Lost to the Ages

by embersofamber

Summary

*****WARNING: Tags are added as the story progresses, and contain story spoilers! Read at your own discretion.*****
She followed a path of myths and legends to impossible places and otherworldly beings. When she meets the elves of the magical Greenwood, she may be faced with her greatest challenge yet with the royal family. Fantasy/slight AU; OC, Thranduil, Legolas, Feren, Galion, OCs of Silvan elves, and many more!

Notes

The timeline on this is from well before the events of The Hobbit, until after LOTR. I think. I'm nowhere near the end of the story yet.
Chapter 1
Chapter One

Elizabeth took a look around the deck of her cabin cruiser, running her hand across the gleaming wood and chrome of the *Aqua Vitae*. It was a fine and seaworthy little yacht that had served her well in the five years she had owned it, and was the final link to who and what she had been before arriving on the shores of Middle-earth.

She smiled, another thrill of amazement running through her. After the trails of legends, tall tales and sightings from fisherman and sailors alike she had doggedly followed, it still made her giddy that she had accomplished something so seemingly impossible. It was as unlikely as discovering a way to enter a Fae realm, but really, who was to say that wasn't possible too? It was not the first time she had known the supposedly impossible to be reality in her life, and perhaps it would not be the last. Her dear brother surely would have been proud of her.

Securing the heavy bags of treasure and other miscellany to her horse, she took a final look around the little cove where she had hidden her vessel. It had been nearly two years of adapting to a new land, and learning to speak Westron had been the first task that took some time to accomplish. It was not as difficult to slip into the rhythms of life in her new land as she had feared. In fact, she felt calm and peaceful returning to such similar customs and ways of dress as she had been born to. It was like slipping into an old, favorite pair of shoes, long buried in the back of the closet.

Elizabeth was never enamored of machines and technology, but she recognized they served a purpose, despite shrinking the world to a tiny place and making it much more difficult to erase your tracks when you wanted to just...disappear. But she had never realized how wearying it truly was to live in a world of phones, computers, televisions, instant communication and the like.

There was never any peace and seldom any quiet or time for reflection, as there had been such an abundance of in earlier centuries. No, the modern world was always racing for bigger, faster, better. The next great discovery or breakthrough. It was mind-numbing and sometimes soul-destroying, as well as lonely. There were millions of people all connected through technology, yet perversely isolated in spite of it. An age of contradictions and fractured humans that left her feeling adrift, where there was no longer a place for her left to flee to.

She was tired; incredibly weary, and more than a little melancholy after so much time on her own. Hopefully, the path she had finally chosen to take would be the right one. All the gossip and tales she had heard in the taverns and from what scholars she had been able to find seemed to agree. The Elvenking of Mirkwood was renowned as a very wise and proud sovereign, and he was *very* fond of gems and treasure.

Mounting the stallion, she clicked her tongue at her horse to get him moving and led the two other horses that carried all her belongings, beginning the trek back to Belfalas. It was time to hire a guide and hit the road, and perhaps find a new life that would not end in further disappointments and despair.

Elizabeth stared in amazement at the vast forest in front of her, stretching in either direction farther than the eye could see. She tilted her head, a swell of anticipation rising in her. There was something
truly magical among the trees ahead; she didn't know what it was, but she could feel it in her bones.

Mirkwood, as some named it, sounded so very ominous, but for all she could see, it was lush, verdant leaves on vigorous trees in the spring sunshine. Despite hearing of some evil that supposedly resided there, all she felt was a desire to enter, every time the branches swayed in the gentle breeze, almost as though they were beckoning her.

Turning, she smiled at the gruff guide and the four guards he engaged to protect them as a precaution on their perilous journey. Although it had been remarkably smooth, and other than one horse going lame, which they had replaced not long after, they encountered no danger at all.

"Well, shall we? I think we should be able to go quite a ways in before loss of light forces us to camp." She looked again to Eluric, her smile faltering as he stared grimly at the forest and shook his head.

"Nay, Miss. This is as far as the lads and I go. You'll be on your own from here if you choose to carry on with this."

Frowning, she looked at the other men, but all of them avoided her eyes except Thurmond, the leader of the guards, and his expression was closed and harsh. Lips parting in dismay, she sought Eluric's gaze.

"What exactly are you saying? I've paid you all very well for this venture, and you agreed to take me to the elven kingdom, not leave me here at the edge of the woods."

He looked uncomfortable but pressed his lips together stubbornly, his salt and pepper beard quivering with the movement.

"Aye, you have paid us well, which is why we've come so far with a strange lass like yourself." When she stiffened in her saddle, he held out a placating hand. "Now, I meant no insult, it's more than clear you're a lady from some fine family, which is why I can't understand why you wanted to come here. You could have got a fine husband in Dol Amroth with your looks and wealth..."

"I have no interest in a husband, Eluric," she said sharply. "I have had one and do not require another."

He sighed, running a hand through his unkempt hair. "Be that as it may, lady, did you not hear what the last peddler we met had to say of this place? Giant spiders spawn here, and the elf king is a powerful sorcerer!"

She laughed humorlessly. "Yes, I heard him! I just had more sense than to count his words as anything other than gossip." Scoffing, she shook her head, muttering in English, "Superstitious ass."

He jerked his head at the men around him, ignoring the strange sounding words she often spoke to herself in. "We have families. None of us can take the risk of going in there," he said, pointing toward the trees. "I will give some of the gold back, if you like, since I did say I would take you all the way there when we struck the bargain."

She urged her horse to the hindest of the guardsman and briskly took the leads for her pack horses from him. Walking the animals closer to the path leading into the forest, she stopped to look at the men, her face a cold, proud mask. When she spoke, her voice was stern.

"You may keep the gold, for I gave you my word and I shan't break it, whether you do or no. I can see now the mettle you are all made of." With her back to the men, she urged her horses down the path that disappeared into the trees, her voice floating back toward them.
"I do not fear spiders or sorcerers. Let them come if they dare, and meet an Englishwoman."

Wiping the sweat from her brow, Elizabeth stared up into the thick canopy of the trees overhead. She could not put her finger on it, but she was sure the forest had eyes that followed her as she rode along. The hair rising on the back of her neck was like alarm bells, and she found herself constantly scanning the trees around her, looking for movement.

Firmly pulling her horse to a standstill, she dismounted and unbuttoned her riding jacket, peeling it off and sighing in relief as the breeze blew gently, cooling her quickly through the thinner blouse she wore beneath the thick coat. She had been traveling for hours on her own, and as the sun took its course, the muted light in the forest was beginning to dim.

It was unnerving being completely on her own after journeying with the hired men for so many weeks, which she admitted might be the reason for her feeling so skittish. They weren't the brightest or most cheerful lot, but as she had gotten used to them, there was a kind of comfort that came from learned familiarity. Likely there was nothing to fear or that should cause alarm in the woods, and it was only their fearful talk that had her on edge.

Wondering how much further she might go before she would be forced to camp, she bent to tighten a strap that had loosened on one of her packs. Straightening, she looked up into the arresting blue eyes of a tall, lithe man standing not four feet away from her. Drawing a surprised breath, for she had heard no sound of his approach, they stared openly at one another.

Tilting her head, she could see in her peripheral vision that she was surrounded by others on all sides, but she could not tear her eyes from the one who stood before her; long blond-hair, the brightest eyes of a blue summer sky she had ever seen, and hauntingly beautiful.

"Are you an elf?" she asked, her eyes wandering to his delicately pointed ears and realizing he could be nothing but. A thrill raced through her at the thought.

He moved forward with a graceful fluidity in his stride and touched her horse, the beast nuzzling eagerly against him.

"I am an elf." His eyes glinted with humor, his voice melodious but undeniably masculine. "This is a horse, and you a woman, that much is certain. But as to what you do in Greenwood or what your business is in coming here, that is a mystery. One I must know the answer to."

She grinned, relieved and nearly giddy to have found the people she had been seeking with no trouble at all, and neither a spider nor sorcerer in sight.

"My name is Elizabeth Seymour, and I come to beg an audience with the king of Greenwood the Great, although I'm sorry I do not know his name as none I asked could tell me."

The elf listened to her intently, eyes sharp on her, although he appeared relaxed and at ease, continuing to caress the tired horse. He moved away from the large beast, walking closer until he was in the woman's personal space, his eyes examining hers searchingly and keenly.

She resisted the urge to back away, instead taking note of his strong jaw, straight nose and proud
bearing. In so many ways, he was not so different to mankind, yet there was still an undeniable otherness about him that was readily apparent. His movements were almost cat-like in their grace, and she realized his skin actually seemed to have a bit of a…glow. Incredible.

"You speak the truth," he announced finally, signaling to someone behind her and speaking rapidly in another language. She turned and saw many more brown-haired elves come out from the trees, two of them taking her pack horses and leading them further down the path she had been following.

The blonde elf motioned for her to mount, which she quickly did, sucking in a surprised breath when he leapt up nimbly behind her. Taking the reins from her, he urged the horse forward into a quick trot, then slowed to a walk after they passed the pack animals. She turned her head enough to see his face, finding him even more startlingly handsome up close.

"May I know your name, Sir, or should I just keep calling you 'golden-haired elf' in my head?" He laughed, the sound rich and fair, making her smile.

"I am called Legolas, and our king's name that you wondered at is Thranduil. I do not know if the king will agree to see you this day, but as there is no harm in trying I will take you to the halls. It is an odd thing to come across a young woman alone, wandering through our woods."

"Legolas," she repeated softly, "and Thranduil. Lovely names." She smiled and shrugged. "I was one of a party. Five men I hired to guide me here from Dol Amroth, but none of them were willing to brave the woods and so left me to come on my own."

The elf frowned disapprovingly. "I suppose I know what manner of men they were, if they abandoned a lady to a place they themselves feared to enter." He slipped a steadying arm around her waist and adjusted the reins in his hand.

"Hold tight, Elizabeth Seymour, and we shall be at the halls anon." The horse shot ahead, Legolas guiding him deftly through the trees and underbrush.

They traveled swiftly, but full dark had fallen before they reached the halls, making Elizabeth wonder how the elf was able to see in the thick black her own eyes couldn't pierce, but chalked it up to some superiority of their race.

When they stopped, he jumped down and reached up, pulling her down easily and setting her on her feet. She took a moment to stretch her arms over her head, feeling the kinks in her back relax.

Looking around, she smiled when another elf walked up, waiting patiently while they conversed in another language. The dark-haired elf led the horse away, and Legolas touched her arm to get her attention.

"The halls are this way." She followed him down a winding pathway, able to see very little in the dim light, but vast gates were soon visible, lit in the soft glow of lanterns. After they passed through they were shut behind them, and she again followed Legolas down walkways that opened out into a vast and beautiful cavern.

When they came to what looked like a lounging area or waiting room, there was yet another dark-
hared elf that flicked his eyes briefly over her, then bowed to Legolas and began conversing rapidly in the pleasantly melodic language that seemed to be their native tongue.

With nothing better to do, she crossed her arms and set to observing the two elves. The brunette one had bowed to Legolas, so he was obviously a subordinate or servant. Was the first elf she met someone of importance, perhaps the leader of a forest army? He had the dangerous mien of a warrior, and she noted he wore knives and a quiver of arrows, although she had seen no bow.

He appeared as though he were a young man, or….elf rather, perhaps late twenties at most? Her eyes dropped from his knives on his back to his clothing. A fine, deep green suede and there was a shirt of mail peeking out, and his boots were also well made.

Legolas looked over, catching her eye and smiling in an amused manner, seemingly very aware of her scrutiny. Shrugging, she smiled unrepentantly and turned away, examining the furniture in the room around her. Lots of wood, and rich fabrics everywhere. It was clearly not a poor kingdom.

"Miss Elizabeth."

Whirling back to face the blonde elf, she raised her brows in inquiry.

"Yes?"

"The king has retired for the evening, so you will be given a room to stay in until it pleases him to see you, although I cannot say when that may be. This is Galion," he said, indicating the other elf. "He is steward to the king, and will take you to where you may rest and refresh yourself."

He said something to Galion in the other language again and turned to her.

"Pleasant rest to you, Elizabeth Seymour, and perhaps I may see you again another time."

She bowed her head and cocked a mischievous brow, addressing him in English.

"Good night, pretty elf Legolas. Perhaps I'll have pleasant dreams of you."

He tilted his head, brow furrowed quizzically.

Smiling innocently, she looked up at him. "I said: 'good night, Legolas, and thank you for all your help,' in my language, called English.

He gave her a cryptic look, nodded his head once and left back the way they had come. Turning to Galion, she smiled her most charming smile.

"Can you tell me if Legolas is head of your army, or what position he holds in this kingdom?"

The steward stared down his nose at her in a superior manner. "That is King Thranduil's son, Prince Legolas, mortal, and you would do well to remember it. Now, follow me."

Prince? Elizabeth mulled silently over that as they walked, twisting and turning down passages and over walkways until she was quite lost and would never have been able to find her way back out without assistance.

For a prince, Legolas had seemed awfully...nice? Very pleasant and kind, in fact. If he was the prince, then perhaps she had nothing to worry about, as his father might also be just as kind and accommodating.

….Or perhaps not. Best not to presume and be disappointed. Kings were seldom paragons of
sweetness and light, were they? *No indeed,* she thought, laughing inwardly. Otherwise, it would not be necessary to come before them bearing gifts.

Galion opened a door and beckoned her inside. A lamp was already lit within, illuminating the room and revealing a narrow bed, several chairs and a small desk. All her possessions, including her chests from the pack horses, were stacked in neat rows along the far wall. If nothing else, elves seemed to be incredibly efficient. Turning to Galion with a pleased smile, she took a hesitant step toward him.

"Am I permitted to leave this room, or am I confined here until it please your king to see me?"

He clasped his hands behind his back and lifted his chin higher, looking every bit the part of a snooty butler, and she had known many. She pressed her lips together to hide her smile.

"During the day, you will be allowed time out to walk, with a guide. In the evening, you must remain in your room, and there will be a guard posted outside, in case you should forget. You will be brought food at mealtimes."

*Time out to walk?* He made her sound like a horse!

"And what about bathing? I see no facilities here, so perhaps you have separate areas for that and I may be taken now? I would hate to get into a fresh bed, as filthy as I am now."

He looked at her in pleased astonishment. "You wish to bathe? Oh! I thought your kind seldom cared to."

She adopted a haughty look to rival his. "I assure you, my practices have nothing whatever in common with uncouth and filthy folk. It is my custom to bathe daily when possible, and just now I am very dirty from the road and smell of horse. Most unpleasant."

He smiled slightly and nodded. "You may eat now," he said, indicating the meal waiting on a low table, "and I will send a female servant to take you to bathe shortly." Without another word, he turned and left.

Elizabeth sat down on one of the chairs, looking around the room slowly, hardly able to fathom that she was actually sitting in a kingdom of elves.

Two full days passed without word from anyone. Elizabeth was regularly led to bathing rooms and brought meals. She was taken out for exercise with a completely silent and taciturn elf named Pedirion, who after the third attempt to draw him into conversation she had given up on. Her dress that she planned to wear to meet the king had been taken out and prepared, with all the accompanying accessories.

There was really very little she could occupy herself with, so she took to elf watching. Her room faced out onto a large cavern, and elves could often be seen coming and going. She discovered that all the elves seemed to wear their hair quite long, and some had decorative braids like the Prince had worn and some did not. There were many colors of hair among them, but the most common seemed to be a nut-brown or a much lighter, reddish-brown. There were a good many blondes as well, but none with a gold as pale as Legolas. Hair as dark as her almost-black shade was not seen at all,
making her stick out wherever she went.

Her eye was drawn by a russet-haired elf walking quickly on an opposite walkway, several other elves following neatly behind. His face was set in stern lines, and his gaze swept the area around him in sharp awareness. He wore a light style of armor in silver and gold and a sword at his hip, similar to what her night guard wore, but more ornate and what seemed to indicate higher rank. She had never seen a group of elves in armor. Was it possible they had come for her?

Turning to face where they would arrive if they truly had been sent for her, she waited with bated breath until the severe elf stood directly before her, staring down with little expression in his warm, brown eyes the color of milk chocolate.

"You are the mortal called Elizabeth Seymour?" At her nod, he continued. "I am Feren, captain of the kingsguard. King Thranduil will see you now if you are prepared to appear before him."

She smiled in relief, glad the wait was finally over and turned toward her room. "I need but ten minutes to change, please, and I'll be right out."

He gave a brief nod but otherwise moved not a muscle, and she slipped inside her chamber, determined to be thorough in her dressing, but quick.

Fastening her earrings into her pierced lobes, she opened the door, smiling widely at the mini double-take she caught from the guard captain, hoping that was a good sign regarding her appearance and not a bad one.

"Captain, I have a small chest with a gift for the king, if you would allow one of your guards to carry it for me?"

Turning to one of the guards behind him, Feren said something in the elven language, and she led the guard to where the chest rested on a table, following him back out.

They created quite a processional, a human woman, and her five elven guards with swords and armor. When they arrived outside the throne room, there was none other standing there than the Prince. His brows rose, and twice his blue eyes swept her up and down, astonishment evident in his expression. Stepping forward, he lifted her hand and kissed it.

"My lady...Elizabeth. You did not tell me you were a person of rank when we met."

Her mouth twisted in wry amusement as she curtsied. "Neither did you mention your title to me, Prince Legolas."

Grinning rakishly, he released her hand. "I suppose neither of us wished to boast. But truly, you look lovely. Is this a fashion from your land? I have never seen such a gown before, and the color so vibrant."

"Yes, indeed, quite a popular style of raiment for formal affairs. I hope it is fine enough to greet an elven king, for I admit I know nothing at all of your culture and practices. I will be forced to rely on what I was taught in the courts of man and trust I will not give offense here."

The Prince raised a teasing brow. "I feel certain you will not give offense, Lady Elizabeth. My father has not beheaded anyone recently nor thrown any into the dungeons in at least a year."

She paled at his words and he chuckled, trying to look contrite and failing. "Forgive me, it was only a jest, and a poorly timed one at that."
By the time Elizabeth calmed her racing heart from the Prince's words, Feren returned from the throne room.

"Lady Elizabeth," he said, copying the Prince's address to her. "The king will see you now."

*Into the lion's den I go*, she thought, trying to ignore the nervous flutter in her stomach, and giving the Prince a hesitant smile of farewell.

She was escorted into the throne room, her eyes scanning the space with interest. But it was when she caught sight of the golden-haired being sitting atop a high throne, wearing an ornate crown of polished wood interlaced with golden flowers, that her steps briefly faltered.

While she had thought the Prince had an impressive, otherworldly beauty, *this* creature sprawled comfortably across his wood and stone throne was truly god-like; an angelic, majestic vision, clad in the finest garments. The eyes of frosty blue that stared down on her held the look of ancient wisdom and a razor-sharp cunning, while the strong jaw and proud angle of his head promised this was not a person who would be easily handled.

Instantly dropping her eyes to the floor, she swallowed and attempted to wrestle her fear into submission. It was entirely possible she had bitten off more than she could chew with this elf king. Sending up a quick prayer for courage, she finished her walk to the base of the throne accompanied by the frantic beat of her thundering heart.

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King Thranduil stared dispassionately down from his high throne as his guards ushered in a mortal woman, clad in a gown of finest blue silk, but of a design he had never before seen. The inner skirt was tightly fitted in such a way as to show off the woman's figure as she walked, as was the clinging bodice, while the over-skirt was made of a deeper shade of silk and flowed in voluminous folds that trailed several feet behind her. It was more reminiscent of his own magnificent robes, with the long train of fabric, which made him narrow his eyes infinitesimally in annoyance, for who was this woman to come before him so richly attired?

When they came to a stop a short distance from his throne, she executed a deep, graceful curtsy, which, he thought with fleeting humor, must not have been an easy feat in such a clinging skirt. At her throat shone a necklace of beautiful white gems that glittered with reflected light, and a large blue stone set at the center. The Elvenking had an eye for the very finest things, and he could see her trappings were exceedingly fine.

Feeling a slight stirring of interest, he leaned forward slightly, noting she kept her head bowed, with gaze respectfully lowered to the floor and had not attempted to speak either. She clearly knew something of court etiquette and proper behavior before a king. How intriguing.

"You may rise, mortal, and tell me why it is you have sought an audience with me. Further, explain why you have ventured into my woods all alone, and with such obvious valuables as adorn you."

Regaining her feet, she finally lifted her gaze to his, her gray-green eyes bright and full of the weight of more intelligence and knowledge than he had ever beheld in the eyes of a mere woman, unlike the dull creatures he had observed among the race of men in the past. She smiled, transforming her face into something truly lovely and inclined her head.

"Thank you, Your Majesty, for your gracious welcome and for granting me an audience before you. It happens that I engaged a guide and guards to bring me here from where I was lodged near Dol Amroth, but they flatly refused to enter the forest with me, so I was forced to continue on my own."

She paused, her eyes sweeping across the vast cavern of the King's Halls in wonder.

"My name is Elizabeth Seymour, Sire, and I have heard tales of the greatness of your kingdom and wished to come pay homage with gifts..." She hesitated briefly, her voice growing quieter than before. "And, perhaps to beg a small boon of you in return, if I should secure your favor."

Betraying no sign of his musings at her speech or her unusually accented Westron, he continued to study the woman before him. She seemed better than most at hiding her emotions, but he was no mere man and had countless ages to learn to read the thoughts so frequently betrayed in unguarded looks or the slightest twist of the mouth. She was clearly concealing something.

Sighing, he crossed his long legs. "What gift have you brought that you think worthy of making demands of me?"

Turning slightly, she watched as one of the elven guards from the back of her escort stepped forward, placing a small, wooden chest that he carried into her hands at the King's nod of assent.

Glancing up, her hand hesitated on the clasp of the box. "If I may?"
He waved a lazy hand in acknowledgement. "Yes, yes. Proceed."

Carefully freeing the latch, she lifted the lid, keeping her eyes fixed on his face to gauge his reaction.

In the largest compartment, gold coins were interspersed with several kinds of gems; some, redder than blood sparkled in the reflected lantern light, while still others shone green or deepest blue, but the chief kind were stones of starlight, similar to the ones she wore at her throat.

He was on his feet and down the steps leading to his throne in an instant, towering over her with his greater height while his hand lightly caressed the hard, glittering stones. There were kingdoms of men and of elves who had no such grand wealth as what the woman before him was so glibly offering.

His eyes flicked to her, narrowing slightly as he regarded her. "Do you think me a fool? You must have a great many demands for a gift of this ilk. Such things are never offered without some form of payment required."

Wide-eyed, she stared up at him, mesmerized by his sudden proximity before she swallowed and dropped her gaze briefly, once again meeting his flinty blue eyes. "I want nothing from you at all, save to be allowed to remain here in your kingdom; to become as one of your subjects and serve you however you please."

As she spoke, she reached out and opened a separate, black velvet-lined compartment in the lid of the box to reveal a truly magnificent necklace, intricately wrought, all set with white gems. When he inhaled and his mouth opened slightly in appreciation, she smiled, satisfied at his reaction to her family's diamonds.

He searched her face for a long moment before he reached out suddenly and cupped her chin in his hand, leaning closer until their faces were mere inches apart, his voice a low vibration, menacing and powerful.

"How came you by these riches? Did you steal them?"

Her eyes sparked with offended anger before she contained it and smiled coldly, lifting her chin away from his hand before she spoke. "I am no thief. These jewels are heirlooms of my family, and of the kingdom I was born into as a lady of nobility, although much of what existed then is gone."

An air of sadness surrounded her and she looked out again across the vast cavern of the King's hall before meeting his eyes again, lifting her chin proudly. "They are mine to give to whom I will, and based on stories I hear of you, I think you will best appreciate and cherish them. That is all."

Pursing his lips, Thranduil straightened and clasped his hands behind his back, considering. "And in return for this treasure, you wish only to live here among my people. Why is that? Do you flee from something, or perhaps someone?"

Shutting the lid of the chest and hiding the gems from sight again, she closed her eyes. "I run from nothing, but I weary of the world of men. I will never go back to it if I have my way." When she opened her eyes again and saw only suspicion and distrust on the face of the king, she sighed, the sorrow in her soul she had kept at bay for so long, almost overwhelming.

"If you do not wish me for a subject, I will depart and seek a home elsewhere, and please keep the gift with my good wishes." She half turned and handed the chest back to the guard as she spoke, clasping her hands before her as she waited solemnly for the King to dismiss her. It would not be the first time she had attempted to navigate the temperament of a capricious sovereign and failed.
He stared at her for several silent minutes, then finally began circling her like a pacing lion, and she felt a blossoming of hope that he had not yet dismissed her out of hand.

"I am not without talent," she said quietly. "I have knowledge of a great many things, from warfare and diplomacy to sewing and gardening, or I could transcribe books. I could offer service in your household, if you will, as I have served kings and queens in my time. I can even fight with dagger or sword, if needed."

A soft laugh sounded close beside her and she whipped her head around to look at his mocking smile.

"You can fight, can you? Surely not in that gown, I venture."

Humor? That was a welcome sign, to be sure. Elizabeth smiled, feeling far more comfortable with the Elvenking than she had mere minutes before.

"Experience has taught me that a woman's fiercest fights may often take place in the prettiest of frocks. And I am never without a weapon concealed somewhere on my person, your Majesty," she murmured.

Thranduil came to stand in front of her, shooting a look of displeasure toward the elves in armor around them. "If you stand before me armed, then my guards have failed in their duties abysmally."

Noting the mercurial change of mood, she bit her lip and stood very still. "It is not a weapon as you may think, but I have had to use something similar in the past to defend myself against a man who threatened my life. May I show you?"

"Yes, show me." He crossed his arms and watched as she raised her skirt to her ankles, stepping out of the strange shoes she wore and lifting one for his inspection.

"These are called high heels, or stilettos," she said, indicating the long spike which had been supporting her weight and making her appear taller than she really was.

He stepped forward and took the shoe from her, examining it intently. Reaching out, she ran a finger down the long protrusion. "You see how easily this can be used in place of a dagger? I had this one reinforced with steel so it would not break."

Eyeing the thing a moment longer, he handed it back to her and watched as she slipped her feet inside and dropped her skirts back into place. "Those must be very uncomfortable to wear for any length of time," he said musingly.

Her gray-green eyes sparkled with humor. "I would not wear this gown or these shoes for anyone less than a king, for no other would be worthy of such suffering."

A surprised laugh escaped him before he knew it, and he shook his head at her in amusement. "You are a very strange woman, mortal, but I am an excellent judge of character."

He paused, a gleam of humor still apparent in his eyes. "I deem you no threat." He extended a hand to her as he continued speaking. "Therefore, I shall grant your unusual request to live here among my people and be counted my subject until the end of your days, should that be your wish."

Her face lit with relief and happiness, she reached out for the offered hand and clasped it between her own, going down on both knees before him. "I swear before almighty Eru to honor you as my King and Sovereign, and to obey and serve you in all things." She kissed his hand and then pressed her forehead against where she had kissed.
Smiling, Thranduil looked down on her, unaccountably charmed by her quaint ways. "That is quite a fine oath. I will not forget it, nor your gift to me. Rise, Elizabeth Seymour, and be welcome in my realm."

He lifted her to her feet, then briefly went and spoke to a guard beside his throne, who set out immediately to do his lord's bidding and alert the steward Galion, that he was needed.

"Come, walk with me a bit and tell me something of the land you hail from, for your manners are rather fine. Are you the daughter of a king yourself? For you have the grace and bearing of royalty as I seldom see among the race of men."

He offered his arm and waited until she had laced her arm around his before he began walking out of the throne room, leading her over a walkway and down passages in the direction of the main gate.

"You are most gracious, your Majesty. My father was not king, but a duke, and cousin to the queen who ruled when I was born and for many years thereafter. She never married, and therefore had no issue, so her successor was her cousin who was king in another realm, and then became sovereign over our country as well."

Listening with interest, Thranduil nodded. "And how came this kingdom to ruin as you said, so that you no longer care to keep the heirlooms of your house?"

"War," she said quietly, looking up at him. "The nation does still exists in a much diminished form, but...is it not always wars that bring misery and desolation in their wake? Far too many lives have I seen lost due to the endless grasping and greed of those ever hungry for power, and the never-ending rise and fall of kingdoms uncounted. I am done with such men. Forever, I hope," she said, vehemently.

Thranduil's eyebrows rose. "And what does forever mean to you, young Elizabeth? Sixty years? Eighty? That is not even a brief moment in the life of an elf, after all."

Laughing quietly, she fingered the necklace she wore, catching his eye with the movement. "If I should die while in these halls, you may have the last of my jewels, as well. Doubtless they would look better on the neck of an elf than on someone like me."

He pursed his lips and gave her an appraising look. "They look well enough on you, and with such a gown and your strange slippers... You wear it with a confidence that is becoming."

She felt an unaccustomed burn in her cheeks and was astonished to realize she was actually blushing, which she couldn't remember having done in ages. Glancing up, she caught his smirk as he examined her high color.

"Well." She cleared her throat softly. "Coming from an immortal elf king of astonishing wit and more handsome than I thought it possible for any person to be, I am amazed you would compliment me so highly, and I thank you."

He waved her words away as they walked out of the gates and headed to the edge of the woods to admire the expanse of forest just beyond. "I do not compliment you, for that would indicate an ulterior motive or interest, of which I have neither. I only speak the truth. Should you find the truth to your liking or not..." He shrugged elegantly. "That is not my concern."

She stifled a giggle before it could escape, perversely amused by the extreme arrogance and superiority displayed by the proud elf king, and nodded in false solemnity. "Of course, Your
Majesty, just as you say.

He narrowed his eyes, but one side of his mouth lifted. "What kingdom do you hail from?"

"England, Sire. I remain a proud Englishwoman, and so I shall for as long as I draw breath. Never setting foot on English soil again is the only thing I truly regret in coming here."

Tilting his head, he stopped walking. "I have never heard of the kingdom of England. In what part of Middle-earth does it lie?"

"It is across the sea," she murmured. "An island nation, far from here."

"Why did you leave something you love so dearly?" He could feel the yearning inside her for her homeland.

She bit her lower lip and lifted a shoulder in a slight shrug. "There was no longer a place for me there. All things change, Sire, and I think I will learn to love this land too, in time."

He wondered if she realized how little time was on her side, but found himself curious about something else he saw clearly in her eyes. "And where is your husband?"

Brows furrowed, she looked up again into his ancient gaze, the question of how he knew she had been married dying before it was voiced. "My husband is long dead, my king, but not forgotten. I chose to never remarry after his passing, but I made a vow to him which I endeavor to keep."

"And what was the vow that you made?"

She drew a slow breath, remembering it again and feeling the weight of it settle in her chest. "He made me swear to go on living and not despair in his absence, and never to give up on life."

Facing forward, he gave her his strong profile. "I understand," he said quietly, and by the weight of the words as he said them, she felt he truly did. Smiling sadly, she looked back into the halls and missed the piercing gaze he turned her way.

The gates closed behind them with the sharp clanging of steel.

~o~
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

There will likely be some substantial time skips throughout this story, and here we come to the first one. Please drop me a comment if you have the time, and as always, thanks for reading.

Chapter Three

Twenty-five years later

Elizabeth meandered down the wide walkway, smiling at the elves that bustled past on their way to the feasting halls. There was a time when she had not thought elves could bustle, her first impression of them as regal, dignified beings had not lasted long after she had attended a few of their revels in the woods. Their delight in nature, and in the whole-hearted pursuit of the innocent pleasures of music, food and wine, were all things she happily shared in and enthusiastically took part of.

Thranduil had generously given her fine lodgings after their initial meeting, turning her over to the care of his chief servant Galion, where she was informed she could occupy herself in whatever way she saw fit, the king having decreed that she could work at any job she wished to, or none at all. He simply didn't care. This she found incredibly amusing, especially the way Galion said it, as he was able to imitate the airs and graces of his liege with almost perfect accuracy.

As such, she had spent her years drifting from one interest to another. First, she had spent several years in the gardens and fields, caring of the flowers and helping to plant and harvest crops, as needed. Next, she had spent time in the kitchens, honing her baking skills and learning how to make perfect loaves of bread that even made the elves praise her fine crusts. Next, it was the healing rooms, where she learned a few useful things about herbology, but lacking all magic, she would never be able to truly become any sort of healer, so soon gave up.

After that, she attacked the libraries with gusto, by that time having mastered both the Silvan and Sindarin spoken by the wood elves, and adding the ability to read and write it in short order, devouring any and every tome on the history of the elves that she could get her hands on. Some of them were very sad or downright shocking, and had her feeling just slightly better about some of the shameful history of mankind.

In such pursuits, twenty years had soon passed her by, and she found she was increasingly bored by the wardrobe choices offered by the elven seamstresses, so began to design and sew her own things, as she used to do when she could find nothing in the shops to suit her back home. Trips to the shoe makers followed, so she could have a fine pair of heels made to accompany her feast day frocks, and they were intrigued by the stilettos she showed them, and some other sketches and drawings she made in an attempt to achieve the perfect shoes.

Stopping, she lifted her foot out in front of her and admired the red leather on the high-heeled, strappy sandals the most gifted of the shoe makers had miraculously created for her. Three inches
high and beautiful enough to make her sigh in pleasure; her ankles had never looked so lovely. They were a perfect match for the gauzy, crimson gown she wore, which was layer upon layer of satin and tulle, slit shockingly high on either side to allow a range of movement, but with her dark, opaque hose she had brought from home which she had hoarded like a miser, she was still able to maintain enough modesty not to offend. Or so she hoped.

Slipping the loop of fabric off her wrist which held her train off the floor, she smoothed her dark hair back from her face a final time before opening the doors to the hall and stepping inside, smiling at the sea of golden lanterns glowing softly around the room and the elves everywhere dancing, eating, drinking and talking animatedly to each other. She moved out of the doorway and released an excited breath, finding the atmosphere contagious as she plucked a glass of wine from the serving area and winked at the brunette elf who was filling glasses for the endless waves of thirsty elves...and one thirsty woman.

Not having much of an appetite for food, she quickly finished her first glass of wine and soon acquired a second, finding one of her favorite plush chairs in a corner where she could watch the revelry unimpeded. Other than the King’s dais, it was one of the better seats to be had.

"Why do I always find you hiding in the corner, Lady Elizabeth? And wearing such a brightly colored gown, you should surely be out there dancing."

Tilting her head back to confirm the voice belonged to who she thought it did, she quickly rose and curtssied, then lifted her wine in salute and took a sip. "Your Royal Highness, you honor me by your notice and kind words."

He frowned and reached for her hand, bringing it to his lips for a kiss. "How many times must I ask you to call me Legolas?"

She smirked, unable to resist. "At least once more, my prince, as always."

He lifted a brow, a smile tugging at his mouth and she laughed. "Forgive me, Legolas, but you know I dearly love to tease you." She finished her wine and set the glass on one of the tables, turning to him expectantly.

"Do not apologize for something we both enjoy, my lady. Will you come and dance with me?"

"Certainly."

Reaching down, she quickly slipped the satin bracelet around her wrist, lifting the train of her skirt high enough off the floor to allow dancing, and showing off her newest shoes. Legolas eyed them with interest before reaching for her hand to lead her to the far side of the room.

"Is this another ensemble of your own design that you wear?"

He twirled her expertly into the sea of moving couples, leading her strongly in a dance much like the waltzes she so loved from back home. She smiled, happy there would be no worry about having her toes trodden on from a clumsy partner, as she had never before seen a clumsy elf, least of all the elegant Prince Legolas.

"Yes, I made this dress and designed the shoes to match. Do you think my fashions will ever catch on here?"

He laughed and spun her again. "I do not know, but this design you wear now is perhaps a bit risque for elves."
Elizabeth laughed in simple delight when he moved her effortlessly, enjoying the twirling dance just as much as the company. "But why? I am not showing any skin as none of the material on my legs is see-through..."

She glanced up into his amused blue eyes and he shook his head at her. "I am no expert on the clothing of females, but none of the eloth I have ever seen have worn slits up the sides of their gowns, that is all. It is possible my father may like it, however. If nothing else, he seems always entertained by your strange clothing."

"Well, that's a comfort, at least," she mused. "The approval of one king is worth more than the approval of ten thousand commoners."

Legolas laughed freely, drawing the looks of several of the nearby couples. "Why, Lady Elizabeth, how very like my father you sound."

"Where is King Thranduil, anyway?" She glanced up to the dais and immediately locked eyes with the Elvenking, who seemed to have suddenly appeared on his throne from one minute to the next. "Ah, he just materialized from thin air, as you all seem wont to do."

The prince gave her an indulgent look. "Or perhaps you are just remarkably unobservant, for I saw the king walk in and sit down."

Annoyed, she shot Legolas a flirtatious smile and fluttered her lashes. "I believe I was just too enthralled by the conversation and ethereal beauty of a certain prince to notice anything else."

"Why do you always say things you don't mean?" he asked with a sigh. "How will I ever know when to take you seriously, or should I assume all you say is a jest?"

She frowned. "Of course not. I'm not always teasing, just some of the time. And I wasn't jesting about your attractiveness or lovely personality either, even if it sounded like it," she said absently, her eyes straying back to a bored looking Thranduil, watching them.

Glancing back up at Legolas, she smiled genuinely to see him giving her a puzzled look. "You mentioned at the last feast that you wanted me to show you one of my favorite dances from my land, but are you sure you still want to learn it? It's probably very...provocative...by elven standards. I have no wish to corrupt you, dear prince."

"If you are attempting to make me blush, you will have to work much harder than that. I am overcome by curiosity to see this dance now, particularly if you deem it shocking," he murmured, leaning closer to speak his words against her ear.

She examined his face appraisingly. "You're really just a rebel at heart, aren't you? Careful with leaning too near me, Legolas, your father watches us with sharp eyes."

"Well I know it," he said with a pleased chuckle. "Since he looks so bored, perhaps we ought to give him something more to entertain." And so saying, he immediately led her from the dance floor and back out into the hallways beyond the throng and released her with a twinkle in his brilliant blue eyes. "Now, teach me this dance."

"And the final pose ends with my leg wrapped around your hip and you in a lunge, with your one
hand supporting my thigh and your other arm across my back holding me flush against you..." Biting her lip, she shook her head. "Actually, now it comes to it, I think it best if we skip that part entirely. No need to be too shocking all at once."

Legolas lifted a golden brow, and that was all the warning she had before he pulled her against him and lunged, effortlessly enacting what she had just described to perfection, causing her to suck in a surprised breath at his strong grip against her thigh.

"Like so?" he asked with a smug grin.

She pushed out of his arms and straightened with a small smile. "Casanova himself would be jealous," she smirked, continuing before he could inquire as to who Casanova might be.

"But surely you are satisfied now, Legolas, and do not intend to actually dance the Tango before your father and the entire kingdom? I have managed to avoid his anger these twenty-five years, and I would not like to invite his ire now."

He frowned, his eyes searching her face intently. "Has it truly been twenty-five years already since you came to live among us?" He tilted her face from one side to the other. "Yet, I see no difference in your appearance. I thought mortals aged more dramatically, for you must now be at least...forty-five years of age?"

She smiled mysteriously as she backed away several steps. "I am just a bit older than that, my friend, although it's never considered polite to ask a lady her age. Now, I shall do the entire dance for you once, but I will not temper my movements as I have been and that way you may better judge if this is truly a wise thing or not."

Elizabeth began the steps, humming one of her favorite pieces of music to tango to, adding back in the normal snap and rolls of her hips as she moved, flipping her long hair playfully as she swayed and allowing her gaze to fill with the passionate intensity that was an inherent part of such dancing.

Straightening from the final pose, she raised her brows questioningly, noting with satisfaction that he stared at her with parted lips and wide eyes, expecting he would abandon the scheme immediately.

"It's perfect," he breathed with a delighted grin, taking her hand and tugging her back into the hall.

The elves around them had clearly partaken liberally of the wine, their laughter louder and more free than usual, and the night had taken on a more pronounced air of gaiety than before.

Stopping by the wine table to gulp down two additional goblets of liquid courage, Elizabeth followed Legolas to where the musicians played. The very strong drink was doing an excellent job of making everything soft and hazy around the edges, and she swayed her hips side to side with the music, closing her eyes and smiling.

The prince spoke quietly to several of the musicians, singing them the same tune she had hummed to herself while dancing. He smiled his approval when they quickly picked up the melody and the familiar sounds of tango music filled the hall, lending a sultry air.

Legolas extended a hand and bowed slightly, eyes gleaming with anticipation. "Shall we dance, Lady Elizabeth? I believe my father is far enough into his cups now that he may even enjoy our performance, or perhaps ignore it entirely."

Slipping her hand into his, she took a fortifying breath, trying to quiet the nervous flipping in the pit of her stomach. She smiled hesitantly. "Are you really sure about this, Legolas?"
When he spun her into his arms and nodded to the musicians, she tried to ignore her trepidation and enjoy herself as they began to dance in earnest, the floor quickly clearing as none of the other elves knew the unfamiliar steps, but watched them with interest.

Keeping his eyes fixed on hers with the same intensity she had shown him when demonstrating, while they moved together to the sinuous and sensual steps of the Tango, she found herself pondering just what kinds of passion elves were capable of. Clearly, based on their histories, the kind of anger and covetousness which could lead to murder were not beyond them, making them seem a bit more...human; in that way, at least.

But what about physical desire? Did they even feel it? From what she had observed, they seemed generally friendly in their interactions with her and each other, but otherwise she found elves quite...sexless?

They were certainly different from any human courts she had moved in, where such debaucheries frequently took place as could cause a whore to blush, particularly in the courts of several of the Louis' of France. Although, many of the European courts were the same in their excesses and intrigues, some of them just hid it better than others.

Legolas dipped her unexpectedly, making her laugh and bringing an answering grin to his lips, which she suddenly found herself contemplating and wondering what it might be like to kiss him. The fine wine the King always provided for feasts coursing through her was doing away with her inhibitions, and she quite forgot herself, allowing more of her own hot-blooded tendencies to make an appearance, even going so far as to caress his cheek during one of the turns. Fortunately, it looked like just another part of the dance, and the prince did not seem to mind her familiarity.

If there were surprised gasps from any of the elves during their dance, the music managed to drown it out and Legolas finished the whole display with the full shock of the final pose, which he held Elizabeth in for several seconds before releasing her and bowing over her hand, then leading her back to the corner of the room after they both acquired fresh glasses of wine.

Elizabeth finally murmured a hasty farewell and slipped away. The weight of all the eyes on her had dimmed the pleasantness of the whole affair, and she knew that when she allowed herself to even acknowledge a thought of what it might be like to kiss the prince, she had made a grave error somewhere during the course of the evening.

Standing atop the highest walkway that allowed a mostly unobstructed view of the bright stars that the current feast was in honor of, she swirled the liquid in her goblet with a frown, unable to recall how many refills she had drunk.

"Too much wine makes fools of us all," she sighed.

"That is very true. Dorwinion is much stronger and finer than the usual fare, and you seem to have imbibed freely, judging by your very interesting...dance."

The Elvenking stood at the top of the steps behind her, looking at her with considering eyes.

"Your Majesty!" With a surprised gasp, she attempted a curtsy and nearly lost her balance close to
the edge. The King reached out and yanked her against him swiftly, her wine goblet clattering onto
the walkway beside her. Her hands automatically grasped handfuls of the rich robes across his chest
to anchor to.

Glancing back to the sheer edge and the blackness beneath, she stared up at him with wide eyes.
"How far down does that drop go?"

"Very far," he said with a slight lift of his regal brows. "You would not have survived the fall."

She breathed a laugh, nearly giddy with relief. "After all I have lived through, and the great distance
I have traveled to come to this faraway place... That would have been a truly ridiculous way to end.
I suppose you did not build your walkways with drunken human clumsiness in mind."

"What made you wander all the way up here?" He was staring at her with a face so still and void of
all emotion that it put her in mind of some vampire tales she had read, and she wondered if his skin
would feel cold and dead to the touch. Would his lips?

Shaking her head, she leaned more heavily against him, feeling a sudden wave of wine-fueled
dizziness. "I came to see the stars more clearly, as seems appropriate during a feast of starlight. Why
else?"

He removed one of his hands from her arms and grasped her chin, angling her face toward the
celestial glow from the heavens to his satisfaction.

"There is truly nothing more beautiful than the pure light of stars." He released her chin and reached
for a lock of her dark hair, letting it slip through his fingers, his expression what might almost have
been called brooding. "You are rather lovely for a mortal. I suppose I am able to see why my son is
drawn to you," he mused.

"Sire, I assure you that..." He placed a finger over her lips, and they parted slightly at the unexpected
warmth of his touch there.

"I am aware you worry over my reaction to that dance Legolas led you in, since you refused to look
at me the entire time, but you need not. My son has been amusing himself for some time by engaging
in things that he thinks will shock or embarrass me. It is a kind of game he plays, trying to wring a
reaction from me."

Elizabeth frowned in confusion. "That sounds like the behavior of an adolescent."

"Yes, precisely. Legolas is, in many ways, still more child than adult."

Thranduil's hand came to rest on her shoulder, with his fingers curled loosely around her throat and
his thumb brushing against the fluttering pulse there. It occurred to her that she had never felt more
vulnerable or like prey than she did in that moment, swallowing against a dry throat and struck by the
absolute alienness of the being before her.

"But I am no child," she whispered, looking from his lips to his eyes where a flicker of something
grew in intensity. A kind of madness overtook her and she wanted nothing more than to drown in the
warm touch at her neck and press her lips to any part of his skin that she could reach.

He stared into her eyes with such focus that her heart began to beat faster in response, the movement
of his thumb achingly slow but never ceasing against her pulse.

"No. There is nothing resembling a child in your eyes." He tilted his head slightly. "You fear me."
She shook her head, unable to break the hold of his gaze on her. "I... I do not fear you." But perhaps I fear myself while near you, she added silently. A shiver went through her at the feel of the King's body against her own. "Do elves never...kiss?"

If her eyes had not been locked so tightly onto his face, she might not have noticed the very slight lift on the one side of his mouth, indicating a subtle amusement.

"Certainly. Have you truly thought otherwise?"

Blushing, she finally managed to drop her eyes to the rich fabric covering his chest directly in front of her. "I have never once seen any elves kiss or embrace. It made me wonder."

"Elves are intensely private when it comes to intimacy. Even to kiss one's mate in the presence of others would be considered very poor form. But why this sudden interest in such things?" He frowned slightly.

"Look at me," he commanded, and she obeyed instantly, unable to deny him anything. He searched her eyes, immediately recognizing what lay there in the gray-green depths. "Ah, I see." His mouth twisted consideringly. "You desire for me to kiss you."

The way he stared at her made her wonder what he saw when he looked at her. Were humans perhaps physically revolting to elves? Was she?

"No," she blurted, then paused when she saw him lift a single, golden brow in disbelief. "That is to say, not if you find the prospect repulsive." She looked down at where she clutched his robes, forcing her hands to finally relax and release him, preparing to step away. Her hands flattened against his chest when his arm unexpectedly glided around her back, pulling her closer.

"I have never kissed a mortal," he mused quietly. "Although, I suddenly do not find the prospect entirely...unpleasant." He tilted her head back with gentle pressure from the same thumb he had been using to torment her pulse point, and slowly lowering his own head, he met her lips with his own.

She sighed in pleasure at the first brush of his warm lips, sinking deeper into his arms as the scent and the feel of his body surrounded her in a welcoming cocoon. Already, he was ravishing her mouth masterfully, the taste of wine and spice on his tongue a heady mix against her own. Her fingers stole across his shoulder and up his neck to the delicate point of his ear, which she stroked ever so gently in fascination. His ragged exhalation of breath gave her a thrill, even moreso when he jerked her tighter against him and kissed her more ardently. Had she ever dared to think elves sexless? What madness! Never had she felt such a frighteningly deep well of passion from any man.

At that moment, Elizabeth learned that an entire lifetime could be lived within the space of a single kiss from the Elvenking. There was an initial burst of joy in her heart, like an explosion that rocked and shook her, soul-deep, and different than anything she had ever experienced in all her days.

It slowly gave way to a consuming warmth, a feeling that made mere physical desire alone seem weak and pale by comparison, and she wondered if that was what elven love might feel like. She basked in it for a small eternity, her spirit spinning and twirling in and with another she knew frolicked beside her. From their dance came a newer, smaller presence, which joined and completed the circle that had somehow been lacking before.

Next, mingled with the warmth, she began to feel a sorrow at the very core of her person, a deep grief that scraped against her heart like shards of cutting glass and bludgeons against her bones. Her soul was rent forcefully apart in all directions, pulling her full of thinness and holes, the pain far and away beyond the very worst physical agony she had ever endured and she moaned against his mouth
in helpless protest, shattering all the sensations flooding her when he pulled away. Breaking whatever spell had woven its way around them but still echoing with the faint ache of passion, they stared at each other in confusion and shock, both their cheeks wet with tears.

"What was that?" Her hand shook when she raised it to press against her pounding heart.

Thranduil still stared at her with his lips parted and eyes wide in either horror or shock, but she couldn't discern which. He touched his own cheek, then stared at the wetness on his fingers like he had never seen such a thing before.

Elizabeth's gaze fell to the ground in front of her, drawn immediately back into reliving the whirl of agonizing pain she had just escaped and a sob spilled from her throat and fresh tears wended down her cheeks. She pressed a hand to her mouth in an attempt to stop the sounds of her grieved weeping, but she seemed to have no control over the overpowering emotions that continued to run riot through her.

Having quickly gained control of himself, the king shook her sharply by the shoulders. "Elizabeth, look at me. Be calm and listen," he commanded, but she continued to cry brokenly with bowed head, the sounds echoing deep within him, tearing at his insides.

Quickly speaking the words of a sleeping spell, he caught her before she crumpled and turned to retrace his steps back down the meandering stairwell, the mortal woman held securely in his arms.

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Elizabeth slowly returned to consciousness by the pounding drums that beat from the inside of her skull, taunting her with the previous night's foolishness of far too much wine. Lifting a hand to rub at the ache, she sighed.

"Bloody hell," she breathed in English, "I'm a total git."

"There is a pitcher of water beside you. I suggest you drink what you can of it," came the Sindarin response from across the room.

Lifting her head, Elizabeth stared at the female elf sitting quietly reading in the chair that faced her bed, one of the healers she recognized from her brief stint among them.

"You're Lhînis, right?"

Closing her book, the elleth stood gracefully, smoothing her skirt with her free hand and giving Elizabeth an assessing look that she was sure had been worn by every nurse through all the ages.

"Yes, that is correct, Lady Elizabeth. After you drink your water, I will give you a tonic for your head pain."

Elizabeth made a noise of acknowledgment, already halfway through her second glass. Lowering it and accepting a smaller vial, which she threw back like a shot, she winced at the taste and looked questioningly at Lhînis.

"How did I get to my rooms?"

Lhînis shot her a disapproving look that made Elizabeth stiffen, disliking the judgement she could feel from the healer.

"If you do not remember, I'm afraid I cannot tell you. I was commanded by the King to come and attend you. You were sleeping on your bed when I arrived, so I changed you out of your party attire and have watched over you while you slept."

Throwing back her covers, Elizabeth stood and smiled. "Thank you for your excellent care, Lhînis, but other than a bit of a headache I feel very well indeed. No need to trouble yourself further as I'm sure you have more important business to attend."

Inclining her head, Lhînis half turned, then paused. "If you have need of further care, you are welcome to find me in the healing rooms."

Elizabeth murmured a polite response and sighed in relief as she heard the door in her sitting room
close, rubbing a hand across her face as all the memories of the night before came flooding back, her face flushing uncomfortably.

She thought it would be nice to take a long walk through the woods to have a chance to clear her mind, but barring that, perhaps she might even be able to ride. Cheered at the thought, she turned to her closet to dress.

Having found no horses readily available for her to ride, she turned instead onto an unfamiliar path leading north well beyond the Elvenking's Hall, enchanted by the idea of exploring something completely new. Most of the elves tended to stay more south and west of the great caverns, but she desired only solitude and quiet, far away from others.

Shafts of sunlight filtered down through the dense canopy, highlighting the brighter colors of the few flowers that managed to bloom amidst the greater gloom of the forest known as Mirkwood. Elizabeth had never called it that aloud, as she well knew the name was disliked by the residents of King Thranduil's kingdom, but she certainly thought it as she walked among the trees.

She had been in many forests, both vast and small, but never one that felt so sick, as this part of the woods did. It would not have surprised her to have heard the trees moaning in some sort of ghostly wail, with the amount of spider's webbing that hung across them in choking sheets. It looked like some foul darkness had vomited across the green leaves in an attempt to choke the very life from them.

Shivering as a frisson of awareness chased down her spine, she slipped the dagger out of the sheathe strapped across her back and turned in a slow circle. There was something concealed among the trees, and it was undeniably watching her. She knew the feeling very well, and she always listened to her instincts; they warned her of danger without fail, and gave her time to prepare before it struck.

Crouching down while her eyes continued to sweep the canopy above her, she pulled a second dagger from her boot, certain she would need both blades for what was coming, the feeling of approaching menace growing more urgent and oppressive.

Over the years, she had only actually seen one of the giant spiders that had dared venture close during a day of gathering needed plants from the woods, and she had been informed by the elves that it was quite a small one, despite being larger than a horse. Shuddering in revulsion, she drew a fortifying breath. She had always detested insects, and she couldn't think of anything less endearing than monster-sized spiders.

"Come out and face me, toxikí skýla! (Greek: toxic bitch) My dagger has a sharp point just for you."

A branch snapped loudly to her left and she whirled, eyes narrowed as a spider raced toward her on swift legs, and she crouched slightly waiting for it to reach her. Just as swiftly it went still and began to fall through the branches with a white arrow protruding from the head of the thing.

Legolas jumped in front of her, rapidly firing arrows from his longbow at something she couldn't see deeper in the canopy. All went silent as he froze, head cocked as he listened intently, before he relaxed and straightened, stowing his bow across his back in a cleverly made clip that held it.

"The other two have run off. It is fortunate, indeed, that I was seeking you and followed your trail here. Had I come even a quarter of an hour later I shudder to think of what would have become of
you." He stared at her with troubled eyes as she put her daggers away, a smile of unconcern on her lips.

"Your sudden heroic intervention was appreciated and very impressive to watch, my prince, but hardly necessary. I am well able to defend myself should the need arise, particularly against nasty, overgrown pests."

He stepped closer, and the stern look he leveled at her was astonishingly reminiscent of his sire. "Elizabeth, there were three spiders hunting you! Do not jest where your life is concerned, for it is precious to me."

Biting down on the flippant retort that was often her automatic response to stress, she forced herself to be silent a moment while she studied his face, clearly seeing the genuine worry he felt, even through the stoic mask most of the elves wore. It was an astonishing revelation that her death truly would have given him pain.

Their interactions over the years had been infrequent, usually occurring mostly during the feast times that the King delighted in, but they had increased recently, with Legolas sometimes seeking her out just to talk. Here was one person among the kingdom of elves who actually seemed to care if she lived or died. She looked down as she mastered her emotions, finally glancing up at him with a small smile.

"Legolas, I apologize for worrying you. Please know your friendship is equally precious to me, but you really must believe me when I say I am not so easy to kill." She reached out and squeezed his hand in hers and watched while he slowly lifted it and pressed his lips to her knuckles for several seconds before he sighed and released her.

"I will retrieve my arrows quickly and we will return to the halls together," he said firmly, while walking to where the spider had fallen.

She grinned at his retreating back. Apparently, princes were the same everywhere, whether man or elf; they did not ask, but always commanded.

"I can feel you laughing at me from here, Lady Elizabeth." He sounded exasperated, which managed to make her giggle before she stifled it.

"I'm not laughing at you, Your Royal Highness, merely noting some similarities between you and other princes I have known, which I admit I find amusing." She had wandered over to the dead spider, watching as he swiftly recovered his arrows, inspecting them to see if they were still sound.

Glancing up, he smirked as he put away the last of his arrows. "Dare I ask in what way I remind you of these other princes you speak of?"

She moved one of the hairy spider legs gingerly with the toe of her boot. "It is merely the way you command me to your will, that is all. I never knew a prince who asked a woman for anything."

He frowned. "You make me sound a callous brute. Did I not ask you to teach me the dance yestereve? You could have said no."

She laughed outright and crossed her arms. "Had I said no, you would have pestered me over it, worrying at the matter like a dog with a bone until I said yes. I do at least know you well enough now that you must admit it."

"Must I?" He smiled beguilingly with a bright flash of teeth that made her heart give a single, hard thump before starting to gallop. Her eyes widened and she shook her head.
"That smile of yours is a powerful weapon, as I'm sure you well know. Take care who you unleash it on."

They fell into step together as they retraced the path she had taken when she remembered what he had said previously. "You mentioned you were looking for me before. Was there something you needed, or were you just checking to see that I survived the wine?"

He smiled faintly but he seemed slightly hesitant. "I overheard an interesting bit of gossip from two of my father's guards and thought to come ask you about it."

Stomach plunging into her toes, she bit the inside of her cheek and glanced at him askance. "What did you hear?"

"That the King carried you to your quarters and remained there with you for some time after." His face was carefully void of expression when she stopped walking and stared at him in horror.

"Legolas," she gasped, "I did not have sex with your father!"

His lips parted in surprise and a blush crept up his face. "Nay, Elizabeth, I...did not think..."

"I was on one of the higher walkways," she continued, as though he hadn't spoken. "So I could see the stars, when King Thranduil happened on me. I attempted a curtsy, but drunk as I was, I nearly toppled over the edge and he caught me. I must have passed out then for that is all I remember until I woke in my own bed with a rather stern female healer keeping watch over me."

She glossed over the conversation and kiss she and the Elvenking had shared, having done her best to forget about it and determined to never bring it up to anyone, ever, including herself. It was clear they had both drunk too much wine, with foolish behavior as the result, combined with some strange elven magic. She would forget it all. She had to.

Sighing, she looked away from his frowning face. "You don't believe me, do you?"

"Of course I believe you." He stepped closer. "What manner of friend would I be if I mistrusted your word?"

Elizabeth shrugged, a world-weary and bitter twist to her lips. "A typical one?"

He lifted a hesitant hand, finally cupping her cheek, causing her to meet his earnest blue eyes again. "Do not doubt my heart, Elizabeth Seymour. My feelings for you are true, and I would never betray your trust."

Tears filled her eyes and she gave him a watery smile, which he returned with a soft one of his own. She closed the small gap between them and rested her forehead against his chest while he wrapped her in a gentle hug. How long had it been since she had allowed anyone to get close enough to make her care for them? The pain of loss was always too great a risk for her to chance it, but- Legolas was a different kind of friend, and worth risking her heart for.

He stiffened and she looked up at his face in inquiry. He stepped away, dropping his arms from her. "Someone approaches," he said in a whisper, turning to look down the path where an elf was soon seen.

The ellon's eyes slid over Elizabeth and he bowed to Legolas. "My lord. Your father, the King, commands you to appear before him."

A slight narrowing of the prince's eyes was the only change in his facial expression as he turned and
extended a hand to her. "Thank you, Garaven. Come, Lady Elizabeth, let us make haste."

Garaven turned and quickly ran back the way he had come, while Legolas and Elizabeth followed at a brisk walk.

Thranduil was restless.

Restless— and angry.

To the casual eye, he appeared relaxed and without a care. He wore some of his finest robes, and a mithril circlet rested above a brow that was smooth and clear. Sprawled elegantly on his favorite chair in the sitting room of his private chambers, his face betrayed no emotion as he stared into a crackling fire. But inside… Inside him a storm raged and frustration festered.

He’d spent time walking aimlessly through the caverns since the feast end, eventually craving the calming touch of starlight and the quiet of solitude when he discovered the strange woman, who seemed to have been seeking the same.

A muscle in his jaw tightened, his face finally showing movement under the strain of his thoughts.

Why?

What error in judgement had caused him to ever touch that mortal? She was not what she seemed, that much was certain, but how had she done it? Was she even aware of whatever strange power dwelt inside her and what she had taken from him? Had she come to his kingdom to secretly try to destroy him?

But no, if she were evil he would have felt it within her and known long before, and he would never have had any attraction for her. He wasn't truly attracted to her, in any case; though he would admit her eyes were fine and bright, with hair dark as night, contrasting with pale skin that glowed like the light of the stars.

He shifted in his seat, seeking a more comfortable position. It was undoubtedly too much wine and watching her dance in the way she had. That enthralling way she had moved her body, particularly the supple roll and sway of her hips, almost like...

His finger twitched against the wooden armrest as he abandoned the thought unfinished. Perhaps if he just avoided her for a few more decades, she would die and it would no longer be a concern. If he could not undo his mistake, he would at least be sure never to repeat it.

Legolas entered the King's chambers and waited, his hands hanging relaxed at his sides while he studied his father's face. In his life, he had spent much time pondering the slightest change in the
muscles around his sire's mouth, or the way his lids would lower slowly over his eyes and how those small changes would preface a certain type of emotion.

There was a slight tightness around his eyes currently that almost always foretold extreme anger. As he was musing over what circumstance might have put his father into a fury, the Elvenking turned his head just enough to look at him fully.

"Where have you been?"

The King's voice was soft, almost gentle sounding. A bad sign. Clasping his hands behind his back, Legolas met his gaze steadily. "I was in the woods, along the northern path."

"And why were you there, my son?"

"I went seeking a friend and ended killing a spider, but there were two others that ran off before I could get them. I thought perhaps to take warriors tomorrow and clear any nests there."

King Thranduil narrowed his eyes, studying the prince's face. "Which friend did you go seeking in that part of the forest?"

Legolas resisted the urge to sigh. "The Lady Elizabeth, Adar."

"Why would you pursue the mortal, Legolas?"

This time he did sigh, unhappy with the direction the questions being asked were heading. "She is my friend. I was concerned for her. I wanted to know she was well. I heard talk that she was taken to her rooms unconscious after the feast, and as you say, she is mortal."

Thranduil stood to his feet and walked to his balcony, looking out across the open space, his back to his son.

"And did she tell you of what occurred to cause that outcome?"

The prince hesitated, then walked over to join his father on the balcony. "She told me you saved her from a fall, then she lost consciousness due to too much wine and awoke in her own rooms."

The King was quiet for several moments and as still as a statue. "Keep your distance from her. There is something not right about that woman, and until I discover what it is I do not want you in her clutches."

Legolas blinked and waited for his anger to pass before responding. "Was there anything else, or do I have your leave to retire?"

Thranduil raised a brow and gave his son a measuring look.

"Yes, go."

Turning on his heel, Legolas stalked silently out of the room, his jaw clenched stubbornly and firmly resolved to ignore his father's wishes regarding his friend.
Chapter 5

Elizabeth wandered onto the practice fields where guards trained, as well as any others who wished to hone their skills, a place that she seldom visited. The prince was sparring with one of the guardsmen she did not know. They both used long knives, their movements a blur of acrobatics and a level of agility and grace that had her shaking her head in wonder. It had been weeks since she had spoken with Legolas and she smiled in pleasure at the sight of her friend.

After watching the elves for a few minutes, she walked further into the training grounds, continuing until she came to an empty area with targets set up in the distance.

With her desire to move freely in the woods on her own, she felt she needed to brush up on her skills that she had used very little over the past century. Living again in a culture where martial prowess was not only desirable, but often necessary for survival, she finally decided to refresh her small store of knowledge and spend some time in practice.

Adjusting her belt where her various shuriken were concealed, she drew out an eight pointed star and studied the distant target. She was most certainly out of practice and didn't want to lose her weapons in the brush if she could help it, so she walked a bit closer to the target in the hopes that she would more easily be able to consistently hit it.

Drawing a breath, she closed her eyes and focused on her breathing, feeling the weight of the shuriken she held, then opened her eyes and threw it immediately. It landed down and to the right of exact center, but she shrugged, pleased with the effort. She pulled out two more and threw them, one after the other, both overhand, getting closer to the center each time. After throwing all of them and retrieving them twice, she moved a little further from the target each time.

Pulling out her four-sided stars, she studied the target again, looking at where her latest throws were grouped and closed her eyes. Only after she heard the third land did she open them, grinning when she saw they were all at the center of the target.

"Do you always throw your weapons with your eyes closed, Elizabeth?" Legolas paced up next to her with his usual fluid grace and looked from the target, then back to her and smiled. She shrugged and walked to retrieve her weapons and he fell into step beside her.

"Only when I'm trying to relearn what I haven't used in quite a long time. Sometimes my eyes can distract me from what I'm aiming for."

He pulled an eight-sided and a four-sided shuriken from the target and examined them. "These aren't killing weapons, so what do you use them for, distraction?" He fingered one of the sharpened points and tested the weight against his palm.

Elizabeth tucked the last of the shuriken away in the slip pockets on her belt and nodded. "Yes, exactly. They are used to harry your enemy from a distance, and since I have no ranged weapon skills, I use throwing stars until I am close enough for my sword."

He handed the metal stars back to her and watched while she tucked them into the slip pockets on her belt holder, beside the rest.

"I am glad to see you here, as I've noticed you've been spending more time in the woods. It's wise to
be prepared for danger. Do you have a sword of your own, or shall I find you one to practice with?"

"I do have a sword of my own in my rooms, but I haven't used it in so long, that I thought I should start small and work my way up to it." She wrinkled her nose impishly. "Perhaps I'll feel ready for sword practice next year, or maybe even the year after that. No need to rush, really."

He gave her a wry look and took her by the elbow, already pulling her back the way she had come in earlier. "Let us go and retrieve your weapon from your quarters and I'll help you train. You'll feel much better after you get past the first time, and then it won't be so daunting."

She was forced to a half jog to keep up with his long-legged stride and shot him a look of exasperation. "For pity's sake, Legolas, can you please temper your pace? My legs are a good deal shorter than yours!"

Smirking, he slowed to match her much smaller strides. "Forgive me, Lady Elizabeth, I've forgotten how very diminutive you are."

"I'll have you know that I'm quite an average height for a woman," she said indignantly. "You're the one that's freakishly tall, you and King Thranduil."

He shrugged, his smile just shy of smug. "I fall a little short of my father's height, but neither of us are considered 'freakishly tall', as you claim, *tithin hiril.*" (*little/tiny lady*)

"God's teeth, I'm not a pygmy," she muttered in English, then switched back to Sindarin at his questioning look. "Here we are." Pushing open the door to her apartments, she breezed into the sitting room and headed straight for the far corner, taking her sword from where it rested on a low stand across the table.

Legolas looked around in interest, stopping to touch the gold pen sitting on her writing desk curiously, then fingered other small items scattered there.

"Here it is," she said with a triumphant smile, lifting her weapon in emphasis.

He turned and held his hand out. "May I?"

Nodding, she gave it to him and stepped back so he would have space to draw it. He examined the sheath, then slowly pulled the blade out and swung it a couple of times with a roll of his wrist, then grinned.

"This is a very fine sword, Elizabeth, in a style that is unknown to me. Was this forged in your country?"

She gave a small shake of her head. "No, in a country far from mine called Nihon, the same place my throwing stars come from. They are masters in the art of the sword, and in the forging of katana, which is their name for a blade like mine. Great warriors hail from there, and it was from one such that I learned the sword drawing and cutting techniques I fight with."

He swung the sword again and tilted his head, bringing the steel length close and sniffing. "This smells just like..."

"Cloves," she said with a laugh. "It's part of the oil I use to preserve the blade, as I was taught to do."

Smiling broadly, he re-sheathed the sword and held it out to her. "Let us go and reacquaint you with your fine weapon, my lady, for I am eager to see it in your hands."
She took it and turned back toward the door. "You are very generous to offer your help, but I do hope you don't expect much. I'm not some warrior goddess or any such thing."

He laughed, shooting her a considering look. "I will reserve judgement until I see what you're capable of. You know how to hit a stationary target from a distance, but that tells me nothing about your sword skills."

They arrived back at the practice yards quickly and Legolas led her to a quiet area with few other elves and stood back.

"Show me the kinds of strikes you were taught, and we'll go from there."

Nodding, she took the stance for a battō-jutsu, hand hovering just above the hilt. Moving in a flash, she drew her sword and slashed upwards, the movement completed in a split second. Re-sheathing her sword, she repeated the quick-draw slash, but spun immediately into a side-slash, chaining several moves together in a kata she had been taught by her samurai master. After several repeats of the battō, and more chained, spinning strikes, she sheathed her sword with a click and finally looked at the elf.

He was standing with his arms crossed and brows furrowed. She wasn't sure if that meant he was horrified at how pitiful her skills were and he was trying to find a polite way to tell her, or…

"You have surprisingly good speed for a woman, and there is skill evident in your movement, although I have never seen a style like yours." He grinned. "Perhaps you may turn out to be something of a warrior goddess with a sword, after all. Come, teach me some of your style, and then we can train together."

She released a gusty breath and grinned back. "That sounds delightful."

Elizabeth hurried back along the path toward the halls as the sun set and the light continued to fade. She had wandered farther than she intended, lost in the beauty of the day, but now she was feeling rather foolish for that choice.

It wasn't worry over any danger that was of particular concern, although that was certainly something to consider; but the fact that it got so utterly dark after the sun disappeared and she might not be able to see to find her way home.

She broke into a run, squinting to see the path ahead of her, stopping after ten or more minutes had passed. The light was gone, and there wasn't any help for it. She held her hand up before her face, unable to even make out the shapes of all five of her fingers.

"God's bones," she muttered sullenly. Holding her hand out in front of her to keep from smacking into a tree, she started forward again, walking slowly. A night owl hooted from close by, making her jump, then laugh in relief.

"Hello, is anyone there?" she called loudly, hoping to stumble onto a patrol, swiveling her head around when she heard rustling in the leaves. But elves moved silently…
The hair rose on the back of her neck and chills rippled across her arms. Moving her hand closer to her sword hilt, she froze, listening. Feeling more than hearing the movement, she drew her sword in a fast strike, cutting through something at the same time she felt herself pierced by what she realized was a giant spider's bite.

"Filius canis!" *(son of a bitch)* she growled in Latin, slashing again at the things in the dark when a second attack of venom pierced her.

Thranduil sat atop his high throne, listening to Galion drone on about some hiccup in the most recent delivery from Esgaroth, or some such. He was distracted by other thoughts and musings, and not really interested in listening to his steward.

The coming of spring always brought a restlessness and need to spend time in his woods, reconnecting to the renewal of life in the never-ending cycle of things. He had nearly decided to order Galion to plan an impromptu gathering for any that wished to spend time deep in the forest as he did, when one of his guards strode in and bowed.

Gaze sharpening, he lifted a hand to cut Galion off. "You may go, Galion. I will hear more of your difficulties at another time." After his steward bowed and withdrew, the Elvenking turned expectant eyes on the guard.

"My Lord, you ordered if anything strange were ever noted of the Lady Elizabeth, to inform you immediately. There has been a report of something very strange that occurred after dark yestereve." He paused, and the king narrowed his eyes impatiently. The guard hurried to deliver the rest of his report.

"While walking in the woods, she was observed having been poisoned by two spiders when they set upon her suddenly, yet she killed them before we could aid her. She made no visit to the healing rooms, and has thus far shown no ill effects or indeed any sign of their venom."

When the guard fell silent, Thranduil tapped a finger lightly against the arm of his throne. He had not set eyes on the woman in many months, but had her watched very closely, annoyed by the fact that Legolas refused to heed him where Elizabeth was concerned.

This was the latest in a series of unusual or unexplainable occurrences that had been brought to his attention regarding her, and he was resolved now to get to the bottom of it. He knew she was hiding something from him, but she would be made to reveal her secrets or suffer for it; his patience was at an end.

"Have her brought before me at once."

Not ten minutes had passed before the woman was escorted into his presence, clearly dressed to go riding, her eyes meeting his warily.

"Your Majesty," she murmured uncertainly, bowing. "You summoned me?"

Walking slowly and deliberately down the steps from his throne, he stalked toward her menacingly.
"I have been informed that you shake off spider venom as though it were nothing, as well as other fantastical and impossible things." Turning his back deliberately, he slowly paced to the base of his throne and whirled to face her, his face harsh and eyes cold.

"You will explain yourself at once, mortal," he said, in a deadly serious voice that made her think of the dungeons and beheadings Legolas had once mentioned, and she swallowed convulsively, steeling herself to speak.

"That is where your assumptions have always been wrong regarding me. I was born a mortal, certainly, but now I am immortal, my king. It's one of the reasons I wished to live here, to be close to others who I share a kinship with in that way."

He scoffed and narrowed his eyes. "Have you finally taken leave of the last of your senses? You have always been an unusual mortal, I grant you, but you are a mortal nonetheless."

She searched his face carefully, but by the stubborn set of his jaw and the implacable look in his blue eyes, she knew he would be unlikely to believe without seeing. Sighing quietly, she pushed up the sleeve of her riding jacket and reached for her dagger and pulled it out.

"I see you refuse to be swayed by my words, so I will simply show you." She extended her arm in front of her, so the white expanse of bared skin was clearly visible. Meeting his cautious gaze, her eyes bore into his as she tried to convey the earnestness of what she was saying, hoping he would not continue to think her out of her wits.

"I was born in the country of England, on the 7th day of September in the year 1560 as they reckon time in my lands, the third child and only daughter of the Duke and Duchess of Somerset."

While she spoke, she slit her arm with the dagger, from wrist to elbow, where as soon as the blade passed through the skin it immediately closed, leaving no wound behind but only the red blood that was shed.

"I have been alive now, for four hundred and eighty years."

She poised the dagger with the point touching her abdomen, just below her ribs. Thranduil tensed, uncertain where her crazed display would end. She lifted her chin and glared into his eyes.

"And I say I am immortal, for I do not die."

Her gasp of pain sounded loud in his ears and echoed in the cavern when she plunged the dagger deep into her belly, and she faltered back a step before sinking to her knees, her breathing labored. He stood rooted to the floor, his lips parted in shock at what she had done.

"Nay, Elizabeth!"

The anguished cry of the Prince of the Greenwood echoed even more loudly through the halls when he ran to her, knelt and swiftly pulled her into his arms, his eyes full of distress as he stared helplessly at the dagger and her blood. He caressed her face as his eyes filled with tears. His voice fell to a mere whisper as he examined where she had stabbed herself, for it was a fatal wound and it made his heart cry out.

"What have you done?"

She looked up at him with eyes full of remorse. "Legolas, I regret you came and saw this, as it was not my intention to give you pain, but it was necessary to convince the King of the truth of my words."
She looked across the way to where Thranduil still stood, his frozen mask firmly in place, showing no emotion or any hint of his thoughts as he watched them. Pulling the dagger free, she gasped again at the fresh pain before she allowed the weapon to clatter to the floor. She reached for the hem of her riding jacket and pulled it up, keeping her eyes on Legolas.

"Examine the wound now, my prince, and fear no more for my life."

Reaching out, he wiped away the blood from the bare skin of her belly and discovered the wound was gone, with no sign whatever that she had even been pierced. He met her eyes in surprised wonder.

"But how is this possible? How can you heal so swiftly from what would kill any other woman?"

"Something I drank," she murmured.

Pulling her clothing back into place she made to rise and Legolas helped her to her feet. Elizabeth looked from his eyes to the inscrutable gaze of the Elvenking, hesitating briefly as she ordered her thoughts to tell the story she told to only a few people throughout the centuries.

"In every land there are tales and legends. Whispers of the miraculous or unexplainable. Many such stories are merely the ramblings of drunken minds and wishful thinking. But some..." She turned to look at Legolas and smiled.

"Some of them are true. My brother Edward and I, along with three of his friends, chased such a legend. We hired a ship to take us to where it was said an island would appear briefly out of the foggy mists at a specific time during the harvest moon's cycle when certain stars aligned. We did not truly believe we would find anything, but the prospect was exciting, and we were foolish young nobles with plenty of gold and well able to indulge in whatever whim took us."

Her eyes rested on the King’s face, but it was apparent from the cloudiness of her gaze that it was not him she was seeing.

"We saw it," she whispered, "the island... On the third night we searched, it was suddenly there. The sailors on the ship were terrified and wished to flee, but enough gold will almost always buy a man's obedience." She shook her head and smiled ruefully.

"The five of us took a small boat and rowed to the island. We were frightened, but the excitement of a new discovery was far greater than our fear. It did not take us long to find the enchanted pool that was at the center of the island." She looked at Thranduil with wonder-filled eyes.

"It sang to me. The water."

Thranduil paced closer to the pair so he could stare directly down into her eyes. "What did it sing?"

She lifted a shoulder helplessly. "It wasn't- audible to the ear. But such beautiful music. I heard it somehow...here. " She placed a hand on her chest, over her heart.

His eyes narrowed as many things about her suddenly became clear to him.

"Magic."

"Yes, for surely there is no other explanation. It sang to me and bade me drink. The water was such a shade of blue that I have never seen outside of that place, so very alluring. We drank and slept, then awoke and drank more, endlessly thirsty for the aching sweetness of that water." She paused, her head tilting.
"For how long this went on I could not say, as time existed very differently there. It felt as brief as a moment yet as long and drawn out as a century." She shook her head, not able to properly articulate what she herself could not fully comprehend.

"After a time, we woke satisfied and wanted no more water, but we were all very different. Somehow, we were...more. In every way. More physically beautiful, more vibrant, our minds also keener, and all our senses sharper than before. When we returned to the ship we had hired, we learned we had been gone a full day and night, and there was an attempted mutiny among the crew. Some wished to leave us and flee the island, while others, including the captain, who killed two of the men before his authority was reestablished, ordered to wait, for we were nobles and if they had returned without us, they feared their lives would be forfeit."

She clasped her hands together and glanced at Legolas, then back to the King. "And that is all, really. Since that time I am as I demonstrated, able to recover quickly from any injury, no matter how severe, nor do I age."

"What happened to the others?" King Thranduil demanded, already sensing what she had not yet said. "Your brother."

Pain and grief crossed her features and she closed her eyes for a brief moment. "He died in battle over a hundred years later, fighting for another king in another war, for war never ends in the lands of men. As to the others, I never knew what became of them after my brother's death, for they were his companions and I never came to know them well."

"But if he was also as you are," Legolas began hesitantly, but pressed onward, wanting to know just how far her healing could extend. "What was able to kill him?"

"He was beheaded," she said quietly. "For not even magic water can heal such a thing."

With puckered brow, Legolas reached out a comforting hand and grasped her shoulder. "Forgive me for asking, but I needed to know exactly what you can endure and what you cannot."

She drew in a slow breath and gave him a shrewd look, a faint glimmer of her usual humor in her eyes. "Should I expect you to have neck armor made for me without delay, followed by an order never to remove it?"

Legolas laughed softly, catching the slight lift of his father's lips.

"But this is wondrous news as I need no longer live in dread of your imminent loss! Why did you not tell us before?"

Elizabeth blushed, dropping her eyes to the floor. "I have spent most of my life trying to conceal my strangeness, and I assumed you would just...know, or very quickly figure it out. Elves are magical beings of myth and legend where I come from, for none exist there. To find my way here, I had to follow a trail of stories and sightings that ended when I sailed my vessel through a thick fog to the shores of Middle-earth."

She glanced around again and her eyes settled on Thranduil and the magnificent figure he cut, with his flowing golden hair, great height and otherworldly beauty.

"You look like angels come down from heaven to my eyes," she whispered. "Although you lack the pure white wings from the stories I heard as a child."

Thranduil smiled in amusement. "Elves have never had wings. We are neither eagles nor dragons."
Her mouth formed a perfect O as she stared at him. "So... That's true as well. Dragons really exist here?"

"Yes," he said, half turning toward his throne, "and you best pray you never meet one. You may go now and clean yourself up. We will speak further at another time."

Her story explained much for him and provided many answers, but presented new thoughts and questions that he needed time to mull over and consider.

She half bowed to his retreating back, then turned and walked out of the throne room, Legolas walking silently next to her.

~o~
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Just a quick note here: for the purposes of this story, Smaug does not just spend time hibernating on a treasure pile, but goes out on occasion to pick up some take away dinner, and hit the town. ;)

Elizabeth galloped her horse as quickly as the beast would run, as though every monster in Middle-earth pursued her, when she came suddenly upon the King's riding party leaving the forest just as she was trying to enter it.

