to mourn him. The crowd grows the lower we go. I can hear people sobbing, and at the corners of my eyes, I see candles lighting up, one by one, like golden stars amidst a sea of white stone.

Then, Aragorn starts to sing, and Legolas joins him, their melodies ripping my heart apart as their words wrap around the procession like a fog. They sing a lament for Boromir, of his journey, his valiance, and how the Rauros has taken him to his resting place, where none will ever find him again. I let the tears fall, and somehow, it's the smaller things I remember about Boromir: The dent in his shield which he lovingly polished every night. The state of his teeth after we feasted on berries that stained our fingers red, as he laughed at Legolas who had freaked out about how pink his nails had gone. Him and Aragorn bringing deer and rabbit for us to eat when we had nothing left during our travels. The way he always protected the hobbits, always making sure they were safe, warm and eating well. The techniques in battle that he taught me. Him kneeling in front of me to tie my boots when I was too sore from our travels to even bend down. And Avorniel... His stories of his lovely Avorniel. "Married life sounds too painfully stagnant, but if I were to marry her, I would live the rest of my days in contentment." He once told me, all those days ago, under the canopy of the golden leaves of the mallorn trees in Lothlórien.

Avorniel had let go of her restraints, and her sobs join those of the women around us. She was always pressured to stay composed back in the Citadel, but here she is just another young girl who had lost her love. And she cries and cries, until her throat starts to become sore, leaning on my shoulder for support. When we reach the edge of the broken gates to the Pelennor, she and Faramir hold each other, sharing in each other's grief. Merry, Pippin and I stand hand in hand.

Boromir died defending us.

We will never forget that, and the guilt this carries. It's unspoken between the three of us but it's still there. He could have run to save himself, but he stayed for us, despite having three arrows to his chest. If only we were more skilled. If only we had fought harder. Maybe, we could have saved him but we didn't. We've fought so hard to make his sacrifice worth it. Pippin offered his services to Denethor because he felt it was the least he could do to show his gratitude for Boromir's sacrifice.
Candles are scattered through the fields, and I catch a glimpse of Eniredir looking into the distance. He lost his cousins here, after all. The sons of the Lord of the Blackroot Veil. He alone remains standing there. He doesn't hold a candle--maybe he had already lit one before I noticed him.

I find the Dúnedain here as well, along with Elladan, Elrohir and Imrahil. The Dúnedain had kept to themselves in Gondor, choosing to remain silent or hidden. Many of the Rohirrim are here as well, and I understand why. We all suffered heavy losses, and we had no time to grieve because it was one battle after the next. I know many of the soldiers here also mourn the loss in front of the Black Gate. Aragorn had made sure that no corpse was left in front of the Gates, but the bodies didn't go too far, and were still buried in the land of Mordor, never to be recovered again.

As the sun sets, Aragorn and Legolas were not the only ones to sing of loss. The air is filled with the haunting song of mourning and the reminder that that the War is still too close, that the wounds are still fresh. As the night sets in, people begin to talk, tents are set up and wine is passed around. There is no need to light campfires or torches. We are already surrounded by hundreds of candles, and even further into the fields are thousands more.

Halbarad's sons, Halon and Arahael, join us during the night. Avorniel had cried until she was tired, and is now sleeping on a blanket under the stars, with Gimli sitting beside her, watching over her. Aragorn had gone off with Gandalf and Faramir to speak to the people, wondering if there is anything more he can do for them as their King. Now that things had settled down, the common-folk greatly appreciated the fact that their King came down to honor their dead. They were thankful that he was there to remember even them. "The nobles do not care about our lives. We do not even know what Lord Denethor looked like before he died. He has not come to speak to us in a long time." They tell him.

I stand where I am facing Minas Tirith instead of the Pelennor. It still makes me greatly uneasy to be here. Even now, it seems the memory of all that I suffered and all the people I saw so brutally killed still lingers here. The less I look at the fields where I have seen people be trampled under a mumakil, or had been impaled upon spears, or had their arms ripped off or their eyes gouged out by arrows, the less I worry. Though, I feel bile rise in my throat, anyway.

My hand has never left the hilt of the dagger I have strapped to my back in secret. I've always had this one last dagger from Lady Galadriel in my possession. Whether it was strapped to my leg hidden beneath layers of skirts, or under my pillow in case something may attack, I have kept it close. The feel of the hilt on my hand is the only comfort I can draw from, the only thing keeping me sane at the moment as I stand on a field of blood and bones.

"Ellie!" I almost throw the dagger then and there and only just managed to stop myself when I realize it's just Arahael coming towards me. I release my grip on my weapon, scared that I may actually hurt someone. Arahael has a stupid grin plastered on his face that felt out of place with the misery of the memorial. His eyes are bloodshot, his beard is unkempt.

"Are you drunk?" I gasp in surprise when I catch a whiff of Arahael's breath as he wraps an arm around my neck and practically chokes me when he pulls me in. Halon is seething beside him.

"Father died. Right...over...there..." Arahael drags me by my neck and points to the horizon. My breath seizes, and panic slowly rises up in my chest as he forces me to look at the great fields of Pelennor.

God, not now. Not now. On top of everything, not this and not now.

"Let her go, Arahael." Halon's voice is sharp, deadly. He puts an arm on Arahael's shoulder but he simply shakes Halon away, his grip around my neck tightening. I gasp for breath, and Halon looks at
us in horror. To anyone else, they may simply be seeing Arahael supporting himself with his arm slung over my shoulder. They won't see how tight his hold on me is, how petrified I am to be in this situation--where he is supposed to be my friend but all I want is to get him away from me as if he is an enemy.

I try to push Arahael away but my arms are shaking. The screaming, the ghost of metal scraping against metal, of bodies hitting the ground, Boromir's gasps for breath. I can hear it all again. It's deafening, it's too much.

"Let go." I croak out, trying desperately not to let the panic overwhelm me. This is like the grip around my neck as Boromir died in front of me. I'm vaguely aware of the rest of the Fellowship looking up at us from a few feet away in alarm.

"He was...on a horse. I was on a horse but I was too stupid to see one of those...those orc filth get through our line and then--" He made a noise that sounded too much like a blade cutting through skin, "you know just--" He made the sound again, and made a stabbing motion towards his stomach. That was how Halbarad died. Oh God, I can see it. I can see the blood spilling over his horse. Halbarad falling, my dagger in the orc's head, just a fraction of a second too late after the orc's blade sank into Halbarad's skin, him dying on the ground. "And then he died. He died and I never got to go to him because I was pushed back and I had to keep fighting."

Arahael's arm around my neck slackens, enough for me to pull back, grip his arm and use my upper body strength to throw him to the ground, where he lands on his back and moans.

He arches his back in pain but stays on the ground as I massage my neck, panting heavily. I can hear foosteps approaching us, and Halon pulling me away from Arahael's reach.

"Get up." Legolas is there in a heartbeat. He must have walked over to us the moment he heard me ask for Arahael to let go. He pulls Arahael by his shirt, his face scrunched into a disgusted scowl.

"Let him go, Legolas!" Halon snarls. It's not Halon's warning that loosens Legolas' hold on Arahael, however, nor my hand on his shoulder poised to pull him back. It's the tears in Arahael's eyes.

Arahael doesn't seem to care that Legolas was two seconds away from punching him. He reaches for the flask on his belt, and takes a swig of the liquor in it, throwing his head back. Legolas looks at him with a mixture of confusion and annoyance. But when Arahael raises his head again, a sob escapes from him, and he leans forward on Legolas' shoulder.

Bewildered, Legolas lets go of Arahael's shirt if only to support the Dunedán.

"What happened to him?" Merry asks. The rest of the Fellowship had come towards us. To onlookers, it simply looks like we're comforting a grieving friend. Arahael is not the only one crying in the fields right now, after all. Plenty of other mourners makes this scene not at all out of place.

"He'd started drinking heavily ever since we got here. If he isn't drinking, he's throwing things. I do not know which is worse." Halon explains, peeling his sobbing brother away from Legolas. I wrap my hand around Legolas' arm, and he pulls me toward him, gently, protectively.

"Most nights, he's either sleeping in his own piss or yelling at everyone who dares take his flask away from him. He has never gotten over father's death. It was hard for him."

I can almost imagine.

"Lay him down and let him sleep," Gandalf says, gently. He reaches for the flask and Arahael grips it tighter. Gandalf need only look at him sternly before he let go, and promptly passed out in Halon's
"Aragorn!" Legolas calls, helping Halon support his brother's weight. Aragorn looks over at our direction with concern and excuses himself to be with his kinsfolk.

I stand there, frozen, with my hand on my forehead as I try to calm down. "Are you hurt?" Gandalf asks me.

"Is that going to be me?" I whisper, weakly. I turn to him, tears blurring my vision. "I haven't been able to sleep well. And the only time I do is when I'm passed out from drinking too much. I get nightmares, the memories keep playing back. Is that how I'll end up, Gandalf?"

Gandalf places a hand on my shoulder and steers me towards somewhere more private, away from prying eyes. Merry and Pippin follow us.

I sit on the ground, still shaking from what just happened, still reeling from the thoughts that just will not leave my mind.

"It's understandable that you would feel this way, Ellie. You have been through so much." Gandalf says.

"I keep seeing Boromir die." I say, wrapping my arms around my knees.

"I see it, too. Every day. Boromir with the arrows in his chest, Lord Denethor on fire..." Pippin speaks up. "The whips of the Uruk-hai on the way to Isengard."

Merry sits down in front of me, the three of us just coming to an understanding. We have been through trauma together, and we're here now, with the scars on our backs and our minds to prove it.

"I never was able to recall most of our time with the Uruk-hai." Merry looks down. "It's all a fevered haze to me. All I can remember is thinking, This is it. This is how I'll die. But I never did, and sometimes I found myself begging for it all to just end."

It's like I'm hearing my own darkest thoughts through them. The last thing I can remember since our capture was Hildraed rescuing us. I don't know if I should be grateful that all that's left for me from that time is the fear, the hunger, and the pain of the bite on my shoulder.

I sniff, and pull the two of them towards me, the three of us on the ground, with each other as support. This has always been my relationship with Merry and Pippin, why I'm the closest to them among the hobbits. We've been through so much together, and we lean on each other when we can no longer bear the pain by ourselves.

"You are brave, all of you. You have an extraordinary amount of strength and kindness in your bones. And I wish I could take the pain from you, but it is beyond even my skill and wisdom." Gandalf says to us. "This I am sure of, you are not in this alone. And sharing the burden of your pain, however hard you think it might be, will help. Someday, the war would be a distant memory and all that will remain is the unwavering strength of your friendship."

He smiles, and it comforts me a bit, to know that he is there for us as well, "Take your time to heal, and whether you need to do it alone or you need someone to help ease the pain, we all will be here for you. For that is what a Fellowship is."

There is so much truth to that, and this brings me relief. However hard it may be for me, or for Merry, or Pippin, or Frodo or Gimli, or anyone in the Fellowship, we could always rely on each other. We've formed a bond so strong amongst ourselves that no matter how far apart we may be, we
could always find comfort and allies amongst us. And I know that not one of us will allow the others to feel alone. We're family. I may have lost Gramps and Rory and Donovan, but they are family, and we love each other, unconditionally and truthfully. I would never again want to go through everything that I have in the past few months, but I am thankful for this unbreakable bond of friendship I have with these eight people. We are all so different from each other, yet they have seen me laugh and cry and fear and mourn without judgment, in a way I never felt from anyone else even from back home save my own family.

We stay this way for a few minutes, silently gazing up at the great wall of Minas Tirith, watching the banners get caught in the wind and the candles flickering around us. Eventually, Merry and Pippin fall asleep, and I look up at Gandalf's hand when he offers it.

"A walk?" He asks me. I take his hand and he is kind enough to make sure that whatever path we took, my eyes would find the City and the not fields. I stop when I look up at the stars, and I see my stars.

Three of them, the brightest in the sky.

Rory, Gramps, Donovan.

"As long as they shine, your family will be with you." Legolas once told me, when we were in Lothlórien and he pointed those three stars to me. And in a way, they never left me.

"I still wish I could have said goodbye. Just once more. Let them know that I am safe and that they should take care of each other." I say.

"Take this." I turn around to find Gandalf holding out a candle to me. I do as he says and take the candle, and I walk towards one of the candles already lit on the ground to light it.

"Now, imagine them... And imagine how they want to see you. Close your eyes."

I feel silly at first, doing it. But I close my eyes anyway.

I picture Rory curled up on the couch with his textbooks on the ground, reading a comic book. I see Gramps on the other end of the couch, snoring while the television drones on. I imagine myself walking in, in that silly yellow hoodie--the one I was wearing when I first got to Middle-earth--and I'm holding Donovan's hand, who excitedly wakes up Gramps to let him know he's going back to college, and he found a job at this coffee shop, and the pay's not much but it will help. Gramps pulls him in for a hug, forgiving him before Donnie could even ask.

I sit beside Rory and put my arm around his shoulder and pull him in for a tight hug, as well. He laughs and pushes me away but I rain kisses down his messy dark hair and cheeks. "You take good care of Gramps, okay? Study hard for algebra. Don't ever lose your love for baseball. And sleep well, Rory, okay?"

He nods, and lets me kiss him one more time before telling me good night. "I love you!" I call to him as he goes into his room, "Love you too, El!"

I turn to my brother and grandfather, and I look at Donnie first. "You've got a lot to make up for." I say. He looks down in shame. "I know. I've been a horrible brother. I have no excuses, just a promise that I'll never leave them again."

"I love you, you goof. Faults and all. I'm sorry I never told you." I kiss his cheek, and I hug Gramps. His hold around me is tight, despite how weak he is. It's as if we both know this would be the last time we would ever get to hug each other. And I whisper, over and over, "I'm okay, Gramps. I'm
okay and I love you so much."

I open my eyes, in time to see Gandalf with his eyes closed, his lips moving though I can't hear what he says, and the wind gently blows my candle out. There are tears running down my cheeks again, but for once, they are of relief.

I have never felt so light in a long time. I know, no matter what happens, that my family back in New York will be okay. I pray that they be okay. If Eru is real, all I can ask for is for him to answer my prayer of safety, and happiness for them.

"I really miss them." I sniffle, a laugh bursting out from me, "But they'll be okay."

Gandalf opens his arms, and I hug him tightly, to thank him for this closure, to thank him for allowing me this time to imagine myself letting my family know that I love them. I didn't think I would ever feel relief like this again, and I'm happy. Today has been long, but at the end of it, I am happy. And that's really all I could ask for, at the moment.

Chapter End Notes

Castar is the currency of Gondor. Smaller silver coins called Tharni are worth 1/4th of a castar. Their Sindarin names are Mirian and Canath, respectively, and were likely used by the Elves.

Whooo! I must admit, tears were shed while writing some parts of this chapter. Maybe I'm just PMSing though lol

Sorry this took so long! The past week's been super busy for me. I was at this forum for women's solidarity that was organized by the French Embassy here in my country. My portrait was also featured in an art exhibit (My face was right up there with the vice president of our country, fam, I'm still amazed!) so I haven't had time to just sit down and write until yesterday.
Moonlight Upon the Water

Chapter Summary

Ellie spends a day in the lower district with Avorniel and Aedelind, and Legolas opens up more about what life for him is like back in Eryn Galen.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I didn't think it was possible for me to miss Ioreth and her talkativeness. She's been like a bright light, and to my delight, also offered to help with the charity work.

"If you plan on bringing down medicine as well, you must take me with you to the apothecary. You need to know which herbs to buy and there will be some there from Harad, I imagine. Uncommon herbs that we cannot grow here in Minas Tirith." She says while preparing the black snakeroot. She and her healers have been working overtime to provide relief for the commonfolk. The black snakeroot is for the woman whose father's medicine I promised to take care of during the petitions. Black snakeroot is something I'm very familiar with, though not by that name. In the modern world, it's called *Rauwolfia serpentina*, which contains reserpine, one of the most well-known medicine used for managing blood pressure. I'm surprised it's being used as far back as this time.

"Aw, I already promised Eniredír I'll go to the apothecary with him, and I don't want to take you away from your work. You're doing a lot of good helping people here. But if you have a list of the herbs you are running low on, I will make sure to buy those."

Ioreth shrugs, "If you ask me, that Lord Eniredír would be less knowledgeable but if you insist. Do not go around concocting anything without my permission."

I laugh, "I promise to run everything medicinal by you. Thank you, Ioreth." I say, taking the jar of snakeroot from her. Aedelind and Avorniel insisted on coming with me to the woman's home, Doroneth, or so Avorniel tells me her name is. We have to take horses, which makes sense because when we walked up from the Gates all the way up to the Citadel, it took hours. A horse would just be more faster.

We are out of place here in the lower levels. They wear worn out clothes with patches here, their hairs are messy and their faces are grim. We wear riding habits with delicate designs, our hairs are arranged elegantly, and our faces are fresh. I feel immediately guilty that we have lived such luxury in the Citadel.

"Should we not have guards escorting us?" Aedelind asks, uncomfortably aware that people are staring. This doesn't usually happen to her, because she's also not usually dressed like the way she does now. She's used to having her hair braided down her back and blood on her arms and dress. Aedelind's a noble, but the people of Edoras look at her with respect and familiarity. Here, she's met with bewilderment, even distrust. The common-folk of Gondor don't trust the nobles as much as the common-folk in Rohan do.

"They are not used to seeing nobles in this part of the city. Perhaps they are just thinking about the exact thing you said. But guards will slow us down, and harrass us out of the district as quickly as
possible for our 'safety.' Avorniel says.

We've slowed our horses down to make sure we will find Doroneth's house. Most of the men here are busy rebuilding homes. The last time I was down here, a child gave me a stone from the ruins of her home. I still keep that stone, along with the water sac that Hildraed gave me. They are the only memories of the war I can bear to keep, because both represent hope for a better future.

"My lady!" Someone calls. I turn and find Doroneth waving at us from a window. We halt our horses and tether them to the nearest fence. I stroke my horse's neck to calm her down, "I'll be back, buddy, okay? Stay calm. I won't be long." The horse snorts in response and nudges my face.

Doroneth open her door for us and the moment she sees all three of us, she hesitates, and then curtsies.

I immediately put my hand on her shoulder. "No, no, you don't have to do that for us. We're not in the presence of the King. You can just call me Ellie."

"Oh, forgive me, my--Ellie." Doroneth says. She turns to Aedelind and Avorniel, who both smile politely. Aedelind gives her a friendly wave. Doroneth nods and smiles shyly at her.

"These are my good friends. Aedelind of Rohan and Avorniel. They were kind enough to escort me, and Aedelind is a skilled healer. She can help with your father."

"She's very young to be a healer. I admire you, Lady Aedelind."

"It is fine if you call me Aedelind, good woman. I learned from my mother about healing. If you need anything, you come straight to me."

"Oh, we're just standing here, how rude of me. Come inside, come inside." Doroneth opens her door wider for us to let us through. "Please forgive the mess. I have five children and it can get cramped."

I see the five children she spoke of, sleeping in one bed. Avorniel looks around with concern. The entire house is just one room, one side being the "kitchen" with a table and a fireplace to cook in and to keep warm, and cabinets to store plates and foodstuff in. There are three single beds. One for all the children to lay in horizontally, to make more room. Their feet dangle off the side, and a thin blanket covers them. On another bed, an old man sits and smiles at us. And another bed, I assume, is for Doroneth. There is a clutter of wooden dolls and horses, and there are empty jars on the shelves. What surprised me is the grass on the ground. I can smell hints of fragrant herbs, but it seems to have been out for days, like how potpourri smells towards the end of its use.

"Sorry about the rushes. I know you girls are used to those woven rushes up in that fancy house at the top." The old man says to us.

"It's perfectly fine, sir." Avorniel says, though I notice her pulling her dress up in order for the grass not to get caught in her dress.

There are dresses, as well. Beautiful dresses that hang next to the empty bed. I am only too aware that my bed chambers is much, much larger than this. Avorniel, too, seems well aware of this fact, and seems embarrassed to be here.

"Please, sit." The old man motions at the table, where there are stools. "I'm Síron, by the way. Doroneth's father. Those are my grandchildren. They're taking their afternoon nap."

"Thank you." Aedelind smiles, being the first to sit, "I am Aedelind, sir."
"Sir? You're too kind, miss, but I'm only a carpenter."

"I am Avorniel."

"Avorniel? Hm. You know, my son used to be an apprentice in the smithy. Speaks very highly about the daughter of his master. I think he was talking about you?"

"My family does have the blacksmith under our employ, and I used to sneak into the smithy when I was younger. But forgive me if I don't remember him." Avorniel says.

"Eh, I wouldn't blame you. He was a very timid lad. Quiet, and all that."

Avorniel hesitates, "Was?" She repeats, softly.

"He was taken by a fever. Died a long time ago."

"I am so sorry, Síron."

"Sorry? There's no need to be sorry. It wasn't your fault or anything."

"Would you like some mead? It's not as good as the ones in the castle but it's drinkable." Doroneth interrupts.

"No, thank you. Please, you do not need to accomodate us. We are here to help you." Aedelind says.

I reach into the pack I have with me and place the jar of powdered snakeroot on the table. "I'm sorry if I only brought one jar. Ioreth said that this jar should be finished first before a new jar is made, or the extra jar would have molds in it." I say.

Doroneth's eyes widen, "This would last for two months, this would. Thank you, Ellie, thank you."

Síron walks toward us to check the jar, and his jaw drops when he recognizes me. "This is--this is an honor. I thought the only time I would ever only see you was in the victory parade. And now, you're in my home. And you have helped my family." He says to me.

"It's the least I could do." I say, warmed by their joy.

"May I?" Aedelind stands from her stool and motions for the older man to sit. He does so, confused, while Aedelind places a hand on his back and checks his pulse. If only stethoscopes have been invented here. Or sphymomanometers.

"Do you feel any worse for wear now?" Aedelind asks.

"Err, no. I do have horrible headaches and neck and chest pain, but only if I move too much or am stressed."

"What kind of diet do you have?"

He shrugs, "Whatever is on the table."

Aedelind turns to Doroneth, "How do you prepare the food?"

"I cook pottage, mostly. Just throw whatever ingredients we have in the pot."

"Even lard?"
"Yes. It fills the belly so I get lard in."

"I would suggest giving your father the soup without lard in it first. Fat would make his heart condition worse. Get white beans and leafy vegetables in his diet, if you can. And only give him meat with no fat." Aedelind is in her element now, ever a good doctor. It's amazing how quickly this fourteen-year-old girl can switch from a carefree teenager to a commanding healer.

"You could continue cooking with lard, but only put it in after you have set aside a bowl for your father that does not have any fat in it. Do you still work, sir?"

"I'm supposed to be helping with repairs but I haven't been able to get up from bed."

"Let your body rest, sir. In a week, if you follow the diet I gave you, you would recover much quicker. You take the snakeroot as a tea, I suppose?"

"Yes, miss."

"Continue that, but only drink it during the morning and the night. It can be harmful if you take too much. And only a teaspoonful."

Doroneth and her father look at Aedelind in awe. I don't think they're used to having a trained healer advising them, let alone one who is much younger than them.

Aedelind doesn't let them catch a breath. She turns to the children next, "Do I need to examine them?"

"My youngest." Doroneth says, immediately. She goes over to the kids sleeping on the bed and nudges one of them awake. They raise their dark heads and look up at us in surprise.

"Mama, who are they?" One of the kids point at us.

"Hi." I wave at the kids.

"Mama, are they princesses? What are they doing here?"

"No, darling. They're friends. Come, Emlin."

There is one child who stands out. He alone has golden hair, and is the slowest to move. He has less energy than his siblings, who immediately approach me and Avorniel with curious eyes.

"He has been sick with a cough and his fever will not go away. I'm worried about him. He's been like this for days..."

While Aedelind examines little Emlin, the other kids swarm around us. They don't seem to be that far apart in age. The oldest looks to be around thirteen or twelve, with the youngest after Emlin looking to be around five.

"Mama, there's horses outside our house!" One of the kids gasp, and the rest follow after her to check them out.

"You'll terrify the poor things!" Síron calls.

"Oh, no, it's quite alright. I will play with them. I love children." I volunteer, running out after them. The horses are moving nervously while the kids, intimidated by their sizes, hesitate by the door. I take my horse and untether her, stroking her neck to calm her down.
"She's very gentle. She gets scared very easily, though, so you have to be careful." I say to the kids, approaching them with the horse. They collectively back away from it.

I give them a playful smile and lean down to their level, "The first one brave enough to touch her gets to ride her as well."

A little girl steps up, probably around six. Her little hand reaches up, hesitantly while I hold my horse steady. The horse snorts, and the little girl screams in surprise and backs away. But she tries again, and this time, she touched the horse's nose briefly before running behind her older brother, laughing in delight.

"See? She won't harm you." I laugh, "What's your name, little one?"

"Eiliant." The little girl says, shyly.

"Eiliant? You have a very pretty name. Do you want to ride the horse, now?" I ask. She steps up, hesitantly, but she lifts her arms to let me carry her and I get her up on the horse's back. "Okay. Hold on to the saddle. I'll make her go slow."

As I walk them, Eiliant's siblings follow after us. Eiliant giggles on top of the horse, and her siblings, emboldened by the fact that she wasn't being thrown off, all ask for a turn. And then, more kids approach us, curious about this stranger with her horse.

Before I know it, I'm playing with a bunch of kids, teaching them how to play dodgeball when one of the kids brought out a ball. Soon, my hair and dress are a mess, because one of the kids had the brilliant idea of covering the ball in mud so they have more motivation to dodge it and I was unfortunate enough to not only be the biggest target but, because of my dress, also the slowest.

Around us, adults grow more and more pleased to hear their children's laughter. And without the added work of taking care of them, they go about their business much quicker. While we play, the repairs are done around us. The kids have endless amount of energy, and I'm happy enough to keep up with them.

I don't even notice Legolas until I hear him laugh when the muddy balls hits my shoulder and gets in my hair.

"Legolas!" I gasp, looking up at him. "Time out for me, kids! Look at this mess you made!"

They giggle and shriek when I motion at my dress and scoop up some mud to fling at them. They take their ball and run to a cleaner part of the street.

I approach my immaculately clean boyfriend, who backs away from me when he sees the state I'm in. "What are you doing here?"

"Aedelgar mentioned you would be here with Aedelind. I was going to suggest taking you to the city library. Instead, I see you surrounded by children and covered in mud."

"And you won't even kiss me." I sigh, dramatically.

"I will kiss you after you bathe."

"So this is the limit of your love for me."

"Ellie." He warns when I approach him.
"I can't believe you would reject me just because I have a bit of mud on my dress."

"That is not a bit of mud. That is a lot of mud." He backs away, slowly. He knows I have something up my sleeve.

"Meleth, do you know that mud is good for the skin? Very rejuvenating. Keeps acne away."

"I do not know what acne is."

"Well, lucky you and your perfect elven skin, huh?" I laugh when he dodges my hand that was supposed to be on his face. I see the kids behind him watching us with curiosity.

"Get him!" I shout. Legolas turns around, and ducks just in time for the ball to hit my face instead of him. The children laugh maniacally as I fall to the ground.

"Ellie!"

Heh. I feel bad that I know this is a weakness of his. His gut instinct is always to come straight to my side when I get hurt. I moan to be more convincing, but the moment he leans down towards me, I wrap my arms around his neck an pull him down.

He yelps in surprise, and falls on top of me. The kids throw the ball and it hits the back of his head, and he laughs at the silliness of our state.

"Look at what you have done." He says, though with a good-natured grin. I laugh, wiping away the mud on his cheek.

"Ellie! Let's play some more!" Eiliant calls. Legolas and I both turn in their direction, laughing at their excitement. He helps me up and I look down at myself, "Well, I won't be using this dress anymore." I snort. Not only am I covered in mud, I'm also incredibly dusty.

"Have you no shame?" An older woman approaches us, and to my bewilderment, she takes one of her children by the arm and pulls him away.

"Ow! But mama I wanna play!"

"Have the decency to not perform your strange elven mating ritual in front of the children!" The older woman snaps.

Legolas and I exchange dumb-founded looks. I almost laugh, because "strange elven mating ritual" sounds ridiculous, but the smile is gone before it truly forms when I realize she's completely serious. Legolas' eyebrows furrow in confusion, and his mouth is open but he does not have any words.

"Excuse me?" I try to be polite, though I'm suddenly very self-conscious about my current state.

"I don't know what sorcery you've put these children under, but you will stay away from mine." With that, the woman walks off, taking her child with her. More women come to take their children away and to berate them, until there's only Doroneth's children and a muddy ball forgotten on the ground left.

"Sorcery?" Legolas repeats, disgusted by the accusation.

Eiliant looks ready to cry, and when Doroneth opens the door to check what we're doing, little Eiliant runs to her, sobbing. Doroneth looks around in confusion, first at the grim faces of her kids, then my dirty state, then at Legolas. Her eyes widen when she sees him.
"Come inside." Doroneth says, quickly. I take Legolas' hand and enter Doroneth's home. "I would offer a rag or water to wash all the mud off but..."

"Don't worry about it, we've had worse things stain our clothes." I say, waving my hand with a laugh. Ah, yes, the fond memory of shit dripping from my shoulder and a yellow hoodie.

"Begging your pardon, sir, but what are you doing here?" Doroneth asks Legolas.

"Legolas. This is a surprise." Avorniel says, then quirks an eyebrow up at the mud on his clothes. She giggles, "I think this may just be the first time I have ever seen you dirty." She quickly realizes no one is in a teasing mood, though, and looks up at us with concern.

"Why were the women so hostile? They didn't have a problem with their kids playing with me an hour ago." I ask, while Doroneth shushes Eiliant.

"I don't think they have a problem with you, miss Ellie." Síron mutters. It takes a moment for us to process what he just said, but it dawns on me when Legolas straightens his back.

"Is it me?" There is hurt in his voice. Síron nods.

"They do not like elves--or the idea of them. Most didn't even believe you existed until you walked these streets. They have terrible notions of elves."

"Like what?" Legolas snaps.

"Like when men walk into your realm, they are never heard of again. Or when they do, they're not as they once were, that their minds are corrupted. They say elves cannot have children so they steal ours and transform them to elves with sorcery."

Legolas releases a disbelieving snort through his nose, "Surely you know that is simply not true!"

"I do. Doroneth does. Many people find it ridiculous. I have seen three elves in my lifetime. I did not think I ever would, but when I did, they did not take my children, but protected them. Many people know better than to spread rumor and accusations. But there are people who will think the worse of those that don't look exactly like them. They have a fear of the unfamiliar, and that fear leads to--"

"Bigotry." I finish, fuming that even now, hatred and prejudice against other races exist like this.

"Unfortunately so."

"Even here..." Legolas mutters under his breath. He doesn't sound surprised when he says it, he sounds... disappointed. Like he was expecting better. I can't help but wonder if he's faced this kind of discrimination before, and my heart bleeds for him. He, who has only ever been gentle and kind. He shakes his head, "I should go, then. Before your neighbors think you are associated with me."

Síron nods, but Aedelind speaks up before Legolas could leave, "Did they not recognize Legolas? Surely, they know his contribution to the War, they would know he's part of the Fellowship. He is even one of the King's closest friends."

"Does that really ever change the mind of people who only see him as an elf?" Síron says.

Of course. Leave it to humans to completely dismiss someone else's achievements because of their race. Legolas looks down, looking completely heart-broken. All this time, that's how he wanted to be known. Just an elf. He wanted his achievements to be his, without people thinking his father had anything to do with them, without wanting the fact that his father is a king determine how people
look at him. And now, people are taking even that away from him. I take his hand, because he needs my support right now.

"More people have great respect for you than those who do not, sir. It's just that the ones who don't have the biggest mouths, if you don't mind me saying so." Doroneth says. Legolas squeezes my hand, but once again, that kind smile is back on his face.

"I understand."

"We should go. We have overstayed our welcome." Avorniel says, standing from the stool. Doroneth nods, while the children groan.

"We'll come back if you want! We can play dodgeball again, and I'll bring sweets." I say to encourage the disappointed kids around us.

"We would be honored, milady." Doroneth beams. She leads us out of the house, and Legolas rides my horse instead with me behind him. We lag behind Avorniel and Aedelind, where I sit behind Legolas on the horse, mud caked on our clothes and hair.

"Meleth, do you want to talk about it?" I whisper. My forehead is leaning on his back, and my arms are wrapped around his waist. With the noise of the busy streets and the clip-clop of the horses' hooves, it's just the two of us who could hear each other now. I feel his shoulders tense up.

I raise my head slightly. "It's nothing..." He says, in a tone that clearly means it's something.

"You are raising your eyebrow." He says after a moment.

"Whoa! Dude, do elves have eyes at the back of their heads too?"

He laughs, "I can practically feel your skepticism."

"Babe, you know you can tell me anything."

He is quiet again for a few moments, and I feel the horse slowing down.

"Back home, there were... people who did not approve of me or my siblings. Our mother was fully Silvan, and there were a few Sindarin lords who were quite upset with my father for not choosing their daughters to be his wife." Legolas explains, "They followed my grandfather to Eryn Galen purely for survival. A few of them did not like how the Silvan elves lived, but because my grandfather embraced their lifestyle and because the Silvan accepted him as king, they had no choice but to stay in the Forest. They believe that the Silvan in my blood, as well as my siblings', taints the Sindarin in us. And that, if anyone was ever to inherit the throne, it should be a fully Sindarin relative. One of our cousins."

"I'm surprised your father didn't exile them because of treason or something."

"No, no. He would not. There never was anyone who openly spoke against us in court. There were just rumors and accusations, but no proof of who was spreading them. Besides, Taumathor has long accepted that he will not be king. He's proud to serve the realm as the commander of father's armies. And I am relieved that I'm the last to be considered. Silarassel is our official ambassador. She is quite the diplomat. If anyone were ever to be on the throne, Silarassel will be the best amongst the four of us. And Celaireth is quite happy being in charge of training new warriors and protection of the stronghold. The throne is the least of our worries, especially since father has taken great care of the realm."
"I'm sorry you had to go through all of that." I say. I understand him more and more when he opens up. I understand why he's guarded, and why he doesn't trust easily. I'm just devastated that he's been going through all of that for years, and continues to go through that even now. Yet, he still looks at the world with hope and respect. Despite how cruel it's been, he still loves the world and the creatures inhabiting it.

"You do not have to be sorry. It made me realize who I could trust. Taumathor and I have our differences, but the four of us have always been there to protect each other." He says.

We get to the Citadel just as the sun is setting. "Jesus, we took that long?" I groan. Okay, so the next time I ever plan to go back to the lowest district, I should pack for safety. Maybe have a stop-over in one of the inns at the higher districts on my way home.

"What... Have you done with yourselves?" Ah yes. Mother Elladan, come to tell his kids off. Out of all the people to greet us, it had to be him. Elrohir is, of course, close by.

"Do you want a hug, gwador?" Legolas says, coming towards him. Elladan looks at the state of his clothes with disgust. "I have a good memory, elfling. I can draw how you look now and send it to Celaireth." This makes Legolas step back and both Elladan and Elrohir smirk.

"I think you would find it interesting that the bath houses are quite empty at this time, Legolas." Elrohir says, breezily.

"I think I would rather bathe from the comfort of my own chambers."

"And leave you to track mud into the castle while dwarven guests roam about? I think not." Elladan says, giving him a slight push.

"The public baths are dirty!"

"The servants clean it during both the dawn and dusk. It should be perfectly clean at this moment." Elladan reasons.

"And there is a separate pool for honored guests. It's private... quiet... it has rose petals in the water." Elrohir says in a sing-song voice. My eyes widen and I look up to see Legolas' face reddening.

"We shall see you both at dinner." Elladan chuckles, turning his back and waving goodbye.

Legolas and I stand there in silence. And then we hear laughter behind us. Apparently, Avorniel and Aedelind haven't left for the stables and have been watching us quietly. Now that they've made their presence known, however, they take my horse's reins.

"I hope you have fun and relax." Aedelind giggles.

"The guests' poolhouse is very comfortable, I assure you. The ceiling remains open to let in the light of the sun or the moon. Very romantic." Avorniel snorts. "I'll tell the servants to bring clothes for you."

Why are our friends the way they are? I widen my eyes at Avorniel threateningly as she yanks the reins from my hand. "If your eyes go any bigger, they will pop out of your head. Think of it as practice."

"Practice for what?"

"Are you really asking me that? Do you truly want me to spell it out?" She smirks.
"I can't deal with you right now. Just go." I shake my head, the corners of my mouth quirking upwards. Aedelind waves her fingers at us before turning away. They loop their arms together and walk to the stables, laughing, the horses trailing behind them.

"You know they're never gonna shut up, right?" I say to Legolas as we stand side by side in silence. There are guards around us, and in front of the double doors that would lead to the Hall of Kings. But they remain discreet.

"Forgive me for Elladan and Elrohir. It seems they did not inherit their father's intelligence." Legolas says.

I laugh, and take his hand, walking with him to the bath houses.

"Come. You have seen me bathing several times already. This should be no different."

"By accident! And we never bathed together." He's blushing. He's more shy about this than I am.

"Well." I say, "Now we can."

The twins weren't kidding when they said the bath houses would be empty. Apart from the servants cleaning up, there is only us, and they point us to a secluded part of the house. We take off our shoes before entering. Like everything in the Citadel, the houses have white marble walls and floors. There are drapings made from a thin fabric, baskets of scented oils and a pool in the middle of the room, half the size of the one by the entrance. And just like Elrohir said, there are rose petals floating in the water.

"It's smaller than I anticipated." I say.

"That is because this is only supposed to be for an honored nobleman and his wife. Their company usually bathed in the common pool, where we first came in."

I quirk an eyebrow, "A nobleman and his wife?" I repeat.

He smiles, shyly, and looks down, "If you would rather bathe here, I can just go to the common pool." He turns to go, but I take his hand to stop him from moving.

"No. Stay." The words are barely a whisper, and I feel breathless. He steps towards me, to the edges of the pool. The mood shifts considerably. We both hold our breath as he unlaces his tunic and pulls it over his head.

My breath catches in my throat. He's beautiful. His arms are muscular, and his chest and abdomen are perfectly sculpted. He has a six-pack. Good lord, he's gorgeous. But also, scarred. There are scars on his chest and side from slices of blades he likely had during battles. There are also scars on his shoulder and upper arms, the parts of his body usually covered by his tunic. His tunic hits the ground and he steps closer. I bring my eyes up to meet his, and he takes that slight movement of my head upwards to kiss me.

His touch is feather-light, and it was no more but a brush of his lips. I nudge my nose with his and lean closer, and the warmth of his lips are on mine again. My hand travels to his shoulders, to his back, where I trace more scars with my fingers when I pull him closer. His hand tugs at the laces on my dress, fumbling as he does so. I help him with the laces and shake the dress off until I'm only in a thin chemise. I step back, and pull him towards me. My feet enter the water and the more I step backwards, the deeper we go, until the water reaches my waist. My chemise is floating on top of the water, and Legolas presses his body against mine to kiss me again.
This time, he is not being soft. This time, his kiss is deep and his tongue slides into my parted lips, and we pant between kisses. My mind is spinning. And I take another step back.

Only to slip on the floor of the pool and smack into the water back-first. He pulls me up, laughing as he does so. I cough out the water I've just inhaled and push back the hair covering my eyes.

"Oh, you think that's funny, huh, pretty boy?" I say. I jump, because he's much taller than me, and drag his head under the water. He thrashes for a few seconds before quickly recovering and pulling me down the water with him. I shriek and try to fight him but he's always been stronger than me, and he throws me into the water.

"Don't you dare--" Before I could finish the sentence, my head is back underwater. When I re-emerge, he's cackling. I splash water on him to wipe the smirk off his face.

"Ellie!" He complains as I continue to violently splash water on him. He turns his head slightly to protect himself and with a powerful sweep of his arm, fights back with a fucking tsunami.

"I yield!" I cough between splutters of water from my mouth. We both pant and lean against the edge of the pool. I try not to look at the beads of water on his chest but it's so hard when he's beside me panting for breath. I am well aware that my chemise, which is white and thin, has become one with my skin but if he's gonna be unfair with his glistening pecs and massive shoulders, I'm gonna tease him with the shape of my breasts. Because I'll be damned if I'm the only one being driven crazy here.

And then I remember I've only ever gone to second base with anyone. I was the "I'll have sex when I get married" type of girl back in high school, and when I changed my mind in college and considered having sex, I just... didn't have the time anymore. Between studying and working and taking care of Gramps and Rory, I just never had time to fool around.

So here I am. A twenty-three year old virgin. With the embodiment of perfection glistening and wet beside me. The thought alone makes me sink lower in the water until it reaches my neck. Legolas' physique intimidates me. What if he realizes how awkward and completely inexperienced I am?

"Let me clean your hair." Legolas says, getting out of the pool to go towards one of the baskets on the shelves. I attempt not to look at how his leggings are clinging to parts of him that I usually don't get to appreciate because his tunic usually goes over it.

Gosh, he has a nice ass. I dunk my head into the water before I moan out loud at just the sight of it. When I resurface, he slips back into the water and makes me turn around. His hands work gently into my hair, first with the lye soap and then with the rose oil for the conditioner. He runs his fingers through my hair, which has grown considerably longer since I came to Middle-earth. Before the beginning of our Quest, my hair reached the middle of my back. Now it's almost to my waist.

Legolas' hair has grown, as well, though not by much. I think he trims it to keep it shoulder-length so he could move well in battle without having to worry about his hair getting caught in anything. When he finishes washing my hair, I make him turn around so I can wash his, massaging his scalp as I did.

"This is traditionally an act of a married couple in elven culture. Hair-washing, as well as braiding." He tells me. This makes me freeze. "We're not married now, are we?"

He laughs. "No, not yet. For you and I to be married, we must first exchange rings. That is the betrothal, and we remain betrothed for a year or so in order for both parties to know if the marriage is what they want. If they both agree, they get to keep the rings and throw a feast for their families."
"Hm. Interesting. In my time, exchanging rings is the last step to getting married, not the first."

"The feast is not the last step in elven tradition."

"Oh?"

"I will let you know what the last step is in the future, however."

"You know I can just ask one of the twins what the last step is, right?"

Legolas snorts, "You could. You would be teased mercilessly, however. And I assure you, Aragorn will not tell you."

"Why not?"

"That will remain, I'm afraid, a secret for you to uncover next time." He dunks his head underwater to wash everything off and wades away from me.

"Legolas!" I whine, "I'll find out eventually, you know!"

I squeak when he emerges behind me and wraps an arm around my waist.

"I know. But in the meantime..." He kisses my shoulder, brushing my hair back so he could sprinkle kisses down my back, his hands gliding down my waist. I shiver when his lips touch the base of my neck, and I turn around before he could do more. If he does, I won't be able to restrain myself.

"Go get the soap. We're supposed to be getting clean, meleth." I tell him, letting my hands glide on his chest.

"As you command." He steps back, does a playful bow and walks back to the basket. I bite my bottom lip to hide my grin when I check out his butt again. Okay, I'm never gonna get over that.

"Nice view." I tease. He looks up at the open ceiling, where the moon and stars shine down on us.

"It is. There are no clouds tonight. The sky is clear. Nature has been good to us tonight."

Yes, she has, I think, while I admire Legolas' body. We sit at the edge of the pool after he brings the soap and brushes, and somehow, we just decide to sit back to back.

"I did not know you had moles down your back. They are like constellations, and your skin is a sky meant just for me." He says. I blush, thankful that he's not seeing my face again. He dips back in the water and I turn around so my legs are in as well.

He takes one of my feet and rubs the soles. Gosh, I needed that. He really does wonders with his hands, it's amazing. "Oh, wow. If you weren't a good warrior, you could make a fortune out of being a masseur."


"That is an actual profession, where you come from?"

"Dude, we have professional athletes where I come from. Everyone can make a living out of anything, if they're good at it."

"And what were you good with?" He asks.
"Hm. I was studying to become a pharmacist. You call them apothecaries here. I was a part-time waitress, though. I served people their food in a restaurant--a tavern, if you will." I say.

"You did not cook the food instead? You are a wonderful cook. You have a way of making radish soup feel like home." Legolas says.

"Nah. I cooked for my family, but I don't think I can cook for other people. I used to be afraid of cooking for others because I didn't think my cooking was good enough." I laugh at the silliness of it now. I have gained my confidence here, I realize. "What about you, O Prince Legolas? You never told me any specifics about what you did for your realm."

"I lead an elite team of the realm's best archers. In times of war, I'm supposed to be in charge of all of the archers, but I was most in my element being a Captain. We were usually the first to go into the forest if spiders or orcs came too close to the stronghold, or when we needed to purge a part of the forest of any evil creature. Celai'reth is in charge with the protection of the stronghold itself. She is even one of my father's bodyguards. The protection of the forest was my responsibility."

His voice softens. I slide closer to the edge of the pool, and he rests his hand on my knee.

"If I was not a part of the Fellowship, I would have been fighting alongside my family to protect it. Every day, I wonder if I had abandoned the realm."

"Legolas, darling." I cup his face with my hands, and gently lift his head to look at me, "You protected your realm. You fought here, and in Mordor. You did not abandon anyone."

"Taumathor would call me a fool."

"Screw him. You've been nothing but brave and honorable. They'll be proud of you." I give him a peck on the lips to encourage him, and he comes closer so that he's between my legs. I wrap my legs around his waist as he deepens the kiss, our bodies pressing against each other. His arm wraps around my waist, and before I know it, I'm back in the water, and his lips are on my neck, and his fingers are tracing up and down my knee and thigh. I let out a little moan at the sensation his fingers bring. My fingers tangle into his hair and I urge his head up so I can kiss him.

"My lo--Eru!"

Legolas and I push ourselves away from each other, and I sink into the water in surprise. A servant had walked in, carrying a basket containing new clothes for us. The only visible part of my body is from my nose up, and even then I know I'm blushing all the way up to my forehead. The servant looks mortified, and quickly puts our clothes on the table before running out. Legolas stares after her as she flees, his hands on his waist.

When she's gone I lift my head out of the water. "Oh, noooo." I moan, covering my mouth while Legolas laughs beside me. We catch each other's eyes and laugh even harder. "I can never show my face to anyone in the castle again." I say, hiding my face behind my hands.

"The poor girl looked so terrified. I could hear her heart beating from here.' Legolas chuckles. "But she came in at the perfect time. A second longer and I would have let go of all restraints." He teases. I smack his chest with the back of my hand, giggling. He helps me out of the pool so we can dry ourselves and change, and we get out of the bath houses with not a speck of dirt on ourselves, carrying our wet clothes in the same basket that the servant came in with. We did get to the Great Hall in time for dinner.

We haven't been able to get away from Elladan and Elrohir's insufferable smirks or Aedelind and
Avorniel's giggling since.

Chapter End Notes

I couldn't resist. Ellie and Legolas haven't had any alone time since they came to Gondor so I had to. I hope you guys enjoyed!
It's a nice, sunny day, I slept in until lunch, there are no petitions for the king and I'm currently waiting for Avorniel in the Great Hall. The bath I had with Legolas last night still keeps playing on repeat in my mind. I just can't stop thinking about what I would have done had that servant not walked in... And also, I can't stop thinking about that servant that walked in. If I know anything from the modern world, it's that people will always talk.

It does not escape my notice that Henneril has been looking over at me and cackling like a hyenna. You know, she would have been my type if she wasn't being such a bitch for no reason. Aedelind notices, too.

"So," Éowyn says, plopping down next to me with this look, "I heard you and Legolas had fun last night."

I look pointedly at Aedelind, who snorts. "It wasn't me!" She says, though from the blush on her cheeks, I'd bet it was.

"I need details!" Éowyn poked me.

"Nothing happened! Just some kissing!" I say, trying to ignore the wide grin forming on her face.

