Nerwen the Green and the Search for the Entwives

by Lady_Angel_Fanwriter

Summary

Unsatisfied with the Wizards’ work, the Valar send another Istar to Middle-earth, Nerwen the Green, with the specific task to find the Ents, apparently vanished form the face of the world. During her mission, Nerwen will meet old friends and acquaintances, like Gandalf, Elrond, Galadriel, and find new ones, such as Tom Bombadil, Bilbo, Thorin Oakenshield. Nerwen will experience feelings new and unknown to the immortals, she’ll rejoice and grieve, face new and old enemies, visit stunning places like the Shire, Rivendell, Lothlórien, and go to the vast and little known lands of the East, where she’ll meet the Avari, the Elves who, at the beginning of time, refused to undertake the Great Journey to the enchanted West, proud and distrustful of anyone not of their race. Her search for the Entwives will engage her bitterly and for a long time, but she’ll have anyway the time to fall in love with a handsome Elven prince, tall and mysterious…
Chapter 1: Nerwen's Garden

I am a big fan of JRR Tolkien’s works, the first of them, *The Lord of the Rings*, I read at 16, and re-read innumerable times. Later came *The Hobbit, The Silmarillion, Unfinished Tales, The Book of Lost Tales, Sons of Húrin*, and other ones.

Like all fans passionate about a work, I fantasied thousands times to be part of it, and so I created an alter ego of myself, Nerwen the Green, great friend and colleague to Gandalf the Grey, and also a disciple of the Valië Yavanna Kementári, the Queen of Earth.

With the arrival of the first movie of the cinematographic trilogy *The Hobbit* I got finally the right inspiration to write a fan fiction narrating Nerwen’s adventures. I tried to stay as much as possible true to the geography and nomenclature of the Tolkienian universe, and also to the plot already established by the Oxfordian Professor – I won’t alter any storyline of his – however, the spirit in which I write it is much more modern and “daring” than Tolkien’s. Therefore, don’t expect his romantic nineteenth-century discretion in the representation of sentimental situations: the characters I describe – mine or borrowed – are definitely more “carnal”, be they Valar, Maiar, Elves, Dwarves of Humans. Therefore, no Valar or Maiar like sexless angels, but instead much more alike to the Olympic or Norse gods, with their passions, virtues and flaws; and no Elves so transcendent to look preternatural, but made of blood and flesh precisely like Dwarves and Humans, immensely wise if you want, but fallible, and amiable or annoying exactly like all other inhabitants of Middle-earth.

For the experts of the Tolkienian universe, the detailed descriptions I give about backgrounds, environments and characters could sound useless and pedantic, but I want the story to be enjoyable also to those who know little or nothing about the Professor’s works.

The mature rating is indispensable, as I narrate in detail also love situations, exactly like all the other ones, because I think that love – included its physical expression – is the most beautiful thing in the world and therefore there’s no reason to feel ashamed. Anyway, my characters don’t have
sex, but make love, or at the most, they have sex with feeling; therefore this kind of scenes can be described, if anything, as erotic, and not at all as pornographic.

Finally, please note that English is not my mother language, so I ask you to be patient with my mistakes and oddities; any correction by English native speakers is very welcome.

Good, now you’ve been warned! XD If you’re still willing to explore the twists and turns of my story, I welcome you. In this case, *elen síla lúmenn' omentielvo* (*).

Lady Angel
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(*) A star shines upon the hour of our encounter. (Quenya tongue, from “The Lord of the Rings”)

OOO

**Chapter I: Nerwen’s Garden**

Nerwen Laiheri, the Lady of the Green, bent over a basil plant and caressed gently its scented leaves.

“Bravo, little brother”, she praised it, “Grow and spread your fragrance everywhere.”

Nerwen’s vast garden was the richest and luxuriant of all Valinor, and often its inhabitants – Valar, Maiar and Eldar – came here looking for plants in order to decorate their parks and to enrich the taste of their food. Thanks to her ability and to the special gift Yavanna Kementári granted her, Nerwen could grow in her garden all the plants of Arda, from the mosses and lichens of the subarctic climates to the succulent plants of the deserts, from the northern conifers to the equatorial palm trees. A profusion of flowers, trees, shrubs, herbs of all genres and types flourished on her wide land, in a cheerful mixture of colours and scents offering joy to the hearts of those who looked at them. Such was the beauty of this place, comparable only to the Gardens of Lórien, that many came here even only to take a stroll and fill their eyes with these incomparable colours and their nostrils with these delicious aromas.

Nerwen was a Maia, one of the lesser Ainur who came into Arda along with the Valar – greater Ainur – at the time of Creation. Since the Beginning of Times, she had been a disciple of Yavanna, the Queen of Earth, the one who gave life to all the plants and animals in Arda. With her, she had travelled far and wide across Arda, curing the wounds Melkor, the Great Enemy, had inflicted, when there was no other light than Varda Elentári’s stars; with her, she participated to the creation of the Two Trees of Valinor, which light had illuminated Aman before Isil and Anar, the Moon and the Sun; with her, she cried upon their destruction by the hand of Melkor Morgoth; and with her, she had seen the arrival of the Shepherds of the Trees, the Onodrim, who in later ages would become known by the name of Ents. For all of this, Nerwen was called Laiheri, the Lady of the Green.
With her brown eyes and hair, Nerwen looked very much alike to her Mistress, even if obviously the resemblance with her sister Melian was much more remarkable, except for the eyes that the latter had green. Melian had been far away from Aman for a long time; in Beleriand, across the Great Sea, she had met an Elda, Elwë, later known as Thingol, and for the love of him she stayed there, where together they founded the kingdom of Doriath and where she gave birth to a daughter, Lúthien. Nerwen went often to visit her sister and her family, and spent long periods with them, but she never abided permanently in Endorë, or Middle-earth as it was called by its inhabitants, even if she came to love that land almost as much as Valinor. Then, when Thingol was killed, Melian came back to the Blessed Realm, and she dwelt with her sister since.

Now, innumerable years after these events, Nerwen took care as always of the olvar, the vegetal creatures of the world, and Melian helped her. She said that busying herself with the plants of Aman soothed the sorrow in her heart, deprived of husband and the only daughter, a sorrow that would last for all eternity, and only the abidance in the Blessed Realm made it somehow bearable.

Not far away from where Nerwen was walking, a sweet, sad song arose. It was Melian, singing a lay of Endorë, or Middle-earth; it narrated the story of Lúthien and her human beloved, Beren, who called her Tinúviel, meaning nightingale. Together, the two of them accomplished a task which still was unequalled in Arda’s history: rescue a Silmaril from Morgoth’s crown; but Lúthien chose the Fate of Men for the love of Beren and went in a place that no Vala, Maia or Elda could reach, because it was meant only for the Second-Born of Eru Ilúvatar, the Creator. Nonetheless, something of Melian’s daughter had remained in the world: through Dior, hers and Beren’s son, her lineage still walked in Endorë.

Nerwen halted to listen; the lay was very long, and Melian never sang it in its entireness. That day, she was narrating about Lúthien’s goodbye to Doriath in order to follow Beren in the place that would become their dwelling, and where she would give birth to Dior.
A butterfly with iridescent colours approached her, flying about. Observing the movement of its multi-coloured wings, much slower than normal, Nerwen realised immediately it was a messenger.

“Tell me, little sister”, she invited her therefore. And the butterfly spoke to her with her ethereal voice:

*Kementári wishes to speak to you, Laiheri. She awaits you in her palace in Valimar, as soon as you can go to her.*

“Thank you, little sister”, Nerwen answered, “Now your mission is complete, choose a flower or a plant and rest.”

*I’m grateful to you, Laiheri*, the wonderful butterfly stated, then went away flying lightly and set down on a flower-filled wisteria.

The Maia went to her sister, who seeing her approaching stopped singing and smiled at her, with a love going beyond their blood bond. Melian had with Nerwen a gratitude debt she was convinced she would never be able to pay back completely. For a short moment, Melian’s memory went back to what happened so much time ago: when Thingol was killed, Nerwen perceived her sister’s immense suffering through the enormous physical distance separating them and begged Nienna to help her go to her. The Lady of Grief, moved by pity, satisfied her request, transferring her magically in an instant to Melian, who was letting herself die out of sorrow. Nerwen offered her the comfort of her love and convinced her to come back to the Blessed Realm, where her affliction could be soothed, even if it would never be cancelled.

Since then, many years had gone by: Númenor was built out of the waters of the Great Sea to be the dwelling of the Edain, the Fathers of Men, as a thanksgiving for having fought along with Eldar and Valar against Morgoth, and then it was sunk because of the arrogance of their descendants, blinded by Sauron’s deceits; Elendil and his sons Isildur and Anárion were able to escape the Fall of Númenor, or Atalantë (*) as this tragic event was later called, with a small number of Elf Friends and a fruit of Nimloth, descendant of the Silver Tree. And then there was
the Last Alliance between Eldar and Men, the first ones led by their high king Gil-galad son of Fingon, the second ones by Elendil and his two sons, who together defeated Sauron; Isildur seized the One Ring, infused with all the malefic power of Sauron, but it was lost in the disaster of the Gladden Fields; the realms of Arnor and Gondor, founded by Elendil and held by the descendants of Isildur the first, of Anárion the second, grew and flourished for centuries, but later Arnor fell, was divided in three smaller realms and finally vanished, while Gondor lasted much longer, but then Anárion’s lineage faded. Therefore, in the north no realm existed any longer, but Isildur’s descent continued to exist, while in the south Anárion’s descent was no more, but his realm continued to exist…

Nerwen spoke, and Melian came back to the present time.

“I’ve been summoned by Kementári”, she informed her, “I must go to Valimar.”

“I see”, Melian answered, nodding, “Please pay my respects to her; see you when you’ll come back.”

Nerwen smiled lovingly to her sister, then she nodded her goodbye and headed for their abode; the gardens, located between the Pastures of Yavanna and the Woods of Oromë, were very large and set in the deep south of Aman, so that to go across them one would need two days, but thanks to a Passage Mandos created for her, the house was reachable in a few minutes from every point of the land Nerwen ruled.

The house of the two sisters was actually an underground cavern opening in a hill, partially natural, partially dug. The façade was made of ochre tuff blocks, where the green painted, honed wooden entrance door opened, as well as a number of windows, adorned with flowers. The rooms not facing outward were lit by a kind of phosphorescent lichen, which had the quality to increase or lessen its luminosity according to the house-owners requests, from a faint glimmer just enough to outline a room, to a radiance comparable to full day. The interior was dry, thermally well insulated, so it was cool in summer and warm in winter, therefore it needed only little heating; furthermore, there was an underground hot spring providing warm water galore.

Nerwen reached her dwelling and headed for her room to change, taking off her comfortable gardener clothes – breeches and short tunic without sleeves – to wear a rider outfit – another kind of breeches, shirt and doublet. In a bag, she placed an elegant dress, apt to present herself to Yavanna, accurately folded, with appropriate shoes and a few jewels; then she wrapped some food in a cloth, filled a bottle with water and put them, too, in the bag. Finally, she braided her hair, then she exited and sent out a long, modulated whistle. She was answered by a far away neigh, and a few moments later she heard the gallop of an approaching horse; shortly after, a stunning mare with a shining white coat and blond mane and tail stopped in front of the Maia.
“Good morning, Silmelotë”, Nerwen saluted her, “I’ve been summoned to Valimar: do you like to come with me?”

The mare, whose name meant Flower of Starlight, raised her proud head and neighed joyfully her consent. Nerwen laughed:

“You like the idea to gallop around half Aman, don’t you?”, she commented in jest. Silmelotë shook her mane and it looked almost as she was shrugging.

_I can’t help it, I like to run_, she said in her ethereal voice. Nerwen chuckled amused, then she showed her the harness and the mare, obediently, allowed her bridle and saddle her; finally, the Maia mounted, shouldered her bag and said:

“Let’s go.”

Silmelotë moved on a walk, heading northward; then she went on a light trot that would allow her to travel for long distances without getting tired. Occasionally she would sprint in a gallop, just to indulge in her longing to run, and Nerwen gladly would let her do sp.

Silmelotë wasn’t just a horse, but a Chargeress. This meant she had the power to use the Passages Mandos created, exactly like Valar and Maiar, a power that had been infused in the race of the Chargers by Mandos himself along with Yavanna at the dawn of times. Among all the _kelvar_, the animal creatures of Arda, only these ones had this capability.

The mare arrived at the first Passage about half an hour later; for a moment, the world looked blurred in Nerwen’s eyes, then, when her sight returned clear, the landscape had changed: now they were near the Gardens of Lórien.

The next Passage, which would take them near the Mansions of Aulë, was farther, a little less than one hour, and the one after that about double so. In whole, they got through four Passages, needing less than a day’s journey to travel a distance which otherwise would require six days on a normal
Notice the surprisingly similarity with the word Atlantis… I don’t think the Professor did it accidentally :-)
Nerwen and Silmelotë reached Valimar in the late afternoon; while Anar’s chariot was descending toward the West, the Lady of the Green and her Chargeress entered the marvellous city of the Valar, located at the feet of the north-western Pelóri. The streets were crowded with blond Vanyar, the Fair Eldar, those who were the first to arrive in the Blessed Realm coming from Endorë, during the First Age of the world. Much less instead were the brown Noldor, who usually lived in the splendid city of Tilion on the green hill of Túna, at the entrance of the Cleft of Light, the only passage through the Pelóri, right in front of the Great Sea. Very few were finally the black-haired Teleri, great mariners, who dwelled in the enchanting Alqualondë – the Swan-haven – on the seashore. Some pedestrians recognised her and greeted her cheerfully, and Nerwen reciprocated them smiling, but didn’t stop, heading without delay for Yavanna’s town abode.

The beautiful palace in white marble, surrounded by an opulent garden, was exactly as she remembered it; Nerwen didn’t even have the time to dismount her horse in front of the gate of pale wood, and it opened, as proof of the fact she was awaited.

“Good evening and welcome, Laiheri”, the butler – an Elda with the typical dark hair of the Noldor – saluted her with a bow.

“Thank you, Varnon, and good evening to you”, she reciprocated him, getting off the saddle; she trusted Silmelotë’s bridle to the groom who had come rushing, a young Vanya Nerwen didn’t know, “She’s a Chargeress”, she warned him therefore, so he would use the appropriate way with this kind of mount, which wasn’t an ordinary horse.

“I see…”, the stable hand murmured with an admired gaze, reaching out his hand to caress Silmelotë’s silky face, being careful in going near to her slowly and openly. Nerwen realised that, even if young, the groom knew his job, and indeed the mare didn’t pull back and, on the contrary,
showed appreciation for the Elda’s homage. After taking leave from her friend, Silmelotë let him take her away.

“Come, Lady”, Varnon exhorted her, “We have a room prepared for you. Kementári will receive you as soon as you’re freshened up.”

“Thank Kementári for me”, Nerwen said, entering the sun-lit hall, “I’ll try to be quick.”

Less than half an hour later, wearing her elegant dress in green and white silk, Nerwen exited the room she had been given and found Varnon waiting for her; the butler escorted her and made an announcement before introducing her in Yavanna’s private parlour.

The Valië was sitting on a comfortable armchair, upholstered in silk damasked with a floral motif; she smiled at Nerwen when she entered and stood up to welcome her. The Maia took three steps, then made a low curtsy to pay homage to the Queen of Earth, but the latter approached her and, as soon as Nerwen rose from the bow, hugged her affectionately. Being much taller than Nerwen, whose height was unusually short for a Maia, she had to bend down a little.

“Welcome, my dear”, she greeted her with her sweet contralto voice. Nerwen responded to her smile with the same affection.

“Thank you, my Lady Kementári”, she answered. Yavanna shook her hand nonchalantly:

“We’re not sitting at council in the Ring of Doom”, she said, “Between us, formalities matter only there.”

It was true: even if Nerwen was a Maia and Yavanna a Valië, the two of them were much more than simply mistress and disciple. Companions since the very remote age of the Music of the
Ainur, together they had passed through many vicissitudes in the constant fight against Morgoth and his terrible devastations, together they had suffered the pain for the wounds he inflicted to kelvar and olvar, together they had mourned for the destruction of the Two Trees, and together they rejoiced in the coming of the Firstborn and the Second-born, of Aulë’s Dwarves, of Yavanna’s Onodrim and Manwë’s Eagles. If Nerwen and Melian had been created as sisters, Nerwen and Yavanna had chosen each other as sisters. Therefore, when they were not forced by the solemnity of peculiar moments, as a great council in the Ring of Doom could be, generally they preferred to avoid addressing each other with the official titles due to them.

So, Nerwen smiled and nodded to Yavanna, who signalled her to take a seat on the armchair opposite to hers. On the small table of carved wood between them there was a silver tray with two goblets, also in silver, and a crystal carafe filled with a golden liquid.

“Sweet cider”, the Valië revealed, winking slightly. Nerwen chuckled: it was her favourite beverage, and her Mistress knew it well.

They took their goblets, already filled, and drank to each other’s health.

“What is the reason of your summons, Yavanna?”, the Maia asked, curious.

Yavanna set down her glass and her gaze became solemn.

“You know the present situation in Endorë”, she began, stating it not as a question, but as a plain fact. Nerwen nodded to confirm: they had spoken about it very often, long and thoroughly, ever since it had been decided to send there five disguised Maiar, at the beginning of the second millennium of the Third Age, in order to fight Sauron’s power which was growing again, and try to unite all those who had the willpower needed to resist him; but it was forbidden to them opposing to Sauron their own power, or trying to dominate Elves and Men by force or fear. Among these five Maiar, there was also a good friend of Nerwen, Olórin. What Yavanna disliked, and Nerwen agreed with her, was that the plans, both of the Valar who made the decision and of the Maiar who had accepted the task, did not include the Onodrim, the Shepherds of the Trees created on Yavanna’s request; ancient, wise and powerful beings, the Onodrim since forever lived very isolated and therefore had ended up being almost forgotten by everybody in Endorë, but of course not by their contriver and her follower. At the time, Yavanna insisted that, among the emissaries, there should be also Aiwendil, who like Nerwen was a follower of hers, but she wasn’t satisfied with his doings.

“I don’t like it, not at all”, Nerwen answered Yavanna’s comment, “Sauron’s power grows with each cycle of Anar, and it doesn’t seem to me that the Istari have been able to do much to unite his opponents.”

She said it in a bitter tone: of two of them, who went to the wild lands in the East, they lost trace almost immediately; of the other three, Aiwendil stayed on his own, more interested in the life of animals, birds in particular, instead of that of the beings on two legs who dwelt in the world, while the last two had very different conducts, the most powerful shut in a tower to study the Enemy, the other, who was Nerwen’s old friend, perennially wandering around the world.

“I think time has arrived to do something”, Yavanna said, “If Eldar and Men don’t achieve anything, the Onodrim will take care of it.”

“For many years they seem to have vanished from Middle-earth”, Nerwen objected, “Could they become extinct?”

“Should it be, I would know. No, they live still, my friend, even if very dwindled in number and
well hidden.”

“They’ve never liked to meddle in the doings of the other inhabitants of Endorë”, Nerwen observed doubtfully, “How can we succeed in making them change their minds?”

“That’s exactly the mission I was thinking to trust you with”, the Valië answered, looking her in the eyes. The Maia raised her eyebrows.

“Me?”, she cried, surprised.

“I know no better qualified person”, Yavanna confirmed with a slight smile. And it was true: except herself, who had conceived them, it was Nerwen Laiheri the one who knew the Onodrim the best and could understand them. Not even Aiwendil, more interested in animals than in plants, was able to.

Yavanna sobered again:

“If you accept the mission, you must understand that, differently than from the other Istari, you won’t be incarnated in a human body; you won’t therefore be subject to malady nor to ageing; nor your memory of Aman will be dimmed, or your Second Sight taken away. However, the quality of Endorë will influence you; you won’t be able to preserve all your Ainurin powers and you’ll therefore be diminished, and you’ll feel tiredness and pain, both physically and spiritually; and you can be wounded, even if not killed. You are not allowed to reveal yourself to anyone, except those I’ll tell you, in your Ainurin majesty; and, like the other Istari, you’re not allowed to rule the inhabitants of Endorë by your power, or dominate them by force or fear. This goes for both for the two-legged creatures such as Eldar, Men, Halflings and Dwarves, and for kelvar and olvar.”

Nerwen nodded to show she had understood.

“Be aware that Endorë will influence you also in another way”, Yavanna went on, “Not possessing all your capacities anymore, you’ll be exposed to sudden and violent sentiments and emotions. This means you’ll love, hate, rejoice, get scared with much more force and immediacy, and you’ll need to learn to handle it.”

Again, Nerwen nodded: during her sojourns in Beleriand, when she went visiting her sister Melian and her family, it didn’t happen, but then she was a full Aini, not diminished like she would be now. Not knowing exactly what it meant, she was slightly worried; but she didn’t let herself be intimidated, because if her friend Olórin had been able to do it, she could well do it, too. Yavanna, too, was sure of it, or else she wouldn’t propose her this mission.

“And what do the other Valar think about it?”, she enquired.

“I spoke to Manwë”, Yavanna answered, “He gave me his approval. He thought it unnecessary to call at council all the others.”

This news struck Nerwen deeply: that the First among the Valar had decided on his own, without asking the opinion of his equals, gave her the full measure of the importance he recognised to the task Yavanna wanted to trust her with.

The Maia put down her glass and joined her hands on her lap, showing an expression of deep concentration. She was silent for a long while, and Yavanna didn’t disturb her thoughts.

Finally, Nerwen lifted her gaze again to her Mistress. In her eyes, the Valië glimpsed a quiet, but very firm decision.
“I accept the mission, Kementâri”, the Maia declared in a formal way, “I’ll leave tomorrow.”

Yavanna smiled warmly.

“I had no doubt, my friend”, she asserted, “In Alqualondë a ship is waiting for you, she will take you to Cirdan at Mithlond. I asked Ulmo to convey him news of your arrival”, she concluded, “He told me he would send Uinen. Let’s make a toast!”, she suggested at this point, taking again her goblet of cider and raising it to Nerwen, “To the success of your mission in Endorë.”

The Maia did the same and they drank.

“How will we communicate?”, Nerwen asked at this point.

“Mentally”, Yavanna answered her, “Tomorrow, before you leave, we’ll create the telepathic bond. Because of the enormous distance that will separate us, it will cost you a great amount of energy each time you’ll use it, so I recommend you not to make use of it if not for really important matters, and always in safe places, because after the procedure you’ll be exhausted.”

“Understood”, the Maia said, “I ask you the favour to take news of me to Melian, when I’ll contact you from Endorë, just to tell her I’m fine and reassure her.”

“Of course, I’ll do it gladly.”

“I thank you, Yavanna.”

They took another sip in a comfortable silence.

“Don’t spend the night alone”, the Valië suggested her, “You’ll be away from Aman for a long time, and surely you’ll have to spend long periods in solitude.”

“Yes, you’re right…”, Nerwen mused, “If Calion is in town, I could send for him.”

“He’ll be happy to see you, and above all to give you an adequate goodbye”, Yavanna smiled, “I guessed you’d like to see him, so I already enquired on where he was, and I confirm you he’s here in Valimar. I’ll send for him to tell him you’re here and that you invite him for dinner. I’ll issue instructions so that you can dine in your room.”

The Maia smiled gratefully at her Mistress.

“You know me better than myself”, she commented, smiling. Yavanna reciprocated her smile.

OOO

Author’s corner:

Now the fundamental plot of my story has been roughed out: Nerwen’s mission in Middle-earth, searching for the Ents, who will take her to the search for the Entwives... I hope it intrigues you! :-)

It intrigued ME since I read the tale Treebeard makes of it to Merry and Pippin in The Lord of
The Rings, and I always thought it was too bad that Tolkien never let know exactly what fate occurred to the Entwives. So I thought Nerwen had to solve the mystery – and who better than her, who is the Lady of the Green? :-) Of course, during her search she’ll have many adventures and meet many characters, already known such as Gandalf, Bilbo, Thorin Oakenshield, Elrond, Galadriel and Treebeard himself, but also brand new characters, born out of my vivid imagination.

The image of Yavanna is by Lady Elleth.

I thank you heartedly if you’ll leave me a couple of words of comment!

Lady Angel
Awaiting Calion’s arrival, Nerwen went out in the garden. Even if it was located in the middle of a town, the trees were crowded with multi-coloured birds, which the Maia addressed:

“Little brothers, is there among you someone willing to take a message to my sister Melian?”

A few moments later, an agile kestrel flew toward her, and perched on a low branch. The small bird of prey stared at Nerwen with a proud gaze and talked to her:

*I volunteer, Laiheri.*

“Thank you, winged brother”, said the Maia gratefully; she loved birds of prey very much. She gave him the message: *My beloved sister, Kementári entrusted me with a mission of great importance, which will keep me away from home for a very long time. Unfortunately, I won’t be able to communicate with you, but from time to time Kementári will send you news of me. Please, take care of the garden for me. With all my love, Nerwen.*

The kestrel confirmed he had understood, bid her his goodbye and took off in the sky that was now darkening into dusk.

At this point, Nerwen headed for the library to refresh her memory regarding history and geography of Endorë. After all, innumerable years had passed since she regularly went to visit Melian, Thingol and Lúthien in Doriath, and those lands had changed greatly ever since, some of them actually even didn’t exist anymore.

About one hour later, Varnon stuck his head in:
“Lord Calion has arrived, Laiheri.”

“Thank you, Varnon, let him in.”

“Very well. I’ll see to your dinner being brought in your room, Lady”, the butler said, taking his leave with a bow.

A few moments later, on the threshold appeared a tall Vanya with light-green eyes. Nerwen got up and approached him extending her arms to him:

“Calion!”

The blond Elda smiled and hugged her:

“My dearest Nerwen…”, he murmured, before kissing her. As usual, it began sweetly, lips brushing lips, and ended passionately, tongues interlacing in a sensual and exiting dance.

“It’s good to see you again”, Calion said, his breath slightly accelerated, placing another kiss on her lips.

“Same here”, Nerwen answered frankly. She never missed to meet him, each time she came to Valimar; and sometimes he came to visit her in her lands in the south of Aman. They had been lovers for a great number of years now, but none of them wanted to formalise their relationship, aware that, despite of the attraction bonding them, they were not destined to form a couple. This capability – to know for certain you have met your other half – was shared by Valar, Maiar and Eldar; sometimes the recognition took a little time, but it never failed.

“How long will you stay in town?” Calion enquired. The previous time they were together for a week and he hoped that this time it would be longer.

“Only this night”, she answered instead, to his great disappointment, “I must leave for a long journey.”

She didn’t say where she would go or why: so far, the Istari’s mission had remained a secret known
only by the Valar, the five directly involved Maiar, and a very small number of others. And now she, too, had become, in all ways, an Istar.

Something told Calion that, because of this journey, he would lose her. Not because she would die – the Ainur, differently from the Eldar, couldn’t be killed – or because she would never return in Aman, but because she wouldn’t be the same person. Instinctively, he tightened his grip around her.

“Therefore we have only a few hours”, he said in a hoarse whisper, due not to the violent desire that had suddenly risen in him after this premonition, but to the sadness coming from that same premonition.

Against her belly, Nerwen felt the evidence of his desire and was flattered, but at the same time perplexed. There was in him a kind of… despair… that unsettled her.

“What is it, Calion?”, she asked under her breath. The Vanya hesitated before answering: after all, what could he tell her? That he had the feeling this would be their last love encounter?

“I’m sorry you’ll stay away for so long”, he finally decided to say, and anyway it was completely true, “I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you, too”, the Maia – the Istar – stated sincerely.

They withdrew from their embrace and, hand in hand, went upstairs, heading for Nerwen’s room. There, they found the small table set for two and a trolley with their dinner.

“I’m not hungry for food, now”, Calion said in a low voice, looking at her. She reciprocated his intense gaze and felt her most intimate part quivering.

“Nor do I, actually…”, she whispered.

She let herself go against Calion’s solid body, enjoying deeply the warmth of this contact, acutely aware that it could be the last time. The mission awaiting her in Endorë involved great perils, and even if she wouldn’t die, the fate – which not even the Ainur had the capability to change – could force her never to return in the Undying Lands.

She lifted her face, and Calion kissed her again passionately; Nerwen felt all her thoughts fly away like a flock of swallows, and responded to his kiss with the same fervour.

Calion started to unfasten her dress on the back, slowly at the beginning, then with more and more impatience, almost with urgency. The gown fell around her ankles in a heap of green and white silk; then Calion laid his hands around her waist, raising them slowly along her torso to cup her full breasts. Through the transparent muslin of her petticoat, he felt her stiff nipples. He caressed them with his thumbs, and Nerwen exhaled a sigh of pleasure.

Calion was still too dressed for her liking: after a few moments, Nerwen pulled away and fumbled with the buckle of his belt, unclasping it quickly and throwing it on the floor. Accepting her silent invitation, Calion gently pushed away her hands just the time needed to get rid of his doublet and shirt; the sight of his muscular chest, covered with thin golden hair, caused a great wave of heat in Nerwen’s body. Chewing at her lower lip, she pulled at the knot closing the wide neck of her petticoat, loosed it and had it slipping down her shoulders; the light garment fell in a heap over her dress. Then she embraced Calion, pressing her breasts against his chest. A sigh full of longing escaped them both.

Calion kissed her, deeply, intensely, caressing her back under the cascade of her silken brown hair.
He felt her tremble under his gentle and at the same time exiting touch; then he lifted her in his arms and carried her to the bed, where he eased her down and laid at her side. He placed his mouth on her neck, where it arched toward the shoulder, and then he moved downward, tracing a wake of tender kisses on her smooth skin, until he reached a nipple; he took it between his lips, nibbling and sucking at the hard bud. Nerwen gasped, feeling pleasure expanding quickly from that point until it reached the burning centre of her femininity. She placed her hands on his head, plunging her fingers in his long blond hair, pressing him against her breasts. Calion answered by sucking harder and began to fondle the other nipple between thumb and forefinger.

“Oh! Calion…”, Nerwen murmured in an ecstatic tone. He lapped at her nipple one last time, then he continued his journey down her beautiful body, towards the triangle of dark curls at the junction of her thighs. Already knowing what he was about to do, Nerwen let his head go, feeling her internal walls contracting at the thought of what would follow in a few moments.

Calion took his time, descending slowly, relishing each kiss. Nerwen’s skin was soft and smooth like rose petals; it smelled like a forest in autumn and aromatic honey. Then he reached her feminine treasure.

Nerwen uttered an muffled cry; she grasped spasmodically the damask silken bedcover, throwing back her head and shivering in pleasure. Calion savoured her intimately, a rich and sweet taste, with a slight zesty flavour. He heard her moan, and decided impulsively to pleasure her this way, before looking for his own fulfilment.

“Ah…”, Nerwen panted, feeling pleasure growing inside of her, sending sparks up and down every fibre of her body. Her breath became more and more erratic. She tensed in the prelude of completion, which a moment later shook her womb in powerful spasms of pure elation, eliciting a piercing, ecstatic cry out of her.

After this, she remained on her back, her breath laboured, a veil of perspiration on her skin. Calion pulled back and looked at her, delighted by the sight of her, stunning in her nudity.

Nerwen finally half-opened her eyes and noticed his gaze, amused and adoring at the same time. She curved her lips in a naughty smile:

“You really know how to treat me well”, she chuckled, “How can I repay you?”

Calion uttered a low, throaty laugh that Nerwen found extremely exciting.

“I can think of a couple of things”, the Elda replied, climbing slowly over her, a hand travelling up her body in a rousing caress, from her thigh up to the curve of her hip and to the tender roundness of her breasts, “One is this.”

He bent down and placed his lips on hers, exploring the velvety recesses of her mouth, initially sweetly, then with a kind of urgency that recalled the despair Nerwen had felt earlier in him; the Maia realised that Calion, too, felt that this could be their last encounter.

“Let me touch you”, Calion whispered on her lips; he began to caress the soft curves of her body, slowly, as wanting to impress them in his mind, indelibly, inch by inch. He brushed skilfully every sensitive place in this body he knew so well, until she gasped and moaned desperately in renewed desire, again ready for him. Then he entered inside of her, slowly, relishing each millimetre of her hot feminine depths; she arched under him, welcoming him. Calion felt her warmth wrap him; rivulets of pleasure ran down his backbone.

“I feel you… oh Nerwen…”, he sighed, “…so right…”
He moved, back and forth, while the rivulets became torrents, rivers. She dug her fingertips in the muscles of his back.

“Calion…”, she whispered hoarsely.

He grasped her hips and thrust, increasing suddenly the swiftness of his movements. He wanted to get lost in her, he wanted to fuse together with her forever.

Nerwen wrapped her legs around his waist, so that he could sink even deeper into her; in a matter of a few moments, the long familiarity of their bodies allowed them to move in perfect synchrony.

After only a few minutes, Calion felt Nerwen’s internal muscles begin to convulse and heard her breath becoming more and more laboured; he realised she was again near the apex. He was, too, but he restrained himself, longing to watch Nerwen’s face transfixed with pleasure. When she screamed his name, shuddering in the spasms of climax, Calion was swamped away by such a piercing pleasure, his sight was dimmed. He collapsed above her, breathless.

“By all the stars of the firmament…”, he panted, “It has never been like this…”

Nerwen’s eyes were full of tears.

“Never. Never.”

It was true: it had never been so intense between them. Physically, yes, but not spiritually. Perhaps they were not compatible as partners for eternity, but surely their long familiarity, the friendship, the affection between them, had created a bond of undeniable importance. The thought that mayhap she wouldn’t see him anymore hurt her at least as much as the thought not to see Melian again, even if obviously in a different way.

OOO

Later they had their dinner, and then they went to bed again. That night they made love several more times, sleeping intermittently, not caring about the lack of sleep that the day after would circle their eyes with a dark shadow.

OOO

Author’s corner:

Well, you had here a taste of the carnality about which I warned you: neither Ainur seen as angels, nor Eldar seen as more spiritual than physical beings :-D

And you could get an idea about what I meant with detailed descriptions of love situations: sexy, but not smutty. Or so I intend them, and from many quarters they tell me I am able to render them
exactly so. Please tell me your opinion about it! Thanks.

Calion's performer is Chris Hemsworth.

Lady Angel
The morning after, they awoke and found the sun already high in the sky. They had their breakfast together, in Nerwen’s bedchamber, and then Calion took his leave with a last, long kiss.

When the Vanya left Yavanna’s palace, his face was sad; he had always known that their association would end eventually, even if he didn’t expect it this way. He thought that, one day, the one or the other would find his or her soul mate and would end their relationship. Nerwen going only the Valar knew where embittered him. He would have much more preferred she found her spouse: even if he didn’t love her that way, he felt true affection for her and wished her sincerely to be happy.

Then a thought struck him: perhaps Nerwen would find her life partner during this same journey. That thought, somehow, comforted him and his sadness was soothed, even if it wouldn’t disappear completely for a long time.

Unseen, Nerwen watched Calion leaving the palace; she, too, felt his same sadness for the long separation awaiting them, which would perhaps last forever. Her Second Sight – the ability of her race to peep at flashes in the future – wasn’t of any use, in this moment, because it didn’t show up by command, and therefore she had no possibility to glimpse at something whenever she wished. Usually it arrived in the most unexpected, sometimes even inopportune, moments, without
warning; and often what she peeped at was so enigmatic that it was of no use until it happened. This was anyway for the best, otherwise a too precise knowledge of the future would influence her and those who surrounded her in a way that could be dangerous or harmful; but in this moment, Nerwen wished like never before to be able to see through the veil.

OOO

Later, the Istar went to Yavanna to take her leave. She was about to make a curtsey in front of the Valië, but the latter hugged her.

“Each and every olvar and kelvar in Endorë, unless fallen under the Shadow, will be your ally and supporter”, whispered Yavanna, “And you’ll have the friendship and respect of the Dwarves opposing Sauron, because you’re a follower of Kementári, spouse of Aulë, whom they call Mahal. In this regard, I bring you a gift from my husband: the knowledge of Khuzdul, their language.”

Yavanna took Nerwen’s head in her hands; the Istar closed her eyes and felt a great, agreeable warmth somewhere inside her skull, where her Mistress was transferring the knowledge of that language directly in her mind, sending it to join the many others she already knew.

“And now I’ll create the telepathic bond between our minds”, Yavanna went on, continuing to keep her fingers on her temples, “so we’ll be able to communicate across the incommensurable space separating us.”

Again, the sensation of pleasurable warmth in her brain, this time in a different area. Behind the black screen of her eyelids, Nerwen saw the image of a small door. She was wondering about it, when she heard a knock, so she imagined opening it, and in front of her there was Yavanna, smiling.

*You will perceive this way a possible contact request of mine, the Valië explained, and in the same way, I will perceive one of yours.*

*I see*, Nerwen thought in answer.

Yavanna drew away from her disciple, both mentally and physically, and looked in her eyes. Her attitude changed subtly, going from friendly to solemn.

“Now you are ready to leave, Laiheri”, she said, “An arduous task awaits you, but you have all the capabilities to carry it out.”

“I thank you, my Lady Kementári”, Nerwen answered with the same solemnity, “In this mission I will put all my heart, mind and soul”, she concluded, using the traditional formula.

“One last thing”, said Yavanna gravely, “I have been authorized to reveal to you who the Keepers of the Three Elven Rings are, so that you’ll be able to collaborate with them. You have the advantage that you already know them all, so they will have no reason to distrust you. Thanks to the power of their Rings, they will recognise your true nature: only they will be aware of it, besides the other Istari.”

Nerwen took a deep breath, struck: the identity of these three persons was a secret known only by the Valar, the Istari – which she was now part of – and the Keepers themselves. Again, the awareness of the enormous importance of the mission she had been entrusted with struck her.
“Narya, the Ring of Fire, was entrusted to Círdan, Lord of the Grey Havens’, the Valië told her, “but he gave it to your friend Olórin, who in Endorë is known with the name of Mithrandir, and also Gandalf the Grey. Nenya, the Ring of Water, is in Galadriel’s keeping in Lothlórien; and finally Vilya, the Ring of Air, is kept at Imladris by Elrond, the descendant of your sister Melian.”

“I’m in very good terms with all of them”, Nerwen mused, glad of it, “As you said, this is to the advantage of collaboration.”

Yavanna nodded, then kissed her brow.

“Leave accompanied by my personal blessing”, she said, “May the road rise to meet you.”

Nerwen bowed her head, accepting the blessing, then she turned and exited. She headed for the stables, where she found Silmelotë already saddled and ready to leave.

“We go to Alqualondë”, she announced her, caressing the silken muzzle of the Chargeress, “And then we’ll cross Belegaer and go to Endorë. I’m afraid we’ll be away from Aman for a long, long time.”

Silmelotë snorted and shook her head.

*I’ll miss my land*, she told to her, *but the important thing is, we’re together, my friend.*

Nerwen tapped her on the neck to show her gratitude, then she mounted; she nodded a goodbye to the young groom she met the day before, who had taken care of the Chargeress, then left Yavanna’s palace and exited Valimar from the southern gate, this time toward the Calacirya, the Cleft of Light. She still remembered the time when the light of the Two Trees shone through it toward the dwellings of the Teleri on the sea; but in this occasion, she wouldn’t pass through the deep gorge in the Pelóri, because a nearby Passage brought directly to the Swan-haven, otherwise a journey of over one day far.

Two hours later, the Maia was trotting over the paved streets of the main town of the Teleri on the shores of Belegaer. When she arrived at the haven, she headed for the harbourmaster, where Tasarion the Ship Marshal, a Teler with a long black mane braided in the way mariners used to, welcomed her.

“I was waiting for you, Laiheri”, he told her, bowing and addressing her formally, “By order of Yavanna, we have prepared a ship for you, the *Telpewinga*. (*) She’s in command of captain Soronwen, the best sailoress I know.”

*What a beautiful name for a ship*, Nerwen thought.

“Thank you, Marshal Tasarion. I will go immediately on board; I would like to leave as soon as possible.”

“Sure. I accompany you.”

Shortly after, guiding Silmelotë by the bridles, Nerwen was getting on the white ship, a small twin-masted, slender vessel. Seeing Tasarion with her, the sailor on watch sent immediately for the captain, who arrived just a few minutes later.

“Welcome on board of the *Telpewinga*”, the Teler greeted Nerwen with a bow, like earlier the harbourmaster, “We have a cabin prepared for you, and a shelter for you mount. We’re ready to
sail anytime, as soon as the tide will be favourable.”

“Very well, captain”, Nerwen said, entrusting the bridles of the mare to a mariner who had stepped forward, “Go with him, my good friend”, she exhorted her, “He will take you to your shelter.”

Silmelotë didn’t protest, her ears down and a lost attitude: she had never been aboard a ship and didn’t appreciate it much. She addressed a gaze to her friend, looking for reassurance, and having received a smile and a caress, she quietly let the sailor take her away.

“Superb animal”, said Soronwen, admired, “A Chargeress, right?”

“Exactly”, Nerwen confirmed, “When she’ll be settled, I’ll go down to visit her, she’s not comfortable.”

“No horse is, when it goes aboard a ship for the first time”, the captain said, nodding sympathetically, “but once she’ll get used to the movement of the waves, she shouldn’t have any problems.”

“Thank you for accompanying me, Marshal”, the Maia said, turning to Tasarion, “May the stars shine upon your path”, she bid him farewell, with her typical parting formula.

“May the Valar accompany you, Laiheri”, the tall Teler took his leave, bowing again, “And you and your crew, too, captain Soronwen”, he added with a nod.

Taking Nerwen to her cabin, Soronwen commented in a casual way:

“It’s been a long time since any ship set sail for Endorë: I had a hard time to find the required navigational charts…”

Clearly, the reason of her journey intrigued her, but she had not the gall to ask directly explanations to someone who was evidently undertaking a mission on behalf of a Valië. Nor Nerwen intended to give her any of it; however, it was useless to deny that there was a very important reason.

“I see”, she nodded therefore, “Luckily you found them: mine is not a pleasure trip like in the ancient times, when I went to visit my sister Melian in Doriath. Your ability in sailing will be a contribution, maybe small but important, to the task I am going to face, and for this I am grateful to you.”

Soronwen bowed her head accepting her appreciation; she didn’t investigate any longer, realising it was a classified matter.

OOO

They set sail at noon; they coasted Tol Eressëa, the great island in front of the Bay of Eldamar, and the day after they passed the chain of the Enchanted Isles, which no mortal could cross if not by special leave of the Valar.
The journey continued with no trouble for several days, until in a certain place, in the middle of Belegaer, they abandoned the Straight Road to venture into the Rounded World, location of Endorë and once also of Aman, before Arda was changed.

OOO

Many days passed, and finally they arrived to the point where they could see the shores of Endorë. Soronwen’s ability in sailing was so great, they arrived directly in the Gulf of Lune, at the bottom of which the Grey Havens stood, dwelling of Cirdan, called the Shipwright, who had welcomed all the Istari when, one or two at a time, they had arrived on the Hither Shore, so many years ago.

It was Mid-Year’s Day (**) of the year 2940 of the Third Age, according to the reckoning of Middle-earth.

(*) Quenya for Silver Spray

(**) First Lithe, Mid-Year’s Day and Second Lithe are three consecutive days that don’t belong to any month, set between June and July.

Author’s corner:
With this chapter, the introductive part of this fan fiction has ended: Nerwen’s mission is about to begin. Many adventures await her, unexpected meetings, strong emotions, dangers, joys and losses; she will renew old friendships and acquaintances, meet new friends, and face old and new enemies…

Did I intrigue you? I hope so! XD

I hope that after reading you’ll be so kind to leave me a comment, even just a few words of encouragement; also the highlight of oversights and mistakes is welcome, and the constructive criticism is good, too. Thank you in advance!

Lady Angel
Nerwen took her leave from captain Soronwen and her crew, thanking them all, and then led Silmelotë by the bridle along the gangway of the Telpewinga to the grey stone jetty, where a tall Teler was waiting for her, his long silvery mane indicating him as belonging to the royal descent of this tribe; unlike the Eldar’s habit, he sported a long beard giving him a very unusual old look; but the lively spark in his bright eyes contradicted the elderly appearance. Nerwen recognized him immediately, even if a long time had passed since the last time she’d met him: he was Círdan, King of Lindon and Lord of the Grey Havens, and was here to welcome her in person. The absence of a closet was a lack of formality indicative of their ancient acquaintance.
“Welcome back in Ennor, Lady Nerwen”, he said, bowing, “and welcome in my dwelling of
Mithlond.”

Nerwen needed some moments to grasp his words, expressed in the local Eldarin tongue, which
was Sindarin. She hadn’t spoken it in thousands of years, but being endowed with an excellent
memory, she was able to answer easily in the same idiom:

“Thank you, Lord Círdan. I’m glad to meet you again, after so long a time.”

“Me too, I’m glad to meet you again”, Círdan said, “Uinen told me about your arrival. Please
follow me: you’ll be my guest for all the time you’ll need to prepare for your journey in Ennor”, he
took a closer look at Silmelotë, “It’s a Charger, isn’t it?”

“Yes, exactly: a female. Her name is Silmelotë.”

“Nice to meet you, Silmelotë”, Círdan said, bowing slightly his head in a greeting, showing he
knew the Chargers understood the two-legged beings’ language, in every idiom they were talking.
Silmelotë responded with a very similar nod of her proud head.

Círdan moved on, showing the way; Nerwen came up beside him, and Silmelotë followed her
obediently. Both took their first steps in a slightly tentative way, not used anymore to firm land
after so many days at sea, but soon they got back to their usual walk.

Nerwen looked around, intrigued: she had never seen Mithlond before. The last time she had been
in Endorë, before the War of Wrath, Beleriand still existed, therefore the Gulf of Lûhn, which had
formed after the sinking of that land, was still to come; at that time, Círdan was Lord of the Falas,
and lived in the coastal towns of Brithombar and Eglarest, now disappeared under the waves of the
Great Sea. Comparing to Alqualondë on the shores of Valinor, the ancient havens of the Falathrim
were only a pale shadow; here, Harlond and Forlond, the two parts of Mithlond divided by the estuary of the river Lûhûn, were in turn a faded memory of the ancient havens in Beleriand. Nothing the Eldar built in Endorë, as splendid as it was in comparison to the buildings of Dwarves and Men, could equal anything built in Eldamar. It was something that had to do with the essence of Endorë, which was different from the essence of the Undying Lands. Feebler. The light itself seemed to be fainter, on this side of Belegaer.

Nonetheless, the well-kept buildings struck Nerwen; in bright grey stone, they were tall and graceful, dense with steeples and full of balconies and loggias; intricate friezes, reproducing plants and sea animals, packed the walls of both public and private edifices. Grey was the dominant colour, in a variety of different shades, but there were also many spots of colour, due to plants and flowers embellishing terraces and rooftop gardens.

Nerwen followed Círdan up a staircase with low and very wide steps, designed also for mounts to go, and Silmelotë actually had no difficulties to ascend it. The roads were crowded with Teleri – no, in this continent they called themselves by the name of Sindar. And she had to stop thinking in Valarin, and even in Quenya and Telerin: here the Eldar – the Elves – spoke Sindarin. Later, she needed to find someone willing to teach her Ovestron, or Common Speech, spoken by all the inhabitants of Middle-earth. This wouldn’t take her much time: as an Aini, she had the capability to learn or teach mentally everything in a few moments, like Yavanna did with her for the language of the Dwarves.

During the walk to the palace of the Lord of Lindon, Nerwen asked him:

“Do you have any news about the Istari?”

“Not recent ones”, Círdan answered, regretfully, “Mithrandir wanders perennially around all the lands of Ennor, Curunír is always shut inside Orthanc, Aiwendil comes around very seldom, while of Alatar and Pallando we have no news at all, since they went to the East. I’m afraid they’re dead.”

Being Ainur, the Maiar couldn’t be killed; but by accepting the mission the Valar had entrusted them with, the five Istari who preceded her were given a human body, with an elder appearance even if they aged actually so slowly, it was not perceivable to the mortal creatures of Middle-earth. Therefore, in a human body the possibility the two Istari who had travelled to the oriental lands were dead was concrete.

Nerwen pondered Círdan’s words. She had never liked Curunír, Aulë’s emissary, because she thought him somehow ambiguous; she was sorry about that, because Aulë was her Mistress’ spouse, but she couldn’t help it; on the contrary, Mithrandir, or Olórin, Manwë Súlimo’s emissary, was a close friend of hers, even closer than Aiwendil, who was also a follower of Yavanna like her. As for Alatar and Pallando, both emissaries of Oromë, she knew them little.

Meanwhile they had arrived at Círdan’s mansion, a building larger than other ones, but with no ostentation, as it is in the Elves’ tastes, shared by Valar and Maiar. Nerwen saw a Sinda approaching, black haired as it was typical of his tribe, who stopped a few steps from them and bowed respectfully.

“Hello, Master Faladil”, Círdan greeted him, “Lady Nerwen, meet Faladil, our supervisor of the stables. He’ll take care of your horse.”

“Nice to meet you, Master Faladil”, the Istar greeted him smiling, “I’m afraid I can’t entrust you immediately with Silmelotë: she’s a Chargeress of Aman, and has very different reactions than a normal horse. I’ll arrange her personally, and get her acquainted with you, so you can teach her the
customs of Ennor.”

Faladil made an astonished face: clearly, he had never heard about Chargers before. However, he recovered quickly and bowed again:

“Then, Lady, if you’ll follow me, I’ll take you to the palace’s stables.”

Nerwen turned to her host to take her leave, but he spoke before her:

“Go ahead, Lady Nerwen. I’ll send a servant to help you with your luggage. When you’ll settled in your quarters, if you like to you can dine with me and my wife Eärwen.”

“Thank you, Lord Círdan”, Nerwen accepted, glad of the invitation, “It’d be my pleasure.”

She led then Silmelotë to the box Faladil pointed her out and took off her saddlebags and harness, which the stable supervisor helped her to store.

“My dear friend”, the Istar told her, “first of all, I must change your name to its local version, in Sindarin: from now on, I’ll call you Thilgiloth. Is that alright?”

The Chargeress seemed to muse about it for a moment, then she lowered and lifted again her head in what looked totally as a consenting signal.

I like it, she told her. Faladil, who of course couldn’t hear her speak but had well seen her approval nod, dropped his jaw:

“I’ve never seen something like this!”, he said in a low voice, “And it’s since the years of Gil-galad that I’m in horses of every kind!”

Nerwen smiled, but not condescendingly:

“The race of the Chargers looks like horses only physically”, she explained, “They have been endowed by Ilúvatar with a very acute intellect, an extraordinary memory and the life of the Firstborn.”

She didn’t mention the ability to use the Passages of Mandos, because they existed only in Aman and Faladil wouldn’t even know what she was talking about.

“I see”, the chief groom nodded, “The most extraordinary horse-race in Middle-earth is that of the mearas of Rohan, splendid, very intelligent, strong, brave and long-lived. But Thilgiloth is a hundred times more than the best specimen among the mearas.”

The Chargeress snorted in what appeared actually a pleased chuckle.

“This flatters your vanity, he, old friend?”, Nerwen teased her, and Thilgiloth turned to give her a flick with her nose, making her laugh. Faladil shook his head, amused by this exchange: if he hadn’t seen it with his own eyes, he would take it for pure folly.

At that moment a young Elf arrived, hardier than the average Teleri, who were rather slim and slightly shorter than their brothers among the Noldor and Vanyar.

“Lady Nerwen?”, he asked, rather uselessly because she was the only other person there, apart from Faladil, “My name’s Giltor. Lord Círdan sends me to pick up your luggage and take you to your quarters.”

“Thank you, Giltor, but before I must take care of my mount”, Nerwen answered, “I’ll need half an
hour, I think. Do you want to wait, or do you prefer to take away my bags in the meantime?"

The valet chose the second solution; shouldering her saddlebags, he took his temporary leave with the agreement to come back later.

Nerwen asked Faladil for a brush and began to carefully groom Thilgiloth’s silvery coat, until it shone; meantime, she exhorted her to accept Faladil’s and his assistants’ care, even if they might be different from those she was used to in Aman.

“Now we are on the other side of Arda”, she reminded her, “Here there’s not one single realm like in Aman, this means we won’t find just one, but many customs different from those we’re used to. As I must adapt, you also must. Understood, my friend?”

Thilgiloth knocked the ground with one front hoof, showing some level of perplexity, but then nodded.

“Fine”, Nerwen approved, because she knew the Chargeress was capable of a certain degree of obstinacy, “Master Faladil, do you have a nice apple for Thilgiloth?”

“Sure”, the Sinda answered, “I’ll fetch it.”

Shortly after, he came back with a big and glossy green apple, which he handed to Nerwen. The Istar took it and offered it to Thilgiloth, who grasped it delicately with her teeth and munched it gleefully.

“Good, now I go to freshen up myself”, Nerwen announced her, patting her affectionately on one side, “Tomorrow I’ll be busy with Lord Círdan, organising our journey in Middle-earth, and therefore someone else will take you out for a walk to stretch your legs, alright?”

Thilgiloth turned her head to Faladil and moved it in his direction.

*I'd like him to take me out*, she said.

“She asks you to take her out, tomorrow”, Nerwen translated. By now, the supervisor of the stables had ceased to marvel about the capability of these two to communicate.

“Very well”, he said, “It’ll be my pleasure, Thilgiloth.”

Again, the Chargeress nodded, then she plunged her head in the trough, evidently hungry.

Giltor arrived shortly after to guide Nerwen to the quarters prepared for her. Círdan’s palace was very large, at the point they needed over ten minutes to arrive to the opposite wing, where her rooms were located.

“Here, Lady”, Giltor said, opening for her the double door in polished oak-wood and going in, “May I introduce you Luinnen? She will take care of you during your stay.”

A tall and slightly thin Sinda came forth; her hair was honey-blond, a rather rare colour among the Elves of Middle-earth, who mostly belonged to the raven-black haired tribe of the Teleri or to the brown-haired one of the Noldor. Evidently, Luinnen had one or more ancestors among the blond Vanyar.

“Welcome, Lady Nerwen”, the handmaid said, “I thought you would like a nice bath, so I prepared one.”
“Thank you so much, Luinnen”, Nerwen smiled gratefully, “I really need one: on the ship it wasn’t possible to take a bath.”

Giltor took his leave, and Luinnen turned to the guest:

“Lady Eärwen sends you a few gowns for your convenience during your stay”, she told her, “I’ll show you them while you take your bath, so you can choose one for dinner.”

Nerwen appreciated greatly the courtesy of Círdan’s wife, who had the perspicacity to imagine that her guest couldn’t bring court dresses in her luggage.

Luinnen helped her take off her travel clothes and enter the bathtub of enamelled copper, then she showed her a number of soaps of different floral fragrances, among them Nerwen selected the relaxing, refreshing lavender. For her hair, worn out by sun and salty air during the crossing, Luinnen offered her a preparation based on olive oil, which she applied in abundance, combing accurately the long tresses and then wrapping them in a canvas towel. The Istar relaxed against the headrest of the tub and closed her eyes with a satisfied sigh; finally, the handmaid washed her hair with a chamomile lotion, and then Nerwen dried them with a simple act of will, a skill of the Ainur that left Luinnen astounded and the Istar a little embarrassed: she didn’t mean to show off her power, even for such a trifle. In Aman none heeded it, but she had to learn to remember she wasn’t in the Undying Lands anymore, because sooner or later she could be in places where it could be dangerous to reveal unusual capabilities.

From the dresses Lady Eärwen had offered her, Nerwen chose a gown in silk the colour of amethyst, with light sleeves in white organza suitable to the hot season. Luinnen, who had quickly recovered from her amazement, helped her dressing, tying the gown on her back and then brushing her hair. Finally, the Istar was ready to join her hosts for dinner.

As soon as she entered in the dining room, the Lady of Lindon spotted her and walked to her, smiling. She was rather minute, like Nerwen, and her raven-black mane was streaked with silver, giving her the same elderly air as her husband, so atypical among the Firstborn; but her eyes, green like the sea in some places in the world where the water is warm and the sand snow-white, shone with a light of perpetual youth of soul.

“It’s a great pleasure to see you again, Lady Nerwen!”, she cried, extending both her hands, “It’s been such a long time…”

The Aini took her hands and squeezed them, reciprocating her smile:

“You’re right, Lady Eärwen… It’s a pleasure for me, too, to see you again.”

“Are your quarters to your liking?”, her host enquired.

“Absolutely”, Nerwen confirmed, “and Luinnen is very efficient.”

“Glad to hear it”, Eärwen nodded, “Please, take a seat”, she showed her the place of honour at the high table, on the right hand of Círdan, “Remembering you like it very much, I ordered sea-food for dinner, but if you got tired of it on board the ship, there’s also some mutton roast.”

“Unlike my expectations, actually I didn’t eat that much sea-food, on board the Telpewinga”, Nerwen revealed her, “therefore I’ll be very glad to have it tonight.”

While they were sitting down, Círdan arrived, and then in rapid succession all the notable people of the realm of Lindon, the most important ones taking place with them at the high table, the others at the lower ones. Nerwen knew many of them, but an even greater number not; it was a definite
sign that a really long time had passed, since her last visit to Middle-earth. To be precise, six-thousand, four-hundred and sixty-three years, or *coranar* as the Elves called them, since Thingol had been killed and Melian had come back to Valinor, in mourning.

During the meal, Nerwen chitchatted pleasantly with Círdan and Galdor, his prime minister, whom the Istar wasn’t acquainted with.

When dinner – which Nerwen appreciated greatly – was over, most headed for the Hall of Fire, where they sat down around the great central fireplace for the entertainments – there are always plenty of them, in an Elven palace: music, poetry, tale-telling, or simple conversations. This evening, a bard narrated the thrilling story of Eärendil the Mariner, whose ascent was half Elven and half Human, who dared to cross the Great Sea to reach Valinor and ask the Valar for help against Morgoth, and who during the War of Wrath fought and killed the great dragon Ancalagon, ending up roaming perennially the skies of Arda with the only rescued Silmaril on his brow, discernible as the brightest star of the firmament, called after his name. Nerwen knew personally part of those events, having witnessed, in her place next to Yavanna’s throne in the council hall, Eärendil’s plea to the Valar in the name of both Men and Elves, of whom he bore the double descent, and got greatly emotional hearing them transformed into a poem.

While taking his leave, at the end of the performance, Círdan turned to her:

“Lady Nerwen, tomorrow at mid-morning, please meet me in my study: we’ll talk about how I can help you in your journey.”

“Thank you, my friend”, the Aini answered, “I bid you a good night.”

“Good night to you, too.”

When she got back into her room, Luinnen helped her taking off her clothes, and finally Nerwen went to bed, but she had some trouble to fall asleep: for the first time after the Telpewinga had left the Straight Road to venture into the Round World, she realised she had left the Undying Lands for good. She did it already many times, in the past, when she came to this side of Belegaer to visit Melian and her family; but now Doriath was no more, the entire Beleriand was no more, and these lands were totally unknown to her; and a great number of the people she knew so many years ago were no more. Abruptly, she felt the great weight of the awareness of having left – maybe forevermore – everything she knew and loved. The path in front of her seemed obscure and full of solitude, and suddenly she felt homesick. She wondered how she could face the months and years to come, if she felt like this after only a few weeks; but maybe, she tried to tell herself, time would soothe this melancholic mood…

Finally she fell asleep, even while Eärendil appeared, bright as ever; its other name was Gil-Estel: the Star of Hope.

OOO

The morning after, at the time appointed Nerwen went to Círdan, who welcomed her in his office and showed her to a sofa, upholstered in amaranth silk.

“Lady Nerwen”, he began, “anything you need, know you can count on me. Other than the obvious such as provisions, clothing, blankets and the whole equipment for a journey, what else can I get
“Do you have detailed maps of the various areas of Ennor?” Nerwen asked, seizing the opportunity, “The ones I found in Valimar weren’t much accurate.”

“Sure: in my library you’ll find very exhaustive charts of the main regions of Middle-earth: from Gondor to Erebor, from Rhovanion to the Shire…”

“The Shire?”, Nerwen asked, surprised: this was a name that didn’t appear in the maps she had studied back in Valimar.

“The realm of the Halflings”, Círdan explained, “Even if talking about a realm isn’t correct, because they have no king. They call themselves Hobbits. They are peaceful and jovial people, lovers of food and comforts.”

“They look like a nice folk”, the Istar stated. Círdan nodded:

“They are. We trade with them since they settled west of Lindon; they are honest people, capable of unexpected courage, which you wouldn’t guess from their appearance. There’s much more to them than what you would expect, in the best sense of the word.”

“I guess that, leaving Lindon westbound as I’m planning to do, I’ll meet them”, Nerwen mused, “Is there anything more to learn about them?”

“Besides they adore their land and are very hospitable, I’d say no”, the Lord of the Grey Havens said, “Your old friend Mithrandir knows them very well”, he added, “He seems to have a special interest in them that I was never able to explain.”

“When I’ll meet him, I’ll ask him about it”, Nerwen smiled, “In this regard, I’ll send messengers for him: birds, mainly, because they can cover greater distances than any other creature. I could use the assistance of the Great Eagles, but I know they dwell very far from here, in the northern part of the Misty Mountains, if I’m not wrong.”

“Correct. However, you could send a message to Gwaihir, asking for their help: I think he’ll be inclined to give it to you, by virtue of his friendship with Mithrandir, if anything, to whom you too are befriended.”

“I’ll try”, Nerwen nodded.

“Is there anything else I can do for you, Lady Nerwen?”

She shook her head:

“That’s all for now. I thank you, Lord Círdan.”

“My pleasure, I assure you.”

Nerwen stood up and took her leave. She went to visit Thilgiloth, whom she found strolling leisurely in the stable corral. After she had made sure she was satisfied with the accommodation and treatment she was receiving, the Aini headed for the gardens in front of Círdan’s palace, lush with plants, flowers and herbs. Usually, her curiosity and love for everything vegetable would induce her to observe all of them with great interest, discovering varieties unknown in Aman, or different by some detail like colour shade, shape, size; but now the thought of the way she could contact Mithrandir was distracting her. Should she send a messenger to the Eagles, creatures of Manwë Súlimo and therefore particularly friendly to the Istar who had been sent by the mightiest
among the Valar? Or should she rather set around a substantial number of creatures, winged and on four legs, so that they may look for him and, once found, report him her wish to meet him?

While she was there, brooding, a blackbird whistled, drawing her attention to him; she spotted him immediately, perched on a branch in a holly oak, with his glossy black plumage and the bright orange beak. *Now this is a very smart bird*, Nerwen thought.

“Hullo, little brother”, she greeted him. The blackbird watched her intently, then he opened his wings and flew down from the branch he was perching on to go and perch on another, lower and nearer to his interlocutor.

*Hullo to you. You’re Nerwen Laiheri?*, he asked her. Surprised, the Istar hesitated a little, then confirmed:

“Yes, in person!”

The blackbird radiated a feeling of satisfaction.

*I bring you a message from Mithrandir*, he announced. Even more surprised than before, the Maia gaped: she was racking her brains to realise how she could make contact with her ancient friend Olórin, and *he* sent her a messenger? And who arrived *exactly* at this precise moment? The coincidence was extraordinary, to say the least.

*The Lord of the Winds has informed him about your arrival*, the blackbird went on, *He says to wait for him here in Mithlond: he’ll arrive in a few days.*

*Lord of the Winds* was an enough accurate translation of Manwë’s epithet, Súlimo. Nerwen supposed that Yavanna had asked to Mithrandir’s protector Vala to tell him she was coming to Middle-earth, and that she recommended him they met. Again, her Mistress had anticipated her wishes and needs.

“You have all my gratitude, little brother”, she said, “You’ve just solved a big difficulty of mine.”

The blackbird moved his head downwards in what looked through and through like a bow.

“Your mission is accomplished, my friend”, Nerwen went on, “Rest now in this beautiful garden. I thank you again for your care.”

*It was a pleasure*, the bird answered graciously, and flew away flapping his wings to find a place to his liking and rest, as the Aini encouraged him to do.

All of a sudden, Nerwen felt euphoric: in a few days, after countless years, she would meet again her best friend. Her feet moved as animated by a mind of their own, and the Istar danced among the flowers and trees of the garden. In the wake of joy and good mood she released at her passage, animals and plants rejoiced with her.

*Author’s corner:*
We have finally arrived in Middle-earth, site of the great events of The Hobbit before (which will occur the year after Nerwen’s arrival) and The Lord of the Rings later. It was very thrilling for me to disembark with Nerwen on the Hither Shore, where many years ago my heart was captured and is still kept as a happy prisoner!

The image of Círdan is by Kimberly, found on the Tolkien Gateway website.

Thank you all, you who read: even if you don’t comment, the only idea you are reading me makes me feel deeply honoured. I hope you will go on; from my part, I will put into my small creation all my love for the wondrous universe Tolkien gave us as a gift of his genius, and I hope this will he appreciated.

Lady Angel
In the following days, Nerwen studied closely the maps of Middle-earth that Círdan had made available to her, memorizing names, locations, distances and shapes of the various lands. Furthermore, she read many books and treatises on populations, realms, customs and traditions, history, as well as herbs and animals of Middle-earth, using the prodigious reading and learning speed typical of her race.

The ninth day after the receiving of Mithrandir’s message through the blackbird, the Maia was buried as usual in documents, scrolls and books. She had found a history essay about the Dwarves, Aulë’s beloved children, a tome totally intact because no one except the Dwarves knew Khuzdul, and the book was there surely only out of love of collection. An illustrious historian had written it; wanting to learn more about this people, as well as exercise in Khuzdul, she had begun to read it. At a certain point, she arrived at the narration of the terrible battle of Azanulbizar (or Nanduhirion, according to the Sindarin name), fought in 2799 between Dwarves and Orcs in front of the gates of the fallen Dwarven realm of Moria. The description of the deeds of the young Dwarven prince Thorin struck her particularly: on this day, he became known for his indomitable courage, which brought him, after having his shield broken, to pick up a large oaken branch and go on with the battle, earning that way the suggestive name of Oakenshield.
At that moment, someone entered the library and addressed her with a quiet:

“Good afternoon, Nerwen.”

The Istar lifted her gaze, the interruption vaguely annoying her; she saw a Man, very old but with an imperious poise, very tall, with long grey hair and beard, and equally grey robes. On his head, he sported a big pointy hat, again grey and somewhat banged up, and in his hands, he carried a wooden staff, a rough crystal set on its upper end.

“Good afternoon to you”, Nerwen responded to the greeting, making an effort to be polite in spite of the slight irritation, “Do I know you?”

“It has been a long time since the last time we met”, the old man said, chuckling, “and my appearance was very different, then. Maybe it’s better I show myself to you as I was once…”

He raised one hand and made a gesture with his fingers; the crystal on top of his staff glowed up, and a thread of bright light came out of it, twisting around the Man’s shape until it created a cocoon so radiant, Nerwen had to squint in order to avoid to be blinded by it. It took just a few moments, then the light vanished, and in the place of the old man there was now a handsome youngster, clean shaved, tall and brown haired, with piercing eyes of a shade between grey and blue; by her utter amazement, Nerwen recognised her ancient friend, now a colleague as an Istar.
“Olórin!”, she cried joyfully, jumping up and running to him. He laughed heartedly and, leaning
quickly his staff against the wall, welcomed her in his arms, lifted her up and spun her around;
being she so minute compared to him, it wasn’t difficult.

“My dear, dearest friend”, he said, kissing her brow, “Really didn’t you recognise me, in my
identity of Gandalf the Grey?”

“No, I didn’t, really!”, Nerwen laughed, “Maybe, with a little more time, I could recognise your
eyes, but you took me too much by surprise…”

They broke their hug, but held still one another by their arms.

“My dear Olórin…”, the Aini whispered. He shook his head:

“I’m not used to this name anymore”, he stated, “and Valinor is no more than a vague and nostalgic
memory in my mind, like the shadow of a dream… Do you mind to call me Gandalf, or
Mithrandir? That’s how they call me all, in these lands this side of the Great Sea.”

“No problem”, Nerwen reassured him, “Come, my old friend, let’s sit down and have a cup of wine
to celebrate our encounter.”

“Very gladly”, Mithrandir accepted. Nerwen led him to a small table where, on a tray, was set a
porcelain flagon with a slender neck and some silver goblets, available to the library visitors. After
pouring the wine, a red one with a fruity and slightly sweet flavour, Nerwen handed a glass to her
friend and then they toasted.

“Delicious”, Mithrandir said, “Círdan has always good wine, in his reserve…”

They went to a sofa and sat.

“Tell me about Melian”, Mithrandir asked her, “How is she?”
“Melancholy takes her still, when she thinks back to the happy times in Doriath”, Nerwen confided him, “When it becomes too unbearable, she goes to Lórien for a short stay: Irmo is the only one capable to ease her grief, even if only for a short time. The sorrow for the loss of Thingol and Lúthien will never fade completely from her heart.”

“So it is”, the Istar confirmed, nodding gravely, “I wish it’d be possible to inform her that the appearance of her beloved only child has come back to tread the roads of the World: I’m sure the news would hearten her.”

“Is there really someone who resembles Lúthien?”, Nerwen marvelled, “Who’s she?”

“Elrond’s daughter… you remember him, don’t you?”

“Yes, I met him shortly, just before the War of Wrath”, the Aini confirmed. Mithrandir nodded satisfied and went on:

“He married Celebrían, the daughter of Galadriel and Celeborn; their children are the twins Elladan and Elrohir, and Arwen, called Undómiel. She looks exactly like Lúthien.”

“Well, I’ll see it by myself”, Nerwen revealed him, “I must meet all three the Keepers of the Elven Rings.”

“You know who they are?”, Mithrandir marvelled.

“Yavanna disclosed it to me”, she answered, “and she told me also that Círdan gave you Narya when you arrived on these shores.”

“That’s true”, the Wizard confirmed, raising his right hand; with a small amount of willpower, he made a golden ring visible, adorned with a fiery ruby, usually hidden from the view of anyone: it was the Ring of Fire, “He said I would need it much more than him, having it the power to inspire in others the resistance against tyranny, domination and desperation, as well as to give resistance against the weariness – both physical and psychological – of time, which I’m subject to, in the human body that was given to me.”

The jewel disappeared again, and Mithrandir took another sip from the goblet.

“May I ask you why Kementári thought there was need to send another emissary of hers?”, he enquired.

“She worries the doings of the Istari so far aren’t enough to thwart Sauron’s power, which she perceives growing more and more each year”, Nerwen answered, not seeing any reason to keep the truth from him, “She fears that Eldar, Men and Dwarves are not enough to defeat him, once he’ll reveal himself again to Middle-earth. Therefore, she wants me to find the Onodrim and persuade them to join the opposition to Sauron.”

“I see”, Mithrandir nodded, feeling troubled, “The Onodrim – or Ents, like they’re more commonly called here – seem having vanished from the face of the world… For many years now, we have no news of them. They may be no more.”

Nerwen shook her head in a sign of denial:

“No, Yavanna perceives them still alive, even if they’re now very few and hidden even from her sight, so well they’re concealed. I was hoping you could give me some news about them.”

“Once they lived scattered in all the woods of Middle-earth, but now I wouldn’t know where to
look for them”, Mithrandir mused, frowning in the effort to remember, “There’s a very ancient wood, called the Old Forest, near the Shire; it’s kept by Iarwain Ben-adar… or Tom Bombadil, as he calls himself now. There were Ents there, once. Maybe he will be able to tell you something.”

Nerwen remembered she saw the location on a map of the Shire: the Old Forest was located on the eastern border of this land, separating it from the Barrow-downs, an uninhabited area with tombs that a legend said haunted by wraiths.

“Oh well”, she nodded, “I’ll begin my search from there. Then I’ll go to Imladris to Elrond, and later to Galadriel in Lothlórien.”

She took a sip of wine, while Mithrandir watched her thoughtfully.

“At each Istar was attributed a colour”, he pondered, “in which he normally dresses up. The leader of our order is called Saruman the White, I am Gandalf the Grey, then there’s Radagast the Brown, and finally the two Blue, now vanished into the East, of whom I don’t even remember the names…”, he made a vague gesture; Nerwen opened her mouth to tell him those names, but he didn’t notice it and went on, “To you, because of your love toward the plants, I’d suggest green.”

The Aini forgot her resolution to remind him of the names of the missing Wizards, and contemplated Mithrandir’s recommendation.

“I’d say it’s appropriate, my friend”, she agreed, “I’m already called Lady of the Green, therefore Nerwen the Green is absolutely fitting.”

They drank more wine, and then something else struck Nerwen:

“My friend, would you teach me Ovestron? I could acquire it from anyone of the Elves living here in Mithlond, but when I learned you were coming, I’d preferred to wait for you.”

“But gladly, my dear Nerwen”, Mithrandir nodded, “I guess you’d like to use our special method of learning, from mind to mind…”

“Sure, otherwise it’d take too long”, the Maia confirmed, “But we can easily think about it tomorrow: it’s almost dinner time now, and I think you’d like to freshen up before it… Did you already greet Lord Círdan?”

“It was Lady Eärwen who welcomed me”, Mithrandir informed her, “and she told me she would give me quarters near yours. I fear she thinks that in Valinor our relationship went way beyond friendship…”, he shook his head, amused: Olórin preferred those of his same gender, as it happens sometimes. It wasn’t frequent, but it wasn’t considered unbecoming at all, neither in Aman, nor in Middle-earth.

“You can tell from this that she doesn’t know you well”, Nerwen commented, equally amused by the apparent misinterpretation.

“Yeah… and how could she, anyway? She met me only very few times, because I come very seldom in Lindon…”

They got up, and the Wizard took again his staff, transforming back into Gandalf the Grey. This look was very different from Olórin’s, that was why she didn’t recognise him at first; however, she noticed that he kept the same tall stature and broad shoulders, and especially the piercing, vivacious eyes.

She smiled at him: she was very happy to have met him again.
Author’s corner:

I always loved the character of Gandalf, with all his lights and shadows; it’s one of the reasons because my alter ego is an Istar, she too. Their encounter thrilled me very much: I really felt like meeting again a very dear friend after much, too much time I didn’t!

Here’s an example of what I call “character who decides on his own”: I never thought Gandalf could be gay… it was him who revealed it to me while I was writing! LOL Probably it has been an association in my brain with the actor who plays him in the movies, Sir Ian McKellen, who is openly gay; but I thought it could fit even with the character, why not? :-) Maybe the good Professor will turn in his grave, but who knows, maybe not: after all, this is only a fan fiction, chitchat on no importance compared to his great Masterpiece, and it doesn’t deserve so much attention from him…

Thanks to all those who follow me: I hope I won’t let you down! And I hope you will be so kind to take a couple of minutes to leave me a few words, commenting my story. Thank you in advance!

Lady Angel
In the evening of the second day they were playing bookworms, Mithrandir stretched his aching shoulders and back, and said:

“My eyes are so tired I see double… I need a nice smoke of my pipe.”

Nerwen stared at him, confused. She saw him rummaging in his belt-pouch and pulling out of it an odd item, long and curved, with a kind of small cup at one end; then, he produced a smaller pouch, from which he got out a pinch of what looked like some kind of desiccated and shredded herb. Its aromatic smell surprised her:

“What is it?”, she asked therefore, intrigued, referring to both things.

“This is a pipe”, Mithrandir explained, “Look, this is called stem, and this, burner. And this is pipe-weed, a plant that grows only this side of Belegaer. I learned about it through the Hobbits, skilled growers and consumers of this herb.”

Nerwen’s interest as an herbalist awoke immediately:

“And what’s its purpose?”

Mithrandir, busy stuffing the pipe burner, paused a minute before answering.

“What’s its purpose?” he repeated, pensively, “Hum… to smoke, of course.”

Nerwen had no idea what he was talking about:

“…to smoke?”
“Yeah, you know…”, the Wizard squirmed, looking for words appropriate enough to explain a notion to a person who didn’t even know the premises, “I might as well show how this works to you”, he supposed. He took a thin wooden stick, lit it on the flame of the nearest candle, then he approached the flaming end to the pipe burner and began to draw air from the stem; soon enough, the pipe-weed became ember, and Mithrandir began emitting smoke from his mouth. His look of manifest satisfaction made Nerwen realise he found this activity very agreeable.

“Come, try it”, he said, handing her the pipe, “Draw the smoke into your mouth.”

Intrigued, the Maia did what she had seen him doing and drew air from the stem. The smoke filled her mouth, and instinctively she blew it back out through her nostrils. Mithrandir felt upset:

“How did you do it?” she asked.

“You need much practice,” Mithrandir answered, his wounded pride finally satisfied by Nerwen’s evident admiration, “If you like, I’ll teach you…”
Several days passed; Nerwen learned the Common Speech from Mithrandir by extracting the knowledge from his mind, and continued to study, in the books provided by Círdan and with him, too, the customs and traditions of Middle-earth. She also engaged in the activity called *pipe smoking* so frequently to the point Mithrandir made a pipe for her, very similar to his own, with a long curved stem, and gave her part of his personal reserve of *Old Toby*; the Aini learned also how to create with the pipe smoke some simple forms, like flowers, trees, animals, but she never matched his old friend’s skill – not in the limited time they stayed at Círdan’s home.

The moment they had to leave was drawing nearer, when one afternoon the Wizard made her a request:

“Could you deliver a message for me? It’s on your way and you’d spare me a long detour…”

“I’d love to help you, if I can,” Nerwen accepted immediately.

“On the way to Imladris, you’ll pass through the town of Bree,” Mithrandir said, and she nodded: she had seen its location on the maps, “There lives currently a friend of mine, a Dwarf who works there as a smith. His name is Thorin…”

“Thorin Oakenshield?” the Aini interrupted him, marvelled.

“Yeah, precisely,” he confirmed, marvelled in turn, “How do you know him?”

“I read about him in a history book in *Khuzdul,*” she explained. Mithrandir’s eyes widened further from the additional dose of surprise:

“You speak the language of Dwarves?”

Nerwen realised she hadn’t told him so far; but they had had to speak about so many things, in those few days – years, centuries of adventures and misadventures, especially from his part – that she really hadn’t thought about it.

“A gift from Aulë,” she explained, “to make me more agreeable to his favourites, in the same way Entish made me agreeable to the Ents, at the time.”

“An excellent idea,” Mithrandir approved, recovering from his amazement, “I know only a few words in *Khuzdul,* even if the Dwarves honour me with their friendship, they’re very jealous of their speech and don’t teach it to anyone fluently. What do you know about Thorin, then?”

“That he is the legitimate heir to the throne of Erebor, destroyed by a dragon called Smaug, and that he earned the sobriquet of *Oakenshield* during a terrible battle at the gates of another Dwarven realm, Moria”, Nerwen told him, “I would’ve never imagined a prince and great warrior like him making a living as a smith…”

“Unfortunately, the few survivors of the realm of the Lonely Mountain lost everything, in Smaug’s attack,” Mithrandir explained, “and for a living, noble or not, they must do what Dwarves do best: miners, smiths, jewellers. Some are mercenaries… even if the Dwarves honour me with their friendship, they’re very jealous of their speech and don’t teach it to anyone fluently. What do you know about Thorin, then?”

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“I see,” Nerwen said in an undertone, feeling sorry for the fate of such a noble prince, deprived of his homeland, his possessions and his heirloom, and forced to a humble – even if honourable – work to make his living, knowing his decimated and exiled folk had to do the same, after having
been great and mighty and renowned everywhere.

“What’s the message?” she asked at this point.

“Please, tell him these exact words: the moment has almost arrived, Thorin Oakenshield. Gather the companions we spoke of and get ready with them to the accomplishment of the mission. He’ll understand what it is.”

“Very well,” she nodded, and repeated word by word to make sure she had understood. Mithrandir approved.

“I thank you very much, my dearest friend,” he concluded, “You have given me a huge favour.”

“My pleasure, believe me,” Nerwen reassured him, smiling at him affectionately, “No need to thank me.”

In response to her statement, Mithrandir hugged her gratefully, then he took a step backwards to watch her intently from head to toe with his bright grey-blue eyes, so intensely he almost made her feel uneasy.

“Is there something wrong?” she asked him therefore, frowning. He nodded slowly:

“Your look is too… luminous,” he said, “One can see immediately you’re not an ordinary Elda. I recommend you to cloud a little your true nature.”

“I agree,” Nerwen accepted, not having thought about it up to now, but then immediately she remembered her faithful travelling companion, “I suppose it’s better doing the same for Thilgiloth…”

“It’s surely advisable she takes on the look of a normal horse of Middle-earth, even if stunningly beautiful”, Mithrandir confirmed, “If they ask you, say she comes from the land of Rohan, which is famous for its horses, therefore they’ll mistake her cleverness for simple training, for the accuracy of which the Rohirrim are well renowned.”

“Thanks for your advice,” Nerwen nodded, “Better I do it immediately, so I won’t need to think about it at the last moment…”

She walked away a few steps, then she closed her eyes and focused on her appearance; she imagined a veil forming around her and wrapping her completely, passing through her clothes to lay on her skin and hair, not missing a single square centimetre. Mithrandir saw her look change subtly, losing the characteristic luminosity of the Ainur – Valar and Maiar – to develop a more worldly appearance. Now she looked like a normal female Elf, but after a few more moments, the characteristic pointy ears of this race became round, and finally he was in front of a human woman.

Nerwen re-opened her eyes.

“What do you think of it?” she asked him. Mithrandir examined her closely from head to toe, then he came near and looked into her eyes: she resembled through and through a human female, except for the ancient wisdom perceivable in her gaze, which no obscuration could ever cancel however.

“Very well,” he answered finally, “but tell me, why did you choose the appearance of Men? You could easily look like an Elda…”

“I’ll have to deal with Dwarves,” she answered, “and it’s well known they don’t have great love for the Elves: I’ve thought it therefore better to look like a human. Besides, also the other Istari
have this appearance: I simply stuck with it,” she concluded, smiling. Mithrandir nodded:

“I see… And it won’t be a problem for you to be accepted by the Eldar, even if you look human, because they’ll be able to see through your veil with no great difficulty. Well done,” he approved.

OOO

A few days later, Gandalf the Grey and Nerwen the Green took their leave from Lord Círdan and Lady Eärwen: the two Wizards would journey together beyond the Tower Hills, and then they would take the Great East Road until the fork to Sarn Ford, where Mithrandir would turn southwards, while Nerwen would continue through the Shire until arriving at Tom Bombadil’s land.

Gandalf mounted a splendid brown bay, with black mane and tail, called Lagordonn because of his swiftness and colour; Thilgiloth, even though she had been obscured, kept her magnificent snow-white coat, shiny like silk, and her black eyes, glowing with intelligence.

The first evening already, when they camped, Nerwen felt weariness, particularly on back and shoulders; a feeling that she, as a complete Maia, would never have experienced. Even her derriere was quite beaten and, while stretching, she groaned. Gandalf glimpsed at her, worried:

“Are you alright?”

“Yeah, it’s just weariness: I’m not used to it… As Ainur, we wouldn’t feel it, in Aman. Even when I went visiting Melian in Doriath, it didn’t happen.”

Gandalf smiled, understanding his old friend’s uneasiness:

“To accomplish our mission, we’ve been diminished,” he observed, “and we haven’t all our maiarin capabilities anymore… I too, needed some time to adjust. Let a few weeks pass and then you’ll get used to it, too…”

OOO

A few days of travelling later, after crossing the Tower Hills, Nerwen and Gandalf reached the Shire’s borders.
“The Shire is a peaceful and cozy land,” Gandalf told her, “and there aren’t any dangerous animals such as bears or wolves. You can easily sleep outdoors, but you’ll find many inns down the road; when you’ll arrive near Bywater, I recommend *The Green Dragon*. When you’ll arrive in Bree, I recommend *The Prancing Pony*, the owner of which, Goldweath Butterbur, is an old acquaintance of mine: name me freely, when you get there. And his wife Violet is an outstanding cook.”

“Very well,” Nerwen nodded, “As we cross the Shire, what can you tell me about the Hobbits?”

“They are discreet and modest people,” Gandalf answered smiling, “of ancient origin, but nobody knows anymore where they came from; they love peace, tranquility and the well-cultivated land. They are quite coy with the Tall People, as they call Men; they have very sharp hearing and sight, and even if, because of their love for food, they have a tendency to plumpness they are surprisingly agile and quick, and are able to vanish rapidly and silently at the arrival of people they don’t want to meet… There could be dozens of Hobbits here around, and we would neither see nor hear them, if they don’t want to make themselves seen or heard. They are very fond of parties, and love laughing and singing and dancing. Among them I am particularly renowned for my ability with fireworks…” he made a vague gesture in the air, “They don’t know my true Istari nature,” he concluded. He paused, suddenly wistful, “Yet,” he went on slowly, “under their mild and well-fed appearance, Hobbits hide a surprising resilience and a considerable temper. It’s difficult to frighten or kill them, and their love for good things is due to the fact they can do without, if necessary, in order to resist hostility and adversity… The courage of their race awakes slowly, but is worthy of the greatest deeds of Elves and Men.”

“I see you think greatly of them,” Nerwen mused. Mithrandir nodded to confirm:

“Yes, there’s more in them than meets the eye. They’re not adventurous, and indeed they rarely leave their borders to go out and explore the world; however there are a couple of families among them – that because of this are of ill reputation – that during their history proved themselves particularly reckless and brave: the Tooks of Tuckborough and the Brandybucks of Buckland…”

OOO
Some days later, they arrived at Michel Delving on the White Downs, the largest settlement of the Shire and, even if not officially, its capital, being it the abode of the Mayor who, as Gandalf had explained to Nerwen, was elected each seven years and represented the highest authority in the country. Here they would go separate ways, because Gandalf was taking the road to Sarn Ford, where he would cross the river Baranduin, or Brandywine as the Hobbits called it, while Nerwen would continue on the Great East Road toward Tom Bombadil’s land, which was beyond the eastern border of the Shire.

Caracoling on the wide dusty road, they ran into a number of Hobbits, who got out of their way, but who anyway made sure to address them a nod of greeting, displaying simultaneously cautious and polite reactions, exactly the way the grey Istar had described them.

Even if it was just halfway in the afternoon, the two friends, reluctant to say goodbye to each other after having been apart for such a long time and a great distance, headed for the biggest inn of the settlement, *The Bold Rooster*. Leaving the horses in front of the door – not fearing they could be stolen because theft was not in the Hobbits’ nature, nor would they be able to ride them because of their small seize – they entered the hall, bowing to come through the round door, painted a bright yellow. Mithrandir had to take off his hat, but even so, with his height of 1.80 m, he had to stay a little crouched in order not to bang his head against the ceiling; unlike him, Nerwen could stay upright, being about twenty centimetres shorter than him.

Mithrandir shook the small bell, placed on the counter to call for service, and a few moments later a strong-built middle-aged Hobbit arrived, sporting a curly brown mane and big hairy feet.

“Well, if this isn’t Gandalf the Grey!” he cried, “It’s been a long time now you haven’t come this part of the Shire.”

Gandalf looked closely at the Hobbit.

“Tobold Hornblower!” he said at length, his lips curving into a smile, “Nice to see you. The last time you were about to marry: how’s Gardenia?”

“Very well, thanks. We have three children, two girls and a boy, all healthy and pretty.”

“I’m glad to hear it. This.” Gandalf went on, half-turning to his companion, “is Nerwen the Green. Do you have two rooms for us?”

“Sure!”, the innkeeper nodded, “Our beds are too short for you Tall People,” he went on, addressing directly Nerwen in an apologetic tone, “but I’ll see to a pallet with clean and soft covers making a valid substitute.”

“It’ll be perfect,” Nerwen reassured him; during her long life, she had occasionally slept in far worse conditions.

“We need also a shelter for our horses,” Mithrandir added.

“We’ll put them into the pony corral and give them our best fodder,” Tobold declared.

The two Istari took then possession of their rooms and freshened up, and later met again in the common room, by this time still empty. They ordered a carafe of cool beer and sat at a table, of course Hobbit-size and therefore rather small for them, especially for Gandalf. But they were in the Country of the Halflings and had to make themselves comfortable the best they could.

“My heart is heavy,” Gandalf confessed to Nerwen, not hiding his sadness for the now impending separation.
“Are you worried about me, my friend?” she asked him. The Wizard shook his head:

“No, I know you’ll be perfectly safe, guarded by animals and plants in every place you’ll go. No, it’s the awareness I won’t see you again for who knows how many years, which makes me sad.”

“It makes me sad, too.” Nerwen admitted, “but this time they won’t be by far as many years.”

“Your Second Sight is telling you this?” he enquired, looking at her with his bright eyes; after his arrival in Middle-earth, this ability had almost completely faded away, in him, like many others. The Maia nodded:

“Yes, it is. Even if it’s not clear to me neither the when nor the where, I saw clearly that we’ll meet again two times, the first one in a short time, the second much later; but the second time we’ll never part again. This makes me think we’ll accomplish our tasks by then, one way or another.”

“You comfort me greatly,” Gandalf stated then, “because sometimes I doubt I’ll be able to accomplish something and I feel frustrated…”

“Never doubt the path you walk in the name of the Valar,” Nerwen exhorted him, placing her hand on his and squeezing it strongly, “Even if sometimes it looks dark or you think you lost it, persist. The Grace of the Valar is with you and won’t abandon you.”

Encouraged, Mithrandir addressed her a smile.

“My dearest friend, you’d be able to hearten this table!” he declared emphatically, tapping lightly his hand on the table top, “And this quality will surely open for you doors that are normally closed for everyone else”, he added, “Hum…” he grumbled then, “I need my pipe.”

“Good idea,” Nerwen approved, turning and rummaging in her pouch to pull out what she needed. While outside the afternoon waned, the two Istari smoke together, and Gandalf didn’t miss the opportunity to amaze and amuse his friend, creating more and more complex forms with the smoke of pipe-weed.

OOO

By dinnertime, the common room filled up with both the inn guests – not many, to be honest, not being it the time of the Free Fair of Mid-Year – and external patrons. Nerwen and Gandalf ate in a secluded corner, targeted by many a glance, intrigued, but not insistent, as it was in the discreet nature of the Hobbits; and finally they retired for the night.

OOO

The following day, the parting moment arrived – now inevitable.

On the crossway where the Great East Road forked in the road taking to Sarn Ford, Mithrandir hugged Nerwen strongly, towering over her with his tall stature, which was accentuated by his pointy hat.
“Good luck, Nerwen the Green,” he said solemnly, “May the Grace of the Valar be always with you.”

“Thank you, Gandalf the Grey,” she answered, equally solemnly, “May the stars shine upon your path.”

With a last embrace, the two old friends parted, then each mounted on his or her horse and took the chosen road, Nerwen eastward and Gandalf south-eastward.

Author’s corner:

Of course, Nerwen couldn’t go around Middle-earth with too much a different look than the other Istari! If these have a human look, the same must have she.

I know I promised to fully respect Tolkien’s canon; however, to find a way to make Nerwen meet Thorin the way I wanted it to, I had to change some details, such as, for instance, the fact that Thorin and Gandalf knew each other for some time and had already begun to make plans to conquer back Erebor, while in the appendixes of The Lord of the Rings is clearly stated that the two meet out of chance in Bree on March 15th, 2941, meaning just a little more than a month before the beginning of their great adventure. Frankly, this seems to me hardly credible: how can Thorin trust Gandalf so much to entrust him with the organisation of the re-conquest of the Lonely Mountain, if he barely knows him? (I humbly ask the Professor’s pardon, but this is an inconsistency I really cannot stomach…) Besides, at this time Thorin didn’t live in Bree, but in the Ered Luin, or Blue Mountains, with his sister Dís and his nephews Fili and Kili, and a few hundreds of Erebor Dwarves.

Passage chapter before the beginning of the Great Adventure: from the next one, we’ll jump right into the story (somebody will surely say: about time!!! LOL), and we’ll begin to meet in rapid fire already known characters like Bilbo, Tom Bombadil, Thorin Oakenshield, Elrond and many others, and some brand new ones. It won’t be easy nor granted, and Nerwen will face not only physical dangers, but confront also the influence that the quality of Middle-earth will exercise over her on an emotional point of view, as Yavanna warned her, and this won’t be easier than confront bandits, orcs, werewolves and such...

I was very sorry to part from Gandalf; but he has to accomplish his task, while Nerwen hers.

Thank you to all those who follow me, and an even bigger thank you to those who leave a comment!

A very special thank you to ColdOnePaul, who edited this chapter! My English may be good enough, but it’s far from perfect, so his help is very welcome and priceless!

Lady Angel
In the following days, Nerwen crossed undisturbed the quiet and tidy countryside of the Shire. The entire land emanated serenity and peacefulness, and she felt at ease; somehow the pastoral land reminded her of her beloved gardens in southern Valinor, now so far away, and which she perhaps – only perhaps – would be able to see again a long time from now.

The third day after parting from Gandalf, she arrived at the crossing with the road coming from Bywater, where the inn recommended by Gandalf, *The Green Dragon*, was located. The Aini turned Thilgiloth to the left and took that road, cantering calmly both because she wasn’t in a hurry and didn’t want to scare off the increasing number of wayfarers on the road.

A couple of hours later she reached the small village of Bywater, so called because it was built on the waterfront of a tiny lake; Nerwen located immediately the *Green Dragon* because it was the largest building in the settlement, and also because its sign – a winged, bright green dragon – was definitely self-explanatory.
She dismounted and whispered to Thilgiloth to wait quietly for her, then she stooped her head and entered in the wide-open doorway, round as it was customary among the Hobbits.

“Hullo, stranger!” she was greeted vivaciously by a young female Hobbit with long brown curly hair and a bright smile, less timid than the majority of the Shire-folk, “We don’t receive many visits from the Tall People, around here…”

Her tone was clearly puzzled, but out of discretion, she didn’t ask her directly where she came from and what she was doing here. Nerwen reciprocated this beautiful girl’s smile:

“I’m on my way to Bree,” she said, “Do you have a place where I can sleep, and lodging for my horse?” then, remembering Tobold Hornblower’s concern, she added, “I know everything’s Hobbit-size, but I’d be satisfied with just a pallet, and Thilgiloth can stay in an outdoor corral.”

“Then there aren’t no problems,” the pretty Hobbit smiled, “Welcome to Bywater, madam. My name’s Petunia Cotton, I’m the owner of the Green Dragon, at your service.”

The owner? Nerwen readjusted her perception of the supposed age of this Hobbit female, remembering that Gandalf had told her they were rather more long-lived than Men but less than Dwarves. Petunia wasn’t certainly old, but not even so young as she had thought at first.

“I’m Nerwen the Green”, she introduced herself, “Thank you for your welcome.”

OOO

A couple of hours later, Nerwen had freshened up and changed her clothes. She hadn’t been able to take a proper bath, being the bathtubs small for her due to their being meant for Hobbits, but at least she had warm water, a pitcher and a basin at her disposal, so she had used a washcloth to clean her face and body, and then she had donned a green housedress in light cotton muslin. Since Gandalf assigned her the colour as an Istar, she had adopted it for all her travel clothes.

Petunia informed her that dinner would be at sunset in the common room, where she would keep a
In a rather concerned tone, she warned her that, again, everything was Hobbit-size – tables, chairs, dishes – but Nerwen, remembering her experience at *The Bold Rooster*, reassured her it would be fine.

When she got down in the hall, Nerwen crossed it and headed for the door to the common room, passing it and only stooping slightly. In the large room there were several Shire-folk, sitting at the tables or in front of the bar. Petunia beckoned her and Nerwen approached her, while the Hobbit lady slipped between two patrons carrying an empty tray.

“I’ll take you to your table,” she told her, leading the way. The Istar followed her to a corner of the room, where a table had been set for one.

“Please take a seat, dinner will be served shortly,” Petunia said, “We’ve got pork loin or roasted chicken, with mushrooms and raw seasonal vegetables: which do you prefer?”

“Chicken, thank you.”

“Fine. As for dessert, I can offer you a peach-jam tart or puff pastry rolls stuffed with cottage cheese and candied fruits.”

“I don’t know the latter,” Nerwen admitted, “I’d like to try them.”

“Sure!” Petunia lit up at the thought she could offer something new to try to such an obviously prestigious stranger, “As for drinks, we’ve got cider, beer, and red and white wine,” she went on, “All cool from the cellar.”

“Then cider, thanks.”

“Very good,” the Hobbit lady nodded, and with a quick nod she went away. Looking around, Nerwen noticed many eyes staring at her, more or less openly curious, exactly as it had been in Michel Delving; but most people, according to the slight shyness of this race, averted their faces as soon as they saw she was gazing at them.

But there was an unexpected exception: a middle-aged Hobbit, with a curly mop, hazelnut brown with some grey strands, well dressed in a dark green jacket, a yellow waistcoat and brown breeches. He came off the desk and crossed the room, clearly heading for her. When he arrived at two steps distance from her table, he addressed her with an elegant bow and introduced himself:

“Bilbo Baggins, at your service, madam.”

His distinguished look and impeccable manners struck Nerwen: the Hobbit she had met so far gave her the impression to be cordial but not very sophisticated, in other words, kind but not overly refined country people.

“Nerwen the Green, at yours,” she answered therefore along his lines.

Bilbo raised his eyebrows, surprised:

“… the Green? Like Gandalf the Grey?”

“Precisely, I’m a friend and colleague to him,” she confirmed, “You know Gandalf?”

“Last time I saw him, I was still a very young lad… It’s a long while now since he showed up these parts, so long I didn’t even remember his looks; but I remember well he’s very talented with fireworks: is he still in business, then?”
“Yes, sure.”

“Uh… I wonder: if he’s a Wizard, are you therefore a Sorceress?”

“More or less…” Nerwen nodded, keeping it vague: Gandalf, too, didn’t open up too much with the Hobbits and preferred presenting himself simply as an illusionist, very good at fireworks, or just something more, hence she decided to follow his example, “but I’m not as good as he is at fireworks,” she added, just in case: as a matter of fact, she didn’t even know how to light them, and should she try to mess around with them, she would probably cause a major disaster.

“I don’t want to sound intrusive, madam, but we don’t see many members of the Tall People here around…”

“They told me,” Nerwen smiled, amused by his obvious curiosity, “I’m just here on my way to Bree”, she explained, choosing to omit the intermediate step she was planning to take to Tom Bombadil’s land.

“I see”, Bilbo said, “So you’re staying just for the night…?”

“Exactly,” she confirmed, “even if I must admit that I’d like to be able and stop here longer: your Shire is a very beautiful country.”

Bilbo straightened his shoulders and puffed out his chest in an evidently proud attitude.

“Yes, you’re right,” he confirmed, not out of arrogance but out of true love for his land, “I think it can easily be compared to the much-praised Elven realms, which are described to be of a striking beauty.”

Even if Nerwen had an unachievable comparison, which was Valinor, she had to admit that the Shire, with its serene and luminous atmosphere, could truly hold a candle to Lindon, so far the only Elven realm she had visited in Middle-earth, excluding the ones of the now-sunken Beleriand.

“I think so, too,” she agreed therefore, smiling, “I’m about to dine: would you like to join me and keep me company?”, she asked impulsively this polite and nice Hobbit.

The invitation took Bilbo clearly by surprise, but he was very glad of it.

“With great pleasure!” he cried, coming nearer and taking the chair in front of her, “You’re really kind, madam.”

Noticing that Nerwen had a guest, Petunia Cotton approached their table.

“Are you dining now with Lady Nerwen, Mr Baggins?”, she enquired.

“Yes, she was so nice to invite this old curious Hobbit to dine with her,” Bilbo confirmed smiling.

“What can I fetch you, then?”

“The same the lady ordered, thank you, Petunia,” he answered, and the innkeeper took her leave; shortly after, she returned with a jug and two pewter goblets, which she placed on the table. Bilbo, the perfect gentlehobbit, poured the cider, and then raised his goblet in a toast:

“Elen síla lúmenn’ omentielvo,” he said. His accent sounded bizarre to Nerwen’s ear, but she appreciated his use of the Quenya language in toasting with her. She touched her glass to Bilbo’s.

“A star shines on the hour of our meeting,” she agreed, voicing the sentiment in Westron, “I didn’t
think a Hobbit would be interested in the ancient Elven tongue…”

“I am very fascinated by Elves and everything concerning them,” the Hobbit revealed in an undertone, almost as a secret, “A quite extravagant interest, my fellows here would say. To them, everything that isn’t Hobbit, is odd, if not even dangerous,” he added, in a conspiratorial way that made Nerwen laugh.

“I see,” she answered, but she thought this mistrust on the part of the Shire-Folk absurd, “And tell me, do you know also the tales and legends of the Elder Days?”

“For sure!” Bilbo answered proudly, not having the slightest idea that he was talking to someone who walked on the land of the now-lost Beleriand during the First Age of the world. “I know the tale of the theft of the Silmarilli perpetrated by Morgoth, which induced most of the Noldor to come back to Middle Earth in order to rescue them; the tale of the building of the great Elven exile realms in Beleriand – Nargothrond, Gondolin – and of their downfall; the tales of Túor, of Túrin, of Beren and Lúthien, of Eärendil and Elwing, until the War of Wrath that caused the crumbling and sinking of Beleriand…”

“Outstanding!” Nerwen cried, sincerely.

Bilbo felt proud of himself and went on enthusiastically:

“My favourite tale is surely the *Lay of Leithian*, which speaks of love and adventure, even if the ending is rather sad.”

Nerwen nodded; of course, she didn’t disclose to Bilbo that she had personally met the main protagonists of the tale, which had become a legend to many in Middle-Earth, and then slowly faded into myth with each passing millennium: Lúthien and Beren, Thingol and Melian, and even Morgoth. Not even the other Istari had met them all, not having visited Endorë before the Valar entrusted them with their mission.

“Yes, it has a bitter ending,” she agreed; in the end, the two lovers, who after so much struggling had finally managed to get married, could live together just a little more than thirty years, “but at least their descendents still lives in Middle-earth: Elrond of Rivendell is their great-grandson, is he not?”

“True, and they say his daughter looks very much like Lúthien. Did you ever see her?”

Bilbo took it for granted that Nerwen was walking around Middle-earth for a long time, at least as long as Gandalf, to whom she said to be colleague and friend. She thought it wasn’t important to correct his presumption.

“I had no occasion to meet her yet,” she answered therefore, “but I plan to meet Lord Elrond, in a near future, and so I’ll see her.”

She was surely very curious about Arwen and wanted to verify personally if she looked really so much alike Melian’s daughter.

When they finished dinner, Bilbo leaned against the back of his chair with a satisfied look:

“The food was excellent,” he mused, “and the company even better.”

“I agree,” Nerwen stated, having really enjoyed both equally.

Bilbo rummaged in the small bag he carried, hanging at his belt, and produced a long-stemmed
pipe.

“Being Gandalf a friend of yours,” he enquired, “maybe you know pipe-weed? He appreciates it very much, as far as I recall.”

“He told me, indeed, and he made me appreciate it, too,” Nerwen pointed at her pouch, “Here I’ve got a small provision of Old Toby which he gave me, as well as a pipe he made himself for me.”

“How nice! So how about having a good smoke together?”

“Very gladly…”

So it was that Nerwen the Green spent a very nice evening in conversation, sometimes in a learned manner, sometimes in a funny one, with Bilbo Baggins. The Istar had no idea she was facing a person whose actions, one year or some more on, would become renowned among Dwarves, Elves and Men, with deeds narrated in tales and songs – but not among Hobbits; on the contrary, here he would be stared at with a good deal of distrust because he let himself involved into an adventure, a word that, in the Hobbit vocabulary, was regarded as almost indecent; but then, no one is recognized as a prophet in his own land… But, as the minutes ticked away and became hours, she began to feel stronger and stronger the vivid sensation that this peculiar Hobbit was destined to something more than the easy life of a wealthy country squire. Her Second Sight didn’t focus on anything specific, but she began to share Gandalf’s opinion that in this race – or at least in some of its members – there was much more than what meets the eye.
Author’s corner:

I completely agree with Tolkien’s idea that History is often made by lesser persons – an idea you can find in The Hobbit and even more in The Lord of the Rings – because it really happens that ordinary people, overwhelmed by events, show a totally unexpected courage and change the course of History. In a way, you expect Thorin to be a hero because he is a prince and a warrior; you expect Gandalf to be a hero because he possesses a great mystic power; you expect Aragorn to be a hero because he is Isildur’s Heir; but who would expect that small, timid Hobbits – Bilbo, Frodo, Sam, even Merry and Pippin – could be able to play a decisive role in the big events…?

This is why I admire these characters. And this is the reason, too, I wrote this chapter, which has an end in itself and no importance at all to the overall development of the plot, at the point you could easily skip it completely; but I wanted to pay tribute to the Heroes Out Of Necessity in the person of Bilbo. Besides, I confess, I couldn’t resist the sympathy and charm of this gentlehobbit and I wanted to meet him at any cost! LOL

Thank you to all those who continue following this fan fiction! And again, special thanks to ColdOnePaul for his precious editing of this chapter!

Lady Angel
The following morning in the early hours, after a night of restful sleep, Nerwen resumed her journey along the Great East Road, heading for the Brandywine Bridge, almost 70 kilometres away; from there, she would take the road that, immediately after the Bridge, led southwards to Bucklebury and beyond, to the confluence of the Withywindle into the Brandywine, some 35 kilometres more on. She would need a couple of days, and then one more to go up the Withywindle to Tom Bombadil’s abode.

She spent the first night at Whitefurrows, in an inn very similar to The Green Dragon that boasted of having the best cider of the Shire, and indeed Nerwen found it excellent. The day after, again early in the morning, she continued her journey; a couple of hours later she crossed the large stony bridge on the Brandywine and immediately took to her right on the road to Bucklebury, crossing the gates – which were closed at night – marking the entrance to Buckland; this territory, even if located beyond the river, was still part of the Shire, which border in this area departed from the Brandywine to follow the Hedge, a high and thick, impenetrable range of shrubbery, beyond which was the fearsome Old Forest, a place haunted by malevolent spirits. This was indeed a vestige of the immense forests that, of which its dense and wide range had become lost in the mists of time, covered vast portions of Eriador, the land situated between the Misty Mountains and the sea; and who knows what peculiar creatures inhabited it. Tom Bombadil lived on the other side of the Old Forest, by the springs of the Withywindle, the river crossing and dividing it in two unequal parts; the Hobbits assiduously avoided drinking the water of the Withywindle, believing that it was poisonous or at least carried strange enchantments of sleep and oblivion; and they even avoided completely going upriver. Therefore, in order to draw no further attention and also not to alarm needlessly her kind hosts, Nerwen never mentioned her destination, and anyway she doubted the Shire-folk knew of Bombadil’s existence.
In the early afternoon, the Maia caught sight of a bird of prey flying high in the sky, circling above her and then going away. From the dimensions and shape, she thought it was some kind of hawk, but it was too far even for her sharp Ainurin eyes to establish exactly which species. Among all the birds, the birds of prey were her favourites, especially the hawks.

In the late afternoon, she glimpsed a second one, or maybe it was the same; this time she heard also its cry *kek-kek-kek*, from which she assumed it was a *cálë* hawk, a beautiful medium-sized species. She tried to send to it a greeting, but the bird slid through the wind on its wing, heading toward the Old Forest and flying away at great speed.

Nerwen stayed overnight in Standelf, a small village located at the end of the road coming from the Brandywine Bridge, here, too, welcomed with cordial curiosity; and the morning after she started again.

When she arrived at Hedge End, where the large shrub ended close to the riverbank of the Brandywine, Nerwen caught again sight of a hawk flying in the sky, and decided it couldn’t be a coincidence; but before she could call to the bird and ask about his persistence in following her, the bird of prey, maybe perceiving her curiosity, swiftly flew away, heading southwards.

“Did you see that hawk?” she asked Thilgiloth; the Chargeress snorted:

*Yeah, it’s the third time it comes, and I wonder what it may want from us*, she answered.

Perplexed, the Istar continued staring at the spot in the sky’s horizon where the bird had vanished, but it didn’t reappear; so she let it be and resumed her pace. When she went past Hedge End, she immediately found the confluence with the Withywindle and began to go upriver on its northern bank, with the wood on her left and the river on her right. Proceeding northwest, Nerwen noticed the trees were becoming increasingly taller and dark, old and gnarled, as the river narrowed. The August sun shone down hard on her shoulders and on the wide-brimmed hat she wore, which she had taken on following Gandalf’s example, even if it wasn’t as high and pointy as his old friend’s. It was very hot.

When midday arrived, Nerwen stopped Thilgiloth in the shadow of a tall birch tree with a double trunk and dismounted. Going down to the riverbank, she plunged one hand into the water, checking it with her power: she didn’t think it could truly be poisonous, but every legend or rumour has normally a real kernel of truth to be born. However, she found nothing.
“The water’s good,” she told Thilgiloth, “We can drink.”

The mare came near and lowered her head, drinking abundantly: the heat of this day was affecting her, too; Nerwen emptied her canteen and refilled it with fresh water, then she drank, discovering it had a slightly vegetal taste, quite pleasant. Then she went to sit under the shadow of the birch and ate her lunch of bread and cheese and an apple, while Thilgiloth grazed the tender grass on the riverbank.

There was an uncanny silence: no birds singing, no insects humming, no leaves rustling. Combined with the heat of this summer noon, Nerwen felt a pleasurable languor rising up, and she leaned more comfortably her back against the trunk of the birch, with the intention to close her eyes one minute to enjoy the quietness. Thilgiloth stopped grazing and, lowering her head, shut her eyes, too.

Nerwen felt like falling into sleep, and this caused her a sense of alarm: she wasn’t particularly weary, because in the last few days she didn’t ride for very long distances, besides she rested well in the cosy Hobbit inns, nor her Chargeress could be very tired, she was used to much harder performances. She fought the drowsiness, which in turn seemed to fight back to subdue her with a mellow voice, enticing her to rest, to let herself go, to sleep… sleep…

She thought she heard far away a worried kek-kek-kek.

Even more alarmed, now convinced she was in danger, Nerwen gathered all her extraordinary Ainurin willpower and imposed it with extreme determination: the spell attempting to enthrall her tried to resist, but then it split up in thousand pieces like a fragile crystal bubble. Nerwen sprang to her feet, furious, because she had finally identified the source from where the attack originated.

“Birch!” she cried harshly at the tree she had lain against, “How do you dare to try and imprison me in your bewitched cobweb? Don’t you know who I am?!”

The tree shuddered in a violent tremor that no windstorm could arise, much less in a completely windless air like now. Nerwen projected her special senses toward the birch; in the beginning, she perceived a great anger emanating from the tree, which immediately turned into incredulity. The tree stopped shaking and seemed to wilt on itself, pervaded by a sense of recognition and dread.

“Good, I see you recognised my nature,” Nerwen growled, fuming, hands on her hips, “You will never again try such a trick! And warn your equals about my presence in this dale: if they dare to
attack me, I’ll be ruthless with them as much as I’m loving toward the friendly olvar. You know what I’m capable of, don’t you?"

Another shiver passed through the birch, expressing all its dismay: it would never expect to stand face to face with one of the Ainur, and precisely of one who had power particularly on plants. What a big mistake it had made, to antagonize such a person! It bent its crown in a sign of acknowledgment and submission; but its heart, even if trembling in terror, stayed black in wickedness. Such was its nature, and such it would stay until the End of Days.

Nerwen was well aware of this; she picked up her saddlebag and drew back several steps, without turning her back to the tree: she had forced it to subdue to her, and she was sure it wouldn’t try and mesmerize her again in a hex or disobey her command to warn the other hostile trees in the Withywindle Dale; but it would use branches and roots to wrap and imprison her, forcing her to destroy it in order to free herself, and even if it was a vicious being, doing so would repel her.

Thilgiloth, freed of the birch’s spell at the same moment as her two-legged friend, had witnessed motionless the clash of wills; now she drew near to Nerwen, snorting quietly to make her aware she was right behind her. Not taking her eyes off of the tree, the Istar threw the saddlebag on her shoulder and got in the saddle; the Chargeress didn’t need any encouragement and started to trot along the riverbank, withdrawing quickly from the maleficent tree.

*What was that, in Kementári’s name?!*, Thilgiloth asked Nerwen, shocked. Only a very few things could frighten the Chargeress, but among them there were for sure those she didn’t know and appeared dangerous, to herself and those she loved, like that birch.

“*A being who was corrupted by the Dark Power in ancient times,*,” the Maia answered, thoughtfully, “or more probably, given its apparent age, a descendant of it. Unfortunately Morgoth’s black influence contaminated many things, in the world: olvar, kelvar, two-legged creatures at all levels… even one of my own kin”, she concluded bitterly. She had known personally Mairon, a brilliant and powerful Maia, follower of Aulë, who had become ensnared by Melkor and became his disciple, and finally took his place after his fall at the end of the First Age; then he took the name of Sauron.

Thinking she had now reached a safe distance, Thilgiloth slowed down her pace.

*Now her companions will stay out of our way, after your warning*, she commented, pleased.

“You can be sure of it,” Nerwen confirmed, stretching her lips in a ferocious sneer, “I put into that creature so much dread to last one year and one day”; then she raised her gaze and observed the sky, “*Did you, too, hear the call of the cále hawk, earlier?*”

*Actually, no*, the mare answered. No bird was in sight, thus the Aini concluded she had maybe imagined it.

They rode on undisturbed for some hours; Nerwen extended her perceptions and felt a feeling of rancour surrounding them, coming from the trees they were passing; but a strong fright was keeping the anger at bay. Nothing, in this dale, would ever dare to attack again her or Thilgiloth.

At about mid-afternoon they passed near an old willow tree, from which radiated a particularly strong sense of hostility, but which didn’t dare attempt any action against them, evidently warned by the birch. Nerwen would never learn it, but a good number of years later, that same old willow would try a trick similar to the birch’s on a group of four Hobbits, in charge of a very difficult and delicate mission.
It was about dusk when Nerwen arrived in sight of a mound; a large house in grey stone was built on top of it, covered by a thatched roof; from the chimney raised a wisp of smoke. A well-defined path wound up the shallow hillside.

Drawing nearer, they saw that on the threshold of the green painted door there was a male shape, not very tall and rather plump, wearing bright coloured clothes: sky-blue jacket, pea-green breeches and yellow boots; on the high hat he sported a blue feather.

As he saw horse and rider coming near, the bizarre being moved, dancing forward, and when he was close enough, Nerwen could see his face, red and wrinkled, adorned with a long hazel-brown beard; vivacious sky-blue eyes stared back at her, smiling.

“Welcome, thousand times welcome!” he cried, taking off his hat and bowing low, “Tom Bombadil is glad to welcome you in his land and house!”

Nerwen dismounted and reciprocated the bow:

“Nerwen the Green and Thilgiloth are glad to meet you, Tom”, she answered, borrowing his unusual way to express himself in the third person, “Am I wrong, or you were expecting us?”

Tom put on his hat again and opened his arms:

“Many eyes watch my land and saw you coming.”

Nerwen raised her eyebrows in surprise:

“Among these eyes, are there also those of a cále hawk?”, she asked. Bombadil nodded:

“My good friend Calad”, he answered, “Did you see her?”

“Yes, and I think she even tried to warn us of a birch which tried to enthrall us.”

“Ha, Old Woman Birch!” Bombadil shouted, begrudged, “Along with Old Man Willow, she’s the creature who causes more troubles, here in the Withywindle Dale. I’ll have to reprimand her!”

“That won’t be necessary,” Nerwen calmed him down, “I did it myself, and at least for one year
and one day she won’t dare to attack anybody, not even a rabbit.”

“Oh, well done!” Bombadil said approvingly, leaping joyfully, already oblivious to his irritation, “Serves her right!” Then he bowed again, “But please, both of you, come. Having realised what your nature is, I am prepared to receive you in my humble dwelling with all the honours you deserve. My sweet lady Goldberry is cooking an exquisite dinner, and I prepared my best fodder and a cosy shelter for Thilgiloth.”

They went first thing to the stables, where a large pony that Bombadil introduced as Fatty Lumpkin, his mount, warmly greeted the Chargeress. Thilgiloth was unsaddled and curried, then left to eat with Fatty Lumpkin and they went to the house. During the short trail, Bombadil began singing:

”Hey! Come bella dol! Arrived have our friends!

Sorceress and Chargeress! We are all happy now!

Let’s have fun and sing all together!”

And from the inside there came a clear female voice, young and at the same time ancient as Spring, flowing like the waters of the Withywindle, which source gushed just a few meters away from the house:

Let’s have fun and sing all together

About sun, stars, moon, mist, rain and hope,

Light on the bud, dew on the plains,

Brambles on the shady pond, lily on the shivering waters!

Old Tom Bombadil and the River-woman’s Daughter!”

They entered, and presently came a woman with long blond hair, wearing a green gown, looking like a girl, but an aura of wisdom and dignity surrounded her as only a great number of years can give. Similar in this was she to an Elven queen who lived many centuries, but in her bright eyes there wasn’t the gravity of those who have seen too much winters to count them; instead there were joy and light-heartedness similar to those shining in Bombadil’s clear blue irises. Thanks to her Second Sight, Nerwen saw beyond and realised that he was the Forest, and she the River, ancient as the world, but always renewed and young. She bowed slightly to greet and pay homage to them.

But Goldberry ran to her and took her hands:

“No, please don’t bow to us, you who come from the Undying Lands! We are the ones who bow to you…”

She made a deep curtsy, and Bombadil bowed low. This time it was Nerwen the one protesting:
“For the mission I accepted to accomplish, my status this side of Belegaer means little. Here I am Nerwen the Green, an Istar like your friend Gandalf, nothing more and nothing less. Besides, I’m your guest, and it’s simple politeness to greet my hosts.”

Hence, Goldberry stood upright smiling and said:

“You are welcome in our house, Nerwen. Come, I take you to the room we got ready for you.”

She went ahead through the room, opened a door and went on along a corridor, at the end of which they arrived to a room with one of the ceilings slanting to one side; the stonewalls were entirely clad in green wickers and yellow curtains, and the tile floor was covered with small carpets made of woven canes. In the middle of the northern wall stood a bed with snow-white sheets, and on the wall at its side was a small table with a large jug, a basin, a mirror, towels and soaps.

“Dinner will be ready soon,” Goldberry told her, “Freshen up and change into comfortable clothes.”

Nerwen gladly did as she had been told to, shaking off the long day on horseback; she took from her meagre luggage her home dress and donned the soft slippers she discovered beside the bed, and lastly she untied her braided hair and brushed it. Finally ready, she headed for the main room of the mansion, where meanwhile her hosts had set the table.

“Well, very well!” Bombadil rejoiced, glancing at her, “Here’s our guest! Come and sit with us at our table! Cream and honey, bread and butter, and cheese, herbs and berries to satiate our hunger; and to calm down our thirst, sweet wine and cold beer!”

They ate and drank, and Bombadil entertained the ladies with many a song and rhyme interposed with a remarkable quantity of *dong dillo* and *bella dol* as a completely personal refrain. When they were finished, he and Goldberry quickly cleared the table, and then they sat down on the comfortable armchairs in front of the hearth, where in spite of the summer season a small fire was burning, not to warm up the room, but for the glee the flames rise in the spirits.

“Tell me, my lady,” Bombadil began, “what did you come looking for, in Tom’s house?”

“Information,” Nerwen answered straightforward, “My mission is finding the Ents, but it seems they’ve vanished from Middle-earth for many centuries now and nobody knows where they’ve gone. Maybe you know where I can find them?”

Bombadil became thoughtful, and his reddish, wrinkled face lost some of the perennial jovial expression characterizing it, while his bright eyes dimmed.

“Truly much time has passed since the last time I saw an Ent,” he said slowly, “Here in the Old Forest live some corrupted descendants of that race, like the Birch Woman or the Willow Man, but of the true Ents I don’t hear for centuries … *Ent the earthborn, old as mountains,*” he quoted an ancient rhyme describing the living beings of Arda, “After all, for many a century now I retired to this small portion of land, of which I defined borders I have no intention to cross. Here I am Master, and the rest of the world is not my concern.”

Nerwen didn’t approve of this point of view, which she considered restrictive; but Iarwain Ben-adar, the Oldest and Fatherless, was who he was, and she couldn’t change his nature, no more than she could change the nature of fire or water.

The thought of water made her think of Tom’s spouse, who was following silently their exchange, sitting next to them.
“Goldberry, did the river ever spoke to you about the Ents?” she asked therefore. Goldberry shook her head:

“No, the Withywindle don’t know anything about them, nor the Brandywine with which it joins and which flows to the Great Sea. From here to the shores of Belegaer, there is no trace of the Ents.”

Nerwen nodded; she was disappointed, but she didn’t expect to solve the mystery of the disappearance of the Ents on the first try.

“Thank you anyway,” she said therefore, “I’ll go on my search walking the roads of Middle-earth: sooner or later, someone will be able to provide me news.”

“This, I don’t doubt!” Bombadil cried, suddenly finding again his usual good spirits, “I think the High Elves will be more helpful than us: Lord Elrond of Imladris has a reputation of great knowledge, and so has Lady Galadriel of Lothlórien. And then of your order there’s Radagast the Brown, who could know something about the Ents.”

Again, Nerwen nodded: she, too, had thought about asking Aiwendil, who like her was a follower of Yavanna; but unlike her, he was more interested in the kelvar, especially birds, rather than in the olvar. She knew from Gandalf that he lived in a place called Rhosgobel, on the borders of Mirkwood.

“Thank you again, my friends,” she repeated, feeling suddenly sleepy; but it was a very different feeling from what she had felt that day from the Old Birch Woman’s spell, completely natural, even if she wasn’t yet used to it: in Aman, as an Aini she wouldn’t feel tiredness, but Yavanna had warned her that in Ennor things would be different; she yawned.

“Forgive me, but the hour’s late by now and I need rest,” she declared. Bombadil jumped up, mortified:

“Tom, Tom, how could you forget that your guest comes from a long day on horseback?! My sweet lady Goldberry, light a candle and take Nerwen to her room, please.”

Goldberry stood up and took from the shelf of the fireplace a silver candlestick with a white candle, which she lighted at the fire; then she went ahead Nerwen along the hallway to her room, where she lighted another candle.

“Sleep well, my lady,” she said, “Tomorrow wake up at whatever time pleases you and we’ll break our fast together.”

“Thank you, Goldberry,” the Istar answered, hiding another yawn behind her open hand, “Good night.”

Author’s corner:

Tom Bombadil is, using Tolkien’s words, a mystery. Maybe not even the Professor knew exactly who and what this character is; that Tom may be the Forest (the Trees) and Goldberry the River (the Water) is only an interpretation of the scholars who study the Professor’s work, not an
explanation of his about their true nature.

This mystery fascinated me since forever and so, like Tolkien in The Lord of the Rings, I inserted it in my modest fan fiction; of course, with all the humbleness of an admirer in front of a masterpiece. Besides, it was rightful to think that maybe, because of his nature (the Forest) and his age, Tom could know where the Ents were, and therefore Nerwen needed to meet him; but it would be obviously too easy to solve it this way, not to mention that, in this case, Nerwen’s adventure would end immediately, while I have many more events in store for her...

Best thanks to ColdOnePaul for his precious editing work!

Lady Angel
The Sun had come up on another summer day when Nerwen got off bed, early bird as usual. As she arrived in the dining room, she found the table already set with milk, butter, honey, several fruit jams, and fragrant bread. A moment later, on the kitchen door appeared Goldberry, holding a bowl full of peaches and apricots.

“Good morning, good morning!” she greeted her smiling, “Tom was in the orchard,” she added, showing her the bowl before putting it on the table.

“A fruit just plucked from the tree is the most exquisite,” Nerwen said, returning Goldberry’s smile; she took a peach and bit into it: it was very sweet and juicy, and the Aini half-closed her eyes while savouring its taste, “Delicious,” she said. Goldberry picked an apricot, then she signalled Nerwen to take a seat. Shortly afterwards Tom joined them, carrying a small basket of berries: wood strawberries, blackberries, blueberries and blackcurrants.

They had a rich breakfast, chitchatting pleasantly.

“From here you can get to Bree before the sun sets,” Bombadil told her, buttering generously a large slice of bread, “but my lady Goldberry and I hope you’d stay today as our guest, in order to rest before the long journeys awaiting you in the future. What do you say?”

“Thank you, I’m honoured to accept,” Nerwen answered, well aware that Tom was right: as far as Bree, it would be easy, but from there to Rivendell there were over five-hundred kilometres; not pushing the pace, she could travel the distance in ten or twelve days, but the inconvenience would be that, during all the way to there, she would find only a single inn, about one day beyond Bree, and then nothing else. She wasn’t afraid of possible dangers in travelling alone – not counting Thilgiloth – because she was able to defend herself very well, but she wasn’t used to sleeping in the
open for so many nights in a row. Well, there was nothing she could do to change this, therefore she just had to adjust.

She spent the day in Tom Bombadil’s and Goldberry’s company, the Forest and the River, and she enjoyed the peace and serenity of this secluded corner of Middle-earth.

It was about halfway in the afternoon and she was walking with her hosts along the bank of the young Withywindle, when they heard in the distance a shrill cry, sounding like kek-kek-kek; Nerwen raised abruptly her gaze and, in the cloudless sky, she saw a black spot approaching swiftly from the north-west, and it turned out to be a cále hawk.

“Oh, here’s our friend Calad!” Bombadil cried, taking off his hat and waving his arm in a greeting. The she-hawk made a large circle above them, turning elegantly on her right wing and spiralling down, until she landed on a boulder near the bank. Her fierce gaze, sparkling with intelligence, glided over the bystanders, and finally rested on Nerwen.

Greetings, Lady of the Green, the Istar heard her ethereal voice.

“Greetings to you, Calad,” she replied, using the name she had heard from Bombadil, “You know me, I see.”

Goldberry and Bombadil stared at her, perplexed, because they were hearing only one side of the conversation, but stayed silent, waiting to learn more.

Calad opened slightly her wings in a gesture that meant agreement.

So it is, she admitted, Many creatures speak of you, since you arrived from over the Great Sea. I’m here to offer you my help: I can be your eyes from above wherever you go.
“Thank you!” Nerwen cried, pleasantly surprised: again, Yavanna’s assurance regarding the alliance and protection she would be offered by olvar and kelvar of Middle-earth was bearing out to be true, “But why do you want to help me?”

Strange voices cross the wind, Calad answered, Eerie voices about the awakening of an ancient evil, far from here, but never far enough to be safe. Your coming from across Belegaer right now cannot be a coincidence… am I right?

As usual, the perspicacity of the kelvar, or at least of some of them, was extraordinary.

“You’re right,” Nerwen confirmed therefore, “However, you still have not told me what makes you willing to help me.”

I want to fight this evil, the hawk answered simply, but with the typical fierceness of her species.

Nerwen nodded.

“I see,” she said slowly, “But you must know that my mission could take me to places very far from your land, savage and inhospitable places. Are you really sure you want to come with me?”

I am, Calad asserted, opening her wings again, this time wider to emphasise her point.

“You could endanger your life,” the Istar insisted, “You could die.”

She wanted no misunderstandings in this respect; she herself and Thilgiloth, being creatures of the Undying Lands, didn’t run this risk, but anybody else in Middle-earth who would join their mission instead would face this reality, and she wanted the bird of prey to be well aware.

I understand this, Calad stated, I won’t say it doesn’t bother or frighten me, because it wouldn’t be the truth; nevertheless, I want to fight.

Nerwen looked at the hawk with great respect; because of her nature, she respected deeply any living creature, animal or vegetal, whatever its intelligence and self-consciousness level might be. But only a few could gain her admiration like Calad had just done.

“In this case, I accept your offer to help me,” she said solemnly, “Know that I don’t wish you to commit to me with any kind of promise or vow: you’ll follow me until your heart will feel you can bear it. If, in the very moment you feel it’s too much for you, you’ll be free to take your leave and go back home. Are we clear with this?”

The bird of prey opened completely her wings, flapping them slowly: the sign of the utmost complete consent.

So be it, she said with the same solemnity as the Aini had.

Nerwen turned now to Tom and Goldberry, who had been able to follow only half of the exchange.

“Calad wishes to help me in my mission,” she explained, even if they surely had already guessed, “I made it clear what risks she’ll face, but she insisted, and therefore I accepted her offer.”

“Well done!” Bombadil cried, “Calad is a good friend to Tom and Goldberry, loyal and brave: she’ll be a good friend to you, too, Tom is sure of it!”

“Come, let’s go back home,” Goldberry invited them, “so Calad and Thilgiloth will get to know each other.”
“Good idea,” Nerwen approved: it was better if the two animals became familiar with each other as soon as possible, having to journey together. They wouldn’t be able to communicate directly between them, but they would do it through her. However, out of experience the Maia knew that, in time, they would develop a certain degree of communication based on attitudes, postures and callings: Silmelotë hadn’t been the only *kelvar* living with her in her gardens in Valinor, and she saw it happen a sufficient number of times to know it.

They went back to Bombadil and Goldberry’s mansion, with Calad soaring above their heads. Thilgiloth and Fatty Lumpkin had gone strolling in the fields beyond the hill where the house stood, and weren’t in sight; but Nerwen’s modulated whistle was enough, and shortly afterwards the Chargeress arrived galloping, followed much more slowly by Tom’s stout pony. Calad perched on the white fence marking the edges of Goldberry’s vegetable garden.

*Well, look who’s there,* Thilgiloth said, recognising the hawk she had caught sight of in the past days.

“Thilgiloth, this is Calad, a friend of Tom and Goldberry, and now of us, too,” Nerwen introduced her, “She’ll escort us in our journey,” she turned now to the bird of prey, “Calad, this is my mount, Thilgiloth; she, too, comes from beyond the Great Sea.”

*I realised already she isn’t just any horse,* Calad declared, *Not even the mearas of Rohan are so splendid,* she turned directly to the Chargeress, *Greetings, Thilgiloth.*

“Calad greets you,” Nerwen said, “and expresses her admiration.”

*Greetings to you, Calad,* the quadruped replied, *And thank you. You, too, are a magnificent specimen.*

“Calad returns greeting and admiration,” the Aini said; the she-hawk sent out a satisfied feeling, then she looked to the right and suddenly took off, and then nose-dived for about ten metres and sprang up in the air again, with a large rat in her claws.

*Sorry, I haven’ eaten a thing since yesterday and I’m hungry,* she explained, coming back to them and perching once more on the fence, but slightly farther than before.

“We’ll leave you alone to your meal then,” Nerwen concluded, understanding.

“And it’s time for a snack for us, too!” Goldberry laughed, taking the hint, “Blackberry juice with honey cookies!”

They got to a pergola shadowed by a vine full of leaves and unripe grapes, under which stood sofas in delicately wrought iron and stuffed with plenty of cushions, and a wooden table with a central stem, again in iron, wrought in the shape of a tree trunk. The hosts made their guest sit down, then went and took all what was needed: the blonde River-woman’s Daughter came back with a tin box filled with cookies in the most various shapes – mainly leaves and flowers, but also simple geometric shapes – and some small dishes, while the red-faced Tom arrived with three goblets and a jug of blackberry juice, cool from the cellar. They sat with Nerwen around the table and so they had their snack, nattering cheerfully, reserving more grave thoughts for another day.
Author’s corner:

I adore birds of prey, especially hawks; so one of them had absolutely to be among Nerwen’s allies. She won’t be the only one, even if most will be just occasional allies, who will intervene in case of need to support and defend Yavanna’s emissary.

I hope you’re enjoying reading my fan fiction as much as I’m enjoying writing it! If so, please let me know, I’ll appreciate it greatly. Thank you!

Special thanks to ColdOnePaul for his patient editing!

Lady Angel
Chapter XI: At the Prancing Pony

As usual, Nerwen got up early; after a delicious and plentiful breakfast with Tom and Goldberry, she took her leave, accompanied by their blessings, and after mounting Thilgiloth, she headed northward, with Calad flying high above their heads.

Following Tom’s directions, Nerwen kept the Old Forest at her left, skirting it at a safe distance, while on her right side she had the mounds of the Barrow-downs.

This was an ancient land, a remainder of a kingdom of Men vanished innumerable years ago, where tombs had been built of past kings who thought themselves so great as to be remembered throughout eternity, and who instead had been forsaken in the ruthless and relentless flowing of Time. It was believed that the wights of these ancient kings haunted the Barrow-downs, but if that was the case, Nerwen didn’t fear them for sure.

When they arrived at the northern end of the Old Forest, the Istar and her two kelvar friends stopped for lunch and an hour’s rest, then they resumed the journey – terrestrial and airborne – northeast to get to the Great East Road. Finally, as evening drew near, they came to Bree; the town was located at the foot of a hill, rising exactly at the crossing of the Great East Road with the Old South Road, another important track that, from the fallen city of Fornost in the north, arrived far in the south to Tharbad, and then went on through Dunland to the Gap of Rohan and to the Fords of Isen, a road now scarcely travelled and heavily covered in grass, which gave reason fo it being called Greenway.

Before arriving to the West Gate of Bree, Nerwen halted and called Calad telepathically:

*My friend, maybe you’d feel uncomfortable in town: would you rather stay and wait for us outside it?*
I don’t know, the answer came, filled with uncertainty, To be honest, I have never tried to enter a town. Do you think it dangerous for me?

It could: some individual with few scruples could think about capturing you for taming…

Better dead than a prisoner! Calad cried indignantly. Nerwen sent her a feeling of comfort and protection:

Don’t worry, if you stay next to me, nobody will dare even to think about it; but feel free to decide on your own if you wish to venture in town or not. I don’t want to force you in any way.

Calad seemed to think it over.

I’m curious, she confessed finally, and I trust you: I’ll come to town.

Fine, then, Nerwen approved, Better we show up together: I have no falconry glove, but I can use my cloak.

She rummaged in her saddlebags and took out a light summer cape, the colour of moss; she wrapped her left forearm in it and then held it out.

Come, perch here, she invited the bird of prey. Calad came down, radiating some hesitancy: it was clear this was a new experience for her. Lightly, she laid her feet on the offered arm, closing carefully her razor sharp talons around Nerwen’s wrist, protected by the fabric of her cloak.

Hold on tight, if you feel uneasy, Nerwen exhorted her, then signalled to Thilgiloth she could go on, and the Chargeress started to pace; the gate was open – the Men of Bree closed it only by night – nor was there any guard to stop those entering town, which proved this was a peaceful and friendly place.

Following Gandalf’s directions, the Istar proceeded along the main street, actually the Great East Road; where it sharply bent southwards, ending up exiting the town through the South Gate, and here stood the inn that had been recommended to her, The Prancing Pony. It was a huge building with two wings going backwards from the street, forming an inner courtyard accessible through an arc in the main façade. A large wooden sign, with a small white prancing horse painted on it, hung over the street, next to the entrance door under the arch.
Nerwen got off her horse and gave the bridles to the groom who had promptly arrived, a young Man with red hair; the Chargeress showed some sign of nervousness: she still hadn’t completely overcome her natural mistrust toward the strangers, but she had begun to control herself, at least with those Nerwen could trust. The Aini sent her anyway a calming thought, but she nonetheless instructed the young groom to treat her with the utmost care. Then she placed Calad on the saddle and told her silently not to fly off Thilgiloth until she returned for her.

There was no one behind the desk in the hall, but a tiny brass bell was placed in plain view on the top; a note with ring me written on it was stuck by a corner under its rim, in the case someone wouldn’t understand its purpose. Nerwen shook it vigorously; she almost hadn’t set it back again, and a panting man arrived, tall and chubby, with a tawny great beard and hair and grey eyes.

“Here I am!” he cried in a jovial tone, “Goldwheat Butterbur, at your service, lady.”

“Hullo, Mr Butterbur,” the Aini greeted him, taking a sudden fancy to him, “I’m Nerwen the Green, and my old friend Gandalf the Grey recommended your inn.”

“Old good Gandalf!” the landlord laughed, “It’s about three generations of Butterbur – no, wait, with me, it makes four! – that the Grey Pilgrim passes here now and then, never forgetting to stop at the Pony. It’s an honour, Lady Nerwen. Do you wish only to dine, or to sleep, too?”

“To sleep, too,” she confirmed, “and also a nice bath, if possible.”

“I’ve got some rooms with a private bath,” Butterbur said, “They are more expensive than the others, but service is included. Besides, they’re large enough to allow you to eat in them, if you have no fancy to come in the common room.”

“Fine,” Nerwen accepted; she hadn’t had a proper bath since she left Círdan’s house, “And I need also a shelter for my mount; also I carry a hawk with me.”

“If it’s well trained and doesn’t soil around, you can keep it in your room,” the landlord said, “but I have no perch.”

“That’s fine, I’ll wrap the back of a chair in a cloth and have her perch there.”

“Very well. I’ll get someone to take you to your room, then.”

Butterbur turned toward a shelf and took a bell, bigger than the one placed on the desk; he shook it forcefully and rather long, and some moments later a boy arrived, a lanky lad with a curly mop the same colour of the landlord’s.

“Go and call immediately your sister Mina,” Butterbur instructed him, “then run for the lady’s luggage and carry it to room number 12.”

“Yes sir!” the lad cried, vanishing in no time. Butterbur smiled in his beard:

“My son Amaranth,” he revealed to Nerwen, “Quick as a pixie, and also very clever. Like his sisters Jasmine and Rosie. They all took after my wife Violet, fortunately,” he laughed uproariously to make it clear it was a joke, “Ah, here you are, Mina… Take Lady Nerwen to room number 12 and then help her with her bath.”

The lass, some 4 or 5 years older than Amaranth, was a brunette, unlike her father, but possessed his same grey eyes; she smiled at Nerwen and addressed her a slight curtsy.
“Mina, at your service, lady,” she introduced herself, “Please follow me.”

“Wait, let me go get my hawk. Oh, in this regard… where can I get a falconry glove?”

“There’s Bob Lichen, the leather-goods manufacturer,” Butterbur answered, “He’s not far from here. Tomorrow morning I’ll give you directions.”

Nerwen thanked him, then she stepped out the door of the inn and headed for the courtyard, where meanwhile Thilgiloth’s bridle had been tied to the fence in front of the stables; Calad was still perched on Nerwen’s saddle. The bags were no longer there, as Amaranth had picked them up.

“A magnificent specimen, lady,” the redheaded groom said in an admiring tone, coming out from the nearest box, “Never seen such a shining coat.”

Thilgiloth snorted, flattered.

“Thank you,” Nerwen answered the youngster. Vain horse, she spoke in a mental undertone to the Chargeress, amused; Thilgiloth snorted again, louder, sharing her friend’s amusement.

The Maia wrapped again her forearm in her summer cloak and had Calad perch on it. Then she gave a silver coin to the groom:

“A thorough currying and then the best oat you have,” she recommended. The youth examined the coin and his eyes widened: it was a positively generous tip.

“I’ll see to it, my lady,” he assured her, beginning to take off the Chargeress’ harness already.

“Relax, you’re in good hands,” Nerwen reassured Thilgiloth.

Yeah, I think so, too, the horse replied, I like him, he has gentle manners.

Nerwen got back into the inn with Calad on her arm, then followed Mina upstairs. The room, as Butterbur had stated beforehand, was large and furnished with old but well-kept furniture; a wide canopy bed, with two nightstands at its sides, dominated it, leaning against the wall opposite to the door, with a chest at its foot, where her saddlebags had been placed; furthermore, there were a dresser, a desk, two well-stuffed and apparently very comfortable armchairs placed in front of the fireplace, and a small table of polished wood with two massive chairs.

Nerwen was about to put down Calad on the back of a chair, when she perceived that the hawk was sending out a feeling of uneasiness.

My friend, is there something wrong? she asked mentally.

I think I don’t like to be indoors, Calad answered, apologetically: after all, it was her who had asked to come into the dwelling of the two-legged beings; but Nerwen understood perfectly her reasons: one cannot expect a wild animal, used to the freedom of an unlimited space, to feel comfortable inside a building.

No problem, don’t worry, she therefore answered; the room was provided with a terrace looking over the courtyard, and Nerwen went there, placing Calad on the balustrade. The bird of prey opened shortly her wings, as to feel the free air, then she exuded a feeling of satisfaction at the change of venue for her perch.

Mina had followed her guest’s movements; returning into the room, Nerwen noticed her interrogatory expression.
“Calad doesn’t like enclosed spaces,” she explained, “Far better if she stays outside.”

“But won’t she fly away?” the girl objected, perplexed, “I see she has no jesses to tie her…”

“Actually, I don’t use these things,” Nerwen answered, “Calad stays with me out of friendship, and it’s only because of friendship that she comes back to me each time she flies, that’s the reason I don’t need to tie her to a perch.”

“I see,” Mina said, not less perplexed as before but favourably struck, “A very interesting concept…,” she stopped mid-sentence, “Forgive me, lady, I’m forgetting myself: here’s the bathroom,” she opened a door to the right of the entrance, showing a room with floor and walls covered in white, green and blue majolica tiles and equipped with a large copper bathtub with supportive pins shaped like lion paws.

“I fetch you some towels,” the girl said, “We have lavender, rose, calendula and honeysuckle-scented soaps: which one do you prefer?”

“Calendula,” Nerwen chose, thinking the fresh fragrance of that yellow flower very apt to the summer heat, “Can you prepare a bath for me before dinner?”

“Sure, we have hot water in the kitchen anytime, and by this hot weather there’s no need of much… unless you wish otherwise, of course.”

“No, no, a lukewarm bath with this temperature is just perfect…”

**Author’s corner:**

*Holy Valar, I didn’t think that arriving at the Prancing Pony – like Frodo with his three companions will do 78 years from now – would thrill me so much! I imagined Goldwheat Butterbur as Barliman’s grandfather, very similar in his chubby looks, but less distracted LOL*

*Short transition chapter: I promise that the next will be more significant both in length and in substance. Indeed, a meeting taking a totally unexpected turn expects Nerwen, and will confront her – for the first time full force – with the influence the quality of Middle-earth exerts on her…*

*Many thanks to the priceless ColdOnePaul for his careful editing!*

*Lady Angel*
Chapter XII: Blue Eyes

The following day, after a relaxing bath, a delicious dinner in the common room and a peaceful sleep in a soft bed, Nerwen showed up at the desk in the hall, looking for Butterbur. Called by the ringing of the bell, the landlord arrived, out of breath as he seemed to be constantly.

“Good morning, lady, do you wish directions to go to Master Lichen, the leather manufacturer?” he asked, reminding her request of the night before.

“Exactly. Besides, I’m looking for the Dwarf smith, Thorin: do you know him?”

“Sure! Master Thorin is the best smith in Bree-land, both for weapons and for furnishings…”

The landlord explained then where Bob Lichen lived, and where Thorin’s forge was located. With his ample directions, Nerwen found immediately Lichen’s workshop, where she ordered a falconry glove; the artisan took her measures and told her he could manufacture it by nightfall, and if she wanted it, he could deliver it where she was staying; Nerwen gave him therefore the name of the Prancing Pony and gave him a generous down payment.

At this point, she headed to Thorin’s smithy, located in a side road on the southern quarter of Bree. Like for the leather manufacturer, Butterbur had given very clear directions, so she had no trouble in finding it.

From the forge came a perfectly regular metallic beat. Nerwen didn’t want to enter the workshop without permission and therefore called in a loud voice:

“Hey there, I’m looking for Master Thorin!”

The beat didn’t cease.
“I’m coming!” a baritone voice arrived from the inside. A few other beats, then a hissing sound told the Istar that the piece in the works had been immersed in cold water. A moment later, on the threshold of the workshop appeared a Dwarf, unusually tall for his race, with a long, wavy black mane, streaked with some white locks; an aquiline nose dominated a noble face, surrounded by a short and well-trimmed beard; but it were his eyes – of an intense bright blue – that struck Nerwen with the force of a maul, piercing her through and through. For a moment, she felt breathless.

“Greetings,” the Dwarf said, “I’m Thorin.”

“Greetings to you, Master Thorin,” she answered, forcing herself to breathe again, “My name’s Nerwen, and I bring you a message from our mutual friend Gandalf the Grey.”

“Really?” Thorin asked, not hiding his surprise, “Gandalf’s friends are my friends: please, come in.”

He stepped back from the threshold and Nerwen moved to follow him inside the workshop; just indoors, Thorin turned to the right and walked through another door, entering the house. She followed him closely and found herself in a clean and well-lit kitchen, which they crossed heading for the next room, a dining room, and finally in a parlour. The house, furnished in a simple style, looked very well kept, being a bachelor’s abode. In a corner, Nerwen noticed a small and elegant harp in golden-painted wood.

“Please sit down,” Thorin pointed to a well-stuffed armchair, “Can I get you cider, or wine?”

Reminding the Dwarves’ passion for another drink, Nerwen smiled and asked:

“May I have an ale?”

“Sure!” Thorin replied, disappearing quickly in the kitchen; he came back shortly after with two ceramic tankard. He placed them on the small table next to Nerwen’s armchair and sat down on another armchair.

“To our friend Gandalf, then,” Thorin suggested, rising his mug.
“To Gandalf,” Nerwen answered; she took a sip, finding the light beer agreeably cold.

Placing his stein back on the table, Thorin stared at her with those extraordinary eyes which seemed to pierce right through her.

“So, what news does the old Wizard want to let me know?” he asked in a voice full of expectation.

“The moment has almost arrived, Thorin Oakenshield,” Nerwen recited by heart, “Gather the companions we spoke about and prepare yourselves to the fulfilment of the mission.”

The Dwarf froze for a moment, then he bent forward, placing elbows on knees and leaving his hands hanging in between, on his aristocratic face an almost incredulous expression.

“After all these years, the moment has finally arrived…,” he whispered. Then he was silent, engrossed in thought, and Nerwen waited quietly.

Several minutes later, Thorin straightened his back and gazed at her.

“Did he name a deadline?” he enquired, “Weeks, months?”

“No,” she answered, “The message was just the one I already delivered; he added only that he would contact you as soon as the exact moment to move will arrive, but he didn’t think it’d be before next spring.”

“I see,” Thorin whispered, with a sigh which told her that he would rather prefer to leave immediately toward whatever destination he and Gandalf had spoken about. For some more moments, the Dwarf took on a distant expression, as if being immersed in thoughts very far from the present time, then he came suddenly back to reality, “I am very grateful to you, Nerwen. How can I thank you?”

The Istar shrugged:

“No obligation exists between us,” she declared, using the formal expression in the Common Speech she learned at the Grey Havens, “In case, it exists between Gandalf and me,” she added on a lighter tone, chuckling, “as it was he who asked me this favour.”

All of a sudden, Nerwen realised her task here was over, and felt sorry, because it meant going away, although she would like to learn more about Thorin Oakenshield, this appealing Dwarf prince, dethroned and reduced to working as a common smith. Their gazes met again, and the blue fire in his eyes pierced her again.

“The truth is, that you do not know the importance this message you delivered has for me,” Thorin said, speaking slowly, “that’s why I feel I owe you. I’d like to buy you lunch… Where are you staying?”

Nerwen thought it was a good way to spend some more time with the attractive Dwarf.

“At The Prancing Pony,” she answered therefore, “Gandalf recommended it as the best inn in Bree.”

“And it is,” Thorin confirmed, nodding, “Violet Butterbur is the best cook in Bree-land: her mutton stew is renowned in the entire neighbourhood. If you allow me, later I’ll come there and we can have lunch together.”

“Gladly,” Nerwen affirmed, finishing her beer and standing up, “I’ll tell the landlord I’m expecting
“You can tell them it’s me,” Thorin said, stranding up in turn, “They know me well.”

He saw her out, this time letting her through the main entrance, and in taking his leave, he bowed to her as he would do to a great lady or a princess. Nerwen responded with a small curtsey, then she left and strode along the paved street. Thorin stayed on the threshold, staring at her, thoughtful.

Rarely had he met a woman who intrigued him, and none more than this friend of Gandalf’s. He and the Wizard knew each other for many years, but he never heard him mention her; however, this didn’t surprise him, because Gandalf didn’t speak much about himself or his plans, on the contrary, he often acted mysteriously and for obscure reasons. Yet Thorin trusted him completely, having had the opportunity to test his loyalty and honesty, qualities that had quickly overcome the customary mistrust the Dwarves feel toward anyone not of their race. Nerwen had in herself something that reminded him of Gandalf, and therefore – beyond the friendship she claimed sharing with the Wizard – he felt he could trust her as much as the old Istar. Her looks were those of a female of the race of Men, exactly as Gandalf was a male of the same race; but exactly like him, even in Nerwen Thorin perceived the existence of something more, even if he could not tell precisely what.

During all his life, the exiled heir to the throne of the forsaken Dwarven realm of Erebor had never felt attracted to females who weren’t of his own race; and even then, only rarely someone had been able to get him interested. This was because of the endemic scarceness of Dwarven females, which imposed a perennial sexual and sentimental austerity to the males of this race; but in case of fatal encounter, the most sober Dwarf could transform into a passionate and insatiable lover, with great delight of the Dwarven females or of the few women of the race of Men who a Dwarf had taken an interest in. This passion did not apply to female Elves, because of the great animosity the two races had for one another, which had been only occasionally mitigated through intense trade as had transpired between Erebor and the realm of Greenwood, or between the Dwarven realm of Moria and Eregion.

Never before Thorin felt attracted to someone who wasn’t a Dwarf female; but Nerwen had unexpectedly fascinated him, so much, he wanted to invite her for lunch just for the pleasure of increasing the time he could spend in her company. He shook his head, perplexed, trying to understand the reasons of his interest in Gandalf’s friend; but he had to give it up soon, because there are things reason cannot work out and one must therefore accept them as they are. Or refuse them, that is; however, Thorin had no intention of rejecting them.

He snapped out of his thoughts; observing the position of the sun in the sky, he thought he had a couple of hours before going to the inn and having lunch with Nerwen, and it was best if he stopped for now and went to clean himself up: he could not go for sure in his work clothes, stained with soot and in several places even perforated by the incandescent particles of the metals he wrought, nor with smoky-smelling beard and hair. Even if he never forgot his royal heritage nor his warrior vocation, he liked his trade and was proud of the works he created; nonetheless, he thought that, in the hope of raising in Nerwen an interest equal to his, he had to look at his best.

OOO

Even as Thorin pondered, Nerwen walked in the streets of Bree, heading for The Prancing Poly. Like the Dwarf’s thoughts were full of her, hers were full of him.
At the time of her visits to Doriath to see her sister Melian and her family, she met several Dwarves, or Naugrim as the Elves used to call them; she always thought they were steadfast, tough, valiant and proud, slow in forgetting the suffered wrongs or the received favours, exceptional friends or formidable enemies, lovers of the splendid items they manufactured – to the point to seem avaricious of material goods and not much inclined to spiritual matters – excellent artisans, and extraordinary warriors. Their best virtue was surely their loyalty, once they had granted it to someone, which wasn’t easy because of their characteristic mistrust; and their worst flaw was their stubbornness, which often ruined them. Nerwen had resented them for a long time because they had killed Thingol, Melian’s husband; but in time she realised she couldn’t blame an entire race because of the act of few, or of one.

And now she had met Thorin Oakenshield; Nerwen had read in Círdan’s books the history of the Realm of the Lonely Mountain, Erebor, of its richness, power and splendour, of its ruin by the terrible dragon Smaug, the diaspora of its people, the battles they fought against the Orcs who took possession of the ancient realm of Moria, and particularly Thorin’s feats during the brutal battle of Azanulbizar, which men called Dimrill Dale, where he gained the appellation of Oakenshield. Here in Bree she had seen him in the modest guise of a smith but, even under the soot of the job he did for a living, his royal mien was apparent.

From what he had told her, Gandalf felt evident admiration and friendship for Thorin and his folk. Nerwen had already learnt he was a great person from her readings in Círdan’s library, and now that she had met him, she was persuaded more than ever; but it wasn’t this what had struck her. No… it had been his eyes. Blue like Valinor’s immense sky, blazing like incandescent flame, they had her literally nailed. Yet Thorin hadn’t glanced at her in any particular way: curiosity, surprise, gratitude, all totally normal feelings. Nonetheless, Nerwen had felt her knees turning to jelly like the first time she had met Calion, a long time ago; so much, she hadn’t believed she could remember the way it felt.

Suddenly she realised she had arrived at the inn’s entrance; with an effort, she put away those thoughts and climbed the steps leading to the door, opened it and entered, crossing the hall dominated by the desk. Behind it stood the portly owner, Goldwheat Butterbur.

“Hullo, lady!” he greeted her exuberantly, “Did you find the leather manufacturer? And the smith?”

“Hullo to you, Mr Butterbur,” Nerwen reciprocated the greeting, “Yes, thanks, your directions were accurate and I found them immediately. Master Lichen will come by nightfall with the falconer glove I ordered: would you please inform me when he’ll arrive?”

“Of course.”

“Fine. Also, Master Thorin will have lunch here with me, today.”

“Very good,” the landlord nodded, “I’ll have a table set for you in the common room, or do you prefer eating in your room?”

Nerwen thought she would like to stay alone with the charming Dwarf, undisturbed by the other customers who, if they were the same of the night before, were rather noisy; but receiving him in her room seemed excessive: she had no intention to end up in bed with him.

Not so soon, at least…

“Is it possible to have a table a little secluded?” she asked anyway, looking for a middle ground, “We’d like to talk in peace…”
“I’ll take care of that,” Butterbur assured her, “In any way, at lunchtime there’s much less confusion than in the evenings, don’t worry. Is there something particular you wish to eat?”

Nerwen reminded something the Dwarf had said:

“Master Thorin told me about Mrs Violet’s mutton stew,” she said therefore.

Butterbur lighted up:

“Yes, it’s her speciality, and Master Thorin, too, comes here just to eat it. I’m glad he mentioned it to you, it means he appreciates it more than he tells – you know, he’s not very talkative…”

“Very good,” Nerwen interrupted him, trying not to laugh because, if Thorin wasn’t, Butterbur definitely was very talkative instead, “Mutton stew, vegetables at Mrs Violet’s discretion, and if possible something sweet in the end.”

“What about a cheesecake with honey and raisin?”

“Sounds delicious.”

“And of course the best wine from the Staddle vineyards will be at your disposal,” the landlord added.

“Fine,” Nerwen nodded, “Please call me when Master Thorin arrives.”

“I’ll do that.”

The Istar took her leave with a nod and exited again, heading for the stables; Thilgiloth greeted her with a cordial flick of her nose, then she drew back and looked at her closely.

You look… strange, she said, What’s the matter?

The matter is a charming Dwarf, Nerwen answered sincerely, I met him one hour ago.

She projected Thorin’s image; the Chargeress shook her head, snorting.

One hour ago?? That’s big matter, he turned you completely upside down, she considered in an unmistakably amused tone, Not since you met Calion, have you reacted like this to someone.

Thinking back to the handsome Vanya she had left in Valinor made Nerwen a little sad. She missed him, and surely not only for the warm embraces they had shared for so many years. Calion hadn’t been her first lover, nor would he be the last; she never had been in love with him, but in time she had developed a great affection for him, which would never change, even if she would finally find her soulmate – which she seriously doubted would happen for centuries now, because she hadn’t found him yet. Well, if there was none, none there was: it meant she would stay an unmarried Aini, such as Nienna, the Valië Lady of Mourning, or Arien, the Maia who drove the Sun in her circumvention around the sky of Arda.

You’re right, my friend, she confirmed, talking to Thilgiloth, I’d never thought a Dwarf would fascinate me so much.

How is he different from the Dwarves you met since now?, the Chargeress enquired, marvelled. She had known Nerwen since the Years of the Trees, before Sun and Moon were created, and what roused now her two-legged friend was something she had seen only a few times, and anyway never so suddenly.
The Istar perceived Thilgiloth’s amazement, and because she, too, was amazed by her reaction, she tried to find an explanation:

*He’s noble; I don’t mean highborn, not only, but he’s got a noble soul. Seldom had I met a person with such a high dignity as I see in Thorin Oakenshield. I understand well, now, why Gandalf has such a high esteem of him…*

But this interpretation didn’t satisfy her completely; it was undoubtedly true, but it wasn’t *all*. She let her conscience *drop* and thought in a more *earthly* way.

*And he’s got extraordinary blue eyes, intense, as sharp as spear-points, she went on, They literally pierced me through and through.*

*Will you mate with him?* Thilgiloth asked, meaning no vulgarity, but simply asking the question from her animal and instinctive point of view: if she liked a male, she had no problems to mate with him, and thought that all beings, with two or with four legs, were allowed to do the same.

Used to the *kelvar*’s way of reasoning, Nerwen wasn’t offended; but she wasn’t very sure about the answer: being immortal and having all eternity to do everything, she had never been hasty in her choices and decisions, and now this unexplained attraction she was feeling for Thorin disoriented her greatly.

*Well, if he feels the same desire,* she answered therefore slowly, *maybe I will…* She shook off those disturbing thoughts and moved on other things, *I came to see if you’re content of the way the stable hands treat you.*

Thilgiloth radiated a feeling of satisfaction:

*Yes, thanks, I’m fine: the straw is dry, food is good and plentiful, and water is always fresh.*

Reassured, Nerwen stroked the Chargeress and took her leave to go to her room, where she sat down by the open window to read, until Mina came and informed her that Thorin had arrived.

Nerwen stood up, smoothing the skirt of her gown; she felt suddenly agitated: a life measured not by years, but by the eras of the world, had not been enough to extinguish in her the capability to feel thrilled, nor, as for this, she would ever want this. However, in all her life she had never felt such an instantaneous attraction like with Thorin, and this confounded her. While slowly descending the stairs, heading for the entrance, she thought that evidently, as Yavanna had warned her, the intrinsic quality of Middle-earth – mortal land, unlike Valinor – was influencing her and imposing on her its rhythms that, compared to those of the Undying Lands, were much *faster.*

When she arrived in the hall, she found Thorin chatting with Butterbur in a quite friendly way; she noticed the Dwarf had changed his clothes and wore now a white shirt of light muslin under a blue velvet waistcoat, and light-brown linen breeches, as well as knee-high boots. If wearing work clothes he had struck her, seeing him so elegantly dressed up left her speechless for a moment.

Hearing her approaching, Thorin turned, and again his bright blue eyes pierced her, making her risk stumbling; she forced herself to focus her willpower on going on and showing a – she hoped – normal, welcoming face.

From his part, Thorin was staring at her almost hungrily; he had seen her just two hours ago, but he thought now he hadn’t noticed how really beautiful she was, with that long dark hair, the velvety brown eyes and the delicious hourglass-shaped figure wrapped in the light-green dress. He straightened his back, trying involuntarily to reach his full height, even if he remained nonetheless
a few centimetres shorter than her; but his natural dignity compensated amply the lack in stature, even compared to a tall big Man like Goldwheat Butterbur.

“Welcome, Thorin,” Nerwen greeted him, in her emotional turmoil forgetting to call him the courtesy title due to a master craftsman; even if, technically, Your Highness would be more appropriate, for a prince like him.

“Thank you, Nerwen,” the Dwarf reciprocated, addressing a bow to her, never taking his eyes off her, “My good friend Goldwheat was telling me he has a table already set for us.”

“Yes, it is,” the landlord confirmed, “Rosie had taken care of it. You can take your seats straightaway.”

Thorin offered his arm to Nerwen; she laid her hand on it and this way, striding majestically as if in a royal court and not just in a modest inn, they entered the common room, where some customers were already present. Rosie, Butterbur’s elder daughter, who looked very alike her sister Mina, approached them and, after a small curtsey, led them to a table in a corner, already set for two.

After Rosie had taken her leave, Thorin, keeping his attitude as if they were in the feast room of a royal palace, pulled a chair for Nerwen and had her sitting, before taking his own seat in front of her.

“I took your advice,” Nerwen told him, recovering her usual confidence, “and ordered the mutton stew. Butterbur offered his best wine, but we can ask for beer, if you prefer.”

“If he was talking about the wine of Staddle, it’ll do perfectly,” Thorin declared, “It’s excellent.”

At that moment, Rosie came back with a jug of freshly drawn red wine, which she poured in the two goblets, then she left, quick and unobtrusive; evidently, her father warned her that the two of them wanted to be left alone.

Thorin raised his chalice to Nerwen:

“To our encounter.”

“Verily excellent, as you said,” Nerwen commented. Thorin nodded, then he placed down his goblet and asked:

“Forgive my curiosity, but how do you know Gandalf?”

“I became part of the Istari Order a short time ago,” Nerwen answered, without going into details, “but actually we have known each other for a much longer time. You’d say we grew up together.”

Thorin finally realised why Nerwen seemed to be something more than a simple woman.

“So you, too, are an Istar like my old friend Gandalf,” he mused thoughtfully, “Actually, I immediately thought that you two look somewhat alike… Well, not in the physical appearance for sure,” he specified, grinning, “you look like a young and beautiful woman, while he looks like an old and far less attractive man.”

Nerwen, too, laughed:
“You’re right; but he and the other colleagues chose the appearance of elders to look like wise men at first sight, while I preferred otherwise.”

Thorin raised an eyebrow, surprised:

“You mean it doesn’t matter to you looking at once a wise and authoritative Istar, in order to impress your interlocutors?”

“Not at all,” she declared, “I prefer to surprise them: sometimes it’s useful, being underestimated.”

“Interesting strategy,” the prince pondered, “I never took it into account… Maybe because it’s too subtle, for me. I’m a very straightforward person, cutting immediately to the chase.”

“Me too, sometimes,” Nerwen admitted, “It depends on circumstances… But tell me, how do you know Gandalf…?”

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They spent this way a couple of very agreeable hours, chatting in a pleasant and relaxed way, initially in front of a tasty stew with zucchini, aubergines and string beans, and later in front of a slice of cake. Often, like animated by a will of their own, their eyes met, but immediately they took them off of one another with some kind of shyness.

When only the crumbs of the lunch they shared were left over, Thorin began to think regretfully that in a short time he must take his leave.

“How long will you stay in Bree?” he decided finally to ask, fearing the answer.

Nerwen hesitated. Her plan had been originally to leave the day after the delivery of the message, but for sure she hadn’t expected to have such an intriguing encounter… to be charmed by two light-blue eyes.

“Actually, I don’t know,” she decided finally to answer, “I’m early in my travelling plans, and a long way expects me: I’m going to Rivendell.”

Elrond’s realm was indeed her next stage; then from there she planned to go to Lothlórien to speak to Galadriel and Celeborn, thence to Radagast’s abode in the hope to finding and asking him about the Ents.

Thorin’s expression lightened up.

“Well then, I hope you’ll stop here for a few days: I’d like to get to know you better,” he said bluntly.

She liked his frankness.

“I, too, would like to get to know you better,” she admitted, with the same frankness. Thorin’s face opened to a smile, which illuminated him and made him even more attractive.

“Fantastic,” he declared, then he seemed thinking for a moment, “I’d like to take you to see an enchanting, and maybe enchanted, place in the Chetwood. It’s about one hour ride from here; we could go there even now, but I have to finish a work I began this morning: I promised to deliver it
tonight… We can go tomorrow, and take lunch with us, what do you say?”

*A trip in the woods,* Nerwen thought; romantic… and *exciting.*

“I say yes,” she accepted, “I’ll ask Rosie to prepare a picnic lunch.”

“Then we see us tomorrow one hour before noon,” Thorin said, getting up. He took his leave with an impeccable bow, then he left the room, while a number of patrons nodded to him, as well as Rosie and Mina, who were waiting at the tables. Rosie hurried to Nerwen.

“You and Master Thorin have been satisfied, my lady?” she asked, while Nerwen, too, was standing up.

“Yes, completely, thank you Rosie,” the Istar answered, “Tomorrow morning, could you please prepare a picnic lunch for two people? I leave it up to you choosing the food and drinks.”

“Of course, my lady…”

OOO

Later, Nerwen went out to the large courtyard of the inn to let Calad fly under her watchful eye; she didn’t really expect someone trying to steal the hawk, but one can never know, in a crowded town like Bree. Calad caught a couple of rodents, eating them in a secluded corner of the courtyard, while Nerwen was chatting with Thilgiloth.

*Tomorrow we take a trip in the woods,* she announced her, *a stroll of about one hour.*

*Fine, I love walking around in the woods,* the Chargeress mused, *Your Dwarf will come with us?*

*It was he who invited me,* the Aini revealed to her. Thilgiloth sent off a feeling of impish amusement:

*Then I’ll go away and leave you alone to mate…*

Again, the Chargeress didn’t imply anything coarse.

*Well, anyhow it doesn’t mean it’ll happen,* Nerwen objected. Thilgiloth glimpsed at her knowingly:

*If he feels like you do now, you can bet on it happening,* she affirmed, amused. Nerwen couldn’t reply, because she knew this was the simple truth.

Calad, having finished her meal, came back to her friends, perching on a fence nearby; Nerwen told her, too, the program of the coming day.

*I know your species doesn’t like to fly among trees, therefore I won’t force you to come with me and Thilgiloth,* she added.

*You’re right,* the bird of prey confirmed, *I prefer avoiding woods, especially if they’re thick. I’ll come with you until you’ll go in, then I’ll stay around there and wait for you to return.*

Having agreed on this, Nerwen went back to her room with Calad, who perched on the balustrade of the terrace. A little over an hour later, Amaranth came and informed her that Master Lichen, the
leather manufacturer, had arrived. The Istar went downstairs to the hall, where she received the falconer glove from the craftsman; after complimenting him for his punctuality and the careful manufacture of the item, Nerwen paid the agreed price and went back to her room, where she showed the purchase to Calad, explaining what it was.

*But I would never wound you intentionally with my talons*, the hawk assured her.

*I know, my friend*, said the Maia, *but you could scratch me accidentally; this glove will avoid it. And then it’s more comfortable than the cloak, just try…*

She put on the glove and Calad came to perch on it, hopping on it and finally calling herself satisfied.

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*Author’s corner:*

*To someone, Thorin will appear out of character; he is for sure, compared to the book, but in Peter Jackson’s movie I saw him this way: hard, proud, even ruthless, but capable of very deep feelings and love. In this I have been surely influenced by his performer, Richard Armitage, who in an interview said that, while he and Peter Jackson were trying to develop a background for Thorin in order to contextualise and therefore describe/interpret him better, he imagined a lost love; of course he was referring to some Dwarven princess, but in my mind I re-elaborated the thing with a view to my story and I ended up deeply involved… but to know how and how much, you must wait the next chapter… :-D*

*Many thanks to ColdOnePaul for his editing!*

Lady Angel
The morning after, Nerwen went early downstairs for breakfast, as she usually did; this time it was Mina, the one who waited on her. Back in her room, the Maia sat down to read, but she could hardly concentrate, because the memory of Thorin’s extraordinary blue eyes distracted her constantly. At last, she gave up and, trying to calm down, she got out of the inn to take a stroll in the pleasant streets of Bree. Workshops and stores overlooked the main street, where many people, both Men and Hobbits, walked along it in both directions.

Nerwen looked around and decided that she liked Bree; it did not possess the serene atmosphere of the Shire’s villages, but it was a pleasant place nevertheless.

She came back in time to change her clothes, putting on her riding attire that she had cleaned the day before, consisting of a short tunic, breeches and boots – she hated riding in a skirt – and then she headed for the stables, where she saddled Thilgiloth personally. Calad flew down from the balcony of her room and waited, perching on the nearby fence.

Nerwen was tightening the girth when Thorin arrived, riding a beautiful white and black speckled pony. With his height, just a little shorter than Nerwen’s, he could easily ride a horse, but clearly he preferred otherwise.

He nimbly got off the mount and approached her, leading the pony by the bridle; taking her hand, he bowed to kiss it.

“Good morning, Nerwen,” he greeted her, straightening his back again. His lips had just brushed the back of Nerwen’s hand, but nonetheless she felt goose-bumps on her skin.

“Good morning to you, Thorin,” she returned his greeting, managing somehow to keep her voice...
steady, which threatened to tremble. By all the stars of Varda, she never thought a Dwarf, even if so charming, would affect her so deeply, with only a simple kiss on her hand!

Their eyes met, as if it had so often happened the day before; but unlike before, this time they stayed locked, as if incapable to get off of each other, some kind of enchantment fettering their gazes.

The world around them disappeared.

“I brought you your picnic lunch, lady,” Amaranth’s peppy voice interrupted them. Startled, they abruptly diverted their gazes from one another.

“Thank you, Amaranth,” Nerwen said, even if she would gladly strangle him. Then she realized that the poor boy was only trying to do his job and couldn’t possibly know anything about what was going on between her and Thorin, and therefore she couldn’t possibly blame him for the interruption. She accepted the bag he was holding out to her, but Thorin took it gently from her hands.

“I’ll take care of this,” he said, shouldering it. Nerwen noticed that, in spite of the temperature, he wore a fur stole, making his height, already remarkable for a Dwarf, even more imposing; a couple of stiff leather bracelets covered his forearms, from the back of his hands to the elbows, and hanging from his belt, he carried a sheath with a long dagger. Prudently, he had chosen not to go out of town unarmed and vulnerable: after all, one can never know who or what he or she can meet, around the world, even at a short distance from home.

The pair both got on their mounts and went out in the street; Thorin turned to the right, followed by Nerwen, heading for the Western Gate; they rode slowly in the middle of the road, in order not to inconvenience the pedestrians, who walked on the sides. Like the day before in the inn’s common room, a number of persons greeted the Dwarf: clearly, the master smith was well known, in Bree.

When they got out of town, they turned north on the Greenway, now side by side so they could chat. Calad flew high in front of them, gliding in lazy circles but staying alert in her self-appointed role as sentinel.

“You have a gorgeous mare,” Thorin observed, looking at her from below because of the lower height of his speckled pony, “but I’m not able to guess which race she belongs to.”

Nerwen thanked mentally Gandalf for his suggestion to dim Thilgiloth; she aroused much curiosity just this way, let alone if she wouldn’t have been obscured…

“She’s one of the mearas of Rohan,” she answered, giving the usual explanation, “Her name’s Thilgiloth.”

The Chargeress’ eardrums vibrated and she sent off a feeling of slight annoyance: she didn’t like it much, being forced to hide her true nature. Nor did Nerwen, actually, but they had to adapt themselves.

“How long have you been living in Bree?” Nerwen asked, wanting to know more about him.

“Almost ten years,” Thorin answered.

“I understand you’re very well known and respected,” she observed.

“I do my job as best as I can,” the Dwarf mused, “and I don’t meddle in other people’s business.”
“Two good ways to gain people’s respect,” Nerwen nodded.

They continued chatting as they went riding along the Greenway, skirting the Chetwood for some kilometres, then they turned again to the right, venturing among the trees. Nerwen halted Thiligloth and, slipping on her falconer glove, raised her gaze to look for Calad and call her, but the hawk was already descending towards them; she landed lightly on Nerwen’s wrist.

*I’ll wait for you here,* she announced.

*Fine, see you later,* the Aini answered, before launching her. Calad jumped in the air and flew away, taking her leave with her typical call *kek-kek-kek.*

Turning back her gaze, she saw that Thorin was staring carefully at her.

“You speak with animals?” he asked, but it sounded more like a statement.

Gandalf had told Nerwen that Dwarves, differently from Hobbits, knew that he belonged to the Order of Istari and that, being such, he had particular powers; out of respect, they had given him the name of Tharkûn in their language. Therefore, now Nerwen thought it useless keeping from Thorin her characteristic talent and nodded:

“Yes,” she confirmed, “and with plants, too; that’s reason I’m called the Green.”

“I see,” said Thorin, thoughtfully, “It must be handy to talk to your horse, when she gets temperamental,” he added, humorously. Nerwen laughed:

“No doubt!” she agreed. Thiligloth snorted indignantly, making Nerwen laugh even harder; Thorin, too, laughed.

They set forth again, going into the wood; the trees in this particular copse were totally different from those, very old, gnarled and of disquieting appearance, which characterized the Old Forest: these ones were tall, slender, relatively young, even if some had a very respectable circumference. Nerwen recognised beeches, ashes, hazels, walnuts, oaks, limes, firs and pines. As a whole, the wood emanated a positive ambience that put her in a good mood.

“It’s a very beautiful wood,” she commented, “Young and full of vitality.”

“Walking among these trees makes me feel good,” Thorin revealed, “almost like walking on solid rock.”

Said by a Dwarf, it was surely remarkable, Nerwen mused.

“…almost,” the prince specified, as for a change of mind. *Trust Dwarves for it,* Nerwen thought, but she was amused.

They got deeper into the wood, illuminated by a suffused light, somewhat greenish because of the innumerable leaves over heir heads. The undergrowth, principally soft ferns, wasn’t very thick and allowed an effortless passage to their mounts.

After a little more than one hour after they had left Bree, Nerwen noticed that up ahead the light was increasing, and indeed, after several dozen meters, they arrived at a clearing, lit by the noon-sun. The glade was covered by flower-dotted grass, mainly buttercups and daisies, but also aromatic herbs such as wood garlic, cow parsley, savory and watercress. On the other side of the clearing, a spring spurted in a tiny waterfall, descending from a rocky rim and spilling into a small pond, which glittered under the sunrays.
Nerwen perceived immediately a serene and merry energy coming from the spring, which in her ear vibrated like a far song of joy.

“You were right, Thorin,” she said, “This is truly an enchanted place. Here the energy of Arda, blending with water, stone and vegetation, is particularly concentrated. It’s not everybody’s talent to sense something like this,” she concluded, looking at him with new respect. Thorin felt suddenly proud of himself.

“Then I’m very happy I took you here,” he claimed, getting off his pony and fastening the bags with their lunch to the saddle, “Come, let’s go near the water.”

Nerwen dismounted and walked with Thorin to the spring, whose soft pounding felt increasingly similar to a melody.

“It sounds almost as if the water is singing,” Thorin whispered, and Nerwen felt awestruck: if it wasn’t common to feel the energy of a place, it was even less common to hear its voice. This Dwarven prince had a definitely out of the ordinary receptivity toward the invisible things.

“So it is, indeed,” she confirmed, “A chant as ancient as Creation itself. The ability to hear it is even rarer than sensing the energy of Arda.”

Thorin stared at her, feeling now not proud anymore, but rather almost dazed.

“Ah,” was the only thing he managed to utter. Impulsively, Nerwen brushed his arm, meaning to reassure him in front of something he was clearly unfamiliar with; surprisingly, he took her hand, bowed and kissed her fingers, reverently, like he would do with Yavanna herself, the spouse of the Dwarves’ Vala, Aulë, whom they called Mahal. A deep emotion throbbed in Nerwen’s soul.

Thorin straightened his back again; he looked at her, and in her eyes he saw the emotion that had come over her. He felt thrilled, in a way he hadn’t felt for a long, long time. The strong attraction he felt for her had nothing to do with it: this was something transcending flesh, something deeper, as if his soul was speaking with hers and heard it answering.

Overwhelmed, he diverted his gaze and let her hand go, clearing his throat.

“I’m hungry like a wolf,” he said in a falsely cheerful tone, “Don’t you?”

Nerwen felt as if hanging between disappointment and relief. On the one hand, she wished this magic moment between them would last longer, evolving into an embrace, a kiss and – who knows – maybe more, but on the other hand she felt very disquieted, almost frightened, by the strong turmoil of feelings inside of her. In the past – when she came to see Melian in Doriath or was travelling around Beleriand – the quality of Middle-earth didn’t affect her, upsetting her control in the way it was doing now; but in the past, she had been a full Aini, not an Istar, not a diminished Maia. Yavanna had warned her that this would happen, and she couldn’t do anything but accept it and adapt as soon as possible.

She breathed in deeply.

“Yes, the ride made me hungry,” she confirmed. Thorin went back to his pony and took the bag, as well as the blanket rolled up behind his saddle.

“Let’s sit down there,” Nerwen suggested, pointing to a spot under a beech. Thorin nodded and unrolled the blanket, laying the bag on it.

They got comfortable, sitting somewhat distant from one another.
“Let’s see what Rosie had prepared for us,” said Thorin, beginning to take the contents out of the bag. They found bread, cheese, hardboiled eggs, ham, several peaches and two slices of strawberry-jam tart. There was also a canteen of water and a flask of red wine, the same superb Staddle they had the day before.

“I’ll change the water,” Nerwen announced, taking the canteen and standing up, “I’d like to drink from that spring.”

“Good idea, the water’s excellent,” Thorin told her, having tried it during his previous trips to this place. Nerwen went back to the pond, where the small cascade fell, and emptied the canteen in it, substituting the content with the water from the source. She tasted it, finding it delicious, with a vague minty aroma. The musical vibration seemed to increase as if expressing satisfaction, and so she answered, hinting some musical notes under her breath to thank the spring.

“True, it’s very good,” she confirmed when she went back sitting on the plaid. She handed the canteen to Thorin, and he took it; inevitably, their fingers brushed, but it was only for a moment.

“It has improved,” Thorin claimed after taking a swig, glancing at Nerwen, “I think it’s because of the nice company.”

Nerwen smiled at his compliment, and suddenly the atmosphere was relaxed again, as it had been before the unexpected kiss on her hand by the spring.

They ate the simple but excellent food, finishing with the tart.

“Absolutely exquisite,” Nerwen stated, “Strawberry is my favourite fruit.”

Thorin watched amused while she was licking the crumbs off of her fingers; noticing it, Nerwen burst into laughter:

“I’m serious, when I eat strawberries I become like a child, I devour them until I’m stuffed like a turkey!”

“But did you never break out in hives?” he enquired, feeling even more amused. No grim and stern Istar here: Nerwen could be very funny. As much as Gandalf in a state of grace. Except she was much more beautiful…

“No…”, Nerwen was about to tell him she could not get sick, but she wasn’t allowed to reveal her Aini nature, so she rephrased it to something different, “…probably I tolerate them well, or I always stopped in time,” she hiccupped softly, “Best if I take a draught…”

Thorin handed her the flask of wine, but she shook her head; so he handed her the canteen of water, from which the Maia took a couple of sips before handing it back. Then she laid down on her back, looking at the leafy branches of the beech, through which she could glimpse the blue sky.

Blue like Thorin’s eyes…

Following her example, the Dwarf, too, laid down, opposite to Nerwen. In this position, turning their heads they could gaze at each other, but they would see each other upside down.

“It’s really nice here,” Nerwen whispered; she closed her eyes, savouring the serenity surrounding them.

Thorin saw her closing her eyelids and was caught by a sudden, hot desire to kiss her; to kiss her, and then caress her, kiss her again, breathlessly, and then make love to her… He stiffened and
clenched his fists. For all the hammers of Mahal, he had never craved for a woman so much, but he wouldn’t certainly become an animal assaulting and taking her in no time! Except, of course, she would encourage him to do so… He brusquely drove away that thought, which was dangerously close to causing him an embarrassing rigidity in a certain part of his body; he closed his eyes, trying to pull himself back together.

They stayed like this for a long time, laying down only a few centimetres apart but as if separated by an insurmountable space. Then all of a sudden, Nerwen heard the song of the spring changing and becoming stronger.

She jumped up sitting.

Alarmed, Thorin shot up sitting, too, and put his hand on the hilt of the dagger he carried on his belt.

“What’s up?” he asked, immediately alert.

“Forgive me, I didn’t mean to alarm you,” the Istar apologised, “The source… do you hear it?”