The wild look in her eye and the way she kept glancing back the way she had come, as well as the lather of the horse she had ridden so hard made the Elvenking instantly alert, and he walked his great stag close to catch the reins of her horse from her hands and bring it alongside his own.

"What is it? What have you seen that frightens you so?"

Her eyes grew wide again in remembered terror. "I saw a dragon, Sire, red, huge and fierce!" She gave an involuntary shudder. "He followed me for a time, taunting me by diving close and then flying high again. Then, before my very eyes he snatched a maiden as was working in her fields with his great claws and then flew away with her." Reaching out, she wrapped a shaking hand around his, seeking reassurance. Her hands were icy cold against his warmth.

He narrowed his eyes, a slight frown on his lips. "That is the creature Smaug you saw. He is a fire drake that resides in the Lonely Mountain and guards a treasure pile there."

She grimaced and looked back over her shoulder again. "Will he take her back to his lair, turn into a man and ravish her?"

All the elves laughed, and she looked around at them with a frown. "Is that part of the legends not true, then?"

Thranduil smirked and quirked a brow. "If that is told in dragon legends from your land, I hesitate to ask what other wild imaginings you carry."

She stroked her tired horse and searched her memory quickly.

"Have you heard of immortal creatures called vampires that sustain their unnatural lives by drinking the blood of their victims, often thought able to shape-shift into a bat or other winged animal? They can only function at night, as the sunlight causes them to burst into flames and die."

The elves looked disturbed by her description and she shrugged nonchalantly. "There are many stories written about mortal women falling in love with vampires and being changed into one of them, as well as similar things with elves, although those elves are nothing like you all, sometimes called Seelie Fae which is the good or pure elves, or Unseelie Fae, which are their dark or wicked counterparts, and other such names. But... I shan't bore you any further."
Seeming to shake himself from the unpleasant descriptions, Thranduil lifted a hand and signaled two of his guards before turning back to her. "Dûrchon and Ornor will ride with you back to the halls, and you are not to wander so far again without my express consent. I do not know how you managed to slip away undetected, but you are never to travel alone beyond our borders, Elizabeth, I do not permit it. Dragons like to collect pretty things, and it would be a shame for you to end in the belly of one."

She frowned but bowed her head in acknowledgement, taking her reins back from the King, happy for the moment just to be alive and able to follow the guards safely home.

Elizabeth walked in one of the smaller herb gardens one late summer day, enjoying the fragrances of the plants on an overcast afternoon when Galion came to find her. She smiled a welcome while he bowed politely.

"Lady Elizabeth, I have come to bring you to the King, for he wishes to speak with you. Follow me, please."

Trailing the King's steward, she wondered what reason there was for King Thranduil to call for her, as he had never done so before, apart from the one time when she had explained her immortality, not in all the years she had resided in his kingdom. But with no further information, her speculation was fruitless and she realized she would find out soon enough.

When Galion led her across unfamiliar paths, she frowned, thinking she was to be taken to the throne room, but her mouth opened in astonishment when she was bowed into the King's private chambers and Galion slipped out and closed the door.

The Elvenking was seated on a fine settee before a cheerful fire. The room was large and richly appointed with expensive looking furnishings and beautiful art that hung on the walls. Rugs lined the floor, and there was an altogether masculine feel to the space. It was the kind of room Elizabeth expected to see a king in.

She curtsied and then straightened. He turned his head to look at her while she waited for him to speak. He continued to look at her and say nothing for the space of several moments. She did not fidget or shift her weight or betray impatience in any way, for her mother had beaten any such tendencies out of her centuries before, and she had never forgotten those early lessons, as they always served her well.

Though the features of his face hardly moved, she could tell when he became amused during the silent staring, by the smallest lift at one corner of his mouth which revealed a dimple there. She blinked, her eyes widening slightly. How had she never noticed he had a dimple? Any time he was in sight, she had always studied his face like a favored work of art; cataloging his expressions and trying to glean his emotions from them. Perhaps it would take much longer than a mere half century to learn all his looks.

"Come here, and be seated by me."

Elizabeth was moving before she had a chance to fully process what he had said. Sit beside him? She had scarcely finished pulling her long hair out of the way so she did not sit on it and arranging her
skirts when he turned toward her and leaned close, opening his hand to show her what he held.

"What manner of coin is this, and what words are written here?"

Relaxing, she leaned closer and plucked it from his palm. "This is called a sovereign, Sire, a type of currency from my country. On this side is the image of the queen, and some of the letters spell her name, Elizabeth..."

"You share a name?"

When she glanced up, his face was so close to hers that she experienced a jolt when she looked into his eyes. They were such a startling shade of blue…

"Ah, yes, actually. Queen Elizabeth I reigned when I was born, and I was named for her as we share a birthday. The current ruler, or at least she was when I left those lands, is Queen Elizabeth II. The inscription is in Latin, which is a language of scholars, kings, and all influential people for much of my life. I learned it as a child, as all well-educated ladies were expected to, along with a number of other languages. The translation to Sindarin would be, 'By the grace of Eru, Queen' and 'Defender of the Faith', and on the reverse side is a depiction of the great legend of Saint George slaying a poisonous dragon."

"Is this one of the dragons that is renowned for turning into a man and ravishing maidens?"

She kept her eyes focused on the gold coin while her cheeks burned in embarrassment at his jibe. "No, my King, this one was only supposed to have devoured them."

"Is not ravishment just another form of devouring," he murmured, reaching across and turning the coin over in her palm. "Show me which of these symbols are your name."

"Here." She ran a finger over them to show him.

"And does your name have a particular meaning?"

She shrugged and glanced up at him. "It would roughly translate to 'oath of Eru'. Religion was very important to my people, and names of faith always popular. May I ask why you were suddenly curious about the coins I gave you after all this time?"

He leaned against the back of the settee, rubbing a thumb across the sovereign, over and over in the similar way that made her think of how he had done the same against her throat… She jerked her eyes back up to his face, willing her heart to slow.

"I had not opened the chest you gifted me until today, and therefore had no curiosity about the coins before."

She gave him a long look. "Your Majesty...are you saying you were not interested in looking at your treasure these fifty-seven years?"

He smirked. "No, I was not. You may call me Thranduil in private." He rose and crossed to a table and poured two glasses of wine, then returned and handed her one, settling again beside her. He raised his brows expectantly after he swallowed a sip of his wine.

"Thranduil," she said tentatively, testing his name without a title on her tongue.

He gave her the smile that lifted only one side of his mouth. "It sounds different with your accent and intonation, but nonetheless I find the sound of my name from your lips pleasing."
"Thank you, Thranduil, it's an unexpected delight to be on a given name basis with you."

He stared at her for another long moment, swirling the wine in his goblet while she sipped hers; the bouquet and taste were very fine and she rolled it around her mouth, enjoying the fruity palate.

"You will stay and dine with me," he decided.

Frowning, she looked down at herself. "I couldn't possibly, I'm not dressed."

He examined her very slowly and deliberately from head to toe, and by the time he met her eyes again her face was flushed which made him smirk.

"You seem so to me."

Elizabeth narrowed her eyes and lifted her chin. "I meant appropriately attired, as you are well aware."

He laughed softly and pinned her with a piercing look. "You have ruled. This is not the first time I have seen that expression and recognized it for what it was."

Smiling sheepishly, she looked down into her wine. "You are correct. My husband was king and emperor, among his many other titles, and I ruled beside him as queen and empress until his death."

He took a generous swallow of his wine and set the empty goblet on the small table beside him, then allowed his gaze to settle on her. "Yet, I hear no love in your voice, Elizabeth, only sorrow. Why is that?"

She drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I still care for him, of course. I honor his memory. He was a good and kind man and a fine ruler, but... he is long gone from me." She thought of all the solitary years that had passed since she was a married queen. Another lifetime, really. Like a story you read in a book that became hazy over time, many of the details lost in cloudy memory.

"How does one continue to love a dead man? One-sided love is empty." She shrugged. "I live on...and memories offer neither reciprocation nor comfort." She met his eyes curiously. "May I ask of your wife? I think you must miss her terribly."

His gaze grew slowly dark and he turned to stare broodingly into the fire, a muscle throbbing angrily in his cheek. He stood and stalked across the room, then turned and glared at her.

"Yes, I suppose I did before you stole her. Now, every trace of her has left me, and you are to blame."

Stunned, Elizabeth placed her goblet on the table nearest her, afraid she would drop it in her shock, then turned to stare at him in offended anger. "I don't understand. Why would you accuse me of such a terrible thing? I did nothing to you."

Almost quicker than the eye could see, he was across the space suddenly and seized her arms in a firm grip, his face inches from hers while her heart raced in alarm.

"With your sorceress' kiss, you somehow severed the bond I once shared with her. Where she was, I am now empty!" His eyes burned into hers, then wandered across her face and finally lingered on her lips.

"Though I recognize you seem to have little understanding or awareness of the magic that dwells inside you... still, it changes nothing. Perhaps a second kiss may even restore what was taken. I will
risk it,” he decided, leaning closer.

His lips boldly claimed hers and she was instantly lost. Lost in the feel of his hand stroking her hair so gently, and the taste of his tongue in her mouth firing her senses. His lips were a paradise she never wanted to leave, his touch the tantalizing thing she had wandered through the ages to find.

Nothing existed outside of the world they inhabited. There was only joy. There was only desire; she ached with it, was wet with it, burned with it and for him. She would have done anything to feel him move inside of her, as she had not felt in years uncounted. There was so much delight in his touch, it could never be contained.

His hand moved up her arm and across her shoulder, then descended slowly down to her breast, and when he kneaded and stoked her nipple there through her gown, intense pleasure tore through her. She shuddered and cried out from the waves of ecstasy that flowed through her, her moans of release echoing in the room and finally bringing the Elvenking back to his right mind and away from the allure of his affected senses.

Looking down at the passion-dazed face of the woman in his arms, he felt sudden rage at the power she seemed to wield over him so easily, making him feel things he had not felt in countless years. A second kiss had restored nothing of what he had lost, but instead filled him with a further hunger for a woman who was not his. He would not give in to it, or to her.

"Leave me," he ground out harshly, turning away, and only relaxed after the sound of her fleeing steps completely faded. He leaned back against the soft settee, licking his lips and growling softly in anger when he still tasted her there.

After fetching more wine to wash away the lingering flavor of her mouth from his own, he walked to his balcony and stood looking out with unseeing eyes, thoughts turned inward as he pondered. He had felt her emotions as clearly as his own, just as she had undeniably experienced his the first time they embraced, forcefully pulling everything he had ever felt for his wife from him during the brief space of their kiss.

He had to admit he was powerfully attracted to her, as unlikely as it seemed; her pale skin like the pleasing glow of moonlight, dark hair trailing beyond the length of her back. She was shapely and soft. The hand that briefly stroked her breast curling into a fist in memory. In both body and mind, he could find little unappealing in her, but what was there to be done about it?

Nothing.

She was merely one of his subjects and could not be more. He wouldn't avoid her but nor would he seek her out, and ne'er again would he allow himself to kiss her. An unquestionable prescience warned him to do so would change much, and that was a risk he could not take.

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Legolas hummed to himself as he walked through the woods, another of Elizabeth's tunes from her homeland. He liked the lilting quality and found himself singing or humming it frequently. He was satisfied that the northern woods once again had fewer nests than before, since they had recently been concentrating their efforts there as part of their rotation, and the air around him had a fresher quality with fewer foul creatures roaming about.
Hearing a noise, he paused as he determined where it was coming from, walking toward it until there was no doubt as to what it was and who it was coming from. Just off the main path, Elizabeth sat curled in a ball against a tree with her arms around her legs and her head resting against her knees while she wept.

Never before had he seen her so upset, and not once had he seen her weep. He froze while he tried to decide if he should respect her privacy and sneak silently past, or if he should go and try to discover what had upset her so. Her soft cries twisted his heart in his chest, and he found his feet moving forward automatically, the decision made for him.

Crouching beside her, he touched the crown of her head gently and whispered her name. Looking up at him, she stared for a moment, her eyes red and her cheeks tear-streaked, then shaking her head crumpled in on herself again with muffled sobs afresh.

Sighing, the prince sat down and pulled her into his arms, holding her tightly in comfort and burying his face against her hair. Breathing in her familiar scent of roses, he stroked her long hair and smiled, quietly humming a lullaby his mother used to sing to him when he was small.

Gradually, her cries quieted and she calmed in his arms, but he continued to hum until he felt her relax fully and realized she had fallen asleep against him. Leaning back enough so he could see her face, he watched her sleep for a time, wondering again what had caused her such upset. She was always so poised and self-possessed that it was alarming to see her discomfited.

She was so lovely in her human repose, free of all care. He ran a thumb across her cheek and smiled; she was so soft, a true lady. His gaze wandered further down to her lips, and he studied them, memorizing the shape and the delicate pink color, like a fresh spring blossom. Mesmerized, he traced the edge of her bottom lip then slowly closed his eyes and drew a deep breath, shaking his head. It was not right to take such liberties without her consent. Staring out into the woods around him, he pulled her closer and kept watch over her while she slept.

~0~
The great library of the halls of the Greenwood was silent. The kind of pressing quiet that only came from a complete, or nearly complete absence of people. As the hour drew ever closer to the evening meal, the few elves reading or browsing had slowly wandered out, leaving Elizabeth still frowning over her half-full page of translations.

Learning Quenya had seemed the next logical step in her desire to fully understand elven languages, especially as it predated the Silvan and Sindarin that she spoke fluently. The difficulty was that she really needed an actual tutor; despite finding a text in Westron that gave a lovely history and backstory, it did bugger-all for grammar or pronunciation. Tapping her pen against the table where she had all manner of books scattered about, as well as her own personal supply of paper and pens, which she preferred over quill and ink; she scanned the large space, pondering.

The truth was, she was hiding and knew the library to be the best place for it. She had been attempting to avoid the sight of a certain king, whom she was now convinced had a split personality disorder, and also his very charming and solicitous son. The first she avoided due to anger and perhaps even a bit of hurt feelings if she was honest; and the second she avoided due to embarrassment and shame at her lack of propriety, and being caught so vulnerably and unable to really explain her behavior to him for obvious reasons.

When Legolas found her weeping in the woods and comforted her with such kindness, she originally had no intention of blubbering all over him and then falling asleep in his arms, but apparently the power of an elvish lullaby was not to be lightly set aside. There was surely as much magic in it as there was in their medicine, and so many other things they seemed to do with such excellence and so little effort.

It had been more than a month since her unfortunate encounter with King Thranduil, and nearly two weeks since she had last seen Prince Legolas. With how little Quenya she had gained in that time, it was conceivable she might even manage to stay successfully tucked away amidst the dusty tomes for decades.

Running her hand through loose strands of her hair, she tugged them in frustration, stilling when she caught movement out of the corner of her eye. Ah, yes, the brown-haired Silvan librarian she had seen so many times over the years with the amount of study she had done in the library. He never looked on her with very friendly eyes, but perhaps he might be persuaded to help her regardless. Snatching up her paper and pen, she walked to where he stood sorting books, watching her approach with a wary expression.

"Excuse me," she asked, with her most charming smile. "I wonder if you speak Quenya?"

He gave her a dubious look and stiffened slightly. "Of course. I would hardly be effective in my position if I did not."

"Marvelous! I'm afraid I'm having a bit of a struggle with some of my translations. Could you tell me what the Sindarin word for puntl would be? I'm sorry if I pronounced it poorly. And I apologize, but I've forgotten your name." Elizabeth stared at him expectantly with a pleasant smile.

He paled, then flushed with color. "I am called Tirion, Lady Elizabeth, and the Sindarin word for
that would be...penis," he said, lowering his voice on the final word.

She automatically translated it to English in her head and shrugged, writing it down. "What about hakka?"

"Ah, that would be buttocks." He pointed to his backside for emphasis.

"Can you tell me what suni means?"

He tilted his head. "That is female dog."

She blinked owlishly. "It means bitch?" After writing that down, she bit her lip hesitantly. "And, dare I ask...pukta?"

He glanced around, frowning, and his flush deepened. "That word means ... sexual intercourse."

Elizabeth pressed her lips tightly together to hold in her laughter and shook her head, meeting the eyes of the flustered elf. "Hmm, I believe I am unwittingly the brunt of a jest." She held out her paper to Tirion. "I found a list tucked into one of the books and copied it. I assume it's someone's compilation of naughty words?"

He scanned her list and finally smiled, his discomfort quickly fading. "Yes, I daresay that is exactly what this is. If I may borrow your writing implement?" He held out his hand for her pen, then turned to lean over a stack of books and filled in the rest of the translations in Sindarin.

She leaned over and watched, giggling at each new word as he wrote it until she was wiping tears of mirth from her eyes. He grinned widely as he watched her, which she thought of as the elven equivalent to howling laughter.

"Forgive me," she gasped, still trying to quell her hilarity. "I'm just delighted to discover any evidence of misbehaving elves. It's terribly refreshing to find something as normal as a juvenile list of vulgarities hidden amongst all the perfections of your people."

He returned her pen and list with a friendly twinkle in his golden eyes that had not been there before. "You think elves perfect, Lady Elizabeth, even after living among us for more than five decades?"

She smirked, lifting a dark brow in amusement. "Alright, perhaps perfect is just a tad excessive, but there's certainly an undeniable superiority; if we're comparing my race to yours, anyway."

He studied her with the kind of directness that might have made her uncomfortable in her younger days, but she recognized the considering look of age and wisdom that she had come to appreciate from the elves.

"You are too severe on your own kind. There are many things we can learn from one another. I would be glad to help you learn Quenya, and in return you may teach me- What is your language called?"

"English," she said, grinning, "and I think that sounds like a wonderful plan, thank you, Tirion. Is tomorrow too soon to begin?"

"Tomorrow will be fine, Lady Elizabeth. Enjoy your evening."

She quickly gathered her things and left for the dining hall, noting that full dark had fallen. Smiling brightly at the prospect of a new friend and the bonus of language lessons, she found herself looking forward to the next day with excitement.
Elizabeth howled with laughter when Tirion repeated back the English equivalent of what she had written for him in Quenya. Ridiculous and coarse as it was for her to write such things, there was truly nothing more amusing than the sound of a seemingly refined and dignified elf swearing in English.

As with most languages, she always liked to learn the profanity, or what was considered offensive so she would not make an enormous faux pas as she stumbled through early attempts at speaking. Plus, the additional pleasure of adding new ways to swear was always a welcome thing.

Tirion stared at her with a small smile. Much to her delight, she discovered the reserved elf was anything but. He had graciously educated her to much of Silvan culture that she had been unaware of, despite living among them for so long. It wasn't until she became friends with him that she realized she had seen nothing more of the elves than the facade they wished her to see, which was far from the truth.

If anything, their culture was nearly as bawdy, mischievous and free-spirited in private as what she had grown to secretly enjoy as a young woman, but very carefully concealed from outsiders. For the first time, she began to feel less like a visitor and more like an actual citizen of Greenwood the Great.

"You are not at all as I had perceived you to be, Lady Elizabeth, nor what gossip inferred," he said, arranging the sheaf of papers in his hands.

"What was the gossip, if I may be so bold as to inquire?" She wiped away the last of her tears of merriment and straightened in her seat on the garden bench. Their lessons had become so loud and full of laughter after their initial meeting, that Tirion had suggested an outdoor location would better suit, and be less likely to offend others who might overhear. They had been meeting regularly in the flower gardens ever since that time.

He shrugged, a bright gleam in his golden eyes. "The earliest whisperings? That you were a brazen and uncouth mortal, boldly aspiring to intimacy with the prince, though lately I hear very little ever spoken of you."
She chuckled mirthlessly. "That is exactly the type of gossip I have ever heard in the courts of men. How disappointing. I had at least hoped for something original from elves."

Elizabeth smirked. "And I have never aspired to any such thing, by the way. Prince Legolas kindly offered me friendship when there were no other such offers to be had." She raised a brow and gave him an imperious look. "Although, I was born nobility and have even ruled as a queen in my lifetime, so were the prince of my race, such a thing would hardly be considered an unequal alliance."

Tirion laughed quietly and peered at her sidelong. "You were truly a queen?"

Smiling indulgently, she stood and walked away from him, then whirled back to face him, allowing the mantle of her former persona to descend on her, staring at him with cool eyes, her chin lifted proudly.

"You will bow before your queen, Tirion, and I may yet grant you my favor." She paced gracefully toward him, her face a picture of carefully contained fury and her voice lowering to just above a hiss as she stared down at him. "But dare to plant another of your spies amongst my ladies, and I will have you drawn and quartered in the high street, as sport for the peasants."

Staring with parted lips, Tirion blinked and smiled hesitantly after a moment. "You are so astonishingly like King Thranduil in your speech and manner that for just an instant, I found myself eager to kneel before you, my lady."

She laughed, allowing her rigid posture to relax. It had been a long time since she had been able to indulge in such light-hearted fun with someone she could tease so freely, and she was enjoying herself immensely.

"Indeed," came a cool voice. "That was quite a convincing display, if I do say so myself."

Tirion looked beyond her, leapt to his feet and bowed, flushing. "My Lord."

Thranduil's eyes flickered over him. "You may go. I would speak with Lady Elizabeth."

After a quick glance at Elizabeth, Tirion departed silently, leaving a tense woman still standing with her back to the King. Turning just her head, she met his aloof gaze with her own, finally turning and giving a demure curtsy.

"Sire." Her face was a blank mask as she had learned to adopt from the elves, but her stomach twisted with anxiety, her heart thumping violently.

He examined her lack of expression intently for a moment before his own transformed into a charming and breathtaking smile, and he stepped close and lifted her hand, pressing a light kiss there, causing her to frown in confusion. Which personality did the king wear now?

"Be easy, I have not come to berate you. And I see you have made a conquest of my librarian." He appeared extremely amused and went and sat on the bench the other elf had vacated, lifting the papers there and scanning them with interest.

She clasped her hands and waited, knowing full well what sorts of things were written on them. After a moment, his gaze flicked to her, a considering gleam in his blue eyes.

"You learn Quenya. That is surprising. I cannot really see that you have any need to."

She walked over and picked up her gold pen off the corner of the bench to have something to do
with her hands, relieved he hadn't made mention of the ribaldry the page contained.

"Scientia potentia est; knowledge is power, Sire. As I said when I first came here, I wish to be as one of your people. Without a thorough understanding of language, history and culture, how could I hope to succeed?"

He crossed his legs and angled himself toward her carelessly, reminding her of a sprawling lion. "So you desire power, Elizabeth?"

She came and sat beside him, looking out over the garden and allowing her eyes to rest on a bush blooming with delicate, pink roses. "Only as much as would further my personal goals I mentioned."

Turning her head, she met his sharp gaze. "But to answer what you're really asking, no. I have never lusted for that kind of power. Ruling is a duty, a responsibility...a burden, even. Never something one would do for pleasure. It is far easier to follow than to lead."

He turned his head to look out across the garden, considering her words, then looked at her and smirked, pointing to the translations on the page. "You must have made an interesting queen if you went around saying things like this."

She bit her lip, wondering if she could manage to get him to take the same bait as Tirion. "You judge me unfairly. I never once told a lord to fuck off, even when I wanted to." She gave the insult in English, hoping he would repeat it back, like Tirion had.

His eyes narrowed while she held her breath. "Fuck off?" he asked quietly, copying her pronunciation exactly.

She managed to keep her composure for two entire seconds before she dissolved into helpless laughter, which grew louder when he lifted a brow and smiled in amusement, clearly having purposefully played along.

"Forgive me," she gasped, "I don't know why it's so very amusing to hear elves use English profanity. Perhaps because your language is always so fine, and the curse you just uttered so very foul."

"What exactly did I say?"

She gave him the closest equivalent in Westron, Sindarin and Quenya, snickering again at his long-suffering expression.

"You have an irreverent sense of humor, Elizabeth." He handed her the papers and she straightened them and set them aside, along with her pen.

Shrugging, she smiled. "Only in private, Sire. I would never behave so except among friends who would not be offended by it."

He stood and paced several steps, his robes trailing behind him, while he stood in profile. "You consider me such a friend?"

Biting her lip, she studied the proud set of his shoulders and wondered if she had overstepped, but felt a definite need to test the boundaries.

"Should I not, Thranduil?"

He chuckled and gave an approving nod, turning to face her.
"You should. I like your boldness, Elizabeth. As to the reason I sought you- I leave to go and visit with the Master of Laketown tomorrow, as I do every few years for trade relations." He paused, his head tilted consideringly. "You will accompany me on this visit, as a lady of my court."

Her lips parted in surprise at the unexpected declaration. "I would be honored to travel with you, my lord. Is it to be a long visit?"

He clasped his hands behind his back. "We stay a week, as they will want to hold a dinner in my honor, as usual." Thranduil smiled. "Do you still have the blue gown you wore when we first met?"

Brow furrowed, she nodded. "I do, and it is still in excellent shape. Shall I bring it?"

"Yes, and the shoes. Pack what else you wish to take and inform Galion when your things are ready. He will see to it for you."

She nodded, mind already busy with what she would need to do to prepare. After she gathered her things, she fell into step with the King, both of them ready to leave the garden.

"We depart at daybreak," he said, before he turned back toward the main hall and she set off for her quarters, filled with anticipation at the prospect of the journey ahead.

~o~
Chapter 8

Elizabeth sat on the beautiful mount she had been given to ride. The dappled grey mare stood docile while she waited for the rest of the King's escort to arrive. Legolas strode up, dressed in the soft green suede he often wore when he patrolled the woods.

"Are you not to accompany us, Legolas?"

He reached out to stroke a gentle hand on the grey's muzzle. "Nay, I will rather go and clear more nests from the western path." He grinned teasingly. "I daresay I will enjoy myself a great deal more in the endeavor than you will in the company of the master of Laketown."

She lifted a dubious brow. "Are you saying you think I will not be able to enjoy myself amongst potentially coarse buffoons? If so, you do not yet know me well enough. With sufficient wine, I can enjoy almost anything."

He laughed. "Lady Elizabeth, the pleasure of your company is the only thing I will regret being deprived of these days you are absent." Legolas leaned closer, dropping his voice to just above a whisper. "Mind you don't drink so much that you pass out near any dangerous drops...or into the lake!"

She winked. "I like to live dangerously, my prince. It keeps boredom at bay." He reached for her hand and pressed a kiss to it, still smiling up at her when his father rode closer on his great elk.

"Pleasant journey, Elizabeth."

She patted her horse and grinned. "Thank you, Legolas. Do enjoy your spider wrestling."

He gave her a dry look and released her hand, going to speak briefly with his father before heading back to the halls.

The order was soon given to ride, and the King and his retinue began the journey to Esgaroth.

The day was overcast, with a thick mist swirling around them as they rode, very like some of the magical fog she herself had encountered over time. It sent a shiver down Elizabeth's spine and put her in mind of Irish myths she hadn't thought of since coming to middle-earth. The fog seemed to thicken menacingly as they traveled further, and she hummed a song of one of the legends quietly to herself.

The King glanced back at where she rode behind him, surrounded on all sides by his guard, as she was the only female among the party.

"Come, Elizabeth, sing your song so I may hear it."
She glanced up, startled, then tilted her head, considering. "Would you hear the legend it speaks of before or after I sing?"

"After," he decided, slowing his mount to ride beside her, so he could converse easily.

Nodding, she hummed another moment as she tried to recall all the verses, then began to sing. Her voice rang out in a high, clear soprano, that carried easily to all the riders and beyond, well into the trees.

"Sha ta co ti oh scum ne rivna
Sha ta co ti oh nugga tir na nog
Sha ta co ti oh scum ne rivna
Nug a tir na nog.
~o~

"Come my love our world's may part,
The gods will guide us across the dark.
Come with me and be mine my love,
Stay and break my heart.
~o~

"From the shores through the ancient mists,
You bear the mark of my elven kiss.
Clear the way, I will take you home
To eternal bliss.
~o~

"Sha ta co ti oh scum ne rivna
Sha ta co ti oh nugga tir na nog
Sha ta co ti oh scum ne rivna
Nug a tir na nog"
~o~

"Tir na nog, come beyond the ancient fog,
Tir na nog, come with me to tir na nog."
~o~

"Far away from the land you knew,
The dawn of day reaches out to you.

Though it feels like a fairy tale,

All of this is true.

~o~

"Run with me, have a look around.

We build our life of a sacred ground.

Come my love, our world's may part,

We'll be safe and sound.

~o~

"Tir na nog, come beyond the ancient fog,

Tir na nog, come with me to tir na nog."

~o~

"Time won't follow the path we came.

The world you left, it forgot your name.

Stay with me and be mine my love,

Spare my heart the pain.

~o~

"Sha ta co ti oh scum ne rivna

Sha ta co ti oh nugga tir na nog

Sha ta co ti oh scum ne rivna

Nug a tir na nog

~o~

"Tir na nog, oh, come beyond the ancient fog,

Tir na nog, oh, come with me to tir na nog."

"Come with me to tir na nog."

~o~

As her voice faded away, she looked across at the Elvenking, who was watching her with a soft smile and she smiled back.

"Now you may relate the tale of this legend, for I have never heard of this Tir na nog you sing of."
She shifted more comfortably in her saddle and adjusted her reins. "This myth comes from a land very near my own, Your Majesty, called Ireland, and in it an elven princess named Niamh, heard tales of the great human hero, Oisín, who did many mighty deeds and was very tall and exceedingly handsome and charming."

"Niamh came across the sea on her magical horse to see him and fell instantly in love, asking him to go back to her land called Tír na nÓg, which in the Irish language means Land of Youth. Oisín agreed, and together they rode the magical horse to her faraway land where they were wed and had three children together."

She glanced around to see all the elves were listening very intently to her story, and smiled, continuing.

"After what felt like only a handful of years, Oisín began to miss his kin, and the beautiful land of Ireland and asked Niamh to go back for a visit. She did not wish for him to leave, but finally relented, cautioning him to never get down off the horse and touch the earth of Ireland, or he would never again come to Tír na nÓg where she and their children dwelt."

"He agreed and set out, soon reaching his former homeland, but he found all had changed, and three hundred years had passed in the brief time it seemed he had been gone. Saddened by what he saw, he decided to return to his wife and children, when he spied several men struggling to move a large boulder. Being very strong, as well as noble and kind, Oisín took pity on the weaker men and leaned over, lifting the boulder and throwing it away with one hand, but the strap of his saddle broke from the strain and he fell to the earth."

Looking up to the sky overhead, Elizabeth noted that the mist seemed to be lifting as she spoke and the sun peeking out, before looking back at the King.

"In seconds, all three hundred years caught up with him and he became a very old, withered man. The horse bolted away, and before long Oisín died, but not before he told the story of Tír na nÓg, the magical land across the sea."

She gave Thranduil a cheeky grin. "If I had to ascribe a moral to the story, I should say it is this: be content with the love of your spouse and children, and do not pine for far off lands when you already dwell in paradise."

He chuckled. "That is the moral you give?"

She shrugged carelessly. "What other is there?"

Narrowing his eyes, he turned his head to look at her fully. "I would say it is for mortals and immortals to never mate, for it is only asking for tragedy and grief."

Elizabeth looked at the massive antlers of the great elk the king rode as she considered his words, before meeting his keen gaze and nodding. "I had not thought of it that way before, but I find I agree with you. Watching your loved one age and die before your eyes is indeed very painful." She glanced away, briefly remembering her own experiences before seeking the eyes of the King again. "There is only one difficulty with your rule, however."

He shifted his reins idly in his hands. "What difficulty would that be, pray tell?"

"Why, only that the mind does not always rule the heart, particularly where love is concerned. The heart is ever rebellious and will love where it wills, whether it be wise or no. Many histories bear me out, and wars have even been fought for the sake of an unwise love and the desire to attain it."

A muscle throbbed in King Thranduil's jaw. "A strong enough will may overcome any inclination, Elizabeth, including ones as powerful as desire or love."

She bit her lip, sensing the Elvenking's annoyance and smiled coyly, lowering her lids to veil the amusement in her eyes. "As you say, my king. I will not argue with your superior wisdom and experience."

He made an amused sound suspiciously like a snort that had her meeting his eyes again. "And yet your easy acquiescence to my wisdom has the strong flavor of irony." He shook his head, and when one side of his mouth lifted to reveal the illusive dimple, she smiled to see it. "What other songs or tales will you share now, Lady Elizabeth, to keep me amused while we journey?"

She smirked mischievously. "I will now tell you the legend of Vlad Dracula, Sire, also known as Vlad the Impaler..."

The journey passed pleasantly and with no difficulties encountered along the way. When the town on the lake came into sight and they drew closer, the King called Elizabeth to him. When they rode side by side, he reached out and plucked the ornament from her hair that held the bulk of it back, allowing it to spill freely around her shoulders and face. When she looked questioningly up at him, he handed the adornment back to her.

"I think it best you wear your hair free while we sojourn here, to conceal your ears. Thus you will be thought to be one of us, and rouse no questions as to your origins or why you dwell among elves. The people here are very simple, and will suspect nothing if it is not blatantly declared."

She pushed the thick curls away from her eyes and inclined her head. "I don't know that my appearance would ever truly allow me to pass for an elven maid, but if you think the deception necessary, I will obey."

"I do," he said quietly, "for your protection."

Elizabeth nodded her understanding, and the Elvenking galloped ahead to meet the men of the town that stood assembled to greet them.

The ride over the long bridge leading into the city in the lake was interesting for Elizabeth, even tucked in securely amongst the King's Guard as she was. Esgaroth felt like stepping back in time to a city from her own past, when the smells and littered filth became apparent the further they moved into the town.

The foul stench actually brought a slight grimace to her lips, borne more of nostalgia than anything else. Living among elves was a delight to all the senses, as their practices were of the very finest,
living effortlessly with nature and what brought health and vitality to both the body and spirit. She caught the eye of Feren, the Captain of the King's Guard and smiled.

"I had forgotten just how disgusting were the smells in the cities of men." She shuddered. "Likely they practice the tradition of annual bathing here, and I shall have to soak a handkerchief in rose water and keep it near my face to keep from retching."

The smile he gave her was slight, his warm, brown eyes always scanning around them, ever watchful. "We shall keep you from all harm as you remain near us, my lady, but I fear I will be unable to safeguard your delicate sensibilities in this place."

She laughed, pleased when his smile grew at the sound, as he always seemed so severe to her. "I daresay I've survived far worse, but I thank you for your kind consideration just the same."

He gave a slight nod, his expression turning sober again as he kept a keen eye on the town folk they passed, gawking and gossiping at the arrival of the Elvenking's entourage. The lanes of the wooden walkways were wider than she had imagined they might be, and they were able to ride all the way to the town square, crowned by the great hall where the Master dwelt, and much of the city's business was conducted.

A tall, richly dressed man swept down the wide stairs leading into the halls, closely followed by several other men, presumably his advisors. Elizabeth examined them with a discerning eye, quickly catching the notice of the Master. She assumed a pleasant smile as he stared openly, a shrewd and calculating gleam in his pale blue eyes.

King Thranduil dismounted his beast and turned immediately to the dappled grey mare, helping Elizabeth down and offering his arm. They walked together to the town's dignitaries, Feren and his guards following crisply behind.

The Master stepped forward with a wide smile and bowed deeply, the Westron he spoke sounding on the nasally side. "Welcome again to our humble town upon the lake, Lord Thranduil. We are honored by your presence, and eager to renew our trade agreements to the satisfaction of your people and my own. May I know the name of the beautiful lady you have so graciously brought among us?"

Thranduil inclined his head. "Your welcome is appreciated, Town Master; we look forward to renewing our friendship with your folk." He turned to the woman on his arm. "This is the Lady Elizabeth, one of the noble ladies of my court who wished to come and meet the people of Esgaroth."

She curtsied and smiled as the king spoke. The Master again bowed even more deeply and reached for her hand, holding it delicately before him.

"My lady, we are thrilled you would gift us with your lovely presence; such grace, poise and beauty as has never before been seen here among men."

Elizabeth schooled her smile to pleasant interest, scoffing inwardly at his false flattery and glad she still had the barrier of her riding gloves between her bare skin and that of the Master. She had heard some men lay it on thick, but this one really seemed to be working hard at it.

"I thank you for your welcome and kind words, my lord. I'm sure I shall greatly enjoy my time here and learn much in the interim."

With the pleasantries completed, refreshments were promptly offered and suitable rooms soon provided for a king and his party.
King Thranduil leaned back in his seat, just managing to refrain from sighing and rolling his eyes as the Master detailed more of his proposed changes to the current trade conditions. The terms were clearly more in Laketown's favor than the elves of Greenwood. Fool. He had no intention of agreeing to any new concessions for Esgaroth, but let the man waste his breath, it would ultimately change nothing.

Allowing his gaze to wander to the ornate window overlooking the city lane beyond, he was immediately arrested by the sight of Elizabeth, sitting with a toddling boy child on her lap on a bench overlooking the water. She was showing him a small, wooden toy in the shape of a boat, and they were both smiling and laughing. The beautiful, golden-haired waif looked no more than one or two years of age, a strangely appealing roundness to his small, human face. But for his hair coloring, he might have easily passed for Elizabeth's child.

A moment later, the boy was trundling away toward a woman who was obviously his mother, and Elizabeth watched him go with a small smile that gradually turned to a look of such pain and distress it made the Elvenking frown to see it.

She looked up slowly and her gaze collided with his, hers betraying a brief surprise before she stood and hurriedly walked out of his field of view.

While he continued to actively ignore the town Master, he found himself musing over what he had just witnessed and puzzling at the reason. Why had the sight of the little boy given her such pain?

Elizabeth smiled to herself as she walked through the town's marketplace, enjoying listening to the whispered speculation of her being either an elven princess or queen. How very far from the truth their assumptions were!

With Feren, and his subordinate, Galedir, trailing behind her in their shining armor and various swords and daggers strapped to their bodies, it did little to quell the assumptions of her being a person of importance. Most likely, the shining silver circlet Thranduil had insisted she wear had been the origin of such talk, for no other in their party besides the King wore such ornamentation.

Although she did not expect to make any purchases, Elizabeth enjoyed being in a town marketplace once more. The bustle of families making a living, as well as the welcome sight of small children once more, warmed her heart.

She had observed one or two younger elves during her time in the Greenwood, but they had looked more the ages of adolescent or young teen, and she had never once beheld an elven infant. She had assumed immortal beings felt less urgency to reproduce, as nothing but war or some tragic accident would reduce their numbers.
Spying a table with lace goods, Elizabeth moved closer with a murmur of surprise, not expecting to find such finery among the lake people. Smiling at the older woman who watched over the table, she fingered a beautiful, pure white collar; it was as lovely as the best Spanish lace she had ever owned.

"Pardon me, but can you tell me if this beautiful lace is imported from afar, or is there someone in this town as makes something so fine?"

The woman curtsied and flushed with pleasure. "I thank you, milady, for your kind notice. I make it all with my own two hands, as I learned from my mother and her mother before her." Picking up the piece Elizabeth had admired, she held it out. "Will you take this, milady, with my best wishes for your health and happiness?"

Accepting it with a smile and sensing the woman was proud and would take offense if she offered gold for the gift, she sought an acceptable way to pay her for her work. "Such a fine gift is greatly appreciated, good woman. I would also like to purchase these, if I may" she said, holding up several more pieces in various colors. "If you would be so good as to wrap them for me."

The woman accomplished the task quickly, beaming from ear to ear, and scarcely noticing how many extra coins Elizabeth pressed into her hand before departing.

"You were very generous with that woman, my lady," Galedir said, as they walked back toward the great hall.

She turned to him with a faint smile and a shrug. "Lace making is an art, with no two pieces alike, and is usually well supported where there are ladies enough to vie for finery. I doubt her work brings in what it ought in a place such as this, and every artist should receive proper recompense and appreciation for their creations."

His expression was thoughtful. "I see. I had not realized."

They finished their walk in silence, with Elizabeth hurrying back to her rooms to bathe and change, with the help of a young serving girl who had been assigned to tend her during her stay. Having a maid to tend on her brought back more nostalgic feelings, when that was all she knew for a good portion of her earlier life with servants being common and an expected part of any noble household.

The great feast King Thranduil had mentioned was taking place later that evening, and Elizabeth was careful in her preparations with her appearance, realizing she was brought along to impress and charm the people of Esgaroth as much as to distract and amuse the Elvenking, relieving him of any boredom.

Sitting before the mirrored vanity, she opened the small bag of cosmetics she had packed, not having bothered with them in many years. Spreading out what she planned to use, she started by lining her eyes in kohl, then adding just enough shadow to her lids to enhance. A light dusting of powder and a pink lip stain that looked natural once dried, completed the picture.

With the help of her serving girl, Arvid, she used a silver comb to hold back the foremost of her dark locks from her face while keeping her ears covered, and quickly dressed in the designer silk Jovani creation she had brought from her other life.

"You look so beautiful, milady," the girl said in an awed voice, making Elizabeth smile and stroke the girl's cheek kindly.

"So may anyone with the proper tools, Arvid. Beauty is very often an illusion as much as anything. A wise lady knows to make the most of what she has, and does her best to minimize that which
After putting on her sapphire ring and drop earrings, she stared at herself critically in the mirror before rising and crossing to the window to look out on the lake, slipping into her heels on the way.

A quarter of an hour later, a soft knock came from the door in the sitting area. Elizabeth walked into the room after Arvid answered the door to find Feren waiting for her. Despite having seen her in the blue dress previously, he stared at her in momentary surprise before recovering himself quickly.

"My lady, I am to bring you to the King if you are ready to depart."

She followed Feren up a flight of stairs and down a long hall before she was admitted to the King's rooms, where she found him sprawled in a plush chair in his usual cat-like manner. His head turned slowly to face her, the same hint of surprise on his face as she had seen on Feren's. He examined her from foot to crown, lingering on her face before his eyes narrowed and he rose fluidly to pace a circle around her. He faced her and reached for her chin, angling her face to the light.

"You've done something different, but it's quite effective. The sight of you is even more arresting now than when you first entered my kingdom." He clasped his hands behind his back, the barest hint of a smile lifting his lips. "There is but one thing you lack."

She parted her lips to inquire as to what it might be, but the King was striding through the doorway that led to his sleeping chamber, and she stared after him in puzzlement. She was about to ask Feren if he knew what the King meant when Thranduil glided back into the room, his hands full of something very familiar to her.

Her heart began to pound rapidly when he stopped before her and lifted the necklace, clasping it about her neck, the very familiar weight of her family's diamonds settling there. His fingers lingered for the space of several breaths, lightly touching the gems and her skin beneath them, making her tingle from the contact there. Backing away a step, he surveyed her again and gave her a slow smile of satisfaction.

"Now, you are ready. Let us see what the people here make of you in your finery."

Tir na nÓg lyrics by Celtic Woman

~0~
Thranduil drained his wine and waited for the serving boy to refill his goblet before turning his attention back to Elizabeth, seated opposite him and surrounded on both sides by ready men, eager for her notice and favor. The first was the Master himself, and on her other side, the commander of Laketown's guard, who was not an altogether bad specimen of his kind, were it not for his unguarded gaze which frequently strayed to the lady's decolletage, and his practiced brushes against her hand and arm.

The Elvenking had thought it would provide the evening's amusement to see the town's most distinguished men fawning over such a lovely creature as Elizabeth. But the more he observed the slight crinkle of her brow, and the increasing tightness of her smile, which he perceived was only discernible to him, did he discover he did not find it as amusing as he would have liked. Perhaps he might do something about it.

"Lady Elizabeth," he drawled, loud enough to be heard by all at the table. "Won't you favor the Laketown folk with one of your songs?"

She looked up in immediate relief. "Of course, Your Majesty."

He met her eyes in silent communication, and read her gratitude there at the prospect of a temporary escape from her tedious position. Rising and stepping away from her two interlocutors, she walked gracefully to the playing musicians with many eyes following her. After a brief conversation, and humming a bit of a tune for the musicians to follow, she faced the feast-goers. Looking up through her lashes, she locked eyes with the Elvenking, smiled at him with a bit of mischief and began to sing.

"Westering home with a song in the air
Light in the eye and its goodbye to care,
Laughter and love and a welcoming there
Woods of my heart, my own land.

~o~

"Tell me of lands of the Orient gay,
Speak of the riches that come from Cathay.
Ah, but it's grand to be woken at day
And find yourself nearer the Green Way."
"Westering home with a song in the air,
Light in the eye and its goodbye to care.
Laughter and love and a welcoming there
Light of my heart, my own land.

"Where are the folk like the folk of the west?
Canty and couthy and kindly, the best!
There I would hie me and there I would rest,
At home with my own folk in Greenwood.

"Westering home with a song in the air,
Light in the eye and its goodbye to care.
Laughter and love and a welcoming there
Light of my heart, my own land.

"Now I'm at home and at home I do lay
Dreaming of riches that come from Cathay.
I'll board a good ship and I'll be on my way
And bring back my fortune to Green Way.

"Westering home with a song in the air,
Light in the eye and its goodbye to care.
Laughter and love and a welcoming there
Light of my heart, my own land!

"Westering home with a song in the air,
Light in the eye and its goodbye to care.
Laughter and love and a welcoming there
Light of my heart, my own land;

Light of my heart, my Greenwood!

~o~

Suppressing a smile at her subtle message to him and suffused with a warmth that came from more than the wine, the King glanced around the room. The expressions most wore were charmed or entranced, and he was amused to even see a slight smile on the always sober face of Feren, where he stood guard near the door. Interesting.

The call for dancing came next and the merriment grew bolder and louder as more wine and stronger spirits were consumed. Draining his latest glass of wine, the Elvenking finally stood and crossed the floor, receiving a look of surprised pleasure when he rescued Elizabeth from her latest dance partner. Pulling her into his arms with a flamboyant spin, he smiled down at her shocked face, guiding her effortlessly about the space.

"I had no idea you were such a remarkable dancer, my King. In fact, I have never once seen you dance."

He smirked, eyes sweeping the room in constant awareness. "There are a good many things you would be astonished to discover I am quite remarkable at, little Elizabeth," he murmured. "I danced a good deal more in my younger days, but it has been a while since I had any desire to."

She laughed as he raised her off her feet in a graceful lift, moving her as though she weighed no more than a trite leaf. "I hope you may be persuaded to dance more in future, Sire. Think of the pleasure it will bring our people to have you participate in revels instead of just watch."

He raised a brow at her words, surprisingly pleased to hear her emphatically claiming his people as her own. Clearly, some change had occurred in her since the time they had left the woods.

"I will consider it. I believe you were proclaiming a longing to return home in your song?"

She bit her lip and nodded, the light reflecting in a glittering display across the gems at her throat, drawing the eye there. "It is said that absence makes the heart grow fonder, and I find it's true. I cannot rest easy among men." She darted a glance across the room where the Master and his guard captain stood and conversed, a flash of uneasiness in her gray-green eyes.

His hand flattened firmly against her back where he held her. "I hope you understand that you are fully under my protection, and what that truly means. I would never permit any man to touch you, Elizabeth." His voice dropped in volume but grew in intensity. "I would kill any so foolish as to try. You may trust in that."

She smiled up at him, like bright sunlight breaking through dark clouds, and an answering smile lifted his lips before he tilted his head. "We will depart in the morning. Our business is concluded and there is no need to linger here. My heart is also longing for the trees. Would that please you?"

"Oh yes, my King, thank you! I find my spirits soaring at the prospect."

The dance ended a moment later and he led her to a refreshment table where they acquired fresh drinks. The Elvenking kept a firm hand at the lady's waist and turned a cool glare on any man who dared to come close for the remainder of the night.
The wind moaned, rattling the shutters loudly and drawing Elizabeth from a dark, hazy dream. She turned her face more deeply into the pillow, smiling as she inhaled the comforting fragrance of woodland and sunshine, and briefly thought herself home. Her limbs felt heavy and strange, and a wave of weakness struck her when she sat up with a groan. The King sat across the room from her in a high-backed chair with his legs crossed, watching her intently.

"I did not drink that much," she gasped, as she looked around the room in bewilderment and realized she was lying in the large bed in what could only be the King's sleeping chamber. "I know I went to sleep in my own room..."

He smiled faintly. "Yes, you did. How do you feel? Have you no memories of the night, after falling asleep?"

She looked down at the richly embroidered coverlet and shook her head. "No, none. How did I come to be here?"

He twirled the green-stoned ring on his smallest finger absently. "The dragon, Smaug, set several buildings alight during the night. While your rooms were not touched by flame, the smoke filled them. When I came to ascertain you were well, I found you senseless from the fumes. Unable to rouse you, I brought you here."

She inhaled a sudden breath in shock. "How bad was the damage caused by the fires?"

He shrugged in his usual elegant manner. "Not very. Three structures were partially burned, and a small section of the great hall. The dragon delights in harrying the folk here, and they are adept at swiftly quelling fires because of it."

His eyes flicked to her mostly bare shoulders where the green straps of the silky slip she wore were sliding steadily down one arm. "What is this brief thing you wear to sleep in? I was quite surprised when I made to carry you from the room, and was forced to wrap you in my cloak before I could move you." His voice deepened and fell to a low murmur. "As I discovered quite by accident that you wear nothing beneath."

Swallowing, she tugged the covers closer against her. "It's just a night gown, Sire, of a type very commonly worn where I come from." She glanced out the window, fighting her embarrassment over what the King had seen. "I wasn't expecting company in my bed, you know," she muttered rebelliously.

He smiled, although the unnerving intensity in his eyes never wavered. "Such a scant garment would seem designed to invite company, Elizabeth."

She worried her bottom lip between her teeth briefly. "It's more than I bother to wear for sleep at home, Thranduil."

The Elvenking smirked and stood, refraining from commenting on that bit of information.

"Are you fit for travel today?" At her eager nod, he lifted his cloak off the chair and waved a hand at her things near the foot of the bed. "Dress yourself, then. I had all your possessions and clothing brought here in the night. We leave as soon as you are ready."

When the door closed behind him, she glanced at it with a wayward smile before planting her face
back into the pillow and inhaling deeply of the King's scent, delighting in the indulgence. Finally, she slid off the high bed and made haste to prepare to depart.

They rode steadily for an hour after leaving Esgaroth behind them, with very little conversation among the party, all content to be out of the settlement and once more returning to their beloved woods.

Following along the edge of the Long Lake, they kept to a pleasant trot. The air was warm and spring flowers in bloom, scattered like a colorful carpet near the bank of the water. Men were seen floating on rafts upon the river, going about their work, and small cottages and farms dotted the landscape.

Though the day was gray with heavy cloud cover, Elizabeth was finding it a pleasant journey until Feren shouted a sudden, sharp warning which had her scanning the sky in panic.

She had scarcely looked up before she went tumbling from the saddle, a shooting pain along her back and side, and her vision full of the vast, red wings of the same dragon that had haunted her steps two years before.

Her chest ached and there was a brief feeling of rawness across her face where she scraped against the turf in her fall. The King's shout to ready weapons sounded as from a great distance with the ringing in her ears. Scrambling away from where her horse lay unmoving, she screamed in alarm when she felt herself grasped by her clothing and lifted into the air.

"Be calm, Elizabeth," Thranduil commanded, settling her in front of him on the great elk, even as he urged his mount forward. He whispered unknown words rapidly under his breath, eyes jumping from her panicked face, to the sky and back.

"Do not look at the dragon or let him see your eyes, do you understand? And do not speak or make a sound, no matter what you hear."

"Yes," she whispered, content to bury herself against the King's chest where he pulled her, and quickly draped the voluminous folds of his cloak around her so little of her showed beyond her bootied feet. He leaned down and rummaged in a cleverly hidden leather bag against his saddle, then stilled, halting the elk.

Holding up a restraining hand to his guards, the Elvenking watched as the dragon landed in front of him with a thunderous flap of his great wings and peered at the elves scattered about.

The dragon's maw parted and he lunged forward and snatched up the dappled grey mare from where she lay, swallowing the horse down in a single, great gulp. Keen reptilian eyes examined Thranduil where he sat on his mount clutching the woman. He moved a step closer, flexing his wings in an impressive display.

"You have a pretty there that I wish to have, elf," the dragon said, in his deep, rumbling voice, drawing the words out tauntingly. "She slipped away from me once before, but not this time, I think."
The King met the eyes of the great serpent with his own flinty gaze, his jaw set with a firm resolve, and his voice commanding and crisp.

"This is my beloved lady wife you speak of, dragon, and I will not be parted with her for anything!"

One of the dragon's wings folded closer to his body. "An elf woman?" He tilted his head back and drew in a great breath. "Her smell is strange. Something about her seems...different to any elf I have smelled before. Some magic of your kind, perhaps?"

The King's large elk stamped a restless hoof, growing nervous at the proximity of the dragon, despite how well trained he was. Thranduil firmed his grip on the reins with the hand he had wrapped around Elizabeth and lifted his chin.

"I don't ask you to leave here empty-handed, but to accept this instead." He held up the beautiful necklace high, the white gems sparkling magnificently in the light. The dragon stared greedily, his mouth of razor sharp teeth pulling into a vicious leer, his eyes narrowing in consideration.

"I will receive your offering, elf lord, and even graciously allow you to keep your little wife today."

Thranduil threw the necklace and the dragon caught it in his teeth, running the tip of his tongue against the gems, testing their fineness, and giving a purring rumble of pleasure. He took a step back, then paused, his eyes growing sharp as he stared at the King.

"I will advise you to keep the lovely little bauble out of my sight if you wish to keep it," he growled, "for if I see her another time I will not be so generous as to allow her escape again." He scoffed loudly. "Even if I do hate the taste of elves."

Elizabeth shuddered against Thranduil, and he tightened his hold to still her. The dragon launched himself skyward in a burst of strength and disappeared into the thick gray clouds. Not wasting any time, the King shifted the woman against him more securely, then signaled his guards to follow, breaking into a full gallop in a bid to reach the trees.

While they traveled so swiftly, Elizabeth alternated between clutching the King's arm around her, and the edge of the saddle in front. Speaking was impossible, and it took all her concentration to accustom her movements to that of the elk beneath her and Thranduil surrounding her, finally melting more against her lord as they moved harmoniously together.

When they finally entered the edge of the forest, the King slowed their pace to a trot and then finally to a walk, to allow their mounts a chance to recover. Galedir rode up next to the great elk.

"My lord, I have healing herbs if you wish to stop long enough to tend Lady Elizabeth's wounds where the dragon's claw slashed her."

Thranduil shook his head. "That will not be necessary, Galedir. Lady Elizabeth's wounds have already healed."

He frowned in confusion. "My lord?"
"I will acquaint you with Lady Elizabeth's unique abilities later," Feren said to the junior guard.

She leaned out from the haven of Thranduil's cloak and smiled at Galedir.

"Thank you for your concern, but I heal very swiftly from bodily injuries. It's possible if the dragon had eaten me, I might have even given him severe indigestion for the next hundred years." She shrugged, uncertain if she would have died in the dragon's belly, or just been trapped indefinitely, and unable to escape. The thought of such a fate made her shudder in imagined horror.

Thranduil's arm went around her waist and pulled her close against him again in comfort, the generous folds of his cloak hiding all from the eyes of the other elves.

"Are you well?" he asked quietly against her ear.

She tilted her head so she could look into his face. "I'm certainly much better than I would have been without your intervention. Thank you for saving me, Sire. I'm in awe of how deftly you handled the dragon, although I am very sorry for the loss of your gems."

He smiled down at her, a firm set to his proud face. "While I admit I do have a fondness for treasure, your well-being is of far greater worth to me than the finest gems or gold. As your king, your life is mine to protect, which is as much my privilege as it is my responsibility. That dragon would not have taken you but over my dead body, Elizabeth."

She wrapped her hands around the strong arm that encircled her waist and glanced down, the unexpected force of her emotions sending a flush to her cheeks.

"The mark of a great ruler is an ability to inspire love and devotion in his subjects." Angling her head to meet his eyes again, hers shone brightly with the strength and conviction of her feelings. "You are truly a fine and worthy king, Thranduil. I have never known one finer nor admired one more greatly than you, not in all my days."

The weight and implication of her fervent words hung between them, and hours later when she slept in his arms, he meditated on them. Slowly raising his hand higher along her ribs until he could feel her heart's steady rhythm against his fingertips, he wondered just how far he would dare go and what he might be willing to brave to keep it always beating.

Lyrics adapted from Westering Home by Celtic Woman.

The "no more than a trite leaf" quote is in homage to the glorious Jane Austen.
Chapter 10

Legolas strode through the gates to go and meet his father's envoy, curious if the early return from Lake-town indicated good news or bad. He scanned the riders as they clattered into the courtyard, becoming alarmed when he saw no sign of Elizabeth's mount among the elves.

"Feren," he said, approaching his father's captain when he dismounted. "Where is the Lady Elizabeth? I do not see her here."

Feren pointed. "She is with the king, my lord. The dragon killed her horse and ate it."

Legolas' lips parted in astonishment. He turned to see his father lower Elizabeth to the ground, and walked to them, arriving right when his father dismounted beside her. When she turned, Legolas drew in a surprised breath at the sight of the shredded clothes on her back.

"Elizabeth! What happened to your raiment? Feren said your horse was eaten?"

She frowned and twisted, trying to see behind her, and smiling gratefully at the king when he wrapped his cloak around her to cover the bare skin showing clearly through her destroyed riding clothes. She faced the prince with a shrug.

"The thrice-damned dragon sliced my clothes and killed the horse, my prince. He would have taken me as well if the King hadn't possessed the kind of silver tongue bards sing of, and talked him out of it."

Glancing at where his father spoke with Galion, Legolas lifted a curious brow. "You conversed with the dragon?"

She shook her head, pulling the rich cloak more tightly around her. "I? No, I never spoke with him at all; the King did and exchanged a rich necklace for my freedom. But the dragon threatened to take me if he ever sets eyes on me again." She frowned glumly. "I wonder if that means I won't be able to leave the Greenwood..."

"That is precisely what it means," the Elvenking said, stopping in front of her with Galion walking beside him. "You are not to stir from this kingdom as long as that dragon lives. Such threats are not idle, Elizabeth."

She sighed and nodded obediently, well understanding the wisdom behind the decree, and wondering absently what the lifespan of a dragon might be.

"As you say, Sire. Although I do wish someone would come along and turn that creature into a few hundred pairs of boots."

Legolas chuckled. "Excitement seems to follow you wherever you go, Lady Elizabeth."

"Fie on excitement, I am for a long bath." She wrinkled her nose. "I still feel tainted by dragon smell." She turned to the King expectantly. "My lord, with your permission?"

Thranduil smiled. "You may go, Elizabeth, and I hope you rest quietly and well, after all your adventures this past week."
She grinned impishly, sketched a hasty bow and turned toward the halls, the King's magnificent cloak billowing regally behind her.

~o~

Elizabeth gasped, sitting up in bed, hands flying to her face and head swiveling wildly around the room in residual terror. The comforting sight of her darkened bedchamber greeted her, and even as she relaxed slightly in relief, she threw off her covers and slid from the bed. There would be no more rest for her this night.

She pulled the King's cloak she had wrapped herself in before going to sleep tighter around her, pressing her face against it where it retained his scent most strongly, allowing her breathing to slow and even out. Carrying it to her closet, she draped it across a chair and quickly threw on undergarments and a dark green silk sheath.

Not bothering with shoes, she glanced again at the cloak, then passed into her sitting room. She had purposefully been hanging onto the garment the King had wrapped her in upon their return to the halls, but after so many weeks of sleeping with it, she knew she would finally have to return it.

Despite the comfort it gave her when she awoke from the nightmares she had been having every night since their return to the Greenwood, it was unseemly to cuddle with the King's attire in her bed every time she slept. She frowned as she left her apartments and began her nightly wandering...very unseemly. Elizabeth lifted her chin, resolved. She would find Galion tomorrow and ensure the return of the raiment.

With no particular thought to her destination, she found her steps taking her back to the high overlook that allowed her to see over the top of the forest to the great mountain in the distance.

Her bare feet made no sound on the walkways, the winding path she trod was familiar and comforting, the silence around her peaceful. The dark of middle night had become her intimate companion in recent times, allowing her mind to empty in the silence. Drawing a deep breath to fill her lungs, she allowed her eyes to slip closed as she released it, and with it, all of the nightmare's tension.

"You ever haunt the shadows in the small hours, of late," came the deep voice from somewhere behind her, and the speaker soon moved to stand beside her. She opened her eyes and turned her head to meet the sharp gaze of the Elvenking. He faced the mountain in the distance, as she did, even as he read the expressions that played across her face, a hint of concern growing in his eyes.

"You are in distress. Tell me what troubles you."

A gust of wind moved through the caverns, fluttering the hem of her dress away from her ankles and lifting her hair back from her face. She looked down, feeling suddenly foolish for fleeing from her nightmares like a small, terrified child.

"It is nothing," she prevaricated, turning back toward the Lonely Mountain in the distance, where dwelt Smaug. "Just dreams."

He shifted, bringing him closer so that she felt the heat from his body where his velvet-clad arm brushed against her bare one. "Of?"

Elizabeth chanced a look at him, but he was so close that her eyes skittered away from the intimacy. Turning her head in the opposite direction, her hair spilled over her shoulder, veiling her face from his perceptive eyes.
"Fire. I see fire, every night," she whispered. "A sky filled with dragon's wings, all around me, and then fire comes, consuming me, melting my face in a blaze of agony."

She shuddered at the memories, scarcely aware when he brushed her dark locks back so he could see her clearly. Firm but gentle hands grasped her shoulders and turned her to face him, his face harsh in the shadowed light.

"Show me."

Confused, she looked into his bright blue eyes, instantly overcome by the sensation of falling from a vast height, blackness darkening her vision until she found herself in the dream again, but somehow awake and aware.

Thranduil stood beside her, dispassionately watching the circling dragons of glistening red and midnight scales until they flew close enough to see their heads clearly, grotesque jaws parting in a truly gruesome display, blood flowing in a red river over teeth like a row of swords.

When the largest landed in front of them, as he always did, and the fire rolled toward them like the great sea, Elizabeth threw up an arm to block the vast wave of fire she knew would melt her face in a wash of agony. Before it could reach them, Thranduil stepped between her and the dragon, his back to the beast and a hint of a smile on his lips as he waved a hand and all the dragons disappeared.

Her head swiveled right and left, still searching for danger. "Where did they go, and how are we here? Where exactly are we?" She looked to him with a puzzled frown.

Glancing up at what had become a clear, blue sky, he smiled in earnest. "I used magic to join your mind. It seems you have taken one of my memories and changed it to something far worse, and dare I say, more terrifying than what I experienced. It appears you have quite the vivid imagination."

Resting his hands on her shoulders, he pulled her close so he could stare down into her eyes as before. "These dreams will plague you no more, for I have banished them." He lifted a hand and ran his fingertips across her cheek where she had felt the painful inferno so many times, then bent and kissed her softly there.

"Dragon fire will never again touch you, in dream or otherwise, Elizabeth, this I vow." Looking deep into her eyes, he smiled again, dimple flashing appealingly. "Now,...awake."

Awareness returned to her suddenly, and she found her face pressed against the King's chest, his arms encircling her and keeping her upright in his embrace. Her arms were wrapped around his waist and his heart beat steadily against her ear, the intimacy of their positions sending a flutter of apprehension and uncertainty through her. Pushing out of his arms, she turned partially away, willing herself to speak and breathe calmly.

"What just happened?"

Clasping his hands behind his back, he paced several steps away. "Something in our previous...interactions...allowed you to take one of my memories. How is a mystery, but I strongly suspect what transformed you has given you some strange powers that you neither understand nor know how to wield, should wielding magic even be possible for you."

Her brows rose as she considered his words, a question she had been mulling over, rising to her lips. "The day that you saved me from the creature...you said strange words before you hid me from sight and bade me not to speak or look at the dragon. Why?"

Turning partially to face her, he tilted his head. "I used a spell of concealment; an illusion of sorts,
essentially cloaking you in the essence of my own being. This is why I told the dragon you were my bride, for there is a mingling of spirits that occurs between elves who are wed, and so it would have appeared to him. Had you spoken, it would have shattered the spell as we are obviously not truly joined, which is why I cautioned you to silence in his presence."

She laced her fingers together, impressed by the great King more than ever. "You're essentially a powerful wizard, then, with magic spells and the like."

He laughed softly. "I am not one of the Istari, Elizabeth, nor do I possess vast power, though I have gained much in the many years of my life. I am of the first-born, and you of the second, though you be altered. You are considerably more susceptible to my gifts than even the most diminished among my own race."

"But you were in my head! That is a frighteningly powerful ability, no matter how you view it."

His eyes moved across her form; everything about her, from her body language to her emotions, proclaiming sorrow and regret.

"Yes."

She stepped forward, eyes beseeching and hand outstretched before she hesitated and dropped it, feeling like a fool. "Forgive me, Thranduil," she said in a small voice. "I regret whatever it was I did and would undo it all if I could. I am not a magical being, and as you say, I blunder about, however unintentionally."

After a moment of silence, he closed the distance between them, his large hand cupping the same cheek as he had in her mind. She searched his eyes, uncertain what lay in his gaze until he smiled, softening his look.

"You have already been forgiven, Elizabeth. I believe we better understand one another now than we did then. Do you not think so?"

She lifted her hand and covered his, turning her face more into his hand and smiled.

"Yes, my lord, I do."

The heat of summer shimmered across the vast Greenwood, long, bright days giving way to brief, warm nights. Colors in nature were vibrant, and while the citizens of the forest were as animated as ever, there was a pleasant languor about them as midsummer revels drew near.

Over time, Elizabeth and Tirion had become fast friends, and he had happily drawn her into his own social circle, much to her pleasure. All the solitary time she had spent in her earlier years in the elven
realm were long behind her, and when she wasn't training or spending time with Legolas and his comrades, she was with Tirion and his.

On the longest day of the year, Tirion, his much younger sister, Elirien, and their three friends, Aerben, Berthon, and Mylion, were picnicking some fair distance from the halls. Having already eaten their fill of the cold meats, pastries and fruit they packed, Mylion was strumming a lyre and singing softly of the wind and sky.

The beautiful melody made Elizabeth smile and close her eyes. Elirien had taken on the task of forcing Elizabeth's wavy, dark hair into a traditional Silvan style of interwoven braids, and the combination of a full stomach, lovely music, and having someone delicately stroking her hair had her feeling quite drowsy.

"Mylion, if you do not soon change the tune to something merrier, we shall have to watch over Lady Elizabeth while she sleeps the day away like the queen she once was," Tirion quipped.

Cracking an eye open, Elizabeth gave Tirion a dry look. "If you think a queen has the luxury of being allowed to sleep whenever she chooses, you are sorely mistaken. My time was never less my own than then."

Laying down fully on Elirien's lap as the young elleth finished the braids, she closed her eyes again. "I far prefer to be a lowly subject of the Greenwood with friends like you, than a queen in the lands of men."

Berthon raised his glass in salute. "Well spoken! For what finer ruler is there than ours, who provides us so well with Dorwinion for feasts?"

Tirion chuckled and drained his own glass in silent agreement. Aerben stood and walked to Mylion, murmuring quietly together before the latter began a new song; one Elizabeth had taught them.

"Blow thy horn, hunter, and blow thy horn on high.
There is a doe in yonder wood, in faith she will not die.
Now blow thy horn, hunter, now blow thy horn, jolly hunter!

~o~

"Sore this deer sticken is, and yet she bleeds no whit;
She lay so fair I could not miss; Lord I was glad of it!
Now blow thy horn, hunter, now blow thy horn, jolly hunter!

~o~

"As I stood under a bank, the deer shoff on the medd;
I struck her so that down she sank, but yet she was not dead.
Now blow thy horn, hunter, now blow thy horn, jolly hunter!

~o~

"There she goeth, see ye not how she goeth o'er the plain?
And if ye lust to have a shot, I'll warrant her barrain.

Now blow thy horn, hunter, now blow thy horn, jolly hunter!

~o~

"He to go, and I to go, but he ran fast afore;

I bade him shoot and strike the doe, for I might shoot no more.

Now blow thy horn, hunter, now blow thy horn, jolly hunter!

~o~

"To the covert both they went, for I found where she lay;

An arrow in her haunch she hent for faint she might not bray.

Now blow thy horn, hunter, now blow thy horn, jolly hunter!

~o~

"I was weary of the game, and went to the tavern to drink;

Now the construction of the same, what do you mean or think?

Now blow thy horn, hunter, now blow thy horn, jolly hunter!"

~o~

Elizabeth snorted inelegantly and sat up as the cheery tune ended. "You realize there is a double meaning, and that song is not only referring to hunting...animals?"

She looked at Tirion and said in English, "Cornysh was a master of the double-entendre, and his songs were much sung at court because of it."

He grinned and returned in Quenya, "Your courts are much different to ours. Glad I am of it."

Berthon raised his brows expectantly at Elizabeth, long used to Tirion and Elizabeth speaking briefly to each other in words no others spoke, and waited for an explanation.

Shifting into a more comfortable position on the soft grass, Elizabeth shrugged, switching back to the Silvan tongue. "Yes, the courts of men can be shocking. Much of the gossip revolved around who was sleeping in which lord or lady's bed."

Reaching out to slip a white flower into Elizabeth's hair, Elirien smiled sweetly, a confused look in her hazel eyes. "But why should lords and ladies wish to sleep in beds not their own? That seems a very odd custom to me!"

All four male elves managed to keep their grins hidden, but Elizabeth smiled openly in delight. Elirien was barely two hundred, and so sweet and naive that it caused the human woman to feel a curious combination of sisterly and maternal affection, as well as quite protective.

Elizabeth reached for the elf maiden's hand and squeezed it gently in her own. "Why indeed? I confess I always found it a bizarre custom, for it is surely much wiser and more comfortable to sleep in one's own bed."
Tirion stood and looked at his friends and sister. "Who is for a climb to the top of a high tree? The view on midsummer day is unequaled, as the light on this day is different to any other."

All stood to their feet except Elizabeth, who looked up ruefully and plucked at her skirt. "I shall have to see it next year, as I was not as wise as Elirien to dress in breeches and tunic. To climb attired as I am would be both perilous and immodest. Alas!"

Aerben stepped forward and bowed gallantly. "I shall remain behind to keep you company, Lady Elizabeth."

Standing to her feet, she shook her head. "You mustn't miss out on the climb because of me. I will walk with you all, then pick flowers while you go up."

Resolved, they set out, Mylion beginning a merry marching song and the others quickly taking it up.

---

Sometime later, Elizabeth tired of meandering among the flowers alone and wandered back to where their belongings were, proceeding to drink a bottle of wine while she waited for the elves to return. Plucking Mylion's lyre up from where he left it, she strummed it softly, grinning when she thought of a way that might manage to bring them back more quickly. After working out the tune sufficiently, she began to sing loudly.

"A dragon has come to our village today.
We've asked him to leave, but he won't go away.
Now he's talked to our king and they worked out a deal.
No homes will he burn and no crops will he steal.

~o~

"Now there is but one catch, we dislike it a bunch.
Twice a year he invites him a virgin to lunch.
Well, we've no other choice, so the deal we'll respect.
But we can't help but wonder and pause to reflect.

~o~

"Do virgins taste better than those who are not? Are they salty, or sweeter, more juicy or what?
Do you savor them slowly? Gulp them down on the spot?
Do virgins taste better than those who are not?

~o~
"Now we'd like to be shed you, and many have tried.
But no one can get through your thick scaly hide.
We hope that some day, some brave knight will come by.
'Cause we can't wait around 'til you're too fat to fly."

~o~

The elves ran up, laughing, and Elizabeth grinned and continued the song.

~o~

"Now you have such good taste in your women for sure,
They always are pretty, they always are pure.
But your notion of dining, it makes us all flinch,
For your favorite entree is fire-roasted wench."

~o~

"Now we've found a solution, it works out so neat,
If you insist on nothing but virgins to eat.
No more will our number ever grow small."

~o~

She paused dramatically, looking at the faces of all her friends before grinning and singing the final line.

~o~

"We'll simply make sure there's no virgins at all!"

More appreciative laughter rung out, and even Elirien giggled merrily. Elizabeth surrendered the lyre to Mylion's expert hands with a wink and went to pour more wine, her throat quite parched from her singing.

Berthon filled the glasses of the other elves and then his own, finally seating himself between Elirien and Elizabeth and stretching out his long limbs comfortably.

"Lady Elizabeth, will you give us the tale of how the King saved you from the dragon? Aerben has not yet heard it, I think."

"Nor I!" smiled Elirien.

Tirion smirked. "Indeed, you must! For each time I hear it, the actions of our lord grow more heroic."

Elizabeth shot a mischievous smile at Tirion and drawled in English, "You think you've heard heroic? I have many more tricks up my sleeve. I shall now tell them the legendary version." His grin grew in anticipation at her words.
Turning to the other elves, she stood and placed a hand over her heart, assuming a false solemnity.

"My gentle ellons and elleth, hearken to me now as I give you the stirring tale...of the fell dragon and the Sunshine King."

~o~

Blow Thy Horn, Hunter by William Cornysh

Do Virgins Taste Better by Brobdingnagian Bards

~o~
Chapter 11

Legolas watched as Elizabeth slipped out of the great hall with a satisfied grin on her face, hanging back in the shadows until she had moved away. Resuming his post just outside the door where he had been listening in secret for some time, he chuckled at what the elves within were saying about his father.

For months, the tale of the King and the dragon had been whispered among the people, and now was being told loudly before the autumn fires. Legolas grinned, wondering if his father had heard this latest version or whether he should acquaint him with it. Shaking his head, he moved away from the door and turned toward his chambers. Undoubtedly, his father already knew all about it.

Elizabeth pushed open the door to her quarters, smiling widely and feeling happy with her pleasant evening. Breezing through the sitting room, she headed for her bedchamber, already loosening the ties on her gown as she walked. The hour was late and she was more than ready to sleep. When she looked across at her bed, she froze. She was certain she had left it sitting on her pillow, and now…

"Elizabeth."

Turning very slowly, she beheld the King lounging on the chair from her vanity, hand draped casually atop the table while he absently fingered her diamond and sapphire necklace she had once worn for him. Across his lap was draped his cloak he had wrapped around her so many months ago, the same cloak she had left on her pillow before she went out...

"Shit."

Swallowing, she realized suddenly she was flashing her partially bared breasts at the King and fumbled quickly to retie the laces of her gown. She looked up seconds later with rosy cheeks to find the King watching her with a smirk, obviously entertained.

"Ah, Sire! ...what an unexpected surprise. To see you. Here." Elizabeth cleared her throat and looked away, no longer able to hold the intensity of his gaze.

"You are a very difficult woman to catch alone. Always I see you surrounded by your Silvan friends. It is no small thing to be accepted by them so quickly, as they are ever suspicious of outsiders."

Quickly? She had lived among them nearly sixty years.

"Oh." She smiled in pleasure, thinking of her friends and how she would happily never have to be parted from them. "I do adore them all, and theirs is very fine company to keep."

He hummed noncommittally and continued to stare at her in the unnerving way he seemed to have perfected. Glancing at her bed, she wondered how you were meant to politely entertain a king in your bedchamber, when it did not involve-
"You sleep in it."

Jerking her eyes back to the Elvenking, they widened when she saw he was holding the cloak in front of his face, his lids half closed over his eyes while he inhaled deeply. He allowed it to rest across his lap again, a knowing smile quirking one side of his mouth.

"You wrap yourself in this cloak to sleep, and you wear nothing else. Why?"

Her lips parted as she scrambled mentally to come up with something to explain herself. What was a plausible excuse for such a shocking thing, even though she had mentioned something of her sleeping habits to him before? He would hear it in her voice if she attempted to lie. Sighing quietly, she bit her lip.

"You will laugh at me."

He pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Will I?" he asked mildly. "Perhaps you should not presume my reactions prematurely."

Shifting her weight, she felt her cheeks flush with fresh heat. "It retains your..." She cleared her throat again softly. "Your scent, or it did for a while. Like forest and sunshine." She shrugged. "The smell of home was very comforting, particularly during the nightmares."

He folded his arms across his chest, drawing her eyes there.

"I freed you of troubling dreams sometime ago, Elizabeth. Do you still require comforting?"

She laughed nervously. "Well, no, not in that way. It became...habit?"

He stood to his full height, making her bedchamber immediately feel very small, and walked to where she stood by her bed, tossing the cloak back onto her pillow where it had been. He smirked.

"You may keep it."

Pacing across the room like a stalking lion, he entered her large closet, his casual question floating out behind him. "What are you planning to wear for the Feast of Starlight?"

She blinked and walked closer to the closet, at a loss. "I- am uncertain. I suppose it depends on whether the prince settles on the Merengue as he seems to favor, or the Fox Trot I am hoping for, as this year's featured dance. I can't really dance Latin style very well in a flowing ballgown."

"Wear this."

He emerged a moment later with one of her richer looking frocks in his hands; an emerald green silk, fitted to mid-thigh then flowing into a very full mermaid skirt, the strapless bodice crusted in tiny Swarovski crystals. It was the only dress apart from her blue silk that she had brought with her across the sea, and she had never been bold enough to wear it, deeming it far too revealing for the more demure and modest elves.

Crossing her arms, she looked at him doubtfully. "You want me to wear...this? In front of- people?"

"Of course."

Throwing it across the foot of her bed, he opened a lower drawer of her vanity and drew out one of her necklace cases, opening it to reveal her diamond and emerald choker, and she stared, truly flabbergasted at the familiarity he seemed to have with her chambers and possessions.
"How did you..."

Tossing the necklace on top of the dress carelessly, he raised a dark golden brow questioningly. "I assume you have appropriate shoes to match?"

Nodding dumbly, she turned to look again at what he had selected. The King of Greenwood the Great had just chosen her feast clothing for her; in fact, he had swiftly put together an entire ensemble. Mystifying.

Feeling the weight of his regard, she met his eyes, hers still full of confusion and his with distant humor. He strolled slowly to the doorway, then paused and half turned, resting a hand against the wooden framing.

"It was you who began the heavily embellished Smaug stories naming me the Sunshine King, wasn't it?"

She bit the inside of her cheek, feeling a desperate need to deny, but instinctively knew she would be unable to fool him. "Yes, Sire," she said, meek-voiced.

He smiled, closed-lipped. "Elizabeth," he began in a chiding tone, and she braced herself for his rebuke, wincing slightly. He surprised her by laughing quietly, dropping his chin and giving her a long look.

"Though I am flattered you think so well of your King, and I quite enjoy the appellation, I have never, nor shall I ever be able to shoot beams of sunlight from my eyes."

She pressed her lips together to hold in her laughter. That part of the story she had added on a whim, but the Silvans had loved it best and repeated it often; apparently it had even reached the ears of the Elvenking, himself.

"Who knows what the future may hold, Thranduil." She let the laughter bubble out of her throat at last. "As a famous saying from my land admonishes: never say never."

He chuckled, his rich voice filling the space. "Rest well, Elizabeth."

"Good night, Sire," she called to his retreating back, standing in the same spot and musing over the evening, long after his silent departure.

The day of the Feast of Starlight arrived on a cool breath of autumn air. The ground was frost covered that morning, and the woods had the feeling of approaching winter. The leaves of many of the trees had long fallen to the forest floor, continuing the cycle that was as old as life itself.

Elizabeth had bathed and washed her hair early, so it would be fit to work with come the evening, then spent the day wandering wherever her feet took her. She best loved the energy the halls always seemed to hum with during feast times, and peeking in on many different areas on a mini-tour was a pleasant way to pass the time.

The kitchens were hot and humid with all the ovens in full use, the succulent scents of savory
roasting meat, and the blend of spices and sweet fruits in pies wafting warmly, making Elizabeth’s mouth water. Instead of bothering the elves working so diligently, she took a red apple, smiling her thanks at Istril, the chief baker, who waved a hand in acknowledgement, her normally perfect braids looking decidedly unkempt.