"It must have been really intense kissing if the servants are talking about it."

"He didn't have a shirt on, my chemise was clinging to my skin, we were in the pool, things happened. But nothing below first base!" I explain, attempting to swat her arm to make her stop grinning. I freeze mid-smack, "Wait. The servants have been talking?"

"Just amongst themselves. I would not have known had I not heard them in the kitchen."

"Oh, this is not good."

"They will not spread it to the nobles, I assure you. The divide between servant and noble is severe here. They do not dare talk to the nobles unless addressed." The smile from Éowyn's mouth slips.

"I heard them talking too but it was mostly about how they wished they had time for whatever you two did." Aedelind adds.

"I think Hinneril heard, too." I say, darkly, turning to the noblewoman with her gaggle of minions, who chose that moment to walk up to us seeing as how we're currently not surrounded by any kings or lords. Figures they would come at people only when they're vulnerable. Or so they think.
I'm not in the least bit intimidated, and neither are my companions. Éowyn has literally stabbed the Witch-king of Angmar in the face, Aedelind chops off limbs from living human beings to save lives, and I've faced countless orcs and lived to tell the tale. A bunch of gossips look like a walk in the park after that. Éowyn beside me looks bored and mildly irritated that they're interrupting. Aedelind, on the other hand, looks pleased to be in the midst of a fight. In fact, she looks tempted to hurl something, with that small smirk on her face.

"Lady Ellie, Lady Éowyn. You." Hinneril does a dramatic bow that I know is meant to mock me instead of to show respect. I stare up at her, not responding, just so she can say whatever catty remark she has in her system and go. Aedelind's eye twitches at being referred to so impolitely.

"Did you have a good bath?" Hinneril asks, mildly. Her friends giggle behind her.

"Very." I reply, icily.

"Nice and long?"

"Quite."

"Pleasurable, even?"

"Just say what you have to say and go." Éowyn says, darkly.

"I just wanted to give Lady Ellie a fair warning." Hinneril places a hand on her chest, looking hurt. "You might want to be more discrete, Lady Ellie." She puts a lot of emphasis on the word 'Lady', and begins to run her fingers over the edge of the table, tracing the rings formed on the wood, "There are rumors going around. You would not want the others to have any ideas."

I continue to just glare at her, then turn to my companions, "Aedelind, do you know I always carry a dagger with me?"

"Why, no, Ellie, I did not know at all." Aedelind says in an exaggerated surprised tone. "Wherever do you sheath it?"

"Right here." I yank my dress up and pull one of my daggers from the sheath on my ankle. I then begin to spin it, up and down, the blade going in circles as I speak, "Do you also know I have not had any practice with it for a month now? My dagger-throwing has probably gotten rusty." I punctuate that last word by stabbing the dagger an inch away from Hinneril's fingers, making the woman squeak and retract her hand. "Oh, forgive me, Lady Hinneril. As I said, I'm a tad out of practice. Anyway, thank you for your concern but I'm certain that I, who has faced down orcs in Mordor, several trolls and an army of undead, would not need to worry about my reputation."

"You best be careful, girl. You think you are protected by being the king's favorite wench but you have no idea how easy it is to ruin someone in this court, no matter their status. One can easily say your position in the army was simply as a prostitute to keep the men entertained. And any man who tries to defend you will simply look like he's doing it to defend his own honor."

"How dare you!" Éowyn snaps as my mouth hangs open in disgust. Hinneril simply smiles at her sweetly, curtsies and leaves. I yank my dagger out of the table and begin to spin it between my fingers to relieve myself of anger.

"Can I kick her shin? Just once?" Aedelind begs. I'm completely at a loss of words. I don't know what it is she has against me, but this is straight up just messed up. Just sick. And fucking ungrateful, too! My ass was out in the Pelannor Fields defending Minas Tirith so her pretty self didn't have to worry about getting eaten alive by orcs.
"Talk to Lord Aragorn about her, Ellie! You cannot let that pass." Éowyn urges me.

"Let her talk big. It will make her look like a fool. There aren't any soldiers here in court but the Dúnedain, and Prince Imrahil, King Éomer, Gandalf. They would defend me, and she is an idiot if she thinks she can question their honor and get away with it."

"She has no respect, whatsoever!" Éowyn huffs. "It amazes me that you held back."

"She's doing that to get a reaction out of me. She must have loved that little scandal during the petitions." I say, still seething. "If she thinks she can bait me into a petty fight, she's sadly mistaken."

"I still would like to put some castor oil in her tea so she can be removed from our presence even for just a day." Aedelind mumbles, making me snort. Castor oil is a laxative. If anyone takes that, they'd be confined to their chamber pots.

Avorniel arrives later with a smug grin, "I heard Hinneril crying in the halls. She was really shaken up. Something about almost being killed and a bunch of wild women. What did I miss?"

"Hinneril threatened to ruin Ellie's reputation."

"The dagger landed an entire inch away from her hand, she needs to stop being so dramatic." I sigh, sheathing the dagger back. "What is it with people in this world and calling me a whore?"

"Of this world...?" Aedelind mutters.

"You need to tell the King." Avorniel says, and Éowyn nods.

"No. I'm not dragging Aragorn into this. He's got enough to worry about without some vindictive noblewoman to deal with. I can handle Hinneril." I say.

"But if you need the castor oil, I'm right here." Aedelind says. We finish lunch after that, with Avorniel letting me know how much money we have for the donation.

I tell her how we are to distribute that money for our resources, and she offers her family's carts to bring the supplies to wherever we may need them. Budgeting all of our money is hard work, and we continue the conversation for an hour. Since Éowyn is already here, she brings her experience handling the household of the Meduseld to the table. Faramir has promised before that he would dedicate soldiers for the security of the event. Lord Éomer promised to send his men to help with the heavy lifting--Aedelgar and Hildraed would be in charge. Ioreth has made me promise I would have space for her tent, where she would be tending to medical needs of the common-folk with Aedelind and, to her dismay, Eniredír helping her. Anything financial, Avorniel was handling. And food preparation would be my area.

"We only have enough gold and castar for a day's work, however." Avorniel warns me. I'm well aware something like this would happen. Most of the money from the king's treasury would be used to repair structures and houses, as well as repairing roads.

Avorniel takes my hand when she sees the look on my face, "We're doing something good, Ellie. We'll make life easier for everyone in due time." She says.

I smile at her and say, "I'm so glad you exist. At least someone here cares about others."

"I was lucky to be born in a fortunate family. That does not make me better than others, however. And I find that the lower you go, the more honest the people are."
"You have been to the lower districts already?" Éowyn asks.

"Well, yes. I used to sneak off to the hidden library in the second district." Avorniel says, "An old woman collected books that cannot be found in the city library. Fictional books, with dragons and talking animals and princesses with special powers. And I like to imagine those exist in this world."

I laugh, "But you can find that here. Frodo's uncle, Bilbo, has come face to face with a dragon. And I have met the closest thing to a queen, Lady Galadriel, who could read minds."

"I'm not like you, Ellie. I have never held a sword in my life, nor journeyed to lands unknown. I've never been outside of Gondor. I grew up knowing nothing else but guards following me around. My only adventures are the ones I read about." Avorniel says. She places her elbow on the table and rests her chin on her palm. "What I would give to explore the world and not feel..."

"Caged?" Éowyn asks, mildly. I look up at her, knowing full well that she knows what Avorniel must be feeling. Their experiences are still unique, but similar enough for them to understand each other. Éowyn, I know, used to feel trapped in Rohan. Having to care for an uncle who didn't even recognize her, and fearing that all her life that was all she was going to be. "I used to feel trapped by my duties to remain in the Meduseld, or to lead the people of Rohan, and I was unhappy that I could not do something to prove I was more than that." Éowyn opens up. As I came to get to know her, I knew that's always been what Éowyn wanted: to prove that she was something more.

"I wanted to prove that I was not weak like other women and that I can fight in battles. That my name, too, can be remembered in songs and tales. I was wrong, I admit. It took me facing the Witch-king to realize that I am a woman, as all other women, and that I did not need to match the strength of men when we have strength of our own, whether we are dreaming of adventure, or healing the sick, or fighting with a sword." Éowyn continues with a small smile, "I thought glory in battle would prove my worth. I know now, that is not at all what defies a brave woman."

It's chilling, to think she wanted to fight simply for the glory of it. I'm proud of her for growing as a person, and learning what strength and honor truly meant along the way. She's different now, and I think her spending time here in Gondor has something to do with it. Killing and battles are not what her heart desires, anymore.

"I am glad you found yourself, despite these terrible times, my lady." Avorniel says. She turns to Aedelind. "What about you? You are a very bright young girl, but did you ever dream of doing more?"

"Me? Oh, no. I enjoy what I do. I never dreamed of adventure or swords. I have seen what swords could do to a person. I used to help my mother close wounds dealt by swords and I found it to be a terrible thing, and have continued to mend broken bodies since. Healing has always been what I wanted to do, to help people." Aedelind says, cheerfully, "My mother used to say, 'If you are ever to hold someone's life in your hands, make sure that you treat it as a precious gem to be handled with care'. I know in my heart, that is what I am meant to do."

Avorniel laughs, "Say what you will. But I still want to break free from Gondor, to be myself without the constraints of nobility. I want to explore mountains and get to know people and draw a map of the whole world, not just Middle-earth."

I smile, appreciating my friends even more. We're all different, with different goals and talents and personalities, but still, somehow, the same. I'm lucky to have met these women, whom I have come to love as my sisters. My bond with them is different from my bond with the Fellowship, and I'm glad about that. I'm glad that they are friends who accepted me, that I can open up to.
The friendship I have with the Fellowship is strengthened by the difficulties we faced together, by the support we gave each other through difficult times of war and turmoil, by honor and sacrifice and selflessness that we have taught each other. My friendship with these girls is strengthened by understanding, and similarities in the things we love and enjoy. We chose each other, Éowyn, Aedelind, Avorniel and I. Éowyn, Aedelind and I have known each other longer than we have known Avorniel, yet Avorniel fit in with us almost instantly. Her personality mixed in with ours so well. And I know they love and accept me as much as I love and accept them. I can trust them with anything, even...

"Avorniel, remember when you promised to show me the city library?" I say, suddenly. She blinks at me, taken aback by this change in topic.

"Yes! Forgive me for not taking you there sooner." She stands, "We can go now, if you want. We have enough time before dinner. I can tell my guards to get the carriage."

"Sure. Aedelind, Éowyn, join us." I say, standing as well and offering my hand to Aedelind. She takes it, confused, but stands anyway.

The city library is located at the fourth level of Minas Tirith, so it's a short trip. It's a tower, and what it lacks in space, it makes up for in the number of floors it has. The windows are large and allows sunlight to spill into the room. The light gives the illusion of space. The largest space is the first floor, with a staircase that runs up, and each floor above had railings as they opened up in the middle. Each floor above the first had separate rooms with two tables, separated by archways. It's gorgeous. Men and women walked around, arranging books. Each floor was high enough that ladders were needed to reach the shelves.

"Whoa." Aedelind gasps.

"This is so cool, oh my goodness." I say, looking around, excitedly.

"Lady Avorniel, it's wonderful to see you back here." An old man walks up to us, his mouth splitting open in a tooth-less grin.

"Balduin, is there anyone in the western room on the tenth floor?"

"None, my lady. No one but you really ever really goes that high."

"Come on. I will show you my favorite part of the library." Avorniel motions for us to follow her, and we do so— with a lot of complaints for why it had to be so fucking high and how dizzying the spiral staircases were. By the fourth landing, Aedelind had begun asking, "Are we there yet?" and practically kissed the ground when we got to the tenth floor. What I would give for an elevator. But it turns out, when we get to the room, the effort was all worth it. The room is bare save for a table with four seats around it. Large glass windows ran around the room, the two corners of the which having comfortable seats with pillows beneath them. But the best thing about it is the view, like a special kind of city skyline. I can see each level below the one we are currently in, all the way to the first wall of Minas Tirith. And beyond is the Pelennor Fields. It looks so vast and peaceful from here. I can't see the mounds raised for the people who died there. But I still know horror beyond anything in those fields. I will never be able to appreciate it, or bear to even look at it for long.

"It's so quiet." Éowyn whispers. And she's right. Here, there is only our voices. We can't hear the chatter of the people in the streets, the carpenters reconstructing houses, the neighs of the horses or the clank of the guards' armors. We can't even hear the quiet conversations of the librarians, nine floors below us.
"I come here when I need to escape it all. I do not like being around large groups of people, but my family comes to Gondor every year. And every year, I find myself running here for comfort. Sometimes, I come here just to watch the sunset, and dream of a world beyond Gondor." Avorniel says, sitting by the window to look out. Aedelind kneels on the seat so she can press her hand against the glass and looks below us, at the activity happening.

"May I confess something?" Éowyn says. She waits for us all to nod, and when we do, she says, "The Pelennor Fields have never been beautiful to me. Whenever I look at it, I just see..."

"Death." I say, and her voice echoes with me. I smile in understanding. "The Battle at the Pelennor is different. Much different than Helm's Deep. It's in this fields where I killed another human being."

Avorniel is quiet, and she looks down as I continue, "It all happened so fast, I can barely keep up with the events even now. It's different when you see others who look like you die at the hands of orcs. But to see them die at the hands of fellow Men, and to kill fellow Men? Orcs are different. They have no families waiting for them to come home. Their sole purpose is war. But right here, in Pelennor, I've taken lives of fathers, brothers and sons."

"You were doing it to protect other people, Ellie." Avorniel tries to comfort me.

"So were they, in a way." I say. "I can never look at the Pelennor Fields and not feel crushed by the weight of every human life I've taken, even if it was for honorable reasons."

Éowyn approaches me and hugs me from the side, placing my head on her shoulder as we both stare out at the place where we stood in battle together.

"Can it be my turn to confess?" I say. I pause, so Aedelind can sit down more comfortably.

"Remember when I said that after the war, I would tell you everything about me?" I ask her. She nods. She was in bed, healing from her stab wound when I promised her that, back in Rohan. It's a testament of my trust in them that I don't feel crazy at all for saying it out loud, "I'm not from here. I'm not from Middle-earth."

They don't look remotely shocked. In fact, Avorniel says, "I figured. The way you form words and your accent is unlike anything I have ever known."

"When we were in Lothlórien, Lady Galadriel made me look into her mirror. It let me see things. Things from the future. But the thing is, that future was my present. Until I died and was sent back here."

Silence greets those words, and that's all I need to continue my tale. About where I'm really from, and how I got to Middle-earth, and why I was captured by orcs to be taken to Isengard. I tell them that I am Aragorn's descendant, and that somehow, the past and the future came together for a split second to bring me here, to be part of history, to make my mark on this world. I tell them who else knows about my story, and that I've told them before I even told the hobbits. Most of all, I let them know how much I miss the family that I left behind.

By the end of it all, Avorniel and Aedelind had come to hug me as well, telling me that it's okay, and that they were my sisters now. There are no questions of my sanity, just faith in my words. And God, I didn't know how much this would help me, how great of a relief this all feels, and how truly lucky I am that despite people like Hinneril or the judgmental women that had called Legolas a sorcerer, I am still surrounded by loyal, open and good people.

Through the rest of the week, Avorniel and I come here, sometimes Legolas would join us, and
sometimes it was just Legolas and me. But Avorniel brings book upon book of Gondor's history and its former rulers for me to read about and study. There were books in Westron, but also in Sindarin which I realized I couldn't read. Whatever magic Eru had brought on me to understand Westron, it did not extend to any other language, which I figured seeing as I had to be taught how to speak Sindarin. So Legolas patiently reads them to me, and together, we learn about Gondor.

I almost don't realize when the day for the Market Festival arrives. This time, it's Avorniel who knocks on the door of my room to let me know she had written up the list of things we needed for the charity event and that I needed to double-check it first before she brings it to her ladies-in-waiting--who patiently wait by my door. I let her know it's good, and she brings out a second list in Ioreth's handwriting, shows it to me for double-checking, and then gives it to her ladies.

She waits for me as I prepare, and later, I find out there's an entire procession for the nobles who would be going down to the Market. It was on the very first level of Minas Tirith, after all, and would take a couple of hours of riding to get to. I sit comfortably in a carriage with Legolas, Gimli, Elladan and Elrohir.

"I haven't seen you at all lately, lassie." Gimli greets me.

"You've been entertaining Lady Dís since she arrived." I point out. It's true that just as I have started spending more time with Éowyn, Avorniel and Aedelind, Gimli has been with the dwarven embassy--who would be leaving today after the festival. Aragorn and Faramir spend most of their time with the Council. And Legolas and the twins have been spending more and more time together if Legolas wasn't with the rest of the Fellowship or reading with me. Gandalf and the Hobbits continue to spend most of their free time together, smoking weed or staying in Frodo's chamber. But today is a rare opportunity for us to all come together again.

"I think this might be the first time we all get to have fun together. Buying exotic goods, and all." Elrohir says.

"Raise your hand if you're an Elf who received money from your rich father in preparation for today." Gimli smirks. Legolas, Elladan and Elrohir all pointedly look away.

"I would have you know that father sent the gold voluntarily." Elladan says.

"No need to get defensive, laddie."

"Will you ever stop calling us 'laddie'? We are thousands of years older than you." Elladan says.

"As you have pointed out countless of times before, Lord Elladan. Yet by elven standards, you are all young lads still, yes? Therefore, taking in the fact that in Dwarven years, I am considered to be at a respectable age, I am, years aside, older than you and therefore can call you 'laddie'."

"That makes no sense." Elrohir points out.

"Not to your young mind. You still have much to learn." Gimli says, solemnly, making me snort while the twins roll their eyes.

"Taking in years, next to Ellie, Legolas is the youngest in our group, are you not, elfling?" Elladan says.

"As you so like to remind me." Legolas sighs, "Yet, I should also remind you that despite my youth, I far surpass your skills as archers."

"That is about the only thing you are good at, child." Elladan says.
"You cannot even choose a stone color without help." Elrohir mumbles, making Legolas kick his shin.

"Be silent."

"As you command, my wise lord Legolas." Elrohir bows, despite the fact that we're all sitting. Just as he does it, our carriage runs over a crack in the pavement, and he accidentally hits his forehead on his knee.

It's the clumsiest I've ever seen an elf, so I gasp and laugh along with Legolas.

"You two truly make a perfect couple." Elrohir rolls his eyes, massaging his forehead. To pass the time, I teach them how to play rock, paper, scissors. I say teach, because we never actually got around to playing since they kept questioning the logic of it, damned elves.

"That is ridiculous. Paper cannot beat rock. They are simply too big to be covered by paper." Elrohir points out.

"You're thinking of a boulder." I say.

"No, you are thinking of a pebble."

"Just accept the game mechanics, will you?"

"Rock can crush paper beneath it."

"Well, what kind of game do you suggest we play?" I huff, throwing my hands up in frustration.

"Well, we cannot play it here. We need a woods to play the game I have in mind." Elrohir says.

"You cannot play Aldathand in Gondor at all, Elrohir." Elladan says. "There are not enough elves here to make the game worthwhile. In fact, there are only three elves in all of Gondor."

"Confused human here." I say.

"Aldathand is not just a game. It's an activity used to train warriors' reflexes and balance. It's quite popular in Eryn Galen." Legolas explains, "Everyone is split into two teams, and each member is equipped with a ball. The game requires everyone to be on the trees. The goal is to get the other team to touch the ground, using the ball you have in your possession as a weapon, and the trees as cover."

Okay, so it's the more dangerous, elven version of dodgeball.

"Wouldn't that game lead to broken bones?" Gimli asks.

"It's a training exercise, really, not just a mere game. The warriors of Eryn Galen go through it to perfect their balance and speed, especially because most of the time, fighting in the forest inevitably leads to climbing trees and even fighting and releasing arrows from up high."

"Well, count me out of that game." I say, shuddering. Heights terrify me. I won't be able to function if I'm that high up. The library tower is fine because there's glass that separates me from falling to my death. But the talans of Lothlórien, or the deep chasms of Moria were nightmares to go through.

"How about baseball? I grew up playing it, all the way up to high school. You just need a bat and a few balls."

"A bat? Why would we need a bat?" Elrohir asks.
"Well, you need a bat to hit the balls with." The moment the words come out of my mouth, everyone else in the carriage gasps in horror.

"That is cruel, Ellie! Leave the poor animals alone." Legolas frowns.

"No, no. Not that kind of bat!" I laugh, nervously, "I meant, like, a wooden stick that you use to hit the ball with. That's called a bat."

"Oh." His expression eases. I explain to them the basics of playing baseball, how the bases are set up, how to pitch, how innings work, and how to get scores. By the end of it, they agree to try it if they manage to convince the Dúnedain and if we find a big enough field.

"Can you all start suggesting games that would not be detrimental to my well-being?" Gimli huffs, "All this running around and tree climbing. A good dwarven game of cards, now that is better. Cards and beer."

"If only I could teach you all how to play Cards Against Humanity... Or Uno."

I never get the chance to explain those to them, however, because at that moment, the carriage stops, and I set aside the curtain covering the windows to look out.

"We're here!" I gasp. The market was huge, and vibrant. There were people milling around, carrying baskets of goods. There were merchants who had set up stalls, their items on display. We get out of the carriage and meet up with the Hobbits, Gandalf and Aragorn.

"Make way for the King and the Ring-bearer!"

There are trumpets, and the nine of us walk together through the stalls.

"Pippin, look!" I drag him to the largest stall set up in the middle of the square, which was a long table filled with different kinds of food. There's rice here. Actual rice, and noodles. This must be either from Rhun or Harad or an entirely different city that I don't know about. This is the closest thing to ramen I could ever find here. Gondor doesn't include pasta in their diet. They also have cheese balls, and other delicacies that include octopus and squid. Legolas looks at the squid with suspicion.

Sam takes an interest in their spices, because there are some that even he isn't familiar with. "Look at this, they have peppers of all size and color." He says. "Do you have seeds for this, sir? I'd love to plant them in my garden back home."

Merry and Pippin choose to get the noodles, which were, according to them, very spicy, and included shrimp and vegetables, and egg. Even further down the table are different dishes. One was even pig's blood stew. Elrohir looks at me as if I'm a mad woman when I say I want that. They serve it in a bowl on top of rice. The stew was a dark brown color, with pork mixed into it. I can also smell garlic, onion and vinegar.

"Oh, come on, you big baby." I take a huge bite, and my eyes widen. "It's good! Try it!" I offer the bowl to Elrohir, who all but backs away. "You get orc blood on your clothes all the time yet somehow can't fathom eating pig's blood?"

"You notice I do not eat the orc blood."

"That's because orc blood is poisonous. Pig's blood is not."

"I will stick to this pickled cabbage instead." He says, turning to another dish there. Gandalf's
interests, it turns out, are in sweets. I don't think I've ever seen the old man enjoying himself this much. He has two boxes tucked under his arm, and was eating a huge cookie, the crumbs of which were mixing into his beard. Aragorn ordered the squid on a stick just to chase Legolas around while brandishing it.

"Estel, do not!" Legolas threatens, hiding behind Elladan. "It smells terrible."

"It smells perfectly fine, elfling!" Aragorn laughs.

"This is not how the King of Gondor should act." Legolas continues, while Elladan struggles to get away from Legolas' grip on his shoulders.

"The King of Gondor can act however he pleases." Aragorn says, jabbing the squid over Elladan's shoulder. Elladan moves out of the way, snarling at Legolas to get away from him, while Legolas ducks.

"My mouth is on fire but I'm strangely okay with it." Merry says, sucking air in through his teeth as he finishes half of his bowl.

"How bad can it be?" Frodo asks, ordering a bowl of the ramen to try. After a few spoonfuls, he just shrugs. "I think after the heat of Mount Doom, nothing is hot for me anymore. Sam, try this!"

It turns out Frodo has the highest level of tolerance for spicy food, with Merry being the least able to take it.

"Dude, I'm so glad I didn't eat before coming here. I want to try everything." I say, going for my third dish.

"We're only in the first booth. We should check the other ones." Elladan says.

We go around as a large group, and people bowed and made way when they realize Aragorn is with them. I notice large carts coming in, and Avorniel ordering them around. She waves at me, and I wave back before continuing to other stalls.

Eventually, we break off in little groups, with Legolas and the twins going off to God knows where. The Hobbits were by some furniture, and I'm with Aragorn and Gimli. Gimli leads us towards a vendor selling wine and happily gives us free tastes.

"Rosé!" I exclaim when the vendor hands us a glass of light pink wine. He looks at me in confusion but I wave my hand and say, "I love this! Your wine is amazing."

"It's too soft. Give me something stronger, good man." Gimli says. The wine-maker gladly presents a bottle of brandy to him, which Gimli nods at in approval.

"Send three barrels of this to the Citadel." Aragorn tells the wine-maker, who bows and thanks him.

We also find a vendor who sells jewelry. Rings and earrings and bracelets of all shapes and color. They were kept in glass boxes for protection, but the gems sparkled under the light of the sun.

"Oh, these are beautiful." I gasp. Aragorn is particularly interested in the rings, and keeps asking me for my opinion. I smirk, knowing full well who they're for. I laugh when he holds up the fifth ring.

"It looks too big. The stone, I mean. It looks too heavy."

"Well, what do you think is the best one, in your opinion?" He asks. I look down at the rings presented there, all of which were beautiful. There were sapphires and rubies there. Even onyx, and
other stones of different colors.

But the ring that catches my attention is simple, though exquisite. It's silver, and every inch of the band is covered in small, white crystals. The stone in the middle is a diamond. The ring itself is shaped like a flower—a rose, in fact. The rose opens up to show the diamond, and the band is formed like a vine around the finger, with even little leaf details that is also covered in crystals.

"This one." I say, gazing down at it.

Aragorn looks at it, taking it in his hand and turning it over, "It looks simple compared to the rest of these."

"It's gorgeous." I say. Aragorn hands it back to the vendor and points down at another ring. The band is thicker, the outer edge is made of gold but the intricate design within is made of silver, incorporating spaces in the middle, with vine-like designs, and small diamonds around it.

"That's beautiful, too!" I look up at the vendor, "Truly, your work is lovely!"

The man bows and thanks me. Gimli looks around in suspicion, and mutters something about how Dwarven rings are made better.

"I will take this one." Aragorn says. "Can it come with a gold chain to wear around the neck?"

"Rings? You are buying rings?" The hobbits have returned, and Frodo raises an eyebrow. "I confess, I no longer feel any desire to see a ring again." He continues.

"You just didn't find a good ring, is all." I say.

He laughs, wryly, "You can say that again. I found the worst one of all."

"But then you destroyed it and save the world." I remind him.

"Still. I would not want to touch a ring again."

"Here." Aragorn promptly says to me, offering me the ring he just paid for.

I look at him in confusion, and then turn to the delighted vendor, whose wide smile indicates that he thinks...

"Aha, how romantic of you, Your Majesty!"

"Ha! No! No, no, no." I wave my hand, while more people look at us, curiously.

"No! I have a boyfriend, he has a girlfriend. We're practically family. I don't know why--what are you doing?" I hiss at Aragorn.

"Can I not spoil my daughter with jewelry now?" He makes a clear emphasis on 'daughter'. The vendor melts, and so do I. That took me by complete surprise, how casually he calls me family. We both know we technically are, but it still warms my heart that he considers me to be something closer, and that he acknowledges that in front of other people.

"There was a time when I thought they were siblings." Pippin whispers.

"Ssh." Merry nudges him.

"You goof!" I laugh, taking the ring. "It's beautiful, but I don't think it fits."
"That is what the chain is for. I want it to be a reminder for you that if anyone, elf or man, ever hurts you in anyway, you come straight to me and I will introduce them to my sword."

"Before or after I introduce them to my dagger, Your Majesty?" I smirk.

"If ever you find that you want to swap this ring for another, however, know that you are free to do so with my blessing. It is of great value and would fetch a high price."

I bring the chain through the ring and secure it around my neck. "Thanks, dad."

"Ellie! There you are, I have been looking for you! Some of the things in Ioreth's list have run out." Avorniel calls for me, brandishing said list in her hand.

"Gotta go. Hey, if you guys wanna volunteer for tomorrow, we'll be working very hard to feed the people in the second district. I'm sure it will raise morale if they see you there." I say to the hobbits.

"Pippin and I will be there! You've been there for us, we'll do this for you." Merry exclaims.

"Count me in as well, Miss Ellie. Someone's gotta watch these two, or they'll go right through all the food you prepare." Sam says.

"Frodo?"

"You do not even need to ask. I will be there, as well."

"Ahh! Thank you, thank you, thank you!" I squeal, pulling Merry and Pippin in for a hug and kissing Sam's cheek.

I help Avorniel find alternatives for the herbs that had run out in the apothecary, and we encounter Eniredír along the way.

"Eniredír! I have not seen you in a while." Avorniel greets him.

He smiles, and bows at her, "Lady Avorniel. I assure you it is by no fault of mine. I've been busy."

"Understandable. You are doing honorable work in the Council. Your uncle must be proud of you."

Eniredír laughs, "Yes, I'm sure he's finally glad I am stepping up for the family."

"What do you have there?" I ask, motioning at the box in his hands. He holds it up and shakes it, though he doesn't open it to show the contents that rattled inside.

"Just some seeds. My mother has a garden in the manor and I wanted to bring something for her to plant there."

"Oh. How sweet of you!"

"That's so cute! You're a mama's boy!" I giggle, making Eniredír rub the back of his neck in embarrassment.

"Yes, well. She has taken good care of me. If you will excuse me." Eniredír leaves, and Avorniel and I return to shopping.

I never did find out where Legolas and the twins had run off to. I don't see them at all the rest of the day, and after fixing the herbs with Avorniel, I spend the rest of the day with Aragorn, Gandalf, Gimli and the Hobbits.
Chapter End Notes

I'm so sorry this chapter took so long! I've been job hunting and just passed an interview! It's lit! Please accept this as my apology. Thank you for being so patient! I never take the time to thank you all for the sweet comments you leave. I read them all and they always keep me going. I'll post the next chapter up soon to make up for the length of time it took to post this one.
The day after the Market Festival starts early for me, and Aedelind lets me borrow one of her dresses because I can't be bothered to wear the typical Gondorian lady's outfit for the rest of the day. And I find that dresses designed by the Rohirrim are much easier to move in, and also weighs ten pounds lighter.

I get to the kitchen and greet the kitchen staff who are already working to make breakfast for the nobles. Éowyn is there to help the head cook, and I step in immediately before she starts volunteering to cook. "Okay, everyone, you're doing great. Take all the time you need. Éowyn, did the carts arrive here on time? All the ingredients are accounted for?"

"Yes, Avorniel's servants had them brought over last night. Aedelind and Eniredír have brought the herbs from the apothecary to Ioreth a few minutes ago. The servants here are just about done with breakfast so they can focus on cooking for the event. What did you have in mind for the cooks?"

"Filling meals, I think. Rice and stew. Chicken, chayote, chili leaves, fish sauce, garlic, onion and ginger. Mix that with chicken broth to give it some flavor, then salt and pepper." I tell the cook, who nods.

"Sounds easy enough. I reckon you'll be wanting ten cauldrons."

"Yes, please. And someone get that sack of rice steaming. If ever we run out of food, we have hundreds of foodstuff to give away, so I will need someone to make sure those are rationed properly so everyone can be given equal amounts." I say. The head cook orders some of the servants to do that, and Éowyn goes ahead to watch over them.

I show the head cook how to make the chicken stew, and most of the morning is spent talking to Aedelgar to talk about the safe transportation of the food.

"Hildraed is already in the lower district with Aedelind. They are preparing the town square as we speak."

"Alright, have them deliver the barrels of mead down to the districts. Can you stay here and wait for the rations? I still have to help the cooks."

Preparations take hours. I don't know how I would have done it if it was just me organizing all this. Éowyn does a flawless job with supervising the rations, Aedelgar coordinates with her to get everything into the carts and Faramir comes in to let us know that soldiers will be guarding the streets to ensure the food carts get to the lower districts safely.

"I hear the healers are already working to help the sick. Hildraed reports that other than the number of people there, it's been uneventful." Faramir tells me.
I nod, but barely have time to respond before someone comes in to ask me if these pots were ready or if those sacks go in that cart. All while I mix what seems to be my seventh pot of food. The hobbits come in later, which means more hands in the kitchen to help with the cooking. I almost sob in relief when Sam comes in to take over one of the boiling pots.

"Let it simmer. Take it out of the fire or the vegetables will overcook and turn into useless mush." He advises one of the cooks.

"This needs more broth." Pippin says, opening one of the pots.

"Don't even try it, Merry." Frodo warns, spotting Merry with one of the serving spoons.

"Just wanted to help with the mixing." Merry says, quickly.

"Ellie, half of the rations are ready. I think we can send the carts down now to distribute the foodstuff." Éowyn informs me.

"Okay! Frodo, let's go down to the lower districts with the carts. I want to see what it's like down there."

"Let's." Frodo nods. I leave the rest of the food to the head cook, while Faramir sets up an escort for the hobbits and I. Ten carts would be going down to the square, and we get there with the carts to find a long line of people waiting. I recognize Doroneth with her children almost immediately.

"It's good to see you again!" I say, pulling her in for a hug. "Sorry I'm all sweaty. I've been in the kitchens this whole time."

"That's quite alright, miss. We've only just arrived." She peers over my shoulder to look curiously at the hobbits.

"The Ring-bearer is here, as well." Doroneth gasps.

"They're here to help."

"Ellie!" Hildraed calls, waving at me to catch my attention.

"I have to go set up." I tell Doroneth, and instruct the Rohirrim waiting in the square to set the pots on one table and the bowls on another.

"Legolas and Gimli are here, too." Hildraed tells me, with a smile. "They're the entertainment."

"The what?" I deadpan. He points me to the middle of the square, where a lot of children are gathered, laughing about something. The inquisitive kids, full of energy as they were, are all speaking over each other, asking questions. Gimli chuckles as he and Legolas continue their tales. I think they're making up a story as they go along, because I see Gimli stutter and elbow Legolas, who pipes in with stories of talking birds and trees.

In the medical tent beyond, Aedelind and Ioreth are working with Elladan and Elrohir to aid the common-folk. Doroneth was right in saying that there were less superstitious folks than I first believed. Most didn't seem to have a problem seeking help from Lord Elrond's sons. The Dúnedain are there, as well. I've always thought they were healers, like Aragorn. Or at least know a lot about herbs and flowers.

"The King sends his regards and apologizes for not being here personally. He and Gandalf are currently in the Hall of Kings, attending to petitioners and bidding farewell to the Dwarven embassy.
with King Éomer and Prince Imrahil." Hildraed continues.

"It's fine. I'm just glad everyone else is here to help." I say, waving at Gimli and Legolas when they notice my arrival.

"Some of the nobles have sent clothing and materials for repair of homes personally. I guess you did get through them, after all." Hildraed says.

I look around, realizing that there are indeed nobles I recognize helping distribute things among the people there. Some of them wave at me in recognition.

"Or Avorniel threatened them." I say darkly, when I notice Hinneril--of all people--there, as well.

I approach her table, where she gingerly gives clothing to those lining up in front of her. She literally looks like she's being forced to stay there.

"Are you possessed?" Is what I greet her with.

She shoves a dress at a teenaged girl and glares at me.

"So, which is it? Do you want the nobles helping or not? Because we're here, are we not?"

"That's what worries me. What's with the change of heart, assuming you had one in the first place?"

"Oh haha, you're very clever." Hinneril brushes a strand of hair out of her eyes, "The very simple answer is that I love an adoring crowd. Look at them, they love me." She motions at the crowd in front of her. The little boy in the line looks up at her, disturbed.

I shake my head, not bothering to correct her, "Just please don't cause any trouble, I beg of you."


I scoff and walk away from her, to find the hobbits already distributing bowls of food to a waiting crowd.

I decide to join them, and while we give out food, we talk to some of the common-folk who would stop to tell us their tales. They tell us stories of their lost friends, those who fell in the war. They tell us of the horror they faced as the orcs poured into the city. It was this district that was attacked first, after all, being the closest to the Gate that was taken down. They tell stories of hiding and running through the alleys and streets of Minas Tirith, and finding corpses of their neighbors the day after, of missing children and elders.

And we listen, the hobbits and I, and we empathize. It's a completely different view of the war. They tell us of their hopelessness, and how their hope dwindled day by day while the Armies of the West marched to Mordor. They confide in us the pain of waiting for their loved ones, and many of the civilians still mourn the deaths of those who did not return.

This entire event wasn't just spent on giving out food and clothing, it was about hearing their stories. It's about getting to know the people we all fought so hard to protect. And whatever weariness we feel as the day goes on is rewarded by the smiles on their faces.

Sam is reduced to tears as a little girl tells him of both her parents dying to keep her safe while the orcs poured into Minas Tirith. Apparently, many of the kids that Legolas and Gimli are telling stories to are orphans, and the community helps with raising them, but some of them are left to fend for themselves in the streets, stealing from their neighbors or begging for scraps.
"Is there no orphanage set up in the city?" Frodo asks one of the folks there.

"None here, sir. Many buildings were burned down. The orphanage here was already in terrible shape when the orcs razed it to the ground. There were still children inside when they set the place on fire."

Frodo winces at the thought, and my heart shatters at such a cruel loss of innocent lives.

"Someday, it will be rebuilt. But not anytime soon." The man talking to Frodo says, and he looks up at me helplessly. After everything we've done, after all the lives he has saved, it still isn't enough. There were lives we couldn't save, and I see the guilt of that eating at him.

"It doesn't get easier, knowing all the damage the Ring has caused. All the lives ruined because of it." Frodo says to me when we have a few precious moments alone to breathe.

"None if that is your fault. You already did more than anyone in history could do--you destroyed the Ring. You saved these people."

"Did I?" He looks around, at the tired and dirty faces of the common-folk, with baskets tucked beneath their arms containing secondhand clothes and maybe a week's worth of food. "There are children here who would never know their parents."

"And there are children here who are still with their families because you bore the Ring to Mount Doom. What you did was not in vain."

I take his hand, understanding the guilt he is feeling. This has always been who Frodo was. Someone who bore such pain on his shoulders, who bore it so others would not have to. His was a battle more important than any I have fought in, but I see the scars of that battle have worn him down. I see it in the way he sometimes runs his fingers over the stub that used to be where he had worn the Ring before Gollum bit it off. He still wishes he could have done more, to lessen the pain that others felt.

Merry and Pippin don't hesitate to put a smile on people's faces, and I'm thankful for their presence and optimism. Their laughter is infectious, and anyone getting a bowl of food from them are chuckling and talking about how they loved hobbits.

Thankfully, no harsh words were dealt while Legolas and Gimli took care of the children. It's like they have a daycare set up, with Gimli being the main entertainment because of his booming laughter and his tuggable, and quite reachable, beard. There are children sitting in front of him, listening closely to his tale about the beauty of Erebor, and Legolas sits on the ground, braiding a little girl's hair.

Aedelind barely has any time to talk to me other than a quick hello and saying, "Eniredír went over there. He insisted I tell you that you look lovely today."

The event goes on for the rest of the day, with carts coming in periodically to replenish stocks. Merry and Pippin giggle over how the nobles looked at what we had for lunch, which was the same thing as the "peasants" were eating. They ate from wooden bowls from the same pots meant for the people, and it was hilarious to watch them having to suffer through what they deemed "peasant" food. I can see Aedelind holding her stomach at the look on Hinneril's face when one of the bowls is offered to her.

But finally, the last cart is emptied, and children and their parents flock around the volunteers to say their thanks. "It was our honor to serve you." I say.

"They never used to do this, them nobles. Not for us here. Doroneth told us you insisted that this
happens. You're a gift to us, miss Ellie. Whatever the others may say about you, I am sure you are a good person." One of the older women say, and she pulls me into her arms for a hug.

The nobles leave almost immediately after the square empties. Now that they've kept up appearances, they had no other business being here. I should have suspected that they had personal agendas for coming, but I don't question it. They helped people, and that's enough for me. Besides, they made it easier for the rest of us with their added hands to pass things around.

But the cleanup was still my responsibility. And I'm thankful for Hildraed and the rest of the Rohirrim, as well as the Dúnedain for being there because they've been so helpful.

I'm carrying a stack of pots to one of the crates when I feel some of the weight lift from my arms, and Arahael is there to take some of the pots from me. I hesitate when I recognize him. The last conversation we had was...unpleasant. We haven't spoken to each other since. But at least he looks sober today.

"You did a good job today, El."

"I didn't do it alone. Thank you for helping." I say.

There's an awkward silence as we place the pots in the cart. He moves slowly, and from the corner of my eye, I see him open his mouth only to close it again. But just while we're walking back to where Hildraed and the Rohirrim are, he gently takes my arm. I wince and move away, and he immediately lets go. I don't enjoy him touching me right now. I didn't use to have a problem with it. Of the Dúnedain, Arahael and Halon are the ones I'm closest to. But after what happened in the fields...

"Halon and I are back to not speaking to each other..." Arahael says after a pause. "He wants me to lay off the ale."

"I'd take his advice if I were you. He's your brother. He only wants what's best for you." I say.

"I can't." He says, looking at me in distress.

"You can't or you won't?"

"I know you understand me when I say that the memories can be too overwhelming. The alcohol is the only thing that gets me to sleep without seeing father...without remembering..." His fists clench, and I see him reach for a flask at his waist.

"Don't do it." I say, slowly. He hesitates, but I see him move his hand away from the flask.

"El, help me. How do you bear it? I used to hear you in camp, and you screamed during the nights. How has it not consumed you yet?"

"I have people I trust who I talk to."

"Talking will do nothing."

"Talking will help. You need someone to confide in, to be there for you during your worst moments. You don't have to go through all of it alone."

"No, you do not understand. You are a woman."

I raise my eyebrow, ready to be offended, but he shakes his head, "No, listen. You are a woman."
People expect you to be more open about how you feel. It's weakness if a man does it. People will look at me and will only pity me and think I am pathetic."

"Oh, Arahael." This time, I do come closer to him, and see the pain in his tired eyes. "You have done great things. You stood beside the King as he charged towards battle. But all that, you did with others standing beside you. This isn't any different. This is a battle you don't have to face alone, and it doesn't matter what others think. Help yourself first. Take care of yourself. Lay off the booze."

He sighs, looking down. "This from the girl who got drunk during the last party?" He tries for a joke.

"Okay, asshole." I snort, making him chuckle at my peeved expression.

"Truly, I had no idea how well you danced."

"Shut your face."

"And the singing! I swear I could hear bats begging for mercy."

I walk away from him, but let the teasing continue. It's a glimpse of how we used to be before we truly felt the effects of the war. Back when we were riding the wave of relief that the war was over, before realizing that we had our own battles to face ahead.

I find Hildraed talking to Aedelind about something, and she looks pissed. "No, we keep a close inventory of the plants we still have because we need to make sure we have enough for everyone. And we weren't even using them!"

"Things were hectic at this side of the square. Perhaps someone just miscounted in their haste. A lot of people went through the stocks. There were at least ten of you healers in the tent."

Aedelind rolled her eyes, but let it slide. She always was controlling of the environment when she was in her element. She needed to know where everything was so she can move as efficiently as she can.

"Is anything wrong?" I ask when she goes back to her list.

"We are missing some nightshade berries. I would not mind if it was any other plant but nightshade is dangerous if in the wrong hands. Just a handful of those berries can be lethal."

"Why was it here, then?" I'm familiar with nightshade. It's one of the first things we learn about in Pharmacognosy because of its significance as an anticholinergic--usually used for asthma or as an anesthetic. But it's an incredibly dangerous plant to use, because just a little too much of the dose can be lethal.

"That is what I asked when I saw it. When I use nightshade, it's already prepared, distilled and ready to be used. Not when they're berries, though."

"What did Ioreth say about it?" Hildraed asked, rubbing his temple.

"She said it was given as a gift by one of the villagers. It was in a covered basket. She did not have time to actually see what was inside until she saw Eniredír hold a berry up. She swore he was about to eat it, but she recognized it right away, thank goodness."

"A gift? Someone gave you poisonous berries as a gift?" Arahael pipes in behind me.

"I'm sure they didn't mean it as an insult. The berries look harmless to the untrained eye. Many
children get poisoned from eating them. Whoever gave it to us must not have known." Aedelind goes back to counting the jars left in the trunk by her feet, "Anyway, after that, Ioreth made me count all the berries and stored it in here, where no one else would be able to get their hands on it accidentally. I made sure to include it in the inventory but someone still got through. Whichever hungry bastard ate them is going to be hallucinating tomorrow."

"Or they could die, Aedelind!"

"That's what I've been telling Hildraed!" She looks up at him, "Now really is not the time to be the optimistic, calm one here."

"How many berries are missing?" Arahael asks.

"Ten. Enough to kill someone if they ate all of it."

"Hold on, alright. Say someone does eat all of it. What is the antidote?" Hildraed asks.

"Physostigmine." I say. Everyone else looks at me in confusion. Of course that's not what it's called here. I doubt it's even been discovered here. Physostigmine is the pure, isolated compound--and isolating compounds isn't exactly practiced here in Middle-earth yet, where microscopes aren't even invented yet, or even just the practice of good hygiene. Crude extracts are still the peak of medicine here.

"I do not know what the antidote is." Aedelind says through clenched teeth.

"You what?" Hildraed's eyebrows furrow. It's the first time I've seen him look so confused since we first met each other and he saw me among the Uruk-hai near the borders of Rohan.

"I do not know! Logic dictates you are supposed to reverse the effects, but there are too many things that happen to the body when poisoned by nightshade. Feeding a poisoned patient several herbs to combat every symptom can make their situation worse, because every herb has other effects apart from their medicinal use." Aedelind explains.

I'm once again blown away by the fact that this girl knows as much about how pharmacology works as I did when I was a freshman in college. All those money I spent for three years on my education, and here she is, with just as much knowledge that she learned just from her mother.

"Okay, let me worry about where the berries could have gone. I will tell my men to check the crates again in case it's been misplaced. And if not, I am sure Ioreth would know what to do in case someone brings their poisoned loved ones to the Houses of Healing." Hildraed places a comforting hand on Aedelind's shoulder, while she closes her eyes and stays still.

I think she's about to cry, and Hildraed notices, as well. He kneels on the ground in front of her and takes her hands, "Hey. Don't you dare blame yourself for something that has not happened yet. It will be fine. And if it will not be, it still would not be your doing."

Aedelind tries for a half-hearted smile, and Hildraed cups her face to comfort her. "Thank you." She says.

"I will find those berries for you." Hildraed stands and bids farewell. I hold my hand out for Aedelind so I can help her up.

"Come on, have you even eaten at all today?" I ask. We hop on to a cart to take us back to the Citadel, along with the last of the crates. We arrive at nightfall, where Arahael helps Aedelind bring in the last of the crates to the servants' entrance. I find Merry, Pippin and Gimli sitting on a bench
smoking pipeweek.

"Hey, boys." I say, waving their smoke away from my face, "Has any of you seen Legolas? He has a habit of disappearing nowadays."

"Legolas?" Gimli repeats.

"Yes, Legolas. Tall, blonde, pointy ears."

"He--he's--"

"Not here." Merry pipes in, "But you're here! Stay with us, have a seat, try the Longbottom leaf."

"Preferably facing that way." Pippin points, and I follow his finger only to find that he is pointing at the entrance to the Hall of Kings, where two guards dutifully stand on either side of the large double doors.

I look at all three of them, my eyebrows knitting together, and say, "You three are acting very strange."

"Us, strange?"

"You've been smoking too much. I think you're all high." I start to turn around, but all three of them start speaking over each other, and all I can do is turn back to them, with my arms crossed over my chest.

"Come on, Ellie, you should try--"

"Been a long day, lassie, you should rest."

"Longbottom leaf is really good."