The Dwarf tried to listen carefully; indeed, the feeling that the water was singing had become stronger.

“Yeah… but what does it mean?”

Nerwen got up and went to the spring; there was an almost perfectly flat boulder beside it, as large as a chair, even if much taller. Sitting on it, the Aini bent just slightly her knees, but this way she could focus better on the song.

Thorin followed her and stood behind her, close but without touching her.

Nerwen listened attentively; the source was narrating a story, a love story, beautiful and heartbreaking, dating back to the First Age, concerning a human girl and a Silvan Elf. Madly in love, they had been hindered by their families, who didn’t approve of the potential union between a Human and an Elf, she mortal, he immortal. She yielded to the pressure, thinking she would age and die, hurting her beloved Elf, whose sorrow would last for the rest of his life; but he would have none of it, he was willing to live the short years of her mortal life and to survive her, because this was his nature, carrying his love for her in his heart until the End of Time.

“Do you hear it?” Nerwen asked Thorin, “Do you understand what it says?”

“I only feel something,” he answered, regretfully, “I hear no words.”

She turned halfway and took his hand, pulling him closer; approaching her, Thorin placed his other hand on her shoulder. In this position, he loomed slightly over her, therefore he tried not to invade her personal space too much; but she pushed back against him, closing in, and took also the hand he had laid on her shoulder. She closed her eyes.

The words of the song poured into him, conveyed by Nerwen.

The Elf had finally been able to convince his beloved that the sorrow he would feel for being refused would be worse than losing her because of her mortal nature, so they had fled together and taken shelter in the Chetwood, near the source. There, they lived for all the time it was allowed to them, until her death, when she finally passed away in very old age in her beloved Elf’s arms. Then he left and went West to the Great Sea, looking for a ship that would take him to the Undying Lands, the only place in the world where his grief could be soothed. Their descendants stayed,
having the mortal nature of the woman, and still lived, scattered among the small communities of the Bree-land.

Dwarves may seem very unsentimental, whereas yet they can be very romantic and poetic, even if sometimes unlike Elves and Men; this love story, which had happened thousands of years ago, touched Thorin’s heart deeply, as much as Nerwen’s.

A gust of wind stirred their hair. Nerwen’s scent was irresistible, and Thorin yielded to the urge to lower his face and bury it into her soft dark hair. She parted her lips in a sigh and turned her face to Thorin. She half-opened her eyes, seeing those irises the colour of the spring sky, which had struck her from the first moment, very close.

Thorin thought of nothing more; stooping a little more forward, he placed his lips on hers.

Thilgiloth ogled at them triumphantly for a moment and then, as she promised, she discreetly went away, going nibbling at the tender grass on the farthest spot of the glade; Thorin’s pony, maybe somehow influenced by the mare’s action, followed her example.

Thorin kissed Nerwen very tenderly: if she was simply feeling emotionally overwhelmed by the romantic tale of the spring, he didn’t want to take advantage of it, convincing her to do something she actually didn’t want to; but Nerwen felt like melting in his arms, and if she wouldn’t leaning half-sitting on that boulder, she would surely collapse, because her knees had given way. She parted her lips, inviting him to a more complete kiss.

Thorin felt his heart leap up to his throat. He moved around Nerwen to get her in front of him and held her tightly against his chest; she wrapped her arms around his neck. Then their kiss deepened, becoming more passionate, but keeping still the original tenderness.

They kissed for a long time, so long, they lost track of time. The song of the spring still enshrouded them, now without words, only glowing with joy for having been able to tell them the ancient love story. Drawing back, Thorin rained small kisses all over Nerwen’s face, brow, eyes, nose, cheekbone, returning at last to her lips for another long kiss. His sweetness was disarming and at the same time exciting, and Nerwen felt the surge of her desire swelling up. She exhaled a sighing moan, expressing openly her feelings.

Thorin sensed her desire and lifted her up in his arms; for him, she was as light as a feather. He carried her toward the blanket where they had their lunch, and gently laid her down. The pulled
back shortly, taking off his fur and leather bracelets and throwing them heedlessly over the stole; then he bent again over Nerwen, kissing her.

Little by little, they took each other’s clothes off, uncovering and discovering slowly one another. Thorin had a potent physique, with rock-hard muscles; Nerwen caressed slowly his chest, slightly covered with black hair, and his large shoulders; he had a surprisingly smooth skin, so warm it seemed almost feverish. And indeed Thorin felt feverish and at the same time delirious, because he thought it impossible he was holding in his arms a creature as much wonderful as Nerwen.

Sweetly, he placed one hand at the base of her throat, where he felt her accelerated heartbeat, which had him deeply moved. He lowered his head and kissed this palpitating spot, while slowly sliding his hand down, surrounding one breast. With his thumb, he stroke its taut nipple, which at his stimulation hardened even more; Nerwen felt hot shivers radiating from there, shivers which became stronger when he took the stiff bud in his mouth and brushed it with his tongue, making her tremble. Involuntarily, she contracted her fingers and sank her nails in his shoulders.

Her reaction flattered Thorin; he went for the other breast, giving it the same attention, and heard her breathe becoming increasingly erratic. Then he slid down her beautiful body, caressing her at first with his hands – the large, calloused hands of a smith and warrior, so surprisingly tender – and then with his lips, sucking and nibbling gently her quivering belly.

At last, he reached his aim and touched her at the junction of her thighs, finding her hot and wet with desire, and she winced violently.

“Oh, Thorin…,” she moaned. At that sound, Thorin’s throat went dry. He bent lower and placed his lips on her feminine flower, eager to taste its nectar. Nerwen tensed like a bowstring and uttered such a heartbreaking moan, he felt his very soul tremble. He could resist no longer: he raised himself over her, laid down on her and, with that incredible tenderness which had characterised his each and every gesture from the moment he had embraced her near the source, looking deeply into her eyes, slid deeply inside of her.

Nerwen gasped, overwhelmed by her feelings.

“Thorin…!” she hiccupped, holding him even tighter.

“Nerwen…,” Thorin whispered, “Sweet Nerwen…”

He began to move inside her, slowly, looking for the angle and depth which would pleasure her the most. It wasn’t long before he began to feel her internal flowers vibrating and clenching his length, urging him along, and so he increased the rhythm, but not too much, because he wanted it to last as long as possible. Nerwen, too, didn’t want it to end too soon: she was feeling something too extraordinary, too dazzling for her to wish ending it immediately in the hurry to reach completion. She cupped Thorin’s face, searching for his lips for a passionate kiss; their tongues interlaced in a sweet and at the same time erotic dance. Then Thorin leaned his forehead against hers and began to thrust harder. Immediately, Nerwen’s depths responded, sending shivers of delight all over her body, growing, increasing steadily, until she felt like being swallowed up into a vortex, sweeping her away and flinging her to vertiginous heights; a blissful cry escaped her throat.

Feeling her clenching all around him, Thorin held back as long as he could, trying to lengthen as much as possible her pleasure; at last, with a low groan, he let himself go.

Afterwards, they lingered in their embrace, the physical and emotional turmoil that had engulfed them slowly quieting down, placating their racing hearts and laboured breathes. Regaining partly her lucidity, Nerwen considered flabbergasted she had just made love with someone she had met
only the day before. In the Undying Lands, with the slow rhythm characterising them, this would
never happen; but here, in Middle-earth, where everything happened much faster, it was different.

She was different.

From his part, Thorin was no less flabbergasted. As a member of a race which males were used to
sexual austerity because of the scarcity of females, he had never thought he could lie with a female
– and not even of his own people! – barely twenty-four hours after meeting her.

He propped on his elbows and looked into her eyes. Nerwen returned his gaze.

“You’re amazing,” he whispered, caressing slowly her cheek. She brushed away a strand of hair
from his brow.

“Thank you,” she answered in a low dreamy voice, short of words: no one, in all the long years of
her life, had ever described her as amazing.

OOO

It was almost sunset when they got back to Bree; Thorin escorted Nerwen to The Prancing Pony
and, once in the courtyard, he took her hand to kiss it.

“I’d love to spend the night with you,” he said in an undertone. Nerwen smiled at him, then she
addressed the stable groom who was approaching them:

“Billy, take care of Master Thorin’s mount: he’ll stay here for the night.”

OOO

Nerwen moved in with Thorin a couple of days later. If anyone was shocked, it wasn’t because the
two of them didn’t care hiding they were lovers – in itself, this was nothing scandalous – but only
because, during the ten years he had lived in Bree so far, Thorin had never shown interest in any
woman. And above all, he had never, ever neglected his job; someone got upset, but most people,
learning the reason of his desertion, felt rather amused, and some of them – those who held the
Dwarf smith in particularly high esteem – where happy for him.

OOO

Nerwen was lying with her head on Thorin’s bare chest. They were in bed; they had just made love
and, as usual, now they were holding each other, exchanging caresses. Nerwen never ceased to feel
surprised by Thorin’s capability to be so tender even at the heights of his hottest passion: even if he
sometimes made love to her very impetuously, he always kept this incredible element of sweetness.

Almost four weeks had passed by from the day they heard the song of the spring in the Chetwood.
In this time, they had lived together, almost never leaving the house, so much focused on one another to forget the rest of the world.

As well an excellent swordsman and smith, Thorin was also an outstanding harp-player. For years, he had left his instrument neglected in a corner of his parlour – where Nerwen had seen it the first time she came to visit him – but now he had a reason to use it, therefore he dusted it off. With his magnificent baritone voice, he sang to Nerwen the most beautiful songs of his people; when Nerwen explained to him that Mahal, through his spouse, gifted her with the knowledge of *khuzdul*, he was delighted he could express himself in his own language, since the best of translations sometimes cannot convey the peculiar nuances of each idiom. He sang to her the bardic poems narrating the adventures of his ancestor Durin – the oldest of the Seven Fathers of the Dwarves and their first king, called the Deathless because he lived so long they lost track of his age – and of the greatest heroes of his people; and he sang to her love songs, with a romanticism none suspected Dwarves could possess, because it was a part of their character they revealed only to the females of their own people.

Nerwen wished those days would never end; but she was bitterly aware this couldn’t be: she had a mission to accomplish, from which depended maybe the same existence of Middle-earth and all the free creatures who inhabited it. Included Thorin.

She felt a lump in her throat, like a strangling rope: the time had ultimately come; she couldn’t afford to linger anymore for her contentment only.

“I must leave,” she whispered, talking under her breath because she risked bursting into tears.
Thorin shut his eyes: he had always been aware this moment would arrive.

“I know,” he murmured, “You’ve got a task to fulfil. So have I.”

Slowly, Nerwen nodded: she had almost forgotten about the message she had brought to him from Gandalf. Soon, he had to accomplish his mission, too, whatever it was.

Thorin opened again his eyes and looked into hers:

“We’ll meet again, Nerwen,” he asserted, “When both of us have done what we must, we’ll meet again and we’ll be together.”

There was an tinge of desperation in his voice, revealing clearly how little he actually believed this could happen. This meant his mission was so perilous, he feared he could not return from it alive.

Nerwen gulped, trying to untie the knot clamping her throat. She strove to use her Second Sight to see something beyond the mists of future, but this faculty came when it wanted, often not required and sometimes not even wished for, and in that moment it denied itself to her.

“I’ll pray all the Valar that this will be,” she whispered, before kissing him.

OOO

Three days later, Nerwen the Green left Bree. Thorin Oakenshield escorted her to the Southern Gate, where he lingered, watching her riding slowly eastward, along the Great East Road. Hot tears ran down his cheeks and dispersed in his beard.

The same tears running down Nerwen’s face.

It was the sixteenth day of September.

OOO

Author’s corner:
This chapter carried me away, meaning that what I planned flew out of the window and I came up with something completely different, in tenor if not in substance. In other words: I planned this had to be a burning flirt with a single hot night for the two of them, passionate and thrilling as much you like, but... just one night. And instead, the protagonists decided it had to be something much deeper and more romantic, and I had no choice but to adjust with it. Therefore it occurred that, while I was writing the few lines narrating their parting, their sorrow and their tears were also my sorrow and my tears... This is what I meant, in my corner in the previous chapter, when I told about how much emotionally involved I got in the story.

I hope I got you involved as much as I was...

The original picture of Thorin and Nerwen is by Rodrigo Gonzalez T. and has been re-elaborated by a friend of mine to fit this fan fiction.

A big thank you to ColdOnePaul for his wonderful editing!

Lady Angel
Chapter XIV: Ambush on the Great East Road

Nerwen rode the entire day in complete silence, not even seeing the road. Thilgiloth and Calad, feeling the deep sadness of their friend, forebore speaking with her and instead just kept watch on the road for her.

In the late afternoon, they arrived at the Forsaken Inn, built on the northern side of the Great East Road; it was a far smaller edifice than the *Prancing Pony*, or even the *Green Dragon*, not very well kept, as it was rarely visited.

At this point, Thilgiloth stirred Nerwen from her dejection, talking to her gently:

*My friend, we’ve reached today’s destination...*

Nerwen came back from the limbo she had voluntarily exiled herself to in the attempt to keep her sorrow at bay; if the parting from Calion had been grievous, parting from Thorin was feeling much worse.

She looked at the building in front of which Thilgiloth had come to a halt, a two-storey house in stone and wood. The wood was peeling, some shutters were missing from the sides of its windows and a window-glass was broken; but from the inside came an animated rattle, and in the stable by the inn stood three horses and a mule. A warm yellow light radiated from the windows on the ground floor.

Nerwen dismounted and entered the run-down building; the door creaked, opening on a small hall not very well kept, lit by a few oil lamps.

“Landlord!” she called.
“What is it?” an annoyed voice came from the next room.

“A traveller looking for shelter for the night!” Nerwen answered curtly. Tonight she was in no mood to be nice with someone who seemingly wasn’t in turn.

A very tall and thin Man arrived, sporting a few grizzled hair on his head and a sloppy moustache; he had a scowling face, but the moment he saw her, he immediately changed his attitude.

“Good evening, lady,” he said in a suddenly kind tone, “Excuse me, I thought it was that irritating old woman, my neighbour Zeda. She’s got a farm two hours from here, and once in a while she comes bothering me because she wants to gamble, and as she owes me much money, I forbade her coming back here until she settles her debt…” seeing her frown impatiently, he changed the subject, “Beg your pardon, you surely don’t care about this. You want a room for the night, I suppose?”

“Right; and accommodation for my horse,” Nerwen answered, “as well as something to eat for dinner.”

“Of course! This is a very modest inn, as you surely noticed, but the sheets are clean and the food’s good, you’ll see. Jack! Jack, where are you, you sluggard?”

A youngster of about twenty-five came running; he was short and chunky, his gaze elusive and his yellow hair so dishevelled, it looked like a heap of hay.

“Take the lady’s horse to the stable, then curry and feed it…”

“I’ll take care of my horse myself,” Nerwen intervened, instinctively mistrusting this stable boy, “She’s very quick-tempered with strangers,” she added, anticipating any possible objection, “When I’m done, I’ll dine and then go to bed. I’ll leave again tomorrow at sunrise: is it possible to have breakfast so soon?”

“Sure, we’re used to early hours,” the landlord answered, “Don’t worry about it, lady.”

Nerwen exited, the groom on her tail; he led her to the stables and showed her where to accommodate Thilgiloth and find brushes and fodder.

*I don’t like that Man, the Chargeress declared, I’m glad it’s you taking care of me, tonight.*

*I don’t like him, either,* Nerwen admitted, *That’s why I insisted on taking care of you myself. Stay alert during the night. I won’t close the pen: I’m afraid someone can try stealing you, therefore, should you hear suspicious noises, go on the run. I’ll tell Calad, too, to be vigilant.*

When she finished freshening up the mare, the Istar exited and called to the hawk, instructing her. Worried by the distrust she sensed in her friend, Calad flew down and settled down on the inn’s roof, in front of Thilgiloth’s box, in order to keep a better eye on it.

Going back inside with her saddlebags, Nerwen headed for the common room and sat at the table the landlady showed her; the latter was a large woman with red hair who was also the cook. For dinner, Nerwen ordered roasted pork with potatoes and cabbage, bread and cider; the food was simple, but surprisingly good, considering the bad impression the inn made on her. The landlord didn’t lie, claiming she would eat well.

The room, too, proved better than she had feared: it wasn’t large, and was rather dusty, a sign it hadn’t been used for a while, but the sheets were actually clean, and on the washbasin table there were an equally clean towel and a new soap, as well as a pitcher with warm water.
Nerwen went to bed and closed her eyes, thinking she would have trouble falling asleep; and indeed, a terrible feeling of emptiness overwhelmed her immediately: her body, her soul missed Thorin sorely, much more than they had ever felt Calion’s… She wondered why: after all, even in Thorin she hadn’t recognised her life partner, her other half.

Nonetheless, this thought was of no comfort to her; new hot tears welled up in her eyes, escaping through her tightly closed eyelids and falling on the pillow.

“Mára mesta an ni véla tye ento, Thorin… ya rato nea,” she whispered.

Goodbye until I’ll see you again, Thorin… and I hope it’ll be soon.

By the grace of the Valar, in a short time she fell asleep.

OOO

After an unexpectedly calm night, Nerwen got up one hour before sunrise and dressed again in her traveling clothes, then she went downstairs to the common room, where she found the landlady preparing a substantial breakfast with pancakes dressed with maple syrup, bread, butter, honey, fried eggs and bacon. Pleasantly surprised, the Maia ate her fill, planning to skip lunch whilst eating just one or two apples, and then took her leave. The bill she was presented with was in no way exaggerated, and she ended up leaving a tip, because, in spite of the appearance of the premises, she had received a fine treatment.

Thilgiloth, too, confirmed that the night had passed very quietly, and Calad had noticed nothing out of ordinary. While the sun was rising in front of them, Nerwen and her two friends resumed the road to Rivendell.

OOO

About three hours later, the road entered into a wood; tall trees loomed on both sides, mostly holly oaks wrapped in ivy, their branches growing over the track covering it almost completely, leaving only a strip of open sky; thick heather shrubs filled the spaces between one tree and the other, creating an impassable undergrowth. Calad flew high, watching the uninhabited landscape in front of them, beyond the trees.
All of a sudden, four Men, hooded and with scarves on their faces, jumped out from behind the shrubs, pointing at her with great bows with notched arrows. Instinctively, Nerwen pulled hard on Thilgiloth’s bridles; the mare reared, neighing out of surprise and fright.

“Get off the horse!” the chunkiest guy ordered her. Even if he was trying to disguise his voice, Nerwen’s sharp hearing recognised him: he was the groom of the Forsaken Inn, Jack.

The Aini thought about simply spurring Thilgiloth into a gallop, trampling on the nearest thief and going on the run: their arrows wouldn’t wound her or the Chargeress. She reminded herself just in time that she wasn’t a full Maia anymore, she had been diminished, and consequently she could be wounded, even if not killed. And the same applied for Thilgiloth.

Therefore, Nerwen stayed still on the saddle, staring at the four scoundrels. Sensing the danger, Calad cried both indignant and frustrated, because she couldn’t do anything against four bows.

Don’t worry, I can handle it, Nerwen sent her, Stay at a safe distance.

Her mind reached out to the trees, awakening their conscience and asking for help. The trees answered, animated by a momentary but very lucid awareness.

“I said: get off your horse!” Jack yelled.

What about teaching him a nice lesson? Nerwen said silently to Thilgiloth.

Gladly, the Chargeress answered with a certain amount of ferocity: unlike Calad, she knew what her friend was capable of.

Slowly, Nerwen got off the saddle. Immediately, one of the bandits grabbed Thilgiloth’s bridles and drew her away from her mistress. The mare showed no sign of opposition: for what she guessed was about to happen, it was better if she stayed at a certain distance.

The trees began quivering, and the branches above them rustled; it would be nothing unusual, if not for the fact that there was no breeze causing them to move. The bandits, however, too focused on what they were doing, gave no heed to it.

“We’ll get good money out of this one,” Jack said sniggering, nodding toward Thilgiloth.
“And I bet the lady here has good money in her pocket,” grinned the one who had seized the Chargeress, gesturing toward the pouch hanging from Nerwen’s belt, “C’mon, pull out the coins!”

Moving slowly in order not to irritate the rogues, Nerwen opened her pouch and took out the small bag with her money, throwing it towards the crook who solicited her. Faking a wrong shot, she had it finishing under the Chargeress’ legs.

Don’t move, my friend, she admonished her, let him take it...

The bandit stooped and grabbed the purse, weighing it to evaluate its contents.

“Not bad, boss,” he nodded to one of the other two bandits who were standing back a little from the Chargeress.

The ivy surrounding the nearest tree trunks began to move, removing itself from the bark and crawling silently on the ground toward the Men.

The boss was staring Nerwen up and down. Her short sleeveless tunic and the tight breeches, even if covering her appropriately, revealed all the curves of her body.

“She’s quite a thing, don’t you agree?” he observed, sneering coarsely, “How about a little fun, before letting her go?”

The other ones stared at her in turn, looking at her now in a different light.

Nerwen’s stomach tied up, not out of fear but of rage. She crossed her arms under her breasts, exhibiting them deliberately to cause even more uproar among the thieves.

“Yeah, we could have fun,” she hissed, “Who begins? Do we go in alphabetical order? Or age order? Or based who’s the strongest?”

Nerwen’s words were meant to turn them on each other to be the first; and indeed the four scoundrels glared at one another in a reciprocal challenge.

“I’m the boss,” said the one who suggested the fun, “I’ll begin.”

“But it was me, the one pointing her out,” Jack objected.

“Well, as for this, it’s been me who fetched the horses to come here…” grumbled in a low voice the fourth bandit, who hadn’t spoken so far.

“It’s me the one in charge!” the boss yelled, raising his bow and aiming at Jack.

Nerwen chose that very moment, when all the four bandits were distracted, to give the attack signal to her vegetal allies. At lightning speed, several branches snapped like whips and hit the swindlers from above or sideways, according to where they were positioned.

The boss was hit full in his chest and hurled backwards, slamming against a tree. He screamed in pain, his ribs shattered, and lost his bow, which fell among the shrubs. Promptly, the heather seized it and made it disappear into the ground cover, while the ivy enveloped the Man who had claimed to be boss.

Thilgiloth took care of the second one, having him within reach: she reared up and struck him down with a hoof on his shoulder, breaking the collarbone. Quickly, another ivy frond came and enveloped the scoundrel.
The third bandit – the one who claimed he had fetched the mounts – tried to take aim with his bow, but Calad dove from the sky, clawing at his head and tearing into his cheek. The man screamed. A branch from the tree next to him swiftly struck down at him on one side, flinging him against a fallen trunk, and again the ivy intervened, blocking his hands and feet.

Now only Jack remained; he was leaning against a boulder partially obstructing the road; he had fallen in a sitting position, and the dark stain on the front of his breeches showed clearly he had urinated in his pants. Nerwen looked at him disgusted, full of a terrible wrath.

“Jack, you’re an imbecile,” she threw at him, making him realise she had discovered his identity in spite of his scarf, “You thought you were dealing with a helpless woman, didn’t you? Appearance can be very deceiving!” she screamed with an appalling voice, standing up in front of him, looking suddenly tall and dreadful, “I am Nerwen the Green, member of the Order of the Wizards! Animals and plants are my allies, and if someone dares attacking or disrespecting me, he gets trouble!”

Jack pulled the scarf down and began to whine:

“Spare me, powerful lady, great sorceress, I implore you! I’m only a poor sod, getting in trouble with these outlaws! I’ve been forced to help them…!”

Nerwen’s anger became even greater and she grew even more in front of the crook, by now reduced to a wailing and quivering heap:

“Yes, sure, as they would force to have fun with me, right??”

As to highlight her wrath, a branch of poison ivy detached itself from the nearby tree and lashed at Jack, who screamed because of the burning the acid had caused: the lash would leave him with an indelible mark, eternal reminder of the mishap he got into.

Nerwen wasn’t a violent person, or a vengeful one, yet she didn’t tolerate misdeeds. She thought she had punished sufficiently these four wretches: two had broken bones, another likely a concussion, and Jack had been branded forever on his face. She went back to her original appearance of a minute, defenceless woman, except for her eyes, which still threw daggers.

“I leave you to your miserable life,” she snarled at Jack, who covered his face and head with his arms, fearing he would be hit again, “Don’t you dare follow me. And, if you all have any sense in those empty heads of yours, change your ways and take up an honest job!”

Nerwen retrieved her coin purse, then turned to Thilgiloth and beckoned her; the Chargeress approached her, jaunty, radiating satisfaction.

*We clobbered them good, didn’t we?* she said. The Aini mounted on her back, smiling fiercely:

“I think so, my dear friend,” she answered.

Calad came, flitting around frantically, and Nerwen hurriedly put on the glove to let her perch on her wrist: the hawk looked very distressed.

*I’m sorry, I’m sorry!* she cried, sending a feeling of deep affliction, *I didn’t see them!*

“But you couldn’t, my friend,” Nerwen pointed out, “They were well hidden, and leeward, at the point not even Thilgiloth could smell them.”

Calad hid her head under her wing, emitting a feeling of shame.
I failed in my task as a sentinel, she complained.

“No, not at all,” the Istar reiterated forcefully, “You were in no condition to see them, mind you! Therefore you didn’t fail anything. Stop feeling guilty. And anyway, I saw how you attacked that scoundrel: you nearly tore off his eyes!”

The bird of prey uncovered one eye to look at her.

*You truly don’t blame me?* she asked. Nerwen smiled:

“I don’t, Calad. On the contrary, I thank you for your intervention,” then she addressed the plants which had helped her, “Thank you for your help, friends,” she said in a loud voice, “Stay alert until these wretches go away, and should you ever see them again, teach them another good lesson.”

The trees, the ivy and the heather moved and rustled, assuring her wordlessly that they would do as she asked them. After one last thanking nod, Nerwen took her leave and spurred Thilgiloth, who resumed walking along the road.

OOO

When the shadows of the late afternoon became very long, Nerwen left the road to camp, protected by a small bunch of trees on the southern side. She picked up some wood for the fire and lighted it using flint and steel to create a spark, seizing it with her thoughts and improving it to better set fire to the fuse, made of a number of dried leaves tightly wrapped together. She felt quite exhausted: she had decided to rest just one hour, during the day, and now she was paying for it. She still wasn’t completely used to the feel of fatigue, so she wasn’t still very good at gauging her strength.

Calad hunted some rodent and Thilgiloth grazed grass and tender leaves; Nerwen, too, nibbled reluctantly a bit of beef jerky and a piece of cracker. Suddenly she felt the whole weight of solitude, in this vast uninhabited country; the recent separation from Thorin made this feeling even worse.

Sensing her unease, Thilgiloth came to lay down beside her friend, to give her the comfort of her presence. Predated animals such horses never did this, in the open, preferring to sleep on their legs, ready to bolt in case of need; but Nerwen really needed to be consoled.

Calad, too, came near her, tapping her with her head before preparing to sleep at her side.

Nerwen felt moved; grateful, she caressed her two kelvar friends before falling in a dreamless sleep.

OOO

*Author’s corner:*
I confess it has been very difficult to write this chapter; not because of the plot, which I had already decided, but because I had to take away Nerwen (and myself) from Thorin, a character who, at least in the cinematographic version, truly impressed me: in the scenes where Nerwen feels bad because she misses the Dwarf, I felt bad, too… I got definitely very involved, maybe as much as never before. But then, it’s also the first time I try my hand writing in the Tolkienverse, and I didn’t take into account my deep passion about this marvellous world that, so many years ago, captured me and in which I still am – happily – a prisoner.

Will Nerwen smile again? Sure, no doubts about this, even if she will need some time: I HATE ill-ending tales, because in real life there are too much of them; therefore, at least in what I write, my tales ends always well, even if they can be very dramatic and the protagonists must sometimes get over terrible ordeals…

I never forget to thank ColdOnePaul for his perfect editing!

Lady Angel
About ten days later, in the afternoon, Nerwen arrived on the banks of the Bruinen, or Loudwater as it was called in the Common Speech. The journey had been solitary and undisturbed, as she had neither met any travellers nor encountered any other peril, after the clumsy ambush of Jack and his accomplices.

Approaching the river, Nerwen sensed its defensive spell, an impassable barrier to those who weren’t invited to Rivendell, similar to Melian’s Girdle that, a long time ago, protected Doriath with enchantments of dismay and folly. Only those who knew the Elven magic could create an opening in this invisible fence, cross the ford, and so entering Elrond’s realm.

Nerwen called Calad, making her perch on her wrist, and then led Thilgiloth on the bank of the Bruinen. She projected her mind toward the barrier, which was similar to a cobweb of ethereal energy, invisible but very powerful. Studying the barrier’s magic briefly, Nerwen realised that its defensive action would raise the river’s waters, which would sweep away every incautious creature daring to cross it with malevolent intents. She wove therefore an adequate counter-enchantment, which opened delicately a safe passage, allowing her to advance undisturbed in the low waters of the ford, until she reached the stony bank on the opposite side.

While sitting on a sunny terrace in his palace at Imladris, Elrond suddenly raised his head from the book he was reading: his mind had just perceived the perturbation caused by the action of someone
who was manipulating Elven magic to open a passage in the barrier on the Bruinen. The way it was modified was definitely a non-hostile action, but he wondered who could it be: usually, those who came to his realm sent word to him... except for Mithrandir, he thought, amused, who always arrived unexpectedly, even if well-accepted. However, to him Elrond had given the mental key that all the inhabitants of Rivendell possessed, therefore he wouldn’t perceive that it was the wizard crossing the Bruinen. Whoever it was, it wasn’t an enemy – otherwise the protective spell would spring into action – and possessed great powers, at least as much as Mithrandir.

He stood up and clapped his hands: immediately, the Palace Administrator showed up.

“Lindir, prepare to welcome guests, but I don’t know how many they are. They crossed the ford right now.”

Lindir blinked, surprised: not everyone had the capability to cross the river without Lord Elrond’s prior permission, therefore he realised correctly that it had to be someone very powerful.

“Understood, my liege,” he said, bowing before taking his leave. He went on slowly: if the host or hosts had just passed the river, their journey would need at least one hour before crossing the slender bridge leaping over the young Bruinen, and arriving at the foot of the long staircase leading to the main entrance of the palace.

OOO

Just past the barrier, Nerwen signalled to Calad she could resume flying, and the hawk jumped
away, much more preferring to glide on the airflows rather than bouncing on the Istar’s wrist while riding.

Thilgiloth began to canter towards the path at the end of the pebbly shore, which began immediately to climb on the first spurs of the Misty Mountains. A little further, the path began to climb steeper, but it stayed a well-kept and easy path also for horses, even if quite narrow.

Something more than one hour later, Nerwen arrived at the slender bridge connecting the two sides of the gorge, beyond which stood Lord Elrond’s magnificent palace.

At the time she had met him, at the end of the First Age, Elrond was very young and hadn’t yet become a king among the Elves, nor at that time Imladris existed. The Maia stopped for a moment to contemplate the wonderful palace in pale stone and carved marble, similar to a fine lacework, and the other graceful edifices built on a terrace on the side of the mountain; many springs gushed and sprang from there in thin falls into the Bruinen, which rumbled loudly in its stony bed on the bottom of the ravine. The air was fresh and pure, and the energy of this place reminded her strongly of the Undying Lands, even if on the background one could nonetheless sense the mortal quality intrinsic to Middle-earth.

Then, on the other side of the bridge, Nerwen caught sight of an Elf, brown haired, tall and slim, seemingly waiting for her. Therefore, she called for Calad to return to her arm, in order to immediately introduce her properly, and spurred Thilgiloth, who started to walk on the bridge.

Sitting on the Chargeress and with the calê hawk perched on her wrist, Nerwen the Green arrived at Imladris, which Men call Rivendell.

With his Elven double sight, that perceived the visible and also the invisible, Lindir realised immediately he was looking upon someone much greater than a simple, minute human female such as she appeared, and therefore, even if he still didn’t know who she was, as soon as she came across the bridge he bowed respectfully.
“Welcome to Imladris, the Last Homely House, Lord Elrond’s realm,” he said solemnly in Sindarin tongue, sure that she would understand, “My name is Lindir.”

“I am Nerwen the Green,” she introduced herself in return in the same language, as gravely as the Elf, “and I thank you for your welcoming words.”

She dismounted, while another Elf came to take Thilgiloth’s bridles, being evidently the palace’s groom.

“Her name’s Thilgiloth,” Nerwen informed him, trusting her to him, “Sometimes she’s a little moody, but you need only to treat her gently. She loves running very much, and her favourite forage is oat.”

The groom nodded with a smile, showing he had understood, and took over the Chargeress, who followed him with great ease: she felt very safe, in this place and with these people, both reminding her her land beyond the Great Sea.

Then Nerwen turned back to Lindir, nodding sideways toward the hawk:

“And this is Calad. May I set her free to fly and hunt?”

“Of course; hawks are noble animals and here in Imladris they’re very popular.”

Automatically, Nerwen translated for Calad, who in response bowed her head and opened her wings, taking off.

“Calad thanks you for the hospitality,” the Aini said to Lindir.

“So you talk to animals, like Aiwendil,” the Elf pondered, now sure he was facing an Istar. Nerwen confirmed with a nod, thinking it unnecessary to tell him she spoke also with plants.

“The Istari are always welcomed guests, at Imladris,” Lindir went on, “Please, follow me: Lord Elrond is waiting for you.”

Soon after, Nerwen was brought to a parlour where, by the glass doors opening to the terrace, stood waiting a very tall Elf with long brown hair. Hearing her entering the room, he turned, and
Nerwen saw it was Elrond.

The Elven lord watched her for some moments before recognising her, *dimmed* as she was now, unlike she had been when he met her, at the end of the First Age, and with a human appearance; then his face brightened up into a wide smile:

“Nerwen Laiheri!” he cried, taking three steps toward her and then bowing. Lindir was a bit shocked: never had he seen his lord bowing to someone.

Strictly speaking, because of her status, this homage was due to Nerwen, even from a great king like Elrond; but she was no longer a *complete* Maia, and at best she could consider herself equal to him, not superior. And anyway, Elrond was a relative to her, being son of Elwing, daughter of Dior, the son of Nerwen’s only niece, Lúthien.

“No bows, my friend,” she therefore said, “Now I’m simply Nerwen the Green, member of the Order of the Istari.”

“I see…” said Elrond, standing upright, “Would you like something fresh to drink?” he asked, the attentive host; she nodded, grateful, “Lindir, let us have some apple juice. And get our best room ready for Lady Nerwen: she’s an honoured guest.”

“I’ll see to that, my liege,” Lindir said, bowing and taking his leave to go and issue the appropriate orders.

Being now alone, Elrond showed Nerwen a seat.

“What an incredible and pleasurable surprise to see you, Lady Nerwen,” he said, taking a seat, too, “A long time has passed, since the last time we met, even for our way to perceive the passage of years.”

“You’re right: almost 6,400 years, as it is measured in Middle-earth. You and your brother Elros were just two youngsters, at that time…”

The two twins had chosen very different destinies: sons of Elwing and Eärendil, they were half Elves, half Men on both parts of their parents, and at the end of the First Age the Valar had decreed they had to choose between the two races. Elrond, who preferred Elves, opted for the Firstborn, while his twin Elros favoured Men, and thusly started the bloodline of the High Kings of Númenor.

Elrond nodded in confirmation.

“I didn’t think the Valar would send other Istari to Middle-earth,” he mused, in a clearly puzzled tone. Nerwen then told him about the mission Yavanna Kementári had entrusted to her.

“I’m here in the hope you’ve got any news about the Ents, or if you know where they may live,” she concluded.

Elrond shook slowly his head:

“Unfortunately, I can’t tell you anything about them,” he answered regretfully, “but mayhap in my library you’ll be able to find some news, at least about their last known location. Of course you’ll be my guest for the duration of the time you need to do your research; But now, now autumn is coming, and travelling in winter is never easy, especially having to cross the mountains: if necessary, you can stay here through the whole winter.”

“I thank you very much, Lord Elrond,” Nerwen said, “I accept gladly your offer.”
They sipped at the apple juice a servant had brought.

“I’m keen to meet your daughter, Arwen Undómiel,” Nerwen added, “Mithrandir told me she looks very like my niece Lúthien.”

“As for this, I can’t tell, I never had the honour to meet my ancestor,” Elrond said, “Unfortunately, at this time my daughter isn’t here: she is spending some time with her mother’s relatives, in Lothlórien.”

Nerwen recalled Gandalf telling her that Elrond had married Celebrían, daughter of Celeborn and Galadriel; but over 400 years before, the queen of Imladris had been abducted by the Orcs, who tortured and poisoned her. Her twin sons Elrohir and Elladan had managed to find and rescue her, taking her back to Rivendell, where Elrond had perfectly healed her body; however, Celebrían never recovered in her mind and spirit, and lost all love and interest in Middle-earth, so much so that at that point the next year, she had taken her leave from husband and children; she went to the Grey Havens and from there sailed for Valinor.

“I see,” Nerwen nodded, rather disappointed: she had been truly eager to see the living image of her sister Melian’s daughter, “Mayhap I’ll meet her there, because I’m going to Lórien, too, and meet the Keeper of Nenya.”

Elrond stared at her with his dark and piercing eyes.

“You know the identity of the Keepers?” he asked, quite plainly. Nerwen just nodded; then, the king of Rivendell held out his right hand and made the Ring of Air appear, a magnificent sapphire mounted on a simple gold band, not very different from Narya, except for the colour of the gem.

“Here’s Vilya,” Elrond said, with evident pride and emotion, “Very few know that it’s kept here in Imladris, in my care.”

Vilya was the most powerful of the three Elven Rings Celebrimbor had created; its power consisted in preserving the beauty of the world, and to keep a state of peace and serenity similar to the Undying Lands. For this reason, Elrond had been able to make Imladris so alike to Valinor.

“Superb,” the Istar claimed, struck: it was truly a jewel of rare beauty, even for Valinor’s standards. With another wave of Elrond’s hand, the ring disappeared, again invisible.

Placing her now empty cup on the table, the Istar felt suddenly all the tiredness she had accumulated in the past days; she stretched her back:

“Twelve days on horseback and ten nights camping in the open left their marks on me,” she declared, “If you don’t mind, I’d like to retire to my room.”

“Of course,” Elrond nodded, clapping his hands. Lindir appeared immediately on the threshold.

“Have Lady Nerwen taken to her lodging,” he instructed him, “and assign her a personal handmaid to help her in anything she’d need: a bath, clothes, food, drinks and anything else,” he turned back to his guest, “If you’re too tired, don’t feel obliged to come to dinner; and tomorrow morning you can have your breakfast in your room whatever time you wake up; but I hope to see you at my table tomorrow for lunch.”

“I’ll be happy to,” Nerwen declared. At that moment, a young female Elf showed up, with gold-brown hair, petite almost like Nerwen; she curtsied to both.

“I’m Gilriel,” she introduced herself to the Maia, “Lindir assigned me to your service, Lady
“Nice to meet you, Gilriel,” Nerwen said, standing up, “With your permission, Lord Elrond…”

The king of Rivendell stood up in turn:

“My home is your home,” he said, using the traditional sentence of the host to the more than welcomed guest, “Rest, and for anything you may need, call Gilriel.”

The lodging Elrond had given to her was large and bright, made of a bedroom and a bathroom, and was equipped with a huge terrace overlooking the ravine, on which bottom the Bruinen flew; the sight was breath-taking.

“Would you like to take a bath, Lady Nerwen?” the handmaid asked. The Aini nodded, grateful: there was nothing better than bathing in perfumed water to relax muscles tired after long days on horseback.

While she was waiting for the bathtub to be filled, Nerwen went outside to look about from the white marble balustrade of the terrace; far away, she caught sight of a familiar form flitting around in the sky. She called, and soon after, Calad perched on the parapet; she radiated a feeling of great satisfaction.

*I feel good, here,* she informed her. The Istar nodded:

“You’re right, Calad, I feel good here, too: it reminds me of home. And I’m glad of this, because we shall stay here quite long: I must do some research, and by the time I’ll be done with it, very probably the season will be too advanced to cross the mountains and continue our journey. It’s therefore likely we’ll stay here over winter.”

*I have no objections,* the hawk stated.

“Now go back flying: here you’re absolutely safe,” Nerwen smiled at her. Calad flapped her wings as a leave-taking and took off.

Now the bath was ready; the tired Istar slid into the lukewarm water, sighing in content. Later, she learned that Gilriel was an accomplished masseuse, and therefore she accepted gladly to be rubbed with lotions helpful in easing the weariness and stiffness the journey had caused her.

As Elrond had suggested, being he very attentive to his guests, she dined in her room, and then went to see Thilgiloth, not because she had any worry about the treatment she was receiving, but to inform her, too, that she foresaw to spend the winter months at Imladris.

The Chargeress didn’t mind, thinking she would feel comfortable in this place so alike to Valinor, and therefore Nerwen took her leave to go to bed.
That night she dreamt about Thorin. They were at the enchanted spring and were kissing sweetly; the kiss was followed by caresses, then other, more passionate kisses. Like the first time, they made love under the beech, and Nerwen felt happy, as never before in her life.

She awoke with the feeling of Thorin’s kisses in her mouth and of his hands on her skin, only to realise that reality was very different. Again, bitter tears rolled down her cheeks. If this dull pain she was feeling in the bottom of her heart was part of her present state as an Istar – a diminished Maia – she didn’t want it. She cursed the moment she had accepted this mission; but immediately she repented of this thought, based on her discouragement: she was Nerwen the Green, appointed by the Queen of Earth to find the Ents, who could play a fundamental role against Sauron, and she was proud of it. Unfortunately, she had learned that there was a price to pay, which she thought now too high; but time would mend her sorrow, especially if she could spend some time in a place, blessed by the Elven power, like Imladris. Elrond would never know how much she was actually grateful for his offer to harbour her.

OOO

For lunch, as she had promised, Nerwen joined Lord Elrond’ table; her host invited her to take a seat at his right hand and introduced her to the other ones with her Istar name, which aroused quite an impression. Among the others, he introduced to her Lady Míriel, his First Counsellor, a copper-red haired Elf with eyes the colour of sapphires, whose quiet but firm appearance Nerwen appreciated much. She had to be a formidable person; after all, Elrond wouldn’t appoint her as his First Counsellor if she wouldn’t be.

In front of her, two identical twins were sitting, very alike to Elrond: they were Elladan and Elrohir, the king’s sons.

“We’re honoured to meet you, Lady Nerwen,” Elladan declared – or was it Elrohir? The two were
indistinguishable, in her eyes, like many years ago had been Elrond and Elros.

“Thank you; and for me it’s a pleasure to be your guest here at Imladris,” she answered, smiling.

“From what tells us our father,” Elrohir said – or was it Elladan? Their incredible likeness confused her, and would continue to do so for some time, until she would learn the tiny differences between the two twins – “you’re our great-great-great great-aunt.”

Nerwen counted the great and nodded:

“Exactly, as I am aunt to your great-great grandmother Lúthien. They say your sister Arwen looks very much alike to her, and I was hoping to found out by myself, but your father told me she’s in Lórien…”

“Yeah, that’s right,” one of them confirmed, “We think we’ll go there, too, next spring.”

“Really? Celeborn’s and Galadriel’s realm is on my travel itinerary, mayhap we could go together.”

“Sure! Gladly…”

They chatted pleasantly through the whole lunch; Elrond was quieter than his sons, and more than once Nerwen caught him watching her discreetly. The reason became apparent to her later, when the Elven king invited her for a stroll in the palace’s gardens.

“I see a great sadness in your heart, Nerwen,” he said, omitting her honorific title to highlight he was addressing her as a friend. Nerwen was surprised: she would never have thought that someone outside Aman would be able to read so deeply inside of her. But on the other hand, Elrond’s Elven double sight was enhanced by his Ring.

“So it is, my friend,” she confirmed, thinking denial was useless, “Here in Ennor I met a person who impressed me greatly, but I had to leave this person, probably forever, and this grieves me very much.”

She avoided mentioning she was referring to a Dwarf: she knew the king of Rivendell didn’t exactly fancy this race, even if he was far from being hostile as much as other Eldar were.

“A mortal may have this effect on us, yes,” Elrond nodded, thoughtfully, “We grow fond of them, but we know since the beginning that we won’t be able to stay with them for long, and this makes us sad. We should never feel an emotional bond with a mortal, however the heart wants what it wants and you cannot control who to love and who not. Even your niece Lúthien wasn’t able to, and she fell for Beren; and so Idril fell in love with Tuor…”

And the nameless Elf fell in love with the female Human, Nerwen added in her mind, thinking again of the song of the spring; but because this had been a quiet love and had produced no epic actions or, as a consequence, songs or poems, it had stayed unknown. Except to her and Thorin…

Elrond kept silent for a moment, becoming pensive: the people he had just mentioned were all ancestors to him, and therefore their lives touched his closely. Then he cast a glance to his guest:

“I hope your stay in my realm will ease your grief,” he concluded.

“Thank you, Elrond,” Nerwen whispered, “I’m sure it will: your land is very similar to the Blessed Realm, and there is no grief that cannot be eased in that place, even if perhaps not cancelled.”
At that moment, a dark-haired boy of about nine years came running and yelling:

“Uncle Elrond, uncle Elrond!”

Elrond’s face brightened in a smile, quiet but radiating all the affection he felt for this vivacious and gorgeous child. Nerwen watched him closely: he had shoulder-long hair, and his grey eyes shone with intelligence and curiosity. One could easily mistake him for a Noldo, except for his round ears that revealed he was a member of the race of Men. What was a human boy doing at Rivendell? And why did he address the king with the name of uncle?

The lad noticed her and stopped, confused; then he recovered from his astonishment and gave her a polite bow:

“Good afternoon, my lady.”

Elrond’s smile grew wider, unequivocally a father-like pride shining through.

“Lady Nerwen, may I introduce to you my pupil Estel, the son of dear friends,” he said, “Estel, this is Nerwen the Green, an old acquaintance of mine, and friend to Mithrandir.”

The boy seemed impressed:

“I thought there weren’t any females in the Order of the Istari…,” he said in a clearly marvelled tone.

“I’m the only one, actually,” Nerwen answered, amused, “and I’ve become one just a short time ago.”

Estel nodded, showing he had understood. Then he turned to Elrond and pulled out of his belt a wooden sword, presenting it to him.

“Look, uncle Elrond, Lord Glorfindel gave me this,” he said proudly, “From now on I can use this instead of the short rod.”

Elrond looked at the wooden weapon and nodded:

“Good! If Glorfindel gave you this new weapon, it means he’s satisfied with you and that you passed the first phase of your fencing training. Well done, son.”

He stroked his hair, and the child smiled at him with the love of a son toward his father.

“Glorfindel is here?” Nerwen asked Elrond, amazed: she knew the fair Vanya from Valimar, where he had dwelled before coming back to Middle-earth, during the First Age. She didn’t see him since then, even if she had heard much of his deeds, among which was the killing of a Balrog.

“Yes, he lives here in Imladris,” Elrond confirmed, “He’s the commander of my army, and also Estel’s fencing instructor; he trained my sons, and all of my soldiers: there’s no better swordsman than him, nor mightier or braver warrior, in Middle-earth.”

Nerwen nodded, agreeing.

“I’m going and show the sword to Elrohir and Elladan!” Ester announced out of the blue, starting to run away. Then he remembered his manners and addressed a bow to both:

“See you later, uncle, my lady…”
Elrond dismissed him with a gesture, smiling, and Estel, thrusting the sword around in the air, ran away in a hurry, heading for the palace.

Nerwen’s Second Sight kicked suddenly in. She saw that same child, but at an adult age, a young Man about twenty years old, all dressed in white, very tall and already possessing the mighty build of a warrior, his face handsome and radiant. Then the image changed and she saw him older, standing in front of her, with the stern air of someone who has seen many things. He brandished a shining sword, and behind him fluttered a black banner, embroidered with a white tree, seven stars and a winged crown. All around Estel, a terrible battle raged.

“Nerwen… Nerwen! Are you well?”

Elrond’s concerned voice shook her out of her vision. She hadn’t realised she had faltered, and that the Elven king had quickly made her sit on a nearby marble bench.

“Yes, yes… I’m fine,” she reassured him, quite weakly, “I just had a vision. Everything’s fine, really!” she added more emphatically, seeing Elrond’s gaze still preoccupied, “It’s only that my Second Sight rarely comes so forcefully like now.”

“What did you see, if I may ask?” the king of Imladris asked swiftly, shaken.

“I’ll tell you, but before, please explain to me who, exactly, Estel is.”

Surprised by the question, Elrond leant against the seatback and watched her, pensively.

“As I said, he’s the son of dear friends,” he answered at length, “but not only: he’s also the last direct descendant of my brother Elros.”

That was why he called him uncle, thought Nerwen.

“A Númenorean, then,” she whispered, “Estel isn’t his true name, is it?”

“You’re right,” Elrond confirmed, “He’s Aragorn, son of Arathorn II, Captain of the Dúnedain, and of Gilraen the Fair. His father died seven years ago at the hands of the Orcs, and his mother came to live here in Rivendell, so that the child could grow into adulthood safely. Now she’d gone to visit her people, and she’ll be back next summer,” he looked where the boy had disappeared – his nephew through many and many generations of Men – and concluded, “He’s the last of his lineage, and their greatest hope, the reason why he has been called Estel [high hope in Elven tongue, author’s note].”

“Now I understand many things…” Nerwen nodded slowly, “His Elven appearance – I’d mistake him for a Noldo like you, except for the shape of his ears – his presence here, the fact he calls you uncle…” she paused and collected her thoughts, “I saw him as an adult,” she went on, “Young at first, mayhap twenty, white-dressed and glowing in happiness; and then older, a sword in his hand, during a raging battle, and behind him fluttered the banner with the White Tree of Númenor.”

Elrond pondered on the Istar’s words.

“About the first vision I can’t tell anything, except that with his mother we decided to reveal him his true lineage at the age of adulthood; perhaps that’s why you’ve seen him so happy. On that day, he’ll receive the symbols of his inheritance: Narsil, the Blade That Was Broken, with which Isildur cut off the One Ring from the hand of the Enemy; the Ring of Barahir, father of Beren; and the Star of Elendil; as for the Sceptre of Annúminas, I will deliver it to him only if the Great Realm will be rebuilt, Arnor and Gondor again reunited, but this is very unlikely.”
A strange tingling at the back of her neck made Nerwen shudder. Sometimes, instead of the Second Sight, she received this kind of feeling, telling her that what she was seeing or hearing could be untrue.

“Don’t be sure about it, Elrond,” she said therefore, “That child is destined for great deeds…”

OOO

Author’s corner:

I am realising that, everywhere I go in Middle-earth – the Grey Havens, the Shire, Tom Bombadil’s and Goldberry’s house, Bree, Rivendell – I’m terribly thrilled. Arriving at the Last Homely House, as Imladris is also called, hasn’t been any different; I must confess, I don’t like Elrond very much, even if I greatly respect his wisdom, and I understand perfectly why, as a good father, he wants only the very best for his daughter Arwen, that is the reason he will require very much from Aragorn before consenting to their marriage – but I suspect that, should he not, the two would anyway end up together, as Beren and Lúthien in spite of Thingol… I know that Tolkien loved Elrond very much, therefore, for his sake, I tried to treat him fairly and not showing my dislike.

Elrond’s twin sons, Elladan and Elrohir, are mentioned very few times in the book, and they are virtually absent in the movies, therefore I cannot tell the reason why I imagined them this way: pleasant and vivacious and playful. Maybe to balance my aversion for their father? :-D

Meeting Aragorn – Estel – as a child got me truly moved: after all, he’s my favourite male character in The Lord of the Rings.

Thank you to all those who are following this humble fan fiction, I hope you enjoy it! Please let me know, I’ll be grateful.

Once more, a very big thanks you to ColdOnePaul for his patient editing of this chapter!

Lady Angel
Chapter XVI: In Elrond’s Realm

Dining, Nerwen had the opportunity, after a very long time, to meet Glorfindel. The Elven High Lord approached immediately the Istar.

“Nerwen Laiheri, it’s such a great pleasure to see you again,” he said gallantly, bowing to kiss her hand, “They just informed me about your presence, otherwise I’d have come earlier to greet you.”

Nerwen looked at him from the shortness of her stature: if Elrond was tall, Glorfindel was even taller, being over 1,90 m; his long golden hair shone in the light of the lamps in the hall.

“Glad to see you again, Glorfindel,” she smiled at him: she had always liked this Vanya of very noble ascent, even if between them there had been nothing more than smiles and flirtatious gazes,
“but now I’m only Nerwen the Green, of the Order of the Istari,” she added.

This news struck Glorfindel greatly.

“An Istar!” he cried, “I had no idea more of them would arrive…”

“I said the same,” Elrond intervened, amused: he and his general often acted or talked in identical way, after all the centuries they knew each other. They were as Elrond and Elros could have been, if the latter would have decided for the life of the Firstborn.

“Like the others, I’m here on behalf of the Valar,” Nerwen explained in a low voice, “I’m looking for the Ents, but it seems nobody knows anything about them: neither Mithrandir, nor Tom Bombadil, nor Lord Elrond.”

“If a great erudite like Lord Elrond isn’t able to tell you something about them,” Glorfindel claimed in a regretful tone, “much less can I: I always cared much more for weapons than books…”

At that moment, Elladan and Elrohir joined them.

“Nice to see you again, aunt Nerwen,” they greeted her, calling her the way she had asked them to; Glorfindel rose an eyebrow, perplexed, before remembering their kinship, “Estel told us he met you, this afternoon.” Elladan went on – yes, it had to be him, Nerwen decided, still not entirely sure on how singling out each of the two twins.

“You made quite an impression on him, he never stopped twittering excitedly how beautiful you are,” Elrohir added, laughing, finishing his brother’s sentence, as it often happened between them. Nerwen, too, laughed:

“I had no idea I made such a great impression on him… Are you serious?”

“Yeah, and I can’t disagree with him,” Elladan confirmed, winking at her, “Wouldn’t you be my aunt, I’d woo you gladly.”

“Elladan!” Elrond pretended to reprimand him, rising an eyebrow, perfectly conscious it was only a joke, “Don’t disrespect Lady Nerwen!”

All laughed, but Nerwen noticed Elladan casting a sideway glance at a beautiful female Elf with auburn hair, who was standing just a few steps away from them, engrossed in a conversation with other young ladies; as feeling his gaze, the Elf turned her head and made eye contact with the prince, blushed and hastily turned again to her friends.

Nerwen stifled a smile: those two liked each other, but had still not found the audacity to express themselves, or maybe they hadn’t yet figured out the nature of their attraction, if it was forever or just for a momentary company, and therefore didn’t know well how to behave.

When they were finished with dinner, the commensals transferred to the Hall of Fire. Gilriel approached Nerwen to see if she wanted something to drink, and the Maia asked for some sweet cider, which the slender blonde Elf fetched her immediately, then she sat behind her, at her disposal. Nerwen wasn’t very used to have a handmaid always ready to serve her and felt a bit uneasy; but as she had learned at the Grey Havens at Círdan’s, this was the custom in the Elven courts for the distinguished guests like her, and refusing it would be offensive toward the host.

Glorfindel came and sat next to her, as he had done during dinner. He, too, was holding a cup with some golden liquid, maybe wine, maybe cider like Nerwen.
Wishing to keep her company, being the good nephews, also Elrohir and Elladan came and sat next to her.

They watched the performance of a musicians’ trio – one of them was Lindir: a harp, a flute and a tambourine, which played a number of sweet and harmonious pieces. Later was the turn of a bard who, strumming a lyre, telling about the creation of the Two Trees, Laurelin and Telperion, which before Sun and Moon shone on Arda. Nerwen, who had a small part in their realisation helping Yavanna’s work, felt very moved: after all those millennia, their destruction, caused by Morgoth, still grieved her, nor it would ever cease to do so because, in all the history of Arda, two olvar of this beauty, grace and splendour had never been seen.

There was a break, during which conversations developed; without realising it, Nerwen and Glorfindel took up again their old game of gazes and smiles, finding again the understanding they had shared so many years ago; but both knew that they wouldn’t go further, because between them there was no true attraction, only a great harmony.

Then several musicians took place on the small stage and began a gavotte with a moderate rhythm, and a number of dancing couples performed it with graceful movements; among them there was also the beautiful Elf with the auburn hair who seemingly had caught Elladan’s interest. The prince indeed didn’t take his eyes off her throughout the whole performance, and when it ended, he applauded more emphatically than usual. Nerwen decided on impulse to do something and leaned over to him.

“That little redhead is very good at dancing. Who is she?”

“Her name’s Gaerwen,” Elladan answered, “She’s the daughter of Lady Míriel, my father’s First Counsellor.”

“I like very much dancing, but I don’t know the dances you do here… What do you think, would she be willing to teach me?”

“You can ask her even immediately,” Elladan smiled, not imagining it was just an excuse to get
them together: she and Gaerwen would need male partners, and she had in mind to involve both the twins, but then she would dance only with Elrohir, obviously…

The prince stood up and offered his hand to Nerwen in order to help her getting up, then he led her to the auburn haired maiden.

“Aunt, this is Gaerwen,” he introduced her formally, “Gaerwen, this is my aunt, Nerwen the Green,”

Gaerwen made a curtsey.

“I’m honoured to meet you, Lady Nerwen,” she said, smiling, and Nerwen noticed she had gorgeous eyes of the same tender green of just sprouted leaves.

“Me too, Gaerwen,” the Istar responded, “I see you’re very good at dancing, and because I like very much dancing, but I don’t know the local dances, I wondered if you’d be willing to teach me…”

“Very gladly!” the young Elf answered, genuinely enthusiastic, “But we’ll have to find partners…”

This was what Nerwen was expecting, so she seized the opportunity:

“Elladan, what do you say? Would you volunteer?”

Surprised, the prince needed a minute before answering:

“But sure! I like dancing. And my brother, too, likes it: I’m going to ask him if he wants to join us.”

Nerwen carefully hid her satisfaction: her plan had worked perfectly, with the unaware
complicity of those directly concerned.

Elrohir was pleased to join the company and become the fourth element, so they decided that the first class would be the next day in the early afternoon.

OOO

The next morning, Nerwen went to Elrond’s library; his collection of books and scrolls was the largest and most complete of all Ennor, assured her Doronel, the librarian; not even the renowned library of Minas Tirith, the capital of Gondor, could compare to it.

“Do you know if there’s any text speaking about the Ents?” the Istar asked her. Doronel nodded:

“Not many, and only hints. I’m going to fetch them…”

Showing an incredible memory, the librarian went straight to look in some shelves, bringing back two books and four scrolls.

“They date back to the Second Age,” she revealed her, “except this scroll, which comes directly from Gondolin. It has been drafted by King Turgon himself, who met the Ents in Dorthonion, as he reports here…”

A spell of preservation, which suspended the decay of the perishable matter the books and scrolls were made of, conserved perfectly the documents. Now Doronel broke the spell to give the papers to Nerwen, who thanked her.

When she was immersed in reading, the Istar easily lost track of time, therefore she asked the librarian to warn her when noon had arrived; then, she sat down on a comfortable armchair with a high seatback, purposely located next to a large window, and began studying the documents.

She consulted immediately Turgon’s scroll; the king of Gondolin, the Hidden City located among the mountains north of Doriath, had encountered the Onodrim in the forests of the plateau of Dorthonion, before Morgoth invaded it and made of it a place of darkness and terror; this undoubtedly forced the Shepherds of the Trees to abandon the area and seek shelter elsewhere; where, however, Turgon couldn’t tell.

It wasn’t much, but anyway better than nothing, and at least it was a beginning. Because Beleriand had sunken in the deep waters of the Great Sea after the War of Wrath, the Ents had certainly relocated east of the Ered Luin, which at that time were the eastern border of Beleriand: they had surely survived the devastation, otherwise Yavanna, their protector, would have perceived their disappearance.

Indeed, reading the other documents, written more recently than Turgon’s scroll, Nerwen found hints to places were walking and speaking trees had been spotted, calling them now with the new name of Ents. From the description of the location of one of these places, Nerwen deduced it was the Shire, where the Old Forest constituted the last remnant of a huge wood that once covered all the land from Ered Luin to Hithaeglir – Blue Mountains and Misty Mountains in Common Speech. Another had surely to be Eryn Galen, the Greenwood now called Mirkwood, beyond the Misty Mountains; the other places were not described in a sufficiently detailed way and Nerwen wasn’t able to understand where they were.
Anyway, now the Ents did not dwell in the Old Forest, or else Tom Bombadil would have known it; nor did they live in Mirkwood, otherwise Elrond, who maintained close relations with Thranduil, king of the Silvan Elves who abided there, would be aware of it.

Noon came, and Nerwen interrupted her study of the documents to go to lunch; then it was time for her first dance class. Elrohir and Elladan took her to a large room in the palace where Gaerwen was waiting for them with a friend of hers, Lasseriel, who played the hurdy-gurdy and would provide the necessary musical support.

They began with two fundamental, very easy steps, which Nerwen immediately learned, and then went for the first dance: the Maya was quick to grab Elrohir and make him her partner, practically forcing Gaerwen to go to Elladan.

“You learn very quickly, Lady Nerwen,” the teacher observed, satisfied, when the lesson was over, “If you go on like this, you’ll be able to dance most of the dances during the party for Lord Elrond’s birthday…”

He would have his birthday in just a few weeks, they told Nerwen.

“Well, I’m favoured by the fact that your dances are, after all, not that much different from those I already know,” Nerwen admitted.

“Perhaps, but some ladies move like wooden sticks even after one hundred years,” Elrohir laughed, “You instead are light like a butterfly, I make no effort to lead you…”

OOO

Nerwen didn’t merely consult the few documents containing explicit references to the Ents: methodically, she began to seek every hint that could have a connection to them, including fables, myths and legends, sifting through one by one every document, large or small, ancient or recent, written by Elves, Dwarves or Men, which she found stored in the library’s shelves.

The second day, she had the nice surprise to find Elrond’s pupil attentively studying a big tome, bound in leather and wood, very ancient-looking.

“Good morning, Estel,” she greeted him. The boy raised his head and, recognising her, smiled: “Lady Nerwen, how nice to see you!”

His eyes suddenly struck her: the first time she had seen him, she didn’t noticed them, but they were almost identical to Lúthien’s; not for the colour – her sister’s daughter had had them grey-green, while Estel’s were light grey – but in shape, and even in their particular brightness. Across the abyss of time and the innumerable generations following one another during centuries and millennia, she felt like her much beloved niece was still looking at her. A sudden lump closed her throat, and she had to gulp a number of times before finding again her power of speech.

“Thank you, and for me it’s nice to see you,” she reciprocated Estel’s greeting, “What are you reading?” she enquired then, trying to find again her composure.

Estel showed her the cover, where the title Akallabêth was branded in archaic characters.
“It’s the story of the Downfall of Númenor,” he explained her, “Uncle Elrond appointed me to study it very extensively, so I came here to look for a book talking about it and Doronel gave me this. I find it quite boring, though…” he confessed, grimacing. Intrigued, Nerwen skimmed through the text: it was written in an archaic version of Westron, which sentences had a very convoluted syntax and pompous phrasing.

“I agree, it’s boring,” she agreed, “but if there is a text in the current linguistic style…”

They questioned therefore Doronel, who admitted the existence of a version dating back just a few decades before, easier to read, which had the only fault to be more concise.

“For a start, it’ll do,” Nerwen decided, “Once you’ll have studied the easier text, if necessary you’ll go to this millstone…”

Estel laughed at the description she gave to the tome, and began to read the newer one, finding it far more to his liking.

So it was that Nerwen and Estel formed a sort of study alliance; most of the time they stayed in silence, reading each his or her documents, but sometimes the Aini made live and real to the child’s eyes the story and geography of the Elder Days, talking about what she had lived in person in Beleriand, and he listened to her, charmed. He developed a particular passion on Beren’s and Lúthien’s tale, two people he still didn’t know to be his distant ancestors, and learnt by heart parts of the Lay of Leithian, the poem narrating their adventures. Elrond was very satisfied and thanked Nerwen wholeheartedly.

OOO

The Istar alternated her library hours with the dance classes with Gaerwen – arranging things in order to dance nearly always with Elrohir, switching him with Elladan only a couple of times just not to appear obvious – and regular outings with Thilgiloth and Calad. Her two kelvar friends were very satisfied with their stay at Imladris, where the Chargeress could run freely on the valley floor every time she wanted to and the hawk could fly and hunt everywhere in the large dale.

OOO

For Elrond’s birthday, as it could be expected, there was a grand feast, which began at noon with a sumptuous banquet and then continued through the whole afternoon with music, dances, songs and plays. Nerwen noticed pleased that Elladan and Gaerwen danced almost only together, while she alternated among Elrohir, Glorfindel, Lindir and Elrond.

During a break, while a bard was reciting a comic poem, Nerwen found Gaerwen at her side while both were seeking something fresh to drink.

“I see you dance a lot with Elladan,” Nerwen began, testing the water. The Elf blushed slightly:

“Yes, we found out we get along very well. Dancing, I mean,” she hurriedly added. The Istar easily saw through it.
“In my opinion, you get along well also in other respects…”

Gaerwen’s blush deepened, confirming – if any need should be – what Nerwen thought about those two.

“Are you sure…?” the Elf maiden cast a glance at the prince, who was chatting with Lindir, “Do you think… he likes me?” she resolved finally to ask.

“Surely,” Nerwen confirmed, sipping at the lemonade she had poured herself a glass, “I understand it from the way he looks at you.”

Gaerwen, too, sipped at the beverage she had chosen. Her gaze fell on Glorfindel, who was talking with Elrohir.

“Lord Glorfindel seems to look at you with interest,” she observed, but Nerwen laughed:

“Oh no, that’s only an old game between the two of us… We know each other for such a long time, if nothing happened until now, it’ll never happen. It amuses us, nothing more. Between you and Elladan, instead, things are different, believe me…”

The feast continued until dusk, and ended with a very spectacular fireworks show, which they watched on the open space in front of the entrance to the mansion, wearing capes and cloaks in order to fight off the crispiness of the autumn night: silver gushes, golden trees, purple flowers, violet flashes, green waves, multi-coloured intersecting circles and iridescent falls, which aroused cries and applauses from the admired spectators.

Nerwen noticed that Elladan and Gaerwen were nowhere to be seen and smiled to herself: she hoped they had gone to find some privacy and smooch. She didn’t think they would conclude immediately: Gaerwen was still a maiden – she had realised it from some attitudes of hers – and Elladan didn’t seem the type who wants to rash things.

OOO

In the following weeks, while autumn was coming, Nerwen continued tirelessly her research in the palace’s library. She found other hints, among them an indication, even if vague, going back to the beginning of the Third Era, about a territory called Greenland that, according to the anonymous author, was located south of the Hazy Range, where enormous walking trees had been spotted. Nerwen guessed it could be Calenardhon, now called Rohan, the Horse-country: the translation would be correct. And, in all likelihood, by Hazy Range the author meant the Misty Mountains. Even if uncertain, this indication looked promising to her; and if she was right about the location, Lothlórien, her next destination, was on the way.

Even if it wasn’t much, Nerwen decided it was time to contact Yavanna and report her progress in the search for the Ents. She went therefore in her quarters and asked Gilriel to make sure that none came to disturb her until she would call for her; then she laid comfortably on a couch and closed her eyes, allowing her astral body to leave the physical one and go to the no-space and no-time place where she could meet her Mistress; in her mind, she shaped the picture of a door, beyond which she imagined the presence of the Valië.

She knocked and waited. Some moments later, the door opened and on the threshold appeared Yavanna, who smiled at her.
My dear Nerwen! I’m so glad to see you, she said, holding out her hands to her; Nerwen took them and gripped them warmly, How are you, my friend?

I’m fine, she answered, I’m in Rivendell, a guest to Elrond’s.

The Valië’s parlour appeared around them and she signalled to her disciple to sit down, taking a seat herself.

Tell me everything, Yavanna exhorted her.

Nerwen told her about her arrival at Mithlond, Círdan’s and Eärwen’s welcome, her early documental research about the Onodrim, the meeting with Mithrandir; and then her short stay, pleasurable even if fruitless for her mission, at Tom Bombadil’s and Goldberry’s, and about Calad.

Then I headed for Imladris, she said, and on the way I stopped in Bree to take a message from Mithrandir to a friend of his… she paused: she had no intention to keep from her Mistress the experience she had gone through with Thorin, but she didn’t know exactly how to describe it, because it was unlike anything she had experienced during her long life. However, Yavanna read in her heart everything that happened and the feelings she had felt, and still felt. She caressed her hand.

That is what I meant, when I said you would be exposed to feelings much stronger and quicker than those you are used to, she said sympathetically, I am sorry for your affliction: unfortunately, it is the price you must pay for accepting the mission I trusted you with. But know that time will soothe your sadness, as I see it is already doing, also by virtue of your stay in Imladris, under the power of the Ring of Air.

For a moment, I repented accepting the task, Nerwen confessed, quite uneasily, It was just a moment, because actually I wouldn’t it to be any different… but I felt it. I’m ashamed of it, she concluded, lowering her gaze. The Queen of Earth squeezed her hands in an affectionate way.

Don’t be ashamed, she told her, You are no longer a complete Maia, an Aini in all her force and power, and therefore it may well be that you are subject to moments of weakness. You knew it could happen.

Yes, I did; but knowing it and experiencing it are two extremely different things. I hope I have the necessary strength to fight my weaknesses…

You have it, Yavanna asserted firmly, in a quiet but definitive tone, Never doubt the path you walk on in the name of the Valar.

Recognising her own words, which she had addressed to Mithrandir some time ago, Nerwen took a deep breath: only now did she fully understand her friend’s uncertainties, because she herself had been exposed to them. And who knows how many other times she would be.

She got herself together.

You are right, my Lady Kementári, she said formally, I’ll make it.

She was silent for some moments, then she resumed her narration, including in it even the ambush she suffered on the Great East Road and the help she got from the local olvar, like Yavanna had prefigured, to which the Valië nodded satisfied.

When I arrived at Imladris, Elrond welcomed me with full honours, Nerwen went on, and here I met also his sons, Elrohir and Elladan. But not his daughter Arwen, who is now dwelling in
Lothlórien, and who they say looks exactly like my sister’s daughter… By the way, how’s Melian? Did you hear from her?

She is fine, the Valië reassured her. She is taking care of your garden. She asked me to tell you she wishes you well for your mission, and that she misses you a lot.

I miss her a lot, too, Nerwen said, yearning for her sister even more. Please, tell her I give her my kisses and hugs.

Sure, her Mistress assured her. At this point, Nerwen continued her narration, reporting to her the meagre news she found in Elrond’s exceptional library, and the small hint that maybe positioned the Onodrim in Rohan.

We knew it wouldn’t be easy, Yavanna commented, pensively, but, as they are not extinct, sooner or later you will find them.

Nerwen nodded: despite the difficulties, she too, was sure of it.

Now the season is too late to travel easily, she said, I’ll wait until spring, then I’ll go south. I was thinking about making a detour to look for Aiwendil and ask him about the Onodrim, as it seems they lived in Mirkwood and his abode, Rhosgobel, is built right at its margins; then I’ll go to Lothlórien to Galadriel. From there to the borders of Rohan there are just a little more than one hundred kilometres: probably they have more accurate news.

I think likewise, the Valië nodded.

Fine, Nerwen concluded, I have nothing more to report, for the moment.

Then it is time to part, my friend, said Yavanna, standing up, Do not consume your energy in vain.

Nerwen stood up, too, and curtseyed to her Mistress; surprisingly, the Queen of Earth placed her hands on her temples and kissed her brow.

May the road rise to meet you, she wished her, as she had done the day Nerwen left Valinor. She smiled at her, then slowly vanished, as did the parlour and the door through which she had entered.

Nerwen opened her eyes, finding herself again on the couch in the quarters Elrond had assigned her. She didn’t know how much time had passed: it could have been a few minutes, or many hours. Time passed by in a different way, in the no-space and no-time dimension where she met her Mistress. She felt spent: Yavanna had warned her that communicating with her would require a great effort from her part, which was why she had recommended her to do it only when she would be in safe places.

Staggering, she got up and called to Gilriel, who seeing her pale and clearly wary, cried preoccupied:

“My Lady, what happens??”

“Don’t worry, Gilriel,” Nerwen told her faintly, “I only need food and rest. Could you fetch me something to eat and drink?”

“First lay down,” the blonde Elf told her, supporting her to the bed, where she helped her setting down and took off her shoes, “I’ll take care of it. Are you sure I’ve not to call Lord Elrond? He’s a great healer…”
Nerwen smiled to her: in those weeks, a great fondness had arisen between them, and therefore Gilriel’s genuine concern didn’t surprise her.

“No need for it, relax,” she assured her, “Something sweet to eat and a glass of red spiced wine will be enough to fix me up.”

Gilriel ran away at lightning speed, and at the same speed came back with a covered tray, from which came three slices of different cakes – one with honey, another with walnuts and the third with chocolate – and a carafe of hot wine, flavoured with cinnamon, clove and orange peel.

Nerwen ate and drank everything, and quickly her strength returned; as she had learned talking with Gilriel, it was now almost dinner time, and therefore at this point she was too sated to eat more, so she sent her excuses to Elrond.

Immediately after dinner, Glorfindel came to see her, a little anxious for her, but the Maia reassured him. When he was gone, Gilriel addressed Nerwen:

“I know you told me that between you and Lord Glorfindel it’s just a game, but… I see you always alone, and sometimes you look so sad, like you’re missing someone… If you forgive my boldness, Lady, I think you could use some company. Sometimes it helps to forget the one you cannot have…”

Nerwen sighed, pondering the Elf’s words.

“You’re not wrong, Gilriel,” she admitted slowly, “but for the moment, it’s too soon…”

It would be for a long while.

OOO

In the following weeks and months, Elladan and Gaerwen didn’t hide their reciprocal attraction any longer, and soon it became a real romantic relationship that had the tacit approval both of Elrond and Lady Míriel. Nerwen watched them, glad for them: somehow, their joy, as well as the enchanted quality of Rivendell, sustained by the power of Vilya, soothed her enduring longing for Thorin and the wonderful days she spent with him in Bree.

Author’s corner:

In Tolkien’s imagination, Middle-earth corresponds with Europe, and therefore someone could say that, before the discovery of America, chocolate wasn’t known; but the Professor talked about potatoes, and Jackson about tomatoes, therefore I took the liberty to insert the only sweet I’m really crazy about, that is precisely chocolate LOL

I loved to figure out a little about Aragorn’s infancy in Rivedell, about which we know almost
nothing; I imagined his education, which had to be both martial and intellectual: in fact as an adult he’s known to us as a great warrior, but also as a man of noticeable culture, capable to help Bilbo creating poems and to sing parts of ancient epics.

Slowly, Nerwen is coming closer to find out the location of the Ents, but we’ll need some more time… otherwise the story would end too soon, and it would be a shame: I must make her go through much more adventures, meet much more people, discover other places and customs. Middle-earth is very vast, and there is much to recount! XD

A romantic interlude – Elladan’s and Gaerwen’s story – eased Nerwen’s melancholy on having to give up Thorin, and so it eased mine, too. Little by little, our Istar will feel again the desire for love… Actually, in a couple of chapters she’ll make a very interesting encounter. ;-) 

I wish to thank those who are following this fan fiction: I hope you’re enjoying reading it as much as I am to write it! :-) 

Lady Angel
Nerwen left Imladris by the end of April, just the day after Thorin Oakenshield, his twelve Dawarven companions, the Hobbit Bilbo Baggins – hired as a burglar – and the Wizard Gandalf the Grey had left Hobbiton, starting their great adventure.

The night before, Nerwen had taken her leave from all those she had met in Rivendell – and they were many – but nonetheless, in the morning Elrond, Estel and Glorfindel came to say goodbye; there was also Gaerwen, who was parting for a short time with Elladan who, along with Elrohir, was accompanying the Istar to Lothlórien.

Nerwen bent down to hug Estel, who threw his arms around her neck and told her:

“I’ll miss you very much, Lady Nerwen: you were able to make my study hours so funny…! I hope I’ll meet you soon again.”

She smiled at him:

“Mayhap it won’t be so soon, dear Estel,” she answered, “but I’ll do my best, I promise.”

The boy made a face half disappointed half hopeful, uncertain on how he should feel about this statement; but Nerwen had had no visions in this respect: she knew only that she would like very much to see again Estel – Aragorn – especially if he would fulfil completely the great destiny she had figured for him.
Glorfindel hugged her, towering over her with his tall stature.

“Take care of you, Nerwen my dear,” he recommended.

“Be sure of it, my friend,” she told him, smiling.

Elrond, too, embraced her.

“Have a good trip,” he wished her, “I too, like Estel, hope to meet you again.”

“I hope so, too,” Nerwen nodded, sincerely: in those months she got to know Elrond better – once only a superficial acquaintance, even if between them there had been immediately reciprocal esteem – and she had come to appreciate him for his thoughtfulness and his great erudition.

Gaerwen, whose expression was very sad, curtseyed to her, but the Maia hugged her and whispered in her ear:

“Don’t worry, it won’t be a long time before Elladan will miss you so much, he’ll come back to Imladris in a headlong gallop…”

Her statement managed getting a smile out of the Elf, who thanked her warmly.

Finally, the moment come to mount on their horses and cross the slender bridge stretching over the gorge of the Bruinen, and take the narrow trail leading to the High Pass, located at an elevation of a little more than 1500 metres. They had chosen this way to cross the Misty Mountains – slightly more difficult than the Caradhras, or Redhorn Pass further south – because Nerwen wanted to go to Rhosgobel, Radagast the Brown’s abode on the edge of Mirkwood.

With her and the princes of Rivendell came an escort of about ten armed men: the Misty Mountains were infested by Orcs, even if nobody knew exactly the location of their lairs.

OOO

They needed three days to get over the High Pass, as they had to proceed very carefully, especially because of the horses, to avoid the risk to make them break a leg on the steep and narrow path. Luckily, they hadn’t any unpleasant meetings and they were able to cross the pass undisturbed.

Once they had came down on the other side, they turned southwards for about 30 kilometres, skirting the slopes of the Misty Mountains, until they arrived to an ancient road that, going straight eastwards, was the ideal continuation of the Great East Road; here, they camped for the night, resuming the journey on the next day. Just after noon, they came to the Anduin, the Long River, here still not too wide; they crossed it at the Old Ford, and after a short break for a meal and a rest, they continued until evening, when they stopped for the night. The next day, they reached the borders of Mirkwood; here, they left the road, which now entered into the forest, and turned northward, heading for Rhosgobel, now only about ten kilometres away.

Calad flew away on reconnaissance; when she came back, she reported she had spotted the Wizard’s house, but nothing was moving inside or around it. However, there were a number of animals roaming about, seemingly somehow connected to the place.

Even if Nerwen doubted that Aiwendil knew something about the Ents, she had hoped that his
deep knowledge of Mirkwood, which once hosted them, could give her some more hints about their present location. She felt therefore quite frustrated, but she decided to go on anyway to verify if the Wizard was really not there.

They halted at a certain distance from the house, which was randomly built around and in part inside an enormous walnut tree. Its haphazardly and almost chaotic look inspired some disquiet.

Nerwen, Elladan and Elrohir dismounted and approached it; as Calad had said, the building seemed deserted, doors and windows were barred, and no wisp of smoke rose from the chimney indicating somebody’s presence.

They knocked on the door, but no one came to open it, nor did anything move behind the hermetically closed shutters. They knocked again, and then called out, but received no response. At this point, Nerwen tried to expand her consciousness all around, seeking Radagast’s mind, but she didn’t find any sign of him. However, she perceived very near the alarmed awareness of a cat; examining the façade of the house, she spotted him, curled up on a ledge of the thatched roof. Its fur was of a shining black and its green eyes were staring at her cautiously.

_Hullo, friend cat_, Nerwen greeted him, _No need to worry: we’re friends._

Surprised, the cat started. His mistrust lessened; curious, he got off the roof with a nimble jump and came a few steps closer, but kept at a safe distance. _Curiosity killed the cat_, said an old proverb; but not _this_ cat, thought Nerwen, amused: it was an old and very experienced feline, it would be difficult to take it by surprise and kill it.

_I hear you! Who are you_, the cat enquired, wary.

_I am Nerwen, a colleague and old acquaintance of Aiwendil_, she introduced herself.

_Now I understand why you’re able to talk with me, as does Aiwendil... the feline mused, while its mistrust dissolved definitely, He left many days ago, it said, and they told me he’d stay away for some weeks; but I don’t know where he’s gone._

Now Nerwen’s frustration was complete. She addressed the twins:
“Looks like we came here for nothing: Radagast left days ago and won’t come back any soon. I’m sorry, I wasted your time.”

“Don’t worry, aunt Nerwen, it’s been a detour of just two days,” Elrohir reassured her, “It didn’t bother us at all.”

The Istar sighed, but there was nothing she could do. She watched the position of the sun in the sky, which was closing in toward the peaks of the Misty Mountains: it was now late afternoon. They would spend the night there, and then leave the morning after, heading for the Old Ford to cross again the river, before turning southward to Lothlórien, marching along the Anduin.

Nerwen addressed again the old feline:

Thanks for the news, friend cat, she transmitted him, We’ll sleep here, but we’ll try not to bother you and your companions.

No problem, the feline consented, If you’re friends with Aiwendil, you’re friends with us.

They set camp, lighting a fire to cook something warm, and let the horses free, which – well trained in the Elven manner – wouldn’t go away; Elladan and Elrohir assigned the guard duty, then they sought Nerwen to chitchat a little before dinner. They found her scowling, staring at the shadows under the trees, some dozens of metres away.

“Aunt Nerwen, is there something wrong?” Elladan asked, seeing her gloomy face. The Maia pressed her lips together:

“I don’t like the looks of this forest,” she stated.

“Once it was called Greenwood the Great,” Elrohir said, “but when the influence of Dol Guldur and of its wicked Necromancer took possession of it, the name was changed to Mirkwood. Gigantic spiders, werewolves and Orcs haunt it, except to the north, where Thranduil’s realm is located. The Old Forest Road, on which we journeyed coming from the Old Ford, is no longer safe, and has fallen into disuse; the Elves of the Wooden Realm created a path further north, but being on the southern border of their realm, not even that way is devoid of danger, except for a great host.”

“Don’t worry too much, aunt,” Elladan encouraged her, “We are anyway out of Mirkwood’s borders, and we’ve got our sentinels.”

Nerwen sighed and nodded, momentarily reassured; besides, the animal roaming around didn’t look alarmed, therefore she attributed her aversion for Mirkwood to its lugubrious reputation.

When they finished eating, the sun had set and the dusk was turning into night; the stars lighted one by one in the clear sky, shining brightly against the black velvet of the firmament.

Raising his gaze to the starry vault, Elladan thought about his beloved Gaerwen, and felt inspired to sing; they hadn’t brought along musical instruments, but he could do without. Mouth closed, he started a tune; his brother recognised it immediately and started the second voice. Then Elladan began to sing in a clear voice:

*Meled, nín ōl,*

*Cuiad lúthannen.*
Love, my dream,
Enchanted life.

Your heart is the light of the sun,
Your eyes the hope of the stars,
Your hair floats in the swift wind.

Love, my dream,
Enchanted life. (*)

Elrohir voiced the counter melody, and the two performed the love song until the end, gladdening the hearts of those listening; but Nerwen listened only distractedly, even if she appreciated both their beautiful voices and the song: an eerie uneasiness had begun to grow in her mind. The glanced at the forest, but in the faint starlight she didn’t notice anything out of the ordinary; again, she thought the awful reputation of Mirkwood was influencing her, and she strove to ignore it.

They went to sleep, while two sentinels placed themselves on both sides of the camp. The night was quiet, and soon everyone drifted off to sleep.

Several hours later, Nerwen awoke feeling a great apprehension; she jumped up sitting, but everything was quiet. Watching the position of the stars and of the crescent moon lightening the sky, she estimated it was about one hour after midnight. The sentinels were still at their posts, alert like only the Elves can be when they decide, in case of need, to do voluntarily without sleep.

The Aini searched for Thilgiloth’s and Calad’s thoughts, finding them disquieted, but none was able to pinpoint a reason, only vague and undefined impressions. However Nerwen was on alert: something was wrong, even if she still didn’t know what. She kicked off the blanket, put on her boots and stood up, determined to explore the surroundings; she passed by one of the sentinels, who cast her a puzzled glance but didn’t dare asking her anything: no one questions an Istar about her or his comings and goings.

Nerwen slowly approached the trees, stretching out her senses in both worlds, the visible and the invisible; as soon as they penetrated beyond the curtain of trunks, in her mind exploded the image of a group of several werewolves ready to attack.

“GOER!” she shouted at the top of her lungs; but the werewolves launched their assault at the same moment. Nerwen dove to the ground, just in time to avoid being hit by one of the attackers.
The Elven horses neighed terrified and ran at breakneck speed, seeking safety; all of them, except Thilgiloth, who as a Chargeress didn’t fear werewolves and instead leapt to Nerwen’s rescue.

“Goer, goer!” the sentinels yelled, jumping to their feet, their arrows already notched. Abruptly torn out of their sleep, the others struggled looking for their weapons, while the first werewolf jumped in the middle of their camp and mauled the nearest Elf, who shouted in pain. Elrohir, still lying on the ground, grabbed his bow and shot an arrow, which caught the gaur exactly in the middle of its forehead and made it drop dead.

Nerwen leapt nimbly on Thilghiloth, who had neither saddle nor harness; a gaur saw them and jumped on them, but the Chargeress reared up and hit it powerfully on the snout with her hoof, shattering its jaw. Furious because of the pain, the werewolf turned against her and tried to hit her with a paw; meanwhile, Calad swept in from above and clawed its eye, tearing it off. Mad with pain, the gaur howled and ran, but was intercepted by two arrows and crashed on the ground, dead.

Elladan rose and was about to notch an arrow, when a werewolf tried to assault him from the side, but three arrows, shot from as much Elven bows, hit it in the hip; one hit its heart and killed it on the spot.

Nerwen looked around in the faint light of the moon crescent. The fight raged and the bowstrings sang because of the swiftness the Elves used in shooting their arrows; but the werewolves were in great number, too much to let the assailed ones get out all alive. Nerwen recalled a wasp’s nest she had seen not far from Radagast’s house; now she called for them, asking their help, and immediately the large black-and-yellow insects swarmed out of their nest. They gathered around her, buzzing ferociously; Thilgiloth swerved, nervous.

*Easy, my friend, they’re our allies,* Nerwen calmed her down. She saw a werewolf staring malevolently at her, clearly planning an aggression, and instinctively she sent the wasps against it. The swarm went for the gaur, practically covering it, and many of them began to sting it ruthlessly; howling, the monster ran away at full speed. The wasps chased it briefly, then let it go and turned, looking for a new prey.

At that moment, an assorted group of wild animals joined them unexpectedly: stags, boars, bears, buffalos. Lead by a huge black bear, they immediately charged the werewolves. Nerwen was stunned: her appeal had been only for the wasps and therefore she didn’t expect the intervention of other kelvar. Where did these arrive from?

She had no time to think about it: noticing another threatening gaur, she directed the wasp swarm against it, and then against another and another. As soon as as they sting, the insects retreated, lessening the swarm, but there were still many of them before the fight was over. The battle lasted for many, unending minutes, among howls, roars, grunts, growls, bellows and shouts; but in the end, the goer were vanquished and lay dead or badly wounded. The Elves finished off the latter cutting their throats.

In the middle of the battlefield, suddenly a huge man appeared, with a thick black beard and long, equally black hair, wearing a short sleeveless tunic of coarse canvas; he carried a massive axe. He immediately headed for Nerwen, still sitting on Thilgiloth, and bowed to her.
“I am Beorn,” he introduced himself, “I live near here, and I was keeping an eye on Rhosgobel, knowing that Radagast is away; I saw you arriving, but being the Elves surely not enemies, I didn’t disturb you. But when I saw those cursed werewolves attacking you, I mustered the nearest friends and intervened.”

Elladan and Elrohir had come near and now were watching the big man, amazed.

“We heard about you, Beorn,” Elrohir said, “but I thought you were a fable… the skin-changer man who becomes a bear!”

He looked at them amused from the height of his two-metre stature:

“I’m not a fable, as you can see.”
“Of course you’re not,” Nerwen confirmed, “Your race is very ancient, Beorn, it goes back to the appearance of the first Men on Arda... But I’m forgetting my manners: I’m Nerwen the Green, and these are my nephews Elrohir and Elladan, sons of Lord Elrond of Rivendell.”

“Yeah, I recognised the emblems,” Beorn stated, then he looked at her askance, “The Green, huh? I heard you calling for help those good wasps; I assume you’re a colleague to Radagast and Gandalf.”

“That I am,” Nerwen confirmed, “And on behalf of all of us, I want to thank you and your allies for your valuable help. But there are some wounded, among both yours and mine, who need treatment.”

“You’re right,” Beorn said, “Let’s take care of them. We’ll talk later.”

It turned out that the first Elf who had been attacked had a broken humerus and deep lacerations due to the werewolf’s terrible canines, while another had light scratches on a thigh, inflicted by a paw, and a third one a serious contusion on his hip because of a fall, caused by a gaur that slammed him to the ground.

Nerwen thanked the wasps for their precious help, and the insects took their leave to go resting in their nest; then the Istar went straight to the most severely injured Elf. As the settlement of the broken bone would be very painful, she made him fall asleep whispering some enchanted words in his ear, then she aligned the fracture and used her thaumaturgic power to weld it; then she did the same with the gashes the werewolf’s teeth left, carefully cleaning the wounds from the monster’s contaminated saliva before healing them. While the fracture wouldn’t leave any trace, ugly scars would instead remain as a perennial memory of the fight; but probably the Elf would show them off proudly: getting out alive from a combat with a werewolf isn’t a foregone conclusion.

Elladan treated the other wounded – like his father, he was a very good healer; he cleaned the scratches with water and wine, and then applied an unguent based on hypericum.

Beorn’s unscathed allies had already gone, except four bears, while the bear-man took care of the injured, luckily only a few and all with minor wounds; these too, immediately after the treatment, took their leave to return to their dens.

Meanwhile, the Elves who hadn’t been injured took care of the werewolves’ carcasses; they counted 18 of them, amassing them in a heap about 50 paces away from the devastated camp. Then some Elves went to seek the horses, which had run in panic, while the other ones moved the bivouac outside the area of the fight.

Nerwen called Thilgiloth and Calad, who came immediately to her.

“Oh, thank you, my friends,” she said, “You’ve been brave.”

I hate the werewolves!, the Chargeress snapped.

I fear them, Calad confessed, but when I saw you and Thilgiloth in danger, I just went for that monster and ripped one eye out of its head!

Nerwen caressed them, both with her hands and her mind, communicating them all her gratitude and her love. Her two friends reciprocated, rubbing themselves against her.

Beorn had come near and watched the scene, smiling in his thick beard: he, too, communicated with animals.
Nerwen turned to him:

“Did you give our thanks to your allies?” she enquired.

“Sure,” the bear-man confirmed, “They’re very satisfied with the way this battle ended,” he nodded toward the pile of dead goer, “What do you plan to do with them, now?”

“We’ll burn them,” Nerwen announced, “and scatter their ashes.”

So they did; they gathered a great amount of wood and made a pyre; Beorn showered it with a flask of a rather stinky fuel oil that, he assured them, would augment the temperature very much, so that the carcasses would burn quicker and better. Then he personally lighted the pyre, and helped the Elves to throw the werewolves’ corpses in the flames. In a short time, all were reduced to ashes and embers.

“There’s no danger anymore,” Beorn said, “At least, not of werewolves. I suggest you to sleep for the rest of the night; my allies and I will keep guard for you.”

“Thank you, Beorn,” Elrohir told him, “We are very grateful for your help.”

“The enemies of my enemies are my friends,” the bear-man simply answered, before taking his leave and organising his sentinels.

Nerwen doubted she could go back to sleep; she thought about smoking her pipe and try to relax, in the hope this could help her falling asleep, but then she gave it up: it was difficult to find pipe-weed outside the Shire and its immediate vicinity, and therefore she had to ration it in order to make it last as long as possible.

She laid sleepless for a long while; finally, taken by weariness, she fell asleep, only to be awakened a couple of hours later by the light of the sun, which had just arisen above the top of the trees, hitting her eyelids.

They found out that Beorn had taken care of their breakfast, fetching them bread, cream and honey, which were practically the only nourishment he fed on. The honey was incredibly good: it tasted like many different herbs and flowers, so many that Nerwen wasn’t able to identify them all.

“My bees produce it,” the bear-man told her in confidence, “They are very large and fly very far looking for the nectar with which they make their honey.”

After finishing their breakfast, the members of the escort scattered the ashes of the werewolves, by now cold, so that they would serve as fertilizer for the soil; Beorn gathered the few remaining bones and put them in a bag, in order to disperse them on the Anduin.

“It has been a pleasure to meet you, Nerwen the Green,” he told her, bowing low, “I hope one day our paths will cross again in better circumstances.”

“It has been a pleasure for me, too, Beorn,” the Istar stated, smiling, “and I hope we’ll meet again; until then, may the stars shine upon your path.”

The bear-man bowed his head in acceptance of her words, then he turned to Elrond’s sons and took his leave with a bow, asking them to pay his respects to their father, whose reputation of great wise he was familiar with; finally he nodded to the soldiers of the escort and walked away in long strolls north-westward, presumably in the direction of his abode.

Eventually, the company from Rivendell was ready to leave and off they went, retracing their steps
to the Old Ford, in order to cross again the Anduin and resume their journey to Lothlórien.

(*) The author of the original verses (which I found on the internet and have re-elaborated) is Siri. My translation is surely poor, so I ask the purists to indulge me; but if someone is able to make the precise corrections, please be welcome!

**Author’s corner:**

Well, the encounter with Beorn wasn’t foreseen at all! I imagined the scene of the fight with the werewolves considering that Nerwen, together with the wasps, would call out for the animals befriended to Radagast, roaming near Rhosgobel, but then all of a sudden the bear-man pops out with his animal allies. Another example of character who decides to get his way… maybe he was offended because I didn’t think about him? LOL

*Picture of Rhosgobel, Radagast’s dwelling, by the great illustrator John Howe; Beorn by Leone on Deviantart.*

*Lady Angel*
Chapter XVIII: The Golden Wood

The second day since they had left Rhosgobel, they reached a swampy area covered in canes and iris flowers, not difficult to cross; nonetheless, they preferred to bypass it, and Elladan explained to Nerwen that this place, called the Gladden Fields, had seen Isildur’s killing by the hands of the Orcs, and it was the place where the One Ring was lost, which Isildur had cut off from Sauron’s hand. Nerwen felt a cold shiver creeping down her spine and was glad they had decided to go around it instead of going through: this place held nefarious memories.

OOO

Three days later, in the early afternoon, the small company that had set off from Rivendell came into view of the northern border of Galadriel’s and Celeborn’s realm. Calad, who was flying high above them but not much ahead, swooped to approach Nerwen, who hastily put on her falconry glove to allow her to perch on it.

"Sooner or later she’ll crash to the ground," Thilgiloth commented amused, but also a little worried: the two kelvar had become close friends, exactly like Nerwen had hoped, and they cared for each other. Nerwen sent a reassuring thought to the Chargeress: flight swiftness was a characteristic of the birds of prey, and particularly of calé hawks.

"I’ve never seen such huge trees!" Calad cried, marvelled, transmitting her the image her sharp eyes
had seen. Even if in Aman existed massive trees, taller than 150 metres and thousands of years old – actually in her garden grew two of them – Nerwen was impressed: these were only a little smaller, both in height and in circumference.

Getting nearer, she recognised the kind: they were *mallorn* trees, with their smooth silvery bark, similar to the birch, and peculiar leaves, green on the upper side and silvery on the lower one.

The vast forest, home to the Galadhrim or People of the Trees, was located in the corner formed by the confluence of the Celebrant into the Anduin; the capital, Caras Galadhon, was built on a high hill at about fifteen kilometres from the encounter of the two rivers, well inside the tree cover, and was the site of the biggest trees in the whole wood.

Elrohir signalled to the commander of the armed group, who unfolded the banner of Rivendell, a blue standard with a large silver star (*). When they arrived near enough from the first *mellyrn* they halted, and only the standard bearer advanced for some dozens metres.

“The sons of Lord Elrond, Lord of Imladris, salute the Galadhrim!” he cried in a strong and clear voice.

From behind the silvery trunks suddenly appeared two dozens of Elves, dressed in a silver-grey colour with green shades, perfectly blending into the forest colours. Most had raven-black hair, claiming manifestly their descent from the ancient Teleri who undertook the long journey from Cuviénén to the Undying Lands, but who stopped along the way, becoming the Nandor, the Silvan Elves. In the group there were also some brown-haired Elves, surely of *Noldorin* lineage; only one showed blond hair, declaring ancestors among the Vanyar. It was he who signalled to them all to lower their large bows of yew wood, bent with arrows notched to the strings and aiming to the strangers, this way revealing him as the patrol leader.

The twins recognised him and smiled, spurring their horses to approach him.
“Haldir, old friend!,” Elrohir greeted him, dismounting to clasp his wrist in the Sindarin custom. Haldir returned his grasp and did the same with Elladan.

“Hullo, and welcome back to Lórien,” he said; his accent was slightly different from the one of Rivendell, which was in turn different from the one of the Grey Havens.

Haldir looked puzzled at Nerwen, who had come near riding on Thilgiloth. Elrohir invited her to dismount, and when she was next to them, he introduced her formally:

“Haldir, this is Nerwen the Green, relative to my father; Lady Nerwen, may I introduce you to Haldir of the Galadhrim, captain of the border guards?”

Haldir bowed low:

“I’m honoured to meet you, my lady,” he said.

“The honour is mine, Captain Haldir,” she reciprocated.

“We were waiting for you,” the blond-haired Elf said then, looking at them, “Messages have arrived from Imladris to Lady Galadriel some days ago, announcing your arrival.”

This didn’t surprise Nerwen, who knew how Elrond and Galadriel, through the power of Vilya and Nenya, were able to converse mentally even through great distances; a capability that Narya didn’t possess, though, excluding therefore Mithrandir from the communications.

“I’m on patrol for another couple of days,” Haldir went on, “I’ll have two of my people taking you
to Caras Galadhon; as soon as I come back, I’ll see you.”

“Fine!” Elladan replied, “So, tell us how you’re doing with that pretty blonde girl, Ireth…”

Haldir’s eyes lighted up like stars, hearing the name of the one who evidently was his beloved, but being reserved, he didn’t comment.

“Beriadir!” he called, turning, and from the group came forth a very tall Noldo, who came near quickly. His eyes, of a very deep shade of blue, rested on Nerwen and stayed on her a moment longer than needed; struck by that gaze, where she could read deep admiration, the Maia returned it, thinking the Elf was really very attractive.

“Escort our friends from Imladris to Caras Galadhon,” Haldir instructed him, “Take Glinnel with you. Then you can stay there, as you shift will almost be over.”

From this point, Caras Galadhon was about forty kilometres away, which they had to travel on foot because their guides had no horses, and this meant an eight-hour walk at the least. Given the hour, they wouldn’t arrive before nightfall; therefore they would sleep outside, and their arrival would be in the late hours of the morning after.

At Beriadir’s nod, a slender female Elf with raven-black hair came at his side; as the other ones, she wore a tunic and britches and carried a great bow over her shoulders. She smiled cordially at the group coming from Rivendell.

“We’ll meet there, then,” said Haldir, taking his leave; he bowed again to Nerwen and clutched the twins’ wrists.

“See you soon,” Elrond’s sons said.

Nerwen called to Calad, who came quickly down and perched on Thilgiloth’s saddle. The Galadhrim watched her manoeuvre with curiousness: it wasn’t a common thing seeing a hawk taking place so comfortably on the back of a horse. It was apparent that the two animals had a great confidence with each other.

“I’m afraid this time you’re forced to come with us in the wood,” the Istar said, talking to the bird of prey, “but they told me there are large clearings, where you’ll be able to fly easily.”

Calad shook her proud head in disapproval.

*Very well, if it’s truly necessary, I’ll do it,* she said, with a certain grace even if she was somewhat moody because of her aversion to forests.

The Elves of Lórien marvelled at this only for a moment; after all, Nerwen introduced herself as an Istar, and all of them knew Radagast, who talked with animals.

The rest of the group coming from Imladris dismounted; with a last parting nod to Haldir and his patrol, they entered among the tall and slender trees, leading their horses by the bridle.

They walked mostly in silence, occasionally making some remark about the surroundings. Nerwen was very glad that in a short time she would see again Galadriel, her old acquaintance from Valinor; she had met her various times in Menegroth, during her visits to Melian, but their last encounter had been before the War of Wrath, because Galadriel and Celeborn had left Doriath for Nargothrond, the realm of one of her brothers, Finrod. Very similar in their characters, being both strong and determined, mindful but capable of infinite glee, Nerwen and Galadriel had been good friends – even if not exactly intimate – during the time the latter had dwelt in the Undying Lands;
even if after Morgoth’s theft of the Silmarilli the fair-haired Elda chose the voluntary exile to the Hither Shore, their friendship had lasted through the entire First Age; and even if thousands of years had gone by, Nerwen had no doubt that this friendship was still intact, and therefore they would renew easily as soon as they would meet.

Concerning Celeborn, Galadriel’s husband, Nerwen knew him enough well, and had a great respect for him: he was the only Elda who, for moral and intellectual stature, could be an equal to Galadriel, who was considered the greatest and wisest among the Noldor. Celeborn was related to Thingol and like him, he belonged to the royal lineage of the Teleri, characterised by the silvery colour of their hair; he had met Galadriel in Doriath, when she had arrived there after leaving Valinor, and here the two of them had fallen in love and had married.

Nerwen snapped out of her thoughts noticing Beriadir had left Glinnie to lead alone the group and had come to her.

“Forgive my curiosity, my lady,” he said, “I heard Lord Elrohir introducing you to Captain Haldir as Nerwen the Green, and this reveals your belonging to the Order of the Istari; but I thought only men were part of it.”

Who anyway weren’t Men at all, even if they had their looks, Nerwen thought; but she didn’t say it, because only very few knew the true nature of the Wizards.

“I see…”

The Silvan Elf found Nerwen quite fascinating and his question had been only an excuse to begin a conversation, but even he had never been particularly timid with the other sex, he found himself unexpectedly running out of topics. Then his gaze fell on Calad, still perching on Thigluth’s saddle.

“I’m fond of birds of prey,” he said, “Here in the woods live owls, little owls and barn owls; as a boy I had an eagle-owl, with whom I went hunting. His name was Erannad.”

“She’s a calë hawk,” Nerwen revealed, “and her name’s Calad. She’s my lookout, and when on reconnaissance she saw the mellyrn, she was very impressed. I, too, actually: I’ve never seen trees this size, in Middle-earth.”

That was true: not even the lost great forests of Beleriand could claim such gigantic trees, except for a few like Hírilorn, the huge beech with a triple trunk where Thingol imprisoned Lúthien in the vain attempt to prevent her to help Beren in the search for the Silmaril he had asked him in exchange of her hand.

Beriadir, who was very proud of his land, was pleased by Nerwen’s admiration.

“Lórien is the only place in Middle-earth where they grow,” he told her, ignoring she already knew about this, having learned it during her research at the Grey Havens, “In autumn the leaves become golden and don’t fall until spring, when the new ones appear; and also its flowers, blossoming in April, are golden. That’s why this is called the Golden Wood.”

“I guess it’s quite a pretty view,” Nerwen commented sincerely. There were many mellyrn in Tol
Eressëa, the great isle in front of the Calaciry, but they didn’t form a wood because they grew scattered, solitary or on groups of three or four.

“Yes, it is indeed,” Beriadir confirmed, nodding with a smile.

“Were you born here, Beriadir?” she asked him, curious to learn how a Noldo ended up among Silvan Elves.

“Yes, I was; but my father was born in Valinor and is part of Finarfin’s House. My mother instead is a Nando.”

Finarfin, Galadriel’s father, was the High King of the Noldor, and in Valinor he dwelt in Tirion on the green hill of Túna. Nerwen knew him well; unlike his children – Galadriel and her three brothers – he didn’t leave for Middle-earth after Morgoth stole the Silmarilli; and even if he joined the War of Wrath, which in the end defeated the Dark Enemy, after the battle he went back to the Undying Lands, therefore his daughter, who at that time had already left Beleriand with Celeborn and was the only one of his descent who had survived until the Third Age, didn’t see him since she left Valinor.

“Do they live in Caras Galadhon,?” Nerwen asked.

“No, they live up the Celebrant, at some distance from the city; my father is known to be the best boat-maker throughout Lórien...”

The following hours passed in no time for Nerwen, who enjoyed very much Beriadir’s conversation, brilliant and funny. She learnt thus how Galadriel and Celeborn had become the Lady and Lord of Lothlórien, even if they weren’t of the same kin of the Galadhrim: Amdír, founder of Lórinand – the original name of this land, which meant golden valley – had died during the battle of Dagorlad, when Sauron was defeated by the Last Alliance, and his realm passed down to his only son, Amroth; but the latter decided to abandon it in order to cross the Great Sea with his beloved Nimrodel. Deprived of a leader, the Galadhrim proclaimed Galadriel and Celeborn as their Lady and Lord; this was the reason why they didn’t hold the title of king and queen. Galadriel changed the name of the place to honour the place she had dwelt in Valinor, Lórien, abode of the Vala Irmo, the Lord of Visions and Dreams.

When they halted briefly to rest and eat something, Beriadir excused himself with Nerwen and went to Glinnel to talk with her about the way still to go. Elrohir approached the Istar and winked at her:

“I see you made a conquest, aunt Nerwen,” he said, amused. She burst into laughter:

“O come on, he just met me!”

“So what? You can be struck at first sight, don’t you know?” the Prince of Rivendell replied, peppy. Nerwen fell silent: yes, she knew it. She knew it all too well, because it was exactly what happened to her and Thorin. Only this time she didn’t reciprocate in the same way – assuming her nephew was right – Beriadir’s interest. He was very attractive, sure, but she didn’t feel for him what she had felt for the Dwarven prince... She doubted she would ever feel that way again.

They resumed their path, deviating slightly westward; Beriadir, who came again to walk next to Nerwen – to Elrohir’s great amusement, and to Elladan’s, too, who his twin had alerted about what, in his opinion, was going on – explained to her that before sunset they would reach a flet, a tree refuge typical to the Galadhrim, where they could comfortably spend the night.
Thus, they arrived in the evening to a small mound where, among the branches of two adjacent trees, platforms had been built.

Glínnel jumped high and grasped one of the lower branches, then with a nimble loop she sat on it, beginning to climb on the tree and disappearing in the central hole of the platform. Soon after, a rope ladder was lowered along the trunk and the Elf came down again.

“You can leave your horses here, they’re perfectly safe,” she suggested them all, “then you can go up, here or on the other mallorn.”

Meanwhile, Beriadir had climbed on the second tree, and at that moment he was lowering another ladder to allow the access to that flet. This was smaller, about the half of the first, so it was decided that the members of the armed escort would go on the larger, while Nerwen, Elladan, Elrohir, Glínnel and Beriadir would sleep on this one.

They dined, using the food brought from Imladris: dried fruits, ripened cheese and stripes of corned beef. The two Silvan Elves offered lembas, a particular type of cracker, very nourishing, which recipe, in the Elder Days, Melian had given to Galadriel, and of which the Galadhrim made large use; they drank fresh water, taken from a nearby spring.

After dinner, they chatted a little, while the light waned and night came; then they rolled themselves in their blankets and slept until morning.

OOO

They arrived at Caras Galadhon more than one hour before noon, coming from northeast; the only access was a large gate opening in the southern part of the wall protecting the city of trees, a tall earthen rampart surrounded by a moat full of water. They circumvent a good third of the circular wall, going over the bridge in front of the gates – which were permanently open, but a mechanism would allow a very quick closure in case of need – and taking the path, climbing with many bends the sides of a great hill, toward the most impressive mallorn of all, which had no equal even in Tol Eressëa, growing almost at the exact centre of the city and hosting Celeborn’s and Galadriel’s palace. As they approached the foot of the immense tree, they saw they were awaited, because some grooms came to take the newcomers’ horses, assuring them they would see to their luggage to be brought to their lodgings.
Calad, still perched on Thiligloth’s saddle, looked at Nerwen, perplexed:

*Where shall I go now?*

The Maia pondered briefly: it didn’t seem suitable to bring her immediately into the palace, nor to make her go to the stables with the horses. Then she remembered Beriadir telling her he had had an eagle-owl: of course it wasn’t exactly the same thing, but it was anyway a bird of prey.

*What if I ask Beriadir to keep you for a couple of hours, until I learn where I’ll stay and come to fetch you?* she asked the hawk.

Calad flapped her wings in an acceptance sign:

*He has a favourable attitude towards you, so I think it’s all right.*

It was her way to tell her she had noticed how the Silvan Elf liked Nerwen. The Istar concealed a grimace, not knowing if she felt exasperated or amused by the situation, and turned to Beriadir:

“May I ask you the favour to keep Calad for a couple of hours? Just as long as I need to learn where I’ll stay, then I’ll come to fetch her.”

The Elf bowed to her:

“All things for you, Lady Nerwen.”

Elrohir, beside the Istar, turned to the other side to hide a grin: Beriadir had fallen *for good*, he thought. He hoped his aunt decided to reciprocate his interest: he had seen her very lonely, during the months of her stay in Rivendell, and even if she had explained to him the true nature of her
relationship with Glorfindel, he wondered why she hadn’t thought to choose him as a companion to ease, even if only momentarily, the solitude he saw in her heart.

“I’m afraid my falconry glove is too small for you,” Nerwen was talking to Beriadir, unaware of her nephew’s thoughts. Beriadir unfastened his cloak and wrapped it quickly around his arm, extending it toward Calad in an inviting gesture. The hawk soared and went to perch lightly on the Elf’s forearm.

“Hello, Calad,” Beriadir greeted her, and she answered him with her typical call kek-kek-kek: the Silvan Elf smiled, then he turned to Nerwen:

“I live in the Third Street, eighth mallorn on the right; on the sign there’s my name, Beriadir Cairtanion.”

“Very well…”

In the meantime, some servants had signalled to the escort from Rivendell to follow them to the lodgings appointed to them, while a court dignitary had come to welcome Elrond’s sons and their relative:

“Welcome, my lady and my lords: Lord Celeborn and Lady Galadriel are waiting for you,” she told them with a graceful curtsey, “My name is Nimgil, the Palace Superintendent,” she introduced herself to Nerwen – obviously Elrohir and Elladan already knew her from their previous visits.

Beriadir turned to Nerwen and the twins:

“I take my leave, for the moment,” he said with a bow, while Glinnel did the same, “I hope to see you soon, all of you.”

He cast a glance to Nerwen, who smiled at him, then he and his colleague turned and went away.

“He wants to see only aunt Nerwen, not us,” Elrohir whispered to Elladan, who winked at him, agreeing.

“Hey, I heard you, you impertinent nephew!” Nerwen reprimanded him, but she couldn’t avoid a giggle.

Nimgil invited them to follow her, and the three did, beginning to ascend the long stair climbing on the gigantic mallorn, winding in a right-moving spiral around the colossal trunk. Many metres higher, they passed through the hole in the large platform on which the palace was built and entered the dwelling of Galadriel and Celeborn, Lady and Lord of Lothlórien.

(*) Actually, I don’t know what the emblems of Rivendell are; I found this description on the internet and I liked it, but if someone know the actual one, please let me know.

Author’s corner:
Among the Elven realms imagined by Tolkien in all of his narrative, Lothlórien is surely my favourite, for two reasons: first, because it’s a realm in the middle of nature, and I love nature dearly – it’s not by chance that Nerwen is the Lady of the Green; second, Lórien is the abode of Galadriel, my favourite female character in the Tolkienverse, for whom the Professor himself had a great admiration. So be prepared to a certain number of chapters set in the Golden Wood. ;-) 

Who knows if a new suitor will be able to make Nerwen smile again? It surely won’t be easy, for Beriadir, to win the Istar’s melancholic heart...

Lady Angel
Celeborn: very tall, with long, silvery hair and a solemn stare; at his side Galadriel: slender and tall as much as him, with the shimmering golden hair which gained her the name Celeborn had given her, *maiden crowned with a radiant garland*, and made her prefer it over the names her parents had given her.
Both were dressed in white and silver, and awaited their guests at the bottom of the large stairs leading to the throne room. Elladan and Elrohir bowed low to them as the Lord and Lady of Lórien, but then rushed to hug them as the maternal grandparents they hadn’t seen in a long time. Even if the twins were tall, they didn’t match the height of their hosts, who were over 1,90 m.

Galadriel kissed their brows, then she turned to her old friend.

“Nerwen Laiheri, welcome in our home,” she said.

“Only Nerwen the Green, now,” the Istar corrected her, returning her smile. Galadriel nodded: she had noticed her look was different, and it wasn’t just because of the shape or her ears; she was veiled, as Elrond had told her.

She opened her arms, and Nerwen approached her; the two old friends hugged affectionately, happy to meet again after all those centuries: the last time had been in Menegroth, the underground palace of Thingol and Melian in Doriath, before Galadriel and Celeborn decided to go east, beyond the Ered Luin, and before the War of Wrath which would destroy Beleriand.

When they parted, Nerwen looked into Galadriel’s bright blue eyes and saw that, in the many centuries that had passed since their last encounter, the Lady of the Galadhrim, who already in Valinor was counted among the wisest of the Noldor, had grown even more in wisdom.

“I’m glad to see you,” she said.

“I, too,” Galadriel said, in a moved tone uncommon for her, who was usually very self-controlled.

Celeborn, too, came near and, in a more formal way but with equal pleasure, embraced his wife’s old friend.

“Welcome, Lady Nerwen,” he said, “I’m glad you’re here.”

“Thank you, Lord Celeborn,” she answered, “I, too, am glad to be here.”

“Where’s our sister?” Elrohir enquired.

“We sent for her as soon as we learned you were about to arrive at Caras Galadhon,” Galadriel answered, then she cast a glance at Nerwen, “Arwen looks exactly like your niece Lúthien,” she warned her. The Istar nodded:

“Mithrandir told me. I’m actually very curious to verify personally how much this is true.”

“Very.” Galadriel assured her.

“Elladan! Elrohir!” they heard an excited voice. Turning, Nerwen was shocked: the only, most beloved child of Melian, Lúthien Tinúviel, the most beautiful creature who had ever trod the world’s paths, was standing before her, alive and vibrant with joy. The Aini staggered, and Celeborn supported her by her elbow, looking at her slightly worried.
The apparition ran to the twins and hugged them impetuously, peppering them with kisses, and receiving back as much.

“Arwen, little sister, we missed you so much!” they greeted her.

So it was true, Nerwen thought, feeling dizzy: Arwen Undómiel, Elrond’s daughter, was the living image of her great-great-grandmother: the same lovely features, the same supple shape, the same black hair, very long and wavy. When the gorgeous maiden turned to look at her, intrigued, the Maia noticed the only difference: the eyes, which were of the same shade of blue as a mountain lake, while Lúthien’s had been grey-green, the perfect blend of those of her parents.

Noticing her gaze, the twins turned, and Elladan hurried to introduce them to one another:

“Arwen, this is our aunt Nerwen the Green, Melian’s sister. Aunt Nerwen, may I introduce you our sister Arwen?”

Finding back her composure, the Aini left Celeborn and drew near the siblings.

“You look exactly like Lúthien…” she said to Arwen, still flabbergasted; then she blinked and came completely back to herself, “I beg your pardon, I forget my manners: glad to meet you, Arwen. Double so, because you remind me so much to my beloved sister’s daughter. Melian would be happy – more than happy – to meet you.”

“Me too, I’d be happy to meet my foremother,” Arwen said smiling, not completely understanding her relative’s feelings, but nonetheless feeling moved by them in turn, “Meanwhile, I’m happy to meet you.”

They embraced, a little awkwardly because, after all, they had just met; but both felt it was an
important moment.

“Come,” Celeborn invited them all, “let’s have lunch together; before it, you can go to freshen up in your quarters. You two have the usual room,” he went on, talking to the twins, “near Arwen’s; for you, Lady Nerwen, we ordered the apartment we give to the guests of honour.”

Nerwen thanked him: again, her original status would be superior to her hosts’, but she didn’t forget it wasn’t any longer that way, now; however, the Lord and Lady of the Galadhrim were treating her like a queen, as Elrond had done, too.

Celeborn was about to call a servant to have Nerwen escorted to her quarters, but Arwen stopped him:

“I’ll take care of it, Grandpa… Come, Aunt Nerwen, follow me,” she said, taking her arm, “My brothers know the way to their room and can go by themselves…”

After a curtsy to the Lord and Lady, niece and aunt took their leave and exited through a door on the opposite side.

Arwen was truly very glad to meet her foremother’s sister; Melian and Thingol started the bloodline Arwen herself belonged to, back in the Elder Days when neither Sun nor Moon existed yet, and not even the Two Trees, and Arda was illuminated only by the stars of Varda Elentári.

“Do I really look so alike my great-great-grandmother?” she asked her, thrilled: the tale of Beren and Lúthien was, among the ancient stories, her favourite one.

“Oh yes,” the Maia confirmed, “except for the eyes, Lúthien’s were grey-green; but for everything else, you are absolutely her precise double.”

“I hope I’ll have a love as extraordinary as hers,” Arwen said in a dreamy voice, “Of course, with a happier ending, but I’d like truly to love and be loved as much as she did and was.”

A premonition caught Nerwen, but her Second Sight didn’t come up; nor did the feeling reveal itself as positive or negative.

“Be careful what you wish for,” she admonished her, “because you could obtain it…”

“I don’t see any peril in dreaming the love of your life,” Arwen replied, with what Nerwen, in time, would learn to be her inexhaustible optimism, “By the way, would you like me to borrow you a gown for lunch? I think we have the same size…”

“Yes, I agree; but you’re much taller than me, I’d surely trip in the skirt!” Nerwen laughed; she always made fun of her stature – which was unusually short for an Aini or even an Elf.

“Oh, that won’t be a problem: we just pin the lower hem, anyway it’s only temporary…”

When they arrived at Nerwen’s rooms, they found a handmaid who was finishing dusting.

“Oh, Gwilwileth,” Arwen called for her, “Would you please go to my room and fetch a dress for Lady Nerwen? The light blue with white sleeves. And bring some pins, too: we must shorten the skirt in the front.”

The female Elf – with the typically raven-black hair of the Nandor and bright hazelnut-brown eyes – made a small curtsey and ran away to accomplish the task she had been entrusted with.
There was a little table with a mirror, a washbowl and a pitcher full of water, as well as soaps, towels and washcloths; also combs, brushes, hairpins and hair ribbons were available. Nerwen freshened up, and in the meantime, Gwilwileth returned with the dress and the pins. As she had noticed Nerwen was wearing boots, very cleverly she had brought also one pair of slippers.

She and Arwen helped Nerwen putting on the gown, which was made of light velvet the colour of aquamarine with long and wispy sleeves in white silk veil. Then, the handmaid shortened the hem, adjusting the skirt length to Nerwen’s lesser stature, inserting the pins in a way so they weren’t visible; the slippers were too large, but for the moment they could do.

Eventually, Arwen invited her aunt to sit down and fixed her hair, undoing the practical braid that she wore while travelling and letting her mane falling free on her back; she braided only two tresses on her temples and pulled them back to avoid them falling on her face, decorating them with white ribbons.

Seeing the enthusiasm she had in taking care of her, Nerwen realised she missed greatly her mother, Celebrían and her heart flew out to Arwen. When her niece was finished, Nerwen looked in the mirror, then she stood up and turned slowly around, appreciating what she was seeing.

“Thank you, little niece, I feel gorgeous,” she said affectionately, and hugged her. Arwen returned the hug, feeling satisfied of her own job, and even slightly thrilled: she already loved this relative coming from such a distant time and place. Evidently, through the generations their blood spoke and recognised itself… she had no other explanation.

“Let’s go, it’s almost time,” Arwen invited her, taking again her arm. They exited the room, and Arwen led her aunt along the corridors of the tree palace to the private dining room of Galadriel and Celeborn; the Lady of the Galadhrim was on a small terrace, sitting on a wicker armchair while having a cold drink. As soon as she glimpsed at them through the open door, she waved them to join her; Nerwen looked out and her breath caught in her throat: the sight from this point, at the top of the highest mallorn on the highest hill of all Lothlórien, was simply amazing.

“It’s wonderful,” she said, “Surely worthy of Valinor.”

“Yes, you’re right,” Galadriel agreed, nodding, “and indeed it’s one of the reasons Celeborn and I were happy, and not only honoured, to accept governing this place, when we were asked for it. We already knew it, having been a couple of time guests of Amdír, the founder of the realm of Lórinand; and we renamed it Lothlórien because it reminded me of the place I used to live in Valinor, the gardens of Lórien.”

“It’s a perfectly proper name,” the Istar said, taking the goblet Arwen was handing to her, “What is it?”

“Sweet cider,” Galadriel answered, an almost mischievous gleam in her blue eyes. Nerwen burst out laughing; her passion for this beverage had been often the cause of many jokes, between the two of them. Arwen looked at her grandmother and her aunt, amused despite she didn’t know the reason of their fun.

The Lady of the Wood raised her cup to her old friend:

“To our meeting, after so much time,” she toasted. Nerwen reciprocated:

“To our meeting.”

Arwen was curious:
“So, how long have you known each other?” she asked.

“For a long, long time,” Nerwen answered, “I know your grandmother since she was born, during the Years of the Trees. They say – and I think not without reason – that the light of Telperion and Laurelin has been entrapped in her hair, that’s why Celeborn named her Galadriel…”

Arwen nodded: she knew that the paternal name of her grandmother was Artanis, and the maternal Nerwen, exactly like her aunt, but that she had preferred over them the one created for her by her beloved, who later had become her husband.

Arwen addressed Galadriel:

“But you met the other Istari only when they arrived in Middle-earth, am I right?”

“Yes, that’s right,” she Lady of the Galadhrim confirmed. At that moment, Elladan and Elrohir arrived; both joined them for a draught of cider, and therefore Galadriel didn’t go on with the issue. Finally, also Celeborn joined them.

They sat down and ate bread, cheese, raw vegetables and fruits, a light lunch following the custom of Lothlórien, where the day began with a very rich breakfast and ended with a substantial dinner, while the mid-day meal was the least significant of the three.

When they finished lunch, Nerwen took her leave to go to Beriadir and take back Calad. By now, her luggage had surely been carried in her quarters, therefore she told Arwen she would return her her dress, but the girl invited her to keep it until evening, so she hadn’t to change again. The Istar went anyway back to her room to recover her shoes, because the too large slippers, besides not being suitable outdoors in the streets, made her risk tumbling down headlong already a couple of times. Then she took her falconry glove and went off, walking down the long spiral stair; once she arrived on the street, she asked information on where to find Beriadir’s abode. It wasn’t difficult: the Silvan Elf had given clear directions, and in a short time Nerwen was in front of the gate that lead to a small garden surrounding the trunk of the mallorn where he lived; on the sign, as he had told her, she read his name and patronymic.

Nerwen hesitated, not knowing what this place’s customs were about showing up at someone’s doorstep: calling aloud? Entering and ascending the stair climbing around the trunk, and then announcing oneself once arrived at the entrance of the flet? She decided for a simpler solution and mentally called Calad who, hearing her, took off from the platform and came to perch on her glove.

Here am I, as promised, Nerwen said.

Nice to see you again; did you find the people you were looking for? the bird of prey enquired.

Yes, and they gave me a nice and wide lodging, with a terrace you can be comfortable on, the Istar answered, I say hullo to Beriadir and then we can go.

Lifting her gaze to the flet, about ten metres above her, Nerwen saw him showing up at the edge of the platform. For a moment, she forgot breathing: the Silvan Elf was shirtless, revealing the muscular chest and shoulders of an accomplished archer.
He, too, saw her, and cast her his dazzling smile; he nodded, then he got back and swiftly donned the shirt he had been about to put on when he had seen the hawk flying away. Swiftly, he slipped through the door and went downstairs.

“Welcome to my home,” he said, opening the gate, “I see Calad is impatient to return to you, my lady: I hope it doesn’t mean she was uncomfortable with me.”

“Not at all,” Nerwen reassured him, having sensed the hawk’s wellbeing, “I thank you for having taken care of her.”

“Don’t even mention it, it was a matter of just a few hours,” he looked at her openly, “You’re very appealing in this attire, Lady Nerwen. As you were also before, anyway,” he added with a chivalrous smile.

And you’re very appealing wearing nothing, Nerwen thought involuntarily, then she blinked, amazed at herself: she hadn’t had such cheeky thoughts for a long time. She didn’t have such thoughts not even about Thorin: his eyes were what had bewitched her, not his physical appearance. Calion, too, had struck her in a different way, at the time.

All of a sudden, she realised she liked Beriadir wooing her. Not that she was feeling ready to jump in a bed with him, but maybe the handsome Silvan Elf could help her getting over Thorin, whose memory was still very strong in her mind and in her heart. Even if her Second Sicht didn’t show her visions in one direction or the other, she thought she wouldn’t see the Dwarf Prince ever again: their missions laid between them; but even if they would meet again, Nerwen knew that Thorin wasn’t her partner for life, and this made wrong her staying tied to his memory.

“Thank you,” she said therefore, thinking his remark agreeable, “You surely know how to compliment a lady…” she added jestingly. He shook his head:
“I’m just saying what I think, I guarantee.”

They stayed there, looking at each other smiling, for some more moments, then Nerwen took her leave:

“I’m going back to the palace to check on Thilgiloth and arrange things for Calad. Mayhap later I’ll take an explorative stroll through the town…” she added, intentionally. Beriadir immediately took the prompt:

“I’d love to be your guide, Lady Nerwen,” he offered.

“You’re very nice,” she thanked him, “If you’re really not busy… What about coming at the palace entrance in one hour?”

“Very gladly. See you later, then…”

Nerwen returned to the palace almost dancing: she felt euphoric, and she wasn’t sure about the reason. Yes, Beriadir was surely a very handsome Elf, but it wasn’t certainly the first time she had a date; and, by the way, this couldn’t be called exactly a date, as it was just an explorative tour of the town; and, unlike what happened with Thorin when he invited her to that fateful trip in the wood, she didn’t foresee nor wished it ending up in horizontal position. She tried to understand what it was that made her so happy, but even if she was racking her brains, she didn’t draw any conclusions. Therefore, she decided to live the moment as it came, and eventually the reason would manifest itself.

Once at the palace, she asked a servant where they were sheltering Thilgiloth, and he addressed her to the stables, located at a short distance from the immense mallorn. The Chargeress was lazily munching fodder, but as soon as she saw Nerwen and Calad arriving, she stopped and moved to meet them.

*I sense you’re content, as you haven’t been for a long time*, Thilgiloth noticed, feeling her friend’s state of mind, *At Imladris you cheered up, but your soul was still melancholic. Has that Elf to be credited for, the one who you talked so long with yesterday and this morning?*

*I think so*, Nerwen admitted, *I still couldn’t figure out the reason, because I’m not attracted to him as I was to Thorin, but… I like the way he talks to me.*

*Good; I’m glad for you*, the Chargeress commented.

Reassured about Thilgiloth comfort, the Aini took her leave and climbed again the long stair leading to the tree palace. Once she arrived in her apartment, she showed the terrace to Calad, and here she found out that someone had thought about bringing a perch and a basin of water for the hawk. Maybe the twins had given orders to a servant: she would ask them at the earliest opportunity, and if so, she would thank them.

Calad went and drank some water, then she made herself comfortable on the perch; gazing at the landscape, she mused:

*From here I can take off without fearing to get caught in the branches. It’ll be easy going hunting: a bit far away, having to exit the forest, but all in all, it’s fine.*

*I’m glad you like it*, Nerwen said, as usual very attentive to the wellbeing of her two faithful kelvar friends, *Like in Rivendell, you’re free to come and go at your leisure: we’re among friends, here. Now I’ll take a little rest, then I’ll go for a walk in town…*
When she went again downstairs, Beriadir was already there, awaiting for her; over his shirt, he sported a dark green doublet in damasked silk, tight at the waist so that his shoulders looked even broader. Once more, his looks struck Nerwen.

The Silvan Elf turned; seeing her, he beamed. She liked the way he smiled: his whole face lightened up and his eyes sparkled.

“My lady…,” he greeted her, bowing slightly. The Istar decided she had enough of all those formalities, at least with him.

“Oh, call me just Nerwen,” she invited him, “as friends do.”

He gave her his arm:

“I’m honoured to call myself a friend of yours, Nerwen,” he said with an even wider smile than before, the heat of which would melt even the ice covering the Helcaraxë strait. She felt her stomach flutter while she was slipping her hand under his arm.

“Same here,” she reciprocated, trying to maintain a casual tone; but she felt rather unsettled.

Beriadir sensed Nerwen’s agitation, and at first he felt flattered, realising she returned his attraction; however, a moment later, he realised that, under it, there was hesitation. Something was holding her back and, very wisely, the Elf decided not to push her further.

“Come,” he invited her, “I take you to see the market.”

Nerwen learned that, near the city gates, a market was held four days of the week; one could find all sorts of goods produced by the Galadhrim, and it was always very crowded: in fact, there weren’t any shops in Caras Galadhon, and those who had a craft workshop, sold their articles at the market, when they didn’t produce them directly behind the stall.

Nerwen and Beriadir wandered among the colourful market stalls; they really had everything: fruits, vegetables, meat and fish, eggs, cheeses, bread, sweets, spices, beverages of all sorts; and then fabrics, clothes, laces and trimmings, footwear, belts, gloves, underwear and household linen, carpets and tapestries; bags and purses, baskets and pack baskets, dishware, perfumes and ointments, jewels, and dozens of other items. There was also one stall selling herbs and flowers, and it was here that Nerwen stopped: in her garden in Aman there were all, truly all of Arda’s olvar; however, as she already noticed since her arrival in Middle-earth, the size and colours here sometimes were different, and discovering the differences intrigued her much.

She and her escort continued to walk arm in arm, glancing at the many goods; Beriadir stopped by the bow-maker to purchase a new string for his great yew bow, and while he was at it, he bought a new baldric for his quiver, too.

Going on walking, the sweet smell coming from the pastries stall attracted Nerwen and her stomach grumbled: that morning she had a quite meagre breakfast, and the light meal she shared with the Lord and Lady of the Galadhrim and her nephews and niece didn’t completely satiate her. Therefore, she was tempted by a slice of apricot pie with sweet cream and covered by apricot jelly; Beriadir, too, had one. Then they went to the stall selling beverages and bought some white wine,
When they ended their walkthrough of the market, they sat on a bench to rest briefly, before going back to the palace; in front of them, a fountain, its stone basin carved like a flower, merrily spurted water. There were many fountains, in Caras Galadhon.

“There are other things to sightsee,” Beriadir told Nerwen, “but sunset is close, and you’re surely tired…”

“A little,” Nerwen admitted, now used to the feeling and capable to manage well with it, exactly as Gandalf had predicted, “but when you have time again, we could go on visiting the town.”

“Gladly,” the Silvan Elf said, “I’m finished with my guard duty at the boundary, so now I have some days off.”

“Fine!” Nerwen cried, then hushed: she was showing too much enthusiasm, she thought, considering she had no intention to encourage him. Yes, she liked him wooing her, but she was not at all sure about how much further she wanted to go: she still felt too confused about this.

Beriadir sensed again the struggle inside of her and, like before, he didn’t push her: something told him that, should he do it, she would withdraw. He had to be patient: he thought Nerwen was incredibly charming, and he didn’t want to ruin everything for one misstep.

It was almost sunset when he accompanied her back to the palace.

“Can I see you again tomorrow?” he asked, “I’d like to take you to the city park.”

Nerwen wondered how could there be a park in a town that already was a park in itself, and thought it was worth finding out.

“Alright,” she answered, “Two hours after noon?”

“Good,” Beriadir took her hand and kissed it, “See you tomorrow. Enjoy your evening.”

“You too,” Nerwen said, before turning and beginning to climb the long stair, now illuminated by
the silvery light of lanterns. She showed easiness, but the gentle kiss the Elf had placed on her hand, even if formal and in no way allusive, had increased her heart rate.

It was useless denying it: she was attracted to Beriadir. However, Nerwen still felt it too soon to get over Thorin, even if she knew she had to do so. Well, she decided, when the moment would come, she would know it, and then she would react consequently. Not earlier. Otherwise, it would be detrimental and deceitful towards Beriadir and even toward herself.

Author’s corner:

What an incredible thrill meeting Galadriel, my favourite female character in the Tolkienverse! And then Arwen, the living image of Lúthien: for Nerwen, it’s truly a great joy meeting her and therefore find again something of her most beloved niece, lost to her family and to the world so much time ago…

Beriadir begins to make his way in Nerwen’s feelings, if not in her heart: maybe he will really be able to soothe her sadness? Let’s see… :-)

Lady Angel
Chapter XX: In Galadriel's Garden

At night, after dinner – that again Nives had in the company of the Lord and Lady of the Galadhrim and their grandsons and granddaughter, as they would do throughout her stay in Lothlórien – like in all the Elven courts there were entertainments: music, poetry, dances. Galadriel wanted Nerwen sitting by her side, and so the two old friends enjoyed the performances together.

At a certain point in the evening, Galadriel bent over to Nerwen and told her under her breath:

“Elrond sent word of your search: tomorrow morning, after breakfast, let’s go in my garden and we’ll talk about it.”

“Excellent,” Nerwen answered, “We have much to tell each other, too, besides my mission…” she added smiling.

“Indeed,” Galadriel confirmed, returning her smile, “Two full eras of events…”

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The following morning, after a large breakfast as was the habit of the Galadhrim, Nerwen followed Galadriel to her garden, which was located in the southeast section of the city of trees, close to the
protective walls. To reach it, they crossed a high hedge and then descended a flight of stairs, beside which a water rivulet trickled merrily; at the centre of the small circular space harbouring the garden, a pedestal of white stone, exquisitely sculptured in the shape of a leafy tree, held a low basin of shiny silver. Leaning against the rocky wall at the end of the staircase, stood a small building in the shape of a tiny house, of the same stone as the pedestal and equally decorated.

Galadriel took off her shoes – she had always liked walking barefoot on the grass – and sat down on the edge of a low and wide wooden step, relaxing into a rare informal pose; but she was too familiar with Nerwen to feel forced keeping, with no real need, her dignity as a High Elf and Lady of the Galadhrim; with her old friend, she felt free to be simply Galadriel.

Nerwen sat beside her, equally relaxed and at ease, and imitated Galadriel taking off her shoes.

“Coming to Lórien,” she began, “I stopped at Rhosgobel: I hoped I’d find there Radagast, but instead of him, we found werewolves: they attacked us, and I don’t know how would’ve happened if a Bear-Man living nearby, Beorn, had not intervened.”

“Beorn the Skin-changer? I thought he was a legend!”

“Also in Rivendell they thought it, but he isn’t. His race goes back to the first Men; they have always been small in numbers, and very private. After the First Age, we lost track of them: no wonder they ended up being considered a myth. Beorn knows Radagast well and, knowing about his absence, he was keeping an eye on his house; when he saw us, he thought there was no need to show up, but when the goer attacked us, during the night, he mustered a good number of his animal friends and intervened, allowing us to survive the fight almost unscathed.”

Galadriel nodded, accepting the news with great interest.
“Why were you looking for Radagast?” she asked then.

“Because of my mission,” Nerwen answered, “Kementári put me in charge to find the Ents: she is sure that, in spite of their coy character, they can play an important role in the battle against Evil.”

“The Ents…” Galadriel repeated, thoughtful, “I don’t know if Radagast has any recent news about them: it’s a good number of centuries that we have none. They have always stayed away from other sentient beings, even more than the Bear-Men, but during the First Age it wasn’t that much unusual to meet one or a group; and more or less, we knew where they were settled. They escaped the devastation of Beleriand because they abandoned it a long time before the War of Wrath. During the Second Age they surely inhabited the forests of Eriador, of which now remain only a few scattered vestiges…” Nerwen nodded, recalling the Old Forest, “and Greenwood, too. I remember Oropher, Thranduil’s father, telling me about them: they were on good terms, the Silvan Elves and the Ents. But when Sauron took up residence in Dol Guldur, almost two thousand years ago – even if we didn’t know it was him, at the time – and Oropher was forced to withdraw to the north, the Ents vanished from Greenwood and none heard from them since. But perhaps Oropher told something more to his son Thranduil: perhaps you should visit him.”

Nerwen shook her head:

“Mayhap later, but before I want to verify a clue I found in Elrond’s library, leading elsewhere,” she told her friend, “I found a hint to a place called Greenland – which is the literal translation in Common Speech of Calenardhon – located south from the Hazy Range, surely another way to call the Misty Mountains.”

She paused, eager to see if Galadriel would make her same assumption.

“It seems hinting to Rohan,” the Lady of the Galadhrim indeed said, some moments later, “and this makes me think of Fangorn Forest.”

Nerwen recalled having seen it on the maps of the Horse-Country.

“Why would you say that?” she enquired, curious.

“Because the Rohirrim talk about walking trees,” Galadriel answered, “and about eyes ogling at them, about voices murmuring in that forest. They fear the place, calling it the Gloomy Forest and talking about it only in whispers. A river flowing through it is called Onodló, or Entwash in Common Speech, and it means for sure that, at least in the past, the Ents inhabited it. But I’ve never been there, nor anyone of the Galadhrim, therefore I can tell you nothing more about that forest. The Ents are not evil, so I can’t get the reason they’ve given it this bad name; this leads me to suspect that the Ents have nothing to do with it, and that this name comes because of other creatures, dark and wicked beings.”

Nerwen nodded thoughtfully: as it was Galadriel the one to warn her, she would be more careful, and wouldn’t be caught by surprise like with the Old Birch Woman on the riverside of the Withywindle.

“So you’ve contacts with the Rohirrim?” she asked then. Galadriel shook her head:

“Not anymore: for many years now they consider us legend and stay away from the Golden Wood, which they call Dwimordene, the Haunted Valley. How they came to this I don’t know, as in Eorl the Young’s days the Galadhrim helped them, during their great ride from the north to the rescue of Gondor; but these are strange days,” she paused, pondering if telling or not some things to her old friend; but she trusted her completely, therefore she decided to go on, “We, too, are uneasy:
something’s stirring in Dol Guldur. For a long time now, Mithrandir pushes for an attack to that evil place, but Saruman don’t want to know anything of it: he says we mustn’t provoke Sauron, we must leave him alone while he stays shut up in his fortress, without doing any damage; but I forebode that, sooner or later, the Enemy will make his move and assail the beautiful Valley of Singing Gold, Laurelindórenan, our Lothlórien... It would be good if it’s us, the ones making the first move, because I agree with Mithrandir in saying that, in this case, the best defence is a good offence. But Saruman is powerful, and persuasive, and so far he succeeded in convincing us to wait.”

“Often in the past the wait proved an awful choice,” Nerwen agreed, “Mayhap it’s time to change tactics.”

“I agree,” Galadriel nodded, “therefore I want to call soon for the White Council.”

Nerwen furrowed her brow: now this was something she didn’t know anything about.

“What is the White Council?” she enquired.

“Forgive me, I was forgetting you’re gone from Ennor for a very long time,” Galadriel said in an apologising tone, “It’s the high command of the Free People of Middle-earth,” she explained, “consisting of the most powerful among the Eldar – Elrond, Thranduil, Círdan, Celeborn and I – and of the Istari. Technically, even the two ones who never returned from the East are part of it… and now you, too,” she concluded, looking at her hopefully, clearly already expecting to find an ally, in her.

“I’m afraid my mission will take me far away, with no possibility to communicate,” Nerwen was sorry, “but if I’d still be around when you’ll call for the White Council, I’ll come. Anyway, what does it do, exactly?”

“Its purpose is to control and stop Evil in Middle-earth,” the Lady of the Galadhrim answered, “and also to search for the One Ring, and if possible to destroy it, because that wicked thing is infused with the power of Sauron, the main creator of Evil in Ennor.”

“So Saruman is in charge of the Whit Council?” Nerwen supposed, recalling what Galadriel just said about the power and persuasive skills of the White Wizard.

“Yes, he is,” she confirmed, “even if I’d rather had Mithrandir, but he didn’t accept.”

“That’s typical of him,” Nerwen commented, “He never wants to be formally in charge of anything, because he thinks himself an assistant, not a leader.”

“But he’s wrong,” Galadriel claimed firmly, “He’s wise, and cautious, and valiant, and for him, Arda’s sake is worth more than his personal one. What can one ask more of a leader?”

“Tell him,” Nerwen retorted with a rough smile; she agreed with Galadriel, but she knew too well her best ever friend: nothing would persuade him to change his mind about himself.

“You’re right,” Galadriel laughed, “he’s really thick-headed!”

At this point, she stood up and headed for the tiny house of stone; she opened the small wooden door and entered shortly, coming back with a silver tray on which she carried two goblets and a long-necked jug, also in silver. She smiled at Nerwen:

“All this chitchatting parched my throat, and yours?”
“Actually, mine, too,” the Istar admitted, reciprocating her smile.

Galadriel placed the tray on the step they were sitting on and went to fill the carafe with the water sprouting down halfway from the small rock wall, then she came back to pour it in the goblets and sat again. They drank, and Nerwen found the water very cool and refreshing.

“Tell me about Valinor,” the Lady of the Wood exhorted her, bending over to her, “How’s my daughter?”

“She lives in your old house in Lórien,” Nerwen revealed. Galadriel nodded:

“Yes, I told her myself to go and dwell there. Her decision to abandon Middle-earth after her abduction grieved me, but the stay in Valinor, and especially in the Gardens of Lórien, was the only cure for the wounds of her soul…”

Nerwen recalled Elrond making the same remark: he had been very saddened by Celebrían’s choice, but no cure, not even the love of her husband and children, had been enough to soothe her distress, after the tortures she suffered by the hand of the Orcs. Going to Lórien was the only remedy.

“She’s much better now,” the Istar anticipated the next question of the Lady of the Wood, “I met her only a few times, but the improvement between one and the other time was always very evident.”

A veil, which Nerwen hadn’t perceived until this moment, fell from Galadriel’s strikingly beautiful face, and it became even brighter: the sorrow for her daughter was deeply buried in her heart, but nonetheless it pained her profoundly.

“Thank you,” she said, in an unusually moved tone, “It comforts me greatly, knowing my daughter’s feeling better…” she sighed slightly, before posing the next question, “And my father?”

“Lord Finarfin is well,” Nerwen answered, “but he misses you,” she added in an undertone. This was a sensitive issue: Finarfin had opposed the departure of his children, who were following Fëanor with the purpose to win back the Silmarils that Morgoth had stolen, but they didn’t want to hear it and left Aman in spite of his veto; this of course had created resentment between them and their father. After the War of Wrath and the Valar’s pardon to all those who had departed against their will, Finarfin wished badly to see his daughter – the only one left of his lineage, because all of his male children had perished tragically in Beleriand – but she and Celeborn had long ago crossed the Ered Luin.

Sorrow veiled Galadriel’s face.

“I miss him, too,” she confided to her, “Who knows, if one day I’ll decide to leave Middle-earth…”

She left the sentence unfinished: she loved very much her adopted land, where after all she had dwelled for most of her life; and even the more she loved it because the power of Nenya – the Ring of Water – made it more beautiful, infused of a quality similar to Valinor, exactly as it was in Imladris because of Vilya. It was unlikely she would leave it, even to go back to her homeland.

“He’ll welcome you with open arms,” Nerwen completed her sentence. Galadriel cast a stealthy glance at her and, to her surprise, the Maia saw tears gleaming in her friend’s eyes.

“Do you really believe that?” she asked, hopefully. Nerwen nodded firmly:
“Absolutely,” she confirmed. She knew the heart of Finarfin the father even better than she knew the heart of Finarfin the High King of the Noldor. She knew for sure that he loved greatly all of his children; learning that three of them – Finrod, Aegnor and Angrod – had died grieved him immeasurably, and he still regretted that the last words they addressed to each other were spoken in a rage. Seeing again the only child he had left would make him beyond happy, and he would be greatly comforted.

“The world is changing,” whispered Galadriel in a gloomy voice, “I feel it in the water, I feel it in the earth, I smell it in the air… Mayhap, one day not much far off anymore, it will be changed so much, that I’ll wish to return to Aman… But not now,” she concluded, brushing away the sadness that had caught her thinking of her distant father, “Tell me about you and Melian!” she urged her. Nerwen realised that Galadriel didn’t wish to talk anymore about Finarfin; for the moment, it sufficed her to know he was well. Talking more about him would only grieve her.

“After Thingol’s death, she came to live with me in my gardens,” Nerwen told her, “Sometimes she goes to Lórien, when the sorrow becomes unbearable… In time, it happens less and less frequently, but I’m afraid it won’t stop never completely.”

“In all this time, didn’t Melian find a little comfort in some friend-in-love?” Galadriel asked, not to gossip, but with sincere empathy.

“A couple of times,” Nerwen confirmed, “but always short relationships.”

Galadriel nodded: losing one’s partner for life meant always this kind of reaction, and indeed, among the Firstborn, it was very uncommon that one remarried, once widowed.

“Celeborn and I had our disagreements, in the past,” she revealed to the Istar, “We did even dwell separated, for some time; but I can’t imagine living without him. I don’t dare to think about how much Melian suffered,” she shook her head and sighed, “And about yourself, what do you tell me?”

Nerwen shrugged:

“Since the last time we met, in the halls of Menegroth, my life has always been the same as before; the only significant change was Melian coming to live with me. Like her, me, too, I had some friends-in-love, but I still didn’t meet my partner for life – if he even exists. Then one day Kementári summoned me to Valimar to talk about the Onodrim; and so I’m here in Ennor, after so long, in search of them… As you see, my life hasn’t been very eventful, until a few months ago!” she laughed, “I bet yours, instead, has been much more interesting…”

And she was right: Galadriel told her how, after leaving Beleriand during the First Age, she and Celeborn settled in Lindon, where they led a small group of Elves as vassals of Gil-galad, who was the High King of the Noldor in Middle-earth. Then, they travelled eastward and settled in a place called Eregion, or Hollin, just east of Moria, the great Dwarven realm in the Misty Mountains, with which they had close trade links, proving that Elves and Dwarves could live near and respect one another; but maybe for them it was easier, because the Noldor shared with the Dwarves the passion for the creation of metal items, from weapons to jewels; and Celebrimbor, Fëanor’s grandson, was the creator of the famous, magical doors of the Western Gate of Moria. In that same time, Galadriel and Celeborn came into contact with Lórinand, the Nandorin realm of Amdír, on the opposite side of the Misty Mountains, and decided to move to it. There, their only child Celebrían was born. And as in time they had proved to be great wises, when Amdír died in the Battle of Dagonlad, at the end of the Second Age, and his son Amroth left Middle-earth, the Silvan Elves asked them to lead them, becoming their Lord and Lady.
“…and when I began planting mellyrn and seeing them flourish here like nowhere else in Ennor, I decided to rename the place as Lothlórien, in memory of my dwelling in Aman,” Galadriel concluded.

This was not the only reason, as Nerwen well knew.

“It’s no coincidence that this is the only place in all Middle-earth where the mellyrn grow,” she said in a low voice, “Lothlórien is blessed and safeguarded by the power of Nenya.”

Galadriel watched her intently with her piercing blue eyes, then nodded slowly.

“I thought you would knew about it,” she said, and raised one hand with the back turned toward her: on her middle finger appeared a magnificent ring of mithril, the fabulous silvery metal, stronger than steel but much lighter, which could be found only in the mines of Moria; a flawless diamond was set on it, which, intercepting a sunray, sent out a dazzling flash: among the Three, the Ring of Water was surely the most stunning.

“Its power is protecting, preserving and hiding from Evil,” the Lady of the Galadhrim explained, “Yes, you’re right: it’s thank to it that Lothlórien became so much like Valinor’s Lórien,” she concluded, while hiding Nenya again.

They stayed in a comfortable silence for some minutes, then Galadriel stood up again, took the carafe and filled it up again. Then she went to the pedestal with the silver basin and filled it up to the rim; she placed the jug on the ground, blew on the water making it ripple, and when it stilled again, she beckoned Nerwen to come near.

The Maia came up beside her; her friend’s earnest expression, while gazing into the basin, made her do the same; but she didn’t see anything unusual: the water was pristine and its surface perfectly still.

“This,” the Lady of Lothlórien said in a low voice, “is the Mirror of Galadriel. In it, eyes that can see can penetrate the mists of Time: you can see things that were, things that are, and things that perhaps will be, one day. You who have the Second Sight, you would be able to see very far, and you could find this device very useful for your search,” she raised her gaze to watch the Istar intently, “Do you wish to look, Nerwen?”

Nerwen knew well how the knowledge of the future could be unreliable, because the future is in constant movement, changing at each choice one makes – or doesn’t make; and Galadriel had indeed said things that perhaps will be. Besides, the knowledge of the future is a double-edged sword, because all too often, to avoid an unpleasant future, one takes actions that end up in realising exactly what one hoped to avoid.

“Will the Mirror show me what I wish, or what it wants?” she asked.

“I can command the Mirror to show what you most want,” Galadriel answered, “But if it is set free, the Mirror will show even non required things, and often these are exactly the most useful ones; however, in this case I cannot tell you what you’ll see, and sometimes not even the wisest can understand the images he or she is watching.”

Nerwen pondered a minute longer about Galadriel’s offer; then she made her decision:

“I’ll look.”

“Very well,” the Lady of the Galadhrim nodded, “Watch carefully into the basin. Don’t touch the water.”
She stepped back a little, not because of privacy – she wouldn’t anyway be able to see what the Mirror showed to another person – but to allow Nerwen focusing better.

The Aini did as Galadriel had told her and watched intensely into the silver bowl, thinking of the Ents. The water seemed to shiver, became opaque, darkened for some seconds, and then became again transparent; but now the basin had become a window through which Nerwen could look and see events and people, remote in Space or Time, or both.

At first, it was like getting closer at eagle’s flight to a forest looking very old, foggy and full of musk; long lichen beards hanged from the huge, gnarled trees. A young river exited from the deep shadow of the wood, flowing rapidly on a vast grassy plain, crossed by large herds of horses. Colossal things crossed the forest and the trees seemed to wave, writhing like the billows of the Great Sea.

Nerwen guessed she was looking at Fangorn, the Gloomy Forest as the Rohirrim called it, and realised why it had the bad name they gave to it: just looking at it was distressing, even more than Mirkwood.

Yet Nerwen wasn’t completely convinced: something indefinable made her realise that this was only the looks; and that the substance actually wasn’t evil; certainly hostile, even dangerous maybe, but not evil. Differently than Mirkwood, she doubted that creatures submitted to the Enemy were creeping around in Fangorn.

Then the vision changed. It turned to the direction where the sun rises and, at a vertiginous speed, under Nerwen ran endless, scarcely inhabited territories, sometimes barren; then a well cultivated, densely populated land; a wide inland sea; an immense forest; again deserted plains; high red mountains with peaks capped with perennial snow; and beyond these, a blooming land, dotted with small woods and crossed by many rivers and brooks, and bordering on a sea; it wasn’t Belegaer, but another ocean. Getting closer, Nerwen noticed that many trees were moving, with stiff but nonetheless graceful movements, walking far and wide across that lush territory. Ents! the Istar immediately thought; but where that fertile land was located, was impossible to determine: she didn’t see it on any of the innumerable maps she had consulted at the Grey Havens and in Rivendell.

The vision faded and the water became as grey as mist; then it became clear again. This time, she was presented with an image of Lothlórien: laying down under the trees of a high hill crowned with mellyrn and covered in flowers of elanor and niphredil, there were two naked bodies, tightly embracing, while kissing fervently. They were clearly making love, but the vision drew near them with no modesty; Nerwen was about to take off here eyes – she never liked to spy on people in their privacy – but then she recognized the female part of the couple of lovers: she was Arwen, dishevelled and flushed with passion. The male part was a dark-haired Man, tall and handsome, and with a start of surprise, Nerwen recognised Estel, or better, Aragorn, as she had seen him in the second part of her vision in Rivendell, not very young anymore, but in the fullness of his manhood.

A green sparkle attracted Nerwen’s gaze on Arwen’s hand, which laid on the wide, muscular back of her lover: the flash came from the gems of an unusually shaped ring.

Nerwen was sure, of such an absolute certainty she was stunned, that she wasn’t looking at two friends-in-love, but at two partners for life.

Arwen wished for a love like that of her foremother Lúthien, and this was exactly what her destiny seemed having in store for her.

The vision faded and the water became pristine again, not showing anything more.
Quite bewildered, Nerwen drew back and staggered; promptly, Galadriel supported her and took her to sit down, then she handed her the silver goblet with some water so that she could drink. Refreshed, the Maia shook her head as to clear her confused thought.

“The sharper the sight, the stronger the effect of the Mirror is,” Galadriel said, “You need some time to get used to it. Even Mithrandir, the first time, had the same reaction as you had,” she paused, “Did you see what you wanted to?”

“I did,” Nerwen answered, “First thing, I saw Fangorn, but there weren’t Ents, or at least I didn’t see any; I saw them instead in a unknown land, very far away to the east, beyond Wilderland and a great inland sea, an immense forest and a very high mountain range. Where this place may be, however, I’ve got no idea, because it isn’t shown on any of the maps I studied, in Valinor or here in Middle-earth…”

She broke off, uncertain if reveal to Galadriel the third vision of the Mirror; she decided better not: after all, it didn’t concern her, at least not directly.

“No all of Wilderland has been charted,” Galadriel pointed out, “We know very little of what lies beyond the Carnen flowing from the Iron Hills to the Sea of Rhûn, which is probably the inland sea you saw; on its north-western shores lies Dorwinion, practically the last known territory; beyond this sea there’s a great forest, called Eryn Rhûn, but we don’t know a thing about it, nor the true extent, nor who possibly inhabits it.”

“In the case I won’t find the Ents in Fangorn, at least I have a clue on the direction to take in order to find those I saw in the Mirror,” Nerwen said.

“I hope that you mustn’t go so far,” the Lady of the Galadhrim said.

The Maia’s Second Sight chose that precise moment to manifest itself: she saw from the rear a very tall Elf with raven-black hair going down his neck, dressed in an unusual, tight black leather attire. When he turned, he showed a long, sharp nose over a proud mouth, and two eyes of a clear, bright blue, which reminded her of Thorin’s. He was talking, and his face was worried. At the horizon behind him, beyond a vast wooden land, loomed the snowy peaks of the red mountains she had seen in the Mirror.
It was just a fleeting moment, then the vision dissolved like fog in the sun.

Whoever that Elf was, he was important for her future, maybe fundamental; otherwise, her Second Sight wouldn’t had shown him.

“I think instead I’ll have to go there for good,” she whispered.

Author’s corner:

“The world is changing…” is a sentence Tolkien gives to Treebeard (The Return of the King, Chapter VI “Many Partings”); but I wanted to pay homage to a very evocative moment in the cinematographic version, where in the prologue you can hear it voiced by Galadriel.

I had absolutely to mention the famed Mirror, and let Nerwen use it: it’s surely one of the most intriguing and mysterious artefact created by Tolkien’s imagination. Besides, a very useful way to find clues about the elusive Ents :-(

The mysterious Elf in black has actor Richard Armitage’s looks – yep, the same performer of Thorin! XD

Thanks to all those following this fan fiction of mine, which is growing beyond my expectations: I continuously come up with facts and events and characters and details to add… I really don’t know where I’ll end up, going on! LOL I hope you won’t get tired and will go on reading; and if you sometimes drop me a couple of lines, I’ll be very happy, so I’ll know if I’m doing well or not.

Lady Angel
Chapter XXI: Strolling Through Lothlorien

Later, Nerwen descended the long stair of the tree palace and, like the day before, she found Beriadir waiting for her.

Seeing her, the Silvan Elf couldn’t help but notice how the cut of the water-green dress she was wearing hugged her beautiful shape; under the smouldering gaze of those dark blue eyes, Nerwen felt suddenly very hot.

“Good afternoon,” Beriadir greeted her, bowing slightly; she reciprocated with a nod, hoping it would look sufficiently casual.

The Elf offered her his arm; she accepted it, and so they strolled down the main avenue of Caras Galadhon, to the opposite side of the city gates, until they reached a clearing ending against the protective walls. Small paths covered with white gravel winded among colourful flowerbeds, interposed with low green shrubs; tiny fountains in marble, white, pink, grey and pale green, and benches in pale wood decorated the paths. Songbirds such as thrushes, chaffinches, blackbirds, nightingales and goldfinches sang in a cheerful concert, and a number of peacocks with magnificent white plumage walked around in the carefully trimmed lawn.

“Wonderful!” Nerwen cried, sincerely, and Beriadir smiled, pleased by her appreciation.

They strolled down the paths in the light of the afternoon sun; now it was mid-May, and in this southern land it was already quite warm; Nerwen was therefore glad to have heeded Arwen’s suggestion that morning and changed the cloth sleeves of her gown with veil sleeves, similar to the ones of the blue dress her niece had borrowed her the day before.

The movement of something white drew Nerwen’s attention to the left: near a lilac rhododendron
bush, an albino peacock was laying. She was impressed: never, in all the long life, had she seen one, even if she knew of their existence.

“It’s amazing!” she cried, careful not to raise her voice too much in order not to frighten it. Beriadir smiled of her evident awe; he inhaled and produced the cry of the female peacock in heat; immediately the male stood up and deployed the feathers of its long, snow white tail, puffing out its chest and looking anxiously around in search of the female, which of course he didn’t find. Nerwen watched him, charmed, one hand covering her half-open mouth and wide-eyed like a child. Her expression was so heart-melting, that Beriadir felt the strong impulse to take her into his arms and pepper her face with kisses; but he held back.

Disappointed, the peacock folded its tail and scampered stiffly away.

“He’s offended,” Nerwen laughed.

“So it seems,” Beriadir confirmed, laughing in turn, “Maybe he felt mocked…”

They continued to walk lazily, Nerwen watching closely plants and flowers; she knew them all, of course, but noticing the differences among the varieties growing in Lothlórien, Rivendell, the Grey Havens and Valinor was for her a perennial source of enthusiasm.

They walked past a couple, sitting on a bench, hugging and kissing tenderly. Nerwen cast them a quick glance, and inevitably the memory of Thorin came to her mind; strangely enough, it overlapped with the face of the Elf she saw in the Mirror of Galadriel. Puzzled, she wondered why.

Just ahead of them, grew a bush of pink hibiscus; walking past it, Beriadir picked up a particularly large flower and offered it to Nerwen.

“Thanks!” she said, accepting it smiling, and tucked it in her hair, securing it behind one of the braids adorning her temples.

Walking on, instead of his arm Beriadir offered her his hand, inviting her to a more confidential
contact; Nerwen hesitated for a moment: she could easily ignore the hand and take his arm to continue as before, but the attraction she felt to him was undeniable, and not admitting it would be completely futile. She placed her hand in his.

Beriadir addressed her one of his incredibly bright smiles, capable of illuminate the darkest night, and once more Nerwen felt her knees wobble; but the Elf did nothing more than lead her around, hand in hand, and didn’t try to come nearer.

After they had completed the tour of the park, they sat on a bench and enjoyed the westering sun. Nerwen closed her eyes and listened to the place. There was a great serenity, like a bubble of peace enclosing the whole territory of the Golden Wood; however, its borders were all but quiet.

“There’s a great serenity, in your land,” she told Beriadir, “but I sense a watchful and constant vigilance all around it.”

“So it is,” the Elf confirmed, sobering, “We patrol constantly our boundaries, especially those toward the Misty Mountains, from where sometimes the Orcs infesting them come raiding; but lately we increased surveillance along the Anduin, toward Dol Guldur: the Lord and the Lady are worried about the Shadow that is growing there again. We won’t let it overcome us. We’d all die, rather than surrender to it,” he concluded threateningly.

“It won’t be necessary, I hope,” Nerwen said, placing one hand on his arm to calm him down, “The Dark Power isn’t stronger, just appalling, and that’s why sometimes to those who are weaker it looks invincible. But here you’re supported by the Power of the Light, of which your Lord and Lady are the first champions, and all of you are supporting them: as long as you’ll be steadfast, the Enemy won’t be able to defeat you.”

“Your words comfort me,” Beriadir said, grabbing her hand and kissing it, grateful, “It seems you know the Enemy well,” he added then in a quizzical tone.

Nerwen thought of Mairon, Aulë’s powerful and handsome disciple who, when Melkor Morgoth had seduced him, had become Sauron.

“Better than I’d like to,” she admitted, shaking her head, “but let’s not talk about it anymore, my friend, not in such a beautiful day and place! By the way… I’m not used to the light midday meal you have here, and now I’m a bit hungry: where could we find something to eat?”

Beriadir stood up, still holding her hand.

“A grocer whom I know, a friend of mine, produces an incredible ham,” he told her, beaming, “I bought one right this morning at the marked. Come, my home isn’t far away: we can sit in the garden and have bread and ham. I have also some tasty salami, and an excellent wine from Dorwinion.”

They went to Beriadir’s dwelling where, at the bottom of the mallorn, stood a number of chairs and a small table. The Elf went upstairs to take from the larder what he had announced, and came back with a tray, placing it on the table. The two of them had a nice luncheon with bread, salami and ham, drinking a glass of sparkling red wine.

In the late afternoon, Beriadir saw Nerwen to the palace. As the night before, he took his leave kissing her hand.

“May I hope to see you tomorrow?” he asked. Nerwen had no particular plans, for the following day; but she had to begin thinking about her next step, Fangorn. She couldn’t let Beriadir woo her
without warning him.

“I had a good time with you, yesterday and today,” she told him sincerely, “but I won’t stop here for a long time: in a few days I’ll have to leave.”

Beriadir didn’t conceal his disappointment.

“I see,” he said in a soft voice, then was about to go away, but he turned again, “Nerwen, by now you’ve surely realised I like you very much, and until you leave Lórien, I’d like you to allow me taking any opportunity to enjoy your company. By day… and by night.”

Nerwen caught her breath: it wasn’t the custom, in Valinor, to propose oneself as a friend-in-love after such a short time; but maybe the Eldar of Middle-earth were influenced by its intrinsic quality exactly like her, and therefore they had partially acquired its rhythms, much faster than those of the Undying Lands.

“You haven’t to answer immediately,” Beriadir hurriedly added, aware he had abruptly accelerated the course of their relationship; but he was forced to do so because of the circumstances, “Think about it, tonight.”

Nerwen nodded:

“Very well,” she answered, “I’ll think about it.”

She climbed the stairs taking to the tree palace, her head slightly spinning. Actually, she hadn’t to think much about it: she appreciated greatly Beriadir’s diurnal company and she would gladly enjoy it again, during her stay. As for the nocturnal, at the moment she didn’t want to consider it.

OOO

The following day, after breakfast, Nerwen asked Celeborn if she could see some detailed maps of the area between Lothlórien and Fangorn Forest, and the Lord of the Galadhrim was so kind to take her personally to the library and look for what she had asked him. Together they verified that the distance between the two woods was slightly over 100 kilometres, which she could cover on horseback in a couple of days; the territory Nerwen would cross was flat, dotted with small elevations, easily accessible. It was an uninhabited region, a no man’s land, located between the rivers Celebrant and Limlight, which marked respectively the southern border of Lothlórien and the northern one of Rohan. Nerwen would head south-south-west and arrive directly on the northern limit of Fangorn.

“I’ll be glad to provide you with anything you need,” Celeborn concluded, “even an escort, if you wish one.”

“Thank you, Lord Celeborn, but there’s no need for an escort: I can take care of myself.”

“I don’t doubt it,” the tall Teler nodded, aware she really could, “As you wish, then.”

They spent the rest of the morning planning Nerwen’s journey, choosing the best trail, considering how much and what kind of food she had to take with her, and if it might be best using a packhorse.
“When will you leave?” Celeborn finally enquired.

“Within one week,” Nerwen decided.

“And where will you go, after Fangorn?”

“It depends on what I’ll find there – assuming there’s anything to find, that is,” the Maia considered, “If I’ll find the Ents, I’ll stay there all the time I’ll need to convince them of the importance of their intervention in the battle against Sauron; only then, the mission Kementári trusted me with could be called accomplished. However, I have reasons to believe that I won’t find them, because in a vision I saw them in a very distant land, beyond very high red mountains I didn’t find so far in any map, and which I think are located very far to the east. So probably I’ll return here and then I’ll go to Thranduil, as Lady Galadriel suggested me: as at the time of his father, Oropher, Ents lived in Greenwood, mayhap he’ll be able to tell me something about them.”

Celeborn agreed:

“Indeed, Thranduil could have news of them…”

When the meeting with Celeborn was over, Nerwen went down to the stables with Calad, in order to see Thilgiloth.

“In a week we’ll leave,” she announced them, “The next step is Fangorn Forest, a couple of days’ trip from here.”

Another forest? Calad grumbled, not at all enthusiastic.

“And mayhap we’ll have to stay there for a long time,” Nerwen reinforced the message, amused but also sorry for her feathered friend, “in case, as I hope, we’d find the Ents; but at that point you’ll be free to go back home, because my mission would be accomplished.”

Because Nerwen had projected in their minds the road they had to go, Thilgiloth pointed out gladly:

“I see wide plains are awaiting us… I’ll have plenty of space to stretch my legs!”

“Exactly, my friend; and for you, Calad, all the room you want to fly, before reaching the forest.”

This means I’ll use it as much as I can, the bird of prey said, resigned.

OOO

At the end of the midday meal, Arwen addressed Nerwen:

“Aunt, would you like to came riding with me, later?”

“Sure!” the Istar accepted immediately; she was glad getting to know better her niece, looking so alike her lost one; besides, Thilgiloth wouldn’t surely mind stretching her legs.

“Shall we meet in one hour?” the Elven maiden asked.

“Fine,” Nerwen answered, thinking that, this way, she could take another look to the maps, to better study the area of the Wooden Realm, in case she had to go there, “You’ll find me in the
library.”

Punctual, Arwen came by and the two of them headed together for the stables, where the grooms had already saddled the Chargeress and Arwen’s mare, Mortinnad. Side by side, the two horses made a spectacular clashing of colours: one was of a shimmering white and the other of an equally shimmering black.

It wasn’t allowed to go on horseback inside Caras Galadhon, except for couriers carrying urgent messages for the Lord and Lady of Lothlórien, therefore Nerwen and Arwen led their mounts by the bridles until the town gates, where they mounted and set off along the road skirting the city walls. When they arrived northwest of the perimeter, they took a wide path proceeding in that direction, where they could set a trot side by side and so chat pleasantly.

One hour later, they came into view of a hill; on top of it were two circles of trees; the ones on the outer ring were white barked ashes, the ones on the inner ring were mellyrn. The grassy slope was covered in golden elanor and pale niphredil. Nerwen recognised the place instantly: it was the same hill where she had seen Arwen and Aragorn.

“This is Cerin Amroth, once dwelling of the last king of Lórinand; it’s named after him,” Arwen explained to her aunt, “They say that, when the wind blows among the boughs of the trees on the top, you can hear the sound of the distant sea and the seabirds. Up there there’s still the flet where Amroth used to live,” she concluded, pointing at the most impressive mallorn, where the residential platform typical of the Galadhrim was visible.

They dismounted and let the mares free to graze at their leisure, while they ascended toward the summit. Nerwen felt on pins and needles, and she realised she had to reveal to Arwen, at least partially, what was in store for her in a not too far off future.
“You remember telling me how much you’d like to meet the love of your life,” she began; immediately interested, Arwen nodded, “Well, this morning I looked into the Mirror of Galadriel and I saw a scene regarding you,” Nerwen hesitated one moment, uncertain on how to expose her vision, “Know that you’ll be granted this: you’ll meet your partner for life, and I don’t think it’ll take many more years…”

“But this is wonderful!” Arwen interrupted her, too excited to notice her involuntary rudeness. Nerwen raised one hand in an admonishing gesture:

“It could be difficult,” she warned her, “but as you are destined together, you mustn’t allow nothing and no one dividing you. Have faith in your love; have faith in the two of you.”

“Exactly like Beren and Lúthien,” Arwen mused, thrilled; their love had been strongly opposed by Thingol. Nerwen bit her lip, wondering if Elrond would accept that a Man, even if of a very high lineage and his relative, and whom he loved dearly, would marry his only daughter. A mortal and an immortal… They would spend together all the years of his life, which would be very long being him of the line of the Númenóreans; but it would nonetheless have an end. He would age and die, while she would stay always unchanged, young and gorgeous, and finally in despair for having lost him forever. Unless she would choose mortal life: descending from both races from her father’s part, she would be offered with that possibility, at the end… In this case, she would be able to share with him the Gift of Ilúvatar to Men, and go where neither Ainur nor Eldar were allowed to go, as only Lúthien had done.

She wouldn’t reveal more about this, even because there was always the possibility that the future she had seen wouldn’t come true: at the moment, it was only a potentiality, even if very strong, and something could turn it down. However, should this be, both Arwen and Aragorn would be incomplete and would feel an inexplicable sense of lacking, as if their lives were partial. At the moment, Arwen was – in Elven terms – still too young to feel it, and Aragorn an unaware child; but Nerwen knew well this sense of lacking, and didn’t wish for others whom she loved, such as Arwen and Estel, to be condemned feeling it. Therefore, she decided to do whatever she could in order that this destiny would come true, though it would be sweet and bitter at the same time.

“Exactly like Beren and Lúthien,” she confirmed, “but remember, nothing is definitely determined, in the future. The tides of chance are in perennial movement, and I’ve seen only one of the possible futures opening in front of you, even if I think the chances are high. Your relationship could be very difficult, but if you both will believe in your hearts, believe in you two, you’ll be able to overcome every struggle.”

Arwen looked troubled, now.

“Will you help me, Aunt?” she asked.

“I’ll stand by you,” Nerwen reassured her, “Morally, at least; because I have a task to accomplish that will take me soon away from Lórien, and I don’t know if or when we’ll meet again. But I’ll make sure you won’t be completely alone, in your fight.”

Arwen nodded, a little comforted.

They strolled along the slopes of Cerin Amroth, and Arwen soon cheered up again – her inexhaustible optimism helped her much. They sat under a tree and chatted, with Arwen asking more and more details about the Elder Days, and about Melian and Thingol, and Beren and Lúthien, but also about her father in the way Nerwen had met him, a young Elf with a sensible character, but at the same time a valiant warrior.
At last, they returned to Caras Galadhon; once in the palace, Nerwen excused herself and sought audience with Galadriel, who met her immediately in her personal parlour. It was almost evening, and from the terrace of the small salon – Nerwen had noticed that practically all the rooms in the tree palace had a balcony – the view on the sunset was spectacular.

“What can I do for you, my friend?” the Lady of the Galadhrim asked her kindly.

“I must ask you for something,” Nerwen answered, sitting on the small armchair her friend showed her, “It has something to do with what I saw in the Mirror.”

With a nod, Galadriel invited her to go on.

“In a few years, Arwen will meet her partner for life,” the Istar began, and the Lady of the Wood smiled, “Someone could think him unsuitable to her, but it’s not for us to decide who the person more apt to become our partner is. I already told about this to Arwen, and I exhorted her not to listen to those who will try to dissuade them from being together. I ask you to help them, or at least not to hinder them.”

“An unsuitable partner, you say?” Galadriel asked, frowning, “For my part, the most important thing is, he’s a good person, and that he loves her as much as she deserves it. Even if she’d fall in love with an Elf who, for a living, is a carpenter, or a hunter, I wouldn’t be against it.”

“What if he wouldn’t be an Elf?” Nerwen asked in a soft voice. Surprised, Galadriel leaned against the back of her armchair.

“I never thought about this possibility,” she answered slowly, “Among her ancestors from her father’s side, there are two weddings between Firstborn and Second-born; so it wouldn’t be something unheard of. However, I foresee that such a love would be opposed, by some. Elrond wouldn’t surely be enthusiastic, even if he descends from those weddings; or maybe exactly because of them.”

“Arwen and her partner for life will need someone who supports them,” Nerwen went on, “I would do it myself, because it’s not fair separating two people destined to be together, but I’m afraid I won’t be there. That’s why I’m asking you to do it in my place… Or at least, not to oppose them.”

Galadriel pondered her friend’s words for a long time.

“That’s a great deal to ask,” she said finally, “After all, Arwen Undómiel is the highest born unmarried Elda in Middle-earth. Kind of like her foremother Lúthien. But nevertheless I agree with you: two people destined to be together mustn’t be opposed, or they’ll both be unhappy for the rest of their lives: I surely don’t want unhappiness for the daughter of my only daughter,” she was silent for a moment, “All right, Nerwen: I won’t antagonise them. However, I don’t promise I’ll support them: everything depends on who will be her partner for life.”

“That’s enough for me,” Nerwen said, relieved, “One more thing: I foresee they’ll have to be separated for long periods, therefore I ask you to teach them how to meet in Olorendor.”

“The Land of Dream? It’s been a long time since I used this technique, but I didn’t forget it. And it could be of great comfort to them, if truly they’ll be separated for long periods,” she cast her a long, inquisitive glance, “Something tells me you already know and appreciate the one who’ll become Arwen’s partner… am I right? Otherwise, I can’t explain the reason you’re trying so hard to favour them.”

Nerwen smiled: it was impossible to conceal something to Galadriel’s sharp eyes.
“You’re right,” she answered, “and I think, too, you’ll get to respect him, in time. A great destiny waits for him: the heart tells me so, even if my brain tells me that the future is never certain until it transforms into present.”

“Over time,” Galadriel mused, pensively, “I ascertained how the heart can be much less mistaken than the brain…”

OOO

Immediately after dinner, instead to go as usual to the Hall of Fire, Nerwen headed for Beriadir’s home: she wanted to let him know she would leave next week. They could spend some time together, if he wished to.

Having she asked about the Galadhrim customs about showing up at someone’s home, this time Nerwen ascended the stair leading to the flét and, a number of steps before emerging from the central hole, she called in a loud voice:

“Beriadir, are you at home? It’s Nerwen.”

Beriadir answered immediately:

“Come in, come in…!” he met her while she was climbing the last steps, “How nice to see you!” he cried, smiling contentedly, “I didn’t expect it any longer, today.”

“I made some plans for my journey,” the Istar explained, “and then I spent the better part of the afternoon with my niece Arwen.”

The Elf had her sitting at his table, where laid still the remaining of his dinner.

“May I offer you some wine? An infusion?” he asked her.

“An infusion, thanks,” she accepted, seeing the kettle already over the fire. Beriadir took a tin can from the pantry, measured two pinches and put them in the teapot, then he poured hot water on them. A very aromatic scent emanated from the pot.

“A blend I invented myself,” her host explained, “black tea with orange zest, cinnamon, ginger and vanilla.”

“It’s surely delicious as its aroma,” Nerwen commented.

“Tell me,” Beriadir urged her, “What are your plans, I you may tell me?”

“I’ll leave in one week,” she answered, not seeing any reason to hide it from him, “to go to Fangorn.”

“Fangorn!” the Elf looked dumbfounded and worried, “That’s not a very safe place, at least from what they tell about it.”

“I have my reasons to believe its reputation is more smoke than fire,” Nerwen replied, “unlike Mirkwood.”

“I see,” Beriadir said, not very much convinced, “but I still don’t like it. Please, promise me you’ll
be very careful.”
“I will, don’t worry.”
“I hope we’ll spend these days together,” Beriadir went on with an expectant look.
“I’ll be glad to,” Nerwen said, “but I can’t promise you anything,” she added, gently but
determined to be clear. Beriadir took her hand and placed a feather-light kiss on it.
“I won’t ask for anything,” he said, “It’ll be enough for me being with you.”

Nerwen’s heart jumped: this Silvan Elf, handsome as well as well-built, was also very sweet. She
wasn’t at all sure she really wanted to resist to the charm of those sea-blue eyes and dazzling
smile… Not for a much longer time, at least.
“Thanks,” she said, grateful.
“So, let’s meet tomorrow,” Beriadir concluded, not hiding his contentment.

They chatted a while longer, then Nerwen took her leave to go back to the palace. While walking,
she couldn’t help but think of the moment Beriadir told her it was enough for him just being with
her and of the thrill this statement had aroused in her heart. The attraction she felt to him was
growing stronger, and she thought the moment it would ripen wasn’t far away.

OOO

When she returned to the palace, Nerwen met Elrohir and Elladan.
“Good evening, Aunt,” Elladan greeted her, “We noticed tonight you missed the Hall of Fire… Are
you fine?”

He looked slightly worried, like his twin; this made Nerwen realise they were remembering that,
back in Rivendell, one night she had excused herself being a little sick, when she had contacted
Yavanna for the first time.
“I was seeing a friend,” she explained to them. Elrohir raised his eyebrows and smiled:
“Beriadir?”
The Istar stared at her nephew from down-under in a fake frown:
“Sure… so what?”
“So, we’re very glad for you,” Elrohir said, “You were too sad in Rivendell.”

At this point, Nerwen opened wide her arms and hugged affectionately both twins.
“Thanks, little nephews,” she told them, “You’re very dear to me.”

They reciprocated her hug.
“You’re very dear to us, too, Aunt,” Elladan assured her. Nerwen felt moved: the death of her only,
beloved niece had left a great hole in her heart, but it had now been filled again with three of her descendants, and one of them looked so alike her she was now convinced that, after all, the world hadn’t truly lost Lúthien Tinúviel.

Author’s corner:

I always wondered why Arwen, the first time she met Aragorn who mistook her for Lúthien, introduced herself by telling him that, even if she wasn’t her foremother, maybe her destiny wouldn’t be unlike hers: how could she know? Mystery solved: Nerwen did reveal it to her! XD

Olorendor is my invention; because I like very much the way Peter Jackson in the movies has been able to insert Arwen in Aragorn’s thoughts and dreams, and vice versa, I got the idea they could somehow communicate and meet, during the long years when they weren’t together; and so I came to the idea of this dream dimension.

The image of Cerin Amroth if by the great illustrator Alan Lee.

Thanks to all those following this “graphic adventure” of mine!

Lady Angel
Chapter XXII: Taking Leave

A few days passed, as Nerwen prepared for her journey to Fangorn. Celeborn suggested taking a packhorse to carry enough provisions for a couple of months.

“There are only two days on horseback until the northern border of Fangorn.” he pointed out, “but you don’t know how long you’ll have to stay away, or if you’ll find shelter. Besides, even if the season is good and you’ll be able to sleep outdoors, there’s always the possibility of rain, and a small tent is surely advisable.”

Nerwen approved: she had slept outdoors on the whole way from Bree to Rivendell – except the first night – and then from Rivendell to Lothlórien, and even if she had been lucky and had never run into rainy weather, it couldn’t be that way forever. Also, in the forest it’s always very damp, and a tent would protect her.