Grinning, Elizabeth wandered back out of the depths of the caverns, emerging once more into the daylight. The practice grounds that normally rang with the sounds of steel on steel and the shouts of sparring elves was mostly silent. Finishing her apple, she discarded the core in a refuse bin and sauntered onto the empty field.

Walking to one of the racks, she selected a mid-sized dagger and twirled it experimentally, testing the weight in her hand. It was a fine blade, as were all of elvish make, but just a tad too heavy for her. Replacing it, she turned to greet the elf she heard approaching.

"Lady Elizabeth. The training yards are the last place I would expect to find you today." Feren wore his usual stern expression, clad in leathers of such shades of brown and red as were an excellent match for his russet-colored hair. "Have you come to slay more branches?"

He had seemed to find her previously practicing her sword cuts with her katana on upright branches strangely amusing. Was he teasing her?

Smiling genuinely, for she had always had a soft spot for the unrelentingly serious elf, she took a step nearer. "It is good to see you, Captain. I so seldom see you out of the King’s presence. Will you be able to attend the feast tonight, or will your duties keep you elsewhere?"

Gathering arrows from the table where he stood, he loaded them into a quiver and set it aside, giving her his full attention. "I will not be on duty and I will be present, by the King’s command."

"Excellent. It’s high time you attended. I daresay you could benefit from pleasant distractions, for a change."

He stared at her in a similarly unnerving manner as his lord often did, which she found rather amusing. "Shall we hear you sing tonight, lady? You seem to have a wealth of interesting songs from your land."

Laughing, she shook her head. "I hope to avoid any singing tonight, or if I do I will hope everyone is so deep in their cups that they won’t remember it. I think the dancing will be more than enough for me to keep occupied with."

He nodded in understanding, a glimmer of amusement causing his warm, brown eyes to sparkle briefly. "Ah, yes. I have heard your dances with Prince Legolas have become something of an annual tradition in more recent years, have they not? I look forward to it."

Relieved she had been able to persuade the prince to choose the more elegant Fox Trot for the dance, instead of the more sensual styles he tended toward, she folded her arms, pleased by a sudden thought.

"Tell me, Feren, are you wed to anyone?"

He gave her a strange look. "No, Lady Elizabeth, I am unwed."

"You have no sweetheart either, or anyone you plan to court?"

Looking increasingly uncomfortable, he shook his head. "Nay, my lady. May I ask to what these questions portend?"
Grinning, she shrugged. "It's nothing unpleasant, Captain. Do you know an elleth by the name of Elirien?"

"I know none by that name."

As his face became increasingly confused, her smile widened. "And would you mind if I introduced you to my friend at the feast tonight? Perhaps you might share a dance? It would make me very happy if you did; she's so lovely and shy, but I know she loves to dance."

He frowned but nodded. "I have no objection to what you propose, lady."

"Then I shall see you this evening, Feren." She turned to go, an excited bounce in her step, leaving the bemused Captain to his own thoughts.

Staring at her reflection in the mirror, Elizabeth fought the urge to fidget at the image she presented, which was very unlike her. Such a gown, with its completely bare shoulders and attention-grabbing décolletage would surely scandalize the entire kingdom! What had the King been thinking by urging her to wear it?

A soft tap on the door of her bedchamber had her rising hurriedly, belatedly realizing the lateness of the hour and how much time she had wasted fretting. Opening the door, she smiled at Elirien and looked to the sitting room at her brother beyond.

"Oh Elizabeth!" she exclaimed. "How very beautiful you look!"

"As do you," she said, hugging her friend quickly with an admiring look.

Both elves were dressed very fine, Elirien in a soft velvet gown of the very deepest wine red that looked very becoming with her hair and eyes, and Tirion in a forest green tunic and trousers. It made her laugh inwardly when she realized they were all dressed in Christmas colors.

Tirion gave a low whistle of surprise and stared at her with wide eyes. "I fear, Lady Elizabeth, that more dragons will have to be fended off this night with you arrayed so." He gave her a teasing grin. "I think even the Sunshine King may look less bored this night."

"Oh, do hush, Tirion," she huffed, then bit her lip. "It's too much, isn't it? One moment." She hurried back to her closet and hunted until she found a satin shawl in the same shade of emerald as her gown. Wrapping it around herself and covering her shoulders more modestly, she felt instantly better.

"Now I think I'm ready." Rejoining her friends with a triumphant smile, she accepted the arm Tirion offered and smiled at Elirien on his other arm.

Considering, Tirion looked between them for a moment. "I'm almost tempted to stay here and keep the two most beautiful ladies in the kingdom all to myself."

Elirien giggled and Elizabeth poked him in the side. "There's Dorwinion waiting at the feast, Tirion."

With a bright laugh, he led them through the doorway. "Yes, and I believe I hear it calling my name."
Leaning against the wine table with her latest glass, Elizabeth allowed herself a satisfied smile. While it may not have been trumpets, bells and love at first sight, Feren had been showing more than a polite interest in Elirien, and was even engaged in their third dance together. Very promising.

"You seem rather pleased with yourself, Lady Elizabeth. I must admit I'm quite pleased with you as well, if for no other reason than your choice of attire," Legolas murmured, lifting her free hand to his lips for a kiss, his blue eyes full of mischief as his eyes swept her. "You look beautiful. That shade of green is enchanting with your eyes."

"Thank you, my prince. You're looking very dapper and handsome yourself, although since that is a constant occurrence I think it hardly bears mentioning," she said, examining his ice blue tunic that perfectly complimented his eyes. "I should hate to be a boring conversationalist."

He laughed brightly and she smiled, looking again to the couple moving gracefully about the dance floor. Legolas followed her gaze, his eyes widening. Leaning closer, he whispered in her ear.

"Do my eyes deceive me, or is that Feren dancing with one of your friends?"

"It is, indeed," she said, with a smirk.

He glanced down at her curiously. "Would you care to share your schemes with me? I sense you have a particular goal in mind, Elizabeth."

She swallowed a sip of wine, her eyes narrowing. "You want to know what my aim is? Let me tell you." She leaned even closer to him, whispering the word directly into his ear. "Babies."

Legolas drew back, his brow furrowed with confusion. "Beg pardon? Babies?"

Elizabeth chortled. "Yes, baby elves. Dozens, hundreds of them! You all ought to be having babies. No kingdom is healthy without young, and there are scarcely any in Greenwood."

He stared out to the dance floor, clearly gobsmacked. She bumped his shoulder playfully with her own. "What about you, Legolas? Surely you also have a duty to continue your family line and produce heirs. Is there a lady you admire? Someone here, even?"

Looking carefully at several of the more elegant of the female elves scattered about the hall, she pursed her lips, considering.

Head tilted, the prince looked at her with a sudden intensity and caught her hand in his, wrapping his fingers around hers and squeezing gently. He took the wine glass from her other hand and pulled her forward with a soft smile.

"Come, Lady Elizabeth. I think it is time for our dance, as my father just arrived."

She angled her head, trying to catch a glimpse of the King, her mouth falling open when she finally saw him. He was wearing rich, intricately embroidered robes, as always, but the color was one she had never seen him wear...emerald green, in a similar shade to her gown.

Grinning, she placed her hand on Legolas' shoulder when he wrapped an arm around her waist,
sighing happily as they began to move to the elegant steps of a ballroom fox trot. Since the steps were not complex, and similar to other dances of the elves, the floor did not clear as it had for the Latin style dances they had performed in past years.

Enjoying herself thoroughly, as she always did when dancing with the prince, she didn't notice how the other elves parted when the latest dance ended, clearing a wide space on the dance floor where their King walked down among them. Confused, Elizabeth turned to see Thranduil approach her and hold his hand out.

"Lady Elizabeth, will you honor me with a dance?"

Gasp of surprise sounded all around them and even as Elizabeth looked at all the shocked faces, due to the gleam of amusement in the King's bright blue eyes, she knew he had done it intentionally.

She curtsied, shooting him a smile of mischief even as she slipped her hand into his. "It would be my great honor to dance with the Sunshine King, Sire."

Legolas chuckled as he stepped away, relinquishing his partner with good grace. Guiding her to the far end of the dance floor, Thranduil faced her from several feet away and an excited whisper went up among the nearby elves, other couples eagerly taking their places in either Thranduil or Elizabeth's row.

She bit her lip in concern. "I don't believe I know this dance, my lord. I will be a poor partner."

Smiling roguishly, he nodded to her then signaled the musicians. "You will pick it up quickly, just follow my lead."

As the music played, Elizabeth kept her eyes on the King, allowing him to guide her, and quickly copying his steps. She laughed with pleasure as the dance called for him to lift and spin her in the air, again and again. Realizing what it reminded her of, she gasped.

"It's very like La Volta," she cried in delight.

He raised a brow, lifting her high again. "You've enjoyed a dance like this in the past?"

She threw her head back, smiling radiant as he spun her. "Yes, it was one of Queen Elizabeth's favorite dances, I learned it when I was very young. This is not exactly the same, but very like."

When the dance ended, all the elves clapped and cheered, waiting to see what the King would choose next. When the music started to play again and Thranduil pulled her into his arms, she relaxed as they started to waltz. There were a number of similar dances the elves did to what she had been taught, but none were so enjoyable to dance with a strong partner as a waltz.

"Where I grew up, this is the dance every fairy tale has the princess dancing with her prince."

He chuckled lightly. "Do the princesses never dance with the king?"

She tilted her head, thinking. "No, not that I can think of. Usually, the king is old and gray and the prince is the handsome hero."

"I would venture a guess none of these tales are about elves, as I am in no danger of gray hair."

The King deftly switched directions, narrowly avoiding colliding with a couple that looked to have already drunk a little too much wine.
"No, indeed. I suppose a great many stories I know would be irrevocably altered if elves featured. Even now, it's hard for me to imagine a story about a grandfather appearing as handsome and virile as his grandchild." She tilted her head.

"I might almost think you and your son were brothers if I did not know better. You appear only a little older than him in appearance, although you clearly have the aura of greater maturity and experience."

While they danced, the King had very subtly been working her satin wrapper lower and lower on her arms until the knot across her chest slipped away, baring her shoulders. When she gasped and made to replace it, he gripped her hand tighter in his own and squeezed her waist.

"Leave it as is, Elizabeth. I prefer it this way, as I asked you to wear it."

Glancing around self-consciously, she blushed when the King lightly gripped her chin between his thumb and first finger, turning it back toward him and giving her the barest hint of a smile.

"Do not care for what others think. You need only please your king, Lady Elizabeth."

She glanced up in shock as a sudden suspicion hit her. "Thranduil! You dressed me to match you because you intended to dance this night, didn't you? Why am I not surprised to discover I am a color coordinated accessory to you?"

He smirked. "Why else do you think I would scour your closet? You did beg me to dance for the people's pleasure when we were in Laketown, and there is no reason we should not look well together while we do so."

Elizabeth flushed in pleasure. "I did not expect you to actually heed my request, although I am so very glad you did. Look," she said, subtly indicating all the elves in the hall, who seemed to be laughing and enjoying themselves even more freely than usual while they watched their king join in the revels with proud eyes.

"Your people adore you, Sire. They can never get enough of their Sunshine King, and who can blame them?" She grinned at Tirion, who winked at her, and Mylion who raised his glass in salute as they went twirling past.

The King looked down at the woman in his arms, his slight smile musing. "Perhaps I am not the only one the people adore."
The revels continued with great success, and when the feast in the halls concluded, Elizabeth found herself joining her friends in the flower garden to continue drinking and singing, in what amounted to a feast after-party. Standing on a stone bench, Mylion strummed his lyre again and held up a hand for silence.

"As you have just heard from the village men in the first part of the song, listen now to the Dragon's Retort!"

Elizabeth laughed, sandwiched between Tirion and Berthon, knowing what was coming next. Mylion had so liked the 'Do Virgins Taste Better' song that she had taught him the next part as well, and he delighted in performing it for close friends. Or anyone nearby really, when he had too much to drink as was the case for everyone in the garden, milling about in the moonlight. Drawing a breath, he launched into the song.

"Now, I am a dragon. Please listen to me.

For I'm misunderstood to a dreadful degree.
This ecology needs me and I know my place.
But I'm fighting extinction with all of me race.

~0~

"Well, I came to this village to better my health
Which is ever so poor, despite all me wealth.
But I get no assistance and no sympathy,
Just impertinent questioning shouted at me.

~0~

"Yes, virgins taste better than those who are not.
But my favorite snack mixed with peril is fraught.
For my teeth will decay and my trim go to pot.
Yes, virgins taste better than those who are not."
"Well, I'm really quite kind almost all through the year. Vegetarian ways are now mine out of fear. But a birthday needs sweets as I'm sure you'll agree. And fire-roasted wench tastes like sweetmeats to me!

"As it happens our interests are almost the same. You see I'm really quite skillful at managing game. If I ate just your men, would your excess decline? Of course not, the rest would just make better time!

"Yes, virgins taste better than those who are not. But my favorite snack mixed with peril is fraught. For my teeth will decay and my trim go to pot. Yes, virgins taste better than those who are not.

"Now, the number of babies a woman can bear Has limits, and that's why my prunings done there. And an orphan's a sad sight and so when I munch, I'm careful to eat only virgins for lunch!"

Raucous laughter filled the garden, Elizabeth giggling along with all the elves. Clambering up onto the bench beside Mylion, who was forced to steady her when she nearly lost her balance, she smiled radiantly down on all her friends and various new acquaintances.

"After the Dragon's Retort comes the Virgin's Response, which I will now sing you."

"What is the Virgin's Response? You have never told me of this." At Mylion's whispered question, she patted his cheek and whispered back.

"I made it up. Just go with it and play for me." He laughed softly and nodded, strumming the opening notes.

"Hey, I am a virgin, so listen to me! For the fate of my kind is so dreadful, you see."
The king bids me accept my fate with his typical air,
I must tell you right now that it's not bloody fair!

~o~

"I have aspirations and a life yet to live,
Whether I marry and glibly my hand do I give.
But appointments with dragons are so very grim,
A pox upon duty, for I won't go to him!

~o~

"If virgins taste better than those who are not,
A snack, a dainty, more juicy or what?
If you savor us slowly or crunch us a lot,
Alas! Virgins taste better than those who are not.

~o~

"If only a knight to save me would come,
I'd be evermore grateful and nevermore glum.
My dreams would again be within my reach,
Never again would you hear my terrified screech!

~o~

"So all you fine men, off now you go,
To slay the dragon and finish this show.
For when great success and victory you meet,
I promise you'll taste for yourselves if virgins are sweet!

~o~

"For if virgins taste better than those who are not,
A snack, a dainty, more juicy or what?
You can savor us slowly or lick us a lot,
Yes, virgins taste better than those who are not!"

~o~

Grinning widely, Elizabeth jumped down amid all the laughter, briefly kneeling to retrieve her high
heels from where she'd tossed them in the grass. Mylion had already begun an elven love song, and the lulling beauty of it made her drowsy, reminding her of the lateness of the hour.

"I hope you don't regret singing that tomorrow," Tirion whispered against her ear. She reached out and took his wine from him, draining his glass and handing it back with a smirk.

"If I keep drinking, I won't remember singing it, and then my problem is solved!" She waved a hand in farewell to all her friends as she walked out of the garden.

Continuing barefoot, she made her way to the overlook that the mountain was visible from, determined to view stars as she usually did during the feast in their honor. Seeing the King already standing there silhouetted in starlight and moonlight, she stopped, wondering if she should leave him to his privacy and solitude.

"Join me."

He did not turn when he spoke, but kept his back to her, his gaze fixed on the far distant mountain. When she hesitated and made no response, he turned his head to her, seeking her eyes unerringly in the dim light. Slowly, she moved forward until she stood near him, a cold wind blasting through the caverns and going straight through her thin gown, causing goose-flesh to rise.

"You are cold."

The King reached out and wrapped her inside his robes, pulling her against his side. She peeked up at him from her warm position, biting her lip at a passing thought.

"It seems I always end wrapped in your robes, Thranduil."

He smiled, his hand resting comfortably on her hip. "You have no objection to my robes, indeed you seem to have quite a fondness for them."

"Rather, a fondness for the elf lord in them," she said wryly.

He stilled, a long moment of silence passing between them. "You've had quite a lot of wine. I heard you singing in the garden with your friends, of dragons and virgins." He shook his head in bemusement, looking down at the woman.

Surrounded by his heat and scent as she was, her drunkenness seemed to increase tenfold. Turning her face into his chest, she nuzzled against him, wrapping her arms around his waist and allowing her weight to rest fully against his much larger frame. She was in her own happy little place inhabited by warm elf and an alcohol haze until said elf lifted her chin abruptly, staring piercingly into her eyes.

"Do not taunt the flame, Elizabeth, or prepare to be consumed by it."

She shivered, drowning in the strength and power radiating from him. "And if I want to be consumed...by you?"

He moved his hand from her chin to push the thick fall of her dark hair back from her face, and rested his hand on the bare skin of her shoulder.

"You speak unguardedly, as I have observed you are sometimes wont to do from too much drink."

Smiling slowly, she raised a dark brow, her gray-green eyes matching his in intensity. "Do you think I don't know what I'm saying? I know very well. I'm hoping to seduce a king, who is so much more to me than just that."
Holding her breath, she searched his face just as he seemed to be searching hers, and she finally shrugged with a self-deprecating smile. "Well ... I had to try. Good night, Sire," she said, pulling away.

Thranduil pulled her back against him forcefully, one arm around her waist and the other fisted in her hair, his face set in hard lines. Lowering his head, he ran his lips across her throat, skimming over the emerald and diamond choker she wore and down to her bare shoulder, his breath hot where his tongue tasted her skin.

"You don't know what you ask of me," he said harshly. He reached for her chin and forced her face to the side, dragging his mouth from her cheek to her ear. "Know this," he whispered into her ear, "when I kiss you again, and I will, do not doubt it; your entire world will change."

"Then let it change," she breathed like a prayer, her eyes closing with desire.

He turned her face back toward him, hovering just a breath above her lips tauntingly. She tried to press her mouth to his, but he kept just beyond her reach. Stroking his thumb across her mouth, he sighed.

"You aren't ready for this. Not yet." He stepped away from her and turned his back. "Go now, Elizabeth," he said quietly, "before I lose my resolve to restrain myself."

She stood still and stared at his back, flirting with the idea of trying to force him into whatever it was he was resisting, thrilled at the prospect of a potentially wild or untamed Thranduil. But what could he mean about changing her life? Would it be a bad thing, or why had he warned her, making it sound so threatening? She knew any warnings he gave were never idle, even if she did not truly comprehend his meaning. Finally deciding to heed his words, she turned and walked away on silent feet.

The Elvenking stood in the shadows of the woman's bedchamber, listening to her deep, even breathing as he teased himself with his own desires and her closeness. So simple it would be to walk over to her...he found himself doing exactly that, and reaching out to tug the bedclothes down to her waist.

The pale skin of her bare back glowed in the dim light, her dark hair a stark contrast splayed fetchingly across her pillow. If he stretched out his hand and touched her… How easy it would be to wake her with his lips against her skin, which would be quickly followed by the sounds of her pleasure ringing in his ears. He found he was hungry for them. For her…

Was she ready? No. Could she be made ready? Undoubtedly. But was he prepared for what that would mean? More importantly, would it be worth the effort of dealing with conflict and struggle?

He ran a single finger down the curve of her back, stilling when she sighed and shifted, her arm moving higher beneath her pillow and revealing the side of her breast to his sharp gaze.

Yes, it would be worth it; he had foreseen that much, but this was not yet the time. Even so, he was a patient elf...he could wait until the time was right.
Pulling the covers back over her nude form, he turned slowly and left as swiftly as he had come.

Elirien smiled at Elizabeth, reaching for one of her hands, and holding it between both of her own. Blushing, she looked down bashfully.

"You were right. The Captain is very kind and thoughtful, and an unexpectedly wonderful dancer."

Rolling her eyes, Elizabeth gave the elf maiden a look. What elf wasn't a fine dancer?

"And," she prompted, "what else?"

Looking around, Elirien dropped her voice to just above a whisper. "And I like him. Very much."

Elizabeth released a breath, letting go of her worry that she might have been wrong. "That's a relief, since he very obviously likes you too. Watching the sunrise together, indeed. How shocking you are!"

The elf maiden leaned closer, her hazel eyes searching her friend's face anxiously. "Do you really think so? Tirion was close by so nothing would be thought improper, but I shan't do it again if you think it unwise."

Laughing, Elizabeth reached for Elirien's shoulders and pecked her cheek with a fond kiss. "Oh, you absolutely perfect darling, you couldn't be improper if you tried. I defy anyone to get to know you and not love you, even the stern Captain Feren."

Elirien blushed to the very tips of her pointed ears, smiling shyly. "Elizabeth, do not tease me so."

"About loving you, I do not tease, Elirien. But I will try to refrain from teasing you about the Captain, although you know I may not succeed. I'm sure Tirion already taunts you mercilessly."

Elirien shook her head firmly. "Nay, he has not said anything to tease me at all! Although it is very unlike him," she admitted with a laugh, "I am glad of it."

Shouting and running could be heard beyond the garden hedges, and Elizabeth stood, frowning. "That's an awful lot of racket. I haven't heard such a ruckus since the day those dwarves escaped the dungeons. She looked at Elirien. "What do you suppose is happening?"

By silent agreement, they both left the garden and walked toward the noise, a group of the kingsguard in armor, milling around. Recognizing one she knew, she approached him.

"Galedir?" When he turned to face her, bowing slightly, she smiled. "Is anything the matter?"

The elf looked between the two females, speaking quickly. "Word has been received today that the dragon has been killed, my lady, and Esgaroth destroyed. The King has called for the immediate muster of the army."

Elizabeth stared in complete shock, nodding automatically when Galedir excused himself and he and the other elves hurried away. She turned to Elirien, who was frowning in thought before she spoke.
"This is rare news. I must go to the healing rooms and see if they require my help. If there is to be an army marching, they will take healers and medicines with them, and that takes preparation. I will see you later, Elizabeth."

Smiling a farewell, Elizabeth turned toward the throne room, wondering if she might manage to hear anything if she wandered close enough. If Laketown were destroyed and the dragon dead, then why would the King need an army? Who was he planning to battle?

Minutes later, she crept down a stairwell and heard the unmistakable sound of the King's deep voice coming from one of the throne room's antechambers. Slowing her steps, she stopped when the voices died away suddenly. She jerked in fright when the King appeared at the bottom of the stairs, several steps below where she stood. With her on the steps, they were the same height and he looked directly into her eyes and held his hand out to her.

"Why do you tarry here? Come." Placing her hand in his, she was led into the room.

Standing there were Feren, Galion and Legolas. Turning to the King, she tried to remove her hand from his. "My lord, I did not mean to disturb, I will withdraw."

His hand tightened around hers, preventing her escape. "Stay. This saves me the trouble of having to send for you as I intended to, and you can offer me your wise counsel as a former queen."

He noted her frown with a gleam of amusement in his blue eyes before he released her hand, quickly growing serious. Clasping his hands behind his back, he paced slowly across the room.

"I have received a request for aid. The dragon has been killed, but in the process Esgaroth was destroyed. What do you suggest I do?"

She glanced at Legolas who was watching her with arms crossed and a more serious expression than she often saw him wear. Lifting her chin, she laced her fingers together in front of her.

"They are your allies, and instability near your own borders is bad for business, so you must send aid, of course."

He nodded. "Anything else to add?"

She stared at the King's inscrutable expression, still wondering why he would need a large force just to take aid to allies, unless... Of course.

"The dragon's treasure horde is no longer guarded. Is this why you gather your army, you're expecting trouble?"

"I always expect trouble when the circumstances foretell it," he said with a slight smile of approval. Turning toward Galion, he continued. "Go and see to the things we discussed. I expect everything ready to move before first light." Galion bowed and quickly departed.

Next, he addressed Feren. "You have your orders, Captain, carry on."

Legolas stepped closer, addressing his father. "If you do not need me, I will also go and attend to necessities."

"You will have an additional thousand under your command, Legolas, so prepare accordingly."

"Yes, Adar." He gave a brief smile to Elizabeth and walked out.
The King turned his attention back to the woman, who was looking at him hopefully. "My lord, with the dragon dead, I need no longer be concerned with confinement. May I accompany you to assist the Lake people?"

Closing the distance between them, Thranduil reached for her, stroking a hand lightly over her cheek, then grasping her shoulder. "No, Elizabeth, I will have you stay safely within the halls. In my absence, you are to act as my regent, and attend the people's needs here."

She blinked in disbelief. "You wish for me to...to...rule...in your place?" She couldn't have been more flabbergasted if she tried. That was certainly the very last thing she expected to hear the king require of her.

He smiled in amusement. "Certainly, it will not be for long. Legolas will march with me, and you are capable as well as respected by the Silvans. I foresee no difficulties with the arrangement."

Looking away, she worried her bottom lip between her teeth. "Won't the people resent such a show of favor to someone who is not an elf? Surely your steward could..."

"No," he said, cutting her off with a sharp look. "I have instructed Galion to assist you, but hear me—I favor whom I please, and there are none who would dare to question my word."

At a loss for anything more to say, she bobbed her head once in acquiescence, repressing a sigh. Features softening to a kinder expression, Thranduil took her face between his large hands, grazing her forehead with his lips, then kissing the corner of her mouth softly.

She smiled at his unexpected show of affection. "Good fortune and pleasant skies on your journey, Thranduil."

Releasing her, he stepped back, the mantle of confident, implacable king in evidence once more. "Go. We will speak again when I return."

Summarily dismissed, Elizabeth slipped out with a vague feeling of disquiet.

Adapted lyrics from The Dragon's Retort by Brobdingnagian Bards

(I made up the Virgin's Response lol)
Preparing a vast host to march away to potential war was no small undertaking, and while she aimlessly wandered the cavern's passages over the next hour, observing the preparations, she was visited by the ghosts of prior wars, in different eras and other kingdoms.

Those memories always remained the sharpest and clearest for her, imprinted into her mind by painful emotions. It seemed like such a brief time before that she had said a farewell to her brother, never once thinking it would be the very last time she set eyes on him. If she had been permitted to stand beside him in battle, she felt sure she could have affected a different outcome. He would never have been lost to her.

Deep in thought, she nearly collided with a cluster of elves. "Lady Elizabeth!" Aerben caught her by the shoulders before her face landed against his chest. Looking around, she smiled at her friends, reaching out a hand each to Berthon and Mylion who had drawn closer to speak with her.

Noting the light armor they wore, in addition to the arrows strapped to their backs and the bows they carried, she frowned. "Are you all to march with the King, then?"

Aerben nodded, releasing his hold on her. "Our company is to be encamped in the woods this night, for we will depart on the morrow at first light."

Dismayed, she looked at each of them in turn. "I detest partings," she muttered mulishly. "Forgive my forwardness, but…." Reaching for Aerben, she hugged him tightly, turning her face against his neck and pressing a quick kiss against his cheek, then repeated the same with Berthon and then Mylion.

Smiling kindly, Mylion patted her shoulder as she wiped her eyes. "Do not fear, lady, we have been in many battles, and we serve a wise king, he will not risk us unnecessarily."

Forcing herself to smile for their sake, she looked at each of them again. "Even so, do look after yourselves until we are reunited."

With softly spoken farewells, the three elves continued on their way and she returned to her apartments with a heavy heart. Standing in the middle of her sitting room, she looked around with unseeing eyes. Every second that ticked past felt long and heavy and she could think of nothing to occupy herself with, wringing her hands in unconscious distress. All simple pleasures paled in the looming threat of war and danger.

A soft knock on her door had her turning with a grateful smile to whoever had interrupted her dark brooding. Pulling it open, her smile widened to see the Prince standing there, dressed in a finer version of the light armor her friends wore.
"My prince, I am surprised to see you amid all the busyness of an eminent departure."

Stepping inside, he pushed the door closed behind him and turned to face her. "You spoke with the king after I left," he said, stepping closer with lowered brows. "What was his command to you?"

Tilting her head, her lips parted. She had assumed he knew what the King's plans were, but perhaps he hadn't had time to discuss it with his son, as it was rather unimportant compared with the logistics of readying so many for departure and battle.

"I am to remain here, and assist Galion in overseeing the business of the kingdom, during yours and the King's absence."

Brows smoothing after a moment of thought, Legolas smiled, transforming his face into his more usual, carefree mien. "That is an excellent notion, and one I think you well suited to."

She lifted a bemused brow. "I am glad the scheme meets with your approval, although I confess I was amazed to hear the King even entertain the idea of me as regent, even for so brief a time."

His smile widened. "You do have some experience, and I suspect that played heavily in your favor in my father's consideration. I must take my leave of you now, for there is still much to be done."

Beset with the same panic as she experienced when her other friends departed, she reached for him. Enfolding her gently against him, he turned his face into the fall of her hair and breathed deep.

"Ever you smell of the petals of a rose. I will never again see that flower but I will think of you," he said quietly.

Brows furrowed, she looked at him with troubled eyes, though she tried to smile. "I know you are a strong and experienced warrior, Legolas, but do please take care. Not for my sake alone, but for the sake of the kingdom."

Looking down on her tenderly, he lifted one of her hands and pressed a kiss there, as he always did. "For your sake alone, I would vow to be extra vigilant, but do not fear, for I further vow to return to you here."

With a deep breath and a hesitant smile, she stepped back, and he gave her his playful smirk she so loved, full of mischief and whimsy.

"May the stars shine upon you, Elizabeth, until we meet again."

Elirien was packing chests full of healing herbs, and linen for bandages when she looked up to see her human friend standing in the doorway, staring at her with haunted eyes.

"You are to go, too?" Elizabeth asked, her face gone pale.

Standing, she went to the dark-haired woman and took her hand, moving to chafe it between both of her own. "Why, Elizabeth! Your hand is as cold as ice. Are you well?"

Nodding, Elizabeth swallowed. "I'm fine, I'm just surprised. I did not realize you would also be
departing.” She looked around the storeroom glumly while Elirien continued to rub warmth back into her fingers.

"It is my duty to go and tend any wounded in the event of battle, for even though I am no fighter, I have a part to play in this."

Elizabeth looked down, her mouth twisted ruefully. "It seems so many are to depart in the morning. With the exception of Tirion, I have had to farewell nearly everyone I love, and now you as well."

Feeling her distress, Elirien hugged her. "If you wish, you may come and assist. I know you spent a little time learning the healing arts, and an extra pair of hands is always welcome should there be any wounded who need tending."

Looking at her with a thoughtful gleam in her eye, Elizabeth gave her a slight smile. "Come along and lend aid, you say? No one would protest?"

Elirien gave a tinkling laugh. "Of course not, and why should they? You are welcome to help, for are you not one of us and a subject of this kingdom too?"

Biting her lip, Elizabeth nodded. "Indeed I am a subject of this kingdom."

She had a niggling feeling of disaster when she had come upon Elirien, an undeniable foreboding and premonition of imminent danger to the kind and gentle elleth that had her hackles rising in alarm, never having experienced such a thing before.

The king might have ordered her to remain behind on some pretext of maintaining the kingdom with busywork, but she didn't truly buy it. He just wanted her out of the way, which was well and good, but she would not remain safely installed in the halls when others marched to danger in her place. That, she refused to submit to. She was certainly no better than the elves, deserving of no preferential treatment, and she could not claim an allegiance to them and be unwilling to lay her life on the line beside them.

If she dared to follow the plan that was unfolding in her mind, the King would be angry with her, perhaps furious, but… She would dwell on that detail and the potential consequences of her actions later.

Giving Elirien a brief, grim smile, Elizabeth lifted her chin with the barest trace of proud defiance. "I will go and prepare."

The following morning when it was still dark, Elizabeth found it much easier to slip from her room and join the healer's caravan than she had thought it might be. Wearing the same brown, hooded cloaks as the other elves, her hair and other easily recognizable features were well hidden in the shadow of the hood. None of the elves had given her a second look. She was known to nearly all of them from her time in the healing rooms, and her accompanying them to assist was seen as nothing out of the ordinary.

They traveled on foot, walking along with the horse-drawn carts which carried what supplies and provisions they would need. A train of foodstuffs and building materials were also being taken for
the purpose of assisting the Laketown refugees.

The pace on foot was much slower than all the trips she had made on horseback, but they still made excellent time, and Elizabeth found herself in awe of the sheer number of armored elves, both in front and behind. She, Elirien, and the other healers marched as part of a seemingly endless column, and if she had to venture a guess, she would hazard their entire retinue of both warriors and those in support roles numbered well over seven thousand.

Staring out at the blackened, charred ruins of the once thriving city in the lake, Elizabeth shivered in the cool wind that came off the water. It was hard to believe that she had been dancing there just the previous spring, and that the dragon that had threatened her life was now no more.

"The lake people say the dragon's corpse lies among the ruined city," Elirien said, coming to stand beside her, and looking across the water at the detritus.

"I am sorry for their hardships and loss of life, but I believe it is ultimately worth all this for that dragon to be done away with."

Turning to look behind them, Elirien's face brightened. "The King and his guard ride among the people, and they're coming this way."

Gasping, Elizabeth pulled her hood further forward. "He mustn't see me!" she hissed.

Elirien gave her a confused smile. "Who mustn't see you?"

"The King! I have to hide." Walking swiftly to the main healer's tent, Elizabeth ducked inside and went to the corner, lowering herself to her knees and hoping to look usefully engaged rummaging through a bag of linen strips.

She heard the King's voice calling out to Nedirien, the chief healer, and her quiet, murmured response. After what felt like an eternity, but was probably no more than five minutes, Elirien came and knelt beside her.

"They are gone. Why are you hiding from the King?" she whispered, with a worried frown.

Standing, Elizabeth jerked her head toward the tent entrance, not stopping until she and Elirien once more stood beside the lake. Clearing her throat, she smiled brightly.

"I may have...disobeyed our lord in coming here. Strictly speaking."

Elirien stared uncomprehendingly before her mouth dropped open in horror. "You disobeyed the king? Our king? Surely not."

A grin spread slowly across the elleth's face and she giggled. "I see, you are jesting with me, are you not? For a moment, I almost believed you." She laughed again, but trailed off slowly when Elizabeth just stared at her without a trace of humor.

Drawing in a long breath, Elirien looked out over the water. "You truly did defy him? But why? King Thranduil is not known to be forgiving, and his anger is fierce."
Sighing, Elizabeth laced her fingers together in front of her. "He wished me to stay in the halls, but I felt a need to come. That is all. If I am careful, he need not discover it until we are back home, in which case by then he may even feel...merciful?"

Elirien gave her a doubtful look, then reached out to wrap a comforting arm around her friend's shoulders. "We must keep you hidden then, anytime the king is nearby. Come, let us go and eat with the other healers and not dwell on this further now."

Elizabeth silently acquiesced and followed her friend to the tent set up for meals.

It turned out she had to be careful to evade more than the King's notice, as she had nearly run into the Prince who was walking among the people of Esgaroth, conversing with a tall, grim-faced man. With the two of them also walked the Master, who she was even more eager to avoid. The time he had spent fawning over her had not endeared him to her at all, rather the opposite.

Feeling a deep compassion for the afflicted people who had lost so much, Elizabeth spent nearly all her time with Elirien, tending burns and injuries, kissing babies and comforting widows. Winter's threat was imminent, and without the aid brought from Greenwood, it was clear that many more lives would have been lost before spring came again.

The one bright spot for Elizabeth was the chance to see the Silvans interact with the people of Laketown, and the kindnesses they showed made her proud to be counted among them. The most touching moment was an overheard interaction between one of the elleth's from the meal tent comforting a young girl crying for a lost father. The elleth told the child to find the brightest star in the sky, and it would always be the eye of her father, watching over her.

When Elizabeth heard that and saw how the child seemed to be instantly soothed by the notion, she had to leave and find solitude to master her emotions, or risk weeping openly before everyone.

The King's army remained encamped near the ruined Laketown for two days, leaving behind materials and elves to help build shelter for the dispossessed people before the onset of the snows.

Bard, the valiant Bowman who had brought the dragon down had been chosen as the new leader of the people of the lake. Together with the men he commanded, and other refugees who decided to try their luck in the old remains of Dale, all departed for the mountain with the elven army.

When they arrived in old Dale, the healers installed their tents and supplies among the remnants of the former marketplace, it having plenty of space to spread out in the event of any wounded needing treatment.

The Elvenking and Bard set up their command tents at the highest point in the city, where they took
counsel together. They and a company of warriors set out for the gates of the former dwarven stronghold the day of the army’s arrival. When they returned later that day, the gossip ran wild that the dwarves who had escaped from King Thranduil’s dungeons were alive and had barricaded themselves inside the mountain with all the treasure.

Elizabeth wasn’t sure what the new developments spelled for the elves and people of the lake, but when she caught a glimpse of the King’s face from a distance as they were riding back into Dale, it was apparent from his thundercloud expression that he was greatly displeased by something.

Further news was hard to come by, and more than once, Elizabeth wished she could seek out someone she knew that she could entreat for answers, like Feren...or even the King. That wish died an instant death though, as her discovery was not worth the risk of what little information she might glean.

The following days passed by slowly, with elven troops positioned around the city of Dale, and the valley surrounding the former dwarf kingdom of Erebor.

Thranduil sat on the elaborately carved wooden seat that constituted the throne in his personal tent. Bard had long since withdrawn to seek rest among his own people, and it was well into the dark of the night watches, but the Elvenking’s mind was troubled. The dwarve’s stubbornness and refusal to negotiate was to be expected, perhaps, but being able to predict their behavior made it no less tedious to deal with.

No matter. They had all the time in the world, and would simply wait the dwarves out, if necessary. The people of Esgaroth were certainly owed just compensation for the destruction of their homes and loss of life, as were his own people and realm who the dragon had also affected.

The bargain struck by Thorin, son of Thrain when he needed the Lake people's help must be honored. Thranduil intended to see that it was, come what may. He would not forsake his allies and trade partners, and he found he quite liked the stern bowman. There was a nobility to him, as the heir of Dale that the Master simply did not possess, despite all his shrewdness.

His lips pressed together in displeasure as he contemplated just how long it might well be before this whole business were concluded and he would be able to return to his beloved woods. Perhaps not only to his beloved woods.

The face of a dark-haired woman smiled pleasantly at him in his mind’s eye, causing the harsh lines of his face to soften slightly. He was pleased at how neatly he had kept her engaged with the business of managing the halls, with the potential added benefit of the people becoming used to seeing her there.

Selfishly, he might perhaps wish for her presence and conversation to divert him from the pressing matters at hand, but how much sweeter might the reunion be after time spent apart? Would she be abed at this hour, perhaps wrapped up tightly in his cloak while she drifted in pleasing dreams? His head rested back against the latticed wood of his seat, his eyes growing unfocused as he sent out a call to her mind with his own.

Elizabeth, lasto beth nin. Ni cheniog? (Sindarin: hear my voice/listen to my word. Do you
Thranduil's lips lifted in a faint smile when he heard her immediate, surprised response. So, not sleeping, after all. Perhaps she was even stronger than he realized, to be able to easily answer him back and over such a distance.

With the sound of her voice still fresh in his mind, he allowed himself to gradually drift into a somewhat restful reverie, deep in the recesses of memory.

Head shooting up, Elizabeth whirled and looked at the empty path behind her in the darkened marketplace, an involuntary response automatically spilling from her lips.

"My lord?"

After turning in a complete circle, she stood very still, mind spinning in confusion even as her heart rate slowed back down to something resembling normal. For a moment, she was certain she had been caught by the King, for that had certainly been his voice speaking to her. Had she imagined it, or was it merely her guilty conscience tormenting her with what was to come?

Wrapping her arms around herself against the cold, she decided to abandon her walk and made her way back to the healer's tent. Slipping into her empty cot, she pulled up the warm blanket, even though she knew sleep would be long in coming, if it came at all.

~o~
The new day dawned crisp and cold, with the sun peeking shyly in and out of thick clouds that threatened snow. Elirien sat beside Elizabeth, leaning against a low table that had been scavenged from a nearby building for its usefulness. Instead of eating her breakfast, Elizabeth had been tearing the bread into tiny, messy shreds, brows lowered darkly.

"If you are not hungry, I wonder you took the food at all," Elirien snapped, causing Elizabeth to jerk her head up sharply and stare at the elven maiden. Immediately grieved at having spoken so harshly, she wrapped an arm around Elizabeth's shoulders.

"I did not mean that, Elizabeth, please forgive me."

Laying her head to rest against Elirien's, Elizabeth sighed. "Don't apologize, I feel it too. We're all like bows too tightly strung and ready to snap at the first provocation."

Most of the two armies had departed Dale before dawn and were gone to do heavens only knew what in the valley below. The garrison that remained behind in the city were only a handful of men and elves, with the majority being women, children, and the support elves who were not fighters.

Faces were grim, and the air was charged with uncertain expectation and tension. There was talk of a wizard having come to give counsel to Thranduil and Bard, but nothing further was known. So far away from where the King's command tents resided, updates were even more scarce.

A low rumble vibrated on the air, shaking the ground beneath them, and both females shot to their feet as screams and cries of alarm from children and women in a nearby building filled the air.

"Elizabeth," Elirien began, reaching out for the human woman's hand, "what do you think made that sound?"

Tugging her friend along behind her, Elizabeth headed for a nearby stairwell. "I don't know, but I certainly intend to find out." Emerging onto a high balcony of a ruined home that offered a clear view, they both stared out in amazement. Elves, men, and what looked to be an additional army of dwarves were all engaged against enemies that were the very stuff of nightmares.

Loaded catapults launched projectiles and rubble into the ranks of dwarves, sending them scattering in many directions, but those unharmed quickly recovered and engaged their foes with renewed ferocity.

"What are they fighting?" Elizabeth questioned through numb lips, unable to identify the black-skinned and hideous things beyond the label of monster.

"Yrch!" (orc) Elirien hissed, her lip curled in disgust. "A vast number of them, from the looks of it. This is not well."

Orcs. Elizabeth had heard any number of stories and references to the hated, evil creatures, but she had never actually seen one before, which was a mercy, as she knew she would never again be able to get the images of those things out of her head.

A line of elven archers fell to the onslaught of giant swords wielded by enormous beasts, and Elirien
and Elizabeth turned grief and tear-filled eyes to each other.

"Trolls," Elirien whispered, her lip quivering as the enormity of the losses they might face became apparent. "Come, Elizabeth." The elf maiden wiped her eyes and squared her shoulders, walking back down the steps. "They will likely need us soon as wounded are brought into the city."

Turning back to the sight of the raging battle below, Elizabeth's hands curled into fists as anger and fear in equal measure flooded her veins. "God save the king," she prayed fervently in English. "Merciful Almighty, if you will deign to grant my plea….save them all, or as many as can be."

Following her friend back down the stairs, Elizabeth ran on swift feet back to where her belongings lay and pulled her weapons out from under her cot. Strapping on her sword, belt of throwing stars and one of her daggers, she carried the other and pulled Elirien aside from where she was setting out instruments and medicines.

"Here." She shoved the blade into Elirien's hands, and she stared at the human woman blankly.

"What is it you expect me to do with this?" she asked, pushing it back toward Elizabeth.

Catching her hands with the sheathed dagger held firmly between them, Elizabeth moved it toward her once more. "I expect you to put it on and use it, of course, should you need to!"

Elirien laughed nervously, again refusing the weapon. "Elizabeth, I cannot. I have never been trained in the use of any weapons. I only know healing. Should I attempt to fight, I would be more likely to injure myself than the enemy.

Lowering her hands with the dagger held loosely in her grip, Elizabeth stared in dismay. "Are you telling me you can't even stab something right in front of you? Not even to save your own life?"

With a firm shake of her head, Elirien returned to her task of preparing herbs. "Nay. I...I...no, Elizabeth, I'm sorry, but I cannot."

Quickly strapping on the second dagger, Elizabeth sighed. "I can't just wait here like a sitting duck, I'm no healer. I will go and see if I can learn anything from our warriors that guard the city."

"Do not go beyond the city gates, Elizabeth, it's dangerous," Elirien said with wide eyes.

Turning away, Elizabeth gave a nod of acknowledgement. "I shan't go that far, I promise."

Heading through the mostly deserted streets of Dale, Elizabeth shivered in the cold, having left behind the healer's cloak as not only a hindrance to maneuverability should she get in a fight, but she also had no wish to be identified as something she was clearly not. Dire situations were no time to indulge in a ridiculous subterfuge.

She had caught sight of not a single elf in armor, and she was beginning to worry in earnest, wondering if there were even a token force that remained in the city to protect the helpless.

Elizabeth reached the far side of Dale, all the way to the wall, without setting eyes on another soul. Frowning, she took a different direction and was nearly bowled over by a young girl running out of
an alley, followed by a group of children. She grasped the girl by her shoulders to steady her, immediately recognizing the serving girl, Arvid, who had tended on her when she visited Esgaroth.

"Arvid? What are you doing here? Where are you going?"

"Milady!" she cried in relief, with wild eyes, glancing behind her anxiously. "They've come! The creatures have breached the walls nearby and we have to hide the littles. The others in that part of the city have already fled."

Nodding her understanding, Elizabeth gave her a gentle shove. "If you know the way, I will follow behind and protect you, but whether I stop or not, you get these children to safety, do you hear me?"

"Aye, I will obey. Thank you, milady." Herding the smaller children in front of her, they set off at a brisk pace, with Elizabeth constantly checking in front and behind them, growing more tense by the minute.

The ground shook beneath their feet as distant explosions erupted, and when she glanced up, she saw the sky was filling with smoke. Some of the children had begun to cry softly, and she did her best to shush and comfort them. Her first instinct was to pick up one of the smaller ones and hold hands with the others, but she did not dare encumber herself with being their only apparent guardian.

Arvid led them down a narrow lane, then stopped, moaning in fear when black-faced creatures appeared suddenly, blocking them. Shoving all the children behind her, Elizabeth pushed herself to the front, hissing instructions while she kept her eyes on the enemy.

"Back! Take them back, and run! Go!"

Stepping forward, she drew her blade, eyeing the ugly things as Arvid's panicked weeping grew fainter. She took another slow step forward, her entire focus on giving the children as much time to escape as possible.

A distant, calm part of her mind took note of their revolting appearances; dark, scaly skin, small, beady eyes in unnatural colors, and sharp, animalistic teeth. She could almost believe she was looking at things straight from the graphic horror movies that were so bizarrely popular in the modern times she had left behind. She wondered if the people that enjoyed looking at those grotesque images on big screens, and watching them pretend to eat people would find them quite so amusing if they ever actually faced the reality.

The closest one shrieked loudly and rushed her, ending impaled on her blade, which she hurried to free in time to meet the second one, slashing down his torso and cleaving him in two.

Hot, black liquid splashed across her hands and on her clothing. She drew back in horrified revulsion when she realized it was actually their blood that was as dark as pitch. What manner of hell's demons were these things that their very blood was so wrong?

The narrow alley worked in her favor as two more made to attack her, their girth forcing them to come in single file. With a yell, she rushed forward, her blade piercing them both, but the back one brought his own weapon down on her shoulder, slicing clear to the bone.

Moaning at the pain, she saw his gloating smile and purr of satisfaction at her suffering and felt her rage kindle. Pulling her dagger from her back, she stabbed it right into his left eye, feeling her own grim smile touch her lips as he died in front of her.

Staggering back, she pulled her sword free of their bodies, rolling her shoulder as the skin knit together. Recovering her dagger, she peeked beyond the edge of the lane but saw no more of them.
Retracing her steps with a thought to catching up with the children, she broke into a light run, trying to listen for any sound of them. Steel on steel and battle cries guided her forward and she stumbled into a courtyard of madness.

A mixed handful of armored elves with swords and ragged men with no armor and short-swords, battled together against five times as many of the foul-faced monsters. Running forward to join the fray, she yelled her own battle-cry.

"For God and King Thranduil!"

One of the elves spun gracefully behind her while she slashed her katana through an orc throat, coming to fight next to her, so she was surrounded by armored allies on both sides. The last of the ill-equipped men fell to a big orc’s blade, and she stepped forward with an enraged growl.

The large creature backhanded her in the face, then slashed his sword across her middle, slicing through her abdomen and knocking her onto her back. With angry cries, the two elves who fought on either side of her stepped forward to avenge her, engaging the big orc.

Truly furious, Elizabeth pushed to her feet with murder in her eyes and circled around the back of the orc while the elves kept his focus on them, her katana clutched tightly in her right hand. Putting the full force of her weight into the strike, she slashed across the unprotected back of her enemy and spun with the force of the strike, beheading him on the second pass.

With all enemies defeated around them, Elizabeth stared at the elves over the body of the orc, breathing heavily. One of them sheathed his weapon and stepped forward, grasping her shoulder gently.

"My lady, you are injured. May I assist you to the healers?"

Pulling apart the slashed fabric, she showed them the whole skin on her belly and shook her head. "Don't be alarmed, I'm fine. I am able to heal almost instantly."

The two elves shared a look, and the same elf who spoke to her previously addressed her again. "You are the Lady Elizabeth, are you not?"

She nodded and bent to see if the fallen man on the ground was still alive, but when she found no pulse, she closed his eyelids with a resigned sigh.

"You know my name, may I know yours?" She looked back and forth between them.

"I am Renion, and that is Thandir," he said, gesturing toward the other elf, who gave a brief bow, while continuing to sweep his gaze around the courtyard, watching for renewed threats.

Straightening, she flicked her katana to remove as much of the nasty blood as possible before sheathing it. "Can you tell me if there are additional forces assigned to protect Dale? There were children fleeing from those creatures, but we were separated when I had to stop and fight."

"Nay, my lady, there are none as I know, and we were not assigned here either. We helped wounded comrades to the healers, and became embroiled in skirmishes in the streets here, ere we could rejoin our company."

She chewed her lip in thought. "Is there any way I can persuade you both to remain with me in the city here, to help protect the people? I will take full responsibility before the King if you agree. In fact, I feel certain he would not wish me left without protectors, and neither would the prince."
Elizabeth experienced only a slight twinge of conscience at the blatant name dropping she employed. Since she wasn't doing it primarily for herself, but others, she thought it would not be morally wrong.

"We will remain with you, Lady," Renion said, stepping closer. "Even if you did not ask us, we would not think to abandon you."

Smiling with relief, she opened her mouth to thank them when both elves turned their heads toward the sound of running feet, coming uphill. A heavyset woman approached them, with flushed face and gasping for breath, and turned to Elizabeth, dropping a hasty curtsy.

"Milady, I come to find ye at Arvid's urging. She and the little 'uns made it safely to the marketplace, but there's more of them orcs roaming the city and no one left alive now to defend us poor folk. They say ye are a kindly elf lady, and if ye can come with your guards and help, we'd all be much obliged."

Raising an amused brow at Renion to hear the portly woman call her an elf, she patted the woman's shoulder comfortingly, and stepped back and drew her sword. "Of course we shall come at once, good woman. Let us go there together now." Nodding to the elves, who fell into step on either side of her, they made their way back down to the lower marketplace.

Several times they were accosted by small bands of roving orcs, but the three of them were able to easily dispatch the creatures, and Elizabeth sent up a prayer of thanks that the city had not been overrun in greater numbers. The woman managed to keep pace with them, ducking back to hide in burned houses or convenient alcoves every time they fought orcs.

Arriving at the marketplace where the healing tents were, they met with a chaotic sight. Wounded were laid out on the ground on what bedding or blankets as were available, healers trying to tend their charges, while orcs were pouring into the opposite side of the plaza, threatening all. Several men wearing bandages over wounds tried to keep them away with swords and shields, but were quickly being cut down.

Sheathing her sword, Elizabeth quickly pulled several shuriken from her belt and launched them at the foremost orcs, managing to briefly slow their advance when she landed stars in the faces and necks of the ones fighting the wounded men.

Sticking her pinky fingers into the corners of her mouth, she gave a piercing whistle to get all of the orc's attention, then quickly threw two more stars, bringing their entire focus onto her and the two elves who stood beside her.

"Come and get us, you vile dogs!" she taunted, her hand hovering above her katana hilt while she took her stance for a battou strike. Looking at the approaching enemies, she whispered a quick prayer in Latin, desperately hoping it would be enough.

"Sanctus Deus, nos defendere et mitte primum auxilium." (Holy God, defend us, and send help soon.)

King Thranduil and his personal guard moved swiftly on foot through the city of Dale, cutting down any resistance along the way, a harsh set to his mouth. The tide had turned markedly in their favor
when the battle was joined by the Eagles and the skin-changer, Beorn, and while there were many heavy losses on all sides, victory was now assured. The last of the orcs had fled the field, and only small pockets of resistance remained.

His twin swords sang as he sliced through ever more of the smaller, common orcs that there were always so many of. He couldn't begin to think of how many of the things he had cut down over the long battle, but he was well coated in the blood of his enemies. The dark armor he wore went a long way toward disguising just how feral he truly looked.

Turning into the lane that led to the old marketplace where he knew the women and infirm had been sent for their safety, his steps faltered for a bare second at the enraging sight that met his eyes.

Elizabeth!

She was engaged with a large orc next to two other elves who also fought to protect the people. But that wasn't what caused a deep well of fury to rise up and overflow inside of him; it was the sight of Elizabeth with arrows protruding from her back and side, and a large sword impaling her middle...and yet she fought on. The big orc raised his sword high above his head, his intent obvious.

With perfect aim, the Elvenking threw one of his swords across the distance, impaling the orc in the chest and killing the evil creature who dared to threaten Elizabeth. The remaining handful of orcs were dispatched within minutes by his guard and the king turned to the woman grimly, trying to assess where to begin to aid her. She looked up at him, her face lined with pain and fatigue and spattered in orc blood.

"Can you pull it out, Sire? I can't..." she took a shuddering breath, "get a proper grip on it," she said, pulling feebly on the sword in her middle. Pressing his lips together and grasping the hilt, he laid a hand on her shoulder, eyes flicking to hers.

"Brace yourself, this will be painful."

At her nod, he pulled it swiftly and smoothly from her flesh, flinging it away in a renewed burst of anger at her protracted moan of pain. The fact that she was standing in front of him in agony she need not have suffered put him into a killing rage, and his nostrils flared as he wrestled his emotions back under his control. She leaned her head against him, resting a hand briefly against his chest plate while she drew a deep breath.

Recovering more quickly than he would have thought possible after being fully impaled on such a large sword, Elizabeth turned and bent over the elleth laying in the dirt that she had been guarding. She shook her gently by the shoulder.

"Elirien? Elirien, wake up!" Slowly, the elleth opened heavy lids and slowly smiled at her friend, though her eyes were hazed in pain from the bleeding wound across her side. Pushing strands of hair back from Elirien's face, Elizabeth turned pleading eyes to the King.

"Please, my lord, she needs a healer!"

Feren stepped forward. "I can take her further down to the healing tents, my lord."

Thranduil recovered his sword he had thrown from where it rested in the body of the big orc and sheathed them both, nodding, his face still tight with displeasure.

"Yes, take her."

He laid a hand on Elizabeth's shoulder after she tugged out the final arrow in her side and threw it
"You, what are your names?" The King asked, addressing the two elves who had been fighting with Elizabeth.

"I am Renion and this is Thandir, my lord. We are of Langion's company, but we were detained in the city when we brought comrades to the healers, and then we met Lady Elizabeth and stayed by her side throughout, as you see."

Nodding, his hand tightened on Elizabeth's shoulder. "It is well you remained here and helped defend, and you have my gratitude for watching over the lady." His eyes narrowed angrily as he met her gaze.

"We were happy to serve, lord king," Thandir said quietly, speaking for the first time. "Many more here would have perished without the help of Lady Elizabeth's fierce defense, though I fear she took many blows herself, to accomplish much of it."

"Indeed," the King said in a deep tone, his brows lowering further.

Thranduil ordered the two elves who had fought beside Elizabeth to secure the other end of the lane. Signaling to his remaining guards, he turned to the woman who was watching Feren retreat with haunted eyes, carrying the wounded elleth.

"Elizabeth," he said, voice intense and serious, "you will come with me now."

Silently, she bent and retrieved her sword from where she had dropped it, flicked the blade sharply and resheathed it neatly with economy of movement, looking to him to indicate her readiness. With clenched jaw, he turned, and the guards and Elizabeth followed along behind him.

Twice more they encountered stragglers of orcs. One burst at them from the side, and in a fluid strike that was nearly elf-like in speed, Elizabeth drew her sword and beheaded the creature in a single movement, while Thranduil and his guards killed the other six.

Arriving finally at his personal tent near the highest point in Dale, he steered Elizabeth inside, waving his guards away, and flicking the flap across the entryway closed. He looked her over critically, noting the many blood-stained holes and rips and tears in her clothing, his brows a thundercloud of anger.

"How many times were you pierced?"

She fingered one of the smaller holes with a frown, and shook her head. "I do not know. I wasn't exactly at my leisure to keep count."

Pulling her against him and wrapping his arms around her tightly, he lowered his head, resting his nose against the crown of her head and inhaling slowly. Beneath the smells of death and battle, her hair still carried a freshness of spring flowers. Breathing it in allowed the rawness of his wrath to cool just enough to think clearly.

Releasing her abruptly, he paced away from her and then back, his flinty blue eyes demanding her full attention.""You were instructed to remain in the halls," he said sharply, his voice still carrying the unmistakable bite of his fury. "Why did you defy me?"

She sighed, wiping a blood and grit covered hand against her hip. "It was not done for the sake of defiance, my lord. How could I remain behind in safety and comfort when others came to fight and die in my place?" Staring down at the ground, bits of the battle and scenes of death replayed in her
"Had I not come, Elirien would be dead." Meeting his gaze in challenge, she continued. "Many of the folk in Dale would also have perished, I and the two elves who fought beside me protected them, when there were no others to do so! Not all the battles were fought upon the open field, for the infirm and helpless are also targets in war."

He gripped her shoulders firmly, stepping close and leaning down until he could stare her directly in the eyes. "That is not the issue at hand. It was not your place to come here and take such risks, Elizabeth, you are not indestructible! That orc I killed was poised to behead you. Suppose I had not come when I did?"

Her brows furrowed as she searched his angry face. "But I love our people, Sire. Though I have no fondness for war, surely my life is mine to risk when the cause is just."

Thranduil's eyes narrowed as his voice grew colder. "That is where you are wrong," he spat. "Your life, your obedience, and all that you are belong to me." He released her and turned, his cloak whirling behind him. "You are confined here until I say otherwise."

Pushing out of the tent, he stalked to Feren, who had returned from his errand.

"The Lady Elizabeth is to remain here, and she is not allowed visitors. No one enters my tent, and she doesn't leave it."

Feren bowed in acknowledgment. "Yes, my lord."

Inside the tent, Elizabeth sat down heavily on a hard, wooden chair, having clearly heard the King's command. Sighing, she looked around and rubbed a weary hand across her forehead. Elirien had been correct: the King's anger was indeed fierce, and he did not seem inclined to forgive her anytime soon.

~0~
Elizabeth was awoken from where she had been lightly dozing in the chair when washing water was brought in by a silent elf she did not know, along with food, the sky outside the tent having darkened to dusk. Moving mechanically, Elizabeth went to the partitioned area sectioned off for bathing and did what she could to clean away the filth of battle.

Her small pack of belongings had also been brought to the tent, and she dressed in a fresh set of tunic and trousers, even replacing her grime-caked boots for softer slippers. There would be no help for the ruined garments she wore in battle, they would have to be burned.

Clean and with a meal eaten, Elizabeth was left with little to do, and wandered to the tent entrance, relieved one of her guards was someone she knew.

"Galedir, I am pleased to see you well. Were you on the field with the King?"

He nodded, glancing briefly at her. "I was, my lady. Our foes were many, but we prevailed in the end. Our lord is indeed mighty in war."

Remembering how fluidly and quickly the King moved with his dual swords, and how easily he cut through the orcs, she nodded. He truly was god-like in battle, and in his fine armor he cut an arresting and majestic figure.

She bit her lip, a new wave of worry plaguing her. "Were the losses heavy?"

When Galedir looked at her again, she could see the answer in his eyes before he spoke and closed her own in pain. "They were," he said quietly.

"I had friends in the battle… Can you perhaps make inquiries for me, as to the well-being and whereabouts of Aerben, Berthon, and Mylion? They were in an archer's company together."

Her lips parted and her head shook in denial when he looked at her with sorrow and a gentle compassion. "I am sorry, Lady Elizabeth, but those among that company were some of the first lost."

Shaking hands covered her mouth in horror, tears rising instantly and spilling over. Turning without another word, she hurried to the back of the tent, hiding herself in the furthest corner of the bathing area, unable to fully muffle her sobs of pain. She bit hard into a knuckle in an attempt to ground herself, but her breath came in panting waves as the tears flowed faster.

It wasn't supposed to happen that way! Elves were not meant to die, but to live on through all the ages. Cursed, foul death; somehow it always won, no matter the time or the place nor how desperately she tried to flee its fell grip.
Her friends...her beloved and carefree friends, so full of joy. They should be singing merry songs in the woods, laughing and dancing; not lying broken and lifeless on a blood-soaked field of death. The weeping came harder and an unholy rage rose inside her. It wasn't fair! It wasn't right.

Reaching out, she flung the dirty water-bowl away with an agonized cry, grimly pleased when the glass shattered loudly, the sound an appropriate representation of the broken and fractured pieces of her grieving heart. She closed her eyes and choked on another thick sob and was pulled by strong arms against a warm chest. Bunching her fists against the King's robes, she continued to weep bitterly.

"It hurts," she sputtered around her tears. "It bloody well, fucking hurts and it isn't fair," she forced out in a mix of English and Sindarin.

"Yes," he said simply "it does", offering only the comfort of his presence and no false platitudes, his hands rubbing soothingly across her back. After a time, she pulled away and wiped her nose, sniffing and finally meeting the King's eyes.

"Elves aren't supposed to die. It was supposed to be safe to….love elves," she said, voice breaking.

His gaze reflected her own pain, his eyes glistening with unshed tears, and she saw the weight of untold grief and losses there that he had suffered over time, her heart breaking for him. Reaching out she caressed his cheek tenderly, feeling an affinity at their shared sorrow and a deep compassion and empathy for his pain.

"Oh Thranduil, you understand! Of course you do, much better than I. Does it ever get any easier to bear such sorrow?"

He covered her hand against his face with his own and turned to press his lips against her palm. The frank and unguarded look of raw pain in his eyes made her own tears rise and spill over again.

"No, Elizabeth." He reached out to gently knuckle away the wetness coursing down her face. "It never does."

She laid her head against his chest, listening to his heart beating against her ear. Despite being in battle, he still smelt of the freshness of home, and she realized he must have washed and changed elsewhere, for he no longer wore his armor. Burrowing her face more deeply against him, she borrowed his strength a few moments longer before giving a shuddering sigh and pulling away.

"I'm really very sorry I upset you with my disobedience in coming here."

He inhaled slowly and released it, and like a door closing, all signs of his own sorrow were tucked firmly away once more, his face falling back into the proud mask he wore as king.

"And yet I do not hear any words of contrition for having disobeyed me in the first place."

She met his gaze steadily, the strange modern phrase she had thought so odd from her past life suddenly floating through her mind in English and making perfect sense...sorry not sorry.

He narrowed his eyes, clearly seeing what she was feeling. "Come," he said after a moment, moving back toward the main area of the large tent. "Walk with me."

Pouring wine for both of them, he handed her a goblet then took his own and walked a ways up a rise overlooking the valley. She followed, preferring to fix her gaze on the deepening twilight in the sky as opposed to the remains of the carnage far below.
Sighing, she took a sip of her wine, a sad and wistful smile quirking her lips. "This is another reason you all need to get busy and have more elf babies. This will negatively impact the population of the kingdom."

"Elf babies?" He drained his wine, looking on her in faint bemusement. "That is your wise counsel in the wake of battle?"

She turned and looked back down into the city of Dale, seeing the people busily preparing to settle for the night, many little ones among them and smiled softly at the sight.

"Make love, not war," she translated directly into Sindarin.

He gave her an odd look. "How does one 'make love'?"

Realizing her error, she chuckled. "Oh. I meant sexual relations. In English, love and sex can be used interchangeably, and I suppose 'making love' is the more poetic and less crass way to express it."

"Making love," he repeated thoughtfully. "It does have a rather whimsical air to it." He gave her a knowing look. "I am already aware of your machinations with regard to my captain. You seek to spread this idea of love and babies to the entire kingdom?"

She ran a finger around the rim of her goblet. "Only to light a fire under the seats of the unmarried, who generally seem to lack all urgency and awareness. Besides, the desire for life-affirming sex after war and loss of life that people engage in is a time-honored tradition." Frowning, she shook her head. "I suppose that may not hold true for elves, though?" Elizabeth tilted her head questioningly.

After all the time she had lived among them, she still knew very little of the sexual practices of elves, as they were a very tight-lipped bunch in that area, and even Tirion managed to deftly avoid any of her curious inquiries of such things.

The King smiled slightly, strolling back toward the tent, and she sighed and followed.

During the night, the sounds and images of war and death continued to ring in her ears and play behind her eyes, preventing sleep. She relived the worst moments over and over, especially when Elirien was wounded by the sword Elizabeth stepped in front of, hoping to save the elleth, and the complete terror she experienced then, fearing her friend's death.

It was fortunate she had been close enough to act as she had, but she still wished she could have saved her friend entirely. Having since received word that Elirien was fine and recovering swiftly with the healers did nothing to remove the trauma of having seen her in pain and bleeding.

Finally, she sat up from her cot and rubbed a weary hand across her eyes. She could feel the nightmares lurking in the shadows of her consciousness, just waiting to consume her if she should dare to attempt to reach sleep.

"Elizabeth." Thranduil's voice came quietly from the other side of the tent, but carried as though he were right beside her. "Come to me."
She slowly crept over to the separate alcove which constituted the King's sleeping area and peeked in cautiously. Thranduil lay on his back on a long, narrow bed of furs, staring up at the top of the tent. Turning to look at her, he held out his hand toward her in silent summons.

Walking forward swiftly, she sighed in gratitude when he pulled her down into his arms and tucked her body closely against his. Eyes drifting closed, she breathed in his scent and settled her head against the dip where his shoulder met his chest, finally feeling safe enough against his warmth to fully relax and allow her weary body and emotions a chance to recover.

Sleep, the King's voice whispered in her mind. *Nothing can harm you when you're near me, nor will nightmares take you.*

She looked up at him, now convinced of what had happened before and tried to think her thoughts back at him.

*You spoke to me this same way the other night too, didn't you? I heard your voice calling me.*

He looked down, meeting her curious eyes and dipped his chin in silent assent.

*How is it possible I can speak so you can hear me like this? I don't have the power to be heard in another person's head…*

*But I do,* came his smooth response. *By communicating with you through mind touch, I created a path that you are now able to follow back to me. You may speak with me this way anytime you wish now, whether we are near or far apart.*

Covering a yawn with her hand, she smiled, her lids slowly lowering over her eyes and rubbing her cheek against his silk-covered chest. *Goodnight, my Sunshine King. I'm very glad my prayers were answered and you were kept safe throughout the battle. Don't think I….. could have endured it….. if something happened….to……you*

Thranduil looked down on her peaceful face as she slipped into unconsciousness, and sent his own swift prayer of gratitude to the higher powers for preserving her life when he could not.

Truly exhausted from the many days of trying events and the long, demanding battle, he allowed his own eyes to drift closed as he passed beyond his usual restful meditation and joined the woman in his arms in the deep, healing sleep of his own kind.

When Elizabeth awoke the next morning, it was still dark in the tent, and the air was heavy with pressing cold. She was lying on her side under warm furs, surrounded in heat and comfort.

As memories from the night before returned, she became aware of Thranduil's body spooned behind her and wrapped securely around her own; his hand resting against her upper abdomen, just beneath her breasts. His breath flowed in a hot caress against the bare skin of her neck with each exhalation.

*I slept with the king,* she thought, suppressing the mad desire to giggle like a young girl at the cheeky idea.
Moving very slowly, she slid her hand over the top of the king’s, jerking in startlement when his fingers parted and trapped her own between his.

"I thought you were sleeping," she whispered, reluctant to break the quiet stillness of predawn.

He moved his head, lips lightly brushing against her neck and raising goose-flesh on her arm exposed to the cool air.

"I took some rest, but I do not sleep in the same way as you do. Always I retain awareness of my surroundings, and I am never fully parted from my senses as you seem to be."

Trying to imagine what that kind of sleep might be like, she freed her hand from his hold and ran the tips of her fingers over his hand curiously, marveling at the strong, slender length of his fingers, and tracing the rings he wore.

"I suppose that kind of sleep would be very useful, as no one would be able to sneak up and take you unawares." She glanced back at him in feigned annoyance, rolling onto her back so she could see him more easily and turned her head to meet his eyes. "Is there any way that elves are not better than mankind? I admit, I'm beginning to be bored by your rather predictable superiority."

He looked at her askance, his dimple peeking out from his half-smirk. "Bored, indeed?" He looked down to where she laced the fingers of her right hand to his left, still resting across her belly, seriously considering their differences. His expression turned musing.

"If I had to find something to openly admire of your kind that my own may lack, I would say it is an….immediacy, a passion and enthusiasm for daily life that those of us who have lived for many ages do not have. Even younger elves can often have an apathy or languor that shorter-lived races such as yours seldom fall prey to."

"To the virgins, to make much of time," she murmured, with a playful smile. When he raised a curious brow, she continued. "It's a well known poem where I come from."

"Tell it to me," he said, shifting to lift his head and rest it against his palm, wondering at her mischievous expression. Smiling, she recited it from memory.

"Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,

    Old Time is still a-flying;

And this same flower that smiles today

    To-morrow will be dying.

~o!~

"The glorious lamp of heaven, the sun,

    The higher he's a-getting,

The sooner will his race be run,

    And nearer he's to setting.

~o~

"That age is best which is the first,
When youth and blood are warmer;
But being spent, the worse, and worst
Times still succeed the former.

~0~

"Then be not coy, but use your time,
And, while ye may, go marry:
For having lost but once your prime,
You may forever tarry."

~0~

At his dubious look, she laughed. "That was written during the days when there was no more important and urgent task for a woman to attend than to marry."

"You suggest that is no longer the case in your lands?"

Giving a sharp shake of her head, she gave a humorless chuckle. "Oh, far from it. Women may now do anything and everything they like in my former lands, and they require no male to do it. Marriage is considered by many to be old-fashioned and unnecessary. A women may have dozens of lovers if she chooses, and society no longer finds fault with such behavior."

Something dark flickered in her eyes and her lips pulled down into a frown. "Even a child may be conceived through a process that takes a man's seed and implants it in the womb of a woman. Commonly, a woman may give birth to a child from a man she has never even met or set eyes on. The child will never know its father. As fantastical as that may sound, it is the truth."

His brows furrowed, a disturbed look in his eyes. "You speak of a broken world in the throes of chaos."

Turning to face him, she gripped his arm tightly. "Do you now understand what I meant when I said there was no longer a place for me there? I am a relic of a time gone by to the people that live in those lands now, and had I been discovered for what I am, I would have been tortured and experimented on, likely to death. Magic is not countenanced, and few believe in it. I lived a hidden and furtive existence, on borrowed time. It was miserable."

He could see the lingering shadow of past fear and suffering in her eyes, and the crippling pain of loneliness. Pulling her against him, he kissed the silken top of her dark hair.

"You were meant to come to Greenwood, Elizabeth. You were not intended for a wretched fate in a world gone mad. Either destiny or a higher power brought you among us. I have felt there was something different, something elusive and important about you from the beginning; when you appeared before me in your lovely gown, flinging riches at me with no ulterior motives or underlying selfishness. That was, in itself, extraordinary."

She leaned back to look at him, her eyes soft with feeling. "I only wished to bring you joy with my gift, Thranduil."

Caressing her cheek, he ran his eyes over her face. "You have brought joy, much more than you
realize."

The light brightened the place where they lay, coming through the tent wall. Standing, Thranduil pulled her to her feet and moved across the tent, the sun now well up. Opening the flap to the outside, he let the colder air and light in, and it cascaded over him in a wall of bright gold, highlighting his hair in a shining halo, reminding her again of angels.

Smiling, she withdrew to her area of the tent, going to make ready for the new day and reflecting on their private, and surprisingly intimate interlude in the aftermath of war.

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**To the Virgins to Make Much of Time by Robert Herrick**

Disclaimer: The final conversation that took place between Thranduil and Elizabeth is solely the opinion of the characters I was writing, and in no way reflects my own, so please don't take offense.

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~o~
The funeral for Thorin, King of the Dwarves, and his kin, Fili and Kili, who died by his side defending him, took place the following day. Though she had brought no gowns or anything appropriate for a formal occasion, the King had somehow managed to provide Elizabeth with a very fine dress in the darkest violet and had her accompany him.

Though it was a very solemn event, it gave her an opportunity to really observe dwarves for the first time, beyond the mere glimpse she had of them in the King's halls. As well as a hobbit, which she came to understand was just a small person, and not a child as she had first assumed. She was also fascinated to learn there was the actual wizard she had heard mentioned before the battle, of the kind that looked to have stepped from the storybooks of her own land, like from Arthurian legend.

At the end of the service, King Thranduil laid a fine elvish sword atop the Dwarven King's stone sarcophagus in memoriam, and she marveled at the fine jewel he had been buried with, which she heard named the Arkenstone.

The dwarves were holding a feast to honor their fallen comrades, and both Bard, the leader of the folk of Dale, and Thranduil, as the lord of the elves, were invited to attend.

The King seated her next to him, and on her other side was the lord of Dale. Bard seemed very grim and stern, but during the dinner, he sometimes smiled, which softened his face considerably.

Leaning nearer him to be heard over the noise of the feasting dwarves, she smiled. "I understand I should thank you, as you were the one to slay the dragon, Smaug?"

He nodded, smiling graciously. "Yes, it was with my final arrow that I found a true mark where the dragon's armor was weak, and so he fell."

She sat back, blinking in astonishment. "Truly? A single arrow felled him, and yet so great and fierce he was."

He tilted his head curiously. "You speak as though you knew the dragon personally, Lady."

She shivered, shaking her head at the unpleasant memories. "I knew him as much and more than I ever hoped to, as he accosted me twice when I was riding in the countryside. I should have been his dinner that second time had King Thranduil not bargained for me with a necklace of rich gems when we were returning from Laketown."

Looking from King Thranduil, who was following the conversation over the top of his wine goblet, back to Elizabeth, who he examined with a keen eye, he frowned.

"You would not be the same lady as visited Laketown and the Master there spoke so highly of?"
She sipped her wine to cover her wince. "I do not know if the Master speaks well of me or no, but I did visit there with the King when last he went."

"But the talk was of an elven princess, and surely you are no elf, are you?" He looked pointedly at her rounded ears clearly visible where her hair was pulled back.

"The Lady Elizabeth is of mixed heritage of both elves and of the race of men, and as such she does not share the mortality of your kind," the King intoned smoothly.

Bard nodded with a smile. "I can see it clearly now you say it. Had I not seen the lady's ears I should have thought her an elf entire. But is it not rare for elves to mate with the race of men?"

Thranduil smiled slightly, catching Elizabeth's eye. "It is somewhat unusual, perhaps, but far from unheard of."

When Bard turned to speak with the wizard seated on his other side, Elizabeth leaned closer to Thranduil, pitching her voice for his ears alone.

"Is that true, what you said of human and elf mating? It really happens?"

He gave her a searching look and nodded. "Yes. As I said, it is not unheard of, although it happens rarely with the brief life span of mankind."

She digested his words silently for a moment. Looking across the cavernous halls at the dwarves, she smiled. They seemed to very much enjoy their food and drink, and with the lovely brogue they spoke Common with, it put her in mind of some fine and fierce Scotsmen she had once known.

She sighed, thinking what a shame it was that nothing resembling a kilt had graced Middle-earth. Turning to Thranduil, she smiled at the thought of bare elven legs wrapped in a kilt. That would be quite a sight! Perhaps she should sew him one as a gift and see what he would make of it…

Bard leaned near her again with a kind smile. "Lady Elizabeth, I heard it said more than once that you sing like a songbird. Can we not persuade you to favor us?"

She looked to Thranduil for direction. He spoke quietly so she alone would hear him. "Do you wish to sing? I will not require it if you do not."

"I will if you wish me to, Sire, if you desire it."

Though his expression remained the same, his eyes softened. "Then you shall, for I find I desire it greatly." Turning his attention to the dwarves, he addressed their leader. "Lord Dain, will you hear the Lady Elizabeth sing one of her songs?"

The dwarf lord looked her over keenly, his brown eyes twinkling amidst his bushy eyebrows. "Of course, let's hear the lass. If her voice is half so pleasant as her lovely face, it will be a fine treat."

Standing, she walked to the area where the musicians played and borrowed a lyre. Mylion had taught her quite a bit about how to better her musical skills, and she was confident enough to accompany herself due to his tutelage.

Thinking about him made her heart clench painfully, and it was then that she knew what she would sing; what her grieving heart had already decided. Facing the hall full of elves, dwarves and men, she smiled, although it was tinged in sadness.

"We honor the fallen at this feast, and their valor, sacrifice and courage that shines through, even
after their deaths. There is a song from the land where I was born called Requiem. It is both a blessing and a wish, in a language called Latin. In the Common tongue, the words are a plea to Eru to grant peace and everlasting rest to the souls of our departed loved ones."

Strumming the lyre softly, just as Mylion would have, she began to sing, the sound resonating off the stone in the vast halls like a great cathedral.

"Pie Jesu, pie Jesu, pie Jesu, pie Jesu
Qui tollis peccata mundi
Dona eis requiem, dona eis requiem"

Closing her eyes, she let the sorrow, pain, and her wish for her friends to find peace in the next life to pour through her voice, tears slowly coming through her closed lids and coursing down her cheeks.

"Pie Jesu, pie Jesu, pie Jesu, pie Jesu
Qui tollis peccata mundi
Dona eis requiem, dona eis requiem
"Agnus Dei, Agnus Dei, Agnus Dei, Agnus Dei
Qui tollis peccata mundi
Dona eis requiem, dona eis requiem
"Sempiternam
Sempiternam
Requiem"

As the final note faded away, she opened her eyes to see there were many who cried with her; man, dwarf, elf, and even the small hobbit. In their mourning, all the races were as one in the shared pain of their grief. Loud applause rang out as she hurried to return the lyre, wiping her tears quickly and finding her seat beside the King again.

"Lady," the dwarf lord began, as soon as she was seated. "I thank you sincerely for that. It was as a balm to my spirit and no mistake."

Bowing her head, she murmured thanks, feeling strangely out of sorts after her emotional outpouring. A strong, warm hand surrounded both of her own under the table, squeezing with gentle pressure. Looking up into the King’s eyes, she swallowed, forcing away more tears before they could embarrass her.

He smiled, his face full of a kindness and compassion that he had never shown her before. "Thank you, Elizabeth. You’ve touched many hearts this night."

She wasn’t sure what made her say it, and later she would wonder, but at the time it slipped out with no thought.

"I only wished to touch your heart, Thranduil."

He was silent for a long moment and Elizabeth didn't dare move or look up at him again after her
bold words. Pulling one of her hands from her lap, he lifted it above the table to his lips and kissed it openly, smiling at her shocked face with eyes bright and intense. He lowered her hand, his eyes still locked to hers and though his voice was no louder than a whisper, it resounded loudly inside of her.

"You did."

Sometime later found Elizabeth sitting at the end of the long feasting table beside Lord Dain, who grew ever more merry and amusing as the night wore on and the ale and wine flowed freely. She laughed, clutching her aching sides as he finished his latest ribald joke, surprised to find someone with an even more inappropriate sense of humor than her own.

Reaching out, she touched the dwarf lord's sleeve. "Alright, you tell me if you've ever heard one like this...It's about a Scotsman, an Englishman and an Irishman, which are all men from three different countries, all nearby one another, but you could easily substitute other lands there." She cleared her throat, smiling, and launched into it.

"Sitting in a tavern the Scotsman says, 'as good as this bar is, I still prefer the pubs back home. In Glasgow, there's a wee place. The landlord goes out of his way for the locals. When you buy four drinks, he'll buy the fifth drink'."