"He's probably gazing at the moon or something."

"Or talking to birds."

"Or sparring with the twins--ow!"

"Do not mention the twins." Gimli mutters under his breath after elbowing Pippin.

"You three are acting really weird right now."

"It's the leaf! You should try." Merry offers his own pipe, but seeing the effects of whatever they're smoking, I'm inclined to say no.

"I'm gonna go now. You three enjoy getting high." I turn around, only to find Arahael, of all people, standing behind me with a single rose in his hand, offered to me.

"Follow the lights and take the roses." He says, with this huge grin on his face. I turn back around to Merry, Pippin and Gimli in confusion, only to find them all smiling like Arahael. He steps aside to let me walk forward, and I notice the candles, on intricately designed candle-holders set atop random objects, leading up to a path. Wherever the candles were, they bathed the white pavement in a pale orange glow. A single rose sat beside each candle.

"Go, go." Merry and Pippin give me a slight push towards the closest candle. I don't know how I could have missed any of this, unless Merry, Pippin and Gimli were deliberately keeping me from
turning around while a few people set it up behind me--very quietly, too, because I didn't hear a thing. I know only two kinds of people who move as quietly as shadows: Elves and Dúnedain.

I move towards the first candle, take the rose, and move to the next candle, and all of it leads me to this secluded little garden. There are flowers of all kinds everywhere, and a stone path that led to the fountain in the middle. The view beyond is of the River Anduin, and the stars and the moon shone and twinkled in the cloudless night. But what catches my attention are the trees.

Because hanging on their branches are lanterns, candles flickering inside, lighting the entire garden up.

"It's just like--"

"New York?"

I turn when I notice movement from behind the fountain, and there stands Legolas, with this nervous smile on his face, beautiful in the glow of all these lights. My heart pounds in my chest. I have about a dozen roses in my hand now, and I've wrapped it with the ribbon attached to the last one to keep them all together. I don't know what's going on, but I'm...almost excited for something.

"I wanted to bring back a little bit of your home. I know it is not exactly the same but--"

"It's perfect, melethelin." I gasp, looking around me, at the flowers and the trees and God, all these lights! I've never realized how dark it really is in Middle-earth during the nights.

He motions for me to come closer, and I give him a mischievous smile, "Is this where you've been disappearing to these past couple of days?" I ask.

"Well..." He shrugs, "I bought all of the lanterns I could find and had Avorniel's people take them back up in the carts.

"Avorniel knew?" I ask,

"Avorniel offered to distract you so you would not notice people gathering things not on your list on her carts."

I laugh, remembering her suddenly asking me to shop with her, towards the apothecary, which was hidden from the main square during the market festival.

"Elladan and Elrohir help me set it all up. They had the brilliant idea of getting you to follow the lanterns toward the garden."

"And what did you do, meleth?" I tease.

"Me?" He laughs, nervously. It's strange to see him blush. Usually, I'm the flustered one in the relationship.

"I, uh..." He clears his throat, takes my free hand, and kneels on one knee.

I could almost hear my brain shrieking like a fourteen-year-old girl. My mouth drops, and I look around, praying that I'm not dreaming. My heart beats so fast in my chest, I would not be surprised if he could hear it right now. But all I could feel is how right this moment is, how much I want this to happen, and how perfect and beautiful everything is.

"For two thousand years, I have lived. And yet I never truly felt alive, Ellie, as when I am with you.
You and I have come a long way, since that time I first met you in Imladris. I always knew, at that moment, that despite how I mistrusted you, that you were someone very special, and I was right. Now, I would trust you with my very life, and my heart. You have given me joy, beyond any I have felt before. But more than that, you gave me your friendship, your smiles, your trust.” He says, his eyes never straying from mine, and I know that there are tears welling in my eyes right now, but for once they are tears of complete joy. He pauses, takes a deep breath, and smiles, his eyes so soft and hopeful, "Helen Grayson, I kneel before you now, asking for one last thing from you. Will you do me the honor of promising to be my wife?"

Wife. The word resonates in my head and repeats over and over again. A tear falls from my eye, and another quickly follows it, and I laugh, and say, "Yes. Yes, I would want nothing more."

He stands and pulls me towards him, and his lips land on mine, and I kiss him back with all the love and gratitude in my heart. He's much taller than me, and I realize this when he lifts me from the ground. We both laugh when we break the kiss, and he spins me around, and wrap my arms around his neck.

And I don't recall a happier moment than this. Right now, I feel like I could float, and as always, he is the one keeping me grounded. Legolas, my rock, my support. I would want nothing more than to spend the rest of my life with him.

"Gin melin." I say to him. He repeats the words back to me, and I kiss him again, just to make sure he knows.

Chapter End Notes

With that, I would like to say, we're coming closer to meeting some of Legolas' siblings. Ellie would have to meet them and Thranduil, after all, for the exchanging of rings ;)

Gin melin.
The Coronation

Chapter Summary

Gondor has its Queen, the wedding commences, and Legolas’ sisters arrive.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The rest of the weeks pass by in a happy blur. The news spreads around the Citadel, for better or worse. The rest of the Fellowship congratulate me, and Aedelind, Avorniel and Éowyn all knew before I did that Legolas was going to be taking that next step. Hinneril makes various insults about how someone as attractive as Legolas could have done so much better than a wench like me, but I'm too busy being happy to give her my time of day.

Éowyn heard her, though, and she couldn't hide behind her minions when it was Éowyn lecturing her about how she acted with less grace than the beggars she deemed were beneath her.

"If Lord Legolas married someone you think is so low, what does that say about you, Hinneril? Knowing no man wants to come within ten inches of you." Éowyn had so cheerfully told her. That had quickly shut Hinneril up.

For weeks, all we do is settle into living in Gondor, and slowly, Minas Tirith is rebuilt to be more beautiful than ever. Gimli had already started making plans with Aragorn about how to rebuild the broken gate, which apparently, they had discussed with the dwarven embassy before they had left. Nobles come and go, as well. Prince Imrahil had to go back to Dol Amroth at some point, which he did to take care of his lands and reunite with his family. He was preparing to leave the day after my engagement with Legolas. No one from the Blackroot Veil ever came, though. Eniredír said that Lord Duinhir was still crushed from the loss of his sons, and asked that Eniredír represent their House until he could recover.

There was also the very empty and painful reminder one day of the Rohirrim's departure. Of course Éowyn and Aedelind had to go back to Rohan at some point, and they did. In fact, the Rohirrim and Prince Imrahil and his knights all went out together, and I admit there were a lot of tears shed despite the fact that I know they'll be coming back.

"Hey, you got your hero's welcome here, it's our turn over there." Aedelgar tells me while I'm sniffling. He ruffles my hair, like an annoying uncle, and I swat him away.

"I still have your water sac." I tell Hildraed.

"In all honesty, at this point, it's your water sac now. Keep it." He says. I think it's because he feels a little bit of sympathy for me and it's the only comfort left. Éowyn, Aedelind, Avorniel and I all come in for a group hug, and we're speaking over each other trying to all not simultaneously burst out crying,

"Remember the recipes I taught you."

"For the love of all good things, Ellie, wake up in time for breakfast."
"Éowyn, I will find those books I talked to you about and you can read it when you get back."

"I'm so fucking jealous of you guys, you get to wear Rohirric dresses daily again."

And I can hear confused men at the back wondering what all the crying is about when they'll all be coming back anyway. But what they don't get is that we've all spent our days together and you couldn't find one of us without the other three. Minas Tirith is going to feel empty now, which is weird because there's never a quiet hallway here, and every street is always busy. There's always someone to run into and meet. Now the Rohirrim will be leaving, and I didn't realize how many of them were actually here until they had all left. The Citadel is definitely less noisy now. And it's just Avorniel and I dealing with Hinneril and her minions now. Even Elladan and Elrohir had to leave to report back to their father, taking the Dúnedain with them, so I don't even have the twins or Arahael and Halon to bother. Thankfully, though, Arahael had indeed weaned off the booze, and Halon and him were back to talking, so at least I don't have to worry about them.

I've started going down to the lower districts to check up on the orphanage. I asked Aragorn if they could prioritize the reconstruction of it, and it pleases me to see it slowly but surely being built. As a result, I've become closer to the children there. I've realized not everyone is going to be so ready to let their prejudice about elves or women in armies go so easily, but it's enough that there are plenty of people here who trust me, whether they are nobles or common-folk.

Some time ago, Aragorn had also planted a sapling in place of the dead White Tree in the middle of the court (There was even a funeral for it and everything) and now that we're in the middle of summer, it blossoms with white flowers that rain down on any that sit beneath it. This has become my and Legolas' favorite spot to read beneath. We still have not exchanged rings--he wanted me to meet even some of his family first before it happened. At some point, all of our family had to meet. Which was a problem, given I had no actual family here. But Aragorn was quick to come to the rescue. "The Fellowship will be there for you, Ellie. We are your family, after all."

"But my mother has to give a jewel to Legolas, doesn't she? And, she's not only technically not born in this time yet, but she's dead back in my own time."

"Leave that to me, Meril."

We never talked about it again. Today, however...today is different. Aragorn's been secretive lately. He and Gandalf have been talking alone a lot. And whenever Frodo asked when we could make our way back home, particularly to Rivendell, so he can meet Bilbo once more, Aragorn would just tell him, "Soon. The time is drawing near." In typical, mysterious Aragorn fashion. Apparently, he has assured Frodo that Bilbo knows what we're all waiting for. He only lets me know the day before it happens, when he and Legolas present a white gown to me.

"This looks like a torture device. You realize it's the middle of June, right? I have every confidence that this thing will kill me." I tell them when I take the dress and realize it weighs several pounds heavier than it should be. The petticoat to be worn after a corset is a deep red color. The gown to be worn over it is white with curling designs hand-stitched in red thread. As always, the sleeves are long and billowing. The gown's skirt parts in the middle to show the petticoat beneath. It's a gorgeous dress, albeit incredibly hard to put on.

"You will wear it tomorrow night. For me." Aragorn smiles.

"Why? What's happening tomorrow night?"

He laughs, puts his hand around my shoulder, and kisses the top of my head, "Lord Elrond's letter arrived today. The elves of Imladris and Lothlórien should be here by nightfall tomorrow."
It takes me a while to get it, but when I do, I squeal, and jump up and down like a child, "Oh my God! Arwen's coming!"

"And we shall be wed the very moment she arrives."

I scream a decibel higher, making Legolas wince. I cover my mouth and put my hands over his ears, "Oh my God, I'm sorry, meleth, I'm just so excited. Oh, my God! Why didn't you tell me sooner? Who's going to prepare the food and the decorations? What about her dress? Aragorn, congratulations!"

I could barely sleep through the night, and I wake up to find Minas Tirith in a flurry. When I left the Citadel early that morning, the servants were already clamoring to hang the silk drapes in the Merethrond, the Great Halls of Feasts. As if the place wasn't grand enough before, now the windows are being cleaned, the curtains being opened to let in the light, people were wiping floors clean and tables were being set up. There's talk of an elven entourage approaching and I had to see it for myself. Besides, I was already up when the messengers arrived.

I run through the streets, my boots making only the barest sound on the stone pavements of Gondor. Thank God for Galadrim tanners and their expert craftsmanship. Even now, the boots given to me by the elves of Lothlórien are as sturdy as ever. I hop off my horse when I realize the streets are too crowded to navigate through, and I tether it to the nearest fence.

I duck away from the busy people in the streets. There are women shouting for their children, and men clamoring to clean the streets and set up decorations. The white pavement is being scrubbed clean and children are gathering flowers.

"Lady Ellie!"

"My lady."

"El!"

The various shouts come from the soldiers, the polite bows from the women and the delighted shrieks from the children. I skid to a halt as they form a circle around me.

"Can't play now, kids!" I say, though I kneel before them, anyway.

"Awwww." They collectively groan.

"Later, later! Have you seen any of my friends?" I laugh, ruffling a nearby child's hair.

"I saw Legolas go up there!" The kid points at the rooftops. I look up to where he's pointing at. If I squint, I could almost see a hint of green and brown amidst the white and grey walls.

"Melethenin!" I call, cupping my hands around my mouth to amplify my voice, though I know it would make little difference. Elven senses are far more superior than mine. He'd be able to hear me even if I had spoken in my normal voice. I see a figure scurrying down the walls, his feet finding small crevices that no mortal would ever be able to hold on to. He drops down in front of me, and I tuck his hair behind his pointy ears as he leans down to give me a peck on the lips.

"Good morning to you." He says, brightly. "Should you not be cleaning up right now? Getting into your dress?"

The dress he's talking about is the one he and Aragorn both picked out for today. And it's a special day indeed.
My parents are getting married!

Or, well, as close to parent figures as I could consider. Hell, I literally am a descendant of theirs anyway, so it counts.

"I wanted to see how many elves were coming. And to be quite honest, I want to see the looks on people's faces when they first see their Queen. Look how excited everyone is!" I fling my arm to motion at everything and end up smacking the back of someone's head.

I squeak as Legolas laughs beside me. "I'm so sorry, oh my..." I tell the man but he just waves me away, cursing under his breath.

"We could climb if you wish." Legolas suggests. I snort at the mere notion of it.

"I would rather be trampled by an Ent."

"I'm hurt."

"I would die if I tried. I'm not exaggerating. I'll fall and break my neck."

"In that case, run fast."

And he shoots off into the crowd.

"You devil!" I shout, running after him. His feet are sure and swift. Not like mine, clumsy and hesitating. When I finally catch up with him, he's frozen in front of the gate. I stop before I run into him but he steps back and ends up stumbling into me anyway.

"Ow! What, what happened?" I hiss and he turns around. His mouth is slightly open, as if he just saw something that he wasn't expecting and has no idea how to react to it. Confused, I attempt to look over his shoulder to see who has arrived, but he places his hands on my arms to stop me from moving. That doesn't stop me from seeing who came, though.

Elves clad in green and brown are riding with the Sons of Elrond.

"The King's Vanguard."

Wait, isn't that what they call King Thranduil's best warriors? I remember Legolas saying he led them. Now I'm really interested.

"Hir nin. You honor us by greeting us at the Gate." One of the elves clad in green says as his horse stops beside us. Legolas and I both look up, me with curiosity, him with a sheepish smile.

"Surprised?" The ellon on the horse says. There is a smile on his face. His auburn hair is braided in the same fashion as Legolas usually does his own hair.

"I was not expecting you at all, gwador." Legolas says, which makes the elf laugh.

"It would defeat the purpose of surprising you if you were, Legolas." He slides off the horse and Legolas immediately pulls him in for a hug.

The two laugh like children and Legolas turns to me. "Ellie." He motions to me and I step forward. The elf didn't even seem to notice me until I did.

"This is Lady Ellie. She was part of the Fellowship of the Ring."
The *ellon* raises a perfectly shaped eyebrow, "Ah, then even more honor is granted to us. Lady Ellie," he bows, "I am Meludir, Prince Legolas' second-in-command."

"I'm honored to meet one of the finest warriors of Eryn Galen." I smile.


"Oh, I do not want to think about the lectures Silarassel has prepared for me." Legolas groans. "I was expecting they would be here. Where are the others?"

"Feren sends his love." Meludir produces a thick scroll.

"I'm sure he does." Legolas winces.

"Celaireth will be coming, as well as Silarassel. They will be arriving with the company from Imladris."

"At least it's not Taumathor."

Meludir laughs. "You are relieved now but you will still have to face Celaireth's fury."

"Fury?"

"You remember you snuck off to deliver your accursed message to Lord Elrond and then *never returned*."

Legolas laughs nervously at that,

"But seeing the company you keep, I do understand why you would choose to stay." Meludir says, bowing to me.

"At least I know the Elves of Greenwood are well-mannered." I say with a smile. Meludir bursts out laughing at that. "You should come to one of the King's parties. See if the elves of Greenwood are well-mannered then."

"After getting to know Legolas, I'm sure I can handle anything."

"I'm tame compared to most of them, *melethenin*."

"*Melethenin*? My, my. You have quite some explaining to do to your father, my lord." Meludir looks at me from head to foot, as if only truly seeing me then.

"Yes, well, it will not be today, thankfully." Legolas rubs the back of his neck.

"Taumathor will have a fit. Not only did you never return after delivering your message, you've fallen for a mortal. And here I thought you were in love with Tauriel all this time."

My face falls, and I turn to Legolas in confusion. Legolas gives Meludir a furious glare, and the other elf quickly shuts up. He coughs, bows, and gets back up on his horse to catch up with the company approaching the Citadel, where people gasp in wonder at the sight of so many elves.

"You mentioned Tauriel to me once." I say, and Legolas does not quite meet my gaze, "You never told me you were in love with her."
"I did not think it was necessary to talk about her. She is already in Valinor, mending a broken heart after the dwarf she loved died in battle."

"And you? What did you do when she left?"

"I moved on. Ellie, whatever I felt for her, it was nothing compared to how I feel about you now."

He kisses my forehead, and I sigh but let it go. There is no use getting flustered over who Tauriel was now. There's just the gnawing discomfort in my stomach after seeing Meludir's reaction. I haven't actually met Taumathor, but him having a "fit" when he finds out about Legolas and I doesn't sound like good news. They'd probably die on the spot once they find out Legolas and I have promised ourselves to each other. But that's a bridge I'll cross when I get there. Take it day by day is a mantra for our relationship now.

Elladan and Elrohir soon join us, and Legolas and I both blink up at Elrohir when we see the cut healing on his cheek.

"What happened to you?" Legolas asks.

"Your sister let loose an arrow at my face and I barely dodged it. She was not pleased that you have been gone for months now, elfling, and somehow blames us for it."

"Why you, though?" I ask. Usually, it's Elladan getting in the middle of fights while Elrohir pulls him back.

"I tried to tell her to calm down while she and Elladan were yelling at each other. Celaireth does not like being told to calm down while she is in the middle of an angry rant."

Lovely. Wonderful. That sounds very pleasant. I'm now severely terrified of Legolas' siblings.

"Also, she just likes threatening Elrohir's life." Elladan pipes in. "It's how they flirt."

"We do not--That is not--You are wrong!" Elrohir stammers.

Legolas makes a face, "Can we not talk about Elrohir and Celaireth flirting? The thought of ever being related to the two of you in any way whatsoever..."

"Do not come to us crying 'gwador' when Silarassel lectures you, elfling. Thankfully, she is sensible and has chosen to keep her opinions to herself until she gets to meet you."

Legolas groans, and I snort. I could relate to Silarassel, at least. I do have the tendency to lecture Rory for ages if I was in a particular mood.

"Come. Meludir insisted we take him with us. He said he had news." Elladan motions for Legolas and I to follow him.

"Good or bad?" Legolas asks.

"You will have to find out." Elladan responds.

I find my horse as we head back and Legolas rides at the front with me behind him. Thankfully, I wore riding gear today. We eventually make our way to the Citadel, to find that the door to the Hall of Kings is open. The company had already come in, most of them are elves from Imladris, and Prince Imrahil and a handful of his knights.

When we walk in, some of the council members look around, whether in fear or awe, I still can't tell,
as they see all these elves flock in. There is the briefest moment of formality, where the elves bow to Aragorn, before he cracks a grin and the elves laugh and hoot and come towards him, pulling him to their circle to give hugs and their congratulations. I lean on Legolas' chest, happy to see Aragorn giddy and laughing, after all the stress he's been through this past month. Elves have that effect, I realize. He looks like a younger brother being teased by his family, and they might as well be. He had known the elves of Imladris for pretty much all of his life. And they in turn have watched his growth.

Gandalf is there as well, and his smile is big and warm.

"Can we, perhaps, have a bath, Estel? Where is the nearest river?"

"You will have to make do with the bath houses, I am afraid. The river is too far from here."

"Oh. Then how do you get water into the castle?"

I turn to Legolas, "How does Minas Tirith get water?"

"There are contraptions built underground from here to the River Anduin."

"Pipes? They have plumbing?" I gasp, my eyes and mouth going round.

"They--what? No, they have reservoirs, man-made lakes in each residential level of the city. The Citadel has servants whose entire job is to collect water for the whole day." Legolas looks at me confused for a while before he continues his explanation.

"Ellie?" I look up when my name is called, and I straighten immediately because I would recognize that voice any day.

"Salabeth?"

I see one of the Imladrim squeeze between her companions and draw the hood of her cloak back, and I scream and run towards her and she laughs when I squeeze her in a tight hug.

"I've missed you, oh my God. You have no idea what we've done. Aragorn literally led an army of undead, it was awesome. And my herbalism has gotten much better, too. Come, come. You can bathe in my room, I have a huge-ass tub there, all fancy and shit, come on!" She looks at me with amusement and a little bit of confusion, but she laughs and waves at her companions when I pull her back towards my room.

"I'll see you later!" I wave at Legolas, whose laughter I can hear even in the hallway.

"My, my. Look at you." Salabeth stops me for a moment to hold me by my shoulders. She brushes my hair back and says, "You're braiding has gotten better, as well. I'm glad you still incorporate something elvish on yourself."

"Of course I did. My first safe place was Rivendell, after all. And I never forgot you for a second. It was my way of reminding myself of you, the first friend I've ever had in Middle-earth." She smiles. She was perhaps the first person who knew I am a foreigner to Middle-earth, but she never prodded me for more. Salabeth was the one who first accepted me for who I was, and took care of me like an older sister. It's about time I repay the favor.

I take her to my chambers, and while waiting for the servants to bring in water for the bath, we sit and talk about what the War was like for either of us, but on a more personal note.
I complain about not being able to bathe as often as I wanted to, or the difficulty of dealing with my period while travelling, which thankfully I only had to suffer through for a couple of months, and how much I miss Elvish dresses because the ones here in Gondor are so uncomfortable. And she tells me about the heightened sense of stress in Imladris, and how there are so few elves left there. She says the ones coming with Lady Arwen are almost everyone, with only a few staying behind to keep Rivendell maintained.

"I wanted to leave for the Grey Havens--I was on my way, in fact. But Arwen turned around and I did not want to leave her friendless, so I went back with her. This will be my last journey. I wanted to see Arwen and Estel celebrate their love. I have watched it grow, and wanted my last memory of Middle-earth to see that love blossom. After that, I will sail to the Undying Lands." Salabeth says.

She sees the disappointment on my face, but she hugs me and says, "Sweet child, the time of the elves is over here. It's time for your race to make Middle-earth flourish. But I will wait by the Halls of Mandos for you, to see you for the last time. Even briefly. I have done my purpose here. I have taken care of warriors, elflings, lost girls from foreign lands." She chuckles as she says the last part, "But it's time for me to go soon. The Sea calls."

I know this. I've accepted that the elves would have to leave, some sooner than most. This would be a new chapter in the life of those in Middle-earth, and they have done their part. Still, I can't bear the thought of their magic and beauty dissipating from this world. And I know Salabeth has high hopes, but I know exactly how capable men are at destroying the very thing elves ever cared for--animals, trees, all good things that grow.

"Well," I sigh, pulling away as the servants knock on the door to my bedroom to say that the bath is ready, "there is one thing I owe you."

I lead her to her bath, like she did to me when I arrived from Bree. And I point to her the hair oils and soap that I bought from the Market Festival. When she gets in, I brush her hair and get her back for her and take care of her, for once. Because I know how Salabeth is always the one taking care of others.

We help each other prepare for the day, with Avorniel coming in just as I'm putting on these ridiculous white, velvet pumps. The shoes would have been cute if the heels were stilettos and not the size of a brick, but I guess that's what's in.

"I brought my things!" Avorniel holds up a little chest she has tucked under her arms. She freezes when Salabeth turns to her, looking completely in awe for a second before shaking herself back to reality.

"I never do get used to the beauty of elves but goodness." She looks at Salabeth, appreciatively. Salabeth smiles, and I see Avorniel's eyes widen fractionally.

I giggle-snort, seeing these two fascinated with each other for different reasons. Salabeth observes Avorniel's dress, which was a soft yellow color, with midnight blue trimmings and applique. Avorniel never does fail to dress well for parties, despite hating actually being there. Her hair is tied up in a half bun, while the rest of her hair hangs down in soft curls, and there are sapphires in her hair and fingers.

Salabeth, meanwhile, in typical elven fashion, wears a white dress. It's simple, but hugs her shape, the fabric itself soft to the touch and following her movement, and her hair is braided to look like a headband. Both look at each other in curiosity, seeing how each interprets beauty.
"Oh, Avorniel this is Salabeth. Salabeth, Avorniel. Avorniel loves books, Salabeth loves herbs." I introduce them.

"Herbs, you say? I bet Aedelind would love to talk to you."

"I would like to meet all of Ellie's friends. Thank you for caring for her. Who is this Aedelind you speak of?"

Avorniel just looks more and more awe-struck by the second. I swear to God, she doesn't have this kind of reaction when Legolas is in the room, or even the twins. She's gonna flip when she sees Arwen. Now that's a beauty no one will ever get over.

"Aedelind is in Rohan, unfortunately. Is she...?" I turn to Avorniel, who shakes her head.

"They still have a lot to do in Rohan, unfortunately. She and Aedelgar will be staying behind, taking care of repairs and with the sick. Éowyn will be coming, though, to bring King Théoden's body back."

I frown, but truthfully, I've been expecting it. I know that she's where she needs to be. Aedelind's calling is healing, after all. She would want to stay to take care of as many people as she can.

"Well, it's the three of us against Hinneril's little group, at least."

"Hinneril?" Salabeth asks. Avorniel seems to have shaken herself from her awe and laughs.

"You will absolutely adore Lady Hinneril. She's quite possibly the most entertaining individual you would ever meet. Her personality leaves a lot of room for improvement, but you will never be bored with her."

"Oh, she is another friend?" Salabeth asks,

"She accused me of being the army whore so..." I say.

"She--?"

"It's okay. Her insults get boring after a couple of days."

Salabeth shakes her head, "Only you would say that. Truly, you would not believe how Ellie and Legolas used to argue when they were in Rivendell. Every elf in the valley was invested in their fights--quite literally."

"They used to bet on who would walk away first. It only ended midway into our training when we were getting friendlier and they realized we'd gotten over our differences."

"So over the differences, in fact, that they are now betrothed." Avorniel says. Salabeth whips around to me, and it's the first time I ever saw her jump like a teenager. She was always so composed and calm.

"Goodness! You and Legolas? Ellie!"

"Oh, but please don't tell Arwen or anyone yet. This is her day, I want the focus to be on her. She's been waiting for years to marry Aragorn. They're the only two that matter. I'll let her know in the future."

"But your dress! What about your dress! I did not bring anything for sewing..."
I laugh as she fusses over it, and Avorniel leads her to my vanity table. Avorniel has quite a collection of cosmetics, and after the Market Festival, she has a few more that she wanted to use. Make up here is mostly loose powders and liquid eyeliner applied with a thin stick. Cheeks were pinched to give a rosy color to them.

We finish preparations and go to the entrance of the Hall of Kings, where elves and men mingle and talk in their colorful dresses. I find the rest of the Fellowship all dressed in their best clothes, though I note the hobbits still have no idea what's happening. I turn around to show them my dress and they clap appreciatively. Legolas kisses my cheek, and he's in a silver, elven tunic and white pants. His hair is brushed back and there's a silver circlet on his head.

"You packed that up during travels?" I ask, making him laugh.

"An elf has got to be prepared." He teases, "Elladan brought it for me. One of my fancier tunics that I left behind in Rivendell. I'm amazed it still fits."

Aragorn is already up on a platform, in shining silver armor, and a red cape. I come up to him before he has to stand by the throne.

"This is it, dad." I tease.

"I wonder, will you be calling Arwen 'mother' after today?"

"It's better than great-great-great-great-great--"

"I get it, I get it." He turns to me slightly, "Do you think she knows? About you being..."

I shake my head, "Oh, no, no. I think that's for the two of you to discuss in the future."

"Are you nervous?" I peer at him. He pointedly looks away, and I laugh, amazed.

"Fallen off a cliff, faced ten thousand Uruk-hai, led an army to Mordor and this is the only time I have ever seen you admit you're nervous."

"I admit nothing." He says, still not looking at me. I take his shoulders and shake him a bit, "She loves you. She chose mortality for you. You two will be wed tonight and nothing will ever stop that, not even God himself. And after this, you two will have beautiful babies and live the rest of your days happy together. Capisce?"

"Ka--what?"

"Break a leg, my dude."

"Break--what?!"

"It means good luck."

"Oh." He looks utterly confused at this point, "Thank you. I think."

I get down from his many-stepped platform as the bells ring. Apparently, the company is already arriving, sooner than anticipated. I get in position between Legolas and Gimli, with Meludir standing nearby, holding a standard of a brown stag's horn, it seems, on a deep green background. Elladan and Elrohir stand close by, and the hobbits are standing even closer to the stage. Many people have arrived, and for a rare moment, the divide between classes are erased. In this courtyard stands as many people that could fit the Citadel level, and there are more forming a path all the way up here,
ready to welcome the incoming entourage.

Today, the coronation ceremony will be done again, if only for formality. The way Aragorn received the crown, though long overdue, was still not prepared for. He was crowned during the war, after all, but now he can get the grand ceremony that the long lost King deserved. He had been doing spectacularly as a King for weeks now, months even. But now, Gandalf stands on the platform beside him, a shining beacon of pure white robes, and Frodo brings the crown as he did in front of the Gates of Minas Tirith up those steps for Gandalf to hold up and present to all of Minas Tirith, and Aragorn is kneeling in front of him.

Gandalf holds the crown over Aragorn's head, and his voice booms across the courtyard, "Now come the days of the king. May they be blessed."

He places the crown on Aragorn's head, and Aragorn turns to speak to the crowd, "This day does not belong to one man, but to all. Let us together rebuild this world, that we may share in the days of peace."

The cheer from everyone is deafening. There are trumpets, and flowers being thrown in the air, and people shouting in great joy. Aragorn sings, and as he does, the crowd behind us parts to accommodate for the newly arrived company. I see Êomer and Êowyn there, but they're caught in the flurry of the crowd. I do see Faramir kiss Êowyn's hand the moment they get within arm's reach, and they stand beside each other, beaming.

Gimli grunts as he is jostled by the taller people around him, and I have to hold on to his velvet tunic to make sure he doesn't get pushed back by the crowd. When I look back up at the platform, Aragorn is making his way down meet the procession. I feel Legolas squeeze my arm and motion behind him, and I see Arwen first of all. Elladan and Elrohir stand on one side of her, and Lord Elrond on the other. She wears this beautiful gown of pale green, with a headdress of gems and silver on her dark hair. She gives me a radiant smile--the kind I have never seen before on her, that seems to outshine the very stones of Minas Tirith itself.

I turn back to find people bowing wherever Aragorn passes, including Êomer, Êowyn and Faramir. When we realize the king is coming towards us, Legolas, Meludir, Gimli and I step forward. He chuckles, tapping my chin up and then placing a hand on Legolas' shoulder.

"Len hannon. All of you." He looks down to smile at Gimli as he says it, "We were the closest, the three of us. I have been through a great deal with you."

That's enough for all of us, really. It's enough that after everything, we know that we are still the people he trusts the most. But I know that smile could use just a little bit more of a lift. Legolas and I turn to each other, immediately realizing each other's intent to be the same, and we both step back at the same time to reveal the company behind us.

And it seems to move in slow motion. Elladan and Elrohir with tears in their eyes, Lord Elrond looking more proud than I have ever seen, and Arwen, setting aside the banner she is holding to reveal herself to everyone. I turn back just to see Aragorn's reaction. I imagine this would be the same thing as a groom seeing his bride in a wedding gown for the first time, and the look on his face is priceless. Just pure awe. Softness. Joy.

Elrohir takes the banner from Arwen and she and Aragorn meet. There are no words spoken. Aragorn just pulls her in for a kiss long overdue. His hands go on either side of her face, and when he pulls away, she places her fingers on his cheek, lovingly caressing him.

And I see it. That smile. I've never seen either of them so happy before. Arwen lets out this
melodious laugh and pulls him in for an embrace, and the rest of us cheer. I think I have tears in my eyes.

Aragorn continues his procession, with Arwen holding his hand beside him, until he comes to a full stop in front of the tiniest people there. The four hobbits, dressed in their finest clothes, their feet bare. They move to bow, but Aragorn holds up his hand and says, "My friends." There is a short pause, "You bow to no one."

He is the first to kneel, with Arwen dropping to her knee beside him, and the rest of us following suit, all of us just giving reverence to these four brave hobbits--our saviors, in every sense. We may have fought battles, but these four have carried the responsibility of saving Middle-earth on their backs, and they, bravest and strongest of all, saved us when great heroes before failed. They look around in a daze, unable to quite believe what they're seeing.

When Aragorn gets back to his feet, he turns to Arwen, sighs, kisses her again and says, "I think it is long time we say our vows."

There's another burst of loud trumpets and cheering, and at this point, the sun has just begun to set. The people loom around in delight, trying to clarify with their neighbors if they had heard correctly. They look at Arwen with great interest now, more than ever. Not only do they have a King, but they now also had a beautiful, almost mystical, queen to rule beside him. An elven queen, at that.

There is a delay in preparation. I imagine they have a lot to set up when it comes to the wedding proper. It isn't until the night has fallen that we all get back in positions, where I find Legolas looking around expectantly.

"Don't worry. They're here somewhere." Meludir mutters.

"I can hear them threatening to tie me up in a sack to bring me to father for my final judgment."

"You are overreacting, my lord. They merely said they wanted to catch up with you."

"Celaireth has a rope and a sack."

"Ssh. Tell your sisters that it's bad luck to shed blood during a wedding." Gimli says.

"Not in some cultures..." Meludir says, widening his eyes as he looks away. I look up at him, disturbed at the thought that anyone would dare shed blood during such a happy time.

Bells ring, and a choir of elven voices harmonize and fill the air. It's almost surreal, and I could swear there is almost a glow from the company of elves now slowly making their way towards the platform where Gandalf crowned Aragorn.

They pass by us, with Arwen standing between Lord Elrond and Lady Galadriel, and Arwen turns her head slightly to me, and she smiles, this radiant, beautiful smile, and continues to walk forward. As she walks, it seems she washes away with her light the fear that darkness brings, a reminder to everyone that night brings just as much beauty as day. The choir in front of her parts to reveal her standing there, standing beside her father.

She turns to him, and I see Lord Elrond blink back tears as he gently takes his daughter's hand and leads her forward. She turns back to him, giving him a gentle smile, and lets go, turning to Aragorn. He, too, has tears in his eyes. She walks up those steps gracefully, and I have never seen Aragorn cry but as she stands beside him, he takes a moment to wipe his eye with a gloved hand. Arwen reaches out first, and he takes her hand.
Lady Galadriel steps up first, a being of divine beauty almost. She is like the sun--warm and golden
and tall. She places a hand on their joined hands and says, her voice deep and carrying over the
entire crowd, "May Varda, Star-kindler, look on to the union of King Elessar Telcontar and Arwen
Undómiel, and bless you with joy, and may Eru, the Father of All, watch over you."

I'm bawling at this point, my eyes are streaming with tears as Lady Galadriel smiles at the two of
them and kisses Arwen's cheek and the top of Aragorn's forehead. She steps aside and Lord Elrond
comes up, places his hand on their joined hands and says, "May Manwë, Lord of Wind, grant
patience and guidance through any challenge that King Elessar Telcontar Arwen Undómiel, may
face together as husband..." His voice cracks as he says it, turning to Aragorn, this boy he cared for
had become a man, a King worthy of his only daughter, "...and wife." He turns now to Arwen, and I
see this bittersweet moment between them. There is an overflow of happiness and pride, and a hint of
sorrow for Lord Elrond that he had truly now let his daughter go.

He backs away, and there are deafening cheers from the crowd, petals being thrown in the air, taken
by the cool breeze of the evening, as Aragorn and Arwen kiss, now husband and wife, King and
Queen. Looking at the Fellowship, there is not one dry eye among us. I even catch Gandalf dabbing
at his eyes. They lead the way back inside the Citadel itself, into the Hall of Feasting.

"They're finally married." I sniffle, and Gandalf looks at me with a small smile as we make our way
for the feast.

"Not quite." He says. There is merriment and dancing and drinking. Éowyn, Avorniel and I
reconnect to share what we have done since we have separated, and I introduce Éowyn to Salabeth.
You've never really seen partying until you are in a feast with elves. The alcohol is ever-flowing, and
there is so much dancing involved that we end up taking our shoes off just to be able to keep up.

We do get a chance to get to Aragorn and Arwen eventually, and Arwen stands and pulls me in for a
tight, warm hug. "Oh, you look so, so beautiful! I'm so happy for both of you!" I say, almost bursting
into tears right there once again.

"You have done so well, Ellie." She says. I wave my hand and say, "No, please. This is about you.
You are finally together."

"Dance with us!" Salabeth interrupts, pulling both Aragorn and Arwen in. The band strikes up a
cheerful tune. Aragorn shakes his head, laughing, but it's too late. He's already in this circle of
laughing people, elves and Men alike. It's a series of spins and joining hands that eventually form a
larger and larger circle as more people join in the dance. And somehow, Aragorn and Arwen end up
being in the center of it. They stand side by-side, their heads turned to look at each other as he places
his hand on her waist and her hand on his shoulder and they turn, slowly, until Aragorn stops to pull
her in for another kiss.

He swoops her up in his arms, and she laughs, making the elves cheer, and carries her out of the hall
towards the hallway that would eventually lead up the King's chamber. The elves shout their support
at them, while the humans whisper and ask what's happening.

I do the same with Meludir, who is currently the nearest elf beside me.

"They're not officially husband and wife until they consummate."

"They...consummate...?" I ask, my face paling.

"Consume, make love, however you want to say it. When body and fea are as one. That is the final
seal of their marriage, their bond. When at the moment of greatest pleasure, their hearts beat as one,
and they are forever connected to each other, until death separates them. Sometimes, if the love is strong enough, not even that will tear them apart." He explains, "We, however, get to stay here and drink and feast to our hearts' desires."

Ah. That is the last step Legolas was too embarrassed to tell me. Meludir has had quite a few drinks, and his tongue is quite loose tonight. I imagine he won't remember this conversation tomorrow but I certainly would.

Sex. Wow. I don't have a lot of experience in that department, in fact I have none. So. That's...that's a bridge I'll cross when I get there. Again. Good grief. I snatch the goblet of wine from Meludir's hand and finish it off in big gulps to calm my suddenly jittery nerves.

"Ai!" He protests, snatching it back. He's in the process of glaring at me when something behind me catches his eye, and then he bows, formally.

I turn to find two female elves with long, blonde hair, both wearing gowns of expensive fabric—layers upon layers of a rich red an silver with exquisite stitching. They wear circlets over their heads, with green gems at the center, and flowers in their hair that matches the shade of red on their gowns. There's something about their strong and yet still somehow delicate jaws that make them familiar to me. Their eyes are green, and their skin flawless and pale.

It's almost like something clicks in my head when I realize who they are. I bow, so quickly I feel like I may have just paralyzed myself from the waist down.

"Your Highness...es?"

What a lovely first impression you're leaving there, Ellie.

I mentally smack myself, and a small chuckle from one of them makes me look up.

"Humans. They really are so uptight and formal. Or is that just Gondor?"

The one who speaks has a playful, melodious voice. Like an excited child, almost. The other one smiles, the more reserved of the two, and motions for me to stand up.

"No need for formalities, good lady. Other than our own warriors, it really is not a requirement for people to bow wherever we stop, though I realize that is the custom of your people." This one's voice is slightly deeper, more mature. She cocks her head to the side, "I do wonder, have you seen our dear little brother? We wanted to say hello to Legolas and noticed up until this point, he has been by your side, Lady...?"

"Ellie." My voice raises an octave higher. I clear my throat and say it again, "Ellie. Um. Helen Grayson, but you can just call me Ellie. You must be Legolas' sisters."

"Oh, so the child knows we exist after all, huh?" The first one speaks again, losing a bit of composure as she snaps. The second one lays a gentle hand on her shoulder in warning.

"He ran into the kitchen, Lady Celaireth. But don't tell him I said so. I would like to keep my hair the way it is, thank you." Meludir pipes in.

"Did he, now?" Celaireth smirks, inclines her head towards me, and disappears in the crowd. The other elf sighs and shakes her head.

"You would think he would want to speak with us to explain and not make it worse for himself. Forgive me, Lady Ellie, I am Silarassel. That was my younger sister, Celaireth."
"He has been gone for months, hasn't he?" I say, in an attempt at conversation.

"Well, time does not really matter. It's the way he left that was the problem. He only left a note behind about fixing his mistake and delivering a message to Imladris but then he never returned. In complete fairness to him, Father did ask for him to deliver a message to Lord Elrond...just, not quite in the way he did."

"He does have a tendency to surprise, that elf." I laugh.

"You two are close, I assume?"

"Quite." I say, not sure if it's the right time to tell her Legolas and I are sort of, kind of...engaged. We haven't even worn our rings yet, partly because he wanted me to meet his family first. "We were in the Fellowship together."

"You are? I did not expect someone so young to be a member of the Fellowship. It is a great honor to meet you." Silarassel smiles. I make a note that she and Legolas smile almost the same way, with their eyes crinkling at the sides, and she has dimples on her cheeks when she smiles.

"There you are, you stubborn, impulsive elfling." Celaireth's voice could be heard even from our direction, and Silarassel turns a curious look at the sound of her voice. She turns to me, motions with her head, and we follow the shouting.

Meludir behind me giggling with a tankard in front of his face.

Celaireth never did reach the kitchens. Apparently, she found Legolas hiding behind Gandalf. Celaireth was talking to him in rapid Sindarin—or at least, it sounds vaguely Sindarin. But there are enough differences for me not to catch what they're telling each other. Gandalf, looking disgruntled, stands between the two siblings only because Legolas has a firm grasp on his shoulders, making him a shield. There's quite a few entertained guests laughing at the spectacle, but the elves have garnered enough attention that they turn away, not realizing fratricide was imminent.

"I'm sorry, alright?" Legolas lapsed into Westron.

"Sorry? Oh, you will have something to be sorry for, you..." Celaireth let out another stream of elvish, at which point, Silarassel stepped in and both Legolas and Celaireth fall silent.

Silarassel turned slowly to her brother, and for the first time, I see danger in her otherwise innocent features. Her eyes narrow, her lips purse, and she crosses her arms in a disapproving manner.

"Explain." She says in a dangerous tone. Legolas steps away from Gandalf, who gives him a slight push before standing beside me, straightening his dishelved clothes. He's muttering something about wood elves and how impatient they were and how brash and now his robes are ruined. After he's done re-arranging his robes, he goes off, away from the little scene. Legolas turns to me, sheepishly, and I give him a small, half-hearted wave.

"You have met Ellie, I see?" Legolas tries for a warm greeting.

Silarassel only glares at him in response.

He bows his head and sighs in defeat, "I am sorry, truly. I did not mean to be away for so long."

"I assure you, that is the least of our concerns. Do you know how worried father has been? He almost started a war with Imladris because he blamed Lord Elrond for allowing you to go on a suicide mission." Silarassel snapped.
"Can we not talk about this in private?"

"You humiliated our father in front of the entire kingdom, you can bear getting told off in the Merethrond." Celaireth piped in. Silarassel held up a finger to make her quiet, and she stepped back.

"Explain, Legolas. In full."

"Not here. Sae. If you want me to explain, we need to go somewhere quiet." Legolas almost sounds pleading. Silarassel thinks this through for a moment, before she nods.

"Lead the way." She steps back. Legolas turns to me, his fingers brushing against mine and pulling me towards him.

"Family only." Celaireth snaps.

"I need her there. Please, Celaireth."

"You are in no position to be asking us for anything--"

"Leave him be, Celaireth." Silarassel says. I follow after them, my heart now beating nervously. We find a small chamber that looks like it could be a study of some sort. It has a table in the corner stacked with books, a fur rug in the middle and cushioned sofas by a fire.

Celaireth sits on the sofa, taking up the entire space and resting her feet on the arm rest. Silarassel stands beside her, and Legolas stands in front of both of them. I remain by the door, closing it behind me.

"Okay, Legolas. It is quiet, your friend is here. Talk."

"I felt guilty for Gollum's escape, alright? Father trusted me with him, and in my misjudgment, he managed to escape and brought information to the Enemy. I could not bear the disappointment in father's eyes when I told him. You two and Taumathor have done your duties to the kingdom well. I had one job and I still failed at it. I already had my orders from father to go to Imladris, and I did not want to have to face the three of you as well with my failure, so I left early that morning. I left a note." Legolas says the last part, sheepishly.

"Yes, let us talk about your note, shall we? I went ahead to Imladris. I thought it best to be quiet and fast so I'm going alone. I should be back by two weeks. Eight moons have passed, little brother." Celaireth says.

"I did not mean to be away for that long! But you were not there, at the Council. You did not see the anger and mistrust that Ring sowed in us simply for being in its presence. I knew it had to be destroyed. I feared Sauron's reach would spread to Eryn Galen. I did not want that to happen, I wanted to protect the kingdom. I knew you would disapprove but I thought you would understand, the Quest was for the greater good. I had to see it through. I just wanted father to be proud of me. I wanted you all to be proud of me. I wanted to protect everyone."

I never really realize how young in elven eyes Legolas is until this moment, where he stands in front of his sisters and confesses his mistakes. It's a vulnerability I have not seen in him. Celaireth freezes, and I see Silarassel's shoulders relax. The two ellith exchange bewildered looks, before Silarassel steps forward and sweeps Legolas in for a hug. I see Legolas visibly relax, and I could have sworn there were tears in his eyes before he burrowed his face on his sister's shoulder. My heart warms at the sight. Celaireth sits up straight, her skirts shifting as she moved, and sighs, shaking her head.

"You have made us proud, Legolas. You always have. You do not have to keep proving yourself to
us or to father." Silarassel says.

"You made us worry so much, you idiot." Celaireth steps in and joins the hug.

"I'm sorry." Legolas says.

"You are forgiven, elfling."

"I'm sorry."

"Just don't do it again."

"I'm sorry."

"Alright, alright!"

They pull away from each other, and turn to me. Celaireth blinks at me, as if forgetting I was even there. I do another embarrassing, half-hearted wave.

"Ellie, is it not?" Silarassel asks. I nod.

"Hi."

I want to smack myself. Celaireth furrows her eyebrows at me, "No offense. But why is she here again?"

Legolas wriggles out of his sisters' arms to stand beside me and take my hand. I look up at him, bewildered.

"There was another thing I wanted to tell you. Celaireth, Silarassel, this is Ellie." He turns to face me, "My betrothed."

Ah, crap. I don't really think that was the best way to tell them. My wide eyes turn to his sisters' faces. Their eyebrows both shot up, before Celaireth started giggling.

"Two thousand years in Eryn Lasgalen and it took a Quest to destroy the One Ring itself for you to fall in love." Celaireth says between gasps.

"With a mortal..." Silarassel sounds dazed.

"Ah, I cannot wait to hear what the ellith back home have to say about that."

"Taumathor is going to have a fit." Silarassel continues in that same, awed voice.

"That's what Meludir said." Legolas says, sheepishly. I'm still confused, so I just stand there like a gaping fish.

"Meludir was not alive yet when Sindarin lords were protesting against Silarassel's Silvan husband." Celaireth mutters.

"Where are your rings?" Silarassel asks.

"We wanted you to meet Ellie first, at least."

"You don't have rings?"

"I do." Legolas says.
"You do?" I found my voice, it seems.

"I have been holding on to it for quite a long time. Well, long by mortals' standards."

"You have?" Celaireth and Silarassel both exclaim.

He turns to me, tugs at a chain hidden beneath his tunic and slips out the ring attached to it, taking my hand and slipping it on to my ring finger. I look down and my jaw drops.

It was the ring I pointed out to Aragorn in the Market Festival. The silver ring, studded with crystals and shaped into a rose to rest the diamond on top.