Galadriel told her she would bake a supply of lembas, the Elven crackers; she learned the secret of its preparation from Melian, during the time she had lived in Doriath. Nerwen, who knew the recipe, too, offered to help her, and therefore the two old friends spent a good number of hours alone in the kitchen, kneading and baking and talking.

Nerwen spent much time with Arwen, too, who had plainly become attached to her and was sorry to see her going so soon. The Aini comforted her by promising she would return: Fangorn wasn’t very far away, and if she decided to go to Thranduil’s Wooden Realm or head for Wilderland, eastward Anduin to look for the red mountains she saw in the Mirror of Galadriel, in both cases she
would stop by Lórien.

In her spare time, Nerwen met with Beriadir; usually they walked along the streets of Caras Galadhon, at the market or at the park; or else they took a ride in the wood. Beriadir wooed her pleasantly, and in his company, she felt as euphoric and carefree as a young girl. Surely, the quality of the place – blessed by the power of Nenya – had something to do with it; but Nerwen acknowledged that the most credit went to the handsome Silvan Elf, his kindness, humour, witticism. And, of course, his bright smile, too.

OOO

Two days before her departure, Beriadir took her on a trip on the Celebrant, the tributary of the Anduin coming from the Misty Mountains. Nerwen had always liked water, in every form: brook, river, lake, sea; and indeed in her garden in southern Valinor, there were many streams and even a small mere, not to mention the hot spring heating her house, where in a room carved into rock, she and Melian liked to spend time in complete relax, enjoying the warm vapour.

At the dock nearest to Caras Galadhon, about half an hour on horseback, Nerwen and Beriadir took a boat, a long and narrow canoe in flexible ash wood, painted in green and gold, with paddles shaped like leaves. They paddled upstream; the river was swift but its current not exceedingly strong. The rowed to a small wooden jetty leading to a semicircular lawn covered in countless flowers: Nerwen recognised mallows, daisies, clematises, cornflowers and periwinkles. Mellyrn and alders surrounded it, as well as shrubs of thistle, box and elderberry, which made the access from the landside difficult.

“This is the Picnic Lawn.” Beriadir revealed, helping Nerwen to get off the canoe, “Actually, there’s a table and some wooden benches for those who want to stop here and have a bite, and lie in the sun and bathe.” he looked at the river, which in this point formed a quiet cove, “Too bad the water’s still too cold to bathe, otherwise we could dive.” he concluded on a light note, winking to ease what would otherwise look like a too audacious suggestion.

Nerwen’s stomach fluttered at the thought of the two of them swimming naked in the pristine water.

She would have liked to do it.

Oh yes. Very much.

She forced herself away from that alluring idea and asked instead:

“If this is the Picnic Lawn, I suppose that there’s something edible in that bag…?”

She pointed to the bag Beriadir had unloaded earlier from the horse and placed on the bottom of the boat.

“Exactly.” he answered laughing, “Because you’re always hungry, in the afternoons, I thought it a good thing to bring something to munch.”

“Well, we rowed for a long way, you can’t possibly blame me!” she replied, laughing in turn.

Hence, they sat at the table, which Beriadir prepared like for a banquet with everything he had
brought: bread, soft cheese, honey cookies, apricots, cherries and strawberries. The latter roused Nerwen’s inevitable enthusiasm; she adored them, as Beriadir discovered now, amused.

“You’re spoiling me.” the Aini accused him in a fake reproach.

“As much as I can.” he replied, “as long as you’ll stay here.”

The hint to her departure broke a little Nerwen’s spirit, which so far had been cheerful; her smile clouded.

Realising her change in mood, Beriadir felt sorry; there were now only very few days left to their separation, but he tried to make her cheer up again offering her a cup of sweet cider, Nerwen’s favourite drink, as he had learned in those days.

“This is made with the juice of golden apples.” he explained, “I think it’s absolutely the best.”

Nerwen tried it and found it definitely delicious.

“Excellent!” she confirmed, “The best I ever had in…” she stopped in time: she was about to say in Middle-earth, which implied her coming from elsewhere; but this was something only few were allowed to know, “in recent times.” she concluded.

They consumed the simple but tasteful food, finishing with the honey cookies that Beriadir had personally baked.

“A recipe of my mother.” he told her in confidence, “She has a bee husbandry and produces the best honey in Lórien.”

They spent a couple of hours in pleasant conversation; when the sun began westering, preparing to disappear behind the high peaks of the Misty Mountains, Beriadir and Nerwen embarked again. This time, being the current favourable, they didn’t paddle and got simply carried downstream, adjusting their course from time to time.

Once they returned in Caras Galadhon, Beriadir saw Nerwen back to the palace. A servant came immediately to take Thilgiloth and lead her to the stables.

“I hope you enjoyed the trip and picnic.” the Silvan Elf said, looking at Nerwen with a slightly quizzical expression.

“I liked both very much.” Nerwen said emphatically, nodding, then she looked around, encompassing the city of trees, “This is a marvellous land. I’m sorry I must leave it.” she concluded, sighing. She thought it for good: somehow, she had felt it less hard leaving Rivendell, even if she had spent there several months and not only a few days as in Lothlórien; but the latter looked so much like her distant home, in Valinor, that she would miss it much more.

Beriadir’s throat tightened. Impulsively, he grabbed Nerwen’s hands and brought them to his lips, kissing lightly her fingers.

“I’ll miss you.” he said in a low voice, “I’ll miss you badly.”

Nerwen’s heart leaped under the intense gaze of those eyes the colour of the ocean. She would miss him, too, but she lacked the voice to tell him.

Something in her expression told Beriadir he could dare more; he turned her hands and, staring into her eyes, kissed slowly the palm of each one. Nerwen felt a warm shudder running down her spine;
Beriadir felt her trembling, so he took her in his arms, slowly, ready to stop if she showed the slightest hesitation.

But Nerwen had finally become tired of uncertainties, and longed for the warmth and comfort of a loving embrace. She placed her open hands on his chest and lifted her face in a clearly inviting gesture.

Seeing her response, Beriadir shivered, thrilled; holding his breath, almost afraid that, should he breathe too loud, she would run away, he lowered his head, and placed his mouth on hers.

The kiss began gently, slow and delicate touches, over and over again. Then Beriadir pressed his lips firmer against hers and brushed them with the tip of his tongue, asking for access. Nerwen had been waiting for this and parted her lips, reciprocating warmly; she moved her arms around his neck, pressing her body more into his.

It lasted a long time, so long that in the end both were out of breath. When they finally parted, it was only for the time needed to catch their breaths, and then they kissed passionately once more.

Against her belly, Nerwen perceived the evidence of Beriadir’s longing, and she felt like burning; she uttered a sighing moan and rubbed herself against the Elf to make him understand she reciprocated him, that she wanted him, now.

“You come upstairs?” she murmured against his lips.

Beriadir’s heart leaped to his mouth: he had hoped for a positive response, but he didn’t think it could be so complete.

“Yes. Oh yes…” he answered in a husky voice. Nerwen drew back and called for the servant who had led away Thilgiloth, in order to trust him with Beriadir’s horse, too; then she took the Elf’s hand and led him upstairs, to the tree palace and her room; when she stopped next to her bed, she turned again to face him and began to untie his shirt; Beriadir let her do it, and once it was open, he took it off.
Seeing his wonderfully shaped, muscular chest, Nerwen held her breath and recalled the moment she had seen him shirtless, the day they had arrived in Caras Galadhon. Was it really just one week ago? It seemed to her a much, much longer time…

She lifted her hands and placed them on his torso in a slow, sensual caress that made him shiver; then she got nearer and placed a number of feather-light kisses where her hands had just brushed him; when she reached one nipple, she touched it with the tip of her tongue, and Beriadir uttered a choked groan. He pushed her slightly back, and this time it was him, the one untying her shirt, throwing it on the floor over his; under her shirt, Nives wore a corset, which she quickly unknotted to get off it. Charmed, Beriadir contemplated her beautifully shaped breasts; he lifted his hands and cupped them, then he bent forward and took one nipple in his mouth, sucking delicately. Now it was Nerwen’s turn to utter a choked groan; arrows of fiery heat ignited her female depths. She placed her hands on Beriadir’s and pulled him on the bed, next to her. He lifted his head and got lost in her dark eyes, fogged by desire; once more, he kissed her, taking his time, savouring her mouth; then he moved along her body, placing a row of small kisses on her neck, chest, breasts, abdomen, until he came to tease her belly-button with the tip of his tongue. Nerwen quivered; she felt hot, very hot, so when Beriadir drew back just enough to take off her ankle boots and the rest of her clothes, she was more than happy.

Beriadir took off his own garments and the Maia contemplated from head to toe his chiselled physique; then he laid back again next to her and took her in his arms.

Nerwen held him tight; she sought his lips in a long, sensual kiss, caressing slowly his shoulders and back. Beriadir reciprocated, running his hands along her body, trying hard to move slowly, even if actually he was feeling a burning desire to take her. He followed the form of her hip and went down her thigh until he reached the socket behind her knee; he lifted her leg and placed it on his, then he slipped his hand on the inside, climbing toward the centre of her femininity. When he touched her, Nerwen jumped and a breathless cry escaped her throat. On his fingertips, Beriadir felt a burst of heat, revealing him the measure of her desire, and was delighted and thrilled. He teased her skilfully, and Nerwen tensed, her breath ragged, her lips parted upon a voiceless moan; eventually, Beriadir felt her ready, so he moved to lay down on her and take her, but to his surprise, Nerwen shook her head in a denial gesture. Taken aback, Beriadir withdrew, and she made him lie down on his back. Her face was flushed in excitement as she started to caress him. Under her touch, at the same time delicate and sensual, Beriadir shivered, feeling alternatively hot and cold, and when she finally came to brush the erected sceptre of his manhood, he inhaled sharply and closed his eyes, overwhelmed.

“Nerwen…” he whispered in a hoarse voice, “please…”

She lingered a few more moments, having a good time in driving him mad as he had done earlier with her; then, she addressed him an impish grin, straddled him and, slowly, made him slide inside of her. Unable to hold back, Beriadir lifted his hips to meet her, and both gasped in pleasure.

They began to move in unison, slowly at the beginning, trying to become familiar to each other, to understand what pleased the other one; then the rhythm improved, as the pleasure they were giving one another increased. Beriadir placed his hands around Nerwen’s slender waist, shifting his movements in order to push inside of her the way she liked most; he realised he had hit his mark when he saw her throwing back her head with a delighted cry.

“Beriadir…!” Nerwen panted, “Ah…”

Pleasure grew inside of her, rising like the tide, growing, growing more and more impetuously,
until it hit her like an irresistible wave, tearing off her an ecstatic scream, followed a moment later by his.

Gasping, Nerwen crouched on Beriadir’s chest, and he wrapped her in his arms, dazed and breathless. They held each other until the physical and emotional turmoil was over. Then, Nerwen moved to slip away from Beriadir, but he stopped her, holding her tight. He kissed her, repeatedly, tender and feather-light kisses.

“It’s been wonderful.” he whispered in between kisses, “Thousand times better than I imagined during the last days.”

“Oh?” she said, drawing back and arching an eyebrow with a naughty grin, “And… did you imagine it often?”

“Oh yes.” he admitted, reciprocating her grin with a likewise one, “Very often…”

Nerwen realised all of a sudden that Beriadir was still very solid, inside of her.

“It looks like you haven’t had enough.” she pointed out, chuckling, and tightened her inner muscles.

“Oh!” he panted, exquisitely caught off guard by her move, “I don’t think so…”

He turned her on her back and their sighs soon filled the room again.

OOO

Much later – dinnertime was way past – they heard a knock on the door.

“Who’s there?” Nerwen asked from the bed, where she and Beriadir still laid, hugging.

“I’m Arwen, aunt” her niece’s voice answered.

Nerwen couldn’t ask her through the door what she wanted, it would be too rude; besides, she had nothing to hide.

“I’m coming.” she answered therefore. Reluctantly, she got off Beriadir’s arms and stood up, took the petticoat from the trunk, where it laid over her home-dress, and slipped it quickly over her head; finally she got to the door and opened it.

“I’m sorry, Aunt Nerwen, but we didn’t see you at dinner and we were wondering if you’re well.” Arwen said in a half worried, half quizzical tone: Nerwen was all dishevelled and messy, and looked tired, but was smiling.

“Hum, I’m pretty fine.” she answered her, “I… have a guest.” she added, winking. Arwen’s eyes widened in surprise, and then she remembered her brothers telling her about Beriadir. She giggled:

“Oh, I get it! Sorry for the interruption, then… Would you like me to send for a servant fetching you something to eat?”

“Excellent idea, thanks.” the Aini accepted, grateful. Smiling, Arwen took her leave and went in search of Gwilwileth, to ask her for a tray of food for two people and take it to her aunt’s room.
Beriadir spent the night with Nerwen; the following morning, he left her for a couple of hours, letting her completing the final preparations for her departure, agreeing to see her for lunch at his flet.

Nerwen was late for breakfast and found the small room deserted, even if the table was still set; Arwen, guessing she would easily be late, had indeed arranged it.

After breakfast, the Istar headed for the stables, where the day before they had taken her new packhorse; he was a hardy, slightly stocky gelding, with a golden bay coat and blond tail and mane, named Thalion. After the first moment of surprise as he realised he could actually understand Nerwen, Thalion took quite a fancy at her, while he was in awe in front of Thilgiloth, who appeared to him like a queen to a peasant. The Chargeress had a proud character, but she wasn’t arrogant, and Nerwen was sure the two of them would bond very fast.

After checking both Thilgiloth and Thalion, the Maia made arrangements with the head of the stables in order to have the first saddled and the second loaded with the luggage and food she would take with her, so that they would be ready to leave as soon as she would arrive.

Then, Nerwen headed for the kitchen, where the head cook had received instructions about the preparation of the food; finally, the Aini looked for Nimgil, the Palace Superintendent – Lindir’s equal at Rivendell – who Celeborn had tasked to fetch the needed things for her journey: tent, blankets, pots and pans, more spare clothes, and anything else could be useful.

During her coming and going in the tree-palace, Nerwen came across Elrohir, for once without Elladan. As soon as he saw her, he beamed at her so widely, he risked his face opening in two pieces, but he didn’t say a word and just winked at her. Anyway, both he and his twin had already said what they thought about her relationship with Beriadir.

Nerwen appreciated his discretion and smiled back at him.
“Will we meet at lunch, Aunt Nerwen?” Elrohir asked her. She shook her head:

“No. Beriadir invited me over to his flet.”

“Oh? Then I think we won’t meet at dinner, either…” the prince of Rivendell presumed, but he said it with no impishness, just as a matter of fact.

“No, I’d like to have a last meal in with my hosts and nephews and niece, before leaving.” Nerwen said, “I don’t count tomorrow’s breakfast, because I’ll leave very soon… and I won’t spend the night here.” she added with an eloquent smile.

“I see.” Elrohir nodded, again meaning no naughtiness, “Have a good time with your Beriadir, then: see you tonight.”

“See you tonight.” she confirmed, taking her leave.

OOO

It was just past noon when Nerwen climbed to Beriadir’s flet, where she spent the whole afternoon in his very pleasurable company. The handsome Silvan Elf was rather disappointed, learning she would go back to the palace for dinner, but he was promptly comforted when she told him she would gladly spend the night with him.

“Tomorrow morning I’ll see you to the ferry on the Celebrant.” he told her. Nerwen was glad to accept.

OOO

When she arrived for dinner, Galadriel welcomed Nerwen with a hug.

“Elrohir told me.” she whispered in her ear, smiling, “I’m happy you found some comfort in my land.”

“Thank you, Galadriel.” Nerwen answered, not surprised that her nephew had told her about Beriadir: she would have done it herself, if she had had the chance to see her during the morning.

Soon Celeborn, Arwen and the twins joined them, and they sat down to dine. Knowing it would be the farewell meal, Galadriel had ordered it to be almost a banquet: mushroom soup, vegetable pie with cheese, roasted boar, grilled perch, boiled asparagus, artichokes with onions and olives, spinach salad and green peas cooked in butter, the whole coming with the best wines of Dorwinion. To cap it all, a cherry tart.

At the end, after cleaning the table, the servants brought an elegant, long necked crystal bottle, containing a golden liquid, and small crystal glasses.

“This is miruvor.” Celeborn announced, “the cordial made with honey that you, Lady Nerwen, taught my Lady to craft, so much time ago in Doriath.”
The Maia nodded: she remembered perfectly. It was a liquor Yavanna Kementári herself created at the Beginning of Time, which recipe was known to very few, in Middle-earth.

Celeborn in person poured the cordial and handed it out, beginning from the guest of honour, Nerwen. Then he raised his glass:

“Here’s to an easy journey; may success on your search await you at the end of it.” he said solemnly. Everyone raised her or his glass, then they took a sip. The liquor was sweet and cold, not too strong.

“I thank you for your hospitality and the help you offered me, Lord Celeborn and Lady Galadriel.” Nerwen then said with the same solemnity, “and for the good wishes you’re making. May the grace of the Valar always accompany you.”

When they finished drinking, everybody stood up and hugged Nerwen.

“I hope to see you again, soon, aunt.” Arwen whispered, her eyes moist with tears.

“So do I hope, too, little niece.” the Aini answered, touched.

OOO

The following morning, as promised, Beriadir escorted Nerwen, taking his horse by the bridle; they headed at first for the palace to take Thilgiloth, Thalion and Calad, then they walked along the streets of Caras Galadhon to the gate, where they got on horseback and headed for the ferry, located on the westernmost point of the Gore, the large, almost perfectly triangular meadow at the junction of Anduin and Celebrant.

While the ferrymen was busy in taking the two horses along the jetty and see them on board, Beriadir took Nerwen in his arms and kissed her. His heart was as heavy as a rock in his chest.

“I’d like you to stay.” he murmured, “but I know you must go, now.”

She nodded: her heart, too, was heavy.

“I count on coming back.” she said under her breath, “but I can’t tell you when: it depends on what I’ll find, or not find, where I’m going.”

The Elf kissed her again, fervently.

“Take care of yourself.” he begged her, “I’ll wait for you.”

Author’s corner:
Finally Beriadir has been able to break through Nerwen’s resistance, and makes her smile again… Thorin and she are not destined together, therefore it was necessary for her to overcome her melancholy, and such a help as the handsome Silvan Elf offered is surely a good thing…

Are you enjoying this fan fiction? Please, let me know…!

Again, Beriadir is “performed” by Alex O’Loughlin, in a superb elaboration of image made by a friend of mine.

Lady Angel
Two days later, Nerwen arrived within sight of the northern border of Fangorn. The journey from Lothlórien had been easy, crossing an open land slightly undulated by sweet slopes, with the Misty Mountains on her right side, while on the left the Anduin flew away, in a wide bend, heading southeast.

Nerwen skirted the forest for two or three kilometres before coming across the Limlight; here, she looked for the ford that she had seen on the maps in Rivendell and Lórien, located a dozen of kilometres downriver. When the sun was about to set, she camped on the riverside, putting off the crossing of the stream to the next day. She didn’t set up her tent – neither had she done it earlier: the days had been sunny, and in this southern land the temperature of the second half of May, even in the night hours, were already agreeably warm.

The following day, she crossed the Limlight on Thilgiloth’s back, with Thalion following her: the good packhorse had a docile and willing character, and he tailed the Chargeress with no need of being led by the bridle, obeying the orders Nerwen gave him verbally or mentally. Calad, of course, flew in front of them, keeping an eye on the territory, but there wasn’t a soul: beyond the Limlight, the terrain climbed again gradually in a region called simply The Wold; here, they were already in the realm of Rohan, or Riddermark as the inhabitants called it, but this area was completely uninhabited.

Nerwen turned upstream, going back to Fangorn. Once she reached it, she stopped Thilgiloth and dismounted, approaching the trees. The variety was surprisingly wide: the commonest appeared to be the most long-lived types, such as oaks, firs, chestnuts, yews, but there were also elms, beeches, maples, lindens, and many others. All of them had in common a very ancient look, with large
trunks often gnarled and crowns full of lichens; the undergrowth was very thick, with ferns, junipers, hollies, strawberry shrubs, blackthorns and mushrooms, some of them edible – along with strawberry, Nerwen liked the latter very much. Rocks emerged randomly from the scrub, covered in moss, which colour ranged from a bright green to a dark brown.

The Istar extended her special senses and scanned the wood; unlike the Old Forest and Mirkwood, Fangorn was richly inhabited by animals, such as foxes, badgers, squirrels, moles, hares, hedgehogs, and birds like little owls and long-eared owls, woodpeckers, cuckoos. Nerwen perceived also the awareness of the vegetal beings, vigilant and mistrusting, but they didn’t seem particularly hostile; there was no trace of Ents, at least not within the range of perception – which was several kilometres – of the Aini’s mind. Anyway, she didn’t count on it: the forest covered over 14.000 square kilometres, and even if the Onodrim actually inhabited it, which she has still to ascertain, meeting one at the first attempt would be really too much to ask.

Because of the vastness of the territory to explore, she needed to do it systematically: therefore, she had decided to begin going upriver the Limlight until the base of the Misty Mountains, following them southwards for several kilometres and then going back eastwards, reaching again the forest’s margin, and so on, coiling back and forth. As the constant use of her Ainurin senses involved a certain effort, she couldn’t employ them too many hours each day, therefore she had reckoned that, to cover the entire expanse of the forest, she would need from six to eight weeks.

She saddled up again.

“Come on, friends: let’s get started,” she exhorted her three companions. Thilgiloth began to walk forward, while Calad glided down and perched on Thalion’s luggage-filled back; the mild packhorse had been at first a little intimidated by the hawk, but Nerwen had reassured him, so now he showed no sign of nervousness and just moved lazily his long blond tail.

_This forest doesn’t alarm me as the one where we met the werewolves_, Calad said. Nerwen nodded:

“You’re right: there’s no evil, in it, at least not within the area I can perceive.”

_The looks are a bit threatening_, the Chargeress chimed in, _but not the substance._
“Exactly, old girl,” Nerwen confirmed, while they were entering the first rows of trees, “Nothing to do with Mirkwood, and not even with the Old Forest.”

They continued all day, following the Limlight, which began narrowing while getting closer to its point of origin; they took a number of breaks to allow Nerwen’s special senses resting, covering more or less half of the distance they would do without her using them. At night, they camped on the riverbank; after tending her horses, Nerwen set up her tent to spend the night sheltered from the forest’s dampness, then she fished two perch and baked them on the fire.

She was about to go to sleep, when a fox approached the small camp, shy but curious; Nerwen saw its eyes glittering on the border of the firelight circle; the fire alarmed it, but even fascinated it.

*Don’t be afraid,* the Istar sent her, reassuringly. The fox relaxed a little, but not completely. Therefore, Nerwen tossed it the remains of the fish; the small predator took them and retrieved, vanishing into darkness, but from the sounds and the satisfaction Nerwen perceived, it was greatly enjoying the food. Smiling, Nerwen got into the tent and wrapped herself in the blanket, falling asleep in a few minutes.

**OOO**

The next morning, Nerwen made herself a cup of black tea and broke her fast with a small piece of *lembas*, then she broke camp and resumed the exploration. A little after noon, she reached the slopes of the Misty Mountains, where she halted briefly to have lunch with stale bread and aged cheese, to which she added some dehydrated apricots. She went on southwards for some kilometres, skirting the side of the mountain range, and then she turned again eastward. There was no risk of getting lost: not only could she verify where the north was simply watching where the moss grew and flourished, but she could send Calad to fly over the tree crowns to see for the sun.

They went on this way for four weeks, back and forth between the eastern limits of the forest and the slopes of the Hithaeglir; leaving the river, they proceeded slower than Nerwen had hoped, because the depths of Fangorn were very thick and passing through wasn’t easy. Occasionally, they met wild animals, in particular squirrels, owls and badges, which watched at them from a safe distance, curious but non afraid. Nerwen continued scanning the forest, seeking the trademark brain pattern of the Ents, which was much more complex than the trees’ one: she hadn’t perceived one in two Ages, but she couldn’t get wrong in recognising it.

At the end of the fourth week, while she was going towards the mountains, Nerwen sensed a vegetal conscience particularly vigilant, located a few kilometres in front of her and on her right. It was too far to recognise its nature, that is, if it was a normal tree with just an unusually high conscience, or a true Ent. Perceiving her excitement, Thilgiloth sped up her pace with no need for the Aini to urge her on, followed by Thalion with Calad on his back; diverting slightly from the straight line they were going on, they headed for the source of the consciousness that Nerwen was sensing.

While getting near, Nerwen became more and more perplexed: the mental patterns were those of an Ent, but somehow… diminished, like maimed. Maybe he was sick? Hurt? Reduced to a semi unconscious state?

The Istar arrived at about one hundred metres distance, then she pulled Thilgiloth’s reins to slow her down, and ordered Thalion to stop. She continued slowly, all of her *Ainurin* senses alert, but
she didn’t find any trace of a malevolent will.

And then she saw it: a great, majestic beech, its immense tangle of roots sinking into the ground; the bark was bright and solid and its brilliant-green leaves proclaimed it perfectly healthy, nonetheless it exuded a sense of prostration. No, Nerwen corrected herself, analysing better the feeling: of surrender.

She halted Thilgiloth and dismounted to go more easily to the massive tree.

_Hullo, ancient beech_, she greeted it. A mild surprise emanated from the tree.

_Who are you, whom I can understand?_ it asked faintly.

_A friend_, Nerwen introduced herself simply, trying to radiate a reassuring feeling, _Are you sick?_

The beech seemed to ponder.

_Sick?_ it repeated, as marvelling at the word, _No… I’m just very tired. I’m resting._

_I see_, Nerwen answered, perplexed: she couldn’t make out the reason of the beech’s resignation, _but why are you tired?_

_I laboured too much, in the past_, it answered, indifferent, _Now I leave the effort to the other ones._

This statement made a bell ring in Nerwen’s mind. She was by now sure that this was indeed an Ent, however at the same time it wasn’t, not completely.

_The other ones, who?_ she enquired: there could be more of its species, possibly more lively, more _dynamic; true Ents, that is._
My own kind, those who still walk and talk, the beech answered, those who still aren’t tired as much as I am…

This was the perfect description of the Onodrim, the Maia thought, excited. Where can I find them? she asked.

Around here, the tree answered, but his voice was becoming feebler, Now I must sleep…

Wait! she begged it, Can’t you be more specific on where to find them?

The beech sent her the image of a sunny rocky terrace, high enough to emerge from the crowns of the trees, located a few kilometres inside the forest; the view stretched on the large, lush plain of Rohan, similar to a sea of grass, and this told Nerwen that the terrace faced eastward. Not far on the right, there was a river, larger than the Limlight: it had to be the Entwash, which ran in the southern part of Fangorn.

Thank you, Nerwen sent, grateful, Rest now.

The beech didn’t answer, already deep in its green sleep.

Nerwen got back in the saddle and directed Thilgiloth to Thalion and Calad.

“I received a quite specific hint,” the Istar revealed them, “Let’s go back, out of the forest, then we’ll head south.”

OOO

They reached the margin of the wood at mid-morning of the next day; here, they turned to their right to skirt the forest in a south-westerly direction; the terrain of the Wold went up and down, but luckily never too steep for the horses.

They went on for the rest of the day, with only one break for a meagre meal; and finally there it was, in front of them: the sparkle of water of a still young river, which soon, flowing into the plain and collecting many tributaries, would become large and slow, until it would divide in a vast marshy delta before joining the Anduin.

When they arrived where the river came out from the forest, Nerwen sent Calad to seek the rocky ledge that the sleepy beech had showed her. The hawk raised up in wider and wider circles to a noticeable height, then she headed in-wood, flying over the trees at a distance, but her very sharp eyes were nonetheless capable to see everything very clearly. It didn’t take long for her to pinpoint the rocky rim, about fifteen kilometres inside the forest; she circled over it a number of times, slightly lowering to detect more details; on the left of the small, treeless ledge, she glimpsed a staircase with very high steps, steeply dropping to the ground.
Returning to Nerwen, Calad perched on her falconry glove and sent her the images she had seen.

*In my opinion, this sort of a stair is very near to the river,* she conjectured.

Nerwen checked the position of the sun: it was almost setting, therefore she decided to postpone the search for the rocky terrace to the next day, when she would have many more hours of light at her disposal: tracking it down could seem easy and quick, from here, but actually she didn’t know what she would find, penetrating among the trees. In this place, they were particularly massive and gnarled, and the shadows of the wood were thicker than elsewhere. The Maia cast her mind among the trees; she perceived a sense of more vigilance than before, but no kind of hostility or resentment, only suspicion and circumspection. Fangorn Forest’s sinister name was surely undeserved, at least in part.

As she didn’t want to annoy the tree-entities, whatever they were, Nerwen preferred to set camp at a safe distance from the forest margin; after dinner, she laid down to watch the stars: Menelvagor, the Swordsman of the Sky, dominated the dark canopy, with Helluin’s blue flame at his feet, while a little further Valacirca, the Sickle of the Valar, cast its eternal admonishment to the Dark Enemy and his servants. The Aini remembered the time when only the stars were illuminating Arda, when the world was young, and she and Yavanna travelled through it, awakening *olvar* and *kelvar*, while the two-legged beings – Elves, Men, Dwarves and Hobbits – were still to come. It had been an exciting time, full of fervent activity for all the Ainur who had asked Eru Ilúvatar permission – and he had granted it – to make their vision true: Eä, the *Created World*; however, it had been also a solitary time, which Valar and Maiar had spent in anxious wait for the Children of Ilúvatar, Firstborn and Second-born, and for the other sentient beings. No, she didn’t want those times back: the following Ages had been far more interesting and thrilling, even if they had brought sorrows for all, even for the Ainur, who had to witness the devastation of Arda, operated by Melkor, and the troubles of its inhabitants… Luckily, the quality of the Blessed Realm could ease that sorrow, or else, in all likelihood, they might not endure it; Nerwen, who had had a taste of the suffering the inhabitants of Middle-earth must stand, wondered how they could be capable of bearing it. The Elves were allowed to leave the Hither Shore to go overseas and ease it, but the others couldn’t do the same. All of a sudden, Nerwen realised that these races – Dwarves, Men, Hobbits – were truly admirable, despite all the imperfections some of their individuals could have. Not that the Elves were flawless: even among them one could find envious, jealous, greedy, violent, arrogant individuals. In the past, Nerwen had met some, and if so far in this Age she hadn’t, it was only by chance, and surely it wouldn’t last for long.

She shook off those thoughts: if she went on like this, she risked a sleepless night. Better drop it and go to sleep.
The following morning, as usual Nerwen got up early, had a quick breakfast and broke camp; she loaded again the patient Thalion, and Calad perched over the luggage, then Nerwen sprang on Thiligloth’s back and set off, seeking the staircase leading to the terrace the beech had shown her. Following the Entwash, she entered Fangorn Forest; now, in the morning light, it looked less gloomy.

It didn’t take long – a little more than one hour and a half – before Calad’s sharp eyes caught the staircase, a few hundred metres from the riverbank: she had been completely right supposing it wouldn’t be far from the Entwash. Promptly, Nerwen headed for it; examining the steps, very high and deep, she immediately knew there was no way for the horses to climb them.

“Thiligloth and Thalion, you’ll have to stay here while I’m going up there,” she told them; immediately Thalion exuded a sense of apprehension: it was apparent he didn’t like the idea of her going away; therefore, she patted him on his muscular neck to reassure him. Then the Istar began to ascend, or better, to climb the stair: it was so steep and the steps were so high, she had to use both hands and feet. Calad, advantaged because of her wings, preceded her in flight.

When she reached the shelf, Nerwen looked at the panorama and recognised it exactly as the one the beech had showed her: it was undoubtedly the right place. The sun had climbed the sky and now lighted the natural balcony, warming it. The Aini smiled: the caress of Anar’s rays always lifted her spirits. She opened her arms, raising her face to the sky, and began to dance; Calad, infected by her sudden good mood, flitted about screeching joyfully her call *kek-kek-kek*, while Nerwen traversed the terrace dancing to an interior music.

Eventually, the euphoric moment passed and Nerwen lowered her arms again; she extended her senses, trying to perceive the presence of Ents, but she didn’t find anything. She tried again, making a greater effort and focusing harder, but she sensed nothing more than the usual lifeforms of the forest: squirrels, badgers, foxes, owls and so on.

Disappointed, Nerwen sat down on a boulder, planted her elbows on her knees and laid her head on the palm of her hands. The place was the right one, but maybe the time wasn’t. The old beech could have referred to a hundred years ago, or even a thousand, and now perhaps the Ents weren’t there anymore. After all, there were only *rumours* about the presence of walking trees, but how long was it, since someone had actually *seen* one? A number of centuries, undoubtedly, according to the reports of the Nandor who once inhabited the southern part of Greenwood, before it became Mirkwood. However… a feeling at the bottom of her mind, a kind of *itch*, told Nerwen she had to insist.

She was travelling for five weeks with no breaks, now. She decided it was time to stop and rest for some days. She could set camp there: the wood and the river would supply fresh food, sparing the one she brought from Lothlórien. She would stay vigilant: if an Ent would pass nearby, she would sense him.
They spent four days in complete relax; the only sounds were the occasional rustle of the higher branches of the massive trees and the calls of the animals inhabiting the forest.

At mid-morning of the fourth day, Nerwen was on the terrace, watching the sea of grass of Rohan’s plains. It was time to resume the search: she would leave the next day, following the Entwash to the slopes of the Misty Mountains – as she had done with the Limlight weeks ago – and from there she would come back, coiling back and forth to explore the part of the forest she skipped after the encounter with the old beech. If her search would prove fruitless, she would come back to the Entwash, crossing it to explore the small portion of forest extending there: even if at that point the hopes would be almost nil, she couldn’t leave any place unexplored. Once ascertained there were no trace of the Onodrim in Fangorn, she would return to Lothlórien, and there she would decide if go back north to speak with Thranduil, or head immediately eastward, seeking those unknown red mountains beyond which, in the Mirror of Galadriel, she had seen the Ents.

She was about to stand up and descend the steep staircase, when suddenly a sound wave swept through the forest, so low it was almost inaudible; the very boulder on which Nerwen was sitting vibrated, but it wasn’t an alarming sensation as with an earthquake. From below, the Istar heard Thilgiloth’s and Thalion’s agitated neighs, however they weren’t expressing fear, but rather surprise. Calad, who had gone hunting, came swiftly back.

What was that? she asked; she, too, sounded disconcerted, rather than afraid.

“I’ve got no idea,” Nerwen admitted; she was unsettled, because she had never experienced anything similar in all her long life.

Then, at a distance, they heard a sound like the ringing of a horn with a very low timbre, which had the forest vibrating again, but in a different way than before. From the high rocky terrace, facing upstream, Nerwen and Calad saw the tree crowns moving as if powerful wind gusts were shaking them, but there was not even the slightest air waft in the calm summer afternoon. They heard crashes and cracks, like a giant passing through the trees moving off his way boughs and branches. For a moment, Nerwen thought about a mountain troll coming down from the slopes of Hithaeglir, but immediately she marked the hypothesis as unlikely: where they were, the mountains were at least one hundred kilometres away, and mountain trolls tended to stay near their lairs for fear the sunlight could catch them, transforming them at once in stone.

The horn rang again, much nearer, like a hoom, hoom, huum. At this point Nerwen felt her heart leap in her chest and a triumphant cry erupted from her throat: this was an Ent!

Author’s corner:

Apparently, Nerwen is finally about to meet an Ent! Let’s see who he is, but I don’t think it’s very hard to guess XD

The picture of Fangorn with a stream (possibly the young Entwash) is Paul Lasaine’s.

Astronomical facts: Menelvagor (also called Menelmacar and Telumehtar) is the constellation of Orion, while Helluin is the star Sirius; Valacirca is the Ursa Maior, or Great Bear.
Lady Angel
Nerwen ran to the staircase and began to descend it with all the extraordinary nimbleness Ainur and Eldar had in common; she reached quickly the bottom, where she found Thalion and Thigiloth looking both in the direction of the approaching noise, resounding and oddly melodious, almost a music from huge horns and bagpipes marked by equally huge drums. Both mounts were tense, but they still showed no particular alarm; even Calad, who perched on a low branch nearby.

And finally, there he was, emerging among the tree trunks: the shape was similar to a Man’s, but he was gigantic, more than twice the height of a troll, very sturdy, with a long head and almost no neck; a grey-green bark covered his body, but his long arms were brown, while his huge feet had seven toes. Over a long and thick beard, looking like mossy twigs, two brown eyes shone, dotted with green.
Seeing Nerwen, the Ent came to a sudden halt and silenced abruptly; his mane of leaves rustled noisily.

Nerwen froze: ever since Yavanna Kementári brought the Onodrim in Middle-earth, she had seen none. Even when she went to Beleriand visiting her sister Melian, she heard rumours about them, but never saw them again; and therefore, now she felt so excited, she was hardly able to utter a single word.

The Ent watched her intently, equally silent. His eyes had a calm and solemn expression, but nevertheless, they were piercing; its pupils looked like very deep wells, full of things seen and kept in mind and pondered slowly and constantly since a very remote past; but on its surface, present sparkled vividly.

Finally, Nerwen pulled together enough to remember the traditional greeting formula; she bowed and said in Entish:

“\textit{I greet you, Shepherd of the Trees}.”

She needed several minutes to articulate the sentence in the slow, resonant language of the Onodrim, and her vocal equipment was put to the test. She would need some time to train her tongue, throat and lungs to this idiom, which was so totally different from any other one on Arda.

At the sound of his own language voiced by another living being, the Ent’s eyes widened and he gaped because of the enormous surprise: nobody knew the idiom of the Onodrim, except their creatrix. Could this be Kementári in person?

He watched her even closer, while she was talking; she hadn’t the aura of a Valië, and yet there was something in her that went beyond her human appearance. A disguised High Elf, perhaps? No,
that was different. But how?

Suddenly he realised it: she had to be a follower of Yavanna, a Maia. She didn’t look like an Aini, even of the lower rank; but no other could know his language.

When Nerwen finished the greeting, the Ent bowed in turn, bending stiffly his body at the hips.

“And I greet you, Ancient One,” he said in Common Speech. Nerwen was glad: if he was willing to speak a different language than his, communicating would require much less time, and much less energy from her part.

“So you know who I am?” she asked in the same idiom, not much surprised he had recognised her: the Ents were known for seeing deeply inside things, even if it could take some time; it was a talent similar to the Elves’ one, who were able to discern what they were looking at, much beyond its appearance.

“I do not know your name,” the Ent specified, “but I think you come from the Blessed Realm, because you speak my language, and this makes me think you are a disciple of the Queen of Earth.”

“It is so in Valinor,” she confirmed, “but here in Middle-earth, I’m only Nerwen the Green, an Istar.”

The Ent looked surprised:

“Hoom, hom,” he grumbled, “What a short name for such an ancient being!” he commented, voicing his perplexity, “O well, buràrum, each one has his own customs…” he concluded.

“Indeed,” Nerwen confirmed, and couldn’t help but feel amused, “And what’s your name?”

“Oh, that is rude of me!” the Ent cried with a thunderous rumble, “Well, my true name would require many days to be articulated, having it grown as years and centuries went by; and many are the names that the two-legged beings gave me, Elves and Men I had the chance to meet. The most recent was given to me by Oropher of the Nandor of Greenwood the Great, and it is Fangorn, or Treebeard in Common Speech. Yes, Treebeard will do.”

“Nice to meet you, Treebeard,” Nerwen said. Treebeard moved his gaze to the horses, and the Istar quickly introduced them, “These are my friends Thilgiloth and Thalion. And…” she pointed, “that’s Calad.”

“Your friends are my friends,” the Ent said, using a widely spread formula; the animals’ tension disappeared instantly, and only curiosity remained.

“Buràrum!” Treebeard boomed, “I have come to check a little on the outer world from my favourite observation point, over there,” he pointed at the steep staircase, which high and deep steps were evidently planned for his colossal feet, “Would you like to join me?”

“Of course,” Nerwen accepted, omitting she had just been there.

Treebeard bent down and stretched out his enormous hand:

“I will carry you,” he said, “The stair is difficult for your short legs.”

That hand could crush an enemy in an instant, but Nerwen perceived clearly that the Ent felt very favourable towards her and therefore she had no worry to accept his help. She sat on that colossal
Treebeard watched for a long time the landscape visible from that high place, beginning from the north where the terrain climbed gradually in the Wold, passing through the east where the endless sea of grass of Rohan’s plains stretched, to the south, beyond the Entwash, in the direction of the White Mountains, beyond which the ancient realm of Gondor was located.

“Hum, hoom,” Treebeard grumbled, “There is nothing to see, I would say. Like always, these times, I would add. Everything is very calm, but I do not know, it seems to me an ostensible, superficial calmness, as if under the earth’s crust, a secret agitation is flowing. Despite the quietness, something is moving, very slow for now, but my roots tell me it will not stay long like this.”

He paused to move his gaze to Nerwen, still standing where he had set her down. She turned to reciprocate that deep and solemn gaze.

“The world is changing,” she confirmed, repeating the words Galadriel had addressed her and that she knew true, like Yavanna, too, knew.

“So you feel it, too,” the Ent murmured, “It is not just my feeling,” he turned to inspect again the horizon, “We Onodrim do not like changes, especially when they are sudden; but this is emerging slowly, and therefore, I will look to it that we are not be taken by surprise.”

He stared at the landscape for some minutes more, then he stretched out again his hand to the Istar:

“Come, Lady Nerwen, I will take you to my home: I will be glad to have you as a guest.”

They went down the sheer stairs, at the bottom of which they found the three kelvar patiently waiting for them.

“Treebeard invites us up to his place,” Nerwen told them. The Ent looked at her in surprise:

“You talk to animals?” then he sobered, “Oh, of course, silly me: you are a disciple of Kementári, why should you not?”

“I talk to plants, too,” she revealed, not seeing any reason to keep it from him, “even if obviously plants normally do not speak with words.”

Treebeard nodded:

“So it is, but with those who can listen, they talk quite well.”

He started up the Entwash, and in this way Nerwen realised that he had meant it literally, by saying he would take her to his home. Surely, her small weight was nothing for a massive being like him.

Calad came and perched on Thilgiloth’s saddle; the latter moved to follow Treebeard, and Thalion placidly began to walk behind her. They had to keep up a fast pace, because the Ent’s strides, even if calm, were incredibly long.

During the journey, Treebeard and Nerwen talked at times, mainly about trees and herbs, and also about animals, water and earth; but for most of the time, the Ent sang softly to himself, partially in Entish, partially in Sindarin and in Common Speech; ancient songs with long compound words expressing the slow, pondered thoughts of the Onodrim.
Early in the afternoon, when Nerwen’s stomach grumbled, they stopped briefly and she grabbed a quick snack, then they resumed the journey, still along the right riverside, going on until evening; and finally, while dusk was swiftly falling under the trees, shrouding them in darkness, they arrived at Treebeard’s house, which was located on the lower spurs of Methedras, the last peak of the Misty Mountains, in this point going rather far inside the forest. The Entwash was now nothing more than a loud and energetic stream: its springs weren’t much far away, higher on the mountain’s slopes.

“Here we are,” Treebeard said, “This is one of my favourite abodes, and the oldest one. I have more, scattered in the forest, and each one has a different name. This is called… but no, the complete name would be too long, being it as ancient as this wood. Let’s call it … hrrrumm… Wellinghall? Yes, that will do.”

They climbed up the treeless, grassy slope; above them, the stars were blossoming in a clear sky. They came up in front of a large opening in the hillside, with two tall evergreen trees at each side, similar to vegetal pillars; their interlaced branches barred the passage like a living gate. From under the wooden grid, a rivulet ran out, descending the slope and joining the Entwash.

“Your mounts can stay here and graze freely,” the Ent suggested, halting, “I suppose you want to take care of them, before coming in.”

“Yes, thank you,” Nerwen answered.

“There is enough food for your hawk, too,” Treebeard added, putting down the Maia, who nodded.

Nerwen unloaded the luggage from Thalion’s back and unsaddled Thilgiloth, then the Ent helped her to carry her belongings inside. When he approached the entrance, the trees protecting it removed their branches, freeing the passage. In the now imminent shadows of night, the Aini’s sharp sight identified a large cleft in the hillside, with a flat floor and high, steep walls, at the bottom of which towered two lines of trees with smooth, straight trunks. On the opposite side was a niche carved in the rock, with a vaulted ceiling, from where a small creek fell, forming a kind of curtain in front of the cavity; the water gathered in a sort of basin, carved into the floor, and then ran gurgling along the floor, exiting the dwelling.

They entered; Treebeard quickly preceded Nerwen to the niche, where it was already dark. The
Istar advanced carefully in order not to set foot into the brook running on the floor, but a few moments later, a soft green-gold light – like sun passing through a thick curtain of leaves – radiated from the cavity, coming from two vessels laying on a high stony table; the trees, too, began to shine in a phosphorescent light of different colours blending into one another: green, gold, copper, until the whole dwelling was illuminated.

Marvelled, Nerwen watched intently the luminescent trees, and concluded there was none of the kind in Aman: they were a variety totally unknown to her. She grimaced, half amused and half irritated: her certainty she knew all the plants and animals on Arda, even if not each and every variety, had just been shattered. After all the millennia of her life, finding something new to learn was at the same time exciting and frightening; but she had never been one who withdraws in front of the challenge of new knowledge, and the excitement she felt was definitely much greater than fright.

“Your house is stunning, Treebeard,” she said sincerely, joining him in the rocky niche.

“Do you really mean it? Thanks!” the Ent cried, very happy, “I placed here your belongings,” he went on, “You can add the rest, too.”

He pointed on a shelf behind him, looking like a step one metre high, carved into the rocky wall, big enough to serve as a bed for at least six people. Nerwen did as she had been told, placing there her remaining stuff.

Meanwhile, Treebeard took two jars – one very large, the other one much smaller – and filled them with the water falling from the ceiling. He handed the smaller jar to Nerwen, keeping the larger one for himself; bringing it to his lips, he took a long swig.

“Buràrum!” he rumbled, satisfied, “This was much needed, after such a long day of marching.”

Nerwen drank in turn; the water was cool, and it tasted halfway mineral – iron, mainly – and vegetal, mostly basil, or athelas using its sindarin name (*), with a trace of thyme. It was delicious.

And it made her feel strangely: she felt her scalp prickling and her hair growing and lengthening, only a few millimetres, but unmistakably. She felt also her body prickle, especially the tip of her fingers and toes. Something told her that also her nails and stature had grown, even if, these too, just a few millimetres, like her hair.

She placed the jar on the shelf: better drink cautiously the water of the Ents. She had heard about it, a long time ago, but she never had the chance to taste it, so far. It was the only nourishment of the Onodrim, and its effect on the other living beings was to make them grow at abnormal speed.

“Thank you for sharing your food, Treebeard,” she said therefore, “but my species needs another type of food: I hope you won’t take offence if I have some of my own.”

“And how could I possibly take offence, when the question is asked with such courtesy?” the Ent replied, “Go on, Lady Nerwen. And prepare a pallet the way you prefer, as your species requires, so you can rest comfortably.”

While Treebeard continued sipping at his prodigious water, Nerwen took some smoked meat from her backpack, eating it with a small piece of lembas and adding to it some dehydrated apricots, then she drank from her canteen. The next morning she would fill it up with normal water from the Entwash.

Outside the Entish dwelling, night had fallen.
“It is quite late,” Treebeard said, “Let’s rest: we will talk again tomorrow morning.”

Being carried by an Ent hadn’t been more tiring than riding, but Nerwen admitted she was weary enough to wish for a good sleep. She spread her blanket on the ledge, positioned the saddle to use it as a pillow and, taking off her boots, she laid down. The stony bed was quite hard, but for one night she could bear it; should she sleep here longer, she would fetch some grass and dry leaves to make a mattress.

OOO

The next day, Nerwen woke up as early as ever, but found that Treebeard was already gone. She went outside, and not far from the entrance of the Entish house, she caught sight of her two horses, who were peacefully grazing. Seeing her, Thilgiloth came to her, and from the sky dove Calad, who perched on a rock close by.

“Did you have your rest, my friends?” Nerwen asked them.

“Yes, this is a peaceful place,” Calad confirmed, while the Chargeress sent an assenting thought to her two-legged friend.

“I agree,” the Aini nodded. The two kelvar returned to their businesses, while Nerwen began looking for dry wood to make a fire. She lighted a small one, paying attention in staying away from the gate-trees, aware that fire upset Ents and their kind. She began to prepare tea, and while waiting for the water to heat, she heard Treebeard arriving, chanting softly to himself a sweet and sad melody, of which she couldn’t hear the words.

“Well, good morning, Lady Nerwen!” the Ent greeted her, “Knowing something about the food requirements of your species, I went seeking something for you.”

He bent and extended his enormous hand, on which laid a large, concave leaf filled with strawberries, raspberries and blueberries.

“Thank you, Treebeard!” Nerwen cried, moved by his thoughtfulness, “You’re very kind.”

She took the fruits he was offering her and tried them: they were perfectly ripe and very sweet, more than usual. She supposed that the Ent, before plucking them, had asked the corresponding plants which were the best ones.

She ate also another small piece of the Elven crackers, which sweet flavour well matched the one of the berries, and then she drank her hot tea. While waiting for her to finish, Treebeard went over to a sunny spot of the meadow, raising his gnarled arms and enjoying the sun that was climbing in the blue, cloudless sky.

After putting out the fire, Nerwen approached the Ent who, hearing her coming, turned to her.

“Hoom hoom, I think it is time to talk,” he said; the Istar nodded, sitting on the grass and watching the massive being from below. Anyone else would surely feel intimidated, but not her, who had assisted her Mistress while she was creating the first Ents. For her, it was like looking at a godson she had seen being born, now grown up.

“I suppose, hroom, you didn’t come to Fangorn Forest out of chance,” Treebeard began in a half
quizzical, half uncertain tone.

“You suppose correctly,” Nerwen nodded, “You see, I was looking for the Onodrim on behalf of Kementári, because for a long time we have heard no news about you.”

Treebeard blinked slowly, pondering carefully and calmly those words, as it was the nature of his race.

“I am greatly honoured that the Queen of Earth worries about us,” he said slowly, “If she has no news about us, it is because we decided to lay low: as the world does not care for us, we do not care for the world.”

This was unexpected, for Nerwen, and she didn’t like it; she frowned slightly.

“But you are part of it,” she pointed out, “whether you care for the world or not, and whether the world cares for you or not.”

“Hummm, this is true, for sure,” Treebeard admitted, “but there is only a few of us left, and many of these few have become, how can I say, tee-ish, and by now they have little left of Entish. For most of the time they doze, when they have not fallen completely asleep yet. We call them Huorns.”

Nerwen recalled the old beech that had provided her with the vision of the rocky terrace.

“They completely lost interest in the world,” Treebeard went on, “and therefore they estranged themselves from it. It is happening to all of us, slowly but inexorably. Until one day only I will remain, and then I will fall asleep, I too.”

“But why?” Nerwen cried, dismayed, “What happened, what turned off your will to live?”

“We lost the Entwives,” the Ent explained in such a terribly sad tone, it made tears well up in her eyes: they had lost their females…?

“Lost?” she repeated, “Are they dead?”

“Dead? Oh no,” Treebeard answered, “They are gone. We searched for them, far and wide. The Elves wrote many a song about our search for the Entwives. But we never found them again, and finally we took shelter here, and slowly we are fading.”

“But that’s horrible…” Nerwen whispered, not having foreseen such a turn in the matter, “How’s that possible? Why did they go away?” she asked.

“Oh, it is a long, long tale,” Treebeard grumbled, “but I will try and tell you as shortly as possible, even if for me it is a great sorrow to recall this matter.”

He was silent for a long time, while recollecting his memories.

“The Ent and Entwives have always been together, since the beginning,” he started to speak, “We crossed each corner of Middle-earth, protecting trees to the best of our ability. We took care of the vast primordial forests of Middle-earth throughout all the Elder Days. The Ents loved particularly the biggest trees, such as oaks, redwoods, lindens, cypresses, chestnuts, pines… The Entwives, instead, preferred the smaller trees, the herbs, the fruit plants. This brought us to become estranged from one another so much that, at a certain point, when we arrived in this corner of Middle-earth, while we Ents roamed through the forest, the Entwives told us they would cross the Anduin to grow gardens according to their preferences. We went often to visit them, and actually their
gardens were lush, colourful and smelling nicely, inhabited by birds and small animals of the woods. They were a true marvel, but even if we liked them much, we preferred in any case to go back to our forest, to take care of the great trees growing there. Little by little, our visits became less and less frequent…”

Treebeard broke off and paused for a long time. Nerwen didn’t pressure him: she had extended her special senses to better understand the old Ent’s feelings, and she perceived his sorrow, regret, ache. Therefore, she waited for him feeling ready to go on.

Eventually, Treebeard resumed the narration, his voice unusually low:

“One day, the desire to see again Fimbrethil, my beloved, caught me; hence, I left the forest, walked through the sea of grass and crossed the Great River; but the land beyond it, once so green and flourishing, was empty and scorched. Where once were lush orchards, there were only a few bare, charred trees; there was no trace of flowers anymore, or of herbs, or vegetables. Where once had been striking beautiful gardens, there was only arid land…”

Again, the Ent paused. Nerwen felt a lump in her throat: Treebeard’s grief was quiet, but very deep. Unceasing grief and regret that was lasting for centuries.

“We never learned what happened exactly,” the old Ent went on, his voice even lower, “What we found out did not concern directly the Entwives, but other peoples, Elves and Men. There had been a great war between them and the Shadow, which had ended with the victory of the first ones, but it had brought disaster on the Entwives’ land. The Brown Lands, now they call them.”

Nerwen realised he was talking about the terrible battle between the Last Alliance and Sauron’s forces, at the end of the Second Age; this meant that the Entwives had disappeared over three thousand years ago.

“For many years we tried to find the Entwives,” Treebeard went on, “Every once in a while, one of us left and journeyed far and wide through Wilderland and Eriador, calling for them, looking for them. So did I, too, many times. All was vain. Our deeds inspired many a song and ballad, composed mostly by the Elves, and a few by Men; but as the years and the centuries went by, the hope to find the Entwives faded, until it was lost; and in the end, nobody left anymore to go and seek them. Never again did we hear about the Entwives…”

His saddened voice broke off; he could maybe not understand the love of the females of his race for the fruits of the earth, and he could disapprove of their decision to leave their males to pursue their own goals, however he was strongly suffering because of their disappearance and missed them tremendously. No future could there be for the Ents, without Entwives; and therefore, his sorrow was not only personal, but extended to all his people, condemned to fade.

Nerwen was nearly crying: Treebeard’s grief upset her heavily. As deep as the Great Sea did it appear to her, and as endless as Time itself.

Then an intuition crossed her mind like a lightning, making her frown.

“Tell me, Treebeard…” she began, trying to shape the idea whirling in her head, “Are the Onodrim all here, in Fangorn?”

“As far as I know, yes,” the Ent confirmed, “As I said, for a long time now none of us leaves to go seeking the Entwives anymore.”

“No, I mean: are there no other groups of Ents, in Middle-earth? In other forests, mayhap far away
east?"

As he couldn’t shake his head in a negative gesture, Treebeard swung from side to side.

“No, there are no other ones; there have never been many of us, and I know them all since I was an Entling, in the vanished Beleriand. And since we lost the Entwives, our number constantly dwindled: some died, killed by the hands of those damned Orcs – buràrum! – other ones fell asleep until they became normal trees with no voice and no movement… No, there are no other Ent communities in Middle-earth.”

“Yet I saw something,” Nerwen insisted, “Very far from here, beyond very high red mountains, on the shores of another sea. They looked like Onodrim; and if they weren’t, then they look very much like you.”

Again, Treebeard swung from side to side.

“I do not know where the place you describe may be,” he said, “Anyway, the world is so vast that none has seen it entirely, not even we in our long peregrinations seeking the Entwives,” he stared at her with those immense vegetal eyes of his, “You say they look like Onodrim? Could… could they be the Entwives?”

“I don’t know for sure,” Nerwen dampened his enthusiasm, not wanting to give him false hopes, “I must find them and verify I’m not mistaken…” she paused, while her Second Sight hit her, suddenly and unexpectedly as usual. She saw herself at the foot of the mountain range, while looking up to the red peaks, covered with perennial snow, one of them looking, in shape and height, very alike Taniquetil, the mountain on which Manwë Súlimo and Varda Elentári dwelled. She was indicating it to someone at her side, a male shape dressed in black, whom she caught but out of the corner of her eye and couldn’t therefore see clearly. It was only an instant, then the vision vanished, suddenly as it had arrived.

Then, Nerwen knew she would go there. Everywhere this there might be.

Author’s corner:

I swear, the encounter with Treebeard impressed me for real!!! LOL

That athelas, or Kingsfoil, might actually be basil it’s my own supposition, based on the fact that the etymology of the word basil means “regal plant, majestic” (from Greek basilikon, coming in turn from basileus “king”).

Tolkien wanted that what really happened to the Entwives remaining a mystery, even for himself, but in one of his letters he wrote “I think that the Entwives are really vanished, being destroyed with their gardens in the War of the Last Alliance.” However, this explanation of his never satisfied me: it sounds almost like “I don’t know what to say to justify their disappearance, and so I kill them all.” LOL Therefore, in my dissatisfaction, I decided I would find them myself! That is, of course, Nerwen will find them. She must still go a long way and much time must pass, but nothing will stop our green Istar in her Search for the Entwives!

Again, I thank all those reading my fan fiction, in the hope you’re enjoying it.
Lady Angel
Chapter XXV: Back to Lothlorien

It was time to contact again her Mistress.

A few days had passed since the encounter with Treebeard, and other conversations, which had completed the picture of the story concerning the disappearance of the Entwives, had followed the first one. By now, Nerwen was persuaded that they had fled during the terrible war, when the Last Alliance between Elves and Men had overthrown Sauron’s armies, at the end of the Second Age, and that they had gone as far as possible, somewhere into the east. The only clue she had, was the great red mountain range she had glimpsed at, once in the Mirror of Galadriel and twice through her Second Sight.

Mindful of the previous time, before proceeding the Maia had some energy food prepared, in this case some acacia honey, fetched by her generous and attentive host, and walnuts, hazelnuts, pine nuts, and the always excellent lembas.

Nerwen laid back on her mattress in the Ent-house; she had warned Treebeard about what she was going to do, so that he wouldn’t worry about her staying motionless like dead. She closed her eyes and visualised a door, beyond which she imagined Yavanna waiting. She knocked and a few moments later the door opened; her Mistress appeared on the threshold, smiling at her affectionately. They embraced, while around them the garden of Yavanna’s palace in Valimar appeared.

*Nerwen, my dearest, I am so happy to see you,* the Valië said, sitting her on a near wooden bench, placed in front of a pond surrounded by large lilac flowers.
I, too, am happy to see you, Yavanna, the Maia said, I wanted to update you, because I have some news.

Tell me, Yavanna exhorted her.

Therefore, Nerwen reported her the departure from Rivendell, the inconclusive stopover at Rhosgobel in the hope to find Radagast, the assault of the werewolves and the providential intervention of Beorn; the news that in Middle-earth Skin-changers still existed surprised Yavanna agreeably, as Nerwen had been, too. Her account went on with the arrival at Lothlórien and Galadriel’s and Celeborn’s welcome, and the poignant encounter with her niece Arwen, perfect living image of Lúthien.

Does she really look so alike her?, Yavanna asked, more stunned than doubtful of her disciple’s words.

She does, Nerwen confirmed, except for the eyes, blue instead of grey-green.

Melian never truly accepted the destiny her daughter has chosen for herself, the Valië considered, Mayhap, knowing about Arwen, she will find a little comfort.

The Maia felt a twinge in her chest and she realised that perhaps Arwen’s fate would be similar to Lúthien’s. Melian’s daughter had chosen a mortal life to be with her beloved Beren; and Arwen could make the same choice for the love of Aragorn. The future wasn’t decided yet, but the way she had seen them – partners for life – left little doubt.

I don’t know, she said gloomily, My Second Sight revealed that Arwen seems to be destined to repeat Lúthien’s case: she, too, could be lost for the Eldar and choose the Fate of Men for the love of a mortal. Perhaps it’s better not telling anything to Melian, so her grief won’t be renewed.

Yavanna pondered on what her disciple had said.

You are right, she agreed in the end, better save her this sorrow.

After a short pause, Nerwen went on, telling her Mistress about the White Council and Galadriel’s
anxieties, and about her Mirror and what she had seen in it. Involuntarily, she thought of Beriadir, too, and Yavanna smiled.

*I am glad you found someone helping you to ease the sadness that having to give up on Thorin caused you,* she said.

Finally, Nerwen got to the most important part of her update: the meeting with Treebeard. Yavanna tensed, anxious to receive at last news about her creatures.

*So few remain...* she whispered, sorrowful, when the Istar finished, *And the Entwives, vanished thousands of years ago... There is no future, for them.*

*Until they stay separated, so it is,* Nerwen confirmed, *but the vision I had in the Mirror of Galadriel gives me hope.*

*They could just be more male Onodrim,* the Queen of Earth objected. Nerwen nodded:

*They could,* she admitted reluctantly, *but I want to believe that instead they are the females. The look of the landscape I’ve seen would suggest it: a well-cultivated land, like a garden, what the Entwives prefer, while the Ents love better the wild forests.*

*It is surely possible that this is the case,* Yavanna agreed, *but you need to go there and verify.*

*I’ll do it,* the Istar declared firmly, *This will give back to the Ents the hope for future, and therefore a reason to feel involved again in Middle-earth’s cause and to intervene, if needed, should Sauron arise again. Therefore, even the Entwives might want to play their part.*

Yavanna nodded slowly.

*Since you left, one year ago,* she said, *I felt his menace growing, like a pressure at the bottom of my mind. The earth itself perceives it. Now I have no more doubts: Sauron is gathering his forces to launch an attack. Warn the White Council: they shall not tarry any longer.*

*I’ll tell them,* Nerwen answered.

*Good; now tell me about your plans about the search for the Entwives,* Yavanna exhorted her.

*I’ll begin with the itinerary the vision in the Mirror of Galadriel suggested,* the Maia said, *I’ll go to Dorwinion, cross the Sea of Rhûn and Eryn Rhûn, and then I’ll look for that strange red mountain range, beyond which I’ve seen what I hope is the land of the Entwives.*

*It will be surely a very long journey,* the Queen of Earth considered, *in wild and little-known places. It will be quite dangerous.*

*I can see that,* Nerwen agreed, *but the help of olvar and kelvar already proved highly valuable, and I have no doubt it’ll continue.*

*Indeed: you can always count on them, should you be in need of help,* the Valië confirmed.

The most relevant subject being now exhausted, Nerwen asked about her sister, and she was reassured she was fine. She asked to her Mistress, too, if she could bring word of Galadriel to her father Finarfin and her daughter Celebrían, and Yavanna gladly accepted to do so.

They were about to part, when a deep rumble resonated in the distance, and the floor under their feet shook violently like for an earthquake.
What’s going on? the Istar asked, alarmed: she didn’t think that in the psychic world where she and Yavanna communicated – somehow similar to Olorendor, the Land of Dreams – there could be true dangers, but this sound was really scary, and the feeling of the earth teetering was highly disturbing.

A rip in the space-time, Yavanna answered, distraught, Sauron is drawing from dangerous energies in order to increase his power. I fear he is under such a terrible attack, he panicked and now he is defending himself with all he can find, even what could destroy Eä’s fabric itself! Wait... Yavanna paused; her face became like stone because of the intense concentration, It is not now, but it will happen in a near future. And the result has been his downfall, but only apparently: actually he was able to escape.

Nerwen noticed that the Valië had suddenly changed verb tense from future to past and felt confused: the battle, which eco they just heard, had already taken place, or not yet?

Yavanna’s next words unravelled immediately the mystery:

The damage to the space-time fabric had it seriously altered, Nerwen: you cannot go back in the same time you left, but only after the battle, when the damage is fixed. Months have passed. You left your body in a safe place, did you not?

Sure: in Treebeard’s Ent-house, the Istar answered, troubled, Thilgiloth and Calad will be terribly distressed, she considered, worried, let alone Treebeard...

The Queen of Earth extended again her senses of Valië to see if it was somehow possible to move up Nerwen’s return, but she saw no chance.

Go, my friend, she exhorted her, Do not worry, nothing happened to your body: it is in complete stasis, but the long stillness has debilitated it and you will have some trouble to move, at the beginning. Be careful and take all the time you need to recover, she suggested.

Nerwen nodded; then, Yavanna embraced her.

May the road rise to meet you, she wished her, like the last time; then slowly she and the garden vanished.

OOO

Opening her eyes, Nerwen found herself in Wellinghall; she looked around: it was day, and the light seeped through the ceiling of branches in the not covered section of the Entish house. Calad was close by, roosted on a perch made of two twigs, criss-crossed and tied together, her head under her wing, as if sleeping. Nerwen sent out her thought to her feathered friend, who started suddenly and looked at her.

You’re back!, she rejoiced, You’re awake!

She took off to land next to her arm and rubbed her head against her hand, in an affectionate gesture.

How long did I sleep? Nerwen enquired. Good Valar, she was so thirsty she could dry out the Anduin, not to mention how much hungry she was...
Four lunar cycles have passed, Calad answered. End of October, the Aini immediately computed.

I go and call the others, the hawk announced, jumping in the air and going away flittering along the passage lined by the trees, which leaves had acquired the colours of the fall livery.

Soon after, announced by a pounding hoom, hrum, hum, Treebeard arrived at full speed, Calad in front and Thilgiloth close behind. The Ent stopped next to her pallet and watched her intently.

“Well, well, I see you are back,” he considered, “Buràrum, you wandered for months in a limbo from which we were not able to awake you! How do you feel?”

“Thirsty,” Nerwen squawked, her throat completely parched. She was also starving, but in those conditions she would never be able to swallow anything.

Quickly, Treebeard fetched some water from the spring and took it to the Istar; he looked positively hasty, showing how much he was worried.

Nerwen sat up and took the jar the Ent was handing her, but she was so weakened, she wasn’t able to rise it; therefore, Treebeard helped her, using very carefully one of his huge fingers. The Maia took a sip, then another, and another, trying not to gulp down too quickly and choke. The Ent-draught gave her instantly strength, enough to let her keeping the jar by herself and draining it in a few swigs. The energy of the magical liquid filled her, like a heat wave radiating from her stomach to her limbs, until the tips of her fingers and toes.

“Better,” Nerwen whispered; she handed back the jar to Treebeard, who filled it up again, and then brought it back to her. Nerwen took another couple of swigs, slower, and then she looked around.

“I’m so hungry, I’d swallow down a whole Oliphant!” she cried, hoarsely. Treebeard burst into a thundering laughter, and she got feelings of relief and amusement from Calad and Thilgiloth.

You had us terribly worried! the Chargeress told her, reproachful, What happened? Why did you sleep so long?

“While I was speaking with Kementári, Sauron disrupted the fabric of the world,” Nerwen explained, trying to simplify the concept, so that it could be comprehensible to her interlocutors who, unlike her, didn’t witness the Music of the Ainur that created the universe, and therefore couldn’t know how it worked, “This prevented me to come back in my body at the time I left it, and I was able to do so only now. I’m so sorry I worried you, my friends, but I couldn’t help it.”

“It’s not your fault, Lady Nerwen,” Treebeard reassured her, “Now think about getting your strength back.”

“Lembas,” the Istar suggested, pointing at her backpack, close by on the same shelf she had slept on for all those weeks. Thilgiloth, who was nearer, slid it toward her pushing it with her muzzle; Nerwen opened it and took out a bundle of the Elven crackers, which in its mallorn leaf had stayed fresh and crispy as if just baked. She wolfed down a whole one, occasionally alternating a swig of Ent-draught to the mouthfuls. Soon enough, her strength was back and she dared to move some steps; her muscles, which had stayed still for so long, hardly responded to her solicitations: she would need a number of days, before they would return in shape like they had been.

“Sauron disrupted the fabric of the world?” Treebeard enquired, “Hroom… as a matter of fact, some days ago I felt a great disquietude in the earth. By branch and root! Maybe the Dark Enemy has been attacked and he did not expect it, therefore he reacted in confusion and panic, creating a disturbance in the forces of the universe,” he looked at Nerwen, who was swallowing up the last
crumbs of the Elven cracker, “Am I right?”

The Maia nodded.

“I don’t know the details,” she said, “but Kementári, too, thought so. Besides, I know for sure that Lady Galadriel pressured the Council to launch an attack to Dol Guldur, trying to wipe out the presence of the Dark Enemy from that place. But I have to go back to Lothlórien to know for sure.”

“You are in no condition to go nowhere, for now,” Treebeard considered, looking at her while she was trying to move some more stumbling steps, probing her own strength.

“I see,” Nerwen admitted with a sigh, going back to sit on the shelf she used as a bed, “I’ll wait until I’ll recover…”

OOO

Nerwen was able to leave Wellinghall the fourth day of November; Treebeard escorted her, leading her directly northward along the foot of the Misty Mountains, in order to shorten the journey as much as possible. In just three days they reached the Limlight, in this place nothing more than a large brook, and forded it, ultimately reaching the northern margin of Fangorn Forest in a rainy day. Here, Treebeard halted, looking northeast, towards Lothlórien.

“The time for me to leave my forest has not yet come,” he said slowly, “nor for the Ents to reveal themselves again to the world. Please, don’t disclose our presence here, for the moment, not even to your friends, the Elves.”

From under the hood of her cloak, Nerwen looked Treebeard straight in the eyes, where green lights floated, flashing lively.

“I doubt I can keep a secret, to the piercing gaze of the Lady of the Golden Wood,” she said quietly. Treebeard mused about it: he knew Galadriel and her perspicacity.

“You are right, Lady Nerwen,” he admitted, “but should the Lady of the Galadhrim guess even what you will not tell her, beg her not to speak to anyone about it, except Lord Celeborn.”

“Alright,” the Istar accepted, “As you wish, my friend.”

“Thank you, Ancient One,” the Ent then said, conferring her again the formal title his race used for Nerwen’s, “I thank you so much for taking up to find the Entwives, and therefore I name you, here and now, Friend of the Ents.”

Touched, Nerwen addressed him a clumsy bow from Thilgiloth’s back:

“You honour me highly, Shepherd of the Trees,” she said, using, she too, the formal title, “I hope I’ll succeed.”

“I hope it, too, with all my heart… even if, knowing the history, I confess I do not dare hoping too much,” he sighed, and it sounded like the blow of the wind in the chimney of a great hearth, “It was an honour and a pleasure to meet you, and I hope we will be able to meet again under better circumstances.”
“So do I,” the Aini replied, “Meanwhile, may the stars shine upon your path.”

“And upon yours,” Treebeard answered, bowing stiffly.

Nerwen spurred Thilgiloth, who started pacing under the rain, followed by the quiet Thalion; Calad took off flying in front of them, taking on again her task for scouting.

Treebeard stayed and watched them go, until they disappeared behind a fold of the terrain; then he turned and marched back into Fangorn’s depths. Many years would pass before he would meet again other two-legged beings wandering in his forest, and those would bring a great turmoil in his life and in his kindred’s…

OOO

Celeborn and Galadriel received Nerwen immediately, in private; the Lady of the Wood told her that, soon after the Istar’s departure for Fangorn, she had called for the White Council; in that occasion, Saruman had finally given his consent to attack Dol Guldur. Mithrandir had taken on the task to lead the army of the Galadhrim, and two weeks ago the battle had taken place, fiercely fought by weapons and Power; when they were about to win, Sauron drew to the essence itself of Eä to launch a desperate counterattack, which Mithrandir had been able to hold back only thanks to the Power contained in Narya, assisted by the one of Nenya brandished by Galadriel. Yavanna had been right, Nerwen thought: Sauron had used very dangerous energies in the effort to win the battle. Luckily, he didn’t succeed, nor the damage on the fabric of Eä had been irreparable, even if it had cost her a time leap of almost four months.

Anyway, Sauron had been defeated and forced to leave his fortress, escaping to a still unknown destination.

Nerwen was sorry she had been unable to be there, not so much for the help she could give in battle – indeed scarce – but for the opportunity to see Gandalf; her Second Sight had told her they would meet again soon, before another long separation, but it hadn’t been like that; after all, the future isn’t immutable, except in very broad terms. If she wasn’t speaking with Yavanna in that precise moment, she would have come back to Lothlórien much sooner and therefore her vision would have become true; but it had been otherwise. At this point, she would meet her best friend again only in many years, and she was sorry about it.

“Too bad we cannot annihilate him,” Galadriel complained at the end of the recount of the battle, referring to Sauron. “No force in this world can. Only the destruction of the One Ring can do it, but it has been lost so much time ago and it hasn’t been found anymore…”

Nerwen grimaced.

“What’s been lost, must be found,” she considered, gloomily. Celeborn watched her intently, concerned:

“Your Second Sight gave you some hints about it?”

Surprised, Nerwen reciprocated his alarmed gaze:

“Hum, not really: I was just quoting the old proverb.”
What she didn’t know – what at the moment nobody knew – was that the One Ring had already been found, and by the maybe most unlikely creature in all Middle-earth; but this would be revealed only in a number of decades.

And therefore, unaware of this, they changed subject.

“How was your search in Fangorn?” Galadriel enquired.

“I made a remarkable encounter,” the Istar answered, well aware it would be useless to try keeping something from her old friend’s sharp gaze, “but I’m not at liberty to talk about it. Anyway, as a result, my mission will go on in Wilderland, far away eastward, beyond the known territories. Do you remember my vision in the Mirror, Galadriel?” the Lady of the Galadhrim nodded in confirmation, “Well, that’s where I must go.”

“We’re sorry you cannot tell us about what you found in Fangorn,” Celeborn said, “but of course we won’t insist, if you have to keep it private. With regard to what concerns the continuation of your mission, it’s not advisable travelling during wintertime, unless it’s about very serious and urgent business: if you like, you can spend here the cold months and leave again in spring.”

“Thank you, Lord Celeborn,” Nerwen accepted gratefully, “Luckily my task isn’t that much impelling to force me travelling in the bad season.”

OOO

Nerwen had her previous quarters back. Elladan and Elrohir had returned to Rivendell, but Arwen still dwelt by her maternal grandparents and was more than glad to see her aunt again, whom she had become so attached in no time.

The day after her return to Caras Galadhon, Nerwen went looking for Beriadir, but she didn’t find him. Calad offered to keep an eye on his flet, but she didn’t see the handsome Silvan Elf that day, nor in the following ones; he had to be on duty somewhere along the frontier of the Golden Wood.

Some days later, on an afternoon, Nerwen was in Arwen’s sitting room, playing teliad with her, an ancient board game consisting in getting out of the chessboard all of your pieces before the adversary did. Both the player were very good at it, and they were having fun in beating each other more or less equally, when Calad perched on the sill of the closed window and tapped on the glass with her beak to draw their attention. Nerwen stood up and opened the window, even if to communicate there was no need to do so.
Beriadir is back, the hawk announced, I saw him arriving.

“Thank you, my friend,” Nerwen said, smiling gladly: she was truly looking forward to see again her friend-in-love, but decided not rushing to him: if he just came back from his guard duty, he surely needed to freshen up, grab something to eat, rest. She would send him a note, inviting him to her as soon as it suited him best.

Beriadir didn’t make her wait a long time: less than two hours later, he showed up at the palace and was taken to Nerwen’s room, and she joined him after a few minutes. As soon as he saw her on the threshold, his ocean-blue eyes sparkled and he beamed one of his dazzling smiles.

“Mae govannen, Nerwen,” he murmured, getting near her in a few quick paces. She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him soundly.

Of course, on that evening the Istar sent her apologies to her hosts for not being able to dine with them.

OOO

Nerwen spent the winter alternatively in the palace or at Beriadir’s, according to his guard duties; by the end of January, one late afternoon a messenger arrived, carrying a letter of Mithrandir to Nerwen. The Maia didn’t expect receiving news from her old friend, and quickly retired to her room to read in private, by candlelight. Beriadir was patrolling the northeast border of Lothlórien, on the river Nimrodel, and would return in a couple of days.
My beloved Nerwen, Gandalf began in his elegant calligraphy, I write to you from Beorn’s hall; he is harbouring me for the cold season along with Bilbo Baggins, while we are returning to the Shire; I learned that, during you journey, you met them both, and they send their greetings to you.

Apart from that, I would like to tell you that it is a pleasure to write to you, but unfortunately this is not the case, because I have news that I know will grieve you.

As you know, Thorin Oakenshield had a mission to accomplish, which now I have the liberty to reveal to you: win back his lost realm of Erebor, destroyed by the dragon Smaug over one hundred and seventy years ago. And he did it; Smaug is dead – even if not by his hand – and the Realm Under the Mountain has been restored. As a result, a terrible battle occurred, involving five armies, and even if it ended with the victory of Dwarves, Elves and Men against Orcs and Werewolves, we paid a dreadful price: almost one third of our forces has been killed, among which, sadly, also Thorin himself, and with him his nephews Fili and Kili, his heirs, fallen while defending him.

The letter slipped from her suddenly weakened fingers. Hot tears welled up in her eyes and began to flow down her cheeks, now ashen-pale.

Thorin… killed!

The pain she was feeling surprised her: after all, she had always been aware that Thorin would eventually die, being mortal. This was what affected her so much, when she had left him in Bree: even if they would meet again and be together, it would last only the time of Thorin’s lifespan, very long, as he was a Dwarf, but nonetheless limited. However, Nerwen had hoped for him a long and prosperous life, and his premature death grieved her deeply.

She took up again Gandalf’s letter, her hands shaking, and tried to be strong enough to go on reading.
This happened the third-and-twentieth day of November. Now, their cousin Dáin Ironfoot is King Under the Mountain.

My dearest friend, I wasn’t aware your encounter had generated affection, between you and Thorin. During the long months we spent together, he never told me, but this doesn’t surprise me, knowing how jealous he was of his feelings, especially the deepest ones. He revealed it to me before parting from this world; his last words have been for you: “Tell her that my heart was hers. Tell her that, would I have lived, I would have asked her to be my queen. I hope she will keep the memory of me and of the time we spent together in Bree.”

Again, Nerwen had to stop reading, because tears prevented her to see. She closed her eyes and cried for a long time, bitterly.

She would never forget him. In her heart, there would always be a special place for Thorin Oakenshield, Dwarven prince, Durin’s Heir, King Under the Mountain.

Namárië, Thorin…

Author’s corner:

The teliad (Sindarin, meaning simply “game”) is an invention of mine, and its rules are inspired by the Egyptian senet, one of the most ancient board games in history.

The news of Thorin’s death traumatised me; obviously, I knew perfectly that it had to occur, but describing Nerwen’s grief was devastating, and again, her tears have been my tears… Luckily, there’s Beriadir to comfort her, a character I specifically created for this purpose: I didn’t want her to confront this great sorrow alone.

From the next chapter on, we’ll leave the known lands of Midde-earth to enter the far less known Wilderland: so far, Nerwen’s adventures have been relatively easy, favoured by persons and places more or less familiar, but from now on it won’t be the case any longer and things will grow more difficult…

Thanks to all those who are following this fan fiction: please let me know if you’re enjoying it! Hugs to everybody!

Lady Angel
Chapter XXVI: In Wilderland

Throughout the winter, Nerwen and Arwen spent much time together; in Elrond’s daughter, the Istar didn’t only see again the appearance of her beloved niece Lúthien, but she had found also a very sweet person, considerate but also sunny, with whom she shared many things, both serious, like a way to see the world, the relationships with people, the feelings, and playful, such as riding, playing *teliad* or other board games, reading. The two of them grew very fond of each other.

Nerwen spent many pleasant hours with Galadriel, too; but it was with Beriadir that she shared the most delightful days and nights of her stay in the Golden Wood.

She spoke to no one about the deep sorrow of her heart, caused by Thorin’s death, because she knew that no Elf would truly want to understand, or accept, that an immortal, moreover one of high rank like her, could feel so connected to a mortal, a Dwarf out of all beings; she didn’t even tell Galadriel, even if – differently from most Elves – the Lady of the Galadhrim had a lot of sympathy for Dwarves, because she doubted that even her old friend would truly understand her feelings. However, neither to her piercing eyes, which went far deeper than the visible things, nor to Arwen’s and Beriadir’s affectionate ones, could Nerwen hide her hurt, and so she told them only that she had had news about the death of a person she had been very fond of. All three felt sorry for her, but Beriadir was the one who kept really close to her, bestowing on her much care and attention; and cuddling her constantly, so little by little he was able to ease her pain. And because of this, even more than his exquisite and passionate embraces, she would be forever grateful to him.

OOO
This way, the months passed by, and eventually the moment for leaving arrived. Saying farewell to Lothlórien and to those she had become attached to was harder for Nerwen, this time, because differently than the first time, she didn’t plan on returning, or at least, not in the near future.

Celeborn and Galadriel insisted on having a great farewell banquet, much more munificent than the previous one; Captain Haldir and his fiancée Ireth were invited, and of course also Beriadir, as well as all the notable people of the realm. There were plenty of food and drinks, and in addition music, poetry, jugglers, acrobats, and dances until late.

Nerwen and Beriadir retired relatively early, but they didn’t sleep much, that night.

OOO

The next day, they got up at about nine o’clock; again, Beriadir offered to escort her.

Unlike on the Celebrant, there was no ferry crossing the Anduin, but Celeborn had ordered one prepared expressly for Nerwen.

While Thalion and Thilgiloth, with Calad perched on the saddle of the latter, were taken on board of the barge, Beriadir clutched Nerwen’s hands and lifted them to his lips.

“We had a really good time together,” he said in a low voice, looking into her eyes. She nodded:

“Yes, indeed,” she confirmed, smiling.

He pulled her into his arm and kissed her sweetly, for a long time.

“I hope one day you’ll come back to Lórien,” he said under his breath, “Till then, may the grace of the Valar be with you and guard you during your long journey.”

His words touched Nerwen, because she guessed that, from now on, she would truly need it: so far, she had had a relatively easy time, moving into a territory that was well-known – even not to her personally, as during the First Age she visited only Beleriand – and among friendly people, almost all familiar with her, from Círdan to Galadriel; but from now on, she would journey in lands little or not at all known, and would meet completely foreign people. Besides, so far her travelling had been facilitated by the existence of important roads, like the Great East Road, or by the company of an escort, such as the one from Rivendell to Lothlórien, or by detailed maps, like going to Fangorn; but from here on out, things would change radically. This meant that difficulties, hazards and dangers would surely come in greater extent, both in numbers and in measure.

“Thank you, Beriadir,” she answered, “I, too, hope to come back, one day… but we have no way of knowing it.”

She stroked his cheek, slightly bristly because of the beard he had shaved hastily.

“May the stars shine upon your path,” she whispered, warmly. Beriadir turned his head to kiss her hand, and then he let her go. Nerwen took a step backwards, turned and went on board, walking quickly to overcome her reluctance. If the first time she had left Beriadir and Lothlórien, almost one year before, had felt hard, now it was a hundred time harder because, unlike the previous, this
time she didn’t know if it would be possible for her to return.

Standing on the deck, she kept watching Beriadir’s shape becoming smaller and smaller while the barge was moving away from the shore. She would miss him. Not like Calion, because they hadn’t spent as much time together; and not even like Thorin, because what she had felt for the Dwarven prince would stay forever a unique and unrepeatable feeling. But nevertheless, she would miss Beriadir.

OOO

On the riverbank, Beriadir kept staring at Nerwen, motionless, almost as if wanting to imprint her in his mind indelibly. He uttered a long sigh: he would miss her for a long time. Even if they weren’t meant to be partners for life, Nerwen had entered in his heart and would occupy there an important place for long, surely until the day he would meet his own soul mate.

Seeing that the ferry had finally reached the other shore, Beriadir turned and climbed back on his horse; with another sigh, he shook the bridles and returned slowly to Caras Galadhon.

OOO

Reaching the shore, the boatman moored the barge at the trunk of a tree, strong enough for the task, and had the horses getting off; after thanking him, Nerwen hopped in Thilgiloth’s saddle and spurred her, moving away from the river. She headed eastward, in the direction of Mirkwood.

It was mid-April, and the noontime sun shone already quite warm at this latitude, therefore Nerwen had put on her hat.

After Sauron had been chased away, those lands – even if located just about 40 kilometres south of Dol Guldur – were relatively safe, for now: Orcs and Werewolves infesting the forest had run away with their master. Nonetheless, Calad monitored carefully the territory from above, and both Nerwen and Thilgiloth remained constantly alert.

The Istar planned on reaching Mirkwood in three or four days and then skirting it almost due eastwards, arriving to its southernmost point. From here, she would proceed eastward, keeping north of the Brown Lands in order to avoid their desolation; then she would cross the large plain separating Mirkwood from the inland sea of Rhûn: her next destination was Dorwinion, a journey which would require about three weeks.

Thalion, the reliable packhorse who had accompanied them to Fangorn, was loaded with provisions and luggage, but his strength and resistance were so great, it didn’t bother him; he always walked in the tail of Thilgiloth, for whom he had a true veneration.

Halfway in the morning of the third day after leaving Lothlórien, from her high position Calad spotted the dark line of Mirkwood on the horizon; they reached it in the late afternoon. They set up camp at a good distance from the trees – after all, one could never know, Nerwen thought gloomily, recalling the dreadful experience with the Werewolves at Rhosgobel, almost one year ago; but the night passed quietly, and the next day they resumed their journey, with the bleak
Brown Lands far to their right; the dark forest loomed to their left, but soon enough they left if behind, and entered the vast prairies of Wilderland, or Rhovanion. Here, the landscape was mostly flat and quite boring, only here and there dotted with minor heights, small trees clusters not even worth the name of woods, and creeks just a few strides wide, fortunately numerous enough to save them the problem of water supply. There were no roads or tracks, because Dorwinion did business mostly by river, sailing up the Celduin for hundreds of kilometres northwest until Lake-town, and from there up the Forest River, reaching Thranduil’s Wooden Realm; the Elven king, Nerwen had learned from Celeborn, was very fond of the excellent Dorwinian wine. A tributary of the Celduin, the Carnen, led instead to the Dwarven realm of the Iron Hills, farther east than Lake-town.

For many days, Nerwen and her kelvar friends proceeded in the empty lands of Rhovanion without meeting any living being except animals like hares, rodents, grouses, pheasants, moles, anteaters, lizards, and a great number of insects, from bees to butterflies, from ants to dragonflies. They heard frogs and toads along the small streams they crossed, and sometimes they caught in the distance the curt bark of foxes and coyotes. The grass was lush, a good forage for the horses, and the abundance of rodents and large insects fed the hawk perfectly.

OOO

Finally, in the early afternoon of the sixth day of May, after an almost three-week journey with no remarkable events, Nerwen got to the Harnenduin. In this place, the river was almost halfway between its springs in the southeast and its merging into the Celduin to the northwest, and it was already quite wide; it looked placid, but Nerwen knew out of experience that, more often than not, a quiet surface hides strong streams, and therefore crossing it would be a serious matter, not to underestimate, because it could prove rather tough.

Nerwen was a good swimmer, and of course she couldn’t drown; Thilgiloth, too, for the same reasons could handle it, and for Calad obviously there was no problem, as she could easily fly over the river. But poor Thalion was frightened by the width of the stream, not to mention there was no
way to carry the luggage. Nerwen had a hatchet to cut wood for a campfire, but it was way too small to cut trunks big enough to build a raft – assuming the could craft it, that is, which she seriously doubted: during her long life, she had learned to do and make many things, but not boats, not even as simple as a raft.

There was only one solution: they had to find a ford, or a ferry. Nerwen watched intently one way and the other; it was more likely to find a ford upstream, but maybe downstream there was a village with a ferry.

*Calad, my friend, would you go and look for signs of a crossing?* she asked the hawk, who was perched on Thalion’s back. After receiving the necessary instructions, Calad took off and started upstream; she would stay away several hours, then she would come back to report and, if she had found nothing, she would start again downstream, obviously after resting some time. Considering this, Nerwen dismounted and set up camp, preparing her tent and lighting a fire. On a flat hot stone, she baked a carp she had caught in the river, seasoning it with thyme and wood garlic she had gathered nearby. Free of ties, Thilgiloth and Thalion began to graze peacefully.

The sun was almost setting when Calad returned; her long scouting had been fruitless, because she hadn’t spot any place suitable to cross the river.

“Rest, now,” Nerwen exhorted her, “Tomorrow morning you’ll fly downriver. If you find nothing even there, we’ll go upstream until the river becomes narrow enough and we’ll be able to cross it, even if it’d take days.”

OOO

The following day, Calad started again at an early hour; she came back shortly after lunch, while Nerwen was indulging in the luxury of smoking her pipe – her supply of pipe-weed was almost over – sitting in the shadow of a poplar. Directing her thoughts to the bird of prey, the Aini perceived immediately her gladness and realised she had found what they were looking for even before she told her:

*I caught sight of a building cluster of the Two-Legs*, Calad said, sending her the image of a village of stone and wood cottages, *There are boats, too.*

Indeed, there were three docks along the riverbank, two large enough to host each a dozen of moored boats, the other one smaller, with a barge; on the opposite riverbank there was its counterpart dock, empty.

It was difficult for Calad determining the distance, but presuming she had found the small town in half of the time she had been away, had surveyed it for some minutes and then had come back immediately, Nerwen guessed it could be around 80 kilometres. If she started at once, they could get there by the evening of the next day.

She broke camp, loaded Thalion and mounted on Thilgiloth, starting along the riverbank. There were many wooded spots, and sometimes the trees arrived as far as the water, forcing the Istar to withdraw some hundred metres from the river, but for most of the time she could ride on keeping an eye on the water on her right side.

In the late afternoon of the next day – a little earlier than she was expecting – they reached the
place along the Harnenduin where, on the opposite riverbank, they found the village Calad had seen. Here, the river was even wider, and approaching the dock with the ferry, Nerwen wondered how they would see her from the opposite side. Luckily, there was no problem: at the beginning of the jetty, she found a small wooden box, closed all around except in the front; inside of it hung a horn with a brass mouthpiece; above it, the words play me were written in Common Speech as well as in Sindarin.

“Simple and efficient,” Nerwen commented, she dismounted and crossed over to the box, took the horn and blew it firmly, getting a low but resonant sound. She kept an eye on the opposite jetty, and soon enough she saw a strong built Man marching on it; they looked at each other across the water, then the Man waved his arms as if telling her he had seen and heard her. She watched him getting on board the ferry, and a second Man arrived shortly after. Together, they untied the moorings and began to pull at the rope stretched across the river, beginning the crossing.

Nerwen put back the horn in its place, then she took Thilgiloth and Thalion by their bridles and led them on the jetty, waiting for the barge to arrive.

It took over half an hour, but finally the flat-bottomed boat docked. The first Man stayed on board, while the second one, taller but less sturdy than the other, his head completely shaved, disembarked and headed for her.

“Hello, stranger,” he said in a heavy accent that sounded quite odd to the Maia’s ears, “Is that only you with two horses?”

“That’s right, master ferryman,” she answered politely, “How much to take us on the other riverbank?”

The Man glanced at the horses, as if estimating their looks and value.

“Ten and five silver coins,” he answered boldly. Nerwen arched her eyebrows, dumbfounded: in Valinor there was no money, but she used it each time she had come this side of the Great Sea and, even if the present worth differed from the First Age, soon she had learned how much it was, and the sum the ferryman had just requested was exorbitant, to say the least. Then she recalled something she had read about the culture of Dorwinion, but paid no mind to it: the inhabitants used to bargain ferociously for everything. The ones offering goods or service asked for an outrageously high sum, and the ones wanting to buy had to offer an outrageously low sum.

She couldn’t help but play along.

“You’re kidding me,” she replied buoyantly, “I’ll give you three coins.”

Three was a ridiculously low sum. The Man pretended to be scandalised, with an excessive emphasis.

“No, that’s absolutely not enough!” he cried, “Let’s make ten and three.”

“No way. Five.”

“But I have a wife and four children to feed, how can I make it…? Ten and one coins.”

“You can whine as much as you want, you don’t fool me… Six coins.”

“Ten…”

She stretched out her hand:
“Let’s make it eight and we have a deal.”

The Man shook her hand, grinning from one ear to the other:

“Deal.”

Nerwen and the horses embarked, with Calad perched on Thalion’s back as it had become customary, except the times she made herself comfortable on Thilgiloth’s saddle when her rider wasn’t there. The other Man, too, welcomed Nerwen beaming broadly: he had followed the banter closely and had appreciated it much.

“Where did you learn to bargain so well?” he asked her while unwinding the binds.

“From those who came here before me,” she answered grinning.

They crossed the Harnenduin and reached the other riverbank while the sun was closing in to the horizon.

The two ferrymen helped Nerwen to disembark, then they led gently the horses along the pier to the grassy riverside.

“Can you suggest me a good inn for the night?” the Aini asked to the Man with the shaved head.

“There’s only one, here in Rhomarian,” he answered, pointing along the road, “You see that white building with the red shutters, at the bottom of the street? That’s it. The Silver Key, it’s named. The owner is my sister Viduravi.”

“Thanks, master ferryman,” Nerwen said, handing him the eight silver coins they had agreed upon, to which she added four copper coins; at his confused glance, she explained, “For the excellent service.”

“Uh, thank you, Missus!” the Man cried, surprised, and she considered amused that, from stranger, she had suddenly become missus, “Tell Viduravi from my part to give you her best room. My name’s Ulfgan.”

“Very well, Master Ulfgan, I’ll do that,” the Istar said, mounting on Thilgiloth, “Have a good night, you and you companion,” she added, nodding to the other ferryman, who reciprocated her.

A few minutes later, Nerwen dismounted in front of the entrance of The Silver Key. As usual, she tied neither Thilgiloth, who had no need for it, nor Thalion, who did everything the Chargeress did.

Be wary, she recommended to Thilgiloth and Calad, We’re among strangers: mayhap they’re honest, and mayhap not. If someone comes too close, call me at once.

The Chargeress and the hawk sent her their agreement, therefore the Maia got inside.

Like all inns, the first room was a hall with a counter, behind which a child was standing on a chair; she was a girl with long blond curls, about eight years old. As soon as she spotted her, she smiled and jump from the chair, running away.

“Mummy, mummy, there’s a very lovely lady!”

A moment later, a woman in her early thirties arrived, as blond as the girl was. Seeing Nerwen, she beamed broadly:

“Welcome to Rhomarian and The Silver Key, Missus,” she greeted her cordially.
“Thank you… Viduravi, I suppose?” at her confirming not, Nerwen went on, “Your brother Ulfgan sends me. He says you should give me your best room.”

“Really? He doesn’t easily say that, you must have impressed him very positively, Missus…”

“Nerwen the Green,” the Istar introduced herself. She wasn’t sure if this title would made her known as a member of the Order of the Wizards, highly respected everywhere in Middle-earth, but she discovered at once that the fame of the Istari had reached also Dorwinion, because Viduravi stared at her in wonder.

“Many years ago, a Wizard passed through here. I don’t remember his name – it was at the time of my grandmother – but I think he was called the Grey. Is there some connection…?”

Nerwen wondered where Gandalf had not been, in Middle-earth; but she thought Dorwinion was the easternmost place he had gone, because he had told her he never went to the east.

“Yes, he’s Gandalf the Grey, a friend and a colleague of mine,” she answered.

“My granny used to tell me he was very satisfied with her beer, and so he put a spell on it by which it would be excellent for ten generations of this family. Today still, the beer we produce here at The Silver Key is the best in a radius of 100 kilometres…”

Nerwen laughed:

“Beer and pipe-weed, his passions!”

“Pipe-weed?” Viduravi repeated, confused.

“Galenas,” the Aini explained, using the corresponding word in Sindarin; the woman lighted up:

“Oh yes, that too! We do grow it, not near here, but in the north-western region of our country… But I’m rambling. So, you want a room, Missus Nerwen?”

“Yes, and two stalls for my mounts.”

“Very well. I’ll have Grendel taking care of this, and I’ll see your baggage in your room.”

“May I take a bath?” the Istar enquired.

“Sure. I’ll send for you as soon as it’ll be ready.”

OOO

A couple of hours later, freshened up by a lukewarm bath in a simple but large wooden bathtub, Nerwen headed for the common room, where she had an excellent chicken roast with vegetables, and a piece of carrot cake, which was new to her, because she would never think a vegetable could be suitable to prepare a sweet loaf.

“How far is Gobelamon from here?” the Maia asked Viduravi, before retiring for the night.

“How far is Gobelamon from here?” the Maia asked Viduravi, before retiring for the night.

“On horseback, four days, more or less,” the innkeeper answered.
“Have you never been there?” Nerwen asked, wanting to know more about it.

“Once, when I was a lass,” Viduravi told her, “my brother and I, with our parents, went to the Biennial Fair, the biggest fair in Dorwinion, which lasts one week. There was it, where I met the one who’d become my husband, Pekka,” she smiled, “A tall and handsome youngster, with long blond hair and incredible green eyes,” she winked and nodded towards the man behind the counter: clearly, she was deeply in love with her husband who, actually, was a very handsome specimen of Man, Nerwen admitted by herself.

“And how is it? The town, I mean.”

“Huge,” Viduravi answered, in a tone expressing, even now after so much time, her marvel, “It is located on a hill by the Celduin, exactly where it begins to broaden before flowing into the sea, and it’s completely enclosed by gigantic walls. You can find anything there, any type of goods, coming from the Elves of the Wooden Realm, the Men of Lake-town, the Dwarves of the Iron Hills, from Gondor, Rohan and once even from the Elves of the Eastern Forest, but it’s from the time of my granny that we’re not on good terms with them, and since that time you don’t see any of them, in Dorwinion.”

Nerwen’s ears perked up:

“What happened?” she enquired. Viduravi shrugged:

“Who knows? To us populace, the potentates tell very little. There are rumours about some offence caused by their queen to our king of the time, or to his son, but what kind of offence it was, I can’t tell. As much as I know, the Elves tell the story differently, and talk about an offence caused to their queen by our king or his son, not even to them is it clear… The fact remains that for at least 50 years the diplomatic relations between our two folks are very tense, and if anyone of us ventures into the Eastern Forest, he or she risks being caught as a spy and thrown in jail or, even worse, being killed on the spot.”

The Aini pressed her lips together: she would never understand why people couldn’t solve a State matter as good as a personal one. Unless it was about dealing with Sauron’s servants, of course, but here it was about Elves and Men.

These circumstances were making her journey surely more dangerous.

OOO

The next morning, Nerwen bargained fiercely with Pekka who, as his brother-in-law the ferryman, began asking her a ridiculously high price, just to be answered with a ridiculously low counteroffer; and like the previous day, the negotiation ended up with both parts satisfied. One wasted a little time, Nerwen thought amused, exiting The Silver Key, but she found it very funny. Moreover, accepting and following this peculiar tradition of them, she would gain the respect of the inhabitants of Dorwinion, and this translated in a more confidential treatment, instead of being regarded as a stranger.

Leaving the village, the Maia took the road that, following the directions Pekka had offered her very gladly, would take her to the next step, the small town of Glavudd, located at almost one day on horseback from Rhomarian to the north-east; there, she would come across one of the main
roads of Dorwinion, which would take her to Gobelamon.

OOO

For four days, Nerwen rode on calmly in a generally flat landscape, well-cultivated mostly with grains such as wheat and barley, and with grapevines, olive-trees and citrus-trees.

Halfway into the afternoon of the fourth day, the Maia got over the crest of a hill range and glimpsed at the Celduin, or River Running, which from the Long Lake ran for almost 900 kilometres to flow into the Sea of Rhûn, from this place visible as a distant glitter on the eastern horizon.

As Viduravi had told her, the town was located on a solitary mound at about 100 metres from the river, which marked the northern border of Dorwinion; in this place, the Celduin began to widen in an estuary, preparing to its encounter with the inland sea.

Watching the town, capital city of Dorwinion, Nerwen couldn’t help but thinking it was much less impressive than Viduravi’s words led her to believe; but then she thought that she had an unmatchable comparison, that was Valimar, the city of the Valar that, as for size and majesty, could have no similarity, in Middle-earth.

The Istar came at Gobelamon’s gates and found them wide open and unguarded, even if in the breadth of the walls – very massive – a sentry box had been carved, manned by a bored-looking guard who watched her distractedly while she was passing through the gates. But when Nerwen halted and nodded him in greeting, he stood up and came out.

“Hello, and welcome to Gobelamon,” he said affably, “May I help you, Missus?”

“Yes, thanks,” she answered, “I’m looking for a good inn: can you give me your advice?”
The soldier pondered for a moment, trying to guess from the looks of his interlocutor what kind of a lodging he could suggest to her: she had to be some kind of noblewoman, he decided, judging from her delicate features and the stunning mare she mounted, as well as the fact she was accompanied by a packhorse and a hawk. She was alone, and maybe in incognito, he supposed.

“The Palace of the Stars,” he answered, choosing the best inn in town, where only the richest merchants and the nobles visiting the Queen of Dorwinion stayed, when there was no place in the castle, and then he gave her the directions to get there.

OOO

Less than one hour later, Nerwen was freshening up in the room they had assigned to her, a well-furnished chamber. The large canopy bed looked very comfortable, the armchairs were well cushioned and covered in satin decorated with alternating glossy and opaque stripes, on the balcony stood a tiny table and a small wicker-couch full of pillows, the bathroom was covered in decorated majolica and displayed a bathtub in enamelled copper. They had accommodated Thilgiloth and Thalion in the well-run stables of the inn, treating them with great care, while for Calad they had fetched a solid perch. The place was absolutely luxurious, if compared to the normal inns Newen had found so far, from the Shire on, even if it was far from the splendour of an Elven royal palace. Nerwen was very satisfied; looking around, impulsively she decided to stop here for some days rest, before finding a way to get to Eryn Rhûn, or Eastern Forest as they called it here.

OOO

In the following days, making good use of Viduravi’s suggestion, Nerwen explored Gobelamon wandering in the streets only by day, and keeping pretty close her pouch, where she carried the purse with her money.

She drank the best wine she ever had, finding out that, even if it was the same one they exported, consumed on-site it was more flavoursome; and in a shop she found pipe-weed, of course of a different quality as the Southfarthing’s in the Shire, but all the same satisfying. She made a good supply of it, expecting it unlikely finding more along the way.

On that evening, she sat on the terrace of her room at The Palace of the Stars, which faced westward, and enjoyed a good smoke admiring the sunset. She had fun exercising in the smoke shaping, an activity at which, after two years practice, she had become quite good, even if she was far not as good as Gandalf. Watching at her last creation – a blossomed mallorn – she thought that, on their next encounter, she would challenge her friend to who would create the most spectacular figure: they would have great fun for sure.

She sighed: she was still sorry for having missed Mithrandir, at Lothlórien, last fall. Now many years had to pass, before they could meet again… but both had an important task to accomplish.

How much important these tasks were, however, none of them had any idea: this would be revealed only much farther ahead.
Author’s corner:

The custom to bargain fiercely on a price is inspired to my personal experience in Egypt; at the beginning I was annoyed, but when I realised it is simply a cultural fact and I adapted to it, I began to enjoy it. Exactly like Nerwen, I received the locals’ compliments, and their attitude towards me was more relaxed and familiar, helping to make my holidays more pleasant: it’s nice not to feel a stranger in strange land. :-) 

And I truly noticed that a wine produced and consumed on-site is better than the same wine drunk far from the production place: you can test it by yourselves! ;-)

With Dorwinion, the known lands come to an end; Nerwen is therefore going to enter in completely unknown territories. Her adventures are about to go in a different direction, literally, and we will see it in the next chapter already.

Again, I thank those who follow my fan fiction, in the hope they’re enjoying it: please let me know!

Lady Angel
Nerwen tarried in Gobelamon a fortnight, comfortably lodged at *The Palace of Stars*. The owner, a very clever, tall and bony Man named Drongan, with thick fawn hair, took quite a fancy at her from the first moment, when she bargained the price of her stay in the inn with such a fierce determination, she had him crying she was like a merchantress of Vinàsgar, meaning – as Nerwen had later learned – a great compliment, as the merchants of that town had a reputation in being the most capable negotiators in all Dorwinion.

Such fancy proved very helpful for her when she asked about a way to reach Eryn Rhûn: because of the very tense diplomatic relations between the two kingdoms, there were so many bureaucratic barriers to overcome, it was almost impossible to go there except for commercial reasons closely surveyed from both parts: however, one could do it by the back door, like the smuggled goods passing back and forth: mainly wine, firewater and grain from Dorwinion, and gems, fine cloths and metals from the Eastern Forest.

There were two ways to get to Eryn Rhûn: by land, crossing the Celduin and going east; or by sea. Drongan advised her against the first, as bandits of both parts infested the territory, attacking the commercial convoys going back and forth between the two kingdoms; for this reason, strong contingents of heavily armed mercenaries always escorted the convoys. By sea, it was much safer.

“I know someone,” Drongan told her confidentially, “an Elf of the Eastern Forest named Corch, who sails between Gaerlonn and Gobelamon for more or less… hum… regular commerce. Let’s say that not always the cargo manifest declares *everything* he’s got in the hold, huh? Sometimes he transports passengers, too. I wouldn’t describe him as recommendable, but with an adequate reward, you can trust him.”

Nerwen didn’t like much the whole thing, but she didn’t see much choice: either join a convoy and
risking finding herself in the middle of a fight; or embarking on a ship full of smugglers, but who wouldn’t drag her into a fight. At the worst, they could try to rob her – like it had happened on the Great East Road with Jack and his accomplices – taking her by surprise, but if she would stay on constant alert, she would be ready to confront possible dirty tricks. As it was the lesser of two evils, she therefore chose to go by sea.

Dronegan organised a meeting with captain Corch, in a tavern at the port of Gobelamón, out of town, on the Celduin riverbank, and he escorted her personally.

Corch was a tall and brawny Elf, with steel-grey eyes and brown, curly hair that, unlike the western Elves, he sported down his neck; a well-trimmed goatee – this, too, an uncommon detail for an Elf – decorated his chin and upper lip. From his looks, he seemed of Noldorin ascent; Nerwen would even call him attractive, if it weren’t for his sneer.

Together with Dronegan, she took a seat at the table where the smuggler was already sitting.

“Captain Corch, may I introduce you Nerwen the Green?” the owner of The Palace of the Stars said, “Lady Nerwen, this is captain Corch.”

Corch addressed her with a sitting small bow, showing good manners, if nothing else.

“Nice to meet you, Lady Nerwen,” he said with cold politeness, “Your title qualifies you as a member of the Order of the Istari, am I right?”

“You’re right,” she confirmed laconically: Gandalf had a controversial reputation in Dorwinion, and some recalled his name with respect, some others with mistrust, according to the circumstances of the meeting. However, she had no intention to hide her official identity.

“Well, I won’t mess around with you,” Corch commented with a mocking grin, “I don’t want you to throw any lightning at me, or transform me into a goat.”

Nerwen wasn’t able doing either one, but she didn’t consider it necessary letting him know: maybe he didn’t believe it much himself, but it was better keeping him in doubt.

“As you rightly imagine,” she replied icily, “it would occur only if, precisely, you’d mess around with me.”

Dronegan had followed closely the banter, where he could feel the sharp reciprocal dislike of the two interlocutors; as there would be a reward for him if they made a deal, he decided to intervene before things would go bad.

“Captain Corch, Lady Nerwen is looking for a lift to Gaerlonn,” he announced in a low voice, “and I told her you could get her one.”

The Elven smuggler looked her up and down, making a perplexed face.

“What is a beautiful woman like you going to do in that Valar-forsaken land?” he asked, in this way revealing he wasn’t local to Eryn Rhûn. Nerwen wondered where he came from, but put aside her curiosity: after all, it wasn’t important.

“I have my reasons, and I don’t have to share them with you,” she retorted, annoyed, “It’s me with two horses. I’m willing to pay you a fair fee. So, are you interested or not?”

Her tone would scathe and crumble apart a rock, Dronegan thought, impressed.
Corch, too, looked impressed by the self-confidence he had heard in the Istar’s voice.

“It depends on what you mean by fair fee,” he said insolently, refusing to yield despite all.

At that moment, the waitress arrived, a pretty redhead woman whose dress showed off all of her prosperous curves.

“What can I take you, lady and gentlemen?” she asked.

“A pint of beer,” Corch answered.

“Me, too,” Dronegan said.

“The same for me,” Nerwen added.

The waitress departed with their orders, wiggling garishly her hips, followed by the eyes of many men.

“I thought you were more the white wine type,” Corch observed, again in a mocking way.

“It depends on the circumstances,” Nerwen replied curtly; Dronegan worried again about his own interest and was about to intrude, but the Istar went on and he had no time to do so, “Tell me your price, captain.”

“One hundred gold coins, for you and the two horses,” he answered promptly.

“Don’t try to fool me,” she warned him, sharply, “For such a sum I could buy your tub, instead of catching a ride. Twenty gold coins.”

“My Feingwend isn’t a tub!” Corch protested, “And there aren’t many ships willing to sail for Gaerlonn. Ninety.”

“Not many, surely; but there are some, and I could turn to them. Twenty-five.”

“Eighty…”

Nerwen got the best of it with forty gold coins. At the end of the bargain, Corch was red-faced as if he had downed a glass of firewater – the strong liqueur distilled from wine they made in Dorwinion – in a single gulp.

“You’re as hard as a merchantress of Vinåsgar,” he grumbled, disgruntled.

“They already told me,” Nerwen said, unperturbed, “You’ll receive twenty gold coins now, the rest will stay in the safekeeping of our good friend Dronegan, who will give them to you upon your return, after I’ll be safe and sound in Gaerlonn.”

“Prudent,” the smuggler commented, grinning, “but how will Dronegan know I brought you there, and I didn’t instead throw you overboard?”

Nerwen looked at him up and down as if he was some stinking excrement.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got my ways,” she said under her breath. Corch’s grin went off like a blown-out candle.

“I was wrong,” he muttered, “You’re harder than a merchantress of Vinåsgar.”
The waitress came with the beers, which she left on the table; Corch took one and raised it:

“Well, let’s drink to our deal.”

“Sure,” Nerwen accepted, rising in turn one of the mugs, but without touching it to the smuggler’s one, “To our deal.”

Dronegan did the same and they drank.

Nerwen was well aware that her distaste for Corch was reciprocated: this wasn’t going to be an easy trip. Luckily it would take just a few days.


Two days later, at sunset, Nerwen embarked on board the Feingwend, a three-mast clipper; its figurehead was a maiden in a white dress, which evidently gave the name to the ship.

The mariners had a small fenced area prepared for the horses, close to the quarterdeck, in a pretty sheltered part of the deck; Nerwen liked this arrangement, even if Thilgiloth and Thalion didn’t show much enthusiasm. Calad would stay with them: Nerwen thought that a ship’s cabin, surely small and dark, would be too uncomfortable for her, as she was used to the unlimited space of the sky.

Captain Corch came personally to welcome Nerwen and supervise the embarking operations of the two mounts, as well as their accommodations. His behaviour was marked by impeccable politeness; but as his smile continued to look mocking, the Maia didn’t change her mind at all about him.

Take turns to sleep, she advised Thalion, Thilgiloth and Calad, and be wary: I don’t trust these people.

All three kelvar sent her mentally their agreement.

Nerwen settled in the cabin they had given her, a space that barely contained a berth, a chair, a small table and a trunk, but for two nights and one day it would do. They would indeed sail the next day at dawn, while the arrival was due during the morning of the following day. After storing her bags in the trunk, she closed it with its padlock and hided the key on herself, slipping it into her bodice.

Corch had invited her to dine with him; aversion or not, a refusal would be a useless discourtesy, and therefore Nerwen had accepted. A little later, the captain’s attendant, a big, muscular blond youngster – the crew consisted in both Men of Dorwinion and Elves of indefinite origin – knocked at her door: he had come to get and escort her.

The table had been luxuriously set: cloth of embroidered cotton muslin with matching napkins, painted ceramic dishware, goblets and cutlery of shining silver, bronze candle holders with candles of perfumed beeswax. Nerwen thought that Corch was trying to impress her, perhaps in order to seduce her, even if she didn’t understand how he could plan this, given their reciprocal dislike; anyway, she mentally prepared herself for an evening of unpleasant tension waiting for a proposal she had no desire to receive.
Instead, nothing such happened; the smuggler captain proved a courteous host, even if in a strictly formal way, and entertained her with futile but brilliant small talk, sometimes biting, but never too impertinent; he asked about any need she or her animals could have, and never left her goblet empty. If he was trying to get her drunk, however, he could dry all of his wine supply and his cargo, because Nerwen’s Ainurin metabolism absorbed alcohol completely, making drunkenness impossible.

During dinner, from his behaviour and some of his statements, Nerwen realised Corch was a very vain person; indeed, his looks were very clean-cut, far more than one could expect from a common smuggler. Probably, the room was full of mirrors much more for his narcissism than to increase candlelight, the Istar thought, shaking inwardly her head. In any case, the captain’s charm was going completely to waste, with her.

When dinner was over, Corch was plainly tipsy, but enough stable on his legs to escort her to the dining room’s door and to bid her goodnight with a formal bow without staggering. Halfway between amusement and relief, Nerwen wished him a good night and headed for her cabin, barring warily the door.

OOO

When she awoke, early in the next morning, Nerwen went up to the deck and noticed they were already far away from Gobelamon, sailing in the middle of the Celduin estuary.

“Good morning, Missus,” she was greeted by Lieutenant Dolimavi, the first officer on board, an impressing, tough-looking woman of Dorwinion with blond greying hair, “Did you sleep well?”

“Yes, thanks,” the Maia answered, surprised she was addressing her in such a cordial way, “You too, I hope.”

“The usual,” Dolimavi answered, shrugging.

“Is it a long way to the sea?” Nerwen asked.
“A couple of hours, at this speed,” Dolimavi answered, turning to look at the horizon ahead the prow, “Not only do we have a favourable current, but also wind in the sails: indeed, we had to shorten them or we would speed up too much, and there’s much traffic here, we could risk a collision.”

Indeed, the quickly widening estuary was full of watercrafts of every type and tonnage, from the rowboat to the fishing vessel, from the drifting boat with a single mast to the three-mast sailing ship like the one Nerwen was on.

As the lieutenant had said, two hours later the Feingwend reached the Sea of Rhûn, which waters were very salty, much more than Belegaer, as Nerwen learned from Vurgan, the ship’s boatswain and chief helmsman.

Navigation proceeded undisturbed, even if the wind turned and began to blow from starboard, presently from land to the open sea, forcing the helmsman to adjust the course constantly. On the northern horizon, the coast was barely visible as a dark line: they would sail in view of the shoreline throughout the whole journey.

At lunch, Nerwen was again Captain Corch’s guest, who once more acted like the perfect host, even if far from being cordial. A very savoury vegetable soup was served; the cook had decidedly exceeded with spices and, after three spoonfuls, the Istar smelled out the reason: a foreign substance had been added, and spices were an attempt to mask its taste. Wouldn’t it have been for her special Ainurin senses, sharpened in millennia of specific training because of her love for the vegetal and animal world, it would have escapes her, so much the savour was confused and covered by the spice aromas. Her organism analysed the foreign substance’s composition and identified it: it was nennin, a strong sleep-inducing milky liquid extracted from the fruit of the poppy, lethal if administered in overdose.

They were trying to drug her, if not to kill her. They couldn’t know that, as an Aini, neither drugs nor poisons had any effect on her, exactly like alcohol; her human looks – whether Istar or not – had obviously mislead them. That would be their end…

She placed back her spoon and brought one hand to her head, simulating a sudden sickness.

“Are you feeling unwell, Lady Nerwen?” Corch asked.

“I’m afraid so,” she murmured, “Maybe some spice made me ill…”

Corch stood immediately up and came near her, showing concern:

“How do you want to lie down on the couch?”

“No, no, I think a breath of air is enough…” the Maia refused, getting up with difficulty. Corch offered his arm to help her, but she declined and, feigning an unsteady pace, exited from the room; she walked down the short corridor of the bridge house leaning on the wall and exited on the deck, where she immediately propped on the gunwale, simulating to be on the edge of passing out. She saw Thilgiloth and Thalion, shut in their improvised corral on the other side of the deck, while Calad was perching on the balustrade of the forecastle. She contacted them mentally:

_Beware_…

She couldn’t finish the thought because Calad interrupted her with a warning call. Nerwen spun around, but it was too late: Dolimavi, her sword drawn, was on her in an instant; she was aiming to her kidneys, but her designated victim’s movement ruined her plan. However, she was able to
plunge the blade in her hip.

The pain exploded in Nerwen’s brain, clouding her sight and taking off all breath from her lungs. In all her multi-millennial life, it was the first time she was being wounded. Of course, it had happened to her cutting herself with a knife, or getting scratched or falling from horseback; but her nature of Aini had always protected her from pain, and her wounds healed instantly.

But now it was different, because she had been diminished.

She reeled, trying in vain to contain the sharp pain she was feeling. Dolimavi raised her sword again, ready to hit her a second time; and this time, she wouldn’t miss her mark.

The moment she saw her two-legged friend being assaulted, Calad took off screeching angrily; she lifted in the air to take enough distance and dove on the first officer. At the last moment she slowed slightly down, throwing herself, claws ahead, towards the woman’s face. Dolimavi had to divert her attack on the Istar and waved around her sword in the attempt to defend herself; Calad had to break off her assault to avoid being hit; but in the meantime, Thilgiloth, rearing and furiously neighing, was flinging herself towards Dolimavi, tearing down the fragile barrier made by the improvised corral’s ropes. Thalion followed her promptly, equally infuriated.

The only physical weapon Nerwen had, was her hunting knife, which however was locked in the trunk in her cabin; besides, even if it was a magnificent Noldorin dagger – manufactured in Tirion back in Valinor – it would be anyway completely inadequate to defend herself from a sword. Not mentioning the fact that, in her present conditions, she wouldn’t be able to wield even a spoon. The excruciating pain of the wound dimmed her capabilities, but she had no other choice.

With an effort that made her almost faint, she sprang on the gunwale and tried running to the forecastle, but her knees gave abruptly way and she fell overboard.

Out of the corner of her eye, Calad saw her tumbling down and called out desperately, then plunged toward the point her friend had fallen.

Cornered, Dolimavi was swinging frantically her sword, barely keeping at bay Thalion and Thilgiloth, who were furiously attacking her. About eight crewmembers intervened at her rescue, included Vurgan the boatswain, who threw several ropes and seized the horses.

Meanwhile, Corch had appeared on the deck, his sword drawn.

“Where’s that little wretch?!” he spat. Dolimavi, quickly gaining back her composure, pointed overboard. The smuggler captain ran to the side of the ship and looked down, but saw nothing.

“I injured her severely.” his first officer told him, “She jumped on the gunwale and then fell in the water. She’s drowned by now.”

Corch drew back from the parapet.

“Better this way: we got rid of her,” he considered coldly, then he gazed at Thilgiloth and Thalion who, despite the ropes, still moved frantically, “We’ll get good money by selling those horses. Put them back in the corral and tie them well. And in that woman’s baggage we’ll find valuable things, for sure. What a stupid overconfident wench... posing herself as an Istar, when you never heard about female Wizards!” he grinned briefly, “Dronegan earned his twenty gold pieces.”

Dolimavi, too, grinned:
“That avid innkeeper is very useful,” she observed, “With this one, it’s the sixth passenger he tells us about.”

“Yes,” Corch nodded, “I wonder what happened to the hawk…,” he added, looking around; he caught sight of Calad crisscrossing over the water, now far off the stern, “It’s trying to find her mistress,” he concluded, shrugging, “Worse for it, it won’t find her, or at best it’ll find her cadaver, should it ever emerge. Let’s go and see what we can get from her cabin…”

OOO

Nerwen hit violently the water surface and sank. She felt an intense burning where she had been wounded, caused by the salty water; exhausted, she continued sinking, while around her everything became cold and dark. She couldn’t die, neither for the injury nor drowning, but nonetheless, unprepared to face this unfamiliar and terrible experience, she was scared. For long moments, she was unmoving and powerless, unable to react with body or mind, while she was slowly sinking deeper and deeper. Her ears began to ache because of the pressure.

She passed by a large grouper, which with a powerful swing of its tail turned to look at her, too bewildered to feel frightened. Nerwen met those enormous round and bulky eyes, and the sight of another living being gave her heart. She moved faintly to fight the descending motion and concentrated on her thaumaturgic power; she felt the rims of her wound beginning to join and weld with what seemed to her an exasperating slowness, but it actually took only a few seconds. It would leave her a scar, marring her otherwise perfect skin, but she didn’t care; relieved, she felt the pain lessen in a good measure, allowing her to regain partially her strength. She moved her legs, and slowly started to swim upwards, to the surface, to the light and warmth of the sun.

OOO

Calad was frantically exploring the low waves, trying to penetrate the water surface with her sharp eyes to catch sight of Nerwen, but she wasn’t able to see her. Anguished, she called out, over and over again. Long minutes passed by, and finally she saw Nerwen surfacing. With a cry of joy, the hawk plunged toward her friend.

Sensing her tension, Nerwen lifted her gaze and saw her flying about anxiously at a few metres distance.

*I was scared I wouldn’t see you ever again!* Calad cried.

*I can’t die*, the Aini reminded her, *but thank you for looking for me. Where’s the ship?*

The bird of prey turned her head in the direction of the *Feingwend* that, with all her sails set, was now very far away.

*What will become of Thilgiloth and Thalion?* she asked, worried.

*Now I’ll contact them, before they get too far…*
Nerwen focussed on them and sent her thoughts towards the ship; she immediately found Thilgiloth’s mind. The Chargeress was on the verge of panic.

*I’m fine!* she told her forcefully, but she had to repeat it twice more before her friend, mad with wrath and worry, would hear her, *You and Thalion?*

*We’re fine, but where are you?* cried Thilgiloth; she was truly very shaken.

*Far off, in the water,* the Maia answered, *There’s also Calad with me, I’ll be fine,* she tried to reassure her. She sensed the Chargeress’ effort to calm down: after all, she knew her two-legged friend’s resources and capabilities.

*You and Thalion, stay calm, let them believe you’ve given up,* Nerwen instructed her, *I’ll come and get you in Gaerlonn.*

*Fine,* Thilgiloth answered, increasingly far away, *Take care of yourself.*

*And you of yourself and Thalion.*

The now excessive distance broke off the contact. Over Nerwen’s head, the hawk continued to fly about, clearly awaiting news of her four-legged friends.

*Thilgiloth and Thalion are fine,* the Istar reassured her, *Corch has no use for two horses and will sell them: we’ll find them again in Gaerlonn, don’t worry. Meanwhile, we need to get to the shore…*

She looked around, but the coastline was too far to be seen from the sea surface. On her request, Calad flew about ten metres higher and, through her eyes, Nerwen was able see the shore that, considering her position on the water, could be about a couple of kilometres off. She was an excellent swimmer, but she was still greatly debilitated from the devastating pain she had felt when injured. Reaching the coast would be very difficult, and possible opposing currents, in her present state, would represent an insurmountable hindrance; but she surely couldn’t stay there, either.

She began moving, slowly to save her strength; at the same time, she launched an appeal, seeking for any sea creature willing to help her.

For long minutes, she got no answer; then, she sensed the intelligent mind of a cetacean, a female dolphin joyfully scampering at a few kilometres distance.

*Who are you?* the dolphin asked, curious.

*I’m a friend in distress,* Nerwen answered, stopping swimming to better communicate, *I must reach the shore, but I’m very tired: can you help me?*

Driven by the natural curiosity of her species, and sensing the benevolent nature of her mysterious interlocutor, the dolphin had no hesitations in accepting and swam at full speed toward her.

About fifteen minutes later, Calad caught sight of a grey dorsal fin emerging from the water and warned Nerwen, who sighed, relieved and grateful.

The dolphin swam about her, watching at her with great interest.

*You’re a Two-Legs!* she determined, *I’ve already seen some, but none spoke to me! How’s it possible?*
It’s a talent shared by few of my species, Nerwen answered, that’s why you never met one before.

I see, the dolphin accepted satisfied her explanation with no other question, Come, hold on to me.

The Istar did it, grabbing her dorsal fin. The dolphin began to move toward the coast.

What are you doing so far off the shore? she asked the Istar.

I was on a ship, Nerwen explained, sending her the image of the Feingwend because surely the dolphin wouldn’t understand what a ship might be, They wanted to hurt me, and trying to escape I fell in the water.

Bad Two-Legs! cried the dolphin, outraged, But now you’re safe, don’t worry.

Nerwen, exhausted, sent her a grateful thought.

The dolphin continued swimming, while the coast approached. At a certain point, seeing in front of them a cliff, low but hardly accessible, the cetacean deviated to the right and went on swimming in parallel with the seashore, until she overcame the rocks and came in front of a small cove with a sandy beach. Beyond it, they could see the trees of a forest: Eryn Rhûn.

This is a good place, the dolphin said, but there’s a very strong opposing current, and for much space in both directions. I take you there, beyond the current.

They moved forwards, and indeed Nerwen felt the water drag her forcefully backwards: if it hadn’t been for the dolphin, she would never make it to the shore, not even with her full strength.

At about thirty metres distance from the beach, the cetacean stopped.

It’s good here, right? she asked. There was definitely no more current.

It’s perfect, Nerwen approved, Thank you so much for your help, my dear friend. I’m indebted to you.

No debt, the dolphin contradicted her, I was happy to meet someone who can understand me so well. I’d like to play with you, but I feel it’s not the right moment.

I hope there will be another opportunity, said Nerwen, who in the past had played with dolphins, along the coasts of Valinor, and thought it always being glorious.

So they parted; Nerwen headed for the beach, swimming slowly, while the dolphin turned and went back offshore.

When she could put her feet down, Nerwen stopped swimming and walked to the beach, where she flopped on the ground, sitting down on the sand, exhausted: it hadn’t been easy to hold on to the generous cetacean all that time. Besides, her injury, even if healed, pulsed still disturbingly.

Calad landed beside her.

Are you well? she asked her, tilting her head to look at her with one eye.

“I’m still very angry, but I’m fine,” Nerwen answered aloud, taking off one boot to shake off the water, “I need to drink, and then to dry off… Here there’s all the dry wood I need to light a fire, but we need to find freshwater.”

I’ll take care of that, Calad said, taking off. Nerwen could only wait, using the time to rest: it was
paramount to find freshwater, while lighting a fire wasn’t impellent, as it was warm enough; she had no flint – lost with her luggage on the Feingwend – but she knew ways to light a fire even without.

Soon after, the hawk returned and told her she had found a creek, coming out of the forest to flow into the sea, at about a couple of kilometres from there. Nerwen put on back her boots, got up and started, her legs still weak.

Author’s corner:

Sincerely, I didn’t expect this sea adventure! It came practically by itself. Well, I see: not only certain characters do as they wish instead of doing what I decided them to do, now even the events do the same... LOL And luckily I read many sea adventures (precisely, Patrick O’Brian’s novels) so I hope I made the scenes on the ship realistic enough...

For the first time in all her life, Nerwen has to face injuries and pain: as an Aini, she had always been exonerated, but as a diminished Maia – as Yavanna warned her – she finally confronted this experience; even if she can’t be killed, the physical pain had her completely taken aback, at least as much as the emotional pain she felt for Thorin...

Note for the pronunciation: the –ch of Corch sounds like the German “ch,” as in “Schumacher”.

Lady Angel
When she came across the creek, Nerwen walked upriver, entering a short way into the looming forest, until the riverbed turned from sandy to stony, making water enough pure to be potable. The Istar drank her fill, rinsing her mouth from the taste of the salt; then she got busy gathering dried wood. She piled it on the forest limit and, when she had collected enough of it, she dug a shallow hole in the sand and piled up in it the thinner twigs; then she found some grass, dry enough to serve as a fuse, sat down and began to rub two wood pieces, in order to overheat them until the fuse ignited. She needed several minutes, but finally smoke rose from the dry grass; at once, she reached mentally for the upcoming sparkle and, when it burst out, she grasped and dilated it, making it ignite the fuse, which she then threw on the small pile of twigs and other dry grass she had prepared. After a few minutes, a small fire was burning in the hole.

Relieved, Nerwen went back to the creek, took off her clothes and washed the salt away from her body and hair, untangling the latter as best as she could by combing it with her fingers, and then she dried it with her power. She inspected the wound on her hip: it had perfectly healed, turning into a red scar of about 10 centimetres length. In time, it would fade, but the gash would remain, as a perennial reminder of Dolimavi’s treacherous assault, at least until she would go back to Valinor and regain her full power as a Maia – and this wasn’t certain at all.

The wounding and the resulting pain she felt had been a critical experience, for her. Her mind had found it difficult to accept what occurred and, clouded by physical pain, had responded slowly. For the first time since she had arrived to Middle-earth, she had confronted something totally unconceivable, for an Aini: the awareness it could actually happen had been of no use to her, because there is a huge difference between knowing something and experiencing it.

She had been taught a real lesson, and from now on, she would bear it carefully in mind.
She shook off those thoughts, plunged also her clothes in the water to rinse them from salt and squeezed them as much as possible. Before going back to the fire, she put them back on: in Valinor there weren’t big issues going around naked in certain circumstances, like swimming in the sea, or in a lake or river, or at the thermal baths; but here in Middle-earth, customs were different and, even if she was enough sure there weren’t people around, she wasn’t willing to take any risk to be caught undressed, therefore she dried off in turn one garment at a time, beginning from her shirt.

When she was done, the sun was low on the horizon; Nerwen collected more wood in order to maintain the fire burning all night through: it wasn’t cold, at the end of May in this southern country, but by the seashore there is always a lot of humidity, and she had no blanket to keep it off. She sat down, thinking about what to do now.

First thing first, she had to go to Gaerlonn, where surely that swindler Corch would go, even if only to sell his goods – among them there were now also Thilgiloth and Thalion – and to buy those offered by the Elves. To reach the port city, she only needed to follow the coast eastwards, but she didn’t know exactly how far away it was, therefore she had no idea how much time it would take her to get there, on foot. That was anyway a secondary issue: the major problem would be water in the first place, and then food. She had no canteen, so she could only hope to cross other creeks along the way; as for the food, in the wood she could find berries, mushrooms, edible herbs, roots, tubers and acorns, but they wouldn’t offer a large nourishment, especially having to walk a lot. All she could do was hoping that along the coast she would find fishing villages where, in exchange of some thaumaturgic service, they would give her provisions, and maybe a mount to go faster on her journey. She knew, from overhearing casually chitchats among the sailors, that Corch stopped averagely ten days in the port, before sailing again to Gobelamon, and she wanted to get there in time to meet him and recover her belongings. In which way, she would see to once there.

Her stomach grumbled: at noon, she had swallowed just a few spoonful of soup, and now she was hungry. But she couldn’t help it: it was late now to seek for something edible, because soon it would be too dark, under the trees. Better putting if off to the next day.

Calad suddenly started fidgeting. Sensing her nervousness, Nerwen leaped up, alarmed, and turned to the forest. From behind the trunks, about twenty Elves emerged, their bows bent, their arrows aiming at her. They were all dressed in camouflaging colours – various shades of green and brown – and their hair was brown or raven-black, sported short or just down their necks, unlike the Elves of the western lands.

Avari, Nerwen thought. Those who had refused to undertake the Great Journey, the migration of the Eldar – or Quendi, as they called themselves at that time – from Cuiviénen, the place they had awaken. Of course, she had expected to meet them, eventually; but not in this way, for sure.

Frightened by the bows, Calad flew away and perched on a branch at a short distance.

A very tall Elf came forward; unlike the others, he wasn’t armed with a bow, but carried a sword, and he was entirely clad in black. His ice-cold eyes were light blue, blending into grey, and were piercing her through and through. There was a blinding light into them, very alike to the light one could see in the eyes of those who lived in Aman; but how was this possible, for an Avar who had never seen the Undying Lands? Nerwen wondered, confused.
“Stop where you are,” he ordered her peremptorily in Common Speech. His baritone voice had a shiver creeping down her spine, as if she was recognising it; but she was sure she never heard it before.

Then, her heart skipped a beat as she realised who he was: the Elf she had glimpsed at with her Second Sight, the day she had looked into the Mirror of Galadriel, whose eyes reminded her of Thorin.

The black-clad Avar strode toward her.

“Who are you?” he asked rudely, “And what are you doing here?”

The Istar tried to straighten herself and planted her eyes into those of her interlocutor; her imperious attitude wasn’t lessened at all by the fact he was nearly 1,90 m, while she was almost 30 centimetres shorter. In the Elf’s eyes shone a steely gleam, cold and hard; but unlike it had been with Corch, Nerwen didn’t feel any mistrust: something, at the bottom of her soul, told her she was
facing an honourable person.

“My name is Nerwen the Green,” she introduced herself firmly, “and I was cast away here. I was travelling on a ship, but the crew assaulted me and I had to throw myself off board to save my life. I reached the shore swimming. I don’t even know where I am. If I violated your territory, I didn’t do it on purpose.”

The Elf halted in front of her, looming over her with his considerable stature; his glare didn’t impress the Maia and she continued to stare back at him.

“You’re telling me you arrived here swimming from a ship off the coast?” he asked her in a low and dangerous voice, “There’s a very strong opposing current, you never would have made it… Tell me the truth, instead: you’re a spy from Dorwinion, and they dumped you here with a tender. Did I guess right?”

“No at all,” Nerwen replied wryly, “As you can see, I’ve got nothing with me, neither bag nor purse: if I’d got here in a tender, I’d have at least some baggage, don’t you agree?”

The Avar frowned and looked around, verifying that things were exactly as the young – and very attractive – woman in front of him had stated. However, the natural mistrust of his people, combined with the one imposed by his specific task, didn’t allow him to trust her word, even if her eyes – brown and charming, he had to admit – seemed sincere. Besides, her ruffled appearance reinforced her argument, even if it looked implausible.

He turned and ordered something to his people, in a tongue Nerwen didn’t recognise, even if it sounded very similar to *Sindarin*. A female Elf gestured to some companions, who scattered to search around, evidently looking for evidence that could confirm or deny the stranger’s claims.

Nerwen crossed her arms, glowering.

“May I know who I’m having the dubious pleasure to speak with?” she asked, not caring to hide her nuisance. The Elf looked up and down her with a rather disquieting scowl, but he noticed immediately she wasn’t at all impressed; this surprised him, because usually his gloomy appearance and remarkable stature were enough to intimidate anyone. Perplexed, he wondered who this woman might be: she looked through and through a woman of the race of Men, but there was something unusual in her, something he wasn’t able to define. And why did her shape sometimes double, as if she was there and at the same time she wasn’t? Besides, what did Nerwen the Green mean?

“I’m Aryon Morvacor, First Sword of the Queen of Eryn Rhûn, my sister Eliéenna Dhilllel, High Sovereign of the Six Tribes of the Avari,” he answered proudly. And he was: proud to be what he was, that is the first paladin of his queen, as well as older sister; but, again, the mysterious foreigner showed no sign to be impressed.

“It was for sure not this, the welcome I expected coming to Eryn Rhûn,” she said instead, disapprovingly. Aryon shrugged:

“If you’d arrive openly, instead of stealthily, it’d be different.”

“I didn’t arrive stealthily!” she flared up, beginning to feel really angry. “I told you I was forced to throw myself overboard from a ship, and it’s only thanks to the grace of the Valar that I came safe and sound to the shore!”

At that moment, the female Elf who had led the search came back, telling him something, shaking
her head; Nerwen guessed she was reporting him the results of the search.

“They didn’t found anything, did they?” she asked, triumphantly. He scowled at her, not uttering a word, “Well, of course!” she snapped, opening her arms in an exasperated gesture, “Because there’s nothing to find!”

Now it was Aryon, the one crossing his arms, while scrutinising her; his face was still surly, but in his bright eyes there was now a little uncertainty.

“Tell me again who you are,” he exhorted her.

“I told you: my name is Nerwen the Green.”

“Fine, but what does the Green mean? I don’t know this title.”

This surprised the Aini. They didn’t know the Istari? Actually, the Wizards operated almost exclusively in the western part of Middle-earth, but Gandalf had come to Dorwinion, which was not far from the Eastern Forest, and until a few decades ago, these two realms had very strong business relationships; besides, two Istari had come into the east, and very likely they have passed through this land: but they had disappeared many a year ago, as she recalled.

“I’m a member of the Order of the Istari,” she explained, even if she didn’t think this would clarify the matter.

Aryon needed some moments to recognise the term – it sounded differently than in his tongue – but when he grasped it, he curled his lips in an ironic smirk.

“The Wizards are a tell-tale, or at best a fable for little children,” he stated. Nerwen narrowed her eyes; Aryon thought she had a dangerous look, and wondered how this could be, considering her small stature.

“Oh, really?” she snarled. Her icy tone made the Avar’s hair stand on end.

“Of course,” he insisted anyways, “They’re a mere legend.”

“Do you see that hawk?” the Maia asked, pointing to Calad with a nod. Aryon glanced at her and nodded, wondering.

“Calad, come here,” she said with words and thoughts. The bird of prey jumped from the branch she had taken shelter when the Elves had arrived, and came perching on Nerwen’s outstretched arm, putting great care not scratching her with her talons.

Aryon shrugged:

“Just a well-trained bird of prey,” he dismissed the demonstration. Nerwen curled her lips in a sarcastic smirk, mirroring the Elf’s one.

“Calad, fly off and make a circle first in one direction, then in the other,” she exhorted her winged friend. Guessing the reason of her request, the hawk took off and did as she had been asked for, then she went back perching on the branch she had left.

Aryon blinked, not able to hide his surprise.

“Noticeable,” he admitted, “but you didn’t convince me completely: it could still be the result of a superb training.”
Nerwen’s frown deepened.

“You’re right, Lord Aryon,” she agreed reluctantly, “Then, look at that tree,” she invited him, pointing to a maple. The Avar turned slightly, in time to see the lowest branch move and slap the archer next to its trunk.

With a cry halfway between fright and indignation, the unfortunate Elf jumped away, turned and bent his bow; but then, realising nobody was there, he lowered it, his expression confused. The maple moved another branch and tried to hit the Elf again, but he noticed it and leaped away, out of range of the fronds.

“I can do better,” Nerwen announced, and the trees – more maples, and holms, ashes, downy oaks – shook their branches in unison, pushing them toward the nearest Elves. All the archers withdrew hurriedly, dismayed.

Aryon’s eyes had widened in shock; he turned again to Nerwen.

“This is magic!” he cried. She nodded:

“Exactly: the magic of the Istari,” she confirmed, then the crossed her arms again in a defying attitude, “Did I convince you?”

Aryon glowered: he never liked admitting to be wrong, but it would be dishonourable not doing it.

“So it seems,” he grumbled through clenched teeth. His tone, an octave lower, had a strange shudder running down Nerwen’s spine. “However,” the Avar prince went on, glaring at her again, “this is no evidence you’re not a spy.”

The Aini snorted, losing her temper.

“You’re really stubborn, Lord Aryon!” she cried, “Didn’t I show you just now my power over animals and plants? How do you think I could manage swimming through the current, even if, as you said yourself, it’s insurmountable? I’ll tell you how I managed it: a dolphin helped me, taking me to the shore!” she took a step forward, almost bumping into the tall Avar, her fists clenched and her eyes flashing, “Besides, I want to point out, too, that I could command the trees to hit your archers much harder and neutralise them, but instead I didn’t. What does this mean, in your opinion??”

Aryon’s light blue eyes revealed puzzlement, even if his face stayed unmoved.

“This might mean two things: either you’re incredibly cunning…”

“…or I’m sincere!” she concluded sharply, almost yelling in her frustration. By Tulkas’ helmet, he’s stubborn as a mule! she thought, exasperated.

The Avar prince hesitated, then he nodded slightly.

“I’m still not sure I can trust you, Lady Nerwen,” he said slowly, as if pondering carefully his words; Nerwen noticed satisfied he had called her with the courtesy title given to high ranked dames, “You proved you possess a noticeable power, but I still think Wizards are only a legend. However, I’ll give you a chance: I’ll take you to Bârlyth as a free woman, not a prisoner; but beware: if you try to escape, or do anything else that can make me think you’re deceiving me, I’ll tie your hands and feet.”

“I won’t try to escape,” the Istar guaranteed him, crossly, “nor to deceive you in any way. But
before I can come with you, I must go to Gaerlonn and get back my horses and my belongings.”

Aryon opened his mouth to say it was out of the question, when Nerwen’s stomach grumbled loudly. He arched his eyebrows, surprised, and she shrugged:

“I haven’t eaten anything since this morning,” she explained.

This small detail testified the truthfulness of her story; but Aryon still preferred to be prudent.

“We’ll talk later about Gaerlonn,” he said therefore, trying to look friendlier, “Meanwhile, as we all still have to dine, I invite you to join us: I don’t want you to misjudge the hospitality of the Kindi.”

Nerwen felt relieved and welcomed his subtle change in attitude towards her, uncomplete but anyway indicative of a beginning.

“I accept gladly,” she answered, “Indeed… very gladly,” she added, with an ironic grimace, “I’m hungry like a wolf.”

Also Aryon’s lips curled in a half-smile, getting her a glimpse at his white, perfect teeth; it was only one moment, then his face turned to stone again. The prince turned and cast some orders to his archers, who lowered their bows and disappeared among the trees, returning soon after with bags and backpacks. They immediately busied themselves around the fire that Nerwen had lit, enlarging it and pulling out everything they needed to cook.

Again, the Maia noticed that the idiom Aryon was using was so alike Sindarin, she could catch the meaning, even if th tonal accents and pronounce of the vowels were unusual, and the singsong inflection sounded bizarre to her ears.

An Elf brought a wicker rug, spreading it on the ground; Aryon pointed to it:

“Shall we sit down, while they prepare dinner?”

They sat, cross-legged; Nerwen noticed that the small carpet was well manufactured, its solid straw tightly woven and dyed in a moss-green colour.

“Who are the Kindi?” she asked. Aryon glanced at her, surprised, then he nodded, as answering himself.

“You just demonstrated you’re not from Dorwinion,” he considered, a tinge of amusement in his voice, “Would you have been one of our unloved neighbours, you’d know all the six tribes of the Avari: Kindi – my people – Penni, Cuind, Hwenti, Windan and Kinn-lai. Here in Eryn Rhûn live the Kindi, while Cuind prefer the sea and therefore live along the coast, included Gaerlonn. The Hwenti and the Windan live in the plains beyond the forest, while the Kinn-lai dwell on the Red Mountains.”

At the latter name – Red Mountains – Nerwen’s ears perked. It had to be the impressive mountain range she had seen in the Mirror of Galadriel.

“Your language sounds very alike Sindarin,” she observed, changing subject, “so much, I guessed what you ordered to your subordinates.”

“Of course; after all we derive all from the same people, the Teleri,” Aryon answered, “We are the descendants of those who didn’t feel the desire to follow Oromë Aldaron to Valinor, and preferred staying where they had awakened, on the shores of Cuiviénen. That’s why they called us Avari, the Unwilling.”
“I know history,” she nodded, careful not saying too much in order not to reveal her real nature. More than knowing history, she remembered it: she had been there, when Oromë reported to the Valar the rejection of part of the Quendi to relocate in the Blessed Realm.

“So you speak Sindarin?” Aryon asked, changing the topic.

“Yes, I do,” Nerwen confirmed, “Therefore I think I won’t have any trouble learning your language.”

“Good thing, because few of us speak Westron, except in Gaerlonn,” the prince informed her, “But now, Lady Nerwen, tell me what takes you to Eryn Rhûn; you can refuse to answer me, but then you’ll have to answer the queen, who doesn’t like unwanted guests in her realm, at all.”

His tone was authoritative, however not impolite: it was apparent he still mistrusted her, but at least he didn’t see her as an enemy anymore.

“I’m seeking the Entwives,” she answered simply, because she had nothing to hide in this; but Aryon glanced at her, confused.

“Who are they?” he asked.

“The females of the Onodrim,” she explained then, using the Sindarin term. The Avar prince smirked sarcastically:

“A few minutes ago I’d describe this as a fable for little children, but you just demonstrated that one of the things I thought to be a fable isn’t at all, hence I won’t say it.”

Nerwen felt amused: his auto-ironic statement made him look definitely nicer as he had earlier.

“I’m sorry, we don’t know anything about Onodrim in our territory,” Aryon went on, “Neither here nor in the forest, or in the plains or in the mountains.”

“Well, I’m just passing through,” the Istar revealed, “Actually, I think they might be beyond the Red Mountains.”

He frowned:

“We believe they are impassable. Or at least, my people never found an accessible pass, and the mountain range is so long, we don’t even know where it ends.”

Nerwen felt disheartened: if not even those who lived in the mountains knew how to get over them, her journey would be much more difficult, because it implied exploring an unknown territory – it was useless looking where the Avari already had, who dwelled in this place for thousands of years – and this meant of course extending the journey by who knew how much time and space.

“Well, somewhere a pass must be,” she said, “All mountain ranges have some: this cannot be different from the other ones.”

Under her defying tone, Aryon caught the disappointment her voice bore and, in spite of himself, he sympathised with her, and felt sorry for her.

“Probably you’re right,” he comforted her, “I’m sorry for not being able to help you,” he added formally but sincerely. He wondered why: after all, what on Arda could he care for the difficulties of a stranger, who arrived uninvited in his land? Perhaps she wasn’t a spy, but she claimed to be on such an absurd mission, that it appeared totally unbelievable. He didn’t say it, but he anyway still
thought that the Onodrim where a fable for little children, nothing more and nothing less than the Wizards. The fact she demonstrated the latter could actually not be a fable – actually, he wasn’t completely convinced – didn’t mean that also the mythical walking and talking trees could be real.

An Elf came, carrying two bowls with a meat and vegetables soup and bread; they took them and began to eat. Nerwen devoured her portion in no time.

“Delicious,” she complimented, putting down the empty bowl. Aryon was still half through it and stared at her, arching an eyebrow.

“You sure were very hungry,” he commented with ironic humour, then he signalled the Elf to bring another dish. Nerwen ignored his sarcasm and accepted the second bowl, which she consumed slower.

When they were finished eating, Aryon handed her a flask.

“Wine from Dorwinion,” he said, “Mayhap we don’t love our neighbours, but this doesn’t prevent us loving their wine.”

What a bizarre individual, Nerwen thought: at first he was ironizing over her appetite, and now he was offering her a fine beverage. She took the flask, thanking him with a curt nod: if he did nothing to look more polite, she hadn’t to do it either. She drank, then she handed back the flask, and Aryon took a sip in turn, then he closed the bottle and gazed at the sky, by now completely dark: light clouds veiled the stars.

“We’ll sleep here,” he decided, talking to Nerwen, “Tomorrow morning we’ll leave. At half a day march we have an outpost, where we’ll find horses: we’ll take some, and we’ll escort you to Gaerlonn.”

She watched him intently:

“Shall I thank you for your thoughtfulness, or is it simply a precaution because you fear I won’t keep my word and will escape you?”

“Both,” the prince answered, briskly, “If you have to cross the territory of the Six Tribes, better you’ve got a pass granted by Queen Eliënna, because uninvited foreigners are not welcomed, here; therefore, until you don’t have one, you’ll have me. Besides, you can never be too careful: as I said, I’m willing to give you a chance, but I’m not going to take any risk.”

Nerwen pondered about it and decided that, after all, she couldn’t blame him, if he had to obey his orders, which evidently concerned the safety of his country.

“Alright. How much time will we need, getting to Gaerlonn?”

“From the outpost, it’s a two-day ride.”

“Fine. That knave of a captain – Corch, the commander of the ship I had to escape – will arrive tomorrow, but he’ll need a few days to cut his deals, therefore I’ll surely catch him, and then he’s going to deal with me.”

Nerwen’s voice bore a steel vibration that, once more, made Aryon’s hair stand to an end. He guessed that this woman – this Istar – in spite of her innocuous appearance, could be a very dangerous enemy; the thought alarmed him, stirring up again his mistrust. However, he had claimed he was willing to give her a chance, and he couldn’t take back his word; therefore he tried not to show it.
He called for one of the Elves with a nod and gave him orders to find a rug and a blanket, to make a pallet where their guest could sleep. Again, Nerwen understood a few words, from which she guessed the meaning of the sentence.

“Thanks for calling me a guest,” she then said to the prince. Aryon turned to look at her:

“I have no reasons to consider you a prisoner, for the moment,” he said in a stern way, accentuating the last two words, “I suggest you to get to sleep soon: tomorrow morning we’ll start at the crack of dawn.”

Nerwen sighed inwardly: by now, she had realised she would need time, to get over the mistrust innate in this Avar prince and probably in all his people. Her Maiarin charm – even if dimmed – wasn’t working as usual.

Later, when all had gone to sleep – except two sentinels – Calad came and landed next to Nerwen.

I’m sorry I wasn’t able to see them in time, she said in a contrite tone, but they suddenly appeared among the trees. A moment before, there were none, I’m sure!

They’re Wood-Elves, Nerwen considered, If they don’t want you to see or hear them, you simply cannot neither see nor hear them.

She felt her winged friend calming down, even if with difficulty: she was always very earnest about her role as a sentinel, and when she failed it, she blamed herself deeply; but there were circumstances when her piercing bird of prey sight could fail.

They looked hostile at the beginning, Calad said, still referring to the Avari.

They were: they thought I was a spy from Dorwinion, the Istar confirmed, but I proved them wrong.

So they’re friends now? the bird of prey asked.

I won’t say this, yet; but, at least, we can say they’re not enemies. And they’ll help us finding Thilgiloth and Thalion.

This is good, the hawk concluded satisfied. She stuck her head under one wing and prepared to sleep; Nerwen did the same.

Author’s corner:

I planned that Nerwen would arrive alone to Gaerlonn, finding her four-legged friends and then beginning to pass through Eryn Rhûn, and meanwhile she would come across the Avari and the mysterious black-clad Elf; but no, once more a character wanted to have his way and jumped (literally) out to meet the protagonist earlier than I planned.

About the pronunciation: the accent is on the first “a,” therefore it’s Á vari and not Avâri.
For those who don’t remember my “Author’s corner” in Chapter XX “In Galadriel’s Garden,” the actor performing prince Aryon is Richard Armitage.

I hope you’re having fun in reading this fan fiction! If so, please let me know, I’m keen to hear of my readers.

Lady Angel
The next day, as planned, they awakened Nerwen while the sky was just paling at east. They hurriedly broke their fast with a black tea scented with bergamot and some cracker similar to lembas, even if not as sweet and fragrant, and then they set forth following the coast, keeping close to the trees. They stopped just once at half-morning, to have a quick snack – dried fruits and a tasty ready-mix of nuts, hazelnuts, almonds and pistachios – then they marched on. It was almost noon when they finally reached their destination, a massive, low defensive tower built of an almost black stone, placed on a hill at the sea-shore, upon which waved a long banner with a red tree on a dark-green field: the emblem of the Kindi, as Aryon explained to Nerwen.

They halted just for the time needed to have a warm morsel together with the small garrison of the tower, then Aryon chose six of his people, among them the female Elf commanding the squad, to escort him and Nerwen, and gave instructions to have mounts prepared for them. After finishing their meal, they exited and found eight magnificent horses with crownpiece, bit and bridles, but without saddle, replaced by a wooden cloth secured around the belly by belts. This was indeed the way to mount typical among the Silvan Elves, used also in Lothlórien. During the First Age, Nerwen tried the saddle with stirrups, customary to the Men, and she had adopted that way to ride since, finding it more comfortable; but for a few days, she wouldn’t have any problem to adjust.

She caressed the bay mare’s snout they had assigned her and greeted her mentally, so to make her acquaintance. The mare perks her ears in surprise, vaguely unsettled, but the Maia sent her a reassuring feeling and the animal calmed immediately down.

*Thanks for carrying me,* Nerwen told her, caressing her fawn neck.

*It’s a pleasure,* the horse answered, *You’re small, you don’t weigh much.*
The Aini frowned a little: something in the mare’s statement suggested a precise reason, thus she examined her. She discovered she was pregnant, just a few weeks; the minuscule embryo looked healthy, but it wasn’t very firmly attached to the uterus.

*You mustn’t exert yourself,* she said then, *or you’ll lose your baby.*

A feeling of alarm radiated from the mare, but again she calmed her down:

*It’s fine, as long as you take it easy.*

“I cannot ride this mare,” she announced in a loud voice, “She just started a pregnancy, but she risks abortion: keep her into the stable and make sure she doesn’t exert herself.”

Aryon glowered:

“And how do you know?” he asked. She turned to glare at him, one hand on her hip; she didn’t answer, just lifting one eyebrow.

Aryon felt annoyed by her attitude; then he recalled her capability to communicate with animals – she told him about Calad and the dolphin, so there was no reason to doubt she talked to horses, too – and felt silly.

He hated feeling silly.

“Of course,” he said through clenched teeth, then he turned to the groom and reported to him what Nerwen had said. The other Avar answered in a protesting tone, but the prince, intolerant to any objection, glared at him in a way that would incinerate a dragon; the poor Elf hastily bowed and seized the mare’s bridle, ready to lead her away.

Nerwen patted the mare’s side to take her leave and mentally wished her good. She got back a feeling of gratefulness.

Aryon approached the Istar.

“The groom claims this mare has never been covered,” he said, in a tone that demanded an explanation. Nerwen glared at him again: it looked like he didn’t want to give up doubting her.

“Not always a mare mates when her owner decides it,” she said coldly, “Apparently she decided on her own.”

The Elf hesitated, then he nodded: he, too, knew this sometimes occurred.

Soon after, the groom arrived with another horse, this time a young roan stallion. He talked to Aryon, who translated:

“He recommends carefulness, Kerfin is a little exuberant.”

Nerwen nodded, then she caressed the horse’s muzzle as she did earlier with the mare and introduced herself. The stallion took a step back in surprise, but his curiosity prevailed and he returned to her. An immediate fondness sparkled between him and the Istar.

Nerwen therefore mounted him, with the help of one of the soldiers of the garrison, who joined his hands and let her use them as a stirrup, and she joined the group leaving for Gaerlonn. Aryon lingered a few minutes to speak with the commander of the tower, perhaps instructing him to send a message to Queen Eliénna, and then mounted on his horse. Nerwen noticed, slightly amused, that
it was black, as it’s rider attire.

The Avar prince guided his stallion to the front of the departing group and signalled Nerwen to come by his side; finally they set forth, with Calad preceding them flying in reconnaissance.

OOO

They reached Gaerlonn two days later in the early afternoon, with no accident whatsoever. Before entering the town, Nerwen called Calad back and made her perch in front of her, on the blanket.

The port city of the Elves of Eryn Rhûn was much smaller and humbler than Gobelamon, and had a very simple architecture; the houses were mostly in wood, some in wood and stone, and only a few – probably the government buildings – were entirely in stone. It was very far from the appearance of any other Elven town in Middle-earth Nerwen had seen so far – the Grey Havens, Rivendell, Caras Galadhon – but the atmosphere was anyway somehow similar.

Many people crowded the streets and squares – in one of them they were holding a market – and there were many carts drawn by mules or manually, loaded with goods and provisions. Most traffic was going to or coming from the port, as Nerwen noticed after some time.

If the town was half so large than its counterpart in Dorwinion was, the port was instead equally vast. The Istar scrutinised the numerous ships of various tonnage moored at the long jetties, trying to locate the Feingwend.

Aryon headed for a low and large building, evidently the Harbourmaster’s Headquarters. When Nerwen and the prince entered, the harbourmaster’s orderly, an unusually massive Elf with dark eyes, his brown hair tied in a bun on top of his head, raised his gaze from the document he was reading. Recognising Aryon, he instantly stood up and bowed in greeting.

“Cunn Aryon!” he cried, talking in Avarin, then he noticed the woman accompanying the prince and switched to the Common Speech, “What brings you at Gaerlonn?”

“A search,” Aryon answered laconically, “Is Captain Misselot here?”

“Surely, my prince, she’s in her office,” the Elf answered, “I’m going to announce you immediately.”

Soon after, he led Nerwen and Aryon to the next room. Captain Misselot was relatively short, but she had an authoritative air appropriate to her position; her long hazelnut-brown hair was braided in a tress hanging down on her shoulder, while her green eyes sparkled with a lively light: as a whole, Nerwen liked her much.

Misselot stood up to greet them:

“Welcome, Lord Aryon,” she said, bowing; she spoke in the Common Speech, as her orderly had informed her there was a foreigner accompanying the queen’s First Sword. Now she openly gazed at the young woman.

Aryon introduced them; hearing the title the Green, the captain arched one eyebrow: probably she had no idea what it meant, but she didn’t comment on it.
“What can I do for you, my prince?” she enquired instead. Aryon turned to the Maia:

“Lady Nerwen…,” he said, inviting her to speak.

“I’m looking for a ship,” she explained then, “The Feingwend, owned by Captain Corch.”

Misselot nodded:

“Yeah, she arrived the day before yesterday. Let me see where she’s docked…,” she browsed through a large leather-bound journal, laying on one side of her desk, “There she is: at the end of pier number 12,” she watched again Aryon, then Nerwen, “My lady, I must ask you what business you have with Captain Corch,” she said, in an apologising but firm tone: it was plain she was very dutiful, and she wouldn’t make exceptions, not even for somebody under the protection of the queen’s brother.

“Let’s say he has in his keeping some belongings of mine that I intend to retrieve,” Nerwen answered; her sentence had been diplomatic and revealed nothing, but her tone had an underlying dangerous tone that made Misselot’s hair stand on end. The captain glanced at Aryon, but the prince just nodded in an encouraging way.

“Very well,” Misselot therefore said, “You can go.”

“Thank you, Captain Misselot,” Nerwen said, appreciating her cooperation.

They exited and set forth on foot; their horses remained in the custody of an operator of the Port Authority, so the entire escort could go with the Istar and Aryon.

Calad, worrying for Thilgiloth and Thalion and wanting to find them as soon as possible, took off and followed her friend; a few minutes later, they reached the quay marked with the number 12 and they walked down it; the Feingwend was docked at the far end.

As there was no guard – there was no need for it, as they were in friendly territory – Nerwen, Aryon and the six members of the escort got on board undisturbed, but as soon as they set foot on the deck, a sailor recognised the Istar and shouted a warning call. Lieutenant Dolimavi came running and, seeing Nerwen, stopped abruptly, almost slipping on the newly waxed planks.

“You!” she cried, her eyes popping out, “I thought you were drowned!”

“As you see, I’m not,” Nerwen said tersely, “I want to speak with Corch, now!”

Dolimavi withdrew a couple of steps, then she motioned to the mariner who called the alarm, and he dashed toward the quarterdeck.

Nerwen looked around: there was no sign of her horses, nor of the corral they were kept in during the journey. She pressed her lips together: if Corch had sold them, she would force him to tell her to whom he had and then she would go find and retrieve them by any means, and to the incautious buyer she would tell to go to the smuggler to get back his money.

Meanwhile, a good number of the Feingwend’s sailors had gathered around them, positioning themselves all over the place, on the quarterdeck, on the deck, on the forecastle. Aryon motioned to his people; they notched their arrows to the strings, but did not bend their bows yet; as for him, the prince placed his hand on the hilt of his sword, ready to unsheathe it. Calad, remembering the crossbows, went off and perched on a pole, out of sight of the mariners.

Corch arrived, taking big strides, walking with an arrogant attitude; but seeing the armed company,
he slowed down, coming nearer hesitantly. *Coward*, Aryon thought, disgusted.

“Lady Nerwen…,” the smuggler began, halting at a fair distance, “I didn’t expect to see you again.”

“Worse for you,” she growled, “I’m here to retrieve my belongings. What about my horses, scoundrel?”

“Be a little more careful with insults,” he said, unable to avoid behaving insolently and placing his hand on the hilt of his sword, “You’re only eight, and we are twenty…”

Instantly, Aryon drew his sword and the other bent their bows, lifting and pointing them at the crewmembers.

“Beware your conduct,” the prince warned Corch in a threatening tone, “I’m Aryon Morvacor, First Sword of Queen Eliénna, and Lady Nerwen is under my protection.”

The smuggler captain paled: evidently, he had realised who he was facing. He withdrew his hand from his blade and opened his arms.

“Your horses are… gone, Lady Nerwen,” he said.

“I can see that for myself,” she replied, stinging as a porcupine, “Where are they?”

“I sold the packhorse to a merchant just this morning,” Corch answered, “As for the mare, I don’t know where she is.”

“What do you mean?” the Istar insisted, frowning.

“She escaped,” the captain explained, “This morning. When we led her ashore, she turned against my men, threw off those who held her and bailed. There was no way to stop her, she knocked down with her hooves anyone trying to stand in her way, included the city guards. She was unstoppable like a twister! She exited town and vanished. Actually, also the other horse tried to break free, but we were able to hold him…”

Nerwen kept her grim face, but inside she felt proud of her four-legged friends.

“I want the merchant’s name,” she said, crossing her arms and tapping impatiently her foot.

“Gailar Begalion,” Corch answered at once: he had apparently concluded that cooperating was a wise move.

“Fine, and now I want my belongings,” Nerwen said. The smuggler hesitated only the fraction of a second, then the nodded to Dolimavi, who rushed toward the quarterdeck. Shortly after, she and a few sailors arrived, carrying the Istar’s luggage, and she inspected it carefully. Relieved, she found both the pipe Gandalf had given to her and the large *galenas* provision she purchased in Gobelamon. However, one thing was missing.

“My dagger,” she said imperiously, planting herself in front of Corch. The Elf sighed deeply and bent down, pulling out the hunting knife from his boot and handing it to this minute but terrible woman. The presence of Aryon and his escort had been crucial, but the smuggler suspected that, even if she had been alone, she would nonetheless give him a very hard time.

Nerwen snapped the *Noldorin* dagger out of his hand and slipped it into her belt.
“Forty gold coins were not enough, for you?” she asked, venomously, “You wouldn’t earn the same amount not even selling my horses, therefore I wonder what on Arda got into your dead head, to try and rob me.”

“Twenty gold coins,” Corch revealed, “The other twenty are Dronegan’s reward, for having recommended you.”

Nerwen blinked, having a hard time to understand the smuggler’s words. Dronegan – the nice, polite innkeeper – was his accomplice! She trusted him, and he had sold her? She felt her face flush in anger, but also in shame: she had been fooled like a chicken! What good were her thousands of years and experience?? The only excuse she could have, was that she knew little about the race of Men, and maybe this was the reason Dronegan had been able to fool her so completely. Anyway, excuse or not, the embarrassment would haunt her for a long time.

“Are we done?” asked Corch rudely, again incapable to control his overconfidence.

This was the last straw.

“No,” Nerwen replied, seizing unexpectedly his head, one hand above, one on the side, “Your actions and your arrogance deserve a punishment.”

She released an inverted flux of thaumaturgic energy: under her hands pulsed suddenly an unwholesome, greenish light and Corch shrieked. Dolimavi took a step forward, but the point of Aryon’s sword, promptly aiming at her, dissuaded her to try any defensive move in favour of her captain. The sailors, too, stayed still, under the threat of the arrows.

Nerwen let go and withdrew; on Corch’s cheek, where she had pressed her hand, a scarlet mark had appeared, while from his head, large locks of hair had fallen out, exposing the underlying scalp.

“Now, each time you’ll look into the mirror, you’ll remember Nerwen the Green,” the Istar snarled, “reminding that you definitely don’t want to make a Wizard angry, whether male or female.”

She rubbed her hands, and the brown curls sticking to her palms fell on the planks; Corch, livid and speechless, took his head into his hands and fell on his knees. Dolimavi dashed to him.

Calad took off from the pole; still furious because of the way Corch had treated her friends, both the two-legged one and the four-legged ones, she retaliated in her own fashion, throwing an excrement right to the smuggler’s head. The victim yelled in vain a range of curses to the hawk, while Nerwen and the Elves escorting her burst into laughter, making Corch’s humiliation complete.

Calad simply ignored his insults and withdrew, satisfied, and perched on one of the bollards of the jetty, at a safe distance from possible retaliation from the crossbow-armed mariners.

On Aryon’s signal, two of the Elves of the escort picked up Nerwen’s luggage, then the group marched down the gangway, the prince with his sword drawn and four archers with their arrows still notched to the strings walking backwards, in order not to lose sight of the crew. Once on the wharf, they quickly walked away.

“I’m curious,” Aryon told Nerwen, sheathing his sword, “Why did you choose that particular form of punishment?”

“I’ve noticed how much vain Corch is,” she answered, shrugging. The prince smirked, amused despite of himself:
“You’ve been pretty wicked, I’d say,” he commented.

“I’m not a revengeful person,” she said, “but when it’s called for…”

“From what you told me, he undoubtedly deserved it,” Aryon confirmed. Nerwen nodded:

“Let’s look for this Gailar Begalion,” she exhorted him, changing subject, “to retrieve Thalion; then we’ll search for Thilgiloth.”

Returning to the Harbormaster’s Headquarters, they retrieved their mounts and got back in town. Here they asked around, and they addressed them to a stable in the western quarter of Gaerlonn.

The horse merchant protested vehemently:

“I paid good money for that horse and I’m not going to let nobody taking it, not even the First Sword of the Queen! Now I’ll call for the bailiff…”

“Do it,” Aryon invited him, a baleful expression in his face, “Just know, before doing so, that that horse won’t be found on the cargo manifest of the Feingwend and will therefore be held as smuggled goods. Do you know the penalty for those who import illegally from Dorwinion to Eryn Rhûn?”

Gailar paled; Nerwen guessed it had to be a very hard punishment.

“I see I haven’t got no choice,” the unhappy trader grumbled, “but how do I know the lady is for good the owner of that animal?”

“Is my word not good enough for you?” Aryon sneered, intolerant at seeing his authority defied. He seemed ready to draw his sword and skewer the poor merchant on the spot, so Nerwen intervened to avoid the argument going bad.

“No, he’s right,” she said, “Gailar, I think you’re a honest person and that you’ve been fooled by that rogue Corch. I’ll demonstrate to you that Thalion is truly my packhorse.”

She extended her thoughts inside the stables and immediately found the faithful animal’s mind, who neighed, excited and happy and reared up inside his box. The groom ran to him, worried, but Gailar signalled to him to forget it and stared at Nerwen, wide eyed.

“It’s him, isn’t he?” she said, entering the stables and heading without fail toward the fifth box on the left, where she truly found Thalion who, seeing her, neighed again and stuck out his head to get a caress.

“Yes, that’s it,” Gailar admitted reluctantly, definitely defeated. Nerwen turned to him:

“Where’s his harness?” she asked peremptorily.

They found it inside the box; after retrieving them, the Istar came out of the stable with Thalion in tail, without any need to lead him by the bridle.

“But my money…” the horse merchant ventured to ask, faintly.

“Ask Corch,” Nerwen replied, wryly, “and next time, make sure that what you buy is actually legal merchandise.”

Aryon came beside her and glared at Gailar in such a way, he felt instantly dissuaded to raise more objections.
Shortly after, they exited town; the baggage had been loaded again on the sturdy packhorse, who followed very closely his mistress, afraid someone could separate him from her again.

“How will you trace your mare?” Aryon asked to Nerwen. The Aini watched carefully around, uncertain about which direction she had to choose. Thilgiloth could have gone everywhere. No, she thought then, not everywhere: she knew Nerwen would come for her and therefore she would stay in proximity of Gaerlonn, even if not as near as to be seen from the town.

“We’ll move in wider and wider arcs away from Gaerlonn,” she therefore answered the prince’s question, “I’ll call for her, and when she hears me, she’ll come to us.”

Hence, they moved as the Istar had told them, going first eastward – that is, in the opposite direction from which they had come – then entered a short way into the forest and came back; in short intervals, Nerwen sent out her thoughts seeking Thilgiloth’s. After a while, Aryon was about to ask her, perplexed, why she wasn’t calling, having assumed she would use her voice, but seeing an expression of deep concentration on her face, he realised she was using her mind, as she had done with Calad on the first day, when they had met, or better, argued.

Considering the way their acquaintance had begun, the prince pondered, they could have been ending up slaughtering each other, verbally, if not by knives; and instead, now they were side by side searching for a missing mare. This could be the prelude to an interesting friendship, he concluded. If she would prove trustful, that is, which he still wasn’t completely convinced of.

A few hours passed; when it became too dark in the forest to go on with the search, they stopped and set camp. They spent a quiet night, and as soon as there was enough light, they resumed the search. Not two hours had passed, and finally Nerwen contacted Thilgiloth’s mind; perceiving her, the Chargeress expressed joy and relief, and soon after they saw her arriving at full gallop, like a bright white flash among the trees.

Glancing at her, the Avari’s eyes widened: never had they seen such a splendid horse.

Nerwen jumped off Kerfin, the stallion carrying her, and ran toward Thilgiloth. Thalion and Calad did the same, and so the amazed Elves of Eryn Rhûn witnessed the reunion of four friends very different from one another.

Nerwen threw her arms around the Chargeress’ neck, and she lowered her head on the Maia’s shoulder, reciprocating her; with his nose, Thalion patted her on her side; and Calad flitted about excitedly, throwing joyfully her cry kek-kek-kek.

We knew you’d come for us, Thilgiloth transmitted to Nerwen, but when that Corch rascal tried to sell us, we were afraid you wouldn’t be able to find us again, therefore I thought better for us to run, she turned to the packhorse, I’m sorry I abandoned Thalion, but I realised he wasn’t with me only after having exited town.

“You’ve been great,” Nerwen told her, “and Thalion, too, who not being able to follow you, has feigned resignation, but he told me that at the first opportunity he’d escape, too,” she patted both on their sides, “You did very well, my friends.”

Aryon recovered from his bewilderment; he got off his horse and approached them.

“If I didn’t know you talk to animals – and trees – I’d think I’m hallucinating,” he said, in his voice a reluctant tone of respect. Nerwen turned to look at him, her eyes sparkling and a dazzling smile on her lips; Aryon couldn’t but think she was charming.
“Meet Thilgiloth,” she told him, “Thilgiloth, this is Aryon Morvacor, prince of the Avari, and I hope I can call him soon a new friend.”

At these courteous words, Aryon bowed his head to thank her: being the brother of the High Sovereign of the Six Tribes of the Avari, he hadn’t to spend words often in thanking people, except the queen herself, but of course good manners sometimes imposed over him, too; and this was certainly one of those times.

“It’s a superb specimen,” he claimed, admiring Thilgiloth, “I’ve never seen a coat of such a shiny white: it looks like silk. Is she a mearh of Rohan?”

“She is,” Nerwen confirmed, “And as all mearas, she’s extremely clever.”

“They say they’re the most beautiful palfreys in the world… and now that I see one, I can’t but agree. Legend has it that it was Oromë Aldaron taking mearas to Middle-earth,” Aryon said, showing to know well this race of horses: indeed, it had been the Vala Oromë, also called the Great Rider, who relocated some of them from Valinor to Endor, where they had proliferated. Then, Aryon seemed to remember something and turned to stare at Nerwen with his bright blue eyes, which looked as if they were able to punch a hole in a stonewall.

“I thought mearas accepted to carry only the kings of Rohan,” he said; suspicion was slithering back in his voice. Unprepared, for a moment Nerwen couldn’t answer: now here was something she didn’t know… Either Gandalf didn’t know it, or he forgot telling her.

“Thilgiloth is the exception,” she answered, trying to sound casual, “She accepted me because I have the ability to speak to her, but also because we met when she was a just small foal, and we bonded.”

This was strictly the truth, even if Aryon could never imagine that this had occurred in Aman and not in Middle-earth.

“I see,” the prince nodded, recalling her telling him that both Calad and Thalion accompanied her out of friendship, and didn’t consider her a mistress, nor she considered them her property. As far as he knew, it could be true that even a mearh would join this woman who was able to speak to animals and plants, “Fine,” he went on, “as we retrieved your belongings and your friends, at this point, as agreed, I’ll take you to Bârlyth, to the presence of Queen Eliéenna.”

He watched her intently, waiting for a signal of confirmation or dissent, on the basis of which he would react: if she would even just hint to not keeping her word, he wouldn’t hesitate a minute to do what he had threatened, that is, to tie her up and compel her to hold her promise; indeed, he still didn’t withdraw his orders to the archers to be ready and aim their bows at her, if need should be.

However, Nerwen never gave her word lightly, and when she did, she kept it, at any cost.

“Sure,” she said, “Give me just the time to saddle Thilgiloth, and we’ll go.”

From the baggage they retrieved from Corch, she took the Chargeress’ harness, prepared her and finally mounted. She approached the roan stallion they borrowed her and bent to caress his neck.

“Thank you for carrying me so far, Kerfin,” she told him. The stallion snorted and shook his tail gently.

My pleasure, he answered.

By now, Aryon and the other Elves of the escort had begun to get used at the Istar talking to
animals – and at them actually understanding her – therefore they didn’t stare in disbelief anymore.

The prince, too, mounted on his black stallion, and so the small company set forth, heading for Bârlyth, the residence of the High Sovereign of the Six Tribes of the Avari, and capital city of the realm of Eryn Rhû, too.

Author’s corner:

I had a great time mistreating Corch, the first hostile Elf Nerwen has to do with… Nerwen could teach a good lesson to Dolimavi, too, who was responsible for her wounding, but after all the First Officer was only executing orders, and the actual guilty party is the smuggler captain.

I am writing with all my passion and enjoying it much, and I hope you’re having a good time in reading my fan fiction; if so, please let me know, I love feedback from my readers!

Lady Angel
They reached Bârlyth in the afternoon of the fourth day of their journey; the capital city of the Kindi was located almost exactly at the centre of Eryn Rhûn, which stretched over one hundred kilometres from east to west, and about two hundred from north to south.

The town, enclosed by tall walls in wood and stone, was built on three ample hills with gentle slopes; it was completely surrounded by trees, even if the close proximity had been deforested for some hundred metres, so that a possible enemy army would be in the open, an easy target for the city defences; the buildings were entirely in wood and the royal palace, the largest edifice and located on the highest point, was no exception.

As soon as they came to the city gates, Aryon dismissed the escort; Nerwen took her leave from them in Avarin, as she had begun to learn the first principles of that idiom so alike Sindarin; judging from their smiles, they appreciated her courtesy, looking not so distrusting anymore. Not too much, at least: Nerwen had never had so many difficulties in gaining someone’s trust, and Aryon seemed the hardest one to win over.

“Let’s go,” the black-garbed prince said, signalling to Nerwen to stay by his side; riding slowly, they crossed the gates and entered the town, closely followed by Thalion, who never got farther than a couple of metres from Thilgiloth. Calad, invited by Nerwen, came and perched on her glove-covered arm.

The street was wide and well paved, and it wound up to the top of the tallest hill in a twisting way, expressly designed to avoid that a possible invader could find a direct way to the royal residence. Once they arrived to the large clearing where the palace stood, two grooms came running to take their mounts into custody.
Nerwen watched in admiration at the mansion’s structure; even if it was entirely made of wood, it was impressive, in a simple but at the same time elegant style, with its high roofs painted in bright aquamarine green and its windows framed in white. Never had the Istar thought it would be possible to build such a grand edifice using simple wood.

She trusted Thilgiloth and Thalion into the care of the palace grooms; Calad made herself comfortable on the Chargeress’ saddle and let them take her away along with her four-legged friends.

Aryon led Nerwen to the entrance; there were two honour guards at the door’s sides, both female, very tall, their long black hair braided in a peculiar way; they were dressed in dark green with red adornments, and on their helmets, they sported the emblem of the Kindi, showing the same colours.

Aryon talked briefly to one of them, who nodded and ran away. To Nerwen’s quizzical gaze, the prince explained:

“I sent word to the queen that we’ve arrived; let’s wait here, I don’t know if she can receive us immediately or if she’s occupied elsewhere.”

It turned out that Eliénna would receive them straightaway in her private office. They went upstairs, with Aryon leading the way for Nerwen in the twists and turns of the palace, which was no less vast than its homologues at the Grey Havens and Rivendell. They met several people, who greeted deferentially the First Sword of the Queen and stared with curiosity to his human companion; the prince reciprocated the greetings with a quick but polite nod. Even if basically surly and blunt, he was well-mannered, Nerwen thought, feeling inexplicably satisfied about this.

The door to the private office of the High Sovereign of the Six Tribes of the Avari was in solid, shiningly polished oak wood; on the upper panel it had a writing – probably the royal house’s motto – in an archaic calligraphy that Nerwen wasn’t able to decipher, both because of lack of time and her ignorance of the Avarin tongue.

A valet waited by the door; seeing them approaching, he briefly knocked on the door, then opened it, announcing them in a formal way:

“Aryon Morvacor, First Sword of the Queen, and Nerwen the Green.”
They entered, and the page withdrew immediately, closing the door behind them.

The room was bright, furnished with refined but functional furniture, made of fine woods like mahogany and cherry, some finely embellished with precious rosewood.

Eliénna Dhillel was sitting at a large desk, placed under one of the windows in order to take advantage of all the light coming from outside; she had turned at the valet’s announcement, and now sat three-quarter on her seat, her striking face framed by long hair, dark with unusual violet reflections. A superb golden diadem with a ruby encircled her brow, matching her earrings and necklace of equal noticeable manufacture. The other Elves thought the Avari a coarse and underdeveloped people, Nerwen thought, but from what she had seen so far, this wasn’t true at all.

The Istar looked openly at the queen, thinking a frank gaze was the best way to introduce herself to endemic distrustful persons such as the Avari were.

Eliénna returned her gaze, watching her intently; unlike her brother, her eyes were brown, but in them, too, were a particular light, similar to the brightness in the eyes of those who had gazed upon the Blessed Realm. Again, Nerwen wondered how this could be possible.

The monarch’s expression was proud, but not particularly hostile.

“Hail, foreigner,” she said in a neutral tone, talking in the Common Speech, “They reported to me your adventurous arrival in my realm. I hope you won’t judge too harshly the welcome my brother gave you, but we don’t like strangers much.”

“I realised that,” Nerwen replied, in the same tone as Eliénna’s, “It’s your right wanting to know who’s treading your realm’s roads; but I’m just passing through, and I assure you my intentions are absolutely not hostile.”

“It’s up to you demonstrating it,” the queen countered, raising one eyebrow. The Aini hesitated, dissatisfied, then she nodded slowly and admitted:

“Fair enough.”

Eliénna, too, nodded, apparently satisfied.

“Aryon says your tale is believable, at least to a certain extent, and that so far you behaved yourself, hence for this reason he tends to give you credence; as I trust my brother’s judgement, I will, too, give you credence. At least as long as you won’t make me think otherwise.”
“I don’t see any reason why I should,” the Maia answered, beginning to feel the sting of irritation: believable, at least to a certain extent? By Ulmo’s beard, these Avari were more suspicious than Dwarves!

Eliénna nodded again, then she went on:

“What takes you to the realm of the Kindi, Lady Nerwen?”

At least, she was using the courtesy title, the Istar thought, trying to suppress her annoyance. She was irritated because, with these untrusting Elves, her natural Ainurin charm seemed to have small effect. So far, she had won the fondness of all those she had met – almost all, she corrected herself, recalling Corch and his gang, as well as Dronegan, who had literally sold her to the smuggler captain; and Jack from the Forsaken Inn.