"'Well', said the Englishman, 'at my tavern in London, the barman will buy you your third drink after you buy the first two.'"

"'Ahhh, dat's nothin', said the Irishman," Elizabeth did her best to imitate the lilting brogue, which made Dain chuckle before she continued.

"'Back home in me favorite pub, the moment you set foot in the place, they'll buy you a drink, then another, all the drinks you like, actually. Then, when you've had enough drinks, they'll take you upstairs and see that you gets pleased, all on the house!'"

"The Englishman and Scotsman were suspicious of the claims. The Irishman swore every word was true. Then the Englishman asked, 'did this actually happen to you?'"

Reaching the punchline, Elizabeth lowered her voice and leaned closer so only the dwarf would hear.

"'Not to me, personally, no', admitted the Irishman, 'but it did happen to me sister quite a few times!'"

Dain's face went even more red beneath his beard when he shouted with laughter, pounding his fist against the table and setting all the cutlery and plate-ware jumping. Elizabeth sat back with a satisfied grin, sipping from her wine glass.

Thranduil came and sat beside her, his brow raised in wry amusement, and leaning back comfortably in his chair.

"You know, Dain, there is a matter you might help the Lady Elizabeth with, if you will."

The dwarf lord's eyes jumped between the Elvenking and the woman sitting beside him, their
canniness belying how much he had had to drink.

"And what might that be, Thranduil?"

Elizabeth took another sip of her wine to hide her confusion, watching her king over the rim of the glass and wondered what he was up to.

"The dragon stole a precious family heirloom from her in the form of a necklace of white gems. It is very distinctive and easily identified, and the lady would be exceedingly grateful for its return."

Dain turned his keen brown eyes to Elizabeth. "Is this true, my lady, the dragon stole from you?"

She nodded, setting her glass on the table and quickly understanding the King's goal. "It is true, my lord. The dragon would have killed me if the necklace had not been turned over to him. It is a treasured heirloom of my house; the Diamonds of Somerset, as the necklace is called...they belonged to my mother," she murmured, with a sad smile.

Pursing his lips, Dain gave a brief nod. "I make no promises, but I will keep an eye out for them."

She smiled gratefully at the dwarf, and when he turned away to speak to one of his kinsmen, she met the gleaming eyes of the Elvenking, shocked to her core when he winked at her.

Elizabeth sat on a stairwell facing into one of the larger courtyards in the ruined city of Dale, surrounded by a group of children of various ages. The youngest, a girl child of no more than four, was seated on her lap, and the children were silent as they listened in apparent fascination to the tale the woman wove for them.

"And the young maiden broke the illusion and awoke from the sleep of the drugged fruit. Through her bravery and courage, she made it through all the traps that the Fae King had set for her. With the help of her friends, she reached the castle before her time was up, allowing her to win back her brother from the King's clutches."

She paused, looking around at the rapt faces listening so intently, and smiled.

"The Fae King tried to sway the maiden, offering her anything and everything her heart could desire in exchange for her brother, but she would not be swayed. Finally, he offered her his heart and kingdom, for he had fallen deeply in love with her, as she was both brave and clever, and he wished to make her his queen."

"The maiden refused, for her sole focus was on rescuing her baby brother, and she spoke the words to defeat him, saying, 'You have no power over me.' And that shattered the last of his magic, returning her and her brother instantly to their home, far away from the Fae kingdom....and that is the end of that tale."

One of the older girls frowned. "But what happened to the lord? It seems sad he was all alone when he loved the maiden so."

Elizabeth laughed, nodding to the girl. "I find I quite agree with you, for I wondered over his fate
too, thus I made up my own ending. Would you like to hear it?"

"Oh, yes, please lady," the older girl gushed, pressing closer.

"Well." She shifted the tiny girl on her lap more comfortably. "I think the King waited until the maiden was grown into the maturity of womanhood, for she was full young when she defeated him, then he went to her. Tenderly, he wooed her, using no magic or tricks, only that honest love which lay in his heart. In time, she also fell in love with him and agreed to wed him, and he swept her away to his eternal kingdom, where they lived together, happily ever after."

The older girl sighed gustily. "Yes, I like that ending much better, lady, thank you."

One of the young lads made a face at the talk of love. "Tell about the Sunshine King and the dragon again, lady! That story is much better."

Elizabeth chuckled, looking up in welcome when Feren drew near, a noticeable bounce in the guard's step. He nodded, bowing slightly when he stood before her.

"Lady Elizabeth, the king wishes you to attend upon him."

Kissing the top of the small girl's head, she stood, smiling at the disappointed groans of the children.

"Now, now, you would not wish me to disobey the Sunshine King, would you?"

A gasp went up and the boy who requested the story sprang to his feet. "The real Sunshine King? He's here?" he asked in excitement.

She nodded, a twinkle of mischief in her eyes as she stepped down off the stairs. "Oh yes, for the Elvenking is the Sunshine King from the story."

The boy stared in stunned amazement, looking at the other children around him and grinning.

Waving in farewell, she fell into step next to Feren, raising her brows at his relaxed expression and slight smile. She narrowed her eyes and nodded knowingly.

"You've been to see Elirien in the healer's tent again, haven't you?"

His expression fell blank as he stared ahead. "Why do you say this?"

She shrugged, suppressing a smile. "I have eyes in my head, Feren." When his ears reddened, she smirked and looked away to preserve his dignity, finishing their walk in silence.

The King was standing with his back to her when she entered his tent and turned to face her, a smugly satisfied smile on his face.

"Dain has sent a gift for you, Elizabeth. Come see." He stepped aside and revealed a small chest sitting on the table near him. Walking over, she opened the latch and lifted the lid, sucking air between her teeth at the sight. She glanced up at the King, then back down to the chest.

Inside lay the Somerset diamond necklace the King had bargained for her life with, against a bed of loose diamonds that constituted a fortune all on their own. On top of the gems sat a blown glass ornament of a delicate blooming rose in crimson. Enchanted, she lifted it, admiring the way it seemed to glow with some inner light. Turning from the diamonds, she ran a finger down the narrow glass stem.

"It's lovely," she murmured. "That was very kind of Lord Dain to remember me, and his gift is far
and away more than what we asked to have returned. I'm glad you have this treasure now, to make up for the dragon having taken the necklace in the first place."

Thranduil reached out and ran a finger across the necklace. "You truly have no interest in any of these stones?"

She shook her head and twirled the rose in her hand. "Those gems are for you, but I would keep this rose, if it please you."

He stepped toward her and took her face between his hands, his bright blue eyes intent on hers. "You please me," he murmured. "which is something I find happens more and more of late. But why do you value this simple trinket over something of true worth?"

Elizabeth lifted a careless shoulder. "I think this gift was one of whimsy and sentiment, and came from Lord Dain's heart, therefore its value to me is far greater than the diamonds."

He scoffed. "Dwarf hearts are made of stone, but even so," Thranduil leaned down and brushed a lingering kiss to her forehead, then smiled down at her. "I believe you managed to crack his open."

Her gaze traveled across his face searchingly, a wistful smile twisting her lips. "And what are elf hearts made of, Thranduil?"

His smile faded slowly, a gravity overtaking his countenance as he stared intently into her eyes. "Flesh," he answered in a low voice. "Flesh and blood, Elizabeth, and when they beat with strong passion...there is nothing as can keep them from what they desire."

Lips parting eagerly at what she saw in his gaze, her own heart began to pound in urgent rhythm. His mouth quirked in a teasing smile on one side of his mouth, and his seriousness fell away as a snake sheds its skin. He stepped back and strolled slowly out of the tent.

But Elizabeth shivered, clutching the glass rose in her palm and wondering at the meaning of his words.

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**Lyrics from Requiem by Andrew Lloyd Webber.**

**Englishman, Irishman, Scotsman joke found on Reddit. XD**

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Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Update number 4 for today, and probably the last, for now. If anyone is reading along, I hope you enjoy. :)

The ride out of Dale and back to the Greenwood was far more solemn than the march coming had been. There were a goodly portion of the wood elves that went away to war, who would never come again to walk under the shading boughs of their beloved trees.

The Prince, who Elizabeth had seen very little of while they tarried in Dale, rode beside her on his fine, white steed. He had fought with a company of elves on the southern side of the battlefield, and been encamped with them there. She observed his proud carriage and the ease with which he sat his horse, seeing the traces of sorrow on his ageless features that they all wore, to some degree. She sighed, sorry for the grief on the face of her friend.

"You are very quiet, Elizabeth. Should I be worried?" he asked, with only the barest hint of a smile.

She shook her head, her own smile just as brief and strained. "I was thinking of the first time I saw you. You were the only elf I ever laid eyes on, and the very first words from your mouth were to tease me." He smiled softly in memory. "I'm sorry for the grief you carry now, Legolas. It pains my heart to see it."

He searched her eyes, his brows furrowing as he stared at her in sympathy. "As yours pains mine, brennil vuin." (beloved lady)

"War is a bastard," she muttered in English, her head jerking up quickly in surprise when he answered her back in the same language.

"Yes. It is."

She snorted a laugh. "Oh! That's right, I had forgotten you asked me for some English to study some time ago, when Tirion was learning. I had not supposed you really bothered with any of it."

"You underestimate me," he said in flawless English. "I wish to know of everything you value and hold dear."

She blinked quickly to dispel the unexpected tears that filled her eyes, touched beyond reason that she now had two elves she could speak to in her mother tongue.

He switched back to Sindarin when he next spoke. "I was very surprised to see you after the battle." Legolas drew her eyes back to his with his words, tinged faintly with disapproval. "For did my father not command you to remain behind at the halls in our place? It was wrong of you to come here and risk your life as you did and disobey your king."

Lifting her chin, she stared straight ahead. "I have ever obeyed and honored my king, and will
continue to do so, but not when my heart bids me act otherwise."

"Elizabeth," Legolas began, a bite of anger now in his voice.

"No," she said, head whipping toward him and voice rising. "Don't you dare Elizabeth me, Legolas! When you and King Thranduil agree to never again risk your lives in battle, then on that day I shall make the same vow. Otherwise, there is no point to discussing it further."

"Do not think I have spoken my last on this, lady," he said, in a low and serious tone.

Legolas turned his head forward and said nothing more, a muscle clenching in his jaw. Her own anger now kindled, she did the same, in time to see the King turn his head enough to catch her eye, giving her a long look. His eyes slid over his son briefly before he faced forward again, his brow no longer smooth, but knit together in thought.

With the strain of their unmended disagreement sitting heavily between herself and the prince, which she was hard-pressed to even make sense of, Elizabeth hung back further in the company for the following day's journey. The wounded and many soldiers on foot were slower moving, and she took the opportunity to walk for a time, stretching her legs and trying not to think of either the king or his disapproving son.

Her pace slowed further, and a song on the breeze gradually filtered into her awareness. Tilting her head as it got louder and she recognized the tune, she walked around the other side of her horse, gasping at what her eyes revealed. Dropping her horse's lead, she ran across the grass, dark hair flying like a flag behind her.

"You live! Thank the Almighty, you live", she wept, pulling Berthon and Mylion into careful hugs, mindful of their bound torsos and other obvious injuries. Laughing and crying both, she looked between their smiling faces, then around at the other elves they walked among.

"But is Aerben..." She trailed off when she saw their joyful expressions turn swiftly to sorrow.

"We could not save him," Berthon said quietly, and she nodded, wiping at the tears that now fell from grief. She took a shuddery breath and smiled tremulously.

"I was told all of you perished. I am so thankful to see the two of you once more, I cannot express it in words."

Mylion took her hand in his, the tight grip conveying understanding. "We were among those where casualties were highest. In the chaos, we were all separated. Berthon and I were both taken from the field unconscious, but still clinging to life. Whereas Aerben..." He swallowed heavily.

Elizabeth touched his arm. "Do not say more. I know. Elirien was also wounded when the orcs flooded Dale unexpectedly."

Berthon shook his head in horror. "Nay! Not gentle Elirien on a foul orc blade."

"It was but a glancing blow," Elizabeth hurried to reassure him. "She travels with the healers, but
even now she is very near a full recovery."

They both relaxed at her words, the three of them beginning to walk forward after Elizabeth quickly retrieved her horse's lead. Mylion was watching her curiously.

"When did you come to the battle, Lady Elizabeth? For when you farewelled us, I thought you were not to come, or did I misunderstand?"

She bit her lip. "You did not misunderstand. The King actually forbade me to come, but I…. chose to come despite that, for the fear I had over Elirien's safety." Her look turned dark. "Had I not come she would have died. While I have not enjoyed incurring the King's displeasure, I would not change my actions for anything."

Mylion and Berthon shared a look over Elizabeth's head, Berthon reaching out to squeeze her shoulder. "Tirion will be indebted to you for all you have endured for his sister's sake. Still, it may be possible King Thranduil will forgive you your disobedience." He shrugged. "In perhaps a century or two, if you stay out of his sight."

She chuckled at her friend's teasing looks, sighing when Feren trotted up beside her, wondering if the King had some sixth sense that let him know when she was discussing him.

"Lady Elizabeth, the King commands you to return to him at the head of the column."

She murmured an acknowledgement before leaning closer to her friends. "Did I mention Prince Legolas is also angry with me?"

She mounted amid their soft laughter, raising her brows at them with a dry look before galloping away.

The King turned his head to look at Elizabeth as she trotted her horse up to fall in beside his mount. "Where have you been?" he asked in a mild voice, having noted the relaxed smile she wore.

"I was near the back of the line, my lord. I found two of my friends as I thought had perished." Her smile faltered briefly. "I learned one is truly lost to me, but still, I am very grateful for every life as was spared, and to have two friends back from the dead, as it were."

"Glad tidings," he murmured, a faraway look in his eyes.

Puzzled by his demeanor, she focused on her sovereign, struck again to see him on a black destrier, instead of his great elk as had been lost in battle due to a multitude of orcish arrows. It was strange to see him riding something as mundane as a horse.

"You summoned me, Sire. Was there anything particular you wanted with me?"

He flicked his eyes to her. "I wanted your presence," he said sharply, voice lashing like a whip. "Do I need a reason beyond that?"

Her mouth fell open even as her stomach twisted with anxiety at his sudden changefulness. "Of...of course not. I just wondered if there was some task or...I..."
She fell silent in unsettled discomfort. Dealing with both Thranduil and Legolas had become suddenly difficult, and unwelcome tears rose in her eyes as she perceived the king was displeased with her once more. How had she fallen into complete disfavor so swiftly? She found herself longing to be back in the halls amid the comfort of her apartments, and her own solitary company.

"I am not angry with you," he sighed, sounding more weary than she had ever heard him, guiding his horse nearer hers so he could capture her eyes again. "I have much on my mind, at present. The kingdom will be in a period of mourning when we return, and all that goes along with it." His lips tightened. "Many duties lie ahead I will not enjoy. Distract me from dwelling on these things with your company and conversation."

Ashamed at her selfish thoughts when his responsibilities were weighing on him so heavily, she nodded in contrition.

"Forgive me, Thranduil, I sometimes forget the heavy burden of leadership and rule you carry. I will gladly ease you if I can." Her brow furrowed in thought for a minute. "Have I ever told you the tale of The Emperor's New Clothes?"

Sometime later, Elizabeth had moved onto yet another story, which had the King smiling.

"And Lady Godiva completed her naked ride through the town with nothing but her long, flowing hair to cover her, and asked her husband, Leofric, to lower the people's taxes as he promised. He did, and she became a champion of fair and just rule, and Leofric learned never to dare his bold wife to anything shocking, ever again."

Thranduil chuckled and Elizabeth smiled, glad to see the King looking more relaxed and easy than he had before.

"It seems there is a common theme to your stories today. Is there some fascination your people have for nudity, Elizabeth? Is that perhaps why you choose to sleep in the manner you do?"

She rolled her eyes, and turned her gaze to him, looking at him from under her lashes. "Many cultures enjoy nudity, Sire, as works of art, if nothing else. I've admired many sculptures of the naked form, both male and female, as well as paintings in the most renowned galleries."

Brow furrowed, Thranduil listened with interest. "Go on."

Smiling, she shrugged. "There are even various tribes who live in hot lands and wear no clothing at all. Modesty and appropriate attire are things dictated by whatever the current culture and norms decree as acceptable. Take your kingdom, for instance. The level of modest expectation is similar to what I was born into, but at the time I left the lands of men and sailed across the sea to come here, women wear very little. Far less than the slip you found me sleeping in at the Laketown."

"I find this somewhat difficult to imagine." He shifted slightly in his saddle. "Tens of thousands of years elven culture has developed, and we have had little change regarding acceptable attire. Open nudity is only practiced between husband and wife, and that in complete privacy."

She bit her lip, gray-green eyes bright with an excited thought. "May I show you?" she asked eagerly. "When we are home again...in the same way that you helped me with the dreams. I would love it if there were a way you could see some things and places from my former lands."

He swept his eyes quickly around them to ensure they were not overheard and nodded, looking intrigued. "Yes, I think I should like that. To see your land."

Leaning forward, Elizabeth petted her horse's mane, strangely giddy at the prospect of having the
Elvenking in her head once more, and set to daydreaming over what she might show him.

Glancing up, she caught sight of Legolas riding across the way with another company of elves, and many of his friends she knew, and dropped her gaze immediately, a stone lodging in her stomach. He still had not spoken to her since their tiff, and she wondered how long he might stay angry with her over such a little thing. They had never had a fight in all their years of friendship, and she was quite at a loss.

"Legolas is not angry with you, Elizabeth, not truly," Thranduil said, seemingly aware of where her thoughts wandered. "It is fear that motivates his actions." He turned away with a brief, haunted look. "Calarien, his mother, was lost to orcs in battle, much like the one we just lived through."

Stricken, she frowned. "I'm so sorry. Legolas has never mentioned his mother to me, indeed I have never even heard your wife's name spoken before now."

"No," he said, quietly, "we do not speak of her. It happened a very long time ago." The wind blew and lifted golden strands of his hair back from his face, highlighting his strong features. Elizabeth looked down, heart aching with sorrow over the pain and grief Thranduil and Legolas still carried, when her own rose up to taunt her.

"At least you have your son," she said quietly. "There will always be a part of Calarien that lives on in him, and because of that you'll never truly lose her. But when Ferdinand died... without a child... I had no part of him left." She shook her head. "I would have gladly given up immortality for even one child of my own."

Thranduil studied her profile, the pain and longing evident there. "Then you've never had a child during your life?"

She met his gaze and shook her head minutely. "Never. We were married for six years, and he was much older. Well..." She smiled briefly. "He was in his forties, and I was assumed to be in my early twenties. I was his third wife, and both of the others gave him heirs before their deaths, but not me. I don't know if the fault was his or mine, but I'm inclined to think it was me."

Shrugging, she continued. "My brother, Edward, had children with his wife, but they were both born before we were changed. I followed his line for a while after his death, but eventually it became more difficult to hide and so I kept away."

"Six years," he mused. "So brief a time, I would scarcely call you married at all. Were there no others, not even lovers? I believe that is something not unheard of among mankind."

She chuckled. "Lovers? No. I was raised in a culture of religion and obligation. I was untouched when I married, and since my husband's death that is how I have remained. It is considered a sin to lay with any but your spouse, and I have held to those teachings. Is it different for elves? I had not thought so."

"No, it is similar," he said absently.

"So, you see, Sire, with your heir, you have much to be thankful for." Looking down, she frowned at where her hand's clutched the reins. "You could have it worse. You might be like me, and face all the ages truly alone."

He gave her a chiding look. "Elizabeth, you are not alone."

She turned eyes on him full of such an immense and festering pain that he felt it like a physical impact.
"Yes, Thranduil," she whispered, her eyes moving across his face, then turning away. "I am."
When Greenwood's army stood once more on their own doorstep, the wizard and his small companion who had traveled with the elven host made to take their leave. After the hobbit gifted a fine necklace of pearl and silver to the Elvenking, and he in turn named Bilbo Baggins an elf-friend, the halfling and Gandalf the Grey departed.

The return of the King and his army was an organized chaos, and as soon as Elizabeth was able to slip free, she quickly made her way to her rooms and spent an extended time washing the dirt of the road from her body and then soaking in a clean bath for good measure.

The laments began that evening; songs full of such pain and loss that Elizabeth could not hear them without weeping bitterly for Aerben and all the other fallen elves. Consequently, she kept to her rooms, turning into a hermit in her attempt to avoid the grieving sorrow that permeated the halls. Selfishly, she wished she could turn time forward, knowing from experience that time was not a perfect healer, but a good enough one.

Two weeks passed by, and she still saw little of her friends, all of them being engaged with their families, of which she had none. Beginning to feel like a caged animal, she finally changed into appropriate attire to go and wander the forest, strapping on her sword on the way to the door. Yanking it open, she stared speechless as the prince stood there with hand raised, poised to knock.

Lowering his hand, they stared at each other for an awkward moment. Uncertain as to where she stood with him, she smiled politely.

"Your Royal Highness, it is good to see you. I trust you've been keeping well?"

He rubbed a hand across his forehead in agitation and peered at her with eyes the same startling color as his sire, yet Legolas was a very different person from the king.

"Don't do that, Elizabeth, please," he said in a low and fervent voice, making her raise her brows. "Don't put distance between us like that. I need to speak with you."

She bit her lip. "I was just on my way to walk in the woods."

He nodded. "That's perfect, I will accompany you."

Turning to pull the door closed, she smiled and heard him sigh behind her.

"That is to say, may I accompany you?"

She stifled a laugh, pleased to see the answering spark of humor in his eyes that she had missed. "Of course, I would enjoy your company, Legolas."

They walked silently until they were beyond the halls and well into the forest, the bite of winter evident in the cold wind that blew, making Elizabeth glad she had dressed in her thicker, warmer clothing.

The woods seemed to slumber quietly in the season that symbolized death, and the passing away of the old, before new life inevitably burst forth in the spring. It was the time of year that always seemed best suited to contemplation and reflection.
She was about to ask Legolas what he had been up to since they had last spoken when she found herself completely wrapped in the arms of the elven prince. Feeling the desperation in his embrace and remembering what Thranduil had told her, she hugged him back just as tightly. He buried his face in her dark hair and shuddered.

"I'm sorry," he said in English, followed by, "Goheno nin." (Forgive me)

"There is nothing to forgive you for. I understand."

He pulled back to look into her eyes, searching them. "Do you truly?"

She rested a hand against his cheek, her own eyes full of warmth and compassion. "Is it because of your mother?"

His head jerked higher in surprise. "Why do you say that?" he asked, stepping away.

She dropped her hands to her sides, looking down at the leaves covering the forest floor. "Your father mentioned how your mother was lost."

He turned and stared at her in open shock. "My father spoke to you about my mother?"

"Well...yes, but only a little, and he told me her name was Calarien. I'm sure she was very beautiful, as her name is."

Legolas smiled, the expression soft and tinged with sadness. "Yes, she was beautiful, in every way, both gentle and kind. She would have adored you, and you her."

She nodded, smiling sadly back. "To have been your father's wife, and mother to someone as remarkable as you, I know she was extraordinary. I wish I had the chance to know her."

"My father has not even uttered her name in an age. I confess, I am amazed that he spoke of her to you."

Elizabeth laced her fingers together, hoping she wasn't making a mistake by betraying a confidence, but forged ahead. "He wanted me to understand that your anger wasn't truly directed at me, but rather motivated by your fear for my safety. Is that correct?"

He nodded, looking away. "My father has always been very wise. He once told me great love can bring great fear, and he was right, for I was very frightened for you."

Legolas reached forward, wrapping his larger hands around her much smaller ones. "Elizabeth, I love you," he said in English, and she grinned and answered him in the same language.

"I love you too, Legolas; you know I have for many years."

Searching her eyes, he shook his head, switching back to Sindarin. "You don't understand. I love you as a lord loves his lady, as the sun loves the moon, as I have never loved another in all my life."

Leaning down, he pressed his lips to hers softly, one hand sliding around her back and the other gliding around her neck to thread his fingers into her hair, pulling her flush against him, his body warm and firm against her own. Stunned silent, Elizabeth found herself kissing him back automatically, until the too real feel of his tongue on hers caused her thoughts to immediately catch up with her body.

Jerking out of his arms, she stared at him wide-eyed, heart pounding and her mind clanging in shock
and denial. "But...you... You can't love someone like me, not in that way. I'm not nearly good enough for you." She tugged her hands away from where he had grasped them with his own and half turned. "I'm sad and damaged, and I've already been married before. You deserve someone fresh and whole, untainted. A graceful and refined elf maiden, not some cursed woman."

Stepping forward, he pushed her long hair over her shoulder, reaching for both of them to turn her to face him again. "Please don't say these cruel things about yourself, they aren't true. You are loving, giving, kind and beautiful, both inside and out. And you are the very essence of grace and refinement, all wrapped up in a humor I delight in. You are...perfect. For me."

Reaching again for her hands, he lifted them to his lips and kissed them gently. "I see you are surprised by my declaration of love and my kiss. Do not feel compelled to answer now, only think on it and consider me, if you will. Take all the time you need, I will not press you. I shall wait patiently for you, through all time and all the ages if I must."

He searched her face and smiled with furrowed brows. "Whether you ever love me in return or not, my love for you will never fade."

"Legolas," she began, but he interrupted her with a sadness-tinged smile.

"Elven hearts cannot be taken back, once given. Mine shall remain forevermore in your care, Elizabeth Seymour, to do with as you will. Come, let us return, the wind blows ever harsher and you are cold."

The walk back passed in a blur, Elizabeth hardly aware when they arrived at her door. She turned to Legolas and he smiled at her as he always had, so that she could almost imagine she had dreamt the entire episode. But instead of his customary kiss to her hand, he briefly gripped her shoulder, lending a strange wrongness to the farewell.

Closing the door behind her, she wandered into her rooms blindly, trying to work out what had just happened. Everything around her looked the same, but it was as though she viewed it all from outside of herself. All was changed, and she shivered with apprehension and anxiety, a deep heaviness in her heart. Unable to make sense of any of it, she went and crawled into her bed fully clothed, pulled the covers over her head and promptly burst into tears.

Elizabeth floated closer to consciousness, turning her face more fully into the comforting smell and warmth of the King's cloak. When the cloak shifted under her face all by itself, she gasped in alarm and tried to scramble up, only to find herself held fast. Opening tear-swollen eyes, she looked up into the eyes of the King. He was reclining on her bed, holding her against his warm chest and looking down on her in concern.

"Your distress was so great, I felt it calling to me from a distance, even while you slept. What causes such grief?"

The weeping started again and she tried to explain around her sobs and ended up blubberyng gibberish into his chest and soaking his robes in her tears. He must have understood some of it, for he sighed.
"Legolas?"

At her emphatic nod, he ran a comforting hand down her hair and back.

"He's hurting and it's my fault," she sputtered, "but I don't know how to undo it. Tell me what to do, please! Command me."

The rise and fall of his chest was more pronounced as he drew another great breath, releasing it slowly. "There is nothing to be done. His feelings are his own and you are not at fault because you do not return them in the same way. He is my son, and I care deeply for his pain, but some things cannot be prevented. I tried to caution him to reign in his regard for you some time ago, but he would not hear it."

"Must I leave?" she asked in a small voice, having finally run out of tears. "It might help if he did not see me for a time."

His arms tightened around her and she saw him shake his head in the shadowed room. "No, your leaving would not solve anything, he would be more likely to follow you, fearing for your safety outside my realm." His fingers tangled loosely in her disheveled curls. "In any case, I cannot spare you, so your leaving is out of the question."

She angled her head so she could observe his face as he considered what to do, watching thoughts be weighed and discarded and emotions swiftly fly across his features. After a silent moment, he looked down at her.

"You grieve very deeply for his pain."

"Yes," she whispered, eyes filling again with salty tears. "I would love him in the way he wishes if I could, but I have no heart."

He ran a finger down the path her tears flowed and shook his head. "You have a heart, but it has already chosen another path. A much wiser path for you, and a future of joy."

She sucked in a sharp breath. "You've seen my future?"

He did not smile, but his eyes softened as though he did. "I have foreseen some of it. Now, worry no more over this. I will devise something useful and diverting that will help my son to move past his pain."

She smiled. "You're a good daddy, Thranduil," she said, giving him the English word instead of the Sindarin.

"Daddy?" he echoed. "What does it mean?"

"Ada. And nana is mommy, or mummy in my language."

He tilted his head. "Perhaps I should just learn your language and be done with it. It could be useful to be able to speak to you in a tongue no one else knows."

"Legolas already knows it, as does Tirion. In fact, Tirion is fluent now, as we mostly speak to one another in English or Quenya."

"All the more reason to know it, I suppose." He looked at her gravely. "Would you like to teach me?"
"With pleasure," she said eagerly. "English sounds very beautiful coming from your mouth; your accent is so lovely."

"Is it?" he asked with an amused smile.

"Of course. There is very little about you that isn't lovely, as you already know."

"And by 'very little' you imply there is still something about me you find unpleasant or worthy of censure."

She huffed. "Trust you to hone in on anything that doesn't praise your every aspect to the heavens, but I shan't incriminate myself further by trying to explain my meaning."

"I take your meaning," he said with a knowing look. "You think me arrogant."

Elizabeth shook her head, her fingers rubbing up and down absently against the soft velvet of his outer robe. "No, not arrogant, for that implies an overblown or unjustified belief in one's own superiority."

She tilted her head back to look at his face, considering the different aspects of his complex personality. "You are superior. You know this and acknowledge it as simple fact, as you would anything so blatantly obvious. But because of this keenness of intellect and wisdom, you are often impatient or annoyed by those inferior to you. If I had to find a fault in you, it would be that: the occasional lack of tolerance or patience for those you see as mental peasants."

His smile was slight but his eyes were full of contained mirth. "Surprisingly insightful for such a young daughter of men."

She laughed. "Young! I'm not young. Far from it."

Thranduil's mouth twisted in a half smile, dimple peeking out. "You are to me." He caressed her cheek, thumb gliding across her mouth to her chin. "You still vibrate with all the passion and wonder of a newborn foal."

"First you belittle my race, then liken me to a horse. I see my worth in your eyes, Elvenking," she said with a quirked brow.

"You don't." He tilted his head, musing. "You consistently underestimate your own power. There is much that could be yours, if you but stretched out your hand to take it."

Her gaze moved over his features, probing his eyes with her own. "But I don't want to take anything."

His lips parted as though in sudden revelation and he lowered his chin, considering. "No, I see it clearly now; you want to be taken. So be it."

Before she could voice the question in her eyes, Thranduil murmured a sleeping spell. He looked at her face in peaceful rest for a moment longer, relieved to feel no trace of her earlier distress, before slipping out from beneath her and gliding away.
The following weeks passed where Elizabeth felt like she was holding her breath, waiting for the other shoe to drop, so to speak. But nothing out of the ordinary happened, and she finally began to relax. Winter arrived in earnest, and with it more cold and snow that blanketed the Greenwood in a covering layer of white.

Her jaunts in the woods grew less frequent, as she felt the cold far more keenly than the elves, and she spent time in the kitchens again, baking bread and pies as seemed right for the time of year. She thought wistfully of Christmas, and told her friends about the traditions of her homeland as they sat around the fire in the great hall.

"So, you cut down a tree and bring it into your abode, set candles on it, but for what purpose?"

Elizabeth wrinkled her nose at Tirion. "Because it's pretty?"

"I'm certain it would be just as pretty if left as it was in the woods," quipped Mylion.

"You wood elves," she muttered in exasperation. "Always taking the tree's side in any argument. I didn't create the traditions, I just celebrated them with my family. And my father would always lift me up in his arms when I was little and kiss my cheek under the mistletoe."

Elirien lifted her mug and took a sip and smiled. "I think that sounds very sweet, the custom of kissing beneath the sprigs of that plant, and this cider you made us is lovely."

"Do you like it?" Elizabeth smiled, lifting her own cup for a drink. "I would have made you hot buttered rum, but since it seems you have no rum in the woods, I had to go with Dorwinion enhanced apple cider."

Berthon sniffed his cup. "How did you come by Dorwinion at this time of year?"

She put a finger to her lips until a cluster of elves passed by, then she leaned toward her friends. "I know where Galion keeps a bit back for his own personal stash, and if he doesn't share with me on occasion, I threatened to tattle on him to the King."

They all laughed, and Tirion lifted his mug. "To wily and enterprising females!"

"Hear, hear!" nodded Mylion, setting his empty cup down.

Elizabeth shrugged. "I gave Galion a tankard full of cider, which he seemed to enjoy, so he really has nothing to complain about."

"Did you hear the Prince has departed the kingdom?" Elirien asked, tapping her fingers against the side of her cup.

Whipping her head around to look at the elleth beside her, Elizabeth stared in surprise.

Tirion nodded. "Aye, it's true. He left on his own before the snows came, but whither he went or what his purpose is, I know not. There is much speculation over it, but perhaps he had some task to accomplish."

Mylion smiled at Elizabeth, a gentle kindness in his eyes. "Did you mend your quarrel ere he went, Lady Elizabeth?"

She swallowed and stared ahead into the flames of the fire. "Yes, we did."

"It will be strange not to see him at the practice fields," mused Berthon. "Still, it is not unusual for a
prince to go abroad and visit other realms."

"Perhaps he will find a maiden he admires and come back wed," Elirien sighed dreamily.

Elizabeth flinched as the others laughed and Tirion stood and walked to her, extending a hand. "Take a turn about the room with me, my lady. After so rich a drink, I feel the need for a bit of exercise."

She rose and took his arm, smiling gratefully up at him as they walked.

"The prince declared himself to you, didn't he?" Tirion inquired, switching to English for privacy. Her brows furrowed in consternation. "How did you know this?"

Tirion nodded and smiled as they passed several elves. "His love for you was not hidden. Particularly, I think, among those who knew him well or those like me, who had occasion to observe you together."

She looked down with a pang. "I did not see it. I thought he felt only friendship for me. Unfortunately, I could not return his feelings."

Reaching over, Tirion patted her hand in comfort and gazed down on her keenly. "No," he murmured, "I imagine you could not."

They finished their stroll and rejoined their friends. Mylion took up his lyre, humming softly and Elizabeth shook herself from her melancholy with a cheering thought.

"Mylion, would you hear a Yule song to complement the season?"

He smiled. "Certainly. You know how fond I am of your music. Teach us."

She sang it through twice, and they all joined in after, beautiful elven voices filling the hall with song, and warming her heart.

"Deck the halls with boughs of holly, Fa la la la la la la la!"

"'Tis the season to be jolly, Fa la la la la la la la!"

Don we now our gay apparel, Fa la la la la la la la!

Troll the ancient Yuletide carol, Fa la la la la la la la!"

"See the blazing yule before us, Fa la la la la la la la!

Strike the harp and join the chorus, Fa la la la la la la la!"

"Follow me in merry measure, Fa la la la la la la la!

While I tell of Yuletide treasure, Fa la la la la la la la!"

"Fast away the old year passes, Fa la la la la la la la!

Hail the new, ye lads and lasses, Fa la la la la la la la!"

"Sing we joyous all together! Fa la la la la la la la!

Heedless of the wind and weather, Fa la la la la la la la!"
Chapter 19

The winter months passed slowly by, with the highlight being a betrothal feast in the great hall for Feren and Elirien. Elizabeth was invited to attend, and Tirion explained the proceedings and the significance of the exchanging of silver rings, and other details specific to Greenwood and Silvan tradition.

Elizabeth was wholly delighted, not only for the happiness of two elves she adored, but also to finally have some further insight into elven courtship practices. Tirion told her it would be at least a year before they actually married, and she assumed he would relate more to her concerning the wedding ceremony as the time drew near. He mentioned the exchanging of gold rings for marriage, and she assumed their customs would likely be similar in many ways to what she was used to from her own culture.

The King was also present, and Elizabeth was hard pressed to control her grin when he congratulated the couple and kissed Elirien's hand, causing her to blush. Further amusing when it took more than an hour before the shy elleth's blush began to fade.

After the meal, he came and sat beside Elizabeth, who was contentedly watching the dancing from the sidelines. He observed her in a thoughtful, measuring way.

"I can't help but notice you are looking, in turn, both elated and smug as you watch the newly betrothed couple."

She observed Feren and Elirien twirl across the dance floor, both of them so clearly in love as they stared at one another with stars in their eyes, and she smiled, turning to the king with a shrug.

"Should I not feel some satisfaction for my very small part in bringing two people together? If you think my smugness unbecoming, I shall attempt to affect a more humble countenance."

He hummed, crossing his arms over his chest. "Your maneuvering was not done for the purpose of their happiness alone."

Frowning, she turned to him. "Of course it was. What do you mean?"

"Elf babies?" he said drolly.

"Oh." She chuckled, and looked at him from under her lashes. "That will also add to their happiness, so your argument is invalid."

His smile slowly faded while he watched the couple dance with a faraway look in his eyes. "Like many things, having children can bring equal parts joy and pain."

Stricken, she looked down to where her hands were folded across her lap, understanding his meaning. "Is...Do you expect the prince to stay wherever he's gone for long?"

Gaze still focused forward, he pursed his lips in contemplation. "I suspect it will be some time before he feels ready to return. He asked me to give you a message." He turned to look at her with gentle eyes.

She met his gaze with trepidation, unconsciously biting the inside of her cheek. Searching her face,
he gave a slight smile.

"The message was two-fold: firstly, he said you are not to blame or berate yourself in any way; and second, that when he returns he will expect to claim his usual dance at the feast, so you had best be prepared with the..." He paused, with a slight frown. "Merengue?"

Tears rose in her eyes at the first part; Legolas had ever been kindness personified in their years of friendship, then she laughed at the second. How very like him it was to touch her heart one minute and amuse her in the next.

"Ah...the merengue... I've been trying to talk him out of that one for the past several years. I really don't think Greenwood is ready for it."

"How intriguing. I think you should show me this dance." He lowered his chin, gaze intensifying. "In private," he continued, "as I am the one to best determine what this kingdom is or isn't ready for."

Her heart thumped hard against her chest before speeding into a much quicker rhythm. Running her tongue along her bottom lip, she held his eyes with her own. "But I cannot show you by myself. I need a partner."

"I will be your partner in the days to come, Elizabeth. You may count on it." His smile made her think of swooping predators when he leaned nearer, and she had the bizarre feeling that there was some dual meaning to the conversation that she wasn't quite understanding.

He gave her an overly amused smile before he departed, and she was left staring after him, wondering if she'd somehow managed to miss the joke.

The following week, Elizabeth was sitting on the floor of her bedchamber, surrounded by piles of clothing, shoes, and other things she had managed to accumulate since the last time she had cleaned out her closet. Blowing wild, unkempt strands of hair out of her face, she puzzled over how she had managed to acquire so many bits and pieces she never used.

A knock sounded at her front door, and she stood and ran swiftly on bare feet to open it. Mylion stared down on her and smiled, reaching out to hook her messy hair behind one ear. Moving aside, she waved him and Berthon in, then closed the door.

"Why do you look like you've been tussling with spiders, Lady Elizabeth?" Berthon asked with a grin, plopping himself down on her most comfortable chair near the fireplace.

Mylion peered into her bedroom and grinned at the other ellon. "From the looks of it, I think it is the clothing that has attacked her. Shall we avenge you, my lady?"

She sighed and rubbed the back of her hand against her forehead. "From the looks of it, I think it is the clothing that has attacked her. Shall we avenge you, my lady?"

She sighed and rubbed the back of her hand against her forehead. "Very funny. My clothing seems far more inclined to reproduce when I turn my back than any of you elves."

Berthon chuckled. "You must learn to practice patience. There was a birth only a hundred years ago. If you wait long enough, there will likely be another."
"I'll have you know that I am the very essence of patience," she said, with a haughty turn of her head.

Mylion and Berthon shared a look, then burst into laughter. A sharp rap sounded at the door, and snatching up an apple from a bowl on the table, she launched it at Mylion who caught it easily, and scowled at him before ripping the door open.

Tirion braced a hand against the door frame and pursed his lips dubiously. "You're looking rather dangerous, Elizabeth. Should I come back another time?"

Grasping his collar, she pulled him inside, turning a severe frown on the still laughing elves within.

"Let us be on a team together, lady," Tirion quipped. "For with you displaying this much aggression, we are sure to win at whatever the game is."

"What is the game to be tonight?" Mylion bit into the apple with an audible crunch.

"It is meant to be charades," she said, with her hands resting on her hips. "But where is Elirien?"

Looking into Elizabeth's messy bedroom with a grin and a shake of his head, Tirion turned to her and shrugged, taking his seat on the long settee. "Feren is not on duty this night, so he and Elirien will be spending the evening together in the great hall. No doubt babbling poetry at one another, or something equally cringe-worthy."

Elizabeth stared at him in dismay. "Why, Tirion, what a bitter cynic you sound. Be careful you are not the next one pierced by Cupid's arrow. She had long since acquainted her friends with Greek myths, so they would understand her occasional references.

He ran his tongue across his teeth and gave her a dry look. "Cupid had best keep his arrows in the quiver where they belong, for my hide is thicker than any dragon's. If I were interested in love, I would simply read about it in a book. Then, when I tire of it I can easily place it back on the shelf and ignore it once more."

Mylion and Berthon chuckled, and she looked at all of them with a calculating smile and crossed her arms. "Just you wait. I will make it my mission to see you all wed before I'm through, and I never do things by half-measures."

Frowning, Mylion shot a worried look at the other ellons then back to her. "I wish you would not threaten us so severely, Elizabeth, and with such a dire outcome. We are all confirmed bachelors, as you are well aware."

She went over and shut her bedchamber door to hide the mess, and smirked at the elves. "You're all intensely miserable, you just don't know it; and I'm obligated to help my dear friends find happiness."

A soft knock sounded at the door and Elizabeth brightened. "That sounds like Elirien. I'm sure she will back me up."

Pulling the door open with a wide smile, she froze at the sight of Galedir standing there in his armor. He bowed, his eyes sliding over the other elves in the room before he addressed her.

"Lady Elizabeth, I bring word from the king. He wishes you to dine with him this evening at the eighth hour." He cleared his throat. "I am to tell you...'wear the red'. King Thranduil said you would know what that means," Galedir said, head tilted curiously.

Hand tightening on the door handle, she nodded, fighting a blush. "Um, yes, thank you, I understand
the message."

"I will return to escort you at the appointed hour." With another bow, he disappeared back down the passage. Closing the door, Elizabeth leaned against it, meeting the curious eyes of her friends.

"I suppose we will have to save our game for another night." She gave them an apologetic smile, narrowing her eyes at Tirion's smirk.

"That is less than four hours from now. If you are anything like my sister, you will need all that time and more to engage in all your feminine rituals."

"Oh please," she said with a roll of her eyes. "I can be ready in a half an hour or less, it's the mess of my closet that will take the most time to sort out. The king asked me to teach him English, and must have decided tonight was a good night to get started."

Berthon stood and stretched. "Which is the red? I'm curious to see it."

Elizabeth went to her closet and retrieved it, then held it up silently to show them. Mylion whistled and grinned. "I remember when you wore that to dance with the prince, before any of us knew you properly. Is that the sort of thing you wore for Tirion's English lessons as well?"

She snorted and shook her head. "Certainly not. Tirion has the fashion sense of a troll, whereas our king likes fine robes and pretty dresses to look at, like works of art."

"Trolls don't wear clothing, therefore their sense of fashion is non-existent," Tirion said with an offended sniff. "If you're going to insult me, at least do it properly."

Elizabeth giggled and patted his cheek. "I only insult you because I love you," she said in a sing-song voice.

Lifting a bemused brow, he followed the other two elves to the door. "Such a cruel definition of love you ladies have… And you wonder why I have no wish to marry."

They said their farewells and Elizabeth turned back to restore her bedchamber to some type of order, amusing herself by going through mental lists of all the elf maidens she knew, and ruminating over which ones might suit her friends.

Galedir walked silently beside her while Elizabeth stewed over the possible reason for her summons. With her opaque stockings long used up, she was forced to wear the sheer, flesh-toned ones she had left, which clearly showed the skin on her legs, making the dress appear far less modest. For the walk there, she donned her floor length cape which covered everything, but the slits up the sides of the dress were certainly much higher than she recalled.

As they drew near the king's private apartments, her feeling of disquiet increased, remembering the only other time she had been there and the traumatic end which had sent her into the woods to weep, and where Legolas found her…

Opening the door for her, Galedir bowed and then closed it after she stepped through. Taking a
breath and preparing to walk further into the room, she jerked in startlement when the King glided right in front of her.

She looked down hastily and curtsied. His eyes appraised her and he held out his hand.

"I will take your cloak."

With fingers that felt numb, she reached up and undid the clasp, handing it to him after it slid off her shoulders. Taking it, he motioned for her to go forward. When she left the entryway, he tossed her wrap onto a small table there and quietly engaged the lock on the door before following her.

Taking her hand, he led her further into his sitting room, then turned to pour wine into two crystal glasses. After handing her one of the glasses and waiting until after she had tasted the wine, he reached for her free hand and kissed it.

"You are very silent tonight, Elizabeth. You have not even greeted me; and you look lovely."

She smiled. "Thank you, Sire, and good evening."

He tsked and gave her a chiding look. "No titles. In private, we are always equals."

She lifted a teasing brow and set her wine glass down. "If you say so, Thranduil."

Turning to the balcony that was set for dinner, she went and stared out at the view of the vast caverns. It was breathtaking.

Coming up behind her, Thranduil stroked a hand down the length of her unbound waves. "How long will it get?"

Pulling a strand over her shoulder, she examined it where it fell to the tops of her thighs. "It will grow far beyond the length of the floor. I must cut it again soon."

He gathered it in his hands and combed his fingers through it. "No, you mustn't do any such thing. It's beautiful. Elven hair rarely grows to such a length as yours, and never all the way to the floor."

Turning to him, she reached out and boldly touched a golden strand of his hair, marveling at it. "It's like the softest silk. Is that from your elven magic?"

He chuckled and led her to the table and seated her. "Hardly. That's just its natural state. Would you prefer more wine or something stronger?"

Spreading her napkin across her lap, she looked up. "What is stronger than Dorwinion?"

"There's brandy," he said over his shoulder, returning to the decanters of spirits across the room.

She smiled. "Wine is fine, thank you."

When he returned and seated himself near her, she raised her brows in question. "Shall I serve you, Thranduil?"

He inclined his head and handed her his plate, which she quickly filled with the various dishes and handed back. After serving herself, they both began to eat.

"I received a communication from Bard today."

"Oh? And how is he?" she said, setting her water glass down after taking a sip.
"He is well, but it seems the Master of Laketown fled with all the gold Bard gave him for the rebuilding of the city."

"What a bloody tosser," she muttered in English. "He always made my skin crawl, so I won't pretend to be sorry he's gone, but it's unfortunate he made off with all the gold that would have improved the lot of the people there."

The Elvenking wiped his mouth with his serviette and nodded. "Yes, he was a weak and greedy fool. Those from Esgaroth would be wise to relocate to Dale. As their king, Bard will lead them wisely and well."

Pushing her plate aside, Elizabeth tilted her head. "You quite like Bard, don't you?"

Leaning back in his seat Thranduil nodded. "As do you. Would you like to visit Dale again, come summer? I feel certain Dain would be happy to welcome you back to Erebor, as well."

She smiled eagerly. "That would be lovely. It's good to have both Dale and Erebor as allies of our kingdom."

"It is," he said, smiling warmly. Standing, he extended a hand, his eyes following her leg all the way up to the middle of her thigh, where the slit ended when she turned and made to rise. He raised his brows. "I do not recall quite that much of your legs showing when you wore this gown before."

"That's because I wore dark stockings then that hid my skin, but these," she said, indicating the see-through hose, "hide nothing, and they're the only kind I have left."

"So I see," he murmured in a low voice.

He led her to the settee where they had once sat together, and she swallowed nervously and peeked at him from under her lashes. She still wasn't entirely certain why he had summoned her to dine with him.

Settling beside her, he turned a relaxed smile on her. "You mentioned before that you would show me some places from your former lands. Would you like to do that now?"

Quickly put at ease, she smiled in delight. "I had quite forgotten about that. What an excellent notion." After considering for a moment, she automatically reached for his hand in her excitement. "Would you like to see an opera, a ballet, or an art gallery, which is to say singers, dancers, or sculptures and paintings?"

He ran his eyes across her face and smiled at her enthusiasm. "You may choose."

"Very well," she nodded and stared at him expectantly. "How do we…."

Stretching out more comfortably, he pulled her to recline against his chest, then tilted her chin back. He looked deep into her eyes, his thumb stroking across her lower lip and whispered, "Show me."

After experiencing the same falling sensation as before, Elizabeth looked at Thranduil standing beside her with a grin and tugged him toward the balcony seats of the theatre they were standing in. He was looking around with interest at all the people and she pointed to the stage.

"Look. This story they are dancing is called Swan Lake."

After quickly relating the tale of the ballet to the king, Elizabeth watched the dancers for a time, sighing with delight at the beauty and grace of their movements, then turned to watch Thranduil
instead. His lips were parted in wonder, and she studied the array of emotions across his face as he watched the story play out. When the final applause died out at the end of the performance, the theatre and everything in it faded away.

She found herself standing in a dark place and took his hand again, seeking his eyes. "How do I take you somewhere else now?"

Pulling her against him, he stroked her cheek, holding her gaze with his own and leaned his forehead against hers.

"Picture it now."

Opening her eyes on the new scene, she spun around in one of her favorite galleries, laughing. Running a hand across the marble sculpture of a nude Renaissance woman, she admired the way the woman seemed to be wearing a delicate veil, evidence of the skill of the artist that crafted the work. Thranduil followed her as she examined a row of nude paintings from different eras, then they stopped and viewed a display of the entire Greek pantheon, depicted in marble.

"Do you see what I meant when I said nude art can be very beautiful and moving?" She indicated the copy of the famous sculpture of David that they stood in front of.

He tilted his head. "Was he a hero of some tale?"

She nodded. "Yes, exactly so. He killed a giant by throwing a stone and stunning him, then cutting the giant's head off with his own sword. His name was David, and he was a very famous king."

Next, they were in her memories of Whitehall Palace, watching Queen Elizabeth celebrate Christmas with her finely dressed courtiers, and admiring the richness of the ornate palace. Tapestries depicting great battles hung more than thirty feet from floor to ceiling, and Thranduil perused the images, asking many questions regarding the histories shown there.

Finally, they stood on a carpet of grass so green it almost hurt to look at, surrounded on one side by woodland, and on the other by a goodly-sized mansion. The lawn was immaculately trimmed, and an elaborate garden stretched far, filled with topiary of animals, with a large fountain set at the center. Walking toward the lush woods, she smiled at the Elvenking beside her. "This is one of several estates my family owned, called...if you can believe it, Greenwood." Closing her eyes and tilting her face up to the gentle, rainy drizzle falling from the gray sky, she sighed deeply.

"This is England, Thranduil. Isn't it beautiful?" Opening her eyes to find him watching her, she tilted her head curiously.

"Yes," he murmured, finally turning to look at the trees. "Very beautiful."

Walking to a horse chestnut tree, he plucked two vivid green bunches of leaves and placed one behind each of her ears, his blue eyes burning with a bright intensity.

"There," he said, resting his hands on either side of her face and leaning close. "Now you are the Greenwood queen," and leaning down, he kissed her.
Chapter 20

When Elizabeth returned to awareness, it was still to the sensation of falling, but it was no longer due to magic in the mind, but rather the feel of Thranduil's lips gently pressed against hers. Sighing in delight, she slid her hand up to grip his shoulder, a shiver racing through her when he teased her lips apart to taste her, deepening the kiss to something far more compelling and urgent.

Sitting up smoothly, he shifted her, pulling her across his lap so she was straddling him, and their faces were nearly even. "Stay with me," he said against her neck, kissing a path down to her collarbone, then back up to one of her ears. "Say that you accept me."

Burying her hands in the long golden hair at the back of his head, she shivered violently with the need he was awakening in her. "I do accept you, and I will happily stay."

He kissed her lips beguilingly while he cupped one of her breasts, thumb slowly stroking against her nipple through her gown. "Before Eru Iluvatar, I will accept and cherish you, Elizabeth...now you say it to me."

She tried to kiss him and groaned in frustration when he moved away. He cradled her face and forced her to look at him. "You must say it back."

"Before Eru Iluvatar, I will accept and cherish you, Thranduil...now will you please kiss me?" she asked in desperation.

He gave a throaty laugh, and his gaze turned intense and hungry. "I will do so much more than kiss you." His fingers trailed up her thighs, disappearing beneath the red dress until he found bare skin, making her moan.

"I will drown in you, and bring you so many pleasures untold you will not be able to stand when I am through with you."

Taking her mouth with his, he pulled her legs to wrap around his waist and lifted her against him. Standing, he carried her through a doorway and down a hall into a large bedchamber, never ceasing to kiss her while he walked.

When he laid her down on the large bed, she turned her head to look around, swallowing nervously when she realized what sin she was about to commit, but his hand against her breasts again sent all thoughts from her head.

She inhabited a place of pleasure and sensation, and wondered fleetingly if his entire body was covered in magic, so that wherever he touched she tingled from it.

"How do you remove this gown?" he asked, searching for the clasps.
Rolling on her side, she pulled her hair out of the way so he could get to her back. "Here, there's a little metal handle, see it? Pull it down." The sound of the parting zipper filled the room and he hummed thoughtfully.

"That is quite a clever thing, and much quicker than hooks."

Tugging her gown off, he tossed it aside and looked at her, his lips parting in wonder as he stared at her black lingerie. Running a finger along the edge of her garters and stockings, he met her eyes.

"What are these, a gift for me to open?"

She shook her head and smiled coyly. "Not until you remove your robes. I should like my own gift, thank you very much."

Straightening, he gave her an indulgent smile and flamboyantly threw off his red velvet outer robe, holding her eyes the entire time, then quickly undid the hooks on his tunic, finally tossing that aside. She sat up to watch him, wide-eyed when she finally saw his bare upper body, all lean, defined muscle and glorious golden skin.

She reached out a hand and slid it across his chest, shivering again at his heat and the firm feel of his body against her fingertips. She looked up at him, and they reached for each other at the same time, coming together again in a wild clash of lips.

Searching her bra deftly, he quickly found the clasp to open it and tugged it off of her, his breath coming more quickly and audibly when he filled his hands with her breasts. She moaned and found herself on her back, his mouth replacing his hands and the feel of his tongue sending her to the very edge of the cliff of pleasure, but not yet over the brink.

It seemed she had barely blinked when she looked down and realized that he had removed the last of her clothing, and was devouring her thoroughly with his eyes alone as they moved across her body, the weight of his stare just as substantial as his touch.

Elizabeth's heart beat loudly in the cage of her chest, feeling a slight embarrassment over his very focused regard. Wishing for a renewal of his lips and body against hers, she reached her hand toward him entreatingly,

"Please...touch me, my Sunshine King."

His eyes flicked up to hers, and the hunger he looked at her with was soon tempered by tenderness. "I will bow before you now, my Moonlight Queen, as I would to no other. Receive my eager offering."

He moved down the length of her body, parting her thighs, his hair trailing silk against her bare skin, and moments...seconds later, she saw stars through her eyelids and flew apart from a pleasure so intense she could not stir a muscle after for the space of several minutes.

Removing the last of his own clothing, he laid down beside her, licking at the taste of her on his bottom lip and studying her wonder-filled face with satisfaction. "You have never experienced that before," he said, with a knowing smirk.

Turning her head to look at him, she smiled, still with a look of dreamy awe. "No, I haven't. I've heard about it, but that was so much more overpowering than I ever imagined."

"You are positively virginal," he said, pulling her to him for a lingering kiss.
Putting her hand against his chest, she pushed him down with a naughty smile. "Am I, indeed? Are you certain?"

It was her turn to move over him, the curtain of her dark hair covering his chest when she dipped her head down and proceeded to wring sounds from him that she was sure no one else would ever get to hear. When he called her name mixed with a moan, she finally relented and moved to straddle him.

Sitting up, he grasped her hips and held her still for a long moment, gliding his hands over her skin before pulling her into a kiss as he finally entered her, joining their bodies into one. Lifting his head, he looked into her eyes, stroking her cheek as tears flowed freely down her face while she looked on him in wonder once more.

"Why do you cry?" he whispered, stilling in case it was from any discomfort.

Running her hands across his shoulders, she gripped his upper arms and smiled. "Because I haven't ever felt this way before, and I can't contain it."

"And how do you feel?" He started to move again, smiling at her sharp intake of air, and soft moan.

"Complete," she breathed, "you make me feel whole as I never have."

He pushed further into her and shuddered. "And you will ne'er again feel alone, for I will never leave you, nor will I allow you to leave me."

She glanced away with a hesitant smile. "Do you promise this?"

Pulling her more firmly against him, his large hand covering her back, he stroked her breast and pressed his lips to hers, speaking his vow against her lips.

"I swear it."

Their gentle, lazy movements soon turned more urgent, and Thranduil finally rolled Elizabeth down onto the bed, the strong movement of his hips finally driving them both into that hovering place of gasping breaths before they plunged into blinding pleasure together.

Elizabeth's eyes flew open and Thranduil stared deeply into them with his own as the pleasure gradually rolled back and the bond completed. As he was filled with her fëa and she received part of his, he released a trembling breath, feeling a rightness in the very core of his being once more.

"What was that?" she asked, her eyes drooping heavily.

He smiled and kissed her. The effort it took to bond was tiring enough for elves, he could only imagine how much more exhausted she must feel as a human. He turned to his back and pulled her against him, reaching for a thick blanket to cover them with.

"Thranduil?" she tried to look at him, but her lids closed over her eyes once more.

"Sleep, beloved," he whispered, kissing the crown of her head and stroking her hair back from her face. Tomorrow would be soon enough to explain it all to her, and for her to learn about all the ways that her life had now changed.
Layers of thick sleep slowly peeled away and Elizabeth floated in a semi-aware state, a slight smile lifting her lips as she remembered the absolutely amazing dream she'd had. Laying on her belly, as she always slept, she ran her hand down the cool sheets and sighed contentedly.

"Ah, you're awake, and even sooner than I expected."

Chin jerking up, Elizabeth's head swiveled around to look at the king, fully dressed in his usual, immaculate manner and sitting on a chair beside the large bed she slept in. Eyes scanning quickly, she realized she actually was sleeping in his bed. In his bedchamber, and the previous night really had happened.

Pushing back the thick fall of her hair from her face, she finally met the king's eyes. "I thought it was all a dream," she admitted, a light blush coloring her cheeks as she noted that she was still naked beneath the covers.

"No, it was very real," he said with a slight smile, "although there was a rather dream-like quality to the evening, with all the things you showed me from your memories."

She turned and sat up, pulling the bedclothes close about her, an awkwardness overtaking her and causing the blush to deepen. She felt his gaze on her, but avoided it, tracing idle circles on the rich coverlet.

"You are very fetching in your dishevelment," he murmured, drawing her eyes back to his and making her feel a flip in her stomach at the simmering passion she saw there. "I am sorely tempted to rejoin you, and spend the day in your bewitching embrace. But...there are many other things to attend."

He sighed, and she was amazed when the hunger in his eyes was replaced by a look of strong resolve, and she wondered at how easily he was able to exert his will to subjugate desire. A king's responsibilities could never allow mere whim or inclination to override all else, that she remembered well.

Brow furrowed, she shifted, her discomfort increasing by the second. "I will dress and return to my rooms immediately. I realize you have business that requires your attention."

His shifted in his seat. "Why would you think to return there? Those are no longer your rooms."

She looked at him with a raised brow and a twist of ironic humor on her lips. "What? You have a suite of rooms kept aside for a mistress? If so, I am surprised."

Thranduil frowned, his brows lowering ominously. "Elizabeth...what exactly do you think happened last night?"

She swallowed, uncertain now as to what her assumptions had been. Was it only meant to be for one night? Disappointed, she twisted her fingers into the thick covers.

"I...became your leman? Or, is that not...what you intended? I know we did not discuss any terms, but..."

"Elizabeth," he interrupted, standing to his feet and tossing aside the papers in his lap he had been perusing onto a table. "You are not a mistress. We are married. You are my wife," he said with great emphasis, walking forward and cupping her cheek, a disturbed look in his eyes. "Did you sincerely think otherwise?"
Lips parting in astonishment, she searched his eyes but saw nothing beyond his earnestness and a firm resolve there. "Married? But, how is that even possible? We had no ceremony, nor did we speak any vows. There were no rings..."

He sat in front of her and took her hands in his, a wariness in his look that had not been there before. "It seems I may have assumed too much. Did you not study all of elven culture and thoroughly familiarize yourself with our traditions and practices?"

"Of course, as much as I was able, but it has never been possible for me to learn anything of your marriages or sexual customs beyond the barest inference. There are no books to be found on the topic and no one would speak of it when I attempted inquiries in the past."

His lips tightened and he drew a small breath. "For elves, marriage is achieved by a spoken pledge invoking the name of Eru, as we did, and completed by bodily consummation and the joining of two fëa." His eyes narrowed slightly, a fleeting hesitance appearing briefly before his chin raised proudly. "Did you not wish to be married to me?"

She gave an incredulous laugh. Just how blind was he? "Of course I did," she said, her hands squeezing his. "But I did not think it would ever be an option."

A smile tugged up one side of his mouth, face relaxing into curiosity and a gentle humor. "Why would you think that?"

Reaching for his face, she stroked his cheek, looking on his golden, majestic mien with wonder. "Because you are god-like, angelic, wise and powerful, a king among elves. How could a former mortal, and human, no less, hope to aspire to such a height?"

Thranduil shook his head sharply, his face falling into lines of displeasure and disquiet. "Do not place me on a false pedestal, bess, you will only set me up to fall." *(Sindarin: young woman/wife)*

He took the hand against his face in his own and kissed it. "I am not a legend or god from one of your tales. I'm real. I have weaknesses and fears, as well as desires and needs, just as you do."

She looked at him for a long moment, feeling her perceptions and expectations shift at his words, and tilted her head and bit her lip. "I am glad to hear it. I suppose it might be exhausting trying to keep up with a god."

He chuckled. "Though I be no god, we will have to work to build your endurance to match mine, for you were easily exhausted last night." He smirked and rose from the bed, waving a lazy hand toward a nearby table set with food, a gleam of anticipation in his bright, blue eyes. "Come. Eat...drink. There is much to be done before we present the kingdom with their new queen."

She slipped from the bed and wrapped herself in his discarded outer robes from the night before and sat at the table, a slight trepidation overtaking her at what the future might hold. A wave of dizziness struck and she ran a hand across her forehead and looked up at him.

"I feel strange today. Weak."

He took the seat beside her and cupped her face in his hands, eyes sharp as he looked deep and searchingly into her eyes for the space of a moment. Relaxing, he kissed her lips gently and released her and sat back.

"It is from the bond. The joining between husband and wife takes a great act of will that is even trying for elves. It is no surprise you would experience some lingering effects and residual fatigue. It will soon fade as you become accustomed to the joining."
"That sounds magical and mysterious," she quipped, taking a bite of eggs that were still somehow warm. "What I wouldn't give for a proper cup of Ceylon tea with milk." She grimaced as she swallowed down the harsher, green style of tea the elves drank.

A knock sounded at the door and Thranduil went to answer it, then quickly stepped out and shut it behind him.

Elizabeth finished her breakfast in solitude, remembering his cautioning her from the evening of the feast. There was no longer doubt regarding his meaning from when he had warned her previously...since he kissed her the night before, her life really had been irrevocably changed.

Thranduil pursed his lips, hands clasped behind his back and shook his head.

"Not that one, rather the blue velvet."

The seamstress held up the requested fabric and draped it across Elizabeth's shoulder, showing him the fine, accompanying brocade it paired with.

"Yes, and make this one with the fuller skirt and train. I believe the queen made you a drawing to illustrate?"

"Yes, my lord," the seamstress acknowledged quietly. "I will have these completed in two days."

Waving a hand, the King nodded. "Very well, Dúlinneth. You may go."

"My lord. Lady."

Gathering her fabrics and other items quickly, the seamstress curtsied to them both with her gaze lowered and slipped from the room.

Stepping down from the pedestal where she had been standing for the ease of the seamstress to fit her, Elizabeth smiled to herself and sighed, going to straighten her stack of dress sketches from a nearby table.

"I can see you have thoughts, bess, share them." (wife) He went and sprawled in his plush throne, which was the focal point of the smaller presence chamber where they had spent much of their first day of marriage together.

Turning, she leaned back against the table and rested her hands there, tilting her head. "Do you know, in English, both Beth and Bess are shortened versions of my name? As well as others, like Eliza and Lizzy."

His fingers stroked the smooth wood of the armrest and he hummed thoughtfully. "And do you prefer to be called any of these other forms of your name?"

She shrugged. "I quite like you calling me Bess, actually, since it has the benefit of meaning in both our languages."

"Then I shall continue to use it when we are in private, since it pleases you," he said with a warm
smile, then raised an expectant brow. "Now you may tell me what you were really musing on before."

Huffing a laugh, she shook her head, wondering if she would ever be able to hide anything from him in the future. Meeting his knowing eyes, she pushed off from the table and walked nearer to him.

"Is Dúlinneth your usual seamstress?"

Head tilting the slightest bit, he gave a nod. "Yes, she has been making my garments for longer than your lifespan. Why?"

"She hates me," she stated matter-of-factly. "Although I can't say that's a surprise, really. Especially with the rather abrupt manner of this new development." She looked at the floor, her brow furrowing. "Truthfully, if someone had told me yesterday that I would wake up a married queen today, I would have told them they were mad. Small wonder if the entire kingdom goes into a state of shock at this news."

Reaching out, Thranduil pulled her down onto his lap and tilted her face for his kiss, and he continued to kiss her until she finally relaxed and melted against him. Stroking her face with his fingertips, he examined her pensive expression.

"It had been my plan to make you my queen for some time, Elizabeth," he murmured. "I have shown you marked attention and favor as I have no other. I do not think there will be very many as surprised by this as you seem to think."

She narrowed her eyes, her mouth twisted sardonically while she ran a hand down his long, golden hair. "You might have let me in on the secret."

"You would have worked yourself into a state of worry, fretting over outcomes and possibilities that would never have been. Even now, you torment yourself unnecessarily, imagining censure and disapproval where there will likely be little or none."

Elizabeth looked down, curling the edge of his robes around her fingers. "How do you know this about me?"

He lifted her chin so she was forced to meet his eyes again. "Do you think I have not studied you carefully and learned your ways? I know aspects of you that you are hardly aware of, yourself, mîr nin." (my treasure/precious thing)

"Is that what I am to you?" she asked with wide eyes.

He smiled, evidently amused by her response. "What else?"

Lifting her off of him and standing fluidly, Thranduil wrapped her arm around his and led her toward the passage leading to their private rooms.

Mylion walked into the great library and made a beeline for the table where Tirion was sorting scrolls and bound books. Leaning a hip against the wooden edge, he met his friend's eyes and leaned near,
speaking in a low whisper.

"Have you heard, Tirion?"

Giving the other elf a long look, Tirion continued his task. "Considering you are practically bursting, I assume you are here to discuss the gossip the entire kingdom is currently consumed with regarding our favorite human?"

Looking disappointed, Mylion picked up a book on the history of Gondor and thumbed through it. "You have already heard, then. I was hoping to be the first to tell you."

Taking the book from Mylion's hand and returning it to the pile it belonged in, Tirion gave him an indulgent smile. "Considering it has been talked of since early this morning, and it is now nearly the evening meal, I think you severely underestimate the speed at which news travels in the halls."

"I have only heard it this past hour," Mylion said with a shrug. "What are your thoughts on it? It was rather sudden, was it not, to mention nothing of the rarity for an elf to remarry at all, much less a king."

"Was it sudden?" Tirion turned from his completed sorting to look at his friend. "If our king's interest was not apparent when he danced with Elizabeth, then I shall call the entire kingdom blind, for he had not danced since before Queen Calarien was lost." He waved a hand. "And Elizabeth's feelings for King Thranduil have long been obvious to me."

Mylion chuckled and pulled out a chair to sit on. "And I thought it was the power of the red gown which worked an instant magic, but you seem to have reasoned it all out. Truly, Tirion, you appear to be all-knowing...is there anything you are uncertain of in all this?"

Brows lowering, the librarian crossed his arms. "I am uncertain how Elizabeth will be received. Some will not be happy about this, as you know. Our new queen will need our support and friendship until all accustom themselves to this reality."

Mylion tilted his head, clearly puzzling over something. "Do you think she was aware yestereve? I do not mean to be indelicate, but...could she have known?"

"Nay, I do not think so," he said with a significant look. "She was clearly surprised and somewhat trepidatious when she received the summons. To speculate more would be, as you say, indelicate."

Grinning, Mylion drummed his fingers on the table. "I just find it diverting that as Elizabeth was scheming to see all of us marry, she is the one now caught in the net."

Tirion rubbed his chin, a hint of concern in his gold eyes. "Do not be too quick to crow with victory, for you seem to forget she now has all the resources and authority as queen to make her goals easier to accomplish."

Mylion shrugged and stood. "I think I shall go and compose a song celebrating our new queen, as she is sure to like that. Staying in her good graces seems the wisest course going forward." He paused, tilting his head. "I wonder what the prince will make of all this when he returns?"

"What, indeed?" Tirion murmured, turning away to hide his worry.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

More explicit tasties. Enjoy.

Also, if you have not heard Lee Pace sing, please immediately go to youtube and look up the song he sings with Amy Adams in Miss Pettigrew. His voice is like poured honey for the ear.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

After sharing the evening meal together, the King retired to his study to attend some correspondence he had neglected earlier in the day, and Elizabeth took the time to take a leisurely bath and change into one of her night gowns and a matching robe that she had used so little over the years.

All of her things had been brought from her apartments, and she experienced a pang of sadness knowing she would never return to live in the rooms where she had spent so many pleasant years.

Her new closet constituted an entire, separate space that connected to the bedchamber she shared with the king. Digging through one of the chests of her belongings, she smiled to come across some of her earlier translations when she had been learning Sindarin, and then on one of the pages of English and Quenya she and Tirion had written.

Laughing quietly at the mischief there, she set it aside with a sigh, eventually wandering through the royal apartments into the sitting room with the balcony. Looking out on the view, she wrapped the sash of her robe around her finger, then unwrapped it, repeating the motions over and over as the disquiet in her mind threatened to consume her.

What was she even meant to do in such solitary isolation? She had never been alone at all as a former queen of men, always surrounded by her ladies, servants, and endless courtiers. How strange that she should now be on the opposite end of the spectrum as a queen over elves, and left entirely alone and to her own devices for amusement.

Disgusted with her morose feelings of self-pity, she whirled and returned to the bedchamber, shedding her robe and crawling beneath the covers, determined to sleep. Burrowing into the thick pillow, the king’s scent surrounded her, only managing to put her into a further ill humor, and wonder why in God's name he had even married her if he only intended to ignore her the very next day.

She was entertaining notions of getting dressed and seeing how successful she might be at procuring a horse for a middle of the night ride-of-rebellion when she heard the door open. With eyes tightly closed, she did not stir from where she was curled into a ball on the furthest edge of the bed, not even when the bed moved and the Elvenking’s warm body pressed against the back of hers.

When he lightly stroked her hair, she stiffened involuntarily and he immediately stilled. Just managing to stifle a squeal seconds later when she was scooped up unceremoniously and deposited in the King’s lap, she stared straight forward and clenched her jaw.
"You are angry," he said in a voice sounding both musing and curious. "...with me. Why?"

She glared, increasingly irritated by his calm demeanor, finally turning her head to look at him. "I might wonder at why you wanted me for wife when you seem to have no desire to be with me at all," she said in a low tone, practically vibrating with upset.

He stared at her in apparent fascination, and she looked away again only to have him catch her chin and turn her face back to his. The way he was looking at her with such interest made her brows lower further.

"Why are you staring at me that way?" she asked, only finally registering the fact that he was naked, and the only thing separating them was her thin gown.

Thranduil's hand ghosted up the bare skin of her arm and his lips lifted in the slightest smile. "This is the first time I have ever beheld your wrath, and I confess I find the sight of your temper rather arresting."

Elizabeth gave a humorless bark of laughter. "I'm glad you are so entertained by my discontent, but I think I would rather sleep somewhere other than your bed. Since we clearly aren't about to observe anything from my culture that would resemble a honeymoon, and you elves seem to have no such thing, I'm sure you would prefer your privacy."

When she attempted to climb off his lap with the full intention of storming from the room, but instead found herself held fast by arms like bands of steel, it took all her will to keep from growling when she turned to him in outrage.

"Shhh, peace Bess, you are overwrought. Be still but a moment and breathe."

He began to hum and stroke gentle fingers through her hair, the sound of his singing so enchanting that she felt the anger and frustration slowly drain out of her. His beautiful baritone voice wove a spell that wrapped around her and coaxed the tension from her muscles until she melted against him with a sigh.

After several moments more of his hypnotic singing, he brushed his lips against her temple, his voice finally falling silent. Turning Elizabeth so he could stare into her eyes, she had the bizarre compulsion of wanting to weep, scream, and kiss him, all at once.

"What's wrong with me?" she asked, her brows knitting in concern. "I don't feel like myself at all."

"I should not have left you." His voice was quietly intense as he rested his forehead against hers. "It seems your reaction to our joining is far more profound than I expected. And now you also believe I do not desire to be with you."

"What else should I think?" She lifted a shoulder in a shrug. "No human husband would choose to go to work with his new wife waiting idly nearby, unless he did not care for her."

Hearing the hurt in her voice, he digested her words silently as he decided how to proceed. "What of this honeymoon tradition you mentioned?"

"It is a time of seclusion where the couple focuses only on each other, or even go away on a journey, so they may spend all their time together to learn one another."

He turned and laid her down alongside him, nuzzling against the softness of her cheek, while his hand pushed the fabric of her gown up. "You are greatly mistaken if you think I do not desperately desire you. I have never felt such a burning need for any other as I do for you, not in all my years."
But perhaps you will only believe me when I show you."

Beginning with her mouth, he teased and tempted her with his lips and tongue, nipping at her full bottom lip with his teeth while she eagerly kissed him back. Thranduil freed her of the gown, touching her with his fingertips from her outer thigh and slowly traveling from her waist to her breast, where he circled and grasped her nipple with delicate pressure until she gave a breathy moan.

Moving down from her throat, he licked a path across her collar bones to a nipple, where he lavished licks and kisses there until Elizabeth was arching her back and thrashing beneath him in her need.

"My lord, come to me now," she pleaded.

She reached for him, stroking the hard length of him that was pulsing with his nearly blinding desire for her, but he pulled away before she could distract him further and painted a wet path with his tongue across her navel and down to her center.

He spoke his response again her skin, his lips brushing against her like a butterfly's wings. "Not yet. Not until I have all of you on my tongue."

He paused to inhale her dewy fragrance deep into his lungs, a half-strangled sound of rapture in his throat before he pressed against the wet heat at her core that was like a siren song. Feeling near unraveled by his lust, he gripped her waist and pulled her more tightly against his mouth, devouring her completely.

The feel and taste of her against his tongue was all he knew for a time, seeking more of her shivers and cries of release until the sound of his name from her mouth took on a desperate edge that broke through his haze.

Moving back up her body, he paused again to suckle at each breast, his earlier gentleness replaced by far firmer touches of hand and tongue as need drove them both. Her hands were grasping any part of him she could reach, her fingers sending tingling shocks of hunger to his own throbbing sex, making his breath come faster and harsher.

Raising up, he took himself in hand, moving until just the tip of his arousal connected to her burning heat, slowly pushing further inside until they were both moaning with the duality of sensation of filling or being filled.

Words of praise in a mix of Sindarin and Quenya flowed from his mouth after he was fully sheathed inside of her, and she squeezed him even tighter with her strong, inner muscles. Tilting her hips, she encouraged him to move, which he did immediately, a slow climb something neither of them wanted, but quick, deep thrusts sending both of them to the summit within minutes.

Taking her lips again, he drank her cries as they peaked together, feeling the echo of her pleasure ripple through his mind and body alongside his own, shuddering with the intensity and completeness of it.

The bedchamber returned to mostly silence at their exertion's end. Angling to the side so his weight was not directly on her, their bodies remained joined while they floated in the warm aftermath. She sighed and stretched an arm above her head and looked at him with a languorous and content smile. Satisfied at seeing her replete from pleasure, he leaned closer to kiss her.

"You have a well-loved glow about you that is beautiful to behold."

Her smile grew as she reached for his hair, letting strands slip through her fingers, her expression sobering as she studied his face. "Thranduil," she asked hesitantly. "Do you love me?"
Reaching for her hand, he laced their fingers together. "Have you not discerned my feelings from my actions?"

"Do you always answer a question with another question?" she asked with a lifted brow.

He gave her a tender smile, dimple flashing. "I do love you, Elizabeth; and my love for you has many facets, like a perfectly cut gem."

Her gray-green eyes shone softly with feeling. "And I have loved you for so long, I could not say when it really began. It seems to have always been there in the background. Just...waiting for you to love me too."

He gave a lazy nod, mouth quirking up on one side. "Or perhaps you have been under my power since you first entered my woods, and it was my plan to have you all along."

"Well," she said, smiling mischievously, "I have no objection should that be the case, as I'm very happy for you to have me, and I cannot deny that I greatly enjoy being under you, and your power."

The skin around his eyes crinkled with amusement at the emphasis she placed on her words creating a separate, succinct message all its own: 'have me under you,' which he fully intended to do. Many, many times, and in a myriad of moods and positions.

"I think it's time you were under my power again," he said with a smirk. "Or, perhaps you would rather have me under yours now?"

She reached for him, sliding her leg up and around his waist. "I think it should be...both."

Elizabeth licked dry lips, attempting to slow her ragged breathing and calm the frantic pounding of her heart and turned to meet the gaze of the insatiable elf beside her.

"I think you have more than proven your point, whatever it may be."

"Have I been proving a point? I was not aware," he said, smoothing back his hair, which was looking nearly as disheveled as her own with how many times she had run her fingers through it over the past several hours.

"There must be some reason you have kept us closeted in here for the better part of a week now. Other than bathing and eating, you have scarcely let me out of your sight." She flopped to her side, laying her head on his outstretched arm and resting her hand on his chest. "I don't think there is any part of my body that is not intimately acquainted with every part of yours."

Even with his eyes closed and lying apparently relaxed on his back, his smile radiated a self-satisfied superiority. "I seem to recall you doubting my desire for you, but perhaps that is no longer the case." He opened his eyes and turned his intense blue-eyed regard to her. "Or perhaps I should carry on with further proving you were mistaken?"

When she felt his muscles tense for movement, she gasped and pressed her hand more firmly against his chest. "Be still! If you touch me again in the next hour, I'm going to die."
Chuckling, he relaxed again. "You have claimed that several times in the past many days, and yet you live. As to why we have spent the week this way, there are several reasons."

Moving her hand to lay on top of his steadily beating heart, she closed her eyes, having learned to snatch rest when she could. "I'm listening."

"The first I have already mentioned of curing your misconceptions, as well as giving you a honeymoon time, which coincided nicely with my own desires." He turned to look at her, and she opened her own eyes, feeling his movement, and was met with a surprisingly boyish looking grin.

"Hmm.....and?" she pressed, unable to stop her own smile.

He turned on his side to face her, his playful demeanor sobering. "But the main reason for our isolation and continued togetherness, is that you have been in the grip of angol-ûr, and as such we must be in almost constant contact until you are able to move beyond it." *(Sindarin: magic heat)*

"I'm in the grip of...angol-ûr? You make it sound like a sort of illness, but I haven't gotten ill since I was changed, so what exactly does it mean?"

Thranduil shook his head and rested his hand across her flat belly. "No, not an illness, per se. When elves bond, there is an equal effort put forth for the joining of the two fëa, but as you are human I exerted my own will to coax yours to follow, and I believe this may have created a temporary imbalance, with your erratic emotions and inability to be separated from me as the result."

Elizabeth pursed her lips. "So...I am the sunflower and you, my sun...and without your light I'll die?"