"If you hold it up to the light, it will capture all the beautiful colors you wish to see." He smiles.

I look down at it, choking up and ready to cry. I have a momentary panic that I don't have a ring to exchange with him, until I realize... Aragorn had predicted this day would happen, or wanted me to be prepared for it or something. God, I remember his words now, "If ever you find you want to swap this ring with another, however, know that you may do so with my blessing." He had said.

I bring out the ring Aragorn gave me from its chain around my neck, strengthened by the knowledge that he approved of this. Legolas looks surprised that I came prepared.

"Let's just say a King knew this moment would happen and prepared for it in advance." I offer the ring to Legolas, a thick band of silver, with gold, intricate details in the middle. He lets me slip it on to his finger, and his sisters clap by the side.

I'm bewildered that they're not protesting at all. Legolas turns to them, and asks the important question, "You are...okay with this?"

"Legolas. People disapproved of father and mother's marriage, but we are the products of their love. We, of all people, could not possibly judge you for who your heart chooses, or dictate who you should marry." Celaireth says.

"You are our little brother. And we want only your happiness. But... this will hurt you in the end. You know that, right?" Silarassel asks.

Legolas turns to me, and he calms my fears about my mortality by running his knuckles softly over my cheek and jaw. "But it will give me the greatest joy I have ever known in the meantime."

I smile up at him, thankful that his sisters, at least, approve of me. Of us. That they're supportive of it. Never in my wildest dreams did I think it would be possible.

"You really are okay with this?" Legolas asks.

"Legolas, you already promised her marriage. Who are we to protest against the will of Erú?" Silarassel says.

"We have a lot of catching up to do, don't we, Lady Ellie?" Celaireth gives me this intense look, and she and Silarassel walk towards either side of me, both linking their arms through mine and walking out the study.

"Also, can the two of you not tell anyone about this exchange of rings? I want the focus today to still be on Aragorn and Arwen. We will let the others know in the future."

"Yes, yes, we can keep our mouths shut long enough." Celaireth waves a hand over her shoulder.
impatiently. I turn back to Legolas, while his sisters bombard me with questions, and both of us laugh, because this is one less thing for us to worry about.

I guess it's time to get to know the in-laws.

Chapter End Notes

Silarassell and Celaireth are finally introduced!

This chapter is late but I hope the ridiculous length makes up for it! I have reference pictures for Legolas and Ellie's rings but I can't seem to find them atm D:

Also, If anyone wonders who I have in mind when I picture them, I think of Lily James for Silarassell and Gabriella Wilde for Celaireth.
Chapter Summary

Ellie finds herself adjusting not so well to Celaireth's abrasive personality, but makes a friend right before the celebration of Loëndë in Minas Tirith commences.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Here's the thing about Legolas' sisters--they are nothing at all like Legolas. Where he is quiet and usually keeps to himself, or playful at some times, Celaireth is loud and laughs freely, and Silarassel is more serious and uptight, though gentle, still. Getting to know them is like jumping head first into the Bruinen River--overwhelming, at times.

Celaireth, especially, has no trouble letting people know what she thinks and feels. Silarassel is there to rein in her younger sister, though. I get the sense that she does that a lot, and not only with Celaireth. I find myself spending more time with them, introducing them to Éowyn and Avorniel after the wedding.

The next day, Hinneril tried to get into their good graces, but Silarassel and Celaireth both grew up in the middle of a royal court, and had to play the political game for thousands of years, making them very quick to pick up on Hinneril's bullshit.

"My lady Celaireth, an honor to meet you. Lady Ellie." Hinneril does that dramatic bow of hers.

"Always a pleasure." I say, with an expression that clearly shows I'm displeased.

"Your hair looks lovely."

"I know. I braided it."

Her eye twitches, and I smirk at her from beside Celaireth. I know she has a biting retort that she's trying very hard not to say right now.

"Ellie does not like you." Celaireth remarks. Hinneril freezes, then tries to laugh at this, "No, no. We are good friends, are we not, Lady Ellie?" There's a hint of a threat beneath her forced smile.

Hell no. I'm not about to crumble beneath any threat of hers. Thankfully, I don't have to say anything. Celaireth does all the talking.

"No, you are not. If you were, she would have introduced you to us. At the very least, given you a hug. She does not hold back on affection for her friends. Therefore, I'm led to believe that you are either not really her friend, or not really as close to her as you believe."

"Well--well, I--" Hinneril stammers, playing with the necklace of red gems on her neck. Celaireth picks up on that immediately.

"Beautiful gems." She comments. Hinneril goes back to her smug little expression, but frowns as soon as Celaireth continues, "But old. Tarnished. So you either do not take care of your jewels or
you cannot afford new ones. Going by how you wear your hair and how much your dress catches
attention, I would say you care about your appearance a lot. Which, I would assume you would.
Someone whose family has gone bankrupt would surely want to still keep appearances in order to
look dignified."

My jaw drops, and so does Hinneril's. Silarassel's eyes narrow at Celaireth, and she says in a
warning tone, "Celaireth. Behave."

"Your family's bankrupt?" I manage to let out.

"Flashy dress, but worn out. Beautiful shoes, but dirty. You look like someone used to living in
luxury, and you do not strike me as the frugal type of person. So I doubt you would ever want to
look anything but your best... yet, you wear old dresses and cannot clean your shoes. I can only
assume you cannot afford to buy new ones that would be up to your... standards."

My mind spins. It's like watching Sherlock Holmes except Celaireth knows exactly how
uncomfortable she's making Hinneril instead of just showing off her keen observation.

"I do not--I--" Hinneril looks visibly shaken at this point, her face pale.

"Make this easier for yourself and be honest, girl. What is it that you require?" There is only pity in
Silarassel's words.

"I simply...wanted to greet you and show my respect..."

"Before or after you take advantage of us to get closer to our little brother, despite knowing he is
already promised to another? One who clearly does not like you or else would have spoken up in
your defense by now."

Celaireth says, sweetly. It's like she's been holding up her dagger and had driven that in for a final blow.

Hinneril breathes in a shuddering breath and walks away without another word. I turn to Celaireth,
horrified. Hinneril's been a bitch but I feel awful for her at that moment. She didn't deserve to be
humiliated like that at all. Silarassel, too, does not seem happy.

"That was unnecessary. More than that, it was cruel." She snaps.

Celaireth shrugs, unapologetic, "She needed a lesson in humiliation. You saw how pompously she
came up to us. I've driven girls like her away before, I would continue to do it again."

"You are not at Greenwood's court, Celaireth. You cannot insult people just because you do not like
how they approach you! Especially not here, in Estel's realm, in his own court."

"You didn't have to make her feel bad for being broke." I whisper. Silarassel and Celaireth turn to
me.

"Broke?" Celaireth repeats, unfamiliar with the word. I feel a seething anger that I try to restrain,
because these are still Legolas' sisters--more than that, they are privileged royals. They would not
understand what it's like to be humiliated for not having money.

"Broke, poor, unable to buy luxuries. I've been in that position before and it's hard. It is not a
weapon to be used by those with money to humiliate those without."

Celaireth, of course picking this up quickly, bows her head. "I did not mean to insult you. I
simply... Look, back home, there are many girls like her. Social climbing their way to a better position
so they could marry into money. It's why Taumathor remains unmarried. He does not trust anyone in
court to not use him. And it has been my job to protect both the King and his firstborn son from any kind of harm."

"What's wrong with wanting financial stability?" I have to restrain myself from snapping.

"Nothing, if you work for it. But if you get it by taking advantage of others, or by presenting yourself as something you are not and deceiving to get to that stability, then I have a problem."

I shake my head, not wanting to get in an argument with Legolas' sister when I've only known her for a day.

"This is why I handle diplomacy." Silarassel mutters beside us.

It's one thing to know Legolas' sisters have big personalities, it's another to know Celaireth can be vicious and refuse to apologize. Silarassel is more graceful, kinder. I have a distinct feeling she cleans up after her siblings' social messes a lot. But it leaves a bad taste in my mouth, and I retire to my chambers earlier than usual. Legolas visits me after what happened with Hinneril. He's carrying a basket with him, and he gives me this sympathetic look the moment he walks into my bedroom.

"Meleth." He says, softly. I turn to my bed and lie face down on it.

"Does your sister hate me now?" My words are muffled by the pillow I've planted my face in.

"Not at all. In fact, Celaireth is wondering if you hate her."

I lift my face from the pillow and put my palm against my cheek, holding my chin up. I turn to look at him and as always, he has a smile on his face. He leans down and kisses my forehead.

"I don't hate her. She just... Well..."

"Does not know when to keep quiet?" He suggests.

"That." I say, "I run my mouth off, I know, but even Hinneril didn't deserve that."

"I would tell you that Celaireth is sorry..."

"But?"

"She is not. One thing you can be sure of, she means what she says, no matter how hurtful her words may be. It's her flaw as much as it is her strength. And believe me, she is polite compared to Taumathor."

I groan and bury my face in the pillow again. I imagine Taumathor to be ten feet tall, ripped as hell, with a perpetual frown. Everyone always talks about him as if he is someone who would readily tear someone's head off. I feel the bed sink beside me as Legolas sits there, brushes my hair away with his fingers, and massages my back, his fingers squeezing my shoulder and loosening the tension on my back.

"She does like you, though. She would not care about what you thought of her if she did not. You have won my sisters over much faster than I thought anyone ever could." Legolas says.

"Mm. I think they're just glad you're finally engaged. I know Silarassel is married, but what about Taumathor or--"

I hear a whimper. A soft, tiny little whimper that certainly did not come from me. Legolas freezes, and I lift my head, looking around the room in alarm.
"Did you hear that?" I ask. He merely shrugs and says nothing.

Okay, I'm either hearing things or my ears just picked up something that Legolas' didn't--which is impossible, given elvish hearing is superb. I hear another whimper, and I whip my head around, trying to find the source of the noise. Legolas bursts out laughing and bends to take the basket which he brought with him.

"Open it." He grins.

I lift the top of the basket up and immediately after, a fluffy, little black and brown head pops up. It's a puppy.

It's a tiny, little, baby puppy.

My eyes widen in delight and I scoop it up and squeal.

"Oh my gosh, he is precious." I coo, leaning back on the bed and letting the little puppy sit on my chest. It licks my face and I giggle in delight while I scratch his head between his perked-up ears. "Ohhhh. Babe, where did you find him? Is he mine? Do I get to keep him?" The puppy licks my hand and fingers. I swear, I could cry right now.

Legolas laughs as well and strokes the puppy's back, "Gimli and I found him on the streets in the residential district this morning. He is very excited. I think he likes you. I tried to communicate with him, but he is not elven-raised. The closest I could get to this thoughts is his emotions."

"Since when did you start talking to animals?" I'm not even looking at Legolas at the moment, I'm too busy putting the puppy's front paw on my nose and keeping it there.

"Since always. Birds and horses, mostly. How do you think I train you on horse-back so well?"

"Okay, pretty boy. You don't have to rub it in. Oh, look at him, he's so sweet. I'm naming him something English. Frankie. You look like a Frankie. Do you like that?"

The puppy growls.

"Okay, not Frankie. How about... Bailey? You can't possibly like Spot. You don't have any, to begin with. Scout?"

The puppy raises its ears.

"Scout?"

He lets out this cute bark.

Legolas scratches his head, "He likes the name."

"You're my baby Scout, yes you are." I coo, lifting the puppy up so I can kiss its nose. This is such a great stress reliever. I don't know how Legolas always manages to make me feel good exactly when I need him to.

"He should keep you company during our travels."

"Travels? Where are we going?"

"Home."
I sit up straighter as he says it, letting Scout roll on the bed and play under my blankets. "Well, we will go to Rohan first, but after that, we go home. To Eryn Lasgalen."

My heart sinks, and I feel butterflies in my stomach. I self-consciously tuck my hair behind my ears and wring my hands, "I'm going to meet your dad?"

"And my brother, yes. And Feren and the rest of Greenwood's council." He tilts my head up and kisses my cheek. "Do no worry, Ellie. You are a hero. You are a trusted friend of the King and Queen of Gondor and the Lady of Rohan. You are not as insignificant as you believe. You have come far from the lost girl struggling to hold herself together in Imladris."

I sigh, adjusting my position on the bed so we're both leaning back on the pillows, with me tucked under his arm and my arm across his waist, the safest I have ever felt.

"How long will we be in Eryn Lasgalen, out of curiosity?" I ask.

"It would depend on the King. If he allows me to bring elves back here so we can make the land fair once more, perhaps we will be here in Gondor in three months, and three more after that in Ithilien."

"Ithilien? What are we going to do in Ithilien?" I ask,

"Aragorn also offered a part of Ithilien to me. So I can build a colony there and have a home close to the Sea. I love Eryn Lasgalen with all of my being but the Sea calls for me. It would pain me now to be away from it for long."

I hold on to Legolas just a little tighter. Because he's still mine, and I fear the Sea's call. I fear that it may be too great for him to resist. But he brushes my hair back with his fingers and assures me he loves me, more than anything--more than the Sea.

"When are we leaving?" I ask.

"In two days. Tomorrow is Loendë, however. And a celebration will be held in honor of Gondor's new queen. They will hold a feast right here in the Citadel, bring in some of the common folk and a few entertainers and merchants from Dorwinion and even Harad."

I raise my eyebrow at that, but Legolas already knows what's on my mind before I can even voice out my concern. "I know, I know. I told Aragorn inviting the Harad for a festival was too much, especially given he had them brought over for the Market Festival last month but he insists on building bridges."

"He's never gonna ask me but if anyone should be making an effort to win the other over, it should be the Haradrim accommodating to us. Weren't they the ones who broke away from Gondor's reign first, killing their own kin or something like that?"

Legolas turns to me with mild surprise that I even retained all that knowledge about the Black Númenóreans. Honestly, the last I can remember is Castamir and how he forcefully took the throne of Gondor before the throne was reclaimed by Eldacar, whom Castamir usurped because the Númenóreans opposed a king who was not fully Númenórean in blood, because Eldacar's mother was Rhovanion. After Eldacar was exiled, a long and brutal civil war that opposed Castamir's tyrannical ten-year rule ensued, where Eldacar killed Castamir and drove his sons out of Gondor. That was how the Corsairs of Umbar--led by Castamir's sons--became one of Gondor's fiercest enemy.

I know all of Castamir's descendants were killed sometime later, but beyond that, nothing more is written that I've read in Gondor's city library. It bothers me that those stories never mention
daughters. Who knows, Castamir may yet have living descendants that nobody paid heed to because they were women. History always seems to forget the women. Although I have read stories about important women in Men's history, it's not nearly as extensive as men's.

"Aragorn still believes in peace. But he knows to keep a close watch. We will not be unarmed during the feast, I will tell you that." Legolas says, which brings me out of my thoughts. "I know you never part with your dagger, and that is well. Do not drop your guard tomorrow. I do not have a good feeling about this. We will be feasting with snakes."

I frown at the intensity of his words. But I know by now to trust his instincts. I lean up to kiss his cheek, trying to soothe his suspicions. "Hey," I smile, "tomorrow, we get to show off our rings, at least."

Legolas eventually leaves after I fall asleep on him and I wake up the next day to Scout biting my foot under the blanket. I'm just about to punt him across the room when I realize what it is.

"Scout! No! Bad dog!" I snap, sitting up and finding a wet spot on the bed. Oh, fuck. The downside of having a cute puppy was potty training it. I'm gonna have to get up now to train him. Annoyed, I pull on my old travelling gear, minus my cloak. It's easier to put on and more efficient for running after an excited puppy. I also realize I don't have a collar and leash for him, or a food and water bowl. Shit, I'm gonna have to go down to the markets for those.

One of the servants who usually comes into my room to replace my chamber pot gasps when this little bundle of energy begins yapping at him from my bed.

"You're a tiny little thing, you're not gonna be successful in attacking anyone." I tell Scout, who then rolls over, expecting a belly rub. I give him what he wants and apologize for the mess that is my sheets.

"New puppy, not trained yet. I'm sorry for making your job harder."

The servant, bewildered that I'm addressing her at all, says, "Oh no, my lady. It's my job, after all. I will leave food for him later."

I eventually find my way out to the courtyard, to find stalls being set up and Faramir instructing the guards on where they are to be positioned. Scout hones in on him and charges, barking at the clanging armor of the guards.

How such a small thing could be filled with so much energy is beyond me. "I'm sorry! He's new here!" I call to the guards, who protest as Scout begins to attack their boots.

"Ah, Lady Ellie. A pleasant morning to you." Faramir smiles as I bend down to pick up my hyperactive puppy.

"I'm beginning to wonder the reason why you got lost is because you charge towards everywhere you go." I say, darkly, to Scout. He merely nuzzles to my chin and licks whatever part of my face he can reach.

"A puppy?" Faramir asks,

"Legolas found him in one of the lower districts. Dogs are allowed in the Citadel, right?"

"They are, but not in the Hall of Kings or the Halls of Feasting. Make sure to keep him out of there."

"I will, don't worry." I look around, seeing unfamiliar faces everywhere. The merchants are also
calling to each other in a language I've never heard before, which leads me to assume they aren't residents of Minas Tirith. "I guess the Haradrim and Dorwinion arrived early?"

Faramir dismisses the guards and follows my gaze, "Yes, they arrived last night. You were not at dinner." He observed.

"I wasn't hungry."

"It's all well that you were not there, I suppose. It was quite tense. Despite the promise of peace, there is much hostility between Gondor and Harad. The King is trying but I think he is putting in too much effort, too early in. Harad's hatred still burns deep. Add to that the fact that there were elves there--elven nobles, to be exact--and...well...it's a miracle no one came to blows."

I sigh in disappointment. I hate that Aragorn has to go through this. The nobles' reactions are out of his control. All he can do is hope for the best and form an alliance with the Harad that is stronger than a thin thread. Diplomacy is a much more delicate work than war.

"Is Aragorn already in the Hall of Kings?"

"Not yet. The bells will ring once he enters, though."

"And Éowyn? Where is she?"

Faramir blinks in surprise at the question, but immediately frowns. "She tends to King Théoden's body in the Hallows. They will be bringing his body back to Rohan, to be laid to rest in peace among his ancestors there. I do not think she wants company, save her brother. They wanted a moment alone there."

I nod in understanding, my eyes turning to the gate that led to the sixth level, where I know the entrance to the tombs of the great people of Gondor is found.

"Ellie," Faramir touches my forearm, which makes me look up in surprise. We've never really been close, or even alone together. He looks at me with a hint of helplessness, "you are Êowyn's friend. And...well..." Now I'm looking at him with curiousity, "If I were to ask for her hand, do you think she would refuse?"

It takes me a moment to realize what he's asking of me, "Like, in marriage?" I ask.

He nods.

"You wanna marry Êowyn?"

"Ssh! I am terrified enough as it is, do not announce it yet!"

"Faramir! This is wonderful! And she loves you! She will say yes, I know it!"

Scout barks in agreement.

"You do not think it is too soon? With her uncle's death and everything... I do not want to overwhelm her."

The fact that he's this concerned about her well-being is endearing. I love that he cares so much for her, without thinking she's weak. The respect Faramir has for Êowyn and her bounderies is honorable.

"No, you idiot! I think it is exactly what she needs. Listen," I take on a more serious tone, "you came
to her during a time when she felt she had no one to turn to. She may have healed in body, but it was you who healed her heart. You, who made her realize she did not need the glory of battle to be important. She is important to you, and that was enough for her. Asking for her hand in marriage is the right thing to do. Erú knows you two fit each other perfectly.

He smiles appreciatively, "Thank you for your kind words. But in truth, it is she who healed me. Such strength was in her, and yet...sadness, as well. She understood me. She appreciated me. She loved me with no conditions, or without needing me to prove myself. I was enough for her." He says his last sentence with such softness. Like after all this time, all he's been doing is trying to prove his worth, and Éowyn came to him to let him know that he is worthy, and more. Gosh, their love is so pure and precious.

"I will warn you, though, if you break her heart in any way, I will come for you."

He laughs, "I will heed your warning. Thank you, Lady Ellie. It is good to know I have the support of her best friend."

"It's not me you have to worry about." I say, slyly, as I start backing away, "It's her brother." I turn around, but not before Faramir groans and his face pales. I put Scout down and let him explore around the courtyard. I take him back to my room after he finishes his business, to find a small plate with meat on the ground near the door to my chambers. Beside it is a small bowl of milk.

"I'm gonna leave you right here, Scout, okay? Do not eat the carpet, I swear to God. Be a good boy and I'll bring you a treat."

Scout lowers his head and wags his tail.

"That's a good boy!" I praise, making him bark again.

I wouldn't have bothered changing out of my travel gear if Salabeth and Avorniel didn't come in and demanded I changed. They convince me to get in a deep purple dress, worn like a robe and secured with a tight belt. Apparently, I still have an image to keep up. Avorniel does not appreciate Scout yapping at her when she walked in, though. I guess she's a cat person.

Eventually, we make our way to the courtyard. Elves and Men alike gather to celebrate, most women wearing flowers in their hair. It's not like the Market Festival at all. Here, it's more like a carnival. There's food, yes, but most of the stalls set up are games and merchandise. Toys and prizes and...

"A tarot reading?" I almost laugh when I see the old lady sitting at her own corner. Salabeth wrinkles her nose, disapprovingly.

"This is foolish. No mortal could predict a future through cards, not unless they have elven ancestry." She says. I pull her towards it, anyway.

"This is a custom in Harad?" Avorniel leans over my shoulder as I sit in front of the old woman. Salabeth wrinkles her nose at it, disapprovingly.

"This is a custom in Harad?" Avorniel leans over my shoulder as I sit in front of the old woman. Salabeth wrinkles her nose at it, disapprovingly.

"This is a custom in Harad?" Avorniel leans over my shoulder as I sit in front of the old woman. Salabeth wrinkles her nose at it, disapprovingly.

"Harad has sorcerers who wield old and powerful magic. This is but a taste. Come, choose your cards." She offers her deck to me, the back of which are black, trimmed with gold. "I can tell you of your past, present and future."
I snort, and back away. "Lady Galadriel has already shown me and I do not want to revisit that again."

"Fate changes, my lady. You may see things you do not know of."

Avorniel plops down on the chair in front of the old woman. "Alright, I will humor you."

The old woman shuffles her deck, and lays them face-down in front of Avorniel. "Choose three."
She says, with a flourish of her hand.

Avorniel picks three out, and the woman opens them up in front of her. "Your past, the Six of Pentacles. It is a card of generosity, prosperity. You have been generous, and efforts you have made due to your generosity shall be given light. But, your success in life is not necessarily your doing. You have also relied on the generosity of others, whether for their advice or support or financial aid."

The old woman looks up at Avorniel, "You were born into riches, but you are not selfish with your wealth. You give freely, and in return, you are rewarded with more treasure."

"She is a noble. Of course she was born into wealth." Salabeth clicks her tongue, impatiently. She narrows her eyes at the old woman, and crosses her arms, clearly done with this show. The old woman ignores her, and opens the second card in front of Avorniel. It's a picture of an armored skeleton, the skull being the only thing visible among the black armor. It doesn't look good.

"Your present, Death." Avorniel leans back, slightly, but the old woman gives a small smile, "It is not a card to be feared. It simply means permanent change. Something happened recently that has completely changed your life, or perhaps you lost something that you can never get back. This card, in your present, is telling you to accept the loss in order to move on to a better life."

I instinctively put my hand on her shoulder, and I feel Avorniel tense up. "Everyday..." She whispers, "I'm reminded of Boromir in the most unexpected ways."

The old woman looks her in the eye, "You have lost a loved one?"

"Many have lost loved ones. We just survived a great war." Salabeth mutters. Again, the old woman ignores her.

"And now, your future." The old woman opens up the last card. A person lying on their back is depicted, with ten swords thrust in their back. This time, the old woman's expression darkens.

"The Ten of Swords. This card is warning you of a complete failure, or a heart-breaking betrayal. Whether you are betrayed or doing the betrayal yourself, this card does not bode well. It is not only a dangerous future for you, but one that tells you it is unavoidable. Whatever difficulty that may come your way cannot be solved, only endured. Be wary of others. Do not let their words sway you, lest you find yourself in grave danger."

Even Salabeth is taken aback, and Avorniel's mouth opens in surprise and not a little bit of fear.

"This is ridiculous. Mere parlor tricks. If you think scaring innocent people with your underhanded and, quite frankly, cheap tricks is entertainment, you are wrong. Avorniel, let's go." Salabeth snaps, urging Avorniel to her feet.

"But--"

"Talk to Lady Galadriel if you truly want to know your future." Salabeth insists, "Ellie, let's go. Leave that woman!"
I hesitate by the old woman, looking completely unfazed by the fact that Salabeth called her a scam. "Is it all just cheap tricks?" I ask her while she shuffles her deck. She looks up at me, and for a moment I feel naked, as if she has just seen into my very soul.

"I only lay down the cards. The rest is up to the person. She could fear the future or prepare for it. I am only a messenger of fate."

"So, you're a scam?"

The woman looks up at me, carefully, and offers her deck. "Ask a question. Just one, that can be answered by yes or no."

Just one? Jesus, I have a lot of questions in my head. Is Taumathor gonna hate me, is Legolas going to love me even when I'm old and wrinkly, will there be another war? Instead... I say, "Will I have a stable future here? Will I actually get to have a normal life, have a home, build a family?"

She offers her cards, "Choose one."

I draw a card from her thick deck and lay it down. She looks down at it, smiles, and says, "The Six of Cups." She pauses, and says, "It indicates moving on from the past, and finding happiness in the support of your friends and loved ones now. The answer is yes, my lady. You will be very happy with the people you love."

I smile, somehow assured. She takes my hand, and I draw back instinctively but she pulls, anyway, and turns my palm up.

"You are a reminder of the good that came from this war. But... your fate is directly linked to the Dark Lord's demise. If he had succeeded, you would not have survived. And yet..." She cocks her head, curiously, "You already have faced death. Interesting. I've never seen lines cross like this before. Your past, present and future all intersect. If I didn't know any better," she lets go of my hand and leans back, laughing, "I would say you have somehow fallen between time and travelled either to a distant past, or distant future. A fate usually only held by the Eldar. But that is, of course, impossible."

I yank my hand back nervously, "Right. Ha. Impossible."

I flee.

That was the strangest, most invasive thing I have ever felt. Either that woman is really good at guessing or she really does have some sort of gift. Either way, she gives me the creeps and I never wanna talk to her again. I'm saved by hearing someone call my name. And I turn to find Merry, Pippin, Sam and Gimli all standing in a line in front of a long table. Meludir stands with them, and to the side, a bunch of Mirkwood elves laugh and cheer him on. I find Gandalf in the crowd, along with Frodo, Legolas, the twins and Avorniel and Salabeth—who was the one who called for me. I make my way towards the group, and Salabeth takes me by the arm and says, "Where have you been? They are doing a pie eating contest!"

"What's the prize?"

"An unlimited supply of ale for the day and a bag of pipeweed."

I poke Legolas' shoulder, "I bet Pippin wins."

"And I place my bet on our dwarven friend." Legolas says.
"Loser gets to buy the winner new boots."

"It's a deal."

We turn, at the same time, towards our companions and yell our encouragements.

"Peregrin Took, you eat all those pies like your life depends on it!" I shout ferociously.

"Think of the ale, Gimli, think of the ale!" Legolas hoots.

Pippin smiles at me, Gimli lets out a laugh, the bakers signal the start and they bury their faces in the pies.

"Get that pie, Samwise!" Frodo shouts. "Imagine Rosie here cheering you on!"

"Gimli, you're getting pie all over your beard!" I shout, in an effort to get him to slow down.

"Hey! Don't distract!" Legolas warns.

"Meludir, finish that pie or you're back to dungeon duty!" Celaireth screams from somewhere as Meludir wrinkles his nose disapprovingly at the taste but continues.

Meludir backs out first, much to the displeasure of the Mirkwood elves, unable to eat the pie because, like Legolas, his elven senses are not used to Man-made food. The second round comes up and three other people drop out, and more and more quit until only Merry, Pippin and Gimli are left.

"How the fuck are they still going?" I gasp in surprise, while at the corner of my eye I see Sam refusing a cup of ale. He backed out because they were on to the meat pies, and Sam, for some reason, has now developed a dislike towards salmon—which was in the pie. Gimli now looks visibly ready to throw up but Pippin, sweet, wonderful Pippin, carries on like he's just eating cookies.

"Do it! Get it, Pippin!" I shout. "Pippin! Pippin! Pippin!" I start the chant, with Gandalf and Frodo quickly joining in. "Eat, Gimli!" I hear Legolas call, "You can do it, Merry!" Avorniel shouts, until at last they finish the pies, one finishing quicker than the others.

The crowd goes wild, and the baker comes up to the last three contestants and raises the hand of the winner.

"Peregrin Took!" He announces. I shriek at the top of my lungs, "That's my boy! That's redemption, my friends! You owe me new boots!" I yell the last part to Legolas, who shakes his head in disbelief as Pippin waves his bag of pipeweed in the air. A special blend from Dorwinion, apparently. If their weed is as good as their wine, Pippin is going to enjoy that for sure.

The day goes on spectacularly. Eventually, Aragorn and Arwen join in on the festivities, and they sit on top of beautifully carved chairs on top of a platform, the people bowing to them and showing their respect as they admire their queen. Arwen is in a soft, yellow dress, and in her hair are white flowers. She looks breath-taking, and she and Aragorn sit side by side, hands held while they clap in appreciation while elves danced, children passed flowers around, and men drank. There were places of honor set on the platform for Éomer, Lady Galadriel, Lord Celeborn, Lord Elrond, Silarassél, Celaireth and Gandalf, as well.

The day ends with a huge buffet, one that even the elves enjoyed. Êowyn eventually joins us for dinner, though I notice she is quiet today, unlike usual. This was her back in Rohan, when I first met her. But Avorniel and I give her tight hugs, and let her know we're here for her. She thanks us, but says nothing more. Avorniel understands, and lets her grieve for her uncle. It's peaceful, and joyful,
and full of laughter, that night.

A proper celebration, for once. People got drunk on food and wine, and got to know each other, elf and human alike. Even the Haradrim smiled, though they remained at the back and kept to themselves. No fight ensued, although I swear one almost started when later in the night, Éomer told Gimli he found that Lady Galadriel was not the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

Gimli had almost called for his ax, until Éomer's smooth recovery, claiming it was Arwen he found most beautiful, which Gimli forgave. There were women dancing in front of the platform after dinner, led by Arwen and Lady Galadriel herself, who towered over all the other women. She really was so tall. The rest of the nobles mingled among those of us in the courtyard, with Silarassel and Celaireth talking to Elladan and Elrohir nearby.

"Brother, if you are unaware. One of the nobles has been looking at you and smiling this entire time." Éowyn breaks her silence to interrupt Gimli and Éomer's talk. Éomer turns to find that one of the women dancing is, indeed, looking at him.

He turns back around, sharply, "That is Imrahil's daughter."

"She's cute. No wedding ring. She also just smirked just now. I think she's single." I say to Éomer, who looks at me with utter confusion.

"She is Imrahil's daughter."

"I bet she's part elven. Imrahil certainly looks part elven." I continue.

"She's Gondorian."

"She seems nice."

"But she's Gondorian."

"She is coming over here. Quickly, wipe the sauce off your beard." Éowyn pinches her brother's arm. Éomer, despite his protests, wipe his mouth on the back of his arm and turns around just in time for the woman, tall and proud of face, stands with her arms crossed. She does bear an uncanny resemblance to Imrahil now that I have a better look at her.

"My lady Lothiriel. " Éomer stands and bows. Éowyn and I giggle as quietly as possible.

"You were taking too long to ask me for a dance so I decided to make this easier for you." Lothiriel says. Éowyn's eyebrows raise in pleased surprise, and Éomer turns to her helplessly. I've never seen him this flustered before. I didn't think it was even possible. Tough and harsh Éomer, former Marshal, now King, flustered over a girl.

Man, he fell hard and he fell fast. It amazes me.

"See you later, brother! Ellie, your ring is quite lovely." Éowyn has a devious smirk on her face. Taking that as dismissal, Lothiriel extends her hand to Éomer and tugs him towards where many people were dancing.

The night went on and boy, do the elves know how to party. They still had boundless energy even when I retired that night. "Listen, pals, we're gonna be travelling tomorrow. I need to sleep." I say to Salabeth. Avorniel had already tapped out and was sleeping with her head in her arms on one of the tables. Legs stuck out from under the table as well. Meludir had gotten drunk on Dorwinion wine earlier, and was currently sleeping on the ground, where Legolas and Celaireth painted his face with
childish mustache using berries that were on the table.

I think they partied until dawn broke. I swear, even in my sleep, I could hear playful elvish tunes drifting in through my window. And a part of me regrets that this may be the only time I would get to see elves in their care-free joyful state, before they leave to sail West.

But that worry is buried deep, because tonight, I sleep well in preparation for a new journey in the morning.

Chapter End Notes

I heavily simplified the tarot card reading, for those who are familiar with how tarot cards are actually read. In truth, I think ten cards are chosen. But that would have been a long explanation that I think would have dragged on too long.

Anyway, back to Rohan, we travel! And even further down the road, the Breaking of the Fellowship. For reals this time ;(
The Road Goes Ever On and On

Chapter Summary

A great Company leaves Gondor to deliver Théoden to his final resting place.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Waking up early is a necessity today. Aragorn would be travelling with a huge procession, since many of Gondor's nobles will be going with him, as well. Arwen, Gandalf, Faramir, Imrahil and his sons and daughter, as well as the Fellowship. The ones remaining behind to take care of business in Gondor would be the Council. Avorniel was almost in tears when she visited my room, and was cuddling Scout the whole time to comfort herself, because her father had not allowed her to join the procession.

"He said I did not need to be there, can you believe him?! He never lets me do anything. He does not let me lead one of our businesses, he does not want me to be part of Council politics, he does not want me to travel! He just wants me to sit pretty and bat my eyelashes at the youngest noble here in Gondor so I can get married and have babies and die old and unfulfilled." Avorniel complained.

"I'm probably an awful influence on you right now, but why don't you just go? You're a grown adult, you don't have to listen to your dad all the time." I say, as I prop my foot on the trunk with all of my stuff by the bed and begin to lace up my boots.

"What, and return to find an entire army searching for me and a stranger my father picked to get me to marry in order to control me? I have tried a great deal to run away before and it never ended well." She frowned.

"Tell him I want you there, and so does Éowyn. Or I could ask Aragorn to tell your dad to let you come along."

Avorniel shakes her head, "I am not sure about that. The King would not want to complicate things hours before departure. And I'm not really worth the trouble. I will just stay here with Hinneril, I guess. Unfortunate that may be."

"It's fine, listen, pack your things. Meet me in the Hall of Feasting when you're done."

Avorniel doesn't move for a second, still scared that it may just be a joke. I'm trying to get the braid I had tied earlier in tact as I gather all of my hair up in a ponytail.

"Get!" I laugh, noticing Avorniel's worried expression in the mirror. I turn around and nudge her with my foot. Scout whines as Avorniel sets him down and leaves the room, still looking pretty hesitant and doubtful that she'd ever be able leave Minas Tirith, or Gondor for that matter.

"Scout, come on, sweetie." I say, dragging my luggage along. What a difference nine months make. When I first came to Middle-earth, I had nothing but a shit-stained hoodie and heavy college books in a backpack. Now, I have an entire trunk full of dresses, shoes, my bow and a quiver of arrows. Scout barks excitedly and runs to the door. This dog has boundless energy. He's either running
around, chewing everything or sleeping—if he wasn't peeing and pooping everywhere he went. I think going outside would do him some good. Get him used to shitting on dirt instead of my bed or carpet.

One of the servants eventually find me pulling my trunk along, not as heavy as I expected it to be, to be honest. All the sword-lifting I've done has improved my physique, but the servant still insisted on taking it to the stables to be put on one of the carriages.

I find Aragorn in the Hall of Feasting, on top of the dais where the long table reserved for the King and special guests is. The Fellowship is there, along with Prince Imrahil. Celaireth is there as well, along with Meludir, who for an elf, looks quite ragged. He's pale and currently nursing a steaming mug of what could only smell like...

"Oh. My. God." I gasp, catching the scent. I immediately come up to Meludir, taking his mug. He groans in protest but I sniff and I drink. And I let out a moan of delight.

"Coffee." I swear, I could feel a shiver down my spine.

"It's mine!" Meludir whines, reaching out for it and yanking it out of my grasp.

"There is plenty more where that came from." Arwen, who is sitting beside Aragorn, takes a jug and puts it down in front of me. I almost hug the jug then and there. "Good, strong, beautiful, wonderful coffee." I say, taking the mug that Celaireth passes to me with amusement.

"Why is there a dog here?" Silarassel comes up to the table, taking Scout in her arms and settling down on a chair, looking just as tired as Meludir did, although a bit more confused. "What's this? Why are you holding that jug like it is a treasure?"

"Hungover elves. What a sight to behold." Gimli smirks, adjusting his helmet. "Legolas almost had me believing no amount of alcohol could get in your heads. I'm delighted to be proven wrong."

"Silarassel? Hungover?" I'm skeptical about it. Graceful and proper as Silarassel is, she is the last person on this table that I'd expect to be hungover.

"Give me a few minutes, maybe a cup of orange juice and I will be fine." Silarassel groans, "Although, now I realize...the wine that the Harad brought? Way too strong. Stronger than Dorwinion, even, which I did not think was even possible."

"Where are the Harad?" I ask, turning to Aragorn. "Good morning, by the way!"

"Good morning to you as well. Beautiful ring you have there." Aragorn smirks. Arwen smiles beside him, as well.

"Oh, yes. I picked it out myself." I say, wriggling my fingers to show off just a little bit.

Aragorn chuckles, "You have wonderful taste. The Harad left earlier--actually, right after you went to bed. They did leave behind gifts for the Elven royalty, and for us here in Gondor as well. They are not fond of grand exits, the Haradrim."

"Tell it as it is, Estel. They felt left out and hated realizing that Gondor is a place full of honorable people so they left." Celaireth, ever honest, cuts in.

"Now, now, Celaireth. They were surprised, is all." Arwen says, the voice of reason as always, "They expected hostility from us. Instead, they were welcomed, but still felt left out. It's only natural. We cannot expect Gondor and Harad to be on friendly terms immediately. But they were willing to
bring in entertainment and trade, which was a good sign. Building this bridge will take a long while, but it is a step in the right direction."

Celaireth raises an eyebrow at Arwen, "Arwen Undómiel, look at you! Spoken like a proper Queen. You are learning how to be royalty very quickly, I see."

"I have always spoken with eloquence and control, Celaireth. You should try it some time." Arwen says, ever so sweetly. There's a round of impressed "oooh"s in the table, which Celaireth simply shrugs off.

"Suddenly, I remember why I so enjoyed pulling on your braid when we were younger."

"I do, as well. You were jealous of my hair."

"Ooh, look at me, perfect little Evenstar, with my hair in the wind, all beautiful." Celaireth says in a high-pitched taunt, flinging her own blonde hair over her shoulder, dramatically, earning her a round of laughter from everyone in the table, including Arwen herself. Whatever teasing is going on is apparently nothing new in their relationship. Silarassel winces at the noise and Meludir's head disappears under his arms.

"Are you all packed up, Ellie?" Arwen turns to me.

"Yeah. Actually--"

"You have all your dresses?"

"Yes, and--"

"Extra chemises, just in case?"

"Oh my god, yes, mom." I bury my face in my hands in embarrassment. Arwen laughs, "I am simply teasing. Continue."

"I was wondering if I could bring Avorniel along? She is my closest friend here, and I would feel awful going to Rohan without her. Aedelind would be waiting for us and it would be nice if we could all get together again before we go our separate ways and not see each other for ages."

I sound like a teenager begging her parents for something, but when your adoptive father and technically your ancestors are the King and Queen of a country, that tends to happen--especially since I'm not all that charismatic or as eloquent as Arwen to begin with.

"Certainly. You do not need to ask me. Anyone who wishes to come may do so." Aragorn says.

"There is the slight problem of her father not allowing her to go. So, if you could maybe ask him...?"

Aragorn raises an eyebrow, thinking this over for the moment, "No." He says, with finality. I sag, and he gives me a smile, but he is firm. "Ellie, if I give in to your every request, the Council will think I favor you too greatly. If I am to be a fair ruler, I should not give my people any doubt about how I consider you all equal."

"Damn. It was worth a shot." I sigh, leaning back.

"If I may." Celaireth speaks up, and I turn to her expectantly. "I will say this: You are a part of the Fellowship. That earns you respect. I am sure if you ask him yourself and give a good reason as to why Avorniel should be allowed to go with you, he would let her go."
Now, I really feel like a teenager. "This is the whole 'My mom won't let me go, so can you ask her instead?' spiel on a whole 'nother level." I say. That goes over everyone's heads, so I'm left with a dozen or so confused stares.

"I will be right back. Hold Scout for me." I stand, turning to Silarassel who is simply running her hand over Scout's back and look for Avorniel in the crowd of nobles breaking their fast.

She is sitting somewhere with a frowning gentleman who has the same eyes as her. There are flecks of grey in his dark hair but he remains tall and proud, much like the noblemen of Gondor usually are, his skin brown and his hands scarred and rough. Luxurious, though, his lifestyle may be, I'm immediately given the impression that whatever money he has was money he worked for. I know Avorniel's family supplies the army of Gondor with their weapons, and I guess her father, despite owning many armories all across Gondor and having many people under their employ still actively smiths swords and other weapons.

"Good morning." I greet, making him stand and bow.

"Lady Ellie. An honor." He says, and Avorniel straightens up in her seat, excitement flashing across her face. "We have never been introduced, although you have become good friends with my darling Avorniel. I am Lord Daeron."

"Lovely to meet you, Lord Daeron. Avorniel has told me many things about you. The pleasure and honor are mine, to finally meet with the man who has raised a wonderful and intelligent woman." I'm laying it on thick but I guess he's buying it because he straightens up and nods, smugly.

"Could I borrow some of your time? Over here?" I motion to somewhere more private and he gives me a curious look but obliges. I turn to Avorniel, who is now looking at me with a bit of worry, and at the dais where the elves who can hear my conversation nod in encouragement. I spot the hobbits giving me a thumbs up, a gesture they recently acquired from me.

"I hope I am not asking for too much from you but... I do need to request that you allow Lady Avorniel to join me in my travels. We will be travelling with well-armed guards, and we will be in the King's procession. She will be in capable hands and will be quite safe." I say.

The smile slips from Lord Daeron's face, "My lady, I cannot allow my only daughter to be left alone in a foreign land. She has been rebelling since the day she got her hands on those books of hers. If I allow her to travel, she will never obey my orders again."

I feel a twinge of indignance for Avorniel, but reel it in. I have to remind myself that things here aren't like how I am used to. Women are expected to be docile and obedient to the men in their lives here, as annoying as that is.

"Okay, put it this way. All this time, she has had a romanticized view of the world. She wants to explore and go on adventures. As someone who has done exactly that, I can show her the reality of what these journeys could do. Once she realizes how painful and inconvenient travelling really is, she will come home and change her mind. All that mud and walking and cooking food over a campfire and cold and rain?" I shudder to put on a show but also remembering how much of a pain travelling really was for me.

"But, as I've said, Avorniel is a smart woman. She could either meet a future husband in Rohan, and establish a connection to the country where you can perhaps build more of your armories--I'm sure Rohan needs wonderful blacksmiths, as well--or come home, realize travelling is not really for her, and choose to remain in the comforts of the walls of Minas Tirith."
Lord Daeron thinks this over, crossing his arms and keeping silent. I stand with my fingers crossed behind me, glancing at the dais now and again to find everyone looking at us in the corner very intently. I see Merry and Pippin exchanging coins and I narrow my eyes at them before my attention snaps back to Lord Daeron as he says, "When you put it that way... I suppose you are presenting many solutions and opportunities. But if you could not let my daughter fall for a horse-lord, that would be best. They stink. And have no shame with being disgusting, as I've seen, men holding hands in public."

I overcome the urge to punch Avorniel's dad in his misogynistic, homophobic face, my fist clenching behind me as I stiffen. He bows again, calls out Avorniel's name and walks away. I am reminded why I despise the nobles and their politics. I walk back to the dais, sitting beside Legolas in annoyance, briefly aware of the squeal of delight from somewhere behind me that Avorniel made and stab a sausage viciously with my fork.

"Who bet on what?" I turn to Merry and Pippin.

"I bet he would laugh at you and walk away." Merry says, with no shame.

"I bet you would punch him to get him to agree." Pippin responds.

"And I," Prince Imrahil pipes in, "bet that you would be able to get the man to do what you wished."

"Thank you. Wow. Someone who believes in me!" I motion at Imrahil with a stabbed sausage.

"See? You did not need me, after all." Aragorn says, proudly.

"Thanks, dad. Although to be fair, Pippin was close to winning. I was ready to punch him. I don't really like him." I whisper that part so as not to let anyone who might be eavesdropping hear it.

"He is a businessman. What is there to like?" Sam mutters.

"Ain't that the truth, Samwise Gamgee!" I hoot, always glad whenever Sam says something clever.

After breakfast, we all make our way outside, where Lady Galadriel, Lord Elrond and the rest of the Imladrim and Galadhrim already wait for us.

"I hope you do not mind us eating out here, Estel. We prefer fruits for our breakfast." Glorfindel says in greeting when he sees us approaching.

"Not a problem at all, Glorfindel. Lady Galadriel." Aragorn bows to the Lady of the Wood, who in the morning glow looks almost like the personification of the Sun. Radiant and warm and almost scary with her all-knowing gaze. Time has passed and yet it's almost like it didn't, if that makes sense, with Lady Galadriel around. I feel younger in her presence, despite knowing that is not possible. She carries with her the ageless beauty of the elves, and looking around, I can see that all it took was a night for the elves to work their wonders on the environment.

The trees seem to be greener and taller, the flowers more vibrant, the air cool and fresh. I never realized before how heavy the scent of smoke from the many smithies and workshops in Minas Tirith carried over all the way to up here, in the Citadel's courtyard, until clean, fresh air greets me.

"Helen." Lady Galadriel's voice is deep and melodious. I bow to her, but avoid her gaze. Her fingers go beneath my chin to lift my head up so I can meet her gaze, Joy fills you, yet you are not without sorrow. You have found peace, at last, I see. But you still face a great deal ahead. Ah yes, how could I ever forget her power to read and speak into my mind? It still feels invasive, and I recoil a bit as her voice fills my head.
"It is good to see you well." She says, out loud.

"You, too, my lady. You look...well...beautiful seems to small a word."

"I hope our gift to you served you well." She smiles.

"They have saved my life. It's a shame they got lost in battle, but they served me quite well."

She chuckles, "Those daggers represented your fears, dear girl. Each time you struck an enemy down with it was you overcoming your fears and apprehensions. They are lost in battle, but with them, you leave those doubts behind. They truly did serve their purpose."

At this point, with the bustle of our surroundings, I'm no longer sure if she really said that out loud or in my head. But I smile, thankful for everything she had given me once again, before I feel a hand on my shoulder. Lady Galadriel nods, and I take that as dismissal as she turns back to Lord Celeborn, who gives me a knowing smile before the hand on my shoulder turns me around.

Éowyn stands before me, her eyes puffy from crying and my face falls as I realize that behind her, the Rohirrim are setting up the bier of the fallen King Théoden, whose body is covered with a golden fabric. That's why I haven't seen her or Éomer until now--they have been busy preparing their uncle's body. Of course, this was why Aragorn and Gondor's nobles will be travelling. We are to pay respects to King Théoden one last time to lay him to rest among his sires. And then, the elves will go back home, and the Fellowship will go our separate ways.