“You Majesty, I’m sure your brother already reported to you everything I told him,” she answered, keeping her voice strictly in check because it was risking to show her discontent, ant his wasn’t diplomatic at all in this moment; hearing her words, Aryon curled his lips in an involuntary grin, which he immediately repressed, “Believe it or not, I am seeking for the Entwives, the females of the Onodrim,” Nerwen concluded.

Seeing her brother’s expression, reluctantly amused, the Queen of the Kindi guessed he was fond of their guest, whether he realised it or not. Well, she had to admit that, for a female of the race of Men, she truly was very beautiful, almost as much as an Elf female. No surprise that Aryon, alone for a long time now, could feel attracted to her.

“I’ve got no problems to believe you’re actually looking for the Entwives,” she answered, “Instead, I doubt greatly about the existence of the Onodrim.”

“Only because you never saw one, it doesn’t mean they don’t exist,” Nerwen countered promptly, “You’ve never seen an Istar, too, but here, there’s one right in front of you.”

Eliénna pressed her lips together, showing scepticism.

“Yes, Aryon told me about your powers, or what look like powers, over animals and plants; but I prefer judging on my own.”

Nerwen’s eyes flashed indignantly. At that moment, she would have liked holding the power to throw a lightning and incinerate something, so much did she feel frustrated, but she had to keep herself in check and so, she just nodded stiffly.

“Why are you seeking these Entwives?” the queen asked. This question, more than anything else, made Nerwen truly realise that the Istari, thought to be a mere legend, didn’t hold any deference in the Avari’s territory. Indeed, elsewhere none would even dream about asking such a query, questioning a Wizard about his purposes. From now on, she had to resign earning the esteem of those she met, because it wouldn’t be handed over to her on a silver platter anymore simply thanks her being an Istar, and even less a Maia, as she wasn’t allowed to let her true nature known.

“Evil is growing again, in the world,” she answered cautiously, not willing to reveal too much, “and in my opinion, the Onodrim could help the forces of Good in a decisive way.”

“You’re talking about the Dark Enemy,” Aryon said, intervening for the first time in the conversation. His wasn’t a question, Nerwen noticed.

“Exactly,” she confirmed. Eliénna stood up and moved a few paces, clearly worried.
“Even voluntarily isolated as we are, we heard disquieting rumours,” she stated in a low voice, “Strange things are moving, to the south-east of the Six Tribes’ territories. Werewolves, Orcs, Trolls and… other things not yet identified. It seems that the Easterlings have been approached by emissaries from the Black Land, but we don’t know what their intentions are, because we have no contact with them; but I don’t like this, at all.”

“And you shouldn’t,” Nerwen observed, “Nothing about what has to do with Sauron bodes well.”

Eliénna quickly moved her fingers in what looked like an exorcism, and so did Aryon.

“Don’t say that name openly!” the queen exhorted her, “For us, it’s synonym of the worst misfortune.”

“For my people, too, as for this,” the Aini agreed, “but he won’t disappear nor end his threat to the world, just by avoiding speaking out loud his name.”

Eliénna frowned, unpleasantly struck by the truth in the words of her bizarre interlocutor. However, she wouldn’t be a good ruler if she ignored the uncomfortable truths.

“You’re right,” she admitted, “and we won’t hesitate defending us with all means, if need occurs.”

She got back to her desk, but didn’t sit down, turning instead to look at Nerwen very carefully. There was something really unusual, in this foreigner, but she couldn’t make out what it was. She didn’t think her dangerous, however prudence advised her she had not to trust her too much; not so soon, anyway.

“Very well,” she concluded, “You’ll be our guest for some time, Lady Nerwen, so I can form an opinion of you. If it’ll be favourable – as my brother’s opinion makes me think – I’ll give you a safe-conduct that will allow you to go freely everywhere in Eryn Rhûn and in the other realms of the Avari; otherwise, you’ll be taken back to Gaerlonn and we’ll arrange a safe passage to Dorwinion or another place of your choice on the Sea of Rhûn. Meanwhile, you’re free to move around in the palace, the gardens and Bârlyth, but not to go out of town without my permission.”

At least, they wouldn’t throw her in prison, Nerwen thought with gloomy sarcasm. The situation disappointed her, but she could put to good use her forced, even if pleasant stay at the palace: surely, the Kindi had maps of the lands east of Eryn Rhûn, as their territory stretched there. Thus, she forced herself to put aside her discontent, also because irritating the queen was not the best of ideas: she would risk to be thrown in some jail cell for an undetermined extent of time, where neither olvar nor kelvar could come to her aid.

“As you wish, Your Majesty,” she said with her best good grace, “As I’ll have to stay here, can I have a look to your maps? I’m particularly interested in the region between here and the Red Mountains.”

Aryon recalled her statement that maybe the Entwives were located beyond that mountain range and nodded to himself. Eliénna thought instead that her request confirmed what Nerwen had said about just passing through.

“Why are you interested right in that territory?” she enquired anyway.

“I found information that the Entwives might live beyond the mountains.”

“There’s no known pass to go over them,” Eliénna warned her.

“Lord Aryon already told me, but all mountain ranges have passes, and I don’t want to believe this
is an exception, at the risk to search for it for years, or to reach its farthest end to go beyond it.”

“I see you’re very resolute,” the queen observed, “Fine then, you’ll have free access to our library. Aryon, you see to this, please.”

The prince nodded to confirm; hence, Eliénna rang a small silver bell on her desk, and immediately the valet came to the door. The queen gave him instructions in Avarin, which Nerwen was able to catch almost completely: she was telling him to take her to the guestroom that was located in the southwestern tower of the palace and have carried there her luggage, too.

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” the Istar said, anticipating the translation that the queen was about to tell her. Eliénna arched her eyebrows, surprised:

“You know our tongue?”

“I’m trying to learn it,” Nerwen answered, “I talk Sindarin, which is very similar.”

“I see,” the queen said with some satisfaction, “You can retire, now. Tonight you’re invited to have dinner with me and my brother.”

Uncertain if it was an actual invitation or rather an order, Nerwen nodded to show she had understood and curtseyed, then turned and left, following the page.

OOO

“I don’t think she told us everything,” the queen said to her younger brother, “There’s something very peculiar, in her.”

Aryon nodded, agreeing:

“I noticed it, too. She looks as one of the race of Men, but at the same time, she looks… something more. But I don’t understand what,” he concluded, shaking his head.

Eliénna searched for the right words to describe it:

“I don’t know, it’s like she’s here and, at the same time, elsewhere…”

She paused; a memory had suddenly come to her mind.

“She reminds me of our father,” she said, thoughtful. Aryon looked at her in surprise:

“In what way?”

“Don’t you remember?” she asked, “He, too, sometimes looked like being here and not here.”

“True!” the prince confirmed, disconcerted, “I didn’t put the two things together… How’s it possible for a woman of the Human race?” he frowned, pondering, “Mayhap it’s because she’s truly an Istar, as she claims to be?”

“Mayhap… But our father told us that we saw him like that because he came from beyond the Great Sea, and it’s simply impossible for Nerwen coming from there…”
She paused for some moments, trying to find a possible explanation; not finding any, she shoved away the topic for the moment and went on:

“These powers about which this so called Istar boasts, Aryon… are they real?”

“I think so,” the prince confirmed.

“Are you sure they cannot be simple tricks, or illusions?” Eliénna insisted. He shook his head firmly:

“If it was only about her animals – the hawk and the horses – I’d say, too, they were just nasty tricks; but I cannot figure out how she would be able to make the branches of trees move at her will. And then I saw her with my own eyes causing marks on the face and fall out hairs from the head of an Elf just by touching him.”

“You didn’t tell me this one,” she said in a tone of mild reproach, quite surprised, “Why would she act like this?”

“He robbed her and tried to have her killed,” Aryon explained, “When she went to retrieve her belongings, he said something way too wrong and Nerwen took her revenge in this way.”

“Are you telling me that, if this Elf wouldn’t make a comment she didn’t like, she wouldn’t have done him any harm?” Eliénna marvelled. Aryon shrugged:

“I can’t tell for certain, of course, but I think so.”

“Interesting… This tells us much about her character: she’s hard, but neither violent nor cruel. And this speaks for sure in her favour. However, let’s see how she’ll conduct herself in the next days, before deciding what to do with her. See to it.”

Aryon nodded:

“Alright, sister. I’ll keep an eye on her for you.”

The queen’s valet trusted Nerwen to a handmaid, handing over the instructions Eliénna had given him. The Istar followed her along several hallways, turning here and there enough times to lose tracks of the way, until they reached the tower on the southwestern corner of the palace, where they climbed two storeys. The room they had given to Nerwen had walls slightly slanting inwards, being actually the roof of the tower; there were many windows, but no terrace. The furniture was less luxurious than the queen’s private office, but the pieces were of good walnut or strong durmast. There was a canopy bed with dark blue velvet curtains, embroidered in silver thread, and then a desk, a dresser, a chest and a small sofa with a tiny table; in the next room stood a bronze bathtub and a stand with washbasin, jug and mirror.

“Soon they’ll bring you your luggage,” the handmaid said; she had introduced herself as Parânel, “Meanwhile I’ll take you some towels and bars of soap. Do you wish to take a bath, before dinner?”

She had spoken in Avarin, but so far, Nerwen had learned enough of that idiom to understand the
meaning, if not all the words, of what she had said.

“Yes, thanks,” she accepted, trying to give the correct accent to the two simple words. The handmaid took her leave with a curtsy, not blinking an eye, and this made Nerwen hope she hadn’t embarrassed herself too much.

OOO

After having freshened up with a lukewarm bath, Nerwen donned her light green dress – the only one she travelled with – and changed her boots to shoes; then, she took her falconry glove and went downstairs, looking for her kelvar friends. Asking for directions in her still uncertain Avarin, she reached the palace’s stables, where she found Thilgiloth and Thalion unsaddled, curried and eating a fine mixture of hay, oat and barley. They were very satisfied of the way they had been treated.

Where’s Calad? Nerwen asked, not seeing the bird of prey.

She flew away, I think looking for food, the Chargeress answered, And you, are you happy with the welcome they gave you?

I had better ones, she revealed, but it could be worse, she added on second thoughts, therefore I won’t complain.

After taking her leave from the two four-legged friends, Nerwen left the stables and watched the sky, seeking Calad. She wasn’t worried: the hawk was well able to take care of herself, besides she didn’t think she could be in any danger, in Bârlyth or in its immediate neighbourhood; but she wanted to tell her where she could find her.

From the top of the hill, looking over the roofs of the houses, she could see the dark green sea of the trees stretching in all directions; the sky was dotted with soft white clouds.

As time went by and Calad didn’t show up, Nerwen resumed her walk, returning toward the palace. She passed near the entrance and kept going, strolling lazily along the small paths covered in light grey gravel; the garden of the royal residence was dotted with trees, shrubs and colourful flowerbeds, and there were some wooden benches, but no fountain.

Half an hour later, Nerwen heard from afar Calad’s characteristic cry; soon after, the hawk appeared from behind one of the palace’s roofs and came up to her. The Istar quickly slipped on her glove and raised her arm, and Calad came and perched on her wrist.

Had you a good hunt? the Aini enquired.

Yes, thanks, Calad answered, radiating a feeling of contentment, And you, did you find food and shelter?

I’ve been offered both, Nerwen confirmed, I still don’t know how long we’ll stay here. Meanwhile I’ll show you where I’m lodged.

She strode back, rounding the corner of the palace towards the entrance, where they could see the tower that contained her room, and she pointed out its windows for Calad.

There’s no terrace, but it’s hot, so I’ll always keep one window open, so you can come and go at
The hawk opened slightly her wings, signalling she had understood. She told you, The hawk opened slightly her wings, signalling she had understood. The sun was westering and the light becoming golden, while the afternoon was growing old. Soon it would be time for dinner, thus Nerwen got back inside, taking Calad with her; expecting someone would come calling for her, she headed for her room, and indeed not much later Parânel knocked on her door to take her to the queen’s private dining room.

A few minutes later, Nerwen was introduced into the room where Eliénna Dhillel used to have her meals in informal occasions, together with her family and possibly with a few, selected guests.

Aryon was already there, as usual wearing all black, but he wasn’t carrying his sword, and he donned comfortable house shoes instead of boots. With him were two Elves, a male and a female; both resembled Eliénna very much. They turned to gaze at her, intrigued and only slightly distrustful, and this made her think they were very young.

Seeing her entering, Aryon motioned her to come in.

“Lady Nerwen, may I introduce my niece and nephew, the children of my sister the queen?” he said, “This is Lorgil Torandyr, heir to the throne; and this is Myranna Fàrodes. Nice, nephew, this is Nerwen the Green.”

This explained the resemblance to Eliénna, the Istar thought.

“I’m very pleased to meet you, Your Highnesses,” she said formally, curtseying; once more, she tried to speak in Avarin. Aryon noticed it and was pleased; a fleeting smile appeared on his usually stern face.

“Our pleasure, Lady Nerwen,” Lorgil said, answering her curtsy with a nod; he sported black hair down his neck, as customary among the Avari, and his brown eyes were identical to his mother’s.

Myranna, too, responded to her greeting; her blue eyes – very similar to her uncle’s, but a shade darker – watched her, intrigued.

Nerwen had noticed that all the Avari, or at least those of a certain rank, had a second name, which always was an attribute: she wasn’t able yet to translate them all, but Morvacor meant surely the Black Swordsman and Dhillel Shiny Star; Fàrodes had to mean Young Hunteress, while Torandyr was harder to guess, maybe Forest Wanderer or something like that.

At that moment, Eliénna came in from another door, which probably led to her private rooms. Nerwen curtseyed, lower than to the two young princes. She wasn’t used in making bows so continuously – even because it happened more often that others bowed to her, instead of being her to bow to others – but she didn’t want risking any dislike because of a lack in showing respect.

The queen accepted her homage with a nod.

“Good, I see we’re all here,” she said, talking in Ovestron, “Let’s sit down, at noon I had near to nothing and now I’m starving…”

“I see this is a family dinner,” Nerwen said in the same tongue, feeling an intruder, “I’m afraid I’m bothering you…”

“If that would be true, I wouldn’t have invited you,” Eliénna dismissed her observation waving casually her hand. Her invitation wasn’t the result of simple politeness: actually, she hoped that a relaxed circumstance like a family meal would make her reluctant host’s defences drop, so that she could study her better and, as announced, begin building up her own opinion about her.
While everybody was taking her or his seat, the queen rang a tiny silver bell; a moment later, a valet appeared on the threshold.

“We’re ready to serve dinner, Your Majesty,” he announced.

“Let’s begin then,” Eliénna ordered.

A waiter entered, carrying a large tureen, from which came a delicious aroma; he served them a creamy soup of zucchini and potatoes with bits of brown toasted bread, followed by rotisserie chicken with string beans and fingerling potatoes, in addition to lettuce and radish salad; as drinks, water and a cool white wine, dry and sparkling, coming from their vineyards in the east of Eryn Rhûn, as Aryon informed Nerwen. It wasn’t bad at all, even if not up to Dorwinian wine, the Aini thought, but she avoided voicing this in order not to irritate her touchy hosts. Winning their trust could pass even through such trifles…

During the meal, Eliénna asked about her children’s doings. Nerwen came to learn therefore that both were studying with tutors; Lorgil excelled particularly in mathematics, logic and oratory, while Myranna preferred history, literature and herbal medicine, the latter making her especially appreciable in the Istar’s eyes.

“How do you want to become a healer, Lady Myranna?” she asked her. The young Avar’s eyes lighted up with enthusiasm:

“Yes, that would be my aspiration, even if Mother doesn’t agree much…”

Nerwen turned to look quizzically at the queen, who smiled indulgently and with obvious motherly pride:

“I just think it isn’t apt to a royal princess,” she pinpointed. The Maia bit her lower lip to avoid saying what was on her mind: that is, a parent should never prevent a child to try realising her or his dreams, even if they look inadequate. But she had no right to speak: she wasn’t a close relative, nor was she herself a mother to have knowledge of this. However, she came to this conclusion by her own, seeing some bad examples that had caused distress and unhappiness, not least her brother-in-law Thingol, who had tried in every way to hinder his daughter’s love dream.

“You’re probably right, Your Majesty,” she said, unable to keep completely quiet, but trying to express herself in a diplomatic way, “Besides, Lady Myranna is still very young and therefore there’s much time for her to decide what she really wants to do with her life. However, following one’s dreams gives hope to every individual; and it’s certainly better try and fail, or find out that, after all, something is not for us, than never trying and then wonder forever how it would have been…”

All eyes stared at her, some grateful, some surprised, some pensively. Slowly, Eliénna nodded:

“You’re right, Lady Nerwen: you said a very wise thing. I didn’t expect it, from such a young woman; but after all, if you’re truly an Istar as you claim, your looks could be misleading, and you may have the same venerable age showed by your legendary colleagues.”

“Mayhap,” Nerwen said, avoiding a direct answer; she felt unexplainably more amused than annoyed by the queen’s doubts. Maybe this was because, now that she had seen her as a mother and not as a monarch, she found her more pleasant.

Myranna stared at her, wide eyed:

“You mean you are a few hundred years old?”
The Aini smiled: in this room, she was the oldest one, as she was born even before Arda itself, not only a few hundred years; she didn’t want to lie, validating the princess’ supposition, but she wasn’t allowed to tell the truth, revealing her real nature. Hence, she remained silent.

Aryon watched her intently, trying to hide it because he didn’t want to look impolite. Could this young and beautiful woman really be several centuries old, as it was rumoured the Wizards were?

“If so, you surely look good for your age…” he grumbled. At his remark, Nerwen couldn’t but widen her smile:

“Thank you, Lord Aryon.”

It wasn’t a confirmation. Not exactly, at least. Anyway, she doubted hard he would believe her, and thought it more likely they would take this simply as one more confirmation of her claim – which they still doubted – to be an Istar.

Dinner continued with other kinds of conversations, more or less light; Nerwen was pretty sure that, would she not be here, brother and sister would talk also about things regarding the realm’s government – safety, commerce, agriculture, justice – but as she was a foreigner, they avoided carefully hinting to such topics. She sighed inwardly: succeeding in making them trust her seemed a difficult task. She wasn’t used to it, because her natural Maiarin charm had made things always easy for her. Well, this meant it was time to make a new experience, she told herself with ironic humour. It was a long time since it happened last: it would be interesting. Frustrating, too; but undoubtedly interesting.

Author’s corner:

And so, Nerwen finds herself facing people who are not subject to her natural appeal, doubting her reasons and even her claim to be an Istar. It’s an annoyance, for sure, but it represents also the excitement of newness.

Anyway, don’t think Nerwen is an exception: Tolkien told as about Melian’s irresistible charm, and even more about her daughter Lúthien’s one, maybe even greater than her mother’s, to the point that neither the terrible Morgoth, nor the unyielding Mandos could resist it… Clouded or not, Nerwen so fat had it easy – except for a few times – but the Avari are severely testing her ability to enthral her interlocutors :-D

The wooden palace in the picture actually exists: it’s the accurate recreation of Tsar Alexis I of Russia (1645 – 1676), father to the famed Peter the Great, and is located in Moscow in the Kolòmenskoje museum-national reservation.

Thanks to all those who are following this fan fiction, in which I’m truly putting all my love and passion for the fantastic world created by Tolkien, which got me involved – or better, dragged in and carried away – since the very first time I read “The Lord of the Rings, now many years ago.

Lady Angel
Chapter XXXI: The Stay in Bârlyth

The next morning, Parànel brought her Aryon’s invitation to have breakfast with him. Uncertain if it was pure politeness or another way to keep an eye on her, Nerwen followed the handmaid, who led her to a terrace looking towards the town; the prince was waiting for her, gazing in the distance leaning on the balustrade, which small wooden columns were shaped in spirals. Hearing her approaching, he turned, and their eyes met. Once more, the light in the ice-blue depths of Aryon’s gaze struck Nerwen.

“Thank you for your invitation, Lord Aryon,” she said in Avarin. He motioned her to take a seat at the small round table, set for two.

“It’s a pleasure, Lady Nerwen,” he answered in the same idiom, with a certain warmth, “Anyway, I don’t like having my meals alone alone,” he added in Common Speech, as having second thoughts, or repenting an effusiveness that maybe he hadn’t in him, “Your mastery of our tongue is improving on a daily basis,” he concluded, completely changing the topic.

Nerwen blinked, confused by those sudden variations in his behaviour.

“Thank you,” she said, sitting, in reply to his observation, “Now that everybody around me speaks it, it’ll be easier to learn. I intend also using your library to read and enhance even more my knowledge.”

There was a far quicker way to learn the Avarin tongue, the same that had allowed her to learn Khuzdul and Ovestron, but it required a deep trust between the two parts, such as she had shared with Yavanna and Gandalf; therefore, at the moment this system was out of question for her.

Aryon signalled to a servant, then turned again to Nerwen:
“If you wish, after breakfast I can take you to the library and I’ll instruct the Keeper of the Books to assist you,” he offered.

The servant came to them with a steaming teapot and poured the hot liquid into the two commensals’ cups. A fragrant scent arose and Nerwen recognised the strong black tea, aromatised with bergamot, which was the favourite breakfast beverage among the Kindi, as she had ascertained during the days of her journey with the prince and his escort.

“I thank you for your courtesy, Lord Aryon,” she said, even if she was sure it wasn’t simple politeness: after all, the day before the queen herself had given him the direct order to see to it, therefore it wasn’t his choice. Besides, probably he had to instruct the librarian about what he could let her see and what not: surely, there were documents inappropriate for a foreigner to see, especially one about whom they hadn’t decided yet the level of reliability.

She sighed inwardly: she had to walk on eggshells, and this was something she hated, because she much more preferred to be frank and blunt; however, she wasn’t willing to risk being misinterpreted.

“You’re welcome,” the prince answered, “I’ll use the opportunity to make some research about the Istari, even if I think I won’t find much information.”

His candour contrasted blatantly with the typical prudence of the Avari, and Nerwen felt even more confused.

“I could tell you something by myself, about them,” she considered coolly, “but of course you could choose not believing me.”

The prince stretched his lips in a sarcastic smile, to which she responded with one equally ironic; at this point, Aryon burst out laughing, shortly but, finally, really amused.

“You’re not easily put on the spot,” he considered.

“I agree,” Nerwen confirmed placidly, but amused, she too.

Meanwhile, the servant had brought up bread, butter, honey and fruit jams, as well as soft cheese, hardboiled eggs, corned beef and an odd cream, white and rather compact.

Curious, the Maia tried it: it was cool and had a sour, but pleasant taste.

“Lovely!” she said, “What is it?”

“Fermented milk,” Aryon answered, “We call it ertan. It’s delicious with honey, but also with bits of fresh or dried fruit, or grinded nuts such as walnuts, hazelnuts, almonds and so on.”

Nerwen added a teaspoon of honey, stirred it in and tried it again; the sour taste had gone, replaced by the sweetness of the honey. She nodded: Aryon was right, it was luscious.

The prince took a bite of bread and cheese and chewed pensively, glancing sideways at his guest. He wasn’t able to decide how he had to feel about her: the natural distrust of his kin toward all foreigners clashed with the attraction he felt for her, an attraction he couldn’t understand, because never before he had felt the least interest for a member of the race of Men.

Once more, he saw her doubling, in that bizarre way he couldn’t understand. If he would have been the only one to notice it, he would think he was hallucinating, but Eliénna had observed it, too.
Having finished his work, the servant withdrew discreetly, therefore Aryon decided to face the topic openly.

“Lady Nerwen, explain to me why I see you as you’re here and at the same time as you were… elsewhere, too.”

She raised abruptly her gaze from the dish and stared at him, genuinely flabbergasted: Aryon had the Elven double sight, but seemingly he didn’t know what it was. This was a gift shared by all Ainur and Eldar of Valinor – who walked both in the visible world and in the invisible one – and it was common also among the Elves in Middle-earth who had a Valinorean ascent, but not among those who were born and had lived this side of Belegaer such as the Avari; hence, it was quite bizarre that the prince had this talent.

She couldn’t disclose her true origin, but it was better if she gave him some plausible explanation.

She put down her fork and looked at him intently.

“You’ve got the double sight of the Eldar,” she explained, slowly, “It’s the ability to see things on both the visible and the invisible level. All the inhabitants of Valinor – Valar, Maiar, High Elves – can be seen in this way, because they exist in both levels. The Istari, too: that’s why you see me on both.”

There was no need to specify that the Wizards were, actually, diminished Maiar.

Aryon, too, put down his fork, feeling like a lightning had struck him: suddenly, all his doubts about Nerwen were gone, and he was certain she was telling the truth: the Wizards actually existed, and she was a member of their Order.

“I saw this way my father, too,” he revealed her. The Maia startled in surprise:

“Your father was an Istar?,“ she asked, thinking he could have been one of the two Blue Wizards gone missing into the East so long a time before; but this would make absurd the conviction of the Avari they were just a fable, good for children.

Sure enough, Aryon answered:

“No, he was part of Oromë’s follow, when he came to Cuiviénen with the invitation of the Valar. There, he met my mother, Lauriell, and they fell in love. For the love of her, he stayed on the Hither Shore, until an ice kobold killed her on the Red Mountains, at the beginning of the Second Age. Then, it seemed that life had lost all significance for him, even if my sister and me, his children, were with him. He took his leave and went away, intending on crossing the Great Sea and return to Valinor,” his gaze became blank and clouded with wistfulness, which was unexpected, given the unyielding character he had shown so far, “We never heard from him since.”

Even as he spoke, Nerwen became tenser, but she tried in every way to conceal it.

“You said he was in the follow of Oromë the Hunter,” she considered in a low voice, “So he was a Maia…”

Now the reason was clear about Aryon’s High Elven double sight, and about the extraordinary light in his and his sister Eliénna’s eyes: they were half-Ainur. As had been Lúthien.

“Yes, exactly,” the prince confirmed, “His name was – or is – Galadhost.”

Nerwen nodded to show she had understood. She didn’t know this name, not even in its Valarin
version, which was Aldarosto. It was apparent that Aryon would like to know about what happened to his father, and for sure Eliénnna, too, would like it. Maybe Nerwen could contact Yavanna and ask her if she knew something about him.

And then, there was another thing: the unexpected disclosure of the prince revealed that something had him convinced that, after all, he could trust her. The fact he could see her with the Elven double sight, and the explanation she had given for it, made him change his mind about her. Therefore, he deserved to have his trust returned.

“I have seen something unusual, in you and your sister the queen,” she revealed therefore, “Now I understand the nature of it: you’re children of a Maia,” at his surprised glance, she smiled softly, “The Istari can not only be seen walking both the visible and the invisible world, but can also see in both worlds.”

The prince nodded slowly.

“Seems to make sense,” he commented, then he frowned slightly, perplexed, “Therefore, do I, too, walk in both worlds?”

“No, neither you nor your sister,” Nerwen answered – nor did Lúthien, as for this, she added to herself, “but you’re Ainur for one half, and in your eyes there’s the same light you can see in the inhabitants of Valinor.”

He gazed at her again, in wonder:

“Did you actually see a Valinorean?”

The Istar barely held herself back at biting at her lip, which would make him understand she had talked too freely; but being in the presence of the son of one of her own kin, she had relaxed, and her anxiety to gain his trust made the rest. Hence, the words had slipped out without her considering the implications they contained.

She quickly thought about some convincing explanation that could get her out of trouble.

“Every Istar is the follower of a specific Vala,” she answered slowly, “For instance, I am disciple of Yavanna Kementári. As such, I had the honour to meet her, and her eyes were bright like yours and those of Queen Eliénnna.”

She didn’t like resorting to half-truths, not to mention actual lies; but when she couldn’t be completely sincere, and showing too much reticence would be counter-productive, she had to resign herself to it.

“Kementári…,” Aryon murmured, fascinated, “It couldn’t be anyone else than the Queen of Earth, given your powers over plants and animals,” he fetched up his fork again and resumed his breakfast, “Tell me, have you ever seen Valinor? Or other Valar?”

Nerwen made a grimace to show her regret:

“I understand I’ve just begun to gain your trust, Lord Aryon, but unfortunately I’m not free to talk about this outside the Order of the Wizards,” she said in an undertone, sincerely sorry. This time, rather than half-truths, she chose to be mute. With others, maybe she wouldn’t mind to lie, but she truly wanted to gain the esteem of this wary prince of the Avar. As well as of his sister, of course.

“I see,” he said, seeming not particularly offended, or suspicious, “It’s just that… well, I’m very curious: after all, Valinor is my father’s homeland, but I never had the opportunity to see it – nor
I’ll ever have it, probably. Therefore, should I find someone who had been there, I’d flood him or her with questions about it. You just escaped this danger!” he concluded with an humorous touch.

She, too, smiled, even if she did add nothing. From now on, she had to watch her tongue: even if she was confronting an Elf whose status was comparable only to her niece Lúthien’s, which she had thought unique and exclusive, she wasn’t allowed to reveal herself completely. It wasn’t like with Círdan, Elrond and his children, or Galadriel and Celeborn anymore, who had known her since before she became an Istar and therefore knew what her true nature was…

OOO

When they finished breakfast, Aryon led Nerwen to the palace library, five or six large and bright rooms occupying the best part of the southern wing of the building, at the ground floor.

“It’s the largest and completest collection of books and parchments of all the Six Tribes,” he said proudly while they were entering, “It contains very ancient documents, originals or copies: essays, novels, myths, legends, sagas, poetries, songs, and of course books about history, geography, medicine, in short, all the knowledge of the Avari.”

“Excellent,” Nerwen said in appreciation.

An Elf came, looking frail and somewhat dusty, perhaps because his garment was grey and crumpled; his eyes, equally grey, were instead very alive and present, denying his shabby appearance.

“Lady Nerwen, may I introduce Teithir, the Keeper of the Books?” Aryon said, “Master Teithir, this is Lady Nerwen, and she’s got the queen’s permission to access all of the exposed documents, on any topic.”

The word exposed strengthened in Nerwen the conviction she was right: there were documents –
evidently hidden ones – that she wouldn’t be allowed to see.

Teithir bowed to her:

“Welcome, my lady,” he said, “What kind of documents do you wish to consult?”

“For a start, maps of the region between here and the Red Mountains,” she answered at once, “and of the Red Mountains themselves.”

While he was looking for the requested papers, Teithir invited her to sit at a table. Aryon took his leave:

“I hand you over to the best possible hands, Lady Nerwen.”

The Aini felt strangely unhappy.

“You said you wanted to find some news about the Istari…” she reminded him. He made his typical half-smile:

“I think I found a better information source than books,” he declared, “Whenever you wish, you can tell me about them, at least as far as you’re allowed to.”

“I’ll gladly do it, Lord Aryon,” Nerwen promptly accepted. The prince nodded her goodbye and left.

Sitting at the table they had shown, Nerwen pondered: had this been a statement of trust, or was it just another way to question her? No, she decided, it was the first: after all, Aryon had decided he could believe her, at least to a certain point. This obviously didn’t imply he had to share State secrets with her: not even Elrond, Círdan or the Lord and Lady of the Galadhrim did it. The documents they forbade her had surely be of this kind.

OOO

While he was going away from the library, heading to fulfil his duties, Aryon’s thoughts lingered on Nerwen. He was beginning to believe that maybe it was truly possible trusting her, and this made him feel relieved. The reason of this relief was surely the attraction he felt for her, but he couldn’t let such feelings get in the way and must instead try reaching an objective assessment. But he would truly love it, if she proved trustworthy…

OOO

A few days passed, which Nerwen spent mostly shut up in the library, studying and memorising maps, and reading about many subjects, particularly history, myths and legends of the Avari, seeking for news that could hint to Ents or Entwives. She read up, too, about this territory almost totally unknown to the inhabitants of the western lands. She learned therefore that the Red Mountains, also known as Orocarni or Eastern Mountains, stretched for an almost endless length, beginning in the farthest north of Middle-earth and reaching the Great Eastern Sea. It was for sure
the longest mountain range of Ennor; many rivers rose from it, passing the plains beyond the Eastern Forest; among them was one called Rinnen, which reached the Sea of Rhûn and crossed the realm of the Kindi, used as a transport route between the latter and the realm of the Kinn-lai, the Avari who lived on the slopes of the Orocarni; this same stream acted as border between the territories of Hwenti and Windan. The Red Mountains where rich with precious metals – gold, silver, copper, platinum – and gems, particularly rubies and emeralds; for this reason, since the First Age four of the Seven Houses of the Dwarves had settled there, precisely the Stiffbeards, the Ironfists, the Stonefoots and the Blacklocks; they were allocated respectively to the north, the centre-north, the centre-south and the south of the Orocarni. The Avari Kinn-lai lived more or less in the exact middle of the mountain range, between the Ironfists and the Stonefoots, and had with the Dwarves merely business relations.

When she wasn’t buried amid books and parchments, Nerwen strolled in the garden surrounding the palace, often with Calad; there, a couple of times she met Myranna, busy in cataloguing the plants of the garden as part of her healer education, and she was glad to give her advice in this matter. The young princess of the Kindi had already looked favourably upon her, and her esteem grew even more when her knowledge of herbs, plants and flowers developed noticeably thanks to Nerwen’s teachings.

The meals had become a routine since the first day: she had her breakfast on the terrace, sometimes alone, sometimes in Aryon’s company, and sometimes Eliénna, too, joined them, with the professed purpose to get to know her better in order to express a fair judgement – she indeed refused her brother’s influence, by now convinced of the Istar’s reliability – while she had her lunch served by Parànel in her own room; at dinner instead she was a regular guest at the queen’s family table, where she met also Lorgil and Myranna, and of course Aryon. After dinner, instead of the Fire Hall like the Elves in the western parts of Middle-earth, there was oft – but not always – a peculiar entertainment called atrabes. A theme was suggested, about which the attendees, sitting in a circle on comfortable couches, gave their views on it while drinking a delicious beverage, made of watered down wine aromatised with spices, from a large common bowl, the possess of which gave the right to speak. One could also just sit outside the circle to listen – but in this case, one wasn’t allowed to intervene in the debate – and Nerwen did it often in order to getting to know better the people who hosted her. She had concluded that the idea of rusticity and backwardness that the western Elves had about their Avari brothers was completely wrong, because even if they had slightly different customs and traditions and an extremely mistrustful mentality toward the rest of the world, they were highly refined, cultured and civil.

About ten days after her arrival in Bârlyth, Nerwen was in the library, reading a detailed description of the Orocarni in the territory of the Kinn-lai, written in a very boring style; after over one hour, she could stand no longer the author’s pedantry, hence she laid aside the book and stretched like a cat, with a wide yawn that almost dislocated her jaw. Raising her tired gaze, she glimpsed at Aryon who was looking at her, his bright eyes sparkling with amusement and the ghost of a smile on his lips.
“Whoops!” Nerwen cried, covering her mouth with one hand, even if it was far too late now, “I’m afraid you’ve seen my tonsils…” she jested. She felt like laughing at her own words; she tried to keep herself, but her efforts were completely useless, and after a few moments she burst out laughing uncontrollably, doubling over: good Valar, her tonsils! Where on Arda did that come from??

Her unexpected wit caught Aryon by surprise; seeing the usually composed Istar laughing her socks off caused him one of his infrequent full smiles, which looked all the brighter because of their rarity.

“I’m afraid I wouldn’t be able to distinguish a tonsil from a uvula,” he answered in the same playful tone. Nerwen laughed again, then slowly calmed down:

“Forgive me, Lord Aryon,” she said, wiping the corners of her eyes, damp because of the tears the laughter attack had caused her, “but I was mortally bored… I don’t yawn in people’s face customarily…” she chuckled, and again the moody prince smiled, amused. “I apologise,” she repeated.

“There’s nothing to apologise for, Lady Nerwen,” Aryon said, waving one hand in a dismissing way. The Maia took a deep breath and composed herself definitively, then she looked at him quizzically:

“What can I do for you, Lord Aryon?”

He looked thoughtful for a moment.

“In the first place, we could drop formalities and call each other simply by name,” he answered, “If you agree, of course,” he added, uncertain about what was the required etiquette with an Istar.

“Of course I do agree,” Nerwen reassured him; she never liked the exceeding use of titles, except in the formal occasions.

He came up to her and placed his hands on the table, bending slightly toward her. Looking at him from below, once more Nerwen realised how tall he was: not as much as Celeborn, but as he was broader, he looked more impressive.
“I was wondering if we could have that famous talk about the Istari,” the prince said, “I was afraid to bother you in your research, but you just claimed you’re bored, so mayhap I am offering you a distraction…”

“Which I accept gladly,” she interjected cheerfully, standing up, “This treaty is noticeable, but awfully tediously written: I need a break. Therefore your suggestion is perfect timing,” she cast a glance outside the window, where they could see the garden, sunlit in this mid-June afternoon, “Shall we go out?”

Soon after, they were walking down one of the paths in the garden; it was warm, but Nerwen liked warm weather. She raised her face to the sun, closing her eyes to enjoy better its caress on her skin and greeting mentally Arien, who drove it through the skies every day.

Aryon noticed her movement and for some reason he liked it.

“You love the sun, don’t you?” he asked.

“Very much,” she confirmed, “I love light and warmth, be they those of the summer sun or of the fire in the hearth during winter.”

*She’s a creature of light,* shot through the prince’s mind; he was completely unaware about how true and fitting this description was.

They heard a *kek-kek-kek* above their heads; raising their gazes, they saw Calad gliding towards them. Nerwen hadn’t her falconry glove with her, hence the bird of prey just flew in circles around them.

*Good afternoon to you and your companion,* she said.

“Good morning to you, my friend,” Nerwen said, “Calad greets you,” she added then, addressing Aryon. The prince lifted one eyebrow: he still wasn’t used to the fact that someone could speak so easily with an animal.

“Ah… tell her I return her greetings,” he said, feeling vaguely clumsy. This irritated him: by Oromë’s moustache, the First Sword of the Queen of the Kindi was *never* embarrassed! Then he thought it was very silly getting angry for such a trifle and, with a shrug, he forgot about his annoyance.

They sat on a bench in the shadow of a maple, while Calad spun around and away, intent on her matters.

“So, what do you wish to know?” Nerwen asked.

Aryon got right to it:

“What are, precisely, the Istari?”

Nerwen had prepared an answer, therefore she didn’t hesitate:

“Summing it up, they’re people endowed with particular gifts, which they use in the fight against Sauron’s evil.”

Aryon started to make the gesture his people always made when hearing that ill-omened name; then he stopped, remembering what Nerwen some days earlier had said – correctly – to him and his sister: that not naming it wouldn’t keep away neither him nor the forces of Evil.
“What are these gifts?” he enquired, “For instance, you speak with plants and animal, but your colleagues?”

“I’m not allowed to be completely exhaustive in this matter,” she warned him, “but I’ll tell you what everyone knows. Like me, one of them – Radagast the Brown – speaks with animals, particularly with birds, and like me, he’s a true expert in plants and their virtues. Saruman the White, chief of our Order, possesses the power of persuasion, being very wise and learned; furthermore, he’s very skilled in mechanics and engineering. Gandalf the Grey can suggest dreams and visions, and reveal what’s hidden; besides he’s a formidable fighter.”

“So there’s just the four of you?” Aryon asked, amazed: for some reason, he had been convinced the Istari were many more.

“Actually, there are two more, the Blue Wizards,” Nerwen answered, “but they vanished a long time ago in the east of the world. Perhaps they passed through here…” she suggested, hopefully: if she would find Alatar and Pallando, she could question them about the Entwives.

Aryon shook his head:

“We have no memory of Istari in our lands,” he said, “at least, not that I know of. But as you’re turning our library upside down, mayhap you’ll find news about them, buried and forgotten,” he concluded with a hint of humour. The Aini smiled, amused even in her disappointment:

“Who knows? Mayhap,” she admitted, “If nothing else, I’m learning your tongue, even if…”

She paused thoughtfully: could she ask him to teach her in the special Ainurin way? Would Aryon trust her enough?

“…even if?” he urged her on, curious. Nerwen looked him straight in the eyes – those bright eyes filled with the light of Valinor even if they had never seen the Blessed Ream – and made up her mind to try. After all, at the worst she could receive a no as an answer.

“…even if there would be a faster and better way,” she finished the sentence, “but it means you have to trust me completely. Now the question is precisely this: do you trust me?”

Aryon returned her forthright gaze with one as much forthright. Nerwen’s question, expressed in the frankness he was beginning to learn was typical to her, had taken him by surprise.

Such a bluntness deserved the same in turn, he thought.

“I’m not yet ready to trust you blindly,” he answered calmly, “because I don’t know you well, and therefore I’m still a little afraid that my trust might be misplaced. However, this is what my mind says; my gut instead tells me I can trust you… and if you must know, it tells me so since almost the beginning,” he added, in a more confidential tone, “but my people is so used to distrust all those who are not Avari, that it took me a good deal of time to realise it.”

Nerwen nodded slowly; his admission struck her favourably.

“I thank you for you sincerity, Aryon,” she said in a low voice. He, too, nodded.

“What would it be, anyway?” he enquired.

“Another special talent of the Istari,” she answered, adjusting the truth just slightly, as this talent wasn’t just the Wizard’s, but also all the Ainur’s, “Learning something extracting it directly form someone’s mind, of course with his consent.”
“I see,” the prince murmured, scratching thoughtfully one sideburn, “And how do I know you won’t look into other parts of my mind in order to learn its secrets?” he asked in a quiet tone, making her understand he wasn’t implying she would want to do it, but just that he needed to know.

“Here it’s where trust comes in,” Nerwen answered with disarming candour. Aryon tilted his head slightly to the side and smiled his characteristic grin: once more, the Istar laid all her cards out on the table with complete frankness, and he liked this.

He decided to trust his guts: anyway, in the past he had been rarely wrong.

“Let’s go with it,” he therefore said. Nerwen couldn’t but smile contentedly: finally, she was certain she was winning the trust of this stern and stubborn Avar prince, and in this way she hoped she could win his sister the queen’s, too.

“What am I supposed to do?” Aryon asked.

“Close your eyes and relax,” she instructed him. The prince did as she had told him; a moment later, he felt Nerwen’s hands on his cheeks, her fingertips on his temples, warm and light. Suddenly he recalled Corch and the treatment the Istar had inflicted him to punish him; he felt frightened, but it was only a moment, because immediately after he felt a warmth in some part of his brain, presumably where the knowledge of his mother tongue was allocated: it was anything but a bothersome feeling, so he calmed down. The contact of Nerwen’s fingers on his face was pleasant and reassuring as a loving caress, and he didn’t think of anything else.

A couple of minutes later, Nerwen pulled away and said in perfect Avarin:

“Thank you very much, Aryon. Not so much for the help you just gave me, but for the trust you chose to grant me, despite your reservations.”

The prince was dumbfounded, to say the least: the difference between the knowledge of the language she had shown before and was showing now was astonishing, because if earlier she had it rather good, but clearly as a foreigner, now she looked mother tongue as much as himself.

“It’s… incredible! You sound native to Bârlyth,” he stated; then he realised what the meaning of Nerwen’s phrasing had been, “As I said, even if I’m not yet willing to trust you unconditionally, I believe in the honesty of your intentions, though.”

She nodded solemnly, accepting his statement, which confirmed to her she had finally breached the wall of circumspection and suspect surrounding this Elven prince of extraordinary high lineage. A wall behind which, it seemed, also all other Avari barricaded themselves, she added by herself, thoughtfully; but she realised suddenly that she cared only of the wall beyond which stood – or had been standing – Aryon. She felt fleetingly dismayed: why should she care about it differently? Sure, winning the trust of the First Sword of the High Sovereign of the Six Tribes of the Avari could help her with all others, included the queen; but it didn’t matter to her for this reason. No, she admitted: it mattered to her for herself. What she didn’t understand was why.

She decided to take off her mind from these thoughts, changing subject:

“My horses are very comfortable, in your stables; and Calad, too, is happy to be here.”

“I’m glad to learn this,” he commented, then he became thoughtful, “If you like to go for a ride to move your mare, from this moment on you’re free to do so. You can explore a little the surroundings of Bârlyth, if you wish to.”
“With no escort?” she asked, arching playfully one eyebrow. Aryon showed his typical half-smile:

“If you prefer so… I trust you enough to think you won’t cut and run, and that you will wait a few days more, until my sister will decide if she should give you or not her safe-conduct. Am I right?” he enquired, watching her intently: after all, he was putting himself in the line for her, on the sole basis of his guts; but she had entered his head and didn’t take advantage of it, and this made him take another step toward trust. And then, after all, he wished dearly he could trust her, because he liked her, he liked her really much.

“You’re right,” Nerwen confirmed, holding his gaze relentlessly, “I gave my word, and I’m not the kind of person who breaks it.”

“I believe you,” the prince nodded, “I’ll inform the city guard to let you come and go at your wish.”

“Thank you,” she said, standing up, “Now better I go back to the library and finish that boring treaty. Who knows, maybe now that I know Avarin perfectly, it may be less arduous…” she added smiling. Aryon stood up in turn and nodded:

“I hope so. Have a good time, then,” he concluded, taking his leave.

“See you tonight,” she answered. They parted, each one going to see for their tasks.

Author’s corner:

Various trivia:

The black tea with bergamot aroma obviously is the well-known Earl Grey, my favourite XD

1. Ertan is nothing else than yogurt – from Sindarin ertannen, stirred, that’s the meaning of this word of Turkish origin ;-). I’m crazy about this food and therefore I inserted it in the story. Like for chocolate, someone could object that in Medieval Europe – more or less the temporal and geographical correspondence of the Tolkienverse – yogurt didn’t exist, but as Turkey (where seemingly it was devised) is much nearer than the American continent where potatoes come from, which the Professor names in his work, I think it can be well possible that the Avari know it – all the more because they live in an area to the east of Middle-earth, exactly like the Anatolian Peninsula is located to the east of Europe.

2. Fork has ancient origins, being in use both among Greeks and Romans; it disappeared from western Europe during Middle Age and was reintroduced by Venetians through a princess of the Byzantine Empire, who in 1003 married the son of a Doge.

3. Discussing about a topic while sitting in a circle and drinking a light aromatised wine from a bowl, which possession gives the right to speak, is a custom inspired by the symposium of ancient Greece.
Lady Angel
Chapter XXXII: Mid-Summer Feast

The following day, Nerwen went down to the stables, planning a tour in the outskirts of the town. The night before, at dinner, Eliénna and her children had been very curious about her new, sudden mastery in their tongue; she had given a short description of the mental technique she had applied, describing it as a special skill of the Wizards and pointing out the important role that Aryon’s trust in her had had. Then the queen looked upon her more favourably, even if she still didn’t reach to a final conclusion, and confirmed her brother’s permission for her to come and go at her leisure.

A groom quickly saddled Thilgiloth, who was very pleased to go wandering about with her two-legged friend; with them came Calad, too.

The near environs of Bârlyth were rather monotonous, but still knowing nothing about the neighbourhood, for the moment Nerwen would not enter the forest, following the roads radiating from the large clearing surrounding the town. Hence, after a couple of hours she got back; she was slightly bored, but the walk had been good for the Chargeress, therefore she decided to repeat the excursion in the next days.

The morning after, passing through the large palace hall while going to the stables, Nerwen came across Myranna.

“Good morning, Lady Nerwen,” the princess greeted her, “Are you going out?”

“Yes, I was thinking of going for a ride with my mare,” she answered. Myranna hesitated, then she told her confidentially:

“I should go on cataloguing the plants in the garden, but sincerely, this morning I have no feeling for it… a ride would be much more agreeable,” she concluded with a sigh and a funny grimace.
“Can you do it in the afternoon?” the Istar asked, amused by her expression. The princess pondered about it:

“Well, yes, actually…”

“Then forget it for the moment and come with me,” Nerwen invited her, “What do you say to that?”

“I say yes!” Myranna cried, laughing cheerfully, “I make a run for my riding boots.”

“I’ll wait for you in the stables,” Nerwen told her smiling.

Once out of town, Myranna led the Maia to the north-west, down a wide road entering the forest. About twenty minutes later, they came across the Rinnen, the river coming from the Orocarni, passing through the realm of the Kindi and fleeing into the Sea of Rhûn. The path went on in both directions of the stream; Myranna chose to turn downriver.

“There’s a port upstream,” she explained, “where all the watercrafts land, coming from the eastern Plains and the Red Mountains. Windan, Hwenti and Kinn-lai come here to trade with us.”

“And the Dwarves of the Orocarni?” Nerwen enquired. The princess shook her head:

“We’ve no direct contact with them, only through our brothers the Kinn-lai.”

They rode on for almost one hour, chatting pleasantly; then the forest opened in a wide, sunlit clearing, concomitantly with the river that, in this point, wrought a large meander; at the inside of it was a beach of fine white sand. Several people were bathing in the stream, which was very gentle here, or sunbathing, laying on cloths or wicker carpets. All were completely naked, but this didn’t surprise Nerwen, because it was common custom in Valinor, too. After all, bathing dressed makes no sense.
There was also a kiosk selling drinks and food, with wooden tables and benches.

“Let’s have a snack!” the princess suggested.

“Gladly,” Nerwen accepted. They dismounted, and a few minutes later they were sitting and eating fruit skewers with sparkling dry cider.

“Now that I know of this place, I’ll come back: I love swimming,” the Maia said, looking around: the water was pristine and, in that heat, it looked very inviting.

“I like swimming, too,” Myranna revealed, “We could come together, sometime.”

“Sure!” the Aini nodded, happy to have found company.

As they finished their snack, they set forth to return. Once back at the palace, Myranna observed:

“In three days, it’ll be Mid-Summer: we’ll have a great feast, we’ll dance and there’ll be fireworks. I’d be very happy if you’d come.”

“Thank you, Lady Myranna, I adore dancing,” Nerwen smiled, “But I don’t know your dances,” she added: they were surely very different from those in use at Rivendell and Lothlórien.

“That’s no big problem,” Myranna reassured her, “Ours are line dances, made of a few basic figures that, before each dance, are called in the required sequence. Some are more complicated than others, but I’m sure that you’ll be perfectly able to perform the simpler ones, especially if you have a skilled partner… My uncle Aryon, for instance, is an accomplished dancer: I’ll ask him to be your partner.”

“Thank you, you’re very kind, but probably he has his own partner…” Nerwen objected: this was something she didn’t know, that is, if the prince had a spouse or a friend-in-love; she had learned that his sister the queen was a widow, but about him, she ignored everything.

“Usually it’s me, his partner,” the princess answered, “but I’ll have only the more complicated dances, those which would be too difficult for you: as for the other ones, I’m glad to share him,” she concluded laughing.

“Well, then it’s fine,” the Aini smiled; then she remembered something, “Oh, my only dress isn’t very apt to a feast at the palace, but I’ll content myself with it…”

Of course, in her meagre luggage there was no ball gown. In Rivendell, at Elrond’s insistence, she had a couple of elegant dresses made, suitable to the court life, but she had left them there when she departed; while in Lothlórien, Arwen had borrowed her her own ones, if need had come.

Myranna furrowed her brow:

“Oh! I didn’t think about this…” she glanced sideways at Nerwen, pondering her shape, “I think Lady Ziriél, my history teacher, is about your size. She’s taller, but it’s not hard shorting a gown…”

“And just who’s not taller than me?” the Aini laughed, as usual with a great sense of humour about her short stature. The princess smiled, amused:

“Well, for instance, the palace chief-cook: I think she doesn’t go over one and a half metre… and in spite of it, she bosses around the whole kitchen staff: even the Superintendent of the Palace must submit to her directions, when it comes to her department.”
Nerwen had never met her, but Myranna’s description made her laugh.

“That’s fine, then, try and ask your teacher if she’s willing to borrow me a gown for the occasion, but don’t make her feel like she has to do it, I beg you,” she said, aware that she was still surrounded by much aversion. The princess nodded:

“Alright…”

OOO

Nerwen spent the afternoon in the library, as usual; by now, she had read many books and documents and had collected a great deal of information about the Avari and their history, as well as their territory; but to her great disappointment, there was no trace of the Onodrim in their writings.

On the evening, Aryon deserted the queen’s table: his tasks had him held up, hence he would dine later, alone.

After dinner, returning to her room, Nerwen realised she had missed the prince.

And his amazing grey-blue eyes.

And his engaging half-smile.

And his charming baritone voice.

With a start, the Istar realised she felt very attracted to Aryon Morvacor. She wondered why; the prince was very attractive, of course, but he was introvert, surly, grumpy, and she had always preferred partners with a diametrically opposed character, sunny, open, peppy, like Calion and Beriadir.

Then she recalled Thorin: the Dwarven prince, too, hadn’t been precisely her type, being quite moody and taciturn, but despite of it, she had lost her head in no time.

She went to sleep rather confused.

OOO

When the morning arrived, Nerwen got up and, as it had become customary, she headed for the terrace where she usually had breakfast. She had slept on the problem and come to accept the situation: if she felt attracted to the queen’s brother, she felt attracted, and it was useless trying to find rational or logical reasons, because feelings are anything but rational or logic. Therefore, she set foot on the balcony rather calm… and her calmness shattered as soon as she glimpsed at Aryon’s broad back, while he was sitting at the table chatting with his sister. With an effort, she got a grip on herself.

Hearing her approaching, both turned.
“Good morning, Nerwen,” Aryon greeted her, looking at her with those bright irises of his. For a moment, the Maia got lost in them.

“Good morning to you, Your Majesty, Aryon…” she managed to answer, regaining her confidence.

“Myranna told me you took a ride together, yesterday,” the queen said, sipping at her tea.

“Yes, we did,” Nerwen confirmed, helping herself with a cup of ertan, which she had come quickly to appreciate eagerly, “We rode to the beach on the Rinnen,” she added, taking her seat.

Aryon couldn’t resist the temptation to provoke her:

“Mayhap our custom to bathe disrobed scandalised you,” he observed, a corner of his mouth slightly lifted in his characteristic grin; but his tone wasn’t mocking, only amused.

However, it took a lot more to embarrass Nerwen.

“Not at all,” she replied with a seraphic glance at him, “I find it simply absurd bathing or entering a bathhouse dressed.”

“This is good sense,” the queen commented, satisfied, “Indeed, I don’t understand why many people think nudity indecorous or even outrageous in settings where it’s just reasonable.”

“Nor do I,” the Aini admitted.

Aryon kept silent, his eyes staring his dish: after hearing Nerwen’s answer, he couldn’t but imagine her undressed, taking a bath in the Rinnen, and the conjured imagine had his throat completely dried. He took a sip of tea, trying to regain quickly his composure. It was a short but fierce fight, which he won out of pure stubbornness; only then was he able to go back participating to the chatter.

Nerwen had noticed his silence and wondered about the reason, perplexed; but when he resumed talking with her and his sister, she forgot about it.

When they finished breakfast, they parted; Nerwen headed straight for the library: in the afternoon she planned on going to the river for a good swim, therefore she wanted to use the morning for her habitual research.

She soon was aware she couldn’t concentrate easily, because her mind constantly drifted away to think about Aryon; his tall shape; his broad shoulders; the noble features of his face; his piercing eyes; his well-drawn lips… she wondered how it could feel kissing them… feeling them parting against her own…

She abruptly tore herself off those arousing thoughts, self-annoyed because she was unable to control them, and bent ferociously her will to the study; but it was only after a strenuous fight that she got her way.

Around noon, she returned to her chamber for a light meal, then she headed for the stables. Should she meet Myranna, she would invite her to come along – if she wasn’t occupied otherwise – but she didn’t see her.

While one of the grooms was saddling Thilgiloth, Nerwen visited Thalion, who was enjoying these relaxing days.

*Be careful not getting fat, old friend,* the Istar warned him, amused while watching him munching
cheerfully the excellent fodder filling his manger.

_They keep me exercised every day_, he informed her placidly. Satisfied, Nerwen took her leave and headed for the Chargeress, who meanwhile had been taken outside. She checked that her saddle was correctly fastened – after all, the Avari weren’t used to that kind of harness – then mounted and set forth, exiting town and heading for the river.

She spent a pleasant afternoon, bathing in the cool waters of the Rinnen and sunbathing, laying on a large cloth Parânel got for her; when she returned to the palace, one hour before dinner, she went to her room to change; soon after, while she was brushing her hair, there was a knock at the door.

“Come in,” she invited. Myranna entered, followed by her servant, a maiden of about her age with long, brown curls, who was carrying a bundle.

“Good evening, Lady Myranna,” the Maia greeted her, standing up.

“Good evening to you, Lady Nerwen,” the princess answered, “I brought you a gown to try on, if you like it.”

At her signal, the maid undid the bundle, revealing a dress of light lavender silk, simply tailored but decorated with embroideries in silver thread on the bodice, both front and back; it had no sleeves, suitably to the summer season.

“But it’s stunning!” Nerwen cried, struck by the refinery of the embroidery, forming wisteria twigs and flowers, “Lady Ziriel is very kind, borrowing me such a superb gown.”

“I asked her as a personal favour,” Myranna told her, glad that her mission had been successful; she chose not to tell her that her history teacher, learning it was for the foreigner, hadn’t been enthusiastic at all, “and as she has a soft spot for me, she told me to choose the one I preferred. I thought this would suit you,” she concluded, “It’s not your colour, but the vegetal theme of the decoration made me think of you.”

Nerwen smiled, thankful for her care and concern.

The servant helped her to try on the dress; it was slightly wide on the upper body, but with the strings on the back it was easily adjusted; as for the length, the maid measured it and said she would take care of shortening the skirt just enough.

The matter settled, Nerwen and Myranna headed downstairs for the queen’s private dining room for the evening meal. This time Aryon’s presence didn’t upset the Istar exceedingly: she had had all day to clear her head and she had concluded that the best thing to do, was paying close attention in catching possible signals from the prince, to see if he returned her interest, and then act accordingly. But neither that evening, nor the following day, was she able making out anything in particular about his behaviour. Frustrated, she concluded that, apparently, her Maiarin appeal was failing, again…

OOO

Mid-Summer Day turned out being scorching hot, so much that Nerwen tried to cool off under the trees in the garden, laying on a hammock Parânel set up for her, reading the nth treaty.
By evening, she went upstairs to change for the feast, which would begin after sunset. She would dine there, as there would be large tables full of refreshments of all kind.

Parànel helped her dressing up and did her hair, braiding it into a four-lock tress, which she wrapped around her head and decorated with ribbons and flowers. For the occasion, Nerwen wore one of the very few jewels she travelled with, a necklace Galadriel had given her, made of glittering moon-crystals that, when struck by the light of the silvery night orb, shone like diamonds.

At the agreed time, she headed for the ground floor, where the feast hall was located, occupying the farthest part of the eastern wing. Three of the walls were mobile and had been removed; solid wooden columns, carved like tree-trunks, supported the ceiling, allowing the evening air circulating freely. Just outside, long tables had been set, loaded with food and drinks, as well as chairs and benches for those who wanted to rest in between dances. Close to the only wall remaining, the one toward the inside of the palace, a few musicians were playing on a low dais; there were two kettledrums, a harp, a psaltery, a rebec, a vielle, a lute and a flute, all played with consummate skill by the instrumentalists.

The guests were about a hundred, as Eliénna had anticipated to Nerwen in the morning at breakfast, and many had already arrived. In the weeks spent in the palace, the Aini had met many notable of the realm, among which the two main counsellors to the queen, Annil Sinton and Tellar Golinnen – two people very different from each other, the first unusually stocky for an Elf, loquacious and witty, while the second was tall and gangly, rather silent and stern; but both were endowed with great perspicacity and vast notions of all kind, and were deeply loyal. Then there were the two young princes’ teachers, some of them being notables of the realm, such as Gartor Sinévrin who taught mathematics, or Ziriel Dennsar, who borrowed Nerwen the gown she was wearing.

The Istar saw precisely her, a few metres away, a tall Elf with an undulated mane of the typical jet-black hair of the Avari, and approached her.

“I hadn’t yet the opportunity to thank you for this stunning dress, Lady Ziriel,” she said, “It was princess Myranna’s idea; I hope you didn’t mind.”

The teacher looked down at her from her 1,75 metres height; her face was aloof, barely veiled by a hint of formal courtesy.

“I love the princess very much and I wouldn’t deny her anything,” she explained in a neutral tone. Nerwen frowned slightly, disappointed: how long would they take, these Avari, stopping being so reluctant to show themselves affable to her?

“I realise you did her a favour, not me”, she said, coldly, “but nonetheless, I am grateful: as you can well imagine, travelling around I don’t carry with me a wardrobe fitting to a royal court.”

Ziriel stiffened her shoulders at her bickering: how did she dare, this Human? It was rumoured she was one of the legendary Istari, but she thought it a fable. However, she was the queen’s guest, and it wasn’t a good idea antagonising her. She nodded her curtly in confirmation, just enough not to seem too rude.

At that moment, behind her Nerwen heard Aryon’s deep voice.

“Lady Ziriel, it’s nice to see you,” he greeted first the elder lady, or who he thought was the elder one. The Istar saw he was dressed in black as usual but, given the temperature, like the majority of the other male guests he wore a sleeveless shirt of thin muslin, and linen trousers; he wore light
shoes, suitable for dancing.

The prince turned to Nerwen and his gaze showed admiration.

“You’re truly charming, tonight,” he said gallantly.

“It’s all thanks to Lady Ziriel,” the Maia said, staring at the female Elf straight in the face, “She’s been so kind to borrow me this gown, so I’m not looking too bad at this feast.”

Ziriel had the good grace to blush, hearing Nerwen praising her even if she had treated her so coldly.

“It was… a pleasure,” she claimed awkwardly. With a hint of perfidy, Nerwen felt satisfied about her embarrassment: *this will teach her about being ill-disposed to someone just because of her prejudices*, she thought.

Aryon sensed the tension between the two and thought it better cutting it.

“Nerwen, can I get you a cup of sweet cider?” he invited her, lending her his arm. During the last weeks, he had learned it to be her favourite drink, “There’s a sparkling type, truly delicious.”

Casting a last, icy glance to Ziriel, Nerwen accepted Aryon’s arm and let him take her to one of the tables, where the prince poured the golden liquid into two goblets. The cider was really excellent and the Maia drank it gladly.

The musicians were playing a cheerful tune with a quick rhythm that captured Nerwen’s ear; after a few moments, she was tapping with one foot along with the drum.

Aryon noticed it.

“Myranna told me you love dancing,” he said, “but that you don’t know our dances, and she asked me to lead you through the easier ones.”

“I hope you don’t mind her request,” Nerwen said, looking at him and recalling annoyed Ziriel’s reaction.

“Not at all,” he assured her with an apparently casual tone; but actually, when his niece asked him, he had felt pleased, because it offered him the opportunity to stay with her practically all night long.

The music ceased and the Mistress of Dances came forth.

“Dancers, please take position for The Maiden’s Reel,” she invited. Aryon recognised a dance Nerwen could do and extended his hand to her; the Istar quickly put down her goblet and took the offered hand. He grasped her fingers lightly in an encouraging way and led her to the centre of the hall, where other dancers were gathering; the ladies lined up on the left of the Mistress of Dances, in groups of four, and their partners in front of them. Aryon positioned himself as the fourth of one group, and Nerwen placed herself across him.

The Mistress of Dances called the first figure, which the first couple of each group performed, and right after the other ones, continuing with the following figures in an intertwining that looked very complicated to Nerwen, but after performing it – led by Aryon – she realised that actually it has a very simple sequential logic. When the music began, vivacious like the reel named in the title, she threw herself into the dance and enjoyed it very much. The prince was indeed an accomplished dancer and guided her easily through the different figures.
At the end, smiling slightly he asked her:

“Did you enjoy it?”

“Very much!” she stated with such an enthusiasm, the corners of his mouth lifted even more, until one of his rare full smiles blossomed on his lips. Nerwen got wrapped up in watching him: if Aryon was a stunning Elven male specimen while grave, he was spectacular while smiling…

The Mistress of Dances called for The Bridge of Kisses, again a dance that Aryon thought she could do, and therefore he invited her for a second round; after this came The Exchange of the Hidden Valley, this time a circle dance that presupposed the continuous turnover of the couples; Nerwen found it particularly amusing. Then came The Lady Marshal of the Ford, with a slower rhythm but more complex figures, therefore Aryon quitted; however, Nerwen had seen Myranna and motioned her to come near, hence uncle and niece danced together, while the Aini was getting herself some food.

At the refreshments tables, she found Lorgil.

“Nice feast,” she said, just to make some small talk: the crown prince had a kind character, but more reserved than his sister, therefore in those weeks she hadn’t build up a strong bond with him.

“Indeed,” Lorgil confirmed, nodding politely, “If you’d like to eat something, I suggest you the cold roasted calf with olive and caper sauce,” he added, pointing out the dish among the exhibited ones on the table.

“Thanks,” Nerwen answered; she took a plate and helped herself with a slice of bread, on which she placed a cut of meat topped with sauce, “Delicious indeed,” she confirmed, after taking one bite.

Eliénna showed up at that moment, wearing an elegant dark-red gown with golden embroideries and a magnificent tiara with rubies. Nerwen put immediately down her dish to curtsey: she really wanted to make clear, especially in public, that she had the uppermost respect for the High Sovereign of the Avari.

“Good evening, Your Majesty,” she greeted her.

“Good evening, Lady Nerwen,” the queen responded, “Do you like the feast?”

“Yes, very much,” the Istar answered, “Especially the music, it’s very cheerful and it makes one wanting to jump and dance till dropping exhausted.”

Unexpectedly, the queen laughed; she was less thrifty of smiles than her brother was, but hearing her laughing heartily was rather rare.

“You’re right,” she confirmed, “I remember when I was young, at one feast for Mid-Summer Day I danced through the whole night with Kalivon… It was when we realised we were partners for life. And at dawn we went to the terrace on the eastern tower to see the sun rise, and there… well, the rest is rather private,” she concluded, while her smile faded slightly into sadness. It was the first time she mentioned her husband who, as Nerwen had learned, had been killed in a skirmish with the Easterlings about three hundred years before. Her expression reminded her of Melian and her inextinguishable bitterness for Thingol’s death; suddenly, the last remnants of aversion she still held for Eliénna disappeared like fog in the sun.

“I’m sorry for your husband,” she said in a low voice, “My sister, too, is a widow; therefore I know what sorrow for the loss of a partner means.”
Not for the first time, the queen thought that the Istar – because by now she didn’t doubt anymore she was one – possessed a great deal of empathy. She gave her a grateful glance, then she turned to her son:

“Lorgil, would you fetch me some wine…?”

“Sure, Mother,” the prince answered, quickly taking the carafe and pouring the beverage in a silver goblet, “Here you are,” he said, handing it to her.

Eliénna thanked him with a nod and drank.

After a second dance, Aryon and Myranna joined them, but the princess immediately grasped her brother and laughing dragged him to the dance floor. Watching him, Nerwen saw that Lorgil was good at dancing.

“Dancing runs in the family, I see,” she said, pointing at the young prince. Eliénna nodded:

“Exactly; after all, among me, Kalivon and Aryon, my children couldn’t but get passionate to it, they too…”

Annil Sinton approached them and made a low bow to the queen.

“Your Majesty, may I have the honour of this dance?” he asked her. He was about ten centimetres shorter than her, but Nerwen had seen he was a talented dancer, even if more enthusiastic than skilful.

Eliénna accepted gracefully, and the couple headed for a dance in circles.

Aryon chose a small pie with cheese and vegetables, and began to nib at it.

“Dancing makes one hungry,” he observed casually,

“And thirsty,” Nerwen added, deciding to try the wine Eliénna had drunk. It was cool and slightly sparkling, sweet and fruity.

The next dance was easy enough for Nerwen to do, therefore Aryon invited her once more.

This way, time went on cheerfully, among dances, chats, food and drinks. Around eleven o’clock, Nerwen thought about taking a break.

“I go and sit down a minute,” she informed Aryon, after concluding the last dance together.

“Tired?” he asked her, escorting her off the dancefloor.

“A little bit, but above all flushed,” she confessed, “Between dances and wine, I need to rest a few minutes.”

“I come with you,” he offered, “I, too, won’t mind an interruption.”

After all, he had danced double so much than Nerwen, as he was the partner of Myranna, too. Besides, he wouldn’t mind at all to go somewhere private with her…

Walking by the refreshments tables, Aryon took a carafe of fruit juice and two glasses, then he strode on, the Istar at his side. Torches and lanterns lit the darkness of the summer night, making it easy walking down the paths in the garden.
They found a bench, but it was already occupied, therefore they went on until they found a free one, where they sat down. Nerwen took the goblets Aryon was handing her and the prince filled them up, setting then the carafe down on the ground. They drank, relaxing against the seatback.

“Now that you’ve been here for a few weeks, how do you judge the hospitality of the Avari?” Aryon asked her, referring to their encounter/fight on the beach: actually, it was one way to ascertain if her disposition toward him was favourable or not.

“I surely cannot complain,” Nerwen answered sincerely, “Even if you didn’t trust me, you treated me with great respect, and for this I thank you.”

He nodded, satisfied; but before he could go on, she asked:

“May I ask you if you’ve got an idea about when the queen could make up her mind? Even if I like your hospitality, I cannot tarry here forever: I must resume my mission…”

The hint to her departure troubled him: he didn’t want her to go, he thought, not so soon.

“I think it won’t take much more time, by now,” he answered reluctantly, “and I think it’ll be a favourable decision, because you gave us no reason to mistrust you further,” he added, looking at her. Nerwen nodded:

“Nice to know it!” she commented, laughing, “Convincing you had been no piece of cake…”

“Yes,” Aryon admitted, “We’re suspicious by nature: it isn’t easy winning our trust, but you succeeded. In an utterly complete way, at least for what I’m concerned.”

She watched him, lifting one eyebrow:

“So far to trust me with your life?” she provoked him, recalling the limit he set the day when he allowed her the learning of his tongue from mind to mind.

Aryon bent his lips in his typical half-smile, recalling the same scene.

“There’s really few people I’d trust my life with,” he answered in a low voice, “but, if you’re not yet among them, know that it won’t take long.”

Unexpectedly, Nerwen felt very thrilled.

“Oh…,” she breathed, “Thank you, I’m… honoured.”

The prince shook his head:

“The honour is mine,” he claimed, “It doesn’t happen all the time, to meet an Istar.”

She chuckled:

“Especially if until the day before one thought it was just a fable, good for children!”

Aryon’s half-smile broadened:

“Exactly…”

At that moment, a loud bang startled them.

“The fireworks,” the prince said. They heard a second warning bang, then the show began: silver
fountains, golden rains, blue willows, fuchsia lightings, green flowers, orange meteors crossed the
night sky standing out against the stars and filling the sky with bright colours. Nerwen and Aryon kept
comfortably sitting on the bench and enjoyed the show, which lasted over fifteen minutes.
The Maia had seen more scenographic fireworks in Rivendell, but these were just a little less and
she appreciated them much.

Three bangs announced the end of the pyrotechnic show.

“Beautiful!” Nerwen commented, referring to the fireworks.

“Yes, this year they’ve been particularly creative,” Aryon confirmed, “I hadn’t seen yet the purple
falls, or the multi-coloured intersecting circles…”

She nodded, agreeing.

All of a sudden, with no warning at all, her Second Sight manifested itself, so powerfully she
thought she received a blow on her head, so strongly did it take her breath away. What she saw
made her eyes widen; she felt astonished, while her heart jumped up in her throat.

She and Aryon. In bed together. Naked. Arms wrapped around one another. Lips glued together.
Heart to heart. Legs intertwined. Ecstatic faces.

But this wouldn’t upset her much: Aryon was extremely charming and it wouldn’t be absurd at all,
ending up in bed with him.

No; what perturbed her was the abrupt awareness that it wouldn’t be a friend-in-love kind of
relationship, but as partners for life.

Aryon saw her disconcerted face and was afraid she was feeling bad.

“What’s up, Nerwen?” he asked, worried, “Are you well?”
She moved her lips, but no sound came out of her mouth, as if she had lost the power of speech. Now really concerned, Aryon placed one hand on her shoulder, ready to support her, should she hint to fainting; but a few moments later, the Istar shook her head as if clearing her head and he heard her whispering:

“No, it’s nothing, don’t worry…”

Usually, the awareness to be partners for life came almost at the same time to both peoples involved. If Aryon wasn’t yet conscious of it, in a short time he, too, would realise it: it could be a matter of minutes, at the most hours.

The prince frowned:

“You sure? You’re trembling…”

Nerwen made an effort to breathe normally and calm down her altered heartbeat. Her head was spinning. It was a good thing she had been sitting while her Second Sight switched on, otherwise her legs wouldn’t have supported her and she would have collapsed.

She had expected anything could happen during her long journey in Middle-earth in search of the Onodrim; anything… except receiving the revelation she had found her partner for life.

After looking into the Mirror of Galadriel, she had had the vision of this moody Elf: now the reason of it was clear.

“I’m sure,” she replied firmly.

She looked into his eyes and waited, breath bated.

Aryon was truly concerned and watched her intently in the light of the lanterns. What had her so troubled to widen her eyes and make her jump as slapped?

But seeing her returning steadily his gaze, he calmed down: whatever it had been, it had apparently gone.

“Fine, then,” he said, standing up and stretching out her hand to her, “Shall we go?”

Nerwen felt awful; she had hoped very much he would realise immediately what was their destiny together, but it appeared not to be the case. Maybe the typical stubbornness of the Avari had something to do with this, and Aryon was particularly gifted with it…

Suppressing a disappointed sigh, she stood up and took his offered hand, allowing him leading her back to the hall; but the remaining of the feast looked pretty dull to her.

Author’s corner:

THUD! What a blow, people… after MILLENNIA of waiting, you discover all of a sudden you have your other half right in front of you! I can completely understand Nerwen almost fainting! XD
Now of course she’s waiting for Aryon’s answer… how long will he make her wait? And what will the prince’s reaction be, discovering something he surely doesn’t imagine, not even remotely?

The dance type I depicted – as well as the titles of the various pieces – is inspired by Scottish Country Dance, which I had the pleasure to practice for a few years, and still do sometimes – to my great enjoyment – during parties the local association throws.

Lady Angel
Soon after one o’clock in the night, during a break in between dances, Eliéenna Dhillel announced she would retire, but invited everyone to go on with the feast at their leisure. Nerwen, too, thought about retiring: she was tired of waiting; that obstinate Avar prince could maybe need days to figure out they were partners for life, but she had enough for one evening. Therefore, as soon as the queen had gone, she took her leave from Myranna and Aryon, who were about to perform the next dance.

“It wouldn’t be bad for me to retire, too,” the black-clothed prince announced, “Tomorrow morning I must get up rather soon. Do you mind going on dancing with Lorgil?” he asked, turning to his niece.

“Not at all,” she answered graciously, “Go ahead, Uncle Aryon. Good night, Lady Nerwen,” she concluded, nodding to her. She left them, seeking her brother.

“I’ll walk you to your chamber,” Aryon said. Nerwen’s heart skipped one beat: had he finally realised the news and was now looking for an opportunity to be alone with her, in order to tell her about his feelings? Suddenly she felt hot, then, equally suddenly, cold.

“Thank you,” she accepted, trying to steady her voice. Good Valar, she never ever felt so thrilled at the idea to be alone with someone. So was this the way one felt about the love of one’s life? Now she could wholly understand Melian’s feelings for Thingol, or Lúthien’s for Beren, or Galadriel’s for Celeborn… It was a sense of fullness, joy, gratefulness, marvel, something that gave her a force and an energy through which she would be able to defy the Dark Enemy himself… and win.

Exactly like her sister’s daughter had done, when she confronted Morgoth and won.

Aryon, completely unaware of the storm of feelings raging in Nerwen’s heart, offered her his arm,
and she accepted it.

They took the nearest stairway going to the upper floor; once there, Aryon walked her to the stairs leading to her quarters, and without stopping, he went on, going upstairs with her. At this point, Nerwen was sure the prince had realised everything and was going to tell her openly, and then he would ask her to spend the night together. At the mere thought, her throat turned dry because of the thrill.

When they arrived in front of the door to Nerwen’s bedchamber, Aryon stopped; she turned to look at him, full of expectation.

“It’s been a wonderful evening,” the prince said.

“Yes,” she agreed, unable to put together a longer sentence. Aryon’s bright eyes sparkled like jewels in the uncertain light of the only lamp lighting the landing; the Maia felt her knees turning to jelly.

Aryon was uncertain: could he make a pass at her? This was the reason why he had walked her there in the first place: he had felt her very close earlier, when they were sitting on that bench in the garden… but then, somehow she had withdrawn. He truly didn’t know what to make of it.

Maybe he had been wrong, he concluded.

“Good night, Nerwen,” he murmured, bending slightly to brush her hand with his lips; then he turned and went for the staircase.

Nerwen felt like petrified. For long moments, she wasn’t even able to breathe or organise a full thought; dazed, speechless, she stared at Aryon going away.

Aryon descended slowly the first two steps; all of a sudden, he felt like punched in the stomach and lost his breath. He gasped for air, while in his brain an abrupt, absolute certainty exploded.

Nerwen the Green was his partner for life.

He straightened his back as if jabbed with a sword and spun around to look at the Istar, his eyes wide, bedazzled. She was staring at him, frozen; the dismayed expression on her beautiful face stabbed his heart.

Dumbfounded, overwhelmed, he froze as well, his eyes imprisoned in hers. Eliénna had described to him what she had felt when she recognised Kalivon as her partner for life, and his few intimate friends had done the same, but nothing, nothing had him prepared for the emotional hurricane that was hitting him now, literally cutting off his breath.

For long moments, they stayed there, devouring each other with their eyes, unmoving, speechless, almost without even breathing.

Then Nerwen, realising that finally Aryon was aware of their fatal bond, she parted her lips in the hint of a smile. That small movement shook Aryon out of his paralysis; with just a few strides of his long legs, the prince annulled the distance between them and cupped her face.

“You…” he whispered in an incredulous tone, “It’s you…”
She fought the lump that was trying to close her throat and managed a sigh:

“Yes…”

That single, barely audible syllable made his heart jump in his throat.

“Blessed Vána…” he murmured in a choked whisper, invoking the name of Oromë’s spouse. Following his instinct, he bowed his head and placed his lips on hers.

Nerwen felt a vibration inside of her, as if she was a harp from which the skilful hand of a musician had just taken a celestial chord; during all her long life, she had never felt something even by far comparable to this, and the sensation shook her deeply, both in body and soul. She moved her arms and wrapped them around him.

Aryon’s lips pressed against hers firmly, but at the same time gently; her mind empty of coherent thoughts, Nerwen opened her mouth, calling him to deepen the kiss. The prince accepted promptly her invitation and their tongues brushed, touching and caressing one another, advancing and withdrawing in a dance that was both sweet and exciting.

They kissed for a long time, stopping just for brief moments to catch breath and then go again for it, each time hotter than the one before. Passion grew and spread inside of them like a fire, until it was uncontrollable. They stumbled toward the chamber’s door, slammed into it; Aryon pressed Nerwen against the closed doorway, crushing his body into hers. *By Oromë’s shield, how soft was her body, and delicious her mouth…!*

Unable to hold back, he stole one hand up her hip until he brushed the side of one breast. He heard her moaning in approval and lost his head. He fumbled in search of the doorknob, found it, turned it and opened the door. Crushing her even more against his body, he lifted her and carried her inside, kicking the door closed. Two lamps turned on automatically, spreading their soft golden light in the chamber.
Nerwen was incapable to think anymore, as if she had lost her senses. As far as she was concerned, all of Eä could have disappeared and now there were only the two of them left, engrossed in this sensual embrace.

Aryon placed her down and unglued his mouth from hers, only to bend lower and kiss her neck; she threw back her head, offering him access to the soft skin of her throat, which he quickly tasted with the tip of his tongue, finding it as exquisite as vanilla. He heard her gasp and he bent even lower, brushing her chest with his lips, and lower, where, just above the rim of the neckline of her dress, the soft mounds of her breasts swelled up.

A long, hot shudder swept over Nerwen. Aryon’s lips, arms, body felt so right, so perfect, as if they had been made just for her; and indeed, they were, because he was her partner for life. As much as she had been created for him… She grabbed his shoulders and uttered a sigh full of desire, not only physical desire, but of soul and heart, too.

Aryon searched for the strings on the back of her gown, undoing them; once the garment was sufficiently open, he slid it down her shoulders, leaving her with only her chemise of thin silk veil. Through the transparent fabric, he could see the dark areolae crowning her breasts, with at their centre the hard and erect nipples; he took one into his mouth, sucking gently.

Nerwen felt like going up in flames.

“Oh, Aryon…!” she moaned, and it sounded like a prayer. Longing to give him pleasure as much as he was giving it to her, she lowered one hand and touched the evidence of his virility. It was Aryon’s turn to utter a delighted groan. He straightened his back and seized Nerwen’s lips for another fiery kiss; she slipped her hands over his back, caressing him. He grasped her by her hips and crushed her to his body; in reply, she rubbed her body against his, making him groan again in pleasure. He cupped her cheeks again, and doing so, his fingers brushed her ears.

Ears with round auricles.

*Human* ears.

He felt as if the earth was shifting under his feet and stiffened. With a gasp, he tore himself off her soft lips and stared at her, incredulous. Confused, Nerwen opened her eyes and looked at him.

“What…” she stammered.

“It’s… it’s not possible,” the prince panted, “You belong to the race of Men, I to the Eldar! How can you be my partner for life?”

He took one step backwards, leaving her. Nerwen staggered for a moment, bewildered: what on Arda was Aryon talking about?

“Wh… what?” she spluttered.

Aryon ran one hand through his hair, torn by doubts.

“I am the son of a Maia,” he mused under his breath, “I can’t believe that my destiny is united with that of a Human, a mortal…”

Nerwen blinked, while the prince was taking another step back. *He was rejecting her*! she thought, incredulous. *How could he refuse his own destiny?*

Then, like a slap in the face, the reasons he was adducing hit her.
He was rejecting her because he thought her of the race of Men. Lesser. Unworthy.

Pain and anger flared up in her spirit, concocting in a racking rush.

“You mean I’m not enough for you, do you?!” she cried, her voice trembling with equal parts of rage and tears.

“Don’t…” Aryon began, but Nerwen was too distressed to let him speak:

“You mean that, should I’ve been the last of the fishmongers at the market, but an Elf, I’d do fine, but because I’m Human, even if an Istar, I don’t?!” she burst out, “I didn’t think you were so haughty! You’re presumptuous, arrogant, mulish, despicable… and hateful! Go away! Get out of here!”

She took off one shoe and threw it at him. Taken by surprise, Aryon raised his arms to deflect the blunt object; seeing her taking off the other shoe, he withdrew three steps.

“Calm down!” he cried, “I never should have…”

“You never should have even looked at me!” Nerwen yelled, beside herself, hurling the second shoe, which hit him on one leg, “Go away!”

Aryon stared at her for a long moment; he wanted to tell her something, something that could soothe the pain he saw in her face, mixed with anger, which was tearing apart his heart, but he couldn’t think of anything sufficiently compelling. Therefore, he gave up; he turned on his heels, reached the entrance and exited, closing the door behind him.

Nerwen’s legs gave way; she fell on her knees and burst into tears. Deep sobs shook her chest while she collapsed.

After millennia of vain waiting, almost resigned to be alone forever, beyond all hope she had instead met her partner for life, only to be refused by him because he thought her less than him and therefore unworthy. If only he had known who she really was… if only she could tell him…

Yet there was something worse: she never, ever would have thought him so petty, so disdainful. Whether he liked it or not, they were partners for life, but this was apparently not enough for him to accept their ostensible race differentiation. She recalled the Elf about whom the spring in Chetwood had sung, telling her and Thorin about his love for the human woman. That Elf hadn’t cared about different races, on the contrary, it had been him insisting for them to be together, choosing to live with her the years he was allowed to, instead of solitude.

Seemingly, Aryon wasn’t cut from the same cloth.

Nerwen had fallen for him without realising it and, in spite of his haughtiness, arrogance, stubbornness, despicability, she couldn’t help but love him. Because, like it or not, he was her partner for life. In the same way, Aryon, too, couldn’t help but love her, yet he had rejected this love. The Aini couldn’t grasp how this could be possible. She had never heard it occurring.

Bewildered, discouraged, embittered, Nerwen stood up and, staggering, headed for the bed, where she dropped. She had neither the strength nor the will to change for the night or to turn off the lamps. Sinking her face into the pillow, she wept until she fell asleep.

OOO
Aryon reached his chamber, but he wasn’t in the least sleepy. Nevertheless, he tried to go to bed, but he didn’t sleep a wink, flustered by totally unknown and upsetting emotions and feelings.

Nerwen was a female of the race of Men, sure; but she was an Istar, too. If what was rumoured about the Wizards went for her, too, she was endowed with a much longer life than Men. Nonetheless, she was mortal, and this meant that at a certain point she would go to a place where he couldn’t follow her. No one knew the fate in store for the souls of Men, who didn’t stay in the Halls of Mandos waiting to be reincarnated, as the Eldar did. On the other hand, even belonging to the race of Elves wasn’t a guarantee for an eternity together, because Elves, too, could be killed, as it had happened to his brother-in-law Kalivon; but it was possible for their souls to meet again in the Halls of Awaiting, and it was rumoured that, being born again, those who loved each other much would reunite, even if it wasn’t possible to state it for certain, because when one reincarnated, one didn’t remember the earlier lives. However, this hypothesis represented a hope, if nothing else, while instead, coming to Humans, it failed, and therefore he would end up losing her forever, sooner or later.

Nerwen was wrong: he didn’t think her lesser than him or unworthy. He loved her, he couldn’t deny it, nor could he help it, because she was his partner for life; but in front of the certainty of sorrow for losing her, he faltered and hesitated. His sister had almost died of consumption, after Kalivon’s killing, and if she had survived, it had been only for the love of her children; while his father, when he lost his wife, had chosen to return to Valinor seeking relief, and with the hope to meet her again, one day, in case she would reincarnate there. He didn’t want to face that sorrow, worsened by the despair of knowing there was no possibility to find Nerwen ever again.

Sleepless, he tossed and turned in his bed until the first signs of dawn; then he got up, dressed and marched to the stables, where he personally saddled his black stallion, Allakos. Then he mounted and headed out of town. He had business to do, and after having them settled, he would take some days away from the palace – and from Nerwen – to ponder and make up his mind.

OOO

The following morning, Nerwen didn’t show up at the terrace where she used to break her fast with Aryon and Eliénna, asking Parânel to fetch her something to her chamber: at the risk of looking coward, she wasn’t ready to confront Aryon.

During the morning, the queen sent for her. The Aini got immediately downstairs, wondering what she might tell Eliénna if she asked her why she didn’t come for breakfast; she hadn’t thought on pleading to be sick.

The queen was waiting for her in her office, the same room where she had received her the day of her arrival in Bârlyth; she was sitting at her mahogany desk and invited her to take a seat, unlike the first time when she had left her standing all the time. Nerwen sat therefore on the stuffed chair beside the desk.

“This morning you didn’t show up, at breakfast,” Eliénna said, a quizzical expression on her stunningly beautiful face, “Are you well?”

“Yes, I’m fine, I just overslept,” Nerwen answered, “I beg your pardon, Your Majesty; I’m not
used to keep early hours,” she added as an explanation.

“I see,” the queen said, hiding her perplexity, “Did you anyway have your breakfast?”

“Yes, thank you: Paranel brought me something in my room.”

“Very well,” Eliénna nodded, dismissing the matter, “Aryon, too, wasn’t there this morning: he was up and out before dawn for his duties, leaving word he will be back only in a few days…”

Nerwen felt disappointed, and it surprised her: she would rather expect to feel relieved; but actually, she felt embittered because he wanted to avoid her. Like she was a leper…

“However,” the queen went on, completely unaware of her interlocutor’s torments, “following my brother’s opinion, I decided to give you a safe-conduct that allows you to move freely within the entire territory of the Six Tribes, with no escort nor limitations of any kind. I therefore instructed my secretary to draw it,” she pointed to the sheet laying on her desk, “and I was about to sign it.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” Nerwen said stiffly; at Eliénna’s perplexed look, she tried to shape up, “I am very grateful, but above all I’m glad to learn that, in the end, you accepted to believe to my good faith.”

The queen nodded graciously.

“I still think your mission is… a fantasy,” she stated tactfully, “but I’m disposed to give you the benefit of the doubt. Who knows, perhaps one day you’ll be back with a host of Entwives in your wake, and then I’ll be glad to admit I was wrong,” she added humorously. Nerwen smiled only slightly, still in too bad a mood about what had occurred last night, and also too embittered by Aryon’s behaviour: not only he had decided to avoid her, but he had also urged his sister to send her away.

“May I leave immediately?” she asked impulsively. Better going away, as he clearly didn’t want her.

“Of course,” the queen answered, not hiding her surprise, “but do you want to leave with no word to my brother? I thought you liked each other…”

Nerwen blushed, not knowing if it was because of embarrassment or anger.

“So did I,” she answered, “but yestereve… we worked it out.”

“Oh,” the queen uttered, rather puzzled: she had been so sure Aryon had become besotted with Nerwen and that she reciprocated him… but no? How strange, she rarely misjudged people’s state of mind, especially of those she knew best: and she knew no one better than her brother, except maybe her children.

Giving up for the moment the understanding of the situation, she took her quill, dipped it in the inkwell and signed with a flourish, then she used the sealing wax to add her seal, making the document official for all intents and purposes. Finally, she handed it to Nerwen so that she could read it; the Istar scanned it quickly and nodded, showing she had understood. Hence, Eliénna gave her a tubular leather case, where she could store the rolled up safe-conduct, and Nerwen slipped the document in it.

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” she said, standing up and curtseying, “With your permission, I’ll leave tomorrow morning.”
“As you wish, Lady Nerwen,” the queen answered, “From now on, you’re free to come and go at your leisure in my realm.”

After another curtsy, less deep, the Maia took her leave and returned to her chamber, where she began to pack and secure the precious document that made her wait so long. At noon she nibbled something, cursing Aryon for her lack of appetite – she never had a poor appetite, damn him! – and then in the afternoon she headed for the stables to warn her kelvar friends that the following morning they would leave.

Thilgiloth didn’t hide her perplexity:

*It looks like a very hasty departure, compared to the previous ones,* she observed, *Did something happen that annoyed you?*

Nerwen didn’t even think about keeping her reasons from her four-legged old friend and told her briefly the facts of the previous night.

*I wasn’t aware you were attracted to him,* the Chargeress said, baffled, *It wasn’t like the other times…*

*Not even I was aware of being attracted to him,* Nerwen explained, *Not particularly, I mean. And even less was I aware I was falling for him… Until I realised he is my partner for life. But he wants me not… Besides, his flight makes it quite clear he wants nothing to do with me. I don’t understand how this is possible!* she shook her head, still disbelieving at what looked like a paradox, *The queen’s decision comes at just the right time: better I go away. It is what it is,* she concluded with an unhappy sigh.

Thilgiloth didn’t know how to comfort her: for her nature, she wasn’t able to grasp the idea of *partner for life* and what it implied at an emotional level. She only knew her old friend was sad, and she didn’t like it. She felt like hating Aryon: how did he dare rejecting Nerwen? Who did he think he was? She badly wanted to trample him.

OOO

Wishing to take her leave properly from Eliéenna and her children, Nerwen showed up for dinner even if she wasn’t very hungry. But the smell of calf stew made her appetite return, therefore she ended up eating almost normally.

Myranna was sorry to hear about Nerwen’s departure: the foreigner was interesting and she would gladly get to know her better; besides, her knowledge in herbal remedies had helped her much in her studies, to say nothing about her encouragement in front of her mother, who didn’t approve of her choice to become a healer. Lorgil instead accepted the news with more detachment, both because of his more reserved character and because he had had less opportunities to interact with Nerwen.

When she took her leave, Eliéenna Dhillel saluted her with the traditional parting formula of the Avari:

*“May Oromë’s shield protect you from danger, and may Vána’s flowers ease your step.”*

Nerwen responded with her own:
“May the stars shine upon your path.”

Perhaps they hadn’t come to love each other, but they sure had come to respect each other; therefore, their parting was rather formal, but surely heartfelt.

OOO

Early in the morning of the following day, Nerwen left Bârlyth; with a last glance at the beautiful wooden palace on the top of the highest hill, the Istar turned Thilgiloth to the right, towards the Rinnen, where the road skirting the river would lead her first to the port and then, going on, out of the forest, in the vast plains between Eryn Rhûn and the Orocarni.

Author’s Corner:

Argh! Have you got any idea on how difficult it has been tearing Nerwen off Aryon's arms?? But it couldn’t be so easy: our Istar cannot have anyone she wants falling under her charm just with a snap of her fingers, even if often, thanks to her appeal, in the past it seemed like this, and in spite he’s her partner for life.

Now let’s see how long it will take for Aryon to make up his mind and surrender to his destiny…

Lady Angel
Chapter XXXIV: Doubts and Torments

Aryon Morvacor mounted and shook the bridles; obediently, Allakos moved, setting forth down the road out of the port on the Rinnen.

After carrying out his duties, Aryon had a mind to take refuge in his hunting lodge, located in an area, rich in game, to the north of Bârlyth, seeking solitude and peacefulness to ponder and make up his mind about his future with Nerwen, as he promised himself two nights before, while he tossed sleepless in his bed. The memory of the fiery kisses they had exchanged, of the scent of her skin, of the softness of her body crushed against his had left him for not even one moment, and he was becoming obsessed. He would give his right arm to live again through those exciting moments, but just when he thought about it, his mind ruthlessly reminded him about the reasons why he had fled. Yes, fled: no point in refusing to admit it, this had been a flight, a flight from a dilemma; but Aryon Morvacor, First Sword of the High Sovereign of the Six Tribes of the Avari, was not the type to run from nothing. The problem was only delayed, and not for long, because he had every intention of facing and resolving it, one way or another.

He took the northbound path that, from the Rinnen, led to the hunting lodge, unaware that in this same moment, Nerwen was leaving Bârlyth.

In the late afternoon, the prince reached his destination; he dismounted and took Allakos to the box next to the lodge, where he took off his harness and groomed him nicely, before feeding him some fodder, stored in bags stacked in a corner. Finally, he entered into the lodge, where he lit a lamp; from the inn at the port, Aryon brought enough food for a couple of days, and now he began to nibble at a slice of bread with some cottage cheese, drinking many cups of red wine. Then he climbed into the bed, tired and in a foul mood. With a sigh, he closed his eyes, and immediately Nerwen’s imagine took shape in his mind, with only her chemise on, her amiable body visible
through the semi-transparent fabric, her erected nipples pushing against the soft cloth; he started and a warm shiver of desire made him tremble. It wasn’t just the physical desire of having her with him in this very bed, in his arms; but also seeing her, hearing her voice, her laugh, smelling her peculiar scent. He realised he was excruciatingly missing her, as if he had stayed away from her for months, not only two days.

Without knowing it, he slipped into sleep.

OOO

The next day, he got up feeling all broken and numb, as if he had been sleeping outdoors with no fire on a wet autumn night. This worsened his mood, which stayed dark all day through while he was loitering around with bow and arrows; but he was so slouched that he didn’t pay attention, hence all game had ample time to bolt and run.

The following day wasn’t better than the first, and the prince’s bad mood worsened even more, while he was struggling in the vain attempt to make up his mind.

At nightfall, he went to bed very disgruntled.

OOO

When she came to the borders of Eryn Rhûn, Nerwen stopped for the night even if there was still light; after all, these were the longest days of the year.

This evening, too, she decided to spare as much as possible of the supplies she had been given at the palace and sought for edible herbs and mushrooms to make a soup, in which she dipped some crackers. She still had lembas, but it was running out, therefore she preferred to spare it. She thought annoyed that, wouldn’t she have been in such a hurry to leave Bârlyth, she could have baked some in the wooden palace’s kitchens; but as it got this way, she would do it at some other point, whenever the opportunity would rise.

After dinner, she prepared the fire to burn low as long as possible – not much for the heat, as the season didn’t require it, but for the light – and unrolled the wicker carpet she had asked for, on which she spread her blanket. Using the saddle as a pillow, she prepared to sleep. She was tired and frustrated: the disappointment about Aryon’s behaviour was far from gone, and would need much more time to subside. Oh, how much she hated him!

Finally, she fell asleep.

OOO

It was dawning, when Aryon got up; not wanting any breakfast, he dressed and went out in the cool
morning air. Unexpectedly, he discerned Nerwen among the trees in front of the lodge: she was wearing a light blue dress under a musk-green cloak, her long brown hair down her back, and she was looking at him. The prince wondered fleetingly what she was doing there, but his heart was thumping with such a joy, he immediately forgot about it; he hurriedly made his way to her, while she was watching him, motionless, smiling. He thought she was the most beautiful creature in the world.

When he got near her, Nerwen threw her arms around his neck and kissed him soundly, sending his heart jumping. Rejoicing, he pulled her in close, lifting her off her feet, and returned her kiss with equal fervour; but, under the passion, he felt the ineffable melody of a sentiment he never felt before, an indescribable emotion tightening his throat and moistening his eyes.

They parted, and Aryon set her back down; short-breathed, they exchanged a glance, silently understanding each other perfectly, then he took her hand and led her to the lodge. While walking, the prince realised he found Nerwen’s close proximity deeply pleasurable. No, it was more than pleasurable: it was... right. She was exactly where she had to be: at his side. Walking with him. Looking in the same direction. Not only physically, but also metaphorically.

Once inside, he led her to the bedroom, where they laid down. Quickly, their clothes disappeared and Aryon could kiss and caress her everywhere, until she was moaning with desire. Then he took her, determined to achieve the uppermost peaks of pleasure; but suddenly he realised that this took second place compared to the joy to see her face transfixed with ecstasy, hear her voice calling his name at the high point, and feel her body vibrating under and around his in the paroxysm of bliss. He pushed himself up on his arms to look at her and began to move...

OOO

Nerwen woke up startled, breathing hard while her body was shivering in pleasure. She had just had a very vivid dream, but its reminiscence was already waning. The only thing she knew for certain was that Aryon was making love to her. She placed one hand on her feverish brow: was it
possible that she had had an orgasm while dreaming about him…? She got angry at herself: by Manwë’s hurricanes, he refused her, and she instead fantasised about rolling around in a bed with him?? Had she no esteem of herself, no shred of dignity?

Tears welled up in her eyes, therefore as a reaction she clung at her anger: blast him!!

She rose; dawn was still far away, but she would sleep no more, hence she poked up again the fire and made herself a strong bergamot tea for breakfast.

OOO

Aryon woke up feeling as if his heart was singing. He remembered each moment of the most stunning dream of his life: loving Nerwen with every cell of his being, body and soul. What a fool had he been, thinking he could reject destiny, embodied in his partner for life, the one he had awaited for so many centuries he had almost lost hope to meet her! What difference did it make if she belonged to the race of Men? She was an Istar: giving credit to the tales he had heard about Wizards, tales going around for almost two thousand years that referred they didn’t age, she would live for a very long time: centuries, maybe even millennia. But even if this wouldn’t prove true, if instead he would be allowed to stay with her only the few decades of human life, he wanted to live each moment together with her, not wasting any more precious time…

He jumped out of bed and dressed quickly; he threw in bulk all his belongings in the saddlebags, then ran to the stable and saddled Allakos. He hoisted on the stallion’s back and spurred him on, whispering:

“Run as fast as you can, my friend!”

Allakos was no Charger and could not understand his words, but he had been infected by his rider’s hurry and at his signal, he leaped forward, galloping down the path taking to the Rinnen and Bârlyth.

OOO

It was growing dark when Aryon reached the palace; he left Allakos into the care of the palfrey who had come to receive him, and sprinted upstairs to the entrance, then he ascended hastily the stairway of the tower where Nerwen’s chamber was located. The door was wide open, therefore he barged in, only to find the room deserted. Thinking she might have gone to dinner, the prince hurried down and reached his sister’s private dining room, entering like a whirlwind, almost breathless; the table was already set for the evening meal, but it was still too early for someone to be there.

The handmaid who was putting the finishing touches to the table set spun around to look at him, scared by his sudden appearance.

“Where’s Lady Nerwen?” Aryon asked her, too impatient to realise how harsh his voice was while speaking to her. The servant winced and stuttered:
“I don’t know, Lord Aryon… you should ask Parànel, her maid, or your sister the queen…”

The prince nodded curtly and headed for the door for his sister’s private chambers. He knocked, and hearing her invitation to come in, he opened.

“Eliénna, may I talk to you?”

“Sure, Aryn, come on in,” the queen exhorted him, having just finished freshening up before dinner, as usual. He entered and closed the door behind him.

“Welcome back,” his sister said, “Where have you been? You disappeared with no world to anyone…”

“I’ve got work to do,” he explained concisely, trying to use a calmer tone, “I’m looking for Nerwen, do you know where I can find her?”

“I’m sorry, Aryn, she left three days ago…”

“Left?” he was startled, interrupting her without even realising his rudeness, “What do you mean?” Eliénna frowned: with her, Aryn was never rude.

“I mean that I gave her the safe-conduct, as you suggested days ago, and she decided to leave immediately,” she explained dryly.

Aryn passed one hand over his face, dusty because of the day on horseback, feeling disheartened. But he could blame only himself: it was solely his fault, if Nerwen left in such a hurry.

“Excuse me,” he mumbled, “I just, you know, needed to talk to her about an important matter.”

The queen had a sudden feeling.

“Like, you changed your mind and you want to be with her?” she threw him. Aryn stared at her, stunned.

“I’ve realised immediately you like Nerwen,” Eliénna went on, “but she didn’t reciprocate your interest; not at the beginning, at least. Then things changed, as days passed by. I’d have sworn you’d spend together the last part of the night of the Mid-Summer feast, but she told me you didn’t. She looked like being in a terrible hurry to leave, and I supposed she offered herself to you, but you, for some reason, refused her. Am I right?”

The prince sighed.

“You’re right, Eliénna,” he admitted, “but it’s more complicated than this. It’s not just a love-friendship: Nerwen and I are partners for life.”

There, he had declared it openly. As soon as he said it aloud, it seemed the most natural thing in the world.

Eliénna felt pretty dumbfounded at this claim.

“Are you serious?” she asked. It was Aryn’s turn to frown:

“Am I looking as if I’m kidding?”

The queen shook her head:
“No, of course not… but you’ll admit that this is slightly unexpected news.”

“Don’t tell me!” he grumbled, “It caught me totally by surprise. It happened when I walked her back to her chamber after the feast. And you’re right, we almost ended up straight in bed. But then, I began to think that she belongs to the race of Men, that she’s a mortal, that when she’ll die I’ll lose her for good, and how much this will hurt me… Worse than our father when mother died. At least he knows that sooner or later her spirit will reincarnate and perhaps he’ll be able to meet her again, but me…? Nobody knows where the souls of the mortals go, after passing… Therefore, I rejected her…”

“…but now you repent it,” the queen concluded, watching him intently.

Aryon nodded to confirm.

“What made you change your mind?” his sister enquired.

“I realised I can’t fight destiny,” he answered under his breath, “She and I are made to be together, and that’s it. Better just a few years with her, than all eternity without… Besides, she’s an Istar, and if what they tell about them is true, then it won’t be only a few decades, but much longer.”

Eliénna went silent; pondering her brother’s words, she walked to the window and watched outside, at the last lights of sunset. As hers, Aryon’s royal status was accentuated by being the son of an Ainu; nobody, in Middle-earth, could claim such a high ancestry. Whoever their partner for life might be, he or she could not match such nobility, but neither she nor her brother did ever worry about this, considering the impossibility to find an equal. Kalivon had been a member of the lesser Avarin nobility of the Windan tribe; for Aryon, Eliénna was expecting at least the same, but also a non-noble Elf could do, as long as he was happy. She never thought about someone of a different race than theirs, also because their contacts with non-Elves were virtually nil, since they broke off their relations with Dorwinion. This didn’t anyway change the fact that Nerwen was her brother’s partner for life; she ended up respecting her, and even if she couldn’t say for certain that she liked her, surely she didn’t dislike her. What she disliked instead was that, because of her, she would lose her brother, her First Sword, because if he wanted to be with Nerwen, he had to follow her on her unlikely search.

All these thoughts swirled through her mind for several minutes. Finally, she turned again to Aryon.

“What will you do, now?” she asked him.

“Nerwen wanted to find a way to cross the Red Mountains,” Aryon considered, “and the shortest way to reach them is following the Rinnen upriver, and then the Sirlechin. I’ll go after and find her.”

“And then? Will you accompany her for the rest of her absurd search?” the queen insisted. Her brother stretched all of his noticeable height.

“If necessary, yes,” he stated firmly. Eliénna wasn’t surprised at all: deep down, she knew he would answer this way.

“And to do so, would you abandon me, your sister and queen?” she asked in a low voice. Aryon stared into her eyes, then he lowered his head: his unease was apparent.

“I could never do it, unless you give me permission,” he answered despondently.

But Eliénna never had intended preventing him to follow his destiny, his love: she knew perfectly
what it was like finding one’s partner for life, and she could never do that to him, she loved him too much. Her question had only intended to remind him where – always and forever – his loyalty was.

“I’m sorry to lose the best First Sword a queen can wish,” she said, slowly, “both for capability and for blood ties; but I’d never deprive you of your happiness, brother mine,” she was silent for a moment, “I release you from your duties, Aryon Morvacor,” she added solemnly, “I’ll find a substitute, and I’ll be fine.”

The prince lifted his gaze again, incredulous; then he ran to hug his sister.

“Thank you,” he whispered, holding her tight, “Thank you!”

OOO

The sun had just risen over the horizon, when Aryon left Bârlyth without knowing if he would ever return. The night before he had taken his leave from his niece and nephew and from his closest friends, then, after a quick bath and a light dinner, he had gone to bed. He had some trouble to fall asleep, being so impatient to leave, but finally he managed to sleep a few hours.

He took a second horse with him, a bay gelding with long legs named Nordhir; this way, he could switch mount as soon as the one he was riding would show signals of weariness, and this way catching up with Nerwen more swiftly.

OOO

In the late afternoon of this same day, Nerwen reached a village on the river of the Rinnen. The only inn was so humble, it didn’t even have a bathtub, but at least the Istar could use a basin and a washcloth to take off dust and sweat. She dined and then went out for a stroll along the riverbank; she sat in the grass of the bank to smoke her pipe, but when she realised she was nervously munching at the stem, she gave up. She returned to the inn and retired to her room, where she got to bed and tried to sleep; but her thoughts tormented her.

In the last few days, she had been so angry with Aryon, she didn’t truly realise how much his refusal had hurt her; but with the passing of time, anger had subsided, and now dejection had emerged. She thought wistfully about her beautiful gardens in the south of Valinor and wished she were there, where the quality of the Blessed Realm would ease the pain that was crushing her heart to the point she felt like having a boulder in her chest. To fight off her misery, she tried to regain the feeling of indignation she had just a few hours ago, but she didn’t succeed.

At last, somehow she fell asleep; but she awoke several hours before dawn and wasn’t able to sleep a wink anymore. Therefore, she decided to contact Yavanna: she needed to vent and, who knows, perhaps her Mistress could give her some good advice.

Behind the screen of her tightly closed eyelids, she visualised the inner portal symbolising the connection with Yavanna and knocked.
A few moments later, the door opened and her Mistress showed up on the threshold.

_Nerwen, my dear, I’m glad to see you_, she welcomed her, smiling. Around them appeared the library of her palace in Valimar.

Nerwen took the hands the Valië was extending to her and squeezed them affectionately.

_I, too, am glad to see you, Yavanna_, she said.

They moved and sat on two stuffed chairs, next to the window opening on the garden, a triumph of summer greenery. Here, it was mid-afternoon.

_Do you have news about your search?_ Kementári asked her. Obviously she was expecting a positive answer, as their contacts were essentially meant for that; but Nerwen had to disappoint her:

_No, this time it’s about me: I need your advice, my Mistress Kementári._

Yavanna watched her closely, rather surprised: it had happened very rarely that her disciple, endowed with the insight of the Ainur, needed advice.

_Tell me_, she exhorted her.

_I met my partner for life_, Nerwen announced up front.

The Queen of Earth smiled, glad for her friend: she knew her follower had always wished to meet him, and that sometimes she worried because it hadn’t happened yet, until she had come to believe he didn’t exist.

_I am very happy for you_, she said. Nerwen nodded to thank her, but didn’t return her smile, on the contrary, her face became distressed, _What is troubling you, my dear?_ she asked her then.

_He… rejected me_, Nerwen explained under her breath. Yavanna lifted her eyebrows, flabbergasted:

_What? But… this is impossible!_

_Nonetheless, he did, the Istar sighed, He is a prince of the Avari, brother to their High Sovereign. He thinks I’m a Human and therefore not worthy of him._

_How mean!_ the Valië cried, indignant.

_Yeah, Nerwen commented, but I don’t think he believes himself superior to me just because he’s an Elf and a prince: he and his sister are the children of a Maia and the previous queen of the Avari._

Kementári felt astonished as much as her follower had been when she learned about it: she, too, had believed that, in all of Arda’s history, there had been only one union between an Ainu and an Elda, the one between Melian and Thingol.

_Who is this Maia?_ she asked.

_Galadhost, a follower of Oromë_, Nerwen answered. Yavanna shook her head:

_I do not know him._

_He was with Aldaron when he went to Cuviënen, the Istar told her, There, he met and fell in love with an Elda, Lauriell, hence he decided to stay in Endorë and marry her. She was killed at the beginning of the Second Age, and then Galadhost decided to come back here, seeking relief from_
his sorrow.

A very similar story to Melian’s, the Queen of Earth mused. Nerwen nodded: she, too, had noticed it.

If only I could tell him who I really am… she whispered.

You cannot, Yavanna said.

I know…

No, it is not only about the prohibition you are subject to, the Valië explained, taking one of her hands, Should he accept you are partners for life only because you match his status – actually, yours is superior – he would truly show himself as mean, even if I cannot believe that you have been appointed to such a consort. He must accept you for what he thinks you are, overcoming his haughtiness: only then, he will be worthy of you.

Nerwen felt blown away: she never considered the matter this way, that is, from a totally reversed point of view.

You’re right, she admitted, frowning, but what happens, if he doesn’t change his mind? We’ll be both maimed of our partner…

Kementári shook her head again:

In all of Arda’s history, it never occurred that someone refused his or her partner for life. He will realise he is wrong and change his mind. I am sure of it.

Nerwen felt a ray of hope glimmering inside of her. Actually, her Second Sight could show her a future that could not come true, but her Mistress’ words comforted her greatly.

Perhaps I shouldn’t have left that much hastily, she mused, I should have stayed and waited, insisting…

There is no need, Yavanna reassured her, As soon as he will realise he cannot resist destiny’s call, he will come for you.

Seeing her face lighting up, the Valië smiled again.

Tell me, what is his name? she asked, How is he?

Her question diverted Nerwen from the strong emotion that had pervaded her.

His name is Aryon Morvacor, she answered, He is very tall, dark haired, with very bright blue eyes; he dresses always in black, and has a rather grouchy, reserved and untrusty character, which seems to be the norm, among the Avari; but when he smiles, oh!, it looks like sunshine rising in a foggy day.

At this description, Yavanna’s smile widened: she had never seen Nerwen with eyes sparkling so much while talking about a lover.

As I said, the Maia went on, unaware of her Mistress’ thoughts, he is brother to the High Sovereign of the Six Tribes of the Avari, Queen Eliénna Dhillel.

And why is it it him, the king? the Valië enquired, knowing that, mostly, the peoples of Middle-earth followed a male lineage.
She is his elder sister, Nerwen explained, *The Avari don’t differentiate birthright between males and females.*

Kementári nodded, showing she had understood.

At this point, Nerwen stood up to take her leave: she thought she had already demanded enough of her Mistress’ time for a personal matter that had nothing to do with the mission she had been appointed with.

*Thank you for listening, Yavanna,* she said, *Now I feel better.*

The Valië stood up, too; as usual, she embraced her disciple and wished her good luck, before the imagine of her and the library dissolved in a soft white mist.

OOO

Nerwen woke up in her bed in the inn; outside, the sun had risen by now. As usual, after an *astral* journey, she was hungry and thirsty; she dressed quickly and went downstairs to have a hearty breakfast before setting forth again.

While mounting, Thilgiloth noticed her calmer state of mind and she remarked:

*It’s good you’re back to your old self, my friend… In the last few days you’ve been truly as dark as a storm cloud…*

*I know, and I beg your pardon,* Nerwen answered; she had actually been so enraged, she wanted to bite someone, *I’ve calmed down, now.*

*For sure, that Avar prince made you as furious as rarely happened in the past,* the Chargeress observed.

*That’s right,* the Aini admitted.

*What will you do, should he show up?*

Involuntarily, Nerwen’s heart jumped. If he followed and found her, as Yavanna had predicted, how would she feel?

*I’ll jump him,* she grumbled, *but I don’t know if I’ll do it to kiss him or give him a black eye.*

Thilgiloth snorted: she would never understand why the two-legs had always to make life so difficult…

OOO

Nerwen felt worn out and hot. Her hat protected her head from the sun, but even if she was wearing only a sleeveless shirt in light cotton cloth, sweat was dripping down her back. Six days had passed since she had had the opportunity to wash, in that small village on the Rinnen where she had
contacted Yavanna. She glanced at the river and thought it wouldn’t be a bad idea to stop and freshen up, bathing and resting in the shade of a tree, but here the riverbank was steep and there were no trees. She hoped to find a more favourable place ahead; meanwhile, she told Calad what she had in mind. The hawk began to search the surroundings.

Less than one hour later, Calad spotted a brook flowing into the Rinnen from this side of the river; the road made a detour to an easy ford, no more than 200 metres away. About one kilometre more upriver, a patch of trees attracted the bird’s attention and she headed for it; in that spot, a series of rocky steps formed a string of small waterfalls; each large step hosted a water basin of an intense turquoise colour, like many small pools.

It was a wonderful place, to say the least, and perfect for bathing.

Calad flew quickly back and informed Nerwen about her sighting, and the Aini was very pleased.

“Today we’ll make an early stop,” she said to Thiligloth and Thalion, both with mind and voice, “and we’ll rest a bit. We’ll go on tomorrow.”

As they reached the patch of trees, Nerwen halted the Chargeress in the shade of a linden and dismounted, then she unsaddled her quickly and unloaded the luggage from the always sturdy Thalion. The horses, too, were sweaty, and she was sorry not having a sponge and a bucket to freshen them up; but they could drink their fill and roll into the grass in the shade of the trees. Therefore, she let them free while she fished out the wicker carpet from her baggage and prepared a pallet, on which she counted to rest after a revitalising bath.

*Keep an eye on the surroundings, she told Calad, and warn me if anybody’s coming near this place.*

It was unlikely, as the great majority of traffic between the Orocarni and ErynRhûn took place by river; besides, she was over one kilometre away from the Rinnen. However, you can never know, and even if the Avari didn’t show prejudices about nudity, she could also run into diverse travellers...
with diverse mind-sets.

She looked around: this place was striking, green grass dotted with flowers of bright colours such as mallows, yarrows, poppies and vetches. The chirping of many birds counterpointed the pounding of running water on stones, while a light breeze gently moved the branches, making them rustle softly. A delicious peace permeated the whole place.

Nerwen smiled, maybe for the first time spontaneously since the night of the Mid-summer feast; she prepared her pallet, then she disrobed and placed her sweat-soaked clothes on a boulder, planning to wash them after her bath; finally, she took a large cloth to dry her up and brought it to the bank of the brook. She plunged in the cool water with a satisfied sigh.

OOO

It was about mid-afternoon when Aryon glimpsed a hawk in the sky, flying lazily. The bird of prey saw him in turn and sent off its call *kek-kek-kek*, which identified it immediately as a *calē* hawk.

Aryon’s heart leaped: might it be Calad…?

The hawk circled above him, but stayed too high for him to positively identify it; with another cry, it turned back to where it had come from. The prince decided to follow it: if it was Calad, Nerwen couldn’t be too far away; if it wasn’t, he would realise it within a short time.

He nimbly jumped from Nordhir’s back to Allakos’, who was fresher, and urged the black stallion to a full gallop; the bay horse followed closely.

After about ten minutes, Aryon came across a creek arriving from his right side; the hawk had seemingly flown upriver. He signalled Allakos consequently; after a few minutes, he saw a small group of trees, under which two horses stood, one dazzlingly white: Thilgiloth, doubtlessly. The prince’s heart rate increased: he had finally caught up with Nerwen!

OOO

The pool she had chosen was unexpectedly deep, and the level of the water reached her chest. Nerwen resurfaced from a dive and pushed a strand of hair away from her face; she looked around, awestruck: this was truly a wonderful place.

At that moment, she heard Calad’s cry and looked up, at the same time seeking her with her mind. She felt her rather agitated.

*Is someone coming?* she asked, at once vigilant.

*Yes, and you'll never guess who it is,* Calad cried, sending her Aryon’s imagine riding on Allakos’ back.

The first thing Nerwen thought was: *Yavanna was right!* She felt hot.

The second was: *I'm completely naked!* She felt cold.
The third was: *All the better!* She felt hotter than before.

She turned to the direction Calad was pointing at and waited.

*Author’s corner:*

The creek forming the natural pools in the picture exists for good and is located in Laos, in the nature reserve of Kuang Si.

Well, finally we are at the confrontation between Nerwen and Aryon. What will our Istar decide to do? Will she kick him, or will she lavish him with kisses? Or maybe first one thing and then the other? XD

*The next chapter will be very special, I promise.*

*Lady Angel*
Chapter XXXV: When Earth and Sky Meet

Aryon pulled lightly Allakos’ bridles to make him slow down: he didn’t want to scare Nerwen’s horses; hearing them approaching, Thilgiloth turned to look at them, and so did Thalion. Recognising Allakos, who had shared with them the palace’s stables in Bárlyth, after a moment of worry they relaxed again.

How would Nerwen welcome him? the prince wondered. Would she act coldly, or jump in his arms to kiss him, or slap him? Either way, he would accept anything she would throw at him, then he would take her into his arms to kiss her breathlessly and then he would make love to her in a way that would leave her speechless… but the one who remained speechless was he, when he arrived near the stunning natural pools and saw her in the water, watching at him, as motionless as a statue, her face unreadable. Of course, Calad had warned her of his arrival, he thought; the fact she had waited for him while bathing encouraged him to hope in a favourable welcome, but he preferred not taking it for granted.

He dismounted; he was sorry he couldn’t take care of Allakos and Nordhir, when they were so overheated, but now it was more important to clear things up with Nerwen: the horses had to be patient.

The Istar’s stillness and posture confused him; he had no idea how to act. He thought it silly speaking to her from the riverbank; on the other hand, he didn’t want to enter the water fully dressed.

As soon as he thought this, he realised what he had to do; he unbuckled his belt and let his sword fall on the ground, then he sat on a boulder and slipped off his boots.

Nerwen guessed immediately what he had in mind; her heart jumped up her throat.
Aryon stood up; hiding his apprehension under a glowering expression, he quickly disposed of his clothes and finally, completely disrobed, he entered the water. In this way, not only he was going near Nerwen, but he was washing away all the dirt and sweat of six days of frantic journey and he could present himself clean to the woman he loved.

While she was watching him undressing, Nerwen’s breath was taken away: Aryon had a mighty muscular structure that seemed like chiselled in marble, but because of his tall stature, he looked more slender than he actually was.

He was simply magnificent.

The prince took a few strides forward, glad that the river floor was grit instead of slippery pebbles; soon, the water was up to his waist, and then he plunged for a few moments. He stood up again and brushed his hands over his face to clean it, then the moved forward again. His eyes searched for Nerwen’s; her ravenous gaze made his blood boil.

At last, he reached her and halted very close to her. He was ablaze because of the urge to pull her in his arms, but he held back, taking some moments to watch deep into her brown eyes. He couldn’t make out what their gaze was: were they smouldering with wrath, joy, desire? Or all of them in one?

“What do you want?” Nerwen addressed him in a low voice. Her tone, as her eyes, was enigmatic to him.

“I want you,” he answered softly, very simply.

Nerwen felt a cloud of butterflies swirling in her stomach.

“What…why?” she asked under her breath, staggering over the first letter. She had been so deeply embittered by his rejection, that now she had a desperate need for reassurance. Never, in her multi-millennial life, had she felt like this, toward anyone; but after all, she hadn’t met her partner for life before. She always had a very strong character, but she felt completely helpless to this Avar prince, and this vaguely frightened her.

“Because I love you,” Aryon said, equally under his breath, “I simply cannot stay without you. I never thought you’re not enough for me. If I hesitated, it’s been because of the thought I could spend with you only a few years, since you belong to the race of Men… but as many as they might
be, I want to spend with you all of the years we’re destined to have.”

Nerwen felt tears welling up in her eyes and covered her mouth with one hand. She had misjudged him: he wasn’t mean, haughty, despicable as she had accused him to be. Her heart pulsed in her throat because of the deep emotions she was feeling, but the dread of another disappointment blurred them painfully.

Her apparent upset revealed to Aryon how much, actually, his refusal had hurt her. He felt full of consternation and wondered if he would ever truly be able to make up for his folly.

Wanting to comfort her, he opened his arms. After only a moment of hesitation, she threw herself in his embrace; Aryon held her tight, caressing her wet hair.

“I won’t leave you ever again,” he murmured.

“Promise,” she whispered, “Oh, promise…”

“I swear.”

Only two words, but uttered in such a resolute and definitive tone, there couldn’t be any doubt left. Nerwen felt such an overwhelming wave of relief, gratefulness and almost blinding joy, her head was spinning. She threw her head back to look at his face, curving her lips; seeing her smile, Aryon felt his heart somersaulting in his chest and reciprocated with one of his rare, splendid full smiles.

Like the first time they kissed, he cupped her cheeks and bent forward; he saw her closing her eyes and so did he, just moments before placing his mouth on hers.

Nerwen parted immediately her lips, anxiously, impatiently; but Aryon lingered to kiss them tenderly, once, twice, thrice; then he brushed her lower lip with his tongue, testing its softness. He heard her uttering a small, complaining whimper, and so he tightened his embrace and deepened the kiss, pleasantly invading her mouth. Nerwen crushed her body to his, her arms knotted around his neck, her breasts pressing against his chest. Against her belly, she felt Aryon’s desire swelling up and wheezed, while hot shivers were crossing her feminine depths.

With a sudden movement, Aryon scooped her up and waded back ashore. He had seen the pallet she had prepared and now headed for it, uncaring they were both dripping wet and would consequently soak the wicker carpet and the blanket.

Gently, he laid her down on the pallet, then he bent over her and covered her mouth again with his. Her lips parted at once at his gentle but firm touch and from her throat escaped a slight, excited moan that sent his heart somersaulting. He felt her arms holding him tight while their tongues were meeting, beginning another sensual love strife.

Nerwen felt a happiness apparently impossible. She thought she was on the brink of fainting: she was barely able to breathe, her heart hammered wildly in her chest, the roar of her blood deafened her, and in spite of the coolness of the water dripping from her body, she felt an intolerable heat.

Aryon caressed those arms holding him; his erection was becoming almost painful while he was craving to sink inside of her and take her with him to the highest peaks of pleasure, but before he wanted to caress and kiss her everywhere, driving her mad with desire as much as he was already.

Nerwen drew back and looked at him; she touched his cheek, smiling slightly, her eyes shiny, heartbreakingly beautiful.

“I still can’t believe you’re here for good,” she whispered. He lifted one hand to cover hers and
turned his head to kiss her palm.

“I can’t believe, either, to be here, having you in my arms, kissing you… You’re so beautiful, Nerwen, so sweet and desirable… and I’m dying to make love to you…”

“Aryon…” she sighed, and his name on her lips was so arousing, he almost lost control. He closed his eyes for a moment, forcing to hold back; then he reopened them and lifted himself slightly to look at her better; slowly, his gaze slipped downwards, to the soft mounds of her breasts. His breath caught in his throat: she was gloriously perfect… On her breasts, her nipples stood erect, as he had seen them the night of the Mid-Summer feast, but then her chemise veiled them, while now they were offered fully to his hungry gaze. He moved to cup one breast, then he brushed his thumb over the hard bud revealing her arousal and he heard her sigh, and this increased his crave. He used also his forefinger to caress and tease the sensitive point, until she moaned and threw her head back, exposing her neck. Bowing quickly his head, Aryon placed there his lips, caressing her delicate skin.

Nerwen was intoxicated, almost dizzy; she felt like making love for the very first time in her life, and in a way, it was, because this was the first time she was making love with Aryon, her partner for life. The need of him overwhelmed her while his mouth and tongue brushed her neck. In between kisses, the was whispering tender words:

“You’re charming… so sweet… and adorable…”

She held him tight, her face flushed with passion, her lips swollen by the forceful kisses they were exchanging.

Aryon was enjoying the taste of her skin, of her scent; he pulled back to look at her again, wanting to spy on her expression, and met her dark eyes, foggy with longing. His heart skipped one beat; he stooped to kiss her once more and she wrapped him in her arms, caressing his back.

Nerwen melted her mouth to Aryon’s and moved her tongue to brush his lips in a provocative way, making him gasp. He responded kissing her long, deep, sensually.

Tearing off her lips, Aryon placed a chain of kisses on her face, brow, eyes, cheekbones, nose, chin, then he went lower, again on her neck, touching tenderly the point where the wild beat of her heart throbbed, testifying the passion pervading her. Then he went even lower, on her breasts, and caught one nipple in his mouth, sucking gently; hearing her delighted cry, he sucked harder, using tongue and teeth and making her moan louder. He felt her tremble in his arms, her back arched, her hands sinking in his hair.

“Aryon…”

His sighed name sent him into raptures; he switched to the other breast, beginning the same delightful torture he had given to the former one.

“I… never felt like this…” she gasped.

“Neither did I, love… neither did I…” he murmured, his voice hoarse. Passion, desire, need of her were setting him aflame, but he wanted to give her pleasure much more than he wanted take his own. He slipped down her body, peppering it with kisses, and found a scar on her hip, marring her otherwise perfect skin; in a flash, he remembered Corch and the attempt to Nerwen’s life, and for a moment, he wanted to kill him; but then he was sucked back into the vortex of passion and didn’t think of anything but the superb creature he was holding in his arms.
Feeling Aryon’s lips brushing gently the scar, Nerwen shuddered, thinking briefly of the horror she felt when she had been wounded and had fallen overboard; but she was immediately called back to the present, when Aryon moved to her belly button, which he caressed with the tip of his tongue; her tummy quivered and she groaned again.

He lifted his gaze; Nerwen had closed her eyes and was biting her lip in pleasure. Captivated, he lingered, watching at her, while the pressure in his lower parts increased even more, becoming unbearable; but he had decided he would go on slowly, showing her all the worship and love he felt for her, before consuming their first union and take her to the top of ecstasy. Therefore, once more, he held back.

Nerwen opened her eyes and met Aryon’s; the ice of their pale blue had become as incandescent as ember and pierced her heart. She sat up and stretched out her hands toward his exposed virility.

“Nerwen…!” he cried, caught off-guard; he moved to stop her, but she shook her head.

“I want to touch you,” she whispered, making him lay down on his back. Subjugated by the intensity of her gaze, Aryon allowed her having her way.

Nerwen placed a kiss on his abdomen, making him quiver; then her hand slipped down and closed around his male sceptre. Now it was Aryon’s turn to jump because of pleasure, while her fingers were touching his warm flesh, solid and pulsating. Then he jumped again, harder, when he felt Nerwen’s mouth closing around him and caressing him in such an arousing way, he almost swooned.

“Nerwen… Nerwen…” he stammered.

Nerwen, too, was now beyond any kind of control.

“Love me, Aryon…” she breathed.

“Oh yes…”

Aryon switched again their positions, then he took her lips in another scorching kiss. Nerwen wrapped her arms around his neck, drawing him over her, impatient to feel him inside her. They were made for each other, they were born to be one thing, flesh and soul, and she couldn’t wait any longer. She parted her legs, ready for him.

But Aryon had other plans; rising on his arms, he pulled back; before she could protest, he kissed her again, while caressing slowly her belly; then his lips followed his fingers in a trail of kisses, lower and lower, all the way down to his goal, at the joint of her thighs. With his fingertips, he touched her, and she uttered a sighing moan that made shivers run down his spine. He brushed the folds of her femaleness, damp with desire, and closed his eyes one moment, overwhelmed.

“Oh Nerwen…” he muttered, “I want to taste your flavour…”

He heard her gasp at the thought while he stooped slowly over her.

A moment before his lips reached her, Nerwen held her breath; when she felt him lapping at her, she seized convulsively the blanket, uttering a breathless cry, and jumped so hard he almost lost her; therefore, he grasped her hips and held her in place, and began to inflict her the sweetest of tortments. Nerwen arched her back while he caressed her over and over again, savouring the essence of her femininity. She gasped his name, once, twice, until she drew back abruptly.

“Please, Aryon…,” she breathed raggedly, “Take me, now…!”
He was looking forward to this; after one last kiss at the centre of her pleasure, Aryon slowly laid down over her; he waited one more moment, watching at her: her face was flushed, her dark eyes blurry with want and need, surely as much as his. At last, gradually, little by little, he entered her sensual heath, which welcomed him like the most passionate embrace.

“Nerwen…” he whispered her name, breathless, “Finally…”

“Yes… yes, love…” she sobbed. Anything she had felt so far in a lover’s arms, faded in front of what she was feeling now. It was… glorious. She couldn’t find any other word to describe it, “Oh Aryon…”

He began to move, leisurely; the dream he had the week before, even if delightful, was nothing compared to the reality he was experiencing while sinking and withdrawing, spying on her face, seeking the angle that would give her the greatest pleasure. Hearing her uttering a gasp, he realised he had found it; he continued to move slowly, because he wanted to make this moment last as long as possible: the ineffable thrill, unique and unrepeatable, of their first time together.

Nerwen opened her eyes to look at him; the adoring expression she saw in his eyes moved her beyond any description, and tears welled up in her eyes. She felt like drowning in those extraordinarily blue irises, where a fire burned as hot as she had never seen before. How could she have thought those eyes were cold? Their heat would melt all the snow on the top of Taniquetil in an instant…

She lifted her knees and wrapped her legs around his waist, allowing him to sink even deeper inside of her. Aryon panted in pleasure; for a frantic moment, he wished to take immediately their lovemaking to completion but, enthralled by the light of rapture in Nerwen’s eyes, instead he stopped.

Never had he imagined that carnal union could be so overwhelming, both physically and spiritually. He was completely at the mercy of unknown and wonderful feelings, and he felt at the same time frightened and glorified. He had been insane, thinking he could oppose the strength of this sentiment.

Nerwen uttered a sound halfway between a groan and a sob, expressing clearly her discontent, therefore Aryon began to move again, his eyes staring into hers. He felt her tightening her arms and legs around him, as if she wanted to fuse completely with him.

Aryon lowered his head and kissed her neck, her throat, her shoulders, nibbling and sucking her smooth skin; half-closing his eyes, he listened to her sighing and moaning, feeling proud of himself, as one can be only giving, unconditionally, without expecting anything in return, just for the simple joy to make happy and content his or her beloved one.

Slowly, pleasure built inside of them, and with it, the rhythm of their dance of love. Step by step, it rose, climbing peak after peak, each time touching heights more and more vertiginous, but not reaching completion because there was still another peak to conquer, and then another and yet another.

At last, Nerwen could stand it no longer:

“Please… please…” she begged him, hoarsely. Her capitulation caused Aryon’s, too, who couldn’t bear the pressure any longer. He rose a little on his arms, increasing speed and width of his movements. Nerwen responded in counterpoint, while pleasure grew, grew whirling furiously inside of her, more and more, mounting like a tidal wave approaching the shore, nearer and nearer, until she felt it break and burst in the depths of her being, both in her soul and in her flesh, dimming
her sight and making her scream, astounded. Almost at the same moment, Aryon uttered a prolonged, low groan while joining her in the elation of the most complete fulfilment they had ever experienced, because it didn’t touch only their bodies, but also their hearts and souls.

Aryon dropped on her, temporarily spent, burying his face on her neck. Nerwen caressed his back, slowly, calling his name in a faint whisper.

They held on to one another, tightly, unwilling to part even slightly, awaiting for their panting breaths and wild pulsing hearts to go back to normal. Even if they had been dripping wet when they had begun, now they were both flushed.

Finally, Aryon rose again to look at her. Nerwen felt his gaze and opened her eyes to return it. He stooped and placed a kiss on her lips, full of tenderness.

“I’m still wondering how I could think, even for just one split moment, to do without you,” he murmured.

“I wonder about that, too,” she couldn’t help but reply, chuckling to ease the reprimand, “What made you change your mind?” she enquired then, brushing his cheek with the tip of her fingers.

“I had a dream,” he told her, “I had taken refuge in my hunting lodge, to be on my own and think. I missed you terribly, as if I hadn’t seen you for months and not just for a few days… This itself made me realise that you had already become too important for me to give you up, give us up…” Then I dreamt of you. You were there, outside the lodge, looking at me. I came to you, and you flung your arms around my neck, kissing me. I took you inside and we made love. It was wonderful… even if reality has largely surpassed fantasy…” he smiled at her and kissed her lips, “When I woke up, I had realised that, even if maybe we can be together only for a few decades, and not for centuries or millennia, I want to spend with you each and every moment that will be granted to us.”

Nerwen touched his lips with her fingers, and he placed light kisses on them; then she frowned.

“When did you have this dream, precisely?” she asked. He thought about it for a moment.

“Eight nights ago,” he answered. The Istar counted quickly, and at the result of it, her eyes widened in astonishment:

“I had a similar dream, precisely the same night,” she revealed, “I don’t remember it in detail like you do, but I know that we made love in a bed… and when I woke up, I was angry with myself, because instead of being mad at you, I loved and wanted you more than ever…”

Aryon kissed her again.

“Forgive me for hurting you… It’ll happen never again,” he said, forcefully; he brushed away a strand of hair from her face, then he added thoughtfully, “Today, I didn’t know whether you would kiss me soundly or slap me hard…”

“I didn’t know, either,” she said; then she laughed at herself, “What a liar I am… of course I knew! If you wouldn’t have kissed me, I would have done it, and then I would have taken you, even if it meant to tie you at a tree…”

He lifted one eyebrow, amused:

“What an arousing idea…” he murmured with that half-smile of his that drove her mad each time she saw it.
Nerwen winked:

“Be careful about what you ask, my prince… you might well obtain it!”

He rested his forehead on hers, sobering.

“I’ve got everything I could wish already,” he claimed in a low, thick voice.

They stayed this way for some more minutes, then, fearing to weight on her too much, Aryon pulled away, but still held her tight. He lay on his back, dragging her to him and having her placing her head on his chest, one arm around her shoulders. They laid there for a long time, caressing each other leisurely, exchanging kisses full of tenderness; in their hearts, they harboured a feeling of completeness and an indescribable peacefulness they had never known before. They felt as if they had been only half-alive until this moment, and that now they were able to sense the whole world more vividly, intensely, as if their senses had suddenly improved.

OOO

Later, they made love again; then, they ate something and fell asleep in each other’s arms, only to wake up several times in the middle of the night and make love and then fall asleep again, stunned both by the pleasure they were giving to each other and by the power of the sentiment that had bloomed between them and had so overwhelmingly captivated them.

OOO

The rising sun caressed the two sleeping lovers with its rays.

Aryon was the first to wake up; he opened his eyes and immediately looked at Nerwen, as if wanting to make sure that what had happened had really occurred, and wasn’t just another wonderful dream. She was sleeping in his arms, her head reclined on his shoulder, her long hair scattered in disarray; realising it was all true, he felt like shouting up to the sky his joy, but held
back, not wanting to frighten her, or the horses that were still sleeping, in a group, a few dozen of metres away.

The previous evening, before dinner, Aryon had taken care of Allakos and Nordhir, then he had put them to graze at their leisure; like all Elven horses, there was no need tying them to avoid them roaming too far away.

Meanwhile, Nerwen had hung out the wicker carpet and blanket that had been their bed, in order to dry them; Aryon brought his own ones and they prepared a new pallet, where they slept. Actually, they didn’t get much sleep… The prince smiled dreamingly, recalling their repeated embraces.

Nerwen, too, awakened. Cracking open her eyes, she glimpsed Aryon’s authoritative profile and for one moment, her throat tightened in deep feeling. His bright eyes, surrounded with black eyelashes, looked up in the sky, perhaps staring at the snow-white cirrus decorating the blue vault, but as soon as she stirred, he turned to look at her.

“Good morning, blossom,” he greeted her softly. She smiled at him:

“Good morning to you,” she answered, rising enough to place her lips on his in a kiss. He responded, then they gazed at each other.

“Did you sleep well?” Aryon enquired.

“Very well… what little I slept, at least,” she giggled, “And you?”

“Same thing…”

Nerwen sat up to stretch and doing so, she grimaced: she felt sore all over. She glared accusingly at Aryon and muttered:

“I’m afraid I won’t be able to ride, today…”

Worried, the prince, too, sat up, and he realised immediately what Nerwen had meant.

“Hum,” he grumbled, massaging his back, “Mayhap we overdid it…”

Nerwen scowled at him in jest:

“It’s your entire fault!”

He played along and made a grim face:

“It didn’t look like you backed off!” he retorted.

“Indeed!” she laughed, throwing her arms around his neck and making him fall back on the pallet. Aryon grinned and held her tight: he adored her exuberance, which made such a blatant contrast with him, who was a very private person. Their characters couldn’t be more dissimilar, but precisely therein laid the strength of their relationship, because accepting each other’s differences, the complemented one another.

Too sore for anything else, at least for the moment, they just exchanged a few kisses, then they got up and broke their fast. After eating, Nerwen thought again about what Aryon had told her of his dream, occurred at the same time as hers. How many probabilities were there, that it would happen spontaneously? She didn’t think it was possible to estimate less than one in a billion. There was only one plausible explanation.
“Do you know what Olorendor is?” she asked him out of the blue. He gazed at her with a blank look:

“Not at all,” he answered.

Nerwen explained it to him, concluding:

“I was mad at you, and you were irresolute, but our feelings gave us the slip and got us meeting there, where we realised what our true wish was, that is, to be together.”

Suddenly he crushed her in his arms, so hard she was astonished.

“It made me make the right decision immediately, without wasting any more time…” he murmured. The sentence revealed he was still worrying about the notion he could spend with her only a limited number of years, compared to what the Eldar could usually do. She couldn’t tell him that death couldn’t take her, even in her status of diminished Maia, but she could at least reassure him about her lifespan.

“The Istari have not the life of the Eldar… but not even the life of Men,” she told him, choosing carefully her words in order not to lie, but at the same time to conceal what she was not allowed to reveal. She was well aware that this way, the sentence sounded rather enigmatic, but she could in no way be clearer.

Aryon stepped back and watched her intently; doubt and hope merged in his gaze.

“Do you mean that what is rumoured about Wizards is true?” he enquired, “They live many centuries?”

“Precisely,” she confirmed, nodding. The Avar prince’s face opened to a smile, tiny as usual, but full of relief and joy; he brought her hands to his lips and kissed them.

“I’m happy to know that,” he said, “but it doesn’t change what I said yesterday: even if it was a small number of years, I would anyway spend them with you.”

Nerwen returned his smile, then suddenly she sobered: she had realised that, in the coming years, situations in which she wouldn’t be allowed to be completely frank with her partner would show up repeatedly. She didn’t like it, because she had always based the relationships of her life – with all people who had meant something to her, beginning from Melian and Yavanna – on honesty; but she had a ban that she had no intention to violate, under no circumstances.

Her earnest face alarmed Aryon and put out his smile.

“What is it, my heart?” he asked her. She freed one hand from his and cupped his cheek, searching with her gaze the blue depths of his eyes.

“I need to ask you to trust me,” she said under her breath; Aryon began to protest:

“But I do trust you…”

The Aini shook her head and hence he broke off.

“There are things I cannot tell you,” she informed him, still under her breath, “Things regarding me, the place I come from, my powers, my mission, things that I am forbidden to tell anyone. It’s not because of distrust, it’s because I cannot and want not break the ban that I received from a power that rules me, you and any other inhabitant of Middle-earth… including even Sauron.”
Aryon closed shortly his eyes, holding back the urge to move his fingers in the exorcism his people always did when they heard that terrible name.

“I understand,” he claimed, but actually he wasn’t completely sure of it. A power ruling even the Dark Enemy… only the Valar were above him. Was it possible that Nerwen was referring to the Powers of the World?

“I need you to promise you won’t insist, if I tell you there’s something I cannot discuss with you,” she pressed him; with her thumb, she caressed his cheek, stubbled because of the still unshaved beard, “I understand it’s a lot to ask; but this is the show of trust I need, much more than you putting your life in my hands.”

Aryon loved and respected her too much to let his pride get in the way, but this last statement made him realise how important Nerwen’s task truly was.

“Fine,” he therefore said, gravely, “I promise.”

Reassured, Nerwen smiled:

“Thank you… Because of this, I love you more than ever…”

OOO

They spent that fine summer day making love, talking and bathing in the brook, briefly forgetting the rest of the world. They decided to stay in this wonderful place for a few days, enjoying better their mutual company before continuing Nerwen’s journey and mission, which Aryon had now necessarily joined.

In the late afternoon, the Istar approached Thilgiloth and Thalion, whom she had neglected all day long, as well as Calad.

The Chargeress stared at her two-legged friend.

I had no chance yet to tell you, she began, but I, too, was very angry with your Avar prince and I would’ve been glad to kick him hard.

Nerwen giggled:

Things have changed a lot, now, haven’t they?

Yeah, sure! You’ve been very busy, between yesterday and today… Thilgiloth said, amused. Nerwen’s giggle became a loud laughter:

You’re right, my friend!

Aryon, who had gone to see his steeds, turned to look at her, surprised by that outburst of mirth, but realised instantly that she was talking to her mare; he wondered what they could be talking about that was so funny, but he didn’t want to intrude, so he got back taking care of Allakos and Nordhir: if the two friends were chitchatting, it was none of his business. And maybe, he concluded thinking about it better and grinning to himself, maybe he didn’t want to know…
“What did Eliéonna say, when you told her about us?” Nerwen enquired after dinner, while rummaging in her saddlebag seeking her pipe.

“She was surprise, as you would expect,” Aryon told her, “She was sorry because this meant I would be gone, leaving my office as First Sword, but she didn’t even try to stop me: she loves me too much to prevent me staying with my partner for life.”

“I like your sister,” the Aini told him, pulling out what she was looking for, “I think that we’d have become friends, if I could’ve stayed.”

Aryon watched with curiosity the things Nerwen held in her hands.

“I wasn’t aware you smoke a pipe,” he said quizzically.

“An old friend, as well as fellow Wizard, taught me: Gandalf the Grey,” she said, stuffing the bowl with the appropriate quantity of pipe-weed, “You smoke?”

“Yes, on occasion; but I’m afraid I forgot my pipe at home,” he complained.

“Well, then we’ll share, until you can buy a new one,” Nerwen smiled, lighting her pipe and anticipating amused the moment she would impress him with some spectacular smoke figure.

Author’s corner:

I don’t think I ever wrote such a long and emotion-filled love scene like this one... it literally grabbed me, dragged me away, shook me and left me exhausted. As if I were Nerwen! (Hum... I would like to!!!)

My description of the way the two protagonists make love – and I certainly do not refer only to the physical part – reflects what I firmly believe can be the reality between two people loving each other truly, deeply and unconditionally, with no ifs and no buts. I am aware that I’m a hopeless romantic, an impenitent dreamer, an idealist chasing a mirage... but that’s me and I don’t repent it: take it or leave it... I just hope I’ve not been too sappy!

The title is definitely pretentious... but it came to me in a dream, and I firmly believe in my dreams! It’s referred to ancient myths, where the Earth symbolises the receiving female energy and the Sky the giving male energy, energies that, when they unite, become life and creation; but on a more prosaic tone, it refers also to the eye colour or Nerwen and Aryon, brown and blue, windows to their souls.

Lady Angel
In the early morning of four days later, Aryon and Nerwen set forth, leaving reluctantly the wonderful place that had witnessed the fulfilment of their love. They followed the brook to the ford Nerwen had seen, crossed it and reached again the Rinnen; they rode beside it, proceeding north by northeast. Their next stop, a couple of days away, was Kopellin, the capital city of the Hwenti realm.

In the late afternoon, they came across a herd of bison, consisting in about 15 specimens, a number of females – one of them was pregnant – a few very young ones and three little calves less than two months old. The herd was standing still and, so as not to frighten the animals, Aryon and Nerwen proceeded very quietly, with no sudden moves.

While surpassing them, the Istar noticed that a few females were grouped at the centre of the herd in what seemed to her an unnatural attitude; extending instinctively her special senses, she picked up a feeling of fear and concern so sharp, she was induced to pull Thilgiloth’s bridles and stop. Noticing it, Aryon promptly did the same.

“What’s up?” he asked her.

“There’s something wrong,” Nerwen explained, pointing to the abnormally herded females, “Those bison are terrified of something, and I want to find out what it is. I alert Calad.”

“All right,” the prince said, sitting straighter on his saddle to keep an eye on the surroundings, his hand on the hilt of his sword, ready to unsheathe it at the slightest sign of danger.

Calad, Nerwen transmitted to the hawk, *keep an eye out and warn me if something bigger than a badger shows up.*
The bird consented.

The Aini then dismounted and went into the herd, radiating reassuring thoughts so that the animals wouldn’t be frightened, and heading for the anomalous group. When she approached it, she saw that a male of about two years was laying on the ground; blood covered one of his hindquarters. A particularly large female, with an air of authority – surely the heard leader – turned to the intruder; she showed no fear, only perplexity and a certain degree of mistrust.

I’m a friend, Nerwen quickly transmitted so as to reassure her. The female bison moved her ears, surprised, and watched her intently with her very lively brown eyes. Then in them sparkled a sudden light of understanding.

I greet you, Daughter of the Sunset, she said; this time it was Nerwen, the one who felt surprised.

Do you know me? she enquired: the epithet she had been addressed to revealed clearly that the bison knew where she came from.

Yes, I do, the leader confirmed, The wind talks about you, and so do water and grass, since you have arrived from beyond the Great Sea.

At this point, Nerwen recalled that Calad, too, had been aware about where she came from: it was clear that the news had spread far and wide, reaching the lands of the Avari, too.

I see, she commented, then she pointed to the youngster laying on the ground, What happened to him?

A monstrous being has attacked us, the female bison answered, anguished, I’m afraid we must abandon him: we have to run, or the monster will attack again.

That kind of monster is it? Nerwen enquired. The leader sent her a scary image: a big, menacing figure in which the Istar soon recognised a female troll of the plains, one of the few races able to bear the sunshine without turning into stone.
Maybe abandoning him won’t be necessary, she stated firmly, approaching the young bison and kneeling at his side, I think I can help him.

One of the females surrounding the wounded specimen looked at her pleadingly:

Can you, really...? she asked. From the strong feelings she was radiating, Nerwen realised she was the mother.

Yes, don’t worry, she reassured her, then she touched lightly the injured leg, examining the gash with her power. It wasn’t very deep, but it was about to become infected: first thing first, therefore, she had to clean the wound; she stood up and went back to Aryon.

“They’ve been attacked by a female troll of the plains,” she informed him, “One of the young bison has been injured.”

“A troll of the plains?” the prince repeated, frowning, “Last year there were some of them, sneaking around in the eastern part of the Hwenti territory; I led personally the hunt and I thought we had exterminated them all, but apparently I was wrong... We’ll have to keep very watchful so as not to be caught off guard.”

“Yes,” Nerwen commented, “Let’s hope she’ll stay away: I want to heal the wounded, otherwise the herd will be forced to leave him behind.”

Aryon’s face expressed doubt:

“But you’ll need days,” he observed; Nerwen remembered she had no chance yet to tell him about her thaumaturgic powers.

“Not if I use my magical abilities,” she explained him. The prince cast a glance to her, expressing his surprise, but he quickly dominated his perplexity: he had no doubt about his partner’s talents, even if he still wasn’t familiar with them all.

“Very well, then,” he nodded. She smiled, grateful for the trust he was showing, accepting her statement with not even one question.

She motioned to Thilgiloth, who walked up to her; the Istar took one of the water canteens from the saddlebag, then she returned to the young bison. She noticed he was shaking.

I’m afraid, he said. She brushed softly his side.

Don’t be, she reassured him, I’ll take care of you: you’ll be well soon, I promise.

The animal calmed down a little, even if he was still feeling anxious.

Nerwen washed his wound, then she extended her particular senses, looking for an antiseptic herb; at a short distance, she found some andlhw, or longears in Common Speech, so called because of the slender, oblong leaves, similar to donkey or hare ears, very common in the meadows. She rose and moved to gather a bunch, which she washed with the water of the canteen and then crushed with her fingers, so as to get the juice and spill it over the injury; finally, she covered wound and remedy with both hands and focused her power on it, stimulating the antiseptic qualities of the herb and therefore fighting the infection more efficiently; in a few minutes, the infection disappeared from the gash and from the organism of the young bison.

Satisfied, Nerwen brushed away the herb, now useless, and cleaned again the wound, then she placed back her hands on it and focused again to close it; a white-blue light radiated off from under
her fingers. When she finished, only an ugly scar remained of the injury. The patient turned his head to look at it, marvelling, and shuddered.

*It doesn’t hurt anymore,* he stated, astonished.

*Fine: you can stand up,* Nerwen told him, *but try to move your first steps cautiously.*

The young bison did as she had told him and got up from the ground, staggering slightly, still weak because of the loss of blood; then he moved carefully, trying his just healed leg and verifying he didn’t feel neither pain nor any kind of hindrance in walking.

His mother brushed with her muzzle the area that had been wounded, ascertaining the healing with a sense of complete wonder. Then she approached the Istar and touched shyly her hand with her wet nose.

*Thank you, Daughter of the Sunset,* she said, deeply moved, *My son is safe.*

*I’m happy I could help him,* Nerwen answered, sincerely, *Now you can go on with no problems, even if not too swiftly: the youngster needs a little rest, to fully recover.*

*Now it’s late,* the leader mused, observing the sun, now just above the horizon, *We’ll have to stop here for the night, and hope that the monster won’t attack us again.*

*Is it pursuing you?* the Maia asked.

*I do fear so: we are a good food supply, and not only... it killed some of us to satisfy its hunger, but other ones, it killed them with no reason whatsoever, only to tear them apart and abandon their remains...* 

She sent her other images, horrifying ones, of females and youths mauled and left rotting in the grass. It was apparent that the troll was dangerous and wicked, because she killed only sometimes to eat, and other times with no reason, if not maybe for gratuitous fun. Besides, the way she tore to shreds the individuals she dragged away, showed a high level of sadism. Nerwen felt outraged: everyone has the right to feed – she did it, too – but *not* to use unnecessary cruelty.

She turned to her partner and told him what she had just learned from the herd leader.

*“The herd is still in danger,”* Aryon considered, frowning, *“but just the two of us can’t protect it,”* he looked in the direction they were heading to, *“If we could reach Kopellin, we could organise a new group to hunt down the troll and get rid of her once and for all.”*

*“But should we encounter her, or if she attacks the herd tonight, we wouldn’t be able to fight her,”* Nerwen observed, *“I’ll try to find some nearer ally.”*

Aryon saw her expression becoming distant, her eyes empty as if they were seeing invisible things, and realised the Istar was extending her mind, looking for someone or something in a position to help them, as she had done while seeking Thilgiloth in the vicinity of Gaerlonn.

Nerwen began to scan the neighbourhood; unlike in Fangorn Forest, as she had not do control the here because there was Aryon to protect her, she could focus solely on the elsewhere and extend her awareness in a more than doubled area. Slowly, she pivoted, examining all around. Not much far away she found a deer herd, but as they were only females with their babies, not unlike the bison herd, she went on searching; she hoped to find a herd of males, possibly precisely bison. Animals among the most massive in Middle-earth, these big herbivores could reach over 2 metres height at shoulder level and an average weight of over 500 kilograms, and in case of need, they
could run at high speed, wiping out every obstacle in their path. Their nature wasn’t particularly irritable or fierce but, if provoked or feeling in danger, they could be devastating. They would be truly perfect, to defend them against the troll.

She had luck: a few minutes later, at about a dozen kilometres to the north-west, she intercepted a herd of eight male bison.

*Bison friends, I need assistance,* she transmitted. The most massive one – surely the herd leader – raised his head from the ground, where he was peacefully grazing.

*I hear you, Daughter of the Sunset,* he answered, *Speak.*

This time Nerwen wasn’t surprised they knew who she was: it was by now evident that her reputation was preceeding her everywhere, among olvar and kelvar. She explained quickly the situation, asking the protection of these mighty cattle. As soon as she showed them the image of the troll, as she had seen her in the mind of the female herd leader, the male was filled with rage.

*We know that creature,* he revealed, *In the last season, it has persecuted my herd, killing babies and females until we’ve been able to catch and drive it away. We injured it, but it looks like it wasn’t enough to get rid of it. And now you say it’s tormenting this other group. We come immediately to you.*

Nerwen thanked them, and then she returned *here.*

“I found a bison herd willing to help us,” she informed Aryon, “They, too, have dealt with this troll, and are anxious to get rid of her. This night they will protect us, and tomorrow we’ll be able to hunt her down with them.”

The prince didn’t hide his doubts.

“I don’t know how exactly to proceed,” he admitted, “I never hunted *with* bison… If anything, I hunted *them.* They could take it the wrong way, I fear.”

Nerwen understood his reservations.

“Don’t worry,” she reassured him, “The animal memory works more through smell than sight, especially the bison who don’t have very sharp eyes; therefore, unless they are the same you hunted and had the chance to catch your smell, they won’t recognise you.”

“I see,” Aryon nodded, relieved: he wouldn’t like to ruin this potential alliance because he was a hunter.

Nerwen informed the female leader about the news, and she was very pleased.

OOO

Aryon lighted a small fire, far enough from the animals so as not to scare them, and prepared a soup with the herbs Nerwen had gathered; they completed their dinner with some crackers and matured cheese.

The bison herd joined the female and babies one while dusk was turning into night. As soon as she
saw the large cattle approaching, Nerwen stood up and went to meet them. The two herds blended and formed a single group, with the calves in the centre of it; the adult males, more massive and stronger than the females and youngsters, set up sentries all around.

Calad landed next to Nerwen.

*I’d like to have the eyes of an owl,* she stated, unsatisfied: indeed, in the darkness her sight, even if very sharp, was unable to detect much, and the absence of the moon – that exactly this night was new – worsened the situation.

*In this dark, sight isn’t very useful,* the Istar comforted her, *Much better hearing and smell, with which the bison are well endowed.*

*Don’t forget me!* pointed out Thilgiloth, and Thalion, too, stated his willingness.

*No, you can sleep,* Nerwen told them, *There are more than enough sentinels already.*

Aryon of course didn’t follow the conversation and asked:

*“Shall we take turn on watch?”*

*“No need for it,”* she answered, *“We already have all the guardians we could possibly want,”* she explained at his raised eyebrows, pointing to the animals, *“It’s enough if we move to the centre, where we’ll be better protected.”*

He nodded, accepting the entire situation with no questions: he trusted completely her abilities, which he was quickly learning about, but above all, the trusted completely her.

They put out the last embers tossing earth over them and trampling them carefully, then they moved with their mounts well into the circle of females and youths, where they prepared their pallet.

Before going to sleep, they discussed a strategy to smoke out the troll and definitively free the area of her presence. Both knew well their allies’ characteristics – Nerwen being a follower of Yavanna, Aryon being an accomplished hunter – and therefore it wasn’t hard for them to work out a plan; the next day they would speak about it to the two leaders.

In spite of all the precautions and the protection of the animal sentries, Nerwen’s and Aryon’s sleep was light and troubled; both awoke several times at irregular intervals, and the Istar each time used her sleeplessness to scan the neighbourhood with her power, searching for a hostile mind, but the night passed without any show of danger.

Finally, dawn lightened the sky in the east, shifting little by little to a spectacular aurora; then Anar, the Chariot of the Sun containing the last fruit of Laurelin, rose from behind the horizon, driven by Arien.

Nerwen called for the two leaders and talked to them:

*My partner and I have thought about how we can get rid of the monster persecuting you…*

She explained the plan she and Aryon had devised the night before; the two animals had a lot of questions, because it involved tactics they were completely unused to, but in the end they understood and accepted it.

Aryon and Nerwen had a quick breakfast with crackers and dried fruits, then they mounted and
finally set forth; the herd of females and youngsters, which would be the bait, went in front of all, followed immediately by Nerwen and Aryon; the calves were in the care of the male herd, following the female one at a few hundred metres distance, while Calad was flying high ahead of them all, scanning the plain.

In this formation, they left the river, heading eastward, in the direction from where the herd of females and babies had come, running from the troll.

Several hours later, while the sun was approaching its zenith, the land began to ripple in low ridges – it would be too much calling them hills; young ashes with grey bark dotted them, thick and numerous enough to call them a small wood, something rather unusual in this landscape that, so far, had been relatively monotonous.

The two herds passed by, turning slightly to avoid the small wood; there was no breath of air whatsoever, and the hotness of the day was heavy on them.

At that moment, Calad sent Nerwen an alarmed feeling:

*There’s movement among the trees… I go and check it out.*

She flew away, and soon after the Maia received the bird of prey’s thought:

*It’s the troll: pay attention, she’s approaching at high speed!*  

They heard a few terrifying crashes; Thalion neighed, scared, while Thilgiloth turned sharply sideways, trying instinctively to go away from the noise. Even Allakos showed nervousness and Aryon had to tug hard at the bridles to prevent him from swerving.

They looked in the direction from where the noise was coming, but they didn’t see anything: the trees hid anything that was producing it. Nerwen extended her special senses, and immediately perceived a mind, full of simple as much as evil thoughts: *hunger, kill, maul, devour, raid.*

Meanwhile, the herd of females and youths had began to scatter, frightened. Following the plan she had devised with Aryon, Nerwen began to send mentally the agreed orders, calling for the first herd to go behind the males’.

*Thalion, you go, too,* she said to the packhorse: too slow to run, the animal would be an easy prey to the monster, if he would go too near, and it was better if he stayed safe until they would overcome the danger. Maybe clumsy in built, Thalion wasn’t less bright than any other horse and obeyed at once: with all the speed his load allowed him, he got back and stayed with the female bison, the youngsters and the calves.

Nerwen asked to the male bison to arrange themselves in front of the small wood on a concave line, of which she and Aryon on their horses would make the bottom, while the animals would line up on the sides, farther but in a more advanced position. In this way, coming out of the trees the troll would see at first the prince and the Istar; in her eyes, they would look like easy preys, so she would charge on them and probably she wouldn’t even see the bison. But meanwhile, the huge cattle would close on her like a pincer and so she would be trapped.

Soon after, from behind the trees that had covered her, the gigantic shape of the troll came out; her skin had the colour – and probably the hardness – of leather and her eyes were red like burning embers.
“Haaaa, I did smell fresh meat!” she roared viciously, coming forth in heavy steps. In her hands, she carried an enormous double-sided axe.

Instinctively, Aryon drew his sword, even if he could do very little against such a monster, three metres tall and weighing several hundred kilos.

Thilgiloth tensed visibly: a troll was a big enemy even for her. Sure, the Chargeress couldn’t be killed, but she could be injured, and therefore feel pain, and no living being likes it. Luckily, the bison were with them…

“We will not be your meal,” the Istar contradicted the troll, amplifying her voice with the aim to keep her focused on her, so that she wouldn’t see the bison, “None of us!”

The troll, unheeding, continued advancing and laughed nastily:

“I don’t see how you can stop me from eating you,” she replied.

“Like this!” Nerwen shouted and ordered mentally the bison to charge, “Out of here!” she yelled then, addressing Aryon; both turned their mounts and left in a gallop, retreating several dozen metres.

The large herbivores started running, converging on the troll, who finally saw them and stopped abruptly. Surprise froze her for only a few moments, anyway crucial for the massive cattle charging and closing in on her; when she realised she had lost precious moments, the troll began hitting frantically around with her axe, but she was too slow and held the blade too high, so she was able to wound only one of the attackers; then, the pincer closed and the troll shrieked while the bison gored, ran over and trampled her ruthlessly.

In a few moments, it was over; the troll was lying on the ground in a pool of blood, lifeless, and the bison retreated from the corpse, scattering around. Aryon and Nerwen watched that heap of bloody flesh, keeping their distance.

“Even if she was an evil and stupid creature,” the Maia said in a low voice, “I’m happy her death was quick, with no unnecessary suffering, unlike the one she inflicted to her victims.”
Sensing she was upset, the prince approached her and placed his hand on her arm, gently squeezing it to make her feel his sympathy.

“The world is now a safer place, without that monster,” he reminded her. She cast him a grateful glance and a faint smile.

The two leaders headed for Nerwen and Aryon.

*My clan and I thank you and your companions, Daughter of the Sunset,* the female said in a solemn tone.

“She is thanking us,” Nerwen said, talking to Aryon who obviously couldn’t hear the leader’s words. Then the female bison approached the male leader and touched him with her snout to show him her gratitude. The massive herbivore shook his head.

*We too, we’ve been tormented by that foul being,* he pointed out, *therefore there’s no need for thanking.*

The female radiated a feeling of agreement as an answer to the male bison, while again Nerwen reported the conversation to the prince.

*Now we can continue on our way with no fear,* the female bison mused, *both us and the males.*

“Indeed,” the Istar agreed, “you can go, we’ll stay here to eliminate the corpse: better not leave it here to rot.”

*As you wish, Daughter of the Sunset. May you and your companions always find green grass and fresh water.*

“Thanks, to you and yours, too,” Nerwen said. The male leader, too, took his leave, wishing her well, and she reciprocated.

While the two herds where slowly taking their separate ways, Aryon asked:

“What do we do with the corpse? Shall we bury it?”

“Too much work, that it doesn’t deserve,” Nerwen stated, “We’ll burn it.”

Meanwhile Thalion had come near them.

*Are you well?* the quiet packhorse asked; Nerwen sensed that he was feeling guilty because he left the fight and sent him a sense of comfort: there would be nothing he could have done, he would not have been able to defend himself in any way from the troll, and if he would have stayed, he would have been only one more concern for the Istar. A little reassured, Thalion halted next to Thilgiloth.

Calad was flying in circles above them and now cried her typical *kek-kek-kek* to draw their attention. Nerwen lifted her gaze:

*I didn’t forget you, my friend,* she transmitted her.

*At least this time I saw her in time,* the hawk grumbled, still remembering the time she didn’t see the bandits or the werewolves, even if in both cases it hadn’t been because of negligence, but because of pure and simple impossibility.

Nerwen and Aryon dismounted and got busy to gather an adequate quantity of dried wood, which luckily in this place was plentiful, thanks to the presence of the trees; they piled it over the corpse.
of the troll and around it, then they lighted a great bonfire. The monster’s mass, even if significant, was much less than the werewolves’ that had been burned at Rhosgobel, however, not having Beorn’s fuel oil, the fire had to burn for many hours, and therefore they had to add wood continuously. It was late at night when the remains of the troll were enough incinerated; they left the fire burning down, and went to sleep keeping some distance, to stay away from both the excessive heat and the stench of burned flesh and fat.

OOO

The following morning, they ascertained that the troll’s ashes were completely cold: they certainly didn’t want risking a small ember triggering a fire in the prairie.

Watching at the ash staining the grass, in which the residues of some of the bigger bones were visible, Nerwen regretted not possessing the talent to control wind: she would gladly stir a gust to scatter the ashes and clean the place. She shrugged: nature would anyway take care of it.

“Let’s go!” she cried, mounting Thilgiloth. Aryon mounted Allakos in turn; orienting with the position of the sun, the prince pointed the way:

“There,” he said, “It’s pointless going back exactly where we started, we’d only go a longer way: we’ll go straight northwest and reach the Rinnen again, then from there we’ll go on toward Kopellin.”

So they did, and before dusk they arrived at the river, where they camped for the night; the day after, they set forth again toward the capital city of the Hwenti.

Author’s corner:

...Zoological detail: the European bison, which is the one here referred to, is taller and more slender than its more famous American cousin, and has longer horns.

...Herbal detail: the andlhaw or longears that Nerwen uses to disinfect the young bison’s wound is nothing else than the common comfrey, which leaves look like donkey’s ears, and in phytotherapy it is actually used for its antiseptic qualities.

The “trolls of the plains” are non-canon in the Tolkienverse, but needing a race of troll compatible with the described territory, I have been forced to come up with something :-D

Trivia: I decided to introduce a female troll because of an observation of Richard Armitage (Thorin Oakenshield in the The Hobbit movies) during an interview, where he complained that
Tolkien never named or described female orcs. Thanks for the inspiration, Mr. Armitage! :-D

Lady Angel
Chapter XXXVII: In the City of the Hwenti

Early in the afternoon, they arrived at Kopellin, the capital city of the Hwenti; similar in looks to Bârlyth, this town was only a little more than half the size of the latter. It was built on the junction of the Rinnen with the Sirlechin, a smaller river coming almost exactly from the east, directly from the Orocarni.

At the entrance of the walls surrounding the town stood two sentinels, who looked at them in surprise. One of the soldiers bowed to Aryon, having evidently recognised him, and let them pass without stopping them. Nerwen thought amused that, if it would be just her, she would have to show the queen’s safe-conduct, as it already happened in the previous days.

Aryon dismounted in front of the booth: as he had explained to his partner, they had to declare themselves to the captain of the city militia.

“Lord Aryon!” the captain greeted him, “Welcome to Kopellin! We weren’t expecting you…”

“This time I’m not on official business, Captain Glorgan,” Aryon explained, “I’m just a traveller like anyone. My travelling companion is Nerwen the Green,” he concluded, pointing to the Istar.

Glorgan watched her doubtfully, probably wondering why the queen’s brother associated with a female of the race of Men, but he didn’t comment.

“Very well, I’ll check you both in. How long will you stay here?”

Aryon looked at Nerwen: she was the one who had to decide.

The Maia shrugged:
“We don’t know yet,” she answered, “It depends on various factors. Surely, at least two or three days.”

The captain of the guards nodded and didn’t enquire any further; certainly, Nerwen mused again, if she was alone he would question her thoroughly, but being with Aryon, brother to the High Sovereign of the Avari, protected her from such nuisances.

Exiting the booth, Aryon commented:

“Usually, when I come here, I stay at the royal palace: the king of the Hwenti, Séredor, is a good friend of mine. Even if I’m not on official business, he’ll host us gladly.”

Nerwen nodded while they mounted again, then they headed for the centre of Kopellin, where the royal palace stood: another advantage to be in Aryon’s company, she thought, pleased. It would last only as long as they were inside the territory of the Six Tribes of the Avari, but in the meantime, she would gladly grab the opportunity.

As they arrived to the palace, a groom came to take their mounts. Recognising Aryon, he bowed low, but he looked Nerwen suspiciously up and down. She reciprocated firmly his stare, glowering, which was normally enough to put anyone in his place, but instead she obtained only a colder stare of dislike. *Not again!* she thought, exasperated. She felt like having gone back to the day when she met Aryon for the first time, on the shores of the Sea of Rhûn.

“I’ll take care personally of my horses,” she said brusquely, refusing to give him the bridles of Thalion and Thilgiloth. This upset the Elf even more, but she didn’t care a fig; grasping the situation, Aryon cast a ferocious glance at the groom, but he had turned and didn’t see it.

The prince followed Nerwen into the stables and, when the groom left them to tend Allakos and Nordhir, he crossed his arms on his chest and asked her in a low voice:

“You want me chopping him?”

Aghast, Nerwen turned to look at him:

“What?”

“I won’t have anybody looking at you the wrong way,” Aryon explained, mortally serious. The Aini stared at him for some moments, then burst into laughter:

“You forget the way *you* looked at me at the beginning...”

To her greatest surprise, the prince blushed:

“You’ve got no idea how much I’m sorry for treating you like that...” he began, but she placed one hand on his arm and interrupted him:

“Water under the bridge,” she reassured him, “You were just doing your job,” at his doubtful glance, she smiled, “If you must know, I’d have gladly kicked your ass, that day, therefore we’re even.”

Heartened and amused, Aryon cast at her his typical half-smile, which she came to love madly, as much as she madly loved the person who was giving it to her.

Nerwen began to unsaddle Thilgiloth, and therefore the prince, feeling uneasy to just watch by, began to unload their baggage from Thalion.
When Nerwen finished taking care of the Chargeress and the packhorse, she and Aryon headed for the palace entrance; again, the prince was recognised and they could pass with no formalities.

They waited in the hall while one of the guards was going to call for the Lady of the Palace, Lindir’s equivalent in Rivendell and Nimgil’s in Caras Galadhon.

About ten minutes later, they were joined by two female Elves, with the typical raven-black hair of the Avari, very alike to one another; the first – clearly the older one, with a solemn air – wore a simple, but elegant gown the colour of saffron, while the second one was sheathed in a tight black dress, highlighting her supple body; she sported her long, curly hair in an bun, while the plunging neckline of her gown revealed generous curves.

“Welcome, Lord Aryon,” the older one greeted formally the prince, bowing respectfully, and then studied the unknown human accompanying him, curious but – for a change – without the usual distrust so typical to the Avari.

“Thank you, Lady Kilven,” Aryon answered, “Nerwen, may I introduce you Lady Kilven Barhevel, the Lady of the Palace, and her daughter Meledhiel. Ladies, my companion is Nerwen the Green.”

Now the resemblance between the two Elven ladies was explained, Nerwen thought, addressing them both with a greeting nod; Kilven answered to it, but not Meledhiel, who stared at the Maia from head to toe with a spiteful expression. It lasted just one moment, then her stunning face, highlighted by striking eyes the colour of amber, pulled back into a smile addressed to Aryon solely.

“I’m happy to see you again,” she stated in a slightly hoarse voice, indisputably fitting to her seductive looks, “It’s been over one year now, that you didn’t come to visit us,” she added in a familiar, almost intimate tone that annoyed Nerwen.

Aryon paid no attention to the remark and just nodded to confirm, then he addressed Kilven again:

“I know I’m here unexpectedly, because mine isn’t an official visit, but I nonetheless came by to
see if my good friend the king is willing to let us stay here.”

“You can ask him yourself, Lord Aryon,” the Lady of the Palace answered, “Please, follow me.”

“I’ll take care of this, Mother,” Meledhiel offered, “After all, I’m your assistant, and so you can go back checking the account books.”

“Thank you, Meledhiel,” Kilven accepted, grateful, “If you’ll excuse me, I have this boring but necessary task to carry out, but then at least I can forget about it until next month,” she explained with a certain humour that Nerwen found appealing. As much annoying was the daughter, as the mother was likeable, she pondered.

“Of course, Lady Kilven,” Aryon said, “No problem.”

Therefore, the Lady of the Palace took her leave and walked away. Meledhiel got back smiling at the prince and, ignoring Nerwen completely, she turned and took one of the corridors radiating from the hall. Aryon glowered: he was surprised by Meledhiel’s attitude, he knew her for many years and they had shared an erratic friendship-in-love, that is, it was valid only during his usual official visits to Kopellin, but they had put an end to it several years ago. Perplexed, he motioned to Nerwen and together they followed the beautiful Avar.

She took them to Séredor, who received them in his office, not unlike Eliénna did in Bârlyth.

“My dear friend!” the king welcomed Aryon, smiling; Séredor was shorter than him, but emanated an aura of calm authority very appropriate to his position, “What a nice surprise!”

“Thank you, Séredor,” the prince answered, calling him by name because of their long friendship; the monarch looked at Nerwen, showing, like his Lady of the Palace, only interest and not also mistrust.
Answering to his silent question, Aryon introduced them:

“Nerwen, this is Séredor, king of the Hwenti; Séredor, this is Nerwen the Green, member of the Order of the Istari that, contrary to what we thought, are neither a fable nor a legend.”

Séredor didn’t mind to hide his amazement:

“An Istar…? I confess I can hardly believe it.”

Nerwen curtseyed.

“Nonetheless, it’s true, Your Majesty,” she stated in the serene tone of one who knows what’s she’s saying and has no fear to prove it.

Meledhiel’s eyes widened in astonishment.

“Come on, Aryon, are you kidding us…?” she muttered, looking again at Nerwen up and down with a hostile stare. This time the prince didn’t let go: as he said earlier, he would allow nobody to look down on Nerwen or, worse, to treat her less than politely. Nobody, included any of his ex-friends-in-love.

“I’ve never been more serious in all my life, Meledhiel; Lady Nerwen is an Istar and has to be treated in a manner befitting her rank,” he said coldly.

“What kind of rank can a woman of the race of Men have, passing herself off as a legendary character?” the Avar female snapped, too blinded by her own prejudices to fear the dangerous light that was flaring up in Aryon’s gaze.

Nerwen was sick and tired with the distrust and latent contempt of the Avari for Men.

“Do you want to put me to the test, Lady Meledhiel?” she asked in a scathing tone, stressing the title so that it sounded almost like an insult.

“I’d really like to see what you’re capable of…” the vice-Lady of the Palace began rudely, but Aryon cut her short:

“I wouldn’t advise it, Meledhiel: I know what she’s capable of, and I assure you, it’s very preferable to be her friend than her enemy.”

Nerwen had crossed her arms on her chest, frowning in a dark way that didn’t bode well.

“Enough now,” Séredor intervened, using his authority, glaring at Meledhiel, “Lady Nerwen is Aryon’s guest, and that’s enough to treat her respectfully.”

Silenced by her king, the female Elf pressed her lips together, annoyed, but didn’t dare to reply.

“I’ll make arrangements to prepare two chambers,” she said instead, her teeth clenched.

“One will be enough,” the prince said, by this way stating publicly that Nerwen and he were lovers.

Nerwen had kept her eyes on Meledhiel; she saw her stiffening, then casting at her a fiery glance. She realised she was jealous of Aryon and held her stare without blinking an eye.

“Did you hear, Meledhiel?” the king asked, very irritated by the provocative behaviour of the assistant, as well as daughter, of his Lady of the Palace.
The female Elf stirred and curtseyed rigidly to her sovereign.

“I’ll give orders about it,” she stated with an evident effort.

When she was gone, Sérédror opened his arms in an apologising gesture:

“I’m sorry about Lady Meledhiel’s behaviour,” he said, “Usually she’s a lot friendlier.”

Nerwen would have liked to slap her hard, if she could.

“It’s fine, Your Majesty,” she declared instead, in an apparently serene tone, “It’s obvious she dislikes me.”

The king nodded, not very convinced, then he turned to Aryon:

“What brings the First Sword of the High Sovereign to the realm of the Hwenti, my friend?”

The prince shook his head:

“I’m not the First Sword anymore, Sérédror: I asked my sister for permission to leave my office in order to take up another mission.”

He said no more: it was up to Nerwen deciding to whom disclose her purposes.

Sérédror was endowed with a noticeable perspicacity and realised that the prince was deliberately remaining vague; however, even if he wasn’t the First Sword anymore, Aryon was nonetheless the brother of the High Sovereign, moreover, they had been friends for a long time; therefore he didn’t press him to learn more. Instead he looked at Nerwen, who intrigued him much.

“And meanwhile you met this pretty woman,” he commented, “or better, this Istar, according to what you say. Lady Nerwen, forgive me if I’m still sceptic, but for all my life I thought Wizards were a myth, and now it’s really difficult for me to believe they aren’t, even if a trustworthy person like Aryon is assuring me it’s true.”

“This isn’t the first time someone doesn’t believe me,” the Maia placidly replied, casting an amused glance at the black-dressed prince. Aryon stretched his lips in his characteristic sardonic half-smile:

“I needed the great and good to be convinced myself, Sérédror, I assure you,” he told him, “but in the end I gave up to evidence.”

“Fine, then,” the king nodded, “I trust your word, my friend. Are you two hungry?”

“Indeed, we didn’t dine yet,” Aryon answered for both.

“Well, I’ll have some food brought to your chamber,” Sérédror concluded, “I think you’re tired, therefore you’re free to leave: freshen up, eat and rest. We’ll talk more, tomorrow morning.”

Nerwen curtseyed, while Aryon just nodded: Sérédror was the king of the Hwenti, but he was higher in rank than he, being the brother of Eliénna, and he didn’t have to pay him homage.

A maid was waiting for them outside the office, with the task to take them to their chamber, where they found their baggage, brought there from the stables.

The room was less spacious than the one Nerwen had had in Bárlyth, but not less cosy, even if the furniture was more austere. In the small bathroom, covered in fine majolica tiles, a bathtub full of
lukewarm, perfumed water was waiting for them.

“When you’re ready for dinner, ring it,” the maid instructed them, pointing to a small gong next to the door. At the confirming nod of the king’s guests, she took her leave and left them alone.

“I don’t understand Meledhiel’s attitude,” Aryon grumbled, unbuckling his belt with the sword and placing it into a corner.

“She’s jealous of you,” Nerwen revealed, in an obvious tone; how could he possibly not realise it? He frowned.

“Jealous of me?” he repeated, “We’ve been on-and-off friends-in-love, but we split up by mutual agreement several years ago now: she’s got no reason to be jealous.”

The Istar raised one eyebrow, confronting his evident blindness.

“Did you ever introduce to her your current friend-in-love?” she asked him.

He thought about it for a minute.

“Well, no,” he admitted slowly, realising his mistake, “In this case, I was insensitive in asking her one room for the two or us; but after all, she made me believe she had no interest in me anymore.”

“Clearly, it is not so,” Nerwen concluded, “and maybe she didn’t know it, either, until she confronted with the situation.”

Aryon looked at her intensely.

“Well, anyway she doesn’t have the least chance, against you,” he stated. The Aini came up to him and placed her arms around his neck.

“But she doesn’t know it yet,” she pointed out with false calmness, “Tomorrow I’ll see to it, informing her in plain terms.”

Her low, menacing tone made his hair stand on end: he thought he wouldn’t want to be in Meledhiel’s shoes for the entire world.

He embraced her tight; his eyes shone mischievously:

“You’re not jealous, are you…”

“It would make no sense,” she denied, but her eyes had a nasty light: true, it didn’t make any sense to be jealous, because Aryon was her partner for life and this meant he would love her till the end of time; but it didn’t mean she would tolerate anyone’s hostility. Usually, the revelation to be partners for life was enough to put an end to any issue. If instead, like in this specific case, this wouldn’t prove enough, she was willing to use an iron mace to get it into the head of that arrogant Elven female.

They bathed and changed, donning house-clothes, and then put away their meagre belongings; finally, Aryon rang the gong. A few minutes later, several servants arrived; two of them brought new towels and busied themselves in emptying and clean up the bathtub, while other two carried large covered trays, which they set on the small table in front of the bed. Again, the two guests were left alone, discreetly; they sat and had roasted chicken with vegetables, some cottage cheese and a peach tart, and drank water and a pleasantly sour cider, very refreshing.
When they finished, they rang again and two handmaids came to clear the table; before taking their leave, they asked if they needed something else, and at their negative answer, they reminded them to call, should they change their minds.