"That is a more poetic way to put it, and while essentially true, you would not die. At most, you would feel strong, irrational emotions, and perhaps progress into some form of physical pain, but separation would not be fatal. I...think."

Her eyes widened. "What do you mean 'you think'? You don't know?"

His expression tightened, and she saw in his eyes just how much he detested not knowing what to expect. "I know much, Elizabeth, and I can feel the bond is well on its way to correcting, but you are human and our joining is simply unprecedented. There are many things we must discover for ourselves."

"But," her brows furrowed in thought. "You said human and elf coupling was not unheard of, only rare, so why...?"

"Those I referred to were always between human males and female elves. To my knowledge, we are the first and only male elf and female human couple."

Her hand came up to cover her mouth as she tried to wrap her head around all the implications. "Are you saying we may have to spend all eternity mating like bunnies? If so, you better call someone else in to run the kingdom, as we're likely to get little else accomplished between shags."

He laughed, the sound filling the room and vibrating the bed, shaking his head at her in amusement while he stroked her face. "Ah, my Bess." He kissed her nose and raised his brows teasingly. "Would you find that such a terrible fate?"

She narrowed her eyes. "It might be nice to get out occasionally, perhaps go for a ride."

His lips curled into a naughty smile as she had never seen him wear before and she gaped at his next words.
"You have had many satisfying rides this past week, and you never ceased to praise me for them."

She giggled and reached for his face. "Did you actually just use sexual innuendo? I'm stunned! Where is my proper king?"

His kissed her slowly and thoroughly and stared into her eyes with a contented smile. "Your proper king is drunk on your charms, lady." Lips twisting in amusement, he continued. "In any case, you need not fear an eternity of ceaseless mating, as no sexual contact is required to counter the effects of *angol-ûr*, merely being together. Perhaps the holding or touching of hands if physical contact is needed for grounding."

Elizabeth bit the inside of her cheek, giving him a knowing smirk. "So, this frenzied week was really all you, wasn't it? So much for your legendary impassivity and iron control, Elvenking!"

He loomed over the top of her, giving her a mock severe frown. "Not all me, you were an eager and enthusiastic participant, and you further said you wished me to..." He leaned down and whispered in her ear, lingering to catch her earlobe in his teeth before pulling back and looking at her blush-stained cheeks with satisfaction.

"I never said that...did I?" she asked, looking abashed.

Quirking a brow, he lifted the mass of her dark waves splayed across the pillow to his nose and inhaled the floral scent. "You did. Should I take it as a challenge?"

Laughing nervously, she shook her head and scooted further up the bed and away from him. "No, really, that isn't necessary. You know that was said in the grip of...passion. For you quite drive me out of my wits with your vast skills, and I forgot I told you what that English phrase meant."

A soft tap on the chamber door had her looking toward it eagerly. "There's dinner! We should probably get dressed, and...eat?"

With a slight smile, Thranduil moved forward with the easy grace of a stalking lion, catching her ankle in his hand and slowly pulling her back down the bed toward him. "I do find I have a sudden, ravenous appetite, Bess." He kissed the side of her ankle and leveled an intense blue-eyed stare at her. "But dinner can wait."

~o~

Chapter End Notes

That brings me current with all I have pre-written and ready to go. I'm going to throw Haldir and Thranduil into a mud pit and let them wrestle it out to see which story gets updated first. Ahrhî, Elizabeth, and I are going to settle in with some wine and watch. Place your bets now! ;P
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Thranduil won. Haldir is brooding. *strokes Haldir* ...It's beautiful

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Two full weeks passed before the king and queen were seen much outside their residence, and when
country business resumed, it was no different than before, the Elvenking being the same
supercilious and demanding elf he had ever been. But those who knew him the longest and worked
with him the closest, such as Galion, Feren, and the other guards, immediately noticed some
differences in him.

He seemed just a little less quick to anger than before, with a touch less coldness in his address, and
when his new queen was with him, he even smiled more. The differences were subtle, but
nevertheless, they were present.

A grand feast was planned for the presentation of the new queen to Greenwood, and as the day drew
nearer, the halls were alive with the energy and excitement of anticipation. There was much curiosity
surrounding the whole affair, and in all quarters there was speculation as to why King Thranduil had
taken a new wife, and the whys and wherefores of her being human.

All of Elizabeth's new gowns had long since been delivered, and the King had chosen what he
wished for her to wear for the big event, right down to her shoes and jewelry. She might possibly
have been annoyed to be told what to wear if it were anyone else doing the telling, but she found
Thranduil's unrelenting interest in her appearance ridiculously endearing. And since he seemed to so
enjoy dressing her up like his own personal doll, and also took equal pleasure in undressing her, she
found she had no wish to gainsay him.

Elizabeth paced the stone floor of the small presence chamber, repeatedly glancing across the way to
where the crown she was meant to wear was resting on a velvet cushion, looking very daunting; the
smaller, more feminine match to the polished wood crown the king wore. Thranduil had probably
not realized the expression that crossed his face when Galion entered the room carrying it, but she
had seen the brief flash of sorrowful longing in his eyes and knew the ghost of Queen Calarien was
in the room with them.

It filled her with an agonized jealousy, which she knew was entirely unreasonable and beneath her,
as Thranduil had loved and lost his first wife long before she even existed. Still, emotions could not
always be reasoned with, and such was the case with hers.

Despite being Ferdinand's third marriage, she had never experienced any jealousy with regard to his
previous wives, as they were both arranged marriages more akin to business arrangements than love
matches.

When she had initially met Ferdinand at a grand ball after the loss of his second wife, they had
shared an instant connection and attraction as she never had with anyone before, and when she was
approached by his agent to begin marriage negotiations she took it as a sign. He had loved her and
she loved him too, but her feelings were so different, so much...less than what she felt for Thranduil,
it seemed almost a different emotion.

Regardless of her own feelings on the matter, she truly had no wish to see the king suffer, and sought for some other solution. Drawing a steadying breath, she faced her husband where he sat on his throne.

"I do not have to wear your wife's crown, surely? Wouldn't you prefer one of the circlets you had me wear before; would that not be sufficient?"

A slight pucker formed between Thranduil's brows, and without a word he stood and retrieved the crown and crossed the room, carrying it in both hands. Standing tall and imposing before her, he settled it carefully and securely on top of her head. Running the backs of his fingers along her left cheek, he gazed down on her in approval at the picture she presented.

"You are my wife, Elizabeth, my only wife, as I am your only husband," he said firmly, allowing his hand to drift lower to stroke the line of her collarbone beside the Somerset diamonds at her throat. "But I see what you are feeling." Dropping his hand, he looked back up to the crown she wore, a faraway hint of wistfulness in his eyes as she had never seen from him before. "This was first my mother's crown, and I suppose it is still her I most associate with it."

"Your mother?" she murmured in surprise, reaching up to finger the smoothly polished wooden crown that fit as though it had been made for her. Relief flooded her as the claws of the green-eyed monster of jealousy quickly withdrew, and she grasped his hand, immediately curious. "But what happened to her? Is she...no longer living?"

Rubbing a thumb against the back of her hand, he looked down at her. "She lives. After my father fell in battle, she took the ship to Valinor, and there she remains."

Before she could start musing on all she had read of the Undying Lands as the ultimate destination of the elves, he squeezed her hand to recapture her attention.

Lifting his chin and looking every inch the proud king he was, he drew a breath, the slightest smile softening his mouth.

"It is time."

Elirien tightened her fingers where she clutched her brother's arm, digging into his skin, and he grunted and looked at her in bemusement.

"I know you are excited, nethel (Sindarin: sister), but there is no need to strangle my arm."

She immediately loosened her hold, looking contrite. "Forgive me, hanar (brother), but I do not see how you remain so calm. It is our Elizabeth who soon comes, and she is queen! I think it all truly glorious."

Tirion glanced from Berthon to Mylion, all of them wearing a look of calm determination. "Yes, we shall do our best to ensure the evening is glorious," he murmured.
In typical feast style, the wine was flowing freely and tables were laden with edible dainties and succulent meats of both fish and game. But the addition of many-tiered cakes rising in high towers and slathered in white, pink or green sugar icing was a thing seldom seen, and speculated to be something from the queen's human traditions. Many elves danced, chatted, or drank the fine wine, but underlying all was a sense of cautious expectancy.

When the musicians fell silent and the King's steward entered and announced the King and Queen in a loud, clear voice, followed by Feren and more than a dozen of the senior guards, the hall fell silent and every eye was on the royal couple. The King held the Queen's hand high between them while they stood before the people. All bowed or curtsied, then he led her to matched thrones side by side on the dais where they were both seated.

The Elvenking was dressed in robes of the deepest midnight blue, subtly accented with silver thread on the collar and around the cuffs of his sleeves, and while the Queen was also dressed in like shades of blue and silver, that was where the similarities ended. Every inch of Elizabeth's gown was covered in bead-work and silver embroidery, and along the bodice were affixed an impressive array of white gems to match the ones around her neck and that hung from her ears. And while the King's appearance was no less grand or imposing than usual, the visual message was clear with his slightly more subdued robes; it was his intention for her to outshine him like the very stars, and dazzle her new subjects.

"Oh Elbereth," Elirien breathed, pressing nearer to her brother. "She is even more beautiful than I expected. But why do her eyes look so different, Tirion?"

He smiled fondly at his sister. There were times when he forgot just how truly young she was, and how many things she was still ignorant of. "That is the light of their bond you now see, and a powerful elf like our king would create the very strongest bond, easily visible it seems, even though she be human. Always before, Elizabeth has carried the weight of great sorrow in her gaze, which has now been replaced by joy, making the difference even more striking."

Elirien's hazel eyes filled with tears. "I am so very happy for her and King Thranduil. Do you not think he seems a bit less severe than ever he did before?"

Tirion tilted his head, studying the King and the way he looked at Elizabeth and smiled with his entire face and not just his mouth when she leaned closer and said something to him.

Looking at his sister, then across at Mylion and Berthon, he smirked. "In point of fact, I think our lord is looking far more relaxed and at ease than I have ever seen him."

Elirien looked at Mylion in bewilderment when he mumbled something about the elusive powers of the magical, red dress, but before she could ask what he meant, Tirion led her out onto the floor for an exuberant circle dance. At the end of the dance, Mylion approached the dais and went down on one knee before the royal couple.

"My lord, my lady, I have composed a song in honor of our new queen and would beg your indulgence in allowing me to perform it for you."

Elizabeth smiled with delight at Mylion and looked to the King, who glanced at her and nodded. "I'm sure the queen is very eager to hear your song. You may proceed."

Rising, Mylion went and retrieved a lute, and after strumming the strings softly in introduction of the beautiful melody, he began to sing.

"In a glorious garden green
Saw I sitting a comely queen
Among the flowers that fresh been
She gathered a flower and set between
The lily white rose me thought I saw
And ever she sang"

~o~

"In that garden be flowers with dew
The Sunshine King that she well knew
The fading boughs she did rue
And said 'the white rose is most true
this garden to rule beside you'
And ever she sang"

~o~

"His valiant deeds in glory who was proud and grand
So sat there a lily white comely queen
Gentle heart that beheld she did love anew
In his blossom a flower most true
And foreknoweth he the lily white, in the moonlight
Our glorious, lily white queen"

~o~

At the end of Mylion's song, Berthon stood and raised his goblet high, his voice carrying through the hall.

"To our King and Queen! May their reign be long and blessed."

All the elves not already on their feet stood and raised their glasses, some higher than others, but with the King's sharp gaze sweeping the room, there were no signs of defiance or disrespect. The response was loud, echoing in the space.

"The King and Queen!"
After the banquet had been eaten and more wine consumed, the King stood and led his new bride onto the dance floor amidst all the other couples, pulling her into his arms for her favorite dance of the waltz. Elizabeth smiled, feeling much more relaxed and happy to have the stressful initial presentation to the people behind her, and studied the King's stern expression.

"You know," she began, with a teasing smile. "I do not think it would pain you to actually look like you're enjoying dancing with me."

One side of his mouth lifted, flashing his dimple. "I was just musing that your friends have managed a surprisingly successful campaign under your banner this evening. Perhaps I have undervalued their usefulness, and you might have even worried less if you knew they were mounting a coup to sway opinions in your favor."

She refrained from rolling her eyes to hear her friends described as tools, but understood his intent was to compliment. "I am fortunate to have their love and devotion. I pray I be worthy of it."

He gave her an indulgent look, filled with his usual pride as they moved and whirled across the space. "You are," he said confidently. "As my wife and queen, all deference and devotion are your due."

She smiled, the expression just shy of a playful smirk. "I shall be always happy with your devotion alone, husband."

His hand across her back pressed into her with the slightest increase of pressure, and he quirked a dark, golden brow. "Wait until I have you shed of that gown, I will show you such devotion..."

Elizabeth's heart-rate increased, and she controlled her expression with effort. "Such a tease you are, Thranduil."

He smiled in earnest, and she recognized the fire in his eyes, although it was well banked and controlled. "You know better. It is a promise."

She laughed, suddenly tickled at what they were discussing in front of the entire kingdom with everyone unaware. "Oh, look at the time! I'm suddenly feeling excessively tired. Perhaps we should soon retire?"

The Elvenking chuckled, looking quite diverted. "Patience, Bess," he murmured. "I shall ensure it is always worth the wait."

Elirien opened the door, grinned and stepped out, closing it behind her. Feren took her hand and led her down the passage and into a shadowed alcove. Pulling her against him, his stern face relaxed into a soft smile before he gave his betrothed a chaste, gentle kiss on the lips.

"You looked beautiful tonight in your green gown," he said in a low whisper. "I wish I could have had the pleasure of dancing with you."

The elleth blushed and smiled, embarrassed by his praise. "But wasn't our queen exquisite? I could hardly tear my eyes from her, she looked so happy."
Feren sobered. "She looked well. The guards were ordered to be extra vigilant by the King. I do not know if it was his typical caution or he expected some manner of mischief."

"That is worrisome," Elirien said with a frown. "Do you truly think there is anyone as wishes Elizabeth ill?"

Feren reached for her hand and laced their fingers together. "Worry not. Of my own volition, I have kept a closer watch on our new queen since King Thranduil took her to wife. There are few among the guards who do not respect and genuinely like the lady. If there be any dissenters in the kingdom, they will likely be kept quiet by the prospect of King Thranduil's anger. Only the most foolhardy would ever attempt to cross him."

"I am glad you watch over her, Feren, as I know she could have no better protector."

He rested a hand against her cheek, his warm, brown eyes staring tenderly into her bright hazel gaze. "Your faith in me is heartening, meleth nin. (Sindarin: my love) But, let us walk under the stars now, and tell me about your day."

Legolas leaned against the wooden railing of the high overlook and stared out across the rushing waters of the Bruinen, lost in thought. In his hand he held the pink petals of a rose that had fallen to the ground in Lord Elrond's garden that he had picked up. They caught his eye as they were the exact shade he remembered Elizabeth's lips being, and just as velvety soft.

His time in Imladris had thus far been restful and peaceful, allowing much time for private thought and reflection. There was a strong magic to Lord Elrond's realm that his father's lacked, and consequently the elves around him reflected it. They were relaxed, happy and free, without the underlying wariness and sorrow that was common among his own people who fought an ongoing war with the evil on their doorstep.

Mirkwood.

He frowned. How he hated that name and despised the encroaching darkness that had caused Greenwood to become known by that ignominious appellation. But even so...not all was darkness at home.

A bright light amidst the dark, Elizabeth was to him. Her radiance called to him, drew him, and soothed his spirit no matter how wearying his toil. Stroking a finger across the rose petals, he lifted them and inhaled their perfume, and smiled. Just the mere thought of her had been enough to raise his spirits for some time.

Hearing the light footsteps of another elf, he curled his fingers around the petals and turned to meet the dark-haired ellon that approached him. Lindir was studious and pleasant, and Legolas had enjoyed spending some time in conversation with him since his arrival at Imladris. Nodding his head respectfully, Lindir smiled in greeting.

"My lord, there is a communication for you that arrived today," he said, extending a scroll.

Recognizing his father's seal, Legolas took it and thanked Lindir, waiting until the other elf departed.
before breaking it. His eyes scanned the message, then with furrowed brows he read it again, more slowly, and then again...until the words finally managed to sink in.

Going pale, he stared out at the rushing water before him, a stabbing pain in the vicinity of his heart. He was unaware of the passing of time while his mind was in a numb haze, only realizing how long he stood there when darkness fell around him.

Slowly, he crumpled the parchment as his hand curled into a fist. An anger, a furious rage unlike any he had ever known spread through his veins like the burning poison of a foul spider, his eyes turning into flinty chips of blue steel. Opening his other hand, he let the rose petals slip from his palm where the strong breeze caught them and carried them away.

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Lyrics adapted from Gloriana.

~0~

Chapter End Notes

The smutty Legolas/Elizabeth oneshot is now up, in case you need to feel better about our precious, cinnamon roll Legolas after this chapter, and want to see him get the girl.
You can think of these next couple of chapters as 'adventures in marriage'. Not even mystical, immortal beings get to escape all the madness of being newlyweds. ~Evil laugh~

Elizabeth stared up at a gold banner with an intricate elven design she had not had much of an opportunity to contemplate previously, finding it vaguely reminiscent of Celtic styling. She rested upon the smaller of the two thrones in her fine lavender gown in the midst of the lesser presence chamber, the very picture of calm and poise as she had meticulously learned in her past, distant life, and had now managed to slide back into, like a second skin. It had certainly not been a seamless transition, as she thought back to a mere quarter hour before…

She shifted restlessly next to her husband for two entire minutes before leaping to her feet to pace aimlessly, her gown swishing in soft susurrations behind her. Forcing herself to sit down again after another minute, she absently picked at a dry spot on her lower lip until Thranduil reached out and captured her hand in his own, frowning. He rubbed a thumb across her abused lip, wiping away the blood she hadn't even realized she had shed in her distraction.

"There is no need to savage your mouth, Bess. I cannot understand these sudden nervous inclinations you are having, when you never showed signs of such things before. Why not just order these guards to their positions and have done? Shall I do it for you?"

"No!" she gasped, pulling her hand from his. "I mean, no. Thank you. I do not prefer to order people about. I should like to handle this in my own way, if it's all the same to you, since they are meant to be my personal guards."

He tilted his head, studying her, then rose calmly. "Yes, perhaps that would be best. I shall leave you to it then, and join you for dinner later."

It was likely the abrupt manner into which she had been thrust into being queen, but it all left her feeling quite unbalanced, and she was struggling to find her feet in the new role. She was grateful beyond words that Thranduil had sensed her need to conduct the meeting with the elves on her own.

Coming out of her abstraction, she looked up and smiled in welcome as Renion and Thandir both entered the chamber and bowed, their calm expressions betraying little of their thoughts, although she thought they seemed pleased to see her again.

"I suppose you are both wondering why I asked for you to come and speak to me." She rested her hands lightly on the smoothly polished wood of her arm rests while both elves maintained a respectful silence.

"The King desires me to have guards who's primary duty shall be my protection, and while you are both perfectly free to refuse me, I can think of no others I would more readily entrust myself to than the two of you. I know you both to be fine, honorable elves, and having fought together, I just feel so very...comfortable with you." She paused and drew a breath.
"But, please, if you have no wish to serve in this capacity, I shall understand completely." She stood and clasped her hands together, looking from the brown eyes of Thandir to Renion's green gaze.

Surprisingly, Thandir, always the more quiet of the pair stepped forward first. Reaching for her hand, he went to one knee before her. "I am humbled by your request, and it would be my great honor to see to the guardianship and protection of one so noble as yourself, my queen."

Renion took her other hand and joined his comrade, also kneeling before her, but he pressed a small kiss to her hand before he looked up and smiled. "I, too, am deeply honored you would ask us to be your personal guardians, Your Majesty, and I gladly accept. Our land is blessed to have such a brave and worthy queen to rule beside King Thranduil."

"Please rise, both of you," Elizabeth said, quickly blinking away the moisture that had gathered in her eyes at their sincere words and ready acceptance to their new positions as Queen's Guards. She beamed at them, happy and relieved to have the business settled, and to her complete satisfaction.

"Excellent. Shall we start with a ride together in the morning? I've been rather confined of late, and feel a very great need for a dash through the woods."

Renion grinned. "With pleasure, my lady. If you do not already have a favored path, I can show you a fine one." Thandir smiled stoically next to his comrade, but it was apparent he was also looking forward to the excursion.

She tilted her head. "And how are the two of you at jumping horses? Or, perhaps we should just stick to racing, to start."

Chuckling, they murmured eager agreement and soon departed, leaving Elizabeth to float contentedly from task to task, with a wide smile for the rest of the evening.

Thranduil sat at his desk and finished reading the correspondence from Lord Elrond, pleased his son had settled in amongst the Imladris elves, and had even taken to spending time with Elrond's own sons. He had no doubt that the next time he saw Legolas, there would likely be some unpleasantness between them that would have to be dealt with, but there was little point to dwelling on it until the time came.

He looked up at Feren who was waiting patiently to give him the morning report. "Were the night watches quiet, Captain?"

"Mostly, Sire. Only the western patrol ran into any difficulties, and were forced to repel two spider attacks before dawn. The nests in that part of the woods have grown ever thicker with the apparent influx from Dol Guldur, although it has certainly lessened in recent days."

The Elvenking sat back in his seat, considering. "Be certain to see the spiders and all nests are kept clear of the northern woods. I won't have the queen threatened, and that is her favored area in which to spend time."

Feren clasped his hands behind his back. "Since the prince's departure, I have taken over the patrols to the north, and I shall personally ensure the queen's safety is never compromised."

"Are you confident in the competency of her new guards?" the King asked with shrewd eyes.

"I am," Feren said with a nod. "I tested them both myself and find no lack in their skills, and their devotion to Queen Elizabeth is unquestionable, based on the admiration they expressed in the queen's bravery and fierce defense of the helpless during the battle at Dale."
The King crossed his arms, his lips pursed as he mused. "I understand the guards were frequently entertained by her sparring sessions with Legolas. How do you rate her fighting skills?"

Somewhat uncomfortable at the unexpected question, Feren frowned. "For a woman, she is quite skilled, my lord. Her foreign style of fighting is unknown, which gives her the definite advantage of surprise. Against common orcs, the queen would have little trouble achieving victory, as was seen in Dale."

"And against a skilled elf," he murmured, "what chance of success would you give her?"

Brows furrowed, the Captain shook his head. "I suppose that would depend on the specific elf in question. May I ask if you think the queen in danger from any of our own people? I can assign more guards, or..."

Thranduil waved a hand and stood to his feet. "No, there is no specific threat, from the people or otherwise. I am merely considering various possibilities, both now and in the future, and the potential benefit of further training Elizabeth myself."

Brows climbing, Feren shifted, his head tilting curiously. "If I may be so bold, my lord, I think that could be nothing but a valuable service to the queen if you were to take it upon yourself to help her improve her skills. We live in uncertain times, and dark things are never far off."

The Elvenking stared at his captain steadily, none of his thoughts visible from his calm expression. He finally reached down for another scroll and broke the seal.

"Indeed. You may go, Feren, and keep me informed if you note any changes to the north."

"My lord."

Feren bowed and withdrew, moving quickly to his next assigned task.

Renion and Thandir gently urged their queen forward, each of them gingerly holding an arm as they had quickly discovered it to be the only way to keep her from wandering off and continuing to move with them. She stared around the caverns with a look of wonder, frequently slowing her steps and occasionally making some unintelligible remark in a language neither of them understood. As they traversed the ramp leading to the throne room, the king looked up, his eyes narrowing immediately.

"What is the meaning of this?" the Elvenking asked sharply, anger and disapproval emanating from him as he quickly came down the throne stairs. "Why do you lay hands on the queen?"

They both released her, and she immediately began walking forward slowly, approaching the throne. Renion cleared his throat.

"My lord, I beg pardon, but it was necessary. While we were out for her usual morning ride, the queen attempted to jump her horse as she delights in, but that stallion was not her typical mount, and he balked and threw her. She hit her head quite hard in the fall, and now..."

"What is this place?" Elizabeth asked in English. "That is a very strange looking throne. Are those... antlers? Where are we? Is this the colonies?"

Thandir picked up where Renion had left off. "And now she does not seem to know us and speaks only in that tongue we cannot understand. We thought to take her to the healers, but first came to you, Lord King, to see what is your will. Were it anyone other than the queen, with her extraordinary healing, I fear the injury would have been very grave indeed, for the sound when her head struck
was chilling."

Thranduil was watching her with a wary frown. He could see the dried blood in her hair, evidence of her fall, as well as the dirt on her riding dress. She turned and looked at him, examining him as though she had never seen him before, with a keen interest that soon turned to caution and suspicion.

"Who are you and why am I here? Does no one speak the Queen's English? Or...would it be the King's English?" She shook her head, shifting her weight. "Blast! Why can't I remember who rules now?"

Stepping forward slowly and carefully, as he would to a skittish animal, he spoke in a quiet, gentle tone, never more glad than at that moment that he had made it a point to quickly learn her language when they married.

"I speak English, Elizabeth, though that is not the tongue spoken in this realm, and I am king here. Do you not remember?"

Her brow furrowed and she lifted a hand, lightly brushing it along where the blood was thickly crusted to her scalp and hair. "I...no, that... isn't right." Her gaze swept the space again, growing more uncertain as she looked at Renion and Thandir.

"Edward," she said quietly. "Where is Edward? I must speak with him. Would you send for him, please?"

Finally close enough, the King reached out and gently wrapped his hand around one of hers, drawing her eyes up to his and continuing to speak softly. "Your brother is not here. He has never been to this kingdom. You have had a fall from your horse and injured yourself. You need to lie down and rest."

She tilted her head, her gaze fastened to his. "There is something familiar about your face, I think. What is your name?"

"I am Thranduil, your husband."

Inhaling a shocked breath, her eyes wandered from his face to his ears and she pulled her hand from his, suddenly frightened. "Husband? What's wrong with your ears? And theirs?" she asked, jerking her chin toward the guards.

Suppressing a sigh at her apparently drastic loss of memory and beginning to feel the first shadow of worry take hold, he pushed calm to her through their bond, where he could feel her panic and fear starting to overwhelm her.

"We are elves, Elizabeth, our ears are different in appearance to yours, but it's perfectly normal and nothing to fear."

"Elves?" She swallowed audibly. "Like...uh, woodland pixies from children's tales? But, no, you're much too tall for that."

"You need fear nothing here at all; I would protect you from all harm." Looking to the guards, he switched back to elvish to address them. "You did right to bring the queen directly to me, and you now have my leave to withdraw. I will send word if I have further need of either of you."

They bowed and departed, casting concerned glances at their queen on the way out. When the King turned to her again, she was holding her hands in front of her for inspection and shot him an angry, accusing glare.
"I think you lie! I am not married. See?" She tapped the third finger of her left hand in emphasis, empty of all jewelry. "I wear no wedding bands, which I feel certain I would if I were married. I see you wear rings, but none look to be wedding bands either, though...I know it is less common for husbands to wear bands."

She dropped her hands, the anger quickly fading to confusion, and she looked up at him. "But why would you lie about something like that? I don't..." Her clouded expression suddenly brightened and she glanced around. "If we are married, perhaps we have children? Surely if I saw him or her...or them? It could help me to recall."

He took both of her hands in his and looked at her gravely. "We have only been married for three months. We do not yet have children. In time, we shall."

Elizabeth glanced away, looking crushed. "Oh, I see. But you sound very certain of this. How can that be?"

"I am. You must trust my word, and the hope in your own heart."

Nodding, she bit her lip. "Yes, I feel I do trust you...somehow."

Smiling reassuringly, he wrapped her arm around his and led her down the west passage. "We will go to our rooms where you may rest more comfortably and speed your recovery."

"You are King Thranduil," she said, mulling over what he had said as they walked. "So, I suppose that makes me queen if we are married, and our realm is called...?"

"Greenwood." He opened the door to their large sitting room and led her to the settee, knowing it would make her uncomfortable if he took her to their bedchamber. Sitting beside her, he held her hand again, feeling through their bond that it gave her comfort. "Greenwood is one of several elven realms in Middle-earth."

She pinched her lip and her gaze strayed back to his ears. "Elves... I feel as though I am in some manner of fairy-tale dream of fae, and I only wait to awaken." Her eyes examined him again, from his ornate robes, to his long, silken golden hair, to his arresting features and distinctive ears. "Your appearance is certainly something I would expect to see conjured from a dream of an enchanted summer glade."

He smiled and lifted her hand to his lips for a kiss and met her eyes. "I assure you, none of this is a dream. Our lives together are entirely real."

"But can you tell me what part of Europe Greenwood is in? Are we near to France? I thought the trees I saw looked a bit like it."

He sighed quietly, deciding to keep his explanation somewhat vague. "We are not near France. You sailed across the sea and resided in a neighboring kingdom for two years before you came here." Pursing his lips, he decided it might be beneficial to reveal more. "You have lived in this realm for sixty years."

Her eyes widened in alarm and she looked down before seeking his eyes again. "Then...you know about...me? About how I don't...age?"

"I know of your immortality and healing, yes," he said with a slight smile. "Elves are as you are, we do not age, and the passage of time has little effect on us."

Peering at him and obviously still trying to puzzle something out, she tilted her head. "What
advantages did your kingdom gain from you wedding me, land or gold? Or a valuable alliance, perhaps? All of the above? You say Edward has never been here, but if not then who arranged our marriage and negotiated the terms?"

He shook his head, amusement and affection clear in his bright, blue eyes at her assumption of a mercenary, arranged marriage. "Would it surprise you to learn I married you for the love I bear you, and no other consideration? Although you were certainly qualified to be a queen in your own right, elves wed only for love."

She worried her bottom lip between her teeth and dropped her gaze. "You love me? What a strange thing that is to be told by a person I have no memory of." She chanced a furtive glance up at him. "And...do I also love you?"

He debated briefly with himself, whether the action he wished to take was the wise one or no, or whether it would cause her to shy away more, but ultimately decided to leave the choice in her hands and see what she would do. Thranduil lightly touched a finger to her chin, tilting it up and causing her to look at him and meet the tender challenge in his eyes.

"Kiss me, and you may discover the truth for yourself."

Her eyes widened at his suggestion and her heart started to beat more rapidly, causing the quick rise and fall of her chest. He watched patiently as thoughts and fears flashed across her face and in her gaze.

The Elvenking made no move until he saw clearly from the lift of her chin and determination in her eyes that she intended to accept his challenge, then he leaned nearer to meet her, pouring his love and desire for her through their bond even as his lips met hers in a soft, gentle kiss.

With a sudden sound of desperation, she reached for him, tangling her hands in his hair as she always did, and he pulled her tight against him, kissing her more passionately at her eager response, his lips wandering down her throat.

"I….I remember, now" she gasped in Sindarin, reaching for his face so she could look him in the eye. "I remember you...us...I remember everything...oh, love... thank God."

"Bess," he breathed with relief, kissing her again, "Mir nin. (my treasure) I knew you would not stay gone from me. But if you had, I would not have rested until I had won your love again."

She laughed. "That would have been easily accomplished. Even without my memories, all of me still wanted all of you, irresistible elf."

He scooped her up in his arms and stood, moving down the passage. Wrapping her arms around his shoulders, she leaned against his neck, inhaling the masculine scent of him and pressing her lips to his skin repeatedly in little kisses.

"Where are we going?"

"I am taking you to our bath to wash away the blood and dust from your fall, then I am going to make love to you for the rest of the day and well into the night."

She stopped kissing him and smiled at his use of the English terminology, quirking a brow. "Make love to me? I won't deny that I like the sound of that. But what about your schedule for today? Didn't you have meetings and a myriad of other important things to attend?"

He kicked open the door to their lavish private bath, lowering her to her feet and framing her face in
his hands, then pushed the door closed. The sound of the continuously running water was soothing, and offered complete privacy.

"Right now, there is nothing more important in this entire kingdom than my being with my queen and branding myself so deeply into every part of you that it will not be possible for you to ever again forget me."

She lifted her brows and widened her eyes guilelessly. "If that be the royal edict, Sire, I tremble and obey."

The determination in his eyes as he looked at her made her smile in anticipation. "Yes, you shall tremble, Elizabeth, and all your eager obedience will be generously rewarded."

He reached for the hooks on her riding dress and made quick work of opening them while she attacked the fastenings on his robes, then he leaned down, murmuring against her ear.

"Now, show me again how well you delight in pleasing your king." And he kissed her.

~o~
Like an unhappy ghost, Elizabeth floated from one unsatisfying activity to another, as she had been doing for nearly four weeks; haunting the halls, but not really fully present in her distraction. All the things she normally enjoyed had become dull and uninteresting in her current frame of mind.

Feeling the need for kindness, companionship and gaiety, she invited her close friends to a day of private revelry and relaxation, deep in the heart of the woods. Music, laughter and diverting conversation were all the things she knew to be the most likely to occupy her attention and relieve her from bleak thoughts, and she missed being with her friends.

Elirien clasped one of Elizabeth's hands between both of her own and smiled. "My queen, I am so happy to spend some time with you. I know you have many responsibilities and demands on your time, but I have missed you so."

Elizabeth wrapped her friend in a warm hug, blinking away a sudden welling of tears. "I am never too busy for friends, you know this," she said, her gaze encompassing Mylion, Berthon, Tirion, Elirien, and even her ever-present and faithful guards she had grown to love, Thandir and Renion. "And please, when we are in private, I am just Elizabeth to you all."

Mylion stepped forward with twinkling eyes. "Then, as a friend, I request you sing us a song. Perhaps something we have never heard before, for we have too long been deprived of the pleasure of your voice."

Her mouth twisted ruefully. "I'm afraid I have taken a bit of a melancholy bent of late. If you do not object to sad songs, I think I can easily sing something for you."

Berthon smiled from the tree he leaned against. "There are some, like Tirion, who prefer tears to laughter, for why else would he keep fending off that nice, young elleth Elizabeth sent to woo him?"

Elizabeth blinked in astonishment. "What is this about an elleth showing interest in Tirion? Surely you don't think I had anything to do with that? If he has an admirer, it is entirely due to his charms alone, I assure you."

Narrowing his eyes, Tirion measured his queen's sincerity. "You are in earnest? This is not one of your schemes to see me wed?"

"It is not," Elizabeth said, shaking her head. "I give you my word."

His smile had a tinge of the wicked to it when he rubbed his hands together. "That is the best news I have had in some time. I need not be concerned with offending you then, when I send her on her way."

Elirien rolled her eyes. "How cruel you are, Tirion. I believe Lhînis genuinely admires you."

Elizabeth frowned. "You do not mean Lhînis from the healing rooms?"

"Yes. The very same." Elirien shrugged. "She has begun to spend much of her free time in the library, always when Tirion is on duty, and she has endless questions which she asks only him. Even I can see she has designs on my brother."

Swallowing the last of the wine in her glass, Elizabeth turned to Tirion with a half smile and addressed him in English. "You have my leave to send her packing whenever you please, for she
dislikes me, and I dislike her in return and have no desire for you to be in her clutches. I would honestly rather see you remain free than be coupled with her."

Tirion laughed loudly, and smirked, answering her back in English. "Your carefully buried traces of cruelty are what I have always liked best about you, Elizabeth, for without that delicious dash of spice and mischief, I believe we would not have enjoyed such a close friendship as we have."

She raised her chin and narrowed her eyes, switching back to Silvan. "Ignoring the fact that you just called me cruel, I would ask you to let the poor elleth down easily. Perhaps try to leave her heart intact, if possible?"

Mylion had taken to strumming the strings of his lyre, softly singing the opening words to a song they all knew, which seemed to well reflect Elizabeth's mood, and she joined him, her gaze moving slowly up the trees and skyward as they sang together.

"Immen dúath caeda
(Shadow lies between us)
Sui tollech gwanna(thach) ommen
(As you came, so you shall leave from us)
Boe naid bain gwannathar
(All things must pass away)
Boe cuil ban firitha"
(All life is doomed to fade)
~o~
"With a sigh, you turn away
With a deepening heart,
No more words to say
You will find that the world has changed forever."
~o~
"I amar prestar aen"
(The world has changed)
~o~
"And the trees are now
Turning from green to gold
And the sun is now fading
I wish I could hold you closer."
"Time and tide will sweep all away"

"Boe naid bain gwannathar
(All things must pass away)
Boe cuil ban firitha"
(All life is doomed to fade)

Closing her eyes, Elizabeth began the next song, a new one as Mylion had requested, but one that more reflected her own inner turmoil and confusion. The words were in English, so none but Tirion could really understand the song, but the emotion and longing in her voice was evident, and Mylion soon picked up the melody to accompany her.

"I try to remember him the way he used to be
The one who's name I've carved on my heart
I was born inside the warmth of him, born inside a dream
Though I never dreamt we'd find ourselves apart..."

"And I cried all my tears
Drowned in these years
Died for the longing of you
For the burning within, for your kiss on my skin
For your heart, for the one I loved"

"I try to remember him, the way he used to love
The one who gave me everything
The rain and the sun
We danced around the chasm
On the edge we made love
And we never feared how far we might fall"

"Now I cried all my tears"
Drowned in these years
Died for the longing of you
For the burning within, for your kiss on my skin
For your heart, for the man I loved

"I'm always yours
I'm always yours
I'm always... yours...
I'm always yours
I'm always... yours..."

"The King and his guards draw near," Elirien said in an excited whisper. "Perhaps they will join us!"

Elizabeth turned and saw the King riding through the woods, his expressionless face turned forward in profile, and felt her heart sink ever deeper inside her chest. Turning back to the fading rays of sunlight, she wrapped her arms around her middle in an attempt to hold herself together, tilted her head up and closed her eyes. "The King will not approach," she murmured.

Elirien came and stood beside her and Elizabeth opened her eyes and looked at her puzzled face. "Why ever not? He has always enjoyed singing and revels in the woods."

"I do not know," the queen sighed. With furrowed brows, Elizabeth met Tirion's gaze, his golden eyes filled with equal parts sympathy and concern. With another small sigh, Elizabeth's voice dropped to the barest whisper as she turned to see the last of the King's riders disappear into the surrounding trees.

"I truly do not know."

With heavy footsteps, Elizabeth turned toward the royal rooms she shared with the King after returning from the stables, although they hadn't truly shared much of anything over the past month, despite her many attempts. Not only had he ceased to kiss or touch her in any way, he no longer came and held her while she slept, and they had barely said two words to each other for the past week. Any effort she made to be near him, he deftly avoided or subtly rebuffed, leaving her continually hurt and confused until she finally stopped trying. She paused in the passage, noting the lights burned under the door in the King's private office and he was likely ensconced within.

Sighing, she went and gathered her things and took a leisurely bath, further falling into despair when she thought of all the baths she and the King used to share before...whatever it was that had now come between them. After eating a solitary dinner and on the verge of crawling into bed to seek the escape sleep would grant, she paused in thought for a long moment. Why should she continue to passively accept this type of treatment and dismissal? Why had she even accepted it for as long as she had? Her chin lifting stubbornly, she tied on her robe and strode purposefully to the door of his
office and pushed it open, not bothering to knock.

Thranduil sat at his desk, attired in his rich, golden robes and staring at her with one perfectly raised brow which seemed to silently proclaim censure for her audacity. His eyes were expressionless and remote, and it seemed almost impossible to believe that eyes that could be so very warm and loving, now looked on her with such coldness.

He laced his fingers on top of his desk, resting them there. "Since you have disturbed me in so abrupt a manner without even the courtesy of knocking, shall I assume you are in dire need of something?"

She flinched when his voice matched his eyes for aloofness but did not allow the fluttering butterflies in her stomach to deter her and stiffened her spine, desperate for some kind of resolution to their baffling stalemate.

"Yes," she said in a wavering voice, her hands nervously crushing the soft fabric of her robe in her fists by her sides. "I am in dire need of you."

When she saw the slightest flicker of something in his eyes, she gathered her courage and walked behind his desk to kneel before him when he angled his chair to face her. Looking up, she rested her hands on his knees and sought his gaze imploringly.

"Won't you tell me what I've done to offend you? I cannot beg your forgiveness if I do not know what I must beg forgiveness for."

He pursed his lips and looked into her eyes intently. "Do you claim you truly do not know?"

"Tell me," she pleaded earnestly. "I would not be so obtuse as to ask if I already knew."

His expression was grave as he read hers, and he finally drew a breath to speak. "You rode out with no guards after I had specifically warned you never to do such a thing. Has this not been a deliberate defiance on your part and an attempt to manipulate me into some desired reaction?"

She sat back on her heels, shaking her head in astonishment and disquiet, wracking her brain to think of when she had ever disobeyed his word. "I have never once ridden beyond the inhabited part of the woods or rows of telain where the Silvans dwell unless there were guards with me, in deference to your wishes."

He tilted his head, the frost in his eyes melting slightly. "You did not go further than the dwellings? You speak truth?"

"I swear it," she said emphatically, much more disturbed by his other assumption. "And you think I would attempt to manipulate you like some tempestuous child?" Her brows drew together, grieved that he seemed to know her so little. "For the love of God, what kind of fool would do that?"

He looked away with clenched jaw and she reached out and gripped one of his hands until he looked down at her again. "Thranduil, why should you think I would attempt to manipulate you?"

He frowned but held her gaze, although he seemed slightly hesitant, which was a very rare expression on the King's face. "Calarien... she frequently used such tactics to gain my notice when she imagined herself neglected..."

"What?!" she exploded, standing to her feet and releasing his hand. She stared at him in wide-eyed incredulity and dismay. "You have cruelly punished me this past month because you falsely believe my motivations match those of your first wife? I am not Calarien," she shouted, hurt and anger warring for dominance within her.
Standing to his full height, he looked down at her, his mouth tightening with displeasure as his own eyes filled with fury. "Nor am I Ferdinand," he hissed. "Were you not singing of your longing for your first husband in the woods earlier today? 'For the man I loved, I'm always yours,'" he repeated in English. "What am I to think of that?" he asked sharply.

She gazed at him with furrowed brows as her anger quickly drained out of her at his accusation. "Why would you believe that of me?" Her stomach twisted with pained emotions of sorrow and misery.

"I was singing of my longing for you, Thranduil, and no one else. What I felt for Ferdinand was the palest shadow of the love I bear for you, and I neither think of him nor do I long for him in any way. You are my whole world."

Elizabeth searched his eyes, her own full of the truth of her feelings and the depth of her suffering. "These weeks have been an agony for me. I can no longer endure your silent disapproval and calculated neglect."

She turned away, the tears she had been fighting finally wending their way down her cheeks in twin wet paths. "It's like a slow, agonizing death from the very worst kind of torture, especially when you erect an impenetrable wall where I cannot even feel you through our bond."

Elizabeth felt his soft touch on her hair and drew a shuddering breath, trying to finish what she had to say before she lost her composure completely. "In future, if I do something to anger you, please tell me so I may have the chance to explain or make it right. I have never desired to defy you, indeed it has only ever been my wish to please you. I had hoped you would already know this, but apparently not."

He pulled her into his arms and she wrapped her own arms around his waist, squeezing as tightly as she could in her desperation, and burying her face against his chest. They stood that way silently for several minutes, his fingers stroking ceaselessly and gently through her hair. The tightness in her chest eased while she relaxed against him, feeling the comforting warmth of his embrace.

"I regret I have wronged you with my incorrect assumptions and given you pain, Elizabeth," he said quietly, finally burying his hands in her hair and resting his chin on top of her head. "Will you forgive me?"

The words hung silently between them for several breaths, then she grinned into the silken fabric of his robes. "Of course," she said immediately, making him laugh softly and kiss the crown of her head, the last of the tension between them finally dissipating.

He cupped her face in his hands, his thumbs caressing her cheeks. "My tender-hearted lady. You never have been one to hold a grudge, have you?"

She smiled up at him, elated that she could once again feel his emotions through the bond, since he had opened himself up to her fully once more. It was like being able to see and hear him clearly again, instead of perceiving him through a thick, distorting veil.

"The only thing I ever want to hold against you is myself, husband. Preferably naked. I think I may be starving for you, and..."

He kissed her before she could finish her thought, the feel of his mouth against hers like the welcome and familiar sensation of coming home again. His lips were quick kindling, setting a fire inside of her to blaze immediately.
"You are not the only one who is overcome with desire; I, too, starve for your touch," he breathed against her cheek.

His hands went to the tie at her waist, tugging it free and then brushing the silk fabric from her shoulders, quickly liberating her of both her robe and gown while she did her best to unhook his tunic. Finally, she decided to concentrate just on freeing him from his velvet trousers after she was able to reach most of his bare chest with her lips.

He swept aside the papers from the middle of his desk and lifted her there, pushing her flat and immediately following her down, biting into the side of her neck and laving the skin there when he entered her, a feral edge and roughness to their coupling that had never been there previously. And when he reached a hand down moments later and stroked her while he moved inside of her, his deep voice against her ear was the final encouragement she needed to surrender to him completely.

"Do not stifle the sounds of your pleasure, Bess, I want to hear when I bring you to bliss."

Arching her back, she clutched at his strong shoulders and gave voice to her peak as he wished her to, while she was swept away into the temporary madness of their shared ecstasy, glorying in the sound of his deep, pleasured groan and bruising grip on her.

Thranduil leaned on his forearms, breathing heavily against her neck and lifted his head to meet her eyes with heated approval in his bright gaze.

"Bed?"

She nodded, still somewhat breathless. "Yes, bed. This desk is rather hard."

He smirked, and she tilted her head, waiting briefly to see if he would say it. "Not taking the bait this time, hmm?"

He shifted his hips so there could be no doubt in her mind as to what else was equally firm once more. "There is no need to say aloud what you are already thinking."

Much later, they reclined among a small mountain of cushions in the center of their large bed, Elizabeth lying across the King's chest, examining some of the scratches she had unintentionally left on his golden skin; a testament to their recent activities, and her own desperate repayment from having been previously denied his touch.

"I can't believe we allowed this misunderstanding to deprive us of this for an entire month. That is one-sixth of our married life. Appalling." She glanced up at him and kissed his chest, sighing, wondering how much longer it might have carried on with an immortal elf king who had the patience of Job. Years?

"You are supposed to lend me your brilliant council from the great age and wisdom you possess, Elvenking, and prevent such a foolish outcome."

He gave her a lazy smile, his blue eyes full of bemused irony. "You know even the very wise may become as fools in love." He threaded his fingers into her dark waves, his expression growing contemplative. "One thing is clear: there are only meant to be two people in this marriage and there is no space for any others. We must endeavor to leave our previous relationships in the past, where they belong. I shall not repeat the mistake of consulting my memories of being married before, and we will learn our way forward together, as Elizabeth and Thranduil."

She smoothed a thumb across one of his thick brows and smiled. "I agree, and further, you will never again assume I long for Ferdinand or anyone who is not you, because it simply isn't true and never
He licked across his bottom lip, his head tilted. "I suppose I was... jealous?" He gave a small nod, as though suddenly decided. "Yes, as unfamiliar as that particular feeling is for me, I recognize that is exactly what it was."

Elizabeth grinned and bit her lip. "Though I would never attempt to provoke such a reaction, may I confess how arousing the thought of your jealousy is to me?"

Thranduil gave her a slow, sensual smile. "You may. Perhaps the sole, unforeseen benefit of such an irrational emotion."

"I'm just glad I am not the only one to have experienced it. I am familiar with the possessive side of your nature, but this is a part of you I had not previously seen."

He traced her mouth slowly. "You do enjoy the possessive part of me, I have long felt it. It pleases me."

She smiled impishly. "I love all of you, glorious elf. But as to that, you like to possess and I very much enjoy being possessed by you. Perhaps we are complementary in our ways, hard and soft, summer and winter, masculine and feminine... we balance each other out and create a perfect whole."

He pursed his lips thoughtfully. "And are you fulfilled by what we have in one another? Do you truly find us a perfect whole, just us two?" Though the questions were asked casually, she could feel the keen interest he had in her answer, and carefully considered her response before speaking.

She turned and leaned on her elbow so she could look at him more easily. "You know I have always longed for children, Thranduil, and I remember you saying we would have children at some later time..." He listened with patient interest in his blue eyes but made no response, so she continued.

"But just assuming that never came to pass, and our family never grew beyond the two of us and Legolas..." At her mention of Legolas, he smiled, though there was a faint shadow of concern in the depths of his eyes. "Yes... I mean... I would obviously be a little sad to have never experienced having a child of my own, but I would be content in our love."

She stroked his face, her eyes wholly grey in the dim light and full of adoration and wonder. "There are so many who are never blessed to know such love as we have, and I will never be anything but thankful that against all odds, we somehow came together. I think we were destined to be, and I thank the Almighty for it every day."

He smiled and stroked her face, his eyes full of a wealth of feeling, and the love that poured over her through their bond nearly made her gasp aloud from the overpowering and all-encompassing rush.

"You are my moon and stars," he said simply. "My shining light of hope for all the ages that lie ahead of us, my Elizabeth, mîr nin. (my treasure)"

Lyrics from Houses of Healing by Howard Shore

Lyrics from For The Man I Loved by Karliene
Chapter 25

The great hall was filled with elves, flowers in every shade, and greenery scattered throughout in joyous celebration of the return of spring once more. A hushed silence was over the gathering as the ellon and elleth all eyes were on finished speaking earnest words of promise to each other, and exchanged gold bands which shone brightly when they clasped hands as they shared their first kiss as husband and wife.

Eager applause thundered loudly and Elizabeth reached up to brush away a happy tear as she leaned closer to the King. "To finally see elves kiss, at last. Now, if you had done things this way, I would have known when we were marrying."

His piercing blue eyes swept the room and her. "I but skipped the unnecessary preliminaries and actually wed you. This is merely ceremony," Thranduil murmured. "You know they are not truly married until they consummate."

She quirked a brow and looked at her husband. "You always have to have everything your own way, don't you?"

He leveled an amused look at her before returning his gaze to Feren and Elirien. "That is a king's prerogative. You may pretend exasperation all you like, but I know very well you enjoy the outcome when I have things my way."

She looked down and ran a finger over the exquisite emerald, diamond and mithril wedding band and solitaire set that was prominently displayed on the ring finger of her left hand, before glancing to the matching band the King wore on his own ring finger, in deference to her traditions.

After she had hit her head and lost her memory, declaring she wasn't married because she wore no bands, he had taken it upon himself to discover her ring preferences, then had their rings made in secret and presented them to her on the evening of their first anniversary, several months before.

Elizabeth smiled softly while she recalled that night, before catching his overly smug smirk. She gave him a narrow-eyed glare as the enthusiastic toasts to the married couple began.

"I do hope you don't expect me to admit that aloud, husband. I'm certain your ego needs no further stroking."

Feren stood and lifted his glass toward Thranduil and Elizabeth, interrupting their quiet conversation and surprising her with his openness and easy words, with not a sign of his usual sternness or reserve.

"A toast to our wise queen, who is entirely responsible for this current happiness, as she made the match between Elirien and myself." He smiled down at his bride seated beside him, and she beamed up at him, looking beautiful in her pale blue wedding gown.

"Without her gently encouraging me toward my need for a wife, I fear I might have remained in my miserable solitude indefinitely."

While the guests laughed and drank the toast, the king lifted his glass toward Feren. "Well said, Captain. I believe the queen possesses quite a remarkable gift for revealing an elf's need for a wife, which not even I was immune to," he quipped with a wry look. He turned a warning smile to where Mylion, Berthon and Tirion sat clustered together. "Bachelors beware," he murmured, and took a sip of his wine.
Elizabeth laughed quietly at her friend's concerned looks in her direction when Feren spoke up again with a hopeful smile. "My lady, will you further honor us with a song from your land?"

Smiling, she stood to her feet. "Of course, Feren, it would be my pleasure. Mylion, if you will assist me?"

Mylion rose and followed her to where several musicians were seated with their instruments, waiting to play for the dancing to come, and borrowed a _sermalirë_, (Quenya: string-song) a stringed instrument played with a bow, which Elizabeth considered much like the elven equivalent to a violin. She murmured quietly to Mylion, who nodded before he began to play a beautiful, lilting melody. Smiling, the queen looked at Feren and Elirien and started to sing.

"The stars, forever unchanging,
they guide us on paths unseen
and you were written in my story,
destined to collide with me"

~o~

She turned her gaze briefly to the King, the words of her song really intended much more for him than for the newlyweds. From the intent expression in his eyes, he well knew she sang it to him.

~o~

"They say you stole me in moonlight,
but Love, I was already yours,
for we were written in the starlight,
as the wolf belongs to the moon

~o~

"Like the rain meets the river,
like the trees meet the sky,
we were born to be together,
you and I

~o~

"Like the fish need the water,
like the birds need the sky,
we were made to need each other,
you and I

~o~
"The stars, forever unchanging,
    they sent your love to me
but cruel, how late in my story,
you came to collide with me
    ~°~
"Like the rain loves the thunder,
    like the waves kiss the sky,
we were born to love each other,
you and I
    ~°~
"Like the fire consumes the timber,
    like the flames kiss the sky,
we were made to be together,
you and I
    ~°~
"The stars, forever unchanging,
    they guide us on paths unseen
and you were written in my story,
destined to collide with me
destined to collide with me"
    ~°~

At her song's end, she went and hugged and kissed Elirien and squeezed Feren's hand warmly before returning to sit beside the King. When everyone's attention was on Feren and Elirien's parents, who were speaking their blessings over the union, Thranduil reached for Elizabeth's hand and lifted it for a kiss, the look in his blue eyes sending a flush to her cheeks.

_Very beautiful. You have never sung that one for me before_, he whispered in her mind.

She smiled and answered him the same way.

_No, I was saving it for today._

He turned his gaze back to the proceedings, a slight smile on his lips.

_Destined to collide… Quite fitting, I like it._
A warm glow suffused her as she turned her gray-green gaze to him and twirled her rings on her finger.

*I hoped you would, love.*

Elizabeth spun and slashed her sword forward, then repeated the same move in the quick blur of speed of her kata and held her blade poised at the end of the movement. Suppressing a grin when she felt a sudden surge of awareness through the bond, she turned and was unsurprised to see the Elvenking standing on the edge of the training yard, his arms crossed as he watched her. Surprisingly, he wore none of his long, trailing robes over his tunic, boots and trousers, and actually seemed to be attired for physical activity with his swords hanging at his waist. Quite a change.

Flicking her blade sharply to the side in a form of chiburui, she sheathed it and held his gaze. Strolling casually over to him, she smiled pleasantly at the guards training nearby and looked up at Thranduil. He had been very busy traveling the forest and surveying his borders with his guards over the preceding weeks, and they had not been able to spend much time together as a result. Elizabeth was very happy to see him.

"Good morning, lord husband. Have you come to give me a demonstration on how to fight with two swords?"

He pursed his lips thoughtfully. "A good morning to you, lady wife. I suppose I can if you wish me to, but I had more thought you might like a training partner to practice your skills with."

Her brows rose and she grinned. Since Legolas' departure and her becoming queen, the guards were even more reluctant to train with her than before, and she didn't press any of them, certain they were likely more eager to avoid their king's wrath should she be injured than for any other reason. She really had missed having someone to spar with though…

"So, what exactly are you offering? Just a companion to fight with, or to become my sensei?"

He tilted his head, brows furrowed. "I do not know that word. It is not English, is it?"

She shook her head. "No, it's Japanese, as my sword style is. It is a term used to refer to a revered teacher, often a master of their art. Tanaka Gensai was the name of the samurai warrior who taught me, and I called him Master, or Gensai-sensei, as he preferred." Elizabeth laughed in memory. "He was a very difficult, unpleasant man to most people, and he hated living in England, but somehow I managed to persuade him to teach me."

She squinted up at Thranduil in the bright sunlight that shone across the training yard, realizing she had never told him much about her martial training, and he had never discussed with her how he had learned to be such an exceptional warrior. Although, she assumed the thousands of years he had lived and honed his skills in countless battles may have had something to do with it.

"You see, the Samurai were essentially Japanese military nobility, and as I was of the highest English nobility, after speaking to me and judging my character, he respected me enough to teach me. Honor was everything to a Samurai, and they would take their own lives without hesitation before accepting dishonor in any way."

He crossed his arms and frowned, looking across the way to where two of the junior guards dueled with long-swords. "That sounds rather extreme, particularly for short-lived mortals."

She shrugged, as she had never fully been able to understand all the nuances of Samurai code and honor, despite Gensai-sensei trying to explain it to her more than once. "Different lands, different
times. I think perhaps to fully understand their code of honor, one would have to be born into it, and part of the people it grew from. But you still haven't answered my question."

He returned his focused regard to her, switching to English for privacy, as he sometimes liked to do when they conversed near others.

"Would you like me to be your master, Elizabeth?"

She smirked as his English words brought immediate, unbidden images of Thranduil clad all in tight, black leather with a whip in his hand, and shook her head to stifle the laugh that rose before it could break free. Elizabeth pressed her lips together to regain her composure, attempting to ignore the strange look he gave her.

"Have I ever said no to anything you ever desired to teach me? If you wish me to learn the sword from you, I will endeavor to be an attentive student… Master." She gave him a flirtatious smile, unable to resist teasing him just a little, even if he didn't fully understand the reference.

His eyes probed hers, although he kept a tight reign on his expression. "I perceive you are no longer referring to swords wielded in battle."

"Your perceptions are correct. Did I ever tell you that the English word for a woman's genitals is the actual word in Latin for sheathe?" she asked conversationally. "Which implies that a female's sexuality cannot truly be defined apart from a male's, as a scabbard or sheathe is rather useless without a sword, isn't it?" She crossed her own arms, mirroring his position, and smiled. "I've always found languages a fascinating reflection of the cultures that produce them."

Thranduil's lips parted as he inhaled, looking conflicted. "I'm uncertain as to how I should proceed in the face of your current playfulness. We could remain here and begin lessons that would likely benefit you in any future warfare, or we could retreat to our rooms to engage in activities that would surely be an immediate benefit to us both."

She laughed softly. "Are you saying you don't think it possible to have your cake and eat it too?"

There was a brief pause as he seemed to be puzzling over her words. "There is clearly some underlying meaning from your land there that you would need to explain, but taken at face value and assuming you are the cake, yes, I am certain I can both have you and devour you, and I would thoroughly enjoy both endeavors."

Shifting her weight from one foot to the other, Elizabeth tried to ignore the sudden rush of heat she experienced at his words. "Merciful God," she whispered. "That proverb never had sensual meaning for me before, but it certainly does now." She looked away and drew a deep breath, missing his look of smug amusement.

"What that is meant to imply is that you can't have something both ways, or the best of both worlds." She finally looked at him again with her libido firmly under her control once more. "But in this instance, I think we can. Let us spar now, and you can show me your superior skills and put me on my back, and then later you can put me on my back in a more pleasurable way with other exceptional skills. After all, you are nothing if not patient. I know you can wait."

He smirked. "You have a rather high opinion of my patience. I am not always content to be thus, wife, particularly when you play the temptress as you are currently intent on. It has been many days since I last tasted your delights and you have awakened my hunger for them now."

She stepped back and raised her chin, sending him a challenging look. "If you want me, then come
best me into submission first." She licked across her bottom lip to moisten it, drawing his eyes there. "Otherwise, no cake for you." Elizabeth walked toward the far side of the sparring area, the fluid sway of her hips a far more effective taunt and lure than all of her words.

With a small smile, he quickly crossed the space, then drew one of his swords and held it loosely down next to his leg, waiting for her to make the first move.

Elizabeth paced back and forth, trying to size him up in a way she never had before. "How exactly do you want to do this?" she inquired in Sindarin.

His eyes narrowed and he answered her back in English. "With you on top, of course. You're well aware of my preferences."

She shook her head, chuckling. "If you're not going to take me seriously and just play like a cat with a mouse, we might as well stop now."

He nodded, his smile fading. "Try to break through my guard if you can."

Drawing her sword and holding it out in front of her, Elizabeth's eyes grew serious as she contemplated how someone as large as her husband could move with such speed and grace, and how she might possibly manage to get through his guard. It was likely impossible, which meant some kind of a Plan B would be necessary.

"You're thinking about it too much," he murmured. "Just move. Go with your instincts and allow your body to lead you."

"That's a nice idea, in theory." She moved forward suddenly and found her sword was immediately blocked by his in a casual movement of his wrist he could likely perform in his sleep. Stepping back again, she lowered her blade and sighed. "Even if you weren't the elven god of swords, you already know the way I move; rather intimately, in fact. I really haven't a hope."

Thranduil rested the back of his sword against his shoulder. "Then use surprise or some equally unexpected tactic. If you believe there is no hope of victory against me, then you have already lost before you have begun. A strong will is the path to defeating any foe, no matter how powerful."

**Right, Plan B,** she thought fleetingly.

She gave a self-deprecating smile that she thought someone facing the gallows might wear, and allowed all her uncertainty and insecurity to leak through their open bond in what she hoped was a natural feeling, then set to work, attacking him as best she could.

It was after some time, through seemingly relentless effort on her part until she felt the slight approval and amusement from Thranduil that she hoped signaled an opening. Rushing him in a desperate display, he gave ground as she knew he would in an attempt to keep from hurting her, so she threw herself recklessly against his sword, crying out in pain as the sharp blade sliced into her arm and upper torso. Dropping her sword, she whirled around, crouching down and curling in on herself in a protective move.

"Elizabeth?"

She called on all her acting skills and whimpered in a pitiful, choked voice, remembering the pain of her very worst wounds she had ever sustained and pushed it into the bond. Cradling her arm she heard him fling his sword away angrily and step closer.

*Three….two….one…*
Launching herself backwards, she caught his legs and pulled, throwing her weight against the backs of his knees and found herself rolling across the ground and trying to avoid the pinning hold of his arms as they grappled.

In split second desperation, she remembered an additional, secret weapon, and reached out to his only ticklish spot under his left arm while simultaneously pulling her dagger from her boot. When his arm jerked in reaction, she ended sprawled on top of him while straddling his chest with her dagger held just shy of resting against his throat.

Shoving wayward strands of her hair back from her eyes, she grinned down into the intensity of his bright gaze and tilted her head. "Since you wanted me on top, doesn't this mean we both win?"

He stared at her for a long moment, the gleam of approval in his eyes growing to full amusement, until he rested his head back against the ground and laughed, making her smile widen before she realized their positions with all the eyes on them and stood hastily.

He got to his feet and reached a hand out to where his sword had cut her, and her clothing was freshly stained with blood and gave her a long, cryptic look.

"Since I did not specify that your surprise tactics should not include bodily injury, I suppose I cannot berate you for it, as much as I wish to." He drew a breath, looking at her thoughtfully. "You achieved victory, regardless of how it was accomplished, and your deceptions to lure me in through the bond were a masterful stroke, even using my own emotional response against me. Such quick thinking in the midst of battle and an intuitive ability to discover your foe's weaknesses can be quite valuable."

Elizabeth bent to pick up her sword, smiling at his praise and amused to see how many other elves watched them while attempting to appear otherwise. She stepped close to him.

"I believe we have given everyone quite a show. I suppose it isn't every day they get to see their king and queen rolling about in the dirt with one another." She laughed. "Or me sitting on top of you."

He turned his gaze across the training grounds, one side of his mouth lifting in a slight smirk. "Hmm, perhaps it will inspire even greater devotion to you, after witnessing the manner in which you conquered me."


Thranduil retrieved his sword then returned to stand beside her. "You take a negative view. It requires cleverness and cunning to deceive me, and the fact that you did it successfully further proves you my equal and a worthy queen to rule beside me."

Sheathing her sword, she fought to control her smile. "If you keep praising me, you will turn me into a vain, conceited queen."

He laughed softly. "That will never happen, as it is against your very nature. You have never seen nor acknowledged even half of your many gifts, Elizabeth."

Her breath quickened when she looked up and met his gaze, her heart reflected in her eyes. "How can I see anything but you? The sight of your glory has ever blinded me to all else."

He sheathed his sword with a sharp click, the bond flaring markedly between them. "Go," he murmured, "before I am tempted to carry you off myself. No more lessons in warfare today. I shall meet you shortly."
As she moved away, he refrained from following her with his eyes, instead watching the other curious gazes that did. There were definitely more than a few looks of admiration and respect. He would never let her know that he had slowed his responses just enough to allow her victory at the very end of their tussle. The sight of her smile and the spike in her confidence had been well worth the calculated risk. In truth, he was wholly impressed at just how very near she had come to completely defeating him. Any who dared to underestimate her would fall victim to their own folly.

*Master.*

There was something curious about her reaction when he spoke the English word. He was looking forward to finding out exactly why.

With a final glance across the training yards, the Elvenking departed in pursuit of his queen.

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**Lyrics to Destined by Karliene**
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

This is a double length chapter, and in fact, it's the longest chapter in the whole story, so far. The time skip here is eight years after Thranduil and Elizabeth's marriage, or the events of BOTFA. I hope you like it, and in the next chapter comes the return of our beloved Legolas.

Elizabeth walked back from the gardens, in a good mood and smiling from the pleasant time she had spent with Elirien, who was due to give birth to her first child any day. Her desire to see the kingdom filled with young had gotten off to a bright start, with more than twenty-five births since the battle in Dale, and hopefully many more to come.

An unusually large cluster of guards were gathered outside the throne room, and she quickly adjusted her course to go and speak with them instead of going to her sitting room as intended.

“Galedir, what is the cause for so many of you here?” She waited until all the guards bowed and then looked to the captain for explanation.

“My queen,” he said respectfully, “there was a skirmish this morning with upwards of thirty orcs in the nearby woods. King Thranduil now questions one of the creatures we took alive.”

Head tilted, she nodded. “Thank you.” He inclined his head and she swept past them all, traversing the path leading up until she looked directly into her husband’s eyes, who was obviously far from pleased.

His voice was soft and coaxing. “The sooner you tell us what you know, the sooner this will all be over.”

With arms crossed over his chest, he stood to one side of the orc, with Feren holding the creature still by the shoulders. Hands bound tightly behind its back, the thing was glaring defiantly forward, still refusing to speak.
No luck? she mouthed, taking his slight frown as a no.

Stopping beside the king, she bit her lip as a sudden idea struck her. May I try? she asked him through mind touch.

He glanced down at her. If you like, but do not expect much. They are very dull and stubborn creatures.

Nodding, she took a breath, letting her face quickly fall into cold, harsh lines and stepped around the Elvenking to face the orc. He looked up immediately, his small, yellow eyes narrowing in his dark face. He took a deep breath, like a blood hound scenting prey, his lips lifting into a barbarous smile.

“A human woman,” he began in a guttural purr, his tone betraying surprise, “among elves. And just who are you?”

Eyes going even colder, she smiled, putting as much cruelty and evil into the expression as she could muster. She stepped forward and leaned down until she could smell the orc’s fetid stench, noting how his pupils dilated at her proximity.

“I am the sole woman who has won a place among elves, by the vast and terrifying power that courses through my veins. That is all you need know.” She laughed inwardly when she felt Thranduil’s amusement at her words.

“I can be your darkest nightmare, orc, or your dearest wish; that choice I leave to you to make.” Leaning back a bit, she pretended to examine him with great interest. “How would you like to please me, by telling me what you know?”

He scoffed. “Why should I do anything to please you, wench? I don’t serve your weak and pitiful kind.”

In a quick motion, she pulled her small dagger from her sleeve and pressed it into the orc’s cheek, smiling pleasantly with eyes full of malice as she pressed hard enough to scratch the skin without drawing much blood, moving it up and down his cheek.
“Because if you don’t,” she hissed, “I’m going to cut you into tiny little pieces, and every piece will beg me for death, but I won’t grant it. I’ll keep you alive, just to enjoy your suffering.” She straightened, noting how he shivered with either excitement or fear, giddy inside that he seemed to have bought her little act.

“But,” she continued. “If you please me... like a good, little pet...” She slit her palm, allowing her blood to gather on the blade before she pulled it free and held it close to him. “I will give you a taste of what you crave most.”

He jerked against Feren’s strong hold on him, his mouth falling open in ecstasy as he scented her blood.

“Tell me,” she said in a quiet murmur, holding the dagger just beyond the reach of his salivating mouth. “Why did you come into the woods? What is your purpose here?”

Shuddering, the orc’s muscles stood out in his dark gray skin as he fought the elf holding him. “My master… He will take these woods and conquer all within. You’re all going to die!”

She tilted her head and smiled mockingly. “I don’t think so.” Her smile faded and her voice grew sharp. “Tell me where your forces are encamped.” She moved the blade closer, just letting the tip of his tongue catch a taste of her blood, and he purred, eyes rolling back in his head in pleasure.

“Magic,” he whispered, going still, then leaning toward her with wide and pleading eyes. “More, mistress! Please! Just another taste...”

She smirked and shook her head. “Answer me, first. You are my creature now, are you not? You wish to please me?”

“Yes!” He bobbed his head up and down. “Yes, mistress, I will serve you as you wish. The others wait in the small fortress we build in the far west of the forest. A secret, dark place, in the thick of the spiders. I can show you. More....”

She extended the blade, allowing the orc to lap eagerly at the blood, ignoring his small, ecstatic grunts and her own revulsion at the sight. Looking beyond him to Thranduil, who still stood with arms crossed, watching them with a blank expression, she lifted her brows expectantly.
Feren glanced at her before looking back down at the orc he held fast, a slight furrow to his brows as his attention remained unwaveringly focused on the beast feasting on her blood.

The Elvenking kept his eyes locked to Elizabeth’s. “Bring a map,” he barked, and one of the guards made haste to comply.

With all the blood having been meticulously lapped from her blade, she replaced it in the arm sheath hidden beneath her sleeve and stepped back to wait. The orc was staring at her with a look of worshipful devotion, licking the final taste of her blood from his lips.

The map was brought and held before the orc. “There, mistress, do you see? In that cluster there. We felled the trees and have begun to build a structure. You would not know it as the many spiders hide our activity and numbers with the thickness of their webs.”

Thranduil stood just out of the orc’s sight, behind him, and she glanced at him before she asked what she knew the king most wanted to know. “What are your numbers? How many reside in this place, and what are the defenses?”

He purred and smiled up at her. “There are more than three hundred there now. The only defense is the spiders and those few what keep watch. If you go swiftly in secret, you will take them by surprise and have the advantage. Have I pleased you with this knowledge, my mistress?”

Elizabeth smiled benevolently, allowing her expression to relax into something less cold. “Yes, you have. So, if I go right away to this stronghold, they will not be expecting us?”

He pulled against Feren’s hold on him again, leaning nearer to her, his eyes wide and pleading. “Yes, but you must not go near there yourself, mistress,” he implored. “There is a bright magic in your blood, and the power you spoke of. The lord of all my kind would take you for himself if he learned of you. You must stay hidden here.”

Thranduil paced over suddenly and tilted his head, looking impassively on the orc. “Is there anything else you can tell us? Anything else of use to the lady?”

“No, nothing,” he said, looking up, face growing sullen at the sight of the elf lord and his question. “I have told you all I know.”
The Elvenking narrowed his eyes, staring coldly. “Good.” In a blur of movement, he drew his sword and beheaded the orc, then smoothly sheathed the blade as the creature’s head rolled across the floor.

He addressed his captain immediately. “Feren, I want five hundred warriors mustered and outfitted to march as soon as possible. Speed is paramount.”

“Yes, my lord, I will begin preparations at once.” Feren stepped clear of the orc and signaled the other guards to come remove the body. Bowing, he swiftly followed the guards that bore away the orc’s carcass.

After the guards departed, Thranduil stepped close to Elizabeth, gazing down on her with furrowed brows. “That was rather disturbing to watch,” he murmured. “Have you questioned an orc before?”

She shook her head. “No, never. But I remember when I fought their kind in Dale, more than once I heard them say how they wanted to drink my blood. I suppose I’ve thought of them as vampire-like creatures ever since, and the way I spoke with him was from something I once read in a book about a vampire hunter.”

His face relaxed into an amused smile. “You assumed that persona from a book? I did not realize you had such a gift for playacting. You must have read some rather macabre tales.”

“A few.” She looked at him from under her lashes and smiled. “But not many of those kind; I have always preferred happy tales over horror.”

“Hmm.” He lifted the hand she had cut open and rubbed away the few flakes of dried blood on her palm, his expression sobering. “I appreciate what you did, but another time, do not feed one of those creatures your blood, not even to gain power over it. You heard what the beast said. Dark things must never learn of you.”

“As you wish, love,” she said with a shrug. “I really had no idea my blood would do...whatever it did.” She smirked. “And may I say how much I admire the masterful way you handle your sword? I think I’m just going to go to our rooms, and...think about that for a while. Perhaps picture other things you handle with equal mastery.”

Pulling away, she started down the path to their private chambers, glancing back at him over her shoulder with a teasing smile. “It is likely to be a while before Feren requires your attention again. You are welcome to join me if you happen to find the time, and feel so inclined.”
Thranduil watched Elizabeth walk away with a small, considering smile, admiring the natural curve and sway of her hips as she moved that he had always been so entranced by. With narrowed eyes, he glanced down the path Feren had taken. It likely would be quite a while until his captain came to report to him again, and what better way to clear his mind in preparation for the battle that lay ahead? Removing his crown, he placed it at the base of his throne and swiftly moved to follow her.

The last of the armored warriors led by the King disappeared into the trees to the west, on their way to eradicate the threat of encroaching darkness on their realm. Elizabeth silently prayed for their quick victory and safe return, finally abandoning her watchful perch and moving back into the halls.

When she neared the throne room’s antechambers, she was approached by Galion holding a long list in his hand, and she repressed a sigh at the prospect of more busy work.

“My lady, this is the list of foodstuffs we must still procure before the autumn feast. You mentioned you wanted to look over everything?”

Accepting it with a smile, she scanned the neat rows listed, her eyebrows climbing in surprise. “Do we always order quite this much wine?”

Frowning, Galion checked the tally. “The extra is for the hot cider. When the King tasted the recipe you sent to the kitchens, he decided we must have enough to serve to everyone.”

“Oh, I see.” She met his eyes with a smile. “It’s a shame we can’t make our own wine, we might save a fortune.”

“We do make our own table wine, but the King has long preferred Dorwinion for feasting and revels.”

She handed the list back to the steward. “Ah well, I suppose every kingdom must have its little excesses. Carry on, then, this all looks fine. Oh, have I received anything from Erebor?”
“Your letters are on your desk, and I believe there was quite a heavy box for you from King Dain. It’s also in your office awaiting your pleasure.”

Elizabeth grinned. “Excellent! I can’t wait to see how his workers fared making zippers and pens from what I sent. So clever, those dwarves.”

Galion sniffed. “If you say so, my lady.”

She smirked, well aware of how little love was lost between some of the older elves and dwarves. “I’ll be attending to correspondence for the next several hours.”

He bowed, rolling the list back up, and Elizabeth hurried her steps to her combined office and sitting room. She moved the unread letters to one side, pulling her chair close and about to sit when she caught sight of a loose paper sitting on one side of her desk, and froze.

_HUMAN WHORE_

The two words there were written in a fine, elegant hand, but there was no mistaking the spirit of the message and that it was clearly intended for her. Lifting it, she stared down at the note for several long minutes.

Glancing around, she folded it up and opened a drawer, shoving it to the bottom of a stack of writing supplies. The words were less upsetting than the realization of someone thinking ill of her walking freely in her private rooms. Could it even be someone she interacted with regularly? Should she bring it to Thranduil’s attention?

She shook her head, rejecting the idea immediately. He had plenty to occupy him and she wasn’t about to burden him further with such petty foolishness. After all, it was just words on a paper and hardly amounted to anything of a serious nature or an actual threat.

Squaring her shoulders, she set to work reading and answering her correspondence, but a shadow of worry hung over her for the remainder of the evening and followed her into sleep, tainting it with restlessness and nightmares.
Feren jogged to where his King stood with his twin swords still at his sides as he surveyed the carnage that surrounded them. Dead orcs lay everywhere, along with a number of swarthy Easterlings that had been encamped with them.

The need to deal with the spiders first had delayed their attack and somewhat robbed them of the element of surprise, but the greater number of elves easily overcame the wicked men and orcs. Dealing with the bodies would likely take longer than the actual battle.

“We have victory, my lord. The last of the creatures lie dead.”

Thranduil looked at the fledgling structure the orcs had been building with narrowed eyes, then swept his gaze to the sickly trees all around them, thick with webs.

“I want no part of this structure left standing, every bit of it must be torn down. See to that after the bodies have been disposed of.”

“Shall we burn the bodies?”

“No.” The King drew a breath, casting a glance at the dense canopy of branches above and around them. “We cannot risk a runaway fire with the trees. Dig a common grave and let that suffice.”

Feren nodded his understanding. “Shall I have your tent prepared, my lord?”

“I am not yet finished killing things. Call a company to me, both swords and bows.” He looked toward the thickest of the webs grimly. “We will not depart until we have freed a portion of these woods from this darkness.”

Lifting his horn, Feren blew two short and one long blast before he let it drop back to where it hung at his waist. “Shall I accompany you?”

Thranduil gave a brief shake of his head. “See to the things we spoke of. I have no desire to linger here any longer than necessary.”
“No, nor I.” Feren’s brow furrowed, his thoughts returning to the halls and his wife.

“Do not worry,” the King said with the barest hint of a smile. “You will be back in plenty of time before the birth.”

Relieved, Feren smiled. “That is good to hear, thank you, Sire. I shall attend to the necessary tasks in the meantime.”

When the company was assembled, the King moved toward the heart of the nests, cutting through the webs and their inhabitants with all the ferocity borne of the years of accumulated hate in battling the spiders, surrounded on all sides by his Silvan warriors.

Galedir entered the rose garden, stopped in front of Elizabeth and bowed. “Your Majesty, there is a messenger from Esgaroth as was sent with an urgent message to the King, but has asked to see you in his absence.”

Her lips pressed together while she listened and then nodded. “Let him come to me here,” she said quietly, setting aside the book she had been reading and folding her hands on her lap.

Within minutes, a scruffy, bedraggled man was ushered into the garden, the dark circles under his eyes and deep lines on his face making him look as though he hadn’t slept in a week, or ever.

“Milady,” he said respectfully and bowed low, then pulled a folded paper from an inner pocket of his coat and offered it to her.

She broke the wax seal and scanned it, her expression quickly growing disturbed as she read. Looking up with a frown still on her face, she addressed the elf beside the messenger.

“Take this man and give him nourishment and a bed to sleep in; he looks ready to drop.”

The guard murmured an acknowledgment and the man bowed low once more, his eyes shining with
After he departed, led by the elf, Elizabeth turned to her captain. “Galedir, how soon can you have a hundred warriors armed and ready to accompany me to Esgaroth?”

His brows furrowed in thought. “After I send out the call, that many can be made ready in an hour, or perhaps closer to two, my queen. Is there some pressing threat?”

She stood and held out the note to him, gathering her things from the bench where she had been sitting while he read it. Folding it back up, he returned it to her with an unusually serious demeanor.

“Should we not rather delay until the King returns?”

Quirking a brow, she started walking toward the garden gate back to the halls, Galedir falling into step beside her. “Do you really think orcs will wait politely and quietly until the King has a chance to deal with them? They will continue to kill, and those deaths might be prevented if we do not delay. No, I shall lead the forces to Esgaroth myself. Do not look so grim, it will not be the first time for me to face such a task.”

He squared his shoulders, well convinced of where his duty lay. “My lady, I request to be allowed to accompany you to Esgaroth.”

She shrugged. “Provided you have someone competent to assume your duties here, request granted. I expect to depart from the front gates in two hours, so make haste with your preparations.”

“I will work swiftly.”

Galedir bowed and hurried away while Elizabeth went straight to her oversized closet in her quarters and opened a trunk she had scarce bothered with since coming to Middle-earth beyond making sure all the pieces were still sound, but she felt the need for all of it now, very glad she had decided to bring a few pieces of armor. If she hadn’t, no doubt they would have ended up in a museum somewhere. The thought that she herself was as old as a museum relic made her smile somewhat ruefully.