Merry would be on the wain carrying King Théoden's bier, where the Riders of Rohan would care for his body, the banner of Rohan flying in the wind. At the front of the procession, Frodo and Sam ride on either side of Aragorn and Arwen. On Frodo's other side is Gandalf, and on Sam's side is Prince Imrahil. Behind Sam is Pippin, riding among the Knights of Gondor. Behind Aragorn are Legolas and Gimli atop Arod, and behind Frodo is me. At my side rides Faramir. Around us, the Rohirrim mingle with the many knights and nobles of Gondor. Éowyn herself rides beside Faramir, and beside Imrahil rides Éomer, the Riders of Rohan behind him with the bier of Théoden. Lady Galadriel, Lord Celeborn and Lord Elrond ride beside Gandalf, and behind them are the Galadhrim and Imladrim, with Elladan and Elrohir, Salabeth and Avorniel riding in my row.

As our procession rides onward out of the City, there is a hint of sorrow in the air. After the high of Lóendë, it becomes obvious that almost everyone leaving has become subdued. The Rohirrim mourn Théoden, the elves mourn their numbered days here on Middle-earth before they leave for the Undying Lands, and we don't acknowledge it, but we in the Fellowship know this could be our last days together like this. We have never been complete since Boromir's loss, but I think we're starting to realize that the day we truly break is upon us--when we will never come together again, the remaining eight of us.

So it really is no wonder that through the days as we travel from Gondor to Rohan--our movement slow because of the sheer number of people--every night when we camp, the Fellowship sits together in a big circle, while Arwen sits with Lord Elrond, the twins, Lady Galadriel, Lord Celeborn and Glorfindel nearby. And we talk, and reminisce, and sing and tease each other, almost desperate to leave one final mark on one another.

"You know what would be fun? Really fun?" I say, as we all sit around a campfire, and for old times' sake, I cook and Sam helps me.

"Sausages and no ash on my tomatoes?" Pippin suggests.

"Skinny dipping in a river."
Gimli snorts, "No offense, lass, but I've seen more of you than I could care for. The last time we did that was not fun at all. It was freezing!"

"Hey, teddy bear, I've seen more of you than I could care for." I snap, thinking back to the exact day where we all first bathed in a river together. I had emerged from the water fully believing a small bear had come in to eat me only to realize it was Gimli, covered in more hair than what should have been possible. Dwarves and their hair, man...

"So did Boromir, you would recall." Frodo points out, making those around the fire laugh.

"God, we never let him live that down, did we?" I giggle.

"It was not my fault that he could not tell a sword from my--" Gimli snickers, "Stop! I feel sick!"

"I have an impressive hilt, If I do say so myself." Gimli continues, proudly. There's a mixture of laughter and groans--the laughter coming from the hobbits and Aragorn, the groans from Legolas, Gandalf and myself.

"I am a warrior, I can fight!"

"Stop! I feel sick!"

Scout barks and tugs at Gandalf's cloak, who bats him away with the end of his staff. I notice Scout's tummy is round, which means he had accomplished his little mission of begging for food around the camp--as if I don't feed him enough already.

"God, we never let him live that down, did we?"

"It was not my fault that he could not tell a sword from my--" Gimli snickers, "Stop! I feel sick!"

"I have an impressive hilt, If I do say so myself." Gimli continues, proudly. There's a mixture of laughter and groans--the laughter coming from the hobbits and Aragorn, the groans from Legolas, Gandalf and myself.

"I am a warrior, I can fight!"

Scout barks and tugs at Gandalf's cloak, who bats him away with the end of his staff. I notice Scout's tummy is round, which means he had accomplished his little mission of begging for food around the camp--as if I don't feed him enough already.

"God, we never let him live that down, did we?"

"It was not my fault that he could not tell a sword from my--" Gimli snickers, "Stop! I feel sick!"

"I have an impressive hilt, If I do say so myself." Gimli continues, proudly. There's a mixture of laughter and groans--the laughter coming from the hobbits and Aragorn, the groans from Legolas, Gandalf and myself.

Scout barks and tugs at Gandalf's cloak, who bats him away with the end of his staff. I notice Scout's tummy is round, which means he had accomplished his little mission of begging for food around the camp--as if I don't feed him enough already.

We continue through the land of Anórien, to Amon Dîn. There is the sound of distant drumming coming from the Grey Woods, and around me, I can see the elves talking excitedly amongst themselves as Gondor's trumpets answer the drums. There is a breath of silence, where Aragorn shouts, though I can't see who he is addressing, "Behold, the King Elessar is come! The Forest of Dráadan he gives to Ghân-buri-Ghân and to his folk, to be their own forever; and hereafter let no man enter it without their leave!"

The drums grow louder, and then fall silent and I don't know what just happened, but we continue on our way.

During the day, we do break ranks to mingle with newfound friends. And Salabeth, Avorniel and I are usually together. Contrary to her father's belief, Avorniel adjusted to travelling quite well. Over the next two weeks, she mentions being sore but doesn't actively complain, and she has gotten along really well with the Imladrim, and by extension, Arwen--which many of the Gondorian nobles notice, and admire her for. Arwen still intimidates the nobles, not because she's scary but because she just seemed too...out of their league to talk to. It's like talking to Beyoncé, or the First Lady--one doesn't really feel like they are worthy. And with Arwen being constantly surrounded by her family--who are intimidating already as they are--it just makes everyone feel like she's untouchable.

Avorniel being one of the few exemptions to that belief, they bond over having strict fathers and their love for poetry and adventurous stories. I hear some of the nobles whisper about how unfair it is that Avorniel is rising above her station quite quickly--it was usually the men's job to gain the favor of nobles higher in position. Women were just expected to marry into money or power, which was obviously not the case for Avorniel. The elves love her, and she has earned Aragorn's respect because of that.

Meanwhile, Salabeth introduces me to more of the Galadhrim. I still don't speak conversational Sindarin, much less understand most of the Galadhrim with their heavy Silvan accents. The Galadhrim, who have been a secretive people, speak Silvan more than they speak Westron, but they have Haldir with them, which was a huge bonus, since he helps me communicate with his people. I
didn't even get to talk to the guy until now since our entire camp is huge. But he introduces me to his wife and brothers, as well as his son, who is still a few centuries older than me.

Slight language barrier aside, I've noticed the Galadhrim are much livelier than their Imladhrim counterpart. They are always the first to strike up songs and dance, and it's for this reason that I usually drag Éowyn over to the Galadhrim camp when we can. She needs the distraction now more than ever, and it's a relief to see her smile and enjoy flowers being braided into her hair. The magic of the elves truly comes from their ability to make everything around them bloom, and bring a youthful joy to everyone else around them.

The one thing that has put me completely off-guard is the use of the latrines—specifically Lady Galadriel. I've put her on such a high pedestal and view her as this immortal being of wisdom and power and beauty that I never imagined her doing something as mundane as relieving herself, or even just eating lembas. It's weird to see such a mystical being going to the bathroom like any regular person. I don't know if that has anything to do with it, but it's somehow made it easier for me to approach her, and Lord Celeborn.

They're a lovely couple to behold. You can really see the love and dedication between both of them, a mutual respect for each other that has stemmed from thousands of years of being together. One did not feel more important than the other, which says a lot about their relationship, because I would have thought Lord Celeborn would feel almost...overshadowed by Lady Galadriel's power, accomplishments, mysteries and past. But I can see how she makes him feel like his equal, and how he brings out the elvish joyfulness in her, and seeing the two of them together is simply like seeing a happy couple enjoying each other's company.

Speaking of happy couples...

"There is nothing that has been more entertaining than watching Éomer fail at avoiding Princess Lothiriel." Éowyn says as we sit for a late lunch. We've taken an entire day off from travelling to let the horses rest and to heal our sore legs, and we are now resting in an open grassland, an indication that we are nearing Rohan now as we enter into our thirteenth day of travel. It's us girls just sitting together, watching Éomer steal glances at Prince Imrahil's daughter. She catches his eye and he chokes on his bread, making us all giggle. It's Éowyn, Avorniel, Salabeth, Silarassel, Celaireth and myself watching him, currently. He glares in our direction when he realizes this.

"It amazes me, truly. He once threw a spear directly into a múmakil's face and killed it along with everyone else riding it in one stroke and yet he struggles to approach a woman and strike a conversation." Éowyn continues as Éomer turns to his fellow Rohirric Riders.

"It's quite cute, actually. I hate using that word but it is the only one I can use that is appropriate." Silarassel comments.

"The funniest thing about this is that I think the only reason he's not acting on his feelings is because of that conversation we had with him, remember that?" I turn to Éowyn and Avorniel.

Avorniel giggles, "When he said he did not like Gondorian women because we're conniving and uptight?"

"Yeah, that."

"To be fair, there are some Gondorian nobles who are exactly that, not just the women. I think it is just the kind of politics they are used to," Celaireth says.

"And now he's faced with the dilemma of a woman who seems carefree, straight-forward and
exciting but is not a woman of Rohan." Éowyn continues my initial thought.

We try to hide our giggles again when Lothiriel approaches Êomer first, and in his haste to stand up, he elbows Gamling's bowl of food out of the man's grasp. Éowyn's hand goes to cover her face as she watches the disaster that is Êomer.

"He's like a lovestruck teenager." Avorniel rests her forehead on Éowyn's shoulder to hide her laughter.

It's almost become a past time for us to spy on Êomer and Lothiriel's blossoming relationship. The mutual attraction between the two have become so obvious that even Prince Imrahil and his sons and daughters have become close to Éowyn and have made it their mission to push Lothiriel and Êomer closer. It's become a highlight of our travels, Éowyn telling Êomer that one of Prince Imrahil's sons requested he join them for lunch, only for Êomer to come back an hour later from a picnic with Lothiriel alone, much to Lothiriel's amusement. Or Éowyn would drag Êomer to the elven side of camp when the elves are being their usual merry selves and dancing, only for Êomer to somehow find himself partnered with Lothiriel.

It's a great distraction for the siblings. They've been going through a lot after all, and I know it's always in the back of Êowyn's mind that they are going home, where their lands are still recovering from the war, to bury the only father figure she has ever known. And this becomes more obvious when we cross through a familiar land, to a village that led up to the Meduseld.

Éowyn stiffens beside me when our great procession approaches, and this time it's Êomer leading the way up, with the wain carrying Théoden's bier behind him, Merry solemnly holding his fallen king's arms. Éowyn's back straightens, and Avorniel and I catch each other's eye before we stand on either side of her and take her hands.

"We're here for you." I tell her.

She squeezes our hands, and we go forth, towards King Théoden's final resting place.

Chapter End Notes

Éomer and Lothiriel riiiiise!
I let Éowyn hold Scout for comfort while Salabeth and I do her hair for her. It's the least we could do. Her face is pale and blank as she stares at herself in the mirror, her hand slowly moving over Scout's fur. In a few minutes, her uncle will finally be laid to rest. I don't know what could be running through her mind right now. She doesn't speak, so we stay by her side to comfort her. Avorniel is sitting on the bed, reading one of the books in Éowyn's room. It's so quiet, which is strange because a huge procession just came into the Meduseld.

Once we finish piling Éowyn's hair up in a braided bun, she stands and makes her way to the window to look out, setting the curtain aside. "The Riders are preparing the horses. It is almost time." She says.

I approach her and put an arm around her shoulder.

"I am proud of what my uncle has achieved. His name will be remembered by generations of warriors. I just wish..." She sighs, "I wish I had more time with him."

Silence.

"I just had him back. I had to take care of him as Saruman's poison wore him down, and became but a cold shell of who he used to be. I thought I had lost him forever, that he will never come back to me. When he did, he was immediately thrust into battle. I wish he could see me right now, surrounded by friends and finally finding peace for myself. But alas." Éowyn laid her head on my shoulder, and I wrapped both arms around her to give her a warm hug.

"I'm sure he knows. And I'm sure he's so proud of you." I say.

There's a knock on the door, and Avorniel, being the closest to it, gets up from the bed to open it. There's a moment of pause before there are excited squeals of delight. Éowyn, Salabeth and I all turn to find Avorniel pulling Aedelind inside the room so the two could hug.

"I have missed you!" Aedelind says, as she and Avorniel approach us. The smile slips from her mouth as she sees the look on Éowyn's face, but she merely gives the younger girl a weak smile.

"It's alright. We need a little bit of cheer in here." She says.

"Who's the pretty woman?" Aedelind whispers to us, motioning at Salabeth, who chuckles.

"I am Salabeth of Imladris."

"I don't know where that is."
"I would not expect you to. We keep ourselves hidden."

"Salabeth is a great herbalist, Aedelind. She knows how to cure almost any ailment." I pipe in.

"Oh, fantastic! Tell me."

Salabeth looks confused that such a young human she barely even knew would command her like so. But, Aedelind is Aedelind and she doesn't pick and choose who she bosses around.

"Later, young one. For now, let us see to Lady Éowyn." Salabeth says with a small smile.

Low horns blew in the distance, and Éowyn's face crumples, a look of pure heartbreak on it, "It is time." Her voice is strong, but she takes my hand, still and we walk out.

She and Éomer lead the procession to the mound where Théoden's body will be laid, and a song of mourning plays in the air as the Rohirrim sing to say goodbye to their fallen king. The Riders of Rohan take position to ride around the barrow, and it is they leading the song. I see Aedelgar and Hildraed among those who were given the honor to ride around the green mound where Théoden is laid to rest. Their slow voices brought emotion to the entire crowd. But there is a light in the Rohirrim's eyes as they sang this song of Théoden, as though they are recalling a distant memory, and Éowyn's tears have been spent, but there is also now a look of acceptance on her, and even relief that her uncle is now resting in peace. Merry stood at the foot of the green mound, and he wept as he said his farewell.

But eventually, the mourning ended, and the Riders, along with Éomer, led the way back to the Meduseld. Éowyn returns to us who are waiting for her and though her eyes are puffy and red, a ton of weight seemed lifted from her shoulders, "He is in peace now, riding among our great descendants." Aedelind says to her, and she nods. "I know. I am relieved that he is now among his sires. I miss him dearly but it brings me comfort to know he is in a good place."

"And there is a feast to celebrate his glorious life! Come, come, my lady. Your uncle would want to see you be joyful and celebrating the life he had." Aedelind smiles, taking Éowyn's hand. She sniffs, but a smile appears on her face as she and Aedelind also walk with the procession back to the Meduseld.

"A feast? After a funeral?" I ask,

"A tradition for warriors. You mourn their death but for a moment and celebrate the glorious life they had thereafter. He died in the service of battle, fighting for his people. The feast is held in Théoden King's honor." Avorniel responds. "And the other warriors do need more time to enjoy themselves."

She, Salabeth and I joined Aedelind and Éowyn now, and there is already cheerful singing in the Meduseld as a band picks up their instruments.

There are golden curtains draped from the high ceilings, the smell of cooked meat and ale fills in the air, and there is already laughter among the many people gathered in the Great Hall. There are, I note, some elves looking at the food served with a bit of unease. Ah yes, elvish sensibilities and their aghast for unhealthy food. A lot of those served on the tables are fatty meats, cooked in their own oil. There is horse meat that is served as well, and a variety of soups, but not as much vegetables as I think they would like. Some of the braver elves try the food on their plate and start rubbing their fingers together at the realization that it they're greasy. Some avoid the food entirely, including Salabeth, who never eats meat to begin with. Yet some, like Meludir and Celaireth, dig right into the food and enjoy it immensely. Silarassel looks down at her younger sister in surprise.
"Just because it is not what you are used to, does not mean that it is bad." Celaireth tells her, which convinces the rest of the Mirkwood elves that are there, though there is only a few of them, to try what food is served there. Still, though, even the pickiest of the elves enjoyed the beer, wine and ale served by the people of Rohan, and even I take a tankard of their beer with me, though I've now learned my lesson. Aedelind drags me toward Aedelgar and Hildraed and I give the two of them huge hugs because I've missed them so.

"Oh! How have you two been?" I smile up at them. Both of them have a glow about them. They look more at ease together, and I suspect them leaving the judgmental gaze of those in Gondor is the reason.

"Wonderful. We have been assigned to help with the restoration of the villages that have been destroyed in the war, and of burying the dead. Aedelind here is working with the Meduseld's healers now. They are training her as their apprentice, so she can serve the king and Lady Êowyn directly. She will be moving in here after her training, and when that happens," Aedelgar and Hildraed exchange joyful glances as Aedelgar explains, "we get to keep the house to ourselves."

"Wha--you're moving in together? Oh my gosh, congratulations!" I hug them both again, while Avorniel claps in appreciation and wishes them good luck.

"There is a little girl in the village here who has lost all of her family. We plan on caring for her now. We can be her new family when everything has settled down." Hildraed says.

"Wow! This is such great news! I'm happy for both of you. You will make wonderful dads."

"Thank you, Ellie." Hildraed beams.

"And nice ring." Aedelgar smirks.

"Legolas and I have promised ourselves to each other. I'm going to Eryn Lasgalen with his family now to meet his father and his brother. We will stay there for half of the year, more or less, depending on whether his father allows him to start a colony in Ithilien."

"Look at that, young miss Ellie, soon to be a wife. Life has been good to us, has it not?" Aedelgar says, clapping me on the back.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that yet. If Legolas' father doesn't hate me on the spot, then we can say it has been good to me."

"I don't see why he would hate someone that his son loves." Hildraed says.

"Enough talk! Come, let us dance already!" Aedelind groans, taking her brother by the arm and dragging him towards where the elves had already begun dancing. Hildraed watches as Aedelgar whines against Aedelind's insistence, and offers a hand to me.

"I must warn you now, Rohirrim dances can be hard to keep up to."

"Fantastic. I must warn you, I have two left feet."

He wasn't kidding about the dance being hard. There's a lot of lifting and swinging involved, and spinning into new partners. Hildraed, as expected, is patient with me as I get into the beat, and didn't show too much pain whenever I stepped on him. By the time one song ended, I've danced with Aragorn and Pippin as well. There's also an all-girls dance, initiated by Êowyn and Aedelind, who is actually the best dancer among the Rohirrim. Avorniel and I join and then the Galadhrim are flocking in the middle, then Silarassel and Celaireth, and Arwen and Lady Galadriel. It's a beautiful, cheerful
dance, arms linking and dresses twirling and hair going everywhere but the amount of fun is ridiculous. We laugh when we bump into each other and take each other's hands and spin in a big circle, before someone breaks off from the circle to dance in the middle, and the circle would break off one by one until there's a group of women just enjoying themselves.

The men in the sidelines clap in appreciation, and Meludir and Gamling—who had apparently been getting along—come into the dancefloor, making us back up. Their movements are big, and more men soon join them. Legolas and the twins are quick to join, with the twins dragging their father with them. Lord Elrond chuckles, shaking his head at his sons but he dances as gracefully as they do, and it's a fascinating thing, watching elven men dance. The way they do not fear moving their bodies in feminine ways and then fluidly moving to be more masculine.

The dancefloor is soon turned into a boys against girls dance-off, except everyone is just having fun, not really bothered on who are doing the better moves, and finally the two groups merge, finding partners. I see Aragorn and Arwen at the corner of my eye, and Legolas' hand is around my waist instantly. He grins down at me as he spins me around. And as I spin back into position, he pulls me up, and my lips are on him, and our smiles are pressed against each other, and for a moment, there's only this. Laughter and music and sweat from all the dancing. No death to mourn over, but a life well-lived to celebrate.

It's a miracle it all died down when it did. But Éomer stood on a raised dais, as is the Rohirric custom to drain a cup in honor of their forefathers. Éowyn steps forward, filling her brother's cup, and stands at his side. A minstrel stands and begins naming the previous kings, right from Eorl the Young, all the way down to Théoden. When his uncle's name is mentioned, Éomer drains his cup. The rest of us rise, hold up our goblets and shout, "Hail, Éomer King!" before draining our own goblets. This still tastes like motor oil going down but with Silarassel beside me currently downing it like it was just water, I had to put on a brave front.

Éomer waits patiently for us to finish, and hands his empty cup to one of the servants, and addresses the crowd once more, "While this may be my uncle's funeral feast, I do not believe he would grudge me by giving tidings of joy on this day, since he has been like a father to my sister, Éowyn." He puts a gentle hand on her shoulder, who steps closer to him. Éomer grins and his voice is carried out through the now quiet hall, "Hear now, all my guests, fair folk of every realm, such as never been gathered in this hall! Faramir, Steward of Gondor and Prince of Ithilien, has asked the Lady Éowyn to be his wife, and she grants it, full willing. Therefore, they shall be trothplighted before you all."

Aedelind, Avorniel and I, all clustered together, gasp in delight. Faramir steps up on to the dais as well, looking like the proudest motherfucker I have ever laid eyes on. There's a grin on his face, and Éowyn looks at him as though he is the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. Éomer puts his sister's hand in Faramir's, who kneels and kisses her knuckles. The hall erupts in cheers as people drink to them, but I had already given my goblet to Silarassel, who watches in amused delight as Avorniel, Aedelind and I stand with our arms linked, barely holding in our squeals of delight.

"Thus is the friendship of the Mark and of Gondor bound with a new bond, and the more that I rejoice." Éomer announces.

"No fool are you, Éomer, to give to Gondor the fairest of your realm." Aragorn says.

Éowyn turns to him, her hands linked with Faramir, and there is only happiness in her eyes as she says, "Wish me joy, my liege-lord and healer."

"I have wished you joy since I first met you, and it heals my heart to see you so."

Éowyn bows to him and Arwen, before looking up at her future husband. And then, she turns to us,
her friends. And all grace is forgotten as Aedelind bursts into tears of joy and Avorniel and I cheer. The crowd around us laughs, but joins in the cheering as well.

When Éowyn comes down from the platform, the three of us swarm her and pepper her with hugs and kisses and congratulations. Nobody sleeps that day, because the feast resumes until almost the sunrise, where people begin saying their goodbyes to friends they just met. Aedelind is once again frustrated that our time in Rohan is so short, but she admits that she still has patients waiting for her in the morning, and Éowyn would have to stay in Rohan with Éomer, much to Lothiriel's delight, as she will be staying behind to rest before she travels back with her brothers and sisters to Gondor.

Arwen herself takes me aside to a quiet corner, and without any hesitation, takes me in her arms, "It brings me such joy to know that my descendants will grow to be such beautiful, brave people."

My heart swells with pride at her words, realizing her meaning. "How long have you known?" I ask her, letting myself be enveloped by the familiar feeling of a mother's touch. I haven't felt this in years. I had forgotten how comforting it is.

"That you are of my blood? I was leaving for the Grey Havens. I had a vision of my son, happy with Aragorn... and of you. You were surrounded by the brightest of lights, and I knew. You were sent to us as a sign of hope, that whatever may come, Aragorn and I would have children that will carry our love through the Ages, even when we have perished. If I had left Middle-earth then, I would not have this beautiful family from my vision turn into reality."

She pulls away and puts her hands on my cheeks, "I am so proud of you. And most of all, I am happy that you have found joy here with us. And I expect you to come to Minas Tirith as soon as you can and as often as you can, and talk to me of what your life was like before us."

I can feel tears blurring my vision, and I smile up at her and take both of her hands in mine, but there are no words. Only gratitude and unconditional love. "I wish you joy most of all, Ellie. You have the strength and honor that would make anyone proud to call you their child. You are a reminder that however painful my decision to choose mortality may be, there is nothing for me to regret, for I know that long after I die and am forgotten, my children will continue to do great things."

"We have so much to talk about." I sniff.

"Later. For now, you travel on, and you learn what you can. We will have plenty of time to talk when you get back."

She escorts me back to Legolas out in the courtyard, where he waits with my horse and she sets him aside for something, before she leaves towards the Imladrim. I see Legolas looking down at something in his hand, before he turns back to me, his face unreadable. He pockets what he was holding right as he comes within earshot.

"We will be leaving after sunrise tomorrow. Quite a few people will be staying here and will no longer travel with us--Faramir, Imrahil and his knights being some of them."

"And Arwen?" I have a sense that she wouldn't be. Her words seem to convey that she is expecting not to see us in a while.

His expression darkens, confirming my thoughts, "She will return to Gondor, as well." He turns, and my gaze follows his as we see her and Lord Elrond walking off in the distance, with Salabeth in tears among the Imladrim. She is not the only one crying there, and my heart sinks. Arwen is finally saying goodbye to her people. As she had chosen a mortal life, she forfeits ever seeing them again. Most will be leaving for the Grey Havens after all this is done.
"They shall meet again in the halls of Mandos, but briefly and then... in time... she will be lost to them forever." Legolas says as we both notice Elladan and Elrohir standing apart from all the others, a look of devastation on their faces. I've never seen them look this tired and defeated. But Elladan straightens up, puts an arm around Elrohir's shoulder, and says something to him.

I turn to Legolas, hoping he can tell me what the twins are saying. "They are promising each other that they will not choose mortality. They choose the Doom of the Eldar. They do not want their mother and father to bear the loss of all three of their children."

"Is it truly that terrible, Legolas? To lose the one you love to mortality?" My voice cracks. He turns to me, his gaze intense.

"Permanent loss is...not something common to Elves. Yes, we watch friends die, but we are always comforted by the fact that we shall all meet again, whether in the Halls of Mandos or in Valinor when we are brought back. Death is never permanent to Elves, unless we choose to stay in Mandos until the end of days. Mortality takes that comfort away. Once a mortal dies, you know their fea is in the hands of the Father, and His alone. It's a blessing that he brought you back here, at all. That is enough comfort for me, that we may someday meet again. But the others do not have that comfort."

I look down, knowing full well that the devastation that Arwen's family faces is the same thing that Legolas would feel when I die. God, I can't bear the thought of him being so heart-broken. But we both know it will happen. We chose to be together despite this.

"Ellie?" He says softly, to bring me out of my thoughts.

"Hmm?" I'm still a bit distracted, and he approaches me, tilts my head up so my eyes can meet his, and says,

"I love you. Whatever may come, I will always love you and that will always be enough for me."

I once again find myself asking how someone so pure and patient could love me as much as Legolas does, and I kiss him, deeply and with all my heart, in response.

Eventually, we all find ourselves on top of our horses, with the Fellowship once again gravitating towards each other. With people staying behind now, we're only too aware that we're getting closer to our final farewell.

"Where's Merry?" Pippin asks, realizing we are one member down.

"He is with the King and the Lady Éowyn." Gandalf replies, "And they offer him a great gift, for serving Théoden King with such loyalty."

"Oh." Pippin says, "How come I don't get a gift?" He turns to Aragorn. Gandalf smacks the back of his head in response.

"A feast shall be held in your honor, if you so wish." Aragorn jokes.

"How gracious of you, my king. Truly, though, the honor of being the Guard of the Citadel is enough."

"Give him paid vacation." I suggest.

"Give--what?" Pippin sounds confused, as he always is.

"He can continue to pay you for your services while you are away on vacation." I elaborate.
"Oh! I can take that! I would like to go back to the Shire, after all."

"We will discuss it later." Aragorn says. And we set off, towards the familiar path of Helm's Deep. A part of me fears our approach towards it. We fought desperately here, and I realize now that many Galadhrim will be mourning their folk who died here. The warriors had made the painful decision to bury the dead elves here in order to go back to Lothlórien as quickly as they could, and I can practically feel the tension from the wood-elves as they enter. Not so much from the Elves of Mirkwood, because they've been so used to living in a fortress under the mountain, but from the Galadhrim who not only are used to open spaces and trees surrounding them, with dirt instead of stone beneath their feet, but would pass by the mounds where their fallen kin may very well have laid.

Erkenbrand meets us in Helm's Deep, when we arrive two days later. It felt longer, though. The Galadhrim have been quiet from Edoras to Helm's Deep, no longer singing songs of dance and joy, but of mourning and woe. There wasn't much cheer from the camp, save Avorniel whose spirit never faltered throughout our long, and sometimes painfully inconvenient, journey. I've seen her hunched on top of her horse as she tries to draw a map of Rohan, and jot things down on her journal that she begun the night after we left Minas Tirith. If her father thinks the reality of travel would kill her passion for adventure, she only proves that it brings out her curiosity more, and she has been spending time in the Fellowship's camp, first to ask Gimli and I about the Glittering Caves, then Aragorn about what he knew of Fangorn. All stories told to her, she responded to with enthusiasm.

And Erkenbrand picks up on this right away. While the Galadhrim looks around with a bit of anxiety at the cold, hard stone surrounding them, Avorniel itches to explore. He lets one of the soldiers guide her around the Keep. She alone seems unfazed by the memory that lingers here.

"Her father is going to be gravely disappointed to know she is not discouraged by what she sees." Aragorn tells me as we both watch Avorniel start pointing towards structures built in the Keep.

"I guess it's a good thing she doesn't know how bad the battle here actually was. I never talk to her about what actually happens in battle, and it's actually nice to see that someone can still see beauty in all of this." I motion at our surroundings, before wrapping my cloak tighter around myself. I have the strange feeling of claustrophobia here... and if I stay quiet for long, I feel as if I can hear metal against metal, flesh falling on the stone, men and boys screaming in pain around me.

We did have a victory here, but at great cost, and it is not an experience I would ever want to relive.

"I feel awful." I whisper, remembering how I walked these streets feeling lost and empty when I thought Aragorn had died. There's too many awful memories here.

"I feel cold." Sam says, beside me, as he and Frodo look around with a frown. Merry and Pippin look around them, as well. That's right, this is their first time here. "I wouldn't miss this place if we left now, to be perfectly honest."

I don't blame Sam for thinking it. There are too many ghosts here that, to me, overshadow the victory we had. Gimli seems to be the only one among the Fellowship not too terribly affected, and Legolas has had his fair share of loss and violence that we now find ourselves leaning to them for some light-heartedness.

"You will not be missing it at all, Samwise. We are to stay here for two days to rest, and to give the Galadhrim time to mourn those of their folk who died here." Gandalf says. He remains strong, as he always is, but not unkind.

I sigh, and follow Aragorn further inside the Keep, and try my best to sleep when the time comes for
us to do so. But I never do let go of my sword beside me, tucked in its scabbard. I find that it helps to fend off the nightmares that have come roaring back in my sleep.

Chapter End Notes

We're getting so close to Mirkwood, I'm actually itching for you guys to meet Taumathor and of course, Thranduil. A little bit more patience, guys!
The Elven-king

Chapter Summary

The moment arrives for when the Fellowship must truly part. But every end leads to a new beginning, and Ellie and Legolas are about to begin a new challenge in their life.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I am awakened by the song of lament by the Galadhrim. The songs never really stopped, but there is a bitterness in their song, and anger that I have never heard in elven song before. Even without knowing the words they sing, I understand their message. The Galadhrim are people of the trees. More than that, they have grown extremely close together. They are one huge family, a fiercely loyal community. And it would leave a scar on all of them to see their fallen kin be left in the cold stone walls of Helm's Deep.

They couldn't wait to get out fast enough. Many of the Galadhrim men here are also veterans of the war that took place here. Haldir himself stands beside me now, and I wrap my cloak tighter around me as I stand on the wall, looking beyond. It's huge, and empty, and sad. I remember looking over this wall with the rain in my eyes and torches beyond held by a thick crowd of Uruk-Hai and orcs. It was a frightening thing to behold, and even now, there is a shadow of the fear that gripped me before the battle.

"I almost died here." Haldir says, running his hand against the stonework. "Right on this spot. If you had not been there..."

I turn to him, and his eyes are downcast. His hand is trembling, "I have not seen war as horrible as Helm's Deep for an Age. And yet, when I returned home, even more destruction struck. I find myself growing weary of Middle-earth. Its beauty is lost on me now." I can't blame him. I know the elves have been waning even before I got to Middle-earth. Some just needed a bit more motivation to leave for the Undying Lands.

"I wish you peace when you leave for the Grey Havens and beyond." I say, not really knowing what to say to his revelation.

"Peace?" He hums, "Yes. Peace. I would like that. But I shall never forget the chance at life you gave me."

"We already called that even when you saved me from a grappling hook, remember?" I try to tease, and he laughs.

"Still. I thank you, Lady Ellie. I do not know where you come from, but you are a friend to me and my family."

"I am glad you consider me as such, Haldir."

"Your friend, by the way..." He starts. It takes me a moment to realize he is talking about Avorniel. "She is a treasure. Her attitude has helped distract many of the Galadhrim. Such positivity in the
wake of all the death and destruction around us helps. She asks such fascinating questions. 'But what if you do fall from a talan? Where do you grow your farms?' Does the Lady Galadriel ever not wear white?

I can't help but smile. "She has a lot of questions, that one."

"She has a bit of desperation, too. I sense it in her. She wants to be free but something is holding her back." He says. "Take care, Lady Ellie. We will never see each other again after this."

I pull him in for a hug, "Good luck, Haldir. I'm sorry you had to come back here."

"I'm not. I needed to mourn my fallen comrades one last time before leaving."

He leaves and I stand looking down the wall to see the Galadhrim kneeling by the mounds where I know their family are buried. An elleth digs through one of the mounds with one hand and places a tiny thing I can't see into the hole, before pushing dirt back in it once more. A second later and her composure breaks, and her sob joins the hundred others around me.

I go downstairs to the hall, unable to take any of it anymore.

"Ellie." Is Frodo's tired greeting to me when I join him and the other hobbits. Even he does not enjoy being here. "How I wish I could explore Helm's Deep. It is a beautiful place, the stonework is quite wonderful to behold. But...

"But there is only mourning here now." I finish for him.

"I always saw these elves to be graceful and powerful and cheerful. Their sobs are hard to bear." Sam says.

"They do not know death like we do. For some, this may even be their first time experiencing what death does to those it leaves behind." Frodo says.

"Let's not talk about death this early, please. I am hungry and ready to leave." Pippin says. With that, he pulls his plate towards himself and digs into his breakfast. Aragorn and Gandalf soon find their way towards us, and then Elladan and Elrohir, though they would not speak to anyone. Salabeth is nowhere to be found. I assume she is mourning with her friends. Lady Galadriel and Lord Celeborn are absent from breakfast as well, though that is to be expected.

Avorniel also walks in late into the morning holding a book, with ink stains on her fingers. She has evidently been working late into the night to finish her drawings of the streets and architecture of Helm's Deep.

Legolas and Gimli are nowhere to be found, though I don't worry until we have our horses set up ready to leave. The Galadhrim look ready to go, and Aragorn and Gandalf are having their last conversation with Erkenbrand. I feel like that possessed girl from The Exorcist looking around me trying to find the last two Fellowship members.

"There you are! Where have you been?" I sigh in relief when I see them approaching at last. Legolas looks mystified.


"What did you find?"

"Gimli here is the only one who can find the words to describe what we have seen." Legolas says. I
raise my eyebrows, honestly shocked that an elf can't find the words to describe anything. "Never before has a dwarf claimed victory in a contest of words with an elf."

Gimli looks extremely proud of himself. "I told you so." Is all he says.

"You took our brother to a cave?" Silarassell, who is nearby, says disapprovingly.

"You lived in a fortress under the mountains for countless years." Gimli grumbled, annoyed by the interruption.

"And I did not enjoy it. It was only necessary to protect our people."

"Do you think we would rather not have our homes built on trees, surrounded by fresh air and woodland beings instead of caves and spiders?" Celairath pipes in, overhearing the conversation. "We are grateful for the masterwork of the dwarves, Gimli, do not think we do not appreciate what your kin did for us or how considerate it was of them to build as many windows as they possibly could but it is not the same as feeling the wind on your face as you stand at the very top of a tree and see your land sprawled before you."

"When we get home, we can rebuild on the trees." Legolas says.

"Not for a long time, Legolas." Silarassell responds, sadly. "You will see when we return... The destruction..." She shivers, "But we will endure, as we always have. Come, Celairath."

I look at Legolas with concern, seeing him shake his head. "Tell me about the Glittering Caves." I say in an attempt to distract him.

Instead, Gimli answers with a lot of dramatic gasps for breath in between. Legolas helps him with his story, and they speak of the ceiling like the night sky and the walls covered in gems. Until eventually, we finally leave, and a sigh of relief escapes the procession. As beautiful as Helm's Deep was, I am glad to be away from it. There are no good memories for me here. Only blood and destruction and boys too young to be holding swords killed before my eyes.

We take a familiar path that I now realize is the way to Isengard. I feel nervousness travelling towards it. This was where Saruman was last seen and indeed is being kept. I don't look forward to meeting him again, and neither do Merry and Pippin, though they do look forward to seeing Treebeard again. They then proceed to narrate their victory in Isengard though we have heard the story before.

It always ends with Merry and Pippin arguing about who is taller than who. The few elven audience they have laugh at their debate, until Pippin turns to Meludir.

"I'm taller, aren't I?"

"You bring me into this argument?" Meludir looks amused, stroking his chin. "I can, in fact, tell who is the taller among the two of you. But I have the wisdom to keep it to myself, my friend."

"Wha--" Merry starts, but Pippin has a smug look on his face,

"See. I am the taller one. He just doesn't want to embarrass you to your face." Pippin says to Merry. Merry nudges Meludir.

"Oi! Come on, Mel, tell us!"

"Yeah, Mel. Tell Merry I'm taller."
"I will do no such thing. I enjoy watching the two of you argue."

"See, that's us, aren't we, Pip? The comedic relief? Nobody wants to take us seriously." Merry says in fake disappointment.

"You watch when I get back home and I become Thain." Pippin announces, to which Sam snorts, "Yeah, and I'll be the mayor."

"Why not, Sam? You would make a great mayor." Frodo pipes in. Sam shrugs, "I just want to see Rosie again, truly, Mr. Frodo. I'll be content with that."

"You will finally tell her your feelings?" Frodo sounds delighted.

"Well, yes. After everything, I think I'll be brave enough to ask for her to dance, at least."

"I demand an invitation to the wedding." It's my turn to pipe in.

"Oh, Miss Ellie! You will love the Shire. It may be too small for you Big Folk but there's never a shortage of good food and welcoming people." Sam says, fondly.

"And stories and songs." Frodo adds.

"And ale." Merry and Pippin say in unison. I laugh. "Who could forget the ale?"

"Hey, never forget me when you go back home, okay?" I say to Merry and Pippin.

"Who could ever forget you, Ellie?" Frodo smiles.

"Visit us in the Shire, when you can." Sam suggests.

"And bring your baby if you plan on having one. Hobbits throw the most wonderful birth day parties." Pippin says.

"I'm not even married yet. Calm down!" I laugh.

"Well, it would only be a matter of time."

"Name the baby after me!" Merry exclaims.

"That baby will be half-elven, if ever. I wonder if it would have a choice between mortality and immortality as well or if it only applies to Lord Elrond's children?" Meludir, who has evidently been listening in, says.

"Can we not talk about my future child who doesn't even exist yet and their mortality, please?" I say, exasperated.

"We can talk about it in Eryn Lasgalen." Meludir says, to which Legolas, who hasn't been reacting this entire time, punches his shoulder. I look at him and he has a little smile on his face, and I return that smile. Because a child of our own is something I would love to talk to him about, to raise with, to love. Not in my near future, but someday. When we have a home we've built and our own legacy to hand down to them.

Eventually, we get to the entrance of Isengard, though everything looks much different than how I remember it. There is no longer any rubble by the entrance. Instead, everything is lush and green. There are orchards and flowers and a stream. No smoke, no fire, no rubble. Beyond, the tower of Isengard still stands, black and imposing, in the middle of a clear lake. Two Ents stand guard and our
entire company slows down to a stop as the elves turn to each other in excitement. Avorniel, having no idea what Ents probably are, looks around in confusion, wondering about what she was seeing.

There is the familiar rumble of the ground shaking, and as if they very earth itself was speaking, the voice of Treebeard fills the air. Avorniel visibly pales. Understandable, seeing as how I wanted to flee when I first saw the giant, talking tree. Even scarier now, perhaps, is that there are two Ents striding towards us.

"Welcome to the Treegarth of Orthanc." Treebeard says in that rumbling voice of his. Avorniel grabs Meludir's arm in shock and weakly points at the tree.

"It...talks?" She squeaks.

"Amazing, is it not? I have always wanted to meet an Ent." Meludir looks up at Treebeard with wonder.

"I knew that you were coming, but I was at work up the valley; there is much still to be done." Treebeard says, and turns to Gandalf and Aragorn. "But you have not been idle either away in the south and the east, I hear; and all that I hear is good, very good."

"And how do you know of this, Treebeard?" Gandalf asks, amused.

"The trees. The squirrels. The owls. They talk, they tell of your deeds. And they were great deeds indeed. You have proved mightiest, and all your labours have gone well. Where now would you be going, and why do you come here?"

"To see how your work goes, my friend." Gandalf gives a slight bow, "And to thank you for your aid in all that we have achieved."

"Hoom, well, that is fair enough." Treebeard says "For to be sure Ents have played their part. And not only in dealing with that...that accursed tree-slayer that dwelt here. For there was a great inrush of those, burárum. With that, his voice takes on a harsher, more terrifying tone. Avorniel pulls back in alarm, and even some of the elves look unsettled by the Ent's anger as he continued, "Those evileyed, black-handed, bowlegged, flinthearted, clawfingered, foulbellied, blood-thirsty, morimaite-sincahonda, hoom, well, since you are hasty folk and their full name is as long as years of torment, those vermin of orcs." I supress a giggle because good lord, Treebeard is savage. He said all of those insults without pausing for breath. It was remarkable!

"And they came over the River and down from the North and all round the wood of Laurelindórenan, which they could not get into, thanks to the Great ones who are here." he bows to the Lord and Lady of Lórien, who in turn acknowledges him with a slight bow as well.

"These same foul creatures were more than surprised to meet us head-on in the Wold, for they have not heard of us before. Though that may also be said of better folk. And not many will remember us, for not many escaped us alive."

If it was possible for Avorniel to shrink into her saddle, I think she may have done so. I kind of understand her. She's a city girl, much like me, though she lives in Gondor. She is used to white stone and pavements. I don't think she's adjusting well to seeing an angry, talking and now apparently murderous tree. But she's holding her ground well.

"If they had not met us, the king of the grassland would not have ridden far, and if he had, there would be no home to return to."

With this, Aragorn bows, "And your great deeds shall never be forgotten in Minas Tirith or Edoras."
"Never?" Treebeard hums, "Never is such a long time, even to an Ent. As long as your kingdoms stand, perhaps. But never?"

"The New Age begins. And time may come when the kingdoms of Men outlive even you, Fangorn my friend." Gandalf smiles, "But come now. What news of Saruman? Is he not weary of Orthanc yet?"

"I don't think he would have liked what you did to his view. Seems death, destruction and pollution is his thing." I say. I see Gandalf shaking his head slightly but Treebeard gives Gandalf a look, which is a feat indeed, because his face is made of wood.

"I thought you would come to that. He was not as weary of Orthanc as he was of my voice. I gave him some long tales, or what would be long in your speech." Treebeard says, "But he came to his window and listened, because he could not get news in any other way, and though he hated the news, he was greedy to have it; and I saw that he heard it all. But I added a great many things to the news that it was good for him to think of. He grew very weary. He always was hasty. That was his ruin."

"I notice, my friend, that with great care you say 'was'. What about 'is'? Is he dead?"

"He is alive, certainly. But he is gone. I let him go, seven days ago."

There is a brief pause from the Elves.

"You let him go?" Celaireth says. "You let that mouth-breathing, selfish, destructive, tree-burning, power-hungry, manipulative murderer go?"

"Ah. I see you are familiar with Entish. But Gandalf, you should know that I hate above all things the caging of live things, even one such as him. A snake is free to roam without his fangs."

Treebeard says.

"You may be right, but this snake still has one tooth left. It would appear the poison in his voice affected even you, knowing the soft spot in your heart."

"Well, he is gone, along with that pale shadow of his. In any case, I have made Saruman lock Orthanc and give me the keys. Quickbeam has them. It now belongs to the King, rightfully, once more. Though maybe he will not need it."

"That will be seen later," said Aragorn. "But I will give to Ents all this valley to do with as they will, so long as they keep a watch upon Orthanc and see that none enter it without my leave."

Quickbeam bows, like a tree bending in the wind, his wood croaked and his leaves rustled as he gives a set of intricate keys to Aragorn. "Now I thank you once more," Aragorn says, "and I bid you farewell. May your forest grow again in peace. When this valley is filled there is room and to spare west of the mountains, where once you walked long ago."

Treebeard hums sadly, "Forests may grow," he says. "Woods may spread. But not Ents. There are no Entings."

"There will be land open to you once more eastward. Do not lose hope yet."

"It is far to go, and there are too many Men there in those parts. But I am forgetting my manners. The heirs of the Woodland king are here as well as the Great Lord and Lady of Lórien, and the Lord of Imladris. Will you be staying long? Maybe there are some that would be pleased to pass through Fangorn Forest and so shorten their road home?" This he said in particular to the Galadhrim.
But Silarassel says, "Forgive us, Treebeard. But we would have to leave immediately."

"Not yet." Legolas speaks up, and cranes his neck to look at Gimli, "Come now, Gimli. It is time to hold your end of the bargain. I will visit the Entwood and see such trees as I have never seen before. And you will travel with me to our lands beyond."

Gimli lets out a long-drawn sigh but agrees, clearly not looking forward to entering Fangorn once more. With that, the elves of Mirkwood straighten up, realizing Legolas' words. The meaning of it is not lost on me, and I turn to Aragorn almost desperately.

"Here now comes the end of the Fellowship of the Ring." He says, sadly. "Yet I hope you will return with the help you promised."

"We will, Estel." Legolas says, "If my King commands it."

"And he will. Because father can never say no to him." Silarassel smirks, "You can be sure that Legolas will return to you."

"I'm sure he'd find a way to make sure he does, anyway." Celaireth adds.

"Wait." Avorniel speaks up, "Is this it, then? You won't be coming back to Gondor with us?" She turns to me, and I give her a sad smile.

"No, mellon. I have to go to Eryn Lasgalen. Just for a while. I will return, I promise." I say, and my words are heavy on my heart. I can feel tears prickling the edge of my eyes already.

"But... I will miss you. Father will be taking me back home when I return to Minas Tirith. It will not be the same without you there."

"Which I think the rest of the nobles will be relieved by, to be honest." I mutter, making her giggle.

She makes her horse approach mine and takes my hand, "Be safe, please, Ellie. How you put your trust in others so easily is what makes you wonderful, yet endangers you so."

She turns to Legolas now, "And you give her all the potatoes she likes. If she sheds but one tear, I will know and I will come to your fortress myself to pull your ear."

"Not one tear but that of joy, Avorniel." Legolas swears with an amused smile. I slide off my horse to approach Aragorn's, and lock eyes with him. We have been on this journey for months, and never have been parted for long. When we were, he sought me out. It's he who has watched me grow, and I saw his rise from Strider to King Elessar. From the very beginning of my journey here in Middle-earth, he was there. And now I will leave him for God knows how long. There will be countries between us. It terrifies me.

He, too, gets down from his horse and I bow low, down to my knees, and hold back my tears. He puts a hand on my shoulder and pulls me up, "You are as close to a daughter to me as anyone could ever be, Ellie. I have watched you grow. You do not need me as your guide and strength any longer. You have not needed me for a while now." He says, wiping my tears away.

"I'll miss you." I sniff, "You've always been there. Always."

"And I will still be here. Write me letters if you can, though I believe Meludir here will keep you distracted enough to not miss Gondor as much. Just know that Gondor's doors are always open for you."

He turns to Legolas, "Hurt her and I will not be able to guarantee to your father that you shall return
"You think so little of me?" Legolas pretends to look hurt, as Aragorn smiles.

"No. I think so highly of you that I know it is a threat that will never be fulfilled. I know I leave her in good hands. Be happy, both of you. You deserve as much."