At last definitively alone, Aryon looked Nerwen deep in her eyes.

“I crave kissing you for hours,” he stated, pulling her into his arms. She raised her face to his, smiling allusively.

“So what are you waiting for?” she provoked him.

Of course, they did more than just kissing.

OOO

The next morning, a page came, inviting them for breakfast in the garden with King Séredor and his wife, Lythelen.

“Nice to see you again, Aryon,” the queen greeted him warmly. The prince kissed gallantly her hand.

“My pleasure, Lythelen,” he assured her, “May I introduce you to Nerwen the Green? Nerwen, this is Queen Lythelen…”

Nerwen curtseyed, while the queen gave her a polite, even if formal, nod.

“My husband told me about you, Lady Nerwen,” she said, “Are you truly an Istar?”

Her question was intrigued, just streaked with doubt, and the Maia didn’t feel irritated at all.

“So it is, Your Majesty,” she answered, “Wizards are not a mere legend.”

They took their seats at a small table loaded of food, where they received immediately the bergamot tea the Avari loved so much.

“It’s difficult to get rid of a general conviction that’s lasting for centuries,” Lythelen observed, lightening the mood with a little smile, “but Aryon states it as true, therefore I want to believe it. Unless it is proved wrong, of course,” she added, prudently. Nerwen responded to her smile, but didn’t reply; after all, the presence of the High Sovereign’s brother ensured her enough credibility as not to be hindered in any way: she was satisfied with this, for the moment. Anyway, she cared little if her professed identity persuaded them for good or not, as long as Aryon was.

Seeing Séredor picking up a bowl of ertan, she did the same: she truly loved this food, especially if sweetened with honey.

“So, what takes you to Kopellin?” the king enquired, uncertain if he should address one or the other of his guests.

“I’ll tell you,” Nerwen answered, having never planned to conceal the goal of her journey, “but know that another legend will prove instead reality.”

“Good Valar, I am terribly intrigued!” Lythelen stated lively, “Very well, tell us…”
“I’m looking for the females of the Onodrim, the Entwives,” the Istar explained. The king and queen of the Hwenti were taken aback for a moment, then simultaneously cast a glance at Aryon, who held their gazes firmly, in this way confirming Nerwen’s statement.

Séredor took a deep breath. His trust in his old friend’s judgement was very strong, but he was already struggling to believe his protégée to be an Istar, and now she came up with… this.

“The Onodrim actually exist, then?” he asked quietly.

Nerwen couldn’t tell him she actually had met one just a little more than a year before without betraying Treebeard’s request not to reveal his existence, therefore she had just to hope that the king’s trust in Aryon was great enough to make him taking her word.

“Yes, Your Majesty, they truly exist,” she confirmed in an equally quiet tone, “I’m a follower of Yavanna Kementári, who created them at the beginning of Time: that’s why I know it.”

“As far as I know, we’ve never seen one, in the lands of the Six Tribes,” Lythelen stated slowly. Nerwen turned her eyes at her:

“We’re just passing through, actually; we’re heading for the lands beyond the Orocarni.”

“There’s no known pass to get over them,” Séredor stated.

“So I’ve been told,” the Aini nodded, “but all mountain ranges have passes. However, should we find none, we’ll get round them.”

“We don’t even know where they end,” the king warned her.

“Mayhap your brothers the Kinn-lai know this,” Nerwen replied, referring to the Avarin tribe dwelling in the Red Mountains, “and if not, mayhap the Dwarves they do business with.”

“The Ironfists and the Stonefoots?” Lythelen mused, doubtful, “Contacts with them happen only three of four times during the warm season, for the exchange of a small variety of goods; as for the rest, they don’t want to have anything to do with us, nor we with them, as for this. We don’t even know the exact location of their towns.”

Nerwen sighed inwardly: the well-known hostility between Dwarves and Elves was evidently harshened by the latter’s typical aversion to the foreigners, which anyway mirrored the former’s characteristic isolationism.

“I’m a follower of Kementári, their creator Aulë’s spouse,” she mused, “and speaking their language, I have some hopes to be better welcomed.”

“Besides, you don’t belong to the Elven race,” Séredor pondered, “this advantages you for sure.”

“You speak their tongue?” Lythelen asked her instead, looking at her appreciatively; Aryon, too, cast a glance at her in surprise and admiration, learning of this ability of hers he didn’t know about, “You’re full of unexpected talents, Lady Nerwen…”

“Thank you for saying so,” the Aini smiled, “Sire, may I ask you a favour?” she addressed then the monarch.

“Sure, if it’s in my power to help you, I’ll do it,” he assured her.

“I’d like to see all the maps of the Red Mountains you have here, would it be possible?”
“In our archives there are some, but they’re not as accurate as the ones you’ll find at the Kinn-lai,” the king informed her.

“Never mind, meanwhile I can get an idea.”

“Very well, then I’ll issue immediately orders to make them available to you.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty…”

When they finished breakfast, Séredor had Nerwen accompanied to the palace’s archives, where the Maia found an official waiting for her, who delivered her half a dozen of maps she could study at her leisure.

OOO

Aryon stayed in the garden with the king of the Hwenti; Lythelen, too, had retired, wanting to leave the two friends free to talk.

“Forgive me, my friend,” Séredor began, “I don’t want in any way to disrespect your Nerwen, but I’m surprised you chose for a friend-in-love a woman of the race of Men, and that for her you even renounced your office as the First Sword of Queen Eliéenna.”

“It wasn’t my choice, actually,” Aryon answered, who had expected this question from his old friend, “She’s not just a friend-in-love: she’s my partner for life.”

Séredor didn’t hide his wonder:

“Are you serious? But… the previous unions between Elves and Men are more a legend than history: how is it that you, the son of a Maia, are destined to a mortal?”

His doubtful tone slightly irritated the prince, who in no way was willing to tolerate the least denigration towards the woman he loved; he glowered and answered in a rather curt tone:

“Perhaps she’s mortal, and perhaps she’s not. I told you, she’s an Istar, and the Istari are known not to age: this means they could be non-mortal. She herself confirmed it.”

The king of the Hwenti realised he had offended him and rose one hand in an apologising gesture: “Sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you. It’s just that it’s hard for me to believe what you’re saying. In the past, there have been only two unions between Men and Elves, and never with an Avar…”

“This because we’ve lived apart from our brothers who abide more to the west of Middle-earth,” the prince pointed out, calmer, “Besides, I remind you that one of these unions involved the child of a Maia, exactly like Nerwen and me, therefore there’s nothing unheard of in my situation.”

Séredor pondered Aryon’s words, then he nodded slowly:

“You’re right,” he admitted, “I didn’t think about it. Besides, I cannot deny that I like Lady Nerwen, as a person: she looks strong, resolute, but also sweet and nice. Am I right?” he enquired, diverting the subject.

Aryon grinned in his characteristically sarcastic way:
“Sweet and nice? Yeah, she’s both… except when you get her angry. I saw her with my own eyes chastising hard an Elf who attempted to have her murdered; but she could have killed him, and she didn’t do it. Like my sister said, this tells us much about her character.”

Admiration showed through Séredor’s expression.

“It tells much, indeed,” he agreed, nodding. “Well, I confess I was worried about you, but now I’m not anymore: from the way you speak of her, I think you found a partner worthy of you…”

The two friends chatted for over one hour and a half, then Séredor dismissed Aryon, having to take care of his duties. The prince then thought about heading for the stables to see how their mounts were doing. While exiting the palace, he thought he glimpsed somebody following him, but turning around he didn’t see anyone.

Once he arrived at the stables, he checked on the boxes of all four steeds, whom he found well lodged, clean and properly fed.

He was closing Thilgiloth’s box behind him, when he heard Meledhiel’s hoarse voice addressing him:

“My dear Aryon, just the one I was looking for…”

He spun around.

“Really?” he asked, rather coldly: he hadn’t forget how much unpleasant she had been to Nerwen, the day before.

“Yes… I wanted to talk to you,” the beautiful Elf stated in a vanilla tone, “but not here where everyone can see us. Come,” she invited him, heading for the entrance of the stables. She slipped into an empty box.

Aryon hesitated, then he followed her: maybe she wanted to apologise for her earlier behaviour, and possibly even clarify the reason of it. At least, he would learn if Nerwen was right, claiming she was jealous of him.

In the box, Meledhiel had turned and was waiting for him. The prince thought that her dress was more low-cut than usual, but perhaps it was just an illusion.

“I didn’t mean to be rude to your friend,” she began, “I was just surprised you would go with someone of the race of Men, that’s all.”

“It doesn’t look like a good reason to me,” the prince shot back, still annoyed she dared to treat Nerwen with so much discourtesy.

Meledhiel pressed her soft lips together, surprised at his coldness: Aryon had never been unfriendly, with her. Quite the reverse, in fact… She changed her approach:

“But I don’t understand what she has more than me… Is it because she claims to be an Istar that makes her interesting in your eyes?”

He made an irritated gesture that induced her to stop immediately.

“She doesn’t claim, she is an Istar, believe it or not. And anyway, that’s not the only thing I like about her, for sure,” he stated. He didn’t understand what Meledhiel was getting at and thought about leaving her there high and dry.
“I think so,” she hastily said, changing tactics again, “You liked me, too, once…” she added, straightening her back to raise her torso, “We had much fun, together, remember?”

Attracted by the movement, Aryon’s gaze fell involuntarily on the curvy mounds of her breasts that the cleavage generously revealed.

“Yes, of course I remember,” he admitted, perplexed.

She came near him, shaking her head to wave around her long black curls, and staring at him with a captivating expression.

“Aryon, I am always available for you…” she whispered.

By Nahar’s mane, the prince thought, Nerwen had been right: Meledhiel still had designs on him. He had to tell her how things really were, between him and the Istar, this would surely convince her to back off her clear purpose to seduce him; he searched for the right words, as to not hurt her any more than was necessary, but there weren’t any, therefore he chose to do it head-on:

“I’m sorry, Meledhiel, but Nerwen is my partner for life,” he stated in a low voice.

This took the beautiful Elf aback, but it lasted just one moment: in all her life, nobody she had eyed had ever resisted her. Not even he, as for a long time, every time he came to Kopellin, he had spent his nights in her bed. No, she told herself, it wasn’t possible, it was absolutely not possible that a Human could be his partner for life! Aryon had gotten it all wrong. No, even worse: he was under a spell. An Istar, sure… that Nerwen was a sorceress and had charmed him with her witchcraft. There was no other explanation.

But she would break the spell, oh yes she would, on the spot!

“I see… What a shame we can’t be together anymore…” she murmured, taking on an air of regret; she pretended to hesitate, then her smile became more seductive and she began to untie her bodice, “What if we have fun one last time, parting in a friendly way…?”

Automatically, Aryon’s glance descended on those curves he knew well and that, once more, were to be displayed in front of him; he realised he was flattered, but completely uninterested.

“Meledhiel, this is not the case…” he tried to stop her by using a firm tone.

“Don’t tell me you don’t like what you see…” she provoked him, “Come on, touch me…”

Taking him completely by surprise, she suddenly grasped his hand and pressed it against her almost naked breasts; shocked, Aryon froze, open-mouthed.

OOO

Between studying the maps and asking for clarifications and thorough examinations, Nerwen needed a couple of hours to feel fully satisfied. Thanking the officer, who had proven a true gold mine of information, she left the archives and got back to her room, seeking Aryon, but she didn’t find him; therefore she exited and headed for her kelvar friends, to see how they were.

As she entered the stables and passed by an empty stall, she heard Meledhiel’s hoarse voice:
“What if we have fun one last time, parting in a friendly way…”

The deep voice answering her got Nerwen frozen halfway through a stride.

“Meledhiel, this is not the case…”

“Don’t tell me you don’t like what you see… Come on, touch me…”

The Aini felt her blood rush to her head and she flung the door of the box open: she found Aryon and Meledhiel, standing one in front of the other, with her pressing one hand of his against her lavish breasts.

Both spun around as Nerwen burst in. Seeing them, the Istar stood still; slowly, she crossed her arms on her chest, while her face became icy. She uttered no word, staring at Meledhiel with a gaze that, should it have been a dagger, would have stabbed and cut her in thousand pieces.

The statuesque Avar turned pale like a ghost. Stifling a cry, she backed away from Aryon and rushed out the door, brushing Nerwen while she passed her, running. Viciously, the Maia stuck out one leg and tripped her over; Meledhiel screamed and fell, sprawling on the hay covering the floor. Under Nerwen’s implacable stare, the Elf pulled herself up, her face as red as a tomato; she slanted one last, hateful glance at her rival, then ran away with her tail between her legs, her hair and gown full of straws, her dignity shattered.

Nerwen realised she had made an enemy, but for the moment, she decided to ignore her. She turned to Aryon, looking into his eyes; in his gaze she read embarrassment, but not fright.

“Care to explain?” she exhorted him, in a neutral tone. She wasn’t accusing him of anything: from what she had heard and seen, it looked pretty clear that it had been Meledhiel the one taking the initiative, trying to seduce the prince with a brazen behaviour, not at all appropriated to her office as vice Lady of the Palace; but she wanted to hear it from him.

Aryon sighed:

“You were right: Meledhiel still had an interest in me,” he began, “I came to check on the horses; apparently she was keeping an eye on me, because I saw her stepping out all of a sudden in front of me. Under the pretext to talk with me away from prying eyes, she dragged me here and tried to tempt me recalling our history together; I told her clearly that you’re my partner for life, but she grabbed my hand and shoved it down her cleavage… and then you showed up.”

Nerwen nodded slowly. She had no reason to think he was lying: not only, after what she had heard before and seen later, it was obvious that things had happened exactly how he had reported but, above all, she completely trusted Aryon, who had renounced his office, the most prestigious in all the Six Tribes, to be with her and help her in her mission, even if he still found it hard to believe in the actual existence of the Entwives. Despite all this, however, the worm of jealousy didn’t spare her: after all, being partners for life didn’t mean never giving in to temptation. Therefore, while her shoulders fell, she asked him:

“And what if I hadn’t shown up…”

More than suspicious, her tone was miserable; the prince felt his heart going out to her and instinctively took a step toward her: he couldn’t bear to see her upset. He wanted to pull her into his arms to reassure her, but he was afraid she would reject him.
“I’d have told her to take a cold bath,” he answered firmly, “A very cold one,” he added through gritted teeth.

Nerwen stared for a long moment into his eyes – those gorgeous eyes the colour of the sky, where the light of Valinor shone – and found no trace of deceit.

Aryon took her hands and, looking at her, brought them to his lips, placing small kisses on each finger, with such a tenderness she felt like melting.

“You could tell me that the sun shines by night and I’d believe you,” the Aini muttered.

“That would be mutual,” he stated in total earnestness, then he grinned in that peculiar way she couldn’t resist and caressed the tip of her ring finger with his lips: the night before, he had discovered it as a particularly sensitive spot, and indeed, Nerwen shivered.

“Oh, you smutty rascal…!” she babbled. Actually, he was a very handsome rascal, she thought, while he continued looking into her eyes and kissed the palm of her hands, then the inner side of her wrists; finally he made her slide her arms around his neck, bent his head down and took her lips.

He kissed her slowly, deeply, putting in the kiss all the love he felt for her; he loved her unconditionally, unshakeably, and no Meledhiel in the world could stir the least interest in him.

Finally, he backed off; Nerwen looked at him, her eyes slightly glazed. She felt her heart like overflowing, flooded by the love she felt for him. Her lost gaze moved him deeply; struck dumb, he kissed her again, fervently, and she responded with equal ardour.

When their lips parted, he whispered:

“Now it’s me, the one in need of an icy bath…”

Nerwen’s lips bent in a grin very similar to Aryon’s typical one: against her belly, she was clearly feeling his desire for her.

“Then it’s better we stop right now,” she whispered, “because there’s two of us, in need of it…”

Author’s corner:

The sexy Elf trying to seduce Aryon wasn’t planned at all! So, here’s another character jumping out and forcing me on describing a totally unexpected situation XD Anyway, now we know for certain – by facts and not just by words – that no one has the slightest chance, trying to get between Nerwen and her Aryon…

The image of Sèredor is by Emmil, found on the amazing site DeviantArt.

The image of Meledhiel is by Graysun_D, slightly elaborated by a friend of mine.

I want to thank again all those who are following this fan fiction, which is developing far more
than I planned… I’m more or less like the Professor when he began The Lord of the Rings, which had to be just a sequel to The Hobbit and became instead the long, wonderful masterpiece we know; this without intending in any way comparing myself to him, of course!

Lady Angel
“Let’s get betrothed,” Aryon told Nerwen.

It was night; they had dined with Séredor and Lythelen, and after that, they had retired and were now undressing to go to bed.

Taken by surprise, Nerwen dropped the gown she had just taken off and stared at the prince, wide-eyed.

“W… what?” she squeaked.

Aryon, shirtless, got around the bed and took her hands, bringing them to his lips.

“Let’s get betrothed,” he repeated, “It’s the custom of my people that, as soon as you meet your partner for life, you announce it publicly with a promise ceremony, witnessed by a male and a female sponsor. The betrothal lasts one year and one day, then the nuptial ceremony take place. I always thought of Séredor as my sponsor, because of our long friendship; and he’s here at hand. So, how about doing it?”

Nerwen was still dumbfounded: she hadn’t expected his proposal, not while they were travelling.

“Good Valar…” she whispered, blinking a couple of times; she noticed the prince’s gaze clouding a little and realised that, with her hesitation, she was making him anxious.

“I’d be glad to,” she began, slowly, “After all, even where I come from they usually do so. It’s just that I don’t know where we’ll be, in one year and one day…”

“This is unimportant,” the prince stated, relieved that her objections were only of practical nature;
he kissed the palm of her hand, “Anywhere we’ll be, we’ll ask other ones to be our sponsors for the wedding. Mayhap… they might be the Entwives,” he concluded with a smirk.

“Mayhap, who knows,” Nerwen answered, reciprocating his smile.

“Is that a yes, then?” he asked.

“It’s a yes,” the Aini confirmed. Aryon let her hands go and began fiddling with the string of her undervest, untying the knot.

“So, we have something to celebrate…” he murmured, his eyes still locket with hers. She felt like drowning in those light blue irises, while a now familiar trembling was sliding down her spine.

“I agree…”

OOO

Séredor was enthusiastic about his friend’s request; even if, deep down in his heart, he still kept some perplexity about the appropriateness of a union between an immortal and a mortal, even if she was endowed with a much longer life than ordinary humans, he admitted that, in the face of destiny, there is nothing anyone can do; besides, from what Aryon had told him, he had the High Sovereign’s blessing, therefore he had no reason to refuse.

Because in this place she had no friend to ask for being her sponsor – she would have had Melian, or Galadriel, but both were very far away – Nerwen asked Queen Lythelen, who accepted gladly in spite of her doubts, even stronger than her husband’s.

As they had no guests to call for – surely there was no need to invite Meledhiel – organising the ceremony required only a very short time, practically just as long as the two betrothed-to-be needed to find the promise rings, that traditionally were of silver; Lythelen sent them to her favourite jeweller, where they chose two identical rings, carved like a flat braid running on the whole circumference.

They didn’t pay for them: as the emissary of the High Sovereign, Aryon’s purchases were directly refunded by the Royal Treasury, and even if he wasn’t the First Sword any longer, his sister had allowed him to use the royal credit for all the time he would stay in the territory of the Six Tribes.

The Istar thought that this was generous of her: she had received money both at the Grey Havens and in Lothlórien, and anyway she could gather some using her medical abilities, but it was surely useful having a virtually unlimited credit like this, as long as they could.

They made the most of this stroll, buying a new pipe for Aryon and a stock of galenas, too.

When they returned to the palace, it was almost midday; as they had already agreed to have their lunch with the monarchs, they headed for their private dining room, where they were surprisingly led to the garden. Here, they had set up a pavilion, under which stood a table set as for a luxurious banquet, and next to it the sovereigns of the Hwenti were waiting for them.

“Perhaps we’re few in number,” Séredor smiled at them, “but the event deserves being adequately celebrated.”
The two lovers exchanged amused glances: they had already taken care of this the night before…

“Thank you, my friend,” Aryon said, forcing the sultry images of Nerwen’s embraces out of his mind, “You’re certainly right.”

“Come,” Lythelen called, motioning for them to get near, “If you like, we can begin straight away.”

Aryon took Nerwen’s hand and together they walked solemnly toward the king and queen. While they strode the few steps separating them from the other two, Nerwen felt the thrill becoming stronger and stronger, until she was almost short of breath. She knew by heart the few introductive words, but when they stopped in front of the ceremony sponsors, she thought she couldn’t remember a single syllable. She gripped spasmodically Aryon’s hand; the prince, sensing her nervousness, turned to look at her with what he wanted to be a reassuring expression, but he was actually as much as thrilled.

Noticing the exchange of glances, Séredor and Lythelen did the same, amused and moved; then they looked again at the lovers, waiting patiently for them to speak.

Aryon began, followed after only two syllables by Nerwen, who had suddenly found back her memory:

“After the ancient tradition of the Eldar, we ask you, our beloved ones and our joy, to witness our promise.”

The ceremony would involve the presence of friends and relatives, and the sentence would be addressed to them, but as they were only the four of them, it was addressed to the sovereigns only. Then Aryon looked at Nerwen and went on:

“Here is the one I chose and to whom I have bound my heart,” he looked again at Séredor, “To you I rely as son of the soul: therefore welcome her like a father welcomes a daughter and be happy for our joy.”

Séredor sensed his friend’s infective thrill and had to take a deep breath to calm down before answering:

“Like a daughter I welcome her in my soul and in my heart.”

Sponsor and sponsored exchanged the ritual embrace, placing their hands on each other’s shoulders; then Séredor bent over to Nerwen and kissed her cheek.

Aryon took the ring out of his pocket and grasped Nerwen’s left hand.

“My heart is bound to yours,” he said, looking into her eyes, his voice one octave lower because of the emotion he was feeling, “Wear this ring, which now I give you, as a token of my faithfulness and of our bond.”

Slowly, he slipped the silver ring on her index finger.

Nerwen felt her heart leaping into her throat and had to swallow hard before being able to answer:

“Happily I accept it, happily I will wear it.”

She gave Aryon a bright glance so full of love, he felt his knees turn to jelly and almost staggered.
He gathered all his willpower to grasp himself and took slow breaths, trying to calm down.

Now it was Nerwen’s turn:

“Here is the one I chose and to whom I have bound my heart,” she turned to look at Lythelen, “To you I rely as daughter of the soul: therefore welcome him like a mother welcomes a son and be happy for our joy.”

Lythelen beamed at her; in front of the evidence of the sentiment these two shared, her perplexities had vanished all of a sudden.

“Like a son I welcome him in my soul and in my heart,” she stated, embracing ritually her sponsored like Séredor had done earlier with Aryon, and then she kissed the prince on one cheek.

With shaking fingers, Nerwen fished the ring out of her waist bag and took Aryon’s left hand.

“My heart is bound to yours,” she said, repeating his words, her voice trembling with emotion, “Wear this ring, which now I give you, as a token of my faithfulness and of our bond,” she concluded, slipping the ring on his index finger.

Aryon’s heart skipped one beat before he could answer:

“Happily I accept it, happily I will wear it.”

They looked at each other intensely, exchanging with their eyes a promise even more solemn than the one uttered by their lips. Again, Lythelen and Séredor waited until the two betrothed recovered from their emotional state, and then they made the final statement together:

“The Valar witness with you what happened today.”

Impulsively, Nerwen and Aryon embraced, then they did the same with their sponsors.

“Congratulations,” Séredor said sincerely: like his wife, he had seen the plain sentiment joining his friend to the Istar and he had no more doubts that their union was right and appropriate.

Finally, they sat around the richly set table, and ate and drank in cheerfulness.

It was the thirteenth day of July.

OOO

In the following three days, Meledhiel stayed out of the way of both Nerwen and Aryon; the Maia was relieved, because she had no desire to start a war.

Unfortunately, it proved to be just the calm before the storm.

It was a sunny afternoon and, because of the heat, Nerwen had the sleeves removed from her green housedress. After having spent several hours in the library, doing more research on every available source about the Orocarini, seeking a hint about a pass that could lead her and Aryon beyond that immense mountain range, she was now returning to her chamber.

Walking along a rather dark hallway, out of the corner of her eye she glimpsed a sneaking
movement on her right side. Instinctively, she threw herself sideways and this prevented her being
stabbed in her back with a long stiletto, ferociously brandished by none other than Meledhiel; the
thin blade of the dagger grazed Nerwen’s arm, opening a long wound, luckily only superficial, but
it made her anyway scream in pain.

With a shriek of surprise and disappointment, Meledhiel stumbled forward a couple of steps, then
regained her balance and threw herself in another assault. Nerwen jumped backwards to evade the
point of the deadly weapon, almost tripping over the hem of her skirt.

“Stop!” she yelled, “Are you gone nuts?!?”

Meledhiel didn’t heed her and came back with a low cut meant to gut her, but the Istar escaped her
with a backflip.

Unlike on the Feingwend, this time Nerwen had not been taken completely unawares; besides, her
adversary didn’t brandish a long blade, but a dagger, so she could easier defend herself. Therefore,
the Aini put into practice the hand-to-hand combat techniques Tulkas had taught her – she had
rarely needed them, but sometimes she brushed up on them because you can never tell – and kept
ready to counter the assault by any means. Her long gown hindered her, but she was able to get up
from the somersault thanks to the prodigious nimbleness of her race. Her opponent was no less,
though, besides she was wearing practical breeches and tunic, which made her movements easier;
she whipped around like a snake and charged again.

This time, Nerwen didn’t just back off; she moved quickly sideways, seized the wrist of
Meledhiel’s armed arm and twisted it in a painful grip that forced her opponent to drop her weapon.
The stiletto fell clattering on the ground.

The vice Lady of the Palace screeched, outraged, and attacked with her bare hands, her gorgeous
face distorted in a mask of hate; but Nerwen was expecting this: she ducked, clutched Meledhiel’s
arm and turned her own momentum against her, hurling her on the ground. The Elf landed hard and
banged her face on the floor; with a growl, she rose again, blood streaming out of her nose. She
glared resentfully at her adversary, but refrained from attacking her again: Nerwen practiced a type
of hand-to-hand combat she had never seen and she didn’t understand how it worked, and
furthermore, she showed a speed that was absolutely impossible for a Human. She concluded it
was preferable recovering the stiletto, which gave her a sure advantage.

Nerwen noticed the direction of Meledhiel’s glance, but he had kicked away the dagger and now it
was out of reach of both her and her opponent. She took advantage of the short break and lifted her
shirt, thrusting its hem into her belt so as to move freely, ready to defend herself.

At that moment, summoned by the noise, two Palace Guards arrived running.

Meledhiel saw them coming up behind Nerwen and thought to use it at her own advantage.

“Guards! Seize her! She tried to kill me!” she shrieked, “She had a knife!”

The soldiers froze, taken aback, and looked hesitantly at the two adversaries, both wounded.

“What are you waiting for?” the female Elf yelled, “Seize her, I said!”

The two guards exchanged glances; having to choose between Lady Kilven’s daughter, whom they
knew well, and the foreigner, whom was to them but a stranger, the choice was obvious. They
moved to grab Nerwen.

“Stop!” Nerwen shouted: her voice echoed appallingly, while her petite form became suddenly tall
and powerful, “Don’t you dare touching me!”

Flabbergasted, the guards froze; Meledhiel was speechless, in shock.

From behind the corner, other three soldiers appeared, led by a sergeant.

“What’s up here?” the latter bellowed, unsheathing his sword while the other two did the same.

“This woman attacked me with a knife,” Meledhiel declared venomously, repeating her accusation.

“Oh, of course,” Nerwen laughed at her, “So explain why it’s me, the one with a stab wound,” she challenged her, showing her bleeding arm to the sergeant. She would wait to heal it with her power, so that she would be able to show it as a proof of the attack.

The sergeant was neither a fool nor a naïve person, and even if he instinctively trusted more the vice Lady of the Palace than the human foreigner, the latter’s remark planted the seed of doubt in his mind.

“Indeed…,” he said, scowling at the female Elf.

“Call for Lord Aryon,” Nerwen quietly suggested him, “He can vouch for me.”

“Yes, sure!” Meledhiel spat sourly, “Because you sleep with him!”

“Jealousy is a nasty thing, isn’t it?” the Aini spat back; she was trembling with fury, but she forced herself to stay calm, but oh!, what would she pay to kick her ass!

The sergeant motioned for his soldiers and one of them ran off; a few minutes later, he was back with Aryon.

The black-dressed prince took in the scene and paled when he noticed the wound on Nerwen’s arm: she shook her head, reassuring him she was fine.

Then Aryon turned to glare at Meledhiel with such a dark face, it would back off a battalion of Orcs in full battle gear.
“Care to explain, Lady Meledhiel?” he asked in an icy tone. The beautiful Elf shuddered under his hard glance, however she didn’t yield:

“Your little friend here tried to kill me with a knife!” she spat, pointing to the stiletto still laying on the floor.

“Actually, it’s the exact opposite,” Nerwen countered, showing off her injured arm, “Lady Meledhiel attacked me cowardly from behind, like a vile assassin.”

“What do you say in your defence, Meledhiel?” Aryon growled, turning to glare again at Kilven’s daughter. The female Elf, too blinded by her jealousy to realise her precarious position, flared up:

“In my defence?? I am the one who’s been attacked, I tell you! Why do you believe her and not me? How do you explain the son of a Maia kept by the leash by a woman of the weak race of Men? Don’t you understand she’s a witch and you’re under her spell…?”

“Enough!” Aryon thundered, cutting her off. His tone made all flinch, even Nerwen, who recognised in it a trace of the imposing capability she herself could give to her own voice.

“How do you dare?” the prince went on, going up to Meledhiel, threateningly standing up at his full height; in front of him, the female Elf shrank, realising she had given herself away with her own words, “How do you dare throwing such accusations? Nerwen the Green is an Istar, not a foul witch, and she wouldn’t waste her power for a meaningless love-spell! Like it or not, she’s my partner for life and my bride-to-be, and attempting at her life won’t change the situation. Sergeant!” he shouted, calling for him imperiously, “Arrest Lady Meledhiel and take her to King Sérédror for him to judge her!”

“There’s no need for it,” a male voice said, making all eyes turn in the direction it was coming from. Sérédror come out of the corner of the hallway from where Aryon, too, had arrived. The guard who had called the prince had also sent for the monarch.
“I’m here,” the king went on while, frowning, he watched the daughter of his Lady of the Palace; he had heart most of the exchange between her and Aryon, but one question tormented him, “Why did you do it, Lady Meledhiel?”

“I didn’t do anything,” the female Elf meekly tried, by now aware she had get herself in a hopeless situation, however insisting on her act, “Please, Sire, believe me, at least you…”

Séredor hesitated: he knew Meledhiel since she had been born and it seemed to him truly impossible for her to attempt with no reason to the life of an honoured guest like Nerwen: then his eyes fell on the dagger, forsaken in a corner, and his face turned to stone. He motioned to one of the guards, who picked up the stiletto and brought it to him. The king turned it in his hands while his gaze was becoming more and more gloomy.

“I recognise this,” he stated in a troubled tone, “I gave it myself to your father…”

“No, no!” she shrieked, hopelessly, “It’s not that one, it’s not mine!!”

Séredor looked at her with compassion; he still didn’t understand her reasons, but it was clear she was not herself.

“Take her away,” he ordered the sergeant, in a low and bitter voice, “Lock her up in her chamber.”

He knew he should throw her in the dungeons, but he still didn’t feel like it. After all, she was the daughter of Lady Kilven, his trusty Lady of the Palace, and it was very hard for him punishing her, even if he was aware he had to do it. However, he wanted to take some time to understand the reason of her insane move and impose the appropriate sentence with a clear head.

The guards hurried to obey, seizing the now ex vice Lady of the Palace; while they were taking her away, Meledhiel turned and shot a last accusation:

“That one isn’t who she claims to be! She moves too fast!”

The soldiers didn’t stop and dragged the recalcitrant Elf away; perplexed, Séredor turned to Nives:

“What did she mean, by saying you move too fast?” he enquired. At first, Nerwen thought about denying, calling Meledhiel a fantasist, but then she pondered that, should she insist, in the long term this would arise legitimate suspicions.

“An Istar’s resources are often a nasty surprise for nasty people,” she answered in a deliberately enigmatic way, shrugging and pretending indifference: she could certainly not reveal that her extraordinary agility came from her being an Aini.

Even if the explanation didn’t satisfy him completely, Séredor had other plights tormenting him, at the moment; he nodded curtly and disguised his distress under a hard face, but Aryon knew him far too well to not see under the mask he had put on.

“I’m sorry, my friend,” he said in a low voice. Séredor shook his head:

“No, Aryon, I am the one to be sorry: an officer of mine wronged severely a guest of mine. Lady Nerwen,” he turned to the Istar, “be assured that Meledhiel will be adequately punished,” he looked better at her and noticed the wound, still bleeding, “But you need to be treated: I’ll call immediately for the palace’s physician.”

“There’s no need,” Nerwen said, “After all, it’s just a scratch, it’ll be enough cleaning the cut and treat it with a balm I have in my luggage… I ask for permission to retire,” she concluded with a
slight curtsy.

“Of course you have it,” the king nodded.

“I go with her,” Aryon announced, and Séredor nodded again; obviously, the brother of the High Sovereign had no need to ask him for permission, but after all it was his home and it was a matter of politeness.

As the king of the Hwenti headed for his office to ponder over the difficult issue, Nerwen and Aryon went to their chamber.

The Maia took off her shredded and bloodstained dress, remaining with only the camisole, and in the meantime, the prince headed for the bathroom, where he poured some water from a jug to a basin and soaked a clean cloth; as he returned in the bedchamber, he used it to wash Nerwen’s injury, his face dark with concern. She let him do it, smiling slightly; noticing it, Aryon frowned:

“What’s there to smile?” he asked, perplexed. She caressed his cheek:

“You’re very sweet taking care of me,” she answered in an undertone, “but actually there’s no need for it.”

Surprised, Aryon stopped swabbing the cut and looked at her, clueless; then he recalled what she did to the young bison the troll had injured.

“You’re right,” he said slowly, “I was forgetting you’re an Istar.”

She smiled at him, then closed her eyes and focused on the wound, sending there her thaumaturgic power to heal it; under the prince’s watchful gaze, the cut closed, leaving only a slight trace that soon disappeared.

Re-opening her eyes, Nerwen noticed Aryon staring at her arm. Taking her unawares, he suddenly hugged her, pressing her strongly against his chest.

“Today Meledhiel could have killed you… By the Valar’s grace, she failed…” he whispered in a muffled tone.

Nerwen felt sick in the heart; she couldn’t reassure him in this area, not without revealing him her true nature, and this was forbidden.

“It’s not that easy killing me,” she tried to comfort him, knowing that it was a poor attempt, “I can heal myself as I did with the young bison, even if I cannot heal something deadly, like a stab in the heart, or a too fast working poison, or a too far advanced serious illness,” she couldn’t tell him this was not applying at herself, “Besides, I’m able to defend myself pretty well: Meledhiel’s broken nose is the proof…” she concluded, sardonically.

Aryon held her tight some moments longer, then slowly let her go.

“Yes,” he said in a low voice, “I think so,” he looked at her, while a slight grin bent the corners of his mouth, partially wiping away the concern from his face, “You’re full of surprises, sweetheart… I had no idea you were able to fight hand-to-hand.”

“I need it rarely,” she observed, “Usually my fame as an Istar is enough to strike fear into people and spare me from attacks, but this of course doesn’t apply if they don’t believe me,” she added, glowering. It happened on board the Feingwend, too: she had to learn to be more cautious.
“From now on, I’ll be there to defend you, if need arises,” Aryon stated with a resolute tone. He would allow nobody and nothing endangering his beloved; for her, he would confront a Balrog and would slice it up.

Nerwen cupped his face and looked into his eyes; in them, she saw all of his devotion.

“Thank you,” she answered, moved, then she pulled him to her and kissed him. He held her tight again, responding to her kiss.

When they parted, he glanced at her arm and brushed the area where the cut had been, feeling only smooth skin.

“Why isn’t there any scar, unlike the wound on your hip?” he asked, perplexed.

“The less serious the damage, the better I can heal it,” Nerwen explained, “This was only a scratch, while that sword blow was much deeper.”

He took her hand and brought it to his lips, placing a kiss on it.

“When I saw you wounded, for a moment I feared the worst,” he admitted, “It didn’t even cross my mind that you have this prodigious talent… which your colleagues share, I think: it would explain the length of your lifespan, so different from the Men.”

Nerwen preferred avoiding answering to this: the Wizards could be very good healers, able to act also on the invisible level to fight the detrimental effects of Sauron’s and his thugs’ dark power, but they didn’t possess the full thaumaturgic power anymore, having been diminished much more than her.

Noticing her silence, Aryon looked at her, puzzled; then he realised that this had to be one of those things she couldn’t share with him and, as he had promised, he didn’t push it. He changed subject:

“I still can’t grasp the reason why Meledhiel attacked you,” he said, “I told her very clearly that you and me are partners for life; besides, she learned about our betrothal; so, why try to kill you? She wouldn’t anyway win me back…”

“She was convinced I’ve bewitched you,” Nerwen reminded him, “and that this is the reason you think we’re partners for life, not because it’s true.”

“But this is pure folly!” the prince blurted, “When was it ever heard about a spell so powerful? And besides, what reason would you have to bewitch precisely me?”

“She could be thinking I’m in love with you, but you don’t reciprocate me, and therefore I resorted to witchcraft to force you,” she conjectured.

Aryon shook his head, still incredulous.

“I’m sorry to be the cause of her downfall,” he mused in a low tone, “I never thought Meledhiel evil and deserving to end up in jail, or exiled; because it’s one of these two, the punishment that Séredor will give her: even if so far she had his respect, the king cannot get over such an insult, which in addition involves me, the brother of the High Sovereign.”

“Meledhiel was blinded by her jealousy,” Nerwen said, “which turned her into a fool; but nonetheless, she’s responsible for her own actions and therefore for the consequences deriving from them. She’ll pay for her stupidity,” she concluded in a harsh tone that reminded the prince how, under her sweetness, the Istar hided a core of steel, which he had caught sight since their first
encounter/clash on the shores of the Sea of Rhûn.

“Right,” he agreed laconically, embittered. Nerwen caressed his hand, which was still resting on her arm, in a comforting gesture.

“I’ll have to buy a new gown,” she observed on a lighter tone, in order to distract him from his dark thoughts, pointing to the torn and bloody garment. Aryon looked at it:

“I know a tailor, just outside the palace: we can go there…”

Nerwen nodded: she was a little sorry for the dress, which had been one of her favourites, but after all, it was just a garment; she would get a similar one.

OOO

The king sentenced Meledhiel to fifty years imprisonment, but out of respect for her mother Kilven, he ordered she wouldn’t spend them in the dungeons; instead, he had a chamber set up on the highest floor of one of the palace’s towers, where the female Elf was confined; strong iron gratings on the windows and a massive door of oak wood with steel bands and a thick steel bar, closed by a padlock, ensured the impossibility to escape. The padlock had three keys, one kept by Séredor, another by the captain of the Palace Guards, and the third by the Prime Counsellor of the king.

Distraught by the events, Lady Kilven resigned her office as the Lady of the Palace, but Séredor didn’t want hear of it; however, he gave her permission to retire from her office for all the time she would need to recover from the trauma the despicable behaviour of her daughter had caused to her. When she would feel like it, she would come back and resume her job.

OOO

Five days later, Nerwen and Aryon took their leave from Séredor and Lythelen; the prince left Nordhir to them; the horse, having completed his task as a spare mount, would be returned to Bârlyth with the first convoy of goods heading for Eryn Rhûn.

Orrodal, the capital city of the kingdom of the Kinn-lai, was located on the first skirts of the Orocani; it was about 250 kilometres away from Kopellin and to reach it, the two travellers would need six or seven days, following the river Sirlechin.
Already in the evening of the first day of their journey, on the horizon they caught sight of the highest peaks of the Red Mountains, surpassing 5000 metres height, hooded with perennial snow.

The terrain began to rise constantly, even if slowly; on the fourth day of their journey, Aryon led Nerwen on the top of a rather high, bare hill, from which he pointed out to her the immense mountain range barring the entire eastern horizon, disappearing in the distance both north and south with no interruption. It truly looked like an insurmountable wall.

Nerwen was impressed; it reminded her of the Pelóri, the massive range extending all along the eastern coast of Aman, which highest peak was Taniquetil, where dwelled Varda and Manwë, the two most powerful Valar.

They fully deserved the name Red Mountains, or Orocarni: even if it was just early in the afternoon, they looked like painted by the tawny light of a sunset, except the tips covered with pure white snow.

From that moment on, the mountains dominated the landscape more and more as they approached them, until it seemed there was nothing else in front of them, while the Sirlechin became narrower and narrower, but remained navigable. On the seventh day of their journey, Nerwen and Aryon entered into a wide valley opening in the mountainside; here, the Sirlechin flowed out of the lake of Orrodal, which took his name from the town built on its shores, a long and narrow mere surrounded by woods; the capital city of the kingdom of the Kinn-lai was located exactly at the bottom of the dale, on a slope.
A well-kept road, even if not very large, skirted the lake, bound for the town; the two travellers rode on, with Thalion on their tail and Calad scouting in front of them.

“It’s been a long time since I came to Orrodal,” Aryon told Nerwen, while they were approaching the gates of the town that, unlike Bârlyth and Kopellin, was mainly built in stone, “Last time, I had a disagreement with King Túrion about some taxes he didn’t pay for ten years… We didn’t part on very good terms,” he concluded grimly, “therefore we cannot expect a friendly welcome like the one Séredor gave us.”

“Suffice not going to the palace and just mind our own business,” Nerwen suggested, but Aryon shook his head:

“Here, too, they know me well, and our arrival won’t go unnoticed. If we don’t want giving the impression we’ve got something to hide, better show up openly, even if just for a formal greeting. Anyway, let’s go and find an inn to make us more presentable; we’ll go to the palace tomorrow,” he concluded.

Author’s corner:

Don’t be surprised if Aryon and Nerwen look as if being in a hurry to formalise their relationship: they had to wait millennia to meet their partner for life, therefore it would make no sense to wait longer than strictly necessary to get married, don’t you agree? XD

The betrothal ceremony is the result of researches made by Gianluca Comastri, well-known Italian scholar of Tolkien and president of Eldalië, one of the most prestigious Italian societies of the Professor’s fans. With him as the male sponsor, I had the honour and the pleasure to be the female sponsor of an Elven betrothal and then of the following wedding, during one edition of Hobbiton,
the annual festival of the Società Tolkieniana Italiana (Italian Tolkienian Society).

Nerwen’s journey is taking her even farther from the known areas of Middle-earth: now we are at the foot of the Orocarni, also called Mountains of the East, beyond which not even the Avari know what lies, because they never crossed them. The Istar and her prince will have to find a way to do it, because Nerwen’s vision showed the possible location of the Entwives being beyond this immense range: will they find someone willing to help them? Or will they be thwarted? For sure, their feat doesn’t look easy to accomplish…

Lady Angel
Chapter XXXIX: Orrodal

They found shelter in a rather elegant inn, *The Silken Thread*, not far from the royal palace; the room was large, bright and well furnished, and the bathroom had a huge tub in enamelled copper. Being almost dinnertime, Aryon and Nerwen hurried to freshen up, before heading for the common room to eat. On the waiter’s suggestion, they ordered one of the local speciality: a fish typical of the lake of Orrodal, similar to salmon but with a more delicate flavour, grilled and served with equally grilled vegetables; with it, they drank a cool white wine, which slight flavour of green apples pleasantly surprised Nerwen.

After dinner, they exited for a stroll in the narrow, but well kept streets of Orrodal. When they got back, they went to bed; however, before falling asleep, they used the comfortable bed for another purpose.

OOO

The following morning, after breaking their fast, they headed for the palace to meet king Túrion; the monarch of the Kinn-lai, after a short wait, received them formally in the throne room. Under the icy and irritating gaze of his green eyes, Nerwen curtsied the bare minimum, while Aryon took advantage of his rank and simply nodded, barely within the limits of good manners.
“Well, well…” the king said pungently, “What takes the First Sword of the High Sovereign to my kingdom, this time?”

“I’m not here on official business,” Aryon answered in an equally pungent way, not bothering informing the king that he didn’t hold the position of First Sword anymore, “but I wanted nonetheless paying you a courtesy visit.”

“Oh, how kind!” Túrion cried ironically, standing up and descending the dais on which his throne stood; he was as tall as Aryon, but much more slender, almost skinny, and looked vaguely effeminate, “Indeed, I was reported you arrived in town with a… lady friend,” he cast a contemptuous glance at Nerwen and approached her, trying to daunt her with his stature, “I wasn’t aware you liked women of the race of Men…”

At his insulting tone, the prince narrowed his eyes and his face darkened dangerously. From her part, not in the least intimidated by her interlocutor’s height or by his arrogance, the Istar stared Túrion right in the face and hurled him a ferocious sneer that looked perfectly like one of Aryon’s:

“Appearances may be deceiving, Your Majesty: it’s not advisable judging without knowing,” she admonished him, “As a sovereign, you should know better than anyone else,” she added, in the same sarcastic tone he had used with her.

The haughty monarch felt utterly irritated, but at the same time, a shiver of fear shot through him and this unsettled him: what was so threatening, in this tiny woman? Nonetheless, the feeling of danger persisted and this annoyed him even more.

“Be that as it may, there’s no accounting for taste,” he replied, dryly; then the noticed that the human foreigner spoke in perfect Avarin. He frowned, while his mistrust grew, “Who are you, and how do you come to speak so well my tongue?” he asked in an inquisitive tone.
“My name is Nerwen,” she answered, not even blinking and omitting intentionally her title as an Istar, “and it just so happens that I’m particularly well-versed in the learning of languages. Knowing already Sindarin, it hasn’t been difficult learning Avarin as well, especially with teachers like Lord Aryon and Queen Eliéenna,” she concluded, nonchalantly throwing in his face her confidential relationship with the two most powerful people of the Six Tribes.

“Yes, sure,” Túrion muttered, thrown, “What can I do to help you, Lord Aryon?” he went on, surely not for kindness, but because he was forced to it by his status of vassal king to the High Sovereign, of whom, as far as he knew, the prince her brother was her representative.

Aryon cast an interrogative glance at his partner, who shook slightly her head in a no gesture.

“I don’t need anything for now, thanks,” he answered therefore, coldly, “However I’ll turn to you, should the need come,” he added, just to keep him on edge.

Túrion set his jaw, but couldn’t reply, because assisting Queen Eliéenna’s emissary was one of his duties.

“Very well,” he nodded curtly, “Then I leave you to your business. Thank you for visiting me,” he concluded; the last words costed him clearly some effort, but courtesy forced him to utter them.

“Thanks to you for receiving us, Your Majesty,” said Nerwen, with all the politeness she was able to gather and a curtsy, again barely as deep as strictly needed, “It’s been truly a pleasure meeting you.”

She said this in an impeccable manner, but nonetheless the underlying message was absolutely clear: it had been a pleasure she would gladly do without. Aryon concealed a grin, wickedly amused; with a brisk nod, he headed for the exit, with Nerwen at his side.

“What an insufferable, snooty person!” the Istar burst out, as soon as the king could hear them no more, “Bloated as much as a rooster in a henhouse!”

Aryon cast her a flabbergasted glance, then began grinning uncontrollably; she watched him perplexed, not understanding his amusement.

“And that’s precisely his fame!” the prince explained, when he was able to catch his breath again, “He had an awful lot of favourites, most of them lasted from a few weeks to a few months… He’s seeded children all over the kingdom. In some occasions, he even had several friends-in-love at the same time.”

Nerwen felt astonished: for her taste, Túrion had neither the charm nor the handsomeness for so many conquests; sure, he was the king, and being the king’s lover could mean many advantages, but nonetheless, she had trouble believing what Aryon was saying. She would rather see him in that role, being he much more attractive in her eyes and having the most prestigious office in all the Six Tribes, as the right hand of the High Sovereign; however, according to what she had learned during her stay in Bârlyth, he had never been a career seducer like the monarch of the Kinn-lai.

“Oh, but please… I’d never go with that one, not even for all of Aulë’s gems!” she grumbled, shaking her head. Aryon shrugged:

“But that’s how it is,” he insisted, “People near the throne assured me he can be extremely charming, when he lays his eyes on someone he likes; the last time I was here, the reckoning was over eight-hundred.”

Nerwen shook her hand like chasing away an annoying insect:
“He could be the last Elf, Man or Dwarf on Arda, but I’d prefer to take the vow of celibacy rather than giving myself to him…”

She truly felt that way: Túrion was so hateful in her eyes, that just the thought of ending up in bed with him made her sick.

“By Nahar’s mane… you think he’s truly awful!” Aryon commented, struck by her vehemence, “Good for him that he didn’t persist in his offensive behaviour toward you: I could stab him, but you could make him stuttering for the rest of his life…”

“…or make him impotent, since he’s so keen about a certain kind of activities!” she concluded with a good deal of perfidy. The prince grinned: he already knew it – but now he had additional confirmation – that it was really better not making an enemy of Nerwen.

He changed subject:

“If you want information about the Red Mountains, having refused Túrion’s help we’ll have to look elsewhere.”

“Yes, I thought about it,” she stated, “We’ll look for a cartographer: he’ll surely have maps he can sell us.”

Aryon nodded:

“Good idea. We’ll ask for directions at the inn.”

They exited the palace; Calad, who had accompanied them but had stayed outside, flying about the highest towers, greeted them with her characteristic cry.

Aryon watched the hawk, cruising around over their heads.

“It’s handy, having a sentinel so far above,” he mused, recalling the troll of the plains.

“Sure,” Nerwen confirmed, then smiled, “She takes her task as a sentinel very seriously and, when she fails, she blames herself strongly, like when she didn’t see you and your people approaching, the night we met the first time. I told her that, if the Wood-Elves don’t want to be seen, you simply cannot see them.”

The black-clothed prince just nodded, without speaking a word: Nerwen could assure him as much as she wanted, about the fact it was water under the bridges and that now it didn’t matter anymore, but the truth was that he still wasn’t able to forgive himself for having ill-treated her, considering how much he was now intolerant when someone dared doing as much. Like Túrion: he had really felt the impulse to stab him with his sword.

Once they had arrived at The Silken Thread, they asked Alkar, the innkeeper, direction on where they could find a good cartographer, but the Elf shook his head apologetically:

“I’m sorry, I know none.”

“Then, the library,” Nerwen suggested: surely, there they would find someone who could give them the information, unless they could find the maps they wanted right there. The innkeeper instructed them on how to arrive at the library, but as it was almost midday, they postponed to the afternoon, after lunch.

Later, they set out for the building that the innkeeper had pointed them out; again, Calad
accompanied them, flying above their heads and, like at the palace, waiting for them outside, perching on a ledge.

Nerwen and Aryon learned that the library kept many maps of the Orocarni, some even very detailed, and because of Aryon’s presence, they were made available for them with no difficulty; therefore, they had no need to look for a cartographer. The Istar warned Calad mentally that they would stop longer than they had planned and exhorted her to go back to the inn’s stable, where the horses had been sheltered, but the bird of prey preferred waiting for them.

To her disappointment – even if she had been warned – Nerwen found out that there were no documented passes through the mountain range, nor the charts showed the northern or the southern end of it, keeping her in the uttermost ignorance about the distance to go in order to get round it.

She called Kelleteyd, the librarian who had helped them.

“Are there no maps showing where the Dwarven realms in the Red Mountains are located?” she asked her. The Avar shook her head:

“Not that I know of. We’ve been trading with them for centuries, but it’s always them coming to us, not the reverse: the Dwarves don’t want us in their kingdoms, nor we want to go there.”

Nerwen barely kept herself from snort impatiently: she knew well the mutual hostility between Dwarves and Elves, but here, it was particularly accentuated.

“When will the next time be, that a Dwarven trade delegation will come to Orrodal?” she asked.

“By the end of August,” was the answer, “when it’ll be the turn for the Iron fists and the Stiffbeards, located to the north of Orrodal. The Stonefoots, who live to the south of our town, will come by mid-October, while with the Blacklocks we had no contact for a long time.”

Nerwen thanked Kelleteyd and took her leave. Exiting the building, she sighed in disappointment:

“The end of August… it’s a whole month.”

“It is,” Aryon confirmed, “If you don’t like to stay here, we can go back to Kopellin and wait for the right time,” he added. She thought about it.

“No, we’d need a week for the outward journey and the same to come back, and we’d already be at half the time needed,” she reasoned, “We might as well stay here. Excluding its irritating sovereign, the realm of the Kinn-lai looks pretty good to me,” she concluded with a shrug.

Aryon grinned:

“You’re perfectly right…”

At that moment, Calad drew Nerwen’s attention:

I think you’re followed, she sent her. The Istar dominated the urge to turn and check it out, but she frowned.

What makes you believe it? she silently asked the bird, who was now flying behind them.

I noticed an Elf, who came out of the great palace, Calad explained, referring to the royal residence, I saw him again when we exited your lodging, and then again now.

Are you sure, that he’s always the same person?
In response, Calad showed her the image of the Elf in question, an Avar in anonymous garb who, for this reason, could easily go unnoticed.

*Check for yourself,* she exhorted her, vaguely offended that her acute sight was being questioned.

Nerwen pretended something had entered her shoe and halted, placing one hand on Aryon’s arm; lifting one foot to slip off her shoe, she told him under her breath:

“Don’t turn… Calad thinks someone’s following us.”

Aryon turned just slightly his head, as if wanting to see what his companion was doing, but he was actually trying to look behind him; however, he noticed nobody.

“Who?” he asked in a low voice.

“A rather strong-built Avar, wearing a brown tunic and grey breeches,” she described him, shaking her shoe whilst pretending to free it of the imaginary pebble.

“Let your shoe fall,” Aryon suggested her. Nerwen did it, so he bent down to pick it up, using the movement to cast a good glance behind them, “Seen,” he informed her, giving her the shoe which she promptly slipped on again, “Surely one of Túrion’s gofers.”

“Well, we’ve got nothing to hide,” the Maia commented, setting forth again, “and until the arrival of the Dwarves, he’ll die of boredom,” she added, chuckling.

OOO

She and Aryon, instead, didn’t get bored at all, in the weeks before the day they could finally meet the Stiffbeards and the Ironfists; momentarily free of all duties, they dedicated themselves to one another, strolling through the town or riding in the woods around it, bathing in the lake, or sun-bathing, trying the delicatessen of the Kinn-lai, conversing and smoking occasionally their pipes, an activity where Nerwen had fun surprising Aryon with the creation of all kind of smoke-shapes; but their favourite activity, as it can be easily guessed, was sharing loving embraces at all times of the day and the night, at their leisure; this way, they got to know each other – and surely not only carnally – more and more every day.

OOO

The twenty-second day of August was Aryon’s birthday.

“My sister used to throw a party,” the told Nerwen while they were lying in the sun, on the lakeshore, after bathing, “A banquet where she loved to have all sorts of food, and then a grand ball like the one at the Mid-Summer Festival…”

“I’m sorry not being able to offer you the same,” Nerwen stated, regrettfully. Aryon looked at her in surprise.

“Are you kidding? *This* is the best birthday of my whole life…” he kissed her, “Being with you is
the most amazing gift I could ever wish.”

The Aini smiled, touched: his declarations always made her heart pound. She thought about how to express what she felt for him and came up with something very natural to lovers.

“Tonight I’ll show you a stunning gift…” she breathed him in one ear. The prince felt a slow shiver of anticipation all over his body.

He wasn’t disappointed.

OOO

At last, on the twenty-seventh day of August, Alkar the innkeeper informed them that the Dwarves had arrived and were setting up camp out of town, where the meetings for the trades would take place, beginning from the following day.

The morning after, in the early hours, Nerwen and Aryn headed for the campsite. The tents of the two clans differed in colour, red for the Stiffbeards and green for the Ironfists; being unimportant which one of the two people going to, Nerwen chose instinctively her favourite colour and headed for the area of the Ironfists. Several Kinn-lai were walking among the tents or sitting outside them with an equal number of Dwarves, undoubtedly discussing business; the Istar looked around, uncertain whom she had to talk to, and Aryn did the same. Seeing a Dwarf sitting alone, smoking his pipe in front of one tent, he pointed him out to Nerwen, and she nodded, thanking him with a smile.

“Hullo, Master Dwarf,” she greeted him politely in Westron: as the Dwarves didn’t teach their language to anyone, nor did they like using the Elven idioms, the Common Speech was the only solution to communicate with them. Unlike the Kindi and the Hwenti, many Kinn-lai spoke it, because they had to talk to the Dwarves they made business with. As for her, she planned to display her knowledge of Khuzdul in a moment it could impress the interlocutors.

The Dwarf had a long auburn mane and a well-trimmed beard; he raised to her an inquisitive gaze, which became perplexed noticing her round human ears.

“Hullo to you, lady,” he countered her greeting with a certain hesitation: it was apparent that he was wondering what on Arda a member of the race of Men was doing in a town of the Avari.

“I’m seeking a way to go beyond the Red Mountains,” Nerwen stated, getting straight to the point, “Is there someone among you that knows about a pass?”

The Dwarf was so astonished, the pipe almost fell from his mouth.

“Hum, I don’t really know,” he muttered, “Never heard about it,” he sucked stronger at the stem, puffing smoke and glancing at her up and down, “Perhaps our chief merchantress, Zagal, can help you,” he added.

“Can you tell me where I can find her?” Nerwen asked him.

“In her tent,” the Dwarf concisely, pointing his pipe at the largest and most luxurious tent, located more or less at the centre of that part of the encampment, in front of which a pennant stood, depicting a grey fist on a field of green.
“Thanks,” said the Maia, without taking it out on his short ways, which were simply the usual ways of his race; Aryon instead glowered at him, but in response, he received only a raised eyebrow.

Heading for the head merchantress’ shelter, the black-clothed prince muttered:

“They’re quite rough, these Dwarves…”

“They always are, with foreigners,” Nerwen observed, shrugging, ”while with friends they become very forthcoming, even if in their own way,” she added in an undertone, remembering Thorin with a rush of emotion: she loved Aryon madly, but the Dwarf prince would always held a special place in her heart… She cast a sideway glance at her beloved: thinking of it, Aryon had some similarities with Thorin: the colour of his eyes, of course, but also the nobility – moral even before the birthright’s – the surly temper, the reservedness concealing a passionate nature… it was almost like Thorin had been the pre-announcement of Aryon, for character, intensity of feelings he had aroused in her, status, even one physical detail. In some way, Thorin was not completely lost to her… The thought was entirely absurd; however, for a moment, her heart leaped up in her throat because of an irrational joy.

Aryon, always very sensitive toward Nerwen’s moods, perceived she was upset and grasped her hand:

“Is there something wrong, sweetheart?”

She strove to overcome the moment of dismay and shot him a reassuring smile:

“Only a bizarre thought, nothing more… A paradox.”

She would not allow this crazy swirl of irrational and incoherent feelings to overwhelm her: Thorin and Aryon were two separate persons whom she loved of two different types of love, which could in no way overlap with one another or get confused. She and Thorin had had their time together – the time destiny had set for them; but from now on, and for the rest of her life, it would be Aryon’s time.

By now, they had arrived at Zagal’s tent, so they dropped the subject.

“Hey there, is there someone in?” Aryon called.

“Coming!” a tenor voice answered; a few moments later, the layer covering the entrance was removed and a plump Dwarf appeared, blond and with a carefully braided beard, glancing questioningly at them. Watching closer, Nerwen realised it was a female Dwarf.
“Are you Zagal?” she asked. Aryon started, astonished: he didn’t recognise her as a female member of the race of Dwarves.

“That’s me,” she confirmed, “What do you want, buy or sell?”

Actually, her voice was a contralto, not a tenor, the prince realised in hindsight. But after all, he had never met female Dwarves, who were known to leave very rarely their dwellings.

In the meantime, Nerwen had gone on speaking:

“Nothing of the sort: we’re trying to find a way to pass the Red Mountains and someone mentioned your name to us,” she explained.

The Dwarf furrowed her brow:

“No, I don’t know of any way to go beyond the mountains,” she declared, by the Aini’s utter disappointment.

“And you don’t even know someone who could?” she insisted. Zagal shrugged:

“If in the world there is someone who knows it, that’s surely Valin, the Court Wise.”

“Well, fine… And where can I find him?”

“At King Khrain’s court, of course,” the Dwarf answered in an impatient voice. Irritated, Aryon opened his mouth to snap at her, but Nerwen was quicker:

“Lady Zagal, we would be extremely grateful if you could organise a meeting with the Wise Valin,” she said, calling her by a prestigious title and in perfect Khuzdul, “It is extremely important
to us finding a way to pass the Red Mountains.”

Zagal stared at her wide-eyed.

“By Mahal’s thousand anvils, where did you learn my tongue?” she croaked stupefied. The Istar hid a satisfied smile: she had been able to impress the Dwarf.

“That would be a gift of his, actually,” she answered, “I’m a follower of Kementári, his spouse: Nerwen the Green, at your service,” she concluded with a curtsy worthy of a throne room.

Now Zagal’s eyes were almost popping out.

“A… gift from Mahal himself?” she stuttered, “But what are you, a character of the Ancient Days stepping out of myths?!?”

*You’ll never know how close you are to the truth*, Nerwen thought; but of course she had no intention to reveal it.

“As I said, I’m a follower of Yavanna Kementári and, for her love, Mahal gifted me with the knowledge of *Khuzdul*,” she repeated.

Zagal stared at her for another long minute.

“So you’re a Wise?” she asked her finally; Nerwen thought it was a fitting enough qualification, more or less equivalent to Istar.

“You can say so, yes,” she confirmed, returning to the Common Speech out of respect for Aryon.

The prince obviously hadn’t understood a single word in the exchange between his betrothed and the Dwarven merchantress, but he guessed the sense by the mimicry of both. He had the confirmation when he saw Zagal step back from the entrance and motioning them to enter.

“Let’s talk in front of a pint of beer, huh?” she invited them, talking in *Westron*, she too; her voice wasn’t maybe exactly friendly, but now it was at least polite.

Whilst entering, following the Dwarf, Aryon cast an admiring glance at Nerwen and nodded to her in approval.

“Hark, go and fetch us some beer, the special reserve,” Zagal ordered a young Dwarf, his beard the colour of wheat, sitting at a desk. Hark lifted his gaze from the sheet he was writing on and jumped up.

“Immediately, mistress!” he cried, hurling himself toward the entrance with such an impetus, he almost tripped over his own feet.

In a corner of the tent, a thick carpet laid on the ground, covered with cushions, on which Zagal invited her visitors to sit, while she went a moment to the desk and cleaned up the paperwork scattered on the top. Shortly after, a panting Hark returned, carrying a tray with three ceramic tankards, painted in bright colours, filled with an invitingly amber-coloured beer; Zagal sat down with her guests.

“Your health!” the Dwarf cheered, raising her tankard to them.

“Your health,” Nerwen and Aryon answered almost in unison. They drank, then they put down the mugs on the ground while Zagal watched them, intrigued.
“May I know your name, too, sir?” she asked, looking at the prince.

“I’m Aryon Morvacor, of the Kindi people,” he answered.

“I’m curious,” the merchantress declared, “Why do you want to go beyond the Red Mountains?”

“We are on a Quest,” Nerwen answered, and seeing that the Dwarf was inhaling to question her surely further, she raised one hand to stop her, “Forgive me, Lady Zagal, but there’s no need for you to know about the details. If necessary, we’ll reveal them to the Wise Valin, when you’ll be so kind to let us meet him.”

The Dwarf scowled.

“I don’t like secrets and mysteries,” she stated, stiffly.

“Nonetheless, we all have some, great or small,” Nerwen replied without a blink, “If the Wise Valin thinks you are to know, we’ll have no objections to share it; but for the moment, we prefer not to disclose it.”

She spoke with the greatest courtesy, but also with such a firmness that didn’t allow the Dwarf a reply without sounding rude; so far, she had always spoken freely about her mission, but since she had begun dealing with the mistrust of the Avari, she had decided to inform only those who could be directly useful to her search; in this case, Zagal wasn’t one of them.

The Dwarf kept her frown, but didn’t insist.

“Of course, you’ll be well-rewarded for your trouble,” Aryon intervened, pushing on the well-known greed of the Dwarves. Nerwen hid a smile: that would have been her next step; they really were connected, she and her husband-to-be. She nodded to confirm.

“Well, of course, yes,” the Dwarf muttered, partially softened, “Usually we don’t invite foreigners to our towns, but I think that for a Wise and her assistant we can make an exception,” she concluded. Aryon felt amused by being mistaken as Nerwen’s assistant, but he thought unimportant to deny Zagal’s assumption.

“Our gratitude will be adequate,” he assured her, removing his small purse of gold coins off his pocket. He poured some coins in his open hand and presented them to the merchantress, “These are a down payment for your trouble.”

The Dwarf took them, very pleased.

“Excellent,” she said, grasping again her tankard and raising it in another toast, “To our agreement, then.”

They sipped at the beer, deliciously cool and with the right amount of bitterness, then Zagal went on:

“We’ll stay here in Orrodal exactly two weeks; we’ll need as much to get back to Fortvalley. I await you on the morning of the departure day, on the tenth of September.”

“Agreed,” Nerwen confirmed, happy with the way the conversation had gone. They finished drinking and then she and Aryon took their leave, and returned to the inn.
Punctually, on the tenth day of September, in the early morning Aryon and Nerwen showed up at the camp of the Ironfists, where they recognised them and took them to Zagal; the chief merchantress was already mounted on her pony, while her tent was being disassembled and stored on one of the wagons.

“Welcome,” she greeted them with a certain affability.

“Thank you,” Aryon answered both for him and for Nerwen, “Where can we stay, in the caravan?”

“Stay near me,” the Dwarf instructed them, “After all, you’re my guests.”

She glimpsed with curiosity at their mounts, the bright Thilgiloth and the dark Allakos, as well as Thalion with his load and Calad perched on his back, but she made no comment. Instead, she heeled her pony, who started at the head of the forming row; Nerwen and Aryon followed her, while Thalion walked quietly behind them, with the bird of prey on his back.

The Ironfists, whose city, Fortvalley, was the nearest one, would travel at the head of the caravan, while the Stiffbeards would follow; nothing would anyway prevent the two delegations to mix up freely, during the halts. In Orrodal they had their tents grouped in different areas just out of practical reasons, because each one offered different goods and in that way the Elves trading could find them more easily.

The journey was peaceful; the Dwarves were well organised: each evening they set camp in places they used for a long time, where they generally found water in streams and brooks running down the slopes of the Orocarni. The road was well kept and wide enough to allow an easy passage to the wagons filled with goods, and even better for the ponies and horses with their riders. Zagal explained to Nerwen and Aryon that this one was the only transport route among Orrodal, Fortvalley and Silverdwelling, the city of the Stiffbeards, located at additional two weeks distance from the Ironfists’. Of course, those were their names in the Common Speech, while in Khuzdul they were respectively Gatholubizar and Kibilgund.

Showing she considered them truly her guests, Zagal invited Aryon and Nerwen to share her tent. The weather of beginning September in Orrodal was still pleasantly warm, but they were northbound and would rise in height to almost 1000 metres, before arriving at Fortvalley, therefore the nights would become progressively colder, while Autumn was coming forth. Nerwen had her own tent, but it was too small for two people, even if she and Aryon loved to sleep very close, and very foolishly, they hadn’t thought about buying one in Orrodal; hence they accepted. A cloth would divide their corner from the rest of the tent, but in the silence of the night even a sigh would be audible, consequently the couple, for the two coming weeks, had to give up their intimacy, with great displeasure of both parts.

Author’s corner:
At last, we got to see a female Dwarf! I must admit that a bearded woman gets me a bit uncomfortable, but Tolkien imagined the female members of the Dwarven race this way, therefore I just stuck to the canon he established.

The imagine of Túrion is Viki-San’s, while Zagal’s is a Weta Workshop study for the trilogy *The Hobbit* by Peter Jackson.

August 22nd is truly Richard Armitage’s – Aryn’s charming performer – birthday ;-

Lady Angel
On the fifteenth day since they left Orrodal, as Zagal had foresaid, they reached the city of the Ironfists. Aryon and Nerwen cast the first glance on it from the crest they were crossing and were struck: none of the two had ever seen a city of the Dwarves, not even Nerwen. Indeed, during the First Age, the Maia never got beyond Ossiriand, the easternmost region of Beleriand, where Lúthien and Beren had fixed their abode after their great ordeal and had lived to the end of their days; this land had been located to the west of the Ered Luin, where Belegost and Nogrod stood, the most ancient Dwarven settlements together with Moria, but Nerwen never had any reason to go there, during her only time in Ossiriand as a guest of her niece and husband.

The façade of the city, dug in the living stone of the mountain, was decorated with colossal statues of ancient Dwarven Kings and with green and grey banners waving in the wind; a gigantic staircase with three flights led to the entrance, opening in the beard of the face sculpted over it, probably the one of the king who founded Gatholubizar during the First Age.
The view was so majestic, Nerwen was speechless, as well as the Avar prince. The Dwarven art didn’t have the lightness and the elegance of the Elven one, being its lines more massive and squared, but nonetheless, it possessed an equal beauty and grandeur. In a flash, with her mind’s eye the Maia saw Menegroth, the dwelling of her sister and Thingol in Doriath, which the Dwarves had helped to dig.

Fortvalley was located on the northern side of a narrow dale, on which bottom a swift river flowed, and it was right in front of the road coming from Orrodal. It was late afternoon and the shadows were lengthening in the vale, while the caravan was descending slowly along the road, full of bends to avoid excessive steepness. On the flat bottom, the road went on, straight and well paved, heading for the city, jumping over the river with a slender, single-arched bridge of stone.

As night fell, hundreds of lights appeared on the side of the mountain, where windows and balconies were set, rivalling with the splendour of the stars twinkling in the darkening sky.

Zagal noticed satisfied her guests’ astonished faces.

“It’s quite a sight, isn’t it?” she observed, the ghost of a smile on her bearded lips.

“Absolutely,” Nerwen confirmed sincerely; Aryon, too, nodded slightly, a little reluctant to express praises about anything crafted by Dwarves; but he couldn’t deny the grandeur of what he was seeing.

They reached Fortvalley when the night had already fallen, but the innumerable lanterns lighted the entrance to the city like broad daylight; Zagal stopped, and with her, her two foreign guests. The caravan of the Ironfists marched past them to pass under the immense entrance gate, while the Stiffbeard’s one stopped outside, where they would spend the night and then leave again in the morning, heading northwards for Silverdwelling.

“I don’t think they have here beds long enough for you, Lord Aryon,” Zagal pondered with an amused grin, watching the very tall Avar sitting on his horse, “even if they will do for Lady Nerwen. I’m afraid that, even if our inns are well-equipped and rather beautiful, you’ll have to keep on sleeping on a pallet, on the floor.”

Nerwen chuckled: sometimes, the noticeable stature of her husband-to-be generated jokes between them, as much as her short one.

“I can’t deny it,” the prince admitted, reluctantly amused, lifting the corners of his mouth just a little in his characteristic half-smile, “Where do you suggest us to stay?”

“Surely at The Amethyst Vessel,” the chief merchantess answered, “They have very large rooms with private baths and an internal thermal bath, which I advise you to try: it’s very relaxing, after a hard day. Besides, it provides great food, at least for our tastes, particularly grilled meat.”

“Looks like you know it well,” Nerwen observed. Zagal nodded:

“Sure: I often go there, for the thermal bath and for the meat. I’ll tell Hark to accompany you and introduce you to the innkeeper, Dhruzin. Tomorrow I’ll see to contact the Wise Valin and tell him you’d like to meet him,” she looked at Nerwen, “He doesn’t love who’s not of our people, but when I’ll tell him you’re a follower of Mahal’s spouse, he’ll be surely interested in meeting you.”

The Istar returned the Dwarf’s gaze.

“I thank you so much, Lady Zagal,” she said, “We’ll wait to hear from you at the inn.”
“Very well,” the merchantress confirmed, “You must leave here your mounts: it’s not allowed to enter the city on horseback; but you can take with you your hawk, Lady Nerwen.”

“Calad doesn’t like much enclosed spaces,” the Aini stated, casting a glance in the direction she felt the bird of prey’s presence, who was flying high above them, “I think she’ll stay with our horses.”

While Zagal was calling for Hark in a loud voice, she contacted quickly her bird-friend, who confirmed she would rather stay with her quadruped friends instead of entering the heart of the mountain.

Hark arrived in a hurry, running on his sturdy legs; Zagal gave him orders, and following them, the young Dwarf quickly organised the transfer of Nerwen’s and Aryon’s mounts to the stables, as well as of their luggage to *The Amethyst Vessel*. Finally, he motioned the two strangers to follow him; therefore, they took their leave from Zagal and marched on Hark’s tail, and he led them inside the mountain, into the city set in living stone.

The interior was no less amazing than the exterior, immense halls with very high ceilings and lanterns everywhere, a network of bridges and audacious runways, staircases, galleries, hallways filled with bas-relief decorations and statues, fountains and benches. The streets were not crowded, as it was almost dinnertime.

*The Amethyst Vessel* was located with a view to the entrance, on the right of the huge ingress hall of Fortvalley; in front of the inn stood a large round fountain, masterfully sculpted and polished in a single, enormous piece of amethyst of an intense mauve colour. Nerwen stared at it in great admiration, thinking that no one was more skilful with stone and gem than the Dwarven master artisans, whatever their detractors might say.

Following Hark, they entered the inn; passing under the architrave, Aryon was forced to bend down and thought, resigned, that he had to adjust to it quickly, if he didn’t want to risk bumping around his head. Luckily, in the hall the ceiling was high enough to allow him staying upright, but he had anyway to pay attention to the chandeliers.

The Dwarf behind the desk gaped at the two strangers, wide-eyed: maybe he had never seen an Elf or a Human in all his life, Aryon pondered half amused, half annoyed.

Hark told the other Dwarf a couple of words in *Khuzdul*, then the latter hurried away, disappearing through the door behind the desk.

“He called for Dhruzin,” Nerwen translated under her breath. Aryon nodded, thanking her: it was quite irritating not being able to understand a single word of what he heard. He pondered about asking the Istar to teach him the Dwarven tongue in the special way that had allowed her to learn *Avarin*.

A few minutes later, a corpulent Dwarf arrived, with a crown of red hair and massive, braided moustache, who stared up and down at the two foreigners, scowling. He addressed Hark:
“I didn’t grasp that your mistress’ guests were and Elf and a Human,” he snorted in a clearly 
annoyed tone, talking in Khuzdul. Before the young Dwarf had a chance to answer, the Istar 
intervened:

“Lady Zagal recommended us this inn, but if you don’t want to accommodate us, we’ll look 
elsewhere,” she said in his same idiom, copying straight his irritated tone.

Caught with his hand in the jar, the Dwarf was startled and on his cheeks appeared two purple-red 
specks, more out of nuisance than embarrassment.

“Where did you learn my language?” he enquired in a suspicious tone.

“During my business,” Nerwen answered curtly, this way not revealing anything, “Well, will you 
accommodate us or not?”

She glared at the Dwarf with a surly look; Aryon did the same: of course, he hadn’t understood the 
words, but from the spiteful tone of both Dhruzin and Nerwen, it was pretty clear it was an 
argument.

The innkeeper returned her stare with an equally glowering one.

“I won’t wrong my best client and friend Zagal,” he said after some moments through gritted teeth, 
going to Westron, “but I have no bed long enough for the beanpole Elf.”

“This is apparent,” Aryon countered, angered, “We’ll sleep on our travelling pallets.”

“Very well, then,” Dhruzin grumbled, “May I have your names?”

“I’m Aryon of the Kindi and this is my betrothed Nerwen,” the prince informed him, once more 
omitting his title, which anyway was completely meaningless, here.

“I see... I had your baggage brought in two rooms, but perhaps one is enough...?”
“Exactly, one is enough,” Nerwen confirmed, “And we’d like to take a bath.”

Dhruzin nodded and motioned imperiously to the Dwarf who had ran to call him when the stranger had arrived; when he came near, he quickly gave him directions about the removal of the bed and the preparation of a bath, and his employee hurried away.

“The room costs one silver coin a day,” Dhruzin informed his new guests, “Down payment for one day, balance at departure.”

“All right,” Aryon said, searching in his pouch looking for the money; meanwhile, Nerwen addressed Zagal’s secretary, who everyone had almost forgotten.

“Thanks for your assistance, Hark,” she told him, handing him a generous tip.

“You’re welcome,” said the young Dwarf, blushing and gladly accepting the offered coins, “For your dinner, I recommend fillet of narag. It’s a peculiar race of black cattle with no horns; it’s bred only in our valley, and its meat is very high quality.”

“Thanks for your advice, Hark,” Nerwen smiled at him; in those two weeks, she had grown fond of him because of his accessibility and shyness, “We’ll take it.”

Hark took his leave with a bow, that he performed again to Aryon, and finally he went away.

“While they’re removing the bed from your room,” Dhruzin said, “you can go to the common room and have a drink. We have an excellent beer or, as an alternative, cider.”

They headed for the common room, where they waited for about half an hour drinking a glass of cider, sweet and pleasantly cool, very refreshing; then the porter Dwarf came to inform them that their room and the bath were both ready, hence they followed him upstairs.

The room was truly as large as Zagal had said, even if the ceiling was still too low for Aryon, forcing him to dodge the central chandelier. They had carried away the bed, making the room even larger, but pillows, sheets and blankets had been left on a chest; and in a corner they found their baggage, neatly stacked. They pulled out their straw carpets, unrolling them on the floor, then they used blankets and pillows to create the pallets where they would sleep.

“I can’t wait to wash up properly,” Nerwen stated while taking off her boots.

“You’re telling me,” Aryon agreed, beginning to untie his shirt; in those two weeks, they had to be content with a basin and a jug, washing up just roughly.

Barefooted, Nerwen went to inspect the bathroom; she found a large round bathtub set into the floor, covered in small polished ties the colour of amethyst, recalling the fountain outside, in front of the inn. It was full of water, slightly cloudy and smelling of iodine, being it actually thermal water coming from one of the sources abounding around Fortvalley, as Zagal had told her. A shelf next to the tub held some towels, of thick linen cloth, snow-white even if looking rather rough.

“Wonderful!” the Aini cried, delighted; she entered, leaving the door ajar, then she disrobed quickly. She threw her dusty cloths in a corner and undid her hair, which she, as usual while travelling, had kept plaited; finally, she immersed herself with a satisfied sigh, sitting looking at the door, the pleasantly warm water to her chest. Holding her breath, she sank under the surface, then re-emerged; pulling her wet hair out of her face, she propped her back against the edge of the bathtub and relaxed, closing her eyes.

Shortly after, she heard the door opening; she cracked her eyes open, but the following second she
was wide-eyed, her breath caught in her throat: Aryon had entered, already entirely undressed. The prince looked around appreciatively, unaware that she was staring at his attractive naked body.

“That Dwarf may be unbearable, but this bathroom is truly spectacular,” he commented, turning to her; only now, he noticed her devouring gaze. A brazen grin slowly curled the corners of his mouth.

“Do you like what you’re seeing, my love?” he teased her, approaching the bathtub; as soon as he set foot into it, Nerwen splashed him, pretending to be upset.

“Don’t you provoke me, you impertinent Elf! I remind you I’ve been deprived of you for two weeks: I could jump you at once!”

Aryon’s eyes flashed while he advanced into the tub.

“I very much hope you do so…” he murmured. Nerwen lifted an eyebrow and bowed her lips in a very, very naughty grin; victim of his own game, the Avar felt his throat going suddenly dry.

“I already told you once, my prince: be careful about what you ask, because you could obtain it…” the Istar warned him under her breath; swiftly, she got near him and wrapped her fingers around his exposed manhood. At her touch, Aryon started and gasped, delighted; she needed only a few seconds to make him respond vigorously to her stimulations.

Nerwen drew back, looking at him from down under with a gaze that could melt a glacier; she was clearly satisfied with the effect she had obtained.

“If this is the result, I’ll go on asking, then…” Aryon squawked, breathless. He sat down and took her in his lap; she promptly straddled him, pressing her body against his.

“I missed you, Aryon…” she breathed in his ear, hoarsely, making a hot shudder running down his spine. He held her tight, enjoying the contact of her skin against his, then he turned his face to hers.

“And I missed you, Nerwen…” he whispered on her lips, before kissing her.

He took his time. With exasperating slowness, he caressed her lips with the tip of his tongue, beginning from the joining, then the corners; finally, he plunged leisurely between them until he met her tongue, slipping along it to explore the deepest recesses of her mouth.

Nerwen almost didn’t breathe, absorbed in relishing the kiss; each time, she felt breathless because of the feelings Aryon, kissing her, was able to arouse in her, both in her body and in her soul, and even now she felt trembling in every fibre of her being. It was much more than the simple meeting of lips and tongues: it was an act of mutual veneration. She had always known that it would be special, with her partner for life; but knowing and experiencing it herself was very different, so intensely thrilling, she felt a lump in her throat at the simple thought of his kisses, let alone when she was enjoying them. A small sob escaped her.

Aryon heard her and his heart flew out to her; he caressed slowly her back, bottom-up until he cupped her face, brushing her small, round-shaped ears that so foolishly, the first time he had kissed her, had him so disturbed to make him withdraw, and that now, instead, he adored because they were part of her, as much as he adored everything in her.

Then, the physical need came back hard on him; he lowered his hands and grasped her by her hips, pressing her against his body: if she knew how to drive him crazy, he had, too, some cards to play. Indeed, now it was Nerwen’s turn to moan, feeling him rubbing against her, taking revenge of the sweet torture she had inflicted him earlier.
Some moments later, with a smile full of promises, the prince drew back; exiting the circle of her loving arms, he made her turn and lay her back against his chest. He surrounded her with his arms and cupped her breasts, beginning to caress them; he brushed gently their peaks, and hearing Nerwen’s low groan, he smiled at himself: he liked to arouse her as much as being aroused by her, he liked to touch, caress and kiss her, he liked to make love to her in every way, and giving her fulfilment was much more gratifying than receiving it. Because Nerwen was his partner, his wife-to-be, and making her happy – sentimentally not less than physically – had become the most important reason of his life… more important than his office as First Sword, than his queen and sister, than his people. Not that suddenly he didn’t care anymore about his family or his land: simply, his priorities had changed, and now Nerwen was the first on his list.

Going back focusing completely on the woman he had in his arms, hot and trembling, Aryon let his hands slip down along her body, caressing her throbbing tummy, then her voluptuous hips, down along her well-shaped legs as far as he could reach; finally, he slid back. He placed one hand on her abdomen, while gently introducing the other one between her knees.

With a sigh full of expectation that sent his heart racing, Nerwen offered herself to his caress, placing her hands on his thighs and relaxing against him. When he reached the access to her most secret part, he felt her starting and heard her uttering a gasp, throwing back her head; then, he bowed his head, brushing her neck with his lips and the tip of his tongue and beginning meanwhile teasing gently her femininity.

At his seductive caresses, Nerwen reacted with a muffled cry and her hands involuntarily contracted on his legs. The pleasure Aryon was giving her was almost unbearable; she quivered in his embrace, her breath quickening, almost shallow.

She resisted only a few minutes before reaching the limit; then, she stopped his hand and turned in his arms. Seeing her desire-clouded gaze, the prince felt thrilled and his heart jumped to his throat.

Nerwen straddled him again and Aryon enclosed her in his arms; they exchanged a deep kiss, burning with the mutual need, going much further than the mere physicality of the love act.

Aryon decided to prolong the wait a little longer, making their joining even better; he left her lips, placing featherlike kisses down her neck, and Nerwen threw her head back. He straightened his back and, holding her firmly to avoid her risking a fall, he pushed her back, going on lavishing small kisses lower and lower on her, until he reached the peak of one breast. He licked gently the engorged bud, making her sigh, sucking until feeling it even tauter against his tongue; then, he switched to the other one.

Totally, happily at her lover’s mercy, Nerwen clung to his shoulders, her long hair spreading behind her, floating on the water surface. Wanting to reciprocate his attentions, she straightened and withdrew a little from Aryon, sliding her hands along his muscular torso, down to his abdomen, feeling it throbbing under her touch; finally, she closed her fingers around his manhood, making him start and utter a muffled sound. She continued to caress him and, hearing his breath becoming erratic, she realised she was igniting his desire; however, her actions turned against her, because he shifted one hand from her back, following the form of her body along hip and thigh, passing then inside going back to caress her intimately, with an even more insistent and bold touch than before; she inhaled sharply, overwhelmed.

A fortnight had been truly too much, for both of them, the prince thought; but underwater he had no possibility to check how much she was ready for him, therefore he would leave it to her.

“Whenever you want…” he breathed, feeling on the verge of losing control.
Nerwen had no need for other exhortations; she pulled back, moving away the fingers that were so deliciously tormenting her, then she positioned him against her and slowly lowered herself on him, making them one. Aryon seized her hips and pushed upwards to meet her, pulling her as much near as possible in body as much as he felt her near his heart, enjoying her sensual hotness, which heated both his flesh and soul.

Nerwen placed her arms around his neck and began to shower his face with gentle kisses; then she returned to his mouth, where she lingered, nibbling tenderly his lips, before deepening the kiss with a fervour that made his heart race like mad in his chest.

Dragged by the mutual craving, hungry for one another, they began to move at an increasingly quick and vehement rhythm, unable to restrain, nor did they want it. Pleasure grew fast, unbridled; their breaths began coming in broken gasps, while the intensity grew, grew more, and more. In a few minutes they reached the peak, and then they felt like flung upwards, beyond the stars, whilst their bodies, and even more their souls, vibrated in unison in a celestial chord; for long moments, suspended outside time, they clutched to one another, lost in an ocean of bliss, enjoying each other in a perfect, unimaginable physical and spiritual ecstasy.

Afterwards, slowly, they came back down to the customary world and time began passing by again, as usual; they collapsed in each other’s arms, gasping, their blood roaring in their ears.

Nerwen laid her head on Aryon’s shoulder; he held her tight, keeping a close contact between them. They waited for their shallow breath and their frantic heartrate to calm down again.

“My sweet Istar, I love you so much…” Aryon murmured in her ear, his voice thick with emotion.

“I love you too, my charming prince,” she answered in an undertone, with equal emotion. He turned his face and kissed her temple, tenderly.

They parted, not without reluctance. They used the soap bars placed on the edge of the bathtub and lathered one another, washing skin and hair, then they rinsed off and relaxed a little in the hot water. At length, they got out of the bathtub and wrapped themselves in the large towels; Nerwen dried her hair in her special way, which Aryon had seen by now enough times to be not surprised of it anymore, and then they got back to the bedroom with the intention of get dressed; but the flame of the reciprocal desire rekindled, sudden and scorching, making them burn again violently, and therefore they fell instead on the previously prepared pallet, making love again, just a bit less ravenously than the first time.

Much later, satiated for the moment of one another, they came down to the common room for dinner. As Hark had suggested them, they ordered narag fillet, which they had grilled rare, with roasted potatoes, stewed broccoli and mushrooms cooked in butter and onions, and they drank dry cider, pleasantly cold. The table and chairs were definitely too small, for Aryon, but the food was so tasty that, after a few moments, he forgot about his uneasiness; they ate with good appetite, to the great satisfaction – but she hid it carefully under a rude appearance – of the inn’s cook, who shared with Dhruzin a dislike for the non-Dwarves.

The following day, late in the morning, Hark came looking for them and took them to Zagal’s. The Dwarven merchantress received them in her sitting room and gave them a drink.
“Unfortunately I have no good news,” she began in a regretful tone. Nerwen furrowed:

“The Wise Valin refuses to meet us?” she enquired, already prepared to flare up: by Nienna’s petticoat, she didn’t bear unmotivated distrust, be it from Elves or Dwarves…

“This isn’t about this,” Zagal shook her head, “The Wise isn’t in town. They told me he’s gone to Silverdwelling and he won’t be back before three weeks.”

Nerwen’s ire cooled off instantly; she felt silly, but above all she disliked it to find out she was biased. Prejudice was something she detested even more than unjustified mistrust, and in herself she tolerated it even less than in other ones.

“I see,” she grumbled with a resigned sigh, “We’ll wait for him.”

She looked interrogatively at Aryon; the prince nodded: there wasn’t much else they could do.

OOO

In the following days, the two lovers entertained themselves in the mutual company and their animals’, going often riding in the valley and exploring it; besides, Zagal had invited them to go and see her whenever they wished, therefore they went visiting her often, and they met her daughter Lukirs, a pretty young Dwarf with just a hint of facial hair, as blonde as her mother. The girl welcomed the foreigners with frank curiosity and overwhelmed them with questions about the world she hadn’t seen yet, because her mother thought her still too young to travel with her. Intelligent and amiable, Lukris soon won over even Aryon. Still trapped in his people’s prejudices, the prince had some trouble to admit that he liked someone of the race of Dwarves; however, one evening, while he and Nerwen were returning at their inn, he pondered:

“Getting to know them better, these Dwarves are not so bad,” he recognised, then, seeing Dhruzin, he made a face, “Some of them, at least,” he reassessed his statement. Nerwen held back an evil grin: the owner of The Amethyst Vessel persisted in his surly behaviour, cold to the point of rudeness, which Aryon countered with an equally icy behaviour; as for her, she had decided to ignore him instead and, on the contrary, she was extremely polite to the unpleasant innkeeper, what made him even more furious, by the Maia’s secret amusement. She admitted tho herself this was a rather mean attitude, but she couldn’t help it.

OOO

After some time, Nerwen began to notice that Hark, in Lukris’ presence, almost didn’t dare to lift his eyes; this made her think he was in love with her but that, being the pretty she-Dwarf the only child of the richest merchantress in town and he just a humble employee, he hadn’t the courage to express himself. She liked even more this willing young Dwarf, however, being absolutely ignorant about his people’s customs in this regard, she wouldn’t know how to help him and therefore she did nothing, unlike she had done at the time with Elladan and Gaerwen in Rivendell.
One day, while they were at Zagal’s, spending some pleasant time with her smoking their pipes, they heard a scream, immediately followed by the sound of a thud. Zagal jumped to her feet and ran to the door, yanking it open and rushing into the hall; Aryon and Nerwen hurried after her.

They found Lukris on the floor, clearly tumbled down the stairs.

“Lukris!” Zagal shouted, running to her daughter, “Oh, child!”

Drawn by the commotion, Hark rushed out from the office where he was working and, as soon as he realised the situation, he threw himself next to Zagal, who has trying to make Lukris recover consciousness by slapping lightly her cheeks.

Getting near her, Nerwen saw that Lukris was conscious, but looked very much in pain. She hurriedly knelted at her side and placed one hand on her forehead to examine her with her power and establish what damages she had suffered because of the fall. She found that one kneecap had moved and created a painful dislocation of the knee.

“It hurts,” Lukris groaned in a muffled voice, gritting her teeth and trying not to faint.

“Don’t worry,” the Istar told her in a soothing tone, “I’ll make sure it’ll go away soon.”

Lukris stared at her, her face half-incredulous, half-hopeful.
“A bone in the knee has dislocated because of the fall,” Nerwen continued; at her bewildered gaze, she explained, “The bone has moved. I must put it back in place: it’ll hurt much more than what you’re feeling now, but I can make you fall asleep and you’ll feel nothing.”

“How… how?” the young she-Dwarf enquired, mumbling because of the pain.

“A bit of Wise-magic,” Nerwen answered, avoiding going into useless details, which anyway she didn’t want to share with someone who didn’t even know the Istari and their talents.

Lukris glanced at her mother, uncertain; Zagal was beside herself with anguish, but she was hesitant to put her daughter’s health in the hands of a foreigner; even if she gave her no reason to distrust her, Nerwen was anyway just something more than a stranger, and the inborn mistrust of the Dwarves toward anyone who didn’t belong to their people, so far carefully kept at bay, in this moment of crisis came back to Zagal forcefully, making her hesitate.

“If I don’t fix the joint, she’ll be lame forever,” the Istar pressed her, worried about the girl.

Her statement shook the merchantress, but it was above all the sincere apprehension she saw in Nerwen’s eyes that convinced her.

“Alright,” she nodded.

At this point, Nerwen bent on Lukris’ ear and made her fall asleep, whispering her some magical words in Valarin, as she had done at Rhosgobel with the Elf who had his arm broken in the fight with the Werewolves.

“Aryon, help me,” she called then. The prince promptly came to her:

“What am I to do?”

“Take Lukris by her shoulders and hold her still,” she instructed him, “I’ll take care of the leg.”

Hark and Zagal withdrew in order to make room, even if the mother didn’t leave her daughter’s hand.

Aryon kneeled behind the young Dwarf’s head and clutched her shoulders, while Nerwen moved to the other side. She lifted the skirt of Lukris’ dress to bare her knee, where a large swell was evident: the kneecap that had shifted. Both Zagal and Hark paled and looked away.

Nerwen gripped Lukris’ ankle and slowly turned her leg. She searched carefully for the right position, then she pulled firmly; with a popping sound that made everybody’s hair stand on end, even the Aini’s, the dislocated bone got back in site. Should the girl have been conscious, she would surely scream in agony and pass out.

Nerwen laid one hand on Lukris’ knee and analysed it: the shifting of the kneecap had damaged the cartilage and inflamed the tendon. The Istar concentrated, pouring her thaumaturgic power on the injury; under her fingers, a white-blue light spread, surrounding the joint for some moments before vanishing. Satisfied, Nerwen drew back.

“Better immobilise the knee with some splints,” she said, “A few days will be enough…”

Her voice trailed off while noticing Zagal’s and Hark’s expressions, whose eyes were almost popping out because of bewilderment, unlike Aryon, who had already seen her in action with the young bison, injured by the troll.
“You’re… you’re much more than a Wise!” Zagal breathed, “You’re a Magician!”

At this point, Nerwen thought it useless to deny the facts.

“So it is,” she confirmed, “I’m a member of the Order of the Istari, the Wizards of the West.”

She used a description that, implying her coming from the western territories of Middle-earth, could explain the reason why they didn’t know the Istari; but it went even further – even if none of those present could know about it – because it described also her true origin, that was beyond Beleriand; but this, she couldn’t reveal.

“Never heard about them,” Zagal stated, “but after having seen you displaying your abilities, I’ve no doubt they’re very powerful,” she was quickly recovering from the shock, “Hark, fetch some splinters and bandages. Move, boy.”

“Immediately!” the young Dwarf cried, jumping to his feet and running hastily away. Shortly after, he was back with two broomsticks and a saw, followed by the housekeeper – a sturdy white-haired female Dwarf by the name of Grenna – with several bandage rolls.

“What happened?!” she yelled, seeing Lukris on the floor.

“She fell from the stairs and got her leg hurt,” Nerwen explained concisely, “I fixed it, but we need to immobilise it.”

Hark measured and sawed one of the sticks in two pieces of adequate length; then the Aini, with the help of Aryon and Zagal, blocked Lukris’ knee so that it couldn’t bend.

“She’ll have to stay in bed for two or three days,” the Istar gave instructions, “If she’s in pain, put a cold compress on it and call me.”

With her thaumaturgy, she had healed tendon and cartilages, but pain could come back and, in this case, it was better intervening again: there was no reason why the girl had to suffer needlessly, with Nerwen at hand.

None told him to do so, but Hark picked up Lukris in his arms and began to ascend the stairs, apparently heading for her chamber. Grenna hurried after him, followed by Zagal, Nerwen and Aryon.

The housekeeper got past Hark to open the door for him to Lukris bedroom, then she ran to push aside the blankets; the young Dwarf laid his burden cautiously down, then withdrew.

“Better if you two wait outside,” Nerwen told Aryon, pointing to Hark. The prince nodded and motioned the young Dwarf to follow him; Hark complied, after a last anxious glance to Lukris.

They changed the girl in a nightgown and wrapped her in blankets; then they let Hark and Aryon in again. The young Dwarf would clearly run to Lukris’ bedside, but held back; Nerwen caught the stern glance Grenna hurled to Hark and realised the old housekeeper knew about the feelings he had for his young mistress, disapproving of it. She felt sorry for Hark, who instead had her sympathy.

It was time to awaken the injured Dwarf-girl; Lukris blinked, lost for a minute, then she recognised where she was and remembered what happened.

“It does hurt no more,” she stated under her breath, incredulous.
“I made the pain go away,” Nerwen explained, “but it could come back, in this case call for me: I’ll come immediately, don’t worry.”

Lukris grasped her hand and squeezed it, grateful.

“Thank you, Lady Nerwen. You’re a stranger among us, but in spite of this, you treated me as one of your folk…”

“There shouldn’t be strangers,” Nerwen said, serenely, “but only friends who haven’t yet met.”

Zagal felt unexpected tears sting in her eyes, while Lukris beamed at the Istar, moved; Hark was struck, and even Aryon felt touched by that phrase, which reprimanded them all the mutual mistrust and incomprehension between their races.

“You’re right, Lady Nerwen,” her merchantess whispered, “You’re completely right…”

Author’s corner:

The images of Dhruzin and Lukris are Weta Workshop properties for The Hobbit.

Zoological curiosity: the cattle race narag (= black) I mention here, is no other than the Scottish Aberdeen Angus, whose most common colour is black and whose excellent meat is really tasty – I tried it, so I can say! :-D

As I’m no orthopaedist, I don’t know if I have described plausibly the looks and the reduction of Lukris’ dislocation; should it not be so, I beg your pardon and ask you to indicate me the correct procedure – in view of circumstances and scenario – to allow me correcting it. Of course, the quickness of the healing is due to Nerwen’s thaumaturgic power, or otherwise it would need weeks.

The sentence regarding friends who haven’t yet met is a paraphrased quotation of a famous comment by the Irish poet and writer William Butler Yeats (1865 – 1939).

Once more, I’d like to thank all those who are following my story; I thank especially those who give kudos to it, and even more those who take a minute to leave a few words.

Lady Angel
A few days later, Zagal came personally to *The Amethyst Vessel* to inform Nerwen and Aryon that the Wise Valin had come back to Fortvalley.

“I thought I’d seek audience with him directly in your name,” she told them, “explaining him exactly who you are and what you did for Lukris: as I told you, he doesn’t like strangers, but I don’t think he won’t be difficult… also because I told him flat out that otherwise I won’t deliver him the load of pipe-weed he ordered me,” she concluded with a slightly mean grin.

The previous afternoon, Lukris had come out of bed for the first time after the bad tumble, and had moved some steps under Nerwen’s watchful gaze: since the Istar healed her dislocated knee, Zagal thought she hung the Moon and, if someone would dare to say something against her or to behave in a less than respectful way, she was ready to tear him or her to pieces; verbally, if not physically.

Nerwen couldn’t help and chuckle in turn: she was very glad she had been able to win so completely Zagal’s trust and even her friendship. The Dwarves could seem gross in the eyes of the other races, but as much as they could be hardcore enemies, they also could be formidable friends. Even Aryon was beginning to change his mind, about them. Or, at least, about some of them: he still loathed Dhruzin the innkeeper very much, and so did Nerwen.

Therefore, the following day, the prince and the Istar went to Valin. The old Dwarf’s house was located near the halls used for the royal palace; a surprisingly small abode, considering his office as Court Wise and First Counsellor of the king, it was overfilled with furniture and ornaments, with many carpets and thick curtains that made it almost oppressive. Sharp perfumes of spices and incenses saturated the air, making it heavy; Nerwen, who loved open spaces, felt rather
uncomfortable, and Aryon, who was an Elf of woods and plains, felt equally uneasy.

A servant introduced them into the Wise’s office, a room which walls were covered with shelves overflowing with books and parchments; Valin was sitting at his desk, engrossed in reading an impressive tome placed on a wooden lectern, with several lamps shining on it. In front of his eyes, the Dwarf held an odd object, made of two round pieces of glass assembled in a metal frame, equipped with a grip to hold it in place.

As soon as he heard them coming in, Valin put down the mysterious artefact, revealing a positively minute physical structure, for a Dwarf.

“Greetings, and welcome in my house,” he said, his voice in the key of bass, which was surprising, given his size. His words were courteous, but his tone sounded neutral: it was apparent that, wouldn’t it be for Zagal’s insistence and her not even much concealed blackmail regarding his pipe-weed, he would happily do without receiving these two foreigners.

Aryon’s face promised nothing good; even Nerwen couldn’t help but feel annoyed by Valin’s biased attitude. However, she tried to keep calm and behave diplomatically: after all, they were in his house and she needed information that, as they told her, only he could provide.

“I know you don’t like strangers,” she said in a soft voice, in Khuzdul, “I’m here only to ask you information, Lord Valin, not to rob nor to trick or to hurt you, therefore I don’t see any reason whatsoever you should treat me or my betrothed like enemies.”

Hearing his idiom on the lips of a Human, Valin was startled; the use of the honorific title flattered him, but he was too old to let someone charm him. Not much, anyway.

“Only Wise… Lady Nerwen,” he corrected her, using in turn the courtesy title – maybe a hint of a
slight softening, the Istar hoped, “You’re truly a disciple to the Queen of Earth, as Zagal told me?” he enquired.

“That I am,” Nerwen confirmed, “and it’s for the love of her that Mahal granted me the knowledge of your tongue.”

Valin watched her intently, then he nodded thoughtfully:

“Now I understand why you speak *Khuzdul*… Well, perhaps we got off on the wrong foot,” he conceded unwillingly, “Shall we start again?”

“Alright,” Nerwen accepted, going back to the Common Speech out of regard for Aryon, then she made a small curtsy, “Nerwen the Green. Nice to meet you, Wise Valin.”

Of course, the Avar prince had followed the interchange between her and the old Dwarf without understanding a single word so far, but from the tone of their voices and his betrothed’s attitude, he realised the hostilities had softened, even if they weren’t completely disappeared yet. Following promptly her example, even if he hadn’t completely grasped it, he bowed his head in a greeting nod:

“Aryon Morvacor of the Kindi. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Wise Valin.”

“The pleasure is mine, Lady Nerwen, Lord Aryon,” the old Dwarf stated, speaking in *Westron* he too; his tone was definitively less cold than before, even if still quite rigid, “Take a seat,” he added, pointing to the two chairs placed in front of his desk.

“Thanks,” the Aini said, sitting; Aryon did the same, finding himself as usual with his knees much higher than they should be, because the chairs in Dwarven size were definitively too low for him, but he couldn’t help it in any way, so he had only to adjust to it.

“So, what kind of information are you looking for?” the Wise enquired.

“We are on a Quest,” Nerwen explained, accentuating the last word so one could hear the capital letter, “and we’re seeking a way to go beyond the Red Mountains.”

Valin shook his head.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know about the existence of any pass,” he affirmed, to the Istar’s great disappointment, “However…” his snow-white eyebrows joined over his big hooked nose while he was furrowing in the effort to focus, “I think I remember reading somewhere that a Stonefoot – or perhaps it was a Blacklock – had found what he thought could be a passage, but I don’t think he actually got through it. I’ll have to search my library, that is, if I still have the book speaking about it. I’m afraid this will take some time: my eyes are not as good as they used to be once and they get easily tired, in spite of the glasses.”

He pointed to the strange object in glass and metal he was wearing when they entered. Then, it was a help for the sight, Nerwen deduced.

“You’re very kind,” she thanked him, “but besides speaking it, I can also read *Khuzdul*: I can look for the information in your books, avoiding both bothering you and straining your eyes. Of course,” she hurriedly added, seeing him stiffen, “I’ll read only the volumes you think appropriate; you will search yourself those you don’t wish I look into.”

Valin relaxed again his stance: evidently, she had guessed right what his concern was.
“I think this will do,” the old Wise commented, “You, too, could lend us a hand, Lord Ayron: I have books in Westron as well. And even some in Elven tongue.”

“Sure,” the prince accepted, “as soon as it isn’t Quenya, which I don’t speak.”

“They’re mostly in Avarin, and some in Sindarin,” Valin reassured him.

“Wonderful,” Nerwen commented, feeling her hopes rekindling, “When can we begin?”

“Even tomorrow,” the Wise answered, “Come in the early morning, I get up early,” he watched them quietly for some moments, “What are you looking for, beyond the Red Mountains?” he enquired.

Nerwen was awaiting this question, and even if she doubted Valin would judge it a sensible thing, she had decided to tell him the truth, since she had nothing to hide.

“I’m seeking the Entwives,” she answered therefore, looking him directly in the eye. Aryon tensed, ready to snap at the old Dwarf if he dared mocking his betrothed: at the time, he did it, but he wouldn’t allow anyone else. Moreover, he regretted it dearly.

The Wise furrowed, probably searching his memory, looking for the meaning of this unfamiliar name.

“The females of the Onodrim?” he asked finally for confirmation. Nerwen nodded.

“They say they’ve been destroyed during the battle of Dagorlad,” Valin said; his tone was sceptical, but soft, showing he was giving her the benefit of doubt, and this made Aryon relax slightly.

Again, Nerwen nodded:

“Their gardens have been destroyed, but none have ever seen their remains; hence, we don’t know for certain if they’re have been truly destroyed.”

“So this is your Quest…” the Wise pondered thoughtfully, “Much has been sung about the journeys of the Ents searching for the Entwives: what makes you think you’ll succeed where they have failed?”

“I have reasons to think that mayhap they’re somewhere beyond the Orocarni,” Nerwen answered. Her calm confidence favourably impressed Valin and he nodded: by now, he was sure about her good faith.

Very satisfied about how the conversation had ended, even if the beginning had been anything but promising, Aryon and Nerwen took their leave and headed for Zagal’s house, both because the Istar wanted to check again on Lukris and her knee’s conditions and because she wanted to report to the merchantress about the outcome of the encounter with Valin.

“Very well,” Zagal commented in a greatly satisfied tone, “I was sure you would convince him, in spite of his reservations on the non-Dwarves.”

“Surely your treat not to give him his pipe-weed had some bearing,” Aryon said with a sarcastic grin, but the Dwarf shook her head:

“That was good only to convince him receiving you: if he wouldn’t help you, he could just say he didn’t knew anything about no pass.”
“You’re right,” Aryon admitted.

“Anyway,” Nerwen intervened, “I admit I’m quite surprised he accepted the reason of our Quest easily enough: I expected him not believing us, or thinking we’re two fools.”

“Is it so absurd?” wondered Zagal who, after the first time, had asked no further elucidations about it; Nerwen was about to answer, but the merchantress waved her hand as if cancelling what she had just said, “No, I don’t want to know, not really, even if I’m quite intrigued from your statement; but I don’t need to know,” she winked at her, then she looked at Aryon to include him in what she was going to say, “Now we’re friends, and friends trust each other.”

The Maya shot her a bright smile:

“Thank you, Zagal: I’m honoured you think of us as friends, and know that it’s both sides.”

As an answer, she got a smile as much bright.

OOO

“I’d never expect to be called a friend from someone of the people of the Dwarves,” Aryon declared later, thoughtfully, while they were going back to the inn, “Least of all for me to reciprocate it…”

Nerwen looked at him, struck he had been willing to admit it. The aversion between Elves and Dwarves was well known, but in these eastern lands it was particularly accentuated, hence she was favourably impressed that her husband-to-be had gone over it, at least for selected members of the Dwarven race; in this case, Zagal, and surely Lukris and Hark, too.

“If you get to know them, they’re not so bad, these Dwarves,” she commented softly.

“So it seems,” the Avar prince confirmed.

OOO

The next morning, after breakfast, they went to Valin and found him already waiting for them in his well-stocked library, which took up three full rooms in his house. The Wise had already prepared several volumes to look through, divided in the various languages that each of them knew; they sat around a large table and began to leaf through the tomes.

A couple of hours later, Valin rang a bell to get some hot cider – by now they were well into autumn and at the altitude where Fortvalley was located it was beginning to be rather cold, even if in the city dug into the mountain, warmed by the thermal springs, one didn’t feel it much – and he invited his guests to drink it with him; then they went on with their research. When noon came, Nerwen and Aryon took their leave to go to lunch and have a break to rest their eyes and stretch their limbs, sore because of the prolonged sitting position, then in mid-afternoon they got back to continue.
About ten days went by, then finally Aryon ran into a passage in Westron that reported the hypothesis of the existence of a pass in the Red Mountains. It referred to another text, a travel diary in Khuzdul, fortunately naming title and author that Valin recognised. However, he didn’t recall where he had stored it, therefore Nerwen and he – but not Aryon, who wasn’t able to read the Dwarven runes – searched through the shelves until the Wise found it, in a forsaken corner; it was an insignificant booklet, its leather cover quite worn out and its pages, which time had made fragile, rather faded, but luckily still readable.

Valin leafed through it personally, remembering vaguely where the hint was that they were looking for, but he didn’t find it; therefore, he had to go through the text more carefully, his glasses glued in front of his eyes, which were half-closed in concentration. Nerwen was barely suppressing the urge to wriggle on the chair, impatient and full of expectation, and she was about to ask the Wise to let her do it, when finally the old Dwarf started and cried in a triumphant tone:

“Here it is!”

Nerwen sprang at his side in what looked a single jump:

“Where? Where?”

Valin pointed to the beginning of one page and stood up, making way for her, but she didn’t even notice it; she took the small book, her eyes wide to better see the faded runes, and glanced through the text holding her breath. Aryon, affected by the Istar’s anxiousness, barely held back the request to translate at once what the writing said, giving her the time to read.

“I’m not sure I understand it right,” Nerwen murmured, furrowing, “probably because I don’t know the geographical references…” she read again the few lines, then tried to translate them in Westron, “At the centre of the crescent of the Shadowy Forest, where the Mountains of the East curve southwards, the Green River exits a deep dale; following the river seeking its source, we travelled many a day, until it was impossible to go on because of the snow, but we were almost at the top. Mayhap this dale is truly a pass through the mountain range, the only one known so far; but we were not able to ascertain it because winter was almost upon us. Alas, I never had the chance to go back to that place, hence I leave its exploration to someone else. I regret it, because if it was me the one to find it, I would have gone down in history as the discoverer of the first, and mayhap the sole, pass over the impenetrable Mountains of the East.”

Nerwen placed down the booklet and glanced at Valin, looking for explanations. While she was reading, the Wise had begun to rummage in a pile of parchments, which he unrolled one after another until he found the one he was looking for.

“Here,” he announced, spreading it on the table. Aryon shove aside a few tomes to make room for him, so the Dwarf could unroll the parchment completely. They noticed it was a map, east-up drawn as customary for the Dwarves, therefore with a section of the Orocarni in the upper part and the Sea of Rhûn in the lower part. Only the western side of the mountains was depicted on it, while the eastern side had been left blank, clearly because it was completely unknown. The Red Mountains appeared from east-southeast, then made a wide curve eastward and finally bent sharply southwards, disappearing beyond the edge of the map. In the concavity of the arch, an immense forest was portrayed, twice the size of Mirkwood, which name, translated from Khuzdul, meant precisely Shadowy Forest, mentioned by the explorer who had written the travel diary. A river delimited its northern end, while another rose in the exact point where the mountain range curved southwards. The first was marked with a name, the second instead not.

Valin poked his index finger on the river with no name and said:
“This must be the Green River: its location matches exactly the description.”

Looking at the shape of the huge forest, Nerwen recognised the place.

“Here, in the Ancient Days, was the great Inland Sea of Helcar,” she said in a low voice, “And here,” she pointed out on the map where the Green River came out of the forest, “was Cuiviënen.”

She said no more. Nor was it necessary, because Aryon knew the name of the place where the first Quendi had awakened, where Oromë travelled to invite them to Valinor and where Galadhost met Lauriell, falling instantly in love with her; as for Valin, as a Wise he surely knew history. That sea had disappeared because of the land and sea devastation at the end of the First Age, and now the Sea of Rhûn was all what remained of it.

“Who inhabits this territory?” she enquired, changing the subject.

“The Blacklocks are here, at Greatcavern, Gabilgundu in our language,” the Wise answered, pointing out the portion of Orocarni just north of the Shadowy Forest, “The Freshwater marks the southern border of their realm,” he concluded, poking his index finger on a stream that, rising from the Mountains of the East, contoured the northern end of the immense forest.

Aryon compared the distance between Fortvalley and Orrodal, and between the latter and the Shadowy Forest.

“From here, we’ll need five to six weeks to get there,” he estimated.

“More likely six than five,” Valin confirmed. Nerwen pressed her lips together, discouraged:

“Considering that it’s the end of October, we cannot face the journey now: it’s too late in the season and we’d find the pass covered in snow.”

“We can go back to Orrodal,” Aryon suggested, “and set off again in spring, gaining this way a full fortnight.”

Nerwen hesitated: she didn’t like the idea to spend the whole winter in the same town as Túrion, constantly under the surveillance of his spies; however, the prince’s suggestion was good, and she couldn’t allow her personal antipathies to hinder their mission.

“Alright,” she said, “even if I wouldn’t mind to spend wintertime here in Gatholubizar,” she added, to soothe a little the Wise who, to be fair, after the initial surliness had always proven impeccably kind to them. Valin nodded, accepting the implicit praise to his city.

“If you’ll truly find this pass,” he said, “will you let me know?”

“If it’ll be possible, we’ll be glad to,” Nerwen assured him, “After all, it’s the least we can do, to thank you for your assistance.”

The old Dwarf watched her thoughtfully:

“At the beginning, I was less than enthusiastic,” he stated frankly, “I can’t say I changed my mind, as for my dislike toward strangers, but from now on, you two aren’t accounted in this number.”

Both Aryon and Nerwen nodded to show their appreciation for what they knew a significant statement, from the Wise’s part.
It was mid-afternoon when they left Valin’s house for the last time, with a copy of the map that the Wise had made for them; while they were heading for Zagal’s to inform her about the success of their search, Aryon told Nerwen:

“My mother painted very well and she often depicted Cuiviénen… I never thought I would have the chance to see the place with my own eyes.”

His emotion, which in Valin’s presence he had concealed, was instead most apparent to Nerwen.

“Now it’s surely very different from then,” she warned him. The prince nodded slowly:

“I realise that, but nonetheless, it’ll be very thrilling for me seeing the places where Aldaron rode and where my parents met.”

Touched, the Aini smiled: she, too, was thrilled at the idea to walk in that place that, after so many millennia, had become a myth even among the Eldar: of those who had seen it with their own eyes, even in Aman there were only very few left.

Zagal received them immediately. They told the merchantress about the news, as well as about their decision to return to Orrodal at once and winter there, gaining this way two weeks travelling when they would set off for the Shadowy Forest. The Dwarf professed her regret in seeing them go, but she understood their reasons and offered to provide for anything they could need.

“Heavy blankets,” Aryon said, worried about the temperatures they would find in the two weeks trip separating them from the capital city of the Kinn-lai, “A tent for two people, and supply enough for the journey to Orrodal.”

Zagal nodded, making mental notes of everything.

“Before you go, will you be my guests for a goodbye-dinner?” she asked them; they accepted gladly.

When they got back to Dhruzin’s inn, Nerwen thought the moment had come to contact again Yavanna and tell her about the progresses of their search. She announced her purpose to Aryon, warning him about the state of apparent catalepsy she would be in during her astral journey, so that he wouldn’t be worried.

“But is it dangerous?” the prince enquired, his brow furrowed.

“My body will be defenceless,” she revealed, “and for this reason, I can do this thing only in safe conditions, like now; or better,” she added, pondering, “never more than now, as you’ll be here to watch over me.”

It was true: also the other times there had been someone watching over her – Treebeard, for instance – but so far, it had never been an expert and fierce swordsman like her betrothed. Nerwen
was sure that, should it be the case, Aryon would give a run for his money even to Glorfindel, who was the most formidable living Elven warrior.

The prince instinctively tightened his grip on the hilt of his sword, which dangled from his hip.

“You can be sure I’ll protect you,” he stated firmly, “Will it be a long thing?”

“I don’t think so, after all I haven’t that much to tell to my Mistress,” she guessed. Unless another perturbation would occur like the one caused by Sauron the year before, which had her jumping forward in time almost four months; at this memory, she frowned, “There’s the remote chance of something keeping me back,” she therefore preferred warning him, out of prudence, “even if it is truly an infinitesimally small probability. Should it happen, don’t worry: sooner or later I’ll be back in my body. You’ll have only to keep it safe.”

Aryon’s eyes darkened.

“I don’t like you taking risks,” he declared in a low voice. Nerwen softly grasped his arm in a reassuring gesture.

“I did this already many times, and the only time there has been trouble, I came back unscathed anyway,” she told him, “Trust me.”

“Of course I trust you, my heart,” he sighed, “Nonetheless, I’ll worry until you’ll back.”

She kissed his lips, tenderly: her prince was truly ferociously protective, and she liked it, because even if she didn’t actually need it, it was a comforting feeling.

“Afterwards I’ll need food and drink,” she said, “I’ll be hungry and thirsty; better ordering our dinner in our room.”

“I’ll take care of that,” Aryon nodded.

At last, Nerwen laid down on their pallet and closed her eyes; a few moments later, her mind had reached the astral dimension and she was knocking at the door representing her link with Yavanna. Soon after, the door opened.

“My dear friend, Kementári greeted her with a smile, as usual, welcome back.

Around them, the library of her palace in Valimar appeared and they sat down on two stuffed armchairs.

I see you a whole lot more serene than last time, the Valië observed, tilting her head sideways to better watch her disciple, May I hope it is because of your Avar prince?

On Nerwen’s face blossomed a wide smile.

Yes, it’s precisely because of him, she confirmed. Yavanna’s smile, too, widened:

I am truly happy for you. Did he keep you waiting for long, after our last conversation?

Not much, fortunately…

Nerwen told her in broad terms how he had joined her and things had been clarified between them; then, she added that they exchanged the promise for marriage in the presence of one of Aryon’s best friends and the latter’s wife.
I would’ve liked so much you to be my sponsor, she concluded, but that wasn’t possible of course.

I, too, would have liked to be your sponsor, Yavanna admitted, but it would be silly to wait only for this. You had to wait already so long to meet, especially you… And do not tarry for the wedding either: on expiration of the year, celebrate it, wherever you are, among Elves, Men or Dwarves.

Or Onodrim, Nerwen couldn’t hold back a smile, remembering Aryon’s words, *I came to bring you up-to-date about my quest*, she kept going, finally taking up the more serious part of her visit, rather than telling you about myself…

Sure, Kementári confirmed, she too, grasping herself after the merry digression, *So tell me*…

Nerwen reported her about the finding of what finally looked like a solid lead to cross the seemingly uncrossable Mountains of the East, on that very evening at the Wise Valin’s house; as well as their plans for the immediate future, that was returning to the capital city of the Kinn-lai and then go on from there, in spring, to the Shadowy Forest and the supposed-to-be pass.

*Beyond the Orocarni*… the Queen of Earth pondered, thoughtful, *You will go more eastward than Oromë and his companions ever arrived, when they went for the invitation to the Quendi to come to Valinor.*

Nerwen nodded: Cuiviénen, place of the awakening of the Elves, had been located on the eastern shores of the great inland sea of Helcar, but still over one hundred kilometres west of the Red Mountains.

*I’m going to follow the same route as the writer of the travel diary that speaks about the supposed pass*, she stated, *and this will take me exactly where once was located Cuiviénen*, she paused a minute, thinking of her betrothed, *For Aryon, it will be surely very exciting seeing the place where his parents met, even if now it’ll be very different from that time.*

That remark reminded Yavanna what the Avar prince’s ascent was.

*You know, I asked news about his father Galadhost*, she revealed.

Really? Nerwen asked, in surprise; she had thought about asking information to the Queen of Earth, but last time they met, she had been too upset and forgot about it. As it often happened, her Mistress had anticipated her wishes.

The Valië nodded:

*Yes: I learnt he made it back safe and sound to Aman. Like Melian at the time, he stayed for a long time in the Gardens of Lórien, seeking comfort from his grief for his wife’s death, then he has been reintegrated in Oromë’s followers.*

*Aryon will be happy to learn this. I thank you on his behalf, Kementári*, Nerwen said, grateful.

*It has been a pleasure*, Yavanna assured her, smiling affectionately.

How’s Melian? the Istar asked now, as usual anxious to get news about her sister.

*She came to Valimar a few weeks ago and she visited me*, Yavanna told her, *She is doing fine, and she asked me to tell you your garden is luxuriant. She hugs you.*

*Very well! Nerwen smiled, Please return her hug.*
Of course… but go, now, do not get tired any more than necessary.

They stood up, and the Valië grasped her disciple by her shoulders, embracing her formally. A little surprised at this, because when they were alone they rarely indulged in the conventional etiquette, Nerwen returned her embrace.

May the blessing of the Queen of Earth accompany you and your betrothed, Yavanna wished her solemnly, As I will hardly manage to physically attend your wedding, promise me that, as soon as you will decide to celebrate it, you will let me know, so that I will be able to be there mentally, if nothing else.

Then Maia felt emotionally overwhelmed: her Mistress was doing her a great honour. She bowed her head, nodding.

I’ll do that, she promised.

Eventually, she took her leave and the library dissolved in a white mist.

OOO

Aryon was spying anxiously his beloved’s face, who was laying unmoving on the pallet for what seemed to him a very long time; her slight going up and down of her chest while she breathed was the only perceptible movement in her body.

Before the beginning of Nerwen’s astral journey, the prince had gone downstairs, ordering for dinner in their room and asking to wait his call before bringing it in, then he had come quickly back to sit at her side; she had flashed him a reassuring smile before closing her eyes and going away. He had no other way to describe it: it truly seemed that her essence had abandoned her body to go elsewhere. It wasn’t like when he saw her shifting in what she had revealed him being the Elven double sight, which allowed him to see her at the same time on the visible and the invisible dimensions: she truly had gone away, she wasn’t in Middle-earth anymore.

Would she return?

She had said so, however Aryon couldn’t help but wonder about it and, as the minutes went by, he felt his worry grow.

Finally, he saw her lashes fluttering and her lips parting on a soft sigh. He grasped her hand; a few moments later, Nerwen opened her eyes and met his gaze full of relief.

“You’re back,” he whispered, kissing her fingers. She slowly blinked, uncertain.

“You doubted it?” she enquired under her breath. The curled his lips in his characteristic grin:

“Actually, no… but I couldn’t help and worry about it,” he admitted. She clasped his hand.

“Nothing in this world could keep me separated from you, now that I’ve found you,” she whispered. Impulsively, Aryon bent over her and brushed her lips with his.

“Same here,” he stated. He wanted to hold her tight and cuddle her, but he remembered what she had told him before taking her journey.
“I’ll call for dinner,” he said, standing up. Soon after, he was back, followed by a Dwarf pushing a cart with several covered trays, as well as jugs and glasses.

They had roasted mutton with boiled cauliflower and casserole chard, drinking a strong red beer; after this, they had some delicious pastries shaped like small rings, stuffed with grape must jam, almonds and chocolate shards, with a mug of sweet cider, hot and spiced.

Nerwen slurped greedily the jam dripping from her fingers; noticing it, Aryon chuckled, amused: sometimes, the earnest and dignified Istar looked truly like a child, like that time she had laughed her head off in the library of the royal palace in Bûrlyth, when he had caught her yawning.

It was just another thing of the many he adored about her.

Nerwen drank the last bit of hot cider, then she placed down the mug on the table and sighed:

“Much better,” she declared; within a few minutes she would recover fully. Aryon nodded and beamed her the special smile he reserved only for her, full of tenderness. He wanted to ask her about her journey, but being it an Istar thing, discreetly he restrained his own curiosity: if she was free to talk about it, he knew she would do so spontaneously.

And this was precisely what Nerwen did.

“You remember when you told me about your father?” she asked him, approaching the subject from the rear.

“Certainly,” he confirmed, recalling the June morning on the terrace where they used to have their breakfast.

“Well, last time I spoke with Yavanna, I told her about you and him…”

Aryon arched one eyebrow, amazed: it looked incredible to him that one could chat with one of the Powers of the World – the second most important Valië after Varda Elentári, among other things – about topics that surely, in their eyes, were very banal. His marvelled expression reminded Nerwen that Aryon didn’t know how close her relationship with Yavanna was, more similar to one between sisters rather than mistress and disciple.

“I had just left Bûrlyth and I was very upset,” she told him then, thinking there was no need to specify why; indeed, the prince grasped it and took on a contrite expression, but she quickly caressed his hand to reassure him and he relaxed a little, “so I opened up to her. She was very encouraging, and she was right,” she concluded smiling. Aryon showed a crouched smile and
shook slightly his head: he doubted he would ever be able to get over his senseless reaction at the revelation that Nerwen was his partner for life.

“Anyway, Kementári thought she could find news about your father,” the Istar went on, “She learned he had made it back to Valinor sound and safe and had been welcomed back in Aldaron’s follow.”

Aryon’s azure eyes lighted up, while his face opened to a smile, soft but expressing clearly all of his relief and contentment in learning his parent was fine.

“What wonderful news…” he said in a low voice, “I must find a way to inform Eliénna, too,” he took Nerwen’s hands and kissed her fingers, “Thank Kementári on my behalf: I’ll be eternally grateful to her. You’ve got no idea how good it does to my heart knowing my father lives and is in the Blessed Realm.”

“I’ll do that,” Nerwen nodded, “Her blessing accompanies us, besides, she exhorts us to marry as soon as possible, wherever we’re going to be; I’ll inform her, so she’ll be with us in her thoughts.”

Aryon kissed her fingers again:

“I’m looking forward to it,” he stated; his tone, an octave lower than usual, had butterflies fluttering in her stomach, while the heat of his gaze made her melt like snow in the sun. In her feminine depths, the flame of desire ignited, and it showed in her eyes; its glow sent Aryon’s heart racing and he felt his throat going dry.

At that moment, they heard a knock on the door, and the charm of the moment was shattered.

“Who’s it?” the prince asked briskly, irritated by the interruption.

“If you’re done dining, I’ll clear up,” they heard the answer. Aryon got up with a sigh and opened the door; the servant cleared the dishes quickly, then took his leave. As soon as the Dwarf had closed the door behind him, the prince turned to face his wife-to-be and met her attentive stare.

Nerwen examined him from head to toe, admiring his tall, muscular shape, as usual infolded in black garments.

“Why do you wear always black?” she asked him, intrigued. At that unexpected question, Aryon cast her a surprised glance.

“I always loved this colour,” he answered, “therefore, since I was a boy, I used to wear it often, so much that, when I began my fencing training, they nicknamed me Black Swordsman, which ended up becoming my second name. Besides, in time I noticed it gave me a more intimidating look, and this was useful as First Sword, henceforth I adopted it as the sole colour of my attire,” he frowned, “Would you prefer… another colour?” he enquired, with a certain hesitation. He would hate to renounce what had become a characteristic of him, but for her he was willing to, if necessary. After all, they were just clothes.

But this wasn’t what Nerwen had meant: it had been just simple curiosity. She would never dream of changing something about her beloved: she liked him as he was. Well, there were things she liked more than others, of course. Her lips curled in a slow, impish grin.

“If you must know,” she said under her breath, “I prefer you wearing nothing at all.”

For a moment, Aryon was speechless, taken aback; then he recovered and grinned:
“As for this, I need only a moment to fix it…”

He kept his promise; but Nerwen, too, didn’t stay dressed for much longer.

Author’s corner:

Finally, we hear news about a possible pass through the impenetrable range of the Orocarni... unless it proves a false hope, of course. The road to get there is anyway very long and surely studded with perils and snags.

Culinary trivia: the pastries in the image are the delicious celli from Abruzzi, which I tried and fell in love with several years ago, when I visited that gorgeous region.

Dear readers, I’ll never thank you enough for following this incredible adventure of mine... I didn’t think it would be so long. And the conclusion is still not near... I hope you won’t get tired and accompany me until the end!

Lady Angel
Chapter XLII: Going Southwards

Two days later, Zagal hosted a grand banquet to honour Aryon and Nerwen, with the best food of the local cuisine, among which a delicious porcini mushroom soup and succulent grilled narag meat, the whole coming with the best beer out of the merchantress’ personal reserve. As a proper conclusion, an exquisite pear tart in a bed of ground almonds and, to Nerwen’s delight, sweet cider.

It was late in the afternoon when they took their leave from Zagal, Lukris and Hark for the last time. The merchantress hugged Nerwen with misty eyes, aware that they would hardly meet again. Then she clasped Aryon’s wrist, in a gesture of friendship that both Dwarves and Elves shared,

“May Mahal and his spouse accompany you,” she said, “and may your feet always step on solid rock.”

“Thank you, Zagal,” Nerwen answered, moved, “A star was shining on the hour of our encounter: I’m honoured I could meet you.”

Aryon nodded to show his approval. Only a few weeks earlier, he wouldn’t even dream to do this: not only his life had completely changed, since Nerwen had come to be part of it, but his convictions, too, were changing. Some of them, at least. It was an odd sensation, sometimes unsettling, but he had never felt more alive than now.

Remembering the agreement they had in Orrodal, he took a pouch full of coins from his pocket and handed it to Zagal, who stared at him, puzzled.

“The balance of the agreed reward,” the prince explained. The Dwarf shook her head, firmly:

“You don’t pay friends,” she stated, “And, now that you remind me of it, I want to give you back
your down payment.”

Her decision struck Aryon greatly; he would never have expected it from a member of her race, held – rightly or wrongly – as greedy for material wealth. After all, they rewarded even Valin for his precious cooperation.

“I don’t want to hear any of it,” he stopped her, “You have been greatly helpful to us and I think this is the least we can do: I insist.”

“I, too, insist,” the merchantress persisted, glowering and placing her hands on her hips in a stubborn stance. Nerwen rolled her eyes: here came the famous obstinacy of the Dwarves, she thought; but Zagal’s behaviour favourably impressed her.

“Let’s take the middle ground,” she said in a forceful tone that brooked no argument, “We won’t give you the rest of the money, but you’ll keep the down payment we gave you.”

Zagal and Aryon exchanged a glance; after a brief hesitation, both nodded, accepting the solution, and the courteous dispute was resolved with the satisfaction of both parts.

Lukris arrived with a large goblet of silver, full of hot, spiced cider, and she offered it to Nerwen.

“The chalice of farewell,” she explained, “We drink to the health of each other.”

This was a Dwarven custom Nerwen didn’t know; she thought it was very similar to the one the Elven of Lothlórien had, drinking miruvor on the parting moment, an example of how much similar customs could be of people otherwise very different.

Hence, they drank in turn from the goblet and finally took their leave one last time.

OOO

They following day, they left Fortvalley for Orrodal. In her saddlebag, Nerwen had stored a detailed copy of Valin’s map, which the Wise had drawn for them.

The weather was rainy, this morning, so the two travellers wrapped themselves in their cloaks and hooded their heads before setting off.

Zagal had supplied them with so much provisions, that Thalion was almost on the breaking point, but he took indomitably the steep slope from the bottom of the dale to the crest, from where the road winded southwards. Noticing his struggle, Nerwen decided to transfer some of his load to Thligiloth and Allakos, but Thalion refused, making it a source of pride: after all, he pointed out, carrying their luggage was his job.

If you see you can’t stand it anymore, you must tell me, Nerwen said, concerned, I don’t want you breaking your back only out of stubbornness.

Don’t worry, the robust horse reassured her, Mayhap I’m stubborn, but I’m not stupid.

I’d hope so, the Istar commented in a stern tone, but actually she was genuinely concerned about him; however, she didn’t want to command him: Thalion was her friend, not her slave.

“What’s up?” Aryon enquired, having of course not heard their mental conversation.
“Thalion don’t want to hear about lighten his load,” she informed him, “He insists he can do it alone because it’s his task.”

Not grasping the problem, Aryon raised one eyebrow:

“You can order him to do as you say, don’t you?”

Nerwen furrowed her brow, slightly displeased:

“Do you order your friends around?” she asked in turn. Aryon reminded suddenly that she considered the animals accompanying her as friends, not as properties of which she could dispose as she saw fit. He had forgotten this; but after all, he had a hard time understanding this concept, because even if he loved and respected Allakos, for instance, for him he remained still just an animal.

“No, of course not,” he admitted, “I stay on the rearguard and keep an eye on him,” he offered in amends. Cheering up, Nerwen smiled at him and nodded.

Once they had reached the crest, they stopped and turned to look one last time upon the imposing façade of the city delved in the mountain, Gahtolubizar of the Ironfists, where so unexpectedly they had found friends – Zagal, Lukris, Hark, even Valin – and bade it silently farewell before returning to ride on along the road.

OOO

The weather stayed wet and drizzly for a few days, then it cleared up in what was called little summer and gave them lukewarm and rather sunny days, which eased their journey. The tent Zagal fetched them proved an excellent purchase, being light but warm and perfectly watertight.

The return to Orrodal required less time than the outward journey because, being only the two of them and not an entire caravan loaded with goods, they were able to travel faster; so it was that, on the thirteenth day of November, they arrived at the capital city of the Kinn-lai and took again a room at The Silken Thread, finding again the affable Alkar; the innkeeper was very happy about their return, because the presence of the High Sovereign’s brother gave prestige to his inn.

In the intimacy of their chamber, Nerwen asked with a grim face:

“Shall we go again and announce our presence to that irritant Túrion?”

“His spies will inform him in any case within a few hours,” Aryon observed sarcastically, “but I think we better go, so he won’t guess we know he keeps an eye on us.”

The Istar nodded: in any strategy game, it was always an advantage not letting your adversary know how much you actually know about him. Technically, the king of the Kinn-lai wasn’t an opponent, but they couldn’t even think of him as a friend, because of his clearly ill-disposition towards them.

The day after, they went to the palace; like the previous time, Túrion received them in the throne room, sitting on his seat with the same narrow expression. His icy green eyes lingered upon Nerwen, scrutinising her brazenly as she was addressing him a formal curtsy, just enough not to look disrespectful; noticing his insolent gaze, the Istar returned it lifting slightly one eyebrow,
making a puzzled and at the same time mocking face. The monarch hastily turned his attention on
Aryon; the prince addressed him a nod, again using his rank to avoid paying him more homage
than what pure courtesy strictly demanded.

“I see you’re back,” Túrion said in a neutral tone, “Fortvalley wasn’t to your liking?”

It was a phrasing bordering rudeness, because it suggested that he would have preferred for them
staying at the Ironfists’, rather than coming back to Orrodal. Aryon’s eyes flashed and his voice
sounded dangerously calm as he countered:

“Very much to our liking, actually. The hospitality of the Dwarves was warm, unlike some Elves I
know.”

The king of the Kinn-lai set his jaw, but he took without comment what, after all, was just an insult
replying his.

“Are you going to stay long?” he enquired.

“Through the winter,” Aryon answered dryly. Túrion made a stony face as to conceal his irritation.

“I see. Well then: anything you should need, my resources are at your disposal,” he stated.

“That’s obvious,” the prince pointed out, smiling ironically, this way reminding the sovereign that
this was simply his duty. Túrion stiffened his back, as if someone had just backhanded him across
his face; he nodded curtly.

“Have a nice stay in Orrodal, then,” he concluded in a dismissing tone. Again, Aryon and Nerwen
– who had uttered no word through the whole conversation – nodded him farewell to look just
enough polite, turned and went away.

Túrion’s eyes returned on the shape of the Human female accompanying the First Sword of the
High Sovereign. What on Arda did Aryon see, in her? She was attractive, for a woman, he
considered; but the female Elves were averagely much more attractive. A derisory grin appeared
on his face: clearly, the prince had been deprived of sex for too long, if some hidden virtue
had been enough to make him choose a friend-in-love so unsuitable to his rank…

Then he recalled a detail that he had missed: both wore a silver ring on their left index finger,
which professed them betrothed. Could it really be that they were partners for life…? He shook his
head, incredulous: the High Sovereign’s brother and a Human… that was crazy.

With a shrug, he dismissed the matter: if Aryon, whose father had come from Valinor, degraded
himself by getting together with a mortal, he could but pity him.

OOO

As they left the royal palace, Nerwen wore a disgusted expression.

“That Túrion is really infuriating!” she blurted, “I’d like to have a good talk with him about the
meaning of the word manners!”

Aryon imagined his betrothed giving a real lesson about good manners to the haughty king of the
Kinn-lai and decided he wouldn’t like to be in his shoes.

“Don’t think about it,” he suggested, “That pompous Elf doesn’t deserve the time you waste on annoyance…”

Nerwen stalked along for a dozen metres more, then she slowed down and uttered a heavy sigh.

“You’re right, Aryon,” she admitted, turning to look at him, “useless wasting time on him… The fact is that he made me truly wish to strangle him, today!” she concluded grimacing, “Did you see his rudeness??”

“Sooner or later all the chickens come home to roost,” the prince mused, hardening the grip of his gloved hand over the hilt of his sword, “even if I must confess that I wouldn’t mind to speed things up,” he added with a vicious grin. His remark made the Maia smirk in an equally vicious way, and then the smirk became a laugh.

“Let’s forget about him,” she concluded, slipping one arm under that of her husband-to-be, “Let him stew in his own juice…”

OOO

A couple of days later, Aryon entrusted a courier with a letter for his sister Eliénna, in which he informed her about what Nerwen had learned regarding their father, Galadhost, as well as the news that he and Nerwen would spend the winter in Orrodal. The letter would need roughly two weeks to reach Bârlyth and as much time would be needed for an answer, but as they wouldn’t leave until spring, this was no problem.

A few days later, the 29th of November, they celebrated Nerwen’s birthday; Aryon gave her a necklace of emeralds, gems coming from Fortvalley and wrought by a skilful goldsmith of Orrodal. It was a truly splendid piece of jewellery, worthy of the best goldsmiths among the Noldor, denying once more the fame of roughness that the Avari held among the other Elves.

As they wouldn’t be able to carry with them such a precious jewel during their journey, Aryon arranged for a trustworthy courier who, once they would leave in spring, would take the necklace to Eliénna, so she would keep it for them.

However, as it had been for him some months ago, for Nerwen, too, the best gift was the presence of her beloved by her side.

OOO

The days passed, becoming weeks, and autumn transformed into winter; the snow fell, wrapping the town of the Kinn-lai in white, covering all in a soft quilt.
The two lovers spent many an evening sitting in front of the hearth of their chamber, reading, chatting or exchanging passionate embraces; or in the inn’s common room, where at least twice a week they arranged some kind of entertainment: musicians, jugglers, storytellers, actors, jesters, acrobats alternated during the long winter evenings. They even went to a number of dancing feasts, where Nerwen was able to enhance her knowledge of the Avarin dances she found so amusing the night of the Mid-Summer Festival. Aryon was a tireless dancer and a fine teacher, and so she didn’t need much time to learn the most difficult dances, too.

At a certain point – they had returned to Orrodal for just a little longer than one month – they noticed that the king’s spies didn’t show up anymore.

“Túrion got fed up to receive from his minions intelligences saying nothing to report,” Aryon commented sardonically, brushing away one strand of hair, which in that time frame he had let grow longer. Nerwen laughed and leant over to kiss him.

“Or,” she mused in an equally ironic tone, “he got fed up to hear how much we enjoy each other’s company, while he, even with all his lovers, is lonely like a roving bear…”

Aryon responded to her kiss and pulled her sitting on his knees, hugging her.

“Probably that’s it,” he murmured on her lips. He too, for a long time, had felt lonely that way, while now the feelings he had for Nerwen filled up his heart to the point it was almost bursting.
The following day – it was the eve of the winter solstice – a royal courier coming from Bârlyth arrived at The Silken Thread carrying Eliënna’s answer to her brother’s missive. The queen’s words showed her thrill in learning, finally for sure, that their father had arrived sound and safe in Valinor and had even returned to his place in the follow of his Vala, Oromë Aldaron. She did in no way doubt about the fact that, through Nerwen, this news came from Yavanna herself: it was apparent that by now she had fully accepted as true the claim she was an Istar, which pleased the Maia very much.

Weeks became months; slowly, winter consumed its time, until the new spring came and thaw began. The day of the equinox, a lukewarm wind swept away the clouds and the sky opened up, blue and clear; a still shy sun lit the city and took glittering shimmers from the waters of the lake. The weather was so mild that in the afternoon Aryon and Nerwen took a fancy to go for a long ride alongside the lakeshore; Calad and Thalion accompanied them, the former cruising over them in wide circles, the latter trotting in tail of Thilgiloth as usual, for once with no loads to carry.

They returned at sunset, in a good mood and reinvigorated, as if the astronomical turning point, marking the passage from the dark half of the year to the bright one, had filled them with a new energy.

At dinner, the two lovers had tasty lamb skewers, very tiny pieces of meat slipped on a long stick, another of the specialties of Orrodal, coming with a mix of peas, carrots, fennels and small onions previously steam-cooked and seasoned with celery salt and olive oil. They drank a light red wine and crowned the meal with cedar jam tart.

As he was finishing the last mouthfuls of the cake, Aryon mused:

“It’s about time to decide a date for leaving, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it’s time indeed,” Nerwen agreed, then she grinned, “I wonder if Túrion will have his spies come after us, when we’ll leave Orroda…”

The prince, too, grinned: after the visit on their arrival, in November, they never met again the obnoxious king of the Kinn-lai, and his spies seemed to have given up their surveillance months ago, but one could never know.

“You can tell Calad to check the road behind us,” he suggested, talking under his breath, “and should we discover someone following us, we’ll ambush him and teach him a nice lesson.”

The Istar nodded resolutely: she had nothing to hide, not even from Túrion, but she thought it extremely annoying to be spied upon and followed; if she had tolerated it during the time the surveillance had lasted, it had been only for the sake of keeping the peace, but she wouldn’t do it in case they were stalked.
In the following days, they prepared for their departure; they purchased provisions for the journey and Nerwen obtained permission to use privately the inn’s kitchen where, away from prying eyes, she prepared a supply of lembas.

On the eve of the expected departure day, weather turned bad and a heavy rain fell for several days, overcoming the drainage capacity of the sewer system and causing a number of floods, even in their inn. Both Nerwen and Aryon willingly helped out, sweeping away water and mud and then cleaning the ground floor, ignoring Alkar’s protests who didn’t want his most prestigious guests engaging in such a humble activity; but The Silken Thread had become sort of a home to them, in these last months, and therefore they thought it just right and proper.

Finally, on the sixth day of April, with a permanent beautiful weather for almost one week, Nerwen and Aryon took their leave from The Silken Thread and its affable owner, leaving him a payment order with a generous tip, to cash at the royal treasury.

They went back all the way skirting first the lake of Orrodal and then the Sirlechin, which was its outflowing river, until they exited the valley; here they bent southwards, beginning the long journey that would take them to the Shadowy Forest, or Tor Kathren in the Avarin tongue, once called Taurë Verca, the Wild Forest, by the Quendi who awakened in Cuiviénen.

Their itinerary planned for them skirting the slopes of the Orocarni until reaching the Lavnen, the river marking the northern boundary of the Shadowy Forest, then they would cross it and ride on, bordering the forest until coming across the Green River, which, according to the map that Valin had copied for them, was located in the exact point where Tor Kathren curved southwards, following the shape of the Red Mountains. There, they would enter the forest, riding up the riverbank until they would arrive at the dale where it flowed out, which they hoped would lead them to the pass crossing the range.

OOO

The first two weeks of the journey passed very calmly. Calad, at irregular intervals, suspended her task as scout to fly back and scan the territory behind them, looking for possible pursuers, but she never saw one, so after ten days they decided to stop the surveillance.

On the twentieth day of April, they glimpsed in the distance a peak that seemed to rise far over the rest of the range. Slightly protruding from the main body of the Orocarni, the mountain rose slender and jagged, covered in perennial snow for about one third of its total height.

Marvelled, Nerwen pulled at Thilgiloth’s reins to better observe the huge mountain. Aryon, noticing a moment later she had stopped, pulled in turn Allakos’ bridles and made him go back.

“What is it?” he asked, slightly worried. She pointed out the white peak.

“It’s enormous,” she said, “How tall would it be?”

Aryon turned to look at it; at that moment, the vision she had had in Fangorn struck Nerwen: that was the very mountain she had caught sight of, reminding her of Taniquetil; and the black-robed figure at her side was the Avar prince. Her Second Sight had once more revealed to her a glimpse of the future that had come true.

“I’ve only heard about it,” the prince answered, “It’s the tallest peak of all the Orocarni, and its
name is Viloss. Its height is estimated at about 7000 metres.”

Nerwen felt dumbfounded for a moment: Viloss was the *Avarin* translation of one of Taniquetil’s attributes, Oiolossë, which meant Everwhite. A name surely apt to a mountain recalling so much of Varda’s and Manwë’s abode.

But this, she couldn’t reveal.

“Impressive,” she simply said. Aryon nodded:

“I agree.”

OOO

They rode on for several days in the sight of the immense peak, until it slowly disappeared behind them. After one week since its sighting, they found their path barred by an offshoot of the Red Mountains that extended almost straight westward, rising in front of them like a very high, solid wall.

Checking the map, they saw no evidence of a pass.

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“I’m afraid we’ll have to go round it,” Aryon stated gloomily. Nerwen looked westward, where the natural bastion disappeared on the horizon.

“If the map’s scale is accurate, it may be around 300 kilometres,” she sighed, disappointed, “This means at least one week journey, and as much to come back near the main range.”

“I don’t think this will be necessary,” the prince observed, pointing somewhere on the chart, “Once beyond the far end, we could head directly southeast and reach the Lavnen and the Shadowy
“Forest.”

Nerwen watched and saw that her betrothed was right. Her face lightened up:

“Fine, that’s a good thing.”

Aryon examined the map for one more moment.

“Technically, we’re still inside the Six Tribes’ territory,” he pondered, “but this area is completely depopulated. The Empire of the Easterlings begins further southwards, more or less here,” he pinpointed the southernmost point where Tor Kathren reached the Lavnen, “therefore we’ll avoid it completely.”

“One less worry,” Nerwen commented, relieved: she was in no mood to bump into those sinister-famed Humans. Not much because she was afraid of a fight – with her resources, which allowed her to call in the help of animals and plants, there was very little she needed to fear – but because she didn’t want to waste time.

Thinking of her *kelvar* allies, she cast a glance to Calad who, when they had stopped, had come to rest on Thalion’s back, which had become her preferred perch when travelling. Sensing that her friend’s attention was on her, the bird turned her head to reciprocate her gaze with one of her large golden eyes. The Istar thought gratefully that she could have found no better friend, after Thilgiloth, than this female *calè* hawk met in Tom Bombadil’s land almost two years ago. Then she glanced at Thalion and smiled: the sturdy and loyal packhorse, too, had won her affection.

“Let’s go,” she exhorted all, spurring the Chargeress.

OOO

As usual, at nightfall they camped; after unloading and tending their horses, they lighted a fire and boiled some strips of beef jerky in order to soften them. While Aryon was preparing their pallet, Nerwen plucked some plantain and wild mallow leaves to season the broth. When it was ready, they had it with a few pieces of *lembas*.

Watching Nerwen, a thought struck Aryon, which had never occurred to him before.

“You talk to animals and plants… but nonetheless, you eat them,” he mused, perplexed.

Surprised, the Aini stopped chewing for a moment, then she nodded, understanding his confusion.

“All that is in Eä is part of a cycle,” she answered slowly, trying to explain in simple words a complex concept, “Spring, summer, autumn and winter, and then again spring. Birth, growth, decline, death, and then again birth. It applies to seasons as well as living beings. I kill an animal or a plant to eat it, but in due time they’ll be reborn. Only the Ainur are not part of this cycle, because they’ve been created outside of Eä,” she concluded; because of the veto to discuss her true nature with anyone, she had obviously to omit that she was in the number of the latter ones.

Aryon nodded slowly.

“The Elves, too, when they die, await in the Halls of Mandos to be reborn,” he mused, “and I heard
that the Dwarves reincarnate in their descendants, therefore they are reborn, too,” he cast her a quick glance, “But we don’t know if this goes for Men, too: after all, what happens to them after the passing is unknown.”

“Ilúvatar’s mysterious gift to Men,” Nerwen confirmed, “Many are afraid of it, forgetting that Eru’s thoughts and purposes are inscrutable… They cannot be comprehended by creatures that are lesser than Him, and therefore they have to be simply accepted.”

This went for everyone, be they inhabitants of Middle-earth or Aman, and even for those who had remained with Eru Ilúvatar in the Timeless Halls, outside of Eä, the World That Is.

“Aren’t you afraid of it?” the Avar prince asked under his breath; his worry about Nerwen’s final destiny transpired apparently in this short sentence.

The Aini bit the inside of her cheek: it was hard, being forbidden to tell him the truth. Since the beginning, she had known this would be difficult; but knowing it and experiencing it were two very different things.

She searched for words that could avoid a lie, without disclosing the truth.

“One fears only what is thought to be bad or unjust,” she answered, “I don’t think that a loving father – as Ilúvatar is – could give to His children something bad or unjust.”

Aryon pondered on her words and agreed with them. He placed down his now empty bowl.

“You’re perfectly right,” he stated.

He thought it for good; but later, when they laid down for the night, he made love to her like there was no tomorrow: he couldn’t forget, nor would ever be able to, that one day, even if in a great number of years because of the Istari’s longevity, he would lose her, maybe forever.

Nerwen realised it and, after the ineffable pleasure that she once more experienced in her betrothed’s arms, a lump stuck in her throat, risking her bursting out in tears; again, she thought that the absolute prohibition to break the secret on her true identity was a very sour meal to swallow, because she could not stand to see her beloved suffering.

OOO

In the immediately following days, nothing particular happened. As Nerwen had foreseen, they needed over a week to reach the far end of the offshoot of the Orocarni barring their path, a bulwark of sheer red rock, less high than the main body, but nonetheless imposing and prohibitive to get through, unless they would find a pass; but as there were none showed on the map, they didn’t dare to try their luck taking one of the few gorges they were able to glimpse: they could easily end up in front of an unsurmountable wall and they would only waste time. Hence, they rode on undeterred westward until, in the late morning of the eighth day, they reached the end.

Aryon stopped for a moment to peek to the south-west. Nothing seemed to move on the endless lowlands, almost perfectly even except for a wrinkle in the ground not even enough to be properly called hills.

“Here we’re in a sort of No-man Land; the realms of the Easterlings are down there,” he said,
pointing, “I estimate that from here, the border is a four or five days journey on horseback away, therefore we’re perfectly safe, all the more because we’re heading in the opposite direction.”

Nerwen nodded, glad she had not to worry about that disreputable stock of Men.

They got around what could surely be described as a cape, similar to a promontory on the sea, and began heading straight southeast, with a view to reach the Lavnen without going back to the main mountain range. The journey would require six or seven days, by Aryon’s estimation.

They camped at sunset and lighted a small fire to cook some food, being careful it wouldn’t smoke: even if the region was notoriously uninhabited, you could never know what kind of eyes would scan the horizon.

After dinner, they indulged in smoking their pipes; they stocked up a fair amount of pipe-weed in Orrodal, but not knowing when they would find more, they were rationing it carefully.

Nerwen had found in Aryon an excellent student for the figures of smoke, and even this evening the prince practiced, creating at first a fountain with many gushes and then a weeping willow rustling in the wind; encouraged by the positive results, he tried a more complex figure, in this case a galloping horse, but it turned out in a completely crooked shape, so funny that Nerwen burst out in laughter. For a moment, Aryon felt hurt in his pride, but objectively it was such a mess that he ended up grinning, amused.

Finally, they went to sleep, leaving the fire burning itself out.

Author’s corner:

*The little summer is, of course, the Indian Summer, called this way in Southern America.*

*The original of the romantic image of Aryon and Nerwen sitting in front of a fireplace – a little elaborated – comes from the website “Allday.ru,” but unfortunately, I don’t know the name of the author.*

*Thank you again to all those following this fan fiction, this makes me hope I’m doing a good job… please let me know, I don’t bite, promise! XD*

*Lady Angel*
Chapter XLIII: A Friend from the Past

It was late in the night. The moon, at its last quarter, was almost setting. In this darkness, only faintly lighted by the last moon-rays, several shapes were moving stealthily. They were a dozen, not very tall, but very sturdy Men, soldiers clad in segmented armours of leather and metal; nine of them carried short halberds with hooked blades, the other three had powerful bows with four curves; their heads were covered with helmets decorated with horns resembling insects’ antennae.

While on patrol, at dusk they had glimpsed a wisp of smoke rising on the eastern horizon; as they knew well this was an uninhabited area, which their people had recently seized, they had come to check the origin of the smoke. Having left their mounts at a safe distance, they went on on foot; despite their heavy equipping, they moved silently, in a precise order, approaching the small campsite staying warily downwind, so that the horses couldn’t scent their smell and raise alarm.

The intruders had arrived at just a few paces away from the sleeping shapes, when Allakos glimpsed a movement out of the corner of his eye and turned to look; seeing strangers, he cast an alarmed neigh that awakened immediately the other two horses, who began to whinny in turn. Calad, on Thalion’s back, uttered a piercing shriek and took off without delay.

At the first neigh, Aryon woke up startled; he saw immediately the threatening shapes and grasped his sword, which lay at his side, unsheathing it with an infuriated yell that tore Nerwen out of sleep. The Aini looked around, confused, and recognised the danger; she grabbed her long Noldorin dagger, which by night she slid under her pillow, at the same time pushing away the blanket. She leaped up, back to back with Aryon, wielding her weapon against the unknown adversaries.

The assailters did waste no time and hurled themselves at them. Three opponents, armed with halberds, attacked Aryon and he whirled his sword around, deflecting their blades. Nerwen instead
resorted to her astonishing speed: she ducked, evading her adversary’s cut, and slipped under his guard as he had his arms raised, stabbing him on the bared armpit. The enemy shouted and fell, but immediately another arrived. Nerwen turned to confront him and at that moment Thilgiloth arrived, ramming into him with her shoulder and throwing him off; Thalion, always ready to follow the Chargeress, finished the job trampling the soldier and knocking him out.

Seeing his companions attacking the strangers, Allakos, too, jumped into the melee, running over an assailant.

The attackers withdrew a little, confused by such a furious resistance.

“Easterlings!” Aryon yelled, “What are you doing here?! This is not your territory!”

“You’re wrong,” one of them, maybe the commander, contradicted him, “We took over this uninhabited lands years ago. No stranger is allowed within our boundaries: surrender or you’ll be killed.”

“We’ll see!” Aryon roared, “Bring it on!”

The Easterlings weren’t impressed at all: they were twelve, while their adversaries were only two. They would defeat them in no time.

Four flung themselves against the Avar prince, as other four watched their backs, keeping in check these so strangely aggressive horses. Nerwen, holding too a short weapon to attack by brute force, stayed behind Aryon.

The prince was fighting like a lion. His blade found a gap and wounded one of the Easterlings on one arm; the Easterling withdrew, but one of his comrades substituted him instantly. The point of a halberd caught Aryon on one leg, making him cry out in pain; but the injury didn’t stop him, on the opposite, he fought even more fiercely.

Irritated rather than worried by his obstinate resistance, the commander motioned imperatively to one of the soldiers who hadn’t yet joined the fight; he understood the silent order: from a pocket he took out a sling, loaded it with a stone and threw it toward the black-dressed swordsman.

Aryon saw the movement and dodged away just in time to avoid the stone aimed to his head; the projectile continued his feral flight toward Nerwen, directly behind Aryon, and hit her on one temple. The Istar collapsed, crashing on the ground, unconscious.

Aryon gave a shout; he leaped over his betrothed’s body, shielding her, but now seven Easterlings surrounded him.

Calad saw his two-legged friend falling and gave an infuriated cry. So far, she had stayed away from the melee, fearing the bows, but seeing Nerwen drop, she flung caution on the wind and dove at lightning speed against the one who had struck her. The soldier was covered in his helmet and armour, but Calad aimed straight to his eyes, which were obviously bare.
At the same moment, the warriors surrounding Aryon attacked him and the Avar prince began to whirl his sword like a windstorm.

The warrior Calad was attacking raised his halberd to protect himself, but the hawk dodged it nimbly and stretched forward her talons, ready to scratch out his eyes; the man managed to turn his head barely enough to avoid it and the talons hit harmlessly on the metal of the helmet. Frustrated, Calad cried out and took off again.

Seven adversaries at the same time were too much even for Aryon, despite all his skill and Eldarin agility: even if he injured a few of them, one rather heavily, he was literally crushed by the number and overcome.

The one who looked to be the commander notched an arrow, aimed accurately and fired; the arrow pierced Calad from side to side.

The hawk dropped from the sky with no sound.

Seeing her fall, Thilgiloth reared up and gave a desperate neigh. The Easterlings, now rid of the threat represented by the Human and the Elf, turned their attention to her and the other horses, trying to gather them with the obvious aim to capture them. Realising she has being threatened along with her four-legged friends, Thilgiloth ran madly toward Thalion and, getting by, she hit him with her nose, hence inducing him to follow her. Seeing the other two, Allakos, too, went on the run. The archers bent their bows, but the commander motioned them to stop: he was sorry to lose three mounts, two of them very beautiful, but the Easterlings loved and respected horses and there was no reason to kill these ones.

He pointed out the prisoners.

“Tie them up,” he ordered.

OOO

Nerwen re-emerged from the black nought where she had fallen into, after a blinding explosion of
light and pain that had taken her by complete surprise. Her head pulsed and she felt nauseous. She stirred, and in doing so, she realised she was laying on the ground on her side, her hands tied up behind her back.

“You’re awake, at last,” an ironic and harsh voice commented, speaking a barely average Westron. Slowly, as to not worsen her queasiness, Nerwen lifted her gaze: in front of her, his legs wide apart, stood a rather stocky Man, completely wrapped in an armour. The sun had just risen and, as he wore no helmet, the Aini could see his face: olive complexion, long raven-black hair tied in a braid, he stared at her with squinting eyes, as harsh as his voice.

A warrior seized her roughly and pulled her up in a sitting position.

“Who are you?” the Man in front of her questioned her in a peremptory tone, “What are you doing, you and your companion, in our territory?”

“We had no idea we had trespassed,” Nerwen answered with difficulty; her tongue felt furry. She had to use her thaumaturgic power on herself as soon as possible, she thought in a haze.

“I want to know your and the Elf’s name!” the Easterling thundered.

“Leave her alone!” ordered Aryon, who was sitting nearby, he too with his hands tied up behind his back; one of the soldiers kicked him hard in his side, silencing him brutally. The prince doubled over on one side, grimacing in pain, but uttered no sound.

Nerwen jumped seeing her betrothed being hit and bit her lower lip to stifle a cry.

“Well?” the Man pressed her on; from his authoritative attitude, Nerwen guessed he was the commander.

“My name’s Nerwen,” she answered, “and I come from Dorwinion. He’s Aeglin, of the Kindi of the Eastern Forest.”

She chose not to reveal Aryon’s true name, whom the Easterling probably knew because of his important office as First Sword of the High Sovereign.

The commander nodded satisfied:

“I see you’ve wisely decided to cooperate… So, what are you doing here?”

Nerwen thought of a plausible reason that could justify their presence in this area, but wouldn’t disclose their real aim.

“We’re… on the run,” she answered slowly, as an idea was taking shape in her mind.

“Oh, really? And what are you running from?”

Nerwen cast a sideway glance to Aryon and saw him watching her intently. Surely, he would back her up.

“As you surely know, general, we Dorwinians are at odds with the Elves of the Eastern Forest…”

“I’m not a general,” he interrupted her, in a vaguely flattered tone, “you can call me Captain Tang. And yes, I know that Dorwinion and Eryn Rhûn are at odds for decades.”

Nerwen had purposely exaggerated the Easterling commander’s rank, feigning a degree of intimidation she was far from feeling.
“Well, captain,” she corrected the addressing, “Nonetheless, I and Aeglin fell in love. To worsen our situation, there’s the fact he was the favourite of the Queen of the Kindi. She’s very jealous, if she’d catch us, she’d kill us. Therefore, we ran away.”

Tang looked at her up and down, then did the same with Aryon.

“And why didn’t you head for Gondor, or Rohan?” he asked, distrustful, showing a good knowledge of geography.

Nerwen thought frantically.

“I’m well known in those lands,” she answered, “I trade in wine and for this reason I travel often to Minas Tirith and Edoras,” she shook her head, “No, Eliénna would learn of our whereabouts there and send her assassins to take us down. The only place we can go to is an uninhabited area. We were thinking of the Shadowy Forest.”

This would explain the direction they were taking, but without revealing their final destination.

Tang pondered carefully the tale his prisoner had told him.

“An elopement, eh?” he muttered, not at all convinced, “I’m not buying it. You’re spies of the Avari, that’s what you are.”

Not again, Nerwen thought, annoyed. She would roll her eyes in exasperation, if she wouldn’t be afraid to worsen her nausea.

“We’re not spies,” Aryon interfered, “Nerwen told you the truth, we’re running from Eliénna to save our skins…”

“Shut up,” Tang silenced him sharply, “I don’t know if I should kill you on the spot and be done with it, or verify your story. If you really were the High Sovereign’s concubine and wronged her running away with your lover, she could be interested in having you back, with a proper reward. An easy way to make good money, for me and my men…” he added by himself. He turned his back to them and paced away, signalling his deputy – who was none other than the soldier who had kicked Aryon – to go with him: he would consult with him to decide the immediate fate of their prisoners.

Nerwen looked around, searching for her kelvar friends.

“Where are Thilgiloth and the other ones?” she asked Aryon in a soft voice.

“I don’t know,” he answered whispering, “I didn’t see them. I think that, seeing our defeat, they ran before being caught.”

The Istar nodded and closed her eyes. She felt too sick to extend her special senses in search of the horses and the hawk, so she focused on her thaumaturgic power and self-healed, leaving but the wound on her temple to avoid the Easterlings suspicions. When she re-opened her eyes, her mind had returned clear, but she would pretend to feel still dizzy.

She watched Aryon intently and saw the blood on his leg.

“You’re injured!” she cried, concerned.

“Nothing serious,” the prince reassured her.
“It could get infected,” she worried; unfortunately, she couldn’t do anything without physical contact and this meant that for the moment being she had to leave the matter aside.

“I’ll look for our friends now,” she therefore said, under her breath. Aryon nodded, showing he had understood. She closed her eyes and scanned the surroundings. She perceived Thilgiloth’s mind – she had with her a privileged bond due to their long familiarity – at a safe distance from the Easterling maniple.

*Thilgiloth! How are you, and the other ones?*

*I’m fine, and Thalion and Allakos too… You and Aryon?* the Chargeress answered.

*We’re a little battered, but nothing serious, luckily,* Nerwen reassured her, *But the Easterlings seized us,* she broke off, realising that Thilgiloth had made no mention to their bird-friend, nor did she perceive her, *Where’s Calad?*

Thilgiloth hesitated, but she knew she could hide nothing, to Nerwen’s mind.

*I’m so sorry, my friend…*

The Chargeress sent her the image of the hawk as the arrow that Tang had fired hit her. Nerwen was so appalled that, for a moment, she didn’t believe in what she was seeing; she scanned desperately the surroundings with her mind, but found no trace of Calad. She tried to tell herself she could simply be out of range, but the uselessness of the thought struck her like a blow on her head. The pain made her double over: her loyal, brave, generous winged friend was dead, slaughtered by that vile Easterling! Convulsive sobs shook her, piercing her chest like agonising stabs.

“Nerwen!” Aryon called, alarmed, “What is it? Nerwen!”

Burning tears streaked the Aini’s cheeks as she was fighting not to completely lose control.

“Calad…” she gasped, “dead, killed… Tang…”

The prince felt as if someone had slapped him hard: almost one year had passed since he had met Nerwen for the first time, precisely in the company of Calad, and in that time he had grown fond of the bird of prey, far beyond her usefulness as a sentinel.

“I’m sorry, my love,” he whispered, trying to comfort his betrothed, “I’m so sorry…” he cast a hatred-filled glance to Tang, “I’ll make him pay for it, I swear to you! I’ll skin him alive!”

The Easterling captain did give no heed to Nerwen’s movements, nor to the words that she and the Elf were exchanging under their breaths, as he was still intent on evaluating with his deputy the strategy they should adopt with the prisoners. The two went on confabulating for a long time.

Meanwhile, Nerwen had run out of tears; a cold fury got through her, replacing the sorrow. Aryon spoke about skinning Tang alive, but as long as he was tied up, he couldn’t do anything. But *she* could.

She extended again her special senses, looking for allies who could help them. She scanned in a circle, spreading gradually the range of her perception. She heard again Thilgiloth, Thalion and Allakos, reassured them briefly, then went on, on, on, farther and farther away…

Tang came back and found her looking lifeless on the ground. He twitched his lips, annoyed, then he addressed Aryon.
“Your lady friend here doesn’t seem very tough” he commented scornfully, “She has only a few scratches, but isn’t able to recover…” he got near the prince, “We decided to keep you alive, for the moment. The time to verify your little tale. In the improbable case that it’d prove true and you’re truly wanted by that slut of your queen, we’ll demand her a sizeable reward to hand you back to her.”

Hearing the insult to his sister, Aryon gritted his teeth to avoid shooting back at that arrogant Easterling captain.

“You’re not much of a talker, are you, eh?” Tang mocked him, “All the better, we won’t be forced to gag you… Get them on horseback and let’s go!” he ordered then, addressing his men. Two of them grabbed Aryon under his armpits and threw him sideways on one of their mounts, then did the same with Nerwen, who still looked lifeless.

Instead, the Istar’s mind was wide-awake, but busy elsewhere, frantically searching for someone who could help them. The caravan of Easterlings set off, heading southwest.

Almost one hour passed, before Nerwen could finally pick up something.

OOO

About 30 kilometres away, westwards, an unusually large pack of wolves was dozing among the bushes. The big male leader straightened his ears and lifted his head, perplexed.

_I hear you!_ he said in the wolf-language, _But where are you?_

_I’m far away_, the answer came, faint but clear, _I need help. I’m the Daughter of the Sunset, mayhap you know me._

The leader had heard about her from another pack, which they had met the previous summer.

_Yes, I know you_, he confirmed, _How can we help you?_

Nerwen blessed thousand times Yavanna, because thanks to her the _kelvar_ she just got in touch with were willing to assist her and Aryon.

She quickly explained their situation; the wolf accepted immediately to help her, in the name of Kementári, and began to muster his pack, composed of about twenty adults and a few youngsters. Aware that the wolves couldn’t attack a maniple of soldiers armed to the teeth without suffering heavy damage, Nerwen advised the leader to wait for nightfall: she had heard the Easterlings saying they would need two days to reach the town they were heading for, therefore there would be time enough for the wolves to catch up with them and assail them at night.

Finished with the task to find help, Nerwen returned completely in her body and feigned she was just then recovering from the fainting. She realised the sun was almost at its zenith and the Easterling were to stop for the midday meal.

Noticing she had revived, the soldier carrying her called for Captain Tang, who arrived trotting.

“Well, well, I see you woke up, Nerwen,” he said derisively, “Feeling better?”
She didn’t answer and simply stared at him with fiery eyes. If she had the power, she would incinerate him on the spot.

The caravan came to a halt and she was unloaded like a sack of flour next to Aryon.

“Are you well?” the prince asked her, concerned, having thought her fainted for all that time. She nodded:

“I found some allies,” she said under her breath, careful that the Easterlings wouldn’t hear her, “Wolves,” she specified.

Aryon didn’t change his facial expression.

“Fine,” he muttered in return, “When?”

“Tonight.”

The prince nodded unperceptively.

The lieutenant, whose name meanwhile they had learned to be Chun, came near them, scowling.

“What are you whispering, you two?” he enquired in a suspicious tone.

“I just wanted to check my betrothed’s condition,” Aryon growled, “Why, do you think it strange?!”

Chun gave him a surly look, then left them alone.

The Easterling warriors got busy in preparing a quick meal, ignoring the prisoners for the moment. Later, one of them came bringing a bowl with some bread and cheese, and a canteen of water. He placed the food and drink at their side, untied them and withdrew a few paces, taking the bow and notching an arrow to the string.

“Just try and make unusual movements, and I pierce you through and through,” he said harshly, shaking his weapon.

Aryon’s eyes flashed angrily, but he decided to ignore him: after all, he was only carrying out orders. He massaged his wrists and took the canteen, handing it to Nerwen. She accepted it, grateful, and took small sips that relieved her parched mouth and throat, then she gave it back to the prince, and he drank, too. They shared the bread and cheese, eating slowly, not much because they were hungry – they were too tense to be so – but to keep their strength up. Finally, they emptied the canteen.

When they finished, their guard tied them up again, then he took away the canteen and bowl. Soon after, the soldiers began to prepare for riding on. This time, Tang ordered the two prisoners to mount together on one of their spare horses, Nerwen in the front with her hands tied to the pommel of the saddle, Aryon behind her with his hands tied around her waist; one of the warriors would lead the horse by the bridle.

They set off, following the same direction they had gone so far. The plain showed no sign of changes, remaining tediously flat except for a few irrelevant folds.

They rode on through all the afternoon at a moderate pace; when the sun touched the horizon, setting ablaze the western sky with a spectacular sunset, the caravan halted to set camp for the night. They lighted a number of fires, cooking some hot food, which they offered to the prisoners,
again untying them barely long enough to allow them to eat and drink and then tethering them again, hands and feet. They even gave them blankets to make a pallet for the night. Overall, thought Aryon begrudgingly, they were not treating them too bad; but the hatred for those who had caused so much grief to her beloved, slaying Calad, did not lessen in any way.

OOO

The night was now old and the moon was almost setting. Nerwen was wide-awake, her mind open to perceive the stealthy approach of the wolf pack. She was in constant contact with the leader, guiding him so that the sentinels, placed to keep watch over the encampment, would see neither him, nor the other members of his group.

*First, get rid of the standing soldiers,* the Istar instructed them, sending them a mental image of the sentinels, *then attack the other ones. One of you should come to me and help me get loose.*

*It will be done, Daughter of the Sunset,* the leader sent her.

*Spare this one,* Nerwen concluded, sending Tang’s image, *He’s mine.*

She felt the leader’s agreement.

“They are coming,” she whispered to Aryon; he had no need to ask her who she was talking about.

“I’m ready,” he whispered back.

“One will come to get us loose,” she informed him, thinking that if she didn’t warn him, he could be alarmed: a wolf coming near usually isn’t something one can take easily. Aryon nodded, showing he had understood.

They arrived so stealthily and quickly that the two sentinels never saw them and were taken off in a few moments, clawed at their throats, with no time to react. Then, the wolves poured into the camp and assailed the sleeping warriors. The night was filled with the Men’s screams of pain, fear and horror and the terrified neighs of their horses.

A young wolf with a light-grey coat ran nimbly toward Nerwen. As soon as he came in front of her, he froze and stared at her with his yellow eyes; the Istar returne his stare, as an odd feeling of familiarity filled her. And yet, she couldn’t have met this wolf before in any way…
He seemed to grasp himself and addressed her:

_They sent me to help you, Daughter of the Sunset_, he sent her. Nerwen was startled and grasped herself in turn; she was still perplexed, but there was no time now to elaborate: she would think about it later. She rose to a sitting position and showed him her wrists:

_Can you gnaw at these ropes?_

The wolf drew nearer and began to chew at the tying that held the Maia’s hands. He needed only two minutes, but to her, it felt like an unbearably long time; then finally the sharp fangs of the predator got the better of the hemp of the rope, severing it, and Nerwen was free. She turned to Aryon to untie him, then both hurriedly untangled the strings on their ankles.

In the meantime, the young wolf stayed there guarding them, even if none had asked him to. This was lucky for them, because one of the soldiers, who had managed to narrowly escape the assault of the pack so far, saw that the prisoners were breaking free and with a yell he charged them, swinging high his halberd; Nerwen and Aryon, still hindered by the ropes, wouldn’t be able to escape him, but the wolf rushed toward him, passing under the weapon spinning over his head. He jumped on the soldier, throwing him on the ground both for his weight and his impetus, and plunged his fangs in the Man’s throat. The warrior’s shout ended in a horrible gurgling.

Aryon and Nerwen had stopped for a moment hearing the first yell and had watched the wolf’s charge, ending in the soldier’s death.

_Thank you_, Nerwen sent to the predator, highly grateful: she would survive, if the aggressor had stabbed her, but Aryon might have been killed.

Finally, they were able to break free and Aryon quickly picked up the halberd of the soldier that
the wolf had killed defending them; Nerwen instead retrieved a bow and a quiver, notching one arrow at the string: she was no good shot but, at a close range, she could do some damage.

The Easterling soldiers, even if caught asleep, had reacted promptly and were now fighting furiously against the wolves attacking them; besides the two sentinels, other three had been cast down, killed or injured enough to be in no shape to endure the combat. The predators hadn’t mauled the latter ones; they had no reason to finish them, once knocked out: wolves, contrary to their sinister reputation, kill only to get food, and in this period of the year, when their natural preys abounded, they had no reason to slay and devour the two-legged beings, who moreover were their most dangerous enemies.

Nerwen shot an arrow against an Easterling who was about to smash his halberd on an already wounded she-wolf, hitting him in the side and so knocking him out.

Aryon instead charged Tang and engaged him in a furious duel; he was not much familiar with halberds, but his superior experience in combat – thousands of years against the maybe two decades of the Easterling captain – as well as his Elven nimbleness balanced the lack of skill. Soon enough, his adversary was clearly in difficulty; at last, Aryon disarmed him and pointed his halberd at Tang’s throat.

“It’s something different, one-on-one, isn’t it?!” he growled at him. Tang looked at him with hatred.

Nerwen noticed the scene and was afraid Aryon wanted to finish the Easterling.

“Stop!” she cried, amplifying her voice with her power so she was sure he would hear her. Tang was hers: she wanted be the one avenging Calad’s death.

The prince didn’t move, threatening Tang as Nerwen ran to them.

“Tell your men to surrender and the wolves will spare them,” the Istar threw to the captain; he cast her a sceptical glance, “Do it!” she pressed on, rudely, “or I’ll tell them to maul them all.”

“You’re insane!” Tang stated, incredulous.

“You’d better listen to her, Easterling… or it’ll be the worst for you and your men,” Aryon advised him ferociously through clenched teeth.

Tang hesitated one moment longer and then, seeing the ruthless determination in both their faces, he made up his mind and shouted an order to his people. As soon as he did it, Nerwen sent to the wolves the order to stop the attack, using both her voice and her mind.

To the complete surprise of the five Easterling still able to fight, the wolves froze, even if they didn’t stop growling at them, not losing sight of them not even for a moment.

“Drop your weapons!” Aryon barked, “Now!”

The Easterlings looked at their captain, who was kneeling in front of the Elven prince with a halberd pointing at his throat; having no choice, they obeyed.

“Tie him up, Nerwen,” Aryon said, nodding at Tang. She found a rope in the captain’s saddlebag and did it. Then Aryon motioned one by one the other soldiers to come near, keeping Tang under threat to encourage obedience, and Nerwen tied them all, hands and feet. The menacing presence of the wolves was one more reason for them not to rebel.
“Thank you, friends,” the Istar said, addressing the pack, “Without your help we wouldn’t have broken free. Who among you is injured?”

Six animals came forward, among them the she-wolf she had saved hitting the soldier with one arrow; under the Easterlings’ astounded eyes, she used her thaumaturgic power to heal them. Then she did the same with Aryon’s leg. It was the first time the prince received the treatment, even if he had seen it applied several times by now; he was pleasantly surprised of the agreeable feeling of warmth that filled him, somehow similar to the one he had felt when she had extracted from his mind the knowledge of the Avarin tongue; despite the terrible situation, he smiled at her, grateful.

“But you… who are you?” Tang asked her, dismayed. Nerwen planted herself in front of him, arms crossed on her chest and eyes flashing. The dancing flames of the still burning fire lit her face, giving her a scary appearance that made him cringe. Even before she began to speak, he had realised he had heavily underestimated her.

“I am Nerwen the Green, of the Order of the Istari,” she informed him in a low, but terrible voice, “You slaughtered Calad, the She-Hawk of the Light, my sentinel, but above all my friend. I was planning to kill you because of this, but I’m not an assassin and therefore I’ll spare your despicable life. However, I’ll leave you a sign, as an indelible reminder of our encounter.”

She leaned over him and grabbed his head, not very differently than the way she did with Corch, the smuggler captain who tried to have her killed. An unhealthy, greenish light emanated from her palms and Tang gave a scream, so terrifying that even the wolves flinched, aghast. Then, the Easterling captain collapsed, as if fainted, but his eyes were wide open over a horrified stare.

“What did you do to him?” Chun yelled. Aryon approached him and kicked him in the side, with satisfaction, getting revenge of the treatment Chun had inflicted him the night before. The lieutenant doubled over, shrieking in pain.

“You’ll see soon enough, what I did to him,” Nerwen answered, with a vicious sneer that made even the Avar prince shudder, confirming him once more that it was far better not having her as an enemy. His betrothed was a very sweet woman, but she was capable of absolute ruthlessness with those who drew her malevolence.

At that moment, they heard horses at a gallop and a few moments later Thilgiloth, Allakos and Thalion appeared. Having been informed of the presence of the wolves, the three horses advanced with no fear, while the predators moved to let them pass.

“Welcome back, my dear friends,” Nerwen greeted them. Thilgiloth approached her and placed her head on the Aini’s shoulder.

Are you well? she asked, worried, including Aryon in the question.

“Yes, we’re fine now,” Nerwen answered, caressing her proud neck, “Thanks to these allies, we could break free and overcome our captors.”

She drew back from the Chargeress and went to Tang, who meanwhile was looking frantically around with a terrified gaze; he was drooling from the corner of his wide opened mouth.

Rummaging through the Easterling captain’s saddlebag, Nerwen had found back her dagger; now she used it to cut the ropes tying the captain. Aryon was startled, but did not interfere, as he was sure she knew what she was doing.

“You’re free,” the Maia told Tang, “and so are your men, when you’ll be able to untie them.”
She straightened and withdrew a couple of paces, staring at him; Tang tried to speak, but from his mouth came only a spitting babble:

“Angh… angh… bvrld…”

He tried to stand up, staggering, crippled, his hands as if paralysed, but he collapsed again under the Istar’s hard glare.

“You are beginning to understand, don’t you?” she hissed venomously, “Your mind is intact, but your body is broken. You won’t be able to speak intelligibly any more, nor to walk straight, not to speak about fighting, or being with a woman, or contain your physiological needs. You’ll live the rest of your miserable life as a prisoner in your own body, remembering every day who did this to you… but above all, why.”

Aryon went cold inside: Nerwen could be truly terrible, in her ire. The fate she had chosen for Tang was thousand times worse than death.

The Aini turned her back to the Easterling captain and his men, heading for her mount. The wolves had meanwhile withdrawn and dawn was by now clearing the sky on the eastern horizon.

“Let’s go,” she told Aryon, “Let’s go back to our camp: I want to seek Calad and give her a dignified funeral. She deserves it.”