She pulled out her shining silver breastplate, pauldrons and shield, setting them to one side, then reached for the matching mail shirt and skirting. If she was going to lead warriors as a queen, then
dammit, she intended to look like something that would put the fear of God into the orcs terrorizing Esgaroth’s people while she did it. If there were only one thing expected of a royal, it was to look the part of majestic leader, even if they were otherwise as dimwitted as a post. Hopefully, her own wits were sharp enough to pass muster and keep her alive under the additional weight of armor.

Less than two hours later, she was mounted on her favorite white stallion with her sword and shield secured to the saddle, dressed in her battle armor displaying the Somerset coat of arms, with her hair arranged plaited away from her face but otherwise hanging free in such a way that she thought would have made both Queen Elizabeth I and Boudicca proud. She had even donned her silver circlet for the occasion, amused at the realization that she did it because Thranduil would have approved.

Renion and Thandir surrounded her on either side, with another two dozen elves mounted around them, while the bulk of the armored warriors were on foot. Feeling the weight of leadership lying more heavily on her than the equipment she was arrayed in, Elizabeth nodded to Galedir and he gave the command to march for Esgaroth.

The King and his army returned in subdued triumph over a week after they departed, to halls that seemed very quiet and mostly empty. When Galion met the King outside the gates, his lord was looking displeased as he walked toward him.

“Where is the queen, Galion?” he asked with a puzzled frown. “I expected she would have been here to immediately welcome our return.”

Galion met his lord’s eyes, his face void of all expression. “The queen departed the day before yesterday with a company of one hundred warriors to go to the aid of the people of Esgaroth, Sire. A message came from their new leader, Master Calder, begging for help to drive off a horde of invading orcs who have been harassing and killing their people and taking their goods.”

The King’s face went from annoyance to full fury by the end of his steward’s explanation, and he swore vehemently, causing Galion’s eyebrows to raise in surprise at the rare display.

“Bring me a fresh mount,” he said sharply, “and alert my guards we ride for Esgaroth immediately. All except Feren, he is to remain here.”
Without waiting for a reply, he stalked off into the great cavern and went to the royal rooms he shared with Elizabeth, growing even angrier when he inhaled her subtle rose scent, further taunting him with her absence in light of his need for her. Why had she not stayed in her place in the halls and waited for him to return to deal with Esgaroth’s problems?

Entering her closet, he frowned at the mess scattered across the floor; leather vambraces, and several types of daggers interspersed with a jumble of clothing were strewn near an open trunk. It was very unlike Elizabeth to be so careless with her possessions, indicating she must have left in a great hurry.

He went to his own impressive wardrobe and replaced the cloak that had been ruined in battle with a fresh one in gold to match the set of armor he wore, making his way back to the gates, noting his guards all stood ready to depart. Mounting the large, black destrier that replaced his weary elk, he urged the horse forward in a burst of speed, not entirely decided as to what he intended to do when he caught up with his wayward wife.

Bearing down in a full gallop on a fleeing orc, Elizabeth leaned forward and swung her sword in a downward arc, slicing into its back and neck, glancing behind her to see that while the head was not fully severed by her strike, the creature was dead nonetheless. She had taken off after the orc and his fellows without a backward glance near the end of the chaotic battle, knowing one or more of her guards would follow or soon catch up to her.

“Where are the others?” she shouted at Renion where he galloped along beside her.

“Back to the east to head off any other stragglers.”

She pulled her horse to a slow walk, glancing around. “Can you see or hear any more of them from here?”

Renion swept his keen elven gaze along the nearby trees and back down the open slope they had just traversed. “I see no others, my lady. That must have been the last of the ones that ran off this way.”

“Then let us go rejoin the main host near Esgaroth. I want to ensure we are thorough and get the very last of them.”
As they started at a light trot back down the steep hill, Thandir and Galedir met them, slowing their mounts until they all trotted along together, her captain speaking first.

“We have finished clearing the surrounding countryside of the orcs as you commanded, my queen.”

She clicked her tongue at her horse and firmed her grip on the reins to keep him from breaking into a full gallop down the hill and looked at the newly arrived elves. “Did you run into any difficulty with the warg riders?”

“Nay, my lady,” Galedir responded. “There were only the three of them, and very quickly dispatched.”

Elizabeth squinted ahead, trying to see further in the gathering dusk. “And what of injuries, are there many as need the services of the healer?”

A smile lit Galedir’s face. “There were very few injuries, and all minor. This has been a very successful undertaking under your command, my queen. I offer my sincere compliments.”

She chuckled and slid her sword into her sheathe strapped to her saddle. “You needn’t sound quite so surprised. As I have been around battle and warfare for much of my life, I was bound to pick up a thing or two.” She rolled her shoulder, feeling the soreness setting in from the weight of her chest-plate and grinned playfully at the elves around her. “Last one back has to clean my armor!”

Giving her stallion his full head, she shot down the hill and along the edge of the lake toward Esgaroth, tearing up the turf in her great speed and chuckling when Galedir just managed to catch up to her before they reached the settlement, his face bright with a challenging grin. She slowed her horse as they passed the bulk of her soldiers, then laughed again in delight when she saw who was riding toward them.

“A little bird told us you were enjoying target practice on some orcs, and we thought we might come lend you a hand, but I see you have it all sorted!” King Dain shouted with a grin, riding his large ram next to King Bard and his son, Bain, other men and dwarves in their retinue riding behind them.

Dain trotted closer and winked. “Here Lizzy, I’ve brought you a present.” He pitched a large troll’s head to the ground in front of Elizabeth’s horse, making the stallion dance nervously to the side and she chuckled and shook her head.
“Why Dain, how you always spoil me with the very nicest things!” she gushed, making the elves, dwarves and men around them laugh. “Was that creature running loose up close to your kingdom?”

He nodded, his brown eyes twinkling. “Seemed he was trying to run away from you, and why not? You look fierce as a dwarf, my lady, and well covered in the blood of your enemies, I see. Now come down from that high horse and give a proper greeting to your old friends.”

Bard had dismounted his horse and came to help Elizabeth down, seeming to sense that her backside had all but become one with her saddle, and she was rather sore and stiff. When she stood on solid ground, he leaned down and kissed her on the cheek, giving her a genuine smile.

“It is good to see you, Elizabeth, despite the less than grand surroundings and circumstances. It seems you had good hunting today.”

She nodded, beaming. “We did, indeed, and I certainly hope it’s enough to keep those things contained for a while. I don’t relish wearing orc blood any more often than absolutely necessary.”

Turning, she hugged Bain, squeezing his arm when he blushed. “I would swear you are taller every time I see you, Bain, and even more handsome too.”

Ducking his head, he glanced at his father with a grin. “Da said your first words to me would be to tease.” He reached for her hand, bowing formally over it. “Greetings, my lady, I think you are even more beautiful than the last time we met, and the orc blood does nothing to detract.”

Smirking, she gave a nod to Bard. “I see your son continues in his silver-tongued ways. He clearly must have inherited it from his mother.”

“My lady, you wound me,” Bard said with a smile, his formerly stern demeanor having relaxed greatly during the eight years of their friendship.

Having also dismounted from his ram, Dain came round and took her arm, tugging her close and startling her by kissing her full on the mouth, her face nearly swallowed up by his impressive beard. She rested a hand on his shoulder and laughed in surprise, tilting her head as she drew back.

“Have you been drinking, my lord?”
He smiled widely and winked again. “Have you ever known me not to drink? And where is your woodland sprite of a husband, lass? Bringing up the rear?”

Her smile wilted a bit and she sighed. “It would seem to be orc season all around. The King took warriors to deal with an infestation of them in the western woods, and had not returned when I departed to come to aid the people here.”

“You’ve led this force all on your own?” Bard asked in surprise, glancing at the elven fighters behind her.

Elizabeth raised a brow and shrugged. “As you see.” She smiled, glancing at Galedir, Renion and Thandir who had also dismounted and now stood nearby. “The Silvans are the very finest warriors, and fierce in battle. I merely came along for the ride.”

Dain slapped a hand against the metal back of her armor. “Oh, you’re being modest, Lizzy. By the state of you, I’d say you more than killed your fair share today. You’ve clearly got more dwarf in your line than elf or man; all you lack is the beard.” Turning to his second, he gave instruction to set up his tents and prepare a feast with the foodstuffs they had brought down from the mountain before turning back to Bard and Elizabeth.

“Come and sit with us under the tree while we wait, Lizzy. Bard and I have been wondering when you’re coming for another visit, as it’s been three years since your last, and Dale and Erebor have well felt the absence.”

“Just give me a moment, I’m coming now,” she said over her shoulder, heading for the cluster of elves to speak with her captain.

Elizabeth gave quiet instruction to Galedir to see to the needs of their warriors and ensure their own camp and tents were set up for the night before the feasting began. The citizens of Esgaroth soon brought droves of food and drink to the shore where the bulk of the small army of elves were, in gratitude for being freed from the pillaging and murderous orcs. The men, dwarves and elves all mingled together as full evening fell, drinking laughing and talking, comfortable with one another as neighbors and allies.

Musicians also began to bring their instruments and set up to play and sing, lending a raucous and celebratory air, while many torches lit the night as bright as day, reflecting off the surface of the Long Lake.
The Elvenking and his riders crested the rise leading down to the brightly lit valley near the newly rebuilt Esgaroth well after dark had fallen. They passed clear signs of battle, including orc carcasses and trampled earth where many feet had trod, and it was immediately clear that victory belonged to his people. It was further apparent that the victory had been easily attained, and based on the loudness of the current revelry, the celebration was in full swing.

He had been paying close attention to the bond while keeping his own presence muted, curious as to the reason for the elated happiness he could feel from Elizabeth and wanting to briefly observe her undetected. Even from a distance, he could see signs of Bard and Dain’s forces and presence. He hoped they had plenty of wine on hand, for he was well in need of strong drink.

When Thranduil could see her clearly in a tent across the distance with Dain and Bard, he pulled his horse to a halt and stared for a long moment. He had never known Elizabeth possessed her own armor, the markings on it obviously the symbol of the royal house or kingdom she was born to. She looked fierce, foreign and exotic, the vibrancy of her humanity never more apparent or alluring, and he felt the spreading warmth of satisfaction in his chest that she belonged entirely to him. He smiled, finally decided on how to greet his queen.

Elizabeth choked, coughed and gasped, shaking her head as Dain and Bard laughed at her when she thrust Dain’s pipe back into his hands and snatched her wine goblet, drinking great gulps until her air passage felt somewhat clear again.

“Oh, that’s vile tasting,” she sputtered when she could speak again. “I can’t begin to understand the attraction for smoking. I imagine that’s what it might have been like to kiss Smaug.”

Dain took a deep draw from his pipe, releasing it slowly, and chuckled. “There are a few other benefits to this particular pipeweed which you are ill equipped to appreciate, my lady, except perhaps being on the receiving end of it. I should give you some to take to your husband.”

Bard laughed softly and shook his head. “Oh, here we go. Prepare yourself, Elizabeth, I fear you are in for some indelicate talk now.”
Shrugging, Dain blew out another cloud of smoke. “Indelicate, bah! Mankind has some strange ideas regarding what is and isn’t appropriate to talk about in mixed company, but we dwarves have no such qualms. We are all married, so what’s the mystery?”

“What indeed?” Elizabeth asked with a grin, leaning closer to Dain. “Alright, tell me what it does.”

Shaking his head, Bard crossed the tent and refilled his wine goblet while Dain explained to Elizabeth, making her pull back to look the dwarf in the eye with a teasing smile.

“Is that all it’s good for?” She shrugged and crossed to where Bard stood, holding her own goblet out to him for a refill, and smirking at the two kings after she sipped from her cup.

“But you forget, Dain, I am wed to an elf. Anything that is designed to increase virility is rather...” she swirled the wine in her goblet as her smile grew, “superfluous. In fact, from my point of view, it may well be life threatening, or at the very least, leave me unable to walk straight for a week.”

Bard choked on his wine, going into his own coughing fit mixed with shocked laughter while Dain grimaced.

“Ack lass, spare me. I don’t need any visuals of you with the elf.”

She laughed and quirked a brow. “You started it, Dain, and you know you can always rely on me to finish whatever you start.”

Her smile faded and her head cocked to the side before she set her goblet down. “I’ll be back shortly,” she said, already striding hurriedly from the tent and turning toward where the horses were clustered together, her smile beaming brightly when she caught sight of the King dismounting from his large destrier, his blue eyes locked firmly to her excited gray-green gaze.

Thrilled at the sight of him, she ran forward and found herself quickly caught up in his strong embrace and drowning in the heat of his ardent kiss. When he released her, she stared breathlessly up at him, blushing in sudden embarrassment.

“Fine greetings to you too, lord husband.” She glanced around self consciously at his guards, who
had only just begun to dismount, and dropped her voice. “I am sure you told me before that elves were never demonstrative in front of others.”

He laced their hands together and began walking back toward the tent she had come from, his chin raised imperiously. “I am the king, I can do as I like, and I recognized you were desperately in need of kissing.”

She bit her lip to control her grin. “I’ve been kissed more today than on any other day, I think. I don’t believe I’ve suddenly become more appealing. Is it the orc blood or the armor?”

His eyes narrowed when he looked at her. “The armor is certainly a part of it,” he said, his eyes sweeping her appreciatively, “but who else has been kissing my wife, pray tell?”

“Bard and Dain have come down from the mountain.” Her eyes sparkled mischievously. “Come and have some refreshment and a rest now. Did you have any difficulty in the western woods?”

He pursed his lips thoughtfully. “No difficulties. We destroyed them utterly and did away with the structure, and as many nests as were nearby there.”

She smiled and lifted his hand to her mouth, kissing his knuckles before they entered the tent.

“Well, speak of the devil and he appears before you.” Dain lifted his cup in salute. “Come in and have a drink, Thranduil, you look to have just come from the thick of it,” he said, his eyes running over the Elvenking’s gold armor, still spattered in orc blood and spider remains.

Elizabeth poured a tall glass of wine and handed it to her husband after he seated himself near Bard, who clasped him on the shoulder with a smile.

“I’m pleased to see you, my friend. I trust you had success in your own orc hunt?”

After draining his wine and receiving a refill, the Elvenking lifted his chin in a slow nod. “I and my host dealt with the orcs and then returned to my halls expecting a rich welcome, with all the comforts of hearth and home.” His eyes narrowed and slid to Elizabeth, leaning against a nearby table, who preferred standing due to the continuing soreness in her backside caused by the long day’s worth of fighting from the saddle.
“Imagine my surprise when I discovered Elizabeth was out seeking her own glory in battle rather than attending to her wifely duties, and instead of rest I was forced to come retrieve my queen,” he quipped, softening his words with a smile.

“Now don’t be too hard on the lass,” Dain said, stroking a hand down his long beard. “The lake folk are obliged for her timely arrival, as she well beat Bard and myself and had it all finished up by the time we got down the mountain. There was little sport to be had, beyond the troll and a few others that came our way.”

Elizabeth sighed tiredly and pushed away from the table. “Wifely or queenly duties aside, I am well ready to be free of this armor, so I will bid you gentle lords a good night. Enjoy your wine,” she winked at Dain, “but mind you don’t smoke too much or you’re liable to have a very uncomfortable night without your wife here with you, and naught but your hand for company.”

She walked out of the tent and headed for her own, leaving Thranduil frowning, Bard chuckling and Dain guffawing loudly in her wake.

An hour later, she was freshly washed and comfortably clad in a soft gown and beginning to brush out her long, tangled mass of hair when she heard her husband enter the main room of the tent, calling to one of the guards to assist him in removing his armor.

By the time he had also washed and changed into a pair of sleeping pants, Elizabeth had already laid down on the camp bed and was just beginning to doze when he joined her and pulled her into his arms to rest against his bare chest.

“Are you truly angry with me for coming here?” she asked, fully awake again and tilting her head up to look at him.

“Angry?” he murmured.

His eyes darkened with a sudden intensity of emotion before he took her mouth with his own, kissing her passionately and rolling her beneath him, soon doing away with their clothing in a whirlwind coupling so enthusiastic that it very nearly bordered on violence. It left her breathing heavily on top of him some time later, still tingling with the aftermath of orgasm and the echo of his strong grip on her waist and thighs.
When his fingers combed lightly through strands of her hair, she chanced another look up at him to see him smiling at her in newly relaxed amusement. She nuzzled against his chest and smiled.

“Shall I take that as a no, then?”

He laughed softly and raised a dark golden brow. “No, I am not angry. But when I want you and you are not there, it certainly annoys me to no end. As queen, I admit you have performed your duty well in coming to the aid of our allies here in my absence. Even if I would have preferred you to wait in the halls and leave all this for me to attend.”

Elizabeth smirked, pushing herself upright until she was sitting on top of him. “But have I at least redeemed myself in your eyes by adequately performing my wifely duties?”

Thranduil smiled. “Your performance in my arms has always far exceeded the pale description of adequate, Elizabeth, rather more in the range of exquisite, but you know I will not be so quickly satisfied with so brief a taste of you.” He cupped her breast and brushed his thumb across a dusky nipple, making her sigh.

She bit her lip and leaned closer, bracing her hands against his firm chest. “You didn’t happen to smoke any of Dain’s pipe, I hope? I will eventually need sleep.”

He tugged her ear with his teeth, sucking her lobe into his mouth and whispering his words. “You know I have no need of any such artificial enhancements, mír nin. (my treasure) But allow me to remind you yet again of all the joys of having an elven lover.”

The pale grey light of dawn shone down upon the Long Lake before the Elvenking and queen finally sought sleep in the comfort of one another’s embrace; and the well-trained Silvan guards stationed outside their tent never betrayed by word or look just what manner of things they might have overheard with their keen ears during the long night.

~O~
Elirien grinned at her husband before looking back at the Queen and further across the room at their King.

“Just look at you, precious, adorable little darling,” Elizabeth cooed, kissing the small face of Lîrdor, Feren and Elirien’s newborn son. He stared up at her with bright, golden eyes and a fuzz of coppery hair on his head, his little hand clutching tightly to her sleeve while she traced one of his tiny, pointed ears in delight. She turned her beaming gaze to Thranduil and nodded with satisfaction.

“This makes elf baby number twenty-eight since the battle at Dale, and yes, I am keeping count.”

While Feren and Elirien looked on proudly, the Elvenking quirked a brow at his wife and came and lifted the infant out of her arms and stared into the little one’s eyes who stared soberly back for a long moment before Thranduil smiled in amusement and handed him over to his father.

“He takes after you in temperament, Captain. Did you ever laugh much as a child?”

“On occasion,” Feren quipped with a wry smile, “but not excessively.”

“He is clearly going to be a deep thinker, perhaps even a scholar like his Uncle Tirion,” Elizabeth said, wrapping an arm around Elirien’s shoulders and nodding in emphasis. “How was the birth?”

“Oh, truly magical, my lady.” Elirien shook her head, glowing with happiness. “I cannot fully explain, but I felt very proud of my efforts once it was all said and done.”

Elizabeth grinned at Elirien, then slid her gaze to Feren. “Excellent! So you both might be open to repeating the experience, perhaps sometime in the next ten to twenty years? Every child should have
a sibling, or ten even! You could begin a new trend of large elven families among the Silvans. What do you say?”

When Feren’s brows climbed at the queen’s words, Thranduil hid a smile and took Elizabeth’s arm and wrapped it around his, leading her to the door.

“We shall leave you now to enjoy your son, with our heartfelt congratulations,” the Elvenking said, staring down at his wife with a half smile, his dimple peeking out as they walked together back toward the throne room. “I see you are quite determined to have this kingdom overflow with young.”

She gave a careless shrug. “Is that not a useful goal for me to have? As a king, what shall you rule and whom do you command if you do not have an abundance of subjects?”

He rested his hand atop hers wrapped around his arm. “While true, you do not have to attempt to appeal to me from that self-serving point of view, Elizabeth. I have always greatly enjoyed children. Raising Legolas was a delight for me, and richly rewarding.” His eyes took on a contemplative look, tinged by nostalgia.

She sighed, suddenly riddled with guilt. “I’m sorry, Thranduil. If it weren’t for me, you would have your son here with you now.”

He shook his head, giving her a gently reproving look. “Legolas is an elf grown, mîr nin (my treasure), it is natural for him to wander out into the lands beyond his birth, and certainly nothing you need feel responsible for.” He drew a deep breath, turning from the walkway to lead them into one of the herb gardens to walk among the green. “He will return soon, I feel.”

She reached down among a row of plants and pulled out a sprig of rosemary, lifting it up and inhaling the pleasant scent. “Was Legolas your reason after you lost Calarien?” She licked her lips, darting a glance up at him. “The reason you didn’t fade from grief?”

He looked out toward the forest, well beyond the orderly garden where they stood, his brows furrowed. Turning to look at her, his lips pressed together and he shook his head. “Yes and no. Legolas was certainly my focus, to say nothing of the kingdom, but to fully answer that, let me ask you a question: did you lose your will to live after Ferdinand died?”

Elizabeth ran the sprig of rosemary across her chin absently and met his eyes, hers full of reflection and memory. “I grieved him and I missed him. But no, his death did not make me wish for my own.
Life still held the promise of sweetness, and many mysteries yet to be discovered, and I was driven to keep seeking those things."

He smiled and lifted her free hand to his lips and turned it, gently kissing the skin of her inner wrist. “It was much the same for me. I did mourn her loss and miss her presence, but it was not so deep and all-consuming as to cause me to fade.”

Her brow crinkled as her eyes filled with the shadows of fear and pain. “But that would not be true for me now. For us. If anything were to happen to you… If you were lost to me, I know I could not…”

Placing a finger against her lips, he shook his head, his blue eyes soft and full of tenderness and understanding. “Do not entertain dark thoughts of possibilities that will never be. Live only in the blessing of the present, with me.”

A smile lifted her lips, brightening her countenance while she stared up into his eyes. “I will always live gratefully in joy with you, Thranduil. I love you so much, I ache from it.”

“Gi melin, Elizabeth.” (I love you) He switched to mind speak to whisper his next words. And I will quickly cure you of every ache later this evening, and perhaps give you a few new, enjoyable ones.

Her eyes brightened further. I will hold you to that, Aran nin. (my king)

Leaning down, he ran his nose slowly against hers and smiled before he pressed his warm lips to hers in a slow, soft kiss. The bond was wide open, full of the complex blend of their feelings and great strength of the love flowing freely between them.

They stood surrounded by the fragrant mingling of the scents of rosemary, athelas and lavender, the heart of the Greenwood seeming to glow with and reflect back the magic and vitality of its King and Queen.

Two years later
Legolas smiled and lifted a hand in greeting to the elves he knew were concealed among the trees directly ahead of the path where he rode, his happiness growing when Langion stepped out grinning from behind a large oak and approached him.

“Welcome home, hir nin, (my lord) I was beginning to wonder if you had decided to settle permanently for the softer life in Imladris and forsake your hardworking woodland kin.”

Slipping from the back of his horse, Legolas landed silently and moved forward to embrace his blonde-haired friend. “Langion, you of all people should know I would never be able to stay away for any great length of time. My heart yet dwells here and it ever yearns for these woods.”

Langion stepped back and looked into the prince’s eyes for a long moment, his grey gaze softening in sympathy at the pain he saw there that festered just beneath the surface, all too aware of the source but able to offer nothing more than his regret and empathy at the sight of his friend’s aching heart.

They had been elflings and playmates together, being of a similar age, and their friendship was tried and true and ran deep. There were very few people Legolas was comfortable sharing his innermost thoughts and struggles with, but Langion had always been one of them. And Legolas had been there for him through difficulties more times than could be easily counted.

Smirking, Legolas crossed his arms, falling into their old pattern of playfulness and good-naturedly teasing one another. “I see you’ve managed to get yourself assigned to one of the easy patrols, so you’ve obviously fared quite well in my absence.”

Langion lifted his brows and gave Legolas an incredulous look. “I have well earned this rest today, Prince! With the King’s insistence of no spiders or nests at all in the northern woods for the Queen’s comfort and safety, the continued vigilance required toward the southern and western woods, in addition to Feren’s relentless pursuit of going above and beyond whatever the King requires, we are all but run ragged at times. Having you back in the rotation shall be a very great relief to many. And my own workload,” he quipped, finally smirking back.

His eyes moving to a nearby talan high above the ground where several elves stood talking among themselves, Legolas’ brow furrowed at the casual mention of the one who was foremost in his current thoughts. “Elizabeth has always preferred the north woods. I suppose as many things as have changed since I departed, some things remain the same.” He smiled sadly, meeting Langion’s gaze once more. “If I wished to avoid the king and speak only to the queen, do you know where I might find her at this time of day?”
“On the days she rides, she generally does so early in the day, and after that it’s a guess as to where she passes time in the halls.” He glanced up at a patch of blue sky before smiling gently at his friend. “As the weather is fine, I would check the flower gardens first.” He rested a hand on the prince’s shoulder. “It gladdens me to have you back, Legolas. Shall I bring the wine and game-board to your quarters later tonight?”

Drawing a breath, Legolas nodded and forced a smile. “Aye, I would welcome the chance to catch up, and I think I will likely be very much in need of your cheering company.” He frowned, his gaze turning dark. “I dread speaking to my father the most.”

Langion shrugged. “Then perhaps you should do it first. Get the worst over all at once.”

The prince shook his head, turning toward his horse. “No, I must see Elizabeth first.” His voice dropped to just above a whisper. “It is that overpowering need which has finally driven me home.”

Nodding, Langion rubbed a gentle hand along the velvety nose of the prince’s stallion, his own voice growing just as quiet. “I understand, mellon nin. (my friend) I’ll bring my special bottle of brandy when I come, in case you have need of it.”

Springing up onto his horse’s back, Legolas chuckled. “How well you know me, mellon. I shall see you later.”

Watching as the prince trotted away, soon lost to sight among the trees, Langion smiled then sighed a moment later. His own love life had been just as unfortunate, centuries before, having courted and been betrothed to a beautiful elleth...who had shocked many by changing her mind before they wed. When her betrothal ring had been cast into the fire to dissolve the betrothal, he had stubbornly kept his, unable to part with his final link to the one he still loved. Not everyone was meant to be happy in love, apparently, whether prince or commoner. With grey eyes full of the old sorrow, Langion turned back toward the large oak to resume his duty.

Elizabeth hummed happily to herself, smiling as she finished the final stitches on the tri-colored kilt she had secretly been sewing for Thranduil. Even if she could only persuade him to put it on for her once, and in the privacy of their bedroom, it would have been well worth the effort of making it. There was something just so very masculine and appealing about the kilt.
Ten years of marriage had passed quickly by, and she had taken to making little things for Thranduil to commemorate their anniversary each year, which he seemed to find exceedingly quaint and amusing as elves generally did very little to mark such a passing of time. Knowing how important their anniversary was to her, Thranduil had adopted her culture’s tradition of gift-giving, and she was frequently lavished with new gowns, jewels, and other fine and thoughtful things to mark the occasion.

The last days of summer were slipping away, heading quickly toward the cooler fall weather, and she was sitting in her favorite flower garden to enjoy the warmth and bask in the sunshine.

“I can see marriage obviously agrees with you, for I did not think you could be any more beautiful, yet it is so, for my eyes do not lie.”

Looking up, Elizabeth took in the unexpected sight of Legolas standing several feet in front of her, smiling at her as he always used to. Happiness and excitement crashed over her like a wave, and she tossed aside the fabric in her lap and leapt up, falling eagerly into his outstretched arms, both laughing and tearing up as her emotions overwhelmed her.

“Oh, Legolas! I cannot properly express my joy at seeing you once more. How I’ve missed you!”

He held her tightly against him as her familiar rose scent washed over him, an involuntary shudder running through him at the joy mingled with sorrow he felt at their reunion, and the simple pleasure of being near her again. Pulling away, she smiled up at him, and he cradled her face in his hands, stroking her cheeks with his thumbs and looked at her with blue eyes full of affection. Tugging him over to the bench, she urged him to sit beside her.

“Please tell me how you have been. I understand you spent much of your time in Imladris. I hear it is very beautiful there.”

His eyes ran ceaselessly across her face, all the old longing stirred anew, and when they sat, he kept one of her hands captive in his own, not yet able to release her. He was forced to stare out at the flowers to order his thoughts enough to respond to her.

“Yes,” he began, meeting her eyes once more. “Imladris is lovely and peaceful; soothing to both the mind and spirit. You would enjoy it there, and Lord Elrond is a fine host and a wise and conscientious ruler.” He glanced down to where her hand was clasped in his and looked at her again, searchingly. “But it is not home, and my heart was ever here, with you.”
His expression turned pained then changed again, growing remote and full of anger. He stood and paced away before turning back, his voice low and intense. “I am sorry, Elizabeth, but I cannot keep silent on this, not even to spare you.” He ran a hand across his forehead before balling the same hand into a fist.

“Even after these ten years, I still can scarce think of my father’s actions during my absence without being filled with this...impotent rage. I do not wish to grieve you, brennil vuin,” (beloved lady) he said with an apologetic look. “It is why I did not return sooner, for fear I would be unable to sufficiently control my emotions. But I cannot understand why he did this except to hurt me or for some other reason that only he knows.”

His mouth took on a harsh set, his eyes slipping briefly closed while he drew a long breath. “He knew how much I cared for you, and how I held to hope that you might one day come to return my feelings. I know there is no changing the present nor undoing the past, but how am I to ever...forgive him for this?”

Her brows furrowed and her eyes filled with distress. Standing, she reached for his hands. “Legolas, I am so sorry for what you have suffered. Please...will you allow me to explain? It is not truly your father who is responsible for all that happened, but me. Will you do me the kindness of hearing my confession?”

His look of anger and hurt quickly changed to one of puzzlement, and he followed her back to the bench and took a seat once more. Haltingly, she began by telling him of when she had first shared a kiss with the king and how it had somehow mysteriously and inexplicably severed the remnant of his bond with Calarien. Then further, how the King’s feelings for her had developed over time, whereas she had loved him for much, much longer. She gave a self-deprecating laugh.

“The night we married, I honestly had no idea how elves wed and I actually thought...” She blushed and looked down. “I thought I was agreeing to become the King’s mistress, as I held no hope of ever being granted more.”

Legolas sucked in a shocked breath. “ Truly? You loved him enough to even go against your own honor and morals?”

Her blush deepened and she nodded. “Yes. I must admit that I loved him to the point of desperation. I was even prepared to embrace sin for the chance to be closer to him in hopes that he might come to love me, even a little. Imagine my surprise when I was informed we were married, and I was not his leman as I supposed, and that he loved me too. I’m certain you must think very poorly of me now, and nor would I blame you for it, but this is the truth and I feel you are entitled to know it.”
Legolas reached out and took her hand in his, squeezing gently while he shook his head. “I do not think any less of you, Elizabeth. I, perhaps more than anyone, understand those feelings. Especially as you describe...to the point of desperation. I believe I would have gone to any lengths to please you or secure your happiness, even I think, at the possible cost of my honor had you ever asked it of me.” His voice dropped to just above a whisper. “I still would, as my feelings remain unchanged, but you already know this.”

She bit her lip. “I hope you understand that if things had been different, I…. It would have been my wish to return your feelings, if my heart had been mine to give. But from my first meeting with the King, I lost it to him. Yet I have looked on you as my closest friend for years, and in that way I do love you dearly, and always will. Can you ever forgive me?” She chanced a look at him and was amazed to see how solemnly he regarded her. He wrapped a gentle arm around her shoulders and pulled her against him, smiling sadly.

“What wrong have you done that you now ask for my forgiveness? None at all. You love my father and based on what you have said, he obviously loves you, or it’s likely he would not have braved conflict and difficulties to wed you. I love you both, despite my anger toward him all this time; and I do realize you both love me, in your separate ways. With so much love between the three of us, there must surely be a way forward in all this.”

He rubbed his free hand against his cheek, his eyes thoughtful. “I suppose I was so blinded by my own emotions, that I never once considered the possibility that his marked interest in you might be anything more than friendship.” He drew a deep breath and released it.

“Thank you for explaining and telling me the sincere truth of your feelings. My assumption of my father’s betrayal has been festering all this time, poisoning my heart and stealing my peace.” He turned and looked at her for a long moment, and then smiled.

“But how quickly you’ve managed to cure it with your words. I love you the more for it, and I will always honor you, as both my father’s wife and my queen.”

Elizabeth leaned her head against his shoulder and reached up to wipe the tears that flowed at his easy words of kindness and complete acceptance. “Thank you, Legolas, your generous nature and selfless devotion is so much more than I could ever deserve.”

“Nay, Elizabeth, I’ll hear none of that,” he said sharply. “Devotion is your due, and you are more than worthy of it.”

She sniffed, wiped away the last of her tears and smiled. “You sound a great deal like the King.”
He leaned his head down to rest against hers and grinned, looking much more like his old, playful self. “I believe I shall now take that as a compliment.”

She chuckled. “Good, as that’s how it was intended. You know, it is a little strange though, to think that I am now your stepmother. I never thought to have a son who was a couple thousand years older than me.”

He pulled back and chuffed a laugh, though his brows were knit together as though the thought had not yet occurred to him. “That...is a very odd thing to contemplate, to be sure. I trust you know I will never be tempted to address you as...what is it in English...mummy?”

Elizabeth chuckled and looked at him with dancing eyes. “Thank God for small mercies, as that would be utterly ridiculous, to say the least.” She tilted her head, slowly sobering. “Have you been to see your father yet?”

Frowning, Legolas shook his head. “No, I came straight to find you, and as it turns out that was the wiser course of action. I believe I shall not now be tempted to say anything to him I might come to regret. Still, I expect it may be a bit of an uncomfortable reunion, at least at first.”

Reaching out, she pulled one of his hands between both of her own and looked earnestly into his eyes. “Shall we go together? I would be happy to, if it would make it easier for you.”

“Are you already trying to mother me, Elizabeth?” he asked with a teasing smile.

She gave him a startled look that changed into distress and turned away, releasing his hand. “I’m sorry. It’s not like I have anyone else I can lavish any maternal feelings on.”

He touched her shoulder, drawing her eyes back to his once more. “But why have you delayed? You could have had a child, or I suppose even more than one during these ten years you have been wed. After all your enthusiasm for babies, I confess I was somewhat surprised not to hear news of a birth during my stay in Imladris.”

She stared at him in dismay, certain he would never be intentionally cruel, but wounded by his words nonetheless. “Don’t you think I would if I could? There is nothing else I dream about or long for more than a child, but I cannot force my body to conceive when it won’t! I realize I am inadequate.”
Springing to her feet, she made it several steps before she was prevented from fleeing when Legolas grasped her arms from behind, stopping her.

“Elizabeth...wait.”

She dropped her head forward, looking down at the grass-covered ground and heaved a sigh. “Thank God your father has you,” she said quietly. “At least my inability to give him a child will not deprive the kingdom.”

He walked around to face her and lifted her chin, searching her eyes. “You truly do not know, then?”

Emotions still twisting painfully inside of her, she stiffened slightly. “What exactly is it that I’m meant to know?”

Dropping his hands to his sides he stared at her, looking uncertain, then he sighed. “For elves,” he began, “conception is never by chance, but through an act of will, similar to when a marriage bond is formed. We celebrate begetting days, because the very moment of conception is known to us, unlike mankind, which is why your people celebrate the day of birth, correct?”

She nodded silently, and he continued. “So, you see, there is nothing the matter with you, or with your body, Elizabeth. My father has but to will it and you shall conceive. I am uncertain why he has not told you this already.”

Looking away, she bit her lip as more tears filled her eyes, blinking furiously in a futile attempt to keep them from overflowing, feeling completely crushed and betrayed. Was it possible that Thranduil had chosen to deny her the one thing she desperately longed to have from him...his child? What reason could he possibly have to keep such information from her, if he truly loved her as he claimed?

Legolas pulled her into his arms and hugged her comfortingly. “I am sorry, Elizabeth, I did not intend to upset you so.”

“You didn’t upset me,” she mumbled into his tunic. “You gave me the truth, and I’m grateful to you for it. I’m just surprised at this discovery, that’s all.” She pulled away and attempted a smile. “And what a shockingly selfish way for me to welcome you home, by thinking only of my own concerns
and crying all over you!” She reached out to rub away the moisture on his suede tunic, and he caught her hand, stilling her.

“You should know your tears are precious to me, and spending time with you is the very best welcome home I could imagine.” He pressed his lips together firmly, his grip on her hand tightening unconsciously.

“Perhaps it is not my place, but I cannot see you in pain and do nothing. You should speak to my father, now you know the truth. Time moves very differently for an elf, and it is likely that he has not fully realized the pressing urgency of your desire for children, so relatively soon after your marriage.”

She smiled softly, placing a hand against his cheek. “Thank you for your wise counsel, Legolas. I promise I will think on your words,” she said before dropping her hand. “I am so glad you are come back to us, and I hope you will not think to leave again. Your absence has been very grievous to me, indeed, and I know your father has missed you greatly.”

He wrapped her arm around his and strolled back to the bench, smiling. “I assure you, I have no plans for any more departures. Being away for a time has shown me how greatly I value home. Despite the darkness that harries us, these woods have borne me and I love them still.”

They sat down and she nodded. “That I understand, for I too love the people here and the beautiful lands of this realm, much more than I would have ever thought possible.”

Her smile turned mischievous as she looked from him and then reached for the fabric next to him on the bench. “Now, how would you like to help me out by modeling a kilt?”

A soft knock sounded on the door and Thranduil glanced up, well ready to greet his son from the warning Elizabeth had sent, telling him she was bringing Legolas to speak to him.

_Do be gentle, love. He’s still so hurt and angry_, she said through mind touch.

“Come,” he called, then answered her through their link. _I am aware, Bess, and I am prepared to deal with it._
The door opened, revealing a smiling Elizabeth and Legolas with a blank face void of all expression, which told him all he needed to know about his son’s current emotional state. His smiled in welcome while he decided just how much he should reveal of his foreknowledge to hopefully alleviate his child of some of the pain he carried.

“I have brought your newly returned son to greet you, my lord,” Elizabeth said with a radiant smile, warming the Elvenking’s heart at how hard she was obviously trying to smooth matters out and restore peace and harmony between them all. He met her eyes briefly in loving approval, aware of how Legolas noted and watched their silent communication and doing nothing to hide it from him.

“Thank you, mîr nin,” he murmured quietly before turning his gaze to his son, who had his head cocked to the side as though musing over something. “Welcome back to your home, Legolas.”

The prince nodded, stopping just inside the room beside Elizabeth. “Adar.”

Stepping back around the prince, she reached for his hand and squeezed it quickly for encouragement. “Well, I’ll leave the two of you to catch up.” Slipping out, she pulled the door softly closed.

Thranduil indicated one of the chairs facing his desk. “Be seated my son, and tell me of your journey. It was uneventful, I trust?” While Legolas sat, the Elvenking rose and moved to pour two goblets of Dorwinion, then handed one to his son and seated himself again.

The prince took a large swallow of the fine wine and nodded, his eyes focused on the liquid in his goblet. “I had a remarkably peaceful journey. I was surprised that even the western woods gave me no difficulties as I came through them with nary a spider in sight.”

The King tasted his own wine and set it down on his desk, his eyes never leaving his son. “No, we cleared it all quite thoroughly, scarcely two years back. And your time in Imladris, did you find it diverting and profitable?”

He finally looked up, blank-faced once more. “I did. Elladan and Elrohir kept me constantly occupied in one manner or another, with orc hunting being the chief diversion they favored. Which is as well, as my skills never had a chance to grow dull, being in almost constant use.”

Smiling, Thranduil shook his head. “I have not seen them in many years, but I know them both to be
fine elves, and they perform their duty to their father and their realm well.”

Legolas inhaled, his eyes growing colder. “I offer my congratulations on your marriage to Elizabeth. To say I was surprised when I received word from you would be an understatement.”

Lacing his fingers together atop his desk, Thranduil pursed his lips. “And now we come to it. My son, I want you to know that I would have spared you all the pain you have suffered, had it been possible, but the circumstances were such that...”

Holding up a hand, Legolas’ mouth tightened. “You need say no more. Elizabeth explained it all to me, about your severed bond with Naneth and how all this came about, as well as your great love for each other.” He paused and glanced away, a muscle clenching in his jaw before meeting his father’s eyes again with a look of determination.

“Adar, I am...happy for you both. I was very angry, I admit it, and I imagined the worst, feeling betrayed and misused by you, but that is no longer the case, now I know the truth.” He drained his wine in a single swallow and set the goblet on the desk, meeting his father’s gentle gaze. “I swear to bury that other love I have long felt for Elizabeth and never consider it again. I will think of her as my queen, your wife, and my friend, and that is all.”

Regretting his past reticence in expressing his emotions openly to his son, he allowed his care to show clearly in his eyes before he spoke. “Perhaps I have not always expressed it to you in words as I should, but since the moment of your conception, Legolas, you have been my great comfort and joy, and so shall you always be,” he said softly. “You have the very best of your mother’s spirit, and I hope only the positives from mine. You do know I loved your mother, do you not, and I respect her still? My remarriage does not change that.”

Catching his bottom lip between his teeth, Legolas gave a single nod. “Yes, but you never looked at Naneth the way you look on Elizabeth. I was...stunned by the depth of feeling I see so clearly between the two of you. Such love is...well, it is truly beautiful to behold and not a thing often seen.”

Thranduil nodded his agreement. “It is a gift, in truth. One that was both unlooked for and unexpected by me until it was staring me in the face.” His lips pressed together as he leaned forward, his eyes searching his son’s.

“Legolas, you know I see many things through my gift of foresight, and while I will not risk affecting the future by revealing all I have seen, I do want to encourage you and tell you this: there is great joy for you in the days ahead. It may not seem so now, but much good awaits you. This last thing I will say, then speak no more on it, only remember my words... When the light of the golden
tree shines on you, protect and nurture it, for it shall be precious to you and greatly enrich your life.”

With furrowed brows, the prince gave his father a puzzled look. “I...thank you? I shall remember your words and I’m sure they will be helpful when the time comes to make sense of them.” He stood to his feet. “I believe I will now go and remove the dust from the road and get settled in my rooms once more.”

“I am very pleased to have you home once more, Lassë.” (Quenya: leaf)

Thranduil stood and walked to the other side of his desk and pulled his son in for a firm and affectionate embrace. Legolas chuckled when the Elvenking released him and smiled teasingly.

“This new love has dramatically changed you, Adar. I don’t think you have hugged me in at least two hundred years, at least not while sober.”

The King frowned, searching his memory. “It has not truly been that long since we embraced, has it?”

Legolas grinned. “The last time I can recall for certain was before Cîrnith took the ship west, and sang the beautiful lay that made every elf in hearing cry, except you. I believe you needed the emotional release and I was next to you at the time.”

Smirking, the Elvenking crossed his arms, his eyes narrowing in warning. “You know you are not yet too old for me to hold you down and tickle you breathless as I used to when you were an elfling.”

Throwing up a guarding hand, Legolas laughed fully. “I actually believe I am too old for that. I shall rather make a strategic retreat now to preserve my dignity from any further threat.” He opened the door and stepped across the thresh-hold, then stuck his head back into the room with a too innocent look.

“If you do feel the need to tickle someone however, I’m sure your wife would willingly accommodate you. You might even multitask and begin a new elfling you may tickle whenever you wish. Just a suggestion,” Legolas said with a slight smile and pulled the door closed.

Chuckling, Thranduil went and poured more wine, sitting at his desk again and releasing a long
breath. The tight knot of worry he had carried for so many years concerning Legolas was finally starting to unravel with harmony restored between them, and he had never been more thankful or felt more blessed than he did at that moment.

~o~

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for the recent slew of comments/feedback, guys, they're much appreciated and inspire me like you wouldn't believe!

In case you wondered at the little foreshadowing in the last scene, there will be a Legolas/OFC happening. Mostly told in a separate story, I think, but some of it will be seen in this story as it relates to Thranduil and Elizabeth. Thoughts? Please share them with me, and thanks for reading!
Chapter Notes

As much as I hate to spoil story content, I refuse to accidentally sucker punch anyone; even if this is fiction, the emotions experienced are real. So… Trigger warning for this chapter for themes dealing with infant loss and stillbirth, and some descriptions may be considered graphic or disturbing to some readers. One in four women experience this pain, yet no one ever wants to think about it or discuss it, and it's treated like a shameful, dirty secret. I have always envisioned this as a part of the journey of this story, in honor of all the mothers and fathers who have had to suffer through the hell of child loss in the crushing isolation and silence of their own grief. If you're a survivor of infant loss, like me, or it's touched your life in some way, know you're not alone.

This is a longer chapter again because I didn't want to break the flow or end it on a dark note.

“What cannot be said will be wept.” ~ Sappho

“The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.” ~ Kahil Gibran

"Life is pain, Highness. Anyone who says differently is selling something." ~ Princess Bride

Chapter Twenty-eight
Blowing a strand of hair back out of her eyes, Elizabeth set down the small stack of books on her desk that she had only just picked up at the library from Tirion. It was a series of supposedly exciting adventure stories that her friend had recently brought to her attention, written by someone calling themselves only Teitha Pen. *(Sindarin: write/inscribe somebody/anyone)*

The manuscripts had begun appearing mysteriously on the librarian’s desk with no clue as to where they came from or who wrote them, more than a dozen years before, first featuring the tale of the Sunshine King and the Dragon in its most embellished form, with several more volumes added in the following years.

The one constant was the main character, an elleth called Vaháyawen *(Quenya: far away maiden)* who came to a forest realm called Brightwood from a previously unknown elvish island kingdom, far across the sea. She got herself and her faithful band of Silvan friends into any number of scrapes and difficulties, surviving dangerous quests and frequently angering the proud king of Brightwood, even occasionally getting herself or her friends thrown into the dungeon for punishment.

Being vastly amused by the many, obvious similarities between Elizabeth and Vaháyawen, Tirion had recommended them to her, even teasingly calling them her unofficial and grossly exaggerated biographies. Since the stories had become so popular, it was difficult to catch them when they weren’t checked out, so Tirion had finally set them all aside as they were returned so she could read all four volumes at once.

The fourth volume was purported to be about the budding romance between the stern King Cálélairë *(Quenya: light summer)* and the cheeky elleth, Vaháyawen, but Tirion refused to tell her any more about it, insisting she discover the details for herself. She intended to settle in later, perhaps in a hidden nook somewhere to prevent interruptions, and devour them all, one after the other. It was immensely amusing and even a little flattering to think she had possibly inspired some mystery elf to write such tales.

“Good afternoon, Elizabeth.”

Breezing into the room fresh from patrol, Legolas pecked a light kiss to her cheek in greeting and curiously lifted a child’s drawing from the middle of the desk and gave her an amused smile. The chalk rendering was obviously meant to be the king and queen, as both wore crowns, with the male being depicted with yellow hair and the female with dark hair. The enormous smiles on both faces were nothing less than hilarious and adorable.

“I don’t know that I would call this a true likeness of either of you, but I would bet you don’t mind that in the least, considering the elfling it came from.”
Elizabeth nodded, chuckling. “Lîrdor is such a quiet little chap, but I can’t help having a soft spot for him. He’s just like Feren but with the occasional flash of Tirion peeking out.” She picked up the first volume from the stack of books, absently flipping through it. “Do you know he asked me last week if he could be my bond-mate, and I quote, ‘after you’re finished with King Thranduil’?”

Legolas laughed heartily and smirked. “Perhaps I should tell Adar that there is a rival for your affections, and he had best be on his guard. But I’m most curious as to what your response was to the precocious elfling?”

Lowering her chin with the hint of a smile, the Elvenqueen shrugged innocently. “I told him he was a bit confused as to how things work and needed to immediately go to his father and demand he explain everything there was to know about marriage, and especially about where elf babies come from.”

Wincing, the prince shook his head. “You didn’t really, did you?” At her smirk, he grinned. “Feren won’t want to speak to you again, and he certainly won’t be open to having more elflings if you cause difficulties for him.”

“Ha!” she said smugly, “that’s where you are wrong. Elirien is already pregnant again, and Feren needs practice explaining the birds and the bees to his children.” She ran a finger across the drawing again and smiled wistfully.

Peering closely at her face, Legolas suddenly sighed, the sound full of ten years worth of exasperation, both his and hers, and the many conversations they had had on the topic of babies. “For the hundredth time, Elizabeth, just tell him to give you a child. Demand it, even; it is your right!”

Frowning, Elizabeth gave Legolas a bemused look, her voice disapproving. “You know I have spoken to him about it and he is aware of my wishes. I won’t push; love does not try to force its will on another. A gift cannot be taken, it must be freely given. I would rather remain childless forever than to devolve into a miserable nagging and demanding shrew. Plus, you know your father never does anything without considering every possibility and all angles. I’m sure there must be a reason for his continued reticence which will likely be obvious in due time.”

The prince made a disgusted noise in the back of his throat. “You are both ridiculous and I give up.” He picked up one of the books and flipped through it, the irritation on his face giving way to a smile. “These are actually quite entertaining. Have you not read them before?”
She shook her head. “I was not even aware of the series until Tirion told me of it recently.” Tilting her head, she smiled teasingly. “I’m rather surprised you read stories like these. I understand they’re chock full of romance.”

“Also a great deal of fighting, written by someone who understands real battle. And beheadings,” he said with raised brows.

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “Typical male, you are.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing. Who doesn’t enjoy the idea of a great quest affecting the fate of the entire world, as explored in books two and three?”

Snatching the book away, she glared at the prince. “Legolas! Don’t tell me what’s going to happen, I want to read it for myself. Now, shoo! I have a meeting with some ladies to prepare for.”

He sauntered to the door, a mysterious smile on his lips as he turned back to face her. “And just how is the secret project to make new, fancy robes for the king coming along?”

Her mouth fell open in shock. “You aren’t supposed to know about that! No one is, it’s a surprise.”

Legolas lifted a careless shoulder and smirked. “The king has spies everywhere, you know. But don’t worry, I’m sure Adar will act convincingly surprised all the same.” Elizabeth stared at him in dismay until he walked out.

Once he was out of sight, she went across the room and grabbed her bag of supplies before going to meet the other ladies helping her make the enormous tapestry to hang in the feasting hall, depicting scenes from Greenwood’s history, including a panel of the Sunshine King and the Dragon. She smiled smugly to herself, glad her idea of a red herring to throw Thranduil off the trail seemed to work, and her true surprise would remain a secret a while longer.

Elirien sat down and blew gently on the steaming cup of tea she held in her hands, smiling at the complete look of shock on the queen’s face, her own cup of tea sitting forgotten on the table in front of her. It was several minutes before Elizabeth seemed to suddenly snap out of her private thoughts.
and glanced at her friend with a hesitant smile.

“But are you absolutely certain? There’s no mistake?”

Rubbing a hand across the small swell of her belly, Elirien smiled serenely. “I am a healer and I well know what I felt, Elizabeth. Why do you doubt me?”

With wide eyes, Elizabeth shook her head. “No! I don’t doubt you, of course not. I’m just surprised to hear this news, that’s all.” Elirien beckoned her closer, and when the queen sat beside her, she took one of Elizabeth’s hands and pressed it firmly against her abdomen, both of them smiling at the shifting movement there. After a moment, Elizabeth withdrew her hand and sat back, looking thoughtful.

When she spoke, her voice was quiet. “Honestly Elirien, I don’t know what to say.”

Shrugging, the elleth smiled and reached out to hold the queen’s hand. “Just say you are happy.”

Nodding slowly, Elizabeth squeezed her friend’s hand. “I am happy, you know I am. I’ll be giddy once it sinks in.”

Elirien smiled radiantly, her hazel eyes full of affection and a pleased satisfaction. “And I am happy too, Elizabeth...for both of you.”

Thranduil looked up when Elizabeth came bursting into the room and walked to where he sat, the grin she wore seeming to stretch from ear to ear. He pushed back from his large desk and turned his chair to face her, wondering at what had caused the jumble of happy emotions emanating from her. He had felt a strong spark of excitement earlier from their bond, and thought then that something must have greatly pleased or touched her. She immediately sat herself on his lap and proceeded to cover his face in eager kisses, making him chuckle.

“To what do I owe this sudden outpouring of affection, Bess?”
Leaning back to meet his eyes, she beamed at him. “How can I not show affection at the magnitude of the gift you have chosen to give me? Is this to celebrate the twenty years we have been married? If so, it is my favorite gift, ever.” While she continued to scatter kisses across his cheek to his neck, he frowned and gripped her arms lightly.

“What gift do you speak of? I have given you nothing of late.”

She grasped one of his hands and placed it low on her belly. “Don’t be obtuse, you must know I’m speaking of our child. Elirien examined me and informed me that I was with child after I complained I was feeling a little strange lately. You should have told me sooner!”

Still frowning, he grasped her chin and looked deeply into her eyes, his frown soon changing to a look of surprise. Placing his hand back on her belly, he concentrated for a moment before looking at her with a puzzled smile.

“I do not know how it came to pass, but I feel the faint spark of life, and our child does indeed grow inside you.”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “What do you mean you don’t know how it came to pass? You put it there, you ridiculous elf.”

He lifted a brow and gave her a wry look. “I mean that I did not will this conception into being. It must have happened spontaneously. Such would never occur with an elven female, but with you being of mankind, apparently it is within the realm of possibility, however unexpected I may find it.”

Her brows furrowed, her eyes falling away from his. “Do you mean to say you do not want this child,” she asked in a small voice, “since you did not choose it?”

Thranduil cupped her cheek, bringing her watery gaze back to meet the tender love in his. “Of course I want this child, elves greatly value all young. I want every child you shall give me, but I had not yet felt the time was right, and now it apparently is. I couldn’t be happier about this, mîr nin. (my treasure) You must believe me.”

“I do believe you,” she said, her apprehension instantly melting away. She smiled and eagerly returned his gentle kiss, then wound her arms around his neck, laid her head against his shoulder and sighed. “Do you think this is a boy or a girl I carry?”
He combed his fingers though her long, dark waves. “It is much too early to get any sense of gender, I think. Was Elirien able to say how long ago conception occurred?” He frowned, shaking his head in bemusement. “It is a very strange thing that I do not know that, nor was I even aware that you carry a child.”

“She thought no more than two months, based on what she felt,” she said, rubbing a soothing hand across his chest. “And that lack of knowing when exactly conception occurs is something all mankind experiences, as pregnancy is often only noted after the absence of the monthly bleeding cycle.”

He pursed his lips thoughtfully. “But you do not have such cycles.”

She shook her head. “No, I have them very infrequently. Not long after we married I spoke to the Chief Healer Nedirien about it, and she said I am much like an elf, as I only bleed once or twice a century, at most. Perhaps it is the way of immortal females?” She shrugged and lifted her head to look at him. “Do you think I should give up riding until after the birth?”

“You must do whatever you feel would be wisest. Perhaps speak again with Elirien or Nedirien and ask their counsel as to whether you should change any of your behavior, or continue as you have. I do not have sufficient knowledge of these matters for human females to be able to advise you properly.”

“Very well,” she said with a nod. “I shall visit the healing rooms later, I think.”

“Or I can summon them to appear before you, if you prefer,” he murmured, brushing his lips against her cheek.

“No, I’ll go there,” she laughed. “I think I am still more than capable of walking, love. When I’m too fat to move, then you can order everyone to come to me.”

He chuckled, his hand returning to rest against her still flat belly. “I eagerly anticipate watching you blossom with new life.”

“When you put it that way, it makes the prospect of growing as large as a house far less daunting. Oh!” She sat straighter on his lap, her eyes wide. “I think I’ll go down to the kitchens. I have a sudden, oddly desperate need for crisps covered in salt and vinegar.”
Grinning, she stood and hurried out, leaving Thranduil staring after her with a smile that slowly faded when his brows knit with worry. The strong feeling of disquiet and foreboding he experienced every time he contemplated having a child with Elizabeth was still present. If anything, it had increased dramatically since her announcement, and he was no closer to understanding why.

“`It is clearly a son,” Istril, the chief baker said, kneading the lump of dough on the work table in front of her with focused energy and nodding sagely.

Renion smiled from the tall kitchen stool he was perched on and reached for another fresh slice of bread, still warm from the oven. “How can you be so certain of this? The queen has only been with child four months. If she carries for a full year like an elf, surely it is yet too soon to know, and even if she carries for the shorter nine months of her own kind, she is still not quite halfway.”

Istril shook her head, separating the large lump of dough into four sections to form loaves in preparation for baking. “I am certain because of what she craves to eat. Always something salty or her favorite of very sour pickled vegetables, and never sweet things as is common when carrying females.”

“But that is not always true,” Renion said laughingly. “My sister ate both sweet and salty things when she carried her daughter. What say you to that?”

Wiping her hands on a thick towel, Istril smiled and shrugged. “Eithadis had no cravings at all, and ate anything and everything in sight. The theory only works if there are strong cravings experienced.”

“I suppose I must concede to your superior knowledge on the subject. Anything to do with carrying and birthing young still remains a great mystery to me, despite all the births we have seen in recent days.”

Istril took a sharp knife and began cutting a cooled loaf of bread into slices. “Why is Thandir not with you today? Is he yet on duty with the queen?”

“Nay,” Renion said, expertly snatching the crusty end piece from the newly cut bread and winking when Istril narrowed her eyes at him. “He is exercising and grooming the queen’s horse. Since she has stopped riding, her stallion has grown somewhat melancholy, so Thandir has been taking time to
show him extra care."

“That is very thoughtful of him to show such kindness to the poor animal,” she murmured. She turned and took a clean kitchen towel and placed several warm slices of bread on it, then wrapped it up. “Here, you may take this to him. A good deed should not deprive him of something to eat.”

Renion took the food she thrust at him and grinned. “I’m sure he will enjoy it all the more since your sweet hands were the ones to touch it.”

She blushed and looked away, returning to slicing bread. “Stop teasing me or I shall do the same to you.” Glancing up, Istril smiled knowingly. “Naradis has received enough flowers from you to fill all of Greenwood these past fifty years. But then, so has Iûldwen.”

Renion grinned, completely unrepentant. “I cannot make up my mind between them, as they are both equally lovely and pleasant. Although, perhaps I also find them equally dull.” He reached out suddenly and took Istril’s hand that wasn’t holding the knife and kissed it, looking up to catch her surprised gaze. “Or will you never admit to yourself why I spend so much time here, with you?”

She swallowed with eyes still wide. “You are teasing me again, Renion.”

His eyes sparkled briefly with humor before sharpening into seriousness. “No, Istril, I am not.” He released her hand and turned toward the door, his charming smile in place once more. “Put some thought into it. I shall see you tomorrow.”

Istril stared at the empty doorway for a full minute before she shook herself from her thoughts. She started slicing the bread again with great gusto, a soft smile on her lips.

Thranduil sat listening to his Captain give report, with the three commanders of the day watches each waiting to take their turn. He appeared as interested and attentive as he always did, but inside he was anything but, his apprehension growing with every moment that slipped past with exaggerated slowness.

The first wave of sorrow was almost as light and gentle as a spring breeze when it drifted across the
bond, and nothing to give undue alarm. But the next swell of pain that struck him was so intensely powerful, raw and primal, that it nearly stole his breath while it sent his heart into a sharp, staccato rhythm.

Gripping the arms of his throne, he forced himself to be still and endure until the elves before him finished speaking, and he was able to say the necessary words to dismiss them, though he scarcely heard himself speak. When they moved beyond the chamber, he was down the steps of his throne and well on his way to the royal residence, where the pulses of his awareness were focused.

He knew not what to expect, but based on the agony Elizabeth was projecting, seemingly unaware through their bond, he knew it must be dire, indeed. Gathering what calm he could, he pushed it to her while he sped his steps, coming to a startled stop at a trail of blood that went from the door of the water closet and down the narrow hallway that connected to their bathing room.

Following the red drops, he found Elizabeth dressed in nothing but a blue robe and sitting on the tiled floor, leaning back against the wall near the water, clutching something bundled in her lap. The path of blood ended beside her and her legs were stained with dark color where it had dried. When she looked up at him, glassy-eyed, his own grief stabbed sharply across the bond, immediately realizing what she held. Her pained gaze dropped back down to the tiny form he could see clearly when she straightened her bent leg.

“I’m so sorry. I have failed you,” she said in a low voice.

His brows knit tightly together while he inhaled slowly, awash in their shared pain and trying to process what had happened. How did he respond to this? For all his long years, this was an entirely new kind of grief he had never had to face; had never even considered the possibility of it before that moment. Letting his love guide him, he walked over and lowered himself to the floor to sit beside her, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and pulling her against him to kiss her temple.

Her voice sounded detached, nothing like her usual self. It was flat and nearly void of all emotion. “You’ll get my blood all over you. I fear I’ve made a terrible mess.”

He reached over and scooped her up, carefully sitting her to rest across his lap. “Do you think that concerns me?” he asked gently. “I care only for the pain I feel in your heart, mîr nin. (my treasure) And do not apologize to me or think you are responsible, as though there were anyone to blame for such a sorrow as this. Pain and grief inevitably visit every life, and it often arrives from directions we cannot control or anticipate. I have had a vague feeling of disquiet of late, but I did not foresee this.”

She met his eyes, the first of the numbness she was functioning under slowly beginning to crack in
his presence. “He’s clearly a boy, even though so very small. I’ve been wracking my brain but I still can’t understand… Why did this have to happen to us?”

He touched the little hand of their lost child, which was not even as big as his fingertip, but looked in every way perfect. A person in miniature, with tiny hands and feet, and small, distinct features, like an artist’s exquisite sculpture. Despite the deep, wrenching agony of sorrow, he could not help but look on in awed wonder at the sight while he pondered her words, well understanding her need to question what had happened and rail against the blow fate had dealt them. How many times in his much earlier years had he done the very same?

“I have found it is better never to ask such questions when faced with a difficult loss. It neither changes the outcome nor comforts the wounds of a grieving heart. Tragedy has struck, and that is the reality we must endeavor to come to terms with.”

She raised her hand and curled her thumb and first finger into the skin of her closed eyelids, her breath coming in sharp gasps as the dam of emotions burst and tears finally began to flow. He embraced her, both with his arms and through their bond, surrounding her as best he could in all the warmth of his comfort.

“Release all your pain to me, mîr nin. I would willingly bear it for you.”

She shook her head, voice coming in a choked sob. “No, I don’t want you to take it all yourself, Thranduil. Just--- do not leave me...and please hold me tighter. I cannot face this without you.”

He pulled her even closer and exhaled a breath, doing nothing to deny his own hot tears where they gathered in his eyes and flowed down his cheeks, while Elizabeth laid her head against his chest and wept bitterly. The sounds of her suffering affecting him on the deepest level, his desire to protect and comfort her greater than all else, even his own sorrow.

“You are not alone, Bess, nor shall you be;” he told her in a voice roughened by emotion. “You know I have sworn never to be parted from you. I am your sword and your shield through any trial or grief, and I love you more than my own life. So cry, beloved. I am here for you. I will always be here for you.”

His words made her weep harder, even as they brought the vital balm of his comfort and love. Though there was little that could truly assuage the sharpness of the ache that was the loss of their infant son; the path ahead of them no longer filled with excited daydreams or joyful anticipation, but only the painful reality of suffering, and the unwelcome promise of aching, empty arms.
They buried their son they had privately named Hêniest, meaning *wished child*, in the northern woods in Elizabeth’s favorite grove of elms, where shafts of sunlight easily penetrated to the forest floor and the air was crisp and fresh. She took to visiting the place frequently in the many months that followed, to bring fresh flowers, eventually spending more time there than in the halls in an effort to avoid the pitying and disturbed looks she often caught from the corner of her eye before the elves managed to hide it behind their stoic masks. She could imagine what they all thought, and what the gossip likely was, as she thought it herself: she was nothing but the queen of failure...

Even the kindness of Legolas or her other friends could not alleviate her misery, as no other she knew had gone through what she had and couldn’t begin to relate to it. Elves did not miscarry, and stillbirths were equally rare. She was of mankind, with many of the accompanying imperfections, and despite her immortality, she could not escape all the burdens of her own race. No one in the entire kingdom really understood what she had gone through or the pain she still carried.

*Except one,* her mind whispered. *He also suffers the same pain; the pain that you alone have brought him to.*

She closed her eyes in defeat, unable to fight the harsh words in her mind, her fingers stroking the soft petals of the white lilies she had laid on her son’s grave. The perfume was a poignant reminder of the memories of past griefs through the centuries, including the losses of her parents and brother.

“But this one is all my fault,” she whispered.

A quiet sigh broke through her misery, making her lift her head. “It is not your fault, Elizabeth. You know there is no fault in this, though you stubbornly refuse to see otherwise.” Thranduil crossed the space separating them, answering the question in her eyes when she looked to where her faithful guards usually kept watch.

“I sent them away.” His eyes slid across the lilies and the tiny grave with a small flash of pain, which deepened when his gaze rested on her face. Reaching down, he pulled her to her feet and enveloped her in his firm embrace.

“Come away and ride with me. There is a secret place in this part of the woods you have not yet discovered, even further to the north.”
“To the north?”

He gave a single nod. “Yes.”

Elizabeth looked to where his great elk stood, a descendant of the noble beast lost outside Erebor, tossing his head and stamping the ground in greeting when their eyes met and bringing a slight smile to her lips. It was clear her horse had been sent back with her guards, leaving no other option than to ride with him.

“Very well,” she murmured, allowing him to lead her to his mount and lift her up, quickly settling behind her and pulling her close. He leaned down, his arms surrounding her and brushed his lips against her hair as the elk started walking.

She sighed and relaxed back against him, admiring the beautiful green leaves of the thick canopy overhead. It had been a long while since she had last ridden with the King, and never once without guards. The unexpected intimacy of being alone with him bringing back the memory of the first time they had ridden together in such a way with his cloak around her, making her chuckle. His eyes filled with relief at the sound, his fingers lightly stroking against her ribs.

“The sound of your laughter is most welcome, Bess.”

She tangled her fingers with his. “I was just remembering the first time we rode together, that terrible, wonderful day with the damned dragon, when you became my savior and hero even more than you already were.”

His mind’s eye filled with the memory, lifting his lips in a smile. “Was I your hero before then? I did not know.”

Reaching back, Elizabeth pulled his head down to meet hers, kissing him. Her eyes moved over his face before she released him and turned forward again. “You’ve been my hero for quite a long time, Thranduil. Since our very first meeting, in fact.”

He pondered her words as they rode, a smile on his lips when they stopped and he slipped off the elk and lifted her down into his arms, cradling her face in his hands while he kissed her. “You recognized me before I recognized you, Elizabeth. I think perhaps that makes you the wiser of the two of us in the ways of the heart.”
She frowned, ready to question him as to the meaning of his words when he nudged her forward and she got her first glimpse of where he had brought her. Gasping, she walked quickly toward the enchanting sight, the sun shining on the pool ahead of them showing the crystal clear water in shades of aquamarine and cobalt blue, rippling in the light breeze. Smooth black stone lined the edge of the water hole, with larger boulders scattered naturally about that seemed ideal for sitting or lounging.

“It’s safe to drink or bathe in,” he murmured. “It’s fed directly by a warm underground spring.”

Thranduil took off his cloak and laid it out to the far side of the pool, then sat on one of the larger rocks to remove his boots and tunic. She pursed her lips, scanning the trees around them.

“Are your guards not able to see us here?”

He shook his head and stood, removing the last of his raiment and setting it aside. “No, they are near enough to hear, should I signal them, but not within sight.”

She stood transfixed, the twenty plus years of their marriage doing nothing to lessen her fascination with his naked form, and his golden skin glowed even more brightly in the pure light of day where he stood in perfect unconcern and confidence before her. He strode to the shallow end and walked down the natural slope into the water, smiling up at her in challenge when he stood chest-deep.

“Will you not join me? You will find the water warm and your companion most accommodating.”

Elizabeth smiled faintly. “Accommodating in what way?”

His earnest blue eyes captured hers. “In any way you need or desire me to be, gûr nin.” (my heart)

She moved to the closest boulder, sitting long enough to remove her shoes, then standing again to peel away her riding dress and undergarments, conscious of the weight of his gaze while she finished unwinding her long braid.

He turned to watch her walk down into the pool, extending a hand and pulling her to him. He brushed a kiss against her temple and lowered his head, capturing her lips and sliding his hands across her back, soon pulling away when he felt a slight reticence from her.
Looking in her eyes, he observed all the conflicting emotions there, many she tried to conceal from him, as well as the way she struggled to hold his gaze. He pursed his lips and drew a deep breath, considering what words she most needed to hear.

“Do you hold me responsible or blame me for the loss of our child?” He tucked a lock of her dark hair behind her ear as she gasped, her eyes going wide.

“Of course I don’t blame you, love, you are at no fault.” Her arms around his waist tightened in emphasis. “How could you possibly think something so ridiculous?”

His eyes softened, his voice gentling. “It is as ridiculous as you insisting on shouldering blame and being buried beneath the cruel recriminations you heap on yourself while shutting me out of your suffering to grieve alone. You must release the weight of this unreasonable guilt you carry, Bess, before it consumes you from the inside out. You have begun to fade from this, but I will not allow it.”

She gave an involuntary smile at the emphatic declaration, but finally began to recognize the truth in his words, and how unfair she had been to him while entirely consumed with her own grief, some of the heaviness beginning to slowly lift from her heart. Looking up, she searched his eyes as she finally gave voice to her greatest fear.

“But what if it happens again? What if I can’t ever…?”

“No.” He shook his head and cupped her cheek. “It will not; your womb sleeps now until I awaken it, which I will when the time is right. You must be patient a little longer and trust me with this.”

Sighing, she ran her fingers across his ribs and up to his chest, pressing her hands flat against the muscled expanse. “I do trust you.”

“Do you?” He buried his fingers in her hair, searching her eyes. “Then let me care for you. Allow my love to heal your pain, as yours does for mine.”

“Thranduil, I was afraid to burden you, but I---- I do need you. So much,” she whispered, her eyes revealing her vulnerability and continuing to speak her desperation and longing for him until he leaned down and kissed her, drawing her closer and scattering her thoughts like leaves in the wind.
Later, they basked in the sun on his cloak, Thranduil leaning back, supporting his weight on his hands and smiling down at Elizabeth where she lay looking up at him with eyes that appeared wholly green and once again shone with the brightness of love instead of being dimmed by grief and pain.

A carpet of tiny white and yellow flowers surrounded them, and he had been twining the blossoms into her hair, creating a delicate floral crown, bringing to mind the words of a song the Silvans loved to sing. He reached for one of her dark locks of hair, which had dried into a spiraling curl and wound it around his finger and began to sing to her.

“My featherbed is deep and soft,
And there I’ll lay you down,
I’ll dress you all in yellow silk
And on your head a crown.”

~0~

“For you shall be my lady love,
And I shall be your lord.
I’ll always keep you warm and safe,
And guard you with my sword.”

She smiled and sat up, singing the next part of the song back to him. Elizabeth adored when he sang to her, which he did so infrequently that she considered it a real gift and a treat.

“And how she smiled and how she laughed,
the maiden of the tree.
She spun away and said to him,
No featherbed for me.

~0~

“I’ll wear a gown of golden leaves,
And bind my hair with grass,
But you can be my forest love,
And me your forest lass.”

He stroked his fingers softly against the side of her neck, leaning nearer until she was lying back again, looking up at him and listening once more to the words of his song.

“My featherbed is deep and soft,
And there I'll lay you down,
I'll dress you all in yellow silk
And on your head a crown.”

~0~

“For you shall be my lady love,
And I shall be your lord.
I'll always keep you warm and safe,
And guard you with my sword.”

She grinned. “I think you have dressed me in nothing but flowers, my lord.”

“That is my favored choice of attire for my queen,” he murmured, kissing her and leaning up to smile down on her.

Reaching a hand to the top of her head, she felt the blossoms in her hair. “You prefer me to wear flowers?”

“And me.” He nudged her thighs open and settled immediately between her legs, smirking.

She drew in a sharp breath at his sudden, overwhelming invasion, her lids drifting lower over her eyes in pleasure. “Wear you, or be part of you?”

“Both,” he whispered into her ear, pulling her close and stealing the last of her ability to speak for a
time.

Feren leaned against a large elm, watching the other guards sitting scattered about where they waited idle with their horses close by, until they should be called for or the king and queen returned. He crossed his arms and suppressed a sigh. The months following the queen’s loss had been very hard on the royal couple, as well as on all those who cared for them but were powerless to do anything but sympathize.

As someone who was privy to much that others never saw, he knew the king had been deeply concerned at just how far into grief the queen had descended, and that was the reason he had come seeking her today. He hoped the king would be able to reach her and affect a change, for it was no secret that mankind could fade from grief just as surely as elfkind could.

Watching his wife grow large with their second child, he felt almost guilty for his own happiness in the face of their sorrow. He loved his king and had come to love his queen with equal devotion. How did you even begin to offer condolences for such loss when you had never experienced it yourself? What was there to say that wouldn’t be useless, empty words? Feren had no answer, and as a result said nothing. But he found himself praying to Iluvatar that his lord and lady might soon be returned to their previous felicity.

Thandir walked over and met the Captain’s gaze, and though he said nothing, his eyes were full of the same worry and sadness for their queen that many of them wore. Renion stood and cocked his head to the side, listening, then came to join them.

“Do you hear that?” Renion asked, the beginnings of a smile curling his lips.

All the guards fell silent as a familiar song came to them on the wind in the king’s deep voice, and the queen’s sweet soprano followed. Their voices were richly full of love and joy, and many of the guards broke into smiles at the sound.

“Thank Elbereth,” Thandir breathed, only loud enough for Feren and Renion to hear him. “Perhaps all will be well now.”

Feren nodded, strong conviction in his brown eyes. “Yes.” The final notes of the song faded away and the Captain smiled at last. “I believe it will be.”
~0~

My Feather Bed by Karliene
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

*AUDIBLE GASP* After 5 months I have finally managed to break through my block for this bridging chapter so I can update this story. It's not the longest chapter, but it shouldn't be too terribly long before I get the next one edited and up, since it's mostly already written. :)

The sound of children's happy laughter rang out, bright and clear, a perfect match to the blue sky and cheerful sun that shone down on the large gathering of parents and elflings milling around on the practice fields that had been temporarily commandeered for the occasion. The three day Children's Festival was a new addition to Greenwood's annual feast-day calendar, but one that was enthusiastically received and instantly well liked. With the pronounced population growth that had taken place since the Battle for Erebor, as it had come to be known, there was an ever greater need for teaching and entertainment tailored for the very young.

Elizabeth had thrown herself into the planning and execution of the event wholeheartedly, enlisting as many elves as possible to work booths and tables and provide an engaging and educational experience for the little ones. Part of her road to healing in the years following the loss of her child had been to concentrate on assisting Thranduil in the running of the kingdom, with special focus on events and services that would be of help to families with new youngsters. In addition, she enjoyed spending more time with Elirien and her boys, Lîrdor and Mindonir, and becoming an honorary doting aunt.

It was the last day of the event, an exhibition of sorts, giving the children a chance to show off what they had learned. Mylion led a group that Mindonir was part of, having taught them some songs and given them an introduction to various musical instruments. Standing in the center of the crowd to perform, their sweet, high voices rang out like a chorus of angels, and Mylion looked on the elflings with evident satisfaction at how well they had done.

As the finale, there was an archery contest for the older children, overseen by Prince Legolas, who had spent time patiently instructing and correcting all the young that came to learn from him. When Lîrdor managed to place first over all his peers, Elirien beamed, grinning from ear to ear, and though Feren scarcely smiled, the look of pride in his eyes was unmistakable.

The King declared the festival concluded, and the crowds of Silvans began to disperse. Those that had volunteered during the event set to cleaning away all the equipment and supplies. As dusk finally fell, Legolas was enlisted to carry a box of yarn and other materials for Elizabeth that she had used to make yarn dolls for all the littles to take home.

She walked into her office, just moments behind the prince, and set down the small box she carried on a side table and sighed with relief. She glanced at Legolas and cocked her head when she noticed he was facing her desk with his back to her, standing stiff and unmoving.
Walking over to join him, she laid a hand on his arm and frowned at how tense he was. Noting the furtive movement as he jerked his hand behind his thigh, she caught sight of what he held, immediately recognized the familiar paper and felt her heart drop. She had long since realized the discovery of her closely held secret was inevitable, but she wasn’t sure what it meant that it was Legolas who had found out about it.

Dropping her hand from his arm, she shook her head and drew a breath. "I'll assume from your body language you discovered one of the notes from my cowardly critic?"

He turned toward her, his face harsh with anger as he lifted the small paper. "One? How many more of these foul messages have you received? Why have you never mentioned it?"

"May I see it, please?" she asked, holding her hand out. He shook his head, his brows furrowing.

"You don’t need to see it. It's a slur against you, but also a threat."

She moved to the drawers of her desk and opened the bottom one, pulling out a wooden box with a lid and setting it on the desk. She removed the lid and pulled a loose stack of paper notes from it and threw it on the top of her desk carelessly, sending them flying in every direction before she plopped down into her chair and rubbed her brow in weariness.

"Is it anything like those?" She glanced at several before looking away, saddened again at just how cruel they all were, and wondering what she had done to provoke such feelings.

_HUMAN WHORE_

_THE DEATH OF YOUR CHILD WAS A MERCY, MONGREL_

_DIE, CUNT!_

_REMOVE YOUR FILTH FROM GREENWOOD, OR IT WILL BE YOUR DEATH_

Legolas moved forward, scanning several before he crumpled the note in his hand in disgust, and pitched it onto the pile amongst all the other racial slurs, threats or sexually derogatory insults. He snarled with anger that anyone had dared to write such things about Elizabeth, and disrespect their queen in so vile a way.

"How long?" he demanded. "How long has this been going on and who else is aware? Why was I not informed?"

She dropped her eyes and began gathering the notes into a pile, tucked them back into the box, then hid it away in the drawer again. "Twenty years, give or take," she said quietly, finally meeting his eyes with a shrug. "And we are the only ones that know. I have not told a single creature, and I must ask you not to reveal this to your father. Not yet. It would worry him unnecessarily."

He stared at her with a frown and shook his head, reeling at the idea of her keeping silent and suffering alone, while twenty years worth of vitriolic hate was spewed at her. Obviously, some misguided attempt to shield her loved ones; fundamentally flawed, but as always the case with Elizabeth, done with the purest intentions. The thought was a frustrating one and only increased his anger against the nameless villain.

"Adar should know. You should have already told him, Elizabeth. He is not just your husband, but your king. This is high treason to threaten the life of the queen, and something must be done without delay before these threats turn to action!"
Elizabeth stood and went to him, resting her hand on his arm beseechingly. "Alright, yes, you're right and I agree with you. If you can find out who is responsible, then we can bring it to the king, but not before. I beg you to do this, Legolas...for me."

He wavered in uncertainty, staring down into her pleading eyes before he found himself reluctantly nodding, against his better judgement. "I will agree to keep silent for a few days, but only because I intend to make it my focus to quickly discover who is behind this and act accordingly. This is a very serious crime, Elizabeth, and it carries the penalty of either death or banishment, at the king's discretion."

She nodded, well aware of the penalties for threatening a ruling monarch, and grateful the solitary burden she had carried for so many years was lifted, now that Legolas knew.

"To be honest, I'm glad you were the one to discover it. It is a relief to have you as a confidant in this, going forward. I realize prejudice exists everywhere, and I know they're just words, but even so...words can wound as surely as arrows."

"I'm sorry, Elizabeth." Legolas brows furrowed while he searched her eyes. "I know the anniversary is coming up in a few days. Are you...well?"

She smiled sadly and nodded. "In some ways, it's strange to think it's only been ten years since the loss. It feels more like a hundred years since it happened. But yes, I'm well, thank you for asking. You and your father are my family, and I'm so grateful to have you both. I truly could not wish for more."

Legolas bent down and kissed her cheek. "We're fortunate to have you, brennil vuin. (beloved lady) I will go and make some discreet inquiries now, but shall I see you for practice tomorrow?"

Elizabeth shook her head, moving to the small box of supplies she still intended to put away before she went to meet the king for dinner. "I'm desperate to get out and go riding tomorrow, but I will come train with you again before the end of the week, I give you my word."

He nodded, pausing in the doorway. "If I learn anything definitive tonight, I will come and find you as soon as I can."