"Ellie..." Pippin whispers, and I approach his and Merry's horses and take both of their hands, "I gave Sam some of the recipes I have of dishes of mine that I know you enjoy. I hope you remember me each time you try them. Please, stay safe. No more big adventures for you. Just a hearth and a book and maybe a good mug of hot chocolate."

"You, too, Ellie. You be safe as well. Don't go running into a tree." Pippin says,

"Or drinking from enchanted streams." Merry adds.

"Or getting attacked by a squirrel."

"Or a skunk."

"Are there skunks in Eryn Lasgalen?" I say, suddenly curious.

"There might. So you keep safe, alright?"

I turn to Sam and Frodo now, and bow to them. "You return home as heroes. You have earned a good rest."

"I'll plant roses in my garden to remember you by, Miss Ellie." Sam says, sadly. I take Frodo's hand and say to him, "Say hi to Bilbo for me. And you rest, alright?"

"I will, Ellie. I will." He says. I back away, and swing back on my horse as the procession of Mirkwood, Lòrien and Rivendell break away from Gondor's.

"Well, farewell, my hobbits! You should come safe to your own homes now, and I shall not be kept awake for fear of your peril." Gimli bids them goodbye, "We will send word when we may, and some of us may yet meet at times; but I fear that we shall not all be gathered together ever again."

"We may yet, Gimli. Be safe, young hobbits!" Legolas smiles as we make our way towards Fangorn, towards a new chapter of my life. Away from the Fellowship, away from Aragorn. A chapter of my life I will write with Legolas from here on out. I sneak back one last glance at the friends I leave behind, and though my heart is heavy, their smiles are hopeful and encouraging.

We eventually get to the edge of Fangorn, with Legolas, Gimli and I leading the way. The Mirkwood elves around us stop and stare in awe, looking every bit as excited as Legolas did when he first entered Fangorn.

"Amazing..." Celaireth looks around, mouth open. "Being here makes me feel young, if that is even possible. These trees must be at least three thousand years old."

"More, even. This forest is old and alive." Silarassel says. I turn when I hear Legolas' sisters getting off their horses and approaching the trees to touch their bark.

"Wha--" The other elves follow suit, and before I know it, Legolas has an arm around my waist pulling me down the horse.

"Come, Ellie." He beams, and his face is too pure for me to say no. He manages to help me scurry
up a tree, with a lot of squeaking and sliding off, but eventually, we end up on a branch, with Meludir and Gimli beside me.

The leaves rustle, the branches shake as a wind blows through. Gimli eyes the tree we're sitting on suspiciously. "As uncomfortable as it is for me to stay here, a part of me does not want to leave." Gimli says.

"You do not want to go back to your home?" Meludir asks.

"Oh, I do, laddie, I do. But... Going home means facing whatever's left. I've talked to Lady Dis, see, and she told me it was not good. I imagine it wasn't good anywhere but the loss of both King Brand and King Dain would have devastated those lands. It's bearable to think about it now. But only because I have you two," he motions at me and Legolas, "beside me. If I go home, I would be alone." He pauses briefly, "The hobbits will all be together, and Aragorn will have half of Gondor following him back home, Gandalf will be with the elves, and you two will stay in Eryn Lasgalen. But me?" He shrugs. I's at this point that I take his hand, as I always do, and lean my head on his shoulder, and it doesn't matter if his beard gets in my nose and mouth.

"Travelling alone would be good, I suppose." Gimli admits, "More time for me to reflect. I just haven't travelled alone in a great while."

"Oh, Gimli." I feel so bad for him, that he has to face so much alone. He's been one of the strongest in the face of great difficulty in the Fellowship, and yet has lost so much. First Moria, now his King. And yet I never heard one word of complaint from him. No words of giving up. Just acknowledgments of how he has to face most of that on his own, in a way.

"We will meet again, my friend. I refuse to let this be the last time we meet. Come the end of this year, we will be back at Gondor, helping Aragorn."

"And you will be going with us through Eryn Lasgalen, at least. You would have to, to get to Erebor." Legolas adds.

"Aye, I know. Which is why our roads splitting into different paths is a bit more bearable for me, knowing they shall cross again."

"You can't be free of us, pal. You're stuck with us. We're your friends." I say, trying to lighten the mood. Gimli chuckles, "And what good friends you have been."

We sit on that branch in silence for a while, enjoying the tranquility of the forest, the peace and quiet. For once, we don't worry about being attacked. We just sit. And let the time pass. Eventually, Gimli says, "I don't think we've ever had this. No talking, no running. Just time to breathe. Bizarre, is what it is." He takes a deep breath. "But we have to go now. Shall we?" He turns to Meludir, who makes his way back to the ground, helping Gimli down as well.

As they go down, Legolas turns to me, "Here at last, the Fellowship breaks."

I put my hand on his cheek, "You still have me, melethenin."

He smiles, "I know, and I am thankful for it. With you, reuniting with father will not be so terrifying."

We get down from the tree afterwards, and pause at the edge of Fangorn, and my mind returns to the hobbits and Saruman who had escaped. A part of me feels like the wizard is not quite done with them just yet, and knowing we won't be there to help them makes me nervous. But we continue on, and it takes a day and a half before we actually cross to Rhovanion, where Legolas insisted on
making camp for my and Gimli's benefit. If it was up to the elves, they would have continued on,
tireless as they were. We break camp at first light.

The rest of our journey is anxiety-ridden for me. This is a king we're talking about that I have to
meet. My fiancé's dad is a king. The only Elven-king left in Middle-earth, at that. It's impossible not
to worry about it. Meludir isn't helping it one bit. He's gone completely from the joking ellen I've
gotten used to to someone who is alert and strict. He insists on keeping me in the middle of the group
with Legolas, and orders the rest of the elves to keep an eye out.

"There are strays, still. Wargs who fled into the forest and spiders who managed to survive the initial
burning."

"The forest is not as you remember it, Legolas, remember that." Silarassal warns.

This makes Legolas frown, "I have only been gone for half a year."

"It only took Sauron's forces two days to do his evil work." Celairith says. A part of me is curious to
know what Mirkwood looks like. Is it like Fangorn, dense and hot and muddy and angry? Or would
it be darker, with cobwebs on some branches because of spiders? What made Eryn Galen into
Mirkwood? Into Taur-nu-Fuinen, the Forest of Nightmares? I look at Legolas and Celairith and
Silarassal and wonder how such bright, cheerful people could be rulers of a land called that? And
what kind of King must Thrandaul be, that Legolas is terrified of reuniting with him?

The group stops, and I immediately notice Legolas freezing up beside me. The Anduin flows in front
of us, and it's shallow in these parts. Easily crossable on horseback. I'd been spacing off and hadn't
realized where we are. Legolas' mouth is open, looking in the horizon. I try to follow his line of sight
but all I see is a dense forest canopy that goes on for miles and miles and the road we are currently on
going through it.

"Dol Guldur?" He asks, which makes Silarassal smile, "Gone. Thrown down by Lady Galadriel
herself."

"Lady Galadriel actually fought here?" I ask. I've always seen Lady Galadriel as powerful. But I
thought it was in terms of her influence and the power of her mind. I didn't expect her to actually be
on the front line of battle.

"Of course. She is Noldor, much to father's displeasure. They are a people skilled in war." Silarassal
says.

"Oh. King Thrandaul doesn't like her?"

"He does not like the Noldor. They have brought war and death upon Middle-earth, slayed their kin
and are an arrogant people. And Lady Galadriel was one of those who rebelled against the Valar.
But he does not hate her, just wary of her."

"Like, open rebellion? Oh wow. See, I knew she was scary. Do you know she has mind powers? I
respect the shit out of her but it's invasive as fuck."

"The things that come out of your mouth..." Celairith laughs, shaking her head in amazement.

"Did you enter the tower at all?" Legolas asked.

"Lady Galadriel threw it down before we could do anything to it. Taumathor was there but he never
got to enter. We only went through the rubble after the battle ended."
"What did you find?"

"Elven garb, the uniform of our scouts, Elvish weapons. Bodies. Many bodies. They had left some bodies on spikes, naked. The ones they managed to drag back alive." Celaireth's tone was dark.

"Managed to drag back alive?" I frown.

"Occasionally, when the orcs grow hungry, and our warriors get too close, they drag someone to the tower. It's a fate worse than death." Legolas answers me. "It's how mother..."

"Ssh, Legolas. You do not have to talk about it." Celaireth says, suddenly protective of her younger brother. "We shoot their captives so that they will not have to suffer through the disgusting things the orcs would do to them."

"Shoot them?!" I gasp.

"Dol Guldur is impenetrable for us. None who have entered there ever made it out alive, save Gandalf. And that was because he had Lady Galadriel, Saruman and Lord Elrond by his side. It is a suicide mission to try to rescue anyone, and if by any way, we do manage to get in, it would be too late. The captive would be dead and we would be surrounded by orcs. It's safer that way."

"Believe me when I say, Ellie, that dying is better than being kept in Dol Guldur for even a second. The orcs who captured you kept you unharmed specifically because Saruman told them to. Otherwise, you would have been taken to him violated and missing some body parts." Legolas says.

"Possibly with a chunk of your arm eaten off, as well." Meludir added.

"You're not helping, laddie." Gimli warns, seeing how pale I have gotten. "Let's not mention Ellie's capture, shall we?"

Legolas looks at me with sincere apology, "I'm sorry, my love, I--"

"It's okay, babe. No harm done." I try to smile, but the thoughts go through my head again of all the things I have been through. God, I'm considered lucky if that was the Uruk-Hai showing restraint, then.

The horses stop, and I look up, and do a double take. Most of the forest is... there's no other term for it, destroyed. There are stumps where trees used to be, and there are trees fallen on the ground as well. The worst of it is right at the edges of the forest. Every tree is either burnt down or uprooted. Legolas jumps down his horse before it even stops moving and approaches the nearest tree, with its leaves singed off. He begins speaking in the same dialect that I have heard the Galadhrim and Mirkwood elves speak in. It's not quite Sindarin, though it sounds Elvish, but I don't understand him.

Silarassel and Celaireth pause and exchange concerned looks, and I slide off my own horse and approach Legolas slowly. He hears me, of course. His head turns just fractionally at my approach. And I slip my hand in his. He takes that opportunity to put my hand on the bark, with his hand on top of mine.

"Do you hear me, my friend? I'm here now. I have returned. And she makes me happy." This time, Legolas does speak in Sindarin. The tree does not move. Nothing moves. And for a long time, Legolas and I just stand there and say nothing.

There is the faintest breeze, and Legolas turns his head. Still taking my hand, he nudges me deeper into the forest. I hear Silarassel call for us but he doesn't stop moving. His hand goes around and my waist. "Hold on." He says. And I do. I cling to his neck as he jumps up from branch to branch, until
we both break what canopy there is. From here, I can see the entirety of Greenwood, or as it is called
now... The Wood of the Greenleaves. And indeed, beyond the edges of the forest, closer to the
mountains, the leaves are a lush green. It's almost like looking at an emerald sea from here. Not one
inch of ground can be seen below but the wind is gentle and colorful birds and butterflies flock
around us. In this instant, I understand why Legolas loves this forest. It's serene, and beautiful and
magical. Had it not been for the destruction of a large part of it, I would say it was almost as beautiful
as Lorien.

"The trees do not speak." Legolas says, and there is heartbreak in his voice, "Many of them have
died. Or have been ruined so deeply that they no longer wish to speak to any living being."

"Maybe just at the edges." I say.

"No, you don't understand. They no longer want to speak. I thought... When the leaves rustled, I
thought..." He shakes his head, "But they refuse to speak. Not even to me."

"They always spoke to you?"

"Always. Always. Not all trees wish to speak, not even to us elves, but never have I not been able to
communicate with the soul of my own home."

I take his hand, "Let them rest, Legolas. Let them forget the wounds the orcs inflicted on them."

"Is it because I left?" His voice is a whisper. "Is it because I left my own home to fight in another
land for another king?"

With this, I take his hands. "Meleth, you fought with your friends. You fought to save all of Middle-
earth. No one could ever blame you for that. Let the trees rest." I say, trying to urge him to not doubt
himself. A few seconds later, Celaireth pops up beside us. I'm half-amazed by this, given that
Celaireth is wearing a long dress. But she is an elf of the woods, and she probably knows every
groove of each tree in Eryn Lasgalen by now.

"Legolas. Come. We have to get home." There is pity in her voice. She pauses for a moment, and
just before going down, she says, "They don't hate you. They will speak again someday, I know it.
This forest has never been silent for long."

"When were they last silent?" I ask, out of curiosity. Celaireth's eyes flicker to Legolas for a moment.

"When our mother died." She said, before retreating back to the ground. I turn to Legolas, who is
wincing. "I don't remember the forest being silent. I was too young to remember mother dying..." I
can't help it. I take his hand and kiss his knuckles.

"Come on, darling. Let's go down."

"Eager to meet my father?" He teases.

"Ha! No! No. I'm terrified, actually. But I would want you to see him again. I know you miss him."

"I do. But I do not want to see him be disappointed in me."

"For bringing a human nobody with you?"

"For leaving the Forest in times of great need."

"Only one way to find out what's gonna happen, right?" I say, though my heart pounds in my chest.
It’s bound to happen eventually, and my heart doesn’t stop pounding for the rest of the ride. There is utter silence; from Legolas who is devastated at the silence of the forest, from his sisters who are anxious about seeing their youthful, usually carefree brother, so silent, and from me, small, insignificant me, about to face not only my future father-in-law, but the King of the Woodland Realm. The only elven king in Middle-earth. My betrothed’s father is the king. I have to meet the king.

“Ellie, stop.” Celaireth has to yank my own reins to make my horse stop and when I come to, I realize it’s because I almost led my horse into a river.

“Oh, sorry. Is it that deep?” I ask, looking at the innocently-flowing river.

“It’s the enchanted river. You get in there, and you may never wake up again.” Meludir warns, “Or even remember your own name.”

“Fantastic.” I say, now looking at the river with distrust. Legolas leads the way to a safer route and, I see in the distance, a narrow bridge, much like the one that leads to Rivendell. No parapet, just a walkway that led inside the mountains. There are huge doors at the other end, and two guards that stand at the ready.

“The princesses Silarassel and Celaireth, and the Prince Legolas have come home.” Meludir calls. There is a brief pause, followed by the sound of trumpets, and Celaireth tugs at my hair and cloak to fix me up during the brief pause. I look around, at the neverending view of trees around us, now lush and tall and green. This part of the Forest was left untouched, I know it. And around us, wildlife thrive. There are birds and woodland creatures that peek at us, and the scent of fresh grass is strong, though there is little wind. We halt at one end of the bridge, while beyond, the gates slowly, slowly open.

And I see him almost immediately. No introductions needed. His very aura commanded respect. His posture is straight, and his hair long and pale blonde. A glorious crown of leaves and stems sit on his head, and he wears robes of silver that looked like they were woven from moonlight. He wears a red cape, as well. And he stands, tall and proud. King Thranduil, looking every bit like Legolas. I have to remind myself that my Legolas is sitting on a horse beside me and not waiting with a cool gaze at the other side of this bridge.

Beside him stands another elf that also exudes confidence and importance. His jaw is more delicate than Legolas’ and his hair paler and almost as long as Thranduil’s, but even from here, I can feel the judgment in his gaze. He looks more like Silarassel, whereas Celaireth and Legolas look more like Thranduil. I’m guessing this is Taumathor, the eldest sibling. The one that everyone has been warning me about. I can feel the exact moment his eyebrow raises when his eyes land on me. Thranduil does not seem to notice me. I am too unimportant for him to do so. I don’t know what feels worse, to be honest. Instead, the King’s eyes are on Gimli, who looks quite unfazed by the party of elves greeting us at their gate.

Silarassel is the first to approach, followed by Celaireth. Meludir waits patiently and looks at Legolas, and I see him swallow before he nudges his horse forward. And then Meludir turns to me. “Remember, you are an important friend of Gondor. You are part of the Fellowship of the Ring.” He says, and that gives me just enough confidence to straighten my back and trot forward.

“Legolas.” King Thranduil’s voice is deep and soothing. And yet, I’m somehow still terrified. “I am glad to see you remember you have a home here.”

“Father.” Legolas gets down from his horse and kneels in front of his King, his head bowed. He reaches for Thranduil’s hand and kisses the ring on it as a sign of respect. Thranduil withdraws his hand from his son’s hold.
"'I shall return soon'."

Legolas stops moving completely.

"'I just need to do this one important thing. Do not worry.'" Thranduil says, "'How many moons have passed since then?'" His head tilts ever so slightly at Taumathor, who responds, "'Six, give or take.'"

"'I shall return in a week.'" Thranduil continues. "'How many moons have passed, again?'" This time he addresses Legolas.

"Six, father. Give or take."

"What do you have to say for yourself?"

Legolas, still kneeling, says, in almost one breath. "'I only wanted to defend the kingdom, father.'"

"By not being here to defend it?"

"By fighting Sauron right at his doorstep. I did not know, at the time of my arrival in Imaldris, that that would be my path. But I knew my skills would be better used if I stood beside the Ring-bearer and the King of Gondor. Forgive me." He glances up and meets his father’s gaze.

Thranduil looks down at him coldly, motions with his hand, and Legolas rises. That’s it. That’s the warm greeting that Legolas gets. Finally, Thranduil glances up at me.

"Are you lost, young one?" He asks.

Ah, yes, fantastic. Wonderful first impression you made there, Ellie.

"Uh. No, sir. I’m with them." I say, and I know I sound like a fucking idiot at this moment.

"Get off your horse and kneel." Celaireth mutters beside me. Taumathor coughs.

Okay. I can fix this. I can fix this. I get off my horse, approach the King, and kneel.

"Helen Grayson, of the Fellowship of the Ring. Friend to King Elessar Telcontar and Queen Arwen Undomiel." I introduce myself.

"You were part of the Fellowship?" Taumathor drawls, and gives a short laugh that grates on my nerves.

"I was. I fought in the Mines of Moria and survived a Balrog. I fought in the Battle of Helm’s Deep and came out relatively unharmed, and I fought in the Pelennor Fields, right after we brought an Army of Undead to help us. And then I fought in front of the Black Gates, and lived to tell the tale." I say, my pride welling up, "Not many people can say they have survived what I have."

Thranduil looks at me from head to foot. And I only just notice the line of people standing just behind them, waiting patiently inside the fortress. All beautiful, all looking important.

"A friend of yours?" He asks Silarassel, whose eyes dart to Legolas. Thranduil notices this and turns to his son.

"You could say that." Legolas cannot contain the smile on his face.

"I suppose the dwarf is a friend as well?" Thranduil just sounds tired now.
Gimli has his chin raised in silent defiance.

Taumathor releases another short laugh. I didn’t think a laugh could ever be sarcastic but somehow he made it work. “I do not believe this.” He approaches Legolas, who straightens up.

“You ran away from your mistakes, and came back bearing more.”

Wow. Run a knife through my stomach, why don’t you?

"Hey!" Gimli and I say in unison, indignant for Legolas.

“I have made many mistakes before, as you like to point out, muindor but this is not one of them.” There is a hint of ice beneath Legolas’ words.

“What lovely robes you wear today, father.” Silarassel steps in, giving Thranduil a warm hug. For the first time, a smile lights up Thranduil’s face. And at that moment, I see Legolas in him. They have different eyes, I realize, now that I look at him closer. Thranduil’s eyes are a paler shade of blue, much like Taumathor, Silarassel and Celaireth’s. But there is warmth in them when he smiles.

“You would say that, my daughter, for you had them made for me.”

“And you should wear them often. They make your eyes light up. Now. Food. A bath.” Celaireth also comes to the rescue, giving her father a kiss on the cheek and her brother a one-armed hug.

Thranduil turns to Legolas, who gives him a sheepish smile.

“Are you hungry?” Thranduil asks, and it’s then that I notice the crack in his façade. He’s been keeping up the appearance of a King, but no one could ever resist Legolas, especially not with those eyes. The side of him that cares deeply for his son has come out.

“Starving.” Legolas responds. Thranduil steps forward, “Come, then. My quarters. Bring your friend. We have much to talk about, and you have some explaining to do, it would seem.” His eyes flicker to me for a moment, then turns, his robes swishing behind him. Legolas offers the crook of his arm, and I look at Taumathor almost daringly before placing my hand there. Taumathor squints at me but follows behind his father, and talks in Silvan to the elf right behind him, who bows and scurries away.

I don’t know what just happened… But I guess I survived this round. Time to get to know them up close.

Chapter End Notes

I have risen from the dead.

Wow, so many things have happened in my life these past few months that I'm surprised I'm still standing here. I've had...a challenging month and real life came in the way of me writing this fic. Don't worry, I never forgot about this. Important things came up, though: A busy job, a busy personal life, and a lot of shit came up. But I missed writing Ellie so, so much! And to make up for the long, LONG absence, here's a long chapter for you guys. Now Legolas' family is complete!
A Family Not-So-Dinner

Chapter Summary

Ellie and Gimli get to know Legolas' family, for better or for worse.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

This is awkward. This is awkward. This is awkward.

That one thought runs through my head as we walk inside the fortress beneath the mountain. Thranduil turns to the crowd gathered behind him, "I trust my Council will keep my son's return quiet until tomorrow? I would like a moment of peace with my children tonight." He says.

"Certainly, my king. And Legolas'..." One of them turns to me and Gimli, and I can physically see him trying not to insult us, "companions? Shall we take them to their guest rooms?"

"No." Legolas says, in a surprisingly commanding tone, the same time Taumathor says, "Please do."

There's a tense moment of Taumathor and Legolas glaring at each other broken by a series of excited barks. My heart sinks to the ground.

"What in the world--?" Thranduil's adviser snaps, turning at the sound of the noise only for Scout—bless his little heart—to sink his razor-sharp teeth into his boot. Logically, he punts my poor puppy to get him off and hisses in pain.

This makes me furious. Scout yelps and slides towards me and I pick him up, protectively. "Hey!" "Is that another companion of yours, Prince Legolas?" The adviser sniffs.

"I befriended him and gave him to Ellie to take care of. He was abandoned in one of the lower levels of Minas Tirith and had no one taking care of him." Legolas explains.

"I would think you had outgrown the urge to take in every wounded, broken creature you see, Legolas." Taumathor says, and the way he's looking directly at me makes me pretty sure he's not talking about Scout.

"I draw the line at bringing in a dog in my quarters, Legolas." Thranduil, who doesn't seem fazed at all by the thought of Legolas picking up a stray animal, sighs in boredom. "Take the dog and bathe him. He needs it."

Scout growls when one of the guards approach, "Oh, I wouldn't do that. He despises baths. I think I still have the scar from when he legitimately tried to chew my hand off for putting him in water." I warn them. The two guards eye my puppy warily.

"Go to the pointy-eared boys with the spears, Scout. It's okay." I say, carrying him under his armpits and holding him out to the guard who approached.

"He responds well to Silvan." Legolas tells the guard, who surprisingly enough takes Scout in gently and carries him much like one would carry a baby. I'm reminded that elves will always, always be
lovers and protectors of nature. Some more than others, but I see that they have a soft spot for small creatures.

"Come. Feren, tell the servants to bring another jug of the Dorwinion. I'm sure I will need it." Thranduil says, once again leading the way, with Gimli and I bringing up the rear.

"Well, there's the famed hospitality of the elves for you. What did I expect from the very people who threw my father in the dungeons." Gimli mutters under his breath, "They bring my kin in to construct their fortress but do we get a thank you? Why, no. We get treated like a nuisance."

"I think Taumathor can hear you." I mutter when I notice Legolas' older brother turn his head ever so slightly towards us, his fist clenching. At Gimli's mention of the architecture, however, I do start to look around. I'm amazed at the structure of the fortress, built right into the mountains like Moria, but with Elven influence everywhere. Thranduil's fortress is a unique and beautiful combination of the intricacy of Elven design, with the craftsmanship and architectural genius of the Dwarves. And while the fortress does look intimidating, there is still the calm beauty to it that I have come to associate with elvenwork. There are a lot of stairs, and a lot of bridges, leading to dark rooms that depend on torches for light, but when they can, they carved small windows into the side of the mountain so they can have a view of the forest beyond. It's truly magical.

"Lothlórien. That's what this place reminds me of. Lothlórien, minus the trees, and Moria." I say to Gimli.

"Looks more like Erebor to me. Can't blame you for not seeing it though, you haven't really seen much of Dwarven work." Gimli shrugs.

"Hold." A new set of guards cross their spears over our paths just as Legolas and his family walks into a grand room through a set of double doors.

"They're with us. Let them in." Celaireth sounds annoyed at the hold up. The guards make way for us. I'm starting to understand Gimli's annoyance. I mean, I know I'm a mess right now and that my hair needs washing and that I haven't had a proper bath but it's only because I've been travelling! I clean up pretty damn well, and I'm sure even now I don't look completely like a feral vagrant.

When I walk into King Thranduil's quarters, I notice two things immediately: one, that his quarters is bigger than the entire apartment I lived in in New York; two, that there is the lingering scent of flowers, and looking around the room, I realize that the source of the scent are the small baskets and vases of gorgeous arrangements of white and blue peonies and lavenders all over the room. They're beautiful pops of color in the otherwise cold quarters of the elvenking. There is a large window where you can comfortably throw my whole body through in here that overlooks the enchanted river. We're not actually that high up in the mountains, because I can still see the clusters that might be the source of the flowers in this grand room. Right by the window is a large table that I think is meant for meetings, but servants have already come in and are arranging plates and goblets on it, as well as going around to light candles to bring light into the room.

On another side of the room is just a wall-to-wall line of books, with the most comfortable-looking chaise right by it, and a desk stacked with letters. There are no paintings, but there are handmade sculptures of forest creatures. And a little further in is another set of double doors, where two more guards are stationed, which I'm assuming is the king's bedroom.

Legolas pulls out a chair for me, ever the gentleman. But we don't sit until Thranduil does first. And when he does, the first thing he does is drink from his goblet. "How was your travel?" Thranduil asks no one in particular while we waited for the food to arrive. It's Silarassel who answers him first, "It was fine, father. We got to see Rohan! The fields were open and there were such beautiful,
magnificent horses. And it was close to Fangorn. I enjoyed it there very much."

"We fit right in there, father. Gondor was a bit stuffy, no offense to Estel. Everyone was always bowing. It was like they were walking on egg shells around us."

"And you, Legolas? How were your travels?" Thranduil says it ever so mildly, but he looks so intently at his son, that Legolas almost shrinks back. I think all of the guilt he felt for leaving his home while Sauron's minions threatened it has resurfaced. He used to tell me how worried he was about his home, and there were times when he wasn't sure of his decision for staying with Aragorn.

"Not quite as lovely as Silarassel and Celaireth's, I'm afraid."

"Yes, one can only imagine how pleasant the road to Mordor is." Taumathor mutters beside him.

"Oh, stuff it, Taumathor. You would have done the same thing." Celaireth snaps.

"Abandoned our people in a time of need? I don't think so."

"What did I say about fighting at the dinner table?" Thranduil lectures his children. He gives Legolas a nod to continue talking. I'm so tempted to speak up for him. But I have the same faith in him as he does in me. He doesn't need protection from harsh words. This is his battle to face, and I know he will win Thranduil's heart in the end.

"I believed it was the right thing to do, father. I still believe it even now. I worried about the kingdom, of course. I know you needed me, but I abandoned no one." The last part, he says to Taumathor, "I was helping to destroy the Ring. The One Ring, Sauron's source of power. I thought that by helping Frodo Baggins destroy it, that I would also be protecting the kingdom."

"And they could not have sent Glorfindel instead?"

"Glorfindel is powerful, yes. But our first intention was to keep the mission a secret. His presence would have announced our coming from miles away. The servants of Sauron feared him so, and felt him as well. His skills were best used defending Imladris' borders."

"And you did not think yours were better used defending ours?" Taumathor asked.

"Yes!" It's the first strain I notice on Legolas' patience. "I knew even with me gone that the forest would be in good hands."

"And why is that?"

"Because it had you!"

Silence greets him. Taumathor himself looks torn between scolding his brother and being touched that there was such trust in his abilities. I try to fight back a smile. As expected, Legolas has won their hearts. It's really a talent of his how he can so easily get in the good graces of everyone, the charming elf.

"Celaireth was here to defend father and I knew you were strong and capable. I knew you would not let our kingdom fall. I knew Silarassel would be able to give the people hope. I believed in all of you. And while at first, I went to Imladris to prove I can right my wrong of letting Gollum escape, in the end, I knew my place was with Aragorn. With Gimli. With Ellie."

I turn sharply to him just as Taumathor and Thranduil turn their attention to me. Silarassel and Celaireth have mysteriously become so fascinated with their wine goblets.
"Yes, Helen Grayson. A very interesting name. Where do you come from, again?"

"Gondor, my king. I am... you can say I am one of Aragorn's... distant relatives."

"All of Aragorn's relatives, distant or otherwise, are dead." Thranduil says. "I do not enjoy being lied to in my own home."

Oh boy. Oh God. I'll take fifty orcs now, thanks. That sounds easier than having to talk to Thranduil. I see the distrust in both his and Taumathor's eyes.

"She and Estel are very close, father. She lost her memory and Estel took her in as an apprentice of sorts during his travels." Legolas says, seeing me freeze up. Oh, I feel sick. I really don't like lying. Oh shit, what if Thranduil is like Galadriel and he can read minds and he's just trying to see if I'll be forthright with him.

"I helped Aragorn guide the Ring-bearer and his companions to Rivendell." That was the truth, at least. So I don't sound like a scared idiot when I say it.

"So is she a relative or did she lose her memory?" Thranduil catches fucking everything. My palms are sweating here.

"Both. We found out I was a relative later on, when we talked to Lady Galadriel. She helped clear things up for me."

"And where is your home now that the War is over, Lady Helen?" I have no idea how Thranduil can make my name sound so scary. This is like that one time during a class of mine where I worked overtime for work and had a graded recitation the next day and I didn't study anything and I got called and couldn't answer jack shit.

"With me." Legolas answers. Taumathor chokes on the wine he had just drunk. Both Silarassel and Celaireth are looking at Thranduil, gauging his reaction. But all Thranduil does is pour himself another gobletful of Dorwinion wine and lean back on his chair before the servants come in with food.

"You look familiar, Master Dwarf. Have we met?" Thranduil addresses Gimli this time, who had just perked up when the food came in.

"Oh, no. You only threw my father in your dungeons."

A small smirk appears on Legolas' face, as well as Taumathor's and Thranduil's. Evidently, they are all recollecting an amusing memory. I don't know what's so amusing about throwing Glóin in the dungeons, he was a sweet old dwarf from what I remembered of our brief meeting.

"Ah, your father was part of the Company of Thorin Oakenshield, that's right."

"Taumathor truly enjoyed cleaning up after your father's mess, Gimli." Silarassel giggles.

"And by enjoyed, she means pissed off." Celaireth says in a stage-whisper towards Gimli.

"While Legolas over here was off chasing after Thorin's nephew with Tauriel, I was stuck lecturing the dungeon guard and explaining to father where the Dorwinion wine went. Which would be down the river, a hundred gold pieces worth of it."

"From what father has told me, all that could have been avoided if you just helped Thorin." Gimli says, defensively.
"They invaded our forest."

"They got lost."

"Thorin told ada to eat shit. Not very diplomatic of him, would you say, Silarassel?" Celaireth turns to her sister.

"But to be fair to Master Gimli, he took no part in any of that. He was a child then, and he is welcome here. Right, ada?" Silarassel says.

"Of course. You are an honored guest, Master Dwarf. You have watched my son's back during battles and you travel with him here. You are welcome in my halls... For now." Thranduil says.

"But do not overstay your welcome." Taumathor adds, "We still have much to do, and the forest is silent and healing. We have families who have lost their sons and husbands and brothers. The incoming days will be spent rebuilding."

"Oh, don't worry yourself, Lord Taumathor. I shall be gone by the morrow. My family does miss me, you know." Gimli replies.

I turn to Legolas when Taumathor mentions rebuilding, because I know he has plans to build a colony in Ithilien, and it's a testament to how well we know each other that we're able to communicate with just our eyes and a few head movements. Legolas clears his throat.

"Speaking of rebuilding, Father." He starts.

Thranduil sighs, and waits patiently for whatever Legolas has to say.

"I... thought about building a colony in Ithilien."

"Good luck doing that by yourself." Taumathor rolls his eyes,

"With the help of the elves of Greenwood who would like to join me, obviously." Legolas says.

"Legolas. We barely have you home and you now want to leave us again?" Thranduil says. I sense a bit of hurt in his voice.

"Ithilien is lovely, but it needs the touch of the Eldar, especially now. With our help, the trees would sing, the flowers will bloom again. And... it is near the Sea."

Silence greets his words. Not even Taumathor has anything to say. In fact, he puts his fork down and hangs his head, his mouth slightly open in...surprise? Awe? Thranduil's eyes, though, do not falter from his youngest son.

"Come." He says to Legolas, who stands from his seat and stands in front of his father. Thranduil rises as well, and turns to Legolas, and takes his son's face in his hands, gently.

"You have heard the call of the Sea."

"I hear it even now."

Thranduil turns to Celaireth and Silarassel, "And you? I have feared that sending you to Gondor would risk you hearing the Call, as well. Does it?"

Both of them shake their heads. "Legolas, you should have told us." Celaireth says.
"I did not want to spoil your journey for you. I already made you worry so." Legolas admits. "I'm sorry I disappointed you again."

Thranduil shakes his head, "When will you ever believe me when I say you have never been and never will be a disappointment to me?"

Taumathor turns to me, almost threateningly. As if I'm the one taking Legolas from his family. "Where do you come in all of this?"

I turn helplessly to Legolas, not wanting to overstep. This is his news to bring for his family, our betrothal. But he nods to be, encouragingly, letting me know we are in this together. I extend my hand which has the ring Legolas had given me on it. Taumathor blinks down at it, pristine and catching the light of the moon on my otherwise travel-stained hand, knuckles still scarred from the battles I have been in.

It seems to take a full ten seconds for Taumathor to get what's happening, before he whips around to look at Thranduil, and then at Legolas.

"A mortal?" Taumathor gasps. "You want to marry a mortal woman? Legolas, for crying out loud!"

Oh, there it is. I don't know why I'm surprised that Taumathor is throwing a fit. Everyone has warned of him doing so. And somehow, Legolas just stands there and lets him yell. While Gimli gulps down his wine, happy to not be part of this drama.

"We do not even know who she is! A mortal, are you out of your mind? What will the nobles think of us, of you? I was under the impression I could still talk you out of your insanity, but no, you have promised yourself to her already. A nobody!"

"I'm right here!" I snap, heatedly. Taumathor turns to me with a look of disgust that stops me immediately,

"Don't. You. Dare. Address me."

"Don't speak to her that way!" Celaireth snaps.

"Oh, look, they brought pie!" Silarassel says, trying to calm everyone down.

"Silence." Thranduil says. Everyone shuts up immediately.

"May I be excused?" Taumathor huffs.

"All of you, out." Thranduil does not take his eyes off of Legolas, while the rest of us stand.

"Not you." This, he says to me. I plop my ass right back down my seat and proceed to feel like I'm two feet tall. Gimli takes one of the chicken legs on the table and pats my hand encouragingly. I don't think my telepathic plea to rescue me got through to him.

"Sit." Thranduil tells Legolas, and he does, finding his seat beside me. He takes my hand in his under the table while Thranduil stands by the window and looks outside, quiet for a moment, composing himself.

"I speak to you now as a father and not as a king." He says, though he still faces the window. "I do not approve."

My heart sinks, and Legolas looks down, looking crushed. I hold on to him tighter.
"Taumathor would advise me to force this betrothal to become null, Silarassel would warn me that that goes against the Father Of All's sanctity on marriage. Celaireth will say to let you two be in love. But Legolas is my son. My youngest son. And love will not be enough to stop the heartache that this marriage will give him."

Legolas opens his mouth but Thranduil turns to us and Legolas shuts up immediately, "You will say now that you are happy to spend what little time you have together. But when you blink your eyes and realize she is gone, will it still be enough, my son?"

"Yes." Legolas insists, as if he has never been more sure in his life.

Thranduil pauses, "You think that your love can defy anything. That you can stand strong against whatever may come between you? Very well, face the council. Face the rest of Greenwood. And when they do not approve of your chosen wife, when they threaten to remove our family from the throne because one of their princes chose to marry an outsider, when they threaten her life as well as the lives of your brother and sister, will you continue to love her?"

Okay, now I'm feeling guilty. If Legolas is truly risking that much for me, this is on my shoulders too. And I don't think I care bare risking his family's life for this.

"I love her, ada. I will love her until the end of my days."

Thranduil turns to me, "I would like to speak with you, Lady Ellie. Alone."

Legolas and I exchange worried looks, but I give him a small smile. I can do this. Scary as Thranduil might be, a troll inside a mine filled with skeletons of dead dwarves is still scarier, and I managed to face that just fine. I can talk to the King and survive it.

Oh, who am I kidding, I'm insane. He's going to eat me alive.

But Legolas has already kissed the top of my head, and before I know it, I'm sitting in the Elvenking's chamber, alone with him.

Thranduil walks over to one of the flower baskets in his room, with the lavenders and blue peonies. He takes one of the peonies out and hands one to me.

"That is Nimiriel's favorite flower. It was very hard to find. In fact, it could only be found in her own garden which she tended to. The seeds she got from a Sindarin lord that was coming into Greenwood from Doriath."

I look up, interested though still terrified, because these are names that I haven't heard before. "Nimiriel eventually became queen, after marrying the Sindarin lord who gave her these beautiful blue flowers." He smiled, softly, and I realize he's talking about his own love story. Legolas has said before that Thranduil never mentions his wife, so it surprises me that he's saying all this to me. His smile fades, his expression darkens, and he continues his story.

"Not many people approved of our betrothal as well. I do not grudge you for loving my son, young Ellie, but he does not, could not, possibly know the utter pain and heart-wrenching emptiness that comes with the loss of the one person you love most of all. He was but two years old, a mere babe, when his mother was taken from him. And she loved him so, more than life itself. She died defending him from an orc, when the evil of Dol Guldur was growing and our people had to retreat to these mountains. I never told him this, and neither have any of his siblings."

He turns to me, "You know how Legolas can be. He blames himself for things he has no control over. I would never be able to bear him blaming his mother's death on himself. All he knows is that
his mother died in Dol Guldur. He does not know it was because he was dragged to Dol Guldur as a child, and Nimiriel went after him with naught but a sword. Taumathor and Celaireth went to them, and managed to get Legolas to safety, but not before Nimiriel was slain. Even then, Taumathor and Celaireth themselves were injured, and every other warrior they took with them had perished. But there Legolas was, unspoiled and sleeping, not knowing it was his mother's blood drenching his clothes."

I know he's fighting not to let the tears fall, I can hear it in how his voice has quieted. And my heart reaches out because I could never possibly imagine that much pain. Thranduil has lost his father to war as well. He lost too many people, and I can understand his coldness now. I can't blame him for how guarded he is when he has lost everything and cannot even grieve because he was king and he needed to be strong for the kingdom.

"I tell you this to make you understand that we have protected him so. Taumathor, Silarassel, Celaireth and I, for we had all almost lost him once, and I had lost my wife trying to get him back. I tell you this to make you understand that I know, more than anyone, how the pain that comes from losing the one you love can never truly heal. And he will face this with you. Because you are mortal, and your life is but a fleeting moment in the eyes of an elf. Legolas is a warrior, he is familiar with death, but not like this. Not this intimately. Not the kind of death that will tear his very spirit into two. So I say this to you now, Helen Grayson. If you truly love him, you will love him completely, honestly, unfailingly. I will not dare change his mind, for doing so will only hurt him even more. But love him so that it will make whatever pain he will face worth it."

There are tears in my eyes as well, because I empathize and because Thranduil has just spoken out one of my fears. That I will hurt Legolas because of my mortality, and I can hear now, firsthand, how it would break him.

"Convince me that you deserve my son. He is an elfling still, in the eyes of the elves. He is young, and still has much to face. Though it pains me to know he is setting himself up for an unavoidable tragedy, I will not be the villain that stands in the way of your love, for I know how powerful love can be. Convince me that you are worth that."

I have never been tasked with that much responsibility in my life. But I am determined. Legolas and I are young, yes, and our time together will be short in the eyes of the elves. But we have come so far to give up now. And I've never been one to give up. I will not let anything get in between us, and I will prove to God himself that I deserve him, and he deserves me, and our love is good and true.

"Was it worth it for you?" I ask Thranduil, "The brief time you had with Lady Nimiriel?"

He stops for a second, turns back to his flowers and says, "Yes. Yes, it was worth all of it."

He does not turn back, but I bow anyway, and leave.

Chapter End Notes

What's this? A new chapter? Finally, amirite? I'm so so sorry to have left you guys hanging. My entire file was corrupted and I tried so hard to recover my previously written chapters, to no avail. And after losing so much progress, I was demotivated. On top of that, my life has been hectic. I was working on top of going to school, so I had zero time to sit down and write.
But the good news is, I'm finally graduating! (Tomorrow, in fact!) And I found my muse again! And I think this chapter was much better than the one I had written before my file got corrupted. So here you go, finally. Introducing Taumathor and my version of Thranduil.

We'll be in Mirkwood for a few chapters, as Legolas and Ellie face the music aka the Royal Council of Thranduil. I'm kind of excited, actually. I hope you guys are as well. And thank you so much for your patience and for sticking around despite the ridiculously long arrival time of this chapter.
The Announcement

Chapter Summary

It's time to make the engagement official to the whole kingdom of Eryn Lasgalen. No big deal.

Chapter Notes

I made a Pinterest board for Ellie if anyone is interested! You can check it out [here](#).

I also made a character playlist for Ellie, including songs that remind me of her and Legolas. You can check out the Spotify playlist [here](#).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The worst thing about this whole ordeal in Eryn Lasgalen is not the judgmental gaze of Thranduil's council or the few Sindar in the crowd, nor is it my ravenous appetite because I didn't eat the night before after a long journey, nor Scout's continuous misbehavior, nor Taumathor's snide remarks. It's the fact that Gimli is leaving. That's what gets me the most. The anxiety of not being there with him, that it's now just Legolas and I holding the fort. Getting separated from Aragorn was bad enough, it was always the four of us who were inseparable. And I'm terrified of the fact that Gimli and I will not be able to see each other regularly. In a way, it feels like graduating... But, it's so much more because I have, quite literally, trusted my life to them. And now, we're going our separate ways.

So, of course, when he bows goodbye to the King in the Throne Room, I'm there trying desperately not to cry. Gimli is in a fur-lined coat, and his beard is braided as marvelously as ever. I notice his boots are cleaner, as well, and he carries his pack with him, replenished with food rations that will be more than enough to get him to Erebor. He won't be going alone, thankfully. Silarassel would even be travelling with him, with some relief goods for the people of Dale, whom Eryn Lasgalen has had a good relationship with for a time now. Thranduil thought it best to task his child with the best diplomacy skills to get to know the damage that had befallen their allies, and Gimli was humble enough to accept Thranduil's help with open arms. He still knew what was good for his people, and that made his goodbye smoother.

But not for Legolas and I.

"Man, you'd think after saying goodbye to Aragorn, Gandalf and the hobbits that this would be easier." I sniffle, smoothing out Gimli's already smooth cloak.

"Are you sure you do not want us to accompany you even to just the borders? You might fall into the Enchanted River if we are not there to watch out for you." Legolas teases.

"I appreciate the concern, but I am a grown Dwarf. You don't need to worry about me, lad." Gimli says, "And I refuse to let this be the last time you see me. I better be invited to your wedding, or I will start a rebellion."
"Of course. You can be the flower girl." I snort.

"I have an ax."

"I love you dearly, Gimli."

"In all seriousness... Do not let these stuffy elves get to you, Ellie. You are a brilliant young woman, and it is impossible for anyone to not see that. You deserve to be happy together." Gimli says, as I take his hand. "You may doubt yourself, and it is only natural to do so, but do not doubt Legolas' love for you. You two are so pure together, it's almost sickening. Do not let anyone ruin that."

I smile at him, gratefully. "Never, Gimli. If I can fight a troll, I can fight anyone that tries to come between us."

"That's the spirit! And you," This time he turns to Legolas, "you're a good person, worth more than a thousand warriors and I am proud to call you my friend. I know you do not show your vulnerabilities as easily as Ellie does because you are always on this personal quest to prove your worth to live up to your siblings' achievements, but Legolas. You had a personal hand in making sure that Sauron got destroyed. You have brought so much good to this world. And not every bad thing that happened along the way is your fault, neither did you neglect anyone. He doesn't say much and I have only met him, but your father is proud of you. I am sure of it."

This coming from his best friend, makes Legolas smile warmly. And without a second thought, he pulls Gimli in for a warm hug. "And I can see how strong you have been for us. When our spirits were down, it was you picking us back up, mellon. You are a gift to the world. And it makes me glad to know you will be going home safely. Thank you for everything, and for proving to the world that a Dwarf and an Elf can truly be friends."

Gimli pats the part of Legolas' back that he can reach and pulls away. "Just let me know ahead of time when the wedding is! I might go back to the Glittering Caves, in fact. Farewell, my good friends."

"Farewell, Master Dwarf. May Elbereth guide you home safely." Thranduil's smooth voice echoes through the chambers.

After that, it's me and Legolas left. I want to say the road to our official betrothal was easy, but it wasn't. Taumathor certainly did not make it any easier for us. He's determined to drive me away. The first attempt was convincing Thranduil that it was a good idea to immediately announce our betrothal to Greenwood's council. It's a relief that it doesn't have to be announced to the entire kingdom, but apparently that comes later.

Boy, Feren almost lost his shit when Legolas and I stood side by side and made the announcement in front of the council. Everyone else was mostly in shock but Feren? Oh, he recovered quickly and had a lot to say.

"My prince, there have been plenty of elven women who were willing to be your betrothed!" Feren huffed,

"Were they?" I turn to Legolas and he shushes me as we break into silent fits of giggles over how red Feren's face had gotten.

"This is not funny!" Feren scolds, and it's a testament to how experienced Legolas is with handling his father's counsellors that his face blanked in a snap. I, however, have to pretend to cough with my hand covering my mouth first.
"You must understand, Prince Legolas, that the woman you are choosing to be your betrothed cannot be queen of our elven kingdom, if even just for the sole purpose that her subjects will and have already outlived her for centuries."

"She is not going to be queen. Just as I am not going to be king."

"I most certainly am not." I back up Legolas' statement, and we have matching incredulous looks on our faces.

"This is not a matter of whether you agree with it or not, my lords. We are already betrothed, the decision has been made and you will not stop it." It is not a request from Legolas' tone, "I come to you to discuss the preparations. Her dress, my ceremonial armor, the feast, the guests. When we should announce it to the kingdom."

"And incite a rebellion?" Feren hisses, "If we announce this to the entire kingdom, those against your father's rule will twist this into a weapon to take King Thranduil off the throne."

"Will you let that happen?" Legolas raises an eyebrow, making Feren scoff

"Of course not!"

"Then I am not worried."

"Legolas." Another one of the advisers finally speak, "When the kingdom finds out, there will no longer be any privacy for the two of you, they will watch you like a hawk watches its prey and strike at any sign of weakness. When we do this, you must be sure. I suggest, my prince, that we keep it from the kingdom. Just for a while, until they get used to her."

"Will being with me truly be that horrible for Legolas?" I ask, a bit hurt that they're taking all this precaution because of me.

"To tell you the truth, many will not care that you are mortal. Or at least, many will not react violently to it. It is the very few who will be vocal about being against your betrothal that concerns us, for they may be small in number but they are powerful. But everyone will agree that this is a tragedy waiting to happen for their youngest prince." The adviser turns to Legolas, who looks down, unable to make eye contact with her.

"We know the risk, Ivordis. It was for that very reason that we tried to fight our feelings for each other. But our love will endure, this I know." Legolas says.