The prince nodded, agreeing with her. He hurried to get his sword, which Tang had taken in his possession, and fastened it to his waist; he retrieved also his stiletto, which he always carried in his boot, Nerwen’s moonstones and their money. At last, he headed to where the Easterlings’ horses were still tethered; the wolves hadn’t harassed them. They were still very nervous because of the proximity of the predators, therefore, when Aryon set them free, they immediately went on the run, bolting in all directions, sparing the prince the trouble to scatter them himself with the aim to leave the Easterling warriors with no mean of transport.

Meanwhile, Nerwen had dismissed the wolves:

*My gratitude for your help will always go with you,* she told the leader. He sat down in front of her, looking her straight in the eye.

*It has been an honour helping you, Daughter of the Sunset,* he stated, bowing slightly his head in what looked exactly like a reverent gesture. Then he stood up again and, mustering his pack, trotted quickly away.

Returning towards the Istar, Aryon gazed at the wolves, by now far away, but did not ask any questions, guessing that, having finished with their task, they were going back to their usual life.

As their destriers had no harness, the prince helped Nerwen on the back of Thilgiloth, then jumped on Allakos; almost without any spurring, the mounts began to move, Thalion as usual on the Chargeress’ tail.

OOO

Hours later, Nerwen ordered mentally Thilgiloth to stop. Aryon tightened his legs on Allakos’ sides and the steed halted.
“What is it?” the prince asked the Maia.

“We’re followed,” she announced, quietly. Aryon placed his hand immediately on the hilt of his sword, ready to unsheathe it, but Nerwen, showing no worry, jumped down from the Chargeress and turned to the direction they had come from.

*Come forward, friend,* she threw mentally to their pursuer. Soon after, a wolf appeared; he was the young specimen who had gnawed at Nerwen’s ropes and then defended her and Aryon.

*I’ve been careful not to be seen,* the predator commented in an unmistakably amused tone, *I should’ve guessed that it was useless.*

His assertion surprised Nerwen, who asked him:

*What do you mean?*

He sat down and lifted his muzzle to look at her.

*Don’t you recognise me, Daughter of the Sunset?* he asked in turn. Nerwen furrowed her brow: actually, when that night the wolf had arrived, he had looked familiar to her; however, she was absolutely sure she had never met him, nor had she ever communicated with him, before now.

She kneeled to look into his eyes and extended her mind to him in a complete way; the feeling of recognition became stronger than ever.

*Yes... I know you,* she confirmed, *but I cannot identify you.*

*You used to call me Sinyelómin,* he revealed to her. *Shadow-of-the-evening,* Nerwen translated from Quenya; and suddenly the veil obscuring her memory was torn away: with her mind’s eye, she saw a great black wolf with the same yellow eyes, whom she had met during one of her journeys in Endorë, when she was going to see her sister Melian in Doriath; he was seriously injured and would have died, if she wouldn’t heal him. They became friends and he remained with her all the time of her stay, which lasted to the end of his life. The two friends had parted in the hope to meet again, but since then two ages of the world had passed, that is almost 6900 years, without ever meeting again.

Sinyelómin had been a loyal and sincere friend, who had endangered his own life several times to defend Nerwen; he had fought at her side in the War of Wrath; and she had saved his life an equal number of times, until age had drawn him to the Threshold.

“My old friend...” the Aini whispered, moved, and hugged him. The wolf laid his head on her shoulder and closed his eyes, moved, he too.

It was very rare meeting again a soul that one had met in the past; this was an incredible gift that destiny was giving her: Calad was gone, and Sinyelómin was back...

Aryon arched his eyebrows, marvelling at the unexpected behaviour of both, the woman and the animal; but he respected their apparent emotions and kept silent.

Nerwen drew back from the wolf to look again in his eye, smiling joyfully. He tilted his head sideways and lolled his tongue.

*You're less... bright than once,* he observed, a little perplexed.

*You have a good eye, old boy... it’s because I’m not the same person anymore,* Nerwen tried to
explain the concept and make it comprehensible to him, *It's a temporary condition, anyway.*

Sinyelómin radiated a feeling of understanding, showing he had grasped and accepted what she had told him. Then, Nerwen stood up, turning to the other ones; she was about to tell them that the wolf was an old friend of hers from the First Age, but this would give away her true nature. Once more, she had to domesticate the truth.

“Our souls have recognised each other: this is an old friend of mine from a previous life,” she stated with her voice and mind, talking both with Aryon and the horses, “His name is Sinyelómin.”

Aryon’s eyes widened and, for a moment, he lost his usual poise: one thing was knowing that souls reincarnate, another one was experience it personally, but he didn’t doubt, not even for a moment, the truthfulness of Nerwen’s statement.

*Look, old boy,* the Maia had meanwhile mentally turned back to the wolf, *Do you remember Silmelotë? My friend, this is Sinyelómin…*

The Chargeress came near and lowered her muzzle to affectionately pat Sinyelómin: he looked different, now, but she, too, remembered him well. The wolf lifted one paw and reciprocated the pat.

*I’m glad to see you, friend,* Thilgiloth said. Nerwen reported the greeting to the wolf.

*I’m glad, too, Flash-of-Light,* the predator responded, using the name he had given to the Chargeress two ages ago.

The Istar motioned for Aryon to come near, therefore he dismounted and joined her.

“Sinyelómin, this is my partner for life,” Nerwen said. The wolf turned to Aryon, watching him intently, then he approached him and sniffed him carefully; finally, he laid on the ground, belly up.

“According to the customs of the wolves,” the Istar explained to her betrothed, “he is submitting himself to you. As you’re my partner, along with me you’re his new leader,” she kneeled beside the predator and caressed his exposed belly, “Copy me,” she invited Aryon. The prince kneeled on the other side and mimicked his bride-to-be.

“I’d never believe I could caress a wolf like a dog,” he commented in a low voice, astonished. Nerwen looked at him with a smile where grief and happiness blended; he realised that her feelings were torn between the sorrow of loss and the gladness of find.

“This is another age,” Nerwen pondered, thoughtful, looking at the wolf, “and we’re very far from the places that have witnessed our first encounter… Even the tongue we use is different. My friend, I rename you Túdhin, the translation of your name in *Avarin.*”

Túdhin turned and jumped up nimbly, sending her a feeling of consent.

“Come,” the Istar went on, “I’ll introduce you to the other two friends.”

Seeing them approaching, instinctively the packhorse withdrew a few paces.

“Don’t worry, my good Thalion,” the Aini told him with voice and mind, “This wolf won’t hurt you, he will hurt none of us: he’s an old friend of mine. Come, come here… you’ll see you’ve got nothing to fear.”

Thalion snorted his perplexity, but he trusted Nerwen completely; besides, he had well seen that
the wolf-pack, which this specimen had belonged to, did hurt neither him nor his four-legged companions, hence, he obeyed. Once he had gotten near Túdhin, he slowly lowered his muzzle to take a close look at him; the wolf realised that Thalion needed reassurance, therefore at first he sat down and then, as he had done with Aryon, he laid down belly up; this time it wasn’t submission, but a show of trust: exposing his most vulnerable part, that is the abdomen, he was telling him that he trusted him and at the same time inviting him to counter this trust.

Thalion came even nearer and, seeing that the wolf didn’t move, he nudged him lightly with his nose, tentatively; Allakos, too, drew near and copied the packhorse. Maybe they wouldn’t trust immediately the predator – their natural enemy – but now the foundations for a new friendship had been laid, even if a strange and improbable one.

OOO

In the late afternoon, they found again the place where they had been attacked, recognisable by the remains of their fire and what of their belongings the Easterlings had discarded, thinking them of little or no interest, which was most of their luggage. In the light of the westering sun, Nerwen used Thilgiloth’s memories to find Calad’s body; the she-hawk was laying on the ground, pierced through and through by the arrow, her half-open beak turned skywards.

The Istar genuflected beside her friend and picked her tenderly up, as hot tears streamed down her cheeks. Aryon kneeled in turn beside his betrothed and put his arm around her shoulders, trying to comfort her as best he could.

When she had shed all her tears, Nerwen asked Aryon – who possessed stronger hands – to break the stick of the arrow; together, they picked up some firewood and prepared a funeral pyre, on which they laid Calad. They lighted the fire, awarding the bird of prey the honours of a warrior fallen in battle.

“Goodbye, my beloved friend,” Nerwen told her, her voice shaking with tears, “I’m not sad because of your death: we are all part of the cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth, and therefore one day you will be flying again in the skies of Arda. Unfortunately, there is no guarantee that we will meet again,” she glimpsed at Túdhin, pondering about the exceptionality of their renewed meeting, “and that is what saddens me, not your death. May the stars shine upon your path…” she broke off, as suddenly the appropriate goodbye for the great Eagles of Manwë, the most powerful birds of Arda, wild and indomitable, was coming to her mind; she thought it appropriate also for the brave and generous she-hawk and so she concluded, “May the wind under your wings carry you where the sun rises and the moon proceeds.”

Aryon thought that, should this had happened one year ago, he would think it’s just an animal and wouldn’t completely understand Nerwen’s grief; but now it was different, both because in the time spent together he, too, had grown fond of the bird of prey, and because of the special bond Calad had shared with his beloved. Therefore he, too, wanted to say some words:

“Thank you for having been my friend, Calad; and thank you for the service you rendered to me and Nerwen. Even if I have known you for a short time, I won’t forget you.”

At this point, Thilgiloth uttered a high-pitched, sorrowful neigh to pay her last respects to her friend; Thalion and Allakos did the same. Túdhin, who hadn’t met the she-hawk but felt his companions’ woe, raised his muzzle to the sky and uttered a long, mournful howl, joining in their
grief.

Author’s corner:

I hope you won’t hate me too much for Calad’s death... I swear, it wasn’t me who decided it, it was her who wanted it. Obviously I had foreseen that, sooner or later, this would happen – not being the hawk immortal like Thilgiloth – but the precise moment and way were decided by her, not me... Kind of like Tolkien said Thorin Oakenshield did. Anyway I remind you about what Nerwen has told to Aryon in the previous chapter: all living beings in Eä are part of a cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth, and therefore our Calad isn’t lost forever... Nonetheless, it was very hard for me writing this chapter, and I don’t keep from you that I shed a few tears on the She-Hawk of the Light’s funeral pyre.

As usual, I thank heartedly all those who are following me in this long literature (what a big word!) adventure.

Lady Angel
Chapter XLIV: Lady Iruegh

They spent the night there; lying on their pallet, Aryon enclosed Nerwen in a comforting embrace, asking for nothing, with the sole purpose to make her feel his support in this moment of grief. He kissed her brow, tenderly, and as Nerwen lifted her face to his, he kissed her lips, too, repeatedly, gently, sweetly. She responded, a little uncertain at first, but then she pressed herself on him and parted her lips. It was a clear invitation, but nonetheless, Aryon kept ready to withdraw at the first sign of hesitation; he brushed her tongue with his own, in a kiss that was meant to give her comfort, more than expressing his desire. Slowly, he caressed her arm, until he intertwined his fingers with hers, and took their joint hands to his heart.

Nerwen returned his kiss, immensely grateful for his presence and support; she felt she loved him even more for this. Impulsively, she lifted one leg and pulled him closer.

Feeling her urging him on, Aryon kissed her with more emphasis, offering himself to her even if still resolved to stop at any time; but Nerwen responded with equal fervour. Hence, he disentangled his fingers from hers and undid slowly her shirt, giving her time to withdraw; but she didn’t. He slipped his hand into the neckline to caress her breasts; Nerwen sighed in his mouth and swayed her pelvis against his.

Noticing their activities, Túdhin moved discreetly away, joining the horses who were sleeping at some distance. In the long years he had spent with Nerwen, the not frequent times it had happened he had always done the same, giving her some intimacy.

The two lovers got rid of their clothes, brushing tenderly each other’s skin as they gradually bared it. Nerwen lowered one hand between their bodies, touching Aryon intimately and causing him to breathe hard; then he grasped her fingers and moved them away.
“No, love…” he whispered, “This time it’s only for you…”

Realising his aim, her heart skipped one beat, and a lump of emotion closed her throat: her Avar prince was simply wonderful.

Aryon dropped his lips on Nerwen’s neck, nibbling the tender skin of her throat in the spot where he felt the fast throb of her heart; then he descended on the soft mounds of her breasts. Feeling him taking a peak in his mouth, the Aini trembled and moaned softly.

“Oh Aryon…” she sighed.

“Nerwen…” he answered, brushing the other nipple with the tip of his fingers and making her quiver again in pleasure. He moved his head, switching breast, as his hand slipped along her palpitating abdomen until he arrived on the threshold of her femininity. She parted her thighs, allowing him caressing her in an exciting, but at the same time gentle way; she uttered another whimper.

Encouraged, Aryon lowered himself even more along her beautiful body, kissing every centimetre as he descended to his aim; then he settled between her legs and placed his lips on the access of her secret garden. Nerwen startled and a soft cry escaped her throat as she felt Aryon’s tongue stroking her sensually, deeply, but still using an incredible tenderness. Her eyes filled with moved tears, as her body shuddered in pleasure.

Aryon savoured her for a long time, sweetly, relishing her taste, which he thought more delicious than any delicacy in the world. Her breathing became more and more erratic and her shivers stronger and stronger; at that point, he raised to lay down on her and Nerwen embraced him with her arms and legs, more than ready. In the dim light of the stars, looking into her eyes, Aryon thrust himself inside of her, and she welcomed him with a long sigh, parting her lips in an ecstatic expression.

“I love you,” he whispered, “With all my heart, with all my soul, with all my being…”

Tears filled again the Maia’s eyes; one dropped out from a corner, rolling down her temple. Aryon wiped it with his lips.

Then he began to move inside of her. Leisurely, lovingly. Slowly, with endless tenderness, he guided her along the exciting paths of pleasure toward their common goal, taking her gradually to the summit; when he made her reach the top, he felt her trembling uncontrollably around him and heard her cry out his name in the paroxysm of completion. Then he, too, surrendered to the climax, calling out her name repeatedly.

Afterwards, they stayed close for a long time, unwilling to separate, holding each other almost spasmodically.

“Aryon…” Nerwen whispered in an unsteady voice, “I love you so much… Thank you for being here… here with me.”

It was obvious she wasn’t meaning it just physically. He kissed her temple, brow, eyes, lips.

“I’ll always be here, blossom,” he promised, “Always.”

It was equally obvious that he, too, wasn’t meaning it in just the physical sense. She surrounded his neck with her arms and buried her face against his shoulder. Many other times during her life had she lost friends, but never like this time had she been so distraught; not even the thought that the cycle of life, one day, would take Calad again in Eä was able to completely comfort her: it was the
effect that the quality of Middle-earth was having on her soul, making it more vulnerable to sorrow. Time, fortunately, would sooner or later soothe her grief; and Aryon’s presence was like a sunray in a dark night.

OOO

Soon after sunrise, they resumed their journey to Tor Kathren and to what they hoped to be the pass leading beyond the Orocarni. Túdhin spontaneously took over the role of scout, running at about fifty metres ahead of the three horses. His vision was surely not as wide as Calad’s had been, but he could smell anything in a great range and this could prove very useful, in an unknown territory.

In the afternoon of three days later, they reached the Lavnen, which in this point had already taken the extensive bend that, from its source in the Red Mountains, led it southwards. They camped on the riverside and captured some fish, which they roasted on the fire for dinner; Túdhin slipped away to hunt for some small rodent.

“How do you feel, sweetheart?” Aryon asked Nerwen, watching her anxiously; he was aware that Calad’s death had deeply saddened her and she would need some time to recover from this loss.

The Istar took his hand and kissed it with such a tenderness, he felt a lump in his throat.

“Your presence makes my sorrow more bearable,” she murmured, laying her cheek in his palm, “Thank you…”

Impulsively, he embraced her.

“There’s nothing to thank for,” he said under his breath, “We’re partners for life, we support each other…”

She put her arms around his neck and buried her face against his chest, immensely grateful to Eru Ilúvatar for having her finally allowed to meet him.

The following day, they prepared to cross the river; it was rather wide, but it didn’t look deep, however Aryon, being a very good swimmer, disrobed and waded into the water to verify its depth. At half the journey, the water was up to his shoulders and the current had him staggering, but for the horses – obviously taller and heavier, besides walking on four legs and not only on two – this wouldn’t be a big problem.

The matter was different for Túdhin: wolves normally don’t cross rivers, even if they are able to swim, unless they are in danger of life; moreover, the current would carry him far downstream.

The prince came back to the riverbank, where Nerwen was waiting for him.

“It’ll be rather easy to cross, for our horses,” he told her, accepting with a thankful nod the blanket she was handing him to dry off, “but the current is strong and for Túdhin it’ll be difficult to cross swimming.”

The Maia turned to the young wolf, who was staring suspiciously at the water, and she sensed his fright and perplexity.

“I think I have a different solution. Thilgiloth, what would you think about giving a lift to our old
“friend?” she asked; the Chargeress cast a glance at the doubtful Túdhin.

Sure, she answered, grasping at once what Nerwen’s idea was about.

Aryon glanced from one to the other.

“Thilgiloth has never been afraid of Túdhin,” he pondered slowly, “unlike Allakos and Thalion… She’s no ordinary mare, isn’t she?”

“She’s a meárh,” Nerwen reminded him, but he shook his head:

“That’s not enough to explain it. She fears extremely few things… like you, that is.”

It was useless denying the evidence, the Aini thought: Aryon was very discerning, therefore, it was inevitable that he would end up noticing this particularity. He could attribute Nerwen’s fearlessness to her powers as an Istar, but he had no explanation for Thilgiloth’s.

“You’re right,” she admitted in a low voice, “It’s… one of those things I cannot discuss with you.”

This was the first time they confronted openly on what she had warned him about, the day they had come together: the fact that there were things she wasn’t allowed to discuss with him.

Aryon nodded slowly.

“I thought so,” he simply said, “and I promised I wouldn’t insist,” he sensed her anxiety and to reassure her, he addressed her his characteristic, lopsided smile, “I’m curious, of course, but I gave you my word and I’ll keep it. I’m just saying that I realised that Thilgiloth compares to the race of meáras as much as you to the race of Men.”

For a heartbeat, Nerwen’s composure cracked, as she thought he had grasped it all; but then she realised it couldn’t be: Aryon had correctly guessed that there was much more, both to her and to the Chargeress, than what was apparent; but what this exactly was, he had no way to determine.

“You’re clever, my prince,” she said with a faint smile, “and I love you for this, too…”

He clasped her hand and intertwined her fingers with his.

“And I love you, my extraordinary Istar,” he answered in a low voice, looking tenderly at her. She returned his gaze, feeling immensely grateful. Then she took her mind off him: she would gladly stay like this, drowning in his grey-blue eyes, but they had to go on.

“Come here, Túdhin,” she invited the wolf, by voice and mind; hearing her, the predator turned and jogged to her, laying down and looking at her from below, awaiting, “The safest way for you to cross the river is riding with me on Thilgiloth’s back,” the Maia told him.

The wolf turned his gaze on the Chargeress; in the past, it never occurred that they needed to cross a river that way, so this would be the first time he got on her back. Hers, or any other mount’s, that is.

Thanks, he answered, As long as you won’t let me fall, he added, vaguely anxious.

It won’t happen, the Istar reassured him, getting on Thilgiloth; Aryon picked up the young wolf and lifted him to Nerwen, who placed him sitting in front of her on the saddle. Túdhin carefully kept his claws in, in order not to scratch the Elf, the Aini or the mare.

Nerwen surrounded him with her arms, offering him support; sensing his nervousness, she sent him
a reassuring feeling. Túdhin turned and licked her hand.

*I trust you and Thilgiloth*, he stated, relaxing a little. Nerwen stroked his side.

*You won’t regret it*, she assured him. She spurred Thilgiloth on, and the Chargeress headed slowly to the river, moving very carefully because her rider had warned her about the wolf’s anxiety; Thalion got immediately on her tail, as usual, and Allakos, carrying Aryon, closed the small procession.

They crossed the stream with no particular difficulties; reaching the other riverbank, Túdhin leapt to the ground and placed himself sitting in front of the Chargeress.

*Thank Thilgiloth for me*, he asked Nerwen, looking solemnly at the mare. The Istar smiled: Túdhin had always been very courteous, more than the average of his kin.

“Túdhin thanks you, my friend,” she therefore said. The Chargeress stirred her ears.

*He’s welcome*, she answered, *I almost didn’t feel him, he has done well.*

Meanwhile, Aryon had come to Nerwen’s side.

“Is all well, with Túdhin?” he enquired.

“Perfectly well,” she answered, “He’s a very well-behaved wolf: he thanked Thilgiloth for having him carried safe and sound over the river.”

The black-robed prince nodded, satisfied.

They resumed their journey; a few hours later, they reached the western offshoot of Tor Kathren; in this place, the trees ran almost straight from north to south, cutting their way. From here, they would ride on skirting the Shadowy Forest until meeting with the Green River.

**OOO**

They went on for six days southwards; the forest was at their left side, then the trees curved suddenly eastward in a great basin that followed the shape of what, in the Elder Days, had been the north-eastern shore of the great Inland Sea of Helcar.

Giving up skirting the forest, which would lead them eastward and then southward again, Aryon and Nerwen cut a straight line east-south-eastward through the grassy plain; a few days later, they met again the trees and resumed skirting Tor Kathren. Finally, the third day of June, they saw in the distance the sparkling of a young river exiting the forest.

Nerwen pulled Thilgiloth’s reins and Aryon did the same, halting beside her. The Aini pointed to what was in front of them:

“Down there, Aryon… down there, once there was Cuiviénen.”

The prince watched for a long time, intently, not hiding to his betrothed how deep he was feeling moved.

“It’s surely very different from how my mother painted it,” he commented at length, in a low voice,
“but as I expected, it’s very thrilling, for me, being here in the place that witnessed the meeting of my parents,” he closed his eyes for a moment, “Less than one year ago I didn’t know what they felt when they met; now instead I know it, thanks to you…”

He turned to look at her with a gaze so full of love, she felt butterflies in her stomach. Nerwen reached out for him and placed her hand on his arm.

“Thanks to you, now I, too, know it,” she murmured. He covered her hand with his and caressed it; his eyes smiled, even if his mouth didn’t.

OOO

They reached the Green River in the place where it came out of the wood; the landscape was very evocative and, as it was late in the afternoon, they decided to set up their camp there, avoiding entering immediately the Shadowy Forest. They unloaded Thalion, took off the harness from Allakos and Thilgiloth and allowed their mounts to graze freely.

They picked up some wood to light a fire and cook; Aryon took his bow and went hunting for some game. Túdhin followed him, looking for some prey to feed himself.

The prince shot a pheasant, while the wolf tracked down a young she-turkey. When they returned, they found Nerwen cooking a soup with some herbs she had found in the neighbourhood; as Aryon was plucking and eviscerating his prey, the Istar finished cooking the soup and so she could skewer the pheasant and begin roasting it over the flames. This evening they had a richer dinner than usual since they had begun their journey.

Later, when the moon rose, Nerwen looked at it, thoughtful.

“Do you know what the dark shadows on the moon are?” she asked Aryon. The prince raised his gaze in turn.
“Actually, no,” he admitted.

“When the Valar created the chariots of the Sun and of the Moon, Anar and Isil in Quenya, they appointed two Maiar to drive them, respectively Arien and Tilion. Tilion is in love with Arien, but she doesn’t reciprocate him; he tries continuously to get near her – that’s why sometimes we see the moon in the sky even by day, when Arien’s chariot is transiting – but she runs always away. But once he got very near to her, too much, and he burned… that’s the reason for those marks.”

“Poor Tilion,” Aryon whispere, diverting his eyes from the moon to look at his Istar, “I feel more than lucky, because unlike him, I found my partner for life and she reciprocates me…”

He closed his arms around her; Nerwen laid her head on his shoulder and whispered in turn:

“I too, feel very lucky…”

OOO

They stayed there for a few days, hunting and fishing to replenish their food stock, before facing the crossing of Tor Kathren and reach the Orocarni and what they hoped being a pass that would lead them through the mountains. At last, the resumed their journey, beginning to ride up the Green River along its left bank.

They needed almost two weeks to arrive at the foot of the Red Mountains, which loomed over them almost all of a sudden the thirteenth day since they had entered the Shadowy Forest. The river had constantly thinned and now, reduced to a creek with a quite wide bed, it flowed out of a narrow valley.

During those days, Nerwen and Aryon didn’t catch sigh of a single soul, except the rich fauna inhabiting the forest; so it was with enormous surprise that they noticed a trail, pretty neglected but still passable, which skirted the Green River on the opposite side, beginning – or perhaps rather ending – at the entry of the dale.

“The travel diary didn’t mention any path,” Aryon pondered, marvelled.

“Indeed,” Nerwen confirmed, “but it has been written over 500 years ago and things could have changed since then. Mayhap someone came to live in the valley and built the road to travel more easily.”

“Good for us; provided they’re not hostile people, of course.”

“We’ll be alert,” the Aini concluded.

With Túdhin as usual on scouting, they easily crossed the small brook and took the path, which continued right beside the river; the latter remained rather wide, showing that, in the time of thaw, the water-flow increased remarkably.

The walls of the dale were sheer, covered in strong-rooted vegetation, mostly conifers, which offered plenty of wood. At nightfall, they camped in the middle of the trail and lighted a fire to cook. They had ascended just a few hundred metres, but they expected the road becoming steeper as the rode on.
They were not wrong; however, the trail remained always wide enough for the horses to walk easily in couples and, where it was particularly difficult, low and large steps had been engraved in the rock, which allowed them to proceed staying on horseback. The steps were splintered and cracked, showing carelessness or abandonment, but they were still easily viable.

“If we’ll ever meet the ones who built this road,” Nerwen commented on the second evening, “I’ll thank them greatly: even if it’s not perfectly kept up, it’s sparing us a great trouble and surely much time, too.”

As they climbed, during the evening and the night it became colder, as the Green River kept narrowing, reducing to a small stream, until during the morning of the fourth day of their ascent, it disappeared in a rocky ravine: evidently, they had reached its spring.

In the afternoon they passed two short, ancient-looking stony columns, rising at the sides of the path; then, Túdhin, as usual on scout, went over one last hillock and stopped abruptly. Noticing it, Nerwen contacted him mentally and, through his eyes, she saw a daunting building that completely blocked the passage. Out of surprise, she pulled Thigiloth’s reins harder than usual, so much that the Chargeress gave off a protesting snort.

Aryon halted in turn.

“What’s up?” he asked, alarmed, his hand already on the hilt of his sword.

“Something we surely didn’t expect,” the Istar answered, turning to him, “There’s a kind of fortress barring the pass… I’ve never seen something like this.”

They got off their horses and approached the top warily, keeping low, to look over it; the structure, built with the same reddish stone that gave its name to the range, looked half like a military stronghold, half like a residential castle: massive, mighty, with small and deep windows, but softened by long banners flowing in the wind and by a surprising roof garden over the battlements of the crenelated walls. On the flags, the image of a cloud-crowned mountain was visible, red in white field.

“Who might have built here a fortress?” Aryon wondered.
“Mayhap someone interested not to allow anyone to pass through,” Nerwen assumed, “but in which direction?”

They watched for a long time this impregnable-looking bastion and the surrounding terrain, coming to the conclusion it wasn’t possible to go round it in any way: in this point, the road ended, the ground in front was completely bare – exposing anyone coming at the sight of the stronghold – and the mountain on both sides was almost vertical and of bare, smooth rock with no holds. The only way to pass was entering from one side of the castle and exiting from the other one; assuming the inhabitants were willing to let them through.

What disturbed them the most was the inexplicability of this barrier; if it had been an important thoroughfare with a lot of traffic, they could think about a mandatory passageway, someone who wanted to get rich demanding a transit toll to the travellers; but as the pass was practically unknown to anybody, they didn’t understand the reason for this stronghold.

At length, they decided to try their luck: there was nothing else to do, if they were hoping to get through on the other side. The alternative was to go back and try to go round the Orocarni on its southern end, not having the slightest idea how far it could be. Weeks, maybe months travelling in a totally unknown territory: it didn’t look attractive.

Worrying that the sight of a wolf, even if a tame one, could alarm the castle’s inhabitants, Nerwen called Túdhin to her.

“Stay close to me, my friend, and simulate as much as possible the behaviour of a dog,” she instructed him: after all, there were dog races very similar to their wolf-cousins, “like you used to do in the past, remember?”

Sure, Daughter of the Sunset, the predator answered with a hint of amusement, I’ll pretend being shy and stay away from anyone. May I intervene, if I see you in danger?

Nerwen hesitated: some behaviours could be interpreted as a threat even if they actually weren’t; it was true that Túdhin, during the years they had spent together in Beleriand, had learned very much about the social behaviour of the two-legs, but a misunderstanding was always possible.

“Only if I tell you myself,” she decided therefore, only to be on the safe side.

They got again on their horses and rode slowly on, keeping their hands clearly in sight to let it known they were no threat; Túdhin trotted beside Thilgiloth, through and through a docile dog.

As expected, at a certain point they heard a peremptory voice curtly ordering them to halt, speaking in Westron with an odd, but well understandable accent; they stopped and waited.

The heavy iron portcullis in front of the entrance was lifted, and at the same time the wooden gate at the back opened up. A well-armed squad of foot soldiers came out, preceded by a knight in a shining armour, with long blond hair, carrying a white and red banner. The soldiers marched in perfect synchrony, surely because well trained.

As the knight approached, they realised it was a woman; her blue eyes were friendly, even if her bearing was stiff.
“Hullo, strangers,” she said in Common Speech, with a surprising contralto voice, “I am Iruegh, the castellan and guardian of the pass. Who are you, and what do you want?”

She was looking at the Istar, thus it was she to answer:

“I am Nerwen, and this is Aryon. We are trying to cross the Red Mountains and therefore we ask you permission to pass.”

“That you want to pass looks quite obvious,” Iruegh pointed out mockingly, but not annoyingly, “I would like to know the reason you want to cross the Red Mountains, before deciding if letting you pass or not.”

Something undefined induced Nerwen not to declare openly her purpose, for once:

“We’re explorers from Dorwinion; we found an ancient book talking about this pass, which the writer wasn’t able to cross, and therefore we came here following his leads to be the first of our people to claim the crossing of the Orocarni.”

Iruegh looked from one to the other; noticing Aryon’s slightly pointed ears, she arched her thin and well-shaped eyebrows:

“Your people? But I see that you are of the race of Men, while he belongs to the Elves…”

“Actually, I’m a Half-Elf,” Aryon explained, faking calmness and supporting Nerwen’s version, “I grew up with the people of my mother, who was a Dorwinian woman.”

The explanation seemed to satisfy the castellan:
“Very well. It is a rare pleasure for me having visitors, therefore, I hope you will stay for dinner and the night, before continuing your journey. I offer you my hospitality.”

The invitation was offered with great courtesy and, despite the slight mistrust she had felt while interrogated about the reason of their presence here, Nerwen found no way to refuse; besides, after so many weeks travelling, it would be surely nice resting in a true bed, possibly after a warm bath and a generous dinner.

She exchanged a glance with Aryon, who nodded.

“Very well, Lady Iruegh,” she answered, “we’ll gladly accept your invitation.”

The blonde castellan smiled at her, then she turned her horse and rode back. The soldiers separated in two wings, still moving in admirable synchrony, and waited for the strangers to pass through, too. Nerwen was ready for a possible frightened reaction caused by Túdhin’s presence, but the wolf performed masterfully the role of a dog; he stayed at Thilgiloth’s side with a proud but docile attitude and none blinked so much as an eye.

They reached the gate and passed through it right after their host; immediately, servants came and helped them dismounting. Iruegh gave orders for their horses to be adequately looked after.

“Take what you need for the night from your luggage and leave the rest to the care of my servants,” the castellan invited them. Nerwen and Aryon took a change of clothes, which an attentive maid asked them giving to her to carry for them; she preceded them inside the main body of the fortress, which they entered following Iruegh. Nerwen motioned for Túdhin to accompany them, still maintaining his role as a dog; luckily, the wolf had learned to do it very well in the time of his first encounter with the Aini and therefore, even in this new incarnation, he had no difficulty to find back the knowledge of that time.

Another maid accompanied them to an apartment with two bedchambers and a small parlour dividing them; each chamber had a private bathroom, with a tub of enamelled copper.

“We will bring immediately the water for your bath,” the second maid assured them, taking her leave.

They found that they had brought Nerwen’s belongings in one room and Aryon’s in the other one, obviously ignoring that the two of them were a couple, but before they could put together their things in one chamber, two servants arrived, carrying buckets of steaming hot water, and they began to fill up the two bathtubs.

Nerwen and Aryon bathed, each one helped by a servant, a female for her and a male for him. Finally, they were left alone; both were very relaxed, so they laid down on one of the beds and rested, beginning to recover from the exhaustion of so many days of travel.

They stayed in silence for some time, then Nerwen said:

“I’d like to take a look outside a window on the other side of the castle, to see if we’re truly on the top of a pass.”

The windows of their apartment looked all in the direction they had come from, that is westwards; the westering sun, indeed, projected its rays directly through the panes, partially covered by heavy curtains of dark red velvet. Red and white – the two colours of the banners on the battlements – were repeated everywhere in the castle, even in the uniforms of the soldiers they had seen earlier, being evidently the colours of Iruegh’s house, whatever it might be.
The Maia got up, thinking about getting dressed to seek a window looking eastwards, when they heard knocking at the apartment’s door. Túdhin, who was laying in a corner of the chamber, jumped up and growled softly, tensing. Nerwen made a warning gesture, reminding him he had to look harmless, and the wolf stopped immediately; but when she crossed over to the door to invite entering whoever it was, he followed her. The visitors proved to be the servants who had helped her and Aryon with the bath; the wolf calmed down, even if he didn’t lose sight of the two domestics.

“Lady Iruegh invites you for dinner,” the female announced, “We are here to help you getting dressed.”

“There’s no need…” Nerwen began: usually, if truly needed, she and Aryon helped each other.

“Please, milady, it’s our job,” the man intervened. The Istar realised that, refusing, she would offend them or, worse, get them into trouble with their mistress.

“That’s fine,” she accepted therefore, heading for the chamber; the maid moved to follow her as her colleague started toward the other one, “No, please, come both here,” she invited them. They made surprised faces for a moment, but recovered quickly: it was apparent they didn’t expect the two guests to be together.

When they had finished dressing – Nerwen in her usual green gown, which she had made redo in Kopellin after Meledhiel ruined the previous one, and Aryon in his house-clothes, invariably black – they were taken to the dining room. Túdhin went with them, staying just one step behind Nerwen, following her instructions.

Iruegh, dressed in an elegant court gown of dark red silk, was waiting for them beside the high table. Her familiars and closer associates already occupied all the lesser tables, about thirty people, who addressed friendly nods to the newcomers.

“Welcome to my table,” the castellan greeted them when they approached her, “Please, take a seat,” she went on, placing herself on the central chair – which back was higher than the other ones, embellished with a floral decoration – and pointing to the two seats on her right side, “Nerwen, sit here next to me, let us chat a little…”

Túdhin crouched behind the seat of his mistress and tried to go invisible.

Half a dozen people arrived, well-dressed men and women who paid their respects to Iruegh and observed the newcomers, intrigued.

“Nerwen, Aryon, may I introduce my collaborators?” their hostess said, listing a series of names and positions, from Constable to Palace Supervisor, from Provisions Director to Wardrobe Principal, and other titles that the two guests immediately forgot. Everyone bowed slightly their heads to them, politely if not friendly, and took their seats.

“Tell me, Nerwen, are you really making this journey only for the glory?” the castellan enquired, as a servant was pouring her something to drink. The Aini thought that this sole reason wouldn’t sound much plausible.

“Not only for the glory,” she answered therefore, “Our king is constantly seeking new commercial outlets: making contact with new areas that could be interested in our goods means wealth and fame both for him and for who generates new business for him,” she watched Iruegh intently, “If your lands are an unavoidable pass-through, you too could make a profit, demanding a reasonable toll on the goods traffic…”
The castellan seemed to ponder it for a short moment, then nodded:

“In fact, this could be interesting, even if I am wealthy enough to live well myself, as well as all my people…”

Servants arrived, carrying trays full of food: braised roe deer beef and sheep stew, coming with roasted new potatoes, zucchini seasoned with garlic and parsley, grilled aubergine; as drinks, a rich red wine and water. Everything was very tasty and both Aryon and Nerwen appreciated much the food and wine.

“I didn’t expect finding a castle, up here,” Nerwen said at a certain point, trying to subtly find out the reason why this stronghold had been built here and in this peculiar way, completely barring the pass.

“My ancestors built Bordercastle about 400 years ago,” Iruegh told her, “to escape a pestilence that had befallen the lands where they lived. Since then, we never got back down. Once in a while – mayhap two or three per generation – somebody arrives from the eastern side, looking for a passage through the mountains, like you. They don’t always cross the pass: sometimes they stay here, sometimes they go back. Of those who continued the journey, none has come back. Are the western lands so dangerous? Looking at you, one would think them not…”

Nerwen realised she hadn’t explained the reason why the building barred completely the pass, but asking too a direct question she feared to alienate their hostess, therefore she chose not pressing the matter on.

“Not all peoples dwelling in Middle-earth are peaceful like ours,” Aryon answered, having closely followed Iruegh’s tale, “The Easterlings, for instance, are a ruthless people. Coming here, we had a bad encounter with some of them: they captured us, believing we were spies. Fortunately, we were able to escape.”

“Thank goodness!” she blonde woman commented, “I would be glad to have you as my guests for a few days, so you can rest before continuing your journey… Visitors are so rare, here, hence I would be very happy, really, if you would stay,” she concluded, staring at Nerwen.

“Your hospitality is truly generous, Lady Iruegh,” the Maia said, feeling suddenly on pins and needles, “and we thank you greatly for your offer, but we were considering going on tomorrow.”

“Oh, too bad,” the castellan murmured, her eyes travelling appreciatively along Nerwen’s shape. All of a sudden, the Istar realised she was confronting with a woman-lover; this wasn’t the first time in her life, but as she never felt any interest in this respect for a member of her own sex, she had always refused this kind of displays of love. And now that she had met her partner for life, this was no option.

Luckily, Iruegh didn’t press on and went back eating and drinking, chatting agreeably with her guests. Now and then, Nerwen handed a bone to Túdhin, and the wolf endeavoured to gnaw at them feigning an enthusiasm that he – preferring much more raw meat – was far from feeling. The Istar praised him silently for this and he felt proud of himself.

When they finished with the main course, the servants came to take away the leftovers, then they returned with sweets, delicious pancakes stuffed with custard or jam, served with a sweet, sparkling white wine. At the end, they had a hot infusion of digestive herbs.

After finishing, Aryon and Nerwen took their leave; the Aini wanted to go and check on their horses, but it looked like a discourteous request, because it would seem like questioning the
competence and good will of those who had attended them, as well as their hostess’. Therefore, she simply contacted Thilgiloth mentally and, receiving reassurance, she was satisfied.

They got back to their apartment, where Túdhin chose a corner of the parlour to sleep in, while Aryon and Nerwen headed for their chamber.

“I feel uncomfortable: I’m afraid Iruegh has designs on me,” the Maia said. The prince arched one eyebrow, startled: he hadn’t realised the castellan’s preferences.

“I can’t blame her,” he stated, watching his betrothed with a loving gaze, but then he took on a threatening face, “but she has to go over my dead body, before having you.”

“And then she would have to deal with me,” Nerwen laughed, “I’ve never been attracted that way to the female genre of any race!”

Aryon made his lopsided smile, but then he became serious again.

“Something is not right in Iruegh’s tale… From what she says, they have practically no contact with the lower lands, but if so, how can they live up here without growing anything? I understand meat and vegetables, which can come from high pastures and from a kitchen garden, but I saw plenty of bread, which means wheat, however we’re too high to grow it here, and I think the same for vines, that is the wine.”

Nerwen agreed with his remarks:

“Indeed, Iruegh makes me feel more and more uncomfortable, and not because of her interest in me. The whole castle, actually, makes me uncomfortable: as you say, her tale does not match. It’d be better leaving tomorrow in the early morn.”

When they slipped under the covers, Nerwen snuggled in Aryon’s arms:

“My prince, yesterday was Mid-Summer Day…” she suggested. He smiled the grin she loved so much.

“Yes, you’re right… exactly one year ago we realised we are partners for life,” he lightly kissed her lips, “I think it’s an anniversary worth a celebration… and this comfortable bed is the most suitable of places…”

He kissed her again, this time with more ardour; he felt her responding with equal passion.

“I was so stupid, that first night…” he murmured against her lips, as usual disturbed by the memory of his first, absurd reaction to the revelation of their bond.

Nerwen slowly caressed his chest.

“Forget it, it’s water under the bridge… think about making love to me, instead…” she breathed in his ear.

Aryon took her word; they made love, long and passionately, before falling asleep in each other’s arms, sated.

Author’s corner:
The castle in the image is Castel Beseno, located near Trento (northern Italy); I found the beautiful blonde she-knight performing Iruegh on the internet, but unfortunately I don’t know who she is.

Indeed, what is the meaning of this castle, barring the practically unknown mountain pass? A small mystery that puzzles Nerwen and Aryon very much...

Lady Angel
A few hours later, in the middle of the night, Nerwen and Aryon woke up startled at the crash of a thunder. The Istar got up, worrying for Túdhin who, like all kelvar, was afraid of lightning and thunder; the wolf had taken refuge under the table, looking for shelter.

“Come here, old friend,” Nerwen invited him sweetly, crouching; he placed his head on her shoulder and she wrapped him in a comforting embrace. Then she led him to her chamber, where meanwhile Aryon had lighted a candle; Túdhin went and laid down next to the bed, on the side where Nerwen slept. The prince nodded to his betrothed, showing his agreement.

Nerwen extended her thoughts and sook Thilgiloth’s mind; she found her wide-awake because of the crack of thunder, but not frightened: a Chargeress like her needed much more than a thunderstorm to scare her.

“How are Thalion and Allakos?” the Istar asked her.

_The noise disquiets them, but we’re safe, here_, Thilgiloth reassured her. Nerwen sent a soothing feeling to the two horses who, sensing her, calmed down, even if they would start at each thunder.

The noise of the pouring rain against the panes made Nerwen move aside the heavy curtain covering the window and look outside; it was raining buckets and a strong wind from the east pushed the water against this façade of the castle, flooding it. Aryon got up in turn and crossed the room to come beside her, looking out.

“Good thing we’re behind solid walls,” he commented, embracing the Istar from behind, “Can you imagine such a bad weather in our tent…?”
“Yes, good thing indeed,” Nerwen considered. An enormous lighting split the darkness, filling the
night with a fierce light, followed immediately by a deafening thunder who made the couple start
violently and Túdhin whine. Nerwen slipped from her betrothed’s embrace and knelt beside le
wolf, caressing him and sending him reassuring thoughts. When the predator calmed down, she
went back to bed; Aryon did the same and blew out the candle, laying down at her side. The
thunderstorm lasted a while longer, making both them and Túdhin start at each crash of thunder,
but finally went away and they could fall asleep again.

OOO

The following morning, they got up and found that it was still pouring; the narrow horizon above
the pass was covered from side to side with heavy dark clouds, which looked unwilling to move,
even if a strong wind was raging, making the windowpanes clink.

“I think we surely cannot resume our journey, today,” Aryon mused, grimacing.

“Yes,” Nerwen confirmed, beginning to get dressed, “Well, anyway things could be worse… just
imagine if this bad weather would have caught us in the open. At least, here we’re dry and
comfortable.”

The Avar prince turned to gaze at her and smiled his typical grin:

“You always manage to see the bright side, blossom. I love you for this, too.”

She returned his smile:

“Thank you… but in the end, it’s just about making the most of every situation. In this case, as we
cannot go on, at the least we can enjoy our stay.”

He skirted the bed and hugged her.

“Did you do so in Bárlth, too?” he asked her, looking in her eyes. The Istar wrapped her arms
around his waist and laid her head against his chest, where she could hear his heartbeat, steady and
constant.

“Yes, I did,” she confirmed, “And I got the best I could hope in my life: you.”

Aryon kissed her hair, tenderly.

“Blessed Vána… I wish I had recognised you that same night, on the shores of the Sea of Rhûn,
and I had not wasted even one single day to be together,” he murmured. Nerwen held him tight, a
little surprised about his intensity before remembering he thought her mortal, even if long-lived.

“Don’t torment yourself too much,” she exhorted him, raising her face to look at him, “After all,
they’ve been just five weeks.”

Aryon sighed faintly: objectively, she was right, it was about a few weeks only, but each day, each
hour seemed precious to him.

At that moment, they heard a knock at the apartment’s door; it was the maid, inviting them for
breakfast. Therefore, they exited the apartment, closely followed by Túdhin who, once more, took
on the role of a dog, inseparable from his master and mistress.

In the large dining room, they found Iruegh already having her breakfast at the high table, wearing men’s clothes in her colours, red and white.

“Good morning,” she said, nodding them to sit next to her like the night before, “Even if, technically, it is a very bad day, considering the weather,” she added with a smile.

“You’re perfectly right, Lady Iruegh,” Nerwen confirmed, taking her seat, “I’m afraid we’ll have to ask for your hospitality for yet another day.”

“That is surely not a problem, Nerwen,” the castellan assured her, “but probably it will take longer: when such a bad weather starts, it usually takes three or four days until it ceases.”

Before she could answer, the Istar received a plate with one piece of bacon, one piece of sausage, half a tomato – all grilled – scrambled eggs and one loaf of bread. Aryon received an identical plate as another servant brought two mugs filled with a hot, amber-coloured beverage, surely a type of tea, even if it wasn’t the one aromatised with bergamot that the Avari loved so much. They brought also a bowl for Túdhin, with some leftovers of the night before; the wolf sniffed at them, mistrustful, then he began to eat slowly, dominating the slight disgust he felt. Again, Nerwen praised him.

“Enjoy your breakfast,” their hostess told them, standing up because she was already finished, “Considering the rainy day, if you like you can spend your time reading in the library, or if you play any instrument, you can go to the music room, where you’ll find harps, zithers, cymbals, lutes and tambourines. Or you can go swimming in the underground thermal pools. Incidentally, this is exactly what I will do later, as soon as I’ll be done with some small tasks.”

She took cordially her leave, leaving them having this very hearty breakfast; not really used to such a profusion of food in the early morning, they left something over, standing up satiated and satisfied by the food’s quality, indeed delicious.

“Let’s go to the library,” Nerwen suggested, “so we can make good use of this forced stopover and get some information about the lands beyond the Orocarini.”

“That’s a good idea,” Aryon approved as they entered the room, as usual with Túdhin in tail, “but before that, I’d like to go and check on our horses.”

“I sense from here they’re fine,” she assured him, talking under her breath as to not let anyone eavesdrop; Aryon nodded to show he had understood and therefore let it be.

Not wanting to look nosy opening doors randomly, the Istar asked at the first servant they met where they could find the library and he addressed them upstairs. Once they got there, they found a window leading on a balcony facing eastwards. The landscape was practically identical, with the two mountain walls at the sides and the bare open space in between. Because of the cloudburst, they could see not even where the slope began going downhill.

“Well, at least we have the proof that this is a mountain pass for sure,” Aryon commented, “We’ve finally found a way to go through the Orocarini!” he concluded in a triumphant tone.

“Yes,” Nerwen nodded, “I hope we can inform Valin about it, one day: without him, we wouldn’t be here.”

“That’s true,” the prince admitted, “it’s because of him that we’ve been able to find this pass-through. We owe him.”
Nerwen turned to look at the book-loaded shelves.

“Let’s see if we can find something useful about the lands beyond the Orocarni…”

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The search was quite productive, because they found a number of books talking about what laid beyond the longest and most impressive mountain range in Middle-earth, maps and chronicles narrating about nations and realms, history, economy and geography. They found no evidence of Iruegh’s tale about any pestilence that, four centuries ago, would be so fierce to induce some people to run this far and build Bordercastle, and this worsened the couple’s suspicions; but this could be because of the fact that the books dated back to that period and weren’t therefore updated. Even though the infrequent visitors the castellan had claimed coming there – two or three per generation – it was anyway odd that they had no more recent books, except novels and poetry, even if this could be attributable to a voluntary isolationism.

They found also a few maps, unfortunately not very extended, but none illustrating a territory similar to the one Nerwen had seen in the Mirror of Galadriel that could be the land of the Entwives; however, it was better than nothing.

About three hours later, Nerwen and Aryon, their eyes tired because of so much reading, decided to take a break and use the thermal pools their hostess had mentioned. They asked a maid for directions and she even took them to the spiral staircase, carved into the rock, that led underground.

“There’s a keeper,” the maid informed them, “you can ask him for anything you need: towels, robes, massages or anything else,” she concluded. The two of them nodded, showing they had understood, and then went downstairs, Túdhin one step behind them.

The underground facility proved to be a large cavern, lighted by golden lamps similar to small suns, looking similar to the Dwarves’ magic lanterns they had seen at Fortvalley. A series of natural tunnels, refined by artificial diggings, went into the rock for about one hundred metres starting from the entrance hall; they had been partially covered with blue tiles of majolica, therefore the water filling its bottom looked invitingly azure. A large frame, with oil lamps on it, surrounded the pools; the room was pleasantly warm.
The vestibule Aryon and Nerwen had entered was furnished with wooden benches and shelves whit towels of various sizes, while on the walls robes were hanging from hooks. A number of niches hollowed out in the walls and shielded with heavy curtains apparently acted as changing rooms.

The keeper he maid had mentioned was cleaning the edge on one side of the tunnel starting from there, but as soon as he saw them, he put down the mop and approached them.

“You are the guests who arrived yesterday, aren’t you?” he asked with impeccable courtesy, and at their affirmative nod he went on, “Here you can disrobe and hang your clothes before bathing. But your dog cannot come with you in the water, it’s not advisable for an animal.”

“Túdhin will stay here and wait for us,” Nerwen nodded, “isn’t it, old friend?”

*Sure*, the wolf answered, sitting obediently at her signal; he had no intention to dive in this water, for him unnaturally hot.

“Very well,” the keeper smiled, “If you like, after your bath you can relax in the salt chamber and afterwards I can suggest you a massage, regenerating, relaxing or invigorating at your choice.”

“The salt chamber?” Aryon asked, having never heard such a description.

“Yes, it is a grotto of rock salt,” the keeper explained, “which has a cleaning effect on the respiratory system; indeed, it helps much in colds, including coughs and bronchitis; but it has a beneficial effect also on healthy people: it reduces anxiety, improves the mood, the ability to concentrate and the physical endurance. In general, it improves the sense of well-being that you already achieve in the thermal bath.”

They decided to try the salt chamber, as well as having a massage, but this, in the afternoon, because otherwise they would be late for the midday meal; but on this behalf, the keeper told them they could easily get something to eat even here – he would inform personally the kitchen to send someone with a tray of food for them – like Lady Iruegh often did herself.

As if speaking about her would have her summoned, the castellan appeared.
“Oh, I see you, too, let the thermal baths tempt you,” she smiled at them, “The stormy weather is inviting to come here, isn’t it?”

“You’re indeed right, Lady Iruegh,” Nerwen confirmed.

They found that the local custom didn’t expect bathing naked, but wrapped in special towels of linen cloth, bigger for women, having to cover up their bodies from their breasts to their knees, while men needed to cover just from their waist down. Both Nerwen and Aryon, accustomed in these circumstances to their own as well as the others’ nudity, thought this absurd, but as good manners require to adapt to local customs wherever you are, they didn’t breathe a word.

Nerwen plaited her hair and fastened it on the top of her head with some pins the keeper fetched her; after having disrobed, she and Aryon wrapped the towels around themselves and got into the water through a few steps; they swam a little, quite hampered by the towels, then sat on a seat and leaned against the edge. The warm water, moving placidly in a slight current ensuring a salubrious water exchange, was very relaxing.

Soon after, Iruegh joined them; she, too, had braided her long blond hair, pinning it on top of her head.

“Come,” she invited them, “in that tunnel,” she pointed to a passage opening about ten metres ahead, “we can have a massage on nape and shoulders with a jet of water.”

They followed their hostess, getting deeper into the tunnel where, at the bottom, a few wide gushes fell from above. Iruegh placed her shoulders under one of them and they did the same, enjoying the massage of the small cascades.

After about ten minutes, they returned on the main passage and sat down for a chat. Iruegh told them some funny anecdotes of life in her castle, and they in turn told her about Dorwinion and the Sea of Rhûn, where they had said they came from.

At last, they came out of the water, dried off and, wrapped in large robes, went to lie down on comfortable long chairs of wood and canvas in the salt grotto, where Túdhin was allowed to follow them, laying at Nerwen’s feet.
“Your dog never leaves you, I see,” Iruegh observed, in a slightly interrogative tone.

“So it is,” the Istar confirmed, “He’s very attached to me.”

They stayed in the salt chamber for about one hour; they had there a snack – bread, soft cheese, fruits – as the conversation switched on more personal matters.

“Forgive my curiosity,” Iruegh said at a certain point, looking at Nerwen and Aryon, “but what exactly is the nature of your relationship? Are you friends or… something more?”

The question, added to the knowledge that their interlocutor was a lover of women, planted a bug in Aryon’s ear. Was Iruegh testing the waters to find out if there was a possibility to make a proposal to Nerwen?

“We’re engaged,” he informed her therefore, bluntly, “and plan to get married as soon as possible.”

Indeed, in three weeks the year of engagement would expire and hence, following the custom that both of them shared, as well as Yavanna’s encouragement, they would see to celebrate their wedding as soon as possible.

“How wonderful,” the castellan commented, “I’m happy for you.”

With no apparent reason, Nerwen thought that she didn’t like her tone, she didn’t like it at all, maybe because she thought Iruegh’s eyes had become cold; nonetheless, the blonde woman had spoken with the highest politeness.

“Thank you,” the Aini said, hiding her discomfort, “Aryon, what about that massage?” she asked then, wanting to put an end to Iruegh’s company, now suddenly oppressive.

“Sure!” their hostess cried, standing up, “Come with me.”

This was not what Nerwen had hoped, but she had to make the best of it and therefore, she and the prince followed the castellan, returning in the hall.

Here, as they had been previously instructed, two servants were awaiting them, a man for Aryon and a woman for Nerwen as the day before for their bath, who took them to separate rooms.

“Enjoy your massage,” Iruegh exhorted them smiling, apparently not following their example. Nerwen thought her smile was forced out; it was obvious she hadn’t been happy to learn that the woman she had laid eyes on was engaged and even next to wedding, but she was trying to hide it. Well, it wasn’t her fault if she did feel no sexual interest in people of her own gender, Nerwen concluded with a mental shrug: Iruegh had to resign and turn her attentions elsewhere.

The masseuse led Nerwen in a half-lit room; she looked perplexed at Túdhin, who was constantly on his mistress’ tail.

“He won’t bother anyone,” the Maia assured her, thinking the woman could be annoyed by the presence of what she thought to be a dog, “He’ll stay out of the way and quiet.”

Grasping the mental request she was sending him while speaking, the wolf trotted to a secluded corner of the chamber and laid down, practically disappearing in the shadows. After all, Nerwen didn’t choose randomly the name she had given him at the time of their first encounter, Shadow-of-the-evening.

The masseuse accepted the situation smiling, then she invited Nerwen to take off her robe and lay
down in a prone position on the stuffed massage table; she covered her with a large towel, which she pulled down to her waist before beginning massaging her with a lavender-perfumed oil.

Not thinking any more about Iruegh and her designs on her, Nerwen relaxed under the woman’s skilled hands and closed her eyes, enjoying the treatment.

OOO

In the next room, Aryon lay down on the massage table and the masseur began the treatment; he was very capable and soon the prince relaxed with a content sigh. Feeling drowsy, he closed his eyes as his breath slowed down and his mind, aided by the smell of the incense burning in a small brazier, slipped into the land of dreams.

OOO

After a few minutes, the masseuse stopped briefly to take some more oil, then the treatment continued; but Nerwen felt immediately that the hands were different. She opened her eyes and turned to see who had taken the woman’s place; she met Aryon’s smiling gaze.

“Hey, what are you doing here?” she asked, surprised.

“I thought you would prefer me, as a masseur,” he answered her with a low and husky voice, “I dismissed the masseuse and told the keeper to not disturb us.”

A warm shiver travelled along her body as she grasped what he was implying.

“Couldn’t you wait for us to go back to our bedchamber?” she asked; she was amused, but above all she felt flattered to see how much he desired her, as the bulge under the towel wrapping his hips revealed.

“No, I couldn’t,” he answered, bending over her and placing his hands on her shoulders; he began to massage her, but immediately his touch became sensual caresses and in response, Nerwen’s femininity trembled.

“You are so desirable…” the prince whispered in her ear; his warm breath made her quiver. She felt his lips on the nape of her neck, kissing it, then wandering down her spine. He stopped at the small of her back, going sideways to nibble at her hip, and she sighed.

“You are so beautiful…” she heard him whispering, “I will make love to you like nobody else…”

Turned on by his skilful caresses, at first Nerwen didn’t heed this phrasing, but after some moments its oddness struck her, because it looked like Aryon had never made love with her. What reason could he have, to speak in this way?

A sense of suspicion caught her and the Istar whipped around to meet the prince’s blue eyes.

Except they weren’t his eyes: they were Iruegh’s.
She darted away from her hands and jumped from the massage table, ignoring the towel falling on the floor. At her sudden movement, in the shadows Túdhin stood up with a jerk, his ears standing upright in an alert attitude.

*What’s going on?* he sent to Nerwen, but she exhorted him to stay in the hide.

“What is this about?!” the Aini asked in an authoritative tone, her eyes flashing as she glared at *Aryon*. For a moment, he looked baffled, then he controlled himself.

“What do you mean?” he asked, “I just want to make love to you…”

“You are *not* *Aryon,* Nerwen claimed, pointing one finger at him, “Come on, show yourself for who you truly are… *Iruegh!*”

The castellan froze for a long moment; then her appearance changed, revealing the illusion she had wrapped herself in to look like *Aryon*. Recognising her, Túdhin was about to utter a growl but, obeying Nerwen’s request not to reveal his presence, he stifled it.

“How did you manage to found me out?” Iruegh enquired, unable to hide her bewilderment.

“You wanted to take me under false pretence!” Nerwen exclaimed outraged, ignoring her question, “How dare you?!”

Iruegh’s eyes became icy.

“In this castle I make and take whatever I want,” she stated, “and now I want you. You will be mine, like it or not!”

“Ha, as for this, you’re sorely mistaken… I am *Nerwen the Green!*” the Istar cried in a thundering voice as her shape became suddenly bigger, “Don’t think your magical skills can subdue or scare me, witch!”

Not at all frightened – as he already had seen her doing this effect – Túdhin kept his gaze on the castellan, and remained unmoving in the shadows.

“Oh, really?” Iruegh mocked Nerwen, suddenly growing, she too, in front of her adversary, “Do not underestimate me, silly mortal woman!”

The Istar was startled, while the wolf drew back, scared; but seeing his two-legged friend showing no fear, he heartened again, yet he remained still hidden, as she had recommended him. However, he prepared for an attack: nobody could threaten Nerwen and get away with it, in his presence!

“It’s you, the one who’s making the underestimation,” the Maia stated calmly, returning to appear at her normal size to affirm her complete lack of fear, “How do you plan to force me to sleep with you? You couldn’t do it by magic, do you want to try by force?” she teased her. Iruegh couldn’t guess she was provoking her on purpose and reacted.

“If necessary, yes!” she yelled, dashing forward. Nerwen moved lightning-fast to one side and Iruegh found only air. Thrown off balance, she staggered, but didn’t fall and turned again to the Maia.

“You cannot escape me forever,” she hissed, leaping forward, her arms outstretched. Again, the Istar moved too fast for her to hit her, but this time she seized Iruegh’s arm and pulled hard in the same direction her adversary was moving, doubling her momentum so that she lost her balance and hit face first the wall. Iruegh spun around, furious, crouching down like a feline ready to jump; she
was bleeding from a cut in her forehead.

Something was bothering Aryon, preventing him from falling asleep, an unexplainable feeling of danger that had no reason to be, in the present situation, so peaceful and quiet in a hospitable place full of friendly people. However, his instinct told him to stay alert and therefore he fought the numbness that was threatening to overwhelm him. The tried to move and chase away the cobwebs of sleep, but the masseur held him down; he didn’t like this at all and therefore he gathered his strength to get up sitting. As he did so, the man withheld him forcefully, and at this point Aryon awakened completely. He thrashed furiously to free himself, but the masseur was sturdy and the prince struggled to break his grip. Finally, he was able to break free and jumped down from the table, but the masseur was on him in an instant, trying to punch him. Using his Elven agility, the prince dodged and struck his adversary on one side, then he lifted one knee and hit him in the stomach; the man doubled over, breathless, and now Aryon joined his hands and hit him with a fist like a hammer on his temple, which made the masseur collapse, knocked out.

Caught by a bad feeling, Aryon leapt over the unconscious man; the towel had fallen from his hips during the fight, but he didn’t bother. He yanked open the door and hurled toward the room where he had seen Nerwen enter with the masseuse.

“I advise you to stop this, witch,” Nerwen warned Iruegh in an icy voice, “otherwise I don’t guarantee you make it out of here alive.”

She had no intention to kill her, unless forced to do so: she was no unnecessarily violent or cruel, and even if, sometimes, she had inflicted death and suffering, it had never been for amusement, nor had she ever imposed them unjustly.

Her tone, clearly dangerous, nailed some sense into Iruegh, who squinted her eyes to watch Nerwen intently.

“You are no regular woman,” she said.

“You’re right,” Nerwen confirmed, “I belong to the Order of the Wizards, who in the western lands are well-known and respected. You’ve got no idea about what my powers are. I suggest you not trying to discover it through an open fight: woe would betide you.”

Iruegh bent her fingers like claws and curled her lips in an unpleasant grin that made her features ugly; Nerwen realised she didn’t believe her.

From her posture, Túdhin recognised Iruegh was preparing another attack and he couldn’t hold himself back any longer: furious, he jumped out from his dark corner and leaped on her back, throwing her on the ground. The castellan shrieked, caught by surprise, as the wolf tried to bite her nape.
“No! Stop!” Nerwen commanded him; Túdhin didn’t therefore plant his fangs, but held them in place against the blonde woman’s skin; she kept stone-still.

At that moment, Aryn flung the door open and sprang inside. Nerwen saw he was naked and dishevelled, with some scratches on his torso and a furious face: it was plain he had been attacked, too.

The prince looked at Iruegh, prone on the floor with Túdhin biting into the nape of her neck.

“I see our good four-legged friend has already taken down our hostess,” he noticed, his fists so tight, his knuckles had gone white, “I can imagine what she wanted from you… or am I wrong?”

“You’re not,” Nerwen confirmed, approaching Aryon but keeping an eye on Iruegh, “She tried to pass herself off as you with a deceiving spell, but I didn’t fell for it. So she tried by force, but found her match.”

“You will regret it,” the castellan said, her voice muffled because of her position, “You will not go very far…”

“We’ll see,” Aryn replied in a low and threatening voice, then he addressed Nerwen, “I go get our clothes and then, may it rain or not, we leave, and Iruegh will be our pass.”

“It’s a fine plan,” Nerwen agreed, “As for you, witch…” she went on, talking to their hostess’ back, “So far you refused to follow my advice, but you’ve seen the consequences. If you’re not stupid, listen to me and don’t move a muscle, don’t even breathe too loud, or my dog will kill you. Do you understand, or must I explain it better?”

Iruegh’s fingers contracted on the stone floor, but the woman made no reply. Shrugging, Nerwen turned to Aryn and nodded, suggesting him to go.

At that moment, on the threshold appeared two armed guards, their swords drawn; behind them, Aryn and Nerwen caught sight of the keeper of the thermal baths, who probably, hearing sounds of scuffles, had ran to call them. The prince leapt backwards to keep out of range.

“Don’t make any rash move!” he warned them, “Or your lady dies!”

The guards saw Iruegh on the floor with the dog on top of her back and froze; after a few moments, they withdrew and lowered their swords, aware of their incapability to help their mistress.

At this point it wasn’t advisable go getting their garments, therefore Aryn ordered the keeper to bring them. The man obeyed quickly; shortly after he came back and the prince demanded for him to enter and place the bundle on the table; when the keeper had left again the room, Aryn and the Istar got dressed. From his boot, the prince drew the stiletto he never forgot and approached Iruegh.

“Can you tell Túdhin to withdraw?” he asked Nerwen, “I’ll take care of our friend here, from now on.”

Hearing the Maia’s request, the wolf left the castellan. Aryn seized Iruegh’s arm and dragged her to her feet, not very gently, pointing the knife at her neck.

“Could I, too, get dressed, at least?” the woman hissed, because she was still wrapped only in the robe she was wearing in the salt chamber.

“Why should we care about your comfort?” Nerwen replied, venomously, “You for sure didn’t
care about ours, did you, ordering an attack on my betrothed and trying to abuse me,” she glared at her with a terrible gaze, “But we are good people, unlike you, and therefore we’ll let you. Be aware that, should you even only hint to rebel or run, I’ll rouse Túdhin against you.”

The keeper ran out to go get also the castellan’s clothes; under the menacing eye of the wolf, who kept uttering a dangerous, low growl, and the dark gaze of Aryon, who kept his stiletto ready, Iruegh got dressed.

“Lay down your weapons,” Aryon ordered the two soldiers, “Slide them on the floor towards me.”

The two obeyed, laying down their swords on the ground and pushing them toward him. With a gesture, the prince called for Nerwen to replace him and seized one sword.

Soon afterwards, the two guards, the keeper and the masseur who attacked Aryon, still unconscious, were laying tied up and gagged on the floor; a quick inspection confirmed to the prince that there were no other people, in the thermal baths, hence they exited and closed the door; then, with Iruegh still under threat of the stiletto that now Nerwen wielded, Túdhin as a scout and Aryon in the rear, they went upstairs. Of course, the first servant who saw them ran to raise alarm, but the band of soldiers who hastily came had to resign to do nothing, or else they would endanger their lady’s life.

Curtly, Aryon ordered for their luggage to be carried down from their chamber and loaded on Thalion; besides, he ordered for their mounts to be saddled. Outside it was still pouring, but at this point it didn’t matter much: they had to go, as quick and as far as possible.

“One more thing,” Nerwen intervened, “I want the map of the lands east of the Orocarni I saw this morning in the library.”

When their orders had been fulfilled, they put on their cloaks to protect themselves from the rain and headed for the stables; Aryon got in the saddle first, then he took over Iruegh, making her sit in front of him and keeping the stiletto, which Nerwen had given him back, pointed against her hip as the Istar mounted on Thilgiloth; finally, they left the castle from the side facing eastward, Thalion as usual closely following the Chargeress, Túdhin on scout.

As they rode away from the bastions, the castellan began squirming.

“Let me go!” she hissed, “Now! Otherwise, my people will hunt you down until they kill you!”

Her behaviour bewildered Aryon:

“Until you’re in our hands, they won’t dare,” he observed, frowning, “So why should we let you go?”

Iruegh squirmed even harder:

“No! Let me go! Or you will regret it!”

Under her threatening words, however, panic was clearly recognisable; Nerwen wondered about the reason.

“Do you think we’re fools?” she asked harshly, “You’re our pass, as Aryon said. We’ve got no reason to let you go, not now.”

“You do not understand!” the blonde castellan shrieked, forgetting about intimidations, “I cannot leave my abode!”
“Enough!” Aryon silenced her curtly, “Once we’ll far enough, you’ll be free to go back. On foot, so you’ll need time we’ll use to disappear without a trace you and yours could follow… but unharmed. What else do you want? It’s already more than what you were willing to offer us, so don’t complain!”

“No, no!” whined Iruegh, by now apparently pretty hysterical, “Don’t take me farther… no… this is the border of my land… here my power ceases…”

They were almost out of sight of the castle and were going through two truncated pillars, identical to those they had found on the other side on their arrival. Suddenly the castellan, ignoring the knife, wrestled convulsively, trying to break free from Aryon’s iron grip; the prince grabbed her even harder.

“Stay still!” he demanded, pressing the point of the stiletto against her hip; a spasmodic jerk of the woman had the blade plunging enough to make her bleed, and she uttered a painful cry but didn’t stop. Hence, Aryon changed his tactics and hit her temple with the hilt of his knife, trying to knock her out, and indeed Iruegh went limp in his arms.

“What was the matter with her?” he grumbled; Nerwen shrugged, as much perplexed as he.

Beyond the pillars, the road began to go visibly downward; they had made just a few metres, when the prince felt Iruegh’s body shudder. He looked at her, alarmed, ready to hit her again if necessary; but instead, he saw her crumbling, like a fruit drying in the sun. Under Aryon’s and Nerwen’s horrified eyes, in a few moments the woman aged, her skin became the colour of an old parchment and wrinkles covered it, her hair whitened, her shoulders bent; they heard a hiss, like air escaping from a bladder. The aging process continued mercilessly, reducing the woman to a dried and skeleton-like mummy. With a disgusted cry, Aryon let it fall to the ground, where it smashed and fell to pieces like an earthenware jug.

“What on Arda…?” he gasped, truly distraught. Nerwen, too, had paled in horror.

At that moment, they heard the rumble of a collapse. Both whipped around, while their mounts jerked, even Thilgiloth, scared by the sudden noise, and Túdhin yelped. Through the rain curtain, they saw Bordercastle crumbling, collapsing in upon itself in a big cloud of dust; in seconds, of the large stronghold there was nothing left except for debris, but there was no trace of its inhabitants, humans and animals.

They gaped at this ruin for several minutes, too stunned to do anything else, as the dust was quickly settling down. Then, the clouds opened up and the rain stopped pouring all of a sudden as the sun appeared behind the torn up cloud curtain and lighted the scene, shining so brightly that, after the earlier greyness, it looked like blinding to them.

“By Oromë’s spear…” Aryon murmured, upset, “What happened? First Iruegh, then the castle… literally fallen to pieces. How, why?”

Nerwen turned to watch Iruegh’s remains, wrapped in the clothes that, in turn, from new as they had appeared, looked now centuries-old.

“I can’t be sure,” she answered slowly, “but I think that Irueg, with her witchcraft, has somehow been able to stop time inside a circumscribed area, some kind of bubble, so to speak, where she lived for many years, probably centuries or even millennia, remaining unchanged. All the people, animals, objects, the whole castle existed into a different time than ours, and it was this way only because of Iruegh’s will. Evidently, however, this power failed when she stepped out of the bubble… you saw how much she was terrified at the idea to walk beyond those two pillars,” she
observed, pointing at them, “so much terrified she was willing to get injured, even seriously, as long as she could stay inside. She didn’t expect you to knock her out and so, as soon as we got over the border, real time struck her, ageing her of centuries in a few moments. Once Iruegh was dead, the bubble dissolved and everything that was inside it has been exposed to the normal time course, and therefore, as much as her, it has aged in consequence, falling to pieces…”

Aryon, too, lowered his gaze on the castellan’s remains.

“I don’t understand the reason of this,” he grumbled in a puzzled tone. Nerwen shrugged.

“Nor do I. Mayhap, if her tale about Bordercastle’s foundation held some truth in it, a pestilence forced her to take shelter here, but long before than she told us… perhaps during the Second Age, or even earlier. The books we saw were much older than we thought. And the map they gave us, in all likelihood is now reduced to dust.”

At this point, Aryon looked into his saddlebag and saw it was just like that.

“If the map went back to the First Age, no harm,” he considered, “as since then, the world has changed very much…”

“But if they went back to the Second Age, they would have been useful,” the Istar pointed out, disappointedly, “Well, this means we’ll discover ourselves these lands beyond the Orocarni. Mayhap we’ll find a town where cartographers live…”

“Let’s hope so,” the Avar prince concluded, turning Allakos and taking down the hood of his cape, now useless as it didn’t rain anymore; then his gaze fell again on Iruegh’s remains and he shook his head, “If only she wouldn’t have persisted on you, now she would be still alive in her time bubble…”

“Perhaps she wanted someone to share her life with,” Nerwen hypothesized, turning Thilgiloth and spurring her on along the downward road at Allakos’ side, “After all, it’s what we all wish… except she chose the wrong person,” she concluded, feeling a hint of compassion for the witch.

“But above all,” Aryon considered through gritting teeth, “she chose the wrong way: you cannot force someone to fall in love with you. She took a fancy to you, but you didn’t reciprocate her and this should’ve been enough to make her desist.”

“If she were a good person, it would’ve been this way… but she weren’t, and therefore she acted differently,” the Maia concluded, throwing back her cloak and lifting up her face to the sun, “Probably even the rain was only inside the bubble: do you see that everything is dry, here around?”

Actually, there was no trace of the violent downpour raging when they had left Bordercastle.

Silently, they turned their backs to the enchanted fortress and rode toward the unknown lands beyond the Red Mountains.

Author’s corner:
The underground pools in the picture are located in a hotel in Ischia, an Italian volcanic island – I don’t name it because I don’t want to make any surreptitious advertising LOL

The treatment in salt caves, or halotherapy, is an acknowledged therapeutic technique lately much re-evaluated even by official medicine.

Nerwen and Aryon have finally got over the so far apparently insurmountable Red Mountains: what awaits them now, in these totally unknown lands, we’ll see in the next chapters.

As usual, I'd like to thank heartedly all those following this fan fiction; beginning it, I never thought it could develop so much! I just hope I’ll be able to keep you interested and therefore you’ll follow it gladly to the end. How much long to it, however, I still cannot say XD

Lady Angel
Chapter XLVI: Beyond the Orocarni

They needed four days to come down from the pass, as much as they had needed to go up; on this side, too, there was a path, in more or less equal conditions than the one on the other side, therefore they had no difficulty.

At a height of a few hundred metres, they found a scenic point and halted there to look out: in front of them lands stretched that were completely unknown to the peoples west of the Orocarni. The landscape laid in the sun of end June, the horizon slightly foggy because of the heat; they saw an endless grassy plain, similar to the sea of grass in Rohan or in the realms of the Avari. Occasionally, a gleam showed the presence of water and a darker shadow revealed groups of trees and small woods. The land looked practically flat, with only few folds, none of them worth the name of high ground. They didn’t see any isolated farmhouses, least of all built-up areas or towns.

When they arrived to the bottom, the sun had set behind them and the mountain range; there would be still two hours light, but they decided to stop nevertheless.

The following morn, Nerwen pondered about the direction to choose.

“I’m not sure about where to go,” she considered, “It’s something gnawing at me since we left Orrodal: where shall we go, once beyond the Red Mountains?” she shook her head, sighing; she had told Aryon about her vision in the Mirror of Galadriel – she had no reason to hide it from him, because anyone could look into the Mirror, with the permission of the Lady of the Galadhrim, and see something – but it had been too quick to allow her seeing the geographical position clearly, “I’ve got an enough precise idea about the conformation of the Entwives’ land, but not about the place where it is located, just that it borders with the Eastern Ocean and is crossed by many rivers and brooks. We need a map of these lands, or someone who knows them and is willing to show us the way…”

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“Hence, first of all we need to find a village or at least a homestead to ask information about this,” Aryon considered, “At this point, any direction is as good as any other.”

“Yeah… Let’s go straight toward the rising sun and the Eastern Ocean,” the Istar decided.

OOO

They proceeded eastward for some days; during the morning of the third day of July, as the skirted a rocky hill, they came across a stream exiting a stony wall, forming a pool with exceptionally clear, green water, and they decided to halt there for a bath, a pleasant relief from the summer heat. Túdhin, too, bathed with them.

As they were freshening up their mounts, Aryon noticed dark clouds, harbinger of rain, coming from the east.

“Looks like weather’s changing,” he told Nerwen, pointing at them. She glanced at the eastern sky and agreed.

“We’d better set up our tent,” she suggested. They took their horses in the shelter of the trees surrounding the mire and prepared the tent Zagal had given them, placing it under the thick canopy of a large ash tree. They gathered there their blankets and garments, wrapped anything else in the impermeable cloths the generous merchantress had given them and finally, as it was noon, they had some smoked meat and lembas.

They had just finished, when a cold wind started and from the sky large drops began to fall. The couple took shelter in the tent, while Túdhin joined Thilgiloth, Thalion and Allakos, who welcomed him among them.
Looking at the sky, now cloud-covered from horizon to horizon, Aryon considered:

“I think it’ll go on raining until tonight.”

Nerwen, sitting on their pallet, had already got rid of her boots; hearing the comment of her husband-to-be, her lips curled in a little smile:

“I have an idea on how we could spend our time…”

The tone of her voice had a shiver running along the Avar prince’s spine; he turned and peered at her knowingly, his characteristic grin tugging at his lips.

“I’m curious to find out what’s in your mind,” he murmured. Nerwen laid down halfway; a naughty sparkle in her eyes, she patted on the blanket next to her:

“If you come here, I’ll show you…”

Aryon certainly had no need for her to repeat it; he hurriedly fastened the strings closing the tent, laid down beside his betrothed and took her in his arms.

“I remember the day I joined you, after leaving Bârlyth,” he said in a low voice, “I recall every moment… every kiss, every word, every gesture… Do you know that today marks exactly one year?”

Nerwen parted her lips, surprised.

“I didn’t realise it,” she admitted, moved that he had, instead; she put her arms around his neck, “I, too, remember every moment of that day,” she stated, “but above all, I remember my feelings in hearing you telling me for the first time that you love me…”

She closed her eyes, overwhelmed; Aryon held her tight.

“I love you, Nerwen,” he said, before lowering his head and kissing her deeply. She responded to his kiss with equal fervour; the prince stroked her back, slowly, until he grasped her hips and
crushed her firmly against his body. On her abdomen, the Istar felt clearly the irrefutable proof of his desire for her. A shudder crossed her most hidden femininity.

“I love you, too, Aryon,” she murmured when he shortly left her lips, “Only Eru knows how much I love you…”

She lowered her hands on the Avar’s firm buttocks and crushed him in turn against her body, slowly rubbing herself on him; Aryon lost his breath.

“You’re driving me crazy…” he whispered, hoarsely, and then took her lips in another kiss, searing with passion but also loaded with all the feelings he had for her.

OOO

The enormous cypress with the low branches under which the horses and the wolf had taken shelter, was thick enough to protect them partially both from the rain and from the cold wind; they closed together, looking for warmth and comfort in the mutual presence. At evening, it stopped raining, but the wind kept blowing.

The two lovers, completely absorbed in each other, stayed holed inside the tent until sleep caught them and they fell asleep, holding one another in a tangle of blankets; they set foot outside only after sunrise, finding a clean and fresh world.

The wood they could have gathered was too wet to light a fire, therefore they had to be content breaking their fast with dehydrated fruit and lembas, drinking simple water instead of the usual bergamot tea. Then they broke camp, mounted on their horses and resumed their journey.

OOO

They rode on for two more days without meeting any inhabited area; then, in the morning of the third day after leaving the small mire where they had celebrated their first year of love, they came across a well-maintained trail, clearly a largely used road.

“A road means people,” Aryon observed, watching the horizon in one direction and in the opposite one with his sharp Elven eyes, “and therefore a town, or at least a big village: the road wouldn’t be so wide and well-kept, if they were just a few houses.”

“The question is: where shall we go?” Nerwen considered. This made her think about how much Calad, in this case, would be helpful, as she had been when they arrived at the Harnenduin, the river marking the border of Dorwinion, to seek a ford or a ferry. Thinking of her winged friend saddened her: less than two months had passed and the sorrow caused by this loss would torment her much longer.

“Since we decided to go eastward, I’d suggest we go there,” Aryon answered, indicating the direction in which the road went northeast.

“Good idea,” the Istar approved, motioning for Thilgiloth to go. The Chargeress began to move,
and as usual, Allakos went beside her and Thalion behind.

In the late afternoon, they arrived in sight of a fair-sized village, built on the banks of a not very large river and surrounded by a strong-looking stonewall. The gates, of massive oak wood reinforced by iron bands, were wide open, garrisoned by a picket of four guards wearing chain mails. They were tall and sturdy men, blond, with long, braided moustaches; they sported wide britches, striped in white and blue, fastened around their ankles with leather strips over robust low boots. Heavy swords were hanging from their sides and they had spears with very long blades.

Aryon pulled at Allakos’ reins to observe the town, evaluating its defences and examining the soldiers’ stance.

“It’s a rather peaceful place,” he told Nerwen; at her puzzled glance, he explained, “The walls are well-built but not particularly impressive, and the guards have a not too hostile attitude.”

The Istar nodded, showing she had understood.

“Let’s hope the dwellers are friendly enough to offer us their assistance, so we can continue our search in a more targeted way,” she said, then she addressed Túdhin, “My friend, it’d be better you disguise yourself as a dog, again.”

*I’ll do it*, the predator assured her.

They set out again; as soon as the small company approached the entrance, the two outermost guards lowered their spears, barring the way and forcing them to stop. Aryon resumed instantly his glowering air, reminding Nerwen of the day they had met, on the shores of the Sea of Rhûn.

“Declare your names and the reason for your presence here,” one of the soldiers ordered in an exotic accented Westron, similar but not equal to Iruegh’s.

“Nerwen and Aryon,” the Maia announced in a clear voice, “We’re trying to reach the sea.”

“There are still many days of travel,” the warrior observed in a rather polite tone, “You speak in a strange way… where are you coming from?”

“From Dorwinion, beyond the Red Mountains,” Nerwen answered, recurring to the same answer they had given to Iruegh. The soldier showed surprise:

“Really? I never heard about someone who managed to cross those mountains…” then he glanced at Aryon with an equally perplexed and intrigued air, “You are not of the race of Men…”

“I’m a Half-Elf,” the prince declared dryly, adapting immediately to Nerwen’s little story.

The warrior hesitated for a moment, pondering about the information, then nodded.

“You must notify your presence to the sergeant,” he said, pointing to the garrison next to the entrance, “afterwards, you can get into town.”

“Fine, thank you,” Nerwen answered, with the same cautious affability of the soldier. She dismounted, while Aryon did the same, and headed for the garrison, which door, because of the heat, stood wide open. In the sole room inside, a flushed woman, sporting the same uniform as the guards, was waving at herself with a bundle of paper sheets, which she put down as soon as she glimpsed at them entering.

“Good afternoon and welcome to Yòrvakars, madam, sir,” she greeted them calmly.
“Good afternoon to you, sergeant,” Nerwen answered, “We came to notify our presence, as the chef of the picket told us to do.”

“Very well,” the brown-haired woman nodded and opened up a register, dipping a pen in the inkpot, “Your names?”

The Istar repeated the information she had given to the chief of the picket, that is, their names and supposed origin. The sergeant wrote it accurately, then she asked them:

“What takes you to Yòrvakars?”

“We’re just passing through. We’re headed for the sea,” Nerwen answered, again repeating herself.

“So you will stay for a short time, I suppose?” the woman enquired.

“We think one or two nights,” the Aini confirmed, “In this regard, can you advise us a good inn?”

The sergeant considered the looks of the two travellers, gentle despite the dust and sweat.

“A classy one is surely the Yorva Embankment,” she answered.

“Thanks… how do we get there?”

“Take the main road, straight on to the square with the fountain,” the sergeant answered, closing the register, “then ask to one of the kids who always hang out there: with a small reward, you can hire one to be your guide.”


Aryon followed her as she exited; he had preferred staying silent, studying the place and the she-soldier, planning to inform her later about his conclusions. He anyway didn’t think having anything to add to the impression he had approaching the village, which now they knew was called Yòrvakars.

They got back on saddle and rode along the main road, like the sergeant had told them to do, Thalion as usual at Thilgiloth’s tail and Túdhin trotting next to her; once they arrived at the described square, where a fountain stood, quadrangular with a dozen of water gushes, they saw a number of kids loafing about there.

“Hey, you,” Aryon addressed one, “can you tell us where we can find the Yorva Embankment inn?”

“Sure!” the boy with dishevelled blond hair answered lively, “I can take you there… with an appropriate remuneration.”

Aryon tossed him a copper coin.

“Double when we arrive,” he promised. The kid looked at the coin and grinned satisfied, then he motioned for them to follow him.

About ten minutes later, after a series of turns, they reached the river; here they went on, until they arrived in front of a rather large building, well-kept and with a brightly coloured sign.

“Here we are,” the boy announced, pointing at the sign.

“Very well,” Aryon approved, fishing inside his purse and tossing him not two, but three copper coins. The blond kid caught them and beamed.
“Thank you sir, may the Valar bless you, and the lady!” he cried, before vanishing in a narrow side alley.

“What a nice little rascal,” Nerwen commented with an amused smile, watching him disappear beyond the corner of the inn.

They entered the courtyard, where a red-haired young man came toward them.

“Hullo,” he greeted them, “Do you want a room? We have some for rent.”

“Yes, thanks,” Nerwen answered, dismounting, “Treat them well, they’re valuable horses,” she recommended him; taking a page out of Aryon, she handed him a silver coin, “As much as, if going away we’ll be satisfied with the treatment.”

The youngster glanced at the coin and smiled content:

“I love horses and I treat them always well, but this way I will do even better,” he assured her, “Please, enter; I will take care of your luggage.”

Nerwen and Aryon took his suggestion and got inside the inn, closely followed by Túdhin who was superbly pretending being a dog; small bells, hanging over the jamb, tinkled softly when they opened and then closed the door. In the hall stood a counter of dark wood, worn out but carefully polished, behind which an elderly woman was sitting, her hair unusually grey in the front and raven-black in the back, pinned up in a bun, and lively grey eyes; she stood up seeing then entering.

“Good afternoon, madam, sir,” she said politely, “How can I help you?”

Nerwen thought she looked very sweet.

“We’d like a room for one or two nights,” she answered.

“Sure,” the elderly lady said smiling, “I’ll call my husband.”

She came out from behind the counter and crossed over to an open door, calling in a loud voice:

“Roden! Come, we have two guests!”

Shortly after, a man arrived, his hair entirely white and his well-groomed moustache grey; he watched the newcomers, intrigued, lingering one moment longer on Aryon’s pointed ears.

“Welcome to the Yorva Embankment,” he said, “It’s very rare to see an Elf, these parts,” he added, with a smile as cordial as his wife’s.

“I’m a Half-Elf, actually,” the prince pointed out, sticking to the version he had given coming to town, “I’m Aryon,” he introduced himself, “and she is my betrothed Nerwen.”

“My name is Roden,” the man reciprocated, extending his hand to him, “and she’s my wife Morvenna.”

Aryon grasped his wrist in the greeting used by all the peoples of Ennor, which instead caught Roden by surprise. Nonetheless, he promptly responded to his grasp, adjusting to the for him unusual gesture.

“You come from very afar,” he commented, intrigued but not intrusive, “I hope you’ll feel comfortable, here in Yòrvakars,” he turned to his wife, “My dear, is the chamber at the end of the
northern wing free?"

“Yes, the guests left this morning and I have already fixed it,” Morvenna answered, “Will you take them there?”

“Sure… Do you want to take your dog with you?” Roden asked, nodding toward Túdhin who, faithful to his role as a fake dog, was laying on the floor next to Nerwen.

“Yes, if it is no problem for you,” the Istar answered.

“Not at all,” the innkeeper assured her, “but please clean up after him, I’ll give you the needed tools.”

“Of course,” Nerwen nodded. Roden, too, was nice, she decided; he and Morvenna were truly a beautiful couple.

At that moment, a young boy came in, carrying their saddlebags.

“I brought you this, to begin with,” he said shyly, “then I’ll take care of the rest.”

“Just give it to me, lad,” Aryon invited him, reaching out and taking the bags off his shoulders, “I’ll carry these, you see after the remaining luggage.”

Struck by the prince’s bright eyes, the boy blushed conspicuously and ran off. Roden smiled:

“That is Orval, our grandson,” he revealed with unconcealed pride, “Smart, even if a bit shy.”

Seeing them ready, Roden led them up to the first storey and then down a long corridor with many rooms at each side, as they could see from the number of doors they got past; the chamber to which he took them was at the far end, on the corner of the inn, looking out on the riverbank. It wasn’t very large, but quite well furnished with a canopy bed, bedside tables and two trunks; in a corner stood a small table with a basin and jug of enamelled copper and a mirror.

While Aryon was placing the bags on a trunk, Roden informed them:

“The time for dinner is from six to eleven o’clock, for lunch from noon to three in the afternoon, and breakfast is from six to ten in the morning. If you wish to take a bath you have only to ask for it,” he concluded.

“Thank you,” Nerwen said, “A bath is always good, possibly not too hot because of the temperature.”

“I’ll see to it,” the innkeeper concluded, “I’ll send for you as soon as it’s ready.”

He took his leave with a cordial smile; Aryon and Nerwen put away their meagre belongings, preparing their house clothing, and then they laid down to rest a little. Half an hour later, a chambermaid arrived to tell them that their bath was ready; they followed the young woman to the ground floor, where she led them in a room with a stony floor, where two copper bathtubs awaited for them, filled with lukewarm water. The girl informed them that, if they wanted, she could take care of their dirty clothes, they just needed to leave them there after finishing. Nerwen thanked her: the last time they had washed their garments had been before beginning the ascent to Bordercastle.

After the bath, they put on their clean garments and, being it almost dinnertime, they headed for the common room, where they had rainbow trout, fished in the Yorva, boiled and seasoned with herb-butter, coming with fresh mixed vegetables such as lettuce, tomatoes, radishes, carrots and
cucumbers, flavoured with rocket and basil; as a drink, they had dry cider. Complimenting the waitress about the food, they learned the cook was her husband and the son of the innkeepers.

At last, Aryon and Nerwen retired for the night, enjoying once more the comfort of a bed. In more than one meaning.

OOO

“Where can we find maps of these lands?” Aryon asked Morvenna the following day.

“I have no idea… I never had a thing for journeys,” the elderly woman answered smiling, but with a certain regret because she couldn’t help them, “But you can ask in the library, surely they’ll be able to tell you.”

She gave them directions for the library, a rather large building not far away from the inn; there, the librarian told them about a book-seller and cartographer, whose shop was located next to the town entrance through which they had arrived.

They left Túdhin with their mounts and headed for the book-seller, who proved fairly helpful as he had a few charts of the lands surrounding Yòrvarem, the realm where they were, which laid down the Yorva from the Orocarni to the Eastern Ocean, where the river flowed in; but no chart he possessed went much northwards or southwards, and nothing on them corresponded to the memory Nerwen had of the Entwives’ land she had glimpsed at in the Mirror of Galadriel, and this disappointed her much.

“Where can we find other maps, larger than these?” she asked to the cartographer.

“Surely in Pallàndim, the capital of our realm,” the man answered, blinking with his short-sighted eyes, “Our sovereign is a great scholar and his knowledge has been written down in many books that fill up a library ten times larger than the one here in Yòrvakars, hence you will surely find much more information there, about the lands surrounding Yòrvarem.”

Aryon located the town the cartographer had named on the map he had given to them; it stood at the mouth of the river, where it flew into a long and narrow gulf going north-northeast toward the ocean.

“How long is it, to reach Pallàndim?” he asked.

“By land, it’s a ten days ride; by river, half the time,” the man answered, “There are always boats coming and going between Yòrvakars and Pallàndim; if you wish, at the port you can find someone willing to take you there,” he concluded. He gave them the necessary directions to get there and the couple took their leave; as it was fairly past noon, they stopped to have lunch in a tavern along the road, where Aryon’s looks gained him a number of intrigued stares. When they arrived at the port, it was about two o’clock and very hot; they asked for a boat that could take them to the capital city.

“Only you two?” the commander of the port, whom they had addressed for information, asked them

“The two of us, three horses and a dog,” Aryon answered.
“Then the only boat big enough is the Riverpearl,” the man mused.

“May we go and speak to the captain?”

“Of course, the boat is moored at dock number 3,” the commander told them.

Hence, they headed for the dock, which they walked to the far end, where the boat was berthed.

“Greetings,” Aryon hailed the sailor on watch, “Can we speak to the captain? We’d like to go to Pallàndim.”

“Wait here, please,” the man answered, motioning for a boy to come near and telling him to call the captain.

“Did you notice that everybody is very polite, in this place?” Nerwen asked, pleasantly impressed.

“Yes, I like these Men, so far,” the prince admitted, “Let’s hope that substance equals appearance,” he added, making a face, as the natural mistrust of the Avari toward the strangers resurfaced in him.

Nerwen didn’t sense malevolence in these people; but she had already been deceived, she thought, recalling annoyed Dronegan, the innkeeper at Gobelamon who had practically sold her to Corch. Better be wary, after all...

A tall Man arrived, with greying tawny hair and beard, and bright hazel brown eyes.

“Good day,” he greeted them. “They tell me you’re trying to go to Pallàndim…”

“That’s right,” Aryon confirmed. The captain motioned for them to come aboard.

“Welcome on the Riverpearl,” he said, “I’m captain Ràdiros, nice to meet you.”

“It’s our pleasure,” Nerwen answered.

“So, what do you need? Two cabins?”

“One is good,” Aryon said, “but we have three horses and a dog.”

“Understood… We can do it, the hold is big enough to set up a corner for the horses, and the dog can stay with you in the cabin. Only one thing: we must do some repairs, therefore we cannot sail for eight or nine days.”

“We’re not in any particular hurry,” Nerwen assured him.

“Very well, so now we can talk about the price…”

They agreed upon a reasonable amount; Ràdiros asked them where they were staying, so that he could inform them as soon as he would know the exact departure day, because they had to go aboard the night before. In the end, they parted cordially; Nerwen and Aryon returned to the Yorva Embankment, satisfied: it had been a fruitful day.

OOO
As the days passed, they explored Yòrvakars and its neighbourhood; the innkeepers, Morvenna and Roden, for some reason had taken a fancy at them, so great they treated them more like relatives rather than guests, proving more considerate than one could reasonably expect from them.

“Your Aryon is truly very much in love with you,” one day Morvenna observed, while her husband and the prince were engrossed in a game of darts; Aryon missed often, on purpose, because he didn’t want to frustrate Roden, whose ability – even if noticeable for a Man – could not compare to the Elf’s.

“I know,” Nerwen smiled, looking at the object of her love, “and I am with him.”

“Tell me how you met and fell in love,” the elderly lady asked her, crocheting skilfully at a superb doily of snow-white cotton, “I adore love stories…”

The Aini realised she would love to tell about it, as she never had the opportunity to do so, except for Yavanna.

“Our first meeting actually looked like a fight…” she began, smiling amused by the memory; she went on, telling Morvenna about the evolution of their relationship – obviously without going into too intimate details – adapting the tale a little to omit her identity as an Istar, which she was reluctant to reveal, now that they had crossed the Orocarni and were in lands they knew nothing about, and omitting, too, the fact that Aryon was the brother of a powerful sovereign, calling him simply the captain of the royal guard, which was an understatement but represented well his station as First Sword. Morvenna followed attentively her narration, asking something here and there but never being intrusive; she was particularly moved when Nerwen told her about the moment Aryon had joined her and they had worked out their feelings, and again when she told her about the engagement ceremony, celebrated in the Elven tradition.

“But this means that in two days it’s you anniversary!” the woman cried enthusiastically, “Do you plan to marry soon?”

“We’d love to,” Nerwen confirmed, recalling Yavanna’s exhortation not to waste more time than necessary, “The Elven tradition – and the Dorwinian, too – says that we should share the moment with friends and relatives, but we’re very far from our homelands…” she concluded, feeling rather sorry.

Morvenna placed one hand on her arm, sympathetically.

“Mayhap you have no relatives, here,” she said in a low voice, “but, if you like, you certainly have two friends. We cannot take the place of your loved one, for sure, but if you don’t want to wait, we’ll be very happy to serve as substitutes.”

It was plain she was referring to herself and her husband. Nerwen glanced at her, touched: since the beginning, she had felt a great affinity with this woman, almost as much as she was an old friend, met again after a long separation. She wondered if it was actually so, if she had already met Morvenna’s soul during the First Age of the world, but it seemed impossible to her – as it was a very rare event – that she could have found again two ancient friends in such a short time, therefore it was perhaps only a matter of character affinity.

“I thank you for your offer, Morvenna,” she said, grateful, “I’ll talk with Aryon about it.”

She did it that same night as they were preparing to go to bed. The prince didn’t hide he was impressed:
“They’re really decent people,” he commented, “I admit I didn’t expect to feel so comfortable among strangers and furthermore Humans… but as you told Zagal a few months ago, there shouldn’t be any strangers, only friends who have not yet met,” he looked at her with one of his little smiles, “We are very fortunate having met these friends at this exact moment… Besides, Yavanna herself advised us to not wait, therefore… yes, let’s get married now!”

Nerwen smiled happily; she tied her arms around his neck and kissed him soundly.

OOO

Morvenna was so happy they would accept her offer, she almost started to weep because of emotion; Roden, too, was very glad about the news.

The regular nuptial rite in Yòrvakars was different from the Elven one, but the two elderly people were willing to follow the bridal couple’s tradition, so Aryon and Nerwen instructed them about the sentences and the gestures they had to perform.

Being the ceremony actually very simple, and being there no need to prepare any grand banquet as it would be customary in these type of event because the bride and groom, after all, had no one to invite, it was easy to organise everything.

The local custom – anyway followed also by all the peoples in Middle-earth and even in Valinor – wanted the bridal couple to dress up in refined attires, therefore, on that same day, Morvenna took Nerwen and Aryon to a seamstress she knew. There was no time to sew custom-made clothes, but they could choose among the ready ones. Nerwen fell instantly in love with a purple gown of light velvet, embroidered with golden thread and decorated with two stoles of white silken veil; the price wasn’t excessively high – considering she would wear it only for one day because she had no intention to take it with her, a pointless weight in her luggage – and hence she bought it. She asked for just one alteration, which was taking away the sleeves that, in the heat of the summer climate, were useless.
Aryon instead bought a tunic of his usual black colour, but softened by silver embroidery and beads.

Finally, the bridal couple purchased the rings – two simple gold bands that would replace the silver ones – from a jeweller the two innkeepers recommended them.

On that same evening, Nerwen contacted Yavanna, as she had promised. Laying on the bed and guarded by Aryon, the Istar went to see her Mistress; she knocked on the door representing their communication channel and, a few moments later, the entrance opened, this time on the parlour where the Queen of Earth had appointed her with the mission to seek the Onodrim, over three years ago.

*Welcome, my dear friend,* Yavanna told her, smiling and reaching out for her; Nerwen grasped her hands affectionately, *Come, take a seat.*

They sat down on the same armchairs where they had talked about the search for the Ents.

*How are you?* the Valië asked her, *The search, your prince?*

*I’m fine,* Nerwen answered, *We were able to cross the Orocarni and now we’re on a river town called Yòrvakars, among very friendly people,* the Maia paused for a moment, organising her thoughts, *Talking about friends… unfortunately, I lost one…*

She told her Mistress about Calad’s death and the grief this had caused her; and she told her about Túdhin, her ancient friend from the First Age she had found immediately after the loss of the she-hawk, almost like a compensation.

*I am sorry for the sorrows you must face during the task I entrusted you with,* Yavanna said,
regretful, *It is not the first one you suffered, nor it will be the last one, I fear…*

Nerwen recalled Thorin, whose soul, at that moment, was probably in the part of the Halls of Mandos kept for the Dwarves, along with his nephews Fili and Kili, awaiting to reincarnate.

*Unfortunately it’s unavoidable,* she sighed, *It’s part of the nature of Middle-earth. I knew it, when I began this journey; but the difference between knowing and experimenting is very bitter… Luckily I met Aryon, my partner for life: with him by my side, the bitterness is more bearable…*

The Valië reached out for her and gently caressed her hand.

*I am every moment happier that you have your partner by your side… If I kept counting right, soon the engagement year will be over, is it not?* she asked, trying to cheer her up, she was successful, because Nerwen instantly smiled:

*Exactly. We’ve been lucky enough to meet an elderly couple more than friendly, I’d rather say affectionate, to the point they offered to be our wedding sponsors even if we barely know each other; therefore, we decided to marry, following your advice to not wait more than strictly necessary. The ceremony will take place the day after tomorrow, at noon.*

*What a good news!* Yavanna cried with enthusiasm, *As I promised, I will be with you in spirit, during the celebration. Send me your thoughts shortly before the beginning and I will arrive…*

*Thank you, Kementári,* Nerwen said, the formality of the answer defused in the affectionate hug they exchanged.

Before taking her leave, the Istar gave Yavanna Aryon’s thanks about the news she had shared with him, through her, regarding his father Galadhost; then they parted with another embrace.

Nerwen watched the smiling Queen of Earth and her library vanish in a snow-white mist; she opened her eyes and found herself back in Yòrvakars, with Aryon at her side.

“Welcome back, sweetheart,” the prince greeted her; he had watched over her with just a little less anxiety than last time; it still troubled him, this *not being there* of hers, even if he tried not to show it, “How was it?”

“Very well,” she answered, accepting the glass filled with apple juice he was handing her and drinking a long draft, “Yavanna confirmed she’ll be with us, during the ceremony.”

“This is a great honour,” Aryon commented in a low voice, “but we better don’t tell it to our friends, or they risk fainting… mostly Morvenna, who is already very emotional,” he concluded with a smile that was equally amused and moved. Seeing the sincere willingness of this elderly couple of Humans, his inborn *Avarin* mistrust had shattered.

“You’re right,” Nerwen confirmed, biting into a piece of strawberry jam tart previously prepared, “We truly couldn’t find two righter people than she and Roden, to be our wedding sponsors, so far away from home…”

OOO
The fourteenth day of July, one year and one day after the engagement day, Aryon and Nerwen came in front of Roden and Morvenna – both very thrilled – in the back garden of the inn, where they had put up a small pavilion to protect them from the hot sun. For this day, the two elderly people had trusted the inn to their son and daughter-in-law, who would take care of the other guests, therefore leaving them free to fulfil the pleasant task they had taken over.

“I am not sure I’ll remember everything,” Morvenna whispered very anxiously to her husband.

“Don’t worry,” he calmed her down, “Aryon told me that, should we forget something, they’ll give us the right hints. Anyway, it’s just the four of us.”

She looked at him with love.

“That’s a good thing…” she chuckled, a little reassured, “At our son’s wedding I was not so much agitated, but, of course, we hadn’t to perform the ceremony…”

Nerwen and Aryon had agreed upon not naming the Eldar, during the formal sentences of the ceremony, holding the impression they were out of place, as they were among Humans; therefore, they had slightly changed the formula, but the result was, actually, identical.

At the agreed hour, just before noon, they went out to the garden and, hand in hand, walked toward the elderly couple awaiting them under the pavilion, as Séredor and Lythelen had done in Kopellin, when they got engaged. That day, Nerwen had been highly thrilled, but it was nothing compared to now. Aryon’s gaze, admiring, even adoring, when she came out from their room – they changed their attire in separate chambers – had her knees turned to jelly, and now she was barely able to walk without staggering.

As for the prince, his heart was beating as strong as a drum and his hands were shaking. He had waited for this day – the day he could call Nerwen his wife – for one year, and now that it had finally arrived, he found himself unprepared to the powerful feelings overwhelming him.

They arrived in front of Roden and Morvenna and halted; they untangled their hands and exchanged a short, intense glance, before beginning to speak together, their voices trembling, full of emotion.

“Following the ancient tradition of our people, we ask you, our beloved and our joy, to witness the renewal of our promise, which today we fulfil bonding our lives.”

Morvenna looked at them, thinking they were striking, and her agitation dissolved. She and Roden took the bride’s and groom’s hands and joined them, then the woman began to speak, slowly and careful because she absolutely didn’t want to get it wrong or forget something:

“May Varda, Lady of the Stars in the Sky, and all the Valiër, watch over you, Nerwen; may they protect you and give you peaceful days at your beloved groom’s side. And may Yavanna, Lady of the Earth, bring her gifts of abundance and prosperity to your house.”

She had no idea that this last part of the blessing was of particular significance, for the bride; and certainly not that Yavanna was actually present, even if only in a spiritual form, and was looking at them from beyond the Great Sea.

Roden addressed the groom:

“May Manwë, Lord of the Currents of the Sky, and all the Valar, watch over you, Aryon; may they protect you and give you peaceful days at your beloved bride’s side. And may Oromë always guard your paths and protect your journey.”
For Aryon, too, the invocation to Oromë Aldaron was of particular significance, being this the favourite Vala of the Avari.

Roden exchanged a glance with his wife to make sure and begin in unison the following sentence:

“May Eru Father of all things, who is always above all the Powers, bless your union and make it strong until the end of days.”

Nerwen and Aryon turned their faces to look in each other’s eyes and said together:

“May the grace of the Valar come down upon us and, with the blessing of the Father of all things, may it accompany us forever during all our new life.”

Hearing her voice faltering, Nerwen took a deep breath to try and calm down enough to be able to go on; she took off her silver ring and said:

“Here is the token of you faithfulness and of our bond. On the fulfilment of your promise, I give it back to you.”

She handed the ring to Aryon; he took it from her hands and put it away in a pocket, from which he fished out the gold ring.

“My heart is bonded to your heart forever,” he said, keeping his voice low to avoid it trembling, “Wear therefore this ring and with it take me as your husband and partner until the end of time,” he concluded, presenting her the new token of their bond. As he slipped the ring on the forefinger of her right hand, she smiled, moved beyond any possible description.

“With joy I accept it,” she breathed, “with joy I will wear it at my finger. In the same way, I will carry your heart in my heart, until the end of time.”

Aryon felt breathless and, for a long moment, he wasn’t able to speak; finally, he recovered, took off his silver ring and handed it to his bride:

“Here is the token of your faithfulness and of our bond. On the fulfilment of your promise, I give it back to you.”

Like he had previously done, Nerwen took the symbol of their promise and put it away in a pocket, hidden in the rich folds of her gown, and fished out the gold ring. She swallowed before she could go on.

“My heart is bonded to your heart forever,” she said, “Wear therefore this ring and with it take me as your wife and partner until the end of time.”

Her hands trembled as she slipped the ring on his forefinger; Aryon’s face lighted up in one of his rare full smiles, as his heart leaped to his throat.

“With joy I accept it, with joy I will wear it at my finger,” he murmured, unable to speak louder, “In the same way, I will carry your heart in my heart, until the end of time.”

They glanced at one another, getting lost in each other’s eyes. Morvenna smiled again, moved; she and her husband, too, exchanged a look, filled with their love that had endured for over four decades, which was, in human terms, a good deal of time.

They waited for Nerwen and Aryon to come back from their reciprocal enchantment and turn again to them; then, Roden addressed the bride:
“Now this son of my soul comes to you. Welcome him and love him, and be forever happy and united as one.”

“With all my love I welcome him,” she answered with a dazzling smile, “and in joy we will be as one forever.”

Morvenna did the same with Aryon:

“Now this daughter of my soul comes to you. Welcome her and love her, and be forever happy and united as one.”

Aryon looked at the woman, his grey-blue eyes so intensely bright they were almost blinding:

“With all my love I welcome her, and in joy we will be as one forever.”

Her turned again to Nerwen, took her in his arms and kissed her lips, in a more chaste way than he usually did, but not less lovingly.

Only the closing sentence remained, and they voiced it together:

“For the grace of the Valar, for the will of the Father, may our union forevermore be blessed. With joy witness with us what is happening today.”

Morvenna wasn’t able to withhold any longer her tears in front of the immense love she saw shared between the bride and groom, which reminded her the love she still felt for her husband, after all that time. Roden held his wife, moved, he too, and she tenderly stroked his face.

Aryon and Nerwen disentangled to embrace their sponsors, in a less formal way than how they did at their engagement with Séredor and Lythelen because Humans used to do it more affectionately.

OOO

Yavanna Kementári, Queen of Earth, observed the whole ceremony, feeling moved; looking at her beloved follower as she exchanged the nuptial rings with her partner for life, this Avar prince so tall and handsome and dark, she was happy for her.

When the celebration was over, before leaving them she sent all the blessings that were in her
power to bestow over them, wishing for them health, physical and spiritual prosperity, and every possible happiness.

OOO

“It is time to celebrate!” Roden cried, smiling, “We got an actual banquet prepared, even if it is just the four of us.”

“At our engagement, we were just in four, too,” Nerwen revealed, “therefore I think it’s just appropriate that it’s the same at our wedding.”

“We’ll have a grand party when we get back home,” Aryon said, thinking that his sister Eliéenna would want to celebrate this event in an adequate way. Nerwen nodded, smiling.

So, they took their seats at the table that had been set for them; after a few minutes, a waiter arrived, beginning to serve them the first course, a cold soup of grinded peppers, tomatoes, cucumbers and onions, made creamy with stale bread softened into water, coming with bread croutons and chopped hardboiled eggs, very tasty and refreshing, a Yòrvarem speciality that the bride and groom appreciated much. Then came a delicate, jellied cold calf roast, served with grilled aubergines and zucchini, and boiled potatoes. As a drink, they had iced sparkling white wine served in abundance, making the elderly couple very cheerful, while it had a lesser effect on Aryon and none on Nerwen. As a closure, there came an actual wedding cake with eggnog cream and fruits, and a sweet white wine.

Finally, Roden and Morvenna encouraged the bride and groom to retire; following the local law, a marriage would be actually valid under all aspects only after the marital intercourse had taken place. It mattered not that it had already been consummated, it had simply to be repeated after the ceremony.

Of course, Aryon and Nerwen didn’t need much convincing.

Author’s corner:

The small mire in the picture is located not far from my home, a truly magic place.

The Elven wedding ceremony, as well as the engagement ceremony, comes from the researches of my good friend Gianluca Comastri, president of the group Eldalië, with whom a number of years ago I had the honour to perform an Elven wedding during an edition of Hobbiton, the festival of the Italian Tolkienian Society (Società Tolkieniana Italiana).

Gastronomy trivia: the cold soup is none other than the famed and delicious Andalusian gazpacho, which recipe my mother apprehended from a friend coming from Malaga.

Now that they are in the lands between the Orocarni and the Eastern Ocean, Nerwen and Aryon have to find evidence directing them in some specific place, or they risk spending years in the
attempt to find the lost females of the Onodrim…

Thank you so much, all of you who keep following this very long adventure in Middle-earth! If you leave me a comment, I’d be very happy :-)

Lady Angel
Two days after the wedding, Nerwen and Aryon got aboard the Riverpearl, which would sail the following day heading for Pallàndim, the capital city. They parted sadly from Morvenna and Roden, friends so unexpectedly found in the very best place and moment; they looked forward to meet again before long, when the two newlyweds would have completed their journey, which reason the elderly couple knew not.

The voyage along the Yorva was uneventful, except the aversion Túdhin immediately showed for navigation.

*I don’t like not having solid ground under my paws,* he declared to Nerwen, half bothered and half complaining.

*I’m sorry,* the Maia said sympathetically, *but it’s only for a few days. Besides, as you can see Thilgiloth doesn’t protest, nor do Thalion and Allakos: you don’t want to look less than them, do you?*

Struck in his pride, the wolf uttered a half growl that sounded very much like an annoyed snort, then he shook himself and concluded:

*Alright, if they can bear it, I will, too…*

They arrived at Pallàndim five days later, in the afternoon. Advised by Captain Ràdiros, they got an accommodation in an inn near the port, called The Vermillion Rose. The innkeeper was irreproachably polite, but nothing to do with Roden’s and Morvenna’s affability; again, Túdhin was presented as a dog and they allowed him to stay in their room, while the horses found a comfortable shelter in the inn’s stables.
The following day, Nerwen and Aryon, with the wolf, headed for the library that the bookseller and cartographer in Yòrvakars had praised, finding it easily thanks to the clear directions they had received at the inn. Its dimensions, which comprised a whole building, impressed even Nerwen, who was used to the enormous book collections in Valimar and Tirion: halls upon halls of shelves going up to the ceilings, packed with books and parchments, with many librarians tending them.

They asked and were granted to see their best maps, but as much as Nerwen studied them, none corresponded to her vision.

A few days passed as the Istar’s frustration increased. One morning, when they were heading for the library to continue combing charts and journey chronicles, they noticed that the town was being dressed up for some celebration.

“What’s going on?” Aryon asked, addressing a passer-by.

“Today is our king’s birthday,” the man answered smiling, “As it’s been the custom for centuries, we celebrate in the streets, eating, drinking and dancing everywhere, and the king parades through the main streets with his guards and the court. It’s quite a show, you’ll see!”

They found the library deserted, except for the librarians, who informed them that on this day they would close at noon to join the celebration. Captured by the joyful atmosphere pervading the town, the couple decided to forget their researches for the day and join the merriment. Therefore, they returned to the inn; there, too, preparations were in full swing, with the maids setting up tables in the street, the boys decorating the façade with flower garlands and coloured paper streamers, the cooks preparing all sorts of food, both sweet and salty, and the innkeeper running breathlessly to and fro, trying to supervise everything with no real need, as everyone knew how to do their job. Amused, the newlyweds got out of their way and went strolling down the riverbank, watching the dressing up of private houses, shops and premises. They got back just before noon, finding the inn stormed by a crowd of patrons because it was located on one of the streets where the king would parade with his whole follow of guards and courtiers. They asked therefore to eat in their room, which windows opened on the street, so they would easily watch at the royal parade without choking in the throng.

A maid came and brought them their lunch, a tasty cold chicken potpie with vegetables coming with a light beer diluted with lemonade, cold and refreshing. For Túdhin, she fetched some bones he could gnaw at and a bowl of fresh water.

It was around 3 o’clock in the afternoon, when Nerwen and Aryon began to hear great acclamations and applauses; drawn by the noise, they looked out of the window and saw that the royal parade was approaching. Two flag wavers went in front of it, with blue and silver standards, skilfully throwing and catching them again in spectacular ways; six maidens of increasing age followed, from six to sixteen years, scattering flower petals from large baskets on the pavement; then came a maniple of four guards in high uniform, in the blue and silver colours of the standards. A figure on horseback followed, a Man tall and white-haired with a long beard, sporting blue and silver garments; he smiled and waved to the applauding crowd. Behind him, after a second maniple of four guards, came a line of other people, ladies and gentlemen in elegant attire walking in twos.

Glimpsing at the king, an unexpected feeling of recognition filled Nerwen; she leaned further out to look better at him and, as he approached, the feeling became stronger and stronger until it became certainty. Her eyes widened in a stunned expression, and she uttered an unarticulated cry.

The sound startled Aryon and he looked at her, alarmed:

“What is it, Nerwen? Are you unwell? You’re pale…”
He wound his arm around her shoulders, worried, but she shook her head:

“No, no, it’s only that… I know that Man! I know the king!” she turned and looked at her husband, “I can’t believe it… he’s Pallando! One of my Istar colleagues, one of the two we lost trace so much time ago…” she frowned as a thought struck her, “The name of the town, Pallândim… surely it comes from his name…”

Aryon blinked, astonished.

“A colleague of yours? How’s that possible?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea…”

Nerwen was very shaken: Pallando and Alatar, the Blue Wizards, whose mission had brought them to the far east of Middle-earth, had vanished and there never had been any news of them since… and now, after so many centuries, she had found one by pure chance.

“I ought to speak with him,” she declared and was about to move, but the prince stopped her, placing one hand on her arm:

“I don’t think it’d be advisable to do it now,” he said quietly, “The armed guard would stop you and probably you’d end up arrested for disturbing the parade. Better wait and find another way.”

Nerwen recognised Aryon’s point.

“You’re right,” she admitted, “Let’s see if we’re able to make us admit into the palace. I think that, once he’s learnt who I am, it won’t be difficult…”

OOO

Instead, it proved more difficult than she thought.

The morning after, Nerwen and Aryon, as usual accompanied by the inseparable Tûdhin, headed for the palace; of course they were stopped by the guards at the entrance, therefore Nerwen asked to see their superior.

“The postulants are received on Tuesdays,” was all she got in response from one of the two soldiers.

“I’m no postulant,” the Istar replied, “I come from beyond the Red Mountains and I’m sure that your superior, once he learns about the reason of my visit, will let me in.”

“Come back Tuesday,” the soldier repeated, indifferent. Aryon’s face darkened and Nerwen began to feel a tinge of irritation.

“I said we’re no postulants,” she insisted sharply, “I ask you again: let me speak with your superior.”

The warrior looked down on her; after all, because of the Aini’s short stature, it was easy. Noticing his contemptuous expression, Aryon stepped forward, placing himself directly behind his wife and staring coldly at him; at the same time, Tûdhin came to her side and growled softly.
The soldier stared at what he thought to be a dog looking similar to a wolf and frowned, slightly annoyed; then he raised his eyes on the black-dressed Elf and, meeting his icy gaze, he started.

“Did you hear her?” the prince asked in a low voice, “Or must she repeat herself?”

The soldier recovered and squared his shoulders.

“I understand, but I cannot bother the sergeant for every stranger coming at the palace’s door,” he declared, “Go away or…”

“…or what?” Aryon growled, “You run us through with your pike?”

Nerwen placed one hand on his arm to placate him.

“Never mind,” she intervened, “This good soldier is only doing his job. We can’t blame him for this.”

Surprised, Aryon lowered his gaze on her, who was smiling in an apparently serene way; but by now he knew her enough to see beyond the façade and realised she had something in mind.

“Very well,” he therefore said, taking one step back to let the Istar move, “Let’s go.”

They went quickly away, but once they had turned around the corner of the palace, Nerwen halted.

“What’s your plan?” Aryon asked her.

“I’ll send Pallando a message by my means,” she declared, pointing upwards. The prince raised his eyes to the slender corner tower and saw that the top hosted a pigeon-house, from which the renowned birds went to and fro. He looked again at the Istar with a little smile on his lips.

“Simpler than this…” he grinned. Nerwen chuckled in turn, then she extended her thoughts to the bird community living up there.

Greetings, friends, she saluted them softly, as to not scare them, I’m an emissary of Kementári and I need assistance.

She sensed thoughts of surprise as the inhabitants of the pigeon-house fuss, confused.

Kementári? Are you the Daughter of the Sunset? a voice surfaced at length above the other ones.

Exactly. Can one of you help me?

What do you need?

I must get a message to the king.

A pigeon looked down from the battlement, then took off and descended elegantly towards them. Seeing the wolf – his instinct didn’t allow him to be mistaken about his true nature – he hesitated, but Nerwen sent him a reassuring feeling; she extended one arm and the bird, after a moment, perched lightly on it.

I am at your service, Daughter of the Sunset, he declared, tilting his head to one side to better look at her.

Thank you, my little friend, she answered, Follow us.
“Let’s go back to the inn,” Nerwen exhorted Aryon, “and find paper and quill.”

At The Vermilion Rose, they got what they needed to write; while the pigeon waited, perched on the sill of the open window, the Istar wrote her message. She chose to use the Valarin tongue, so that her origin would immediately be apparent to the recipient:

Greetings, Pallando the Blue, follower of Oromë Aldaron. I am Nerwen Laiheri, follower of Yavanna Kementári, coming here on her behalf. I need to speak to you as soon as possible. I am staying at The Vermilion Rose. Please send someone.

The lack of space prevented her to write more, but the use of the Valarin tongue would convince the Wizard about the sender’s identity.

She cut the paper stripe and rolled it up, fastening it with a thread she used also to tie the minuscule letter to the foot of the cooperative pigeon, then the bird took respectfully his leave and flew off.

“Now we have just to wait,” Nerwen considered.

OOO

The reply came less than two hours later, still through the pigeon. The tiny letter had been written with a clear, elegant lettering, in Westron, and said:

Greetings, Nerwen Laiheri. I admit I am very surprised. I await you straightaway at the palace. At the entrance, they have instructions to let you pass with no delay.

“Pallando waits for us immediately,” Nerwen said, jumping up impatiently. Aryon checked the position of the sun.

“It’s almost lunchtime, I hope the king will invite us to his table,” he commented wittily. The Istar laughed:

“You’re so prosaic, my love!”

“No, it’s just that today the cook is preparing a succulent deer roast,” he replied, hinting to the delicious smell coming up from the kitchen.

“We’ll make it up,” she assured him as they went out, again accompanied by Túdhin.

Once at the palace, when Nerwen told her name to the guard – not the same as the first time – they found out that a Man was awaiting them, tall and blond as seemingly the majority of the inhabitants of Yòrvarem was, who bowed to them very politely.

“My name is Délamin, First Lord Counsellor to the king,” he introduced himself, “Sire Pallando is waiting for you, Lady Nerwen,” he declared, then he looked intrigued at the black-dressed Elf accompanying her, obviously expecting to be introduced to him.

“This is Lord Aryon,” the Aini said concisely. The Man nodded, showing he had understood, then he pointed at Túdhin:

“Is your dog docile? Otherwise you have to leave him here, safely tied…”
“Túdhin is well-mannered and obedient,” Aryon said curtly; in the weeks that had passed since their encounter, he had grown fond of the wolf, who reciprocated him, “We won’t leave him anywhere.”

“As you wish,” Délamin replied, quite intimidated by the Elf’s flashing glare, “Follow me, please…”

They crossed the yard to the main body of the building, where they entered through a gate of carved and polished oak; they climbed a flight of marble stairs to the first floor, then walked down a long corridor. They stopped in front of a double door, decorated with the drawing of a great bow, in which Aryon and Nerwen recognised the favourite weapon of Oromë, the Vala to whom Pallando was the follower. Délamin knocked softly, then opened one of the doors and entered, motioning for them to follow him.

The king was sitting behind a monumental desk of walnut; seeing them coming in, he put down the book he was reading and looked at them.

“Lady Nerwen and Lord Ayon,” his counsellor introduced them formally. At Pallando’s nod, he bowed and withdrew, leaving them alone.

The Blue Wizard watched Nerwen intently, almost ignoring Aryon; the Istar reciprocated his frank gaze with one equally frank, while the prince, his hand lazily placed on the hilt of his sword, kept ready for anything; his spouse could even trust the king, but he didn’t know him and his natural circumspection urged him to stay alert, in case there would be any need to defend her and himself.

At his side, Túdhin didn’t take his eyes off the stranger, studying him intently.

This one smells good, like you, he sent to Nerwen. It was his way to say that he trusted someone; the Istar sent him a thought equivalent to an affirmative nod to show him she had understood.

Slowly, Pallando stood up and rounded the desk to go in front of Nerwen; he was very tall, even in not as much as Aryon, and the Maia noticed that his looks matched more what she recalled of him, than Gandalf’s. It was undoubtedly this the reason she had recognised him immediately, unlike three years ago with her best friend.
“I feel I should know you,” the Wizard began in Westron, in a perplexed tone, “but I cannot remember, I am sorry. Where have we met before?”

Nerwen blinked, surprised. Actually, they had met only a few times in Valinor, but nonetheless, she thought it odd that Pallando didn’t remember her. She couldn’t remind him their history in the Undying Lands, not in Aryon’s presence. Therefore, she had to seek a more elusive way.

“You don’t remember…? We’re both follower of a Vala, you of Aldaron, I of Kementári. Then there are our colleagues, Olórin, Aiwendil, Curunír, Alatar…”

She, too, spoke in the Common Speech, but she listed the other Wizards’ names in Valarin: if Pallando had lost his memory, perhaps hearing them in his mother tongue could light in him a sparkle of recognition.

But Pallando shook his head negatively:

“Yes, I am a follower of Aldaron, but I do not remember the names you said, nor yours,” he then looked at the silent black-dressed Elf next to the tiny Human woman, “Nor do I know your companion.”

“Forgive me, I’m being rude… This is my husband, Aryon Morvacor, prince of the Avari Kindi,” Nerwen introduced him formally; she couldn’t help feeling thrilled in using the word husband, still so new.

The tall Avar brought one hand to his chest and bowed in the way his people used to pay homage to one of higher rank than one’s own, a reverence he was required to give only to his sister as his queen; but now he was in a foreign land and he thought it appropriate to show enough respect, especially with an acquaintance of his wife.

“And this,” Nerwen continued, “is our faithful dog, Túdhin. Greet the king, Túdhin,” she exhorted him, waving her hand as if this was part of his training, while instead she was asking him mentally. The wolf, rather amused by this subterfuge they had used many times in the past, sat down and bowed his head in a gesture that imitated very well a human salute. The king smiled, pleased.

“Welcome, then, Lady Nerwen and Lord Aryon,” he said courteously, “And Túdhin, of course. I am sorry I do not remember you, Lady Nerwen,” he went on, “even if I feel I should. As much as I grasped the words you wrote to me, even if the language is unknown to me. You know, I am suffering from amnesia: I do not remember anything of my life preceding the moment I woke up in the house of a kind soul who had found me, naked and unconscious, in the snow of a winter of many centuries ago.”

“I see,” Nerwen nodded: that’s why Pallando had abandoned his mission and, somehow, had become the king of Yòrvarem: he lost his memory, he didn’t know who he was anymore, nor what he had come for in Middle-earth, “However you remember your name,” she added, frowning.

“Yes, and also that blue is, for some reason, my colour,” the Wizard confirmed, “but nothing more: I don’t know where I come from, nor what my ascent is, nor how old I am. I know only that, even if I look like a Man, I do not age, if not very slowly, and that I know the secrets of nature, particularly of woods and their life, animal and vegetal. I know how they work. And I know many, many other things: the name of all stars and their position in any given night of the year, the name of minerals, metals, their use, how to build up an edifice of stone, and innumerable other things… but not my past before awakening from what, wouldn’t it be for that generous farmer, could be an
eternal sleep,” he shook again his white-haired head, but this time for another reason, “I am truly a very poor host… Please, have a seat.”

He showed them one of the two small sofas next to the desk. Aryon and Nerwen waited, following the etiquette, that he had taken his seat, then sat down in front of him, while Túdhin laid down at their feet, his yellow eyes still pointing to the Wizard, because of curiosity rather than mistrust: it was the first time he met someone as much as bright than his two-legged friend. In the past, when Nerwen was brighter, there had been only Melian, but in this incarnation none, yet.

“May I ask you how you became sovereign of Yòrvarem?” the Istar enquired.

“I have no reason to hide it,” Pallando answered, “The farmer who saved me – his name was Kalar – recognised immediately that I was no common man, least of all a beggar or a criminal. I didn’t know where to go, hence I stayed with him, helping as much as I could with my knowledge. Little by little, his neighbours began coming to me, then the neighbours of the neighbours, until my reputation reached the capital city, which is this town, known by the name or Yòrvadim at the time. The queen learned about me and wanted to meet me, therefore she sent for me. I became her First Counsellor, and later I was her son’s, and later on his daughter’s; after eight generations, the royal family became extinguished and the people chose me as their king. To mark the passage, they changed the name of this town in Pallàndim. And that is basically all.”

“I see,” Nerwen nodded, “The name Sauron is familiar to you?” she asked, hoping to provoke a reaction: after all, the mission of all the Istari had been fighting the growing power of the Dark Lord, one way or another. Hearing this nefarious name, Aryon tightened his lips, but the instinct to make the usual exorcism gesture typical to the Avari was not so strong anymore, after all the time spent with Nerwen who was used to utter it openly.

Pallando seemed to think carefully.

“Yes, actually the name is familiar to me,” he admitted, “but I cannot put it in place. Who is he?”

“You mean that Sauron isn’t known, here on the east side of the Red Mountains?” Aryon asked, so highly marvelled he suddenly came out of his silence.

“No, unless he has other names.”

“Oh, he has many,” Nerwen commented bitterly, “Dark Lord of Mordor, Black Hand, Terrible, Shadow, Necromancer, Great Eye, Enemy…” she interrupted the list seeing Pallando’s appalled expression, “Anyone of these is familiar to you?”

“All of them… and at the same time, none,” the Wizard murmured, “I feel I should be afraid of him, horrified at this abomination; however, I do not understand the reason. From the titles you name, Lady Nerwen, I guess he is a person of enormous power and malice, am I right?”

The Maia nodded in confirmation.

“He is Melkor Morghoth’s heir,” she revealed to him, “the ancient Dark Enemy of the World, the Flame of Udûn, overthrown by the Valar at the end of the War of Wrath. After hiding for a thousand years, he came back to the Elves under false pretences and deceived them, persuading them to manufacture Rings of Power for themselves, Dwarves and Men, and forging one for himself that bound them all to his evil will. He could easily corrupt Men, but not Dwarves and much less Elves; I’m not going to tell you all about his wicked doings: just know that, at the end of a terrible battle that opposed his forces and those of Elves and Men, he has been thought defeated for a long time, but then his power has begun to awaken; that’s why the Order of the Istari has been
created, of which we both are members. Our task is to oppose Sauron’s growing power; you and your companion Alatar have been sent in the eastern lands to create alliances of Men willing to intervene, in case Sauron would decide to attack the inhabitants of Middle-earth; my mission, instead, is to find the Entwives, the females of the Onodrim,” she watched him closely, “Have you ever heard about them?”

Pallando shook his head with a regretful air:

“No, never. Nor do I know who Alatar might be, even if, as for you and Sauron, his name sounds familiar to me,” he sighed, troubled, “For a long time I have not thought about my lost past anymore, resigned to never being able to retrieve it; but now here you come, telling me all these things, and my frustration is back tormenting me…”

There was a soft knock on the door. Pallando shook himself out of his thoughts and invited to come in; on the threshold, a page appeared, a vivacious blond lad.

“Your meal is ready, Sire,” he announced. At this prosaic call back to ordinary life, the king seemed to recover; he looked at Nerwen and Aryon:

“Would you like to keep me company?” he asked them, “We could continue our conversation while having our meal.”

“Very gladly,” the Istar answered for both.

“Add two seats to my table,” Pallando ordered therefore the page, “What does your dog eat?”

“If you have remnants of meat and some bones he could gnaw at, it’d be a more than adequate meal for him,” Aryon said, “And a bowl of water, of course.”

The king glanced at the page, who nodded in recognition and withdrew. Pallando stood up; Aryon and Nerwen did the same, then they followed him out of the room and down a hallway to a small room where, as the monarch told them, he used to have his meals alone, or sometimes with a small number of guests, generally his close collaborators.

Even if the diners were only three, the tableware was refined, with dishes of white glazed ceramic decorated with blue floral patterns, silver cutlery and gold goblets. The food was excellent and plentiful, and so the wine coming with it. As for Túdhin, he received two bowls, one with water and the other with flesh-bearing bones. The wolf began to eat, as usual slightly disgusted because the meat was cooked and not raw, as he would like best.

As they ate, Pallando asked again Nerwen about her mission.

“Kementári is persuaded that, in the plans of the world’s great ones, the Onodrim have been unjustly forgotten,” the Aini answered, “and she has therefore entrusted me with the task to go seeking them. I cannot reveal where, but I met an Ent and he told me about the loss his race has endured: many centuries ago, the Entwives disappeared and, despite all their desperate searches, they have never been found again. I have reasons to believe that they are here, in the lands beyond the Orocarni, but in the maps I consulted so far I wasn’t able to find the area where I think they have settled,” she concluded, shaking her head in a gesture that was half frustration, half annoyance.

“I would like to help you,” Pallando declared sympathetically, “I will send for all the most renowned explorers and cartographers of the realm, telling them to bring all the maps they have. After all, even if they claim that the library of Pallândim is the best stocked in Yòrvarem, you can
never know.”

“I thank you, Sire,” Nerwen then said, pleasantly struck by her colleague’s willingness; even if he was oblivious of his own past, it seemed he had taken her search to heart.

“Today I will send my messengers to the four corners of the realm. When the summoned people arrive, I will inform you. Meanwhile, I would gladly be your host: I would love to talk with you again, Lady Nerwen, in the hope that, with the right stimulus, my memory of the past could come back to me.”

Nerwen exchanged a glance with Aryon e she saw him making a slight nod: their monetary reserve wasn’t limitless and it would be an advantage being accommodated without having to pay.

“And we’ll be glad to accept, Sire,” the Istar declared therefore, smiling, “If I can help you to gain back your memory, I’ll be very happy.”

They finished their meal and took their leave, with the agreement to come back the next morning with their baggage and animals and lodge in the chambers Pallando would prepare for them.

As they went back to the inn, with Túdhin trotting in front of them, Aryon addressed Nerwen:

“What was the tongue Pallando hinted to? The one you wrote to him?”

The Istar gazed at him with a sorry expression and he understood immediately.

“Oh, I see: it’s one of those things you cannot discuss with me…”

“I’m sorry, love…” Nerwen began, placing one hand on his arm. He placed his above hers.

“No, don’t. You warned me and I accepted. I’ll keep my curiosity, awaiting the day you will be allowed to tell me everything.”

The Aini’s heart swelled up with love and emotion: Aryon’s complete trust in her, so dramatically different from the deep mistrust he met her the first time with, never ceased to touch her. She just hoped he would be patient for a long time to come; sure, he had given her his word, but in the long term, this could begin to bother him.

OOO

The next morning, after footing the bill at the inn, they headed for the palace. At the entrance, they met the guard who, the first time they ha come, had been so unpleasant; of course, now his attitude was totally different; to his credit, he didn’t prove too much obsequious trying to make up for his previous disagreeable behaviour. Aryon couldn’t anyway help it and glared darkly at him, and the poor man jumped and avoided his gaze; noticing the exchange, Nerwen smiled: her spouse was always very protective toward her, even if he was very aware there was no need because she could manage very well alone. It was a love-driven attitude, of course; besides, even the Istar felt the same protective instinct toward him.

Their mounts were taken to the palace stables, where skilled grooms would take care of them, while Túdhin accompanied them to their quarters.
They found that Pallando had prepared for them a true apartment, with a sitting room, an office, a bedchamber and a bathroom; in the sitting room, there was also a table with two chairs where they could have their meals, if they would like better keeping to themselves.

On that day, they had their midday meal by themselves, while for dinner the king invited them in the common dining room, where they were introduced to a number of court officials as the wise Nerwen the Green and her husband prince Aryon Morvacor of the Kindi. The apparent consideration Pallando held for them was enough for all to welcome them politely, some even cordially.

As they learnt, the king had his midday meal on his own, or at the most with a few selected people – as he did the previous day with them – while he always dined with the court. The sovereign took his seat at the table at the far end of the hall, smaller than the other ones and set on a dais, beside the most high-ranked dignitaries; Aryon and Nerwen were invited to sit at one of the other tables, but next to the king’s one. Their table companions treated them with polite curiosity, so the company was as much pleasant as the food.

After dinner, they had a little entertainment, as it happened – they told them – almost every evening. It was always something different: acrobats, jesters, dancers, musicians, actors, bards, singers. On this evening, a jester entertained the court with jokes and witticisms and some little magic tricks; Nerwen and Aryon, being foreigners, weren’t able to appreciate the better part of the clown’s jokes and clever remarks, often referred to facts and people they didn’t know, but the laughs and applauses of the other spectators were indications of his talent. At the end of his show, the quick-witted jester received a thundering applause and took his leave with an exaggerated bow that made him lose his hat; he picked it up among the general laughing, feigning to be extremely embarrassed.

At this point, Pallando stood up, signalling this way that the evening was over; all stood up in turn and bowed to the passage of the sovereign, receiving from him polite nods. It was apparent that the king was very beloved and respected and this pleased Nerwen. Back in Valinor, she had hardly known Pallando, but she had always held him in esteem; she had known Alatar even less, but she had no reason to think differently about him.

OOO

The next morning, Nerwen thought it was appropriate to talk with the Blue Wizard alone and try to remind him of Valinor and his mission. Therefore, she asked for an audience through Délamin and the king let her know he could see her within the hour.

To fill the time when she was occupied with Pallando, Aryon decided to train with his sword – he did so almost on a daily basis even when they were travelling – and asked where he could do it; they directed him to the courtyard of the guardsmen, where he headed for. Túdhin decided to keep him company.

Meanwhile, the Istar went to Pallando, who received her in his office like the first time. They sat down on the sofas and he nodded her to help herself with a carafe filled of a pale yellow liquid, which Nerwen was delighted to discover being sweet cider, cool from the cellar.

“My favourite drink,” she revealed, talking intentionally in Valarin with a casual attitude.
“Mine, too,” Pallando answered in the same tongue. Then he looked at her, wide-eyed, and she smiled placidly.

“Taking you by surprise, I made you recall your mother language,” she observed, still talking in Valarin. He groped, in search of the words, then he capitulated and answered in Common Speech:

“I am sorry, I understand what you say, but I cannot talk… words come to me only in flashes…”

“Sure, because now your mind is again vigilant and it prevents you to draw on the memories you’ve removed. Your amnesia is probably due to a physical trauma – you told me that the farmer found you near death – as much as to a psychological trauma. I think something terrible happened to you, so much terrible that, unconsciously, you don’t want to remember it because it’s too painful…”

Slowly, Pallando nodded.

“Yes, I think you are right,” he confirmed, “Indeed, each time I strive to think about it, I feel a horrible sensation, which tightens my throat almost cutting my breath…” he shook his white-haired head, “Nonetheless, I would like to remember. Who am I, where do I come from, why am I here, are all questions that I would like giving an answer to.”

“I can answer them, partly,” Nerwen declared in a soft voice, struck by the pain, which crossed to despair, she sensed in Pallando’s words. She had continued talking in the language of the Ainur, to which the Blue Wizard, too, belonged, while he spoke in Westron, but he had uttered the last sentence in Valarin, undoubtedly because the thrill that had pervaded him had caused his brain to reconnect again to that deep memory.

Pallando sighed slowly, as if to calm down, and leaned on the back of the sofa; he motioned for her to go on.

“As I told you yesterday, we are followers of a Vala,” Nerwen began, “You and your friend Alatar of Oromë Aldaron, I of Yavanna Kementári. And so are the other Istari, too, whom I named to you: Olórin, known in Middle-earth by the names of Mithrandir and Gandalf, is follower of Manwë Súlimo; Curunír or Saruman is follower of Aulë; Aiwendil o Radagast, like me, is follower of Kementári. Our Masters have invested all of us with the mission to organise the resistance against Sauron’s possible reappearance. Each of us received special instructions: I, for instance, have been tasked with the finding of the Entwives, while you and Alatar ought to go in the far lands in the east to convince their inhabitants to prepare for the possibility to fight the Enemy. You have reached your destination, even if because of the lack of memory I doubt you’ve been able to organise an opposition to Sauron; of Alatar I’ve heard nothing.”

Pallando brought one hand on his forehead and massaged it.

“Alatar… his name recalls in me contrasting feelings. Affection, I think, on one side; and something similar to grief on the other side.”

“You were close friends,” she revealed, “this explains the affection; the grief makes me fear something very bad happened to him… mayhap he’s dead, or in some way lost forever,” she concluded in a low voice, sadly. The Wizard nodded:

“This may be, indeed… and I would like to find it out.”

He looked out the open window, toward the garden stretching out at the back of the palace, surrounded by a wall, and was silent for a long time. Nerwen gave him the time for his thoughts,
sensing he needed to bring order in them, clarifying his feelings in the process.

“I guess there is more,” he finally said, “something you did not tell me yet… As it seems, both you and I are part of a group called the Istari, we look human but we do not age like them… so are we something else? Elves, mayhap?”

Nerwen shook her head; that had to be expected, she thought: Pallando, even if devoid of his memory, still possessed a great mental acumen.

“What I’m going to tell you is a secret,” she answered, “Are we sure nobody’s listening?”

Pallando noticed her earnest expression.

“I can make absolutely sure of that,” he declared. He closed his eyes and concentrated, then he raised one hand, his fingers apart and curved as if he was holding a ball; a white sphere took shape on his palm, then widened, including at first him and then Nerwen, too. Inside that milky-transparent bubble, silence was absolute: not the slightest sound was perceptible, neither the singing of the birds outside the window, nor the rustling of the trees, or the far noises of the town. If it weren’t for the fact she was hearing her own breathing, the Aini could think she had suddenly become deaf.

“Now no one can hear us,” Pallando said; his voice sounded muffled. Evidently, with his power he had created a soundproof bubble, from which and to which no sound could arrive.

“Very good,” Nerwen approved, “No, we don’t belong to the race of Men, nor to the Elves: we are Maiar, even if for the purpose of our mission, we have been diminished.”

The Wizard was dumbfounded; for a long moment, he just stared at his interlocutor, his eyes – of a deep blue shade like sapphires – emptied of any expression.

“But Ainur,” he finally said, slowly, “both of higher or lower rank, cannot be wounded, much less killed…” his gaze suddenly focused again on her, “You said we have been diminished? What does that mean?”

“We aren’t complete Maiar anymore, in full possession of our capabilities,” she explained, “We can be hurt, get sick, feel physical and moral tiredness, shortly, we feel the effects of Middle-earth’s mortal quality, with its load of pain and despair, fear and sadness…,” she paused, meditating about telling him of the different type of decrease that had been granted only to her; she decided for no: she didn’t know Pallando well enough to be sure that this knowledge wouldn’t make him feel envy or malevolence. He didn’t seem the type, but caution induced her to keep that information to herself, “To the Istari, the memory of Valinor has been dimmed, even if they can remember the main things, such as the faces of the Valar or their mother tongue; they age, but very slowly; and they can be killed.”

She hated lying or even, like now, taming the truth; but she couldn’t risk rousing the Blue Wizard’s dislike.

Like before, Pallando brought one hand to his forehead to massage it, a gesture that was evidently characteristic to him.

“This is really major news,” he murmured, “and I understand perfectly the need of secrecy coming with it. In just a few minutes, I learned many more things about my past than I had in centuries… I will need some time to adjust.”

“Of course,” Nerwen nodded sympathetically, “Do you want me to leave you alone?”
“Yes, thank you,” the king accepted, “I will retire to my room and meditate over all that you told me. Surely I will have more questions to ask, but they can wait.”

“Send for me whenever you want, Sire…”

“Only Pallando,” he interrupted her, with a slightly forced, but sincere smile, “We are colleagues, after all…”

She chuckled, relieved: his capability to joke was a good sign.

With an elegant wave of his hand, the Wizard broke the silence spell that had enclosed them; then she took her leave, returning to her apartment.

It was some time after noon when Aryon returned from his training, with Túdhin on his heels. He was hot and sweat glued his hair on his forehead and nape.

“I found an excellent fencer in the captain of the royal guard,” he told her, getting rid of his shirt and freshening up with a cloth soaked in cold water, “We confronted on our respective techniques,” he went on, going into detail, “It was fun,” he concluded, drying up. He turned and saw Nerwen watching him with an appreciative smile.

“You’re always a nice sight, husband,” the Istar told him. He made his characteristic lopsided smile.

“Nice to hear it, wife…” he answered; he was about to don a clean shirt, but he stopped halfway, “Or do you like me not getting dressed…?”

She burst into laughter:

“I’d like it certainly, but it’s better going for our midday meal: after two hours of intense training, you must be hungry like a wolf!”
Túdhin sent her the equivalent of a snort, half amused and half annoyed:

*I don’t understand why we have this fame to be so voracious!*

Nerwen laughed even harder and at Aryon’s puzzled glance, she reported him Túdhin’s remark.

“Don’t get upset, my friend,” the prince told him, grinning, “it’s just an expression…”

*I know, I know…* the predator grumbled after the Istar’s translation, but amusement was already taking over annoyance.

Aryon finished dressing and held out his arm to Nerwen, who took it gladly.

“Let’s go eating,” he said, “Later, if you have no other engagement, we could spend the afternoon together…”

If was clear to what he was referring, but nonetheless, she wanted to have her say:

“If you mean in a horizontal position, that’s fine…”

Aryon arched one eyebrow, staring at her in amusement:

“Horizontal, vertical, diagonal… as for me, it’s good in any way…”

Under his heated gaze, Nerwen felt suddenly a hotness that couldn’t be attributed to the summer season.

“You’re the usual scoundrel,” she grumbled. Suddenly, Aryon pressed her against the wall, placing his hands on both sides of her, imprisoning her, and his gaze dropped on her lips.

“It’s for this, too, that you like me, don’t you?” he whispered, before lowering his head and taking her mouth in a sweet and at the same time sensual kiss. She put her arms behind his back, holding him tight, and responded fervently. When they parted their lips, her knees had turned to jelly; nevertheless, she placed her open hand on his chest and pushed him back.

“We better go or I won’t be responsible of what happens,” she threatened him, only partly joking. Aryon’s lips curved in that grin she found absolutely irresistible.

“You’re right, but I warn you, we won’t linger for long, at the table…”

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Author’s corner:

*Light beer diluted with lemonade is none other than the Bavarian drink called Radler, which I find delicious and very appropriate for the hot season.*

*As for the Blue Wizards, there are two versions of them, one primitive and one more recent; for my*
story’s purpose, the original one was more suitable, therefore I decided to stick to it. In the very last years of his life, Tolkien changed radically both their names and their doings. For a confrontation of the two versions, you can check http://tolkiengateway.net/wiki/Blue_Wizards.

Thanks to all my faithful readers! Remember, if you leave me a few words feedback, I’d be delighted.

Lady Angel
In the next days, Nerwen talked often with Pallando, recalling all she knew of his past in Valinor; she told him about the other Maiar who had become Istari, even if she knew little about Saruman and even less about Alatar, unlike Gandalf and Radagast. Pallando had constantly a feeling of recognition, but it stubbornly didn’t change into actual reminiscences: his memory remained shaded by a thick veil, beyond which he wasn’t able to see anything. He expressed his growing frustration several times to Nerwen.

“So far, I managed to live without the memory about what was my life preceding my awakening in Kalar’s house, because I thought I could never recover them and I had resigned myself… but now you talk me about my past and I cannot help but feel like maimed, uncomplete. I am… restless,” he said one day, standing up and walking nervously back and forth.

They were in the garden, sitting on a stone bench in the shadow of an elm tree. Nerwen could only imagine his unease; she stayed silent as the Blue Wizard continued pacing up and down in front of her, leaving him alone with his thoughts.

Tûdhin, who had accompanied her this day and was now laying by the bench, watched Pallando carefully with his keen yellow eyes.

_He smells almost of fear_, he observed.

_This doesn’t surprise me_, the Aini replied, _I, too, would be scared, if I were him. He had found serenity and balance, here, with this life, and he has gone on for centuries; then all of a sudden, I arrive and turn everything upside down…_

The wolf sent her a feeling of understanding.
After several minutes, Pallando halted, frowning; he looked as he had made up his mind, but about what, he didn’t tell.

“Now I leave you, Nerwen,” he said in a gentle but resolute way, “I must take care of some chores.”

The Maia stood promptly up, as did Túdhin.

“Of course, affairs of State cannot wait…”

Pallando interrupted her with a polite gesture and a tiny smile:

“No, no, I planned the day so that I could spend this time with you; but in view of what you told me, I must fix a few things. We will meet again tonight at dinner.”

Nerwen then took her leave, but without bowing to him: since she had revealed who they both were, he had exempted her, at least in private, as she actually was an equal to him.

Leaving Pallando, the Maia returned to her lodging, where she found Aryon cleaning the blade of his sword, which he had asked the palace smith to sharpen. As soon as he saw her coming, the prince placed down his weapon and asked her:

“How’s it with Pallando?”

“He’s very troubled,” Nerwen answered, “He wants to recover his memory at any cost, but he doesn’t know how; and I don’t know what I could recommend him, as for this,” she concluded with a sorry face.

“Why don’t you ask Yavanna for advice?” Aryon suggested. She looked at him as if he had just revealed a magic formula; she slapped her forehead.

“I didn’t think about this, yet,” she admitted, “It looks like an excellent idea!”

Therefore, they got some food – in this case, being it afternoon hours, a piece of peach tart and some sweet cider – then Nerwen laid down on the bed, where Aryon would watch over her as he had done the last few times, and contacted her Mistress.

This time, Yavanna received her in the garden, where she was sunbathing on the edge of the pond. Seeing her arriving through the inter-dimensional door, she smiled at her and stood up, wrapping herself in a towel.

"Welcome, as usual, my friend," she said, embracing her.

"Thank you, Yavanna… but am I not disturbing you? You’re relaxing and I turn up just like this…" the istar asked, worried.

"If I could not receive you, I would just not allow the door to open," the Valië answered her smiling, for instance, if I were with my husband…

Nerwen chuckled:

"Good to know! I never would want to risk interfering in your intimacy!"

"No risk at all… You rather: how is your married life?" the Queen of Earth enquired. Nerwen smiled dreamily:
Just great. Despite a whole year spent together as if we already were husband and wife, now that the bond has been formalised, it’s even better…

Yavanna smiled indulgently:

*It is the Blessing of Ilúvatar,* she reminded her. Nerwen nodded:

*Right…*

When Eru Ilúvatar had created Eä through the Music of the Ainur, he had foreseen everything, in general terms, from the beginning to the *Dagor Dagorath,* the Battle of the Battles, the *Ambar-metta* of Arda. Among other things, this meant that those among the Ainur who weren’t created directly with a partner, such as Yavanna and Aulë, Manwë and Varda and the other couples, or without, such as Mandos, Ulmo and Nienna, were incomplete until the meeting with his or her partner for life. When she and Aryon had recognised each other, for both it had been like finding the missing part of himself or herself; but it was with the wedding, which Eru blessed through the ceremony, that the bond had been fastened and had become absolutely indissoluble, even if Death would come. This was the reason why, when one would lose his or her partner, it was impossible to find a rebound, at least until one didn’t reincarnate again; but this didn’t always happen, or it didn’t happen in the near future. Like her sister Melian, who was still waiting for Thingol’s return; but it was not known if he would reincarnate before the *Dagor Dagorath.*

*I informed Melian about your wedding,* Yavanna told her smiling, *I had already told her about Aryon, and she was very happy for you; and then, the news about your wedding thrilled her. She sends you her best wishes and all her blessings.*

Nerwen felt moved: she had been sorry not having her sister at the wedding ceremony, but circumstances couldn’t obviously allow otherwise.

*Thank her and give her a big hug for me,* she asked her Mistress, *I hope that, one day not too far away, she and my spouse will meet.*

*When your mission is accomplished, you will be able to return to Valinor,* the Queen of Earth reminded her, *I suppose your husband will want to come with you…*

*Not being allowed to tell him where I come from, nor who I really am, I cannot ask him,* Nerwen pondered, her face darkening, *If he’ll want to come in Aman with me, I’ll come back; otherwise, I’ll stay in Middle-earth. Nothing in the world will separate me from him, not even my longing for home… or for you, or my sister,* she concluded in a low voice.

*That is natural,* the Valië commented, sympathetically. It was almost impossible that two partners for life would stay separate, if not temporarily.

There was a short silence between them, while both were considering this slightly sensitive topic; then Yavanna resumed talking:

*But tell me: what did you come to discuss with me? I do not think it was only about your joys of married life…*

*Of course!* Nerwen cried, *I had a truly unforeseen encounter: I found one of the Blue Wizards, Pallando,* she informed her Mistress. Yavanna blinked, dumbfounded:

*Really! After all this time, we thought he was dead, as well as Alatar…*

*I know nothing about Alatar:* unfortunately, Pallando had some sort of accident and because of
this, he lost his memory and doesn’t remember his friend, nor his life before the trauma, therefore neither his origin nor his mission. Only his name and the fact he’s a follower of Aldaron.

I wonder what happened to him, the Queen of Earth mused, worried, And what happened to Alatar…

He says he feels a great sense of loss, Nerwen revealed, hence, I think he’s dead.

I will have to inform Oromë, Yavanna mused.

I’d like to help him recovering his memory, or at least try to do so, the Istar said, but I don’t know how. Do you have any suggestions?

The Valië pondered carefully.

Mayhap returning on the site of the accident could stir in him some memories, she considered. Nerwen thought about this, then she nodded:

That may well be so… but I don’t know if he knows the place: he told me a farmer found him, seriously injured, and that he took him to his house and cured him.

If you can find the exact place, it is surely better, Yavanna confirmed.

I’ll ask him, Nerwen concluded, standing up, I thank you for your advice, Kementári…

The Queen of Earth, too, stood up and embraced her follower and friend:

May the road rise to meet you, my friend.

The Istar reciprocated the embrace, then she took a few steps backwards; slowly, all dissolved in a milky-white fog.

Aryon saw his spouse opening her eyes and addressed her his characteristic smile, tiny but always full of love:

“Is everything alright, blossom?”

She smiled in answer:

“Yes, everything is alright,” she reassured him, while Túdhin, too, was approaching her; he touched his head against her arm in an affectionate gesture: he, too, felt uneasy, as much as the Avar prince, about her absence. Nerwen caressed him with equal affection.

“Did Kementári give you some suggestions?” Aryon enquired, while helping her getting up sitting.

“Yes, she advised me to take Pallando in the very place where Kalar, the farmer who took and cured him, found him… but I don’t know it Pallando actually knows where this place is. I’ll have to ask him.”

While she was talking, the prince had stood up to pour the sweet cider in a glass, which he now handed to Nerwen.

“It looks like a good idea to me,” he commented. She thanked him with a smile and took a sip; Aryon grasped also the dish with the tart pieces – he had accounted one for himself – and kept her company while she was eating.
Later during dinner, they met the king; Nerwen asked him if she could talk to him briefly, after the meal. Pallando accepted immediately, inviting her to join him in his office, which she did, and Aryon went with her.

After the Istar had Yavanna’s suggestion explained to him, Pallando thought over it earnestly.

“Kalar showed where he had found me,” he considered, “at the borders of the Great Forest; but at that time, the place didn’t impress me in any way. Perhaps now that you awakened in my mind at least the ghost of memories, it will be different…”

He was silent for a while, thoughtful, and the two other ones respected his silence.

“It is not a place where one goes with a light heart,” he finally said, slowly, “After I left, in a matter of a few decades the area has been depopulated because of strange phenomena. Persons and animals disappearing without a trace, dogs barking at nothing, horses becoming frisky in the stable with no reason… diseases of hens, epidemics of cattle, harvests withering with no reason… strange fogs that seemed coming crawling out of the forest, enfolding the nearby houses in villages and farms like a shroud, nights full of a threatening silence. It is said that a kobold hung about at night, but sometimes even during the day, abducting persons and animals, casting evil spells on fields and villages. Squad of soldiers has been sent after this kobold, but found nothing. An entire patrol, which had gone deep into the forest, disappeared, and none of its soldiers has ever came back. Since then, the area quickly emptied, and is now an uninhabited territory.”

“Sounds disquieting,” Nerwen admitted, “but much time has passed: mayhap this kobold that infested the area, finding nobody else to torment, has left, or is dead.”

“I cannot say: the fame of the whole southern strip of Yòrvarem, for three good days ride from the Great Forest, is still very sinister and nobody goes there, nor I ever had any reasons to send someone to see if the danger was over. It will be best taking an escort of the royal guard…” he shook his head, “I am talking as if I could leave the town and my office like nothing, but actually it will not be easy organising it… However, even if it will be no small thing, I will find a way: now that there is an opportunity for me to recover my past, I absolutely do not want to give it up, at the cost of abdication. I am not so avid for power and honours that I cannot abandon my office. At the time I accepted, it was only because they literally begged me to, because they feared a civil war for succession. Now, if I have to leave my place as the sovereign, they can anyway elect someone else: after all, there is none so near to the throne to aspire to it out of simple kinship reasons, and any candidate would do. In this way, there will be no danger for an infight…” he paused, looking at Nerwen and Aryon, “Would you come with me?”

The couple exchanged a look, a little surprised.

“We’re assumed it already,” Aryon said then. Pallando smiled at them:

“Thank you, my friends. Because now I can call you this way with reason... hoping you, too, will consider me a friend.”

“I don’t see why not,” Nerwen assured him, responding to his smile.

“Fine,” the monarch nodded, “Before leaving, we will anyway wait for the cartographers and explorers I summoned to arrive, to see if any map they have corresponds to your vision and therefore would be helpful to find the Entwives. Meanwhile, I will begin to prepare for my absence from the government of Yòrvarem...”
The Blue Wizard didn’t waste time: the following day, he summoned the whole Great Council, led by Dèlamin, and announced his intention to leave in search of his memories. At first, the counsellors protested, raising lively objections, but the king was adamant and, at the end of an exhausting session, they approved that the First Lord Counsellor would act for him until he would return. If they received news about his death – Pallando preferred prudently to take into account this unpleasant eventuality, too – they would proceed to the election of a new monarch, choosing among the noblest and most honourable people in the kingdom.

They reckoned that, for the transfer of powers, they would need two to three weeks, as Pallando told Nerwen and Aryon that same evening at dinner.

A couple of days later, the first cartographers arrived at the palace, bringing the maps they had drawn of the farthest lands they knew about, and in the following days other arrived, in the whole about ten.

This way, they found out that the Great Forest, located on the southeast of Yòrvarem, was roughly half the size of Tor Kathren, but nonetheless of noticeable extent; it went mainly from north to south until it exceeded the maps in territories never explored by the peoples living east of the Red Mountains. It was at its northern borders that the farmer who saved his life had rescued Pallando.

To the north, instead, the charts showed a rather anonymous territory, dotted with only a few heights, some rivers of minor importance and a couple of swamp areas. Unfortunately, none of this was helpful to Nerwen’s search; she was beginning to feel truly frustrated.

“In my opinion, we should reach the coast and then randomly decide to go on southwards or northwards,” Aryon suggested, sorry to see his spouse’s disappointment. They were in the library, where they had received the last cartographer and examined in vain his maps.

“Yeah,” the Maia agreed, “I don’t see any other way. We risk wasting much time looking in the wrong direction, but staying here won’t surely take us any nearer to our goal. After helping Pallando as best we can, we’ll continue our search,” she concluded.

The announcement about the king’s departure very much impressed the people, which showed his unease clearly, but fortunately with no excesses.

There was a lively debate inside the Council, to decide whether performing a great leaving ceremony or not; Pallando was against it, but Délamin reminded him of the affection the people felt for him, considering which it wasn’t fair for him to leave them without a word. So it was that they organised a great celebration, which they called Goodbye to the King, during which the
sovereign would parade in the streets of Palländim – similarly to what he did during the celebrations for his birthday that, as now Nerwen and Aryon learned, was none other than the day in which Kalar had found him injured and stripped of his memory.

In the morning of the 23rd of August, they left the palace at the head of an escort of the royal guard consisting in twenty soldiers, men and women all skilled fighters, who the king had chosen personally; Aryon and Nerwen were mounting their horses, preceded by Túdhin and followed by Thalion in what had become a custom in their own small procession, while Pallando, wrapped in an ample tunic of his usual blue colour, proceeded at the head of the parade sitting on a proud bay horse. Behind them, in twos, came the soldiers, the first of them carrying Pallando’s white and blue banner.

They paraded along the main streets of the town, among people shouting their goodbyes, moved and quite worried; some threw flowers in front of the king’s horse, and a girl had the audacity to get near enough and hand him a bouquet of cornflowers, which were known to be the sovereign’s favourite flowers. Pallando accepted it, touched by this affectionate gesture.

They exited town from the gate that Aryon and Nerwen had passed one month earlier, heading southeast, toward the Great Forest.

For the first five days, they marched on unworriedly because they were in safe territory. Pallando rode in front, with at his side Nerwen and Aryon, with whom he amiably chatted, as behind him came the escort, in wide formation. The royal insignia, once out of sight from Palländim, were retired because the king wished travelling as anonymously as possible, even if the presence of an armed guard couldn’t go unnoticed, of course. They avoided towns and villages as not to waste time with formal welcoming; every evening, they set up camp, with the supply train distributing excellent food. In the ranks there were some musicians – a flute, a mandolin, a cymbal and a tambourine – therefore they had song and music. Among the women, there was one with a very nice voice, a warm contralto who entertained often her military companions, the king and his guests with thrilling ballads talking about adventure and love, or with comical songs that had everyone laughing.

The fair temperature of this season and latitude consented easily to sleep in the open air, which the soldiers did, while the king used a large and luxurious tent that his orderlies set up every night in not time. Aryon and Nerwen, wanting to benefit of a little intimacy, decided to sleep in their own tent.
During these days, the three of them talked about many things, mainly of the knowledge each had about places and peoples of Middle-earth; Nerwen spoke about Ériador, the Shire of the Hobbits, Rivendell and Lothlórien of the Elves – obviously she didn’t name Beleriand, sunken in the Great Sea at the end of the First Age – while Aryon spoke about Dorwinion and the lands of the Six Tribes of the Avari. For his part, Pallando told them about the inhabitants of Yòrvarem and the neighbouring peoples, located to the east, toward the ocean, and to the north; to the south, beyond the Great Forest, there were other peoples, dark-skinned and with black hair and eyes, but with them they had only very sporadic and indirect contacts, through the ports of their neighbours living on the coast, who traded with those exotic peoples by ship, but not in a regular or frequent way, therefore the Wizard knew little about them.

OOO

Approaching the Great Forest and the uninhabited territory preceding it, the commander of the escort – Derva, a lady soldier with an imposing physique but not lacking of femininity – suggested the king and his two friends wouldn’t proceed anymore at the head of the formation, but instead at the middle, surrounded by the soldiers, but Pallando refused.

“I am in the company of a great sorceress and a skilful swordsman,” he observed, “I could have no better protection. Besides, you are just behind us, if any danger shows up, it would take you just a moment to reach us.”

Derva was not much satisfied, but she had obviously to bend to her sovereign’s will, to whom she was completely loyal.

During the three following days, they crossed a totally deserted territory, as Pallando had told Nerwen and Aryon; they passed by two or three ruined farmhouses and a village that, after
centuries of neglect, was now reduced to rubble.

In the late morning of the eighth day since they had left Pallândim, they arrived in sight of the Great Forest. A dark line of very tall trees barred the horizon almost straight from north to south; a bluish mist rose from them, revealing to Nerwen’s expert eye that they were mostly eucalyptuses, which essential oils, evaporating in the summer heat, produced this unusual phenomenon.

“Can you point out the exact location where Kalar found you, Pallando?” Aryon asked, watching the trees with his sharp eyes. During those days, the Blue Wizard had asked them to forget the formalities definitively and address him always in the familiar way.

“Much time has passed,” the Wizard considered, watching the forest in turn, “and maybe it will not be easy. I remember there was a hill with a rock wall facing exactly northwards. Kalar found me at the foot of that cliff.”

They moved toward the trees for some hundreds metres and then established camp. They sent scouts both northward and southward, to seek the hill Pallando had described; then they had just to wait.

The explorers that had gone north came back four days later, with no useful information: they had reached the northern border of the Great Forest, where it bent eastwards, continuing parallel to the coast, still several kilometres away. The following day came back, too, those who had gone south, with the news they had found the place of Pallando’s finding. The sovereign, very anxious, would have left immediately, but it was almost sunset and it wasn’t worth, hence they prepared to leave on the next morning.

At sunrise, they broke camp and set forth southwards; slower than the scouts, they needed four days to reach the place, a solitary round hill, about sixty metres high. The cliff that Pallando had named was almost perfectly vertical and it looked like the hill had been roughly hewn with an axe. From the side facing away from the forest, a watercourse spurted from a hole at the foot of the cliff, already large enough to be called a brook.

As soon as Pallando saw the place, he recognised it.

“It Is precisely the place where Kalar found me,” he confirmed as they went nearer. The forest, now thicker and darker than before, loomed just a few metres away from the rock wall, at the foot of which the farmer had discovered the Wizard. Nerwen felt a sense of oppression, similar to what she had felt near Mirkwood, when she had been at Rhosgobel in the fruitless attempt to find Radagast. Beside the eucalyptuses, there were chestnuts, cedars, beeches, black pines and plane trees, but it wasn’t from there that the sensation of disquiet and mistrust came, which the Maia was feeling.

“I don’t like this place,” she declared, watching intently the dense shadows under the trees.

“We’ll set camp at a distance,” Aryon suggested, “and double the sentinels.”

Pallando nodded, confirming, and issued instructions about this to Derva.

As the westering sun was colouring pink the white rock of the hillside, along with six guards they approached the exact point of the finding; the Wizard watched every single detail, trying desperately to see beyond the impenetrable veil obscuring his memory. They halted and dismounted; Allakos and the other horses were quite nervous, but Thilgiloth’s calm presence somehow reassured them enough to keep them from bolting. Thalion had stayed with the rest of the escort, while Túdhin hadn’t left Nerwen’s side. But he, too, was tense and slightly bared his teeth.
in a silent growl.

Aryon noticed that the Blue Wizard was staring at a precise point in the rock wall.

“Any reminiscence, Pallando?” he asked him. The sovereign did not look away:

“I vaguely recall a ravine… mayhap a cavern, or a tunnel,” he answered slowly, “but I cannot see it.”

“Don’t you think you fell from the height?” Nerwen asked, looking dubiously at the top of the cliff, high enough to make leap deadly.

“No... I have this hazy imagine of myself coming out from a dark place and then collapsing,” Pallando told them, “however, I can see no passage, the rock looks solid and impenetrable,” he concluded, shaking his white-haired head.

“Let’s get closer,” Aryon proposed. They did so, with the prince staying a little behind with the men of the escort, his hand on the hilt of his sword, ready for anything.

They slowly walked along the foot of the precipice and finally, behind a projection, they spotted a narrow opening, like a cleft in the rock.

“There!” Pallando cried, excited, “That is the passage I came out from!”

Nerwen observed it, frowning: it was from there that the disturbing sensation came, which she had felt since when they had come near.

“I don’t like it,” she said under her breath, “It feels... evil.”

“How can a tunnel emanate evilness?” Aryon asked, perplexed.

“Not the tunnel,” she Istar explained, “but what’s inside.”

“Nonetheless, we ought to explore it,” Pallando pointed out, “Not that I like the idea: I, too, have a bad feeling. However, I fear it will be necessary, at least to try and figure out why I was inside there, and why I came out of it in such a bad state.”

Aryon glanced at the sun, now almost touching the western horizon, where they could catch a glimpse of the far shape of the Orocarni.

“Better postpone it to tomorrow,” he remarked, “Not that this changes much, as inside there it’s surely pitch dark both by day and by night, but we’re all tired after a day’s ride and as we don’t know what we’ll find, it’s advisable being rested.”

Pallando hesitated, eager to learn the reason why Kalar found him dying, but he recognised the validity of the prince’s suggestion and ended up nodding.

Hence, they withdrew for several hundred metres and set up camp for the night. As usual, they mounted the king’s large tent in the centre, and at its side Nerwen’s and Aryon’s, while all around the guards unrolled their pallets; more outwardly, they lighted a number of campfires, beyond which they placed the sentinels, who from four passed to eight, as the Avar prince suggested.

They took turns to make the most of the brook and its clear and cool water, to wash away the sweat and dust of those travel days; then they dined, but afterwards, unusually, there were neither music nor songs: all felt a sense of threat, even if there was absolutely nothing hinting to any danger, and
therefore no one wanted any playful entertainment. A few soldiers began fencing in the light of the campfires; Aryon watched interested and Nerwen thought he wanted to join them, but instead after some moments the prince turned away and looked at her. His grey-blue eyes gleamed in the light of the crescent moon and Nerwen felt unexpectedly a warm shiver of desire shooting through her. Since they left Pallàndim, eighteen days ago, they had made love very rarely, worried they could make revealing noises; now the need of him caught her so suddenly and forcefully, she was stunned. Whatever the reason of this urgency, the Istar decided to follow her instinct: she took Aryon’s hand and led him to their tent.

Once inside, as the prince was closing the strings of the entrance, Nerwen lighted the lantern and set it in a way it would provide a very soft light, enough to see but not enough to be seen outside; then she turned to Aryon and pushed him down on their pallet.

“Do you want me, lovely wife?” he asked her under his breath, his lips curling into his irresistible wolfish smile.

“Madly,” Nerwen whispered huskily; bending down, she placed her lips on his. She kissed him deeply, exploring his mouth, savouring it slowly. Aryon responded happily to her solicitation; he wrapped his arms around her, holding her tight, relishing the softness of her body against his.

“I love you, Aryon,” she murmured on his lips, before kissing him again. Then she left his mouth, only to kiss him lower, brushing the tip of her tongue on the tender skin of his throat.

“I love you, too, Nerwen,” he whispered, feeling intoxicated by her kisses; his body was reacting forcefully to his spouse’s ministrations and his breeches were becoming tight.

She unfastened his shirt, pushed aside the edges of its neckline to uncover his chest and bent down to place kisses there. Then she drew back and lifted the garment; Aryon moved to help her taking it off and remained shirtless. Quickly, Nerwen bent again over him; she nibbled at the firm muscles of his chest, then she brushed her lips on his flat nipples, making him sigh. Slowly, she moved downwards, on his abdomen, following the line of hair disappearing into his trousers. She placed one hand over the hard bulge of his excited virility and felt him jump; a gasp of pleasure escaped him.

She straightened to get rid of her shirt, but Aryon sat quickly up and did it himself, because he loved undressing her, uncovering her little by little, even if by now he knew perfectly every centimetre of her body. The garment ended up in a corner of the tent.

It was Aryon’s turn to push Nerwen on the pallet. With the same care she had had on him, he kissed her mouth, as with one hand he caressed lightly her breasts, brushing the soft mounds with his fingertips, and then rubbing gently her upright nipples which were begging for his touch. Nerwen whimpered softly, then she stifled a louder moan when his lips seized those rosy buds, caressing and sucking skilfully. Pleasure jolts spread from that point, going straight to her quivering depths.

Aryon untied the strings of her breeches and took them off, leaving her naked, then he undressed in turn before slipping one hand between her knees; Nerwen was looking forward to this and parted them, longing for the caresses he was able to give her in a both cheeky and sweet way. She felt him brushing the inside of her thighs, climbing toward the hot core of her body; when he touched it, she started and uttered a stifled cry.

Aryon caressed her slowly, feeling the heat radiating from her womanly flower, which soft petals became moist with the dew of desire, thrilling him as usual. He felt Nerwen tremble under his touch; he continued to tease the entrance to her intimacy and when he brushed her most sensitive
point, he heard her utter a small, breathless exclamation. He caressed her again and saw her biting her lips to stifle other pleasure moans, to avoid that prying ears could hear her.

By Aryon’s great discontentment, Nerwen finally escaped the sweet torture he was inflicting her, but she rewarded him immediately making him lay down again and kissing him ardently. In the meantime, her fingers wandered lightly over his chest, following the outlines of his muscles. Then her lips took the place of her fingers, and these ones moved further down his body, on his abdomen… and then even further, until they rested on his virility. Aryon trembled, like she had trembled earlier under his caresses, and he barely suppressed a cry; but when Nerwen fastened her mouth around him, an incoherent sound escaped him. He closed his eyes and grabbed convulsively the blankets, trying desperately to stifle his groans; if she would continue like this, he wouldn’t need much time to reach the limit.

Nerwen was well aware of it and soon she stopped; breathing hard, he opened again his eyes and looked at her, his gaze blazing with desire. Longing to feel him inside of her, the Maia straightened her back and straddled him, the she grasped him and guided him into her body. Unable to hold back, Aryon lifted his pelvis to meet her, thrusting deep inside of her.

“Aryon...” Nerwen whispered, welcoming him with a sigh that was both of pleasure and of relief.

“My sweet Istar...” he murmured back; he felt like one thing with her, not only in flesh, but also in heart, soul, mind. He lifted his hands to cup her breasts, tenderly caressing her soft curves.

Nerwen leaned forward, placing her hands on both sides of his head, and began to sway her hips, alternatively drawing back and pushing; Aryon responded in counter-time, widening and deepening their movements. They moved in unison in the eternal dance of love, slowly to make it last longer, relishing the mutual warmth, which wasn’t just physical, but also deeply spiritual because the fire heating them was love.

Slowly, pleasure grew in the depths of their bodies. As they approached the top, their breathings became more laboured and it was more and more difficult holding back their love cries. Nerwen reached the peak and it took her breath away; her eyes closed irresistibly and she pressed her lips together, but despite this, small moans escaped her. Those delicious sounds and her spasms around him hurled Aryon beyond the crest; he arched his back and uttered a stifled sound as they enjoyed each other intensely, body as much as heart.

Breathless, Nerwen laid down on Aryon’s chest, and he wrapped her ins his arms and held her closely, lovingly. He kissed her temple and she turned her face to his; their lips met in a tender kiss, languid because of the embrace they had just shared.

They stayed like this for a long time, exchanging caresses and kisses as they always used to do, after their lovemaking. At length, they parted, but only to extinguish the lantern and slip under the light cover they used as a blanket, and finally they fell asleep in each other arms.

OOO

In the morning, as it had become their custom, they broke their fast in the company of Pallando in his tent.

“How shall we go on with the exploration?” the Blue Wizard asked them.
“We need light, inside that cavern,” Aryon said, thinking immediately about the practical side, “torches or lanterns. I’d send four soldiers on scout to see that there’s no danger, then we enter behind them.”

The king sighed:

“I don’t like to risk the lives of my men, but I understand the need for caution,” he declared, “I will issue instructions to Derva.”

One hour later, Aryon, Nerwen and Pallando, with the escort of Derva and ten guards, returned at the entrance to the burrow they had discovered the night before. Four soldiers, equipped with torches, entered with drawn weapons; the tunnel was too narrow to walk side by side without risking, in case of fighting, to hinder or even to injure one another, therefore they had to move forward single-file. The other ones waited outside; Derva positioned herself just inside the cleft, keeping an ear on the interior for possible cries of alarm, ready to get the rest of the soldiers into action.

Minutes passed, slowly; Nerwen’s feeling of unease hadn’t lessened even in the bright morning light. Pallando, too, was uncomfortable, while Túdhin, even if he wasn’t growling like the day before, stayed anyway alert. The horses were very nervous, except Thilgiloth of course, forcing their riders keep a tight grip on the reins.

About twenty minutes later, the four explorers returned and reported to their commander. After questioning them thoroughly, Derva approached Pallando:

“Sire, the scouts report that the passage is a few hundred steps long and it slowly widens, until arriving to a rather large cavern, on which back stands a wall covered in strange inscriptions. Except this, they didn’t find anything unusual or dangerous.”

“Let’s go inside, then,” the Blue Wizard exclaimed, unable now to hold back his keenness to know, “Mayhap those inscriptions will shed light on the mystery of my finding in the conditions I was.”

“That’s if we’re able to decipher them,” Nerwen pointed out. Pallando nodded:

“Yes, let us hope we can…”

They prepared to enter; prudent to the extreme, Derva marched ahead, followed by two explorers, behind them coming Pallando, Aryon and Nerwen, with Túdhin at her heels; other four guards closed the small procession.

As they walked along the tunnel, Nerwen felt the sensation of oppression growing, but she fought it: she wanted to see the mysterious inscription. Anyway, there was actually nothing, in Middle-earth, she had reason to truly fear, except for Sauron himself, and she didn’t expect finding him here.

The burrow widened perceptibly after some dozen of metres until, as they had been told, it opened into a cavern, roughly the size of a great hall. The soldiers scattered all around, bringing light in every corner to make sure there still was no evident danger.
On the opposite wall, they saw the writings about which the scouts had told them. Pallando and Nerwen got near to study them; Aryon and Túdhin stayed next to them.

The Blue Wizard asked for a torch and began examining the inscription. The Aini, too, got close to the wall and carefully inspected the letters, which looked as if written with carbon black.

“The characters are quite rough,” Aryon noticed, “but they look enough like the Elven tengwar.”

“You’re right…” Nerwen commented, perplexed, bowing to scan a section. By her enormous amazement, suddenly she recognised the writing, even if still not the language: it was sarati, letters of the graphic system in use in Valinor before Fëanor, on this basis, would devise the Elven tengwar. She couldn’t however say this clearly in front of Aryon and the other ones, but while she was thinking of a way to announce she was able to read the inscription without giving away its origin, Pallando intervened:

“I can read this writing!” he declared in a surprised tone. Nerwen groped to find a plausible explanation not involving the Undying Lands.

“Of course,” she smiled, feigning nonchalance, “it’s the secret writing of the Istari. Mayhap you drew them… Evidently, seeing them your mind recognised them, making resurface to your memory the capability to read them.”

“I would like my memory coming back in full,” the sovereign grumbled, dissatisfied, “not in bits and pieces as it is doing…”

“Be patient,” she exhorted him, “In a few weeks, you remembered much more than in many centuries,” she pointed out. Pallando hesitated, then nodded:

“You are right… except that it is truly frustrating feeling constantly on the edge of remembering, but then not being able to, no matter how hard I try…”

He got nearer to the wall, lighting it better with his torch. Nerwen, too, got near and together they
began to decipher the mysterious writing.

Seeing them so engrossed, and not being anyway able to do anything to help them, Aryon walked away and began to explore the rest of the cave.

Trying to better concentrate, Pallando began to read aloud:

“Burzum ghásh rikh tramgatul…”

Hearing those scratching sounds, an icy shiver travelled down Nerwen’s back.

“Esh wargh nigulat…”

Where did she already hear that tongue? she wondered, squinting her eyes while struggling to recall it.

“Snaga durb agh thrak…”

It was there… somewhere in her mind… Nerwen tapped one foot on the ground, impatiently. She did not suffer of amnesia, by all the Valar, why wasn’t she remembering…?

“Búbosh bagronk krimpishi…”

Abruptly, the Istar realised what it was: the Black Speech, the idiom Sauron devised for his servants, based on the Melkorin that his Master, Melkor Morgoth, had created; and Pallando was unknowingly weaving a potent spell called Dark Portal.

Nerwen opened her mouth to command him to stop, but she discovered horrified she wasn’t able to voice a single word, as if something prevented her to utter any sound. Therefore, she tried to move to stop the Blue Wizard, but her limbs were paralysed as much as her voice.

All happened in a few heartbeats.

All of a sudden, an indented crack opened silently in the wall, crossing the inscription; from it, a darkness issued, like black tentacles, shooting toward Nerwen and Pallando, wrapping around them in an instant. A shout rose from the Maia’s throat, but no sound came out. Fighting against the shadowy tentacles, she turned to look at Aryon; but he seemed to move with unnatural slowness while turning to her, and the same was happening to the king’s guards.

Pallando, too, was trying to break free, but wasn’t able to. The torch had fallen from his hand, grazing Túdhin, but the wolf didn’t even notice it, busy with trying to maul the dark appendices winding around Nerwen; in response, the black tentacles closed around him, too. Túdhin yelped, out of surprise rather than fear; he wriggled frantically to break free, but in vain.

Pallando, Nerwen and the wolf were swept off the ground; meanwhile, the crack had enlarged and a moment later, the tentacles got back into it, dragging with them the three prisoners, who were unsuccessfully twisting in their iron grasp, their mouths wide open on voiceless shouts.

The crack closed crashing behind them, separating them from the other ones and hurling them into an unknown place.

OOO
Out of the corner of his eye, Aryon caught sight of a movement that induced him to spin around and face the wall with the inscription, in front of which Nerwen and Pallando were intent on deciphering the mysterious language of the rough writing.

Horrified, he saw the Istar and the king disappearing in a gloomy flash together with Túdhin, as if sucked into the wall, in which for a moment he glimpsed an opening, as black as the darkest night. With a yell, he flung himself toward the spot where the three had been, but even if reaching it just a split second later, there was no trace of any of them.

“NERWEN!”

Shouting, the prince threw himself against the wall, crashing into the hard stone, then he began banging at it, yelling again, desperately, his wife’s name; but the rock remained solid and unyielding, heedless of his anguished screams and the soldiers’ alarmed cries.

It was the eleventh day of September of the year 2943.