She smiled. "There's no rush. After twenty years of this cowardly foolishness, I seriously doubt circumstances will change anytime soon. I have no fear for my safety."

Legolas nodded but said nothing more and set out to question Galion and Feren, hoping they would be able to offer insight and tell him what he needed to know. Regardless of who was responsible, he fully intended to see that they paid for what they'd done. For the crime of threatening Elizabeth, he knew his father would never be satisfied with banishment as the punishment, and he felt exactly the same way.

Elizabeth smiled and drew a deep breath, tilting her face up in pleasure to catch the narrow patches of blue sky that managed to be visible through the trees. With all the responsibility and endless duties to attend to in the halls and with the festival, there were few things she enjoyed more than the freedom of riding in the woods once more. Glancing back, she tried to recall the names of her new guards, with her usual protectors of Thandir and Renion being off on their day of rest.

Slowing her horse, she looked to the armored elf on her left. "Laston?" she questioned uncertainly, and he grinned and pointed to the other elf.

"I am Cildor, my queen, that is Laston."
She shrugged, a gleam of humor in her eyes. "I had a fifty percent chance of being right, and being human, I do occasionally make mistakes. Do the two of you know this path well?"

Laston urged his mount until he was even with the queen's horse. "Not as well as the eastern direction, but well enough. Do you wish to turn back now, my lady?"

"Nooooo," she said, drawing out the word and gripping her reins, then leaning forward with a bright, teasing smile. "I think we should race!" Her stallion shot forward in a burst of speed, her laughter trailing behind her while her guards grinned at the challenge and hurried their mounts to catch up.

Thranduil looked over the maps spread across the table in front of him, frowning at all the ground they had continued to lose to the spiders and the ever encroaching evil in his realm, daring to briefly wonder what worse was yet to come. They had not seen the last of the darkness, that much he was certain of.

He leaned forward and rested his hand against the parchment of the terrain of Greenwood, or Mirkwood, as it was called by so many, thinking of all that had slipped away and how little had been gained during his reign. How different might it all have been if his father still ruled?

Stiffening his spine, he straightened to his full height, shying away from the scattered images and stabbing memories of that long-ago war and the wickedness of Mordor, that even after the passage of so much time were still too painful to contemplate. Some losses could never be recovered from, only endured.

He drew a deep breath and let the tension flow out of him, turning away from dark thoughts of past losses and the bleakness of grief and sorrow. Not all was failure and loss. He had also undeniably and unexpectedly gained. The kingdom was thriving, growing by leaps and bounds with so many births in recent years. In Legolas, he had a son any father would be proud of, and he had a wife he adored more than life itself. A hundred images and fleeting thoughts of Elizabeth glided past his mind's eye, melting the blue ice of his gaze by several degrees.

What had he heard her singing while bathing just yestereve? Since the beginning of their marriage when he had learned to understand and speak English, no longer were any of her muttered imprecations under her breath or softly spoken songs beyond his understanding. When she didn't realize he was listening was when he enjoyed doing it the most, thoroughly diverted by her frank, unguarded comments and listening to the seemingly endless repertoire of songs she somehow perfectly recalled from her memories. The words she had sung the previous night had resonated within him. The melody was not the most compelling, but even now, the simple lyrics replayed in his mind.

*She's like the wind through my tree*

*She rides the night next to me*

He looked up, eyes narrowing at the sound of quick-moving feet, and turned to meet Feren and the surprising sight of an elf he had not seen in many years. They both bowed before him, the silver-haired elf less deeply than his captain, making Thranduil's lips turn up slightly in a mocking smile.

"Haldir O Lórien," he murmured, "I was not expecting to see you in my kingdom unannounced. To what do I owe this pleasure?"

Haldir showed no sign of emotion on his stern features before he spoke. "Lord Thranduil, I come before you with an urgent message from Lady Galadriel. I rode here in all haste to deliver it to you.
She has seen something dire in her mirror and could not reach you through mind touch, and has sent me to warn you of imminent danger to your realm. A darkness covers your land and presses ever near. You must take steps to secure your borders, and the Lady further warned of a possible threat to your queen. She advised haste."

Already striding down the passage to the throne room, The Elvenking called back over his shoulder to the two elves following behind him.

"Feren, where is the queen now? Is she in her sitting room?"

"My lord," Feren began, the slight hesitance in his voice making the King stop and turn to look at him. "The queen is out riding with her guards. I believe they were set to take the western path."

Thranduil's lips tightened as he sent out a mind call.

Elizabeth, hear me!

When nothing but loud silence answered him, he willed his heart to keep to its steady rhythm and his mind to clarity and quickness of thought, slamming the door firmly on his clamoring emotions. Above all, he knew he must act swiftly and with outward calm.

"Feren, send out the call to arms and hurry to gather as many warriors as you can, then go to the armory. I must visit the vaults first, then I will meet you there."

With a brief bow, Feren departed and Haldir stepped forward, his blue eyes earnest. "Hir nin, le nathathon." (Sindarin: My lord, I will help you.)

Thranduil narrowed his eyes. "Aphado Feren." (Follow Feren.)

Nodding crisply, Haldir hurried away, and Thranduil took the winding paths leading down into the deeper part of the caverns to a place no other than him could access. Standing before the stone door, he spoke the spell that allowed entry, stepping into the room as soon as the door opened.

The temperature within was unnatural and colder than ice. He went directly to the far back of the large space and reached a hand toward the jewel-topped and blackened piece of ornate wood that stood all on its own in silent menace, hesitating briefly. It was a valuable relic his father had taken from a slain enemy sorcerer long ago and had remained locked away ever since. He had long felt there would come a time when he would need to call on its power, and he now knew this to be it.

Clenching his jaw with determination, he wrapped his fingers around the Staff of Rhudaur and lifted it, immediately blocking off the eager, dark whispers from his mind. After sealing the room once more, he retraced his steps and made his way to the armory.

"Where is my son?" he demanded, once inside, going immediately to his armor stand and nodding at Feren to help him don the protective pieces.

"My lord, Prince Legolas has been informed of the situation and immediately went to prepare," Feren said, quickly working at his task until Thranduil stood fully armored and armed.

Legolas entered the room moments later in his own armor with weapons strapped on, his face set in worried lines that quickly turned to alarm when he saw what his father held in his hand. He examined the king's face warily, stepping closer to speak in a low whisper.

"Adar, why have you brought the staff out? It is evil; surely you do not intend to try to use it."
Thranduil stared with resolve into his son's eyes and gripped his shoulder. "Legolas, my will is strong, and I intend to make use of every advantage available to me in these circumstances." His voice lowered and his grip tightened. "The situation may seem dire, but we will *not* lose the queen so long as we draw breath. Not this time."

Searching his father's gaze, he hesitated, wondering if he should take time to inform his father of the threatening notes Elizabeth had been receiving for so many years. It had only been two days since he himself had found out, and he had learned very little from either Feren or Galion as to who might have been in the queen's workplace who were anything other than trusted elves, and now, he was well out of time. Deciding against burdening his father further with useless knowledge, his hesitance changed into a firm resolve, his nostrils flaring when he inhaled deeply, placing his hand on top of his father's where it gripped his shoulder, and nodded.

"Nay, we shall not."

Half of the warriors on foot set off for the western woods, while other companies departed to the south. With no sure information to go on, there was no choice but to divide up their forces in an attempt to cover as much ground as quickly as possible to find the queen.

Those with the king followed him, the warriors making their way to the mounts saddled and waiting for them. Thranduil sat his young elk calmly, the very picture of majesty and command, but his fear hovered on the edges of his awareness, pressing against him and he continued to hear the haunting words of Elizabeth's song in his mind, even after they started to ride.

*She leads me through moonlight, only to burn me with the sun,*

*She's taken my heart, but she doesn't know what she's done.*

*Am I just fooling myself that she'll stop the pain?*

*...Living without her, I'd go insane.*

---

**Lyrics from She's Like the Wind by Patrick Swayze**

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~0~
Elizabeth returned slowly and painfully to consciousness, all the weight of her limp body pulling on her tightly bound wrists secured above her and sending pulses of agony up her arms. Wherever she was, it was dark, hot, and smelled more foul than Satan's armpits. Based on those deductions alone, she thought it very likely she was in hell, or an imitation of it.

How had she gotten to this terrible place? Wracking her memory, all she could recall was racing her guards down the path, and then...nothing. Whatever made her lose consciousness must have hit her very hard, as she could still feel an aching tenderness at the back of her skull without even moving. Her mouth tasted like bitter dust, and her whole head was starting to pound in earnest. Fleetingly, she wished she had some cool water to soothe her parched throat, but realized in the circumstances such a thing was highly unlikely.

Minutes later, a glaring light came from an open doorway, making her squint at the assault on her eyes and then her blood run cold when she saw what approached her. Dropping her gaze to the floor in hopes of not provoking the beast carrying the light, she forced herself to sit very still. Her eyes widened when it gently stroked a lock of her hair, then thrust a metal cup in front of her face.

"Pretty lady is thirsty. Grik brought water for you to drink and feel better."

Her mind raced while she considered whether she should drink what the thing offered. Was it possible they had any poison that could harm her? Unlikely. The cup was pushed against her mouth and tilted, giving her little choice but to drink or let it dribble down her front. Swallowing down the tepid liquid that had a strong metallic aftertaste, she examined the creature after he lowered the cup. Small, even for a common orc, he was gray-skinned, red-eyed and staring at her with a look of worship and devotion she had only seen once before from his kind.

"Oh no..."

Pulling out a small, wicked looking knife, he petted her hair again when he saw her eyes widen. "Pretty lady has had a drink, now it's my turn to drink again."

She stared in horrified revulsion and shrank back as much as her bonds allowed when it pushed up her sleeve, slid the tip of the blade into her skin, then stuck its tongue into the wound, preventing it from closing, and removed the blade. Sealing its mouth against her skin, it sucked strongly, making
horrible grunting and wheezing noises while it gulped her blood.

Completely disgusted, both by the feel of the thing's mouth against her and the sight and sound of it feasting on her blood like a vampire, she turned her face away, relieved when it finished with her a moment later.

Pulling her sleeve back into place, he gently petted her hair again and reached his gnarled hand out to rub her cheek in what she assumed was meant to be a soothing manner, but only ended up being further repulsive.

"Grik will take care of the magic lady and keep the good blood a secret." He nodded in a knowing way and grinned, showing off misshapen and blackened teeth. "I'll come back later with food. Lady must stay very quiet and not draw attention from Master. That would be bad."

Looking around to see how she was bound, and to learn all she could about where she was being held before the light disappeared when the orc withdrew, she sighed when she was completely plunged into darkness once more, having seen nothing beyond a plain, empty room where she was chained. Uncertain of what else to do, she clung to the warm inner comfort of her bond with the King and reached out with her mind in sudden, panicked desperation.

*Thranduil, can you hear me? Love? I'm being held prisoner somewhere in a hot, dark place with orcs. Please find me! I need you.*

The Elvenking pulled the reins firmly, bringing his mount to an abrupt halt. Holding his hand up to the other riders, he closed his eyes and turned his entire focus to the weak message he had just caught from Elizabeth. Something was hindering their ability to speak to one another, but he had heard her just enough, and doggedly followed the faint path back to her until he was certain of where she was and his worst fears were confirmed.

*I'm coming for you.*

With all of his considerable power, he pushed his words back to her, hoping she would be able to hear him through whatever darkness surrounded her. With clenched jaw, and a dark fury radiating from him, he turned to Legolas and Haldir.

"She is held captive by orcs, but I know where they keep her, and it is many hours ride from here. We must make haste deep into the western forest where the spiders have grown thick once more."

The anger on Legolas' face reflected the frustration churning impotently inside of him. Cursed *orcs*. Just like his mother… That was not at all what he had expected. If any of those foul beasts *dared* to harm her…

"She spoke to you?" the prince asked anxiously, his brow furrowed with worry.

The king nodded, his own brows lowered ominously as he struggled to hold his emotions in check. "There is some pressing dark that interferes, but yes, I heard her faintly. We must not delay."

Thranduil ordered Feren to ride swiftly and gather the additional forces and meet them. Turning their mounts in the direction of the dark stronghold they had destroyed once before, the company set off again with greater urgency, traveling at a punishing pace.

Elizabeth stumbled blindly along, wincing at the bruising grip of the two orcs that herded her down the long, dark passage, as well as the stench emanating from them.
Her little orc devotee, as she had come to think of him, had twice more come to tend her. It seemed she only had to think of her thirst or long for something to eat, and he would soon appear with her wished for item in hand. If it hadn't been so terrifying to think about how he was able to immediately know her needs, she might have been a bit more grateful.

If Grik had been one of the bigger orcs, like the two brutes dragging her along, she might have even thought his mysterious obedience and allegiance could be useful. But she struggled to see how such a scrawny, pitiful little orc could do anything to help or protect her from whatever fate awaited her at the end of the long hallway she traversed.

They entered a large chamber that had the feel of a throne room, with long, black banners hung against the walls with red symbols on them that looked like some kind of bursting star with an eye in the middle. The strange image sent a shiver of foreboding down her spine that increased when she saw a tall, lithe man dressed in dark robes sitting on an ornate throne of ebony, and with his sharp, aquiline features and hair of deepest black, his appearance seemed fitting for the setting. When he turned his gaze on her with eyes so pale a blue they appeared nearly leached of all color, she felt more fear than she ever had before. There was not a hint of kindness or pity in those eyes, but only what seemed to promise suffering and pain, and ultimately death. She would have to tread carefully.

"Bow before the master, woman!"

The larger of the two orcs gave her a hard shove when they stood before the man, making her lose her balance and fall to her knees. She stayed on her hands and knees and kept her eyes trained on the floor, waiting to see what the dark man would do. When he spoke, his voice was not the harsh, guttural tones that she expected. It was silky, smooth and deep; like what she imagined the serpent that tempted Eve in the Garden of Eden might have sounded like.

"Rise, girl."

She pushed to her feet, her eyes still glued to the floor and quickly decided on the persona that might be the best to take with such a frightening man.

"Please, my lord," she whispered, the fear in her gut adding a convincing quaver to her voice. "I am just a servant; a lady's maid."

"A servant, do you say?" He hummed thoughtfully. "How very quaint. And who is it you claim to serve?"

She swallowed when his voice kept the same tone, but somehow became more menacing than before. "I serve the Elvenqueen, lord. My father is one of the Lake men, and he owed a very great debt to the elf king which he could not pay, and I was sent as an indentured servant until all the arrears shall be accounted for."

He stood to his feet and came closer, pushing her chin up with the tip of the menacing staff he carried, and whatever wood it was made from burned into her skin like fire, making her suck in a pained breath. Holding it there for several seconds, clearly enjoying her discomfort, he loomed over her and stared down into her eyes. His lips finally lifted in a mockery of a smile.

"Bring in the elf."

Elizabeth's head turned to look and her heart thumped out a savage beat when a door opened and two more orcs entered with a familiar elleth walking between them, her head held high.

Lhînis?
She made no sound of the dismay she felt, or betrayed that she knew the healer in any way, but her heart began to pound faster when the dark man stepped off the dais and moved toward the elleth. "Is this the queen you promised to me when we struck our bargain?" he asked Lhînis in his smooth, serpent's voice.

She kept her gaze away from Elizabeth, refusing to meet her eyes and lifting her chin higher as her mouth twisted in a look of disgust, her voice dripping with disdain and contempt. "Yes, that is the usurper that dares think herself worthy to take Queen Calarien's place and rule over us, as if she ever could, meddling in things well beyond her understanding."

She finally raised her eyes to Elizabeth's, and the hatred there was so severe and apparent, the Elvenqueen wondered how she had never seen it in their previous interactions, few though they had been. Lhînis sneered, the first hint of triumph lifting her lips in a nasty, superior smile before she turned back to the man. "As long as she never returns to Greenwood, do whatever you please with her, only pay me the promised price now and let me depart before I am missed." Her eyes swept the room uncomfortably. "I do not like these halls."

"Lhînis," Elizabeth said quietly, "you must know this will never stand. It will be discovered what you've done, one way or another. With such a betrayal of your people..."

The elleth smoothed her skirts and smiled smugly. "I won't be discovered, and neither will Pedirion. No one would expect this of either of us, therefore they would never be looking for the signs. And it is not a betrayal to remove an infectious illness from among my people. Rather, it's a kindness and no less than my responsibility as a healer. There are others who feel as I do, they are just too frightened of the king to act, but I harbor no such fears." Her mouth tightened. "When you are no longer around to influence the prince and king, they will be returned to their right minds in due course. I daresay they will even wish to thank me for my actions at some future time when your power over them is broken. This is the right course of action, I'm certain of it."

Elizabeth stood still as a statue while Lhînis spewed her warped ideas, shocked silent and heart beating in a pained rhythm to discover the elleth really believed her own words, having reduced Elizabeth from a living, breathing person with feelings and worth, to a rotting sickness that needed to be eradicated.

"As...charming...as this little reunion is, I think it is time to move on to the business at hand," the tall man sniffed.

Handing his staff to the beefy orc beside him, the dark man looked at Elizabeth and smiled coldly before turning back to the elleth and walking up to her. He stared consideringly for a long moment.

"Very well," he sighed. "You have fulfilled your part of the bargain as we agreed and may now have the reward you have rightfully earned."

The healer smiled in apparent relief, the tension easing from her shoulders as she stepped closer to him. Elizabeth stared, everything seeming to go into slow motion when he sprang forward, pulling a hidden knife from beneath his robes and immediately plunging it deep into Lhînis' chest. He greedily watched her shocked face with apparent relish, reaching out to hold her upright in a cruel mockery of a gentle embrace, until the last of the light faded from her disbelieving eyes.

Liberating his blade once more, he casually wiped it off on the healer's gown before he stepped away and allowed her dead body to crumple to the cold floor. He shook his head in mock regret and sighed, turning his eyes to Elizabeth to watch her reaction to the sudden death.
"Elves. So pretentious and unworthy of the immortality that should belong to us." He waved a hand, and the two orcs who had escorted Lhînis in minutes before now picked up her lifeless body and carried it back out the same doorway.

Elizabeth stood helpless, feeling dizzy and nauseous as she considered the facts now clearly revealed. The mysterious, spiteful notes she had received for the past many years; the seeming ease with which she had been taken captive...it was somehow all due to Lhînis and the apparent disgust she had carried for someone she considered an upstart human. No matter her crimes, Elizabeth had not wished such a death on her tormentor, and her murder left a hollowness in her heart at the waste of life, and grief and regret clogging her throat with tears she could not afford to shed before the sadistic man. An unstoppable domino effect was now in motion due to the hate of a few, and who could say who it might still affect and where it might ultimately end?

"I am Lord Ancalidaûr, Elvenqueen Elizabeth." He paused and smiled darkly. "And you serve me now."

He paced close, his knife still held loosely in his hand and leaned down close to her head, his eyes half-lidding as he inhaled deeply.

"You smell of the strong perfume of magic, yet you are clearly no sorceress." He paused for a long moment, his expression one of puzzlement or confusion before he extended a hand toward her. Elizabeth gasped as something powerful and terrifying shoved against her mind, making her head pound with sudden, sharp pain.

"I further sense..." His eyes widened in realization. "You! You have found a path to the immortality of the elves." He stepped closer, his eyes alight with eager greed. "I will have this secret from you, and any others you carry."

She shook her head to deny all his claims, her mind desperately scrambling for some believable denial, but decided it would be better to keep quiet than to attempt to speak without his leave.

"My orcs have told me something very interesting about you that they observed when you were captured."

He paced a slow circle around her, then slashed his blade suddenly across the side of her throat, watching with a detached kind of interest. She cried out in surprised alarm, her hand flying up to the already healed skin. He caught her wrist in a firm hold and tugged it away as he observed where the wound had been, then ran a finger through her blood, staring at it thoughtfully before he lifted it to his mouth, tasting it. He smiled cruelly and chuckled in triumph.

"Ah, there is where it rests, and so very easy for the taking. The rate you heal means I need not wait to partake of more when I please. Such a find," he said in a menacing purr. "The elves were even greater fools than I suspected not to guard you more diligently." His head tilted and he leaned down and licked the rest of her blood directly from her skin, holding her in place when she struggled against him and tried to break free. A Furious tear slipped down her cheek when his head fell back in pleasure and his eyes slipped closed, several of the nearby orcs growling hungrily as they caught the scent of her blood.

His eyes opened again as he shivered with apparent pleasure. "Oh yes, you shall serve me often and well, for already I feel my power increase with the influx of yours." He stepped back, leaving Elizabeth swaying from the shock and horror of his assault and greedy orc eyes on her while he put his sharp knife back in the hidden sheathe under his robes. His eyes narrowed in crafty thought while she glared at the stone floor in anger at the prospect of being used in such an unthinkable way.
He spoke louder to be heard by all the creatures gathered in the hall. "Let it be known that I have taken this woman to my bed for pleasure alone, and I keep her for no other reason," he said sharply, addressing the orcs in the room as Elizabeth's mouth fell open in shock at his words. "Nothing more need ever be spoken of her to my rivals, either in Dol Guldur or Mordor, is that clear? If I discover any of you have ever betrayed me, either by thought or deed, I shall devise the rarest and most painful of tortures, unending!" His pale eyes glowed with intensity as he swept his gaze over all present. The orcs all shouted something in a guttural language and struck their chests with clenched fist, making the dark man smile.

"Good." He extended a hand to her and gave a smirk that made her skin crawl. "Come, my dear. You must be taken to bathe and change. I cannot have my new possession looking so coarse and ill-used."

When she made no move, unable to force herself to voluntarily touch the bare skin of his hand with her own, he reached out and wrapped his fingers around her arm, squeezing cruelly, then backhanded her across the face, sending her to the floor with the force of the strike.

"The first thing you will learn is obedience," he hissed, staring down at her. "Defy me again and I will punish you in ways I'm certain your mind has never yet conjured." He jerked her back to her feet and shoved her toward the tall orc who seemed to hold some higher rank, and sneered. "See that she is bathed, gowned and jeweled before the evening meal. She must be resplendent before I will allow her the honor of becoming my consort."

Ancaladaur walked calmly back to his throne and sat down, watching as his orcs forced the woman out of the door. Fortune had truly smiled on him. He had hoped to cause what mischief he could for the wood elves when approached by the silly she-elf, as another step toward conquering them for his own lord, and had instead stumbled on something of true worth.

Power.

A pity her form were not more to his preference of lanky young boys, or he might actually use her for pleasure. He had never had any use for a woman in his bed beyond his penchant for doling out pain, but no matter. There was nothing more valuable than a seemingly unending source of power, and if he bred on her, it might also create an additional source of power for him to harvest in the form of a child, allowing him to extend his life indefinitely. Something to consider, to be sure. He had certainly discovered a treasure buried among the elves, and he intended to do everything he could to keep it for himself.

Elizabeth was silent as the dark-skinned, veiled women finished preparing her like a lamb for the slaughter. At first, she had tried begging the three women for help after the orcs left her there, even promising to reward them generously when she was free, but the one in charge had lifted her veil and opened her mouth, revealing that her tongue had been cut out. While Elizabeth stared in horror, the woman pointed to the other two women, then back at her mouth and shook her head, then shrugged. After that, Elizabeth gave up fighting and cooperated with the women, feeling sorry for what had been done to them, but not willing to wait around and share their fate. While they dressed her in an elaborate black and crimson gown, painting her lips and eyes to match, then worked rubies into an elaborate hairstyle, she plotted her next move.

She knew Thranduil was likely on his way to find and liberate her, but she wasn't willing to take a chance and remain in the madman's clutches any longer than necessary, knowing rape, or heaven forbid, something even worse might be her fate if she did. If she could somehow manage it, she intended to save herself.
"Sanctus Deus," she whispered fervently in Latin. "Da mihi fortitudinem ad proelium ante mihi."
(*Holy God, give me strength for the battle before me.*)

Drawing a deep breath, she focused on calming her mind and collecting her thoughts for what she
needed to do next, then tried to reach out with her mind, desperately hoping she wouldn't bugger it
up.

_Grik, your mistress has need of you. Listen very carefully to my instructions, and follow them
exactly..._
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

This is a much longer chapter, and there's a lot going on. Let me know if you have any questions, and I hope you like the direction the story is taking. A quick bit of story trivia: I've had the last scene of this chapter written and ready to go since early November of last year, but the rest of the chapter has been all new writing that I've done in the last few days. I hope it flows okay.

Special thanks again to all of you that leave comments. Your thoughts and impressions really inspire me to keep going.

Thranduil sliced through the body of one of the giant spiders, then cracked his staff over the head of a shrieking orc, snarling in anger and fluidly lunging back far enough to allow the arrow shot by Legolas to finish the creature off. Haldir jumped from the back of another nearby orc he beheaded, before landing on the next and knocking him to the ground with the impact, burying his sword at the base of his skull. Legolas killed the final three spiders at range before they could reach the melee fighters.

"Onward," Thranduil yelled, leading the other elves through the dense webbing, but it was slow going as they had to frequently stop to hack away at the sticky obstacles the spiders left, which in turn drew more of the eight-legged fiends they were forced to pause to dispatch. Earlier, when the webbing had become too thick, they had been forced to leave their mounts behind and continue on foot.

The more quickly the king tried to press ahead, the more skirmishes they found themselves mired in, to the point Thranduil felt the calm he always effortlessly operated under in battle, slipping away from him bit by bit. His fear for Elizabeth was overriding all else, and though he could still feel her presence within him, he could not touch her mind, and that absence had begun to make him desperate. He could not let this be a case of history repeating itself, while orcs destroyed what was most precious to him. He would not.

"Get back behind me," the Elvenking shouted in a loud voice to his warriors, as more spiders approached and a large cluster of orcs ran toward them at great speed. With a quick glance, he ascertained the elves had obeyed and faced the quickly approaching enemy, beginning to speak an ancient spell he had never used, having lacked the power to wield it on his own, but with the staff's focus, many options now lay open before him.

He slammed the staff to the ground, and a burst of light and force exploded outward in a reverberating shock-wave that temporarily blinded the elves. When they blinked their vision back to normal, the Elvenking was already striding ahead. Legolas took in the way cleared before them, all traces of spiders, webbing and orcs completely gone, as far as the eye could see, and shared a surprised look with Haldir.

"That...makes things a bit easier, I suppose," he murmured to the Galadhrim elf.
Haldir cocked his head with a frown as other elves passed them to follow the king. "I have seen Lady Galadriel use that spell once, but this time it felt – different."

They broke into a jog to reach the front of the line beside Thranduil, Legolas again critically eyeing the staff his father carried. He knew what Haldir referred to, as he had felt it too, the dark power of the staff having become more noticeable after use. With a pronounced pucker between his brows, Legolas tried to think only of the battle that lay before them, rather than his worry for both Elizabeth and his father, and what difficulties they still had yet to meet.

More than half a dozen orcs of various sizes stood clustered around Elizabeth in the small room where Grik had managed to sneak her, standing as docile as a group of contented puppies. Really ugly, smelly puppies.

Amazingly enough, the little orc had not only managed to follow her instructions to the letter, but after stealthily fetching her and leading her from the room she waited in alone after the veiled women finished preparing her, he had brought her orc after orc, one at a time. As soon as each one entered the room and scented her blood, which she quickly offered them using Grik's dagger, they seemed to be immediately obedient, and apparently loyal only to her.

She had tested her theory on the first one, telling him to sit, then stand, then stand and hop on one leg. He followed each command instantly, his orange eyes full of nothing but adoration when he stared at her.

She tried not to entertain the uncomfortable thought that she was like some horror tale, vampire-like queen, making mindless thralls to do her bidding. Yet even with the reality staring her in the face, it was difficult to fully believe such a thing was possible.

"Is this the best you could find?" she asked Grik, adjusting the uncomfortable, ill-fitting armor he had brought her to change into, her skin itching terribly beneath the blackened leather. It had been mildly amusing when she ordered them all to face the wall while she changed out of the black and red mostrosity, and they all looked at her with complete confusion at the command, but complied regardless. Apparently, modesty was rather mystifying to an orc.

"Yes, Lady. Grik is sorry, but all others were too big."

The tallest orc stepped forward and offered a helm with a full face shield. "Mistress, you must wear this to hide your face or others not like us will see."

Elizabeth accepted it and looked at him askance, still uncertain she could trust him, as he was one of the two who originally escorted her to the cruel man in the first place, knocking her down onto her hands and knees.

"And what will you do if Ancalidaûr tries to take me and hurt me again?" She narrowed her eyes when he went to his knees before her, the tender look in his eyes changing to an anger that looked far more appropriate on his savage face.

"We will kill him, mistress. None may harm our blood-mother. We will guard you with our lives."

The others murmured agreement and she shifted her weight nervously, not at all liking the new title they bestowed on her. Working cooperatively with orcs felt bizarre enough without adding any maternal, magical mumbo-jumbo into the mixture.

"Ah, well, that's...good then." She nodded and put on the helm, raising the face plate so she could see.
One of the average-sized orcs stepped closer, drawing her gaze, his eyes pleading as he also went to his knees before her. "Mother, give us your blood again to prepare us for battle. Your power in us gives us more strength to protect you."

The others added their own eager pleas and pressed closer, making her repress a shudder of revulsion before she slowly nodded and pulled out Grik's little dagger once more.

"Very well, but one at a time and only a little. And no biting!"

By the time Thranduil and his warriors reached the large rebuilt structure, Feren and the rest of the Silvan host had caught up to them, increasing their numbers from sixty to well over six hundred. Elven archers rained death down on orcs and Haradrim men alike, and all who wore the trappings of the enemy were cut down without hesitation. A yard full of snarling wargs were likewise dispatched before their orc riders could put them to use.

From the complete confusion among the ranks of orcs, it was obvious they had not been prepared for an attack on their lair, so well hidden by the spiders. But Thranduil had done away with that advantage in one fell swoop, laying them open to easy defeat.

The King stalked ahead to the black double doors of the main entrance, closely followed by Legolas, Haldir and several companies of sword and dagger wielding elves. Feren remained on the exterior, continuing to coordinate the battle that raged all around.

As the first orcs shrieked and attacked in the wide passage they stepped into, elves surged forward to surround and protect their king, shouting battle cries while they sliced and cut away at their foes.

Thranduil stepped back and beckoned Haldir and Legolas to him while the fighting raged just beyond them. He leveled a severe look on both elves, his voice firm and filled with the anger he was holding tightly in check.

"She is here, but I still cannot touch her mind. You are both to have no other purpose than to find her without delay. Go with speed and only stop to engage those you must until Elizabeth is safely in your care." They murmured acknowledgments and sprinted off, cutting through orcs and disappearing down a branching passage away from the main hall to begin their search.

Thranduil followed the elves who had already carved through many orcs, the floor slick with their dark blood, and threw open the doors to the large, cavernous hall and stepped through. His eyes swept the space in an instant, coming to rest on the dark-clad man standing in front of an ebony throne, an arrogant smirk on his sharp-featured face.

The Elvenking gripped his sword more tightly and rested the end of the staff on the hard floor, his lips twisted with contempt.

"Black Númenórean," he said in a low, menacing tone. "You should have stayed in Mordor." The light gleamed off his silver armor as he took another step forward, his eyes growing harder with every word. "This is my realm, and none may threaten the life of my queen and live."

The man chuckled and opened his mouth to speak, but the Elvenking did not give him the chance. No longer holding his rage in check, he allowed it to flow from him and through the Staff of Rhudaur in violent release, turning the full force of his considerable power on the man. Bright light burst forth from the King's body, surrounding him in dazzling brilliance and blinding his enemy while Thranduil bore down on him.
“Mistress, I can hear sounds of battle nearby,” Grik reported, ducking back into the sanctuary of the room they had occupied for the past two hours and closing it behind him, glancing anxiously up at Elizabeth.

“That could actually be a very good thing, if it’s my people come to liberate me.” She closed her eyes and focused on trying to speak to Thranduil, but sighed in frustration and opened her eyes when she got no response. "Let's try to get away while there's a distraction, in case it is not an ally, but Ancalidard having discovered my absence and coming to find me.”

"Stay behind me, Mother, I will protect you," Shagrol, the largest orc growled, shoving past Grik and looking up and down the passageway and motioning them to follow him. He carried his large, curved sword in a loose grip, ready for a fight and bristling with aggression. He said something to the other orcs in their guttural language, and two more of them took their place beside him.

Adjusting her helm to cover more of her face and disguise her long hair as much as possible, she got behind the big orcs, while the smaller ones surrounded her from behind. As a unit, they hurried forward, Shagrol leading them into rooms or narrow side-halls to hide, whenever they heard the sound of approaching feet. They were nearly to the door leading outside when they heard a battle cry from behind, then most of the orcs fell with arrows through their head or chest.

Elizabeth whirled and ripped off the helm distorting her view and snarled, sending a mental shout to her orcs to get behind her, which they did immediately, all except Shagrol, who growled and stepped in front of her protectively, staring at the arrow protruding from her shoulder then back at the two elves holding bows and staring at Elizabeth and the orcs in hesitant confusion.

"Mother," Shagrol said in a pleading tone. "They have wounded you! Let me kill them to avenge your pain."

"Don’t hurt them, they're with me!” she shouted to the elves then turned toward the big orc. "Sit down, Shagrol." He instantly obeyed, plopping down onto the floor while she turned toward Legolas in accusation.

"What the fuck, Legolas!” she exploded at him in English, waving a hand toward the arrow sticking out of her armored shoulder.

"Elizabeth, forgive me,” he said with an anguished expression while he rushed forward to assist her. "I mistook you for one of the orcs in that armor."

Haldir kept his bow trained on the last two orcs still alive, confused as to exactly why he wasn't supposed to kill them, but waited for clarification.

When Legolas pulled the arrow from her shoulder, she gasped from the pain, drawing an angry growl from Shagrol and a frightened whimper from Grik, who pressed against her for comfort. "Mother hurt,” he moaned, making Elizabeth sigh and pat the little orc's head absently in reassurance.

Legolas stared at them incredulously before turning his gaze back to Elizabeth. "Why were these orcs protecting you? And why do they call you Mother?"

She chuckled and rubbed her brow while her wounded shoulder quickly healed and the pain faded. "It's a bit of a long story. Perhaps I can tell you later?"

Turning to Grik and Shagrol, she ordered them both to run away into the woods and hide and she would call them later when she had need of them, adding through mind speak that they were to stay...
well away from anyone but her, especially all other orcs and their former master. With grumbles of agreement, they ran for the door and disappeared through it seconds later.

Haldir finally lowered his bow, his brow creased in puzzlement when Elizabeth checked to see if any of the other orcs lived, then shook her head regretfully when they all proved dead. She met his eyes and shrugged with a small smile.

Legolas took her arm, guiding her between Haldir and himself so they could easily guard her since she had no weapons, and they started back toward the main hall to meet up with the rest of their forces.

Feren nearly ran into them when they turned a corner, a look of profound relief on his face when he saw Elizabeth. "My Lady, you are safe! Thank the Valar. I must beg you to come right away. The King did not answer when I called out to him moments ago. Most of the orcs lie dead now, but… I fear something is gravely amiss."

Elizabeth, Feren, Legolas and Haldir arrived at the entrance to the large room and stood in the open doorway, Elizabeth throwing up a hand to shield her eyes from the radiance bathing the Elvenking in an aura of light, and throwing a worried look at Legolas, which he returned.

Everyone around the King, men and orcs, all lay dead, some bodies hardly recognizable for what manner of creature they were before, but he stood perfectly still, like he was frozen in place. His sword was held loosely at his side and the staff extended before him, as though he still faced an enemy.

Legolas looked at his father's blank face, his own expression grim when he turned. "You must go to him, Elizabeth. Call him back from whatever holds him. He will hear your voice."

Elizabeth bit her lip and nodded, fighting a sudden knot of fear in her stomach. She wasn't sure what it meant that her husband was standing within sight, glowing, and she still couldn't reach him through mind touch. Lifting her chin, she started toward him with more confidence than she felt.

"Thranduil?" she called in a loud voice. "It's me, Elizabeth. I'm here, I'm safe." She stopped several feet from him, suddenly uncertain when he seemed to grow even brighter at her approach, making her wince and her voice grow quieter and full of anguish at his lack of response.

"Please… Come back to me, love. I need you."

The universe was vast. Unfathomable. He floated in a place beyond thought. Beyond time.

There was everything that ever was or would ever be.

There was nothing and never had been.

Emptiness.

It was warm and comforting, then solitary and melancholy in a bitter, piercing cold.

Stars in their bright beauty wheeled overhead, dancing to the strains of Iluvatar's music and weaving a tapestry in every color the creator could conceive.

The thick black of night met the vibrant brightness of day, colliding into something entirely new.

Something unknown and never before seen.
In it lay the font of all knowledge; the sum of all experience.

He had but to dive in and immerse himself in it…

It beckoned.

The silence was loud and absolute. It demanded all.

But something else tugged sharply on the edge of his awareness, calling him back down a thin, shining thread. Reminding him of…something he never wished to forget. He followed it back to the source.

It was her voice. The beautiful sound of it, clear and bright, cutting through the thick clouds of confusion that held him fast.

*Love.*

It was more potent than any other force in existence, the lure of power and knowledge falling away like dead leaves on a withered tree. Memory enfolded him, urgently pulling him into its embrace.

*Elizabeth.*

She was the answer to all his questions; the very essence of his hope.

He would always choose love over all else, and a life by her side.

Pushing against the tide, something shifted and gave way.

He was the master of his own fate once more, and his will remained strong.

....

Thranduil gasped a deep breath as he returned to the full awareness of his body, sparks of lightning still coursing up and down his spine in a fresh surge of dark power feeding on him, greedily trying to consume his light.

He flung the staff away with all his might, severing its hold on him and letting it smash against the far wall, wrapping his freed arm around Elizabeth where she stood in front of him and yanking her to him, exhaling in relief when she wrapped her arms around his waist and clung tightly to him.

His connection to her surged forth, strong and unbreakable, the sweet touch of her emotions filling him completely. It was immediately apparent the cursed staff had been the majority of the darkness responsible for separating them all along, and his jaw clenched angrily at the realization as he silently cursed his own folly. Augmenting his power to such an extent had not come without cost, and one that was nearly too dear.

His grip tightened on the sword he still held in his right hand as he swept his gaze around the room to assess what threat remained. There was none. All the orcs were dead, and the body of the Black Númenórean lay crumpled mere feet away, the features of his face no longer recognizable as a man. He didn't even remember killing him… Turning away from the sight, he looked at Legolas and Haldir, both watching him warily from further away.

"Legolas." His voice came out sounding surprisingly calm and normal. "Take the staff out and burn it. Leave no part of it behind, the flame must consume all, and take care not to touch it with your bare hands. Its dark power has increased tenfold in this place."
The prince listened attentively and nodded, relieved beyond words to see his father had returned to himself once more.

"Yes, Adar, I will see to it."

The Elvenking turned his attention to the Lórien elf. "Haldir, go and check the cells for any other elves or prisoners and clear out what remaining orcs you find."

Haldir gave a slight bow. "Henion, hir nin." (Sindarin: I understand, my lord.) The Marchwarden walked to the doorway in the far back of the room and disappeared.

After Legolas exited the room, having wrapped the staff in the thick cloth of one of the banners he tore from the wall, the silence that remained was pressing. Thranduil rested his lips against the top of Elizabeth's head for a moment, still reeling from the battle he had just fought on more than one front.

"Are you well, Bess?" he asked quietly.

She tilted her head back to look up at him and smiled reassuringly. "Other than being dressed this way, and having the smell of orc stuck in my nose, I'm fine. But are you? For a moment, I was truly frightened. It seemed you did not know me."

He touched her cheek, the feel of her bare skin against his further impressing on him the reality of the present, and the fact that they had won and defeated the threat of evil. For the time being, at least.

Drawing a deep breath and then releasing it, he ran his eyes across her features, meeting her gray-green gaze with his own. He bent down, slanting his mouth over hers in a relieved kiss before resting his forehead against hers, basking in her gentle smile.

"You are alive and in my arms. I could wish for no greater joy."

Thranduil led Elizabeth out of the foul hall, her hand clasped firmly in his, and took her to where the mounts waited nearby. He lifted her onto his young elk, murmuring to her that he would soon return, and called for Feren.

"Guard the queen, Captain. I must speak with my son."

Feren bowed with a genuine smile. "Of course, my lord."

The Elvenking glanced back at Elizabeth, already chatting to one of the nearby archers she knew well, his heart lurching sharply at just how close he had come to losing her. Spying Legolas some distance away, overseeing the destruction of the staff as the last of it burned down to ash, he approached him.

"Legolas, I believe you had no trouble locating Elizabeth. How was she held, and was there any indication of...torture, or...other misuse?"

The prince shook his head. "When Haldir and I came upon her, I did not recognize her, with her clad entirely in orc armor..." He rubbed the back of his neck, the tips of his ears reddening. "We fired on what we thought were just a group of orcs, and I- wounded her in the shoulder. She was quite angry with me."

Thranduil sighed and shook his head, giving his son a bemused look. "Anything else of note?"

Legolas stepped closer to his father, lowering his voice. "It was very odd, the orcs with her were
protecting her, and they seemed completely loyal to Elizabeth. But that is not the strangest part, Adar, they called her Mother, and their behavior was such...as though they...loved her. I have never seen anything like that from an orc before. I would not have even thought it possible!

The King swore viciously and looked away, clearly displeased. "They took her blood and drank it, or she offered it to them."

Legolas reared back in shock. "What? Why would she do such a thing?"

Thranduil waved an impatient hand. "It was something discovered by chance when she helped me question an orc we captured near the halls once. She offered the creature a taste of her blood in an attempt to persuade him to talk, and it worked. All too well. The thing was immediately bound to her, worshiped her even, consumed by concern for her safety and protection."

"Yes," Legolas nodded. "That is exactly the way these others behaved. How strange her blood should contain such an...unusual power."

"Elizabeth carries a great deal of magic within her, she just has not thought to try to find a way to use any of it." He pinned his son with his eyes. "I assume you killed them all?"

Legolas shook his head, his expression still disturbed by the recent revelation. "She ordered us not to fire on the two who remained alive, one small orc, and one large warrior. She ordered them into the woods to hide and await her call."

Thranduil's mouth tightened and his eyes narrowed. "Find them. Track them down and slay them both. I want no orc alive with such a tie to her."

The prince's face hardened and he nodded. "With pleasure."

Haldir walked up and bowed. "Hir nin, I searched and found no living prisoners, only the bodies of three elves. Two were male guards, from their armor and trappings." His jaw clenched angrily. "Their bodies had been mutilated. I also found a female, and her body had been left unmolested, stabbed through the heart as the cause of death. A healer, I thought, from the look of her robes and the herbs she carried."

Frowning, the King crossed his arms. "Undoubtedly, the two ellyn were Elizabeth's guards, killed when she was taken, but an elleth?" He shook his head in puzzlement. "The orcs must have found her wandering on her own. We must determine who she is and inform her family of her fate. A pity." He examined the Lorien elf with a sober expression. "You have done me great service this day, Haldir. I will not forget it."

The Marchwarden bowed his head in acknowledgement, then looked to where Elizabeth sat atop the King's elk, grinning at the cluster of elves who now surrounded her. Haldir's stern features relaxed, his lips lifting in a slight smile.

"I am relieved we were able to reach your queen before any harm could come to her. She seems quite a formidable and remarkable lady in her own right. Perhaps you will bring her to Caras Galadhon someday. I believe Lord Celeborn and Lady Galadriel would enjoy making her acquaintance."

Thranduil shrugged. "Perhaps." He looked back at his son. "Legolas, see to your task without delay and then return to the halls." He walked off to rejoin Elizabeth and Legolas smiled at the other elf.

"Come, Haldir. We have orc to hunt."
Haldir nodded and followed Legolas when he ran toward the woods, both of them with bows at the ready.

The ride back to the halls was accomplished with speed and without incident, half the force of elves accompanying the king and queen on their return. The rest stayed behind to deal with the structure, having been commanded to destroy it once more, and also to deal with the bodies of the dead; always a grim but necessary task in the wake of battle.

Elizabeth spent much of the ride asleep in Thranduil's arms, wrapped securely in his cloak as she had been many times before. While she rested from her ordeal, he stared down in bemusement at the rubies still worked into her hair in elaborate braids, sparkling like blood in the daylight and forcing him to swallow down a fresh swell of rage as it brought to mind the thought of orcs touching her and taking her blood.

Breathing deeply to calm himself, he found himself looking forward to seeing her in her own gowns again, out of the orc armor and with their tainted smell washed from her skin and hair. There would inevitably be things which required his attention when they returned, but he would delay those tasks as long as needed to focus on his wife first.

He had come to another surprising realization during the course of their ride, as well. He could no longer sense the nameless threat that had been an oppressive shadow over their marriage since the very beginning, it apparently having been done away with. He would now be able to move forward with his original plans without delay. Already, Elizabeth had been forced to wait far longer than he would have preferred, but he intended to make up that lack to her in the years before them, until she was completely satisfied and fulfilled with their family.

It was not even half an hour after they rode into the main courtyard that he and Elizabeth were in their private rooms, on the way to their bath.

Thranduil sat on the edge of the bathing pool, the warm water still dripping from his hair and body, now cleansed of the last of the dirt and smells that came of death and battle. If only it were as effortless and trivial to do away with the inner wounds he still ached with and continued to silently tremble from. To heal…. 

His eyes sought Elizabeth on the other side of the pool where she stood beside the continuous fall of heated water that flowed through the caverns and fed their large bath, her fingers disappearing into the cascading liquid where she stood, seemingly lost in thought.

She was beautiful in the reflected light of the water, her hair appearing as the darkest black, saturated as it was in wetness. The ends floated in the waist deep water, while her skin glowed with the faint luminescence of her own inner light. And he had never been more desperate for her, or had greater need to lose himself in her softness and love.

"Elizabeth." His voice carried across the space with a quiet urgency. "Come to me."

She looked at him over her shoulder and smiled, already turning and gliding through the water until she stood in front of him in the shallows. Their eyes were locked to each other, and he stared up at her before he reached to pull her forward, between his open legs. With him seated on the edge of the pool and her standing within, his head came to just below her breasts, and he nuzzled against her, laying his cheek flat against the soft skin there.

Her arms surrounded and enfolded him at his neck and shoulders and his own arms crushed her to
him firmly but gently, always mindful of his greater strength. His breath was a warm puff of air against her bare skin while he angled his head to press a kiss to the side of her breast.

"I need you."

His voice was deep and strong, but she detected the slightest tremble of vulnerability in his words and her arms tightened further in response, while her fingers carded into the wet strands of his golden hair.

"I'm here, love. Whatever you need... I am always here for you." Giving back similar words to what he had spoken to her so many years before in comfort.

A jolt of pain and longing lanced through him, the tight rein he had been keeping on the dangerous coil of his emotions finally beginning to loosen, and allowing him to examine the various threads of his more volatile feelings.

He kissed her breast again while his hands roamed her curves, awakening her body and preparing her to receive him, when he slid his fingers into the heat at her core and discovered she was already eager and ready; slick with desire and drawing a grateful sigh from his lips while he moved her to straddle him. His mate, his perfect match.

With his hands firmly on her upper thighs, he controlled her movement as she sank down on him so slowly, feeling how the wet warmth of her both surrounded him and gave way to his presence inside of her, drawing out the sensation as long as possible. A shudder of pleasure and awareness went through both their bodies when they were completely joined, his eyes seeking hers and showing her the first glimpse of what he had suffered; of what he still struggled to contain.

"Do you have any idea what dark fate you have saved me from?"

He pushed the smallest bit deeper into her when she wrapped her legs around his waist, holding tight to his shoulders, the small bite of her nails against his skin a welcome grounding in the fact that she was truly in his arms, and very much alive.

His bright blue eyes bore into hers. "Look," he whispered, and pictures begin to flash through her mind, an onslaught of images, emotions and terrifying possibility. The boiling rage, sorrow, and bone-deep anguish of a being who had lived for such a length of time, she could scarcely fathom the nearly six and a half thousand years of his long life.

The bright light of his hope he clung to was suddenly and viciously torn away, leaving nothing but impenetrable darkness behind. A suffocating fury arose like a monster wave on the sea, sweeping away everything in its path. So great in its torment and terrible power, it struck out against friend and foe alike, no longer able to differentiate, no longer caring. Flame and smoke followed... Complete destruction of their realm...Screams and suffering. Death.

"No," she said in horrified denial, her eyes wide with fright. It was a chilling revelation to see and experience, and she trembled in the aftermath of the impressions left behind.

Thranduil's brows furrowed, his eyes full of a weary sorrow.

"That is what would have come to pass had I lost you. I would have fallen to the darkness of the staff and razed the forest to the ground...killed everything in my path, and only then would I have embraced the utter despair of being fully sundered from you, and my own death."

The images of horror faded away from her mind when he stroked her breast with expert fingers in an opposite experience to the painful images, then moved his touch down, his thumb brushing against
the apex of her pleasure, a jolt of his power and light against her lower abdomen making her moan while cresting the peak of a sudden, strong climax, clenching and shaking around him.

"But that is not what happened," he whispered. He trailed a kiss against her ear while she was still gripped by sensation, beginning to move inside of her once more with his tight hold on her hips, immediately starting to build the tension anew before she had fully recovered from the small shocks of pleasure continuing to course through her. He pulled back and met her eyes again, the fading shadow of pain in his gaze flowing into a look of tenderness, a small smile lifting his lips.

"Instead, this is the future that now awaits us...together."

Their intimate dance continued unabated while new images played in her mind's eye. Tiny feet kicking the air, little hands waving and grasping onto the unmistakable fingers of her husband, scratching curiously against his rings. A golden-haired, chubby faced little cherub that sat and giggled, turning to look at her with eyes so like her own. A dark-headed toddler attempting to climb the throne steps, scooped up by the King, and then he turned and placed the child in her arms, all of them laughing and smiling…

He kissed her parted lips, capturing her focus again as the last of the vision he showed her disappeared like a wisp of smoke.

"That is what I promise you, beloved. What I have wished to give you when the time was right. As it is now." He breathed his words against the skin of her neck, his hand sliding down against her belly once more, the bright light emanating from his hand there filling the room.

The feeling of his vast power flowing into her, combined with the pleasure of his deep strokes inside temporarily stole her voice until he bit gently into the muscle of her neck, starting off a chain reaction that had her throwing back her head and crying his name, pulling him along with her into climax. His own cry was muffled against her while he poured all he had into her, and her own fēa echoed the ecstasy back to him, catching them in a loop of pleasure that seemed almost endless and left them both gasping and panting in the wake of its receding strength.

She clung to him, shaking like a leaf while he held her tightly, finally reaching for her face to lift it so he could stare into her eyes and smile in satisfaction at what he saw there; a new, vital spark. Her lips lifted in an answering smile while his hand lightly brushed against her belly and then settled warmly there.

"Our child has begun, and even now grows inside you."

Her eyes widened in wonder as her smile grew. "Are you saying that we...we're going to have a...baby? You've given me our very own elf baby? At long last?"

"Yes, Elizabeth, our human and elf baby."

He shook his head, his lips pursed as he felt a sudden spike of fear from her. "Do not think the outcome will be the same as last time. This child will not leave us. Already, I can feel the fēa of this little one, and it burns bright and strong."

Elizabeth laughed, her eyes filling with tears and causing his eyes to grow misty from the swell of love she smothered him in, and his pleasure at finally being able to give her what she had so longed for.

Grasping his face in her hands, she stared into his watery eyes, peppering him with kisses. "Thank you, Thranduil, so much. You've made me happier than I ever knew I could be, and I love you even
more than ever, as impossible as loving you any more seems."

He chuckled, the first hint of a tease and a renewal of humor in his voice and eyes since before their trying ordeal with the orcs began.

"I shall only hope you continue to feel as loving and appreciative when it is time for the birth, mîr nin." (my treasure) He stroked her face tenderly. "It is your happiness that completes my own, Elizabeth. Never doubt that."

She smiled, a firm resolve growing in her eyes. "And you must never again fear my loss, Thranduil. Not even Satan himself could succeed in tearing me away from you, and if he tried I would always find my way back. Please believe me."

He kissed her again, choosing to embrace the joy she filled him with instead of his fears, and smiled against her lips.

"My beloved Bess. I do."

~o~
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

Today my fortune cookie said: 'You have at your command the wisdom of the ages.' I took it as a sign I should update this story, so I banged this chapter out all in one go. Fun fact - some pregnant women experience a pronounced increase in sexual desire from those magical, mysterious hormones that rule our lives.

Quick update on the Legolas/OC story for those interested (as of 5/29/18)... I have over thirty thousand words written now, but I keep going back and rewriting the beginning, and tweaking stuff with the OC's back story. When I think it's consistent and decent enough to publish, I'll probably break it into chapters and start posting it, so send me lots of good writing vibes!

Warning for a little smut this chapter.

Legolas and Haldir did not return from their errand for four days, and when they arrived, Thranduil took them into his private study, where they remained secluded for two hours before the King sent Feren to bring Elizabeth to him.

As soon as she saw her husband's face, she knew Legolas had told him about the notes, which she saw with a sinking heart were sitting in a pile on top of his desk. She sighed and looked at Legolas, who was giving her a sympathetic but determined look. She had hoped to spare Thranduil the pain of reading them, and she could feel through their bond just how truly angry he was.

Elizabeth looked back up and met his eyes with firm resolve in hers. "You can destroy those. The person responsible for them is dead, and no longer poses a threat."

The Elvenking's eyes narrowed. "And who exactly is responsible for them?" He asked, his hand splayed across the pile as though he intended to crush them into oblivion through the force of his will alone.

"A healer named Lhînis, and someone she mentioned as her accomplice named Pedirion. I don't believe I know Pedirion, but Ancalidaûr betrayed Lhînis and stabbed her through the heart after she fulfilled her part of the bargain they made, which was to deliver me."

"That would have been the elleth's body I found," Haldir said, from where he leaned back against the wall on the side of the room furthest from the door.

Elizabeth nodded and looked at him. "Yes. She was terribly naïve to think she could trust that evil man, but her hatred for me made her blind to all else, I suppose."

Thranduil barked for Feren, who was standing just outside. He came into the room and looked to the king for direction. "Feren, you are to find an elf named Pedirion and bring him to me immediately."

"At once, my lord." Feren turned and departed at a brisk pace, and Thranduil turned his gaze back to
Elizabeth. She met his furious stare calmly, certain he was trying to decide just exactly how he wished to punish her.

_That is one of several things I am contemplating at present_, he said to her in mind-speak. _I don't know if I should permanently confine you to our rooms, or just bend you over my knee and give you the type of punishment your childish actions warrant._

She laughed quietly, drawing Legolas and Haldir's curious gazes while she shook her head at him in amusement. _Don't threaten things you know you will never do. You're far too dignified to stoop to something of that nature. Besides, who's to say I wouldn't like it, and then your so-called punishment would just be a reward for me instead._

It was his turn to stifle an amused laugh, even as he reached up to rub his brow and sigh. _Bess, would you drive me to distraction with worry for you?"

"Of course not," she murmured, her eyes soft with apology and regret. "I never set out to hide this from you, it just seemed such a silly thing in the beginning that I didn't want to trouble you with it. And then...well, I suppose I felt responsible. I made a poor choice, and I'm sorry. Legolas was right when he berated me for concealing it from you. It will never happen again, I swear it."

Legolas smiled in relief and approval and looked at his father to see the indecision on his face, and couldn't resist the chance to tease them both a little.

"You did choose to marry a very young bride in Elizabeth, Adar. You can hardly expect her to make wise choices all the time when she does not yet have the perspective of greater experience and years."

"Traitor," Elizabeth whispered to Legolas with a mock glare. "You're supposed to be on my side."

"I am," he whispered back. "I just defended you before the king, with great personal risk to myself, I might add. Adar is known for throwing anyone in the dungeons who angers him. I daren't believe I am immune just because I am his son."

"I should throw you both in the dungeon for the crime of being ridiculous." Thranduil raised a severe brow and turned cool eyes on his wife and son, making Legolas grin and Elizabeth laugh aloud.

The king turned his gaze to the Lorien elf and shook his head and exhaled loudly, looking extremely put upon. "Do you see the insolence I have to put up with, Haldir? I doubt your lord and lady ever have such difficulties to contend with."

Haldir crossed his arms, thoroughly entertained and a slight smile on his lips as he watched Greenwood's ruling family bantering playfully, which was a welcome sight to see after the serious threat against them, so recently vanquished.

Elizabeth spoke up again with a cheeky smirk. "I don't believe the dungeons would be a very hygienic place for me to give birth, my lord, but if that is where you wish your child to come into the world..."

Legolas sucked in a breath, looking back and forth between his father and Elizabeth in surprise. "Then...? This means that you are...?"

Elizabeth smiled radiantly and nodded. "Yes, you're going to be a big brother. Finally."

It was during the smiles and hugs from Legolas and murmured congratulations from Haldir that Feren reappeared, stepped to the king and quietly gave his report. When Feren withdrew, Elizabeth
turned an expectant look on Thranduil, who appeared disgruntled once more.

"Well? Did Feren manage to locate him?"

Thranduil laced his fingers together on top of his desk. "It seems Lhînis and Pedirion were brother and sister, and had no other family. He was last seen in the company of his sister before the attack and not since. Feren has orders to continue to look into the matter and root out any others who may have taken part in the treasonous actions carried out against Greenwood, but that may be the extent of it."

"Good," Elizabeth said with a decisive nod. "I think it's time to focus on the joy that lies in our future, and leave the miserable past behind us, where it belongs."

"Wise words, my lady." Haldir pushed away from the wall and turned to the Elvenking. "My lord, as you have no further need of me, I will take my leave to return to my duties in Lothlórien and deliver your messages to Lord Celeborn and Lady Galadriel."

The Elvenking stood and clasped the Lórien elf on the shoulder warmly. "I thank you for your service, Haldir. Travel safely back to your realm."

Haldir placed a hand on his heart and bowed, then turned to Elizabeth with a true smile. "Lady Elizabeth, it has been a privilege to meet a queen so full of beauty and kindness such as yourself. Please accept my best wishes and congratulations on your child, and do come and visit us in Caras Galadhon. It has been many years since the sound of children's laughter was heard among the mellyrn."

"Why, thank you, Haldir. That sounds delightful, and thank you for your skilled help." She cut her eyes to Legolas. "And I also appreciate you not shooting me full of arrows."

Legolas shook his head at Elizabeth and blew out a breath. "You're never going to let me forget that, are you?" He headed for the door. "Come, Haldir, I'll see you off."

When they went out, Elizabeth wandered casually over and shut the door, quietly engaging the lock, already plotting several titillating options of pouncing on her husband involving either the desk or chair. But before she could turn and put her ideas into motion, Thranduil had her pinned against the door, still facing it and breathed a heavy sigh against her neck.

"What am I to do to keep you out of harm's way, mîr nin?" (S. my treasure)

Elizabeth smiled while he kissed her neck, suppressing a shiver. "That should be an easy thing for a clever elf like you to work out. Just make love to me every day until I'm too exhausted for anything else, and that should solve your problem."

She felt his smirk against her skin while he pulled up the back of her skirt and immediately discovered she wore no undergarments.

"I'm not certain that would be enough to keep you truly contained, but I would certainly enjoy trying. And I see you already made plans to entice me, temptress." He reached around with one hand and caressed her breast, humming in approval that she wore no breast binding of any kind either. He kissed the edge of her jawline and lightly sucked her earlobe.

"What am I to think when my queen wanders the halls only half-dressed?"

She tilted her head back trying to catch his lips, then shot him an annoyed look when he stayed just beyond her reach. "You should think that I'm so desperate to have you inside me that I can't be
bothered with more layers I'll just have to waste time removing."

The sound of ripping fabric filled the room, and cool air across her now bare body and Thranduil's hot mouth on her naked shoulder forced a breathless laugh from her.

"You're lucky that wasn't one of my favorite gowns."

He slipped the ruined dress down her arms to pool on the floor, then pulled her flush against him, grinding his hardness against her.

"I will get you a dozen more, right now I want to see you."

She turned in his arms to face him and tugged pointedly on his tunic. "I'm not strong enough to tear your clothes off, so you'll have to get rid of these the slow way."

Thranduil started on the hooks at the top of his tunic while Elizabeth slipped off her shoes and tugged his boots off, then his trousers, which he stepped out of just as he threw off his opened tunic. His head fell back with a quiet groan when Elizabeth, already on her knees before him, took him fully in her mouth. With an exquisite level of skill that had him both begging and praising her in a jumble of three different languages, her name soon tumbled from his lips, turning into his cherished benediction of release.

He opened his eyes when she kissed his thigh and looked down into her smugly satisfied face, and felt his love for her spilling out of him and through the bond, smiling when her eyes softened, then widened in surprise when he pulled her up into his arms and pinned her to the wall, poised to enter her, but paused just on the brink. He watched her through hooded eyes, enjoying the way hers grew hazy with desire while she tried to force him closer, squeezing tighter with her legs wrapped around him.

Thranduil kissed her, his tongue slowly stroking hers and tasting himself there, his hands on her hips and backside tightening in possessive satisfaction.

"Is this what you want of me? To take you against this wall..." He nipped her neck sharply and pushed forward until just the broad tip of his erection was inside her.

"To make you forget that anything or anyone else exists." He stared into her eyes, reaching for her emotions to twine them with his own. "Until there is nothing else but us. Only us."

"Yes," she breathed, anchoring her hands in the gold strands of his hair at the back of his head. "Just us." She thrust her hips forward, taking all of him inside of her.

"Huitho," he groaned, when she tightened her inner muscles around him, pulling him firmly under her power. (Sindarin: fuck)

Just as he had her under his when he bent his head down and pushed her high enough for his mouth to worship her breasts, his tongue lapping at her nipples while he withdrew nearly all the way, then thrust back into her, a slow drag against sensitive tissues, the heat building between them in a dance of passion that never lost its luster, or dimmed in intensity.

"Harder," Elizabeth begged in a ragged voice, and he let her slip lower so he could kiss her lips, his hips snapping sharply against hers while he watched her fall apart in his arms a moment later. The look in her eyes when she came around him was worth more to him than all the gold and gems beneath the earth. She truly was his greatest treasure, and he whispered it in her ear as he drove her higher once more, relentless in his pursuit of her pleasure.
Elizabeth lay flat on her back on the large rug in the center of the King's office, blinking awake to the feel of Thranduil's head resting on her inner thigh and his large hand splayed warmly across her belly, making her smile. He kissed her leg and sat up, smiling down at her while she stretched.

"Our child grows stronger by the day. I think perhaps in another couple of months I should be able to determine the gender."

She rubbed her eyes, wondering what time it was. "Can you also determine why the elven magic you employed to make me conceive has turned me into a sex-starved maniac?"

He smirked. "You are in metamorphosis now while your body creates new life. I did not expect such a change in you, but I will certainly enjoy it for as long as it lasts." He ran his fingers up her thigh and skimmed along the top of her sex and through her dark curls there, smiling when she inhaled sharply at the light touch.

"I noticed your scent and taste have also altered, which did not happen before."

She ran her fingers through her long, tangled hair, frowning when she hit a snag.

"Altered how, good or bad?"

He lifted the hand he had been touching her with and closed his eyes, inhaled and smiled, meeting her eyes again when he sucked his index finger into his mouth with obvious enjoyment. "Good," he said with a heated look. "Always good. My reaction to this change in you is so visceral and absolute, it can be nothing but instinct. I want to lock you away even more now, to protect you and our child. Possess you utterly."

Elizabeth's respiration increased, despite how many times they had already coupled. "Thranduil, I'm going to jump you again if you keep that up," she muttered in English.

He raised a brow and smiled, standing to his feet and looking like a Greek god in all his naked glory, making her bite her lip in appreciation.

"If that is meant to deter me, Bess, you should know it is having the opposite effect to the one you intend. But I think we must defer until you have had something to eat. It is well past dinnertime, but there should be something waiting in our rooms."

He reached a hand out and she took it and let him pull her to her feet, then wrapped her arms around his waist, smiling lazily. "I have nothing to wear, since you shredded my gown. Shall I run naked to our chambers and hope no one is around to take note?"

Thranduil moved away to where their garments lay strewn, picking up his outer robes and handing it to her while he dressed again in his other clothes, then gathered her torn gown and shoes.

"Are you ready?"

She frowned as the sleeves she had just rolled on his overly large robes came undone again, and nodded. "I suppose as ready as I can be in this," she said, flapping her arms comically and making him grin at the picture she presented, like a child playing dress-up in an adult's clothes.

"Shall I carry you, dearest?"

"Yes, please. I'm liable to fall flat on my face with how long this thing is and how tired I am. I think I would like to sleep for a solid week."
Thranduil lifted her into his arms and unlocked the door, striding out into the empty passage. "Not surprising, we were rather enthusiastically engaged in physical activities for a number of hours. I think you even managed to tire me out a bit."

She laid her head against his shoulder and let her eyes drift closed. "You don't sound very tired to me, nor do you look it. In a shagging contest, I fear you will always beat me. Alas. But I shall never stop trying to outlast you."

"I'm glad to hear it," he murmured, nodding to several guards they passed. "We all need goals to strive for."

Elizabeth lifted her head and smiled mischievously, boldly proclaiming as they passed more guards, "Mine is to fuck the Elvenking to a standstill."

"Elizabeth," he said with a chiding look as they turned into their passage.

"What?" She looked at him with wide, innocent eyes and smiled. "It's not like any of them speak English and know what I'm saying."

"No, but I just saw Legolas leaving in quite a hurry. That's probably far more than he ever wanted to know about either of us."

She went pale as she looked back in the direction they had just come. "Really? But I didn't see him, are you sure?"

When she looked at Thranduil, he was smiling at her and winked, making her huff in annoyance and give him a frosty look.

"Lies do not become you, Sire. I think I shall have to pay you back for that."

He chuckled and pushed open the door to their sitting room. "I look forward to it, Bess."

Thranduil kicked the door closed behind them.

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Chapter 33

News of the attempt on the queen's life had spread quickly in the kingdom, stunning many, and 
producing the unexpected result of staunch support for the king and queen. Scorn toward the two 
traitorous elves that could so betray their own people and consort with the enemy was rife among the 
Silvans. Further inquiries by the guards had determined that Lhûnis and Pedirion had acted alone, and 
a death decree was issued for Pedirion, should he still be living and ever be foolish enough to return 
to Greenwood.

The new gossip of the queen's pregnancy followed soon after, and brought excitement in more than 
one quarter, with hopeful optimism that Elizabeth would carry the child to term and deliver a healthy 
babe as a blessing on her reign with the king.

Renion and Thandir were her constant shadows whenever she went further than her and the king's 
private quarters, and were even more diligent than before, both struggling with guilt for not having 
been on duty and present to defend their queen. But selfishly, Elizabeth had been secretly glad. 
Though she regretted the loss of the two fine guards who had accompanied her that day, the deaths 
of protectors she loved would have been a much harder blow for her to have recovered from.

Elizabeth tilted her head up to the sun and smiled where she stood in front of a rose bush in her 
favorite garden. "Renion, how is your courtship coming along with Istril? Any progress to report 
there?" She opened her eyes and glanced at her grinning guardian, who quickly tugged off one of his 
gauntlets and held up his hand, a silver band shining brightly in the light.

"What?!" Elizabeth exploded, and glanced at Thandir. "When did this happen? Have you both been 
keeping secrets from me?"

Renion shrugged. "It's recent, my lady. You were still indisposed after the incident, and then when 
Thandir and I were allowed to keep watch over you again, it had already slipped my mind."

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. "Slipped your mind, bah! Tell me how you proposed. Was it over a loaf of 
bread?"

Thandir laughed outright and looked at his fellow guard. "The queen knows you well, Renion."

Renion blushed and shook his head. "I did not propose to her over bread, Thandir, do not slander 
me." He cleared his throat. "I took her to the high overlook under the light of the stars, where I 
confessed my love and asked her to wed me."

Elizabeth sighed with an approving smile. "Oh, that's romantic. The King and I shared our very first 
kiss in that same spot, after I tripped and nearly went over the edge and he caught me against him." 
She chuckled in memory and her guards smiled. "Well done, Renion, I'm impressed. I hope you will 
invite me to your wedding."

Renion placed a hand over his heart and bowed his head. "My lady, we would both be honored 
beyond words if you blessed us with your presence when we exchange our wedding rings."

"Of course I will come. Nothing delights me more than seeing those in love united, unless it is seeing 
the babes born from those unions soon after," she said with a significant look at Renion.

He grinned boyishly and blushed. "We both want children, my lady. But perhaps not right away."
She shrugged. "There is no hurry. I am the last one to insist on speed, as you see I am thirty years
married and only now have the prospect of this child," she said, caressing the slight swell of her belly
that was scarcely visible. Elizabeth turned to Thandir with a sober look, her head tilted. "And who
shall we find for you, dear Thandir, now that Renion is taken care of? Is there an elleth you favor at
all?"

Thandir clasped his hands behind his back and shrugged. "No one in particular, my queen. You are
so wise and skilled with making excellent matches, that if you were to bring me an elleth and bid me
marry her, I should do it without hesitation."

Elizabeth's eyes filled with tears when she looked into Thandir's brown eyes and saw complete trust
and sincerity there. "You have so much faith in me that it humbles me, truly. I shall do my best to
find an elleth worthy of all your fine qualities, but it may take me a while. I'll let you know when I
have any ideas."

He inclined his head with a smile, and Elizabeth strolled between the flower bushes, deep in thought
while her guards trailed behind at a respectful distance.

Elizabeth continued in radiant happiness, glowing with health and vitality for seven glorious weeks.
All the elves that beheld her remarked on her beauty, and her pronounced inner glow that shone so
clearly from her eyes. Thranduil was near bursting with pride as she grew more voluptuous in her
shape, and her sexual appetite remained voracious, which he happily helped her with as often as she
desired, and then some.

But at the beginning of the eighth week, everything changed abruptly. She rolled over in bed early
one morning and promptly vomited all over the floor, and it was only downhill from there. Random
cravings hit her strongly, but as soon as she gobbled down whatever sounded wonderful and
appetizing, it was not long before it came right back up.

And the strangest things could set her off with no prior warning. Her nose became overly sensitive to
smells, and even the sweet perfume from a rose could make her gag when the nausea was heaviest
upon her. She cried often and easily, and Thranduil was hard-pressed to know how to handle her in
such a state, especially when combined with the constant throwing up.

"God in heaven," Elizabeth moaned, fighting off another wave of nausea and dizziness. "What have
I ever done to deserve such misery? Whoever called it morning sickness is a bloody liar; it's all the
time sickness, it never ends!"

Elirien replaced the cool cloth across her forehead gently while the queen threw an accusing glare at
the king. "If this is what it takes to have elf babies, I no longer wonder why there were so few born,
previously. I hope you are aware you're never touching me again."

Thranduil frowned. "Elleth seldom suffer any ill feelings when they are with child, and I was not
previously aware it could be so severe in mankind either, until you became stricken so." Her face
paled further and Elirien brought the bowl she held closer, making the Elvenking back away with an
uncomfortable look. "I shall check on you again later, Elizabeth." He retreated hastily, wincing at the
sound of retching that followed him.

"Beloved lady," Elirien murmured, rubbing Elizabeth's back and wiping her face when she laid back
down after the last of the vomiting ending. "I can assure you that what you suffer now will seem as
nothing at all when you finally hold your child in your arms for the first time."
Elizabeth rinsed her mouth with the cool glass of water Elirien gave her and smiled weakly in thanks when she handed it back. Closing her eyes, she rubbed a hand against the swell of her belly, already visible and prominent after barely three months.

"The rational part of my mind knows that, but the part of me caught in this miserable, unending feeling of sick just doesn't give a fuck," she said, using the English profanity, which she knew her friend still did not fully know the meaning to. Opening her eyes, she met Elirien's sympathetic hazel gaze with worry in her own.

"What if this lasts for the rest of the nine months...or year even, or however long I end up carrying this child?"

Clasping one of Elizabeth's hands between both of her own, Elirien leaned closer. "You shall endure, my queen. Whether mankind or elfkind, it makes no difference! Females are strong and powerful. Even though I be no warrior, I have done something my dear Feren never could, and that is to create life and give birth to our sons. You will know the truth of my words for yourself before another year has passed."

Sitting up on the couch, Elizabeth gave her friend's hand a squeeze. "I know you are right. I should be trying to savor every moment of this, so long have I waited for it, but alas..." She shook her head ruefully. "I hope you will forgive me for my weak whining and complaining, but after five hundred years of no sickness and then to be hit with this! I confess, your companionship is the only thing keeping me from endless weeping."

Tilting her head, Elirien grinned. "You are well entitled to whine and complain when you feel so poorly, my lady. I do understand. What you really need to raise your spirits, is fresh air and sunshine while the weather remains fine."

Nodding, Elizabeth stood, fighting through another wave of nausea but with a look of determination on her face. "You're right." She smiled, with a trace of her usual humor in her gray-green eyes. "If nothing else, going out into the gardens will give me a new location to throw up, and different elves to horrify. That will be diverting!"

Laughing, Elirien wrapped an arm around her queen's shoulders while they made their way out of the Elvenking's great caverns.

Legolas sighted on the animal grazing in the underbrush and released his arrow, dropping it instantly with a shot through the heart. He signaled to two other elves from his guard to retrieve it, while he stowed his bow across his back and turned to his friend, Langion, who had been nearby on duty when the prince came to that part of the woods to seek a deer.

"You say this is for the queen's current craving?"

"Aye," Legolas replied with a smile. "She asked me to come and hunt for her, so that she might enjoy venison for evening meal."

"Shall she keep this meal down, do you think?" Langion asked with a dubious look.

The gossip of the queen's continued illness from her pregnancy had become quite the curiosity among the Silvans. With her previous loss, all of her friends and acquaintances had become very invested in doing all they could to help her, and Legolas had made it his responsibility to see Elizabeth had anything and everything she wished to eat. Legolas crossed his arms, pleased the buck he shot was goodly sized and would yield plenty of meat.
"There is actually good news on that front; Elizabeth has not brought up anything for the past three days. The healers think perhaps she has turned a corner, now she is well into her fourth month, and that she shall not suffer more sickness."

Langion's white teeth shone in a genuine smile. "That is good to hear. I did happen to see the king last week, and he appeared more distracted than I think I can ever remember seeing him."

Clapping Langion on the shoulder, Legolas laughed brightly, then lowered his voice, leaning close to his friend. "In fact, Adar has been at a complete loss as to how to manage Elizabeth. Between her sickness and abrupt swings in mood, I think all the wisdom of his years is as nothing there."

Langion leaned even nearer as Legolas dropped his voice to a whisper to keep from being overheard. "I witnessed him compliment her the other day, telling her she was as a lovely, blooming flower growing ever larger with life..." Legolas paused and lifted his brows. "And she promptly burst into tears and became inconsolable for a time. I tried to assist, to see if there was any help I could offer, and I did succeed in distracting her, I think, but I have never seen Adar look as though he very much wanted to fall upon his sword."

The two elves chuckled together, and Langion shook his head. "I think perhaps both of us are thankful we are not married, when faced with the prospect of such difficulties."

Cocking his head, Legolas nodded with a thoughtful look. "I think if I had a wife in such a state, I would be tempted to go attend an urgent task elsewhere for a few weeks."

Langion snickered. "You know husbands that adopt those tactics always wind up worse off than if they had just remained to brave the storm. In any case, if you ever do find someone you wish to wed, it would be an elleth, and not a human, and that would likely be much easier."

"Nay, I do not think that is so," Legolas sighed with a sadness in his blue eyes. "I have developed rather particular tastes and preferences with regards to females, and I know in my heart that no elleth will ever satisfy them."

"Do you mean to insinuate that you would take a human woman to wife?" Langion asked, with an astonished look.

Legolas shrugged. "I have always been honest with you, Langion. You know what my feelings for Elizabeth once were before they became what they are now. She is so very different, so enthralling in her ways, and from such an interesting and learned land that I could never settle for any less." He glanced away, a far-off look in his eyes. "Yet, I could also never bind myself to the brief lifespan of a mortal, so therein lies the verdict for my future. I must be content as a son and an elder brother, and those loves will sustain me."

Crossing his arms, Langion repressed a sigh. "But you want more than that, prince, you know you do."

Legolas grinned. "Of course I want more, it's in my nature. But reality does not show any inclination of willing to bend to my whim." He took a step back, preparing to follow his guards. "Come and find me later, and we shall raid Adar's private wine stores."

"Do you still think he doesn't know it's us, after all this time?"

"He likely does." Legolas threw a smirk over his shoulder. "But since I am always careful to leave evidence otherwise, he may still harbor doubts. In any case he has said nothing, so I see no reason to change our longstanding habits."
Lifting a hand in farewell, Langion scrambled back up into the nearby tree, and jumped from branch to branch until he reached the platform built among the strong, upper limbs of the oak where he was to keep watch for several more hours.

He smiled and shook his head as he watched Legolas and his guards make their way back toward the hall. Langion was glad his friend had returned to much of his former joy and cheerfulness since his disappointment over the queen, but he knew his heart was still as unsatisfied as his own remained, so many years later.

Yet, with such impossible preferences, he well knew Legolas would remain a lifelong bachelor, just as he intended to. At least it would be nice to always have such excellent company in his princely friend, who shared his circumstances. Langion sighed and turned his gaze to the east, searching in the distance for sign of any threat.

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Tirion entered the queen's office, smirking at the sight of her lounging on her couch, a bowl of strawberries on one side of her, and a stack of books on the other.

"I see you are hard at work, oh, glorious queen of mine." He reached for a strawberry, smiling further when she glared at him for the offense.

"Watch your tone, Tirion. I am, in fact, working very hard. I would have you know that a pregnant woman at rest expends just as much energy as a grown man climbing a mountain."

His brows climbed as he bit into the red fruit and chewed with a thoughtful look. "How do you know such a thing?"

"I read it before I left my lands behind to come here. Much study has been done on what a woman endures to produce new life, where I come from." Her eyes rested on the book he held, and she set aside the fruit bowl to reach for it. "Have you brought me the next in the series?"

Tirion relinquished it to her with a nod. "As you commanded. I think you will find this one quite amusing, as well."

Thranduil swept into the room, having heard much of the conversation, and looked to the other elf curiously. "Does this one pick up after Cálélairë and Vaháyawen have wed?"

Tirion coughed in an attempt to cover a laugh, but it was obvious from the slight narrowing of the King's eyes that he wasn't fooled. "Indeed, my lord, this one begins after the honeymoon," he answered, using the English word. "Am I to understand that you also read these tales?"

King Thranduil gave him a dry look. "As they are nothing but very thinly veiled stories about the queen and myself, yes, I have read them. There are a good many details contained therein that only someone close to us both would know, and I must ensure they are fit for circulation." His eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Are you quite certain you are not the secret author?"

"My lord, no! I assure you I would never be so bold as to..." he sputtered, before he was interrupted by Elizabeth.

"Now, love, leave Tirion be. I don't believe he was the one to write them, and at any rate, there is nothing in any of the books that is less than flattering to either of us, so it's inconsequential. I also find them very entertaining and diverting, so I wouldn't wish you to scare the author away from writing more."

Tirion bowed with a grateful look to Elizabeth. "With your permission, I will return to the library.
now and leave you to your reading."

She opened the cover, and glanced up. "Yes, thank you, Tirion. I'll send it back via your sister once I finish it."

The elf nodded. "My lord, my lady." He slipped out and pulled the door closed behind him, doing his best to avoid the sharp gaze of the Elvenking.

Thranduil came and knelt in front of Elizabeth, immediately catching her attention. She smiled and leaned toward him to receive his gentle kiss. He looked into her eyes for a long moment before resting a hand on her belly, his own lips lifting in a pleased smile.

"I felt something very clearly from our child late last evening, after we made love, but you were already asleep and I did not wish to wake you to tell you. I came as soon as I could get away this morning."

She sucked in a sharp breath as her mouth fell open. "You know, don't you? Oh, please tell me! I can hardly stand the suspense any longer."