After that, they discussed Legolas' promise to Aragorn to help rebuild Gondor, and his desire to start a colony in Ithilien. This was announced the day after that meeting. Many Sindarin elves volunteered to be one of the first elves to be part of the colony, if only because it is closer to the sea. But surprisingly a lot of Silvan were willing to go as well, wanderlust taking over them to make beautiful another forest. And perhaps for some, it is an escape from the trauma that happened in their own beloved forest. Whatever the case, quite a number were willing to go with Legolas back to Gondor, and plans were already being made for the colonists to head out after three moons' time.

So here I am, stuck in, yet again, unfamiliar territory. And it doesn't seem to matter how long I stay in the fortress, because no matter how hard I try to memorize the labyrinth that is these caves, I always get lost. Scout is my compass now, because he has somehow learned how to lead me to my room.

In the following days, I finally meet Silarassel's husband, a dark-skinned Silvan elf with a gorgeous jawline and green eyes. I can immediately tell why Silarassel fell for him when I got to know him. More than the fact that he's handsome and has such a soothing, deep voice, he is also a gentleman.
Like Silarassel, he has the heart of a pacifist, and was one of the army healers during the War. He was actively part of the battles that happened in the forest but barely shed any blood, choosing instead to care for soldiers on the field, giving life-saving first aid. It turns out, he spent most of his time with the Vanguard—the group of elite soldiers that Legolas commands. Through him, I end up getting close to the warriors of the Vanguard, along with Meludir's help. I get to see Legolas as he usually is when he's not hiding his identity and staying in the back, being the rear guard. With the Vanguard, he is free to embrace all parts of himself—the teasing friend and commanding prince all at once.

He sounds like Thranduil, actually. But warmer, more approachable. He always smiles, and the warriors under his command are not afraid of teasing him. My fears of not being accepted are relieved in their company, at least. The moment I walk up to them with Legolas hand-in-hand, they begin clapping and whooping.

"Are we not pretty enough for you here, my prince?" One of the *ellith* under Legolas' command jokes, "I see your tastes lean towards the dark-haired ones. Our hair is a little too copper for your, then? Ears a little too pointy?"

"Mouth a little too big, if you ask me." Meludir says, to which the *elleth* smacks his arm in response, "Might be why no one is attracted to your smart mouth as well, Meludir." She says, and then approaches me. She is, like, super gorgeous. Green eyes, auburn hair that goes all the way down to the back of her knees tied in a complicated braid, and a fringe that goes just below her eyebrows.

"Pale and small is what our prince likes, after all. Now I know why you don't like dancing with me." Another *elleth* joins the conversation. This one has deep, dark skin. And her long hair is styled into long dreadlocks that go to her waist, tied into a high ponytail. Her eyes are a striking grey. "I am Halloth, my lady. This is Tathariel." She motions first to herself, and then to the auburn-haired *elleth* beside her.

"I do not dance at all, Halloth, you know that." Legolas says, defensively.

"Yes you do. You always dance with me." I say to him, "That's because it is you, meleth." He says in response.

"Someone is going to be bitter over the fact that our young prince is completely smitten with such a nice girl." Tathariel snorts.

"The sad thing is, you can only feel sorry for her." Meludir responds.

"Who?" I ask. In hindsight, I should have known some girls would have had a crush on Legolas, and it didn't used to bother me before with the girls in Rohan and Gondor, but here, a twinge of jealousy erupts. Whoever Legolas' friends are talking about, she clearly knew Legolas before I did, and odds are, she's definitely prettier than me.

"There was a girl who has taken a liking to Prince Legolas. She was always very sweet about it but Legolas here sees her more as a sister than anything else. It will break her heart to find out the prince will be marrying someone else."

"I have told Ceviel multiple times already to stop holding out hope but she never listens!" Halloth tuts. "We cannot say we did not warn her."

"Can we not talk about her? The prince's betrothed is right here. Tell us about yourself, Lady Ellie. Where do you hail from? What do you like to do? Did you not want to tear Prince Legolas' hair out even once?" One of the *ellyn* speaks up this time. I think I remember his name to be Pelilas, Halloth's
younger brother. He, too, has dark skin, and brown doe-eyes. His dimples appear even when he is not smiling, and his hair, like his sister's, is dreadlocked and tied up into a ponytail.

Legolas rolls his eyes, "If they ever tried teasing Celaireth like this, they would be doing a hundred pull-ups."

I laugh, "We used to get on each other's nerves, didn't we? He used to accuse me of being a spy. Right until he started having a crush on me."

"Oh, I had a crush? If I did not know any better, you were the first to have a crush on me." Legolas teases.

"Darling, lying in front of your troops does not set a good example." I tease back.

"I do not lie! It's okay, meleth, you can admit you used to... what is your term for it...check me out?" I smack his arm while his warriors laugh. "She is fiesty! And here I thought you were just cute." Halloth says.

"There is a reason why Estel calls her Meril. You think she is delicate until her thorns prick you." Meludir remarks.

"And so quickly does she pick up dagger-wielding. For a human who had no prior experience, she learned how to hold a blade like a natural warrior." Legolas boasts.

"I had a lot to prove to Aragorn. I was very determined." I say.

"Ah, speaking of training, you should see Legolas play Aldathand. In all the years I have known him, he has never lost that game." Meludir says.

"You have not known me very long, then. I always lost to Taumathor." Legolas replies.

"That was before Prince Taumathor deemed Aldathand too childish."

"I think I remember the twins mentioning Aldathand before. Wasn't it that game where you all go up on trees armed with a ball and you try to knock each other off?" I turn to Legolas.

"It is a training exercise, as Prince Legolas here would say." Pelilas snorts. "And we are planning on hosting a game tomorrow. Give the warriors a chance to distract themselves from...well...everything."

"I do not think that is a good idea." Legolas frowns, and the excited look on Pelilas' face melts. The rest of the warriors notice his sudden change in demeanor, as well. "My prince..." Pelilas bows. It is a testament to the fact that while they tease him a lot, they still know Legolas is their superior.

"The trees are healing. Give them peace. It would be best to not disturb them as they recover from the war." Legolas says. Ah. Of course. The trees' silence really has him worried, and it appears that it worries the Vanguard as well.

Tathariel wrings her hand, "As you command, my prince. Forgive us for the impertinence. We thought hosting an Aldathand would get the trees to be more excited, to get them used to friendly touch once more."

"It is too soon. Their wounds are still fresh. Let us give them time." Legolas says, in which the Vanguard all place their right fists on the left side of their chests and bow.
"Yes, Prince Legolas." They all respond. We change topics soon after, until the warriors decide they needed to get back to their duties. Which meant Legolas had to be away with them. He refused to stand by while his warriors worked. He wanted to be there with them, arranging burials or overseeing the replanting of trees. That leaves me free to roam the stronghold, much to the curiosity of the elves there. Rarely do the elves of Eryn Lasgalen have guests, isolated as they are from the rest of elven society, more than Lothlórien, even. At least Lady Galadriel and Lord Elrond were in contact. Lord Thranduil preferred to not interact with either, though that certainly didn't seem to sour the friendship between his children and Lord Elrond's. Perhaps there was a time when they weren't so isolated. I can only guess.

Regardless, I stick out here. I've honestly gotten used to it by now. Never fitting in anywhere here in Middle-earth is something I have to get used to and have come to expect. That doesn't mean enduring the curious stares gets easier. And it took me a while to get used to the culture here. Unlike in Gondor, where Aragorn always dined with the nobles, here, barely anyone sees King Thranduil unless they really need to. There is a mess hall, much like that in Rivendell, but even then, few people ate all together at once. It's like living in an apartment again. Outside of their daily work routines, most of the people stayed in their own rooms, because there were enough amenities in their own rooms to keep them sustained. I figured out mine is special when I ran into Halloth and Pelilas just as I was walking back and they invited me over to eat at their place instead. Apparently, I had a room set up similar to most of the nobles--I had a private bath, a bed and a sitting area, but no kitchen. The basic set up for those who were not of noble blood had a kitchen and dining area, as well as separate bedrooms for families.

It's like a condominium here in the stronghold. I guess to maximize the space for all the elven families that had to stay in the mountains, that set up just seemed more efficient. That way, they could all function independently and maximize their space. The kitchen was still manned to provide for the nobles, though. It appears that on a daily basis, only the nobles use the mess hall, and even then, the royal family had their food brought to their quarters. If any grand celebration was to happen, that was when everyone went down to the mess hall. Near the mess hall is the grand hall, where people gathered for announcements. The grand hall is set deep into the mountains, and that was the biggest area in the stronghold, bigger even than the throne room. Which is saying something, because the throne room is huge.

One thing I do observe is that it all feels... cramped. And Silarassel later tells me that before I came, before the War of the Ring, citizens were forbidden to go beyond the Enchanted River for their own safety. Too many spiders or orcs threatened their borders. It's sad to think that elves, so used I am to seeing them free and in touch with nature, isolated from it all. I can only imagine the pain it must have cost them to be disconnected from the stars and the trees, only to stay in the cold confines of the mountains, safe but never quite happy because their home had been taken over by the dark servants of Sauron.

It is a reminder of how important Legolas' role is as the commander of the Vanguard. It was their duty to secure the borders. Celaireth's duties were mainly kept inside the stronghold. It was Legolas who was risking his life every day before the War of the Ring, which explains the anger from Taumathor over his sudden departure, and explains why Legolas in the most loved by the warriors among his siblings. It's him that fights side by side with the warriors, him that they all interacted with and got to know. Celaireth was always by King Thranduil's side as his guard, Taumathor intimidated them and did not actually interact with them, and Silarassel kept herself as far away from military concerns as possible.

All this paints a clear picture to me of why many are eager to start a colony in Ithilien. While Eryn Lasgalen is rebuilding, it would take decades to completely purge the forest and rebuild homes in the trees. I imagine Eryn Lasgalen used to look like Lothlórien, or at least, the elves of Eryn Lasgalen
had a similar way of living as the elves of Lothlórien did before they were forced to retreat into the mountains. Many of the Silvan elves just want to be free, to jump from tree to tree, to sing by the riverside unhindered. Ithilien would give them that, as well as safety, and they would be under the lordship of the most-loved prince. So the colonization efforts became a priority, and for a while it seemed people started caring about that more than my presence.

Until, of course, the news broke out about why I was really there. By then, I had only been in the stronghold for a month. The Sindarin nobles were pressing for answers on why I had not gone back to the Angle or Gondor or Rhovanion or wherever the hell it was I came from. A single human woman who never left the royal siblings' sides, and was especially close to Prince Legolas? It was a surprise Silarassel held them back for so long. None of the Vanguard ever let it slip that Legolas and I were betrothed. They were fiercely loyal to Legolas, after all. But people still wanted to know why I was really there. So, that leads to an emergency meeting with all of Legolas' family and the King's counsellor.

"Ruthredir is causing a commotion among the nobles! He keeps implying that they are being lied to and they do not like it. My prince, we may have no choice but to make the announcement tomorrow if we are to keep the peace." Feren says.

"Ellie has barely even settled into staying here, and we hardly have had anytime together!" Legolas says. I nod in agreement, "It's true. I only just figured out how to get to my room two days ago." I say, to which Feren shakes his head in annoyance.

I do so love pulling his leg.

"Legolas, I have told you before that you did not need to keep going into the forest with the troops. It is no one's fault but yours that you did not get to have a lot of time with your betrothed." Taumathor drawls in boredom, "For someone who claims to be completely in love, you do not spend as much time together as one would expect a newly engaged couple to be."

"I missed the memo about how our lives had to suddenly revolve around each other just because we got engaged." I say, coldly, gaining a bewildered look from Taumathor. I gather it's not every day someone talked back at him. Well, he was gonna have to get used to it if I'm gonna be his sister-in-law. "I encourage Legolas to go. I know how much it means to him to be with the warriors, to immerse himself in their work. It's important to him, so I tell him to go. We have plenty of time to be together when it's all over."

"Bold of you to assume you have 'plenty' of time at all, when you will be lucky to even have a century." Taumathor mutters,

"It's a good thing I'm not gonna be wasting any time, plenty or otherwise, minding other people's business, then." I say, before turning back to Feren.

"Let's just get it over with. Make the announcement. Stop all the rumors." Jesus Christ, I feel like I'm in a celebrity couple relationship right now. Swear to God, I've never had to make this big of a deal telling other people who I was dating before. Although, to be fair, I've never dated an elven prince until now. My pre-teen self did want to marry either Prince William or Prince Harry, and now look where I am. In the middle of a meeting chamber built into a mountainside, talking about announcing my engagement to an immortal prince of great beauty. Life does have its ways of coming around.

Oh, shit. Feren's been ranting again. No offense to him, but I've now gained the skill of tuning him out whenever he goes on one of his angry monologues. He is interrupted by King Thranduil, though.

"Make the announcement, counsellor." He says. That shuts Feren up, and King Thranduil stands and
turns to me, "Let's see how you can survive in this court, Lady Ellie. Silarassel, help her."

So, suddenly, two days later, I'm in a grand dress, much like the style that I've seen Silarassel and Celaireth wear, draped in silver and red and standing side by side with Legolas in his ceremonial armor, as Silarassel announces to the entirety of Eryn Lasgalen that I was more than just a Gondorian diplomat.

"Lady Helen Grayson, who had a personal hand in defeating the Dark Lord Sauron as she put her life on the line in front of the Black Gate itself, is not here simply as a friend of the King of Gondor, King Elessar Telcontar, but as a friend to me, and to Princess Celaireth. More importantly, she is someone whom Prince Legolas holds dearest. We are here to formally announce to the people of The Wood of the Greenleaves that Prince Legolas and Lady Ellie are betrothed, and would be joined in marriage in Ithilien, where they will rule side by side as Lord and Lady of Taurmallen, the colony that Prince Legolas wants to establish in Gondor. We ask for your forgiveness for keeping this a secret, and ask for understanding. We wanted the Lady Ellie to be comfortable first, and for the people of Eryn Lasgalen to get used to her presence and get to know her without any pre-judgment or bias. We hope, with this information coming to light, that you will all continue to welcome Lady Ellie, and wish her and Prince Legolas the best of luck."

There was applause, and a lot of talking, and a lot of incredulous stares in my direction. But Legolas stands, and so do I, and with him by my side, I feel no fear. He takes my hand and leads me forward, to where everyone has a good view of both of us, hands held. It is the Vanguard that cheers the loudest. Dozens of warriors, all clad in green and brown similar to Legolas' garb when we travelled, cheering for us. Their enthusiasm sends a ripple through the crowd. If they were happy, many others trusted their judgement. As the crowd quiets down, Legolas addresses them.

"It is a relief that Ellie and I no longer have to hide our relationship to you all. We wanted to have some time to ourselves, to have quiet moments that will not be interrupted as we heal from our travels. But now I am happy to know that I will no longer have to hide every touch I share with her. She has made me happy, more happy than I thought could be possible. In her eyes, I see the brightness of the stars and the moon. In her laughter, I hear the music of the world. And in her presence, all color seems to become more vibrant. I know that you will all love her, as I have come to." He says the last part while turning to me, and he stoops down to kiss my hand, which leads to more cheer from the crowd. He then steps back and lets me take the spotlight, so to speak.

This, I was not prepared for. Celaireth warned me that I would probably have to make a speech, but how the hell was I supposed to address hundreds of people, some standing on talan-like or balcony-like structures built into the walls of the mountain, some standing by the winding stair leading to the mess hall, even more just standing in front of me, waiting for me to speak. For many of them, this would be the first time they would even see me or hear my voice. I very strongly feel the urge to throw up. But I push the sick feeling in my stomach down and try to speak.

"I know that you are all looking at me now and thinking 'Who is this child?' or 'Is she even worthy of our prince?'. Believe me when I say, I have asked myself the very same questions. I have often doubted my worth or importance, that I was too young. But I have been through a great deal, despite my young age. You all love Legolas, and I understand for what is not to love? He is brave, dutiful, kind. He is far more than anything that I thought I deserved. But it is not a matter of whether I think I deserve him or not. He has chosen me, a great honor. That he would give his heart to me completely." I take a breath, looking around at the silent crowd. "So I stand before you all, making a promise with you as my witness, that every day of my short life, I will prove, relentlessly, that I am worthy of his heart. Every day, until my last, I will love him, purely. I may be young, and my life short-lived, but Legolas has given me so much joy, and I aim to give to him the same joy he has given me every day. Every day, until my last. I only hope that you will give me this chance, Eryn
Lasgalen. I know I hold something that you treasure most. I will never let it be tainted by sorrow. And I hope I can prove this to the colonists of Taurmallen. Legolas and I have spent some time exploring Ithilien, and you will see why we chose the place we have in mind to be called Taurmallen. For every day, without fail, when the sun sets and rises, its reflection on the waterfalls bathes the leaves of the forest in golden light. You shall find peace there, and fields unhindered and untouched by any dark creatures. There, you will be free, and safe. A haven near the Sea."

There is once again even more thunderous applause. And I take this moment to turn around to see King Thranduil's face. For once, I see from him a smile, genuine and full of pride. I don't know if I've proven to him that I really am worthy of his youngest son, but at least this time, I know I'm in the right direction.

Chapter End Notes

There's not much that happens in this chapter, because I had to establish what kind of place Eryn Lasgalen is (At least, how I imagine it to be). To make up for the delay, because I know how long it takes me to post chapters now, I'll post two today! I hope you guys like this one, nonetheless.
Unrequited

Chapter Summary

An assassination attempt leads Ellie to having a new bodyguard.

Chapter Notes

I made a pinterest board for Ellie if anyone is interested! You can check it out [here](#).
I also made a character playlist for Ellie, including songs that remind me of her and Legolas. You can check out the Spotify playlist [here](#).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Ivordis was not wrong about the lack of privacy. And I now see what Celaireth means by the ruthlessness of court politics here. Ever since the announcement, Halloth and Pelilas have stuck to my side. Apparently, Legolas himself appointed them as my guards. Twice, they have saved my life already. Once, when Halloth knocked my goblet out of my hand during breakfast. Apparently, she had barely spotted that I was given water from the enchanted river, instead of regular drinking water from the mountain spring. To elves, it would not have much of an effect, but apparently, just a sip would cause me to lose my memory, or worse, make me fall into a coma. Another was when I cut into a loaf of bread and a small vial hidden inside it cracked, causing acid to spill out of it. People here are quite determined to kill me, which is a bummer. I thought I left this behind in Mordor.

The current situation pisses both Celaireth and Taumathor off, and as much as it sucks being the target of assassinations, it has brought me closer to Taumathor. As much as he wanted to get rid of me, he knows it's a serious security breach that for two consecutive days, I've had people trying to off me. He knows it would devastate Legolas. It would break him if I had died.

"These dishonorable bastards would never resort to Kin Slaying. Their resentment towards the Noldor means they would never resort to something so terrible, which is why there has never been open rebellion against us. But they are not above killing you," Taumathor says to me as Halloth reports the most recent assassination attempt to him and Celaireth. "In fact, killing you would be more appealing than killing us. If you die, Legolas would never recover from it. And father... father will be powerless against that. All of us will break if Legolas does. He is the one pure thing in this family, he keeps us together. If he falls to sorrow, we all do."

This is the first sign of emotion other than disdain that I see from Taumathor. He looks genuinely concerned, and even Celaireth was not giving him any sarcastic quips.

"Taumathor, you don't believe Ceviel's family had anything to do with this? Before Legolas left for Imladris, they almost believed that she would wed him."

"They what?" Legolas and I both echo.

"Bro, how close were you to this girl?" I turn to Legolas.
"Not close enough to want to marry her!" Legolas seems appalled, "Celaireth, I would like to keep my engagement, thank you."

"I want to meet this Ceviel. See what the fuss is about." I say. Legolas frowns and says, "Truly? Ceviel is harmless. She is a nice girl."

"I'm not gonna fight her or anything. I just want to talk to her. Get to know her." I feel a twinge of annoyance that Legolas wants to protect this girl so much. They were clearly closer than I ever expected him to be if he's this protective of her.

"You can do that later, father said he wanted to speak to you as soon as possible." Silarassel enters the room, and I spot Pelilas and Halloth quickly throwing a concerned glance at me from outside before the doors close once more. "Ivordis and Feren will be there. Just Ellie, though. No one else."

"Oh, fantastic." I mutter. Survive an assassination only to be grilled by the king, just my luck.

"I want to find out who put that acid vial in her bread!" Taumathor snaps, annoyed by the continuous interruption.

"I have the utmost confidence that you will, dear brother. But unless you expect Ellie to know who put it there, I do not think there is anything else for her to do here." Silarassel has a gentle hand on my shoulder, leading me out of the meeting chamber. "It's important, Taumathor, I apologize. I would never have interrupted otherwise."

Taumathor's expression softens, but no one can really resist Silarassel for too long. He nods and motions for me to leave with a flick of his hand out the door.

"Legolas, Celaireth, stay. We need to talk about this more. I would not let there be a third time." I hear Taumathor say just as Silarassel and I leave. Pelilas and Halloth are by my side immediately, with Silarassel's arm linked with mine.

"You are either very lucky or very unlucky. I cannot tell which yet." Pelilas says to me.

"They are very clumsy attempts, though, you have to admit. It is as if anyone who tried to kill you wanted you to know." Halloth frowns.

"Or they simply underestimated the security surrounding Ellie now. I assure you, it will not happen again." Silarassel says.

"Does this happen often?" I ask her,

"Attempts on our lives? No, not at all. Not by fellow elves, at least, and certainly not in this kingdom. Politics here is more on one family talking ill of another to gain the king's favor. Ruining reputations is what the nobles here are good at. You would have noticed how politics in Gondor is mainly the nobles pretending to care about what is happening to the commoners? They do all these things to gain the king's favor in an attempt to get a higher position in court. Here, it's more straight-forward. Whoever keeps their family's name in tact is who is at the top."

"Does that not get tiring? I imagine you always have your hands full with trying to keep the peace." I say to Silarassel, making her shrug.

"I have gotten used to it. Taumathor would have suggested just to let the nobles fight amongst themselves but that is not peace to me. I help settle differences, even for just a little while."

"But then, if no one actually attempts to kill you, why is Celaireth the King's bodyguard?"
"Just to make sure. Celaireth's duty is not just being father's bodyguard, she is in charge of the guards in general, the ones keeping the peace inside the stronghold. She just prefers to stay by father's side. Ever since mother... well... she promised never to leave father alone ever since we retreated to the stronghold." Silarassel says. We stop in front of King Thranduil's chamber, and I'm surprised to find Scout there. He's gotten bigger than when I first picked him up but he's also gone past the hyperactive puppy stage and is now sitting upright beside one of the guards next to King Thranduil's chamber. I think this was the same guard who picked him up to be bathed when I first came here. Glad their relationship is improving.

"Scout, baby." I coo, kneeling down to scratch his head. "Stay here, okay? I'll be right back with a snack."

He wags his tail and lies down on the ground, his head resting on the guard's boot. The guard does nothing to shake him off. The door opens, and I step inside. I realize only when the doors behind me close that Silarassel, Pelilas and Halloth all stayed behind. King Thranduil is standing by the window, facing out to the forest. The skies are clear and beautiful. Sitting on one side of the table is Ivordis, looking as serious and unreadable as ever, and Feren, with that perpetual frown. The dude clearly needs a holiday. There's someone else in the room, as well. One of the guards, from the looks of her armor. Her hair is black, her skin pale, and her eyes brown and almond-shaped. She looks like how I imagine Mulan would look like if she let her hair grow all the way down her back.

I don't have much time to greet everyone in the room, because as soon as I walk in, King Thranduil turns to me, and I bow. When he motions for me to get up, he approaches me, taller than any of his children. "How are you, Lady Ellie?" He asks.

"Uh... I'm okay, thank you, my king."

"Good. Ivordis, I do not like that there has been two attempts on a guest's life, much less a guest of honor." He turns his head slightly to the side.

"We are doing our best to find out who the attacker is, my king."

King Thranduil turns back to me and asks, his eyes locked on mine, "You are quite, quite lucky, Lady Ellie, that you are still alive."

"So I've been told, my king, so I've been told." I respond. At this point, I've started counting my lives as though I'm a cat. I'm down to my last three, I think.

"I would also like you to know that Aragorn and I have kept in touch. He favors you so, I see. Even goes as far as saying you are as dear to him as a daughter. Both him and Arwen refer to you as their first daughter. He assures me your claim that you are related to him are true, both literally and figuratively, although he warns that would be another conversation entirely." He chuckles at this last part. and I feel a surge of warmth and love for Aragorn and Arwen. Despite how busy they are, they still think about me. God, I miss them so much.

"We have been talking about the colony in Ithilien. Aragorn says that as soon as we are able, we can start sending some elves to begin the colonization effort there. I will tell Legolas that by the next moon, he can go back to Gondor to oversee the establishment of Taurmallen." Thranduil continues, "Aragorn also says that Prince Faramir and Lady Éowyn have already established themselves in Ithilien, so they will help as well."

"Éowyn is one of my best friends. You are assured that they will do their best to help, Your Grace." I answer.
"Pelilas and Halloth, I have come to understand, have been assigned to you as your guard. I will replace them. As honorable as they are, their duties lie outside of the fortress." My heart sinks. With his no-nonsens, straight-to-the-point tone, King Thranduil sends me into another flurry of anxiety. Something tells me this is what he really wanted to talk to me about, "From now on, Ceviel will be your guard."

I blink at the elleth who stands and bows.

"Oh." I say. My heart sinks so deep, I think it's now in some bottomless pit at the ninth level of hell.

As expected, she is extremely prettier than me. I'm mad that I'm getting this insecure, but what wasn't there to be insecure about? She's probably tons more talented than I am, and she's taller, probably a better fighter, too. I could go on and on.

"My lady." Fuck, even her voice is hot.

"Where you go, Ceviel goes. I suggest the two of you get to know each other quickly. You will be spending quite some time together. At least until Lady Ellie has to leave for Ithilien." King Thranduil returns to his position in front of the window, and I take that as his signal that he's done talking to me. Ceviel gets the same idea, and she opens the door for me, to a shocked Halloth and Pelilas waiting outside. Silarassel is in front of them, and though from afar, she looks as if she is keeping it together, I see her eyes dart from me to Ceviel.

"I want to see my... Legolas. Can I talk to Legolas, please?" I tell Silarassel, and I cringe at how high my voice had gotten.

"He is still in the meeting." Silarassel's tone is apologetic.

"We can wait for him outside the war chamber, if you wish, my lady." Ceviel says.

"Oh, no! No, that won't be--do you really have to be by my side all the time? Halloth and Pelilas sometimes left me alone when I asked."

"With all due respect to them, I know they are skilled warriors but they are not trained as guards." Ceviel responds.

Halloth nods in agreement. She looks like she's delivering the news to a child that their puppy died, although strangely, it is not directed at me. "It is true. Ceviel has more skill than either of us when it comes to guarding. She knows what she is doing more than either of us do. Loyalty can only go so far. You are in much better hands, Lady Ellie."

"Well, thank you for staying by my side, either way." I say, because there's nothing else I can do. What's done is done. And I'm getting the feeling the sympathy isn't towards me, for once. I have to remember that Ceviel had a crush on Legolas, and the others know this. It must be hard for her to have to accompany the woman her crush is engaged to. And I pray to God, it really is just a little crush.

"Well. We're going now. Bye. See ya. Scout, come here, boy." I whistle, and Scout trots right next to me.

Somehow, the walk back to the war chambers seems infinitely longer. Ceviel walks one step in front of me, which is weird because Halloth and Pelilas used to flank me. Most of our walk is spent in silence, with my eyes planted firmly on her back, where her dual-wield knives are sheathed.

"Thank you for taking the job of protecting me. I'm sorry if it's a bother." I say, trying to make
"I took nothing, the job was assigned to me, my lady." Ceviel says, and the tension rises. She slows
down, and I slow down with her, before she turns to me, "Forgive me. I did not mean to be rude.
And you are not a bother, Lady Ellie. My job is to protect you, and it is an honor to."

Oh, man, Legolas wasn't kidding when he said she was a nice girl.

"Legolas talks highly of you. I have complete faith in your abilities." I smile, and she returns the
smile as we continue walking.

"Though I hear you don't really need me. From my understanding, you survived Moria as well as
Mordor. Not many can say they can come out of what you did unharmed." Ceviel continues.

"I didn't. I had to recover from a poisoned wound after the battle. And I was captured by the Uruk-
Hai before that, so I had to recover from those wounds as well."

"Still," Ceviel says, "there is not much that the elves of Eryn Lasgalen fear but to be captured by the
servants of Sauron. It is a notion more terrifying than death to us, and you survived it. That makes
you strong. Any scars you have are marks of that strength."

She stops, and I realize we've reached the war chamber, just in time for the doors to open. Legolas
comes out, looking confused at first that Ceviel is there, but then he spots me right behind her
immediately, and Ceviel smoothly steps out of the way so Legolas can come towards me.

"Where are Halloth and Pelilas?" He asks me.

"The king thought I needed a new bodyguard." I say, motioning towards Ceviel, who keeps her eyes
straight ahead, looking past us.

"Ceviel is good at her job, meleth. You can trust her." He says.

"I have no doubt. I do trust her." I say. There's a short pause, where I realize Legolas looks
distracted, "What's wrong, Legolas?"

He shakes his head, "Something feels off. No matter how you look at it, the attempts were too
clumsy. I think whoever targetted you did not actually want you dead. They just wanted to send a
message, or scare you off."

"Well, it's not working. Heights, ugly trolls, Gimli's feet. Those scare me. Poison, not so much. It's a
coward's weapon." I say, shrugging.

Legolas shakes his head and takes me into his arms, "Your complete disregard for your own safety
will be the cause of my death someday." He laughs, his breath fanning my hair.

"You're immortal, buddy. You're not gonna die."

"Mmm. Don't remind me." He is still holding on.

"Don't you have to be with the Vanguard? Halloth and Pelilas are gonna be out in the forest again." I
say, feeling quite squished, though I'm not complaining. It's a very soft and warm cage where I am.

"You have lost your mind entirely if you think I will leave your side after that ordeal." He tells me,
pulling my head in closer.

"Ow, Legolas, you're ruining my hair!" I try to push him off, but he holds on tighter, and I hear him
giggle as he gives me an honest to God noogie. I squeak, appalled. This hair took me most of an hour to do!

"My hair!" I whine, actively trying to pull away from him now. He merely laughs and continues like the child he is.

"I'll yank your ears, I swear to God, Legolas! These braids took at least half an hour!"

His giggling continues, but he lets me go. I try very hard to glare at him in anger but when he looks at me with that face of his, I can never get annoyed at him for very long.

"You are the single most annoying elf I have ever met." I shake my head at him, though the smile creeping up my lips only makes him smile wider.

"But you love me anyway." He says, nudging me with his elbow. I give his side a tickle before I loop my arm through his. "Picnic?"

"Training ground. I think Scout wants to play." I say, motioning towards Scout, who's been pacing in front of us.

"Mess hall? Get some food, as well."

"You can say that you're hungry, I can cook for you." I tell him, as we move towards the mess hall, where the entrance to the kitchens is.

"Mm, I do so miss your cooking. And this way, we can see how good you actually are. You will have full access to all the herbs in the kitchens."

"French toast with strawberry jam and cream cheese?"

"I have no idea what that is but it sounds delicious."

I completely forgot about Ceviel's existence until she silently steps in front of us. Oh jeez, she really is good at her job. Guards have this unique talent of blending into the background, unseen and unmoving until something happens and they are needed.

"So, how did you two know each other? Aside from the obvious that you, you know, live in the same kingdom." I say, to break the silence between the three of us.

Legolas smiles, "She was my guard."

"Except the good prince here never let me do my job. He tends to sneak away from me any chance he gets."

"Ceviel, your skills are far better used when you are not following me around like a glorified governess."

"She was your...babysitter?" I ask.

"My goodness, no." Ceviel laughs, "Prince Legolas was already fully grown when I was assigned to him. All of the royal family have bodyguards, or are supposed to. Princess Celaireth is an exception, for she leads the guards herself."

"Celaireth became Captain of the Guard specifically so she would not have to be followed around by them." Legolas mutters to me,
"So she says. Princess Silarassel, on the other hand, is a dream to work for. She does not make our job harder for us, for one." Ceviel says, in a grateful tone.

"What do you do in your spare time, Ceviel?" I ask.

"Me? Nothing much. I just... sometimes I write poetry." If I didn't know any better, I'd say she was blushing. "Not very good poetry, mind you. I am certainly not as good as Lady Ivordis."

"Ivordis wrote poetry? I did not know that."

"She governed me and my siblings when she was not busy being adviser to the king. When it came to matters of war, father turned to her. When it came to matters of the people, father turned to Feren." Legolas says. Huh. The more I know.

"I thought Taumathor was second-in-command to the army?"

"He is, but Ivordis has been in battle since the Second Age. She was there during the sack of Doriath, helping grandfather and father out of the city. When they decided to settle here in Eryn Lasgalen, she stayed with them. She has seen more battles than father or Taumathor combined. It would be foolish to not include her insight when strategizing."

I would never have guessed that Ivordis was that old. She had known and worked for Legolas' grandfather, which meant she has been around for a long time indeed. The fact that she's older than Thranduil is surreal. I don't know why, but being in the presence of the king made me believe he was the oldest and wisest, as most kings in fairytales are. To know that there were elves here older than him is only making me realize how truly timeless elves are. Who could ever expect the soft-spoken Lady Ivordis had faced many great battles before?

"She will be coming with us to Taurmallen, and will depart to the West as soon as she is able." Legolas says in a more serious tone.

"I cannot blame her. That many years of battle takes a toll on anyone's feä. She deserves quiet, uninterrupted peace." Ceviel says, though I sense a hint of sadness there.

We arrive at the kitchens after that, where the cooks are not at all surprised to find Legolas there, even with an excited puppy beside him.

"He has managed to sneak a living deer into these kitchens to feed, Lady Ellie. A puppy is nothing strange anymore." Ceviel says when I mention how nonchalant they are that he was taking some meat and handing it to Scout in plain sight.

With orders from Legolas, the cooks gave me the ingredients I needed, and it is grounding to be back in the kitchen like this, experimenting with what ingredients I had. I even made a salad for Ceviel, who is Silvan and preferred eating vegetables. Legolas helps himself to three servings of french toast, which has quickly become his new favorite.

"You would think after all the lembas I have had that I would want to stay away from bread for a while but alas."

"I could make pancakes if you want. It's similar to french toast, but the texture is different. A bit firmer. It would taste amazing with butter, honey and strawberries.

I spend the majority of that afternoon in the kitchen with Legolas and Ceviel, getting to know the elleth as I go through the motions of cooking. Even the elves seemed impressed with my recipes, so strange they are. At least here I know I have one talent that is deemed good enough by the elves,
which I take pride in. Also it's kind of nice, even therapeutic, to be holding a knife and not cutting through a person or an orc or a warg. I even made hot chocolate, which Ceviel immediately liked.

"I have had hot cocoa before but not often and not like this! It is thick! And creamy! And the hint of cinnamon is just right."

"How did you use to drink it?" I ask, pleasantly surprised that she enjoyed it so much.

"Just with milk. We were told that was how to make it. It was brought by a merchant from Gondor a long time ago, when Númenorean blood ran strong through the veins of their kings. They brought it to Imladris, who brought it to us. We have been growing it ever since, but not a lot. Chocolate is expensive to make here."

"How come I never had chocolate in Imladris knowing it already exists here?" I tell Legolas,

"The elves of Imladris does not like it." Legolas shrugs, "No accounting for taste."

"Their preference is tea there, or fruit juices. They have every kind. Here, we prefer wine." Ceviel says, raising her mug of hot chocolate.

"I had zero idea that there was chocolate in Gondor, too. I'm gonna have a word with Aragorn for not mentioning it."

Legolas laughs, "Well, he was raised by the elves of Imladris. He probably picked up the dislike for chocolate and never mentioned it."

"First coffee, now chocolate. I miss Gondor." I sigh,

"Surely you do not miss the heavy dresses?" Legolas teases,

"Man, fuck those dresses and curse them for all eternity." I say, in disgust.

"You wear the garb of the Galadhrim, you do your hair similar to the Imladhrim, have the fondness for sweets like our people... Are you sure you are not an elf with her ears cut off?" Ceviel laughs,

"I've been told I am more similar to dwarves." I joke, which Scout barks to in agreement.

"You should see how she eats. Just shovels food in her mouth and asks for thirds. And she drinks like a dwarf. Curses like one, too. Ai!" Legolas yelps when I smack his arm.

"You certainly are not getting any thirds of what I cook if you keep talking shit about me." I scold him.

"Goheno nin, melethenin." He says, taking my hand and kissing my knuckles. Ugh! Someday, I will be able to get annoyed at his teasings for more than two seconds.

Ceviel tries to hide it, but I notice her look away, and I get the sinking feeling in my stomach that her little crush on Legolas never truly went away. It would make me feel less guilty if she was easy to hate, but Legolas was right about her, she is nice, and polite, and her love for chocolate is endearing and relatable. Legolas is completely oblivious to the way she looks at him, and my heart feels an uneasy pinch the more I notice it as the days go by and she's glued to my side. And the more I notice, the more I start to suspect that her 'little' crush is not so little.

Since Legolas has decided to stick by my side as well, the three of us hang out often. Legolas may not notice it, but Ceviel's eyes tend to stray on him, perhaps even subconsciously, and when he
laughs, I see a little smile on her face to, and no matter who made a joke, she would most likely be looking at him. At first, I thought I would get awfully jealous and protective, instead I'm just sad for her.

It is easy to fall in love with Legolas, I know that. He sneaks into your heart, makes you fall for his good-natured teasing, or his laughter, or his love for animals. And then you fall even harder for his sense of duty, his sense of humor, the gentleness of his touch. Even his insecurities, his desire to prove himself. His one downfall is how hard he is on himself, and even then, I know it's rooted in how completely and utterly selfless he is. He is hard on himself because he wants to protect everyone, to save everyone, to be what everyone wants him to be. His distrust for strangers is not for himself, but for the people he's protecting. And honestly, knowing all that about him, I can't blame Ceviel for falling for him.

And it makes me feel only luckier that once again, he has chosen to marry me. That doesn't make seeing the heartbreak on Ceviel's face whenever Legolas and I are affectionate in front of her any more bearable, but it does make me feel secure that he has eyes only for me, even when far more attractive and desirable women are around him. His loyalty and love is unwavering.

This, however, only makes me want to prove to King Thranduil that I am right for him even more. One day, I just decide to fuck it and cook a whole breakfast meal for him. Cooking was my only talent, that and sarcastic retorts every now and again, so I may as well start off strong. I realize I don't know what he likes so I touched all the basics. The cooks all watch me like a hawk. After all, I was still planning on serving food to the king. They had to make sure it wasn't poisoning him. I'm kind of hurt but I understand that, ultimately, it is not about me. They were simply doing their jobs. I did went ahead and cooked pancakes, stacked on top of each other and finished with a scoop of butter at the top, mixed berries and honey. Eggs-in-toast, that is a whole fried egg in the middle of toasted bread. Mixed vegetables in olive oil, and sausage and bacon. I even had Meludir bring me a rose from the forest since I'm not allowed to go out.

"Mmm. The king does not really like eggs." He says, looking at the tray in which I was setting up the food. I almost dropped the jug of orange juice when I hear him say it, which makes him laugh.

"I jest! I am a warrior of the Vanguard. How am I supposed to know what he likes to eat for breakfast?"

"I'll shove this jug so far up your ass, you'll be throwing up orange juice, good sir." I threaten.

"How very imaginative of you, my lady. Now, I have lost my appetite." He sighs, "Where is Ceviel?"

"I told her to wait outside and tell the servants to wait for the food I make."

Meludir is quiet for two whole, glorious seconds as he leans against the table, his arms crossed. And then those two seconds are cut short as he asks, "Sooo... How are the two of you getting along?"

"Spectacularly, dude, thanks for asking." I say, knowing exactly where this was going.

"What, no fights? No fits of jealousy?"

"What novels have you been reading, Meludir?"

"Me? None at all. Not in the last ten years, I think."

"Suddenly, I understand you a whole lot more than I did when you first walked through those doors."
"I will pretend that is not an insult. You are changing the subject."

God, this was why he was punished with dungeon duty all those years ago, so Legolas tells me. Perhaps Celaireth wanted to lock him up herself deep underground so the whole fortress can have peace. I'm sure to some his playful inquisitiveness is cute, but he can be a gossip when he wants to be.

"We're fine! Honest. Cross my heart and hope to die."

"Why would you wish death on yourself, Lady Ellie?!" He looks utterly concerned.

"It's an expression! Ceviel is honorable, and nice. You're looking for drama where there is none. Just because she has a crush on Legolas does not mean I have to hate her."

"Wait, she told you?" Whoops. Apparently the was the wrong thing to say because now, Meludir looks delighted. I did stop with my cooking to shrug.

"No, but I can see it on her face. She has this sad look in her eyes whenever she looks at him. I know it's how I would look if Legolas had fallen in love with someone else." I sigh, "I feel bad. I feel like I took something from her. You should see her face, she can look so sad."

"Legolas chose you. You took nothing. Do not feel any guilt for being loved. It is just the unfortunate situation. Besides, she knows Legolas is unreachable to her now. She will move on from it soon enough."

"I'm kind of scared, actually. I still remember Legolas mentioning Tauriel and how she sailed off to Valinor because of a broken heart. I don't want that to be Ceviel's fate."

Meludir shook his head, "That will not happen to her, believe me. It takes more than unrequited love to break someone's heart that badly. She will hurt, but the pain will heal." A beat, "You do love Legolas, do you not?"

"More than anything."

"And nothing else can change that?"

"I will love him, always, and that will never fade."

"Good. Then you have nothing to fear concerning Ceviel."

He motions for one of the servants to take the tray I've just finished arranging away, and Ceviel peeks her head through the doorway to check up on me. I give her a thumbs up to signal that the incoming tray was mine, and she looks at me, stunned at the strange gesture I made, before stepping inside the room.

"You should know... Ceviel here has found the person responsible for giving you the water from the enchanted river." Meludir says.

I whip around to my guard, "You did?" I say,

"It was an honest mistake from a servant, not an attempt at your life, my lady. He is very young, no more than fifty, and he has not met any mortal before now, nor stepped outside the stronghold. He does not know that the enchanted river's waters is dangerous to anyone that was not of elvish blood."

"And the acid vial?" I prod. She frowns, "That, we are still investigating. But do not concern
"Thank you for finding the first guy, then. Even if it was just an accident."

Ceviel blinked at me, and I get the feeling she does not get thanked a lot for doing her job, "It was my pleasure, Lady Ellie." She bows.

After that, it was a matter of waiting for King Thranduil's reaction, but it never came. So I tried to bring him breakfast again the next day, and the next, and the next. I begun to suspect that the servants were switching out his breakfasts to what they cooked when he approached me in the library one day.

I had asked Ceviel to take me there, while Legolas and his siblings spent the day together. Apparently, it was important, because Taumathor himself insisted it. So, it was just Ceviel and myself, in that room where every wall was lined with books and scrolls. I was trying to find any drawings of how Eryn Lasgalen looked before the people retreated into the mountains, how their own talans looked like, where the king's halls were found, or even stories about Doriath and Gondolin, things the elves mentioned in passing but never fully went into detail about. Things I couldn't find in Gondor's libraries.

I turn around for a bit and at the corner of my eye, I see Ceviel looking at a chart with columns along it. I turn away from what I'm doing to look over her shoulder, and realized she is looking at a calendar of some sort. For all our lessons, neither Arwen nor Legolas taught me how to read a calendar, much less an elvish one.

"Is it going to be your birthday soon?" I ask, as she frowns at the calendar.

"No, not at all." When she turns to me, I'm alarmed that there are tears in her eyes. "It is just... how do you mortals count the days that pass by, the weeks?"

I fidget uncomfortably. I don't exactly know how it's done here in Middle-earth so I can't make an informed answer. Thankfully, she continues for me, "Three hundred and sixty five days is one year to you. And one day to you is just one cycle of sunset. Three hundred and sixty days is one loa to you." I don't know where she's going with this but I can't imagine it's anywhere good. "One 'year' to us is a hundred and forty four years by the calendar of men. Do you understand this, my lady?"

She wipes the tears from her eyes, but I do understand. One year to the elves is not even one lifetime for me. To them, I would be born, live and die all in the same year. But somehow, I don't think her tears are for me.

"You think it is too short a time for Legolas?" I say. She freezes, and bows, on one knee, even. "Please do not think me insubordinate. I do not mean any offense." She says. She holds that position, and I can understand how confused and heartbroken she must be at that moment. I kneel in front of her as well, and gently hold both of her shoulders.

"You can say what you want to say freely, Ceviel. It will stay between the two of us." I say to her. She shakes, and continues to look down, her black hair falling to cover her face. The closer I look, I realize she has freckles lightly scattering her nose and cheeks, tears glistening off of them.

"The elves do not count the days as mortals do. Time does not matter to us that much, it is true. To Legolas, it will not matter that he will be married for less than a year. But I cannot help... seeing that calendar, I cannot help but see it from a different perspective. it hurts to think that he will have such a short time to love and be loved in return."
She looks up at me, and her eyes are still brimming with tears, "I wish I could hate you. I wish I could say I deserve him more than you, but that would be dishonorable of me to say. And it would be a lie. I see how you look at him, and how he looks at you. Love like yours comes once in a lifetime, and I say that as an elf. Please, I beg of you, Lady Ellie, give him all the love he deserves. The kind I, nor anyone else, can give but you." She says, and I pull her into my arms and let her weep until she is calm, and it's only when she pulls away do I realize that I'm crying, as well. She looks past me and gasps, then stands and salutes in the way the elves here do: with her closed fist against her chest. I turn to see what had caused this reaction from her only to realize King Thranduil was standing right behind us. How long he's been standing there, no one knows.

But suffice it to say, he's been standing there long enough to watch us cry like idiots over his son.

"My king."

"You may leave now, Ceviel."

Ceviel does so only too quickly. She walks out of the room, wiping away the tear tracks on her face. I sniff in a most un-lady-like way and curtsy.

"My king." I say, though I know how ugly I probably look right now.

"There was a time when I thought it would be Ceviel that Legolas would marry." He says, "He was too preoccupied with his duties to notice how the girl looks at her. But I knew how she felt. I thought seeing her with you would convince me, one way or another."

I didn't bother to ask him what he meant. At this point, I know not to question the king. He will say what he wants when he wants. "I should have known she was too honorable, too kind-hearted, to go after him."

This fuels anger in me. Before I can stop myself, I say, "Legolas isn't a toy for you to throw at us to fight over. He is a person with his own thoughts and emotions."

This merely causes Thranduil to raise an eyebrow at me, and that only makes me angrier. "I don't know what else I can do to prove to you I deserve him. I've fought through hell and back with him, for him. I survived the war with the thought that we would spend our days after it together. I am done trying to gain your favor. What matters is him, and that he's happy. And he's happy with me. I wish you would stop for a second to see that."

There's a very heavy pause, punctured only by my breathing and sniffing. When the anger dissipates, my heart begins to pound rapidly, and the weight of what I just did settles on me.

I just snarked at the King.

I remember doing something similar to Legolas back in Rivendell, when Salabeth had to tell me off. Now, there is just the king. And he stares at me, his expression unreadable. I've just about resigned myself to the fact that I'll be spending the rest of my life in the dungeons when a smile slowly tugs at his lips. And then he laughs, and his laughter is deep and melodious.

"That brought back memories." He chuckles.

I am, naturally, stunned. Whatever I thought was gonna happen, it wasn't this. I've heard about Thranduil's temper and how quick he is to punish those who disrespect him, yet here he is, laughing like I just made the world's funniest joke.