Author’s corner:

The examples of Black Speech I quote here are my invention, but based on a meagre vocabulary I found here http://lotr.wikia.com/wiki/Black_Speech

So, did you like this turn of events?? Are you wondering about where Nerwen, Túdhin and Pallando were dragged? And how they will return? Well, you’ll have to read the next chapters… :-)

Lady Angel
Chapter XLIX: Beyond the Portal

Complete darkness. Complete silence.

Slowly, Nerwen opened her eyes; but she saw no difference from keeping them closed. There wasn’t the least trace of light, nor did she hear any noise.

“Túdhin? Pallando?” she called, the first name with her mind, too; her voice sounded muffled.

“I’m here,” she heard the Blue Wizard’s faint answer; she couldn’t mark what direction it came from. At the same moment, she perceived the wolf’s confused thoughts.

“Are you well?” she asked them, and again it was as if the darkness swallowed her voice.

“Not exactly,” Pallando’s feeble reply arrived, “You?”

I feel dazed, Túdhin answered as he uttered a yelp, How about you?

Nerwen moved cautiously. Under her, she felt stone, cold and hard and rough.

“Nothing broken,” she informed them both, “but I feel weak.”

“I do, too… but other than this, I do not think anything is wrong.”

“Thank the Valar… Túdhin, can you pick up my scent?”

After pausing for a moment, the wolf answered:

Yes, I smell you.
“Fine, can you figure out where I am? Can you came near me?”

There was a longer pause, then Túdhin sent her an affirmative thought. After a few moments, the Istar heard the light footsteps of the wolf approaching her, then she felt the warmth of his body as he laid down beside her. She reached out and caressed him, giving and receiving comfort.

“How do you think we are?” she asked, addressing Pallando.

“I have no idea… but anyway, what happened, in Oromë’s name?”

“What you were reading… it was a spell in Black Speech. A spell called Dark Portal. Reading it aloud, you have activated it and it has sucked us into the Valar only knows what place.”

“Oh no… I’m sorry, Nerwen…”

“You couldn’t have known, Pallando,” the Istar sighed, “If only I could see… it’s pitch black, here. Anywhere it may be, this here…”

“Let’s hope it is just a temporary condition, as if we were in the middle of the night, and that sooner or later daylight will arrive,” the Blue Wizard said.

Nerwen was slowly regaining her strength.

“Go on talking,” she exhorted him, “I’ll try to figure out where you are and join you.”

“Alright,” Pallando answered, “Wherever we are, wherever this accursed Dark Portal has taken us, do not doubt that we will be able to find our way back. I have my people – the people who adopted me – to take care of, you have to seek the Entwives, and of course you have to go back to your husband…”

As the Blue Wizard talked, Nerwen moved in one random direction, staying on all fours and feeling the ground in front of her. She realised immediately she was getting away, so she turned and went back, always with Túdhin practically glued to her. Again she realised she was going the wrong way, so she turned at a right angle to her left and this time she heard Pallando’s voice becoming louder.

“I’m closing in with you,” she announced.

“Fine! Well, I was telling you Derva is an excellent warrioress and I would trust her with my life a thousand times…”

A few moments later, Nerwen’s hand encountered the Wizard’s leg; he interrupted his monologue and reached blindly out to find his colleague. Their hands met and clasped one another.

“At least we’re in a dry place,” the Istar commented, as usual looking for the brighter side even in the most difficult situation, “Nor it’s too cold.”

“If only we had something to shed light…” Pallando complained.

“But we haven’t,” she pointed out, “I’m afraid we’ll have to wait and see if you’re right guessing we’re in the middle of the night and therefore, sooner or later, the sun will rise. But it was morning when we passed through the portal and I find it odd that we’ve remained unconscious, all three of us, for so many hours.”

“Mayhap we have been teleported very far away from where we stood,” Pallando fathomed, “in a
place where it is night while in our location it is day.”

“That may be,” Nerwen agreed, knowing that a very different longitude meant such an effect. Aman, being outside the World Circles, wasn’t subject to such a difference, so when she went there mentally to confer with Yavanna, she always arrived at the time she was in the place from which she left.

“So we just have to wait,” the Wizard concluded.

Hence, they laid down side by side on the cold stone, with Túdhin between them, warming them a little with his body heat.

Nerwen thought about contacting her Mistress to see if she could help them, but then thought better of it: they had no idea of the possible dangers surrounding them, so it was better staying alert. They saw nothing in this pitch black place, but luckily the wolf was with them and with his sense of smell and of hearing, he could warn them in good time if something would approach them in the darkness.

OOO

In the cave, Aryon had fetched all the torches and lanterns to light the rock wall as much as possible; now he and Derva were examining every centimetre of it.

“It’s not possible,” the Avar prince growled, “It’s not possible that there’s nothing!”

The commander of the escort was terribly concerned for her king, but she hid it under a stern frown.

“If there’s something, we’ll find it, Lord Aryon,” she assured him. He nodded, his expression gloomy.

They continued the examination, checking each square centimetre of the impenetrable wall of stone but, as much as they searched it carefully, they found no sign of a passage. As minutes went implacably by, becoming hours, Aryon’s heart felt heavier and heavier as his worry grew.

They studied the rock from top to bottom, and then again from bottom to top, but didn’t find the least trace of a passage, even just a small fissure, a crack, anything.

The prince felt a red wave surging inside of him; taken by an incontrollable impulse, with a roar he unsheathed his sword and banged the hilt heavily against the rock, unleashing sparkles. Once, twice, thrice. Then he screamed wildly, expressing equally anguish, frustration and rage.

Fearing he would hurt himself, Derva jumped on him and pinned his sword-brandishing arm, but Aryon shook her off. Grinding his teeth, he assaulted again the pertinacious rock, even if he was aware that his actions were completely useless; Derva got back to him, this time with the assistance of two fellow soldiers, who seized the prince and took away his weapon before he could injure himself. Aryon struggled hard, shouting, then he fell to his knees as his screams became sobs with no tears, ripping his chest like cruel steely claws.

“Nerwen…!” he gasped, “Oh Nerwen…”

OOO
Time passed; unable to quantify it by observing the stars, Nerwen and Pallando could only guess that it was a number of hours. Eventually, slowly, the darkness dispelled and a greyish light allowed them discerning the shapes, at the beginning of themselves, then of each other, and finally of what surrounded them. No true sun was visible, only a diffused light high above their heads. On their right, there was a very rough rock wall, so dark it seemed black, looking almost glassy; while on the other sides a reddish landscape stretched, flat and dusty, apparently empty of any sign of life. Nerwen used her special senses to seek any animal or vegetal creature, probing for a few kilometres around, and perceived the laboured life of spindly plants, as well as the simple minds of insects such as scarabs, spiders and scorpions, and of snakes and lizards. She found nothing more complex.

“No sign of intelligent life,” she informed Pallando, “at least not in the area, I don’t know if it’s a good thing or a bad one…”

When there was enough light, Nerwen stood up and went inspecting the rock wall looming behind them, very high and almost perfectly vertical. It cut the landscape from horizon to horizon, with no sign of interruption, like the gigantic step of some immeasurable threshold.

There was no indication of a passage through which they would have arrived there, neither a crack, nor the entrance of a cavern or tunnel, not even a hole.

Pallando, too, got to his feet and watched all around. The dusty plain was completely empty; the only signs of life were gaunt trees and thorny shrubs.

Nerwen came back to him, telling him about the complete absence of openings in the rock.

“So, where do we go?” the Wizard asked. She pressed her lips together:

“There’s nothing making one choice better than the other,” she said flatly, “at least regarding sight or hearing… Old friend, what does your sense of smell tell you?”

Túdhin had already sniffed all around and answered immediately:

*Nothing that suggests favouring one direction or the other.*

“There is not even a true sun to understand where one is going,” Pallando commented, then he turned to the high wall of black rock looming over them, “This is the only direction we have to exclude… shall we go in the opposite direction?” he asked finally, looking at the Istar. Nerwen, too, lifted her eyes on that unpassable wall.

“Yes, let’s do it,” she accepted, “but we won’t need the sun to keep our course: Túdhin, like all *kelvar* and many *olvar*, perceives the magnetic field of the world. Hence, unless this place is beyond Eä, he should be able to distinguish the directions. My friend, is that it?” she asked him.

The wolf looked like listening carefully, but it was not a sound what he was seeking. He moved circularly, slowly, until he aligned with his muzzle in the opposite direction as the rock wall.

*That way is the sunrise,* he announced, *even if we don’t see it, even here the sun rises and sets.*
Nerwen reported the information to Pallando, who simply nodded in acknowledgment.

“Perhaps we don’t see it because of some refraction of light phenomenon, which diffuses it abnormally,” he considered as they set forth.

“This may be,” the Istar nodded, “Everything is abnormal, in this place… it looks like a desert, but it isn’t very hot. In fact, now I don’t feel a great difference in temperature between darkness and light…”

They walked for a long time; unable, as during the hours of darkness, to measure time with the sun moving in the sky, they had no idea about how many hours were passing.

“We should find water,” Pallando said at a certain point, “and then food.”

Túdhin sniffed attentively.

_No water_, he said. Nerwen reported the laconic comment to the Wizard, who made a worried face.

“Water is a priority, more than food,” he pointed out. The Maia was about to tell him that it wasn’t really that urgent, as they couldn’t die, before she recalled that he possessed a through and through human body, even if subject to a much slower ageing than the Second-Born of Ilúvatar; this meant that, unlike her, Pallando could actually die of starving or, much earlier, of thirst.

“Anyway, we’ve got nothing in which carry it, neither canteens nor any other vessel,” she said instead, grimacing.

“Aye…” the Wizard murmured, gloomily, “Well, we will address one issue at a time. As soon as Túdhin smells water, we will go there and drink, and then we will think about what doing next.”

Nerwen simply nodded.

A good deal of time later, the wolf halted and raised his muzzle, sniffing carefully.

_Water_, he announced, turning to their right, _not very far away_.

They headed for the place he was pointing to; soon they saw a group of trees looking much healthier than those they had so far encountered, through and through similar to palms, and this made Nerwen hope in a food supply in the form of dates.

Her hopes were fulfilled: not only there was water – a rather large pool – but the palms were full of ripe dates.
First thing first, they quenched their thirst: as a precaution, Nerwen made sure that the water was enough pure to avoid Pallando and Túdhin becoming sick by consuming it, and then they drank their fill, paying attention not to exaggerate. Then the Wizard watched the big bunches of dates hanging from the palms, at least a dozen metres high, and made a worried face.

“How can we go get them?” he asked.

“In the far West they call me Nerwen Laiheri,” the Istar reminded him, “This means that there are no secrets I don’t know, about plants, included the way to pluck their fruits…”

She unbuckled her belt, took the Noldorin dagger from its sheath and slipped it into a pocket, then she slung the belt around the trunk of the lowest palm and rolled its edges around her hands; using it as a lever, she climbed deftly, propping herself with her feet, until she reached the foliage. Here, she straddled a branch and leaned toward the nearest bunch of dates, which she cut off with her dagger; the dates fell on the sandy ground. Then Nerwen moved to other bunches and cut them off, too. Finally, she got back on the ground.

“You are very nimble,” Pallando commented, admiringly. She remembered she hadn’t disclosed to him the different level of decrease she had, compared to the other Istari; she decided to continue keeping this from him: even if she trusted him by now, and even considered him a friend, she didn’t want him feeling somehow discriminated. In the situations they were, not knowing how long it would go on, they had to be behind one another with no reservations whatsoever.

“It’s fortunate, under the circumstances,” she answered in an apparently light way.

The dates were smooth and crisp, less sweet than those dried in the sun because fresh, but for this reason richer in vitamins and precious mineral salts. Weaving the fibres of the palm leaves, they could manufacture bags to store the dried fruits and therefore gaining a food supply; the problem of
transporting water remained, but for now, they could postpone the solution.

They decided to stop here for some time. They gathered wood for a fire, so they could have light during the night; the temperature didn’t seem a problem, as they hadn’t noticed much difference between day and night.

Túdhin wasn’t much inclined to eat dates, therefore he tried his luck going hunting; he found a colony of frogs, but he was able to catch only three of them, which didn’t satisfy much his hunger, hence in the end he resigned to eat the fruit.

As the daylight slowly decreased, Nerwen got busy lighting the fire; she rubbed two pieces of timber together to generate heat, until a sparkle sprang, which she captured with her power to strengthen it and light the bait. Shortly after, a small bonfire burned safely in the hole they had dug in the sandy ground.

“This place puzzles me,” she then said to Pallando, sitting with him next to the fire, “The date palms are typical to a hot desert climate, but the temperature isn’t so high, nor it’s so arid, as we can see from the vegetation that, even if thin, is more than what you can find in hot deserts. Nor is it a steppe. Moreover, if we were to the latitude where usually deserts are located, the twilight would be very short,” she shook her head, perplexed, “It’s a true riddle.”

“Everything, here, looks like a riddle,” the Wizard considered, “I saw tracks of animals that I could swear are roe deer, some others of gazelle.”

Nerwen nodded in agreement: she, too, had seen them.

“And good thing we didn’t see tracks of lion or tiger,” she commented gloomily, “even if this doesn’t mean that there aren’t.”

“We will have to set up watch…”

“No need for it, Túdhin is the best sentinel we could wish.”

“But he, too, will need sleep, will he not?”

“Sure, but his senses are much sharper than ours and it takes very little to wake him up and raise the alarm…”

To avoid sleeping on the bare ground, Nerwen cut a number of large leaves from a young palm. As darkness slowly closed around them, Pallando placed them on the as makeshift pallets; then they used more to cover themselves. They fixed the fire so it would burn with very low flames as long as possible, and finally they prepared for sleep, tired from the long day. Túdhin laid down just outside the light circle of the small bonfire, so that he wouldn’t be visible to a possible watcher.

This time, even if the darkness was as much impenetrable as the first night, with neither stars nor moon, at least the croaking of the frogs populating the surroundings of the pool broke the silence.

Still not trusting the environment safety to the point of going away from her body and contact Yavanna, Nerwen decided going to Olorendor and try to meet Aryon, reassuring him about her being at least still alive. She hoped the same idea occurred him, too: in their time together, she had taught him how to access the Land of Dream, in anticipation of a possible, even if improbable, period of separation; probably her Second Sight, in an unusually subtle way, had suggested this need.
“You cannot stay here forever,” Derva said to Aryon.

Three months had passed and the prince refused to move away from the place where Nerwen and Pallando had vanished. In that time, they had sent a messenger to Pallàndim to break the feral news about the disappearance of the king and his friend the wise, news that had all his people distressed. Fortunately, Pallando had been farsighted and the kingdom didn’t fall into chaos because of his absence, however his subjects had refused to elect a new king and had chosen a regent, who would act as a monarch until the return of the legitimate one, or until they would receive news of his death. Aryon had vaguely thought it was similar to the situation in Gondor, after the death of the last direct heir of Isildur, where, not finding anyone who could really claim the throne, they chose for a Steward acting as the king until the prophesied return of a true descendant of the line of Eléndil, father of Isildur; but actually he didn’t care much about it, completely distraught by the loss of Nerwen, which he was unable to cope with. He had categorically refused to move and had set camp in front of the cave, which he inspected every day with obsessive care, but to no avail.

“Of course I can,” he replied to the commander of the royal guards, “I won’t move from here until my wife will return. Because I know she will. Only death would prevent her to come back to me, but I she were dead, I’d knew it.”

It wasn’t the first time he told her this: he had explained her that it was this way for Elven people, because marriage created a spiritual bond between husband and wife that allowed them to perceive each other in a subtle way, and therefore, if one of them died, the survivor would feel it; it mattered not if the other spouse wasn’t of Elven descent. He perceived that Nerwen was still alive and would wait for her; even a hundred years... even a thousand.

That night, when he went to bed, he travelled to Olorendor, as he had done each night since Nerwen’s and Pallando’s disappearance. He had never been able to find his wife, but he didn’t give up; and that night, finally, he met her.

She looked gorgeous in his eyes, more than usual; his heart leaped into his throat as he began running to her.

She did the same; they rushed in each other arms and Aryon lifted her off the ground, holding her frantically. When he placed her down, he peppered her face with kisses.

“My love... my blossom... I’ve missed you so much... where have you been all this time...?” he stuttered in between kisses.

As his reaction seemed excessive to her, Nerwen was astonished and she drew slightly back to look at his face.

“But only just a little bit more than a day has passed...” she objected, perplexed. It was now Aryon’s turn to be astonished.

“No, three months have passed!” he exclaimed. Nerwen frowned:

“Then time passes differently, in the place I am...”

“And where is it, this place? I’ll come and get you!” Aryon almost yelled, so much was he beside himself. Nerwen placed one hand on his cheek to calm him down:
“I don’t know where I am... it’s a very strange area: it looks like a hot desert, but its temperatures are not so torrid, and you cannot see the sun, and neither the moon nor the stars, only diffused light and darkness, and this prevents me from determining the location.”

“But are you well??”

“Yes, I am, and also Túdhin and Pallando... And you?”

“No, I’m not well, not without you... I’m almost dying from preoccupation! Good Valar, what can I do??”

She shook her head:

“Nothing, for the moment, my love... except waiting. I’ll find a way to come back to you, I swear!”

Aryon nodded:

“I know… I know, my life, my heart…” he embraced her, desperately, “I cannot live without you…”

“But you must,” she exhorted him, swallowing down the lump in her throat, “Wait for me: you know I’ll return. As time passes by differently where I am, for me it could be days, for you years... but hold on.”

Aryon tried to regain his composure; losing his head would be useless, both for him and for Nerwen, and also to resolve the situation.

“I will,” he promised, “Will you come back to see me again?”

“Every night, for me... for you maybe it could be months, as it looks like...”

“It’s alright... as far as you come to see me as often as you can...”

Nerwen closed her eyes, feeling them full of tears: she couldn’t imagine even three days without Aryon, and for him it had been three months...

In the way one could do in Olorendor, with an act of will the Istar changed the shapeless surroundings into the location that had seen their first union; laying on that same mat, they made love repeatedly, getting lost into each other.

OOO

The morning after, Nerwen told Pallando what she had discovered about the different passing of time between the place they where and Middle-earth. The news upset the Blue Wizard, who racked his brains to find an explanation; but neither he nor the Maia were able to reach a satisfying conclusion, therefore they gave up, thinking it unproductive.

Before continuing their journey and deciding in which direction, Nerwen wanted to resolve the water problem; it wasn’t so much for her, as she couldn’t die of thirst, but for Pallando and Túdhin.

They had luck: in a corner of the oasis, Pallando found a gourd plant, of the type called bottle-gourd, from which he chose some fruits of a suitable size, removing them with his dagger, then he
took them to Nerwen. Once emptied and dried, they could be used as canteens; meanwhile, they would weave the fibres of the palm leaves to manufacture bags to carry on their shoulders, where they could store the pumpkins and the dates that they had now spread out to dry in the air. These operations would require a few days, but they couldn’t set forth without a supply of food and water. They used then the same fibres to weave mats, on where they could lay down for sleep, and others to use as blankets.

On the opposite side of the oasis, they found also some plants of desert pears, of which not only the fruits are edible, but the pads, too, of course after removing the prickles.

They had seen tracks of animals they could feed on, but with no appropriate weapons, they couldn’t hunt them; the perfect thing would have been manufacturing a bow, but they needed the right type of wood, like hazel, yew, elm, ash, and there were no such trees available; not to mention the string, the arrows, the fletches for the latter. Much easier was fabricating a rudimentary spear, but palm branches were not suitable for this use.

“I think we must resign to a diet of only dates and desert pears, at least for the moment,” Pallando commented, grimacing: they were deliciously sweet fruits, but on the long term, they would surely grow fed up with them.

On that evening, before going to Olorendor, Nerwen decided to try contacting Yavanna.

“I’d like to contact Kementári,” she therefore announced to Pallando before going to sleep, “I’ll be in a state of absence from my body that will leave it vulnerable, but I think the area is safe enough for me to risk it; besides, I have you and Túdhin to look after me.”

“Of course,” the Blue Wizard assured her.

Therefore, Nerwen laid down on the mat and closed her eyes, focusing as she usually did; but as much as she tried, she didn’t succeed in separating her spirit from her body to reach Valinor.

After several unsuccessful attempts, she gave up and re-opened her eyes.

“I can’t do it,” she dejectedly told Pallando, who was watching her anxiously, “I can’t figure out
the reason...”

She wouldn’t stop trying, of course: she would do it again and again, until she would succeed, or at least discover the reason why she was unable to do it.

OOO

Some days passed by; every evening, Nerwen tried to contact Yavanna, with no success, while during the night she went to Olorendor, finding Aryon waiting for her, and learnt that time passed erratically: once it was one week, once months.

Meanwhile, Túdhin, unable to adjust to a vegetarian diet, went obstinately hunting; at the beginning he had no luck, but on the third day after their arrival at the oasis, he found a small antelope and succeeded in killing it; then, even against his very instinct, instead of devouring it he tried laboriously to drag it in order to bring it to Nerwen, but after a hundred metres he gave up. He looked around suspiciously and, not seeing anyone, he decided to take the chance abandoning the carcass to run and notify his two-legged friend.

Nerwen saw him arriving running and feared some cause of alarm; she sent him a thought, but the wolf reassured her immediately.

Come and see, he invited her, I found some food.

The Aini informed Pallando who, unwilling to let her go around alone, joined her in following Túdhin; they found the antelope at a couple of kilometres distance.

Nerwen noticed that Túdhin hadn’t touch it and realised her friend had left it intact for her and Pallando. Grateful, she hugged him, and in response, Túdhin licked her face affectionately.

The Wizard watched the predator intently:

“He is no dog, is he?”

Nerwen straightened up and looked at her colleague.

“No, actually he’s a wolf,” she admitted, “I pass him off as a dog because otherwise people would be afraid of him.”

Pallando nodded:

“I see… Anyway, he is as loyal to you as a dog, and he looks equally sweet.”

“Except when I’m in danger,” the Istar smiled, remembering Iruegh.

The antelope was enough small for Nerwen to carry it on her shoulders to their encampment. Here, they skinned and gutted it, then cut most of the meat to strips, except a piece that they gave to Túdhin, so he would finally be able to eat in the most suitable way for him. They found a number of large stones, positioned them all around the fire – which they enlarged adequately – and lastly they placed the strips of meat on them to dry them. Nerwen saw to that no insect would come near until the meat would be enough dry to prevent them laying their eggs in it. It took a few hours; it was late at night when the meat was ready at last. They ate their fill, then they wrapped the
remaining strips in palm leaves, storing them in their backpacks.

They were now ready to go on with their journey, wherever it would take them; so they decided they would set forth the next morning.

OOO

“It’s five years now,” Derva told Aryon.

“I know,” he answered, sullenly.

He looked about; over time, around his tent they had built at first a permanent camp, then a small village. There was no trace of the kobold, and the looming sensation of threat coming from the tunnel had vanished with Nerwen’s and Pallando’s disappearance, as if the spell that had abducted them had been disabled, after it had been used. Hence, slowly the area was repopulating; farmers and breeders had arrived, and also a few tradesmen.

Derva had resigned from her job in the royal guard and had settled here, awaiting to learn her king’s fate.

“Do you still believe she’ll return?” she asked, referring to Nerwen.

“Absolutely, forever,” the prince answered. In his tone, there was a ferocious determination that time would never undermine, even because the encounters with his wife in Olorendor supported it.

OOO

The next day, Nerwen and Pallando left the oasis and resumed marching in the original direction they had chosen before detouring for the water. In their bags of woven fibres, they carried the dried meat, the dates and desert pears, as well as the pads of the latter, but above all they had four large bottle-pumpkins emptied of their pulp, properly dried and filled with water. Their baggage was quite heavy and useless for Nerwen, because of her immortal nature, but it was crucial to Pallando. What the Wizard didn’t know, was that his colleague planned to barely eat and drink, in order to keep as much as possible food and water for him and Túdhin.

A number of hours later, they halted to have some food; they sat on the ground and pulled out the dates and desert pears, which they wanted to consume before the meat because they were more perishable.

“If we do not find another oasis when we will have consumed half of our supply, we will be forced to go back and replenish it,” Pallando pointed out in a pessimistic tone, “and then choose another direction.”

“Yeah…” Nerwen began, and then stopped abruptly: from behind the Wizard, a horned viper had come out, one of the most venomous snakes she knew, “Don’t move, Pallando,” she recommended, as at the same time she sook the reptile’s mind. Too late: the viper sprang forward and sank her sharp teeth in the Wizard’s thigh; he screamed in shock and pain. Túdhin jumped
backwards and yelped, scared.

“Leave him!” Nerwen yelled at the viper, both with voice and mind, jumping to her feet. Stunned by the scream that had shot through its brain, the snake withdrew and slithered away as fast as possible. Nerwen rushed to Pallando, who has dropped the leaf with the dates and was pressing his leg above the bite, trying to slow down the spreading of the poison toward his heart.

“Let me see,” the Maia ordered, lifting the hem of his tunic; under it, the Wizard wore breeches of heavy cotton. At the level of the snakebite stood a bloodstain that was quickly spreading: one of the venom toxins was an anticoagulant. With her dagger, Nerwen cut a hole in the cloth to expose the bite, then she placed one hand on it and focused there her thaumaturgic power; she singled out the poison and neutralised it, changing its chemical structure to make it harmless. She had to use a great deal of power, because the venom was strong; Pallando felt a terrible burning that had him groan in pain. When Nerwen took her hand away, the wound had disappeared; cleaning the blood, two tiny dots were visible, where the viper’s teeth had sunken in the flesh.

“What…?” croaked Pallando, dazed.

“I possess the skill of thaumaturgy,” the Aini revealed, concisely, “There’s no danger anymore.”

“Good to know,” the Wizard murmured, “If it were not for you, I would be dead.”

“Even if often the bite of the horned viper isn’t lethal, it makes one terribly sick and, in our precarious conditions, you’d be easily dead, yes,” Nerwen confirmed in a low voice. Pallando clasped her arm.

“I am very grateful,” he said, “Thank you.”

“Don’t even mention it,” she smiled, “If you could, you would do the same for me.”

He nodded; Nerwen picked up the dropped dates and put them back in the leaf: they were stained with sand, but she wouldn’t waste water to wash them. She took another leaf and opened it, handing the content to the Wizard.

“Here, eat it,” she exhorted him, “You must get your strength back straightaway to go on.”

He obeyed. After eating, they rested shortly; when he tried to get up, Pallando limped a little, but he could walk, therefore they set forth, even if at a slower pace than before.

The hours went by; evening came. They halted before it was too dark to gather some wood and light a fire; luckily, the shrubs and withered trees offered plenty of fuel.

OOO

They went on walking for four days, consuming as little as possible of the food and water; if Pallando noticed that Nerwen almost didn’t touch neither of them, he didn’t show.

On the fifth day since they had left the oasis, the landscape began to change significantly, becoming rockier; they had already consumed almost half of the water and the day after at the latest they had to go back, but once more Túdhin’s sharp sense of smell came to their rescue: the wolf led them to another spring, a number of kilometres to the northwest. Here, they found a steep
hill of reddish rock, looking like an enormous boulder hammered into the ground; from one side gushed a spring of clear and fresh water, forming a sizeable pool surrounded by lush vegetation. They found dark berries, sweet and juicy, as well as figs and olives, and a tree with fruits rich in carbohydrates and starches, which taste was similar to bread.

Once more, they decided to stop for a few days, to both rest and gather some supply.

The morning after their arrival, while picking up berries, a movement in the sky attracted Nerwen’s gaze; it was too far even for her sharp sight to make out what kind of bird it was, but she didn’t hesitate and sent a call: a view from above could be useful to decide in which direction proceed, if in the same they had gone so far or change.

The bird was very uncertain and hesitated for a long time before deciding to come near, proving to be a male great bustard with long feet. Mistrustful, he kept flying as he questioned who had called him:

**Who are you? And why do I understand you?**

*I’m the Daughter of the Sunset*, Nerwen introduced herself, even if she doubted that, in this strange place where she, Túdhin and Pallando had landed, this title would have any meaning; indeed, the bustard showed no sign he had recognised the name.

**How is it that you can talk to me?** he insisted.

*It’s a skill I have*, the Istar explained concisely, *I’ve got no intention to harm you, only to ask for your help, if you can*, she assured him.

**What do you want?** the bustard enquired.

**Where I can find other beings like me?**

The bird looked like pondering for some time.
Sometimes I see them, he revealed at length, *but not very near this place.*

*In which direction?* Nerwen asked, hopeful. As an answer, she got a sense of pressure behind her. As she was looking westward, it meant east. To know for sure, she pointed in that direction:

*This way?*

*Exactly,* the bustard confirmed.

*How far?* the Aini enquired.

*For me, it would be from the first light to the last, twice,* the answer was. After a moment of perplexity, Nerwen guessed it meant two days. Medium speed of a bustard taken into account, they would need twice as long on foot.

*Thank you, my winged friend,* she told him, *You've been very helpful.*

*You're welcome,* the bird replied; after one last sweep above Nerwen’s head, he flew away in the direction he was going to before she called him.

The Maia returned to Pallando, who was grilling the fruits tasting like bread they had plucked the day before; she placed down the berries and reported him what she had learned from the bustard.

“Let us hope they are not hostile,” the Wizard said, wary, “Before showing ourselves, we will better study them.”

“No doubt,” Nerwen agreed, “Better be cautious, always.”

Túdhin arrived at this moment with a big lizard in his fangs; since he had caught the antelope, each time he succeeded in hunting, he brought always something to Nerwen and Pallando. Hence, today they lunched with roasted reptile, which tender pale meat tasted like chicken.

OOO

“Twelve years, Aryon… Are you still convinced they’ll return?” Derva asked. They were sitting at lunch in the prince’s house, a wooden hut divided in three rooms: the kitchen, which acted also as living room, the bedchamber and the bathroom.

Each time Aryon met Nerwen in Olorendor, he reported to the ex-commander of the royal guards that she and Pallando were well; he had also explained her the time difference between Middle-earth and the place they were.

“I have no doubts about this,” the prince stated, placing down the spoon with which he was eating the spelt and beans soup, “Soon they should meet someone who could tell them where they are and therefore how to come back here.”

“Their soon could mean several years for us,” the woman commented, in a sad tone; slowly but inexorably, the signs of time were leaving traces on her: the wrinkles around her eyes had thickened and in her blond mane the white hairs had become more and more numerous, “At this rate, maybe I’ll not be able to see my king again…”

To this, Aryon had no answer, so he stayed silent. He looked outside the window, closed by a
simple transparent glass. In those years, the village had grown to become the most important town in the area. There were mills, forges, a carpenter’s shop, potters, weavers, leather shops, candlestick makers, pot makers, bakers, even a small inn.

“I hope we’ll be able to see them earlier than we expect, Derva,” he murmured. The woman pressed her lips together, sceptic, but then she nodded: after all, one could never know.

OOO

On the third day since they had resumed their march, they walked past a formation of red-orange sandstone.

There’s water! Túdhin informed them, excited, and leaped running forward. In a not far spot, the sandy ground appeared darker, and it was from there that the smell of water came; thinking it was beyond this point, he passed in the middle of it, but after a few metres, he began to sink. He uttered a startled yelp and tried to move faster, but all he got was sinking even more.

Nerwen saw what was happening and rushed to his aid, but was careful not to place foot on the darker area.

“Freeze!” she shouted, “It’s quicksand! The more you squirm, the sooner you go down!”

Túdhin fought his instinct, which induced him to wriggle hard in the attempt to break free; panting, he stilled. Nerwen perceived clearly his terror and tried to send him a reassuring feeling.

“How can we pull him out?” Pallando asked, concerned; he was getting fond of the wolf and was worried about him.

“We’d need a rope,” Nerwen pondered, “but we’ve got none... we have to find a long enough branch.”

“But Túdhin will not be able to catch it...” the Wizard objected.

“Nor he’ll have any need to,” the Aini replied, “You’ll hold the branch, I’ll enter the quicksand clutching it and drag Túdhin out.”

Pallando looked at her.

“You cannot know how deep it is,” he pointed out, “I am taller than you: I will go,” he lifted his hand to prevent her protesting. “I am stronger than a Man of my apparent age, surely enough to drag the wolf for a short way.”

Nerwen shut up: the Wizard was right, if the hollow containing the quicksand was deeper than 1,40 metres, she would be trapped to her neck, with no possibility to use her arms to seize Túdhin.

“Alright,” she simply said.

They searched in the vicinity for a branch long and strong enough for their purpose, then Pallando disrobed – it was useless staining his clothes, as much as being modest – and stepped into the quicksand. He immediately sank for about thirty centimetres, then more and more whilst he went on step by step, but luckily, when he reached Túdhin, it didn’t go beyond his waist. When he
arrived next to the wolf, following the instructions Nerwen had given to both, the Wizard freed Túdhin’s front legs from the mud, then he lifted him slowly until he was resting on his shoulder. At this point, he turned and, keeping Túdhin in place with one hand, he grasped again the branch with the other hand; slowly, he began to walk back, as Nerwen helped him, pulling the branch as he was coming.

At last, Pallando reached the edge of the quicksand and placed Túdhin on the solid ground; the wolf jumped immediately away to make room for him and the Wizard hoisted himself out with Nerwen’s help. He was visibly tired.

“Stay here,” the Aini exhorted him, “If I find water, you can wash yourself, otherwise you’ll have to wait for the mud to dry and then shake it off as best as you can.”

“I thought about it,” Pallando grumbled, pushing back his soiled hair: he didn’t go so far to immerse them in the quicksand, but the wolf’s smeared fur had got them dirty.

The Aini had no luck: there was no trace of springs, and apparently, the only water that Túdhin had smelled was that of the quicksand hallow. Both the Wizard and the wolf had therefore to wait for the slime to dry before getting rid of it as best as possible, the former rubbing his skin with his hands, the latter shaking it vigorously off.

For that day, they didn’t go on; according to their plans, the following day or at the most the one after it, they would reach an inhabited place, where they could find water, food and shelter. This, of course, presuming that there were no hostile beings; but they didn’t have much of a choice. Or rather, they had none.

Author’s corner:

The mysterious dimension where Nerwen and Pallando have been catapulted into is not realistic: actually it has similarities with the Sahara desert, the Sonora desert and the savannah, with plants and animals of all three locations; besides, it doesn’t possess the torrid climate of these territories.

“Vegetable” trivia: the bottle-gourd (lagenaria siceraria) is called also pilgrim’s bottle; suitably emptied and dried, it is used by the Saharan peoples to carry water. While desert pear is an alternative name for prickly pear.

I wish to thank my readers from the bottom of my heart; who began reading from the very first appearance of this fan fiction, had any idea it would turn out so long? Come on, tell me... I’m curious! As I already said, I didn’t expect it, not so much; but I’m happy that my stay in the Tolkienverse is lasting on and on! J

Lady Angel
Aryon Morvacor walked along the crowded street without really seeing where he was going.

That day marked 28 years. So many had passed, since that accursed day when Nerwen and Pallando had vanished without a trace. Many things had changed, in this place, in the almost three decades that had gone by.

The village, born from the military camp that settled there after the disappearance of the king and the Istar, had grown until it had reached, to the present day, 700 inhabitants; they had called it Tarsad, meaning *wait*, a proper name.

In the area once depopulated, they had built a number of settlements, some on the old ones, which had been abandoned for centuries, other in different places; but Tarsad was the largest one. The creation of this cluster had been unforeseen and sometimes Aryon would prefer solitude, but he had to admit that, instead, most of the time it was a good thing having company.

Often, the inhabitants of Tarsad turned to the prince to ask his opinion; there were a Burgomaster and a Council of six people who assisted him, elected every five years, but instinctively they relied on him and his vast life experience. Several times, he was offered to become himself the Burgomaster, with the prospect of being continuously re-elected, but he had always refused; however, if somebody would ask any inhabitant of Tarsad who was their leader, they would name him, rather than the Burgomaster.

After a while, the need was felt for setting up a small guard corps to maintain order; the Yòrvar were generally quiet people, but sometimes somebody got drunk and began to make a din, or started a fight, or small thefts occurred or arguments between neighbours; given his competence with weaponry, they had asked Aryon to train these guards and to become their commander; as he
had anyway the need to make a living, because sooner or later his money supply would end, the prince accepted. Hence, even if in a much lesser form, he had found himself having almost the same duties as he once had performed, when he was the First Sword of the High Sovereign of the Six Tribes of the Avari.

Fifteen years after Nerwen’s and Pallando’s disappearance, Allakos had died of old age; Aryon had allowed him coupling several times and from his descent he had retained one foal, Riltur, now grown up and looking very alike to his parent, shiny black like him even if his front legs were decorated with a kind of short white socks.

Six years later also Thalion, the faithful packhorse, had died. Now remained only Thilgiloth, Nerwen stunningly beautiful mare, who didn’t seem to age, which reinforced in Aryon the certainty that she was much more than a horse, even if of the half-mythical race of the mearas. She refused any rider, even him, even if she escorted him spontaneously nearly always, when he took a ride in the surroundings to keep in shape Allakos and now Riltur.

Derva was by now an old woman well into her sixties; she had stayed in Tarsad, waiting for the return of her king and of Aryon’s wife who disappeared with him, but she had almost given up the hope to see them again before her death. At least, through Aryon and his intermittent link with Nerwen in that strange Land of Dreams, she knew they were alive and well, and this comforted her, or at least the prince thought so.

Aryon arrived home. Initially, it had been a simple hut of nailed wood planks, then with the growing of the village, it had been replaced by a real house of plastered bricks, as they used to have in Yòrvarem. It was roomy enough, as he lived in there alone, with a kitchen, a living room, a sitting room, a bathroom and a bedchamber. It was comfortable, but very simply furnished; the only luxuries were the many books he collected and the lute, an instrument he played since his youth. He had left his in Bârlyth when he had gone looking for Nerwen and then, during their journeys, he never had the chance to use one, but now that he was stuck here for who knows how much time, after about 10 years he bought a new one. He didn’t play it very often, and when he did, it was always melancholic music.

He missed Nerwen horribly. His wife… they were married for not even two months, when she disappeared. They kept meeting in Olorendor; for her, it was every night, for him instead much more time passed, and as the years went by, the intervals grew increasingly longer. Last time, she told him she and Pallando and Túdhin were headed for some inhabited settlement, where they planned to enter after having studied it a little so to be sure, as much as possible, that the population was not hostile; but since then, already eight years had passed.

When he entered into the house, he found Kerensa, his handmaid, occupied in folding laundry. She was a young woman, very beautiful, with strawberry blond hair and intense green eyes; she kept his house clean and was a fine cook, too.

“Welcome back, Lord Aryon,” she greeted him, placing down the towel she was folding to walk to him and help him getting off his cloak, “Dinner’s almost ready,” she added as she hanged the garment next to the door, “I prepared some roasted chicken.”

“Thank you, Kerensa,” he answered absent-mindedly, “I go and rest a little, in the meantime.”

He went to his chamber, where he took off his boots and stripped to the waist, wanting to change his shirt and slip into comfortable house-shoes.

His gaze fell on the empty bed.
He was overwhelmed with memories of the beds he had shared with Nerwen, from the simple blanket on which they had made love the first time to the luxury thalamus offered to them in Pallando’s palace. An immense longing caught him, both of heart and body, and he felt an unbearable oppression on his chest. He swayed and dropped on the bed, where he curled up, spasmodically clawing the blanket in an attempt to restrain himself from shouting.

Oh Nerwen… my beloved wife, my sweet Istar… my heart… where are you?? he screamed in his mind. He clenched his eyelids, but couldn’t stop the tears.

He hadn’t noticed a lament had escaped him; Kerensa, who was passing in front of the door of his bedchamber after putting away the laundry, heard him and cracked the door open, alarmed; she knew her master’s sorrow – everyone knew, in Tarsad – and she was deeply sorry, because she was in love with him, sincerely, even if she was aware that she had no hope. It wasn’t the first time she caught him crying; he did it only when he thought nobody could see him, but she went around the house and her eyes were always on him to anticipate his wishes. Each time, her heart broke; tonight, she decided to do something, because she could bear it no more.

The room was semi-dark, as night had fallen by now and the only light came from the full moon entering through the window and falling on the curled shape; Kerensa entered soundlessly and approached the bed, behind his back. She quickly undid the strings on her corset and let the dress slip down her body, then the underlying camisole followed; she kicked away her shoes and finally, naked, she laid down behind Aryon, embracing him.

He was startled and moved to turn, but Kerensa kept him still.

“No… don’t move…” she whispered in his ear, “Keep your eyes closed… pretend I’m her…”

Aryon uttered a sort of lament; he shuddered in her arms, but didn’t move.

“Yes, this way,” she encouraged him, under her breath, “I’m your Nerwen… I’m here…”

She caressed him with feather-light fingers, brushing his chest, then she slipped down on his abdomen, fondling the small hollow of his belly-button, and even lower, on his manhood. She heard him groan and sigh; another tremor shook him. She drew back, allowing him to lay flat; she saw he had his eyes closed, as she had suggested him. She bent over him and placed her lips on his, kissing him gently. With a gasp, Aryon took her into his arms; taking one hand to her nape, he made her press her mouth harder on his. Kerensa parted her lips, inviting him to deepen his kiss, and he did, frantically, with a kind of desperation that tightened her throat. She knew he wasn’t kissing her, but his lost wife, and yet she was willing to act as her for him, because she truly loved him.
Groaning, Aryon reversed their positions and began to rain kisses on her face, then he descended on her neck. Kerensa arched her body, sighing in pleasure as she felt his hands running all over her, on her breasts, her tummy, her hips.

For long, dizzying moments, Aryon let himself believe that Nerwen was there, in his arms; but the scent was not hers, the shape of the body was not hers, the taste of the kisses was not hers… With a sob, he stopped and opened his eyes.

“I can’t,” he whispered, “Forgive me, Kerensa, I can’t.”

She looked at him, confused; she thought he was hesitating because he thought he was taking advantage of her and reassured him:

“Don’t worry… I’m fine if I can ease your sorrow even for a short time…”

Aryon closed his eyes again; the moment of confusion was over and now he knew exactly what the right thing to do was. Or the wrong.

“No, Kerensa,” he said in a low voice, looking at her again, “I thank you deeply for your generosity, but simply I cannot. If Nerwen was dead, it’d be different; but she’s alive, and sooner or later she’ll come back to me. This is sure as spring follows winter,” he saw that she was distressed, on the verge of weeping, “Don’t you think you’re not desirable, Kerensa,” he added gently, “You’re gorgeous and any man would be glad to take what you’re offering to me…”

“So why don’t you do it?” she asked, her voice cracked. He caressed her cheek in a kind gesture, but devoid of any erotic implication.

“Because I love Nerwen too much to want another woman,” he answered simply. Kerensa fought her tears.

“Nonetheless, your body tells differently,” she pointed out in a low voice. Actually, the bulge in his groin was apparent; but he shook his head.

“I told you, you’re a desirable woman, and therefore my body reacts automatically,” he explained, “But my heart doesn’t agree. I would wrong you, her and myself,” he drew back, “Please, now get dressed and leave me,” he concluded, with all the grace he was capable to muster.

Slowly, Kerensa got off the bed and picked up her clothes; as she exited, Aryon told her softly:

“If you don’t want to stay at my service any more, I’ll understand.”

She spun around, clutching her garments to her chest, her cheeks streaked with tears:

“Are you turning me out, my lord?”

“No! No, of course not… but if after what happened, you’re too uncomfortable with me, please feel free to go.”

She lowered her eyes; after a long moment, she nodded, showing she got it. If he would have humiliated her, then she would surely leave him; but instead he had been kind. Sometimes he was a little curt, or standoffish, but never impolite. She truly loved him; she couldn’t resent him if he loved the same way his wife. After all, she loved him even for this. Maybe, one day she would get tired of loving someone who couldn’t reciprocate her, and she would leave; but, until then, she would stay.
Hidden behind a rise in the ground, Nerwen and Pallando were watching the small lake stretching in front of them. In the last two days, the landscape had quickly changed: vegetation had become increasingly more lush and green, as the desert gave way to prairie, then to rich and fertile soil, which in turn had become well-farmed fields that looked in the period of winter rest, being well tended but bare and deserted. However, the temperature didn’t suggest it was wintertime; unless, of course, summer was torrid. The farmhouses they saw, which they prudently approached to study them, looked abandoned, too, but were perfect, showing this was a recent condition, or just a temporary one.

At the centre of the lake stood a small isle, almost entirely covered with a fortified town, looking forbidding. A number of white boats were sailing lazily in the placid waters, in all likelihood occupied with fishery or with freight and passengers transport from and to the castle.

A pier was visible, not far from where they stood, and it seemed there were more of them a little farther.

“What do you think?” Pallando asked Nerwen.

“I don’t know,” she answered, perplexed, “Those formidable bastions and the impregnable position in which the fortress has been built, suggest a not exactly peaceful situation; but on the other hand, it could have been belligerent centuries ago and now it’s instead pacific.”

The Blue Wizard looked around:

“The country is well tended,” he considered, “and the scattered farms too, which makes me think it is a peaceful place. The absence of workers in the fields can be explained by the fact that, perhaps, this is their wintertime and the farmers use to spend it in the castle on the island.”
Nerwen nodded: it was a plausible explanation. She didn’t feel completely reassured, but she saw no valid reasons to be suspicious. Besides, they couldn’t go on forever wandering around without knowing where they were; moreover, they had to find a way to go back home. With a twinge in her chest, she thought of Aryon: the night before, he had told her that eight years had passed since the previous time, even if for her it had been just 24 hours. It looked like the time gap between the two places was growing increasingly.

“Let’s approach openly,” she suggested, “showing immediately we have nothing to hide. Hopefully this will make the inhabitants of the island well-disposed toward us…”

They stood up and, with Túdhin closely following them, they headed for the lakeshore and the wharf; they walked it until the far end and prepared for a patient wait, counting on the fact that there were surely some sentinels on the castle bastions.

“While we wait, better we think what to say,” Pallando observed pensively, “They will question us for sure, wanting to know who we are, where we come from, what we are doing here…”

“You’re right,” Nerwen agreed, “We certainly cannot tell them we arrived here because of a spell in Black Speech… They could possibly not believe us. And mayhap they don’t know Middle-earth…”

Together, they elaborated a backstory that they thought convincing.

Not much later, they saw a boat getting off one of the island jetties, raising a square sail with a symbol in it and heading for them. At half the distance, Nerwen made out the details of the symbol and started in surprise: it was a large black bow, which reminded her of the image carved on the door of Pallando’s office, which reproduced Oromë’s bow. It could of course be just a coincidence, but nonetheless, she felt confused.

The small vessel approached the quay; ropes were thrown around the bollards, docking the boat. The sailors hadn’t even finished the job, that a couple of soldiers jumped on the pier and marched toward the two who waited; their attitude was rather intimidating and Nerwen tensed, expecting trouble. Sensing the newcomers’ aggressiveness, Túdhin growled softly, preparing to react to a possible attack, but the Istar commanded him not to move without her consent.

“Who are ye, and what are ye doin’ in Qos?” the shorter of the two questioned them curtly, speaking in perfect Common Speech, even if with a strongly slurred accent. The two Istari felt relieved, because this way there would be no problem in communicating, even if the use of this idiom in a place that wasn’t Middle-earth and not even Arda was truly inexplicable.

“We are wayfarer and got lost in the wastelands beyond your beautiful region,” the Wizard answered in a firm tone, respectful but not showing any uneasiness, “My name is Pallando, and this in my daughter Nerwen. We seek help to return home.”

“Where do ye come from? And what were ye doin’ in the Wilds? Don’t ye know it’s unsafe crossin’ them?”

The soldier’s pressing questions disturbed Nerwen, but Pallando didn’t lose his temper.

“We come from a very distant place, but I have no doubt that, as a surely cultured man you look, you know the name of our land, Yòrvarem, located east of the Red Mountains on the shores of the Eastern Ocean, north of the Great Forest and south of the Green Prairies.”

All those names confused the soldier, who blinked hard trying not only to figure them out, but also
to memorize them. The aim had been giving him a load of information without actually giving none, so that he would possibly forget about the other questions he surely wanted to ask them.

He succeeded: Pallando had hinted to the soldier’s supposed culture, and at this point, the latter didn’t want to look ignorant.

“I understand,” he said, nodding and pretending he knew the places the old man in front of him had named, “it’s really very far from here... If yer intentions are peaceful, ye won’t have trouble; but ye must come to the castle to be questioned by our lord, King Alatar.”

Unintentionally, Nerwen’s eyes widened and Pallando blinked in surprise; this didn’t go unnoticed by the soldier, who glared at them suspiciously.

“We... know the name of your lord by reputation,” the Aini hastened to explain. By all the Valar, they had found the other Blue Wizard!

OOO

One hour later, they were inside the castle, awaiting for an audience. On the way there, at first by boat – which had provoked Túdhin’s bad mood as much as the Riverpearl – and later walking through the streets of the town, which was an integral part of the manor, and finally along the palace corridors, Nerwen and Pallando didn’t feel like talking freely in front of the soldiers who were escorting them; for sure, none of them knew what to think about this shocking finding. The main question was how Alatar had arrived here; that he had become the lord of these people was an extraordinary parallel with Pallando, but it wasn’t odd in itself, considering that, because of wisdom and powers, many could find desirable to be ruled by a person like him.

Soon after they introduced them in a large hall, rich tapestries covering its walls; the tall and narrow windows let the light of the day in and lighted a floor of grey marble with light blue streaks. Elegant twisted columns stood in two parallel rows on the long side of the hall, drawing the gaze to the end of it, where on a dais of three steps stood a golden throne; on it a man was sitting, with long hair, as white as his beard, wearing a velvet robe the colour of lapis lazuli. Approaching him, Nerwen noticed a strong resemblance to Pallando, which went beyond the colour of beard and hair and the fact they wore clothes of similar shape and colour.

When they reached the foot of the throne, the soldiers who had escorted them here stopped them; they saluted their lord, then lined up two steps back, their eyes staring at the visitors and their hands on the hilt of their swords. It was apparent they wouldn’t allow Alatar taking risks with these strangers.

Pallando and Nerwen curtseyed, as it was convenient in front of the lord of this place, while the wolf watched at him intently.

This one is bright as much as you and Pallando, he announced. Nerwen sent him an approving sensation: she had expected it, as he was an Istar.

Alatar, who had their names announced, watched at them carefully, as if wanting to make sure they really were who they said. Then he rose and descended the steps, stopping in front of Pallando; they were of the same height and built and, again, their noticeable resemblance struck Nerwen: they could be mistaken for siblings. The major difference was that Alatar had grey eyes, while
Pallando’s were blue.

“It’s really you, my old friend.” Alatar said, embracing him in the formal manner customary in Valinor and among the Eldar of Middle-earth, too.

Pallando returned his embrace, but his amnesia prevented him feeling a true joy in seeing again his ancient friend; a part of him, deep in his soul, was happy, but it was something so remote, it bore not much significance. Alatar noticed there was something strange and his expression became confused.

Nerwen intervened:

“Do you remember me as well, Alatar?”

The Wizard turned toward her, releasing Pallando.

“Nerwen Laiheri,” he announced, then the tilted his head to the side as if looking better at her, “You are… different.”

“Yes: now I’m Nerwen the Green,” the Aini explained briefly. Alatar grasped what this title implied and nodded.

“Welcome to Qos,” he said to both, “They told me you got lost in the Wilds,” he added, “and I see you are tired and worn out. Let me take care of you as a good host.”

He clapped his hands and from behind one column emerged a tall and thin woman, whose brownish hair was tied up in a bun at the top of her head; she had an austere and efficient air.

“Cariel, I trust you with these two old friend of mine,” Alatar told her, “Make sure that they are accommodated comfortably and have all they may need.”

The woman curtsied stiffly and then signalled Nerwen and Pallando to follow her.

“We’ll talk tomorrow,” Alatar said, politely dismissing them, “Now think about freshen up, have some food and drink, and rest.”

They took their leave and followed Cariel, who led them to another wing of the palace.

“Ye can take a bath as yer chambers will be readied,” the woman said, whom they by now knew being the castle Superintendent, “and I’ll fetch ye some clean clothes.”

It was a polite way to tell them they were dirty and shabby, but after all, they came from six days in the Wilds and they couldn’t certainly deny the evidence.

“Thank you,” Nerwen said, “I’d wish a bath for our dog, too, but I’ll take care personally of it.”

“No need for it, my lady, I can give the task to one of the servants…”

“Better not, Túdhin allows only me to get near him enough to wash him.”

“As ye wish,” Cariel nodded, opening a door, “This and the following are yer chambers. Get comfortable: in a few minutes they’ll arrive with hot water for your baths.”

It was a relief for both of them, being able to finally wash and change, after so many days of complete lack of water except for drinking. The clothes they received were comfortable, even if not particularly elegant; but Nerwen thought, with a hint of humour, that even a jute sack would do, as
After she had had her bath, the servants came back and emptied the tub, then filled it again to allow Nerwen washing Túdhin, too. The wolf glared distrustingly at the large copper container, full of just lukewarm water.

_Must I actually..._? he asked. His idea of a bath was a dive in a river or in a pool, and an afterward shake.

“I’d say do, old friend,” Nerwen affirmed. The wolf was full of dust and soil since his misadventure with the quicksand, which had irritated the skin under his coat, and it was much better if she could assist him with a brush. She sent him these thoughts and he understood, therefore he made a virtue of a necessity and complied. As he couldn’t jump into the tub without flooding the room, he let his two-legged friend pick him up and place him into it, and stayed still in a very disciplined way as she soaked, soaped and then softly brushed him; finally, Nerwen rinsed him and dried him with some towels, wrapped him with a dry one and left him out the tub, placing him on the floor. At this point, the wolf shook himself, spurt out a myriad of tiny droplets, but without big damage, as the towels had absorbed the most of the wetness.

*I feel better indeed,* he admitted, to the Istar’s satisfaction.

Later, the servants brought dinner for her and Pallando; they had it in his chamber, so as being able to talk, while Túdhin chew on some fleshy bones.

“It’s incredible,” Nerwen commented, “Everyone thought you and Alatar were lost forever, and instead at first I found you, and now we run into your friend. And all this, in just a few weeks.”

“I do not know what to think,” Pallando declared, “because I do not know the circumstances in which Alatar and I parted, or why I ended up in that cave and he instead here. Over 1800 years went by since Kalar found and saved me. I do not know what happened that I was so seriously wounded to be almost dead… mayhap Alatar knows and tomorrow we will find out.”

“He too, like you, became a lord of Men,” Nerwen considered, “Or at least, of people who _resemble_ Men. However, I’m not surprised: an unchanging monarch is certainly a reassuring reference point. Provided that this monarch is capable and liked, of course, as you are in Yôrvarem.”

“It seems Alatar is like that, too,” Pallando observed. Nerwen nodded, agreeing.

OOO

When she went to sleep, as every night since they passed through the Dark Portal, Nerwen travelled to Olorendor, where she found Aryon already waiting for her. He looked pale and miserable and her heart sank: how much time had pass, for him, since last time? She realised it had been a long time from the way he hugged her, nearly crushing her into his arms.

“I miss you terribly…” he whispered, before kissing her desperately; after a number of endless kisses, he drew back to look at her, “How are you, sweetheart? Are you all right?”

“Yes, we reached an inhabited place – a castle on an island in the middle of a lake – and we received a warm welcome,” the Maia reassured him, “Besides, we had the enormous surprise to
find Pallando’s ancient friend, Alatar, the other Blue Wizard.”

“Good!” Aryon cried, relieved, “Among the three of you Istari, you will surely find a way to come back, won’t you?”

“I hope so: if Alatar, too, has been trapped in this strange dimension, mayhap not even he knows how to return; but putting together our capabilities, it’s surely possible to find a solution… And you? How are you…?”

“Not well, without you… but I resist, knowing you’re alive and will come back, sooner or later.”

“Are you still the captain of the Tarsad guards?”

“Yes… and now I live in a real house, too big for me alone. I even have a maid, Kerensa, taking care of me. She’s a fine cook.”

Nerwen suddenly clung to him. His last sentence had pierced her through like a stab, because it could be interpreted in an anything but innocent way; that is, the named maid could take care of Aryon not only in the kitchen, but also in the bedchamber. If this was the case, she didn’t want to know; anyway, she didn’t feel like blaming her husband: after all, between one time and the other they met in the Dreamland, for him many years passed. She couldn’t demand his absolute physical faithfulness; moreover, sentimental faithfulness is infinitely more important, and she had no doubt about his faithfulness in this.

Unaware of his wife’s sudden anguish, Aryon used his willpower to transform the surroundings into his bedchamber in Tarsad, the way one could do in Olorendor.

“It’s here where I sleep,” he explained her, “The bed is so empty, without you… If you now fill it, I will take this memory until our next meeting…”

This sentence revealed to Nerwen that, even if this Kerensa was maybe consoling him, it didn’t take place here.

“Come,” she invited him therefore, leading him to the bed, “Let’s not waste any minute of the time we can be together…”

OOO

The morning after, Nerwen called for breakfast; the servant who fetched it informed her that Alatar wished to see her and Pallando, as soon as they would be done.

Later, they were escorted to the Blue Wizard’s private parlour; as usual, Túdhin trotted closely behind them. They were introduced with no great formalities and Alatar invited them to take a seat with him.

“Are your chambers to your liking?” he politely enquired; at the positive reply of the two of them, he went on, “You will certainly wonder how I came here. The answer is very simple: surely in the same way you arrived here. Pallando and I were in a cave with an inscription in Black Speech on the bottom wall, and when I read it aloud, a passageway opened and swallowed me. I didn’t think the spell could be activated just by reading it, because usually, as you know well, to prevent an inappropriate use, it must come with precise movements known only by its creator…” he paused to
shake his head, still perplexed, “Mayhap who created it was too much in a hurry and didn’t protect it adequately. Anyway, it’s what happened to you, too, isn’t it?”

“Precisely,” Pallando confirmed, “But I must tell you something, Alatar: I remember nothing about what happened in that cave, or about my life previous that moment. Hence, I ask you to tell us what exactly occurred.”

Alatar looked at him in surprise:

“You remember nothing? Therefore… you do not remember even me, our friendship, our shared past in Aman?”

“Nothing,” Pallando confirmed, somberly, “It was Nerwen who told me of your name and in broad terms about our history as Maiar in Oromë’s service, entrusted with the mission to go to Middle-earth as Istari called the Blue Wizards, our assignment being going to the East and organise the resistance against Sauron’s power… but, I repeat, I do not remember anything of all this. Hence, I do not know how it happened, or why, that you ended up here and I did not.”

At this point, Alatar looked at Nerwen, intrigued.

“If I do not remember wrong, you are a follower of Yavanna Kementári,” he considered, “but you were not part of the Istari group…”

“No, indeed,” she confirmed, “I became an Istar only a few years ago, with the task to find the Onodrim, that’s the reason I came to Middle-earth; now I’m looking for their females, and this brought me beyond the Orocarini and to Yörvarem, where I found Pallando. You were both reported missing and therefore it was a huge surprise, to me, finding first Pallando and now you, too. Tell us, then: how did you come here?”

“Pallando and I were exploring that cave,” Alatar began, “from which we felt radiating a disquieting power, which for some time alarmed the local residents. We found these inscriptions and I read them incautiously aloud. In the rock wall, a cleft opened, from which emerged tentacles of darkness that wrapped around me. I fought furiously against them, but I wasn’t able to break free. Pallando was slightly farther; I saw him fight, but then he vanished from my sight and I fainted. When I regained consciousness, I was at the root of a rocky wall, tall and impassable, and for this reason I set off in the opposite direction until I came across these people, who welcomed me friendly. I reciprocated them as best as I could, making my knowledge available to them. In a few years they elected me as their lord.”

Pallando watched him, thoughtfully.

“They found me near death,” he considered, “It must have been a terrible fight… even if I emerged victorious, I got almost killed. And it cost me my memory, mayhap because I hit my head, or because that was the price to pay to win… I am afraid we will never know,” he concluded with a resigned sigh, “In any case, when I activated the Dark Portal – no more and no less than you did – both me and Nerwen were defeated,” he added, casting her a quick glance. She nodded.

“How long have you been here, exactly?” Nerwen asked Alatar, point-blank. He looked at her, surprised because the question sounded odd to him:

“Almost 15 years,” he answered anyway, “Why do you ask me?”

“This place,” the Maia explained, “wherever it may be, must be located outside Arda: time progresses differently.”
“There is nothing outside Arda!” Alatar countered lively.

“Eä is not all which exists,” Nerwen reminded him, “Ilúvatar alone knows what there is beyond.”

The Blue Wizard pressed his lips together, vaguely annoyed, but what the Aini had affirmed was undoubtedly true. Therefore, he nodded curtly and then changed subject:

“Time progresses differently, you say: how much passed in Arda, then?”

“Over 1800 years,” Pallando revealed. Alatar paled:

“And in the meantime, what had Sauron done?” he asked, worried.

“He didn’t succeed in becoming the master of Middle-earth, yet,” Nerwen reassured him, “So far, the White Council – composed of the other Istari and the highest lords among the Elves – has succeeded in hindering him. However, they haven’t defeated him definitively: his threat still exists and, even if it looks remote, we mustn’t stop keeping him under surveillance.”

“I agree,” Alatar nodded, “As long as Sauron lives, he will always be a peril for the free peoples of Middle-earth, and our assignment to prevent him conquering the world still stands. We must find a way to return… I tried, in these years, even going back to the place – I assume it is the same where you found yourselves – where I arrived after having unwillingly gone through the Dark Portal, but I was not able to discover how to do it.”

“Now there are three of us,” Pallando observed, “Even if my memory is dimmed, I still keep my power. Joining our powers, we will find a way.”


OOO

Later, when the other two Istari had returned in their chambers, Alatar headed for his office, issuing orders at to be not bothered for any reason whatsoever; then he locked himself in. His servants didn’t marvel at this, because he did it rather often; it wasn’t for them questioning their lord’s activities.

Alatar stood in front of a bookshelf and made a gracious movement with his hand, murmuring a word of power; the piece of furniture slid aside for about one metre, revealing a narrow passage in the wall at the back of it, showing a winding staircase; quickly, Alatar slipped through the passage and, from a niche carved into the wall, he removed a lamp, which he lighted magically. Then he got the bookshelf back into its original place, hiding the access to the secret passage, and began descending the narrow staircase.

He arrived at his destination, located in the rocky heart of the island; it was a large circular room with a vaulted ceiling, excavated with magical arts and seemingly completely bare; in the exact centre stood a kind of well with no parapet, from which came a reddish light, similar to fire, but darker. A dull sound was to be heard, on a very low frequency, more a vibration than a sound.

Alatar placed the lamp in a niche next to the entrance from which he had arrived and lighted other three lanterns, positioned in equidistant niches along the perimeter of the room, then he approached the pit.

“Khorakûn, I summon you!” he cried in Black Speech. Actually, there was no need to use his
voice, as he was in mental contact with the creature he was calling for.

The intensity of the rumble increased, as well as the light. Slowly, a shadow emerged from the pit; its shape vaguely human, he was twice the size of Alatar.

“Tell me, Master,” the apparition said in a very deep and echoing voice.

“I am here to remind you of the promise you made me,” Alatar said.

“Granting you enough power to overcome Sauron and banish him from the world once and for all,” the apparition stated, “but as you know, to do it I need another one of your kind.”

“From the Other Side, two have arrived,” the Blue Wizard announced in a triumphant tone, “If you use both of them, the power you will bestow me with will be doubled?”

The demon stayed silent, pondering the news; he studied Alatar, who was waiting for his answer looking at him unafraid. Fool, he thought, if you would truly know who I am and what I can do, you would be terrified, and a lot.

He let Alatar think he was a minor demon, but actually, he was a Balrog; and not just any one of them, but one of the most powerful. This ancient spirit, seduced and corrupted along with other ones by Melkor Morgoth when the world was young, was imprisoned in this dimension since the time of the fall of Utumno, the first fortress of the Dark Lord, which Valar and Maiar had destroyed after a siege that had lasted many a year and had cost great loss. At the end of that terrible war, the Valar had seized the Enemy and annihilated all of his allies, or so they had believed: some of them had instead been able to escape. Khorakûn had fled creating a Dark Portal that would take him far away over the Iron Mountains; but, because of the rush, the spell didn’t work perfectly and had brought him instead here – anywhere this here might be. Khorakûn couldn’t go back through the same Dark Portal because, as it had to serve just as an escape route, he had created it one way; therefore, he tried to create another one, but he had found out that here his power had dramatically decreased and wasn’t enough to forge another passageway. He began to wander around, until he met living beings similar to Men; hence, he cloaked himself in their looks and mingled with them. As he fed on negative emotions like hatred, rage, fear, he fomented wars among them, leading them to hunger and despair, beginning slowly to regain his strength; but soon after this Blue Wizard appeared, through the same Dark Portal that, because of the disruptions of the Battle of Powers, was now in a completely different place and time, but still working. Alatar had located him and waged war against him; as Khorakûn at that time was still weak, he managed to defeat and imprison him; out of gratitude, those beings so alike to Eru’s Second Born, proclaimed the Blue Wizard to be their lord.

Khorakûn made that promise to Alatar for his own purposes; he could feed on the Blue Wizard’s power – a very small amount each time, so that he wouldn’t notice, and in between one time and the other he would regain his usual level – until he would restore his full strength. Nevertheless, even his full power joined with Alatar’s wasn’t enough to go back to Arda: he needed another Istar, but even a High Elf would do, to create a passageway that could return them in their world. What the foolish Alatar didn’t know, was that when Khorakûn would assimilate the powers of the intended victim, killing him or her, he wouldn’t transfer them to the Blue Wizard, instead he would use them to seize also his powers, killing him, too, then he would return alone and put himself at the service of Sauron, who was the heir of his ancient liege Melkor Morgoth, as he had learned from Alatar.

But now Alatar had told him that even two other Istari had arrived. This changed things: with the power of three Istari, he, Khorakûn, would become more powerful than Sauron and would take his place.
“I think so, Master,” he answered at length, feigning unsureness, “I never thought about such a chance, but I think I can do it.”

“Very good!” Alatar was pleased, “How do we proceed?”

“Take them both here, make them sleep so they will not be able to resist me and then summon me; I will take care of the rest.”

“Will it be a quick thing?”

“It will require just a few minutes.”

“Fine. I will take them to you as soon as possible. Now go back to your place.”

The shape of shadow bowed and returned sinking into the pit. At this point, Alatar went back to the staircase and began slowly ascending it in the light of the magic lamp. He was pleased: soon he would be able to leave this place that, even if he had been friendly welcomed in it, wasn’t his home; and moreover, he would acquire so much power to be able defeating Sauron, which would make him a hero even greater than Tulkas. Everybody would honour him: Ainur, Eldar and all peoples of Middle-earth, for having freed them definitively from the Dark Enemy’s threat. He would be Alatar the Liberator, whose fame would overtake any other’s in the whole story of Arda. And to prevent the coming of another Sauron, he himself would become the lord of the world, ruling it with an enlightened and magnanimous tyranny. Everyone would adore him.

He was so very convinced that he had the demon in his hold, he didn’t realise his reasoning had just one, fatal flaw: Khorakûn didn’t ask him anything in return of his help…

Author’s corner:

The castle on the island is none other than the magnificent Castello Aragonese in Ischia (Italy).

Even in his great Istar wisdom, Alatar is making an enormous misjudgement, underestimating who he thinks being just a minor demon; and he doesn’t know yet he’s underestimating Nerwen, too...

What will happen? Keep following me… J

Lady Angel
Chapter LI: Into the Balrog’s Lair

After the midday meal, which she and Pallando had in his chamber, Nerwen tried again to contact Yavanna, but in vain. If the time gap between here and Middle-earth wouldn’t be enough, this, too, backed in her the conviction that they were in a place outside Eä. She was able to communicate with her not even through Olorendor, nor with her sister Melian, nor anyone else; if she could meet with Aryon, it was surely because they were joined in the nuptial bond, which had linked their souls in a way that only the death of one of them could break.

Sighing, she got up from her bed and Túdhin, sensing her discouragement, brushed his muzzle against her leg to comfort her. She caressed his head, fondly; at that moment, she heard a soft knock on the door. She invited to come in and a page appeared on the threshold.

“My lord Alatar requires yer presence, Lady Nerwen,” he said, “together with Lord Pallando, if ye please. He waits for ye in his office.”

“Sure,” the Aini answered, “Inform him we’ll arrive immediately.”

Dismissed, the page went away, while Nerwen headed for Pallando’s chamber and knocked on his door. Hearing his invitation, she entered and delivered the message; the Wizard stood up from the armchair next to the window, where he was resting looking at the enjoyable view from there, and together they went to see Alatar, accompanied by the wolf.

“My dear friends,” the Wizard welcomed them, “Come, I want to take you to my secret chamber, where I have been studying the mysteries of this world, so alike and yet so different from ours. Among other things, also the way to go back to Middle-earth. We can start on what I found out so far, and try to find a solution together.”
“Excellent idea,” Pallando approved, “As I said this morning, joining our forces I am sure we will find the way.”

Alatar cast an uncertain glance at Túdhin.

“Mayhap it would be better leaving here your dog: it is a place of great power and I fear he would feel uncomfortable…”

_I don’t leave you, not a chance_, the wolf immediately sent to Nerwen, protective as ever.

“Túdhin is used to be in contact with our power,” Nerwen declared quietly, “He’ll come with us and won’t have any problem, nor will he bother us.”

Alatar nodded, then he crossed over the door to lock it; he already issued orders not to interrupt him, as he always did when he went down to the vault. Then he got to the bookshelf and moved it with the proper word of power, revealing the passage at the back. He took and lighted the lamp, then he signalled his two colleagues, who were looking closely at him, to follow him down the winding staircase.

Suspecting nothing because they had no reason to, Pallando and Nerwen tailed Alatar, followed by Túdhin, and wend down the narrow passage. While they were descending, the Aini began to feel the energy of the place, comparable to Arda’s, but subtly different, as an incontrovertible proof that this place was _not_ Arda. She reached out to it to study it, finding that it was very alike to the one she knew; this didn’t surprise her, because she had been able to communicate with _olvar_ and _kelvar_ of this world: if it was too different, she wouldn’t succeed, because everything in the world – this one as much as Arda – was joined through it.

As their descent progressed, the energy became steadily stronger; at length, they reached an underground hall, where it peaked at very high levels and Nerwen thought that Alatar was right calling it _a place of great power._

Their host put down the lamp and progressed into the hall; he headed for a round opening in the floor, from which emanated a reddish light that Nerwen thought disquieting. As much as disquieting was the dull sound she was hearing, at the edge of her auditory perception. She felt nervousness coming from the wolf and cast him a glance: he had his ears flattened down on his skull in a frightened attitude that was very unusual, in him.

“What is it, this place?” she enquired.

“I built it when I arrived here,” Alatar answered, “because it had to host a creature I came across as soon as I arrived and who came into my service. I introduce it to you, come…”

Nerwen and Pallando got nearer; taking advantage of the moment Alatar turned his back to them to look into the pit, they exchanged a worried glance. They couldn’t imagine any reason to be afraid of something, nonetheless both perceived a looming danger.

Alatar began chanting, in a low voice so the other two wouldn’t figure out the words, weaving a sleep spell; when it was ready, he cast it.

Caught by surprise, the two Istari were hit full force, and with them Túdhin, too. The wolf collapsed immediately, whilst Pallando rolled his eyes and tried to react, but it was too late and he dropped to the floor, slipping into the sorcery sleep.

Nerwen instead wasn’t affected, because Alatar, deceived by her appearance, had though she had a human body like himself and the other Blue Wizard, therefore he had set his spell on this
supposition; he couldn’t know that she, unlike them, even if she had been diminished she was still an Aini, and on her, this kind of magic didn’t work.

For a moment, she thought about attacking Alatar and prepared to unsheathe her Noldorin dagger, but then she decided to trick him instead: she wanted to understand why the Istar was deceiving them. Hence, she dropped next to Pallando and pretended to fall asleep, her face turned toward that odd opening in the floor, one hand just a few centimetres away from her friend, ready to use her thaumaturgy to free him from the sleep spell.

She saw Alatar getting near the edge of the pit.

“Khorakûn, I summon you!” she heard him cry; shocked, she recognised the Black Speech in its original version, Melkorin, which Morgoth had created the dawn of Arda.

The light coming from the opening in the floor intensified, as much as the low sound vibration filling the vaulted chamber; from the pit slowly emerged a large shape of shadow.

Nerwen forced herself to stay still, as she observed the appearing creature through cracked eyelids, not understanding what it was.

Khorakûn glanced at the two collapsed Istari and realised his moment had finally arrived; he shed the cloak of illusion he had wrapped himself in so far, to appear more harmless than he truly was, and grew in stature until he brushed the ceiling and towered over the presents.

Alatar gaped at him: never had he seen him so large and terrible. Abruptly, he realised that he had been deceived, that the demon was something else and not what he had told him to be.

The dark monster abruptly seemed to flare up in flames from the inside; from its eyes and jaw burst incandescent flames, and suddenly Nerwen realised she was in the presence of a Balrog. She touched Pallando and sent him a shot of thaumaturgic energy that freed him of the sleep spell; the Istar awoke with a start and looked at her, bewildered.

“Valaraucol!” Nerwen warned him with a shout, jumping to her feet and unconsciously speaking in Quenya. After Morgoth and Sauron, Balrogs were the most appallingly powerful beings in Arda,
such that had earned the name of monsters of power. For a moment, terror caught her: a Balrog was a formidable foe even for a Maia in full power, while she had been diminished, and even more had been her colleagues; one of them seemed to have conjured the monster and therefore be in league with him, so he was to be considered an enemy. She and Pallando against Alatar and a Balrog: a fight which outcome was very uncertain.

The knowledge Alatar had betrayed them filled her with a terrible wrath; she used it to keep her panic at bay, embracing it and turning it into determination. Even if he could inflict her a dreadful pain, tearing her body in pieces, not even a Balrog was capable of killing her. She straightened herself and suddenly she towered in front of the monster.

“I warn you, Dark Flame of Utumno!” she roared in such an amplified voice, it sounded distorted, “Don’t you dare attacking us or you will be destroyed!”

Khorakûn hesitated: it seemed this one was very powerful and he hadn’t foreseen it. He supposed the two Alatar had spoken about were like him, strong but not to the point it would be impossible for him to subjugate them. He had been one of the most powerful servants of Morgoth, a Maia fallen and transformed but still in full possession of his strength, while Alatar – and hence his colleagues – were Maiar greatly diminished, to the point he didn’t fear even three of them. But now it seemed that one of them was different.

He gathered his power and vomited flames over her.

Nerwen’s power was the power of earth, not fire; through it, she could communicate with the creature inhabiting earth, both plants and animals, and ask for help; but there, in the rocky heart of an isle in the middle of a lake, with her friend wolf knocked out, she had no such possibility. Therefore she drew directly from the local energy – which was of earthly nature – and used it to create a protection that deflected the blaze upward. The flames reached the vaulted ceiling and blackened it.

Still laying on the ground, Pallando was very pale; his dimmed memory didn’t allow him to recognise exactly what was attacking them, but the name Nerwen had shouted – Valarauco – had filled him with horror almost as much as Sauron’s.

He saw the monster throwing flames from its maws to Nerwen, who had suddenly become much taller, and saw the flames deviating upwards as if deflected by an invisible shield. He found again enough cold blood to gather his magic and channelled it in one hand, then he hurled a white-bluish lightning at the monster, which hit him in his chest and sent him staggering backwards; the creature uttered a terrifying howl of pain.
Infuriated, Khorakûn turned to the one who had attacked him. In his hand appeared a flaming javelin, which he flung with blinding speed; but Nerwen, with her still intact Maiarin reflexes, was equally fast: she created a shield and launched it in front of Pallando. The spear broke against the invisible protection.

Alatar had hastily withdrawn. He didn’t know what to think. Obviously, he had expected his demon attacking his two colleagues, as he had to subdue them to seize their powers and then transfer them to him; but he didn’t expect he would reveal a power greater than his own. Another thing that had shocked him, was that his sleep spell had had no effect on Nerwen, who had freed Pallando, too, and was now proving to be much more powerful than him, to the point she has keeping Khorakûn at bay. For a moment, he faced a choice: to ally with his colleagues and revolt against the demon, destroying it forever; or stuck to the original plan and, through the demon, seize their powers to go back to Middle-earth, freeing it from Sauron’s threat and becoming its benevolent tyrant. The awareness he couldn’t justify his actions with his colleagues forced him to follow the plan developed with Khorakûn; hence, he gathered his energy and created a fireball between his hands, and then hurled it against Pallando.

Nerwen’s shield was still in place and nullified the deceitful Wizard’s attack; it dispelled the magic energy sphere, but then collapsed, leaving Pallando vulnerable.

Dazed and incredulous that Alatar was revealing himself as an enemy, Pallando didn’t waste time to ponder about it, aware that defence took priority on everything. Therefore, he collected energy again, gathering it in his eyes, from which he threw ice-blue flashes of lightning that hit Alatar in his chest, hurling him backwards and making him crash on the floor.

Meanwhile, the Balrog had come forth again; the flames in his eyes flared up, ready to strike. With
the speed of thought, Nerwen created another shield in front of her and Pallando; it deflected the monster’s tongues of flame, as the Blue Wizard stood hastily up.

“What is going on?” he asked, though as he was asking, he was already preparing a counterattack, closing the palms of his hands: between them, energy lighting passed, blindingly white.

“Alatar evoked a Balrog!” Nerwen answered, “You attack, I defend,” she added concisely. The type of power she possessed was only defensive, not offensive, and even if amplified by the local energy, so it remained. Only when she asked for help to olvar and kelvar could she do an attack; or when she was using the inverted thaumaturgic power, but for that, she needed to come into direct contact with her opponent. In this circumstance, she must team up with Pallando, with him taking care of confronting their antagonists and her defending him.

A nod from Pallando revealed her that the Blue Wizard had understood; she saw him raising his arms and unleash the energy between his hands against the Balrog.

Khorakûn tried to dodge sideways, but was too slow and the bunch of beams hit him full in the stomach. With a horrendous yell, he fell on one knee, but he got up almost immediately and stumbled backwards, hovering over the opening of the pit.

Taking advantage of his momentarily retreat, the Aini leapt to Túdhin and freed him from the sleep spell; the wolf sprang immediately on his four legs, his ears flat against his skull and his fangs bared in a growl, showing fear and aggressiveness in equal parts.

*You can do nothing, here,* Nerwen sent him urgently, *Hide, quick!*

In spite of his terror, Túdhin would fight at his two-legged friend’s side, as he had done so many times in the past, both in the other life he had known her and in this; but he recognised he was helpless in this circumstance. Therefore, even if unwillingly, he carried out her order and ran to take shelter beyond the opening through which they had come.

Knowing he was safe, Nerwen could return to focus on the fight.

“Is Alatar knocked out?” she asked Pallando.

“I think so, I hit him full force. I do not think I killed him, but surely he can no longer do any harm to us, for awhile.”

In the meantime, Khorakûn had recovered enough to resume his attack. This time, he created two javelins of flame and threw them both against his opponents; under the double impact, Nerwen’s shield shattered, but it was able to absorb enough energy to the point the remainder gave them no more damage than stinging a little their skin. Lightning-fast, the Aini created another shield.

“He is too strong!” Pallando exclaimed, worried.

“Not if we join our powers,” Nerwen declared through clenched teeth, then went on, “As soon as we overcome the next assault, I’ll dissolve the shield and lend you my energy: use it together with yours to launch your most powerful strike, do you understand?”

Pallando nodded: he wasn’t certain how he could manage it, but he didn’t see any other way to overcome the Balrog.

Khorakûn regurgitated again an enormous blaze of fire against his two obstinate adversaries; after having stolen so much energy from Alatar, he was practically back to his original level, and he had absolutely not expected not being able to overpower two wretched Istari. He was one of the most
powerful Balrog who had ever lived, nobody except the Valar – and maybe now Sauron – could stand up to him!

Also this time, though, he had to see his assault nullified, because again his flames were rejected by the defence the woman had created.

As soon as the fire was dispersed, Nerwen deactivated her shield and conveyed the local energy toward Pallando; the Blue Wizard felt suddenly full of an immense strength. He thought about the most powerful offensive spell he knew and evoked it; in his hands appeared a bar of light, which became a bow – Oromë’s weapon – with a nocked arrow, flaming of power.

Khorakûn reacted by creating one of his javelins and threw it; Pallando shot at that same moment and the arrow stuck exactly between the Barog’s eyes.

The monster’s head hurled backwards as if hit by a sledgehammer; but he didn’t fall, and on the contrary he straightened again, even if clearly weakened. Horrified, Pallando saw he was stoking the flames inside of him; in a fraction of a second, he would vomit them; he fumbled, trying to create immediately another arrow.

A shape came suddenly between him and the Balrog, its arms raised, a great blue sphere in his hands. With a cry, Alatar hurled the energy ball, where he had concentrated all his power, against Khorakûn, who received it full force in his chest. Roaring, the creature of shadow and fire doubled up and stumbled backwards; for an endless moment, it lingered on the edge of the pit. Finally, with unnatural slowness, it fell heavily in the opening from which it had emerged and, with a frightening howl, it disappeared. The reddish light went out and so the vibrant rumble that had filled the vaulted chamber.

Alatar turned to his two colleagues with whom, in the end, he had decided to take sides. As he had recovered from the dazedness due to Pallando’s blow, he had seen Khorakûn who was going to strike at him and Nerwen; in an instant, he had finally realised his own foolishness and made his choice, then he had rushed headlong into the fight, even if he knew perfectly what price he would pay.

Pallando turned to Nerwen, triumphant. Horrified, he saw her laying on the floor; from her slashed belly rose smoke, where the Balrog’s javelin had hit her. The bow of light disappeared from the Wizard’s hands as he ran to his friend and colleague’s side.

“Nerwen!” he screamed. She opened her eyes and tried to tell him not to worry, that in a short time she would be well, as soon as she would be able to use her thaumaturgy on herself, but the pain was so excruciating, she passed out.

Túdhin realised the fight was over and got on the threshold; he saw Nerwen slumped on the floor and rushed to her with a yelp. Aware of her nature, he knew she couldn’t die, however seeing her hurt troubled him much. When he came next to her, he fondly licked her face, but she stayed still.

Pallando turned to Alatar seeking aid, but saw him frozen; he was going to urge him helping him, but the other Wizard collapsed on the floor. Pallando ran to him, leaving Nerwen in the wolf’s care, and kneeled beside Alatar; he had no memory of him, nevertheless he felt that a deep connection linked them. There was blood on the fallen Wizard’s lips.

“I… paid for my mistake,” Alatar wheezed, gazing at his ancient friend, “I thought I could… control that monster. He… deceived me…”

“Do not speak,” Pallando exhorted him, taking his hand, “You will recover and together we will
find a way to return to Middle-earth.”

“No,” Alatar interrupted him, “For me… it is too late. I spent all my power to hit Khorakûn, there was… no other way. And it is fair that I pay my mistake with my life. He… had promised he would give me your powers, s I could return… and then I wanted to defeat Sauron and take his place to… rule the world in Light. I have been… a fool… Forgive me…”

“Hush, Alatar,” Pallando pleaded him, with tears in his eyes, but Alatar shook his head.

“Take my place,” he advised him, his voice growing weaker by the second, “They could not be willing to believe I was killed by a Balrog and accuse you and Nerwen of regicide… Then find a way to return… I recorded everything I learnt from Khorakûn, described the procedure… what lacked was a power great enough… mayhap you and Nerwen together could do this, she is much stronger than me or you…”

“Where is this description?” Pallando enquired, but Alatar didn’t hear him and said instead:

“Go back and… take down the Enemy… for me, too…”

He exhaled a last, long sigh, then the light of life left his eyes whilst his body went limp in the arms of his friend.

Pallando bowed his head; even if is memory was failing him, he felt a great bitterness. Tears streamed down his face and dispersed into his white beard.

A whine diverted him from his sorrow and suddenly he remembered Nerwen, who was laying nearby, seriously injured and perhaps she, too, dying. Carefully, he placed down Alatar’s body on the floor, then he rushed to his colleague.

Túdhin was laying next to Nerwen, who was still unconscious, and looked like patiently awaiting something. Pallando bent down over the woman, watching closely her face, trying to figure out if she was dead. He saw her chest rising imperceptibly and realised she was still alive. Thinking he must seek aid for her, he decided to carry her upstairs – she didn’t weight much and he was anyway very strong, despite his seemingly old age – and prepared to lift her in his arms, but the wolf raised his head and stared at him with his yellow eyes, growling softly.

“Easy,” Pallando placated him, “I do not want to hurt her, but we must get out from here.”

He moved again to grasp her, but Túdhin jumped to his feet and shoved him back with his muzzle.

“Hey,” the Wizard huffed impatiently, “if we do not aid her immediately, she will die! Let me…”

His third attempt, however, caused a definitely hostile reaction from the wolf, who bared his fangs and growled dangerously.

“Look, I can make you sleep as Alatar did,” Pallando rebuked him, “Why by the Valar do you want to prevent me from helping your mistress?”

Realising that the Wizard was unable to understand his reasons, Túdhin changed tactics and withdrew; when Pallando came back, he planted himself in front of him and shook his head in the gesture he had learnt to recognise as a refusal or denial in the two-legged beings’ body language.

The Wizard hesitated; he had well realised the wolf was much more intelligent than one could think about those predators, but that he would consciously mimic the human body language left him dumbfounded.
“What are you telling me? That we must not move her?”

Of course, Túdhin didn’t grasp his words; he stood his ground, ready to repeat the negative gesture if Pallando would try again to move Nerwen.

The Wizard passed his gaze from the wolf to his colleague on the floor, uncertain.

“Fine, be it as you wish,” he surrendered, “I hope you know what you are doing.”

He forced himself to keep his anxiety at bay and waited.

A few minutes later, Nerwen fluttered her eyes open, her gaze clouded with pain. Pallando bent over her.

“My dear! How do you feel?”

“As if a mountain had collapsed on me,” the Istar croaked, “The Balrog…?”

“Destroyed,” he reassured her, “thanks to Alatar, too.”

“What about him…?”

“Dead… he used all his energy, consuming it in a single blow that, added to ours, has finally annihilated that abomination. He passed away in my arms, asking forgiveness for his folly… He, too, had been deceived, and he truly thought he was acting for the greater good. He also said that in his papers we will find the procedure to create a passage to take us to Middle-earth, he could not do it alone because he was not enough powerful, but he said that you and I can succeed.”

Nerwen closed her eyes again, aching everywhere. If the sword blow Dolimavi had inflicted her on board the smuggler ship had felt painful, it was nothing compared to what she was feeling now, taking her breath away. She nodded to show she had understood.

“What can I do to help you?” Pallando asked, taking her hand in his.

“I can heal myself,” she said, “using my thaumaturgic power, but it’ll take some time.”

“I will wait… I have nowhere to be, at the moment,” the Wizard tried to jest. She smiled a little to make him know she appreciated it.

Feeling ignored, Túdhin yelped to draw her attention. The Aini glanced at him affectionately:

“Relax, my friend, I’ll be better in a short time.”

The wolf came to lay down next to her and licked her hand, then he placed his head on his forelegs, preparing to wait as long as it would take.

Nerwen closed her eyes and focused on herself. First thing first, she dispersed the pain, which prevented her from thinking clearly; then she began to fix the internal organs that had been damaged by the Balrog’s flame and subsequently muscles and tissues, up to the skin.

Half an hour later she re-opened her eyes: she was again perfectly whole, even if weak. Of the terrible wound, she would keep an ugly jagged scar crossing obliquely her belly, at least until she would return in Valinor where, regaining her full power, she could cancel it, along with the one on her hip. She turned her head to Túdhin, who had stayed laying beside her; seeing her move, the wolf jerked up his head and let out a joyful howl that drew Pallando’s attention to him.
During the wait, the Wizard had taken care of Alatar’s body, closing his eyes and combing with his fingers his friend’s long hair and beard, then he had sat down with his back against the wall and waited. Called by Tûdhin’s howl, he got up and came close.

“Are you well?” he enquired. Nerwen nodded in confirmation:

“You’ll have however to help me climbing the stairs: my legs still can’t carry me well.”

“Of course,” the Wizard nodded, then he hesitated, “Anyone else would have died, with an injury like the one you received…” he observed. It wasn’t exactly a question; Nerwen realised Pallando didn’t want to look rude demanding to learn her secrets, but at this point she couldn’t keep from him any longer her different degree of diminishing in comparison to the other Istari, nor didn’t she want that anymore, by now.

“When I’ve been chosen for my mission, they didn’t give me a human body,” she revealed, “I can feel physical and spiritual pain, I can be wounded, even seriously, but I cannot be killed.”

Pallando blinked several times as he absorbed this news.

“That is good,” he finally commented, “otherwise, now I would have two dead friends.”

The Aini smiled in relief: maybe Pallando would feel envious for her partially advantaged condition, but if so, she thought he had taken it well, or he wouldn’t call her a friend as much as Alatar.

“Come on, let’s go,” the Wizard invited her, helping her to her feet, then he gave her his arm to support her. With Tûdhin at their heels, they began the ascent of the long winding staircase.

Climbing, Pallando recalled something Alatar had told him, about the fact of passing himself off as him to prevent a possible accusation of regicide, and he informed Nerwen about it.

“Yes, better you pose as Alatar,” she agreed, “It’s surely easier they believe we killed him instead of a legendary monster, about whom they mayhap know nothing, as we are not in Arda.”

“But how can I do this? I look enough like him, but not sufficiently to be mistaken for him…”

“Aren’t you capable of creating an illusion spell?”

Pallando rummaged in his flawed memory; he had never been in need to use such a spell, but he found out he actually knew it.

“We will say that Pallando had a stroke,” he decided, “and died. Whilst I will cloak myself in Alatar’s appearance, I will cloak him with mine.”

“Good idea,” Nerwen approved, “and then we’ll check his papers seeking the procedure to create the passage.”

At length, they reached the office. Pallando left Nerwen sitting in an armchair to go back down into the underground chamber to recover Alatar’s body; they didn’t want to reveal the existence of the secret room sending others for it.

He used a levitation spell to carry the corpse in an easier way, then he positioned it on the couch. At this point, he weaved around himself the spell that would give him Alatar’s illusory appearance; not having a mirror at hand where checking its effectiveness, he had to settle with Nerwen’s opinion, who assured him he was perfect. Then the Wizard evoked the same enchantment to give
Alatar his own looks; when he was finished, he took a deep breath.

“It will not be easy pretending to be Alatar,” he commented, “I do not know the name of all his collaborators, or the location of each hall in the palace… not even of his bedchamber…”

“Feign tiredness and confusion,” the Aini suggested him, “so you can make them take you wherever you want and they won’t marvel too much if you temporarily don’t remember someone’s name. We’ll try to find those papers as soon as possible and then we’ll leave.”

Pallando nodded, then he shoved back in place the shelf – manually, as he didn’t know the word of power Alatar used – this way hiding the secret passage; finally, he went to the door, turned the key in the lock and opened it. Outside stood the usual page, who turned immediately to look at him.

“Lord Pallando had a stroke,” the Blue Wizard said with Alatar’s voice, “I fear he is dead.”

The youngster paled:

“Do ye wish me to call one of the physicians?”

“Yes, quick!”

The boy bolted, while Pallando got back into the office. They waited for about ten minutes, then a woman came hastily, her hair the colour of iron, carrying a large duffel bag. She went to bend over the one she thought to be Pallando, laying on the couch, and examined him, as Nerwen, his supposed daughter, showed a dreadful anxiety.

“I’m sorry, Sire,” she finally said, “Lord Pallando is dead, I think his heart gave out.”

Nerwen began to sob and Pallando went to embrace her in a comforting gesture.

“I am sorry, my dear,” he said in a low voice, but audible by all, “He was a good man,” then he turned to the page, “See to the arrangements for the funeral.”

He didn’t name a pyre, unsure if in Qos they had such a habit instead of another, for the funeral ritual; the youngster nodded and, after a short time, two tough men came with a litter, on which they laid the dead, covering him with a sheet, and then they carried him away. The illusion about his appearance would last until Pallando’s will would support it, even if he was sleeping and at any distance, consequently there was no danger they would find out the identity swap.

When they were alone again, Nerwen stopped her performance; the Wizard had issued orders not to be disturbed for any reason whatsoever. The page had timidly asked if they wanted something to eat, but the Aini had refused, thinking it wouldn’t look appropriate as she was apparently grieving for her father, and Pallando had taken the hint. If they skipped the midday meal, it wouldn’t be a big problem.

They began examining every single book, parcel, parchment and scroll in Alatar’s office, seeking the document containing the instructions to create a passage that would take them back home – that is, if their combined powers would prove strong enough.

Hours later, when outside night had already fallen and their eyes were burning with fatigue, they decided to suspend the search; they would go on the next day.

OOO
Exactly 51 years, 7 months and 3 days had passed since Nerwen’s and Pallando’s disappearance. Aryon Morvacor counted also the days, sometimes even the hours.

Derva had died the year before, sad because she couldn’t see again her king; Riltur, too, whose parent had been Allakos, had died, and now the prince rode a fourth generation descendant of his stallion. Kerensa, the handmaid in love with him who had generously offered herself as a substitute for Nerwen, had been able to turn her heart to another man, got married and had had children and nephews.

Aryon was still the captain of the Tarsad guards; the built-up area, after stopping growing for some time, had started again and was now a town of several thousand inhabitants, surrounded by a quite strong wall of wood and stone. The wooden houses had been little by little changed into masonry houses; at this point, Aryon could have afforded an actual palace, but he wasn’t interested, therefore he settled for an abode only a little larger than the earlier.

Living among Men saddened him, because it seemed to him that, as soon as he had made friends with somebody, he or she aged and passed, and each time it was very painful accompanying him or her to the funeral pyre. Nerwen had taught him that everything actually comes back again, in the great cycle of life, but this lightened just a little his sadness regarding a friend’s demise.

“Why don’t you go back to your people?” Derva had once asked him, about six months before dying.

“Because Nerwen will return, and she’ll return right here, from where she left,” he had answered. Actually, he and his wife never spoke about this, but until he wouldn’t be sure she would reappear elsewhere, he wouldn’t move.

This night he went to bed – alone as always – and fell asleep in the hope of finding Nerwen in Olorendor. Since the last time, 23 years had gone by and he, night after night, stubbornly, went to the Land of Dreams seeking her. He knew she was alive, he knew time passed differently in the place she was, he knew that sooner or later he would meet her again: he had made this awareness his absolute and unshakable certainty, to which he clutched to not give up in the moments of despair that, as time went by, had become increasingly frequent.

Olorendor was a formless and grey mass, until the dreamer didn’t decide to shape it somehow. The last time with Nerwen had been Aryon’s bedchamber in the old house, but he hadn’t evoked that image for a long time now, because it caused him an impossibly heartbreaking longing. Hence, the prince just waited, sitting on a couch he created with his mind, his head resting on the back of it, his eyes closed.

“Aryon...”

The voice was weak, but unmistakably Nerwen’s. The prince leapt to his feet, looking frantically around, but he didn’t see her.

“I’m here!” he cried, “Where are you? I can’t see you...”

An imaginary wind swept away the mist, leaving in its place a verdant garden; it was then that he saw her, as she was coming slowly closer. He ran to her and engulfed her in his arms.

“My love...! How are you?” he asked her, anxiously.

“Pallando and I just emerged victorious from a fight with a Balrog,” she told him, smiling, “I came
out a little badly, but I already recovered.”

“A Balrog?!” Aryon was startled, “How... what...?”

“I don’t know how he came here,” Nerwen answered, “Alatar somehow managed to enslave him, but he didn’t know his true power, mayhap not even his true nature. At first, he tried to hand us over to him, but then he repented and fought him at our side, as far as sacrificing his life for us.”

The prince remained silent for some moments, trying to elaborate the news.

“Are you well, now?” he asked at length, still terribly preoccupied.

“Yes, everything’s over,” she reassured him, “Pallando is pretending to be Alatar to avoid a possible accusation of regicide; everyone thinks the dead is him, Pallando. We are looking for a way to return; Alatar thought that we two together could do it, using his instructions. He couldn’t, because he wasn’t powerful enough.”

“Wonderful!” Aryon cried, holding her tight, “So you’ll be able to come back soon!”

“I hope so... but my soon could anyway be many years for you...”

The prince stiffened at this prospect.

“Never mind,” he stated under his breath, clenching his teeth, “More than 50 years have passed: I’ll wait as much, if there’s need to. After all, a hundred years are not much, in the life of an Elf.”

Nerwen did a quick calculation; she found out that, since the last time they met, for Aryon 23 years had gone by, and she felt terribly upset.

With her will, she changed the surroundings into a bedchamber, precisely the first they had shared, in the royal palace of the Hwenti in Kopellin, where they got engaged.

“Let’s forget the passing of time,” she exhorted him, “and think just of the two of us...”

They made love several times, at first with uncontrolled urgency, then with slow tenderness. In Olorendor there was no need of sleep as to let their bodies rest in the material world, therefore they took intensely advantage of each hour, of each minute, entwining their limbs, skin to skin, breathing in one another’s mouth, their hearts beating in unison, as they exchanged caresses and words of love.

Dawn came all too soon.

“It’s already time...” Aryon sighed sadly, feeling the tug to the world of the awaken becoming increasingly pressing; he held Nerwen to his heart, kissing her one last time, “Blossom, come back soon,” he recommended her.

“I’ll do anything to succeed,” she assured him, brushing his cheek, “Everything that’s possible and even impossible. Remember always I love you more than my life.”

“And I, too, love you more than my life...”

They parted slowly, holding hands until the very last moment; then the awakening tore them apart once more.

Aryon woke up, a lump in his throat, as every time he came back from a meeting with Nerwen in Olorendor, due to the awareness a long time would pass before seeing her again. He got up, even if
he would rather prefer to hide at home and see no one in the next days, but his duty as the captain of the city guard was awaiting him. Hence, he got dressed and headed for the dining room, where Elstrena, his chubby housekeeper whose red hair was streaked with white, brought him his breakfast and asked him kindly if he had slept well. Despite that, between them, he was the older one – two ages of the world older, actually – Elstrena acted motherly around him; Aryon was fond of her, because she reminded him much of Morvenna, the kind innkeeper who had been the female wedding sponsor. He had seen neither her, nor her husband Roden ever again.

“Yes, thank you, Elstrena,” he answered her, as she poured his morning tea, a bergamot aromatised blend he had helped making popular in Tarsad, “I saw Nerwen,” he added, as everyone knew he sometimes met with his wife through dreams, “She’s well, and Lord Pallando, too,” he concluded. In spite of the decades that had passed, Pallando was still very beloved; the new generations that hadn’t known him, had learnt from the older ones how much of a just and wise sovereign he had been. The monarch now ruling Yòrvarem, elected every ten years, continued to be called Regent because they were sure the king would come back, along with the wise woman who had disappeared with him.

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“Any hint on the moment they could return?” Elstrena asked. She came from Pallàndim and even if she had been a child of only six years at the time when the kind had vanished, she still remembered him well.

“They seem to be near a solution; but by now we know that a few days for them may be many years for us.”

Elstrena sighed:

“I’d like to see our beloved king again, soon.”

“I hope your wish comes true,” Aryon said in a low voice, “because this would mean that I could see my wife again equally soon.”

She looked at him sympathetically: his faithfulness to his wife was legendary, in Tarsad, and all the romantic girls in town dreamt about such a love, blissfully unaware of how much anguish this meant.

“I hope that, too, for you,” she said, before returning to the kitchen to fetch the ertan that, like the bergamot tea, had been introduced in the eating habits of the Tarsadians by Aryon; the prince had it always sweetened with honey, therefore she brought a pot of the sweet stuff, too. She made sure he was eating, because she noticed that sometimes he forgot to, and when he was finished, she cleared the table, while he exited, heading for the barracks.

Another long day without Nerwen had begun; hope supported him that his wait, sooner or later, would be over.

Author’s corner:
The Balrog figure has always evilly fascinated me and I think that two of the most thrilling scenes in all Tolkien’s work are precisely the duels of Glorfindel in Gondolin and Gandalf in Moria against two members of this terrible spawn. Therefore, since the beginning, I planned a fight between Nerwen and one of them. I hope I kept you on the edge of your seats as much as I was while describing the scene! :-D

At the start, Alatar had to be the Saruman of the situation: a traitor that ends up killed as he deserves. But no, once more the character decided to act differently than what the author had planned and at the last moment he redeems himself; even if he dies anyway, he does it honourably. By now, I should be used to this, I mean characters who go their own way and derail from the predetermined course, but instead I get a – pleasant – surprise each time.

Poor Aryon, over 50 years alone, except for the rare times he’s able to meet with Nerwen in Olorendor... I’m cruel, I know, but it’s necessary: you’ll discover the reason soon.

There’s a small homage to the movie “The Hobbit: Desolation of Smaug,” did you notice? Who can tell me what it is? XD

Lady Angel
The following day, Pallando and Nerwen resumed their search; Alatar hadn’t pointed out where his instructions to create a passage were stored, nor in which form they were – if scroll or book or a bunch of loose sheets – but they could be reasonably supposed to be found in his private office. His bedchamber, too, could be a good place to look for them and indeed the Wizard had spent the best part of the night rummaging everywhere, but to no avail.

In the afternoon, the funeral ceremony of the one who everybody thought was Pallando took place, and they had of course to attend. According to the customs of Qos, they would have him cremated and then his ashes would be scattered into the lake; this made sense, as the island was densely inhabited by the living and there was no place for the dead.

During the rite, Nerwen was careful to appear deeply afflicted, because everyone must think she was mourning her father’s death; when it was over, they got back to Alatar’s office to continue the search.

They had luck: in the late afternoon, Pallando found what they were looking for in a bunch of sheets written in Valarin tongue.

“I think this is it!” he cried, excited, showing the pages to Nerwen. He had recognised the idiom as the same of the missive she had him delivered through the pigeon, but even if he had been able to read that simple message, the complex instructions of Alatar’s document went beyond his ability to understand it.

Nerwen examined the parcel, her heart beating fast in the hope, which increased as she went on reading.
“Yes, that’s it indeed!” she confirmed animatedly. She and the Blue Wizard embraced enthusiastically in their joy.

“Is it complicated?” Pallando enquired then. She shook her head:

“Not much, but we need a significant amount of energy, that’s why Alatar alone wasn’t able to do it. And he couldn’t have the monster helping him, because the energy of a Balrog is the antithesis of ours, therefore they cannot be used together… that’s why the monster needed to steal our strength, changing it into his and finally use it for its purposes. Probably the energy of the sole Alatar was not enough, hence he insisted on having someone else,” she looked at Pallando, “I am stronger than the average of the Istari, because I haven’t been as much diminished; therefore I think that the joining of our energies will be enough.”

“Alatar thought the same,” he revealed, nodding, “At the point of death, probably some entirely Maiarin capabilities came back to him and he could see through you…” he was silent for a moment, pondering, “Where do you think his soul has gone?”

“It’s surely back in Valinor,” Nerwen affirmed, “in the Halls of Awaiting. Mayhap the Valar will decide to let him reincarnate in his ancient form of Maia, if they forgive him his almost fatal naivety to ally with an evil spirit; or mayhap he’ll prefer going back to Ilúvatar, who knows…”

“I hope I will meet him again, one day,” Pallando declared, “if possible, remembering my past, and consequently him. But I am afraid this could happen only if and when I, too, return to Valinor…”

The Aini nodded, agreeing.

“Meanwhile, let’s think about going back to Arda,” she exhorted him, “Are you ready?”

“I am.”

“I think we’ll need several hours,” Nerwen considered, “Better mayhap have something to eat, to keep our strength up.”

So they did, asking for dinner in Alatar’s office. If the servants were wondering what their sovereign and the young daughter of the dead were doing, they never showed it and kept their curiosity to themselves. After all, it was not for them discussing their lord’s decisions or behaviours.

After dinner, the two Istari got ready to begin.

“I suggest moving to Alatar’s secret chamber,” Pallando said, “so, should there be noises or strange lights, no one will come to investigate. If all goes well and we will able to return home, tomorrow morning they will not find us in our beds and will come looking for us, and will wonder forever what happened to us; otherwise, we will come back here and go to sleep, and then we will try again tomorrow.”

“Good idea,” Nerwen approved. Hence, they went down to the underground chamber, taking special care to put back in place the bookshelf behind them, so that nobody would find out – or at least, not immediately – the secret passage, then they began the process, following the instruction Alatar had left.

At first, on the wall they sketched a drawing replicating the shape of a door: a rectangle with a knob, an architrave, a threshold. To do so, they used some charcoal crayons they asked for along with their meal.
Then they sat down – they brought two pillows with them, not knowing how long they would have to sit like this on the bare rock – and joined hands and minds, trying to melt their energies. It was different from the way they did the previous day during the fight with the Balrog, when Nerwen lent her strength to Pallando: then it had been about sending her energy to him, while now they had to act in unison. Once their power would join, they had to learn to manage it simultaneously, exactly as if they were a single entity.

The first obstacle they had to overcome was the fear to lose their own individualities; each one trusted completely the other one, but it wasn’t an easy task; the process looked very alike the learning technique from mind to mind that Nerwen had already experienced, both as the receiving part and as the giving part, however now it didn’t involve only a small part of the mind, but the entirety of both parts, and it wasn’t easy letting go to something that looked like going irremediably lost in a place from where one had no chance to come back. Hence, they had to fight the instinct to withdraw at every step, advancing slowly one toward the other.

At last, after a long time – surely over two hours – their minds were totally joined, the thoughts of one undistinguishable from the other one; and so began the next phase: the building of the passage. The simultaneous managing of their joined powers proved less difficult than they had anticipated and, at the fourth try, they succeeded in beginning the creation. Slow spirals of a green-blue light – their blended colours – began to emanate from their bodies, channelling into the drawing of the door sketched on the wall and covering the marks of the charcoal crayon on the rock. Little by little, the image became three-dimensional and changed into an actual door of pure energy. The thoughts of the two Istari imagined it opening on Arda, precisely on the same cavern from which they had been taken by the Dark Portal, but in another spot, so as to not superimpose it on the latter.

As if they truly were one person, they stood slowly up and walked to the door, which opened under the push of their joined minds, revealing a cluster of white light – as much as the darkness that had brought them here had been black – from were came elegant bright coils that enwrapped them softly, lifted them gently and brought them into the gleaming cluster. The light that enveloped them was blinding, to the point their eyes began to water and they were forced to close them.

Then came nothingness.

OOO

Aryon Morvacor glared at the young recruit standing in front of him, between two guards; the youngster lowered his gaze, intimidated.

“Delkar, your behaviour is unspeakable,” he barked, “Drinking like a fish, wandering around in the streets blind drunk and take off your clothes in front of the Burgomistress’ daughter!”

“I wasn’t aware of what I was doing…” the youth tried to defend himself.

“Shut up!” Aryon boomed, leaping to his feet and slamming his fist on the desk; the unfortunate jerked, frightened by his fury, “The fact you were drunk does not justify, in any way, your conduct! A city guard must always behave in an irreproachable way, I’m very strict on this, and when you enlisted, you knew it perfectly!”

The prince took a deep breath, trying to calm down.
“You’re a disgrace to this barracks,” he went on, sitting again, “For this reason, you’ll get one week in jail on bread and water and a fine equal to a month’s wages.”

“But, sir…!” Dalkar tried to protest, but was struck dumb at the glare, as sharp as a razor, he received from his captain.

“Thank the Valar I don’t pillory you, publicly disgracing you,” the prince growled, then he made a commanding signal to the other two, who seized Dalkar and dragged him away. One didn’t mess with the rules captain Aryon Morvacor had established, everyone knew that, and one of the rules was never drink in public until drunk, for no reason whatsoever, on duty or not. If one wanted to do it, it had to be at home.

Aryon went back checking the documents the quartermaster had brought him, about the estimate on the supplies of the next month, a task he thought tedious but he knew was necessary. It was late in the afternoon and he wanted to finish before going home.

Half an hour later, he heard a commotion coming from the street. He crossed over to the window and at the far end of the road he caught sight of a jubilant throng, lining up around a small group of guards escorting two shapes, one tall and white-haired, the other small and brown-haired, a wolf at their heels.

His heart stopped in his chest.

For an endless moment, he was incapable to move, breathe, even think. He was afraid he was hallucinating; but the vision didn’t fade nor changed.

With an unarticulated cry, he sprang to the door, wrenched it open and ran outside, toward the crowd.

Nerwen saw him coming forth, tall, black-clothed as usual, a reddish halo around his head because of the sun at his back; his face was so incredulous that it looked almost frowning. She pushed aside one of the guards who were accompanying her and Pallando, a little rudely, but at the moment she didn’t care; then she began to run and flew in her husband’s arms.
Overwhelmed with joy, Aryon lifted her off her feet and held her tight, closing his eyes now suddenly full of tears. He clutched her like this for a long minute, speechless, an indescribable happiness dazing his mind; then he placed her down, gently, and withdrew a little to look at her, staring hungrily to those adored features he didn’t see for over 20 years, but the memory had never faded in his mind and heart. He cupped her cheeks and kissed her.

Neither of them had noticed that the crowd had surrounded them, following the scene with bated breath; now, it burst out into general jubilation, adding to the euphoria for the return of their beloved king Pallando.

Aryon took off his lips from Nerwen’s; he would have kissed her again and again, breathlessly, but the joyful rumble of the throng dissuaded him.

“You’re both so beautiful!” a female voice shouted; affirmative screams echoed it.

Pallando had stayed behind to let the married couple reunite; now he approached them smiling and placed his hands on one shoulder of each. Aryon cast him a glance.

“I’m glad you’re back, Pallando,” he declared under his breath, but his gaze had already moved back on his wife’s face: he wasn’t able to take his eyes off of her. At that moment, he felt something tapping on his leg; he frowned, annoyed, but lowering his gaze the prince saw Túdhin watching at him from below and he smoothed his scowl. Glad to see him again, he kneeled down and caressed him affectionately, as the wolf licked his hand.

“Welcome back to you, too, my friend,” he said.
A plump middle-aged woman with hazelnut-brown hair, the energetic Burgomistress of Tarsad for three years, arrived at that moment.

“What’s up, captain Aryon?” she asked in an authoritative voice. The prince stood up, turning to her, and she gaped amazed at his wide smile, something she had practically never seen, in all the years she had known him.

“Burgomistress Rovena, your king, Lord Pallando, is back… and so is my wife Nerwen,” he informed her. The woman’s green eyes widened, staring at the two Aryon had just mentioned. She recognised the king from the paintings she had seen, while for Nerwen she trusted the captain of the city guard’s word.

“Welcome back, my liege,” she said, spreading her skirt and curtseying formally, “We’ve been awaiting you for a long time.”

As if realising they had kept maybe a too familiar behaviour, everyone there knelt down in front of their king. Even Aryon bowed to him, and so did Nerwen.

“Thank you, thank you all!” Pallando cried, casting a circular glance at the kneeling crowd, “There will be celebrations, I promise, but not now: at the moment, I just want to take a nice bath and sleep, I am very tired.”

“Of course!” Rovena hastily declared, straightening her back, “Here in Tarsad we have no proper lodging for you, my liege, but if you’ll be happy to come to my house…”

“An inn will perfectly do,” he interrupted her, refusing to expel a family from its own house. It was typical of him, worrying about other’s wellbeing: he was anything but a haughty monarch.

Therefore, between two rows of cheering crowd, Pallando was taken to the best inn in Tarsad, where the innkeeper almost fainted because of the thrill to welcome the lost king in person.

Aryon and Nerwen instead sneaked away; taking her hand, the prince hurried to his house. Noticing she had almost to run to keep up with him, he slowed down and addressed her a tiny apologising smile.

“Blossom… how are you?” he asked her.

“I’m fine,” Nerwen answered, slightly out of breath, “And you?”

“Now that you’re back, I’m great!” he assured her, taking one of her hand to his lips to kiss it, “Good Valar, I feel like my heart is about to burst…”

Nerwen halted abruptly in the middle of the street and hugged him. For her, only one day had passed since she had seen him the last time, for him who knows how many years… she hadn’t dared to ask yet. He kissed her brow, holding her tight.

“I take you to Thilgiloth,” he said under his breath. He was dying to be alone with her, but he knew how much the mare was important to his wife.

However, Nerwen had already contacted the Chargeress’ mind as soon as she had emerged from the narrow passage; Thilgiloth had been so happy to sense her friend’s thoughts, she had begun running wildly around in the paddock hosting her, so much that the grooms were highly worried. Knowing the mare’s touchiness, they didn’t dare to approach her, and finally she had calmed down, hence they had left her alone.
“No need for it,” the Maia therefore told her husband, “I already talked to her. I’ll go and see her later.”

Meanwhile, they had come in front of a house of light grey stone, with green painted shutters; on the windowsills stood geraniums and violets decorating the façade.

Aryon led her to the door, opening it for her; Nerwen entered into the living room, furnished with a table surrounded by chairs and two small couches in front of a large fireplace. From a side door arrived a blonde woman on her early thirties, with a girl of about three years in her arms, with long blond curls and large blue eyes.

“Lord Aryon…?” she began in an puzzled tone, looking from him to the stranger who was accompanying him, followed by a dog looking very alike to a wolf.

“Nerwen, this is my housekeeper, Convena, and her daughter Beryana,” the prince introduced them, “Convena, this is my wife Nerwen.”

The servant gaped in wonder for a moment, then she smiled broadly:

“What a magnificent surprise! I’m so happy for you, Lord Aryon…” she curtseyed, a little clumsy because of the child in her arms, “Lady Nerwen, it’s an honour to meet you.”

“My pleasure, Convena,” the Istar said, glad of the warm welcome.

“If you’re back… does it mean that King Pallando, too, is back?” the housekeeper enquired. Aryon nodded:

“Yes, they came back together. Now the king is housed at the Enchanted Sword and wants to rest, but he promised celebrations.”

“Can I go and tell my husband?” Convena asked, “His grandmother was in the original guard that accompanied here the king from Pallàndim and he’s waited for ever his return…”

“Of course you can go,” the prince authorised her, “My wife and I can surely make without your service, today…”

Convena smiled to both, then her smile widened as she grasped also the hidden message in the consent: it was apparent the couple wished some privacy.

“Then I’ll see you tomorrow,” she said, “I’ll come at the usual time to prepare breakfast.”

With another curtsy, she exited, while little Beryana waved at them; smiling, Nerwen reciprocated her and thought she was a truly charming child.

Finally, they were alone; Aryon turned to Nerwen, staring at her adoringly; he took her hands in his and placed them on his chest. Under her fingers, she perceived the pounding of his heart, strong and slightly irregular.
“Sweet Vána…” the prince whispered, “I can’t believe you’re here with me… I’m terrified it may be just another dream…”

“It isn’t, my love,” she reassured him, a sudden lump stuck in her throat, “I’m truly here, in the flesh… It’s not a dream, and not even Olorendor…,” she slid her arms around his neck and lifted her face to his, “Kiss me…”

Aryon wrapped her in his arms and bowed his head, kissing as he did earlier, but this time he parted his lips in search of a deeper kiss. Nerwen responded to his solicitation and their tongues met, caressing one another in a lovingly and sensual way; their bodies clung, seeking one another. With a groan, Aryon picked up Nerwen and carried her in his bedchamber.

Túdhin watched them disappearing beyond the door; his species, too, mated for life, so he understood perfectly the two partners’ wish to be alone. He trotted in a corner and laid down, prepared to wait patiently.

Their clothes flew off them, in the eager desire of the two lovers to be skin to skin. Even if for Nerwen the last time she made love with Aryon had been just the night before, Aryon’s desperate urgency soon caught her, too.

Aryon needed Nerwen madly, like he had needed her the first time they had made love, in that wonderful place now so far away in time and space; but now, as then, he refused to give in to his body’s demands and, instead of focusing on himself, he focused on her.

He made her lay down on the bed and stretched out next to her, embracing her. He rained kisses on her face, brow, eyelids, nose, cheekbones, lingering on her lips; meanwhile, his hands caressed her, finding again each curve, each form of this body he knew so well, but that now, because of the elapsed time, he rediscovered like it was the first time. He slipped down her hip to her thigh, then moved on her rear side, sliding past her buttocks and back, up to her shoulders; she responded brushing his chest, touching his nipples with feather-light fingers and making him shiver.

“Please, no…,” he murmured, kissing her neck, “I don’t want to lose control…”

Nerwen sensed his need, due to a number of years of celibacy she didn’t dare to imagine; the regard he always had for her touched her, but this time she decided to do it her way.

“I don’t want you to control yourself,” she whispered, slipping her hand down his abdomen and
caressing him daringly; Aryon started and groaned, closing his eyes for a moment. He tried to protest, but she hushed him with a kiss, “Love me with all your passion, Aryon…” she invited him huskily.

Her bold request left the prince breathless and he gulped. He stared into her eyes – those irises of the sweetest brown he had ever seen in all his life – and glimpsed in them a firm resolve and a clear encouragement.

So, he kissed her, fervidly, deeply; when he left her mouth, he travelled down her neck and chest. Nerwen arched her back and, with a gasp, threw back her head to offer herself to his kisses. Aryon moved further downward, on the soft mounds of one breast, nibbling it with his lips as he cupped the other one in his hand. He took one peak in his mouth, caressing it with his tongue and then suckling at it; at the same time, he brushed the other one with his fingers. This time was Nerwen the one moaning.

Aryon continued his descent along her beautiful body and reached her belly, where he saw the ugly scar traversing it diagonally, memento to her almost deadly fight with the Balrog. He had already caught sight of it when they had met last time in Olorendor, but nevertheless a sob escaped him at the thought that, unlike with Meledhiel, this time he had truly risked losing her, because of the monster of shadow: from the way it looked, this injury would surely have proved fatal for anybody else. He kissed the scar reverently, caressing it with his lips, thanking Oromë and all Valar because she was here with him, in his arms, warm and vibrant with life and not cold and dead.

Nerwen heard the muffled sound Aryon had uttered; guessing the reason, she felt her heart clenching. The full burden of not being allowed to reassure him about her safety weighed once more on her soul, but the veto she received and the respect she felt for those who had imposed it were simply too strong for her to break. Then he touched the threshold of her femininity; she started in pleasure and didn’t think about anything else.

Aryon caressed her with trembling fingers, finding it hard to believe this warmth, this softness he felt under his fingertips were truly real. He placed his lips on her secret flower and parted it petals, savouring its nectar, his head spinning.

Nerwen trembled, relishing in his ministrations, but she was aware that he, in spite of her exhortations, was still holding back.

“Stop,” she begged him, trying to withdraw, “Please… I need you…”

Aryon guessed his wife’s purpose; he was immensely grateful, but he was aware that, should he accept her invitations, all would be over in a few moments, for him, while she would surely fall behind; and this, he wouldn’t allow.

“Let me have my way…”

He went back savouring her, wanting to take her as much as possible near to the goal before joining their bodies. He felt her quivering and heard her exhale a broken sigh; he listened to her moans becoming gradually higher and watched her tossing more and more uncontrollably in the bed, until he realised he had brought her where he wanted. At this point, he laid down over her and entered in her welcoming warmth, forcing himself to do it slowly, so as not accelerating too much his release; but she had other ideas, as he realised when he felt her rising to him to speed up their joining. He lost his head now; with a muffled groan, he began to move convulsively, incapable of any control. In a few thrusts, he reached the peak and, just a moment before getting over the point of no return, he heard her utter a satisfied sigh; then, with a long moan sounding more like a cry, he emptied himself inside of her. For an endless moment, he felt as if the world had disappeared and
time stopped, as if the universe had crystallised in this sublime moment that went far beyond the mere carnal gratification.

Coming again to his senses, for a moment he feared he had not taken Nerwen to the top, but he realised he had heard her loving whimper and that she was still trembling in pleasure around him, her eyes closed and her lips parted on her laboured breath. He thought she never looked so beautiful and his throat tightened.

Slowly, Nerwen reopened her eyes, focusing her gaze on Aryon’s face and noticing his bright blue irises were slightly fogged. She needed some moments to realise it was tears; moved, she cupped his face and pulled it down to hers.

“My beloved husband…” she whispered against his lips, before kissing him desperately. He returned her kiss with equal ardour.

“My sweetest wife…” he murmured, before kissing her again, “You’re the light of my life…”

They went on exchanging tender caresses and kisses for an indefinite time, refusing to part, and then they made love again, this time in a much calmer way; later they had something for dinner – simple bread with some cheese they found in the larder, unwilling to waste time in cooking – and fed Túdhin, who had stayed quietly dozing in the living room.

As they were eating, Nerwen finally asked the question she hadn’t dared to ask so far:

“How long has it been since we disappeared?”

Aryon placed down the beaker from which he had just sipped his wine.

“Today is October 21st, 3018, following the Numénorean reckoning,” he answered in a low voice, “It was exactly 75 years, one month and ten days ago.”

Nerwen closed her eyes, troubled, and took a slow breath.

“I’m sorry…” she began, feeling on the brink of tears; Aryon quickly took her hands in his.

“No!” he exclaimed, “It wasn’t your fault. And not even Pallando’s, even if he was the one reading that accursed inscription. It was a dreadful misfortune. To prevent anything like this occurring again, from that day two guards watch constantly the entrance to the cave…” Nerwen nodded: exiting from the passage, they had found them, giving them a terrible shock, “and now that you’re back, we’ll have it walled up.”

The Istar gulped down her tears.

“A wall can be knocked down,” she observed slowly, “Better deactivate the spell: now that we know how it works, Pallando and I will need only reversing it to cancel it.”

The prince nodded his approval.

“Tell me about these years…” she exhorted him.

Hence, Aryon told her roughly what had gone on in the three quarters of a century that had gone by since the day she and Pallando had been sucked in beyond the Dark Portal. Thalion’s death grieved Nerwen greatly, as she had been very fond of the faithful packhorse; Allakos’ demise was less bitter, as the stallion, unlike the gelding, had descendants, among which there was now a namesake who was practically his copy, and this somehow made his death less sad.
When they finished eating, Nerwen announced she had to contact Yavanna.

“She’s surely very concerned, not having heard from you for so long,” Aryon considered, accompanying her to the bedchamber.

“Only partly,” she revealed, “Like between you and me, also between she and me there’s a bond: even if I was never able to contact her, like you she felt I was still alive.”

She laid down on the unmade bed and smiled at her husband:

“As I just had dinner, after my trip I won’t be very hungry; but if possible, would you make me some hot milk with honey, by the time I return?”

“Yes, I am. Alatar used all of his power against him when Pallando had just hit him with his most powerful spell, Oromë’s Arrow.

She completed her tale speaking about the Blue Wizard’s death and his instructions for the creation of a passage that would take them back to the starting point.

As soon as possible, Pallando and I will reverse the spell of the Dark Portal and we’ll seal if forever, she concluded.

They stayed silent for some moments, then the Queen of Earth spoke again:

During the years of your absence, Sauron’s power has grown again, she informed her gravely, We feel very strong energies moving, both in his favour and against him. An epochal battle is preparing, which will involve with no exceptions all peoples of Middle-earth and on which outcome the future of the entire world will depend. This terrible battle will end one age and a new one will dawn, but if this new age will be bright or dark, we cannot tell: all depends on the number
of those who will be strong enough to oppose Sauron, but even more on the strength of their courage. Both sides will deploy massive armies and, no matter which way it will go, the world will change...

The Valië was silent again, as Nerwen tried to assimilate this feral news; but Yavanna hadn’t finished yet:

From the news Ulmo has collected from the waters, the peoples of Harad, the pirates of Umbar and the Easterlings have allied themselves with Sauron. Other peoples to the farther East are looking favourably to the idea to do the same: if Pallando’s people would be able to keep them occupied, they will prevent them to go to Mordor giving support to the Enemy...

Pallando’s people is basically peaceful, even if they can be formidable enemies, Nerwen considered, talking slowly, I have no doubt they’ll fight fiercely against Sauron, but even mustering their allies, they aren’t very great in number...

She broke off because Kementári was shaking her head.

And here is where the Entwives come in, she affirmed, You must find them and convince them to support the free people of the East in their fight against those who want to ally themselves with Sauron.

But the Onodrim aren’t a warlike race, Nerwen objected, The males aren’t, even less the females.

I know it well, Yavanna nodded, yet the latter are capable to become very aggressive, if they must defend their land.

This is true, the Istar admitted, Then, I have only to convince them their land is not only the area where they have settled, but all of Arda.

Excellent argument, Kementári approved.

I know I’m near, now, geographically speaking; I’ll resume the search for the Entwives as soon as I’ll be able to sort myself out.

Very well, because time is running out...

She broke off, because Nerwen’s eyes had suddenly become distant, a gaze she knew well: it happened when her Second Sight kicked in. For long moments, the Istar stayed still, staring at something only she could see, then with a start she came back to the present place and moment.

What did you see? the Queen of Earth enquired.

Two small shapes… Hobbit, mayhap, from the size, her disciple answered, They were climbing the side of a volcano in restless activity, in a dark and barren land… Not far away stood an immense tower, on top of which I’ve seen Sauron’s Eye, she collected her thoughts, trying to analyse what she had seen; the conclusion she came to left her flabbergasted, After all, I don’t think that it’ll be the number of soldiers of one side or the other, or the efficiency of war machines, that will decide the ultimate outcome of the final battle, but something or someone so small and insignificant that Sauron has overlooked it in his plans...

We will see this only when the time comes, Yavanna commented gravely; Nerwen could only confirm with a nod.

At this point, Kementári stood up, ending their talk; the Istar stood up in turn. They parted with
When Nerwen opened her eyes, she saw her husband next to her, sitting on a chair at the bed’s side, while clutching lovingly her hand.

“Welcome back,” he said in a low voice, “Everything’s alright?”

“Rather disquieting news, unfortunately,” she answered, “but before telling you, I’d like to drink that hot milk…”

“I fetch it immediately.”

The prince hurried to the kitchen, where he had warmed up the milk in a pot that he had then left next to the fire to keep the temperature. He mixed in a spoonful of honey and poured it into a mug, taking it to Nerwen.

Meanwhile, she had sat up. Seeing him coming back with a steaming mug, she smiled at him gratefully; she took it and sipped at it a couple of times, slowly in order not to burn herself, and then she told him what she had learnt from Yavanna.

“You’re right, it’s not encouraging news,” Aryon observed, “We have to resume as soon as possible the search for the Entwives. In the meantime, Pallando will gather information about which among the eastern peoples are willing to ally themselves with the Dark Enemy and then wage war against them, a diversion distracting them from their purpose.”

“The Yorva are not a warlike people like the Rohirrim, for instance, or the Gondorians themselves,” Nerwen pointed out, “They will be able to face up to such a war only if I convince the Entwives to support them,” she sighed, “If they bear the same attitude as Treebeard, it won’t be an easy task…”

Aryon looked at her, intrigued:

“Who’s Treebeard?”

Only then did Nerwen realise she had named the Ent, breaking therefore the promise she had made him not to speak about him or his kin living in Fangorn; but after all, 75 years had passed and they were half the world away, and she trusted Aryon like no other, with the only possible exception of Gandalf, and of course Yavanna and Melian.

Hence, she told her husband about her encounter with the ancient Shepherd of Trees and about what she had learned from him, which had convinced her to undertake the search for the females of the Onodrim. She recommended him absolute discretion, and of course, he promised. Then Aryon took the mug back to the kitchen and got back to his wife.

That night, they slept very little, intent on sharing more sweet embraces.

OOO

When they got up, the next morning, they found the table already set and Convena in the kitchen, busying herself in preparing breakfast.
“Good morning, Lady Nerwen, Lord Aryon,” she welcomed them, smiling, “Your dog is very well-bred: when I arrived this morning, I saw he kept clean. I opened the door to the garden and he went out. Now he’s still there, looks like he loves better staying outdoors than indoors.”

“Yes, he does,” Nerwen confirmed, “Did you feed him?”

“No,” Convena answered, “because I don’t know what he’s used to, I gave him only water.”

“Well done,” the Istar approved, “I go and say good morning to him.”

She exited through the backdoor, stepping into the garden; being now well into autumn, it was rather bare, but she could see it was well kept. The Maia recognised oleanders, azaleas, hibiscuses and fuchsias, mimosas, chimonanthuses, rhododendrons and camellias; in spring and summer, it must be a feast of flowers and colours. She advanced a few steps and perceived a warm sensation of recognition that left her marvelling. Then she saw Túdhin running toward her and she forgot about it.

*Is everything well?* the wolf asked her, even if there was no need to, as he sensed her state of physical and psychological wellness, so high that it touched ecstasy. Nerwen bent down to caress him.

“Yes, now finally all is well,” she confirmed, “except that two dear friends of ours, Allakos and Thalion, are no longer with us. As I told you, time goes by differently in the place we have been to: there only a few days, here many years…”

The wolf exuded a feeling of sadness.

*I’ll miss them,* he declared.

“I, too…”

Together, they got back in the house; Túdhin approached Aryon to greet him, then he laid down next to the table; husband and wife took their seats and Convena served them a very bountiful breakfast, with pancakes topped with strawberry jam, bread, butter, honey and – to Nerwen’s delight – *ertan*: all this came with bergamot tea.

“I feel like back in Bârlyth,” the Aini considered, tasting her *ertan* that, as usual, she had topped with a spoonful of honey.

“Lord Aryon told me you love it,” the servant smiled, “as much as strawberries, that’s why I chose this jam for the pancakes. Do you like them?”

Nerwen smiled her back and nodded:

“They’re delicious. I’ve never had such.”

“They’re a specialty of mine,” the woman revealed, blushing slightly in pleasure for the compliment.

Aryon leaned back, patting his stomach.

“I’m bursting,” he jested, with his typical grin, “This morning you’ve been very plentiful,” he added, pointing out to Convena all the food on the table. She winked:

“I thought you could be in need to get your strength…”
The Istar chuckled, genuinely amused, while Aryon made a funny face, so she laughed even harder. Nerwen exchanged an impish glance with the housekeeper and realised she had found a friend.

Later, Aryon accompanied her to see Thilgiloth; of course, Túdhin went with them.

The Chargeress was hosted in the stables next to the barracks of the city guard and she was presently trotting indolently in the paddock along with Allakos, the descendant of his namesake.

As soon as she caught sight of her two-legged friend entering the paddock, Thilgiloth neighed joyfully and ran to her; she stopped in front of her and lowered her head on Nerwen’s shoulder. The Istar surrounded her neck with her arms and hugged her affectionately.

“You’re back, at last! the Chargeress welcomed her, I missed you so much…”

“And I missed you, my old friend,” the Maia answered, “You have no idea how many kilometres I had to walk, down there where I had ended up…” she jested. Thilgiloth caught the irony in her friend’s tone and tapped her with her muzzle, feigning indignation.

“So you missed me just as a transportation mean, huh?

Nerwen burst out laughing and Aryon was charmed by the sound. He had missed his beloved wife’s laugh so much… he gulped down the lump that was tightening his throat and pushed away the melancholy caused by the long years of solitude he had lived, focusing on the present moment alone, with her who was – finally again – at his side.

Meanwhile, Thilgiloth and Túdhin had warmly greeted one another, with the Chargeress lowering her head to brush the wolf’s nose.

Whistling, Aryon called the new Allakos to introduce him to Nerwen, but the stallion refused to come closer: he had scented the wolf’s smell and he feared him. Noticing it, Nerwen sent her thoughts to the stallion, who was of course amazed to be able of hearing her. After telling him who she was, the Aini assured him there was no peril, because Túdhin was no ordinary wolf; then she asked the predator to reassure the horse as he had previously done with his ancestor and Thalion. Therefore, as Allakos was approaching, Túdhin stayed still, and then laid down belly-up, showing he trusted the stallion. Allakos watched Thilgiloth’s relaxed attitude – he had known her since the day of his birth – and, even if hesitantly, he followed her example, lowering his head and tapping the wolf on his bare belly.

“How about a good race together?” the mare asked Nerwen. The Aini stroked her side.

“Not now,” she said, “But we can do it in the afternoon,” she turned to look at her husband, “Thilgiloth asked to go riding together, but before I’d like to report Yavanna’s news to Pallando.”

“Yes, I think that’s best,” Aryon agreed.

They took therefore their leave from their mounts; they were about to exit, when a young she-soldier arrived:

“Beg your pardon, captain, but Lieutenant Ryol is looking for you.”

Aryon had sent word he would take this day off, therefore, if his deputy was seeking him, it had to be important.

“Duty calls,” he excused himself with his wife.
“Don’t worry,” she told him, “I’ll go to Pallando; see you home.”

Home, he thought, thrilled. Now that she was there, his abode wouldn’t be just the place he was living at, but home. Even if, probably, only for a short time, because soon they would leave in search of the Entwives.

He addressed her his typical little smile and went away to look for Ryol.

Nerwen, accompanied by Túdhin, headed for the inn where Pallando was staying; the Wizard received her immediately.

After she had told him the news she had learnt from her Mistress, the king remained thoughtful.

“Beyond the Great Forest dwell warlike populations we had to defend ourselves from, in the past,” he said at length, “We are a peaceful folk, but we can fight, if needed, and luckily we have some allies; but starting a war ourselves?” he shook his head, “I do not know if we would be able to. However, with the help of the Entwives...”

Remembering Treebeard’s opinion, Nerwen shook her head in turn:

“First I must find them, then I must convince them to act, not to lock up themselves in a false peaceful haven that, should Sauron win, would last only until he would decide to wipe them out, as he will do with all those who oppose him or who will even only not recognise him as their lord and master. I don’t know how much time I’ll need: mayhap you’ll have to act before I’ll be able to come back with the alliance of the Entwives. Assuming I can convince them, of course.”

Pallando tightened his lips.

“We must do what is necessary,” he stated firmly, “We are peace-loving people, but we love our freedom and no one can take it away from us easily.”

When she got back home, Nerwen found Convena busy cooking their midday meal, while her child, Beryana, was playing with a rag doll on the floor in the parlour.

“That smells good!” she cried, sniffing the scent coming from the kitchen.

“Beef stew cooked in brown ale,” the woman announced, beaming, “Lord Aryon likes it much, I hope you’ll like it, too.”

Judging by the scent, doubtlessly,” Nerwen declared, laughing, while heading for the bedchamber. There, in a chest, during all those years Aryon had jealously stored her house garments. She freshened up in the nearby bathroom, then she returned in the kitchen.

“I baked also a honey sweetbun,” Convena announced, pointing out the golden cake she had just got out the oven and placed on the windowsill to cool, “You can have it with a nice beaker of the sweet cider my husband produces,” she added, winking; Nerwen arched an eyebrow in surprise and the woman laughed, “Yeah, I know also about the sweet cider. Lord Aryon didn’t speak often of you – even if it was evident you were constantly in his thoughts – but I’ve been in his service for ten years, and before me, my mother was: between the two of us, we have collected some
information that now I’m happy to put into practice,” she concluded with another broad smile.

Waiting for her master to come back home, Convena fed her child.

Aryon returned half an hour later; seeing him on the threshold, Nerwen got up and went to meet him. He bent down and kissed her lips, then engulfed her into an embrace. It was wonderful coming home and finding her; until this day, his dwelling seemed to him always cold and empty, even if there was a fire burning, a hot meal laid out and somebody to welcome him; but that somebody, so far, had never been Nerwen.

“Convena cooked a delicious stew, and a cake for dessert, too,” his wife informed him.

“Excellent,” he approved, then he whispered in her ear, “Even if the best dessert I could wish is you...”

He withdrew to see how she felt about his statement and saw a naughty glint in her eyes.

“...but we surely need food to keep up our strength for our special activities,” she pointed out to him, retorting. He grinned:

“You’re absolutely right.”

He took off his jacket and sat at the table with Nerwen; Convena arrived with their dishes filled with steaming stew, served with the same brown ale she had used to cook it and coming with spinaches and mushrooms, both flavoured in butter and onion.

“Any problems, at the barracks?” the Aini enquired.

“Not at all,” Aryon answered, “It was just about informing me of the preparation for the celebrations for Pallando’s return. Rovena wants to go big: a banquet with all the leaders of the town – including me, and therefore you, too – followed by a dancing party and finally fireworks. She already hired half of the cooks in Tarsad and the best musicians. The city guard will be very busy and Ryol is getting very nervous, because being me one of the guests, he’ll have to do it by himself.”

“Is he capable of it?”

“Yes, he’s been my deputy for 18 years, he can handle it perfectly even without me. But he seems not aware of it,” he concluded chuckling.

It was simply wonderful being able to share with her his daily events, he thought. He grasped her hand and kissed it fervently, his bright eyes gleaming with love. Nerwen brushed his cheek, moved by his adoring gaze.

Convena was coming from the kitchen to pick up the now empty plates and saw them exchanging these endearments. Having a romantic soul, the woman felt her heart melting; she was happy for her master, whom she loved like an elder brother – after all, she had known him all her life and had grown up in this house, as much as Beryana was now doing. She decided she would leave them alone as soon as possible.

She returned discreetly in the kitchen, then she made some noise before returning.

“My compliments, the stew was soft and very tasty,” Nerwen declared.

“Thank you,” the woman replied, very pleased, “I fetch you the cake.”
Shortly after, she was back with the sweetbun, which she served with cider, fresh from the cellar.

“This afternoon I have errands to run,” she declared, “Therefore, I’d like to go out as soon as I’ve finished cleaning the kitchen, if you give me permission.”

“Of course,” Aryon answered, “don’t worry, take your time. We can manage dinner by ourselves.”

Convena took the hint, but played it cool.

“Very well, then I’ll be back tomorrow morning for breakfast.”

“No, tomorrow will be a celebratory day for everyone,” the prince revealed, “We celebrate the return of King Pallando. Stay with your family. You’ll resume your job the day after tomorrow.”

“Oh, I thank you so much, Lord Aryon!” the woman smiled, happily. She went back to the kitchen to begin cleaning it, so she could go home early.

Aryon and Nerwen savoured the cake, finding it deliciously fragrant; the cider, cool and sweet-scented, was perfect with it. Convena came to take the empty dishes, so they stood up to let her clear the table. Túdhin trotted to the backdoor, looking at Nerwen expectantly; the Istar guessed he wanted to go out, so she opened the door and the wolf ran outside.

“Do you like the garden?” Aryon asked her under his breath, “I designed it for you... too bad it’s not blossoming.”

“It has to be stunning, in spring,” Nerwen considered, then turned to him, “Thank you.”

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her hair.

“I took care of it, thinking of you,” he said, “Every single plant, if it has perceived my thoughts, has so much heard about you, that it’s like it knows you.”

“Oh... now I understand why I perceived a sense of familiarity...” Nerwen murmured, “Yes, Aryon, they heard your thoughts, and when I stepped foot in the garden, they recognised me...”

Her voice trailed off; wordless, she held him tight. She couldn’t imagine 75 hours without him, and for him it had been 75 years, with only one night here and there spent with her...

“I love you, Aryon,” she whispered, “I love you so deeply...”

“And I love you, Nerwen,” he said in a low voice, brushing her back.

“Beryana, let’s go,” they heard Convena calling for her child; they withdrew from their embrace to say goodbye to mother and daughter.

Alone at last, they devoted themselves to one another; forgetting about their intention to go for a ride, they spent a long afternoon of love in each other’s arms.

Author’s corner:
Gastronomic curiosity: the beef stew with dark ale is none other than the famous and delicious Irish Guinness stew, which I had the luck to taste in Ireland.

Finally, husband and wife are back together; for Nerwen it was just about ten days, while for poor Aryon it was three-quarter of a century. Okay that “a hundred years is nothing in the life of an Elf” (cit.) but nonetheless this time has been very hard, for our Avar prince.

Did you notice the date? October 21st, 3018: Frodo Baggins’ great adventure has started... time is running out, Nerwen must find the Entwives as soon as possible and convince them to play their part in the War of the Ring that’s about to begin, even if neither them nor Nerwen know anything about it.

Lady Angel
Chapter LIII: Heading for the Land of the Entwives

The following day, there was a great celebration throughout Tarsad; people improvised kiosks dispensing drinks – ale, cider, wine, fruit juices, hot infusions – and other ones selling bread, cheese, cured pork meat, buns and sweetbuns, cakes, cookies and pastries. The streets were full of feasting people who ate, drank, sang and danced to the music of hornpipes, bombardons, hurdy-gurdies, psalteries or rebecs, preferably dances with a lively rhythm beaten by tambourines and kettledrums, castanets and chimes.

Aryon and Nerwen were of course invited to the king’s table, which had been set up in Burgomistress Rovena’s house. To her surprise, Nerwen was bade with Aryon to sit at the left side of the king, who had to his right side his hostess and her husband.

The banquet was sumptuous; they began with a creamy soup made with pumpkin, potatoes and leeks, seasoned with black pepper, followed by a tasty mushroom pie; then there was a very soft braised beef, coming with oven-baked onions and broccoli, and after this a succulent partridge roast with stewed chards and steamed sprouts. Then, they served several types of cheese, both cottage and ripened; finally came Pallando’s favourite cake, made of water chestnuts and decorated with whipped cream and chocolate powder, a delight for the palate. The courses were generous but not excessive, and there was a lot of excellent wine, both white and red.

Dancing followed the banquet. Pallando asked Nerwen the first dance, an elegant pavane with a slow and solemn rhythm that she didn’t know, but was able to follow well enough; then the king left her to her husband, who was very glad to lead her in the simplest dances, which he had learned during his enforced stay in Tarsad, jigs and farandoles that amused her greatly. When the night fell, an agreed signal interrupted all parties: the moment for fireworks had arrived. Everyone took their cloaks and got out into the late autumn cool air, to admire bright pathways, waterfalls, fountains,
blossoms and explosions in all kind of colours. The show lasted for a long time and prompted many admired cries; finally, they all returned inside to warm up again with one last cup of mulled wine.

Nerwen and Aryon returned home hand in hand; once there, they hanged up their cloaks and went to sleep.

OOO

The two enjoyed several days together; at Pallando’s request, Rovena had exempted Aryon from this duty as the captain of the guard, which could be carried out satisfactorily by his deputy, Lieutenant Ryol; besides, he would take the office as the commander, when the prince would leave it to follow his wife in her search.

With Pallando’s consent, Nerwen and Aryon set the date of their departure on October 27th, exactly one week after their return from the mysterious dimension where the Dark Portal had taken them.

The day before leaving, the two Istari went back to the cavern to destroy the spell that triggered the passage. Aryon Morvacor accompanied them, keeping at his wife’s side; from his glower nothing shone through, but the possibility that the passage would accidentally be activated and Nerwen would vanish again terrified him; but this time, he would make sure to go with her.

“How shall we proceed?” Pallando asked; he was standing in front of the rocky wall covered with the Black Speech writing, but kept to a safe distance. Even if he knew perfectly that, to activate the Portal, he had to read it aloud, going nearer gave him chills, and Nerwen didn’t feel differently, even with the comforting presence of her husband.

“We must cancel the writing,” the Maia considered, “To engrave it, the Balrog used magic, and therefore we’ll have to use magic to erase it.”

“Have you got any idea about what spell would do?” the Blue Wizard enquired. Nerwen racked her brains.

“Orthel teithad gondram,” she declaimed; nothing happened, “Join your power to mine,” she invited her colleague. They recited the phrase together, but again they didn’t succeed.

“Toba têw gondram,” Pallando tried, then they repeated it together, but again to no avail.

“Lammorn leithian gond,” Nerwen tried again, but they failed once more.

They tried new approaches, but they didn’t reach any successful outcome. After one hour of useless attempts, the two Istari sat down, disheartened and puzzled. Aryon crossed over the writing, staring at it with deep loathing; then, in a fit of rage that startled Nerwen and Pallando, he unsheathed his sword and gashed the inscription; the indestructible Elven blade, forged by the best smiths among the Avari, left a cut that partially altered the writing.

Pallando and Nerwen gaped at each other.

“Did you feel it, you too…?” the Wizard stuttered. His colleague nodded, incredulous:

“The power of the spell has lessened!” she confirmed. Aryon turned to look at them, confused.
“Don’t tell me it’s simple like that…!” he muttered.

Nerwen cast him a quick glance full of perplexity, then she got up and went to watch the scratch closely; Pallando mimicked her.

“Try again,” Nerwen invited Aryon. The prince used his sword once more, this time grazing away a letter with the sharp tip of the blade. Again, the power the inscription emanated diminished slightly.

“Very well,” the Aini accepted the obvious, “It truly looks like being so simple, we would never grasp it, if not by chance. Let’s go and fetch more suitable tools and more capable hands.”

They got outside, where not only the ever-present guards, watching the entrance and preventing anyone to enter, were waiting for them, but also the small escort that had accompanied them. They called for all the available carpenters, to provide their skills with hammer and chisel; within the hour, a dozen of masons, marble-cutters and stonecutters were working on the wall at a good pace, erasing the evil inscription and its spell. As the work progressed, Nerwen and Pallando constantly controlled the power level, until, about three-quarters through the job, they felt it dispelling entirely. As a precaution, they let them finish the job, until the writing was completely erased; to be even safer, they had the splinters grinded and the resulting stone dust dispersed into the wind. The whole procedure lasted several hours, but finally the two Istari claimed to be satisfied.

The next morning, accompanied by an escort appropriate to the occasion, they left for Pallàndim; they needed over two weeks to reach Yòrvarem’s capital city, because this time, unlike during the outward journey, they couldn’t avoid stopping each day in a settlement and being welcomed joyfully because of their return, which had been unhoped-for after so many decades. When they finally arrived in town, they had to accept with good grace the three days of celebrations the Counsel had planned; Lady Bryulen, a descendant of Délamin, now led the Counsel, with the title of Regent. The first ceremony was, of course, about returning full power as a monarch to Pallando, followed by a parade in the town’s streets, where the inhabitants warmly welcomed back their king, who had become almost a myth in the years that had passed since his disappearance. There were lavish banquets, dancing parties, concerts and plays in Pallando’s honour, which Nerwen and Aryon joined as guests of honour.

Eventually, the excited mood began to subside and life settled back to normal. The day after the ending of the celebrations, Nerwen went to the royal library, seeking for possible new documents about the lands beyond Yòrvarem; she didn’t expect to find much, instead she was pleasantly surprised.

“Of course we have new maps,” the chief librarian assured her, a tall and lanky Man looking only apparently distracted, “Since the king called in for you all those cartographers and explorers, before you’d leave for the Great Forest, it stuck as a kind of tradition, for those who explored new areas and made maps about them, to take a copy to our library.”

He invited her to follow him and led her in a specific section of the last hall in the large library, pointing out a number of bookshelves.

“You’re still free, as you used to be, to consult all the papers,” the librarian assured her, “Maps,
reports, everything. I hope you’ll find what you’re looking for,” he concluded. Nerwen thanked him and began examining thoroughly each and every document stored in the shelves the librarian had showed her; the papers had been filed in chronological order, not divided by topic or author, therefore she simply began to consult the oldest ones, proceeding little by little to the present date. She expected it to be a meticulous and sometimes boring job, but Aryon’s presence, who offered his assistance, made it less hard.

OOO

Several days later, Pallando summoned them both. He received them in his office, as he had done the first time; Tûdhin came, too.

“I am catching up with the events occurred in the realm during the years of our absence,” he announced them, “One of the most serious is that the savage peoples of the south are seemingly preparing for some imminent war, but not in the neighbourhood. There are rumours about an alliance with some sort of a power to the west; in the light of what Kementári told you, in my opinion I think it is Sauron.”

Nerwen nodded grimly.

“So, the Dark Lord is truly on the move,” she commented, “What are you planning to do, Pallando?”

“As soon as I learnt this news, I sent spies in Harad and to the Easterlings and the pirates of Umbar,” he answered, “Also, I sent emissaries to our eastern and northern neighbours, the Valasim and the Daladim, with whom, as you know, we have excellent relationships, asking them about what they know about this, so that we can join our intelligence and have a more complete picture. I want all the possible data to better decide how and when waging war against our southern neighbours,” he shook his white head, “If they are truly about to make an alliance with Sauron, we must stop them, or the peoples of the west will be attacked from two sides: squeezed between them, it is likely they will be overpowered.”

“The Avari, too, should play their part in the fight against the Enemy,” Aryon mused, “I could write a message for my sister, Queen Eliéna, exhorting her to keep the Easterlings occupied along the border with the lands of the Six Tribes,” he suggested, “but for a messenger to get over the Orocami, we’ll have to wait for the spring thaw.”

“Or he could go round the mountains to the south,” the sovereign considered, “however, in this case I fear it would take as much time as waiting for spring; besides, the lands the messenger would have to cross are more hostile.”

“Then better wait,” Aryon concluded.

“In the meantime, we’ll leave in search of the Entwives,” Nerwen interjected, “If we’ll find some directions in the papers that have piled up during these years, we’ll follow them; otherwise we’ll leave anyway, trusting in chance.”

OOO
In the next days, Aryon and Nerwen went on sipping through the books and papers of the library. At the eve of her birthday, a strong feeling – a more fleeting kind of her Second Sight – convinced the Istar to dig behind a line of tomes, where she found a carefully rolled up scroll. Aryon, surprised by her frantic movements, watched her unfolding it on a table located under a window and examining it with almost wild eyes; but he avoided bothering her with useless questions.

As she was closely observing the map, Nerwen felt the embers of hope flaring up quickly into a true fire.

“There it is!” she almost shouted in happiness, “This is exactly the appearance of the land I’ve seen in the Mirror of Galadriel!”

The prince got near her and glimpsed at the chart from over her shoulder. Orientated northwards, as Men used to do, on the left it showed the range of the Orocarni, while on the right stood the Eastern Ocean and on the bottom the northern part of Yòrvarem. Lands they had already seen in other drawings occupied most of the middle section of the map, but it was the upper section that had filled Nerwen with enthusiasm, showing an area full of watercourses and small woods. A note of the person who sketched the map said that the region looked well-trimmed, as if cultivated, but he hadn’t seen any sign of inhabitants.

“Do you see this river?” Nerwen asked, pointing at it, “It’s exactly how I saw it. And this group of hills, too, and the conformation of the coast…,” she turned to her husband, “Aryon… that’s it!” she threw her arms around his neck, “I almost cannot believe it…”

The prince returned her hug, happy about her happiness.

“Let’s leave immediately!” she exhorted him, eagerly.

“This is not the best season for a journey,” he considered, “but the climate is milder, this side of the Red Mountains, therefore I think we can do it,” he kissed her brow, “May I suggest to wait a couple of days? Tomorrow is your birthday and I’d like to celebrate it… the last one was 75 years ago, for me.”

Nerwen squeezed him, moved.

“You’re right,” she whispered, apologetically, “Sure, we can absolutely wait some days, at this point it makes no difference,” she raised her head to look at her husband and smiled, “I, too, want to celebrate with you my birthday,” she concluded, then she sighed, troubled, “I’m so sorry I missed so many of yours, though…”

He surprised her by kissing her at once, heedless of those who might see them in this public place.

“Let bygones be bygones,” he said under his breath, “It’s over, and I don’t want to think about it anymore. Now we’re back together and nothing else matters.”

Nerwen could only agree with him.

OOO
The couple preferred celebrating privately, having their midday meal in their chambers – the same they had the previous time – with some of Nerwen’s favourite food: porcini mushrooms soup, followed by a slice of veal roast with cream, coming with potatoes and beets stewed in olive oil and onion, and finishing with a strawberry jam tart. Aryon gave her a hairclip in mother-of-pearl decorated with malachite rhombuses of a bright green, a small and practical item she could take with her even during their search, which continuation was now imminent.

Pallando supplied them with everything they needed for travelling: a new tent, blankets, food, goods and a long-legged she-mule, stout but surprisingly nimble, with a light bay coat and blond tail and mane, named Kerra. As usual, Nerwen communicated with her, finding that she was stubborn, which wasn’t surprising in one of her race, and rather touchy, but also generous and loyal. She thought they would go along well, and maybe, in time they would even grow fond of each other, as it had been with Thalion.

When she met Túdhin, however, Kerra was frightened and it wasn’t easy convincing her the wolf wouldn’t hurt her. Ultimately, it was Thilgiloth’s serene attitude that persuaded her to give the predator a chance. She would need time, though, to trust him fully.

Allakos, too, didn’t feel completely comfortable around the wolf yet, but at least he was slowly getting used to his presence and didn’t swerve nervously each time Túdhin came near him.

The night before Aryon and Nerwen left, Pallando had a banquet prepared in their honour; at the end of the sumptuous dinner, he drank to the success of their search.

The morning after, the second day of December, Aryon and Nerwen left, heading for the area that, most likely, was hosting the Entwives; considering the distance and the morphology of the lands they had to cross, they thought to reach it in around 20 days, barring accidents.

Unlike the previous time, when the king himself accompanied them, they left the palace on the sly, soon after the sun had arisen. They headed for the nearest ferry and crossed the Yorva, then from there they moved north-north-westward, more or less parallel to the coast, about 50 kilometres away; they would cross the realm of Dalad and for this reason, Pallando had given them a safe-conduct, and he had informed his counterpart, Queen Carysa, so that they would benefit of a free passage with no questions of sort, in case they would be stopped.
The tall range of the Orocarni, even if almost 350 kilometres away on their left, shielded the regions of the far eastern Middle-earth from the meteorological disturbances coming from the west; besides, the Eastern Ocean, warmer than Bellegaer, softened the climate even more. Hence, the temperatures were appreciably higher than further west at the same latitude and snow fell only rarely in the plains of Dalad.

Following the directions on the maps they had taken with them, in about ten days Nerwen and Aryon crossed Dalad, turning slightly towards the coast just before reaching its northern border and arriving at Tregaron, a large village on the boundary, which was another river – smaller than the Yorva – called Convy.

They planned to stop here a couple of days to purchase some food, but weather worsened suddenly, bringing pouring rain and sleet, so they were forced to extend their stay for three more days. They took the opportunity to rest, with a view to the second stage of their journey.

This morning, Nerwen awoke early. Emerging from sleep, she felt Aryon’s arms around her: since she had returned from the mysterious dimension she had been to, he had taken to keep her close also during sleep, as if he wanted to know where she was in every moment, even sleeping; it was clearly a consequence of the long years during which he had been alone. She regretted having to disturb him when she needed to get up, like now, but she didn’t feel to deny him this comfort; and after all, she liked to sleep so close to him.

She moved extremely quietly, but after a few moments, she heard him murmur in a sleepy voice: “Mmmmhh… where are you going, star?”

“To check on the weather,” Nerwen answered, smiling in the darkness, “I’m sorry I woke you up…”

“Never mind,” he reassured her, letting go of her; he turned to search blindly for flint and steel to light the candle on the nightstand and, after some moments, the small flame lightened faintly the room. Nerwen got up, wrapping herself in a woollen shawl before crossing over to the window; she opened it and moved the shutters aside, discovering a cold, but finally clear dawn.

“Looks like the bad weather is over,” she observed, “We can resume our journey.”

They went downstairs to break their fast in the common room, then they got ready to start; they were ferried on the other bank of the Convy, consequently leaving Tregaron and Dalad. From now on, they would wander through apparently uninhabited lands, heading north-west to a zone comprised between two large rivers coming from the Orocarni, which met at about 100 kilometres from the shores of the Eastern Ocean, forming a large triangle rich in watercourses and dotted with woods, which base was the Red Mountains. Their destination was precisely the point where the two rivers met, then they would seek a ford to cross the southern watercourse and from there they would begin scouring the territory in search of a trace of the Entwives.

Six days after leaving Tregaron, the land slowly became boggy. The map signalled this area as a strip about 20 kilometres long but wide at most four, alongside a river that coiled in the plain and that in this place branched into many minor small courses forming a marsh. There were no fords
downstream, where the river became even larger and deeper as it approached the ocean; nor did it appear to be any passages upstream. To cross the river, they had therefore either to ride upstream for an indefinite number of days, until they would find a narrow and low enough place to ford, or they had to go across the swamp. This was precisely what the anonym editor of the map had done, about 50 years earlier, indicating clearly the exact point, just south from where they stood now, where the marsh was less than three kilometres wide. The sun was setting – the winter solstice had just passed and the days were very short – hence they decided to camp there and reach the beginning of the passage in the following morning, and then go for the crossing.

The night passed peacefully, even if Túdhin was a little restless.

*I hate swamps*, he admitted straightaway.

“Be grateful we’re in winter,” Nerwen observed smiling, “In summer, it’d be far worse, with clouds of mosquitos tormenting you…”

*But you’d drive them away, wouldn’t you?!* the wolf promptly countered and the Maia chuckled, amused.

*Yes, that’s true*, she confirmed: it was a very prosaic use of her gift to communicate with *kelvar*, but nonetheless very convenient.

They pitched their tent, then Aryon gathered firewood; the dampness of the place made it difficult to light a fire, but Nerwen intervened with her power, so that it could better catch the spark, and finally they obtained a nice, lively flame. Aryon put some water in a pot to make a soup, softening some strips of beef jerky and dried herbs coming from his wife’s stock. Waiting for it to cook, they took care of Thilgiloth, Allakos and Kerra, freeing them from their harness and letting them graze. Túdhin instead went hunting, as it was his habit when they travelled.

After the warm meal, they arranged the fire so it would burn low as long as possible; before retiring to the tent, Nerwen raised her gaze: in the night sky, the huge constellation Menelvagor stood out, representing Túrin Turambar, the great Human hero of the First Age who, according to the prophecy, would return to fight against the Great Enemy in the Dagor Dagorath at the End of Time. At his feet, the bright Helluin shone vividly, looking like a jewel.

“I missed stars dearly, in that strange place…,” she whispered. Aryon had no need to ask to what she was referring.

“Were there no stars?” he asked, surprised.

“No, sky by night was pitch black, there was no sign of light; while by day there was a suffused luminosity. If there were moon and sun, they weren’t visible.”

“What a strange place,” he commented, thoughtful, “so different from Arda… Who knows where it’s located.”

“Only Eru knows,” the Aini considered. The prince engulfed her suddenly in a hug and held her tight.

“It doesn’t matter… What does matter, instead, is that you’ve come back to me, safe and sound…” Nerwen reciprocated his hug.

“You’re right, it doesn’t matter,” she confirmed, “All that matters is that we’re back together. And mayhap we’ll soon find the Entwives…” she added, tilting her head backwards to look at him. The
flickering light of the fire drew flashes from his bright eyes, captivating her.

“I’m sure it won’t be long now,” Aryon affirmed with his characteristic little smile; then he bowed his head and kissed her.

OOO

The next morning, they started early as usual; a couple of hours later, they found the entrance of the trail, as shown in the map, and they entered the bog. The path was rather narrow, so they had to ride in a single-file line, Túdhin scouting as usual, followed by Aryon on Allakos; behind him came Nerwen on Thilgiloth, while Kerra closed the small procession.

The wolf didn’t feel comfortable at all: his dislike for swamps was really great.

*It stinks,* he grumbled. Actually, the odour of the stagnant water wasn’t particularly pleasant even for Nerwen’s and Aryon’s much less sharp sense of smell.

“Hold on, old friend,” the Istar exhorted him, smiling at his grumpiness, “We all need to do so.”

Túdhin snorted, irritated, but gave up complaining any longer.

They trudged on slowly, advancing cautiously, careful not letting the hooves of horses or mule out of the dry ground they were treading on among reeds, sedges and rushes. It was only three kilometres, but at this pace, they would need a couple of hours; at least, they could orientate easily, because from the back of their mounts they could clearly see the plain beyond the marsh.

The place was extremely silent: no breath of wind stirring the vegetation, no chirp of birds that usually inhabited swamps, such as mallards, teals, herons, curlews, or croaks of amphibians like frogs and toads.

“It’s too quiet,” Aryon observed in a gloomy tone.
“You’re right,” Nerwen confirmed, furrowing her brow, “Actually, this is unusual…”

She had just finished speaking, when something cold and slimy grabbed her from behind.

Unseen, behind them some creatures of mud had noiselessly emerged from the murky waters of the swamp; humanoid-shaped, they had moved quickly to catch up with the intruders. They had watched them since the moment they had entered the bog and now they were attacking them.

Nerwen shrieked as they hauled her from her horse; Aryon whipped around, unsheathing his sword, but he, too, was assaulted from behind and knocked down. He fought furiously against very strong arms, while Allakos whinnied in fright, attacked in turn by another creature.

Thilgiloth, too, neighed, but out of rage; she jerked to one side and escaped her aggressor, turned and reared, lashing out a powerful hit with her front hooves to the mud monster, who looked like imploding and dissolved.

Meanwhile, Kerra was kicking furiously, strenuously defending herself from her assaulter, which jumped backwards to avoid being hit; now the she-mule, dismayed but also enraged, turned and sank her big teeth into the slimy being, ripping one arm off it. The creature howled in pain and retreated, throwing itself into the marsh.

Túdhin had been the only one not assaulted, maybe because he was the smallest one and therefore they thought him the less dangerous. After a moment of pure terror, fury overwhelmed him and he hurled himself against the nearest creature of mud, the one that was trying to immobilize Aryon on the ground. He bit it angrily into a leg and the being roared as the limb was cleanly chopped off under its knee. Its grip relented and the prince could break free; he whirled his sword, cutting in half the monster, which went limp on a heap and reduced itself to a puddle.

In the meantime, a second creature had attacked and overrun Allakos, and now with a mate it was dragging the stallion into the bog as he neighed desperately, in terror. Nerwen, too, unable to get rid of the monster, was suffering the same fate, her prodigious agility completely useless against the invincible grip holding her. With a furious roar, Aryon ran toward the creature of mud, but he couldn’t strike his sword without risking hurting his wife. Therefore, he let his blade fall and jumped on the monster’s back, clutching his neck and wringing it with all his strength; the creature resisted, but Aryon held on. Hence, the monster let go of Nerwen to grasp the prince’s arms and yanked at them, trying to break free. Being much stronger than Aryon, he would surely succeed,
but the Istar, now free, unsheathed her long *Noldorin* dagger and, with an angry yell, sank it two-handed into the creature’s chest, ripping it open to its belly. The monster screeched horribly, wriggled off Aryon’s grip and stumbled toward the water, evidently trying to escape, but the prince retrieved his sword and cut it in half, as he had done earlier with its mate; this one, too, went limp on a heap, dissolving into a puddle.

For a moment, Aryon and Nerwen stood there, staring at it, breathing heavily, then Allakos’ terrified neighs roused them; they turned to him, who was now half sunken into the bog, and saw that Thilgiloth had come to his aid. The Chargeress flung herself against one of the monsters that were dragging the destrier, pushing it away from him, then she turned to face the other creature, but the muddy bottom of the swamp hindered her. Aryon leapt toward his horse, plunging into the water and sinking his sword into the back of the creature still all over Allakos; the monster let go and howled. The prince drew back the blade and swept it, cutting one arm off the creature, which howled again and threw itself into the water, disappearing.

Meanwhile, Nerwen had arrived; she clutched Allakos’ bite and pulled him towards the dry ground of the track; the destrier was in trouble because of the mud where his hooves had sunken, but slowly he was able to move. The last creature, figuring out the defeat, sneaked away and vanished into the swamp.

Thilgiloth, too, laboured her way back to the dry ground of the path, imitated by Aryon. They were all variously muddy and drenched, and they trembled because of the fright and the nervous tension.

Aryon came up to his wife and grasped her arm, watching her closely.

“Are you alright?” he asked her. She returned his gaze:

“I’m fine, don’t worry,” she reassured him, “And you?”

“Yes, I am, too… But anyway, what were those monsters, in the name of all the stars of Kiltoniel?”

The Maia needed a minute to recognise the *Avarin* version of Gilthoniel, the name by which Varda Elentári was known among the Elves of Middle-earth. Then she focused on her husband’s question: she didn’t have the time yet to reason on it, but now she thought about a possible explanation.

“I think I know,” she answered slowly, “Aulë created the Dwarves because he wanted someone to hand down his knowledge as a smith and he was too impatient to await the awakening of Ilúvatar’s First Born; but he didn’t succeed at the first try. He used water and mud, and he dissolved all the experiments that didn’t succeed; apparently, some specimen have escaped the dissolution and these creatures could have descended from them.”

The prince nodded:

“Yes, it’s plausible…”

They checked their animals; luckily, they had suffered no damage, but they had to rearrange Kerra’s load, which had shifted and risked to fall off, while Allakos – who had had the roughest time – was still shuddering violently because of fear; Nerwen needed several minutes and all of her power of persuasion to calm him down.

“Do you think they’ll come back?” Aryon asked, referring obviously to the mud monsters.

“Now they know they have no longer the advantage of surprise,” she considered, pensively,
“besides, if I go on listening mode, I’ll be able to catch their minds approaching and therefore we’ll be ready to welcome them.”

He pondered their chances.

“They didn’t prove very difficult to overcome,” he considered, “however, we don’t know how much they are: if they’d attack us in great numbers, I doubt we could handle it. Better getting out of here as soon as possible. We’ve passed the midpoint, let’s go as fast as possible.”

“I totally agree,” she accepted; should they be attacked again, in this place with no kelvar she wouldn’t be able to call for help anyone which could intervene soon enough.

In their soaked clothes they were cold, so they enveloped themselves in their blankets, then they got back on horse and rode on at maximum speed; Nerwen kept her special senses open to perceive the possible approach of the monsters, but they stayed away and the small company came out of the swamp with no other bad surprises.

“I doubt those creatures can go very far, outside their element,” Aryon said, “but better not take unnecessary risks: let’s go quickly away from here, at least a few kilometres.”

Again, Nerwen agreed.

“He have to wash and change,” she suggested, “Let’s go upriver.”

Aryon nodded and turned Allakos eastwards, spurring him to a trot; he would prefer a nice gallop, but Kerra couldn’t keep a faster pace.

They rode on for about six kilometres, with the marsh on their left, until the found again the river, in the place where it began to branch into the lesser watercourses forming the bog, and they went upstream until the swamp disappeared behind them.

When they finally halted, it was well past noon. First thing first, they lighted a fire, where they put some water to boil, and set up their tent: for this day, they wouldn’t ride on anymore, as they had to wash and dry the clothes they were wearing. While they were waiting for the water to become warm enough, they unloaded Kerra, then took off the harness from their horses and groomed them thoroughly. Túdhin dove quickly in the river, shook himself forcefully and ran to warm up by the fire.

_I hate bathing in winter_, he declared resentful.

_I understand you completely_, the Aini commented, sympathetically, _Unfortunately, we don’t have a comfortable bathtub with warm water like in Qos._

_Indeed… I’ll never say again that I don’t like to wash into a tub with warm water!_ the wolf concluded with a spark of auto-irony that made her laugh.

When the water was warm enough, Nerwen and Aryon used a cloth to cleanse themselves from the dirt, donned clean garments and rinsed the discarded ones, then hanged them on a rope fastened from one tree to another. Finally, they had their meal, eating dried fruits, walnuts, hazelnuts and lembas, which Nerwen had baked before leaving Pallàndim.

“I think I’ll cross a bog never again,” Aryon commented with a face, while they were eating, “if only I can avoid it…”

“The problem wasn’t the bog, but its hostile inhabitants,” the Istar considered in a low voice, “If
only I had thought about mentally scanning the area before going in…” she concluded in a depressed tone: her fault had endangered Túdhin, Kerra, Allakos and even Aryon, who had the life of the Eldar and not of the Ainur.

“No danger was indicated, on the map or on the corresponding travel diary,” the prince pointed out to her, “Mayhap that explorer was lucky and the mud monsters didn’t see him, or mayhap at that time they weren’t here, or who knows what else… The trail looked safe: there was no reason to seek potentially dangerous creatures.”

She pressed her lips together.

“Alright,” she admitted, “but from now on, I’ll be more cautious.”

Seeing her still distressed, Aryon pulled her into an embrace and had her laying her head on his shoulder.

“Not even an Istar is all-seeing,” he reminded her, kissing her hair. Nerwen inhaled deeply, then exhaled slowly: her husband was right, only Ilúvatar was. She was extremely grateful for his support and she loved him more than ever. She lifted her head to look at him and smiled:

“If I wouldn’t be already in love with you, I would fall for you right now, because of what you’ve just said,” she declared, then reached for him and kissed him fervently.

He held her tight, a little perplexed, and reciprocated her.

“I don’t think I’ve said anything so big,” he affirmed when she left his lips, “but if this is the outcome, I’ll say it more often…” he added with a wolfish grin. Nerwen laughed, cheering up, and kissed him again.

OOO

The next morning, they resumed their journey, leaving the river and heading again northeast, to what they supposed being the land of the Entwives. Two days later, at sunset, they reached its southern boundary, bordered by a wide watercourse, its surface placid, which meant it was deep. They watched it: in this place, it was impossible to ford. In summer, they could cross it swimming, of course placing Kerra’s entire load on a raft, but in the middle of winter this was unthinkable. The possibility that Nerwen, extending her special senses, would perceive an Entwife was infinitesimal: assuming this was actually their territory, the area was very large and the Entwives very few in number, perhaps some hundreds. However, even an Entwife would have trouble crossing, if the river was very deep.
The only solution was the one that, because of the swamp, they had been able to avoid with the former river: riding upstream until they would find a suitable place to ford it. Anyway, this was something they had taken account of, when they had left Pallândim, therefore they weren’t too much disappointed.

They camped; after setting up their tent, while Nerwen was busy lighting the fire, Aryon took his chance fishing; he was lucky enough to catch a considerably large sturgeon, which they cut transversally in thick slices and roasted on the fire, seasoning it with salt and herbs.

“We’d need a good white wine,” Nerwen commented in a jesting tone, biting into a tasteful slice of fish. Aryon handed her the water bottle.

“Well, this is so white,” he countered, grinning, “it’s even transparent!”

The Maia laughed heartedly, and her husband with her, and their good mood cheered up their four-legged friends, too.

OOO

Upstream, the nameless river turned southwest. They followed it for five days, fording a small tributary on their side and seeing another one on the opposite bank, before finding a suitable place to cross: by now, the river had shrunken to less than half its width. It was too cold for Aryon to check its depth, as he had done with the Lavnen, after their misadventure with the Easterlings, therefore they decided to try crossing it staying on their mounts, except turning back if the water would arrive to Kerra’s belly, who was the shortest. Túdhin was placed again on Thilgiloth’s saddle.

The first attempt didn’t work because the water was too deep; several hours later they tried again and this time they succeeded. Finally on the other side, they exchanged satisfied gazes and then rode on, heading again northwest, more or less parallel to the Orocarni – still invisible from this
point because over 200 kilometres away – and leaving the river behind: in those days, Nerwen had mentally scanned the territory, seeking any sign of the Entwives; her hopes had been scarce and indeed, she had gathered nothing, therefore they had concluded they had to go deeper into the triangle bounded by this watercourse and the northern one. The Istar planned to repeat the search the way she did it in Fangorn, scouring back and forth the land between the two rivers staying in *listening mode*, her mind bent to pick up thoughts that could indicate the presence of the female Onodrim; but neither this day nor the following did she hear anything.

Later that night in their tent, cuddling under the blankets in their mutual warmth, the two took stock of the situation.

“*The land is the right one,*” Nerwen declared, her head on her husband’s shoulder, “*The map leaves no doubts; but if the Entwives are dwindled to a few like the Ents and live very scattered, we could need weeks, before finding one…*”

“The same applies if they live all together in a remote corner of this land,” Aryon considered, “*The area is very extensive.*”

“Sooner or later we’ll meet them,” the Maia declared firmly, “*it’s only a matter of time.*”

“*Unless…,*” the prince began, then he paused, making a face.

“*Unless…?*” she urged him. Aryon sighed: he didn’t want to disappoint his wife in any way, but they had to be aware even of the worst chance.

“*Unless they’re all dead,*” he concluded in a low voice. Nerwen pressed her lips together: she didn’t like thinking about this possibility, but he was right. After all, the image she had seen in the Mirror of Galadriel could be referring to a time past, and now the Entwives could have become extinct.

“Yes, this is a possibility, unfortunately,” she admitted, “*but I won’t give up until I’ll have scoured every inch of this territory.*”

“Of course,” Aryon agreed, then he thought better of it, “*Anyway, even in this case it wouldn’t mean they have become extinct for sure… It could be that they relocated elsewhere.*”

“Sure… but then, we’d have to start all over again to search for them,” Nerwen grumbled in a gloomy tone, “*Let’s hope we’ll find them here,*” she concluded, sighing.

“Don’t think about it now,” he exhorted her, kissing her brow, “*We’ll cross that bridge if we come to it.*”

Once more, her husband was right, Nerwen thought. She lifted her face and kissed his lips, her heart love-swollen.

*Author’s corner:*
Gastronomic trivia: the cake made of chestnuts is the famous Montblanc, rather heavy but absolutely delicious.

The image of the mud monster comes from the website “Rise of the Empire GDR”.

Well, finally Nerwen and Aryon are in the place where she is sure the Entwives dwell. Is she right? We’ll see in the next chapter!

Once more, I wish to thank those who are following this story; double thanks to those commenting it :-)

Lady Angel
Chapter LIV: The Land Between the Rivers

The following day, they departed for the river delimiting the northern border of the alleged land of the Entwives.

Even if Aryon’s presence allowed her to focus only on the elsewhere, as he could take care of the here, the Aini couldn’t keep her thoughts extended for too many hours in a row, therefore the explored area was forcibly smaller than the distance they would actually be able to scour; but they didn’t want to take any chance to miss the Entwives, maybe by a hair.

“If nothing else, this land is truly beautiful,” Nerwen observed, when they camped at night. Aryon, who was stirring the stew he was cooking, made with a rabbit he had shot that same afternoon, turned to look at her.

“Young capability to find the bright side in everything is amazing,” he declared, moving to sit beside her, “It’s one of your qualities I love best.”

The Istar smiled at him:

“Sometimes I, too, got discouraged,” she admitted, “but never for long. It’s typical of my character, wanting to find a ray of light in the deepest darkness.”

“I’m quite the opposite,” the prince admitted. Nerwen’s smile broadened:

“But I love you anyway!”

He cast her a quick glance.

“Thank the Valar!” he grumbled; a tiny smile danced at the corners of his mouth in a way the Aini
found always adorable.

Their character difference could have been a source of conflict, between them; but instead they had
turned it in a strong point of their relationship, because where one exceeded, the other mitigated,
and where one didn’t work something out, the other did. They completed and enriched one another.
This didn’t exclude small quarrels, on occasion, but they were always trifles, quickly sorted out
with the simple use of common sense from both sides. Even at the very beginning, when they had
clashed, more than met, on the shores of the Sea of Rhûn, this capability to understand each other
had always been there – which now, in the light of the fact they were partners for life, looked
obvious.

OOO

The next morning, they broke up camp and started for the day. In the afternoon, Nerwen perceived
an awareness she thought she knew, but it was very faint because of the distance. She pulled at
Thilgiloth’s reins and the mare stopped immediately.

What’s up? the Chargeress asked, moving her ears trying to catch unusual noises.

“I felt something,” the Maia answered in a tense tone, speaking aloud to Aryon’s benefit. The
prince halted Allakos next to Thilgiloth.

“Hostile?” he enquired, his hand already on the hilt of his sword.

“Not at all,” she reassured him, “but it’s very far away; if I’ll figure out in which direction it is, we
could go and verify.”

She closed her eyes to better focus and extended her thoughts at maximum range, moving them in a
slow semicircle in front of her.

“There,” she said at length, pointing straight northwards, “but I cannot make out the distance.”

“We’ll just have to find out,” Aryon commented with a shrug. They spurred on their mounts and
resumed their ride.

Half an hour later, Nerwen turned to her husband:

“I lost it… I don’t perceive it anymore,” she announced, frustrated.

“Did it move away?” Aryon asked, frowning, “Did it get scared?”

“But I sent only friendly thoughts!” she protested, “I don’t see why it should get scared…”

“Mayhap your way to communicate made it uncomfortable,” the prince reasoned. Nerwen
pondered about it, then she nodded, agreeing.

“Too bad… it could have been an Entwife…” she murmured, slumping down her shoulders. Aryon
felt very sorry for her.

“Come on, let’s go on anyway,” he encouraged her, “Mayhap it changes its mind and comes back
toward us.”
It was a faint hope, but better than nothing, Nerwen thought, therefore she nodded in acceptance.

Shortly before dusk, they reached the borders of a wood; Nerwen singled out yews, oaks, acacias, birches, beeches, ashes, chestnuts, walnuts, hazelnuts, maples and pines. There were very ancient trees, younger ones, and even very young ones; when the Istar probed them, she found traces of a great vitality that, even if dimmed by the winter rest, expressed a sensation of such wellbeing and joy, she smiled: the wood was healthy.

She told Aryon, who commented quietly:

“It could be a hint to the presence of the Entwives, couldn’t it?”

Nerwen lighted up: she hadn’t thought of this.

“That’s true!” she cried, “It could actually be like that… Aryon, I feel we’re so close…” she sighed, “Sometimes my Second Sight manifests in such a subtle way, I cannot distinguish if it’s my own wish or an actual premonition.”

The prince smelled the air.

“Anyway, it’s time to stop for the night,” he observed very practically, “Even because it’s going to snow very soon.”

Nerwen watched the almost dark sky, where the stars sparkled very brightly, as it is usual in winter nights.

“Is that so?” she asked, sceptically, “There are no clouds at all…”

“Trust me, it’ll snow before dawn,” he assured her, dismounting, “I smell it in the air.”

“Oh,” she uttered, amazed: she had never heard about someone who could smell snow, hence predicting its arrival; but she didn’t question her husband’s words, certain that he knew what he was saying.

“Better then pitch the tent in the cover of the trees,” she said instead, pointing to an acacia with an umbrella-shaped crown that, even if leafless, had branches so thickly intertwined, they offered some shelter. So they set up their tent there, then they lighted a fire where Nerwen prepared one of her delicious soups with herbs, adding morsels of lembas that made it more substantial, while Thilgiloth, Allakos and Kerra grazed the hard winter grass and Túdhin went hunting for a prey.

They warned their four-legged friends about the upcoming snowfall, hence they, too, took shelter under the wide crown of the acacia; finally, they went to sleep, wrapped in their warm blankets and shared embrace.

OOO

When Aryon and Nerwen awoke, the next morning, the world outside their tent was particularly quiet, as it usually is after a snowfall; but in this climate, it was unlikely that the white covering would be so thick to justify this silence. Somewhat alarmed, Aryon reached out his hand and placed it on his sword – never too far from him – as the Maia was extending her thoughts outside; she immediately found her four-legged friends’ minds, watchful but calm, and therefore she, too,
Feeling Nerwen brushing her own consciousness, Thilgiloth told her serenely:

My friend, finally you’re awake... There’s someone here who would like to meet you.

At this point, the Istar extended her awareness even farther and met a very peculiar mental pattern. She sprang up sitting, suddenly excited.

At her abrupt movement, Aryon gripped the hilt of his sword, ready to wield it, but catching a glimpse of Nerwen’s smile in the dim light inside the tent, he restrained himself.

“What is it?” he enquired under his breath.

“The Entwives,” she answered simply; she threw her cloak over her shoulders and exited, her husband closely following her.