His smile widened as her hand came to rest on top of his against her swollen abdomen. "A son. We have another son."

Her eyes shone brightly with joy. "A baby boy..." she whispered in wonder. "I so wanted another son, but I was too afraid to wish for it. Oh, thank you, love."

Thranduil kissed her again. "Why do you thank me? I had no control over our child's gender, just his conception."

"Of course you do. Whether gender selection is random or not, it comes from the male. I'm certain it is no different in elves. If King Henry VIII only knew that fact, he might not have been so deadly to his wives."

He tilted his head. "That's – interesting." There was a shifting under his hand and Elizabeth laughed.

"Did you feel that from the outside, or was it too faint?"

Changing the position of his hand slightly, he looked up when a harder thump actually moved his hand. "I felt it, Bess, both times."

"He's quite strong to still be so little, isn't he?" She looked to him curiously. "I'm not quite five months along."

Thranduil smiled with an obvious look of pride. "Would you truly expect less from our son?"

With great effort, she refrained from rolling her eyes and smiled softly. "No, I suppose I could not think otherwise of any child of yours."

He pressed a kiss to her belly and another to her lips before he stood. "I have correspondence I must attend to now, but I will join you for dinner this evening, or earlier, if I manage to finish sooner. Enjoy your reading."

When Thranduil left, Elizabeth set to daydreaming about their son, imagining what it would be like when he was finally born, and whether he would look like Legolas at all, or be completely different in appearance. It was some time later when she finally picked up the book again and set to reading.
Chapter 34

The King dismounted from the white charger he had ridden to and from Laketown with his guards, and rubbed the horse's nose approvingly. Thurindir, the elf in charge of all mounts in the kingdom, including the acquisition and breeding of said animals, came forward with a smile to take the reins.

"Thurindir," the King greeted warmly. "I am surprised to find you here this evening. I thought you would leave any late night grooming chores to your more junior apprentices.

The tall, blonde elf bowed his head in acknowledgement with a rueful smile. "Perhaps that has been my custom in the past, Sire. But with my sister off in Lothlórien to visit our kin there, I find our family talan is rather silent and unwelcoming. The horses are far better company on such a fine night."

The King pursed his lips. "Yes, females have a way of turning any dwelling into a home with their presence, haven't they? Will your sister stay long on her visit?"

"I doubt she will wish to remain away for very long," Thurindir said, leading the horse to a stall, then returning to stand near his King. "Likely no more than a decade or two."

Nodding, Thranduil crossed his arms and paused, attempting to remember, as it had been many years since he had any private conversation with the reserved elf. "Your wife is no longer on these shores, is she?"

Thurindir looked down, but the King had noted the obvious flash of pain in his eyes. The elf's voice was full of the same suffering when he answered. "Nay, my lord. I lost my wife, many long years ago."

Thranduil frowned. "I cannot recall… What was her name?"

"It was Melissëah, Sire. You did not know her," he said quietly, raising his green eyes to meet the King's.

Squeezing Thurindir's shoulder in sympathetic understanding, Thranduil nodded. If there were any in Greenwood who knew the pain of losing a wife, he was certainly one of them, though fate had well smiled on him since, with Elizabeth.

"I shall not detain you from your duties any longer, Thurindir. How does the new elk calf fare? Does he look to be as hearty and clever as his sire?"

Thurindir inhaled a slow breath, clearly relieved at the change of subject. "He has shown great spirit and intelligence, though he be young. I believe he shall serve you well, once he is weaned and trained."

Thranduil walked out of the stables, raising a hand in farewell.

"Pleasant eve, my lord," Thurindir called after him.

Turning back to the horse, he picked up a currying comb and set to grooming. While he worked, he allowed himself the rare indulgence of permitting his mind to wander back to cherished memories of the wife he had loved and lost, nearly a thousand years earlier.
Thranduil entered the dimly lit sitting room, taking in the sight of Elizabeth sleeping on the long couch, her feet resting across Legolas' lap while he read silently. The prince looked up and smiled a greeting at his father.

"Good evening, Adar. I trust your meeting with the Lake men went well?" he whispered quietly, setting the book aside.

"Well enough," the Elvenking responded in an equally hushed voice. "I see you've managed to put her to sleep once again. What was the method this time, another song?"

Legolas grinned, slipping out from under Elizabeth and standing. "A foot rub. She mentioned her back was paining her as well, but I obviously leave that to you."

"Ah, of course," the Elvenking said with a small smile. "I am grateful to you for keeping her company in my absence."

"You know I am happy to perform any service for you or Elizabeth, and I admit she is extremely diverting in this state. The larger her belly grows, the sharper and more witty her complaints become."

Thranduil gave Legolas a long, searching look. "You have not yet said what your feelings are on becoming an elder brother."

Turning his gaze to rest on Elizabeth's distended belly, which rippled suddenly with the movement of the child within, the prince smiled softly. "I do not know if you are aware, but before Naneth was lost, I had greatly hoped for a...a sister. I now find that hope has grown new wings." He gave his father a questioning look, and the king nodded, his lips lifting in a slight smile.

"You shall have your wish at some point, my son. I have foreseen at least one daughter." He gripped Legolas' shoulder when the prince grinned boyishly, fleetingly reminding him of when his firstborn was a toddling child himself.

"Thank you for telling me, Adar. I am pleased I shall have a little brother soon, and a younger sister to look forward to in the days to come. I shall bid you a pleasant rest now."

When the door snicked closed, the Elvenking knelt beside his queen and reached a hand to rest against his tumbling offspring, sending gentle waves of calm and a soft command to sleep, stilling the babe. He watched Elizabeth's face in peaceful rest for a moment longer, and pressed a kiss to her forehead. He smiled when she stirred slightly and sighed his name. Reaching out, he lifted her in his arms and walked toward their bedchamber, his most precious treasures held securely and near to his heart.

Nine months had come and gone, and the tenth also passed, but still the queen showed no signs of going into labor, and her enormous girth had become something of an amusing novelty among the willowy, lanky elves, who mostly sported cute little bumps in pregnancy. Elizabeth felt that she fit neither descriptor of cute or little. While she was reduced to awkward shuffling, or heaven forbid, waddling, the expectant female elves of the kingdom continued to stride around in seeming ease and comfort. She could not deny some small twinges of jealousy, and wished she were a taller woman, perhaps a bit better suited to graceful gestation.

Riding was altogether out of the question, as it seemed likely that if she fell from her horse in such a state, her overripe belly might actually split on impact, like a midsummer melon.
"An enormous melon," she muttered, examining her gown-swathed shape in the gilded, floor-length mirror of her dressing room. She shot a rueful glance at Elirien, who had become her nearly constant companion during the long pregnancy.

"Beg pardon, my lady?" Elirien asked with a sweet smile.

Elizabeth turned to the elleth and grimaced. "I look like I swallowed at least four big melons, whole." She slipped her arms beneath her big belly and lifted it slightly. "Would you just look at the size of me! Who knew I could even grow to such proportions? It's a bit terrifying when I contemplate this child's size." She lifted wide eyes to Elirien. "However shall I get him out?"

Elirien smiled and came and laid a hand on her queen's belly, probing it gently. "I believe you are carrying a great deal of water. Your son may not be so very big as you think."

Shaking her head, Elizabeth gave her a bemused look. "I sincerely hope you are right. Well, I think I am as ready as I can get in this state. Let us attempt a stroll, and I shall try not to fall on you this time."

The healer laid a comforting hand on her friend's arm. "You are only two weeks away from a full year of pregnancy, Elizabeth. I have the sense that your time will come in the next day or two," Elirien said cheerfully, bringing an enormous smile to her lady's face. "I have a very good feeling about it, and I am seldom wrong."

"From your lips to the Almighty's ears," Elizabeth said fervently, heading into the outer hall. "I have already enlisted the King's amorous aid numerous times in an attempt to bring this child out, as you suggested. He doesn't seem the least put off by me looking this way – quite the opposite, in fact – but it has certainly become an awkward endeavor."

Elirien leaned closer to whisper in Elizabeth's ear while they walked the passages out of the royal chambers. "Feren could not keep his hands off me when I carried our sons! I was pleasantly surprised by it, but perhaps it is something to do with male pride and protectiveness when we carry their offspring?"

Elizabeth snorted, and lowered her voice to a quiet murmur when they passed a guard. "Or maybe we're just married to a couple of virile and lusty elves, hmm? That seems most likely."

"Perhaps you are right," Elirien laughed. "But I certainly prefer it than to have a lover who I would have to beg to touch me."

"Such scandalous talk, and to think of how innocent and ignorant of all this you were when we first met!" Elizabeth asked, shaking her head. "What would our husbands say if they heard us discussing them in such a manner, I wonder?"

"Why don't you turn around and ask them?" Thranduil said in a bland voice.

"Well, that wouldn't be any fun," Elizabeth mused, glancing back at the King and his Captain who were coming through an adjacent doorway. "It's likely they would scold us, so it's better to leave the question entirely unanswered." Winking at a blank-faced Feren, Elizabeth pulled the blushing Elirien along beside her.

Would it make any difference if I scolded you for speaking so carelessly where any might hear you? Thranduil asked Elizabeth in mind-speak.

It might. If you will get this child out of me, I will be too busy tending him to wander around indulging in idle gossip, so get to it.
You know I am more than happy to do my duty, Bess, came his purring response. Meet me in our bath at midday, and I shall see what can be done about encouraging our son to leave his comfortable abode.

Why the bath? Having gained the outdoors, Elizabeth tipped her face up to the bright sun and smiled, nodding to Elirien when she excused herself to go and fetch them both some cool juice from the kitchens.

I heard you say it had become an awkward endeavor. The water will make you buoyant, and there are any number of positions we can employ for your comfort.

She settled on a cushioned bench under a shady bough in one of the herb gardens, and sighed in relief at having her weight off her feet.

Ah, very clever. It's a date, then, the baths at midday. Thank you, love.

I shall see you there, my beauty. Thranduil withdrew from her mind and Elizabeth smiled in welcome to see Legolas approach.

"Is this to be your perch for the day?" He grinned and dropped onto the bench beside her.

"Just for the morning. It's nice to get out for a bit of air, and to prove to myself that I'm still capable of forward motion," she said dryly, "however slow it may be."

Legolas laughed and raised his brows in inquiry, nodding to her belly. "May I say good morning to my brother?"

"Of course." She took his hand and placed it where she was currently being pummeled, smiling fondly when his expression softened in wonder, as it always did. He looked at Elizabeth in concern at a very hard thump against his hand.

"Does that hurt you when he moves so forcefully?"

"Sometimes it does, but I think it's a good sign that he's healthy and strong. Don't you?"

"He certainly does seem strong, but perhaps I must tell him to be less rough." He leaned nearer and pitched his voice low and soothing, switching to English to talk to the baby, as he had made a habit of. "Listen to me, little one, you must be gentle with your mummy, and not kick so hard. If you wish me to teach you how to fight when you are older, I shall. But for now, I think it would be best for you to sleep and give your mother a rest."

The kicking stopped a moment later, and Legolas withdrew his hand from where it rested with a smugly satisfied smile. Elizabeth shook her head, still smiling. "You have the true power of an elder brother, Legolas. I hope you will use your gifts of persuasion for the betterment of the kingdom, and to help me manage this little fellow, of course."

"Of course," he replied with a teasing grin. "I am to patrol to the south today. Did you want me to hunt for you while I'm away?"

She sighed gustily and shook her head. "Thank you, but no. I'm so full of baby that I find I have lost most of my appetite. A little fruit is all I can manage the past couple days. Elirien predicts it will be my time in the next day or two."

He smirked and scrutinized her form. "Let us hope she is correct. It's difficult to imagine you could grow any larger."
Elizabeth narrowed her eyes in mock offense. "I hope that if you ever do marry, you will have better sense than to tease your pregnant wife, as that will likely get you slapped, or at the least earn you a very cold shoulder. Remember this: pregnancy weight increase is temporary, but a woman's memory of slights against her figure last forever."

Legolas contemplated her words and nodded slowly. "I will heed your wisdom, should I ever find myself in a situation that would require it. Though I confess I think it very doubtful I am fated to ever marry and become a father. I shall see you tomorrow, Elizabeth." He pecked a kiss to her cheek and stood, nodding a greeting at Elirien as they passed.

The healer handed a cool glass of fruit juice to Elizabeth and sat in the seat Legolas had vacated. "The prince looks very happy this morning. He must be looking forward to finally meeting his sibling."

"Yes, I believe he is." She sipped her drink and smiled a secret smile, thinking on what Thranduil had shown her recently of one of his visions that concerned Legolas, and a lovely young lady they were all yet to meet. It was a very exciting prospect for the future, and greatly comforted her worry concerning Legolas' continued solitude.

Draining her glass, Elizabeth set it down and pushed to her feet, stretching the kinks from her back. "Come, Elirien, let us walk. I have a sudden burst of energy, and while we stroll, you can tell me how you plan to sweet-talk Feren out of any discontent when you see him later."

"Oh, I already decided on what action I shall take. I'll send the boys to Tirion for the evening, and greet Feren when he arrives home wearing nothing but that tiny, see-through green slip you made me. That's his favorite." Laughing, Elirien took her arm and led her toward the path to the woods.

Breathing slowly and deeply until the latest pain subsided, Elizabeth loosened the death grip she had on the arms of the rocking chair she had been sitting in, off and on since her labor started. The royal bedchamber had been transformed into the elven equivalent of a labor and delivery suite with the pleasing scent of fresh herbs filling the space and stacks of soft blankets and towels at the ready. Both Nedirien, the chief healer, and Elirien, as a healer and her dearest female friend, were in attendance.

The appointment she had kept with the King in their bath the previous day had apparently been a successful endeavor. Perhaps even a little too successful.

When the regular surges began mid-morning, they were mostly gentle and easy, and she had laughed inwardly to think of all the horror stories she had heard of the utter misery of childbirth, thinking them all grossly exaggerated. But that was before her waters had broken in a hot gush that had soaked her gown and the floor, signaling a marked change. Afterwards, the pains came much closer together, with the intensity altering to an agony that felt like it was trying to rip her open from the inside out with each gripping and inescapable wave.

"Where is my husband?" she growled, the next strong surge already starting before the last fully faded, causing a sudden panic. Doubt and fear began to plague her as to her ability to really endure what lay ahead with any measure of control or calm.

Elirien came and knelt down beside the rocking chair. "My lady, when we sent word, we were told the king had not yet returned to the halls."

Pushing to her feet, Elizabeth took shuffling steps toward the door, hindered by her awkward girth, some distant part of her not occupied by pain firmly deciding that if he could not come to her, she
would go and find him, although she hadn't quite thought out the part about how she might manage a horse in her current state.

When the door opened and Thranduil stood on the thresh-hold, she hurried her steps until she could lean her head against his chest, imbibing his comforting presence and breathing through the last of the forceful wave crushing her middle.

The King rested one hand on her shoulder, the other stroking down her hair soothingly as he looked at the healers. "How long has the queen been this way?"

Nedirien stepped forward. "Her pains began six hours ago, my lord, and she has suffered the harder pains a little more than two."

"Don't talk about me like I'm not here," Elizabeth snapped, glaring up at the king and then shooting an angry look at Nedirien.

Elirien shared a look with the other elleth and grinned at Elizabeth. "Oh, my lady! Sudden anger is often an excellent sign. I think your child may be ready to be born!"

The queen frowned and then looked at the king when his movement caught her eye. He had taken a step back as though to leave, and she gasped, her hand shooting out to grab a handful of fabric across his chest, stopping him.

"And just where do you think you're going, Elvenking?" she asked in English. "You put this child inside me, and you will most certainly be with me when he's born."

His brows drew together and he answered her back in the same language. "I...have never been invited to attend a birth, not even for Legolas. You truly wish me to stay with you?"

"Did I not say so? Where I come from, fathers are not only present for the births of their children, but some even deliver them, insisting their hands be the first to touch the babe. You do not have to do that if you do not wish it, but I still need you with me." Her eyes turned uncertain and pleading. "I cannot do this without you."

He cupped her cheek tenderly and nodded, his eyes soft with feeling. "You know I would deny you nothing." He stepped all the way into the room and closed the door, moving over to the far side of their bedchamber and removing his trailing outer robes, leaving him clad in the embroidered tunic, leggings and boots he had ridden out in earlier that morning.

Elizabeth wandered back to their ornate bed and leaned against the side with her hands flat against the soft coverlet, groaning as the worst torment yet struck her, like a giant fist pushing down into her back and bottom. "I changed my mind," she moaned, when she was able to speak again. "I don't want to do this anymore! Someone make it stop."

Thranduil came nearer but wisely kept silent, more than able to feel her suffering through their bond but unable to do anything to prevent or lessen it.

Elirien ran a cool cloth across her friend's forehead and Nedirien touched her shoulder gently, speaking calmly and gently. "My lady, I think I should check you as it is very likely you are ready for the birthing stool."

Closing her eyes, Elizabeth nodded, concentrating on slow, deep breathing as the healer touched her belly all over, feeling it, then gently probed inside of her. Standing straight again, Nedirien frowned with concern in her pale blue eyes, glancing at the king where he stood nearby.
"Your body is fully prepared and open, my lady, but the child has still not turned and is not in a position that would allow birth. We could attempt the various laboring stances to encourage the babe to turn again."

Elizabeth dropped her head forward for a moment in thought, then climbed up onto the bed and leaned back against a pile of several pillows, parting her robe until her distended abdomen was fully visible and waved a hand at it in emphasis. "Get a sharp knife and cut me open." She looked to Thranduil. "You will have to put your hands into my flesh to keep the wound from closing. I'm afraid this is going to be quite bloody and messy."

The healers moved to obey and begin preparations, both looking concerned at the prospect of cutting their queen open, but the king held up a hand to forestall them.

"Wait."

Moving to Elizabeth, he placed his hands on her belly, his eyes going unfocused with a look of deep concentration. After a full minute, he looked up and smiled at his wife in satisfaction. As soon as he removed his hands, her belly started to ripple with drastic movement, making her squeal in alarm.

"What did you do, and what's happening to me?"

He laid a comforting hand on her shoulder, even as he glanced from her face back to the pronounced motions that continued. "I have spoken to them and made them understand, and they are now moving to positions that will allow them to be born."

Her eyes widened and her mouth fell open as he spoke. "What do you mean, they? Just how many are in there and how did we not know before now?"

The king glanced at the healers, his eyes softening again when he looked at Elizabeth and smiled. "You carry twins, a son and a daughter. Our son has been covering our daughter and blocking her so completely, that until I truly focused my will on speaking to him, I could not feel her."

As her belly continued to move, she stared down in wonder, a smile growing on her lips despite the ongoing discomfort. "We have...twins?" The movement ceased and she felt the change immediately as something slid into place. She gasped and looked at her husband, reaching out for his hand, then turned to the healers.

"I feel something different now."

Keeping hold of her hand, the King moved up nearer her head, making space for Nedirien, who opened the queen's robe fully and smiled in relief. "I see the top of the babe's head, my lady. If you work with your body as the next pain comes, you will soon have this one in your arms."

Nodding, Elizabeth drew a breath and closed her eyes, pushing with all her might when the next surge came. Time seemed to slow while she pushed with each pain and then rested, until she felt an aching, burning stretch and then a sudden cessation of pain as the baby finally slipped out.

"My lady, open your eyes and behold your son," the healer said in a happy tone. Nedirien swiftly tied off the cord and cut it, liberating the baby and placing him on his mother's chest.

Elizabeth rested a hand on his bare back, amazed at how warm and heavy his little body was as he squirmed against her, tears filling her eyes when the King laid his hand on top of hers, his fingertips touching their little boy's dewy skin. She beamed up at her husband, thrilling at the love and amazement she felt through the bond and saw in his eyes. She bent down and pressed a kiss to their son's damp head and inhaled the unique, sweet scent on their baby's skin, sighing in rapture.
"Oh love," she said quietly, "just look at how beautiful he is; the most beautiful child I could have imagined." He had a head full of dark hair and his skin was the same gold tone as his sire, with little ears that had delicate, pointed tips. "My very own elf baby," she whispered. "I can scarce believe it."

"He is beautiful," Thranduil murmured, still smiling in wonder. "Like his mother."

Elirien came and wrapped a warm, soft blanket around the baby and Thranduil took him, lifting him into his arms and laughing softly when he started to wail in protest at being removed from his mother. The King pressed his lips to his son's dark brow and started to hum, and the baby fell silent once more, staring up with eyes of brightest blue and listening intently to his father's voice.

Nedirien smiled encouragingly up at the queen. "My lady, the second babe has crowned. I don't think it will take much of an effort to bring her, as she's much smaller." Elizabeth bore down strongly with the next pain.

"Wait one moment, my lady. Her head is born and she turns now for the rest of her body to emerge."

Glancing to the side, Elizabeth watched Thranduil admiring their son, holding one of his tiny hands gently between two of his fingers, and she smiled brilliantly. She felt when her daughter's body slid free from her own and reached down to take her from Nedirien, pulling her up on her belly while her cord was also tied and cut. She began to cry loudly, her plaintive, sweet little voice instantly filling Elizabeth with an overwhelming love and protectiveness.

"Oh! My lovely, darling little girl, come to your mummy now so I can look at you," she cooed. Cradling her daughter against her, she laughed when she started rooting at her breast and opened the top of her robe and guided her close, smiling when she immediately latched tightly onto her nipple and began to nurse hungrily. She ran a reverent hand over the golden fuzz of soft hair on her head, her tiny features so like Legolas, and looked back toward Thranduil who was watching her with a tender smile.

"I think perhaps that little brute there was starving his sister. He's much larger and heavier than she is."

The Elvenking nodded, looking back down to where his son was noisily sucking on the tip of one of his fingers. "I believe he also wishes for nourishment, if you feel equal to feeding them both at once."

She shifted their daughter and bared her other breast. "Bring him and I'll give it a try."

When they had their son situated with the help of several cushions and he had latched on as readily as his sister, Elizabeth glanced to her husband. "What shall we name them?"

He pressed a soft kiss to her forehead. "You may name them whatever you please."

She grinned teasingly. "Really? Even if I decide on Thunder and Lightning for the earth-shaking and shocking pains they gave me?"

Elirien laughed where she was helping Nedirien with the last of the clean up from the birth. The king glanced at the elleth then raised an amused brow at his wife.

"Must I specify anything within reason?"

Elizabeth turned thoughtful, examining their little faces while they nursed. "Would you mind if I named him for my father and brother, and her after my mother?"

He tilted his head. "Edward and Catherine? What are the meanings of those names?"
Smiling softly, she leaned her head back. "'Edward means 'fortunate guardian or protector' and Catherine means 'pure'."

The Elvenking smiled at his queen, lifting his daughter into his arms after she released her mother's breast, drowsy and content. He enfolded her against his chest securely and ran a finger across the tiny bow of her lips and nodded.

"They are Edward and Catherine, Greenwood's newest prince and princess." His voice dropped to a low murmur. "Legolas will be pleased to meet you, little one."

Nedirien had finished packing up most of her supplies and smiled at her king and queen holding their twins. "My lady, I was not certain what to expect with regard to your healing, but when the afterbirth was expelled, you very quickly ceased to bleed. It seems you have mostly returned to your preconception state, although I would still advise you to rest as much as you feel able to for the next several days."

Elizabeth smiled an acknowledgment and murmured her thanks, extending a hand, which Nedirien moved forward and clasped warmly before taking her leave. Elirien came and kissed Elizabeth and stroked the head of the little prince she held. "Congratulations, my lady, congratulations, my lord. They are both beautiful and our kingdom is truly blessed."

Elizabeth hugged her friend and gave her an impish smile. "You were right, of course. Not only was it worth all the discomfort and sickness, I truly do feel powerful after giving birth. It's quite an amazing feeling, and rather addicting." She tilted her head and gave her husband a considering look. "Perhaps we should have another child very soon. I think I may get quite good at it."

Elirien grinned and waved as she slipped out the door, and Thranduil gave his wife an amused smile. "Will you not be content with these two for the present? It has not even been a full hour since you birthed them."

Leaning down, Elizabeth kissed her little son's head again while he continued to nurse and nodded, smiling a dreamy, elated smile, fully enchanted by their children.

"Very well, lord husband. I am deliriously happy and completely satisfied with these darlings." She raised one dark brow, her eyes full of mischief. "For now."

He shook his head, still smiling indulgently while he swayed with his daughter in his arms. "I suppose now the floodgates have been opened, I am duty bound to give you all the children you desire."

"Yes," Elizabeth grinned. "And I fully intend to hold you to that."

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Two hours later, Elizabeth and the babies were bathed, dressed, and settled comfortably in the sitting room. Catherine had nursed twice more to her brother's once, and it seemed clear she was trying to make up for her much smaller size.

When a knock came at the door, Elizabeth was fully engrossed in watching the range of expressions flitting across Edward's face while he slept in her arms, moved to laughter several times by the more comical nature of some of them.

Thranduil opened the door with Catherine tucked in one arm, and after smiling at the overjoyed grin from his first-born, he handed her off into Legolas' eager arms. After examining her intently, touching her golden hair and running a finger against her little cheek, he pressed his lips to her tiny nose and nodded in satisfaction. "I think she looks like me."
"Yes, and Edward looks like your father. If I want a child in my own image, I will just have to keep trying," she quipped with a teasing smile.

Legolas came and kissed Elizabeth on the cheek and sat beside her to get a good look at his baby brother. "He's much larger than her." He turned his gaze back to Greenwood's only princess, his face softening as love and protectiveness rose in him. "Nearly double her size, I should guess. Had you no idea at all that you carried twins?" Legolas chuckled when Catherine sneezed twice and let out a cry of protest before falling silent again.

"None. Did you, love?" Elizabeth asked with a look at Thranduil, where he had settled in a chair beside her.

Thranduil crossed his long legs. "I suppose if I had been looking for two, I would have noticed sooner."

"Hmm." Elizabeth looked between her husband and Legolas. "It would explain why I was the size of a house, at least."

Legolas grinned. "But you would never know it now. Your appearance has returned to what it was before. No one would ever guess you had just given birth to two babies. I should think you would feel a bit smug about it. Female elves do not recover their figures nearly as swiftly."

"I admit that I am glad to be returned to my former self. The past couple of months, I felt rather disabled. It has given me a new sympathy for people who are trapped inside feeble or less than ideal bodies. But the sickness was definitely my least favorite part. I won't look forward to repeating that." She smiled at Edward when he opened his eyes, seeming to study her intently.

"Yet you wish to do it all again," Thranduil said with a raised brow. "And seem to be rather eager to get started."

"What?" Legolas looked at her in astonishment and laughed aloud. "How can you want more children already? Is this a common occurrence for human women?"

Elizabeth smirked, and traced Edward's dark brow with a light touch. "I seriously doubt it. But most human women are not forced to wait thirty years to begin their family, and I have hundreds of years of repressed longing for children. I suppose we may wait for a couple of years before I beg for another baby."

Situating his sleeping sister more comfortably in his arms, Legolas' brows drew together as he studied her face silently for several minutes. He finally looked at his father, catching his eye. Thranduil frowned.

"You are troubled, my son. Tell me what burdens your mind."

Glancing at Elizabeth, Legolas pressed his lips together before meeting the King's eyes. "It had not occurred to me to ask before now, Adar, but are they...mortal?"

"No, they are not," he said emphatically, understanding Legolas' fear. "I was unsure for a time if that would be the case, but when I examined the fëa of each, just after their birth, I discovered they feel no different to any other elves. In truth, I believe Elizabeth is more like an elf than a human, although she obviously retains some aspects of her humanity."

"Perhaps I'm a different type of elf, in disguise," she mused. "I know there are things from my world that most would consider impossible, and a race of elf-like beings who left part of their magic and culture behind seems very likely, or where else would all the stories of Fae have risen from? Who
can say for certain what that remarkable water really transformed me into all those years ago?"

Thranduil folded his arms across his chest. "With no way to examine it, that is likely to remain a mystery for the ages."

Legolas smiled in obvious relief, bending to kiss Catherine's forehead. "Regardless of how it was accomplished, Greenwood's elves are better for having you among us, Elizabeth. And I thank you both for giving me siblings, which is a gift I never thought to receive." He smiled teasingly at Elizabeth. "I wonder just how much our family shall grow and change over the next century."

Watching his wife and children, Thranduil felt truly blessed, savoring the warm feelings of love and contentment swelling in his heart. Smiling a knowing smile, he leaned his head back against the plush chair where he sat and closed his eyes.

"I could tell you both how it shall change," he murmured. "But I think it best to let you discover it for yourselves."

~o~
Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

An update! Just a tiny bit less fluffy than the last one, but still with some sweetness.

For anyone who doesn't know but would be interested, A Bard's Tale, the Legolas/OC story is now up and quite far into that story. If you don't mind some spoilers for this story, you can read it all. If you don't want very many LTTA spoilers, you can still safely read up until Chapter 17. In addition, I've also started an Aragorn/OC short story. :)

Galedir strolled down the passageway in the direction of the throne room, soon due to begin his duties for the day, when the sound of light feet running further ahead of him greeted his ears. The queen appeared suddenly from a nearby archway, looking rather aggravated and pointed a finger beyond him.

"Grab that child!"

Turning, Galedir saw little Edward dart out from behind a decorative planter and start to flee. Laughingly, the guard lunged and scooped up the wayward toddler into his arms. He smiled and ruffled the messy mop of dark hair, looking into the mischievous blue eyes of the boy.

"Greetings, little lord. I believe your lady mother wishes you to return to her."

The child widened his eyes and looked down the passage longingly and pointed. "Run!"

Galedir chuckled and handed the child to his smiling mother. She kissed his forehead and looked at the guard.

" Barely a year and a half old, and already as fleet-footed as a deer." Edward reached forward and patted his mother's cheeks and grinned.
“Mummy smile.”

Elizabeth laughed. “I can hardly keep from smiling with your antics, little scamp.”

He nodded with a proud look bordering on smug. “Scamp.”

Galedir grinned when Elizabeth glanced at him with a rueful look, then back at her son. “With that expression and attitude, you are a perfect copy of your father. I haven’t decided if that’s a positive thing or not.”

A loud squeal followed by happy giggles had the three turning toward the sound in time to see Legolas enter the passage with his baby sister perched on his shoulders, her little hands resting on top of his head, and every time he bounced her she laughed harder. Coming to a stop beside them, Legolas smiled.

“I see you’ve managed to track Edward down again, and just in time, as I’m taking Catherine to the rose gardens and I can take him along as well.” He winked at his younger brother. “He’s getting better at hiding, it seems.” He lifted his sister down into his arms and she looked at Legolas.

“Eddie naughty,” she proclaimed solemnly, making all three adults laugh.

Elizabeth stepped aside. “I won’t keep you any longer, Galedir, but I do thank you for your timely assistance in capturing my little runaway.”

“It was my pleasure.” Galedir bowed. “My lords, my ladies.” Moving down the passage, the sound of children’s laughter followed him, making the guard smile. The joyful laughter of the young in the king’s hall was always a most welcome sound.

After a long day of dealing with kingdom minutia, and more time wasted in meetings with his
captains and Galion’s latest complaints about the Laketown men’s tardy deliveries of goods, Thranduil was feeling thoroughly irritated. He had hoped to be done with his responsibilities in time to share dinner with his wife and children, but it seemed that wasn’t meant to be. After a quick bath, and an even quicker dinner alone, he finally entered the bedchamber he shared with Elizabeth, fully expecting to find her sleeping.

His brows climbed in surprise and all his irritation left him to find her on the bed, sitting comfortably sprawled against a mound of cushions and staring off into nothing, in a form of trance. He smiled in satisfaction and approached the bed. It had been his suggestion that she work on exploring her own magical skills and abilities in her free time, and she had been working on something that she had told him she intended to show him when she had a better grasp of it.

Coming out of the trance, she turned at his approach. Smiling warmly in welcome, Elizabeth wrapped her arms around his shoulders when he lay his head against her breasts and belly, untying her robe so her could kiss her bare skin. “How is our daughter this evening, mîr nin?”

Brushing her fingers through his loose, golden hair, Elizabeth turned slightly more toward him and guided one of his hands to the side of her pregnant belly. “As I’m sure you can tell, she is sleeping soundly. I feel so small and cute compared to how large I was by this stage with the twins. It’s quite an easy thing to carry only one child after carrying two at once, and this baby is far less aggressive than Edward was. This entire pregnancy has been an absolute joy.”

Pressing a reverent kiss against her belly before turning his attention to her lips, he hummed in appreciation when she met his kisses with eagerness. Rubbing his nose against hers, he smiled into her gray-green eyes.

“Am I correct in assuming you are feeling well enough to receive my amorous attentions? For I have a great need of you after being forced to wait so many hours to return to your arms.”

Opening his robe with a smirk when she found him bare beneath, she quirked a dark brow. “Long day, hmm? Did you lock the door?”

“Of course.” He gave her an amused look, and cupped one of her full breasts, then released her soon after and sighed when he heard the sound of small feet, pulling the two sides of her robe back together to cover her. “Although, I’m not certain why I bothered.” Standing and tying shut his robe and waiting until Elizabeth had done the same, he went and opened their door, staring down at Edward and Catherine standing outside the door, holding hands and looking uncertain.

“And why are you both out of your beds and wandering the halls at such a late hour?”
Catherine looked up at her father with wide, pleading eyes. “You never came to tuck us in, Daddy. Will you now?”

The Elvenking bent down and scooped Edward and Catherine into his arms and turned toward the bed, setting them down on it, raising a brow at Elizabeth’s teasing grin. “Go and kiss your mother and I shall settle you both into bed, which I will expect you to stay in for the rest of the night.”

They both kissed and hugged their mother, giggling when she tickled them, and Edward hugged her belly and patted it. “Night, other sister. Sleep well inside Mummy.”

Catherine beamed at her twin and took his hand, both reaching for their father again and settling into his arms for the return trip to their room. Though they had separate beds, neither of them would sleep without the other, and no matter how many times they were put into their own beds, one of them always crept into bed with the other.

Thranduil laid them both in a bed together and pulled up the coverlet, pressing a kiss to the golden brow of his daughter and the dark brow of his son. Smiling tenderly at Catherine’s wide yawn, he marveled at just how quickly the three years since their birth had passed, and now there was another infant just days away from her own birth.

Edward turned on his side, rubbing his eyes tiredly with a chubby fist. “Daddy, will you please sing to us before you go?”

“Very well, but you must close your eyes while you listen.” When they both grinned and closed their eyes obediently, he began to sing the Quenya lullaby that his mother had sung to him as a child, and he had sung to Legolas when he was small. It had become a favorite of the twins, and they requested it often.

"Lörna à'kuilä"
~o~

"Värna mi'olör"
~o~

"Türma ei ràumo"
~o~
"Sinome"

~o~

(Asleep, yet awake
Safe in dreams
Shelter from the storm
Here)

By the time he reached the song’s end, they were both fast asleep. He stood and watched them a moment longer before he closed their door and returned to his own room. He frowned when he saw no sign of Elizabeth when he closed the door and locked it. She entered the room by the time he walked to the bed, coming from her large closet wearing one of his favorite night gowns on her – a sheer red silk that fell to her knees, but was slit high on either side, reminiscent of the gown she wore the night they wed. He smirked at what she held out to him.

“If you will wear this kilt for me, Thranduil, I promise I shall be properly appreciative.”

He pursed his lips, considering. “How appreciative?”

“Immensely,” she purred, giving him a crooked smile. “I don’t think you’ll regret it.”

Pulling off his robe and putting on the garment he had always found exceedingly strange that she had an obvious fondness for, he narrowed his eyes, smiling faintly at the excitement he could feel from Elizabeth through their bond.

“You are in a surprisingly playful mood tonight, mîr nin. Is there an occasion I am not aware of?”

“Yes,” she laughed. “It may be our last night without an infant to look after for the immediate future, and I intend to make the most of it. The twins are sorted?”

He pulled her against him, sliding his fingers into her long, dark hair and smiling in anticipation. “I sang to them, they will not awake before morning.” Thranduil leaned down and kissed her, desire simmering hotly in his blood when she reached beneath the short garment he wore and stroked him teasingly.
“Then I shall have you all to myself without interruption.” Elizabeth bit her lower lip, considering the possibilities. “How marvelous.”

Pushing the gown off of her shoulders to fall to the floor and admiring her nude, lush shape, he caressed one of her breasts. He was very glad that there were still many hours left before dawn, as he also intended to make the most of their time.

Tirion entered his sister’s dwelling, stepping over the clutter from his young nephew’s small wooden building toys from his abandoned play in the entryway. Glancing around the sitting room to confirm his sister was not there, he wandered to the desk tucked away in the corner and opened the thick sheaf of papers and lifted the top one, quickly scanning what was written and smirking.

“Tirion!” Elirien gasped accusingly, rushing to take the paper from him and restore it to the rest. “That’s not ready for you to read yet, brother.”

Turning to nod at his sister, he crossed his arms. “Still waiting for Feren to finish writing the battle scenes for you, I take it?”

She smiled radiantly with an obvious look of pride. “He is very nearly finished with his part. Such a breathtaking section he wrote of King Cälélairë and Queen Vaháyawen defeating the dark foes of Mordor together! It was both thrilling and romantic. You really must tell me what you think after you read the finished manuscript.”

Tirion shrugged. “I doubt I will have anything critical to say or any further advice to offer. You have both improved dramatically in your writing over the years, and I enjoy reading your tales as well as the rest of the kingdom.” He smiled teasingly. “You know the king and queen have also read the entire series, and Prince Legolas too. I have been asked when the next volume might be expected.”

Flushing in pleased embarrassment, Elirien tidied the desk absently. “I trust you have made no mention as to the true identities of the authors, Tirion? It must remain a secret to protect Feren from any awkwardness he would experience with the king, should our involvement become known.”

Resting a hand on his younger sister’s shoulder, Tirion raised a brow. “You know I have always
kept your secret, and shall continue to do so, though I still do not see why you don’t take credit, at least. Feren could remain in the background as he prefers, and you could at last receive all the praise and thanks from your very grateful readers who have been thoroughly moved and entertained by the tales you have crafted.”

“I prefer it not be known.” Elirien patted his hand on her shoulder. “I think half the pleasure and excitement of it is that I can have the freedom to write whatever I choose without consequences or explanation required. I am certain I would not have been quite so bold with the romance between the characters if it was known that I wrote such things.” She looked down and blushed again.

“All you have written is tasteful and beyond reproach. You have no cause to feel any discomfort about it. But you said you had something you wished to show me in your message, so if not the new story, then what is it?”

Reaching for a lower drawer, she pulled a small sheaf of papers out and pushed it into his hands with a hesitant smile. “I wrote a children’s story, and I hoped you might read it and tell me if you think it good enough to be added to the collection of tales in the library.”

Tirion took the papers and opened the cover to begin reading before Elirien closed it and shook her head. “Take it with you and let me know your opinion after.” She pointed a finger at him with an unusually stern look. “And do not be kind. If you think it lacking, then tell me honestly.”

He narrowed his eyes, smiling with a hint of a tease. “I am always honest when I give my opinion of your writing, nethel. You surely know this by now.” (S. sister)

She shook her head. “I think there are times that you are too kind to me in an attempt to spare my feelings, but you need not be. I can take criticism when it is warranted.”

He kissed her forehead and turned toward the passage leading back to the door. “You are a fine and talented author, Elirien. If I found something that warranted criticism, I would offer it to you, but I seldom do. You are my sister, so your level of skill with written words is hardly a surprise.” A peal of laughter filled the sitting room, making Tirion grin as he had always loved the sound of his sister’s laugh since she was only a small child.

“Yes, I’m certain any ability I may possess is entirely due to your excellent tutelage or our shared blood. Father would certainly be happy to take credit for anything clever we have ever done.”
Turning back, Tirion shrugged. “False modesty is a waste of breath, just as much as unwarranted boasting, as we both heard many times from Father. There is truth to that, if you will heed it.”

She gave him an exasperated look, but one full of affection. Lifting a hand in farewell, Tirion left his sister’s dwelling and turned in the direction of the library. A sharp shout in one of the nearby gardens had him pausing and looking in, as he recognized the voice as belonging to Prince Legolas.

His eyebrows climbed in surprise to see the prince standing at the base of a tall tree holding his young sister and looking up into the branches in exasperation. His hair was also more untidy than he had ever observed it looking before. Curious.

“My lord,” he ventured hesitantly. “Are you in need of some assistance?”

With an expression of frank relief, Legolas pushed his young sister into the librarian’s arms. “Thank you, Tirion, your timing is impeccable. Edward has climbed all the way to the top of this tree and will not come down. I must go retrieve him.”

Watching as the prince quickly leapt up into the lower branches and disappeared into the thicker, leafier branches higher up, Tirion turned to look at the young princess in his arms. She was scrutinizing him with frank interest with her gray-green eyes that were a perfect match to her mother’s, but the personality behind them so obviously different. Smiling, he addressed her in English, as he knew the twins spoke with their mother.

“I am Tirion, Princess Catherine. I do not believe we have been formally introduced. Your twin seems rather naughty today.”

The child smiled, winding her arms loosely around his neck and shifting slightly in his arms. “Eddie is sad because Mummy hurts from sister. But Mummy says it will be over soon and we will be happy then. Eddie doesn’t understand because he is a boy.”

Frowning up at the tree, Tirion turned his gaze back to Catherine, her words and expression a good deal more serious and aware than he would expect from a three year old elfling, but being half human, perhaps that was enough to explain the difference.

“Your mother is in pain? From the baby?”
Jumping lightly to the ground with the dark-haired Edward in his arms, Legolas rubbed a soothing hand across his brother’s back, switching to Quenya to speak to Tirion. “I am watching over the twins for the day. Elizabeth’s time has come, and my father remains with her for the birth. Edward was quite upset by his mother’s pain, understandably so, and has been acting out a bit because of it.”

“Of course,” Tirion replied with a sympathetic look at Edward. “No child likes to see their parent suffering, and being so young, I am sure he is having difficulty fully understanding there is a reason for it.”

Edward wriggled until Legolas set him on his feet, and the little prince walked to Tirion and tugged on his trousers until he bent and lifted Edward into his free arm. Catherine patted her twin’s cheek and reached for one of his hands to hold it in hers. They stared into each other’s eyes in silent communication and Tirion observed them with interest, glancing at Legolas who nodded at the question he could see on the other elf’s face, continuing to speak in Quenya so the twins would not understand.

“They can speak together in their minds if they choose, though I think much of their communication requires no language at all, being more shared emotion. It’s quite something, but I know twins are often said to share such profound connections.”

Cocking his head with a smile, Tirion nodded. “Indeed. No doubt they both have many gifts from their unique heritage from Elizabeth and the king.”

Edward and Catherine both smiled radiantly, and Catherine giggled and looked across at Legolas in obvious excitement. “We can feel Mommy is happy now! We can go see our sister, Legolas!”

Taking Edward back in his firm hold before he could slide out of Tirion’s arms and dash off into the halls, Legolas smiled and shook his head. “We will go soon, but perhaps not just yet. Would you like to go to the kitchens and have some of your favorite pie? I could smell the apples baking earlier, and I’m sure it is ready.”

Knowing his young sibling’s pronounced weakness for sweet pies and cakes, Legolas had no qualms about using the enticement whenever he had a need to distract them or secure their immediate cooperation. Bouncing in his arms, Edward pointed to the pathway out of the garden. “Cake, please brother, cake!”

Enjoying himself far more than he would have thought while spending time in the company of such young children, Tirion shrugged and bounced Catherine playfully in his arms. “Shall I carry you to
“Yes, please, Tirion,” Catherine replied politely, continuing to melt the heart of the sharp-witted, sarcastic librarian by slow degrees.

“Are you sure you don’t mind? I can take her if you have somewhere else you need to be,” Legolas raised a brow and winked at his little sister when she wrapped her arms tighter around Tirion’s neck and laid her head on his shoulder, silently giving her opinion on the matter.

Tirion chuckled and shook his head, moving to follow Legolas and finding the eldest prince to be far more agreeable company than he had realized, having had little opportunity to spend time with him in such light and casual conversation.

“I am happy to serve the whim of Princess Catherine and have no pressing engagements to interfere, my lord. I daresay she is already quite charming and well-mannered, despite her tender years. Perhaps you may even be forced to keep a close eye on her when she is of age, or she shall turn all of Greenwood on its ear with so many young elves of similar age attempting to pay her court,” he quipped, making reference to Greenwood’s population explosion over the past thirty years.

Legolas smiled in amusement. “I think she has many carefree days of childhood ahead of her before we shall have to concern ourselves with things of that nature. But tell me, have you any idea of when the next volume of the Brightwood Chronicles may appear? It has been several years since we last had a new book in the series. I particularly enjoyed the introduction of Prince Nordornë and his daring exploits into the series, several book ago.” (Quenya: oak tree)

Tirion stifled his smirk as they passed from full daylight into the dimmer illumination inside the halls. “Hmm, yes, he is a rather compelling character and a truly extraordinary warrior, isn’t he? Alas, I cannot truly say when we may expect the next volume. As the author leaves each book anonymously, I can’t exactly request an update or even be certain there will be another, you understand. If you like, I can put you on the waiting list just under the king and queen as I have in the past, and as soon as anything shows up, you will be one of the first to read it.”

“Yes, I would appreciate that.” Legolas glanced back at Tirion with a knowing smile. “But I’m certain you must have an idea after all these years as to who the author is.”

Tirion again hid a smile from the eyes of the perceptive prince. “Even supposing I did know, I could never say, as it has been made clear to me that the writer does not wish his or her identity to become known. I have given my word to respect this wish, which I feel is the only reason the stories continue to appear.”
Legolas considered his words for a moment. “I have no opinion as to the gender of the author, but one thing I am certain of, and that is that the tales are written by an experienced warrior, whether ellon or elleth. Only someone who had fought in real battle could describe scenes of warfare so compellingly or accurately.”

Seating Edward on a high stool, Legolas nodded to the elleth that quietly offered to fetch a slice of the toddler prince’s favorite cake, as the entire kitchen staff knew the preferences of the royal children with their frequent visits.

Tirion chuckled and Legolas lifted surprised brows when Catherine resisted being set on the stool next to her brother, letting out a whine of protest and only calming when Tirion sat down with her on his lap. The librarian lapsed back into Quenya. “Apparently, the princess also desires I be her chair while she eats.”

“It seems you have certainly made an impression.” Legolas crossed his arms while both of his siblings ate their treats with gusto, Edward with little concern for manners or mess, while Catherine took dainty bites and was careful not to get any on her clothing. She speared a careful bite of pie on her fork and held it out toward Legolas, smiling happily when he leaned down and accepted the bite, pinching her nose playfully.

An hour later, Tirion lowered Catherine to her feet to go with Legolas and Edward to visit her mother and meet her new sister. Looking back over her shoulder, she waved at him and grinned brightly. Smiling back, Tirion walked to the library, musing on just how pleasant it had been to spend time with the royal children, and thinking Elizabeth had offspring she could be proud of.

Shagrol opened his eyes and accepted the cup of grog from Grik, his second, who sat beside him and stared into the fire before looking across at the many dwellings they had built as their numbers had grown over the years. Though Shagrol led the Grish Dâgal, as they had come to call themselves in the Black Speech, he made no decisions of importance on his own, but deferred to their true master in all things, who remained ever watchful over them.

“The new ones are gathered and ready to take the ritual, Grat. Shall I bring them forth?” (Black Speech: Leader) Grik set down his own empty cup and looked at Shagrol expectantly.
“Not yet.” Shagrol gulped down his beer with obvious enjoyment and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, narrowing his amber eyes on the smaller male. “Our Mother has birthed a high child again. You’ve felt it?”

Golden eyes softening into a look of eager longing, Grik nodded. “Another daughter. I feel her tender sweetness, as I feel all our blood kin. How I wish we would be permitted to look upon her with our new eyes. Mother would surely approve our many changes, if she would only come to us, even once. How I ache for the sight of her! Have our orders yet changed?”

Shagrol stood to his full, impressive height and flexed a muscled arm, his grey skin rippling with the movement while he faced to the south-east where his own deep longing continually pulled him. “I have been given no new instructions,” he spat harshly. “We are to watch and wait, and grow our numbers in secret, as we have been told.”

When Grik cowered at his sharp tone, Shagrol pulled him to his feet and rested a hand on his shoulder, no longer bent and misshapen, but sleek with lean muscle, and his own skin the same matching grey as Shagrol’s. Their dark hair fell like silk to their waists, and though their features and skin were not the fair color of their mother, all was blemish-free and pleasing to look on. The changes in their physical appearances were striking, and the sight of them never failed to draw new orc disciples to their cause, all eager for the rumored power and beauty that came to those who took the change.

“Do not fear me, brother, I would never harm you as I would have in former days. We are not the savages we once were before Mother elevated and transformed us. I but share your frustration and need. As the only ones to have drunk from the Source, we have a stronger ache than all those who have come after us.” He dropped his hand and looked away with a tormented scowl. “I do not know how much longer I can resist the pull. I have told Mother of my struggle, but she has not yet given me an answer.”

Grik stepped in front of Shagrol with a determined look. “Drink from me if it will ease your struggle, Grat. I offer my blood freely.”

Shaking his head, Shagrol looked down at the one who he had once disdained and scorned as lesser, but who he now valued as brother and friend. “I...am grateful for your offer, shaûk, but I will endure. I do not believe Mother will leave us to suffer. I have faith she will yet come to us and grant her blessing.” (Black Speech: companion) He drew a deep breath, exuding a calm determination he had learned from his mother, as she patiently instructed him in how to be a leader of his kind through the whispers in his mind.
Suddenly, Shagrol tilted his face up to the dark sky, closing his eyes and smiling with the same euphoric bliss as was reflected on Grik’s face, and a moment later, they embraced in joy. “She promises to come!” Shagrol whispered before stepping away from Grik, his hands curling into fists in his excitement.

“Let us perform the ritual now, Grat.”

At Shagrol’s nod of agreement, Grik rushed off to summon the ones waiting nearby, coming to stand beside his leader again as the orcs filled the area around the fire, watching with greedy, suspicious or mistrustful eyes. Pulling out a dagger, Grik waited for Shagrol’s nod before slicing a long cut across the tall leader’s bare, muscled arm.

“You have come here for the power you have heard of and wish to have!” Shagrol shouted over the growls and hungry purrs that erupted from all those that smelled the sweetness of his blood, which quickly turned to murmurs of surprise as his skin slowly pulled together and began to heal before their eyes. Shagrol surveyed all the dark faces of the orcs, smiling grimly that he had their full attention. Lowering his arm, he waited for Grik to hold up the large ritual cup that held their combined blood.

“All of you who drink from this cup will have the same power flowing through you as I do. You will no longer be orc, low and hated by all the world, but you will be changed forever, and become Grish Dâgal, the Blood Children.”

While orc after orc came eagerly forward to drink deep from the cup, Shagrol walked among them, watching as they each went through the initial quickening, and subsequent change in their demeanor that signaled completion. Standing before them, the ritual complete, he raised his arms and stretched them toward them.

“Be welcome. I am Shagrol, your leader and guide, and we serve the will of our gothûrz, dushûrz Kranklob. We are Grish Dâgal, hiil Kranklob!” (Black Speech: powerful, magical Mother. Blood children, follow our Mother!)

As all those nearby took up the cry, it became a chant of purpose and worship that grew louder and filled the night. Shagrol gave a subtle nod to Grik, indicating he could feel each of the new members, and all had gone as it should.

If they continued on their current course of expansion and growth, neither the forces of Dol Guldur or even Mordor itself would be able to stand before the power of their queen, and her many devoted children. With a smile that only hinted at the savageness of his past existence, Shagrol joined the
chant.

Partial Quenya lyrics quoted from Lullaby From A Distant Land by Forest Elves

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Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

Time to find out what Elizabeth has been up to. What will Thranduil think about it? What will Legolas have to say? Let's find out!

The lazy clop-clop of horse’s hooves was muffled by the moist dirt and leaves on the forest floor, there having been quite a few days in a row of spring rain. Elizabeth was out for her morning ride with her two guards, Renion and Thandir, and nothing seemed out of the ordinary or in any way strange. But unknown to both guards, unfamiliar eyes tracked the progress of the queen with her escort from far enough away so as not to be immediately detected.

Glancing to the west, the Elvenqueen narrowed her eyes and brought her horse to a stop. After dismounting, she raised a hand to Renion and Thandir.

“No, don’t get down. I’m only going to take a short walk, and I wish you both to remain here.”

“But...my queen,” Renion began to protest, with a concerned look at Thandir.

“I will not go far.” She gave them both a reassuring smile and patted the hilt of her sword strapped to her waist. “And you know I can look after myself for at least a few minutes. I will be briefly out of your sight, but not out of hearing range.”

A rustling and the sound of footsteps from just beyond a nearby young tree had both guards instantly springing into action, leaping from their horses and standing in front of Elizabeth with blades drawn. When two figures appeared, one tall and one short, both clad in brown leather armor, Thandir stepped forward.

“Halt!” he said sharply in Common. “In the name of King Thranduil, on whose land you trespass, come no closer to our queen or we will cut you down.”

Both leather-clad males raised their hands in a sign of surrender, and the taller one gave a contrite smile to the queen. “Forgive us for disobeying, dear Mother. We were too eager to be in your
presence again for caution, but we removed our weapons as you commanded.”

“Exoikonomíste me tous peismatás ándres pou den akoúin!” Elizabeth muttered in exasperation, moving in front of Renion and Thandir and giving them a reassuring smile. (Greek: Save me from stubborn men who don’t listen!)

“They are no threat,” she said in Sindarin. “Lower your weapons, please, and be at ease. I summoned them both here to speak with me.” Without waiting for a response, she faced the two gray-skinned strangers and held out both of her hands. They approached and fell to their knees, each taking a hand in both of their own and pressing their lips against the back of her hands in a reverent kiss.

“My Queen,” the smaller one whispered in Westron, “I cannot fully express to you the great joy of beholding your glory once more. Please say we have your favor.”

She smiled benevolently. “You know you have my favor, both of you. Stand, and tell me by what new names you would have me call you, as we last spoke of.”

Slowly rising and keeping their gaze only on the queen, the taller one clasped his hands before him. “I am Shagrol no more, my lady, but have taken the name Viktûr, as you suggested.”

Nodding, she turned to the smaller male, able to look him directly in the eye since his change, as he was no longer stooped over as he had been. “And you?” she prompted.

His golden eyes shining with eagerness, he bowed his head to answer. “I am Ashûr, Great Queen, similar to the word for first in the Black Speech, for I was privileged to be born before all others.”

“Ashûr and Viktûr,” she mused while pacing back and forth in front of them, taking note of all the changes in their appearances since she last saw them in person. “You sound like twins, which I suppose is fitting in the circumstances.” She shook her head, crossing her arms. “It truly is remarkable, the differences, even I would not recognize you if I did not already know you both. Some might even say such a transformation impossible, yet by such reckoning, I too have been through impossible changes.” Turning back toward her bewildered guards, she smiled at their confusion.

“Renion, can you tell me what race you think these two males standing here were born of?”
With furrowed brows, he shared an uncertain look with Thandir and shook his head. “I...am unsure, my lady. In some ways, they seem to share similarities with elfkind, with their hair, ears, and to some extent, their features, but I have never seen gray-skinned elves. The names they spoke before were orc names, but they are clearly not orc, as I sense no evil as I always do from such creatures.”

Viktûr smiled at the guard. “We were both orc by birth, before the blood of Queen Elizabeth changed us and saved us. Our Lady has given us new life and purpose.”

“What exactly is your purpose?” Thandir asked, clearly disturbed by the revelation that the ones before them were from among the ranks of their hated enemies. “And how can you be trusted? Such an evil nature is surely not so easily changed.”

“All you say is true,” Viktûr agreed. “We were wicked, born of evil and kept for no other purpose. But the magic of our Queen’s blood is greater than all of Mordor, and every dark lord besides. I never knew love or compassion until Mother freed me from my bonds of hate. I never knew joy until she gifted us with it.” He gestured toward his comrade, who nodded with a small smile at the guards.

“Our purpose now is to serve Queen Elizabeth in any way she directs us, and to rescue more of our former kind from the clutches of darkness, giving them the choice to become as we are. The enemies of the Queen are our enemies, and those she calls friend and ally we hope to do the same. It remains to be seen if your Lord King, and mate to our mother will accept us.”

He drew a great breath, glancing up at the trees as the wind blew them, before meeting Thandir and Renion’s eyes in turn. “There has been much hatred and enmity between elf and orc through the ages, but with us comes new possibilities for peace. It is my hope, and the hope of my brethren, that we will be accepted by your kind, so we may live in harmony, as neighbors.”

The approval Viktûr could feel from Elizabeth and the touch of her hand against his cheek brought tears to his eyes. Resting his own large hand on top of hers, he met her gaze, his eyes full of his love. “I would die a thousand deaths for you, Great Queen, and count it an honor to do so.”

Going to his knees again and resting his cheek against Elizabeth’s hand, Ashûr closed his eyes. “And I. Thank you for agreeing to meet with us, at last, Mistress. I am well strengthened by your presence and touch, for all the days that lie ahead.”
Two hours later, as Elizabeth and her guards journeyed back to the halls, she stopped and turned her horse to face them, giving them each a long look.

“I would ask you both to swear you will say nothing of my meeting today, with anyone. It was not my intention to burden you with the knowledge of this new endeavor I have undertaken, but as you now know, you will please keep silent, or you will risk injuring me. I will tell the king soon, as I plan to take him to see the settlement they have built in the far north-west corner of these woods.” She sighed and looked away.

“But I cannot fully predict his reaction, or what steps he may take in his initial anger toward my concealment of these things. Will you both give me your honest opinion? Did you find Ashûr and Vïktûr compelling and sincere?”

“I found nothing in their manner offensive, and their devotion to you certainly seemed genuine,” Renion began hesitantly, looking at Thandir, who nodded.

“But,” Thandir ventured, “we have no way of knowing if they really mean all they say, or if it is merely an act to draw us in.”

“I know it is no act, as I have full access to the minds of all who are bound to me, as they are,” Elizabeth shrugged. “They were made into what you saw by ingesting my blood, which I know you will both find abhorrent, but I did it with purpose as a means to escape when I was held captive in the dark tower. There were others besides them, as I thought to change enough of the orcs to form a guard, but they were slain during the fighting, all but the final two. I sent them away until I could decide what was to be done with them, never dreaming the kind of change would occur as has. Once I realized the possibilities, I bade them to make a settlement and convert more orcs, taking steadily away from the enemy’s ranks while building my own army of devoted allies.”

“And army?” Renion echoed in surprise. “How many more are there like the ones we saw, my lady?”

She smiled faintly. “Around five hundred, currently. If the King approves, that could easily climb into the thousands in another ten years.”

A moment of silence passed while both guards considered the possible implications of such a force, for good or ill. “We will neither of us make mention of any of this, as we are sworn to obey you,” Thandir said quietly. “I trust you know what you are doing, my lady, and will soon seek the king’s opinion and wisdom as to this venture.”
“Yes, let us hope he will share his wisdom on all this with an open mind.” She turned her horse and they began riding toward the halls again.

Legolas peeked into the family sitting room, smiling at the sight of the twins laying on the floor together, drawing pictures of animals. His father was pacing the length of the room, reading a scroll with one hand, with one year old Alassë draped across his other forearm on her belly, looking more like an arm accessory than a toddling baby.

Coming forward, Legolas reached his hands out, silently relieving his father of the strawberry-blond haired infant, and chuckling when she squealed in protest until Legolas turned her to the same position with her belly across his forearm, and her face out toward the room.

“I believe you’ve spoiled her to this position now, Adar. She scarcely lets me hold her any other way, unless it’s over my shoulder when she’s tired.”

Thranduil raised a brow, lifting his gaze from his letter to his eldest child. “She came to enjoy being held that way as a newborn when she was difficult to soothe, and I believe now it is just familiar and she enjoys the view.”

Legolas tossed her in the air and caught her, chuckling at her happy giggles. “Is that true, Alassë, you enjoy being able to see from so high up?”

“Up! Up more, Legolas! High!” Alassë demanded in her sweet toddler’s voice.

He tossed her even higher before he spun her around to sit on top of his shoulders, where she rested her hands on his head and looked around from her even higher vantage point, briefly content.

“This one is rather fearless,” Legolas said to the Elvenking, who nodded.
“Yes, she has a strong will, as we frequently see displayed when she resists her rest time, as she is currently doing.”

“Where is Elizabeth this afternoon?” Legolas held Allassë's legs in place to stop her from kicking, wincing when she tugged on one of his braids.

Thranduil hid his amusement over the abuse Legolas was enduring from his youngest, going to sit in one of the plush chairs near the twins and tossing aside the correspondence he had finished reading. “She is at a committee meeting with the other ladies helping to organize this year’s Children’s Festival.”

Untangling his sister’s small fingers from one of his braids, Legolas lifted her down into his arms. “I thought Devrien was put in charge of all of that, more than two years past.”

“She was.” The king sighed. “But unfortunately, she has proven utterly inept for the task. Elizabeth would have given herself far less work if she had not tried to delegate to that one.”

“I’m surprised you haven’t already ordered someone else to take over,” Legolas said with a smirk, well used to the decisive way his father normally dealt with similar circumstances.

Thranduil gave him a bemused look that showed only a portion of the frustration he had endured over the matter. “I would certainly like to, but Elizabeth does not appreciate when I intrude on matters under her authority and guidance, and she sees that young elleth as something of a daughter. Particularly since Devrien’s parents recently departed to take the ship West.”

Legolas laughed, bouncing Allassë in his arms. “Yes, I believe Elizabeth would mother everyone if she could. Not even I am exempt from her maternal care. She made me a strange garment last winter, though I have yet to wear it.” At Thranduil’s curious look, the prince shrugged. “She called it a turtleneck,” he said, using the English.

The Elvenking smiled. “Yes, she has a number of odd garments from her former lands that she retains a notable fondness for, which I suppose is to be expected.”

Catherine thrust up her completed drawing in a triumphant hand. “Finished! Daddy, do you like my horse?” She ran to his father and climbed up on his lap before presenting him with her art. He examined it with furrowed brows before he met his daughter’s eager gaze.
“This is not a horse, my child. But it is a pleasant rendering of an elk, and very like my mount.”

Sighing, Catherine laid her head against his chest. “It was meant to be a horse, but since Eddie was drawing one first, he said I had to draw something else, so I did.”

Both Thranduil and Legolas turned to look at Edward, who was just gathering his own drawing, then walked toward his father with a sheepish smile. “Here’s my horse.”

Legolas walked closer to see, and repressed a smile. Thranduil raised an eyebrow after he accepted the drawing. “It seems your horse has had rather too much to eat, Edward, and not enough exercise to counterbalance the fact.”

Edward looked down, scuffing his little boot against the floor. “I tried to make him a huge, strong warhorse. That’s why he looks so big.”

Catherine slid off her father’s lap and took Edward’s hand. “I like your horse, Eddie. You made him all white, and that’s my favorite.”

Edward swung her hand back and forth, clutched in his, and grinned. “I know! That’s why I made him like that, so you would like it, Kitty.” The twins giggled together, and then turned to look at their father with the same pleading look before Edward spoke again. “Ada, can we go play in the gardens outside for a little while? We’ll be good and not climb the highest tree again.”

Thranduil pursed his lips with a considering look and turned his regard toward Legolas when he spoke.

“I can take them all out to the gardens for a while, if you wish. I am meeting Langion in the great-hall this evening, but I have nothing else I need to attend to before that.”

Nodding, the Elvenking stood. “Very well, you may take them out.” He turned a stern look to all three of his small children. “But no pie or cake in the kitchens before evening meal, is that clear? Your mother will be upset if you come to the table again, unable to eat your dinner properly.”

A chorus of protesting groans filled the room. Legolas smiled guilelessly when his father turned a knowing look toward him before he led his siblings away, Edward already begging to be allowed to ride on his back.
After they left, Thranduil stood, deciding to go to his office and work for while, taking the parchment he had been reading. After hesitating briefly, he reached down and picked up both drawings, his lips lifting in a slight smile as he looked them over again. Tucking them securely under his arm, he made his way out of their private rooms and toward his office.

The following day, Elizabeth drew a deep breath and knocked on the door to her husband’s office. It was still quite early in the morning, but she felt the time had come to be open and honest, and let the chips fall where they may. Four years she had been working toward something so new and potentially volatile that she wasn’t certain if there was hope for success, or if it would all turn out to be for nothing. Everything hinged on what Thranduil’s reaction might be, and the decisions he made based on them. When she heard his call to enter, she squared her shoulders and opened the door.

Looking up with a welcoming smile, the Elvenking set aside the correspondence from Dale he had been reading, saddened to hear of the further decline in King Bard’s health, but such was the way of mortals. Noting the nervous manner in which Elizabeth grasped a fistful of her skirt and her furrowed brows, he was instantly on alert.

“Something has upset you,” he said in a soothing tone, probing their bond and frowning when he found her partially closed off to him, and she had learned to do in recent years. “Or,” he paused, carefully reading her expression and not liking the signs of trepidation he saw. “There is something you fear to tell me.” He narrowed his eyes when she shrugged and sat down heavily on a chair facing him.

“Both,” she admitted. “I am upset because there is something I have kept from you, and I admit I do indeed fear your reaction when all is revealed. Will you perhaps promise me just one thing? Try to see past your anger to the careful consideration and purpose behind my actions.”

Leaning forward, he laced his hands together on top of his desk as he digested that she had done something she was certain would make him angry and attempted to prepare himself. “This sounds rather serious. Is it to do with the children?”

Pushing back her long, dark hair, she shook her head. “No, it has nothing whatever to do with the children. Or, rather, nothing to do with our children together. From a certain point of view, I suppose you could say that it centers around my offspring, as unconventional as it may be.” Looking away
from him, she bit her lip. “And I’m babbling. God’s bones, I have no ability to speak when I know I shall upset you.”

Eyes softening, Thranduil pushed back his chair. “Elizabeth, come here.”

She approached him and breathed out in relief when he pulled her onto his lap, kissed her tenderly and rested one of his large hands against her cheek. Looking into her eyes, his lips lifted in a slight smile. “You know you need say nothing aloud if you find it difficult. Open yourself to me fully, and you can show me all you wish to by letting me enter your mind.”

Her own eyes softened with love at his never-ending attempts to protect her, even from her own discomfort. “I would like to show you something. It’s what I’ve been working on when you find me meditating. After, I will attempt to explain myself in words. Is that agreeable to you?”

“Of course.” He was eager to see just what manner of thing her magic could be commanded to do, for he had felt it coming off of her in powerful, vibrating waves when she was fully focused on it.

Opening the bond fully, Elizabeth fell willingly into the combination of their power when Thranduil stared into her eyes. Much stronger than she had been when he entered her mind in years past, she was able to keep a partial awareness of her body and physical surroundings, but mostly focused on showing him what she wished.

They stood side by side before a vast web, many crimson strands flowing outward, all pulsing with energy and life. Some were visibly stronger, the strand denser than others close by, but each and every string, even the narrowest silk connected to a beating heart at the center.

After studying the entire thing for several minutes, Thranduil placed the tip of his finger on one of the thickest strands, immediately able to look through the eyes of another being. He felt uncertainty, but excitement from the one who’s mind he touched.

_Mother? Your presence feels different to me than usual. Are you well?_

Hissing, Thranduil withdrew his touch from the strand and immediately left Elizabeth’s mind, staring angrily at her when she turned her head to meet his accusing gaze.

“Mother,” he said in a flat tone, keeping tight reign on his fury to prevent himself from verbally
lashing out at her as was his first inclination. “Every one of those strands is an orc connected to you, isn’t it? When I told Haldir and Legolas to find and kill the last two bound to you, they could not find them. You helped them hide, and beyond that, you have added many more to their numbers.”

Scrambling to keep from falling when he stood suddenly, Elizabeth took a step back and lifted her chin. “Those connected to me are not orcs, Thranduil. Not anymore. My blood kills orcs, and in their place, something new is born. A being no longer bound to evil, but with a free will and a desire to do good.”

Thranduil gave a short, bitter laugh and a slight shake of his head. “You claim they have free will, yet they are tightly tied to you by blood-bond. You cannot have it both ways, Elizabeth. There is a reason why the use of magic fueled by blood is frowned on, for with such ties the stronger party always rules the weaker. Why did you conceal this from me instead of seeking my counsel? I seem to recall you swore never to conceal matters of importance from me, or is your word to me of no worth at all?”

Looking away from his accusing blue eyes, she pressed her lips together to stop their trembling, unable to prevent the hot tears that gathered at the magnitude of his upset and anger toward her. “I didn’t mean to conceal it from you, not truly, only briefly delay telling you while I explored if it would be an asset to our realm; an asset to you. We both know war will come again from your foresight, and I sought to grow our forces while also freeing slaves from bondage. They are eager to serve, in thanks!” She shook her head and looked back at him.

“Yes, I know you would say I have made them my slaves, but I’m certain I can find a way to fully free them all when the time is right. But now they are like toddlers just learning to walk, and they are still greatly in need of my guidance.”

He turned his face away from her and she hurried to finish her plea before his patience reached an end. “Please, just come with me to see the settlement they have made with your own eyes and judge what should be done. They are nothing like you would think, considering they were once orcs. And...I discovered, quite by accident...I...can kill them all with a thought,” she finished quietly.

“A thought?”

Mollified, he met her gaze again and exhaled slowly, letting some of the tension leave his body at that reassurance. With the bond fully open between them, he swiftly searched her thoughts and found it to be true, and that she had discovered it was possible when she mistakenly killed one of the creatures during her experimentation to see how far her control extended.
“Very well,” he agreed, stepping closer. “We will go together and see what you have done in secret from the eyes of your king.” He lifted her chin in his hand and bent closer until she could see nothing but his face and the firm resolve in his bright blue eyes. “But if I deem these not-orcs a danger, in any way, you will slay them without hesitation. Do you understand? Down to the last.”

“Yes,” she whispered. “I’m sorry. You know I take no pleasure in vexing you, but all I have done is for you, our family and the kingdom. I hope you will not hold long to your anger toward me.”

“Your king is very angry with you, Elizabeth. You knew I would be.” His eyes held hers, even as a tear finally slipped over her lashes and cascaded down her cheek. “But your husband loves you no less. No matter the choices you make, whether wise or unwise, nothing can ever change my great love for you, as you know to be true. Now dry your tears and let us depart.”

She felt weak with relief at the reminder of his unshakable love, and his willingness to give the whole thing a chance, despite his intense hatred for orcs. Elizabeth dashed the moisture from her face, smiling when he laced his fingers with hers and led her from the room so they could make preparations.

Legolas held his little sister in front of him while the company rode with the king and queen to the north-west woods, where he had just hours earlier been told by his father there was a previously unknown orc settlement. Though apparently, they did not need to don armor or prepare additional forces or weapons, which had initially struck him as odd. Further, his father made no objection to Catherine and Edward coming along when they begged, so he clearly anticipated no danger at all, or he would never have allowed it.

Guiding his horse nearer Elizabeth, Legolas pitched his voice low, speaking Quenya, as they always did when talking in front of his young siblings about adult matters. “These are the same orcs as were with you when Haldir and I found you?”

She raised a brow and gave him an aggravated look. “The same two people, yes. But they are no more orcs now than a butterfly remains a caterpillar.”

He shrugged. “Same creature, just a different form.”
“These individuals we speak of are entirely different to what they once were, Legolas. Do not let your own hate for orcs blind you to the truth. And even orcs are just tools for their dark overlords. If you would hate, then hate the ones who use them and make them into the cruel things that they are.”

“I will attempt to keep an open mind.” Legolas dropped his voice even quieter. “But do not be surprised if Adar condemns them to death. They have done much harm to our people and land.”

“I only want to help our people, and make a difference for the better. What if this is a key to a new understanding and alliance? The chance to turn a former foe to friend?”

Looking down on Catherine’s golden head, Legolas tightened his hold around her. “As long as we do not risk what is dear in some vain attempt.”

“I see their minds!” Elizabeth said in exasperation. “Do you really think I would so carelessly risk what is equally precious to me? I wish you and your father would have more faith in me.”

“We have faith in you, Elizabeth, you know we do,” he murmured in a gentler tone. “It is them we do not trust, and with good reason.”

“You will judge for yourselves soon. It is less than half an hour until we reach their dwelling place.” Her eyes went slightly unfocused before she looked away. “They wait eagerly for our arrival. Passively, with no weapons or intent to fight, and they defer to my judgement fully, even to the point of death.”

“Adar told me you can kill them all with a thought. Is this true?”

Elizabeth nodded and gave him a sad look. “It is. I only hope I am not required to do something so painful or cruel.”

The elven forces from Greenwood came to a halt on a rise that overlooked the entire settlement that was quite large, and sprawled for a fair distance. Feren and the other guards moved their mounts off
to one side in a line, quiet and watchful, but ready at a moment’s notice to emerge from the trees and strike, if commanded by their king.

Thranduil led his great elk to a clear vantage point, narrowing his eyes as he surveyed the dwellings. Everything appeared clean and well-ordered; not something he had expected to see from orcs. Elizabeth walked her mount up beside his, also looking down on the rows of small homes, and a large expanse of tilled land, with many types of vegetables and grain flourishing, waving gently in the breeze.

When Edward shifted restlessly where he was held in front of his father, Thranduil settled him more comfortably against him.

“You may summon the one in charge of all this. I will make no final decision until I speak with him.”

Elizabeth turned her head to look at her husband. “Do you not wish to ride down and examine the settlement more closely? They have taken great pains to live in a manner that...”

“No,” he interrupted, meeting her gaze with a stern expression on his handsome face. “I will not waste time on such trivialities. I agreed to come and see, but I still believe elimination of this potential threat will be the safest, most expedient option.”

She pressed her lips together and furrowed her brows, the first wisp of anger rising inside her. “Do you not intend to give them a chance to prove their worth to you at all? You condemn them already?”

Clenching his jaw, he raised a brow. “Summon them and I shall hear what they have to say. Beyond that, I will make no promise.”

Dismounting, Elizabeth came to stand alongside Thranduil’s elk. “I’ve already called them. They will be here shortly, and it is two that run this settlement, working in harmony together.” She gave Thranduil a disappointed look and reached for her son. “Come, Edward, you may play with your sister while Mummy and Daddy are busy.”

Four year old Edward went eagerly into her arms and patted her cheek, his little face creased with concern. “Don’t be sad, Mummy.”
Elizabeth forced a smile and did her best to will away her upset, knowing just how sensitive Edward was to her emotions or pain. “I won’t be sad, my darling. You mustn’t worry.”

After leaving Catherine and Edward playing quietly together nearby, under the watchful eyes of Renion and Thandir, Elizabeth walked back to stand and wait near Thranduil and Legolas. They both wore the same cold, implacable expressions, and she repressed another sigh over just how stubborn they could both be in certain circumstances.

When two dark-haired males became visible, approaching from below, Elizabeth felt the rising tension all around her and walked forward to meet them, intent of diffusing the situation as much as possible. Once they reached the edge of the small clearing, they both glanced around warily before they went to their knees and each took a hand she extended to them and kissed them reverently.

Viktûr looked up to meet her eyes and smiled sadly. “My Queen, this day is blessed, if for no other reason than your coming. I hope you may find our efforts done in your name, to be worthy.”

“Thank you, Viktûr, and you as well Ashûr. I know you’ve all worked very hard, and I’m proud of what you’ve managed to accomplish.”

Thranduil, who had been listening to the exchange, and carefully examining their unusual physical appearances, walked nearer, then stopped and crossed his arms, speaking for the first time.

“You are both orcs?”

Legolas walked around behind the males and stood with his arms loosely at his sides, but fully alert, ready to reach for his knives at the slightest provocation. The smaller male looked up to meet the Elvenking’s eyes, while Viktûr answered.

“We are orc no longer, Great King. The compassion and love of our Glorious Queen has changed us fully. Our outward forms are only a small sign of the many changes wrought within. Though we were instruments of evil, we no longer have truck with darkness, and all of Mordor could not turn us against our Queen, not even The One. She is dearer to us than our lives, and we serve her will alone.”

The Elvenking pursed his lips. “A pretty speech, but any deceiver can tell lies and make them sound sweet. Remain where you are, both of you.” Thranduil turned and walked back toward the mounted guards, calling over his shoulder. “Legolas, Elizabeth, tolo hí. Ídhron peded. (S. Come here. I wish
When the three stood together, Thranduil kept his back to the two males in question, first turning to Legolas. “You see them and you stood near them, what is your impression?”

“I am not certain what they are, but I think we dare not trust to anything that was once orc. You know their cruelties, their depravities, and the complete disregard they have for the lives of any others, including their own kind.”

While Legolas continued to argue against entering into any understanding with the former orcs, Thranduil’s attention remained fully focused on him. Elizabeth looked between them and gave a subtle nod to Renion and Thandir, who allowed their charges to walk away from them. At the sight of the four happy faces in front of her, she smiled radiantly, drawing the Elvenking’s gaze first, and finally Legolas as he fell silent. They both turned to see what had put such a pleased expression on her face.

Both Catherine and Edward had approached the gray-skinned males, who were smiling tenderly, Ashûr with tears in his eyes when the small princess reached out and took his hand in hers. Catherine brushed a curious hand down the length of his dark, silky hair and leaned fully against him. Edward settled on Viktûr’s knee and gave the large male’s cheek a friendly pat.

Legolas tensed, immediately ready to go retrieve his siblings, but Elizabeth put a hand on his arm to stop him. “Wait and watch. They will not hurt them, they would die before they would allow harm to come to any child of mine.”

Thranduil silently watched them interact for another minute while Catherine chattered happily away, and Edward and the two males listened to her in apparent contentment. With furrowed brows, the Elvenking finally opened his mouth.

“Catherine, Edward, come to me at once.”

With obvious reluctance, the twins moved away from their newfound friends. Edward reached his arms up to his mother, and she picked him up, patting his back soothingly while Legolas pulled Catherine into his arms, holding her protectively against his chest. The young princess turned her gaze to her mother, her little mouth turned down in a worried frown.

“Mummy, they’re sad and afraid, but they want to be good, please don’t hurt them. Please.”
Edward lifted his head and nodded, equally solemn. “Ashûr and Viktûr are our friends. They’re nice, and they love us.”

Elizabeth turned to her husband, her brows lifted expectantly. “Well, what is your will, Sire? You have counsel from the very mouths of babes, who would never be drawn to a creature of evil. Shall you receive it?”

Thranduil frowned, looking back at the males watching them with hope in their gold eyes. Turning away, he looked down into his wife’s gray-green gaze seeing the same hope there. He drew a long breath, pushing away his emotions in favor of only rational thought.

*I suppose after seeing them, I will agree to...a trial period, he told her in mind-speak. Six months, but nothing more than that. They must earn any future concessions, including being allowed to exist as well as remain on our lands. This is a temporary reprieve, not a final decision.*

Elizabeth smiled and patted Edward’s back, knowing just how difficult it was for Thranduil to give even that much of a concession, considering the ingrained hatred he and all elves had for orcs. In that moment, her respect for him as a wise, careful ruler grew even larger than before.

*Thank you, that’s all I was asking for, love. Just a chance for them. Thank you.*

Looking like he had just been forced to swallow something foul, Thranduil walked toward his elk. “Come, Elizabeth, let us go down and inspect this settlement of not-orcs.” He turned toward her with a quirked brow. “I think we must come up with something more appropriate to call your worshipers.”

Following behind him, she handed Edward up after he was mounted, switching to English. “They have their own name amongst themselves, but I thought we might call them Liberari, which is the Latin word for freed.”

“Liberari,” he murmured. “I suppose it will do.”

Legolas walked toward his horse still holding Catherine. Shifting her to one arm, he leapt up, watching Elizabeth and his father begin to walk their mounts down the path. His friend, Langion, drew up beside him, concerned at the dark look the Prince wore.
“I certainly hope we do not regret this,” Legolas muttered for his friend’s ears alone. Langion nodded, setting his mount to follow the prince, and silently hoping his king had made a wise choice.

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