"I will say this about Legolas, he is correct when he compares you to a rose. How prickly you get."
He says, "I had my doubts about you but not anymore, surely. In any case," He says, waving his hand dismissively, "I knew you were here and thought to ask you in person, and in private. The colony of Ithilien shall travel there by next week. But I wanted to know from you if you wanted to hold the wedding here or there?"

I feel as if the wind was just knocked right out of me. I am floored by this. Wherever that conversation was going, I did not expect it to go there. "Uhhh..." Is my very smart answer.

"I would have expected you to say it would be held in Ithilien. Legolas tells me it is beautiful there. And your description of Taurmallen certainly appealed to many of the elves here. Quite a few have come forward expressing their desire to live there, on top of our initial count. They trust you and Legolas to govern over them well."

"My king..."

"It would be symbolic, as well. To join yourselves in marriage in the same place that you will establish together, that will grow under your care. A place built by the two of you."

I don't know if this means King Thranduil is finally saying he really does approves of me or if he just wants to get rid of me. He never really specified if it was a good thing that his doubts about me have been cleared and I'm too scared to clarify. He senses my confusion, so he continues.

"Legolas loves you, and I know you love him. Your life was threatened twice and I have not heard one shred of complaint from you. No fear, even. I only see trust from you. And not once did your love for Legolas falter, nor your understanding for what he holds dear. He is happy with you, I see it now. Happier than I have ever seen him. For that, I am grateful." Thranduil sighs. "I have come to accept that he has grown. He has seen the world, and heard the call of the sea. His days on Middle-earth are numbered. Who am I to hold his happiness back? He has chosen to marry you, and I support both of you. You have my blessing."

I am speechless. My time here has just been a rollercoaster of emotions but this, this moment right here, makes it all worth it. All my insecurities and hesitation vanish on the spot with the knowledge that the king, more than that--Legolas' father, approves of me, approves of our marriage and supports us.

"Take care of him, Ellie. And do me one favor, plant his mother's favorite flowers in Taurmallen. At least that way, she would also be part of the family that you will care for there." He gives me a velvet bag, with a silk rope tied around it to secure it. It sounds like there are beads inside but I know they are really seeds. "And plant roses, as well, white ones especially. They would look good with the peonies." He turns to go, but then he pauses and turns back to me, with a small smile on his face, "Those toasts you made. Leave the recipe to the cooks. I rather enjoyed them."

He leaves, and I'm standing there, my jaw dropped, holding a bag of seeds, feeling like my future marriage just got a whole lot more real and official than ever.

Chapter End Notes

I have, like, a whole outline planned out for what will happen when they return to Gondor right before they settle in Ithilien! We have one more arc to go, and the end draws near for this fanfic (which has taken far too long to make let's be honest). I don't know how many more chapters it will take, but I do know what will happen at this
point, and loose ends will (hopefully) be fixed, questions shall be answered and so on and so forth. Don't worry, this is not the last we'll see of Thranduil or his children.

I don't remember if I mentioned this before, but I'm also planning on releasing a new work called Scenes Unseen, a collection of canon one-shots involving Ellie and Liv. It's not gonna be a new series, but if you guys have any specific requests you want me to write, I'll post them there and dedicate them to whoever requested it! I'll also post there any short scenes that might have been skipped in this series, or events that happened after this series. Anything under the sun that involves my OCs and beloved canon characters, I'll write. They can be fluff or angst, whichever you like. They can even be AUss.

Let me know what you guys think about it. Should I continue with that mini project of a collection of one-shots, or nah?

Also I hope this two-chapters-in-one-day update makes up for my delay in updates. Thank you all so much for your patience and understanding!
Chapter Summary

Ellie, Legolas and the Vanguard travel to Minas Tirith to reunite with old friends. But things drastically change during the feast, and Aragorn faces the first great challenge of his rule as king.

Chapter Notes

I made a pinterest board for Ellie if anyone is interested! You can check it out here

I also made a character playlist for Ellie, including songs that remind me of her and Legolas. You can check out the Spotify playlist here

I'm exhausted, and we haven't even actually travelled yet. Silarassel has just dragged me to the royal seamstress to get fitted for my wedding gown. It's not as simple as it seems. There's a lot of passing fabrics around and trying on pre-made gowns to see which style fit me, and then there was Celaireth and Ceviel talking about the security that would be coming with us. Some of the Vanguards will be coming; namely, Meludir, Halloth and Pelilas. Tathariel was to stay behind to train the new warriors of the Vanguard.

It is a testament to their loyalty to Legolas that they were willing to follow him to Ithilien, to risk hearing the call of the sea, so they can be with him one last time. Taumathor, of course, denied their request to go at first, but Silarassel convinced him it would be a well-earned vacation. Many of the Vanguard had been working ceaselessly, and many were tired.

There was, of course, an argument. Taumathor and Celaireth are like cat and dog, unable to get along with each other. On the blue corner, we have Taumathor--boring and with that stick up his ass farther in than even Elladan's. On the red corner, we have Celaireth--feisty and also pukes her opinions out before thinking them through. Both are used to getting things done their way. And...fight!

"Unless you are willing to have your warriors take the responsibility of the Vanguard, I will not allow it, Celaireth." Taumathor says, in a bored drawl.

"My warriors? What about yours? What, are the King's Army just going to sit pretty while the Vanguard overwork themselves?" Is Celaireth's snappy retort.

"If you recall, the Vanguard's duty is to the forest."

"And the Guards are to the stronghold. Yours is to defend during times of War, but that doesn't mean you will do nothing the moment it ends. Clean up your own damn mess."

"My bet is on Celaireth." I whisper to Legolas as we take a break from the flurry of activities to
watch Taumathor and Celaireth argue.

"Taumathor is like the mellorn trees of Lothlórien. He does not bend. He is incapable of it, in fact." Legolas says, though with far more worry in his voice.

"My mess? It is not I who is petitioning to give the Vanguard a 'break'. They have a responsibility to protect the forest, they knew that going in." Taumathor continues, still in that bored tone of his, as if he is used to Celaireth yelling at him.

"What does that have to do with anything?" Celaireth fumes.

"It means if I want things to go my way, I would be willing to compromise."

"Liar! You never compromise!" Celaireth whips around to her other siblings. "Silarassel!" She whines.

Silarassel, ever the referee, sighs and stands. Even Taumathor turns to her, waiting for her to speak.

"Taumathor, it is cruel to not give the Vanguard time to rest and mourn their losses. They have had any time to themselves at all. Their duty is to the forest, it is true, but they deserve to rest. We cannot keep overworking them. Even when there is no war, they are our hardest working warriors. Give them this one request." Silarassel says, patiently. Taumathor opens his mouth to argue but I see Silarassel's eyes narrow just a fraction and he immediately shuts up. Oh good, he at least has a good sense of self-preservation. "Let the King's Army take over their duties. It will just be, what, a month or two? The Vanguard have been working ceaselessly for centuries. Do not be cruel if only to follow the law."

Taumathor freezes. I think he may have held his breath for a good ten seconds. When he finally sighs in defeat, Celaireth lets out the most obnoxious "Ha!" which makes me laugh as Legolas hands me a gold coin.

The rest of the week is Thranduil showering Legolas with affection in his own way. Always inviting him to join him for dinner, joining him in the training grounds, I even caught him fletching arrows one time when he calls for me in his chambers one time. He looks down at his work in annoyance.

"I have not touched an arrow in... I do not remember how long. I was still in Doriath when last I did." He says as a greeting, only looking up at me for a brief glance before he goes back to the arrows.

"Perhaps I can help, sir? Legolas actually taught me how to fletch my own arrows during our travels."

He sighs and throws his work down, "Oh, it's no use. I will just give him new knives. I am good at choosing the right blade for him, at least. Come, I asked you to come here so I can give you something." He hands me a box with a latch on it, wider than it is tall. I accept it in awe. "Thank you, Your Majesty." I say, opening the lid to find an intricately designed circlet, golden and with twisting designs of red roses with rubies sparkling in the middle and green leaves made of emeralds.

"I thought it would be fitting for you. I know you are called Merril by Aragorn. Legolas was named after the leaves of this forest, ever green. This is a small symbol of your union. I hope to see it on you the day you are wed."

I beam up at him, "This is beautiful, sir."

He offers me the tiniest of smiles. I take it as a victory.
"No doubt Legolas' siblings will be staying here for arrangements of the new colony. When they are prepared, they will head straight to Taurmallen, and Legolas should be there to greet them so the forest may be rebuilt under his watch." Thranduil tilts his head to the side at me, "I suppose this is farewell for now, Ellie. Do keep yourself out of trouble. And keep Legolas out of trouble, as well. In times of peace, he really tests his family's immortality."

I know how hard this must be, for all of them. I see it in Legolas most of all, the excitement and guilt continuously warring in him. I know he's looking forward to the next chapter of his life, one he will share with me. But already, I feel him missing the Forest of Greenleaves, his home for two thousand years. I see him taking it all in, as if searing the memory of every nook and cranny of the stronghold in his mind. On the night before we leave, Legolas leads me out to his mother's garden, his fingers gently touching the peonies, and then his gaze turns to the window of Thranduil's chambers, the curtains currently drawn.

"The first time I came here, I did not know what this place meant." Legolas says, softly. "It was a garden, there are many beautiful gardens in Eryn Lasgalen, but it was not until I saw Taumathor personally tending the flowers here did I realize." He sighs, settling down on the grass beside the blue peonies. "This is the one thing left of my mother that is alive, the one memory I can hold that is hers. To leave it all behind..."

I take his hand, "You never leave home behind, Legolas. Don't worry. Your mother's memory will live on in Taurmallen, I promise you." I decide then and there to keep the stash of seeds Thranduil had given me as a surprise. It was always Legolas coming up with romantic surprises for me, maybe planting flowers from his mother's garden in our home can be my grand gesture for him.

"And Eryn Lasgalen will always be here, safe now. We can visit as many times as you want." I say, Legolas turns to me. "Father loves you, you know. He and I spoke earlier today. He said he could not imagine anyone more deserving of me than you."

That warms my heart, and a grin spreads on my face, "Really? And here I thought I was doing subpar."

"It's impossible for anyone to hate you, Ellie. You are the kindest, most selfless person I know. I will never tire of telling you how lucky I am to have you with me."

I look up at him, cupping his cheeks to give him a soft kiss, and he leans into it, deepening the kiss as he places his hand on my waist, pulling me closer.

"I love you." I tell him with a gentle smile when he pulls away.

"And I love you." He replies, placing his forehead against mine. "Now come. You should rest. It will be a long journey ahead."

The next day, we leave with Meludir, Pelilas, Halloth and a dozen others from the Vanguard, and I'm back in my travel gear that Arwen had given me. Celaireth groans about having to deal with Taumathor's tantrums, and how she'd miss having me around, and Silarassel says goodbye with the promise that when we meet again, she'd have my wedding gown with her. The days we travel are calm, and it's amazing to be able to travel as slowly or as quickly as we wanted to, with no imminent threats like Saruman's spies or a band of orcs to worry about. And traveling with elves makes it even more pleasant. The food when we camp is actually flavorful, and I don't have to sacrifice my hygiene because they, too, care about bathing. Finally, we arrive back in Gondor to find the great gate of Minas Tirith already beginning its repairs. What's more, there are dwarves there. A pleasant surprise.
"Finally decided to show up, eh?" Are the first words that greet us at the gate. A voice I can only recognize as...

"Gimli! *Mellon,* I have missed you so!" Legolas says, cheerfully, leaping off his horse to pull Gimli in a tight hug. Gimli chuckles appreciatively and pats Legolas' back. "Aragorn is waiting for you in the Citadel. Gondor has been busy since we left, we only just arrived here a week ago to fulfill my promise to Aragorn that we would help rebuild the Gate. And the roads. And some of the buildings." Gimli informs us.

He takes in the company with us and shakes his head, "You brought your merry band of pretty elves with you, Ellie, I see." He says, and I laugh and lean down to kiss his cheek. "We brought the Vanguard, Legolas' warriors."

"I know you." Pelilas says to Gimli, thoughtfully.

Gimli looks bewildered, "I have never met you in my life! But I am pleased to meet you. Gimli, son of Glóin, at your service." Gimli bows, and Pelilas squints at him.

"Halloth, did we not throw this Dwarf as well as a dozen others in the dungeons a few decades ago?" I widen my eyes at Pelilas in warning, motioning with my hand going across my throat to make him shut up. He only looks at me with confusion. Meanwhile, Gimli is very still.

"Charming friends you brought, Legolas." He snaps, turning to my fiancé, who winces at Pelilas.

"Gimli was a guest in Eryn Lasgallen. You did not meet for he left the very next day and you were still in the forests." Legolas addresses his warriors.

"Forgive my brother, Master Dwarf, he would not know tact if it danced naked on a treetop above his head." Halloth says, bowing to Gimli.

"At least she has manners." Gimli mutters, turning back to the Gate. Scout bounds on in, barking excitedly.

"How quickly he has grown!" Gimli gasps, watching my dog run at a flock of pigeons, who take off in flight.

"And he's still growing. I'm beginning to think German Shepards in this time are much larger than I was used to." I say, going back to my horse.

"Well, go on inside. Aragorn is waiting for you in the Hall of Kings. There will be a feast later so you should get settled and wear a pretty dress. I shall stay here for now." Gimli says.

"Are you not going to accompany us?" Legolas asks.

"I still have some work to do here, lad. This Gate is not going to fix itself. Enireddir is actually waiting for you inside. He is supposed to accompany you. Lord Enireddir! Your guests are here!" Gimli bellows. A few seconds later, Enireddir comes out to greet us. astride his own horse, with a warm smile on his face.

"Lady Ellie! I am glad to see you happy and healthy! Come, I was given the honor of accompanying you back to the Citadel. You will find that Minas Tirith is quite busy, what with repairs going on. You are also not our only guest. The Haradrim ambassador is here to discuss further business."

"Already? How quickly mortals forget their feuds." Halloth says as we all ride into the city.
"It has been two months, and we forget nothing, but King Elessar thinks it is vital that we make peace with our neighbors, and Queen Arwen has been most gracious to them. The people adore her. While the King takes care of politics, the Queen's efforts are focused on caring for the people. It was her idea to employ those who have lost their livelihoods and homes to the war on the reconstruction of the city, with the nobles paying the wages. She says it is vital that wealth is not hoarded by the nobles and should rather be redistributed for the benefit of all." Eniredír explains, and as he does so, I do notice that the streets are even busier than usual. Even the road looks better than it used to. Still, when we travel through, people gasp and stare, much to the surprise of the Vanguard.

"They are not used to seeing Elves here. Have patience," Legolas tells them.

"Meludir is enjoying the attention a little too much, my prince." Pelilas smirks, punching Meludir's shoulder after the latter winked at one of the young women who waved at him.

"Ai! Why, you--" Meludir aims to get back at Pelilas, but Pelilas simply dodges his blow and flicks his reins to get his horse to move forward. Scout stops every now and then to get petted, but remains close to my own horse.

I tune out Meludir and Pelilas' banter when I notice one building in particular, completely remade, and gasp in recognition. "The orphanage!" I say, turning to Eniredír excitedly. He returns my grin with one of his own, "The king insisted it be one of the first to get rebuilt. We have you to thank for that, I assume?"

It warms my heart that despite being busy with his duties now, Aragorn still somehow takes into account my advice, and that he let the kids whose parents have died in the war have a safe home. He's taking care of the ones who need it the most, though I don't expect anything less. And looking around, I see the people's high spirit. I can finally see them recovering from the war with renewed vigor. Aragorn's leadership has definitely inspired them, and I am already so proud of him for what he has accomplished in such a short amount of time. He rose to be king and is quickly proving how much he earned the title.

"It was actually the king's insistent command that reconstruction start here, in the lowest district. Lord Gimli has graced us with the aid of his people from Erebor, and the Haradrim ambassador is currently offering his country's aid with the reconstruction of other cities in exchange for further land in this side of Middle-earth for them to use for farming." Eniredír explains, "But I am sure Arnuzír can tell you more about that."

It's strange to hear a friend talk so... politely about someone I almost killed. Almost half a year ago, I had my sword at Arnuzír's throat. Now, he's the representative of a country which could someday become our ally. Eniredír seems to read my mind, and his voice drops to a whisper, "To tell you the truth, for a people who have tried to destroy Gondor for generations, the Haradrim are very quick to offer their services. I know the king believes their intentions are true, but I cannot help but advise caution. The peace talks are going only too smoothly."

"Eniredír, I would not have thought you a pessimist." Legolas says, beside me, making Eniredír jump. Evidently, he isn't used to elven hearing.

"Not a pessimist, my lord, merely cautious. Realistic."

"Perhaps the Haradrim have grown tired of fighting and destruction. Perhaps they simply want to rebuild now." Legolas says,

"Ah. You are an idealist. I wish it were so but no Haradrim ever lets a grudge go. I do hope you are correct. Peace," Eniredír smiles softly as he pauses, "it has been a long time since Gondor knew true
peace. Now, if only we could get the nobles to stop fighting."

Legolas chuckles, "There, you are asking for a miracle. Nobles never agree on anything. When they resolve an issue, they find something else to fight about."

Eniredír snorts, "Truly." He turns to me once more, "I think it would please you to know Avorniel is rising in position in the court. She waits for you in the Hall of Kings as well. Lady Éowyn is also here with Lord Faramir."

That immediately perks me up. I turn slyly to Legolas, and in an attempt to get to the Citadel faster, I say, "Race you to the top!" and flick my reins, gaining a headstart. I hear several echoes of surprise behind me but am quickly overtaken by the Vanguard and Eniredír, who are all evidently so much more skilled than I am at horse-riding. In the end, even after my headstart, I finish last. I blame the horse.

"New rule: The loser wins." I say, sliding off my horse and bracing my hands on my knees as I gasp for breath.

"That makes no sense at all." Pelilas remarks.

"My game, my rules, man." I note that I am literally the only one out of breath here. When I finally do recover, the guards in front of the entrance of the Hall of Kings pull out horns and let out a blast, signaling our arrival. The Vanguard quickly assemble themselves behind Legolas and me, and I watch them snap from laidback friends to attentive soldiers. I slip my hand in the crook of Legolas' arm and he gives me a quick kiss on the forehead before the doors open and we enter.

There aren't a lot of people there, actually. Mostly just Aragorn's advisers, but I light up immediately when I find Avorniel among them. Faramir stands beside the seat of the steward, and above him, at the top of the steps that lead to the throne, sits Aragorn and Arwen, sitting side by side as King and Queen. I let go of Legolas to get on my knees and pay my respects, with Legolas, the Vanguard and Eniredír also going on their knees, and both Aragorn and Arwen come down to meet us. I feel a gentle touch on my arm and I take that as my cue to rise. There's a split second of silence before Aragorn and Arwen simultaneously wrap their arms around me in a big hug.

"Awww, I missed you too. Ow. Ow, guys, you're choking me." I whine as they tighten the embrace.

"You have no idea how quiet it has been without you, Merril." Ah there it is. I actually kind of missed being called that by Aragorn.

"Did my letter get to you on time?" Arwen asks me.

"Yes, my queen, these clothes are newly washed and of course I took care of the cloak you gave me. Look, it's good as new." I say, spinning around for her to see that I am indeed wearing the travel gear she had given me last year as she had requested. Arwen and I have written to each other during my stay in Eryn Lasgallen, though it wasn't a back and forth type of thing. The postal service in Middle-earth is abyssmal, as such we have only sent one letter to each other, but boy were those letters long.

"Look at you, elfling. No longer hiding who you are to Gondor?" Arwen says, giving Legolas an affectionate hug as well.

"Who I am, my queen, is simply the Captain of King Thranduil's finest warriors, and no more." Legolas says with a bright smile.

"Oh, shush. Your sisters have already made it quite clear who you were during our wedding feast. There is no need to hide it, Prince Legolas."
"Well, it was comforting to be treated equally by everyone while it lasted." Legolas sighs.

"Come, Meludir, Pelias, Hallooth. There is no need to be quiet. You are guests. Relax." Aragorn says to the Vanguard. Immediately, their demeanors change back to the naturally cheerful elves that I'm used to.

"Permission to tease, Your Highness?" Meludir says.

"Granted, though I will not be held accountable for injuries." Aragorn smirks,

"Look at you, Estel, all grown up. Please remember it is I who gave you your first little wooden dagger." Hallooth smiles.

"How could I ever forget, mellon? And that wooden dagger shall be passed to my firstborn."

"It better. I could not take out the splinter in my thumb for days when I made that! Lord Legolas kept telling me how much it affected my aim."

"You were whinging, Hallooth." Legolas comments. Hallooth looks affronted at the accusation.

"Excuse me for caring about Estel's happiness!" She frowns.

"May I interrupt?" a soft voice says from over my shoulder. I turn and see Avorniel beaming at me, and we don't hesitate at all. I let out a squeal, she lets out a squeal, and we hug each other fiercely. "I have so much to tell you, Ellie! So much has changed since you left!" She lets go of me and pulls Legolas into a hug himself. He chuckles and hugs her back.

"Lady Avorniel, I am glad to see you are well."

"More than well, thank you! I came back expecting father to be furious with me. Instead, he is pleased to see that I am in the King and Queen's good graces. So much so that I have now been officially instated in the Council as the financial advisor to the crown! The first woman to have that role, can you believe it?" Avorniel looks like she is ready to bounce up and down, though, I note she has more dignity than I ever had and she remains smiling from ear to ear instead.

"It is all thanks to Lady Arwen, of course." She bows to the Queen, and Arwen smiles. "King Elessar told me of Lady Avorniel's great help with the charity you started, Ellie. Every penny accounted for, with no details spared. She is very thorough in her work, and I see that she is trustworthy with the Crown's money and was able to handle everything well. I note Lord Daeron had... expectations when Avorniel returned, but it was certainly not this."

"Oh, no. Did he try to talk you out of it?" I ask Avorniel. I've met her father only briefly and I did not have a good impression of him. He simply saw Avorniel's value if she was following his rules, wanting her to be wed immediately. I think he would have approved Boromir courting her, but he did not approve of Avorniel wanting to travel with us back to Rohan. He did not, in fact, have a great opinion of the Rohirrim--infuriating given that the Steward is engaged to a Rohirric shield maiden. I believe the words he used during our brief conversation to describe the Rohirrim were 'stinky' and 'disgusting', the latter in regards to how open they were with Aedelgar and Hildraed's relationship.

"Of course he did. I mentioned before that he does not want me to involve myself with the Council. But I did manage to convince him, eventually." Avorniel explains, "For one, I did get him a business opportunity in Rohan. With Aedelgar as the new weapons master, he would be in charge of training new recruits for the army. Not any time soon, given that King Êomer expects a long time of peace, but it will be the perfect time to restock their weapons. Forges shall be established in Rohan, and we
will be providing the Rohirrim with new weapons."

"I'm surprised your dad ever accepted business with Aedelgar." I say, darkly.

The smile slips from Avorniel's lips, "So did I, honestly. But money convinces him. And it would be good business to establish ours out of Gondor. But enough about him. He's back in Lamedon and I'm here for my duties. And right now, I'm busy balancing the crown's finances for tonight."

"I suppose you have already been told that there will be a feast later? It is to celebrate the establishment of Ithilien. Faramir and Lady Éowyn shall be wed there in a month's time, and then, they will rule Ithilien, in the land where the Stewards of Gondor before also ruled: Emyn Arnen." Aragorn says to me and Legolas, "Your colony shall be established near Emyn Arnen, as well. Silrarassel has already sent me plans for the talan construction, and I have given her official permission to bring in their architects and builders in thirty days. When it is finished, you will only been about a day or two's travel from Emyn Arnen, and shall not be far from Minas Tirith."

"It seems we arrived at the perfect time, then." Legolas smiles.

"But that will not be for tonight so you still have plenty of time until then to take your baths and get out of your travel gear." Arwen smiles, to which the elves all collectively sigh in relief, with me being relieved right beside them. See, Arwen understands us. She understands that days of travel can take a toll on one's hygiene. I am immediately relieved of my gear by a flurry of servants that Arwen calls over, and am taken back to a familiar room. Scout happily barks inside and settles right back on his place in the bed, with the servants busying themselves with the private bath that's set up in the room.

I look out the window and over the many levels of Minas Tirith beneath me, now flourishing and even busier with activity. The wave of nostalgia for New York comes over me again, but it's peace that enters my heart and not sorrow. I didn't think I'd ever feel as at home anywhere else than here in Gondor. It just feels right for me to be here, like this was where I was meant to go the entire time, like the journey from Bree to here was all so I can find a home to call my own again, with people I love dearly surrounding me. There are taverns as well, and I've passed by the high society district enough to know that the closest thing to restaurants can be found there: fancier inns and pubs for the nobles to mingle in when they were not needed here in the Citadel.

I think Avorniel mentioned taking me there once, but we found that the library in the lower districts was a better place to go to, and then things got busy and Aedelind had to leave, so we never got around to it. Apparently, there was even a theater there. I make a note to explore even more of Minas Tirith while I can. Now that we have some actual downtime without any obligation, I'd like to sight-see.

Perhaps even see what I can do to help Minas Tirith flourish. And do some permanent change for the better around here. Now that I have time to discover who I am without the impending threat of doom, I realize I have a lot of influence now, and with Legolas and Aragorn to back me up, I feel like I have a responsibility to help people now more than ever.

But that would be for another day. Tonight, I get to eat and dance.

After bathing and going back into a traditional Gondorian dress, I meet up with Avorniel just outside the Merethrond, and of course things have been going all too smoothly so Hinneril had to ruin it. I haven't seen her around and had hoped she would have gone back to whatever hole she crawled out of but alas.

"Well, well. Look what the muddy horse dragged in."
"Hinneril. Oh, how I've missed you and your witty declarations." I say, giving the most exaggerated bow I can muster.

"I suppose you are the one to be blamed for corrupting Avorniel here? Making her think she can be part of the king's council without it being overwhelming. They will eat her alive, you know."

"Not every noble is as much a vulture as you, Hinneril." Avorniel says, calmly.

"Don't you have other people to bother? Where's your mindless horde of followers gone off to?" I snap. For once, her expression slips. But she quickly rearranges her features into a smirk.

"I just wanted to welcome you back to court."

"Thank you, I feel very welcome by your warmth and hospitality. Bye, now." I take Avorniel's hand and lead her away from Hinneril.

"God, I can't imagine you and Éowyn having to deal with her without Aedelind and I."

"She has not been so aggressive, believe it or not. Ever since news broke out that her family had no money, her friends have been avoiding her and I think she's antagonizing me because she's so lonely. Apparently, her parents appealed to the king in private to let her stay here while they handle the financial crisis back home. Their farms were decimated during the war and many of their people are sick."

Okay, now I feel just a twinge of guilt. I didn't realize just how bad Hinneril's situation has been. Still, that was no excuse for her to start acting like a complete bitch to everyone around her. But I do wish she didn't have to go through that, especially the people under her family's rule.

"Is there anything we can do to help?" I ask. Avorniel shakes her head, "Her parents are as stubborn as she is. They refuse to let the crown help until they've exhausted all their options. All they want is to let Hinneril stay here so that she may be comfortable. Not even to force her to marry a rich noble."

"They only want the best for their daughter. I'm glad Aragorn is letting her stay."

"And it's not as if she isn't any help. Believe it or not, she is a great negotiator. She has a way of getting people to agree to do what she wants."

I laugh, "Actually, I do believe it. So I take it you two have been getting close?"

"Oh, no, she is as much a bully as she was before. I doubt we will ever be friends."

"Ellie! There you are." The voice is familiar, but she runs into me before I actually get a good glimpse of her. There's just a flash of light blonde hair before I get squeezed into a tight hug. When she pulls back, Éowyn's smile reaches her eyes and her cheeks are red and healthy.

"Éowyn, I've missed you so much! Wedding plans going along well?" I say as Faramir walks not too far behind, an equally bright smile on his face.

"There is one part of the wedding we still have not agreed upon. Faramir here thinks I should be brought in on a carriage as to not ruin my wedding dress. I insist on riding my own horse." Éowyn says.

"Ride your horse if you so wish! I just worry about the state of your dress." Faramir says.

"Oh, poo! Even if she's covered in mud from head to toe, she'd still be your beautiful bride." I say.
Faramir laughs, "I cannot disagree with that. But her wedding dress will be heavy."

"Gondorian style?" I ask Éowyn, who nods solemnly.

"Yikes."

"That's all you have to say?" Avorniel laughs.

"I, personally, would not want to ride a horse myself knowing how heavy Gondorian dresses can be. But I am not Éowyn, who grew up surrounded by horses her entire life. If she can handle that, and she wants to ride a horse, let her ride a horse."

"See, I knew Ellie would be on my side."

"Even if I wasn't, we both know you would do what pleases you, anyway." Faramir says to Éowyn, who smirks proudly.

"Come, Ellie. The feast is about to start! And then we can dance later tonight." Éowyn smiles. I take that as my cue to find my seat at the King's table, where I am seated beside Legolas. And near him, my heart sinks as I realize, is Arnuzîr, the Haradrim diplomat. He gives me a small nod, his brown eyes as intense as ever.

"Lady Ellie. I am glad to see you are well." He says as greeting.

"As am I, to see you so well, my lord."

"Lord? You are too polite, but I am simply a Sir here amongst you great nobles." He nods to the rest of the table.

"How long have you been staying here, sir?" Legolas asks politely.

"A week, perhaps? I may leave in another week if our business here goes smoothly." Arnuzîr lifts his wine goblet to Aragorn, who smiles.

"With the way things have been going, I am sure you will go back home bearing good news."

The small talk could have kept going for hours. I know they're trying their best, but there is still some tension between Arnuzîr and the rest of the table. Or perhaps, it's just me and him. Aragorn himself seems comfortable enough, but I avoid his gaze. Whenever I look at him, I just remember almost killing him. There will always be guilt for me, that he was on his knees and I, for a split second, thought still of slaying him. I'm relieved I didn't, for who knows what would have happened if it isn't him negotiating with Aragorn at this moment.

I am shaken out of my thoughts when I notice Legolas suddenly stop eating. I'm just about to ask him what's wrong when a hush falls on the rest of the nobles, and most that are seated at the back of the room begin to gasp and rise from their chairs.

My throat seizes up at the thought that we were perhaps about to get attacked, when a guard steps towards the door that the servants use when coming in and out of the kitchen. Right out the door, a young woman steps out, shaking and weak. Her nose is bleeding.

"H--help...me..." The guard rushes to her and she throws up, a spray of blood on his chestplate.

Panic sets in, noblewomen begin screaming, and there is chaos.

"My queen, we must take you to safety." One of the guards are immediately at Arwen's side, and she
is already being led away into another entrance, while Aragorn, Legolas, Gimli and Arnuzîr make their way to the fallen servant, who is bleeding profusely in the bewildered guard's arms.

The nobles are scurrying away from the scene, while the Vanguard, ever vigilant, bring out their hidden knives and take point around the room, keeping all entrances and windows guarded, moving like a silent machine. I spot Avorniel and Éowyn holding each other's hands, though Avorniel looks more panicked than Éowyn, while Faramir steps forward as well.

"Lady Ellie." I step forward the moment he calls my name.

"Take her to the Houses of Healing. Now." I say, after taking a moment to check her pulse. She is no longer breathing, nor does her pulse beat. I feel my own heart beating too quickly with adrenaline.

"I need Ioreth to examine the body." I whisper to Aragorn. He nods, "Go. We shall stay here and deal with the rest of the nobles. Legolas, I need you and the Vanguard to find out what happened to that woman. We need people who are quick, and we need your eyes and ears."

Legolas nods and motions for his warriors. He kisses the top of my head as he and the rest of the Vanguard run towards the servant's entrance and I follow the guard who holds the limp servant in his arms towards the Houses of Healing.

My first question is this: What the absolute fuck?! This isn't supposed to happen. This isn't how Gondor was supposed to be recovering. There is supposed to be peace! This is what we fought so hard against! Innocent blood being shed, right in the halls, right in the middle of celebration... How the hell did something like this get past us?

One of the healers catch sight of me, the guard and the woman in his arms and opens the door for us quickly.

"Get Ioreth, now." I say, as the guard settles the servant on one of the beds.

Ioreth comes out seconds later, chattering on, blissfully unaware of what we have come here for.

"... when they should be off celebrating in the Merethrond. Now, what is it you have been going on about--" She stops short when she sees me, face pale, hands shaking and covered in the servant's blood. There is the faint, horrifying sound of the dead woman's blood dripping on the stone floor. And Ioreth's whole demeanor changes as she turns to the guard.

"Tell me what happened."

I don't know, miss. She came in, shaking and bleeding from her nose and then she vomitted blood on me and passed out!"

"Thank you, sir. Please let the King know that Lady Ellie and I will get to the bottom of this." Ioreth says, dismissing the guard, who bows and runs off to go back to the Merethrond.

"You and me?" I stutter, completely taken aback. I am not a healer. That was Aedelind's expertise. My actual skill is just making medicine. I'm surprised Ioreth wants me to be part of this... autopsy at all. This is far out of my realm of expertise.

"You have knowledge on plants and herbs, correct? This is not a natural cause of death and I may need your wisdom."

I don't know how I could be of any help but I stay anyway, if only for the sake of this poor girl. I help Ioreth peel off the servant's drenched outfit. The woman is pale and looks as if all blood had
been drained from her. From the looks of all the blood she lost, she may as well have. Ioreth rubs her blood-covered fingers together, frowning. I help her clean the body and we find a narrow stab wound, like one that would come from the thin blade of a rapier or dagger.

"Cause of death?" I ask, but Ioreth's frown only deepens.

"Yes, I think so. But... That wound should not have bled that much. There must be somewhere else all this blood is coming from."

"But it's the only wound on her." I point out. Ioreth searches the woman's body and finds what looks like rash on her arms and thighs. No other wound, however.

"She did throw blood up earlier. And before that, she was bleeding from her no--ohhh..." It's like a fog lifts from my mind. I know these symptoms. I used to study this, back when I was still in college, in my previous life.

"Warfarin." I whisper. Ioreth looks at me, utterly confused.

"Rat poison. She was given rat poison."

"Could this be an attempt she made on her own life? The servants alone know where rat poison is kept. They are in charge of managing pests, after all." Ioreth suggests. I don't answer.

Something's wrong. Things aren't adding up. Warfarin, when I studied it, could be managed by an antidote. With the correct treatment, patients usually recover from warfarin poisonings, because it takes a shit ton more of the poison to kill a human compared to rats. So it would have been impossible to forcefeed her the amount of poison needed to kill her because it would mean feeding her multiple times, and if this was a suicide attempt, she would have just stabbed herself. Warfarin takes a long time for symptoms to actually show. Someone attempting suicide would want an immediate effect, not something prolonged for hours. Something more sinister is at work here.

"I need to talk to Aragorn. I need to find out who this woman is, who was last seen with her." I say to Ioreth.

"My lady, you cannot walk alone in such dangerous times."

I wince. It's not supposed to be dangerous in Gondor, not anymore, not this soon.

"I'll be fine. Thank you for your concern, Ioreth." I say. She nods, "I will... prepare her body for burying. Please be careful, you're always so impulsive. It will be the death of you someday, and it will be the death of me for worrying so much."

"Okay, let's not talk about dying anymore, shall we? Goodbye, ma'am." I say, and find my way back to the throne room, where Aragorn sits at the head of a long table. Surrounding him are Legolas, Gimli, Faramir, Éowyn, Avorniel, Arnuzir and Eniredír. He has his hands clasped in front of him, and he rests his forehead on his knuckles.

"How did this night end up like this?" Avorniel's voice is shaky, and she is pale. Eniredír is staring at one spot on the table, his mouth slightly open, blinking slowly. When I walk in, Legolas looks at me with concern. I realize the blue dress I am currently wearing is stained with the servant's blood.

Aragorn stands when he notices me, and even Gimli looks taken aback. "Ellie. Are you alright?" He asks, carefully, as Legolas gathers me in his arms, holding my head to his chest. Tension immediately leaves my body, though not much. When we pull away from our embrace, I turn to Gimli.
"No, but I am not what matters here. What matters is that a young girl was murdered right under our noses." I say. There is a brief pause before I continue, "She was so young. No more than Aedelind's age, perhaps. It's not right that she's dead."

"I promise you, we will find her killer." Legolas says, steel in his voice.

"She was killed, then? Not sick? The other nobles fear she may have brought a plague into the Citadel." Eniredir asks. I feel my blood boil at the thought of how selfish the nobles were being, once again.

"She was stabbed. But there's something else." I say, taking a seat beside Éowyn as I look around at the people gathered around me. I look at Aragorn, "Her bleeding. It was inconsistent with the wound inflicted on her. You are all warriors, I'm sure you understand what I mean when I say that while a knife to the stomach is fatal, there is only so much blood that could come out of a wound that small."

"What do you mean?" Faramir frowns,

"I mean, she would have lost the same amount of blood if her stomach was cut open completely. I know of a medication--a poison--that could cause bleeding consistent with what we saw on her, but I only have guesses." What I would give for a modern laboratory and the technology to determine exactly what was given to her.

"Educated guesses, I hope?" Aragorn asks.

"Of course. But a guess, nonetheless."

"I trust your judgment, Merrill. Continue."

"I mentioned this to Ioreth already but I highly suspect she was given rat poison. But much earlier than when she was stabbed."

Silence and confusion greet my words,

"Are you saying that her killer intended to poison her first? But then... what... changed their mind and stabbed her instead?" Gimli says.

I sigh, rubbing my suddenly throbbing temples. "Maybe, I don't know. But rat poison doesn't work fast, if I'm thinking of the correct poison. Not on humans, anyway. She had rashes, had severe bleeding, and threw up blood. All of these are symptoms of warfarin poisoning."

"Warfarin? I am well-educated on herbalism, my lady, but I do not know this medication you speak of." Eniredir says.

"It's from..." I rack my brain, trying to figure out where warfarin originated from. It had something to do with cows and farmers... "Sweet clover. Rotten sweet clover, specifically." I say, as a jolt of memory comes to me.

"Sweet clover is a common spice in Harad." Arnuzir speaks up, his eyebrow raised, "Be careful what you imply, Lady Ellie."

"I assure you, sir, I have no idea what is and is not common in Harad. Why so defensive?" I retort. Aragorn shoots me a warning look and I back off, instantly. I wouldn't want to cause any more stress to him.

"I know of the plant you speak of. It is common in Lamedon, as well as Ithilien. Sweet clover is
found all across Gondor, and Ellie is correct in that rotten sweet clover is what the servants use to poison pests in the Citadel. So, we find that a servant has been poisoned by rotten sweet clover... Why was she stabbed, then? Why not wait for the poison to take effect?"

"Perhaps the poison was taking too long and the killer feared they would be exposed the longer their victim was alive?" Avorniel suggests. She places a hand on her mouth, "Oh, I feel sick just thinking about it."

"But why a servant? Why waste all that effort on poisoning a servant?" Eniredír frowns. I give him a cold glare, and he realizes his mistake immediately.

"Forgive me, I did not mean to imply that her life matters so little. I only meant... there are far easier ways... I am not making this any better for myself, am I?" He stutters, weakly.

"He is right, though. Give him a small break, Ellie." Faramir says, "Surrounded by all these nobles, it would have been wiser to poison one of, well, us. It would take less effort, and he would have been able to flee after the deed was done. What has poisoning an innocent servant accomplished other than now being hunted down by both the Vanguard and the Guard of the Citadel?"

"And what was the point of stabbing her after poisoning her? It makes no sense." Éowyn says. "All that effort and for what? Did they just want to torture the poor girl, to make her suffering worse? I cannot imagine someone being so cruel as to torture someone so young and innocent like that. That girl must have been so terrified and confused, and in so much pain."

"How come she didn't tell anyone? Rat poison takes hours for symptoms to show on humans. She would have had the time to warn people..." I sigh, almost in tears.

"Perhaps it was made sure she would not be able to tell anyone? Perhaps she was locked up, or blackmailed or threatened or something." Legolas says.

"That still does not explain her being stabbed." Gimli says. "If whoever did this just did it out of a twisted way to torture her by giving her a long-acting poison, what was the point of stabbing her?"

"She was never meant to live." Arnuzîr says, darkly, "However way her killer decided to intend it, she was still to die tonight."

"Let me propose an alternate theory: she attempted to kill herself with the rat poison, for she only knew it was a poison, realized it was taking too long, and stabbed herself instead." Eniredír says, "What--realized it five hours after? Why do you and Ioreth insist that this girl tried to kill herself? She did not! She was begging for help until her last breath!"

"Perhaps she ingested rotten sweet clover. It is a common spice, after all. And that is entirely coincidental that it was found in her body on the same day she was killed. Perhaps what the killer intended was simply to stab her, completely unaware that she was also poisoned?" Avorniel suggests.

Aragorn nods, "That is one decent explanation of what happened. And it makes the difference between whether this is a premeditated, organized attack and a crime of passion. This way, we may be able to narrow down the list of possible suspects."

They continue that conversation with that thought, but something doesn't sit right with me, still. She was a servant who knew that sweet clover was something regularly used as poison. I don't think she would intentionally ingest something that she knows is poisonous. As the people around the table continue to talk, Legolas nudges me.
"Ellie, I know there is something on your mind." He says to me. I turn to him, and my eyes are wide at the thought that crosses my mind. Maybe Eniredír was right... Why waste all these resources and time on a servant when there were greater targets?

"She's a warning." I whisper, horrified, as the thought dawns on me. Those gathered around the table quiet down and turn to me, their mouths open in shock.

"She wouldn't intentionally ingest the poison, and yet she ingested it nonetheless, and in enough quantity to make it toxic. It's easy to slip poison in someone's food... I would know. Someone had attempted it on me back in Eryn Lasgalen. She could have been secretly being given sweet clover in her meals. And whoever did it was just biding their time--until the feast--to stab her and send her to the Merethrond." Warfarin's most fatal toxic symptom was excessive bleeding. That's how it kills rats, much like the servant presented just moments before her death. Maybe we've been looking at this all wrong. Both the poisoning and the stabbing were intentional, just for entirely different reasons. One was to kill, the other was simply to strike fear. The horrible thoughts continue to plague my mind.

Legolas, however, picks up my line of thought. And it seems a lightbulb went on in his mind, as well.

"Someone killed her to send a message. The stab wound is the cause of death, not the poison. She was just poisoned for the effect. To make it more terrifying for the witnesses. Whoever killed her intentionally did it moments before she entered the Merethrond. I knew I heard steel being drawn moments before the servant entered." Legolas says.

Avorniel gasps, her face pale, "But why? Why would anyone do something so cruel to such an innocent girl?"

"Someone is playing a sick game on us. They wanted the nobles to know. The servant is simply a warning of what would happen to us if we do not find the killer immediately."

"Where are Meludir and the rest of the Vanguard?" Aragorn says to Legolas,

"I sent them to investigate the servants' quarters. What are your orders, King Elessar?"

Aragorn rises from his chair, and I see fury and determination in his eyes. His jaw is set, and tense, but we here have all faced great peril. This is an insult, not a threat.

"Faramir, double the guard in the Citadel, find this woman's killer and keep the other nobles safe. Keep the guards around to show that we will not be intimidated and that we are capable of protecting our people. Legolas, I place the investigation in your hands. We need quick and quiet people to investigate this. The Vanguard knows how to blend into the shadows, and your elven eyes and ears are invaluable so as not to miss any details. Ellie, Éowyn, the people trust you. If you can gather any information from the other servants, do so." He hesitates, "Keep this quiet, and make the investigation fast. If Ellie and Legolas are correct, someone wants to strike fear into the hearts of our people and their rulers. We will show them we are not so easily bullied. Avorniel, Eniredír, this is where your connections to the nobles are most useful. Strengthen their resolve. Remind them that they are leaders first, defenders of the people."

Aragorn then turns to Arnuzîr and Gimli, "My friends, please accept my sincerest apologies that you, our honored guests, are now in the middle of a dangerous mystery. I assure you, we can protect you."

"Aragorn, you know I will not stand by while this happens, yes? I shall help Ellie and Legolas gather
information. I would never abandon you at a time of need."

"Assassinations are a common occurrence in Harad. I assure you, this is simply another business day for myself, and I do not scare easily, Your Majesty." Arnuzîr smirks, bowing low. I don't know how to feel about the fact that assassinations are part of a daily routine in Harad. Then again, it was under the rule of Sauron for quite some time. His cruelty surely would have spread to the puppet government there. I have to remind myself that the ones who have most to recover from the war are those who were oppressed by Sauron's tyranny.

Aragorn nods, "Get some sleep, all of you. Tomorrow, we will find this killer, and they will regret spilling blood in our city."

We take that as our dismissal and the others leave for the door. When it's just me, Legolas and Gimli left, Aragorn's strong demeanor relaxes. He sighs deeply and sinks back to his chair, his face covered by his hands.

"Hey, we will get through this. We'll be here to help you. They messed with the wrong team." I say, as I take Aragorn's hand away from his face so I can look him in the eyes. The look on his face is akin to when we had just exited the Mines of Moria. He's trying to be strong so the rest of us could despair. "You don't have to do this alone anymore. Arwen will be there to support you. So tonight, you will go to your chambers, and you will confide in her, alright? You don't have to bottle it all in."

Aragorn gives me a weak smile, "I know. And it is good to have you with me, Merrill."

"Hey, that's what family is for, right?" He kisses the top of my head, affectionately, and I give him a big bear hug.

"Family, indeed, my daughter." He says.

"More like great-great-great-great-great-great--"

He pushes me jokingly, "I get it, I get it." He laughs,

"--great-great-great-great--"

"This is what I get for trying to show my appreciation for you."

"--great-great-great-great--"

"Ellie!"

"--great-great-great-granddaughter."

"Legolas, take your future wife to her room before I throw her." Gimli grumbles.

"Oh, you want to talk about throwing?" I turn to him, eyebrows raised, remembering a certain moment back in Helm's Deep that Aragorn told me about. Gimli sees the mischievous look on my face and squints.

"Good night, Aragorn." He says, immediately going for the door.

"Come on. You need to get rest, too, Superman." I tell Aragorn, dragging him to his feet. He follows after Gimli with a grateful smile and I look up at Legolas,

"He is worried that he has an enemy he cannot simply take down with his sword." Legolas whispers to me.
"He has us. He won't need his sword." I say, putting on a brave face. Legolas cups my cheeks and traces his thumb along my bottom lip.

"Ellie, do you want to resume your training? I hope it never happens but there may come a time when we will not be there to look out for you. I need to know you are in top shape to defend yourself."

I lean closer to him, "I'll be fine, meleth."

"Ellie..." He sighs. I feel his breath on my lips as he does.

"I'll think about it." I say, and kiss him. In truth, I'm terrified of holding a sword again. I'd be happy not to do so at all, and holding one would feel too much like preparing for war again. I know Legolas is only looking out for me but I would rather not hold a sword again, if I could.

And I don't want to think that things are bad enough for me to have to hold one again. Not yet.

Chapter End Notes

WHAT IS THIS, YOU MAY ASK? This, my friends, is a long. LOOOOONG chapter to make up for my equally long absence. My muse kind of abandoned me there, and I've had to adjust my schedule and get used to my new job (Ayyyy that's right, I'm an employed woman. This fanfic has literally spanned half of my college life all the way to adulthood. It's been that long in the making) so I never had time to write. BUT GUESS WHO'S BACK WITH AN EXCITING NEW PLOT POINT. Hey, if I'm gonna end this fanfic trilogy, I may as well throw in a murder mystery as a final goodbye. I hope you guys like it! Let me know what you think in the comments and thank you all so, so much for staying around and reading this monstrosity of a fanfic for... What's it been... Three years now? It's because of you that I still find the inspiration to write after all these years.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!