The landscape was blanketed in snow, but the white covering wasn’t higher than three centimetres. However, Nerwen’s eyes widened for another reason: even if she had perceived the Entwives’ thoughts, she found herself unprepared for the sight that appeared before her when she came out of the tent: eight trees surrounded their small encampment… though they weren’t trees. Motionless, they pointed to her their eyes, round and of different colours, from green to brown; their gazes where solemn, calm, completely avoid of menace, but the nervous flick they possessed, while going from her to Aryon as soon as he had appeared behind his wife, indicated a certain degree of disquiet.

The Avar prince, who had never seen an Onod in all his long life and, for the better part of it, had thought them a mere, foolish tale, stopped dead in his tracks; in his hand he was still clutching his sword – which for good measure he had taken with him – but he almost dropped it, his fingers suddenly limp.

Nerwen fought to find back her composure.

“Hail, Keepers of the Trees,” she saluted them, talking in Entish and calling them with their formal title, “I am Nerwen the Green, follower of Kementári. I am honoured to meet you.”

Saying so, she bowed. Aryon of course hadn’t grasped a single word of her speech, which seemed to him very long and flowery, but he guessed the meaning when he saw her paying homage to the Entwives; he quickly did the same, bestowing them with the hail he granted only to the monarchs.

The Entwives were silent for a long time and Aryon began to feel worried.

“Why don’t they respond?” he asked in a low voice.

“The Onodrim aren’t hasty,” she answered serenely; knowing them, she wasn’t surprised if the reply was taking so long: they were surely elaborating the shock of hearing their language from someone who wasn’t of their race, “Be patient, this will take a while.”

After several minutes, the Entwife looking the oldest finally spoke.

“Hail to you,” she answered, “I am Calenfinn. Hum, hoom. No one of other races speaks the tongue of the Onodrim, except our creator Kementári, of whom you claim to be a follower. Was it her, who taught it to you?”

“Yes,” Nerwen confirmed, “she did.”
Calenfinn watched her silently for a long time, while the implications of this news sank slowly into her awareness. Who was she, or better, what was her nature? She looked like one of the race of Men, but Calenfinn’s sharp sight glimpsed a strange aura around her, something ethereal that went beyond the earthly sphere.

Nerwen reciprocated the Entwife’s gaze with serene firmness; that wooden face didn’t allow any emotions coming through, but after a while, in the green eyes lighting it, a series of feelings began whirling: surprise, incredulity, uncertainty, and finally reverence.

She had finally discerned in her a Maia.

“My friends,” Calenfinn finally announced, addressing her companions, “this is an Ancient One. Let’s honour her.”

As she finished her speech, she bowed, bending stiffly. Astonished, Aryon saw all the Entwives lower their bare winter crowns in an unmistakable gesture of deference.

Nerwen noticed his confusion; she had foreseen that the Entwives could behave deferentially, as Treebeard had done at the time of her visit to Fangorn, therefore she had thought about a plausible explanation and now she gave it to him:

“I told them I’m a follower of Kementári; they needed some time to be convinced, but now they’re paying me their respects.”

The prince nodded, unaware that it was a domesticated truth.

“Do you speak Westron?” Nerwen asked, “For me it’s hard speaking Entish and my companion doesn’t speak it at all,” she doubted the Entwives would possibly speak Avarin, but on the other hand, Aryon didn’t know Sindarin nor Quenya – on which Entish was based – and therefore, the only option remained the Common Speech, “But I ask you not to reveal my true nature,” she added quickly, “because I have not the permission to divulge it to those who do not recognise it by themselves.”

Calenfinn, as it was typical of her race, pondered carefully over those words.

“Yes, I speak the Common Speech,” she finally confirmed graciously, “even if it is a very hasty language and therefore we do not like to use it. And do not worry, your secret is safe with us.”

“Thank you,” the Istar then said, switching to Westron, then she pointed out the black-clad prince, “This is my husband, Aryon Morvacor, prince of the Avari Eldar.”

At those words, which were finally intelligible for him, Aryon bowed again.

“Honoured to meet you,” he declared, unaware he was repeating the same phrasing Nerwen had used.

“The honour is ours, Lord Aryon,” Calenfinn reciprocated him courteously, then she addressed the Maia again, “We perceived your presence from a distance and we became intrigued,” she paused, pensive, “I admit we felt rather alarmed, because never before did we hear the thoughts of another creature. Therefore, we came to check this out. Humm… We were surprised your kelvar did not get scared…”

She left the sentence unfinished, clearly perplexed by such a behaviour.

“I think it’s because of Thilgiloth,” Nerwen explained; the Chargeress, hearing her name, shook
her blonde mane to identify herself and sent her a feeling of agreement, “She has encountered an Ent before, west of the Red Mountains, and she knows you’re not evil creatures, so she reassured the other ones.”

“Buràrum! You… encountered an Ent?” Calenfinn asked for confirmation, astounded; Nerwen nodded:

“It was him, the one who told me about your disappearance, which is the reason we were looking for you. However…” she shivered in the cold air, “for us, this temperature is uncomfortable: we’d like to light a fire and prepare a hot draught, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course… how rude of us to keep you in the cold! While you refresh yourselves, we will retire. Then we will speak.”

The Entwives walked away, gathering not far away; they began talking among them in the slow, booming language of the Onodrim.

Nerwen turned to Aryon and saw him staring at the Entwives as if he wasn’t still able to believe his own eyes.

“Well, my love, are they as you expected them?” she asked him sweetly. The prince tore off his gaze from Calenfinn and her companions to look at the Istar.

“Yes… and no,” he answered slowly, then he shook his head and explained better, “Since I joined your search, I tried to imagine a thousand times how it would be to meet the female Onodrim, but the truth is, I didn’t know what to expect. Not much for their looks – you don’t need much to imagine a tree with two eyes and a mouth – but for the perception I’d have of them… Such ancient beings who make me feel young again… The thought that some of them are even older than me is… unsettling.”

The Aini nodded, understanding his state of mind: as a race, the Ent were virtually older than the Eldar, because Yavanna had created them just after Aulë’s Dwarves, but they awoke to conscience along with them, because Eru had decreed that the Elves would be his Firstborn and therefore no one could be born before them. Aryon was born at the beginning of the Second Age and had rarely met someone older than him; there were of course the High Elves coming from Aman, some of them – like Celeborn and Galadriel – were born during the Years of the Trees, or Círdan the Shipwright, but these people never went to the lands of the Avari.

“Now let’s have breakfast,” she exhorted him, “Then we’ll talk again with the Entwives.”

The prince nodded; he returned into their tent to get his sheath and put away his sword: he highly doubted that, despite all his fencing skills, he would be able to win in a confrontation with an Entwife, therefore holding his weapon was completely useless. When he exited, he found Nerwen busy lighting the fire; he helped her, getting the wood from under the cloth they had used to cover it the night before, knowing it would snow. While she was handling flint and steel, he filled up the small pot they used to boil water for their morning tea and, when the fire was burning, he put it there. They sat down on a blanket close to the fire and broke their fast with some de-hydrated fruit and lembas, drinking the bergamot tea that the Avari loved so much and that Nerwen, too, appreciated greatly.

As they ate, Túdhin came near and laid down next to them, staring at them with his yellow eyes.
So these are the famous Entwives... he began, hesitantly, I'm... impressed.

Nerwen reported his statement to Aryon and the prince admitted:

“You’re not the only one who’s impressed, old friend.”

“Yes, they’re truly formidable beings,” the Maia agreed, “One mustn’t get mislead by their apparent slowness. They are kind by nature, but if they come to the point of unleashing their wrath, they can be more destructive than an avalanche and more devastating than a fire. And I assure you, the Entwives are no less than the Ents.”

“Better make friends with them, then,” Aryon commented wittily.

“They don’t concede their friendship very easily,” Nerwen revealed, then she chuckled, “In this, they resemble to the Avari...”

Aryon frowned, but she laughed, her eyes shining in amusement, and he cheered up immediately, realising it had been only a little tease.

Seeing them having finished their breakfast, Calenfinn came over to them, while the other Entwives remained back.

“We came to the decision it is better you meet our First Keeper,” she began, “and talk directly to her.”

“With pleasure,” Nerwen promptly accepted, “We strike camp and follow you.”

As Calenfinn withdrew, Aryon asked under his breath:

“Do you trust them?”

“Of course I do!” the Istar began vigorously, before realising that, after all, her husband didn’t know the Ents at all and, before meeting her, he had always thought them just a fable good at most for children, so she went on more calmly, “The Onodrim aren’t evil in nature, even if they can be corrupted by the Dark Power,” she explained, recalling Old Woman Birch whom she met in Tom Bombadil’s land, “but I would sense it. I probed Calenfinn and the other Entwives: they’re trustworthy, even if it’s surely not advisable irritating them with a disrespectful behaviour.”
“I wouldn’t even dream about it!” Aryon reassured her, “I just wanted to make sure we’re not taking any risks,” he brushed her arm, “I couldn’t bear anything happening to you...”

Nerwen felt her heart shrink, because once more she couldn’t reassure him completely about her safety. She covered his hand with hers:

“Don’t worry, the Entwives respect me because I’m an Istar, and even more because I’m a follower of Yavanna Kementári, their creator. By virtue of this respect, also you and our four-legged friends are safe.”

Aryon’s bright eyes shone in amusement, as a grin bent one corner of his mouth.

“It’s convenient, being in the company of a powerful Istar...” he said jestingly, making her smile.

They took down their tent and loaded their luggage on Kerra; the mule was glimpsing the Entwives anxiously, impressed by their stateliness, therefore Nerwen calmed her apprehension caressing her neck and sending her a reassuring feeling.

While Nerwen was buckling the girth of her saddle, Thilgiloth turned her head to look at her:

Finally we managed to find the Entwives! she commented cheerfully, It was about time, don’t you think?

Surely, the Maia confirmed, nodding, But now comes the crucial part: convincing them they have an important role to play in the fight against Sauron. If they reason like their males, it won’t be easy at all...

She remembered all too well Treebeard’s attitude, shared by the other Ents of Fangorn: because they thought that the world didn’t care for them, they had decided that they didn’t care for the world.

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They needed the whole day to reach the place of the First Keeper’s abode; in that time, they learnt that the Entwives called their territory Dor-im-Duin, which meant simply Land Between the Rivers.

They crossed a wood to the northeast, then they rode on in this direction until they reached a woody hill range stretching almost exactly from east to west. The peak at the end was the tallest, very steep and slightly detached from the other ones; a deep indentation cut it almost in half on the vertical direction. It was there where the Entwives led Aryon and Nerwen; it was the evening of the sixth day of January.
When they arrived in front of the entrance of the indentation, they saw a golden light with a greenish hue flowing out of it, very similar to the one Nerwen remembered in Treebeard’s Ent-house.

“You can leave your mounts here,” Olbranch, one of the Entwives escorting them, said.

“Mayhap we should set up our tent,” Aryon suggested, pointing to the sun that was almost setting on the western horizon.

“In the meantime, I will go in and announce you,” Calenfinn told them.

They unloaded their baggage from Kerra and took off Allakos and Thilgiloth’s saddles; as they were about to pitch their tent, Calenfinn came back.

“The First Keeper awaits you,” she reported, “and she invites you to be her guests for the night.”

Aryon cast a perplexed glance to Nerwen, who countered it with an encouraging smile and an affirmative nod.

“Very kind of her,” the prince commented, “but what about our furry friends?”

“If you wish, you can leave them here, they will be perfectly safe; but if you prefer, you can take them with you.”

Nerwen appreciated this very much, but she wasn’t sure that all their four-legged friends would feel comfortable in an underground Ent-house, therefore she delegated the decision directly to them:

“Dear friends, we have all been invited into the First Keeper’s dwelling, but if you prefer, you can stay outdoors here.”

*I’ll go with you*, Thilgiloth announced immediately.
I come, too, Túdhin affirmed.

Allakos shook his mane and snorted:

I don’t like the idea to be underground.

I don’t like staying indoors, Kerra intervened. If you don’t mind, I’d rather stay outdoors with Allakos...

Nerwen reported their choices to Aryon, who nodded, accepting them.

“They can graze freely,” said Olbranch, who went along very well with kelvar, “I will take care of them.”

“We are grateful for your service,” Aryon thanked her.

He and Nerwen wrapped their tent around its poles and secured the straps, and then placed it beside the rest of their luggage next to the entrance; finally, they walked behind Calenfinn, followed by Túdhin and Thilgiloth.

The Entwife led them down a tunnel, skilfully carved out; the location was dry and healthy, because the rock was porous yellow tuff, insulating and breathing. Globes full of a liquid emitting a soft golden glow, similar to a summer moon, lighted the passage; Nerwen recalled the vessels in Treebeard’s house, which illuminated the Entish abode with a green-golden radiance.

When they arrived at the bottom of the tunnel, they entered into an almost perfectly square cavity, with smooth walls full of the same previous globes that lit it brightly as daylight. A gush of water spurted from one of the corners, about halfway between the ground and the ceiling, pouring into a round basin carved into the floor and then flowing away on a small canal, parallel to the left wall, finally disappearing in a hole. A wide shelf occupied the opposite wall entirely, and Nerwen recognised it as an Ent-bed.

But what drew immediately the gaze of both the Istar and the Avar prince, was the Entwife who was waiting for them at the far end of the rocky hall. Tall and slender, with the white bark of a silver birch, her crown was made of gnarled branches – bare because it was winter – which showed her elder age; however, her eyes, green and dotted with brown specks, were very lively and staring at them attentively.
“Lady Nerwen, Lord Aryon, this is our First Keeper,” Calenfinn said, making the introductions in Common Speech. The Istar bowed formally, as if in front of a queen, and her husband did likewise with no hesitation.

“Hail to you, First Keeper,” Nerwen said in Entish, then returned immediately back to Westron, “It’s a great honour for us to meet you.”

“Hail to you both, and welcome to Dor-im-Duin,” the Entwife saluted them formally; she moved towards them, still watching them intently, “I am Fimbrethil.”

The name sounded familiar to Nerwen, who furrowed slightly her brow in the effort to recall where she had heard it; when she remembered, her eyes widened in shock:

“You’re Treebeards partner?!”

It could be a simple homonymy, of course; but for some reason, it looked unlikely, being them Onodrim.

Indeed, she was right: the Entwife straightened herself further, towering over her and Aryon, not in a threatening way, but showing amazement:

“You know Treebeard?”

“Yes, First Keeper,” the Istar confirmed, “Yavanna Kementári put me in charge of finding the Onodrim, who looked like wiped off Arda. In my search, I arrived to Fangorn Forest; it was he telling me about your disappearance. My Mistress then gave me the mission to find you, the Entwives. Along the way I met Aryon Morvacor, prince of the Avari Elves, who joined my search,” she concluded, turning to look at her husband and smiling at him. He responded lifting
slightly the corners of his lips, but his eyes were shining: he felt his wife’s joy and rejoiced in turn.

Fimbrethil observed the exchange of looks; Calenfinn had told her they were spouses, of course, and that the Elf didn’t know the Aini’s true nature. She wondered why this had to remain a secret to him, but she didn’t doubt this would be disclosed in the future eventually.

Now she saw the evident love these two shared and in her mind she saw herself and Treebeard, young and carefree, as they scoured the plains of Eriador and Beleriand under the stars of Varda Elentári, when Sun and Moon hadn’t been created yet and the Two Trees blossomed in Valinor; a feeling she thought she had forgotten for a long time suddenly arose again in her soul: the longing for her partner and the desire of having him again by her side.

“I think we really do have very much to discuss,” she observed slowly, “Please, sit down...”

They took their seats on the edge of the shelf – which actually was a bed – while Fimbrethil remained standing; the First Keeper dismissed Calenfinn, who retired with a stiff bow.

“If your kelvar friends are thirsty, they can drink from the spring,” Fimbrethil said, “The same goes for you two.”

Nerwen translated for Túdhin – Thilgiloth of course had grasped the Entwife’s words – and the two of them thanked her, but for the moment didn’t take the offer and simply placed themselves next to their two-legged friends, the Chargeress beside Nerwen, the wolf laying down at Aryon’s feet.

Fimbrethil began the conversation, asking:

“How is Treebeard? And his companions?”

“He’s fine, at least when I last saw him,” Nerwen answered, “but it’s been over 75 years since and therefore it’s no recent news, sorry. As for his companions, I hadn’t the chance to meet any of them, however Treebeard told me that more and more of them fall asleep and become almost entirely vegetal. They call them Huorns. This situation saddened him greatly and he was almost resigned to see the Onodrim vanish from Arda. It was then that he told me about you and your disappearance. At first I thought he meant you were all dead, while you were actually just gone without a trace.”

The Maia paused and looked Fimbrethil straight in the eyes; feeling under examination, the Entwife blinked slowly and, for the first time in her life, she knew she was in a state of inferiority, because she was facing a creature older than she was, as much ancient as the world itself, no, even more, because she had existed before the creation of Eä.

“I will not ask the reason for your choice,” Nerwen went on slowly, in a grave tone, “but it took your race almost to extinction and this can only be a great sorrow for Kementári. You all are aware of this, I think...?”

Even if enclosed in a speech of flawless politeness, the reproach was stinging. Aryon wondered worriedly if Nerwen had considered the possibility it could infuriate the First Guardian, then he called himself silly: rarely Nerwen didn’t know what she was doing, and never about what concerned her specific area as an Istar.

Nerwen’s remark struck Fimbrethil hard; her gaze became blurred, as if lost in unfathomable depths. Then she cast down her eyes and it was as if she was bowing under the weight of an unexpected responsibility. She kept silent for a long time, meditating about those words; the Istar
and the prince waited patiently, leaving the Entwife her time.

“By leaf and sapling,” Fimbrethil finally murmured, “We have always thought that, sooner or later, we would send back one of us to Eriador, seeking our partners to convince them to join us... but we have it good here, everything is tidy and cured and growing as we wish it to... we prosper and live in peace. The years have gone by, becoming at first centuries, then millennia, and finally here we are, facing the emissary of our creator, and she is reminding us our lack toward her and our partners...” she raised her gaze again, now back to the present, “The Ents seemed to care little or nothing about us and our land, or so we convinced ourselves; when we felt Sauron’s threat grow and his accursed Orcs – burarum! – began raiding our land, devastating it and cruelly destroying the olvar under our protection, we decided to go in search of another place where we could live in peace. We preferred saying nothing to our partners because they would try to dissuade us and we didn’t want to listen to them, and there was no time for discussions... we have been forced to decide hastily. Apparently, it wasn’t for the best...”

She paused; at this revelation, Nerwen furrowed her brow.

“It wasn’t for the worst, either,” she said slowly, “Your previous land witnessed a terrible battle that destroyed it, to the point that even today, after over 3000 years, it is a barren and burnt place called the Brown Lands. If you stayed there, you, too, would have been destroyed.”

Fimbrethil pondered over the Aini’s words.

“Yes,” she admitted at length, “if it is like you say, then mayhap it was not entirely a fault. However, this does not justify the fact we never came back... I can only say that we felt deeply let down by the Ents’ behaviour towards us. We felt them distant, indifferent, and when we found this place and took it into our care, for a long time we were so busy that we never thought of returning. When we began to think again about it, we kept postponing, sure that there was always time to do it... of course we didn’t grow in numbers, without our partners with whom giving birth to Entlings, but we flourished. Our life was so good that we didn’t feel the urge to go back to Eriador.”

She sighed, and it seemed like a whirlwind among trees, a sound that impressed both Aryon and Túdhin, making them start.

“The Ents weren’t indifferent,” Nerwen declared in a low voice, “only little interested in your way to take care of the trees, unalike to theirs. When they discovered you were disappeared, they mourned greatly; many of them left to seek you, scouring every corner of Middle-earth for many years. Songs and poems have been composed about their search. But I am persuaded they have never been able to go over the Orocarni – we succeeded just because we came by chance across a document indicating a forgotten pass – otherwise they would have surely found you. How did you manage to go beyond the Red Mountains?”

She had already figured out the answer and what Fimbrethil told them confirmed it:

“We walked and walked and walked, constantly heading eastwards, crossing rivers and endless prairies. The lands were mostly uninhabited, except for a few Men – Easterlings, I guess – who ran, scared to death, upon our sight. Then, one day we reached a great forest, which we recognised being the Wild Forest, or what remains of it since the great inland sea of Helcar disappeared, on which shores, Lord Aryon, your people had awakened, so long a time ago...” she bent slightly toward the prince – her way to nod – and he nodded in turn, “At this point, we turned southward until we came round the forest, than we resumed going eastwards until we reached the Eastern Ocean. At that point, as we didn’t wish to go to Harad, which savage inhabitants have no consideration for other creatures unless they are at their service, we turned northwards, following the coast, for many months. Then, one day we came across a river which told us about an inland
area, uninhabited but splendid. We came to see it and became enamoured of it, adopting it as ours... and here we are.”

“A truly splendid land,” Aryon confirmed, talking for the first time – but after all, he had little to say, about Nerwen’s mission: he accompanied her, supported her, but it wasn’t his mission, “even in the middle of winter.”

“Thank you, Lord Aryon,” Fimbrethil said; her woody lips were incapable to smile, but her eyes lightened up in delight.

“I agree,” Nerwen intervened, then her tone became unexpectedly harsh, “but I fear soon Dor-im-Duin will end up like your ancient gardens and become new Brown Lands.”

This brutal statement startled the First Keeper and her gaze darkened. If it were anyone else saying this, she would dismiss it with a shrug of her wide crown: the Entwives were afraid of no creature, not even the Orcs. Indeed, if at the time they had preferred leaving, it hadn’t been because of fear, but because they hated fighting; this didn’t mean they weren’t able to, if need came. However, her interlocutor wasn’t anyone, but an Ancient One, even if in incognito. Suddenly, she felt sure that the reason Nerwen didn’t openly reveal her true nature – not even to her husband – must be very grave.

“Why were you seeking us?” she therefore asked, slowly.

Nerwen exchanged a look with Aryon: the decisive moment had finally arrived. If Yavanna was right – and the Istari didn’t doubt she was – from Fimbrethil’s answer could perhaps depend the fate of Middle-earth. Hence, she had pondered very carefully about what she was going to say.

“During these last centuries, the Dark Enemy rebuilt his power,” she revealed, “In secret at first, hiding his identity and seeking refuge in a secondary stronghold; here, he suffered a defeat, but he was far from destroyed; he ran and went back to Mordor, finally revealing himself openly and restoring Barad-dûr. Then, he began gathering around him armies of Orcs, with the apparent intention to arrack the free peoples of Middle-earth; and not only this: he found allies in the Haradrim and the Easterlings. If he’ll succeed in his purpose, his overwhelming numbers will ensure him victory, the world will fall under his shadow and all living beings will suffer horribly under the heel of his tyranny,” she paused to emphasize what she was going to add, “All the living being, Fimbrethil... the Onodrim also. Fangorn as much as Dor-im-Duin. It’s only a matter of time.”

The Entwife was silent for a long time; her blurred gaze revealed she was pondering deeply about what had been told her.

“This news is very, very grave,” she commented at length, “Even feral, I would say. However, it cannot be that you and your husband crossed half the world only to take us this information: hence, what is the true reason?”

Again, Nerwen chose carefully her words, even if she had meditated on them for a long time, after her last interview with Yavanna.

“Kementári felt for a long time that the other Valar were wrong to leave the Onodrim out of their plans,” she answered, “They sent the Istari among the free peoples of Middle-earth – Elves, Dwarves and Men – to oppose the growing Darkness, prevent its return if possible and, if not, prepare for defence; but they didn’t think of the Ents. And yet, you’re ancient beings, wise and powerful. You are a potent help in the fight against the Dark Lord. You cannot and must not be left out, nor keep yourselves out.”
Aryon, who had shared with his wife her thoughts about how expressing the cause to the Entwives, intervened:

“Middle-earth – *all of it* – is also yours... not only a small piece called Dor-im-Duin!” he said in a low, but passionate voice. Nerwen cast him a quick glance full of gratitude: she hadn’t anticipated his involvement into the conversation, but his contribution was valuable and she was thankful.

Again, Fimbrethil took her time to ponder about the issue.

“I see your reasons,” she finally declared, slowly, “Can you tell me what Treebeard’s position on this is?”

Nerwen stiffened: the question came unexpected to her. She quickly weighed up her options: she could lie and declare the old Shepherd of the Trees had told her that, in case of conflict, he would support the free peoples of Middle-earth in their fight against Sauron; but lying – except for extreme circumstances – was something she loathed, also because, on the long run, it always proves counterproductive. Hence, she decided for the truth.

“He said that, as the world cares little for the Ents, they decided that they care little for the world,” she answered frankly, “My objection was the one my husband just expressed: you are part of this world, whether the world cares for you or not, or whether you care for the world or not. On this, Treebeard admitted I was right.”

“I see,” Fimbrethil murmured; it sounded like a low subterranean rumble, “However, Mordor is remote and since we settled here, we never saw a trace of an Orc. I do not think the enemy will arrive so far away...”

“Don’t delude yourself: the western lands won’t be enough for Sauron,” Nerwen interrupted her harshly, “Once finished with Gondor, Rohan and Eriador, he’ll turn to the lands east of the Misty Mountains, swallowing up all of them as far as the Orocarni, from the Iron Hills to Eryn Rhûn, and at that point, you don’t think he’ll stop, do you? As we managed it, the Dark Lord’s armies, too, will succeed in getting through the Red Mountains and, once here, they’ll wipe off any resistance they’d find. It’s only a matter of time, from a few years to a few decades, and all of Middle-earth will be subject to the Eye and all its peoples will be enslaved. You cannot seriously think you’d be able to stand up alone to all the power of the Black Hand!”

Fimbrethil stayed stock-still, as if hit by a lightning; however, her eyes had been so far as placid as mountain-lakes, but now it looked as if a violent storm was raging in them.

Aryon shivered at the picture Nerwen had painted, even if it wasn’t the first time he was hearing this reasoning, which he shared.

“You won’t avoid the Enemy’s menace just ignoring it,” he pointed out with quiet firmness. The Entwife’s troubled gaze moved to the prince.

“The prospect is - *buràrum!* – definitely horrifying,” she admitted at length, “What do you suggest, then?” she paused briefly, “Or mayhap the right question is another: what does Kementári want us to do?”

The Maia nodded.

“That you join the fight, according to your skills,” she answered, “to stop and if possible defeat Sauron definitively.”

“We are no warriors,” the First Keeper replied.
“Not in your nature, no,” Nerwen admitted, “but if someone threatens the trees in your keep, you would surely be capable of defending them, am I right?” she leaned over to the Entwife, “The last time you preferred go away and seek another territory; you could do it again, of course... but sooner or later, continuing giving ground, the places where you can take shelter with your protégés will run out and then you’ll be anyway forced to confront the extreme choice: submit to Sauron or fight.”

“Fighting does not mean an assured victory,” Fimbrethil observed.

“Fighting means winning or losing,” Aryon intervened forcefully, “and both prospects are better than the certainty of slavery without hope under the heel of the Abhorred.”

Once more, the First Keeper fell silent for a long time, pondering.

“You bear terrible news,” she finally considered, “However, it will not become less terrible pretending not to hear it,” she paused, “I will muster all my companions and we will talk together to decide how we must act. Calenfinn!” she called out, and her voice sounded like a trumpet blast. The other Entwife arrived immediately.

“Hum hoom,” rumbled Fimbrethil, “Send for all and everyone. Let them know that I summon them for an Entmoot!”

Author’s corner:

Finally, we have reached the core of the narration: the Entwives have been found! As says Thilgiloth, it was about time... but this story dilated in a totally unexpected way, leading me through unforeseen and sometimes unforeseeable situations and characters, taking me by surprise more than once. I hope you’ve been taken by surprise, too, dear readers, because this means I’m not boring you! XD

As for smelling the snow, I didn’t imagine it: I can do it! My parents always made fun of me, despite my forecast coming each time true. Until in a documentary they learnt about some Islanders, Norwegians, Siberians who can do it, and that among them this isn’t such a big deal; and finally they stopped mocking me LOL

As much as for Corch, the smuggler Elf, also the pronounce of the –ch in Olbranch the German way, as in SchumaCHer.

The image of Fimbrethil, found on the wonderful DeviantArt website, is of Metavor.

And so, Fimbrethil summoned an Entmoot! Of course, she doesn’t know it, but it comes about one month before Fangorn’s. Will the Entwives decide to support Nerwen and Aryon in the fight against Sauron? And if so, how? Follow me in the next chapter and you’ll see...

And in the meantime, what is happening in this same timeframe in The Lord of the Rings? Well, on December 29th, the Fellowship of the Ring has left Rivendell and is now about to arrive to the land of Hollin; in a few more days, they will try to cross the Misty Mountains through the Caradhras pass...
I never get tired of thanking the people following this story; and remember, if you leave me a comment or a constructive criticism, I would be really glad. And mind, I don’t bite LOL

Lady Angel
A few days were required before the Entmoot could start, because Fimbrethil wanted all of the Entwives to be there; they were 146 in total. A number of them were far away, taking care of the orchards located the farthest from the abode of the First Keeper, which stood almost at the exact centre of Dor-im-Duin, therefore some had to go and look for them.

At last, four days later, the Entmoot began.

Fimbrethil sent Calenfinn to fetch Nerwen and Aryon. The two headed for the place where the Entwives were gathered; the sight of almost 150 Enyd was something unquestionably impressing, Aryon decided; but Nerwen, too, was struck because, despite these were all females and therefore generally smaller and more slender than the males, never in all her life had she seen so many in the same place.
The couple addressed a respectful bow to Fimbrethil, who responded with a stiff movement of her trunk, bending it slightly at the hips.

“Lady Nerwen, Lord Aryon,” the First Keeper greeted them, “before we begin our discussion, I would like you to present your reasons as why we should intervene in the fight against Sauron.”

Nerwen nodded, glad she could have the opportunity to talk personally to all the Entwives. Aryon signalled her she should speak: after all, he hadn’t much to say.

“Very well,” Fimbrethil said, “Come, I introduce you to the assembly.”

The Maia followed the Entwife, until they stopped at the centre of the free round area. The hum that surrounded them, similar to the rustling of leaves of an entire wood in a windy day, caused by the muttering among the Enyd, stopped instantly.

“My friends and sisters!” the First Keeper began, speaking in Common Speech, “For those who don’t know her yet, this is Nerwen the Green, who came looking for us from the distant West on behalf of Kementári. You already know the reason of this Entmoot; now Lady Nerwen will produce her arguments. She knows perfectly our tongue, but it is hard for her voicing it, therefore she will speak in Westron,” she turned to the Istar, “Now it is over to you.”

Nerwen waited for Fimbrethil to retreat in the circle of her companions, then she cast a circular glance to the Entwives gathered all around. There were birches, beeches and ashes, elders, holms and strawberry trees, as well as some willows, alders and poplars. Their crowns were all bare because of the season; some had an elderly look, such as Fimbrethil or Calenfinn, other looked less old, and some seemed relatively young. Their eyes – large and round, their colour from brown to green – were all on the Aini.

Nerwen took a deep breath: she hadn’t expected to speak in front of the entire community of the Entwives, but she knew very well what to say.

“Since the creation of Arda,” she began aloud, so that all could hear her, “the perfection of Eru Ilúvatar’s work has been marred by the Dissonance Melkor Morgoth produced during the Music of the Ainur. Nonetheless, it has been incorporated in Eä and therefore we must cope with it. Occasionally, it seems to stop, to vanish for some time, but then it comes always back, because it is part of the Created World. When Morgoth was defeated and banished from Arda, his servant Sauron replaced him. He, too, looked defeated, after Eléndil and Gil-galad beat him in duel and Isildur seized the One Ring; but he was not. Slowly, he has rebuilt his strength, for a long time secretly, but now he has finally revealed himself in his full terrible power and his menace to Middle-earth has become imminent.”

Nerwen paused, looking at the Entwives all around; none of them made a sound, waiting for her to go on.

“Mordor is very far from Dor-im-Duin,” she continued then, “and some of you could think that Sauron will never come here, that the fight is up to the inhabitants of the lands west of the Orocarni, Gondor and Rohan to begin with; but if the Dark Lord wins the resistance of the brave Men living in those countries, afterwards his armies will spread everywhere, conquering one by one all the realms beyond the Red Mountains, from south to north, where he has other allies. And when he does, the stare of his terrible Eye and his insatiable greed will turn to these lands.”

She paused again, so that the listeners would better grasp what she was saying in a language that,
for them, was very *hasty*. Then she went on:

“A long time ago, when Sauron’s menace reached your land, you decided to abandon it and seek another place to live in peace and take care of your plants. You made this choice because you are no warriors. You could make again the same choice now: to leave Dor-im-Duin and seek another land. But if Sauron wins, sooner or later there will be no other place to take refuge in, sooner or later you will be forced to face him anyway, and then you would be alone, because all the other will already have succumbed, and the only choice you’ll have will be living, like everyone else, as thralls under his heel, or die.”

Again, Nerwen paused; the assembly was listening to her in complete silence, evidently impressed. Aryon felt very proud of his wife: he thought that her words and her eloquence would convince even the rocks of the Orocarni to join in the fight against the Enemy.

“Or else, this time you could make the opposite decision,” the Istar went on, “Instead of fleeing, *fighting*. You’re no warriors, sure; but I know what you’re capable of, if you’re forced to defend your land and the trees in your keep. It has already happened, in the past. I am asking you to consider yours also the lands and the plants of the rest of Middle-earth, not only of Dor-im-Duin; because you and Dor-im-Duin are part of Middle-earth as much as all its other inhabitants and all its other lands are.”

She paused once more, before playing her best card:

“Yavanna Kementári is sure that all the other Valar were wrong in not considering the Onodrim in their fight strategy against Sauron; she’s sure also that you all – both you and the males – have a central role to play in the fight to free Arda from his menace once and for always. Form my part, I am sure you won’t let down the Valië who both you and me worship.”

She addressed a bow to the assembly, this way indicating she was finished, and went back to her husband’s side; Aryon gave her a glance full of admiration and pride, which she countered with a nervous smile, uncertain about how much her dialectical efforts had actually affected her audience.

“Thank you for your speech, Lady Nerwen,” Fimbrethil said, lowering slightly her branches toward her to show respect, “Lord Aryon, is there something you would like to add?”

“No, my wife has already set everything out in a very effective way,” the Avar prince answered. Hence, Fimbrethil dismissed them courteously and they returned at her abode, where the First Keeper had offered them private quarters, a small cavern well heated by a brazier and lighted by the magical Entish lamps, where they had set their pallet and stored their baggage.

“Thank you for calling my speech *effective,*” Nerwen said, while they walked.

“You’re an excellent orator,” Aryon answered, “Especially considering you’ve been taken by surprise.”

“Would I’ve been ready, mayhap I’d be less effective,” the Istar reflected, thoughtful, “This way instead, the words poured out directly from my heart.”

“And it was audible, I assure you,” the prince concluded; he was silent for a few minutes, then while they were entering their lodging, he asked, “How long will it take for the Entwives to make up their minds?”

“Hard to tell,” Nerwen answered, “but for sure, several days. As you know by now, the Onodrim need a long time to meditate on things and make up their minds.”
Aryon pressed his lips together.

“I just hope their choice will be the right one,” he commented.

“So do I,” she agreed with a sigh.

OOO

While the Entmoot was ongoing, the two of them spent their time exploring the neighbourhood, in the company of their four-legged friends, or taking some alone time in their quarters. Fimbrethil had granted them unlimited access to vegetable gardens and orchards, where they found broccoli, carrots, cabbages, spinach, chicory, turnips, and oranges, persimmons, mandarins, apples, pears and pomegranates; on occasions, Aryon went hunting or fishing. This way, they spared their travel provisions.

The site of the Entmoot was several hundred metres away and, with all those Entwives, it offered the appearance of a large circle of trees. Despite the distance, listening carefully they could hear the sound of the debate, a murmur that never ceased, neither by day nor by night, and that increased or decreased in tone erratically. Aryon and Nerwen thought this depended on the greater or lesser liveliness of the various discourses.

“But do they never sleep?” the prince asked one evening, while they were coming back from a ride, accompanied by Kerra and Túdhin; it was getting dark and it was bitterly cold.

Nerwen had no need to ask what he was referring to:

“Actually, the Onodrim do sleep, but if necessary, they can do without even for long periods; and for long periods I mean really long: even several years.”

“Good Valar!” he cried, impressed. Meanwhile, they had arrived at the entrance of Fimbrethil’s dwelling, where the Entwives had set up an accommodation for their mounts, nothing more than a hut made of thickly intertwined branches, but enough to shelter them from the severe cold of the winter nights and from the sporadic bad weather.

They dismounted and unsaddled Thiligloth and Allakos, then the Chargeress entered spontaneously into the shelter to eat some fodder, mirrored by the black horse and Kerra. The wolf instead followed his two-legged friends inside the First Keeper’s house. As they arrived to their lodging, Nerwen lighted a fire, then they prepared and had some dinner; later, Túdhin took his leave to go sleeping with his equine friends and the couple got to bed. After a few minutes, the magic Entish lamps turned off; they would turn on again as soon as they would detect a movement of some significance, that is, when they would awake.

OOO

On the evening of the third day of the Entmoot, Olbranch came to get them.

“We are about to proceed with the final vote,” she announced, “and the First Keeper wishes you to
“attend.”

Nerwen exchanged a surprised glance with Aryon.

“They did it much quicker than I expected,” she declared.

Aryon and Nerwen returned therefore to the site of the gathering, where Fimbrethil welcomed them; they stood next to her, awaiting to learn the Entwives’ decision.

“The question is easy,” the First Keeper announced to the assembly, talking in Common Speech out of regard for Aryon, “Shall we get involved in the fight against Sauron, supporting the other free peoples of Middle-earth?” she paused dramatically, so that the question would have the time to settle well into the Entwives’ mind, “Who is in favour, to my left,” she went on, pointing, “Who is against, to my right.”

They moved in an orderly manner, nevertheless the noise produced by the movement of such a great number of Enyd was powerful, so much that Nerwen’s and Aryon’s four-legged friends, who had stayed in their shelter, turned to stare, alarmed.

In the end, there were 132 in favour and 13 against; Fimbrethil expressed her vote last, joining the larger group.

Aryon cast a satisfied glance at Nerwen, who responded with an almost incredulous smile: she had expected a much stronger resistance, instead she had been wrong.

“Fine,” Fimbrethil said at this point, “we have established that it is our duty to intervene into the fight against the Dark Lord. But how?” she turned to Nerwen, “What could our contribution be? We are no warriors...”

“No, you’re not,” the Maia admitted, “You’re the Keeper of the Trees, you take care of them and of all the plants, and of the land on which they grow. However, if the land is in danger, you are capable to defend it. A long time ago, you did it, for your gardens in Beleriand now sunken into the waters of Belegaer. You can do it again, with the same strength and the same determination, fighting side by side with the other free peoples.”

“Must we abandon Dor-im-Duin?” one Entwife asked, a slender poplar with an almost white bark.

“Only momentarily,” Nerwen answered, “for the time we’ll need to fight against Sauron.”

“But how shall this fight be carried out?” the Entwife insisted.

“I’m no military strategist,” the Istar declared, “so I turn it over to my husband, Lord Aryon of the Avari Eldar.”

Unexpectedly called in, the prince stood straight at his full stature, even if he couldn’t hope to equal his formidable interlocutors, not in the least.

“We cannot know it precisely, yet,” he answered therefore, his deep voice resounding firmly in the clearing created by the circle of Enyd, “First thing first, I’d say we should join the Men living this side of the Orocarni. I suggest going to Pallândim, the capital town of Yòrvarem, which King Pallando supports us and is an Istar like my wife.”

The news made quite an impression.

“Another Ancient One?” Calenfinn cried; because of Nerwen, she took it for granted – indeed
correctly – that another Istar had to be perforce a Maia.

Aryon arched one eyebrow hearing this title and Nerwen hurried to explain:

“It’s the title the Onodrim tribute to the Istari,” seeing him still perplexed, she added, “I can’t tell you any more...”

The prince furrowed his brow, then his expression brightened and he nodded:

“Understood, it’s one of those things you cannot tell me.”

She addressed him an apoloising smile, but he shook his head:

“I promised, remember? And I keep my promises.”

Reassured, Nerwen broadened her smile:

“I love you,” she mouthed voicelessly, “Yes, he’s another Ancient One,” she then confirmed in a loud voice, “His name is Pallando the Blue. He has agreed to play his role in the war against Sauron and he’ll happily welcome you in honour.”

“I am glad to learn this,” Fimbrethil declared, “So, we will do as you and Lord Aryon suggest: leaving momentarily our land is no big deal, but we must arrange things so that our wards can manage for themselves for a while. Luckily, we are in winter and there is not much to do, at the moment. I think that in three or four days we will be ready to leave,” she watched thoughtfully the Entwives who didn’t want them to join the fight, “No one is forced to go: you are free to stay, if you wish.”

“Thank you,” one of them said, after a brief hesitation, “but the majority has decided, and largely; we have always been united: we will not stay behind.”

“But mayhap it wouldn’t be bad if someone stays to go on caring for your wards, at least the ones most in need,” Nerwen suggested impulsively, favourably struck by the loyalty of the Enyd even when at odds.

“This is true,” Fimbrethil approved, “Talk amongst yourselves and decide who and how many will stay.”

OOO

At last, they decided that five Enyd, among those who had been against their involvement in the fight against Sauron, would stay in Dor-im-Duin to protect and watch over the trees and plants that needed it most, while the others would join the rest.

So it was that, on January 14th, an Istar, an Elf and 141 Entwives, accompanied by a wolf, a she-mule, a Chargeress and a horse, left the Land Between the Rivers, headed for Pallândim.

OOO
They advanced quickly for about ten days, proceeding at a great speed because the Entwives walked very fast. The slowest would have been Kerra, but Fimbrethil had suggested that some Enyd would share her load, taking turns each day, and so also the mule advanced swiftly, keeping up with the horses.

They went on in an almost straight line on the slightly undulated plain, heading southeast directly for Pallândim; they transited east of Dalad, the realm ally of Yòrvarem located on its northern borders, without passing through it.

Only a few hours before reaching Yòrvarem, on the afternoon of the eleventh day of their journey, in Nerwen’s mind the image of a door took suddenly shape, in such a pressing way, the vision superimposed over her normal sight: Yavanna was sending her a contact request. It had never happened before, so far it had always been her to ask for a contact: something extremely serious must have occurred. Startled, she pulled abruptly Thilgiloth’s reins; the Chargeress snorted, surprised, and was about to protest energetically, but sensing her two-legged friend’s agitation, she refrained.

Alarmed, Aryon rushed at her side:

“What’s up, Nerwen?!”

“Kementári is calling me,” the Maia panted.

Fimbrethil, noticing the two of them had stopped, halted the Entwives and headed for them.

“What is it?” she asked, concerned.

“I don’t know yet,” the Istar barely managed to answer, “I must speak with Kementári.”

The First Keeper refrained from asking anything, as she thought inappropriate questioning an Ancient One about a Great Ancient One – the Entish way to call a Vala or a Valië – and simply nodded.

Nerwen dismounted, as Aryon was doing the same, then she spread a blanket on the ground, so she could lay down; Túdhin came to her and touched her hand with his nose.

*What are you doing?* he asked, disquieted.

*I must go Elsewhere: they are calling me.*

*I'll guard you along with your partner,* the wolf promised. Nerwen stroked his head, smiling with gratitude:

*Thank you, my friend.*

She laid down; Aryon sat beside her on his blanket and Túdhin stretched down on the other side.

Nerwen closed her eyes and the door, which was the link between her and Kementári, looked even clearer to her. She opened it and her Mistress appeared on the threshold.

*Nerwen,* she welcomed her, reaching for her; she took her hands and felt her clutching her own.

*What is going on, Yavanna?* she asked, worried.

*Come, take a seat,* the Valië said, as behind her a couch appeared; they sat, still hands in hands, *We just perceived the death of an Istar,* she went on. Nerwen tensed: because they were in another
dimension, they didn’t perceive Alatar’s death; now, who could it be of the other four? Pallando? Or… Her eyes widened: only for one of them would Yavanna call her so urgently.

Olórin? she breathed. Her best friend, known as Mithrandir among the Elves, Tharkûn among the Dwarves and Gandalf among Men in Middle-earth, So his soul is now in the Halls of Awaiting...

The eyes of the other Aini were full of sadness.

Unfortunately, no, she said, Manwë felt him dying… but his soul is not in Mandos. I am so sorry, my friend…

Nerwen was having a hard time to believe this news.

How is it possible? she asked, distraught, He did nothing to deserve ending up into the Void like Melkor! I’m sure that even Alatar, who mended his ways at the last moment, had been allowed to go there!

Actually, he is there… Neither me nor Manwë can understand the reason why Olórin instead is not. We are afraid he is lost…

No, this is not possible! Nerwen rebelled, There must be an explanation… mayhap he isn’t dead at all!

He fought with a Balrog, exactly like you, the Valië revealed, and even though he was alone, he managed to overcome him, after a long battle, throwing it into the abyss… but his victory costed him his life.

This doesn’t explain anything: it happened also to Glorfindel, the Istar recalled, and he went back to the Halls of Mandos! Why not Olórin?

She couldn’t accept it, she never would; she and Olórin had been friends since the beginning, when Ilúvatar created the Timeless Halls and the Ainur; together they had sung in the Ainulindalë and admired it when Eru had made it visible in the form of a vision of Eä, the Created World; together they had witnessed its concretisation through the Flame Imperishable; and together they entered it along with the other Ainur who had asked for its custody, who later would subdivide in Valar and Maiar. They had been friends through all the Valian Years, the Years of the Lamps, the Years of the Trees and the Years of the Sun. Now it couldn’t be all over!

No, there ought be another explanation, she repeated, stubbornly, something that we cannot even imagine…

Suddenly, at it usually did, her Second Sight kicked in. She saw a large army of the Easterlings leaving their capital city, marching swiftly to Mordor; at the same time, from the southern lands, the armies of the Southrons were on the move, even more numerous and powerful because of the terrible oliphaunts, they, too, heading for Mordor; moreover, from the Khand, located southeast of Mordor, the cavalry of the Variags was moving. Her sense of time told her this would happen in a very near future.

Then her Second Sight took her farther into the future, but she had no way to know how much. She saw an immense deployment of armies in front of a strikingly beautiful city of white stone, which she recognised as Minas Tirith as she had seen it in the pictures in Elrond’s library back in Imladris. There was an incalculable number of Orcs, supported by the human armies she had seen earlier. Appalled, Nerwen saw them laying siege to the town and bombing it with catapults and trebuchets; after wreaking devastation, fire and death, they assaulted the large gates with an immense battering
ram shaped like the head of a wolf, breathing fire from its jaws. Above them flew big winged animals, mounted by the Nazgûl; and the icy voice of their commander, the Witch-king of Angmar, was terrible to hear.

Minas Tirith was clearly condemned; the small army she saw coming from Rohan wouldn’t change the outcome of the battle.

Then her vision changed, moved northward with the speed of thought. She saw an immense lonely mountain that she recognised as Erebor, in front of which, in a large dale, stood a great city of Men. Mighty forces besieged it, and Dwarves and Men were fighting fiercely to defend both the town and the Lonely Mountain.

Their situation, too, was desperate.

A feeling of terrible urgency gripped Nerwen.

Yavanna, things are going down! she cried, We must move immediately to assault Sauron’s allies from the rear and divert at least some of them from the attack on Gondor! she thought frantically, Pallando told me he needed months to reach Yòrvarem from Gondor, but the pass we used to cross the Orocarini is very narrow, an army going through it would require weeks... we must find another way, a quicker track to reach the Easterlings!

Yavanna furrowed her wide brow while reflecting upon this, her green eyes lowered on her hands.

I think that no one in Arda know the shape of its lands better than the Eagles, she said at length, Hence, they could know about a quicker way, other than the pass. I can ask Manwë to send you one of them to assist you, if there is one willing to agree: as you know, they are wild beings who helps the other creatures only at their will.

Mention them my friendship with Gandalf, Nerwen suggested, this time using the most well-known name of her friend, who is the emissary of their creator: this could be useful to make them more favourable about helping me.

Excellent idea, Yavanna approved, I will contact Manwë and tell him so.

They quickly parted; and even this time, the Queen of Earth didn’t forget to bless her friend and follower with her special formula:

May the road rise to meet you...

OOO

Nerwen re-opened her eyes, meeting immediately her husband’s grey-blue gaze, as he was sitting next to her.

“Welcome back,” he said with a little, but love-filled smile, helping her to get up sitting. Tûdhin rubbed his nose on her hand to greet her and she stroked him affectionately.

Aryon handed her a canteen of water and a piece of lembas; after drinking a long draught, the Istar signalled Fimbrethil to come near; eating, she told them about her encounter with Yavanna.
“The armies allied to Sauron are about to move?” Aryon repeated, as his military strategist mind was promptly starting up, “We must hurry, that’s for sure! And if there’s a way to go round the Orocarni by a shorter way than the one the Blue Wizards took when they came here, we’ll follow it. When do you think the Eagles will arrive?”

“I don’t know… I don’t even know if they’ll arrive,” Nerwen pointed out, “They are wild beings, very much individualistic… they could decide they are not interested in helping us because they have other plans, or problems they judge more important. Not to mention that crossing the skies so far from their eyries could involve the risk to meet the Nazgûl, who are now equipped with enormous winged creatures capable of tearing them apart…”

“We will just have to hope,” Fimbrethil said, “and in the meantime, hasten to join your friend the Wizard,” she looked at her with intrigued eyes, “Or are they two? Lord Aryon mentioned another one…”

“They were actually two,” Nerwen explained, finishing the last morsel of lembas and standing up with Aryon’s help, “but one has died to save me and the other one.”

“I see…” the First Keeper nodded, without further questions.

They resumed marching and didn’t halt until night fell.

OOO

The next morning they went on. The inhabitants of a few farmhouses they happened to pass by ran in fear, panicked by the sight of what looked to be through and through walking trees; doubtlessly, the noise produced by 141 Entwives marching on was significant, similar to a constant thunderclap blended with the cracks and rustles of a forest in a windstorm, and sounded terrifying to the ears of the unaware Yorvar.

At nightfall, getting near Pallândim, they realised the news of their approach had preceded them – they had anyway expected it, as they hadn’t kept it secret in any way, nor would they have reason to – because outside the gates of the town a group of about thirty riders was deployed, carrying Pallando’s white and blue banner. The Wizard in person was leading them.

As soon as she caught sight of him, Nerwen nudged Thilgiloth to go and join him, closely followed by Aryon and Túdhin. Pallando mirrored them, followed by his flag-bearer and two guards.

“Welcome back, my friends,” the king greeted them from afar, waving. They halted facing each other, smiling, glad to meet again.

“I see you succeeded,” the Blue Wizard considered, nodding towards the Entwives, who had stopped a couple of hundred metres from them.

“Yes, we did,” Nerwen confirmed, “Come, I’d like to introduce you.”

Pallando followed the Maia and the Avar prince, accompanied by the standard-bearer and two guards of honour, who stayed a few metres behind him.

Seeing them approaching, Fimbrethil came forth to meet them, accompanied by Calenfinn.
They halted some steps apart from each other. Pallando’s eyes were round in marvel: he had never
seen an Ent in all the time he remembered of his life, and Nerwen thought he hadn’t seen one even
before losing his memory.

“Pallando, this is Fimbrethil, First Keeper of the Entwives,” she said, “Fimbrethil, this is Pallando
the Blue, King of Yòrvarem.”

The Wizard bowed his head in a respectful greeting. Fimbrethil observed him for a long time, but
he stayed still, as Nerwen had warned him about the Onodrim taking things slowly.

“I am honoured to meet you, Ancient One,” the First Keeper finally declared, responding to his
greeting with a stiff bow. The title made Pallando arch one eyebrow, as he, because of his amnesia,
wasn’t familiar with it, but he accepted it nevertheless.

“My pleasure, First Keeper,” he answered.

Aryon had already gone over the courtesies and was instead pondering about practical things.

“I don’t think it opportune having the Entwives – or even just a delegation – entering town,” he
said, “In my opinion, better we discuss what we got to do staying out here.”

“You are certainly right, Aryon,” Pallando agreed, “While you were away, I sent emissaries both to
Dalad and to Varas, explaining the situation to their monarchs. Both have agreed to join the fight.
From here, you cannot see it, but beyond Pallàndim you will find their encampments: there are
over 8000 soldiers, plus almost 3000 of mine. I will send for their commanders and organise a
meeting for tomorrow morning in the early hours…”

“Forgive me, Pallando,” Nerwen interrupted him, “but I bring most urgent and grave news. If
possible, I’d like to have a meeting now.”

The king glanced at her in surprise.

“You mean right away?” he asked for confirmation and, at her nod, he sat upright on his saddle,
“Fine,” he agreed, trusting her completely, “as you wish. Just let me issue the orders.”

Pallando beckoned one of the soldiers, then he gave him instructions and soon after the man went
off on a gallop to return to the squad that had accompanied the king out of town. There was some
fuss, then three guards went off in different directions, one heading for Pallàndim, the other two
for other places outside the town.

A little over an hour later, Nerwen, Aryon, Fimbrethil, Pallando and the two chief commanders of
the armies of Dalad and Varas were gathered in council. No tent would contain the imposing First
Keeper, therefore they held the meeting outdoors, with the Humans, the Istari and the Elf sitting on
comfortable field-chairs.

The two allied generals had been informed about what was ahead them, but the sight of the
Entwives had them nonetheless greatly impressed.

After he was done with the necessary introductions, Pallando gave the floor to Nerwen, who
explained the situation as her vision had shown it to her, adding that it was extremely urgent
leaving immediately, hoping the Eagles would accept the request of the Valar to help them finding
a shorter way to reach the lands of the Easterlings. She didn’t take into account the Southrons and
the Variags, as their lands were even remoter.

When she finished, the commander of the Daladar, a woman by the name of Voranya, with
piercing grey eyes and a fiery mane streaked with white strands, was the first to speak:

“How much are the forces these Easterlings will deploy?”

Straight to the point with no hesitation, Aryon thought, pleased. Nerwen, too, was favourably impressed for the same reason.

The Aini was no expert and wouldn’t be able to explain in detail; but she had shared with Aryon her vision – in a manner similar to the one she had learnt the Avarin tongue from him, even if now, instead of extracting an information from his mind, she had put one into it – and therefore she could answer:

“How much are the forces these Easterlings will deploy?”

“About 15,000 infantrymen.”

“No cavalry?” Grellon, the general of the Varasar, enquired.

“Not as warriors, only dispatch riders and commanders,” Aryon answered, “The Easterlings fight solely on foot. The Variags of Khand are those who have a very strong cavalry, even if not as formidable as the Rohirrim. However, the number of Mordor’s allies is predominant, compared to Gondor and Rohan: we must divert at least part of them, easing the pressure on Gondor. The Easterlings are the nearest ones: if we attack them, they’ll have to commit at least half of their troops to defend themselves. Even this way, the allied forces of Mordor are much superior to the Gondorians and Rohirrim, in a ratio of one to four.”

“Gondor and Rohan have not many hopes for victory, then,” Pallando mused in a dark tone.

“Mayhap not,” Nerwen admitted, “Nevertheless, we must do whatever we can to help them.”

“It won’t be easy, taking our troops so far to fight in a war that somebody could think does not belong to us,” Voranya remarked.

“Whoever thinks this way is a fool,” Fimbrethil intervened for the first time, startling both Voranya and Grellon with her thundering voice, “This war belongs to us all! Burarum! It belongs to all the free peoples of Middle-earth, of which also your realms are part. We Entwives, too, forgot it, but fortunately Nerwen the Green has come to remind us that we belong to this world and, should the Abominable win this war, he will not let any people escape him and soon all of Arda will be crushed under his domination and we will all be his thralls!”

Nerwen recognised her own words in those of the First Keeper and felt pleased, because it meant that she had her truly convinced.

There were no other objections. They discussed well into the night, skipping dinner, about how to organise the departure and the journey. The supply wagons would slow them down, but it was unthinkable moving their joined armies without them, with their load of food and spare weapons. Meanwhile, they would head for the southern end of the Orocarni, which they estimated to reach in nine or ten days, marching at maximum speed. There, the southern span of the Shadowy Forest would bar their way westwards and they would need to decide whether crossing the wood, where the trees would slow them down, or going round it, marching quicker. Understanding which solution would offer the less waste of time would be the problem. Then they would have to find a ford to cross the Lavnen, this way reaching the southwestern territory of the Easterlings. From there, they would head for their capital town, Ichidoragon, hoping to draw soon their attention. They would be ready for battle any moment, marching already deployed; as an alternative, they would set camp around Ichidoragon, putting it under siege.
“We can’t take with us siege engines like catapults and trebuchets,” Grellon pointed out, “We’ll need to build them on location. This will require time and means…”

“No need for it,” Fimbrethil intervened, “because in this, my companions and I can help; we will be your siege engines,” she paused, responding solemnly to the flabbergasted gazes of the attendants, “Our aim at hurling projectiles is surely better than your devices, and our strength is no less…”

OOO

The next day was entirely devoted to the preparation for the departure of the armies of Yòrvarem, Dalad and Varas. The Entwives rested on the banks of the Yorva, east of the town, from which wall many people watched them gaping, half in amazement and half in awe, but none dared approaching them.

Finally, at dawn of the 28th day of January, the triple army began do move. The Yòrvar marched in front, then camethe Daladar and then the Varasar; the high command had been entrusted to Pallando, as he was the only monarch there – both his homologues had stayed in their palaces, being none of them a warrior – and even because of his age and wisdom, noticeably greater than the other two commanders’.

Aryon had received the title of First Captain, because of his knowledge of the Easterlings; for the same reason, he would actually command the three joined armies, once on the field, as he had commanded the army of the High Sovereign of the Six Tribes of the Avari. Nerwen was formally appointed First Personal Counsellor of the King.

They marched southward, as fast as possible, for ten days. At first, they skirted the Yorva, then, when it bent eastward to the Red Mountains from which it came, they left it, diverting slightly westward while the mountain range, in this place, curved sharply southwards, arriving at about 120 kilometres from the Great Forest. The good weather and the mild temperatures of this latitude facilitated their journey.

This was a completely uninhabited region, unclaimed by any realm, as Yòrvarem’s warlike southern neighbours were located on the other side of the Great Forest and on the coast, so the only living beings observing the passage of the triple army were the animals, who accidentally were wandering in the vicinity.

In the middle of the eleventh day of marching, they reached the end of the mountain range, almost by surprise, because it ended abruptly with a peak no less high than the others they had seen so far, white with snow. At the same time, in the distance on the western horizon, appeared a dark stripe: the Shadowy Forest.

The moment had come to decide whether trying the crossing of the forest, which breadth in this point was unknown to them, with all the troubles implied in moving an army of 11.000 units with all the supply wagons through such an environment, or continuing to go round it, without knowing the distance they would need to cover. Supplies weren’t an issue, at least so far, but they could become, should the journey last too long.

Nerwen had constantly kept an eye to the sky, also with her special senses, in the hope to see the Eagles appear, or at least, one of them; but so far, she hadn’t seen or perceived any trace of them. She tried even now, unfortunately to no avail; she exhaled a dispirited sigh.
Pallando decided to halt and hold a council with the generals and the senior officers, as well as the Entwives, about the path they should take. The question was debated thoroughly, but it didn’t find a satisfactory solution. If the forest was very large in one direction, they would waste much time crossing it; if it was in the other direction, they would waste time in the attempt to go round it. Having no maps showing them one or the other distance, it was all about luck.

“We might as well flip a coin,” Voranya declared through clenched teeth, frustrated.

“Indeed,” Grellon agreed, equally discouraged.

At that precise moment, they heard a faint sound: the cry of a distant eagle. Nerwen raised immediately her gaze to the sky, while hope had her heart jumping. She scanned all around, straining her sight, and finally she detected a black dot, coming nearer from north by northwest.

Noticing the direction of her gaze, Aryon raised his eyes in turn and caught sight of the shape that had drawn his wife’s attention.

“What is it?” he asked, dismayed.

“I don’t know yet,” she answered, “Let me check…”

Nerwen sent her thoughts to the still vague form and met the mind of an Eagle. She gasped in her joyful surprise and smiled, revealing to Aryon this was a friendly and welcomed presence.

*Greetings, Nerwen Laiheri, the Eagle hailed her, I’m Coeris of the Eyrie of the Clouds.*

Her name – Queen of the Skies – revealed she was a female.

*Greetings to you, Messenger of Manwë, she countered her respectfully, Thank you for coming.*

*It’s a pleasure helping a friend of Mithrandir, Coeris answered, I was with Gwaihir when we went to bail him out on that flaming hill, he and his companions the Dwarves, and I fought with him at Erebor. When I learnt you were asking a guide to go the quickest way to fight in the war against the Dark One, I volunteered.*

Nerwen was pleased to find out how her suggestion to name Gandalf had paid off.
Thank you, she repeated, I'll announce your arrival to my friends.

Shortly interrupting their mental conversation, she turned to the other ones.

“The Eagles agreed to help us,” she simply informed them, “One of them is arriving right now.”

Everybody looked in the direction she was showing them.

“An Eagle?” Grellon repeated, squinting his eyes in the effort to see better, “I can’t see a thing...”

“She’s still very far away,” the Istar told him, “but she’ll be here soon. Let’s prepare for her a proper welcome. Remember, the Eagles are very touchy: treat her with great deference. Her name is Coeris, or Queen of the Skies, which means he has a high rank among her people.”

“Better warn the troops,” Pallando observed, “They could feel scared, seeing such an enormous eagle.”

He called his aide-de-camp and ordered him to spread the news about the arrival of an Eagle of Manwë, who was coming to help them finding the way, adding that none had to bother her or got near her without permission.

Shortly after, Coeris glided majestically toward them, revealing herself in all her impressive size, with her over 20-metres wingspan; she landed at a certain distance and Nerwen, Aryon, Pallando and the two generals hurried to mount their horses and approach her. Túdhin, who never abandoned his two-legged friends, followed them, while Kerra preferred staying, intimidated by the newcomer.

The enormous bird of prey waited, watching them intently. She was at least six metres tall and her huge beak could easily grab a horse; everyone except Nerwen – who already had seen the Eagles on other circumstances, also during the War of Wrath at the end of the First Age – stared at her in wonder and a trace of reverential awe, as much as they had at first stared at the Entwives. They got near, slowly, then Nerwen talked to her with voice and mind:

“Welcome among us, Coeris. These are my husband, Prince Aryon Morvacor, Pallando the Blue from the order of the Istari, and generals Voranya and Grellon. Friends, meet Coeris of the Eyrie of the Clouds.”

“It is an honour meeting you, Coeris,” Pallando declared, bowing from the back of his white horse, “Your help will be very valuable.”

Aryon, too, bowed his head, showing his deference, and the two senior officers did the same.

Nerwen translated for the Eagle, who didn’t understand Westron.

As I said earlier, I’m glad to help you, Ancient One, Coeris replied, Your friends are well-mannered, she added, satisfied, Give them my regards, please.

“Coeris greets you,” Nerwen reported, “and says she’s ready to help us.”

“Ask her about the shortest way to get to the land of the Easterlings,” Aryon exhorted her, “between going round Tor Kathren and crossing it.”

Crossing it, was the Eagle’s opinion, Not far away from her, e there is a place where the forest becomes significantly narrow, being less than a hundred kilometres wide. After crossing Tor Kathren, there are less than 250 kilometres to get to the Lavnen in a place you can ford, so it is
350 kilometres at most. If you would choose to go round the forest, that would be over 600, and you would be almost 200 kilometres too far south.

Nerwen reported her words to the others.

“Definitely, it’s worth crossing,” Voranya commented, “Even if the trees will hinder us and we’ll have to move much slower than across open territory, we’ll surely need less time than going round the forest.”

They used the rest of the day to advance toward Tor Kathren, turning straight westwards exactly at the end of the Orocarni, and in the late afternoon they set camp on the border of the forest.

“Not only did we find a way to cross the Red Mountains,” Aryon commented, talking to Nerwen before going to sleep in their tent, “but we even found its southern limit. Our names will enter the geography books along to those of the great explorers,” he concluded, amused, making his wife chuckle.

The crossing of the Dark Forest took four whole days, then they needed as much days to get to the Lavnen in the place Coeris had pointed them out. Once they had reached the riverbanks, they looked across it, where the land of the Easterlings was.

It was the 18th day of February.

Author’s corner:

Linguistic note: Onodrim is the Sindarin collective noun used for the Ents, while Enyd is plural to Onod; that is, Onodrim means the people, the race, while Enyd means Ent or Entwife as individuals.

The Entwives’s Entmoot, in spite Nerwen’s surprise about its brevity, actually lasts as much as the one that, between the end of February and the beginning of March, the Ents will have at Fangorn: three days.

The oliphaunts are, of course, the elephants, an archaic noun used by Tolkien.

Ichidoragon (pronounced ee-chee-do-ra-gon; I emphasise the first “o” but I don’t know if it’s correct) means City of the Dragon in Japanese (at least, according to Google Translator…); I chose Japanese because the armours of the Easterlings imagined by Peter Jackson look very alike those of the ancient samurai.

What is happening in the meantime to the Fellowship of the Ring? On January, 15th – the day after the departure from Dor-im-Duin – Gandalf fights the Balrog on the Bridge of Khazad-dûm; on the 25th, he flings it into the abyss from the peak of Zirak-zigil and dies; and while the three armies march to the Lavnen after crossing the Dark Forest, on February 14th Frodo looks into the Mirror of Galadriel and on the 16th, the Fellowship leaves Lothlórien.
I thank all those following patiently and constantly the progress of this fan fiction. We’re almost there; I promise you won’t need as much chapters to get to the end hahaha!

Lady Angel
They needed two days to cross the Lavnen, then the military caravan – almost three kilometres long – resumed marching.

Three days later, Coeris warned them of the presence of Easterling patrols; they didn't do anything to hide, because they counted precisely on being spotted to prompt a confrontation with at least part of the Easterling army, distracting them from the western front.

The battle took place on February 28th, on a flatland about halfway to Ichidoragon, where they found around 8000 infantrymen deployed and ready; the fight lasted several hours and ended with the resounding victory of the three allies. The few survivors were caught and then released, so that they would break the news of their defeat to the capital city and warn their emperor that the triple army would march on Ichidoragon and make scorched earth all the way through. The prisoners, incredulous they would escape death and torture – which they wouldn’t hesitate inflicting, should their position be reversed – rode away headlong, not out of fear of the army coming from beyond the Red Mountains, but because of the presence of the Entwives: ancient stories, told in low voices around the campfire or in front of the hearth during winter nights, narrated of terrifying beings looking like trees, which had scoured their land so long ago that it had become a legend... and now, this very legend was proving frighteningly real. Indeed, the Entwives had taken part in the battle, hurling boulders they had ripped up from the ground and flinging them in the midst of the opponent army, then charging side by side with the cavalry that had swept away the enemy lines.

This way, a terrifying reputation preceded the triple army; the few villages and remote farmhouses they met on the march to the Easterling capital they found deserted, and therefore they were able to go on without the slightest hindrance.

Coeris, who had kept an eye on the freed prisoners, came back reporting she had seen a number of
couriers leaving Ichidragon headed westward, certainly dispatch riders chasing after the army that was marching to Mordor, carrying orders to recall part of it for the defence of the capital city. Through the Eagle again, they learnt that about 7000 soldiers had been detached from the forces heading for the Dark Land and were returning to Ichidragon marching at maximum speed; they reached the town while the three armies coming from beyond the Orocarni were still one day away.

On the fifth day of March, under a pouring rain, at last Nerwen, Aryon and the armed forces accompanying them arrived within sight of the enemy capital. The Avar prince deployed the troops in formation, with the Entwives at the centre and Coeris flying above them along the whole line, so that they would appear all at once on the horizon in an daunting sight; and indeed, the apparition of 11.000 soldiers on a line of almost three kilometres, accompanied by gigantic walking trees and an enormous eagle, impressed greatly the inhabitants of Ichidragon, undermining the Easterling warriors’ spirits in spite of their officers’ ferocious encouragements, which didn’t sound very convincing. Even the emperor, who was watching from the highest tower of the castle, felt distraught.

Ichidragon was strategically built on a large rocky cliff, just over one hundred metres high, rising suddenly up from the plain, almost vertical on one side, while on the other side, the slope was just slightly less steep. It was impossible to take with a frontal assault, and the walls had defence engines such as ballistae and onagers; but the besiegers could count on siege engines more formidable than the traditional ones: Fimbrethil and her companions. Almost 150 Entwives would act like as many trebuchets and catapults, with a deployment that could not be compared to any other siege in all of the history of Arda so far. At the worst, they could starve Ichidragon because, even if well stored with food and water, sooner or later the defenders would finish their stocks. What mattered, was having removed a substantial part of their forces from the assault that Sauron was preparing against Gondor; if they would conquer or not Ichidragon, was of secondary
importance.

OOO

For 48 hours, the triple army did nothing, except setting camp in plain view, but well out of reach of possible reactions from the besieged city, a strategy meant to unnerve the adversary.

On the third day, Pallando, Nerwen, Aryon, Fimbrethil, Voranya and Grellon, followed by the standard-bearers of the three realms and a squad of soldiers coming from all three armies, approached the walls under white flag, arriving almost within range. Here they halted and only one soldier, bearing the white flag, rode one at his own risk; he was a young lieutenant named Faron and he had volunteered, nonetheless Grellon, from whose army the brave warrior came, followed his advance with concern.

Arriving within earshot, Faron stopped, showing off the peace banner.

“I’m here on behalf of the armies of Yòrvarem, Varas and Dalad!” he shouted in a clear voice, “I come to offer you an honourable surrender! You have no escape: you’re cut off from the main body of your army and from supplies. Surrender! Otherwise, we’ll burn down your town.”

For a while, nothing moved on the bastions; then a mocking voice answered:

“I don’t see how you can do this: you don’t have the necessary resources. Where are your siege engines?! We can withstand here for weeks, even months if needed. Meanwhile, our troops will be finished and come back, and you’ll be caught up in the middle. Get away! We have nothing against you. If you strike camp now and go back to where you came from, we’ll forget the offence you caused us by invading our land. Otherwise, you’ll have war, no holds barred: the Easterlings don’t tolerate strangers entering their empire with no invitation!”

Nerwen clenched her fists: she had already had a foretaste of the Easterlings’ lack of tolerance toward strangers. The memory of the fight she and Aryon had with one of their patrols, which had cost her friend Calad’s death, still burned in her heart.

They had taken into account that the Easterlings wouldn’t surrender; actually, they hadn’t expected they would. Theirs had been only an attempt to see if it was possible avoiding a battle, which would inevitably bring many deaths, on one side and on the other.

Faron was unimpressed.

“Is this your last word?” he asked. There was a moment of tense silence, before the same mocking voice replied:

“No... this is our last word!”

On the last syllable, arrows rained from the bastions, aimed to the standard-bearer, in complete disregard to the white banner he was carrying. Instinctively, Faron drew back, but he had no chance: pierced by many darts, he fell from the saddle and his horse, he too wounded, bolted terrified.

From the lines of the triple army, the warriors shouted furiously; Nerwen, Aryon and the others of their group, too, felt shaken and indignant.
“Cowards!” Voranya yelled in a rage.

Faron’s horse galloped towards them; Nerwen rode to him, trying to grasp his reins, but the poor beast was wild with pain and, foaming at the mouth, shot past her, running madly towards the troops. The Istar could do nothing for Faron, surely already dead because an arrow had pierced his chest; she spurred Thilgiloth, turning her loose, but shortly after, the wounded horse crashed to the ground. Nerwen jumped from the saddle and ran to him, hoping she could do something for him with her thaumaturgic power; but it was too late and she could only witness his last breath.

In the meantime, Aryon and the others had followed her and now the Avar prince was barking orders:

“Sergeant! Gather a squad of twelve men with shields! Form a shield wall, advance until you get to Faron and bring him back here!”

In a few minutes, the maniple was ready; under a hailstorm of arrows, attempting in vain to stop them, the twelve soldiers got to their dead companion and carried him to the camp.

General Grellon issued order for the body to be washed and prepared for the funeral. His companions, furious, wanted to assault Ichidoragon immediately, but Aryon and the generals had other plans and stopped them.

OOO

The following day, the battle began. The Entwives had worked the better part of the night hoarding boulders, as well as picking up trunks of dead trees. Now they started flinging the boulders against the city walls, focusing on the iron gates in an attempt to knock them down, and on a number of spots along the bastions, trying to breach them. They set the trunks afire and hurled them over the walls; several fires broke off where they crashed.

The Entwives’ strength in throwing the missiles was maybe lesser than trebuchets and catapults, but the precision of their aim was far greater than any device. Besides, being them highly mobile – unlike the traditional siege machines – prevented the defenders from hitting them with their ballistae and onagres. They even tried to pierce them with flaming arrows, but the female Enyd kept constantly out of range and the darts tumbled on the ground, useless.

Pallando felt sorry that his powers were of no use, because for safety, he had to stay too far to hit the bastions with lightning or fireballs before they would disperse; but he used them often to light the trunks the Entwives were hurling, instead of having to do it with a traditional fire.

OOO

The siege lasted four days. By night, the Easterlings endeavoured some sorties, trying to catch an Entwife by surprise and set fire on her, but both the Enyd and the soldiers’ watchfulness was too strict and the enemy was never able to get near them.

During the morning of the fourth day, the iron gates of the city broke and soon after, two other
spots of the bastions collapsed, bringing down with them towers and houses. The besiegers approached the walls under the protection of their shields, while the defenders were throwing at them pitch and hot oil from the top, as well as hailstorms of stones and arrows. Many soldiers of the East fell, promptly replaced by others, until they were able to enter and establish bridgeheads. At this point, the fight slowly climbed toward the citadel, last line of defence. Aryon led the assault, trying to take advantage of every cover in order to avoid unnecessary losses among the soldiers.

Without any specific command, about twenty Entwives, led by Fimbrethil and Calenfinn, entered behind the soldiers, overtook them and advanced irresistibly, trampling over the defenders who were fighting strenuously and hence opening the way for the besiegers; taking advantage of the offered opportunity, Aryon ordered to all who were already inside the city to follow the Entwives, heading quickly for the stronghold at the top of the rocky hill, where the emperor and his personal guard were barricaded; to the rest of his forces and to the other Entwives, he ordered to find and take down the last pockets of resistance in town.

When they arrived on the forecourt opposite the citadel, a rain of arrows coming from above its walls welcomed them. Ignoring it, the Entwives marched on: the darts piercing their barks were painful, but no more than pin punctures.

“Take down the gate!” Fimbrethil ordered. Calenfinn and other four clung to the iron-clad double doors, sliding their fingers between them trying to rip them from their hinges.

Aryon and his men arrived at that moment; seeing the Entwives assaulting the gate, the prince observed the facade of the palace and noticed a movement on the walls. He instantly realised what was about to happen and yelled at the top of his lungs:

“Get away!”

Too late: from above, they tossed hot pitch, hitting fully Calenfinn and the other ones; then came a number of flaming arrows, inflaming the black, sticky substance. Under Aryon’s and their own companions’ horrified stare, in a moment the five Entwives were engulfed in flames; with terrible shrieks, some of them began to run desperately, while others flung themselves to the ground, in the vain attempt to extinguish the fire devouring them.

Calenfinn looked frantically around her, seeking escape, but there was none; realising she could do nothing to save her life, she hurled herself against the still intact gate and pushed against it with all her strength; she kept shrieking in pain while the flames were consuming her rapidly. The wood of the gate blackened, began to smoke and finally caught fire; as strength abandoned her in the agony of death, Calenfinn had the satisfaction to see the gate beginning to burn. Then, she closed her eyes and passed away.

Helpless, the other fifteen Entwives watched their companions burn and perish. Then, Fimbrethil rose at her full height and sent out a terrible shout, similar to a hundred horns of war; immediately, the other ones echoed her, shaking the city to its very foundations. Besiegers and defenders covered their ears at the dreadful sound.

Because of her inadequacy in combat, Nerwen had stayed in the rear, devoting herself to the care of the injured. Now she heard this appalling roar and recognised it; alarmed, she came out of the tent where she was organising bandages and ointments, and looked toward Ichidoragon; from the Easterling capital, smoke spirals were rising and in several spots, she could see flames reaching up to the cloud-streaked sky.

Distressed, she felt the urgency to go there, but Thilgiloth, even with all her speed, looked
insufficient to her, hence, she turned her thoughts to Coeris, asking her if she was willing to take her to Ichidoragon. In answer, Manwë’s emissary glided quickly, landing near her and bowing her shoulder to allow the Aini mounting on her. It was the first time that Nerwen rode an Eagle and she regretted it had to be such a tragic circumstance. She climbed quickly, positioning herself between the neck of the formidable bird of prey and the joining of her wings; at her mental beckon, Coeris took off and in less than a minute she was above the city. The forecourt opposite the citadel on top of the rocky hill was wide enough for her to land, therefore Nerwen was able to get off precisely in front of the castle.

The scene she took in made her heart shrink in affliction: four Entwives on the ground, burnt, one leaning against the gate that was still burning, and other fifteen Entwives, hand in hand in a semicircle in front of their fallen companions, weeping tears of green sap.

Seeing his wife, Aryon ran to her; Nerwen jumped down from Coeris’ shoulders.

“What happened?” the Maia asked in an undertone.

“Calenfinn and the others were trying to rip off the gate,” the prince told her, “but they threw at them pitch and flaming arrows. There was nothing we could do to save them,” he concluded, sadly; there were so few Onodrim left, that the loss of five of them was an immense tragedy for all of Arda. “That one is Calenfinn,” he added, pointing to the charred and formless heap that had been the Entwife who had welcomed them into the Land Between the Rivers. Tears welled up in Nerwen’s eyes: she had been very close to Calenfinn, as much as she was with Fimbrethil and Olbranch.

Fimbrethil approached them.

“Victory has a very bitter taste,” she affirmed in a disconsolate tone. Nerwen nodded slowly: she remembered the great victory of the Valar over Morgoth, but the price had been very high in terms of lives of Elves and Men; the Dwarves that had fought alongside the Forces of the West had been unjustly forgotten, but she recalled them.

“So it is, unfortunately,” Aryon confirmed sadly, “especially considering that none of your companions had been so far injured or killed… and right in the end, five of them have fallen all at once.”

“We will honour their memory forevermore,” Fimbrethil affirmed, with a sigh that sounded like wind blowing through the fronds, “as our greatest heroines.”

Meanwhile, the gate had burned down, collapsing; the smoking debris, as well as Calenfinn’s remains, obstructed half of the doorway and made passage difficult.

“I don’t want to risk other lives in the attempt to clear the entrance,” the Avar prince said, glowering at the wrecked gate, “We’ll give them one last opportunity to surrender, after that, we’ll drive them out using fire.”

“I will take care of it,” Fimbrethil volunteered, as her sorrow-veiled gaze found back its usual calmness. She waited for the prince to nod his agreement, then she approached the citadel, but remaining well out of range from the potential pouring of new pitch.

“You, in the fortress!” she boomed in a voice so loud, it made the walls of the nearby buildings tremble, “We will grant you one last chance to save your lives, if you surrender immediately! Otherwise, we will set fire to your castle and you will burn to death like our companions. You have five minutes!”
Nerwen was sceptical.

“I don’t think they’ll surrender,” she mumbled. Instead, three minutes later, a white cloth appeared on the windowsill of a window at the highest floor.

“We want to negotiate our surrender!” a voice shouted.

“Wait!” Fimbrethil shouted back, then she returned quickly to Aryon and Nerwen.

“Let’s call Pallando,” the prince suggested: as the commander in chief of the triple army, the king was the only one with the authority to conduct possible negotiations.

“I’ll see to it,” Nerwen said. She returned to Coeris, who had waited on the sidelines, and climbed again on her back. With a powerful stroke of her wings, which swept the forecourt like a whirlwind, the Eagle took flight and headed again for the encampment.

Warned, Pallando hastened to mount on his horse; Nerwen, sitting on Thilgiloth and with Túdhin on her heels, rode beside him and, escorted by Generals Voranya and Grellon with a squad of guards of honour, they headed for Ichidoragon. By now, the city had completely surrendered to the armies of the East: the last pockets of resistance had capitulated as soon as news spread of the emperor’s surrender.

His troops and those of Varas and Dalad saluted Pallando’s passage with equal enthusiasm, as he climbed the main street to the citadel. When he arrived there, the Blue Wizard halted within earshot.

“I am Pallando, King of Yòrvarem and commander in chief of the triple army,” he introduced himself, “Who am I talking to?”

On the balcony above the shattered gate, a tall shape appeared, wearing a heavily decorated armour; a crown was set on his brow.

“I am Murai, monarch of the Easterling Empire,” he introduced himself in a proud tone, “What are your terms of surrender?”

Pallando had discussed them with Nerwen and the two generals during their ride here.

“Your lives are to be spared,” he answered therefore, as agreed, “and so all men and women living in Ichidoragon who will surrender to us. We will take all of your weapons. We will leave with no further hostile acts, but you and your family will come with us as our prisoners, as a guarantee that others of your people will not go and help Sauron in his war against the free peoples of Middle-earth.”

Murai looked as if he was carefully pondering this offer.

“If I come with you, who’ll stay and lead my people?” he asked. It was a sensible question and Pallando had foreseen it.

“You will appoint a lieutenant or a superintendent you trust and you will leave him or her here to lead the empire in your name,” he therefore answered.

“How long shall we remain captive?” the emperor enquired.

“As long as needed,” the Blue Wizard replied, “Surely at least until Sauron will be defeated.”
“And who says he will be defeated?” Murai objected, then he shrugged, “This is of little consequence: should he prove the winner, you too, and your people, will be conquered, sooner or later; and should he prove the loser, you’ll release me and my family. But what guarantees do I have, that you will keep your word?”

“More than my messenger had,” Pallando declared in a crisp tone; even if Faron hadn’t been one of his soldiers, his treacherously murder in spite of the white flag, under which protection he was standing, had him indignant, “You have to be content with my solemn promise, the promise of not only a King, but also of an Istar... if you know what this means.”

The emperor’s sudden paleness was discernible even from the distance.

“Yes... I know what this means,” he admitted slowly, “Fine, I accept your word. How shall we proceed?”

Pallando turned to Aryon, who had come beside him at the beginning of the interview, and looked at him for advice.

“The defenders shall drop their weapons through the windows and walk out the gate, single-file,” the Avar prince commanded, “When everyone’s out and taken into custody, you’ll let your family out: we know you have three wives and nine children, therefore you cannot hide any of them. Finally, when all of them are safe, you’ll come out, unarmed.”

“You won’t give me the honours of war?”

“No,” Aryon snapped in answer.

Mulai visibly clenched his jaw, but he didn’t reply. He nodded curtly to show he had understood and retired without adding anything else.

Long minutes went by with no movement from the inside. Losing his patience, Aryon called:

“Well? We won’t wait much longer! Drop your weapons or we’ll set the castle on fire!”

A man came to a window near the balcony; not Murai, but another one, younger. In his hand, he held a dagger.

“There’s no honour in captivity,” he declared in a stentorian voice, then he placed the hilt of the weapon on the windowsill and, without a sound, stabbed himself on it.

Nerwen gasped in surprise and horror while realising what had happened inside the citadel.

“They all committed suicide,” she affirmed. Aryon cast her a quick glance, then he nodded, agreeing in her deduction.

They entered, moving cautiously; on the stairs, they found several dead soldiers, some of them fallen on their own swords, others with cut throats or a knife planted into their hearts. They climbed to the first floor, the one with the balcony; in the great hall, there were at least two dozen people: various soldiers and officers, three women richly dressed, nine children of both genders, aged between two and twelve years, and the emperor. All dead.

Nerwen ran to the children, searching frantically for vital signs, in the hope to save someone; but it was too late and their souls had already left for the place where Eru Ilúvatar had decreed them to go after death, and she hadn’t the power to call them back. She collapsed in a heap; Túdhin, almost forgotten in all the commotion, approached her and tapped his nose on her, trying to comfort her.
The Aini straightened her back and stroke his side, grateful for his support. Then she turned, her eyes flashing.

“I curse thee, Mulai,” she growled between gritting teeth, looking at the emperor with despise, “I can accept it for the adults, because they have the capacity and the power of choice, but I can not accept it for the children! I hope your soul will freeze into the Void and stay banned there for all eternity!”

Aryon got near her and pulled her gently up, then in his arms; he had never seen her so greatly distraught.

Nerwen grasped his jacket and buried her face into his chest. She could endure anything, but not the dreadful sight of nine children killed for the pride of the adults.

The prince took her outside, leaving to his deputy – a capable captain of Pallando’s army – the task to take care of the bodies. They would give them whatever funeral honours were customary to the Easterlings: they were enemies, and even not very honourable, based on the way they had behaved with Faron the standard-bearer, but this didn’t mean they would sink to their level, offending the dead.

OOO

The Entwives retrieved the charred remains of their five fallen companions and said their last goodbyes in the Onodrim way: they carried them into a near wood and laid them in a grave, dug among the trees, then they sang a long song, which narrated of birth, growth, decline, death and rebirth. Eventually, they covered them with turf and, above it, they planted flowers, ferns, shrubs and saplings. Nerwen, as Yavanna’s emissary, attended to the rite and blessed the Enyd’s tomb.

The next day, Coeris took her leave: her mission was complete and there was no need of her anymore. Nerwen and Pallando thanked her immensely for the assistance she had given them, and the Blue Wizard ordered an honour guard detail to bid her farewell. Hence, when the Eagle took off to fly away, one hundred soldiers of the three armies saluted her; Coeris answered by flying three laps over them, then she turned straight north-westwards and quickly disappeared in the light blue
of the spring sky, heading for the Hithaeglir and the Eyrie of the Clouds.

Meanwhile, they set up a prison camp for the captive soldiers; many had followed the emperor’s lead, killing themselves, but others had chosen otherwise. It wasn’t easy organising the logistic of security for so many prisoners, but with the precious help of the Entwives, they erected a solid palisade close to the ravine of the cliff where Ichidoragon was built, where they locked up the enemy soldiers with tents and camping gear, enough to grant them a certain degree of comfort, separating men from women. They did likewise for the civilians, with the difference that they kept them inside the bastions, free to come and go as they pleased, but not to leave the city.

OOO

Four days after the fall of Ichidoragon, at dawn, Nerwen startled out of sleep when her Second Sight kicked in. Her sudden movement awoke Aryon; in the grey light, he saw from her facial expression that her mind was focused far away, so he remained silent and waited.

The Aini saw a vast battlefield, which she recognised: it was the same she had seen earlier, the white city of Minas Tirith on the background. Realising that the scene she was seeing was taking place this same moment, the Istar observed large fires burning in the plain, heavy smoke spreading all over, but this wasn’t enough to justify the deep darkness covering everything like a thick layer, even if the Sun was rising, far in the east. With her mind’s eye, Nerwen approached at great speed a specific spot on the battlefield, where a large black shape, mounting a fearsome winged creature, towered above another, much smaller shape: with a shudder of revulsion, Nerwen recognised the Witch-king, confronted by a soldier who seemed protecting a fallen man.

*Begone, foul dwimmerlaik, lord of carrion! Leave the dead in peace!* the Istar heard the warrior shout.

The Lord of Morgul answered coldly:

*Come not between the Nazgûl and his prey! Or he will not slay thee in thy turn. He will bear thee away to the houses of lamentation, beyond all darkness, where thy flesh shall be devoured, and thy shrivelled mind be left naked to the Lidless Eye!*

The soldier drew his sword.

*Do what you will; but I will hinder it, if I may.*

*Hinder me? Thou fool. No living man may hinder me!*

To Nerwen’s greatest surprise, the warrior laughed, then he took off his helmet. A long blond mane fell upon the soldier’s shoulders and back; he spoke, and his voice was like the ring of steel.

*But no living man am I! You look upon a woman. Éowyn I am, Éomund’s daughter. You stand between me and my lord and kin. Begone, if you be not deathless! For living or dark undead, I will smite you, if you touch him.*

The winged beast gave a sickening cry and attacked the warrior maiden, who moved with great skill; with a fast sweep of her sword, she slashed the creature’s neck, and it fell heavily to the ground. At that moment, the sun rose behind Éowyn’s back, lighting her.
The Black Rider rose from the wreck of his mount and attacked the young woman with his enormous mace. Éowyn’s shield shattered in a thousand pieces and she fell on her knees. The Witch-king wielded his mace again, ready to deliver the mortal strike.

But all of a sudden, he stumbled forward with a terrible cry of pain: a small shape had unexpectedly risen behind him, stabbing his knee and shearing its sinew. Flabbergasted, Nerwen recognised a Hobbit with a brown, curly mop.

Éowyn struggled to her feet and drove her sword between the crown and the cape of the large black shape. Her sword broke in many shards and she dropped forward upon her fallen foe, but incredibly cloak and hauberk proved empty. A piercing howl was heard, which vanished in the morning wind and faded in the distance.

Nerwen held her breath, incredulous: the terrible Witch-king of Angmar, Lord of Morgul, captain of the Ringwraiths, had been killed by a woman and a Hobbit.

Much more happened on the battlefield, as well as in the north, in Lórien and among the trees of the Woodland Realm, but Nerwen’s vision stopped there; coming back to her senses, she looked at Aryon almost wildly.

“The battle I’ve seen while I was talking with Kementári is ongoing. The outcome is still very uncertain, but I noticed that the enemy forces on field are less than those I’ve seen in my first vision. Our intent to divert part of Sauron’s armies from the assault on Gondor has proved successful... Now we must hope that Gondorians and Rohirrim will equally prove successful,” she shook her head, still stupefied about what she had seen, “The captain of the Nazgûl is dead, killed by a Human girl and a Hobbit!”

Aryon furrowed his brow, uncertain, before recalling what Nerwen had told him who the Ringwraiths and the Hobbits were, both unknown to his people. She had told him also about Glorfindel’s prophecy, according to which no Man would kill the Witch-king; and indeed, so it had happened.

“Until the Ring won’t be destroyed, however, Middle-earth will still be in danger,” the prince observed in a low voice. She nodded:

“Unfortunately you’re right. I don’t know how this is possible, but Yavanna has a feeling that the Hobbits, again, will play a fundamental role in this... and when an Ainu has a feeling, usually it becomes true,” she concluded.

“Or when an Istar has a feeling,” Aryon added, unaware that the Istari belonged to the Ainur: obviously, Nerwen couldn’t tell him, therefore she simply nodded in agreement.

OOO

Several days passed, during which the Easterlings learned that they hadn’t to fear abuse or gratuitous harassment from the triple army; very reluctantly, they began thinking that the enemy was honourable as much as themselves – even if Nerwen thought that their idea of honour was quite twisted: she would never forget the way they had defiled the white flag carried by Faron.

With their emperor and all his direct heirs dead, the Easterlings looked among his closest relatives for someone who could take his place; Pallando forced them to accept him and Nerwen as
impartial arbiters, as to avoid a struggle over the succession. Eventually, with the approval of the two Istari, the Easterlings chose Sumire, eldest daughter of Murai’s younger brother who had died the year before in a hunting accident. There was no coronation ceremony, but all the potentates of the empire living in Ichidoragon took their pledge of allegiance to the young woman; Nerwen came to the conclusion that Sumire had a great deal of good sense.

During those days, somebody began calling Pallando with the names of Shadow Conqueror and Protector of the East. Hearing them, Nerwen automatically translated them to Quenya as Morinehtar and Rómestámo. When these names were reported to the Blue Wizard, he shook them off asserting he didn’t deserve them, the first one because with the term shadow one thought of Sauron and Pallando hadn’t confronted him, he had only confronted some of his allies – who, moreover, had been overthrown with the aid of many and certainly not just by him alone – and the second one because he wasn’t the sole monarch protecting the lands beyond the Orocarni. But the names had taken hold by now and would remain, with or without his approval.

OOO

It was the morn of the twenty-fifth day of March. Nerwen got up in a state of foreboding, a foreboding that caught also Aryon. The Istar put on her cloak, lifting its hood – overnight, a cold wind had begun blowing from the north – and left their tent; Aryon followed her, and together they headed for the western end of the large encampment.

“What happens, Nerwen?” the prince asked her softly. Her eyes were staring at the horizon, but there was nothing to see, or so seemed to him.

“I don’t know,” the Maia answered in an equally soft voice, “but something of vital importance is about to happen.”

Shortly after, Pallando joined them; he, too, looked troubled.

“Something is about to happen,” he affirmed, unaware that Nerwen had just said those same words to her husband.

“When I need it, my Second Sight never arrives!” the Aini snorted, frustrated.

They waited in silence; the two Istari’s tension was evident and affected Aryon, too. Long minutes passed by; ten, then twenty. Finally, the wind ceased and the light dimmed as if Arien had veiled the burning chariot of the Sun; the sounds became fainter, then faded. No birdcall or rustling of leaves were audible, no voices or noises from the encampment. It looked like everything had stopped, even their breaths, even Time itself.

Unconsciously, Aryon and Nerwen moved their hands, found each other’s and clasped them together.

They continued waiting for several more, unending moments.

Eventually, the ground beneath their feet shifted, but it didn’t feel like an earthquake; even the air seemed to vibrate and they heard what sounded like the sigh of someone who had held his breath for too long a time. The light became vivid again and they heard the usual sounds of the world.

In their hearts rose an unexpected gaiety, ad if all of a sudden, a great weight had been lifted from
their shoulders.

Nerwen and Pallando exchanged incredulous gazes.

“Do you think that Sauron...?” the Blue Wizard began.

“...has been destroyed!” the Maia concluded, before turning to Aryon, her eyes wide in joy and relief, “The Enemy is no more!”

“How can you be sure of it?” the Avar prince enquired; he, too, had perceived the signs, but he didn’t dare believing in the hope that was flaring up in his heart.

“There’s no other explanation to the relief I feel,” Nerwen said, “I feel it in the air... I feel it in the ground...” she expanded her special Ainurin senses and touched the mind of the nearest olvar and kelvar, Thilgiloth, Túdhin, Allakos, Kerra, Fimbrethil, Olbranch, and of the soldiers of the triple army, and farther, to the wood where Calenfinn and her four companions had been buried, where all plants and animals sent her back the same feeling of liberation and joy, “I feel it in every living being I can perceive,” she looked again at her husband, “I must speak immediately to Yavanna.”

She hurried back to their tent and found Thilgiloth and Túdhin waiting for her.

What’s up? The Chargeress asked her, as the wolf brushed her hand with his muzzle, gazing questioningly at her.

It looks like Sauron has been defeated, Nerwen answered, To be completely certain, I’ll get in touch with Kementári.

Thilgiloth stayed outside the tent – which was of course too small to contain her – but Túdhin entered with her. Aryon was about to go and fetch something to eat and drink for her after returning, but Pallando stopped him:

“I will take care of this,” he said, “You shall assist your wife.”

The Aver prince thanked him with a nod and followed Nerwen, who was already lying on their pallet. Now she smiled at him, grateful: she always appreciated knowing him by her side while she was elsewhere.

Yavanna welcomed her with a wide smile of pure joy that made her beam. To Nerwen’s surprise, at her side was her husband Aulë; then, the place where they stood became more distinct and Nerwen’s heart jumped to her throat out of thrill and surprise: she was in Mahanaxar, the Ring of Doom, where all the Valar were gathered.

Welcome, Nerwen Laiheri, said Manwë Súlimo, You conducted your mission successfully: you found the Entwives, and their contribution to the fight against Sauron favoured his demise: the One Ring has been destroyed in the Cracks of Doom, among the flames of Orodruin where it had been forged.

Nienna the Wise, Lady of Mourning, intervened in a grave tone:

Barad-dûr has fallen and the Eye is extinguished forevermore: Sauron’s soul is wrecked and has followed the soul of his former master Morgoth in the Void, where it will remain until the Dagor Dagorath.

Even if she had already guessed what had occurred, Nerwen felt now overwhelmed with joy.
But how did it happen? she asked, wanting to know more.

As Kementári supposed, Manwë answered, in the end, the destiny of the world has been decided by an apparently insignificant being, a member of a race that never meddled with the great events of Middle-earth: a Hobbit. His name is Frodo Baggins.

The Istar furrowed her brow: this name wasn’t new to her.

Let’s not forget his faithful companion Sam Gamgee, intervened Námo the Judge, who was called Mandos, talking solemnly, Even that wretched creature, Sméagol called Gollum, who kept the Ring for so many years that it had devoured him, played a fundamental, even if involuntary, role in its destruction.

Your mission is completed, Yavanna declared, gazing affectionately upon her follower, As much as the mission of the other Istar. You all can come back to Valinor as soon as you wish; and now more than ever, the Eldar, too, who want to leave Middle-earth are welcome, including obviously Aryon Morvacor.

Nerwen was silent, pondering on those words.

If my mission is completed, have I your permission to reveal my true nature, at least to my husband? she asked, talking slowly.

There is no reason anymore for you to keep from him who you really are, Manwë answered, Choose by yourself to whom else you want to disclose it.

Nerwen curtseyed respectfully:

Thank you, Súlimo.

They were all silent for a moment, before Yavanna resumed talking.

You did well, disciple mine, she said with ostensible pride, You have our gratitude, and with you also all the other Istar who contributed to the victory over Sauron: Olórin, Aiwendil, Pallando. We await you all here in Valimar, whenever you will return. Now you can go, and may the road rise to meet you.

Again, Nerwen curtseyed respectfully, then she turned and, in her mind, visualised a door. She passed through it and everything vanished in a white mist.

A moment later, her eyes fluttered open and she met Aryon’s bright gaze.

“Welcome back, sweetheart,” he murmured, as he usually did, addressing her his typical little smile. She returned it lovingly:

“Thank you...”

Then she turned her gaze on Túdhin, who licked her hand as a greeting sign.

“All is confirmed,” Nerwen went on, as her husband helped her sitting up, “The One Ring has been destroyed: Sauron is defeated and his soul banished in the Void. He will threaten Middle-earth never again.”

Aryon handed her bread, butter and honey.

“Eat,” he exhorted her, “I’ll inform Pallando, who will take care of announcing this to everybody.
I’ll come back with a cup of hot tea.”

When he returned, he found Nerwen had already devoured her breakfast, but he didn’t smile, as he knew how debilitating her journeys were. He gave her the bergamot-scented tea, which the cooks brew expressly for them, and she took it, thanking him with a smile. He had brought a mug for himself, too, so they drank together; when they finished, Nerwen took his hand.

“My love, the time has come for me to reveal you my true origin...”

Author’s corner:

The picture of the citadel of Ichidoragon is nothing else than the splendid castle of San Marino at the top of Mount Titan, Italy.

I apologise to all those who were expecting the description of a great battle in the style of the Pelennor Fields or Helm’s Deep, but unlike Tolkien, I haven’t the necessary technical competence, therefore I preferred a summary of the facts.

The “nicknames” given to Pallando are actually the alternative names Tolkien had thought at a later stage for the Blue Wizards; the translation is a bit arbitrary because I don’t like the literal one: Killer of the Darkness and Helper of the East simply don’t sound good, at least for me.

I wanted to revisit the scene of the duel between Éowyn and the Witch-king because it is one of the most thrilling scenes in the book; while the scene in which Nerwen, Aryon and Pallando perceive Sauron’s demise is deliberately similar to the one that, at that same moment, is happening in Minas Tirith with Éowyn, Faramir and Merry. Both these scenes are intended as homage to the Oxford Professor’s masterpiece.

By now, we have reached and are over the climax of the tale; and like in Tolkien’s priceless work, my story is slowly coming to a close: some more chapters and then this adventure – which length I absolutely didn’t foresee, at the time I began to write – will be over. Meanwhile, I thank all those who are following and, I hope, appreciating it, reviewing it or also just reading it.

Lady Angel
“No need for it,” Aryon claimed, “but if you want to, I’m ready.”

Actually, he had been ready for a long time, since the beginning. He didn’t care at all who she was, or what: Elf or Human, child of a slave or of a queen. All that mattered to him, was the undoubtable fact that she was his partner for life.

“I wish I could have told you since the beginning, but as you know, I was forbidden to do so,” Nerwen began and he nodded, as he was aware of this, “As it was forbidden to the other Istari, too, because we all come from the same place. However, please don’t divulge to anybody what I’m going to tell you.”

“Of course; you have my word,” he reassured her.

Nerwen pondered about the way she should tell him the truth; her eyes locked with Túdhin’s, who was calmly lying on the floor, watching her. The wolf perceived his two-legged friend’s tension; he didn’t know the reason but, guessing she needed some encouragement, he brushed his head against her leg.

_What is it, Daughter of the Sunset?_ he asked her. The Aini started a little in hearing this title: she had almost forgotten that Túdhin, unlike Aryon, knew about her origin.

_I’m going to tell Aryon about the place I come from_, she revealed, _but I don’t know how to do it…_

_Keep it simple_, the wolf suggested, with great common sense. Nerwen smiled slightly: he was right, the simple way is always the best. Grateful for his support, she stroke his side; and eventually, she found the words. She turned again to her husband:
“The Istari are the Valar’s emissaries,” she reminded him and the prince nodded again, as this was well-known to him, “We have been personally selected by our Masters: in my case, Yavanna; in Pallando’s case, Oromë; and so on. And when I say personally, I mean it literally,” she paused to emphasise what would follow, “We all come from Valinor…”

She stopped because a triumphant smile had appeared on Aryon’s face:

“I knew it!”

Nerwen’s eyes widened in surprise:

“You… knew it?”

Realising his statement had been excessive, he adjusted it:

“No, not exactly... let’s say I had guessed it. It explained many things: your longevity, your reticence in telling from where you came, your agility, your capability to communicate directly with a Valië… and especially, the fact I see you at the same time on the visible and on the invisible level.”

“Oh,” she stammered, momentarily speechless: she had underestimated her husband’s perspicacity and felt ashamed; then she considered what he had precisely said, “My... agility?”

“Yes: I saw you, even it only fleetingly, the night the Easterlings attacked and took us prisoners,” Aryon explained, “and Meledhiel’s words came back to me, when she spoke about your speed of movement, words I didn’t heed at the time. However, the two things together made me think you could be an Elf. Now that you confirmed it, I am greatly relieved to learn you have the life of the Firstborn.”

She was about to nod in confirmation, but then she hesitated, realising he had interpreted the news in the most obvious way, not knowing it was wrong; she shook her head.

“I’m no Elf,” she said softly. The Avar prince furrowed his brow, perplexed.

“You’re no Elf? So, what...”

Words stuck in his throat, while the only possible alternative was taking shape in his mind; he straightened his back in wonder.

“You... are a Maia. Like my father.”

It was no question, but a statement.

Nerwen nodded once, slowly.

“That I am,” she confirmed.

Aryon was dumbfounded. He had convinced himself Nerwen was a high ranked Elf in incognito, maybe some princess of the Noldor – because of her hair colour – who had crossed Belegaer on behalf of Yavanna, becoming an Istar; but she being even an Aini, this he hadn’t imagined for sure.

“Good Valar,” he mumbled, unable to think about something smart to say.

Nerwen stayed silent, knowing that her husband needed to elaborate the news. She very much hoped that nothing would change, between them; of course, the sentiment they shared would remain unaltered, because nothing could change the fact they were partners for life, but if Aryon
would feel in awe towards her, now that he knew who she really was, his attitude could change. However, he was the son of a Maia and therefore he was half Maia himself, so she was confident that he wouldn’t feel in an inferior position. Or not too much, at least; nor did she think he should have any reason to: even if aware of their superiority, the Ainur didn’t think themselves better than the Children of Êlúvatar, as they were themselves His creatures, no more and no less than Elves and Men. Or, by extension, than olvar and kelvar, she added in her mind, patting affectionately on Túdhin’s side; the wolf had meanwhile stretched out on the ground, his head on his forelegs.

Then, Nerwen saw Aryon furrowing again his brow and tensed, fearing despite everything a negative reaction.

“How is it that I see you on both levels, visible and invisible, but not Pallando? I always wondered about this, because he, too, is an Istar, isn’t he? And therefore, a Maia like you...”

Nerwen nearly went limb on the ground out of relief: if Aryon was thinking of something else than the fact she was an Aini, even if of lesser rank, it was a sure sign he didn’t feel intimidated by her; not in a significant way, at least.

“He is indeed,” she confirmed, “but the Istari the Valar originally sent have been diminished much more than I was. That’s why he, as the other colleagues of mine, cannot be seen walking in both worlds: they had to give up many more powers than I had. For instance, the other Istari have a mortal body: they age, even if very slowly; and they can be killed, while I cannot... Indeed, I am particularly sorry that you had to be so much concerned about my life, when it wasn’t really necessary, because I can’t be killed,” she concluded, lowering her head and showing her discomfort for having been forced to inflict him this pain.

Again, Aryon was silent, pondering on this information.

“This means the time Meledhiel wounded you... and before her, that smuggler, and then the Balrog... Have I been mortally anxious for nothing?” he asked slowly. Nerwen felt her throat tighten; she nodded with a bitter grimace.

The Avar prince noticed it and realised she was feeling very distressed.

“I don’t like it,” he admitted sincerely, “but as you’ve been vetoed by the Valar, I understand why you wouldn’t nor couldn’t betray their confidence, telling me. However, you told me clearly that there were things you couldn’t disclose to me, and I have feely accepted this limitation. It would be pretty hypocritical of me, feeling upset now for this reason... even if, I admit it, it isn’t easy for me accepting that I’ve been mortally distraught for nothing; however, at the same time I am relieved it was for nothing, because it’s the confirmation we can be together forever, which I thought impossible at first...”

He brushed her arm in a reassuring caress. He would need some time to adjust to the awareness Nerwen was much more than he had imagined, but at least of one thing, he was anyway certain: she was his partner for life and, whatever her true nature was, this was a fact that couldn’t change for any reason at all, as well as his love for her. Everything else was secondary. He had just to remember this and he wouldn’t feel uncomfortable with this new, unexpected state of things.

“And now that you mission is complete...” he went on, hesitantly, “what will you do?”

“I’m free to return to Valinor,” Nerwen answered, looking into his eyes, “but I will do it only if you wish to come with me. Otherwise, I’ll stay in Middle-earth. Because what matters to me more than anything else, is being with you; where, does not matter.”
Aryon returned her gaze, struck: was Nerwen truly willing to give up the Blessed Realm for him? Of course, he answered himself: he had already given up his home for her. It was only logical that she would be ready to do the same.

“I’ll… think about it,” he answered, cautiously.

“It’s no easy decision,” Nerwen confirmed sensibly, “but there’s no hurry. In the short term, we could return to Bârlyth and stay there for a while, until you can make up your mind, after due consideration. Let’s say, one year? Or more, if need be…”

Aryon nodded: it was a good idea, returning home to test his own sentiments and see if he preferred staying there or leave with her for the Undying Lands.

“Lady Nerwen? Lord Aryon?” a voice came in from outside; they recognised Pallando’s orderly, a young woman named Melvina. Túdhin’s ears stiffened, but as he identified the voice, he relaxed.

The prince stood up and moved aside the flap of the tent’s entrance:

“Yes?”

“Lord Pallando invites you to the celebrations for Sauron’s defeat,” Melvina informed him, “A banquet will take place, and then there will be music and dancing. Nothing very grand,” she added in an apologising tone, “but we’ll do our best with the resources we have in the encampment.”

Since the beginning, immediately after conquering Ichidoragon, the triple army had avoided force to appropriate the Easterlings’ provisions, purchasing them rightfully through barter or money, and this, among other things, had helped winning the respect of the defeated population. This time wouldn’t be different, even if it would be very easy seizing everything they needed.

“Thanks,” Aryon said, “What time does he expect us?”

“At the noon bell,” the woman answered, “in his pavilion.”

The prince nodded to show he had it, then he retreated again in his tent; sitting next to Nerwen, he told her about the invitation.

“This is surely an event worth being celebrated,” the Aini commented, “I still can hardly believe it… it’s something so… so…”

She paused, incapable to find the right word to describe it.

“Immense,” Aryon suggested, feeling the same way, “and, frankly, also unexpected. I…” he shook his head, “of course I hoped for it, but I didn’t really believe it would happen, considering the enormity of forces that Sauron had fielded…”

He realised he hadn’t hesitated in mentioning explicitly the Enemy’s name, now that he had been defeated: his people’s superstition that citing Sauron openly would bring bad luck, already irrational per se, now had no reason at all to be anymore.

“It’s still a couple of hours to the beginning of the celebrations,” Nerwen mused, “If you wish to ask me anything, now that I’m free to tell you, please don’t hesitate.”

He pondered for a short time.

“Pallando knows he’s an Ainu?” he asked.
“Only because I told him, the first time we spoke together alone,” she answered, “Previously, he had no idea, because of his amnesia. He was surprised, to say the least…”

“I can believe that,” Aryon mumbled, “like me learning to be married with a Maia…”

Nerwen’s shoulders limped down while her face showed despondency; noticing it, the prince hurried to reassure her:

“No, no, I’m not blaming you! I was merely highlighting the amount of astonishment I’m feeling, which isn’t surely less than Pallando’s. As for the rest… Nerwen, I love you, exactly like before. This cannot change. It’s only that…” he paused, sudden laughter shaking him, “By Oromë’s shield, and I was thinking you were a spy from Dorwinion!”

The Istar recalled their first encounter, on the coast of the Sea of Rhûn and, watching him grinning, she felt so relieved that she began laughing in turn.

“Yes!” she cried, “We almost beat each other…”

This made Aryon laugh even harder.

When their merriment ceased, the prince addressed her his typical little smile.

“I should have taken you prisoner at once,” he declared, “but since the first moment, I felt you were special. Of course, I’d never imagine how much special, but… here we are,” he concluded. He paused shortly, as he pondered about another question.

“And Thilgiloth?” he asked then.

“As you already guessed, she’s not at all a mearh,” Nerwen revealed, “She belongs to the race of the Chargers, the horses of Aman, like Nahar,” she added, naming Oromë’s stallion.

“Yes, that’s apparent,” the prince nodded: in the light of the revelation of Nerwen’s true nature, he thought, it was merely obvious that Thilgiloth was no simple, even if splendid, specimen of the mearas, as he had anyway guessed a long time ago.

“And Túdhin?” Aryon asked, “Does he know who you are?”

The wolf, hearing his name, lifted his head and banged his tail on the ground; Nerwen cast him an affectionate glance, then she looked back at her husband.

“Yes, he does: do you remember that, when he arrived, I told you that our souls recognised each other because we’ve been friends in another life?” the prince nodded, “Another life of his, of course, because he’s not immortal. We met during the First Age, one time when I had gone to Beleriand to see my sister. I often visited her in her realm.”

Aryon caught the parallelism and arched one eyebrow.

“Do you, too, have a queen as a sister?” he enquired.

“She was… Melian, Queen of Doriath. Her husband was Elu Thingol, and their daughter was Lúthien Tinúviel.”

Aryon’s stared blankly in nothingness, as old memories of sagas and legends, heard during his infancy, came to his mind. The Avari, voluntarily and obstinately isolated from the Sindar and all other Elven peoples, knew little about the remote history of Middle-earth, only in bits and pieces;
however, they knew the main facts, even if in a reduced and loose way; among them, the characters Nerwen had mentioned had played a role of primary importance.

“Your sister is Melian the Maia…?” he gaped, not hiding his renewed astonishment, “Oh well… I think that, as I’ve seen Istari and Ents popping out of myths, the same can be for other legendary characters,” he looked at his wife, suddenly struck by another thought, “You’ve seen the very birth of Arda… even more, you partook to its creation!”

“I sang in the Ainulindalë, yes,” Nerwen confirmed, “but the conceptual creation is Ilúvatar’s…”

“You… You saw the One?” Aryon gasped, even more flabbergasted, “Well, of course, what a stupid question… He created you all from His mind,” he took a deep breath, feeling suddenly on the edge of a ravine, “I… am realising now that there is an incommensurable distance between me and you…”

Nerwen held her breath: in the end, what she had feared was happening, Aryon was feeling intimidated by the difference in their origins.

“Less than between your father and your mother,” she pointed out, “or Melian and Thingol. Remember, for one half you are a Maia yourself.”

She waited, again holding her breath; the Avar prince’s stare became blank while he was meditating over this assertion.

“You’re right,” he said at length, slowly, “And anyway, what counts in the end… the only thing that really counts is, that we have been made for one another. Nothing else matters, not really. I keep telling this myself, but… it’s difficult,” he sighed, “I’m… disappointed with myself: I was convinced I didn’t care about who you are, or what, or where you come from… I pictured every possible kind of things, or so I thought, and I really didn’t care, I swear it! But confronting reality, I fail…” he shook his head, “I’m afraid I’ll need some time…”

Nerwen felt a lump in her throat and gulped it down.

“Are you… resentful?” she enquired, speaking in a low voice.

Aryon glanced at her, truly surprised.

“No!” he cried animatedly, “It wasn’t your choice. You’ve been forbidden to tell me… It was a prohibition no loyal person as you are, would ever break. I, myself, wouldn’t do it, for the same reason. And anyway, you warned me. I cannot be resentful. Amazed, yes. Even impressed. And also quite bewildered. Mayhap even a little intimidated. But…” his eyes softened, “I repeat it: I love you; and I know you love me… and nothing else matters to me, after all.”

“Should you feel in any way uncomfortable, tell me,” she pleaded, taking his hand, “I don’t want any shadows between us.”

“No do I.” Aryon assured her, “and I don’t see how there can be any, now that I’m free to ask you anything…” he smiled at her, “Tell me about your home…”

Hence, the Maia told him about her gardens, located in the far south of Aman, between the Pastures of Yavanna and the Woods of Oromë; about the Passages of Mandos, which allowed to move around the continent very quickly; about her house, which actually was a cave transformed in dwelling, with the phosphorescent lichen lighting the internal rooms and the thermal spring that provided hot water aplenty; about the cities of Valinor – Valimar, Tirion, Alqualonde – and the other places that Aryon had heard about, like the Gardens of Lórien, where one could find peace
and regeneration for both wounded body and soul, and the Halls of Mandos, where the souls of Elves and Dwarves went, which walls were covered with the tapestries of Vairë and Míriel, her maid, the one who was the mother of Fëanor, the creator of the Silmarilli, the jewels which caused so much pain to both Ainur and Eldar, but indirectly also to Men and Dwarves. She told him about Melian and Yavanna, about her close friendship with Olórin and Galadriel, but she didn’t say anything about Calion, because it was considered indelicate mentioning the past friends-in-love, unless coming across them as it had happened with Meledhiel in Kopellin; for the same reason, she wouldn’t mention Thorin Oakenshield, Beriadir and the other friendships-in-love she shared during her long life.

Aryon listened to her, almost without breathing, charmed by her depictions of the Undying Lands.

The long narration stopped when they heard the midday bell, signalling it was time for them to go to Pallando’s pavilion.

“I spoke for almost three hours... I hope I didn’t stun you with all my stories!” Nerwen exclaimed, half amused and half worried.

“On the contrary,” Aryon reassured her, “they’re incredibly fascinating. It’s astounding thinking of you chatting with Oromë Aldaron and all the Valar and Maiar,” he concluded, in his voice a hint of bafflement that, for a long time still, would catch him each time he would consider his wife’s origin, “but I’m more interested in you, your life, your deeds, than in them...” he concluded.

“It’s not like I did who knows what deeds,” Nerwen protested as they stood up to go out, “but I’ll tell you everything, until your ears will beg for mercy!” she finished laughing and making Aryon laugh in turn. Túdhin slipped out behind them and walked on their heels until they entered the king’s pavilion, knowing that he was welcomed there.

On their way to Pallando’s field dwelling, they noticed that the sun was shining and the temperature was very mild, unlike it had been at dawn, when the cold north wind had forced them putting on their cloaks. Nerwen was glad she was wearing her green dress, which sleeves were detachable; Aryon took off his black jacket, remaining in his shirt only.

In Pallando’s pavilion stood a table full of food for the king and his guests, who were, besides Nerwen and Aryon, also Grellon and Voranya, as well as senior officers of all the three armies, for a total of sixteen people. Aryon and Nerwen, who were the nearest with their tent, were first there. Fimbrethil and her new deputy, Olbranch, should have taken part in the feast, too, but this was logistically impossible because of their size; moreover, they couldn’t share their food, as they fed on completely different means.

“How did the Easterlings take Sauron’s fall?” Aryon asked Pallando, after greeting him.

“Empress Sumire has an absolutely impenetrable face, like stone, when she wants to,” the Wizard reported, half amused and half annoyed, “I went personally to break the news to her and she stayed impassive.”

“But she must have said something,” the prince insisted.

“She simply thanked me for the news and asked if she may send some couriers to meet the Easterling army – or what remains of it – returning from Gondor. I allowed it, on condition that they are escorted by twice as many of my men. This did not please her, but I gave her no choice.”

“One can never be too cautious,” Aryon agreed.
A few minutes later, all the other ones had arrived, too, so they took their seats, Nerwen and Aryn on the right hand of Pallando, Voranya and Grellon at his left, the others in random order.

In spite of the improvisation and the relative scarcity of provision, they ate plentifully, as it was for the troops, even if in a less fancy manner. First, they had a carrot and potato soup, seasoned with leek and chives; then came boiled asparagus with hardboiled eggs, crushed to a purée, and peas cooked with butter and shallot; then came roasted pork tenderloin, with artichokes cooked with garlic and parsley, and a tuber similar to potato called eliant, completely unknown beyond the Orocan, stir fried with garlic and rosemary. This all came with plenty of wine, a type produced in the surroundings of Ichidoragon, which quality, in comparison to the Dorwinian wine, was far less, but acceptable.

The banquet ended with a pear and chocolate cake that, to Nerwen’s delight, came with a sweet cider.

When they finished, they were invited outside, where they heard flutes, psalteries, hurdy-gurdies and citterns, which were playing animated tunes at the rhythm of drums and tambourines. Aryn took advantage of his knowledge of the Yorvar dances to guide Nerwen in cheerful farandoles and lively jigs; they had great fun dancing into the afternoon, while bread, cheese, cured meat and more wine and cider were offered to the joyful throng.

At a certain point, Aryn found himself watching his wife dancing a bouncy saltarello, led by Grellon who had proved an excellent dancer; their eyes met and he addressed her his distinctive quiet smile, which she returned with sparkling eyes. It seemed to him that the westering sun doubled its brightness and this, more than any other consideration, made him realise how the revelations of the morning, even if they had struck him deeply, were not even remotely as much important as the feelings between them.

He waited for the end of the dance, then he went to Nerwen, took her hand and gently led her out of the crowd, getting away from the celebrations. Once among the tents, out of sight, he pulled her in his arms and held her lovingly.

“I haven’t kissed you all day,” he whispered. Pleasantly surprised, Nerwen slid her arms – bare because she had taken off the sleeves, because she had gotten overheated dancing – around his neck, and rested against his chest, raising her smiling face to his.

The kiss began tenderly, a delicate joining of endearing lips; then it deepened and became more passionate, their tongues brushing, fondling each other and intertwining in a dance that was at the same time sweet and sensual. Nerwen felt her knees becoming weak, her heart beating increasingly faster; she grabbed on her husband’s wide shoulders, a hot shiver travelling slowly down her spine.

Aryn held her tighter, kissing her with growing heat. He cupped her face and removed his lips from hers for a moment, just to look at her; sensing his gaze, the Maia opened her eyes and stared into his, happily drowning in them.

“Blessed Valar, I do love you so much…” she whispered in a trembling voice.

“You’re the light of my life…” he whispered in turn, “I do love you, too,” he added, then bowed his head to seize her lips again. They kissed with increasing ardour, fervently devouring each other mouths. Aryn lowered his hands, caressing her back, then he slid lower, grasped her hips and crushed her against his body. In response, Nerwen lifted one leg, hooked it on the back of his and rubbed herself against him. She heard him groan and felt his grip around her tighten, almost taking her breath away.
“Let’s get away from here…!” she exhorted him, as soon as she could speak again.

“Good idea,” he approved in a hoarse voice. Intertwining her hand with his, palm against palm, Nerwen moved; surprised, Aryon noticed that she wasn’t guiding him to their tent, but instead toward the wood skirting the encampment, where the charred remains of the five killed Entwives had been buried; the heat of the day had sipped also through the trees, warming the air conspicuously. They walked into the wood for about a hundred metres, until the sounds of the merrymaking faded in the distance.

Nerwen was watching all around, seeking a place that would satisfy her; eventually, she saw a great beech with a smooth, light grey bark. A soft bed of leaves and moss had formed among its roots. She turned to her husband with a little smile full of promises.

“Sit down,” she invited him, showing him the spot. Aryon felt a hot throb in his crotch, already envisioning what was about to ensue; he obeyed and sat down, leaning his back on the trunk.

“Do you remember our first time, when I told you I would make you mine at any cost, even tying you to a tree?” Nerwen asked him, making room for herself between his legs and kneeling in front of him.

“Yes, I remember,” the prince confirmed; he would never forget a single minute of the glorious moment of their first joining, “and I remember, too, I said it was a tantalising idea…” he added, intentionally.

“I’ve got nothing to tie you… but we can pretend you’re roped,” she whispered and, her smile becoming more impish, she seized his wrists and lifted his arms. He raised his gaze in hers and returned her smile with a very naughty smirk.

“But this way, I won’t be able to hold you,” he pointed out, under his breath.

“You’re right,” she murmured, “Well, let’s forget it, then…”
She let go of his wrists and bent forward, placing her lips on his. Promptly, Aryon wrapped her in his arms and opened his mouth to welcome her kiss; but she lingered, nibbling tenderly at his lower lip, then brushing it with the tip of her tongue. Refusing the provocation, he played along and let her have her way, but when Nerwen was about to deepen their kiss, he paid her back the same way. After a few moments, he heard her uttering a frustrated whimper; smiling secretly to himself, he then lovingly invaded her mouth.

They kissed slowly, in the way, both tender and passionate, only two people profoundly in love with each other can have: not only touching of lips and tongues, but deep communication of sentiment and emotion, mutual adoration, complete acceptation of each other.

They parted and their eyes met; in their gazes shone love, desire, emotion, tenderness.

“I love you, Nerwen.”

“I love you, Aryon…”

Their lovingly whispers almost superimposed and this synchronism was a sign of their reciprocal understanding, of their connection of thought and sentiment.

Nerwen laid her forehead on Aryon’s and an intense feeling, as if a tingling, passed from one to the other, exactly between their eyebrows; their lips curved in a simultaneous smile of knowing and complicity.

Understanding each other with no need of verbal communication, they drew back from one another and began to untie their clothes, Aryon her bodice, Nerwen his shirt. The prince bent forward and placed his lips at the base of her throat, brushing the delicate skin there. Nerwen bent her head backwards, giving him full access, her long hair falling like a cascade on her back, and with a small sigh, she wrapped her arms around his head.

Lowering her bodice, the prince bared her breasts and cupped them, reverently; under his right hand, he perceived the fast beats of her heart. Impulsively, he bent over, placing one ear over her left breast, and closed his arms around her, holding her tight, listening carefully for long moments.

Moved by this unexpected gesture, Nerwen caressed slowly his hair. Then Aryon stirred, kissing the soft mound next to his lips, stooping even lower to take one excited apex in his mouth. She sank her fingers into his hair and moaned in pleasure, feeling him sucking and lapping sweetly this sensitive place of her body. She drew back and held him slightly at distance, slipping her hands into the opening of his shirt to brush his chest; perceiving the quick throbs of his heart, she imitated what he had just done, slouching forward and putting her ear over his heart to listen, wrapping her arms around his shoulders. Aryon placed his cheek on her head, brushing her hair, a swarm of butterflies stirring in his stomach.

The Aini closed her eyes, a tremble shaking her in the deepest of her being, both physically and spiritually. Her desire for him, to join their bodies as much as their hearts and souls were joined, became paramount, igniting a fire in her womb. She straightened her back and moved between Aryon’s legs, positioning hers over his; the prince sensed the surge of her desire and, as a reflex action, he felt his own increasing even more.

“Sweetheart…” he murmured, lifting her skirt to caress the outer part of her thighs, slowly, up to her hips and then backwards on her buttocks, finally coming down again to her knees, brushing their sensitive back.

With shaking fingers, Nerwen began untying the strings that kept closed his breeches, finding
some difficulty because of the swelling pushing up from the inside; at last, she managed to open the garment and was able to caress the warm and solid flesh of his virility.

Feeling her touching him intimately, Aryon closed his eyes and sighed, delighted. He moved his hands, this time on the silky inner part of her legs, climbing slowly toward the hot centre of her body. He cracked his eyes open and searched for her lips for another kiss; he brushed softly the core of her femininity and heard her whimper, then he touched her more firmly and felt satisfied how her warmth increased. He kept caressing her, enjoying her growing moans of pleasure.

Nerwen felt like bursting up in flames. It was true that Aryon was capable to inflame her desire with a single gaze, an allusive tone, a gesture; but now that no secrets stood between them anymore, it was somehow different, more intense, deeper. The need to join with him grew even more and became unbearable, to the point she tore off her lips from his and lifted herself, cancelling any distance between their bodies, then she descended on him, guiding him inside of her. Aryon clutched her hips and raised his pelvis to meet her; as their bodies melted into one, they uttered in unison a groan of pleasure, both physical and emotional.

Her arms around her husband’s neck, Nerwen moved, pushing and drawing back rhythmically in the exciting, rousing dance of love, while Aryon responded in a counter-rhythm, widening the movement and increasing the mutual pleasure. The heat radiated by their joined bodies went far beyond the mere physical sensation: it surrounded their souls, it infused in their hearts, it charmed their minds. The world around them disappeared; there were only the two of them who had become now one, arms intertwined, mouths sealed, sighs and moans that were music in each other ears, their breaths laboured and progressively erratic, while their bodies swayed in perfect harmony at the eternal rhythm of love.

Pleasure grew, accumulating into their depths, climbed, climbed further in an increasingly frantic crescendo; their movements quickened in consequence, as well as the beat of their hearts, the rhythm of their breaths, the volume of their love laments. Aryon drew slightly back his head, wanting to see Nerwen’s face transfigure at the high point; she reciprocated his gaze, then pleasure intensified suddenly, gathering inside of her in the imminent explosion, making her irresistibly close her eyes, breathless. At the same moment, Aryon, too, felt the acme approaching, and he tensed. They reached the peak together, invoking reciprocally their names, shaking in the convulsions of the orgasm, enjoying their own pleasure as much as that of other one, giving themselves entirely and receiving back as much.

Slowly, the spasms of the mutual fulfilment subsided, as they kept holding each other tightly. The daylight was dimming and dusk was falling quickly in the wood, as much as temperature, but for long moments, they didn’t even notice it, still joined and lost in their lovingly bliss. Eventually, Nerwen perceived the evening coolness and shivered in her husband’s arms. He realised she was cold and hurried to lift her bodice.

“Best we get dressed,” he exhorted her. Reluctantly, they parted, smoothing their clothes, and began to walk back to the encampment, hand in hand, exchanging frequent gazes full of love.

Both felt like pacing ten centimetres over the ground.

OOO

Two weeks later, the explorers, who had been sent to look for what remained of the Easterling
army that had fought in front of Minas Tirith, returned with the distressing news that it had been nearly exterminated, as less than one hundred infantrymen had survived, now coming slowly back.

The scouts brought also other news, which made Nerwen immensely glad: Gondor had a king again, Aragorn son of Arathorn, who had taken the name of Elessar. He hadn’t still been crowned, but the Gondorians had already accepted him because his claim to the throne looked perfectly legitimate. And this wasn’t all: at his side, there came always a white-dressed Wizard called Gandalf.

Only at that moment, the Istar realised that, during her meeting with the Valar in Mahanaxar, they hadn’t spoken about Mithrandir, except for the final hint that now she and all the survived Istari were welcome, whenever they would return to Valinor. This should have been a clue, but at that moment, she had been so stunned by the joy for their victory over Sauron, that she hadn’t noticed.

“I knew he wasn’t dead!” she exulted; then she furrowed her brow, “How is it that from Grey he has become White? And Saruman, then…?”

But for the moment, she had to keep her curiosity.

OOO

At this point, Pallando decided that the triple army could safely go back home; therefore, in the morning of the tenth day of April, they broke up camp and set out. Accompanied by a guard of honour, Empress Sumire joined the column of soldiers, as a guarantee that the Easterlings wouldn’t attack in retaliation the peacefully retiring armies: even if they stated respect for the enemy, Aryon didn’t trust them and so Pallando stuck to the original plan he had explained to Murai, Sumire’s predecessor, therefore the empress and her family would go with them as far as the ford of Lavnen, where they would witness the crossing and would then be free to go back. What Pallando kept to himself, on Nerwen’s suggestion, was that he would use, on Sumire and all the others escorting her, a spell that would make them sleep for three days; an energy barrier would protect them from the wild animals – the only inhabitants of those remote lands – while the triple army would retire concealing all traces of their passage, as to not reveal the precise direction they would take. This, to prevent any possible pursue, even if a late one, from the part of the Easterlings, furious because of their defeat and keen to get revenge. It was an improbable prospect, but one could never know and prudence is never enough.

After one day of marching from Ichidragon and the confirmation from the rearguard that they weren’t followed, Nerwen and Aryon took their leave from Pallando. As they were dining together for the last time, the Istar asked her colleague:

“Now that Sauron has fallen, are you planning to go back to the Blessed Realm?”

“I thought about it,” the Blue Wizard answered, solemnly, “But I have no memory of Valinor and therefore I am not in the least homesick. Now my home is Yòrvarem and I doubt I will ever feel the wish to leave it. Except that, for any reason, I would regain my memory, of course, and in this case I could mayhap change my mind.”

“In case, seek the Grey Havens,” Nerwen reminded him, “on the shores northeast of Eriador. To shorten the trip, you could go to Minas Tirith, where you can find ships sailing on a daily basis for Dol Amroth, from where you can sail for Mithlond, retracing your own steps from the time you
journeyed with Alatar.”

“In case, I will do as you suggest, my friend,” Pallando assured her, then he gazed upon them with benevolent curiosity, “And you two, what will you do, if I may ask?”

“For now, we’ll go back to Eryn Rhûn,” Aryon answered, “and we’ll take our time over our decision.”

“You do well,” the Blue Wizard approved, “It is not a decision to be taken lightly.”

OOO

When the triple army resumed their marching, on the next day, Aryon and Nerwen embraced Pallando one last time and then, with Thilgiloth, Túdhin, Allakos and Kerra turned north-northeast, heading for Eryn Rhûn. With them came Fimbrethil and Olbranch, who would escort them to Bârlyth; then, they would proceed for Fangorn: the First Keeper wanted to invite Treebeard and all the Ents to go with them to Dor-im-Duin, to join their partners and unify again their race, which had stayed apart for too a long time.

Author’s corner:

Food trivia: the strange tuber looking like potato I called eliant is none other than Jerusalem artichoke, scientific name helianthus tuberosus.

What is happening meanwhile in the book?? On March 25th, Frodo and Sam come to Mount Doom and the One Ring is destroyed, and consequently Sauron, too; while on April 6th, the two brave Hobbits are duly praised and celebrated at the Field of Cormallen.

I won’t post for the next two weeks because I’m on vacation; I’ll be back after Sunday 19th August :-)

Lady Angel
Proceeding in an almost perfectly straight line north to north-eastward, Aryon and Nerwen needed something less than a fortnight to get to the southern border of Eryn Rhûn; the Avar prince was highly thrilled to see again the places where he was born and where he had lived all his life before meeting Nerwen, and now he looked about avidly, yearning to recognise this or that piece of familiar landscape.

“Halt!” they heard a loud female voice, coming from amidst the trees, “Who’s coming on the borders of the realm of the Kindi?”

About twenty Elves, in green and brown attire, came forth from behind the trees, their bows fully extended, with notched arrows aiming at them. Aryon started and pulled Allakos’ reins, while Thilgiloth stopped with no other signal than Nerwen’s thought. Túdhin bared his teeth in a silent growl, while Kerra froze behind the Chargeress’ tail, her ears stiff. Olbranch and Fimbrethil, a little at the rear, simply stood stock-still.

“I’m Aryon Morvacor,” the prince announced in a loud voice, “brother and once First Sword to Queen Eliéenna.”

A female Elf with long brown hair approached them with strong steps, scrutinizing the black-dressed wayfarer with plain mistrust. Noticing he too was an Elf, she relaxed slightly and lowered her bow.
“We’ll verify your claim later,” she declared, turning her attention to his apparently Human escort, “Meanwhile, who’s this?”

She said it with a contemptuous tone that annoyed Aryon deeply.

“This is Nerwen the Green of the Order of the Istari, as well as my wife,” he growled, “and you’ll show her proper respect!”

The Elf hesitated, intimidated by his vehemence; but her duty was keeping off Eryn Rhûn the unwanted strangers, therefore she stared again at the prince and replied:

“I will do so if and when your identities will be confirmed: if you truly were the First Sword of the High Sovereign, you know the law.”

To this, he had no objections; after all, the Elf was simply following orders, the same he followed himself for all the years he had been in the queen’s service. Hence, he nodded curtly and said:

“Sure. And what might be your name and rank?”

“I’m Erediel, Captain of the Southern Marches,” she answered proudly.

“Fine, captain: send a messenger to Bârlyth, announcing my and Lady Nerwen’s return. Add to this that we’re in the company of two Entwives.”

Erediel furrowed her brow and looked around; it was apparent she had taken the two Enyd for trees, even if she had probably wondered from where they had come, as before they weren’t there.

“Is this some kind of joke?” she asked harshly.

“Absolutely not,” Nerwen answered in a sharp tone, annoyed by Erediel’s irritating attitude; she turned to the First Keeper and her deputy and invited then in Entish, “Come forth.”

The captain started at the sound of this very unusual tongue, and started even harder seeing a birch and an elm moving and advancing towards them. She withdrew hastily, aiming again with her bow, unaware of the complete futility of her gesture.
“Stop!” Aryon commanded her imperiously, “They’re not enemies to take down, exactly like us.”

The Entwives halted next to Nerwen, as Túdhin kept his eyes on Erediel, tense, ready to leap at her throat if his two-legged friend would ask him to do it.

*I smell her fear,* he said, satisfied.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of the Entwives,” Nerwen declared, “except you would threaten them without reason. Drop your bow, captain.”

She saw her hesitating, then doing as she had told her.

“Well, captain,” Aryon intervened, “appoint an escort and have us taken to the queen, as your messenger go ahead of us; when he’ll come back with the confirmation of our identity, you can allow us go on alone: I know the way perfectly well.”

Erediel watched warily the Entwives, who returned her gaze solemnly, with no fear whatsoever, and no trace of malice at all.

“If the legends are true,” the captain considered slowly, “these Entwives could sweep us away in an instant, if they want to, therefore an escort to keep you from escaping or from causing trouble would be completely useless. However, I must follow my orders and do as you have just said,” she turned and signalled to another Elf to come near, “Prontur, choose someone to send to Bårlyth and inform Queen Eliénna,” she turned, looking again at Aryon, “How do you expect to prove your identity?”

The prince had already given thought to this.

“Tell her I hope she’s still keeping safe the necklace I sent her from Orrodal,” he answered.

Erediel nodded, as well as Prontur, both showing they had understood; shortly after, a female Elf rode off, heading for the capital city of the Kindi with the message for the High Sovereign. In the meantime, the captain had chosen half a dozen guards: they would be their escort, of which Prontur would be in charge.

They set off immediately, three soldiers at the vanguard and three at the rearguard, with Prontur riding beside Aryon and Nerwen, and they entered Eryn Rhûn. They rode on for the rest of the day; at evening, they camped, then they resumed their journey the next morning. In the early afternoon, the Elf who had preceded them returned; she brought the confirmation that Aryon was indeed who he claimed to be and consequentially his companions, too. Prontur, who has proved cold but polite, affirmed he was glad of the news and took his leave with the escort, leaving them to go on alone.

They arrived at Bårlyth in the late afternoon of the third day since they had entered the forest. The town looked exactly as they remembered it: the clearing surrounding the three hills on which it stood, the battlements, the beautiful wooden palace on the highest mound. Aryon felt moved: he was returning home. Nerwen, too, didn’t remain indifferent, as this place had seen the beginning of their romance.

As they approached the gates in the battlements, a rider galloped towards them, waving joyously; as it drew nearer, they recognised Myranna, Eliénna’s daughter.

“Uncle Aryon, Uncle Aryon!!” she yelled merrily. The prince smiled and spurred Allakos to meet his niece; they embraced from the back of their horses.
“Welcome back!” the princess cried, then she glimpsed at the Istar who was coming closer, 
“Better: welcome back, both of you! Oh, but now I must call you Aunt Nerwen,” she added, 
noticing the gold ring gleaming at her right index finger, identical to the ring Aryon was wearing at 
the same finger.

“If you don’t mind...” the Aini jested, recalling how they had always gotten along well.

“I’m glad to,” Myranna stated, embracing Nerwen, too, then she looked around, “I see you brought 
new friends...”

The Entwives had kept at a distance because they didn’t want to scare this young stranger, but 
now, on Nerwen’s reassuring nod, they came near.

“Fimbrethil, Olbranch, this is Lady Myranna Fàrodes, daughter of the High Sovereign of the 
Avari,” the Maia said formally, “Myranna, meet the First Keeper Fimbrethil and her deputy, 
Olbranch, of the Onodrim.”

The princess gaped at them, her eyes wide and round almost as much as the eyes of the Enyd, 
clearly flabbergasted; then she pulled herself together, regaining a composure that was more 
suitable to her rank. She bowed her head in greeting and said:

“Welcome to Bârlyth, friends.”

“Oh, well… hum hoom… thank you, Lady Myranna,” Fimbrethil said, bowing stiffly, while 
Olbranch was doing likewise, “Nice to meet you.”

Myranna looked at Túdhin.

“Is he, too, a new friend?”

“Yes and no,” Nerwen answered, “but it’s a long story, I’ll tell you in another moment.”

“Very well… Calad isn’t with you, I see; however, many years have passed,” she eyed at 
Thilgiloth, “but your mare looks exactly the same… how’s that possible?” she enquired.

“It’s part of the long story I mentioned earlier.”

“Oh, fine, then… You’ll have both surely very much to tell! Come, let’s go, mother is waiting for 
us impatiently...” she turned to look at the Entwives, “How can we quarter you, so that you’re 
comfortable?” she asked them.

“A sunny meadow and a watercourse would be more than enough,” Olbranch answered.

“A fountain is also acceptable?”

“Absolutely.”

“Then I invite you to come to the palace; we will host you in our gardens,” Myranna said 
enthusiastically.

The guards at the entrance gates stared in wonder at the Entwives, but didn’t breathe a word. 
Aryon recognised the commander of the picket, whom he greeted as if he had left the day before, 
and the soldier stood at attention even if, technically, the prince wasn’t his senior officer anymore. 
This thought stirred Aryon’s curiosity:

“Who’s the First Sword, now?” he asked, turning to Myranna.
“Lord Herentor,” she answered.

“Good choice,” the prince approved, recalling this brother-in-arms of his youth.

“He became also my mother’s friend-in-love,” the princess smiled, “I’m glad of it, she’s been alone for too long.”

Aryon felt slightly surprised: his sister never mentioned she was feeling lonely; but his niece was right, the queen had been alone for far too long. Therefore, he nodded approvingly.

“And how’s Lorgil?” Nerwen asked, referring to the crown prince.

“He’s becoming the best swordsman in Eryn Rhûn,” Myranna told them, clearly proud of her brother, “but now that you’re back, Uncle Aryon, he won’t get that title easily…”

“We’ll see,” the prince replied, thoughtfully: even if he was more than happy to be back home, he didn’t know yet whether he would stay or instead decide to leave with Nerwen.

As they rode slowly up the street leading to the palace, many people came to look at the group that was escorted by what looked to be two walking trees. The rumour that Aryon Morvacor was back had spread, and the prince answered to many greetings from acquaintances of his, but the most of the throng just gaped, full of curiosity, pointing out to one another the Entwives who ambled behind the group.

At last, they came to the gardens surrounding the royal residence and the crowd halted at a distance. Myranna stopped.

“First Keeper, except for different orders of the queen, you and your companion can choose the place most suitable for you, in the area of the palace gardens,” she said, gesturing around, “Should you need anything, ask for me,” she added.

“Thank you, Lady Myranna,” Fimbrethil replied, pleased by the princess’ courtesy, unaware that the liking she was showing them came from her fondness of herbs and plants.

Grooms came to take their mounts; Thilgiloth, remembering the treatment she had the first time, followed them gladly and thus, Allakos and Kerra did the same. Túdhin chose to stay with his equine friends, taking leave from his two-legged friends.

Myranna watched him going away, not hiding her curiosity.

“Your dog looks exactly like a wolf,” she observed. Nerwen smiled:

“Because he is a wolf,” she revealed, “but don’t worry, he’s absolutely inoffensive, except someone angers him by attacking me or Aryon.”

“Oh!” the princess cried, slightly anxious, but remembering her uncle’s relaxed attitude while affectionately caressing the predator’s side, just before he would follow the horses, tranquillised her, “If you say so, I trust you,” she declared.

At the entrance, one of the guards ran off to announce them, preceding them in the queen’s office, where she was waiting for them.

Eliénna Dhillel, High Sovereign of the Six Tribes of the Avari, stood up as soon as the door opened. Heedless of the dignity her title meant, as she was in the presence of solely her family – in which she now counted also Nerwen as Aryon’s partner for life – with a broad smile illuminating
her beautiful face, she ran to her brother and embraced him heartily; the prince returned her
embrace, holding her tight, with great affection.

“I was beginning to despair of seeing you again,” Eliéenna confessed to him, when they drew back
to look at each other, “You, and Nerwen, too,” she added, turning to the Istar. She let Aryon go and
held out both her hands; Nerwen grasped them, not knowing exactly how she should behave: they
had parted in friendship, even if not in any particular affection, but now they were actual sisters-in-
law. However, they weren’t much close.

It was Eliéenna breaking the ice, embracing her at first formally, as Eldar use to do, that is, putting
her hands on Nerwen’s shoulders, but then she left alone the etiquette and embraced her as one
does with family.

“Welcome in our family, Nerwen Kaleniril,” she said, giving her unexpectedly a second name,
which was nothing else than the translation in Avarin tongue of Laiheri, that is Lady of the Green.
The Aini stared at her dumbfounded: did she know…? No, impossible, she told herself: none could
have informed her. However, it couldn’t be a coincidence: maybe the queen had partially inherited
the Second Sight from her Maiarin father, together with the double sight that allowed her – as well
as Aryon – to see both on the visible and on the invisible level.

“Thank you… Eliéenna,” she answered, hesitating over the confidential use of the queen’s name,
but her sister-in-law nodded encouragingly, “It’s good to be back.”

“You’ll have both to tell me much,” Eliéenna said, “but before you’ll surely like freshening up from
the journey and rest a little, therefore I’ll keep my curiosity at bay. We’ll meet again for dinner,
and by that time, also Lorgil will be here,” she turned to her brother, “When I learnt you were
coming back, I ordered your quarters aired out and warm water for a bath. Go ahead,” she
dismissed them smiling.

Aryon and Nerwen climbed to the upper floor, heading for the prince’s quarters – which the Maia
had never seen, during her former stay – where they found their luggage carefully placed in a
corner; a maid welcomed them smiling, and Nerwen was pleasantly surprised to recognise her.

“Parànel, how nice to see you,” she said. The pretty brunette Elf smiled at her.

“It’s nice to see you, too, Lady Nerwen, and you too, Lord Aryon,” she said, “Your bath will be
ready in a few moments.”

She called for other servants, who carried in buckets of steaming water, filling up the bronze
bathtub in the bathroom next to the bedchamber. Entering, Aryon noticed that everything was
exactly how he had left it, over 75 years ago, and once more he felt moved. He never realised how
much he had actually missed his home.

“We’ll manage our bath by our own,” Nerwen announced to Parànel, in fact dismissing her. The
maid curtseyed and exited, together with the other servants, closing the door behind her.

“You go first,” Aryon invited Nerwen, “I’ll take care of our stuff.”

“Fine,” the Maia nodded, thankful, heading for the bathroom. There, two buckets of cold water
stood next to the bathtub, in case the prepared water would be too hot, and in fact she used some
before plunging in the water with a contented sigh: it was since Pallândim that she didn’t have a
private bath because, during the military campaign, they had to settle with ablutions with
washcloths, vessels of cold water and soap, and in Ichidoragon they had used the public baths,
because the Easterlings didn’t use private baths.
She reclined against the back of the bathtub, closing her eyes and relaxing; a few minutes later, she heard Aryon’s voice calling from the threshold:

“Shall I help you washing your back?”

She turned to look at him and nodded smiling; the prince had taken off his jacket and now he rolled up the sleeves of his shirt, as he advanced in the room.

“Too bad the bathtub isn’t large enough for both of us,” he grinned, “but we can have it replaced…”

“Excellent idea,” Nerwen approved; she adored taking baths with her husband, act that often ended up in a passionate embrace.

Aryon soaped her back, then he passed the sponge on her skin and rinsed it; eventually, he retired, not without a good glance at his wife’s beautiful forms he could detect through the water. She noticed his gaze and stuck her tongue out to him.

“How impertinent,” the Avar prince grumbled, pretending to be offended, “We’ll deal with this later: I’m the queen’s brother, for Aman’s sake, you cannot treat me like this…” he concluded grinning, before exiting; Nerwen, too, laughed.

She washed her hair, easily drying it with her power, then she got off the tub and wrapped herself in a large towel. Seeing her returning to their bedchamber, Aryon called for the domestics to have new water, task that was fulfilled in a few minutes. Again, they dismissed the servants and Nerwen returned the favour she had received, washing her husband’s back; she, too, took advantage of the situation, admiring him openly with an impish gaze, before retiring. Noticing it, Aryon hurried to finish bathing, dried himself hastily up and joined her in their chamber, where he spent the next hour dealing with her for the tongue she had stuck out to him earlier.

OOO

Later, Parânel came to call them for dinner; they joined Eliénna in her private dining room, where they found Lorgil. Nerwen noticed how the crown prince’s shoulders had broadened and his arms had become more muscular, almost as much as his uncle’s, but he would never match his height. Less effusive than his sister, his embrace to Aryon was more reserved but equally heartfelt, whereas he kissed Nerwen’s hand gallantly and called her aunt.

Shortly after, Myranna and Eliénna joined them, so they sat down around the table. The queen had instructed the cook in preparing her brother’s favourite dishes and apologised to Nerwen because she overlooked her preferences, during the time she had been more or less a forced guest to them; however, she remembered a couple of things, therefore she had ordered strawberry fruit salad and sweet cider. The Maia thanked her warmly for her kind thought.

As they ate, Aryon and Nerwen told about the stories and adventures they had in the years they had stayed away, beginning from their engagement in Kopellin in the presence of Sêredor and Lythelen – they chose to omit the disagreeable incident with Meledhiel – and going on with their journey to Orrodal and later to Fortvalley, where thanks to the Wise Valin they had discovered the ultimate lead that had taken them beyond the Orocarini; their winter in Orrodal, the departure in spring, the attack of the Easterlings that had cost Calad’s life and had brought them Tûdhin. At this point, Nerwen explained that she and the wolf had already met in a previous life, but she would
return to this topic later. They went on with their tale, speaking of their arrival in the place that once had been Cuiviénen, where Aryon’s and Eliénna’s parents had met and fallen in love; of their strange adventure at Bordercastle, in the bubble outside of time; of the welcome at Yòrvakars, where they got married. At this point, the queen asked them to have a break, as they had finished dinner, and invited them in her parlour, where they would be seated more comfortably.

Once there, Eliénna took a small wooden box from a cupboard and handed it over to Nerwen.

“This is yours,” she said, smiling, “I have taken care of it for all this time, as my brother had asked me to.”

The Aini opened the carved box and found the splendid necklace of emerald Aryon had given her for her birthday in Orrodal. The prince helped her to fasten it around her neck; meanwhile, the queen took another, larger box in mother-of-pearl, and gave it to her sister-in-law as soon as the necklace was in place.

“These are my wedding presents to you both,” she announced, “I’m sorry I couldn’t attend your nuptials, but as soon as I learned about your engagement, I guessed you wouldn’t await longer than the traditional time and therefore it would be almost impossible for me being there, because you would be who knows where. However, I nonetheless wanted a gift prepared for you, to give it upon your return, for which of course I hoped.”

Nerwen opened the second box and was speechless: side-by-side, there stood two diadems, one in emeralds, shaped as a garland of leaves – clearly intended for her – and the other in gold, decorated with aquamarine gems the same colour of Aryon’s eyes, plainly intended for him.

“They… they’re wonderful, Eliénna,” Nerwen stuttered, struck not much for the material value of the two jewels – nothing could compare with the lost Silmarilli created by Fëanor – but for the fact they had been specially designed for her and Aryon.

“They truly are,” the prince agreed, admiring both diadems.

“As we couldn’t attend your wedding,” Myranna intervened vivaciously, “we’ll have a grand feast, now that you’re back, possibly the exact day of your anniversary… What would be the date?”

“July 14th,” Aryon answered, “but I don’t know…” he paused, looking at Nerwen.

“Of course, we can do this,” she affirmed, realising the reason of his hesitation: there was no hurry to decide whether they would stay here or leave for Valinor. Should the Entwives feel the urge to
go to Fangorn, which was doubtful given their anything but hasty nature, they were perfectly capable to undertake the journey even without them.

“Fine!” the princess exulted, “I’ll take care of everything; do I have your permission, mother?”

“Sure,” the queen smiled.

At this point, Nerwen and Aryon resumed their tale, telling about the unexpected meeting with Pallando, one of the Blue Wizards they all had believed lost; then came the painful time of the separation of husband and wife, while the two Istari and Túdhin had been trapped in the mysterious dimension where time passed differently than in Arda, where they had found the other Blue Wizard, Alatar, and confronted a Balrog. The story of the fight gave the chills to all of them, even to Aryon who had already heard it, and the knowledge he now had that she couldn’t be killed by the monster of shadow was of little comfort to him.

Finally, they spoke of the final stage of the search for the Entwives and of how the latter had decided, with unhoped-for quickness, to intervene in the fight against Sauron; hearing the ill-omened name of the Enemy, the three listeners shuddered: even if they were aware that they couldn’t be harmed from it anymore, for too long they had feared that name.

The tale continued with their return to Pallândim, the long journey to the capital city of the Easterling Empire, the siege of Ichidragon, and at last, the return to Bárlyth, in the company of two Entwives.

“Tomorrow you’ll introduce me to them properly,” Eliénna said, then she chuckled, “Nerwen, do you remember, when you left, I told you I thought your mission improbable, but I hoped I was wrong and I would see you come back with a host of Entwives? And now I have two of them in my garden…”

The Aini nodded, amused.

“I didn’t came back exactly with a host, but there was no need, as we fought our battle in another location than the main one;” she said.

“Mayhap it wasn’t the main battlefield, but it was prominent,” Aryon observed and Nerwen nodded once more. Then she took a deep breath: time had come to reveal to her husband’s family, too, what her true nature was.

“Following Sauron’s downfall, on March 25th, I received permission to reveal to persons of my choice something about myself,” she announced, “I told Aryon straightaway, and now I’ll share it with you, as his family; but I must ask you to keep to yourselves what I’m about to tell you, at least for the moment.”

“Absolutely!” Eliénna assured her. Lorgil and Myranna, too, guaranteed her their discretion.

“It’s about my origin, and of all the other Istari,” Nerwen began, “Do you remember, when I’ve been your guest, we hinted to my age and you supposed I was much older than I appeared?”

Mother, son and daughter furrowed their brows in the effort to recall that memory, then Lorgil nodded:

“Yes, I remember! It was one night at dinner, but you didn’t neither confirm nor deny…”

“I couldn’t, because I was bound to conceal my true origin,” she explained, then she shook her head, “To cut it short: I come from Valinor and I am of the same kind of Galadhost.”
The queen stared at her, slowly blinking as she was taking in the news; Myranna’s blue eyes widened, and Lorgil instead drew in a sharp breath and frowned.

“My grandfather was a Maia,” he said, “You claim being of his same kind, but how’s that possible…?”

“Are you questioning Nerwen’s word?” Aryon interrupted him, glaring: he was his nephew, as well as the heir to the throne, but he wouldn’t allow anyone to call Nerwen a liar.

Intimidated, Lorgil hushed; Nerwen placed one hand on Aryon’s arm to placate him.

“Don’t blame him,” he invited him, gaining a surprised glance from the crown prince, “After all, he doesn’t know me as well as you do, and he has only my word.”

Eliénna intervened:

“I instead have something more: I see you as I saw my father, as if you’re here and not here at the same time. He told us that this was exactly because he came from Valinor. Aryon at the time told me you called this double sight.”

The Aini nodded in confirmation:

“So is the ability called, to see things and people at the same time on the visible and on the invisible level. All the Ainur have it, as well as the Elves born in the Undying Lands or that had dwelled there for a long time.”

“Therefore, we see you like this because you’re a Maia,” the queen concluded, “I think this proof enough…” she chuckled, amused, “And at first I thought you could be a rascal, a cheating illusionist who pretended possessing powers… Besides, I thought the mission you claimed you where upon – the search for the Entwives – was a great absurdity. And now you reveal yourself as an Aini and I have two Entwives in my garden,” she shook her head, suddenly sobering, “However, I won’t apologise: I was acting on the protection of my people,” she concluded, speaking slowly and looking in her sister-in-law’s eyes.

Nerwen made a surprised face:

“Nor do I think you owe me any apology: you, as well as Aryon, were simply thinking you were taking care of your people. Besides, in spite of your doubts you’ve been exquisite hosts and I don’t see any reason to complain… especially since among you I found my partner for life,” she concluded, looking lovingly at her husband.

She wasn’t so much arrogant to demand that, as soon as they learned who and what she truly was, all those who had treated her with mistrust, coldness or haughtiness, should profuse in apologies; and anyway, Aryon’s family members, even if they had been distrustful at first, had never behaved too coldly, much less haughtily. But she had to admit honestly to herself that her ego was pleased, after all, in seeing their astonished faces. Oh well, she, too, had her weaknesses…

“In any case, please keep this news to yourselves,” she repeated, “I received permission to divulge my true identity, however it is inappropriate that this should become public knowledge. I told you because you’re Aryon’s family and deserve to know the truth, as he does.”

“And we thank you,” Myranna declared, “Don’t we, mother, Lorgil?”

“Sure,” her brother nodded, reassured by his mother’s affirmations. Eliénna, too, nodded, then she looked pensive.
“Now that your mission is over and you found the Entwives, what will you do?” she asked slowly, looking at her brother and sister-in-law, “Nerwen… do you want to return to Valinor?”

“Only if Aryon, too, wishes to,” the Maia answered with no hesitation, turning to look into his eyes, “Otherwise, I’ll stay here. I waited for so long to meet him and now, the only thing that matters to me is that we are together. Where, is of little consequence.”

Aryon grasped her hand and squeezed it gently.

“Same here,” he declared, firmly.

Eliéenna looked thoughtful from one to the other; she understood perfectly what they were feeling, because she had felt the same way with her husband. Even her rank as crown princess hadn’t mattered anymore, to her, and with it, the place they would dwell together.

“Well, of course I hope you’ll stay,” she admitted, “but whatever your decision will be, the important thing is, you’re happily together.”

Nerwen could well imagine how much it was costing to her saying this, because she had gone through this, when Melian had decided to stay in Beleriand for the love of Thingol. The smiled at her, gratefully; now she was sure she and her sister-in-law could be friends, even if perhaps only for a short time, in case she and Aryon would decide to leave for Valinor.

The following morning, as they had agreed, Aryon and Nerwen met with Eliéenna for the formal introducing between her and the Entwives; Lorgil joined them as the crown prince, and Myranna, too, wanted to go with them.

They had no difficulty in spotting Fimbrethil and Olbranch who, like two trees grown in a single night, stood next to a fountain in the southernmost area of the garden. As the group approached them, the two Entwives turned to them and waited.

“My friends,” Nerwen began in Common Speech, “let me introduce to you Eliéenna Dhillel, Queen of the Kindi and High Sovereign of the Six Tribes of the Avari, as well as sister of my husband Lord Aryon, and her son, the crown prince Lorgil Torandyr. You already met princess Myranna. Eliéenna, Lorgil, these are the First Keeper Fimbrethil and her deputy Olbranch, of the Onodrim.”

Recognising she was in front of an equal, a queen like herself, Eliéenna bowed her head in a greeting and said:

“For me, it is a great and unexpected honour to meet you, because since a long time we thought the Onodrim were just a legend of the Elder Days and not reality.”

“The honour is ours, Your Majesty,” Fimbrethil replied with equal courtesy, “And now that you have seen us, what do you think of the legends?” she added, her immense eyes, green with brown streaks, sparkling in amusement. Eliéenna couldn’t restrain a smile despite the solemnity of the moment:

“I was forced to change my mind already about the existence of the Istari, when I met Lady Nerwen; therefore, now that the myths prove again to be real, I have less trouble to accept it.”
Lorgil was keeping a little aside, trying to maintain his demeanour, but he was actually almost gawking in wonder. He needed quite a long time, while the conversation among the Entwives and the other ones was going on, to regain his composure enough to throw a couple of words into the dialogue.

“My dear friends,” Nerwen said at a certain point, “as you know, Aryon and I will stop here for a while, deciding if stay forever or not. Please don’t feel bounded to us: you are free to leave whenever you like.”

Fimbrethil looked around, over the great forest surrounding Bârlyth.

“This wood is very ancient,” she observed, “Before going on, I wouldn’t mind to visit it with Olbranch, if Queen Eliénna would give us permission.”

“Certainly,” Eliénna approved, “Please feel free to scour my realm up and down. Only, for the sake of my subjects, leave me a few days to send around messengers announcing your possible presence.”

“Good idea,” Aryon approved, “We don’t want anyone being scared so much, to the point of thinking it’s some sort of assault and react with violence: better be safe.”

“I’ll instruct Lord Herentor,” the queen concluded.

OOO

A few days later, in a bright morning at the beginning of May, the Entwives left Bârlyth: in all of Eryn Rhûn their presence had been announced, with the order that none must bother them, much less attack them.

Fimbrethil and Olbranch took their leave from Eliénna, Nerwen and Aryon with solemn words and deep bows.

“Give my regards to Treebeard,” the Aini asked the First Keeper, “and tell him I exhort him to accept your invitation.”

“Thank you, Ancient One,” Fimbrethil said, “I will do that. He will surely take your advice into account.”

OOO

The days passed quickly, becoming weeks and then months. In the realm of the Avari, too, one could feel a new atmosphere, of relief and joy, that translated into a greater enthusiasm in doing things. Many new projects started or came into realisation after a long time of hesitation, like the building of new houses, the start of new commercial or artisanal activities, weddings; and, now that the world had become better, many decided to make plans for a child. Because of their immortal nature, births were rare among the Elves, therefore every pregnancy was welcomed with great joy and excitation; and so, the glee and the relief for Sauron’s annihilation were improved by
the many pregnancies that were announced pretty much everywhere in the territories of the Six Tribes.

At the beginning, Lord Herentor thought that Aryan would want to have back his office as the First Sword, but the prince said no and preferred taking Nerwen to visit Eryn Rhûn and other places of the six realms of the Avari, where he couldn’t take her during her first stay; in particular, they spent one week alone in his hunting lodge, where he had taken refuge when he didn’t know how to react to the awareness she was his partner for life and where he was staying when they met the first time in Olorendor.

OOO

On July 14th, they had a great feast to celebrate Nerwen’s and Aryan’s wedding anniversary; the Aini wore for the first time the precious diadem her sister-in-law had given her, along with the splendid necklace she had received from Aryan, as well as a magnificent gown in light silk, of course green, with silver embroidery on the bodice, that she had ordered expressly for this day; while the prince, in black as usual, was wearing his diadem decorated with aquamarine gems.

They held a sumptuous banquet, and all the potentates of the Kindi attended it; the evening went on with a ball, which ended very late, much after the couple of the day had retired to celebrate in private.

OOO

In mid-August, Aryan and Nerwen left for Kopellin, where Sérédoł and Lythelen happily welcomed them. Here, they learned that Meledhiel, after serving the sentence she received for attempting on Nerwen’s life, had retired in a country manor and dropped off the world, while her mother Kilven was still the Lady of the Palace.

They stayed as guests of the king and queen of the Hwenti for two weeks, than they took their leave to go back to Bârlyth; on their way there, they stopped three days in the charming place that had seen their first joining, renewing those magical moments with great emotion.
The evening before resuming their journey to Bârlyth, Aryon and Nerwen were sitting in front of the dying embers of the fire where they had cooked their dinner, amusing themselves as they created figures of smoke from their pipes.

“This place is so beautiful, it reminds me of Valinor,” Nerwen declared, looking around. It was true: even if it didn’t possess the light of the Elven realms this side of Belegaer, which made them look very alike the Blessed Realm, this corner of Middle-earth was really appealing.

They hadn’t spoken openly anymore about the choice they got to make, between staying on the Hither Shore and travelling beyond the Great Sea. Aryon thought that this moment was as good as any other to ask the questions he was thinking about for some time.

“Those who go to Valinor, do they forget about their home in Ennor?” he asked in a soft voice.

“No, of course not,” the Aini answered, surprised, “Living in the Undying Lands doesn’t dim your memory; it just eases the pain you suffered in the past, even if some of it cannot be completely erased,” she concluded, thinking of Melian’s eternal regret for Thingol, her lost partner for life, whom she would meet again only at the time of the Dagor Dagorath; and that time none, except Eru Ilúvatar, could know when it would arrive.

“But those who go there, will they be homesick about what he or she has left behind?” the prince insisted.

“No, except mayhap for those they won’t see anymore; but this is true also in case you stay in Ennor,” she answered, then she looked at him, intrigued, “Why are you asking me? Are you thinking about how you’d feel if you come with me beyond the Great Sea?”

Aryon made his typical half smile: as usual, Nerwen guessed his state of mind by just a few hints; nor did he expect differently.

“Precisely,” he confirmed, nodding, “I am thinking about it since the day you revealed your true origin.”
"You know there’s no hurry at all..."

“I know... but I think I came to a conclusion right now, when you compared this place to Valinor,” he placed down his pipe and took her hand, lifting it to his lips, “For you, I already left my home once, because the only thing that matters to me is to be with you. I’ll call home any place that makes you entirely happy, and I think this place is Valinor, or more precisely, your Garden. And anyway, I’m curious to see the place where the Ainur dwell, not to mention the fact I’ll meet again my father,” he kissed her fingers one by one, “Let’s leave.”

For a long moment, Nerwen just stared into the depths of her husband’s azure irises, which were always so transparent to her, that she could see as far as the bottom of his heart. She, too, didn’t really care where they would dwell, as long as they would be together; but she couldn’t deny that the perspective to go back home filled her with a deep joy.

“If this is your true will,” she said slowly, “then it’s fine; but I want you to be sure beyond any possible doubt. Therefore, I wish this decision settled deeply in your mind: we said we’d stay one year with your sister and so shall we do. If you change your mind, I implore you, tell me: this is a decision that, once made, leaves no room for doubt or uncertainty, or repentance.”

Aryon was about to protest he had neither doubts nor uncertainties, but he realised that for Nerwen it was really extremely important to be sure he was completely convinced; and she wouldn’t be wholly satisfied until he wouldn’t demonstrate he had pondered over it truly thoroughly. It wasn’t enough that he assured her he was thinking about this for months already.

“I understand that,” he affirmed then, “and I’ll do as you ask.”

But he knew he wouldn’t change his mind.

OOO

The autumn passed serenely, followed by winter; and then it was spring again. Then, Aryon brought up again with Nerwen the topic of leaving; they were taking an evening stroll in the palace garden when he halted and made her turn to him.

“Blossom,” he began, “it’s now exactly one year that we came back to Bârlyth. In all this time I have thought carefully about our future, as you asked me to do; and now I confirm what I have already told you: I wish for us to leave for Valinor.”

Nerwen didn’t waste time to ask him if he was sure: he had had one year time to think about it and now he was giving her the ultimate answer.

“Fine,” she accepted therefore, simply; then she smiled at him, “I’ll be glad to show you my gardens. We’ll build a new house to dwell in together, so Melian won’t have to leave the one she and I lived in together so far.”

“And you’ll teach me how to do plants,” Aryon suggested. At this claim, Nerwen’s smile broadened:

“Are you sure you wouldn’t prefer scouring Aman in the wake of Oromë or Tulkas?”

Aryon held her tight:
“Not if this means staying away from you for too long.”

“Don’t worry, there are very fast ways to travel all across Valinor,” she reassured him.

“Do you mean I may have a Charger like Thilgiloth?”

“Not only: there are the Passages Mandos created, through which one can cover hundreds of kilometres in the fraction of a second. You could go hunting with Aldaron in the far north of Aman and be back home in two hours.”

“Very interesting,” the prince affirmed, “I’ll think about this, when we arrive there.”

The next morning, Aryon told his sister and his niece and nephew his and Nerwen’s decision to leave. There was a moment of silence, then Eliénna nodded slowly.

“Somehow, I knew it,” she admitted softly, “I am sorry to lose you forever, brother mine; but Nerwen doesn’t belong to Middle-earth, she belongs to the Blessed Realm. She must return, and you must go with her.”

Nerwen’s heart clenched as she realised what great cost it was for her sister-in-law uttering those words.

“I am happy you don’t hate me because I take away your brother from you,” she said in a low voice, “and I hope you, too, won’t hate me,” she added, looking at Lorgil and Myranna.

“Hate you?” the queen repeated, casting her a surprised glance, “I’d hate you if you’d make him unhappy, forcing him to go away with you; but I see he’s made up his mind freely. Therefore, I accept it, even if I can’t deny this makes me very sad.”

Myranna nodded to show she shared her mother’s thoughts and sentiments.

“I’m very sorry to see you going away,” she admitted, “I’ll miss dancing with you, Uncle Aryon, and your classes on medicinal plants, Aunt Nerwen…”

“I, too, will miss you, both of you,” Lorgil affirmed, a bit unexpectedly for Nerwen, as he had never shown a particular affection for her; but after all, because of is reserved character, the crown prince didn’t show much his feelings with anybody.

“When will you leave?” Eliénna enquired.

“Within a fortnight,” Aryon answered, having decided so with his wife.

“And what route will you take?” Lorgil asked. This time, it was Nerwen who answered:

“Our first stop will be Minas Tirith: the new king is a Man I met when he was still a child in Rivendell, and I wish to see him again,” she smiled, “Besides, if things had gone as I think, at his side as a queen there’s my niece Arwen, daughter of Elrond of Rivendell…”

In the previous months, she had the chance to break the news about her relationships to the Elves of Middle-earth, so she had no need to explain which one she had with Arwen or Elrond.
“Arwen Undómiel is in love with a Man?” Myranna enquired, intrigued, “Exactly like her great-great-grandmother Lúthien...”

“Precisely,” the Aini confirmed, “And he, too, is a descendant of Lúthien, through Elros, Elrond’s twin brother. Technically, they’re very, very far cousins”, she revealed, then she became thoughtful, “It’s curious how the great tales intertwines one into another and never truly end…” she considered; she was silent for a moment, engrossed in her thoughts, and at length she went on, “After Minas Tirith, we’ll head for Fangorn, to see what has become of the Ents. I very much hope they accepted Fimbrethil’s invitation and have gone all beyond the Orocarni. At this point, we won’t be very far from Lothlórien, so we’ll go there to say farewell my dear friend Galadriel and her husband Celeborn. Finally, we’ll cross the Misty Mountains and head for Lindon, to the Grey Heavens, where we’ll sail for Valinor.”

“A very long journey,” Eliénna commented.

“Yes, it is,” Aryon confirmed, “that’s why we’ll leave in a short time.”

The queen sighed:

“I see. Of course, I’ll give you anything you’d need: you have just to ask.”

OOO

They day they left, in the privacy of her office, the queen embraced her brother for a long time, sad but composed.

“Greet our father for me, when you’ll meet him,” she asked him when she let go of him. Aryon nodded; his heart, too, was heavy, but he knew he had made the right decision.

Then, Eliénna reached for Nerwen and embraced her, too.

“Promise me you’ll take care of him, always,” she told her, under her breath. In this short sentence, all her affection for her brother was contained, and Nerwen understood this.

“Aryon is my heart,” she assured her, “You can be sure that I’ll take good care of him, every day of my life, until the end of time.”

The queen nodded, blinking away the tears that were welling up in her eyes.

Myranna and Lorgil, too, hugged their uncle and his wife; the princess wiped incessantly her eyes and the prince, too, was visibly moved.

Eventually, Aryon and Nerwen left the room and the palace; in the courtyard, they found Thilgiloth and Allakos, saddled and ready to leave, Kerra with their luggage, and Túdhin, laying in patient wait. They mounted and, cantering slowly, they went down the road to the gates.

So it was that, on the second day of May of the year 3020 of the Third Age, Aryon Morvacor and Nerwen Kaleniril left Bârlyth, never to return.
Author’s corner:

And so, the last part of this long adventure begins: the journey to Valinor, full of meetings, that will be bittersweet because there’s the joy to see again places and people and there’s sadness because you know you won’t see them ever again...

The emerald diadem truly exists and belongs to Queen Rania of Jordan.

The wonderful place where Nerwen and Aryon stopover is represented again by an image of the stunning falls of Kuang Si in Laos.

What is happening meanwhile in Tolkien’s masterpiece?

In 3019, on May 1st, Aragorn is crowned as King of Gondor and Arnor with the name of Elessar; on Midsummer Day Elessar and Arwen Undómiel wed; on August 10th the funeral of king Théoden is celebrated in Edoras; on August 19th, Saruman leaves Isengard; on October 30th, Frodo, Sam, Merry and Pippin return to the Shire and find it under the dominion of the ex-Wizard; on November 3rd, the Battle of Bywater takes place and Saruman is killed; on this date, the War of the Ring ends officially.

In 3020, on April 6th, the mallorn that Sam planted in the Shire blossoms and all the Hobbits marvel at it; on May 1st, Sam weds Rosie Cotton and they move to live with Frodo Baggins.

Many thanks to those who spend time reading this fan fiction; a double thank you to those who spend some more time sending me a review, short or long.

Lady Angel
A few days later, Nerwen and Aryon arrived at Gaerlonn, where they took a room in the best inn in town; then they went to the Harbour Master, who turned out being still Misselot. When they entered her office, the captain rose to meet them:

“Lord Aryon, welcome back,” the brown-haired Elf said, “I didn’t think I’d ever see you again: I’ve been informed you were no longer the First Sword of the Queen…”

“I didn’t return to that office,” the prince explained, “I’m just passing through, captain: we need a ship willing to take us across the Sea of Rhûn.”

“To Gobelamon?”

“No, precisely across,” Nerwen intervened, “as far west as possible.”

Misselot gazed at her, intrigued; she remembered well this woman accompanying Aryon, the first time she had been here, and afterwards she had learned that Nerwen and the prince got married. The world had become truly strange, if an Elf of Aryon’s rank took a Human female as wife, she thought, even if she was a member of the half-mythical Order of the Istari, as she had learnt; but she didn’t dare showing anything less than the respect due to the High Sovereign’s sister-in-law.

“It’s a very unusual request,” Misselot observed, “I’m afraid you’ll have to rent a vessel specifically for this purpose.”

“Then we’ll do it,” Nerwen concluded with a shrug, “How can we proceed?”

“There are several ships in port now; you can go along the docks and ask their captains,” Misselot suggested.
“Thank you”, Aryon answered.

“Well, good luck then, and have a nice journey”, the Harbour Mistress told them; she was of course unaware she would see them never again, and they didn’t bother to inform her, as they weren’t close in any way. Therefore, they simply thanked her again, then took their leave and exited.

Altogether eleven sailboats were moored on the wharfs. The first six captains they asked weren’t interested, as they had been already hired; but the seventh was free and accepted to take them to the westernmost shore of the Sea of Rhûn, with the proper reward. This was no problem for the couple, as once more, Queen Eliënna had given them unlimited credit.

OOO

Three days later, they embarked. Túdhin wasn’t at all enthusiastic about getting again aboard a floating object, even if so big; Allakos, too, didn’t look enthusiastic, and Kerra even jibbed, refusing to get on board. Nerwen talked to her, assuring her there was no peril, but she needed the great and good to convince the mule, who finally relented only because all her three friends were already aboard. Then, she got on the gangplank; she kept a bad mood for the entire journey, but at least she stayed calm.

The crossing took a sennight; the weather kept fine, except one very windy day that stirred the waves and got Túdhin seasick, but Nerwen healed him with her thaumaturgy; anyway, the wolf strongly emphasised again his aversion to anything floating.

They reached eventually the southwestern coast of the inland sea; the landing operations, in the absence of a wharf, were laborious because of the horses, who had to be transferred from ship to dinghy using the capstan and many belts. Thilgiloth faced the situation with her usual determination and Allakos didn’t want to be outdone, even if he was quite frightened; as for Kerra, even if she was shaking uncontrollably, she faced her ordeal making no sound; in the end, Nerwen praised her greatly for her courage.

Courage? the mule wondered, I thought I was going to die of fright!

You faced it and got over it, the Maia explained, What else do you think courage is?

Pleased, Kerra didn’t answer and just wagged her long tail. She always thought herself less than a horse, but from this day on, she was proud of herself.

Once landed, Aryon and Nerwen took their leave from the captain and his crew, who would return to Gaerlonn much richer than before, as the reward the captain had asked had been very high; after all, he had given up two weeks of possible trade travels and he had applied the fare he would have asked for two crossings, from Gaerlonn to Gobelamon and return, so it hadn’t been unfair.

After the parting from the sailors, Aryon and Nerwen began their journey southwestwards, going around the far end of a low mountain range located on this corner of the Sea of Rhûn. The route they planned to go would take them skirting the Brown Lands on the south and crossing the Dagorlad, the Plain of the Battle where, at the end of the Second Age, the Last Alliance had fought against Sauron’s forces; the battle had ended with Isildur taking the One Ring, cutting it off the Enemy’s hand. Nerwen and Aryon would pass close by the Morannon, the entrance to Mordor that
now was surely destroyed, after Sauron’s definitive downfall; but the couple would stay highly alert, because some Orcs could still roam those unhappy places.

They were lucky: in the two weeks they needed to cross the barren land northeast of Mordor, they didn’t meet another living soul, neither friend nor foe, except the few kelvar wandering in this sad place.

Eventually, they came upon the road that, from the Morannon, skirted the Ephel Dúath and crossed Northern Ithilien from north to south, a road that would take them to Osgiliath, the ancient capital city of Gondor now in ruin, built on both sides of the Anduin; here, they counted on finding someone who would carry them on the other riverbank, unless, in the year and more since Sauron’s defeat, they had rebuilt at least one of the many bridges that once linked the two sides.

When they came to Osgiliath, on the late afternoon of June 9th, they found it garrisoned by soldiers, who guarded a great number of rebuilding works. Perhaps the city would never return to its former glory nor to the rank of capital of the Southern Realm, but at least it would find again its dignity.

A number of guards halted them, then brought them to their captain, a young Man, tall and handsome, brown-haired with piercing grey eyes.

“I am Faramir, son of Denethor,” he introduced himself, “Prince of Ithilien by the grace of King Elessar and Queen Arwen. And who are you, and what are you doing in Gondor?”

His tone was firm, but not particularly hostile or distrusting: just a warden of the boundaries doing his job.

“I’m Nerwen the Green,” the Aini said in a friendly tone, favourably struck by the Man, “and this
is my husband, Lord Aryon of the Kindi Elves of Eryn Rhûn. I’m Queen Arwen’s aunt, and I met King Elessar many years ago in Rivendell; we wish to visit them.”

Faramir showed mild interest.

“You’re Queen Evenstar’s aunt?” he asked, “You claim a very high relationship: you’ll forgive me if, before letting you pass, I’ll have your assertion checked.”

“If it’s your duty doing so, do it,” Aryon snapped, quite annoyed because he could never stand someone doubting his wife’s or his own word, “but quickly.”

Faramir frowned and Nerwen, fearing a useless squabble, intruded:

“Forgive my husband’s temper, but we’ve been travelling for three weeks and we’re tired.”

“I see,” the Man nodded, relaxing just a little, “Don’t worry, our hospitality is mayhap humble, but we won’t deny you what we can offer. In town, there are no inns yet, but the thermal baths are working since last month and you can use them, if you wish. I assume that, if you were travelling so long in barren lands, you will appreciate such a comfort.”

It was a plain peace offering and they accepted it gladly, even Aryon, who had decided that, after all, he liked Faramir; he hadn’t dropped his eyes at his snap and had answered adequately, but without losing his temper. He showed character and Aryon liked persons of character.

Hence, they set up camp in the shadow of the chipped walls of Osgiliath, the Citadel of the Stars.

“I don’t mind cleaning up thoroughly, before showing up at the royal court,” Nerwen observed as they prepared to go to the thermal baths, which location Faramir had showed them.

“I don’t mind, either,” Aryon agreed.

The building that contained the thermal baths stood near the river, which in this point was very wide and deep. They saw a multi-pillared bridge of white stone that was being restored, but wasn’t passable yet; next to it, a pontoon bridge acted as temporary crossing.

“Well, at least we won’t need a ferryboat,” Aryon observed, looking amused at Túdhin, who had followed them and had already flattened his ears against his head, showing his annoyance at the idea of having, once more, to set foot on something floating: even if, technically, also a pontoon bridge was floating on water, at least it was motionless.

The wolf skimmed over his two-legged friend’s slight mockery and relaxed, reassured.

“Minas Tirith is down there,” Nerwen told her husband, pointing west towards the mountains, the Ered Nimrais, which formed the northern border of Gondor; beyond them was Rohan, “It’s only two or three hour ride away.”

“You’re thrilled you’ll soon see again your niece and her husband, aren’t you?” Aryon asked, placing one arm around Nerwen’s shoulders as they walked to the thermal baths.

“Yes, very much... I have the feeling they had to fight long and hard to be together. Arwen was the unmarried female Elf of highest rank in all of Middle-earth and Aragorn – who is called Elessar now – must have felt like Beren towards Lúthien. And you know what? When I met Arwen, she told me she would like to live such a love story as her foremother... and it’s exactly what she got,” she shook her head, slightly incredulous, “Ilúvatar’s Plan often repeats itself, but the reason is unknown to me.”
“The Creator’s mind is inscrutable even to the Ainur?”

“Yes, it is. After all, we are simply His creatures, like all the other ones...”

OOO

The next morning in the early hours, Faramir came to them.

“The messenger I sent yesterday to Minas Tirith has returned,” he announced, “King Elessar and Queen Arwen are expecting you at their palace; a guard from the Great Gate will escort you through the town,” he handed them a scroll, “This is your pass.”

“Thank you, Lord Faramir,” Aryon said, accepting it, “We’ll leave immediately after breakfast.”

They took leave from the Prince of Ithilien, crossed the pontoon bridge and rode along the causeway that from Osgiliath would take them directly to Minas Tirith.

About one hour later, they arrived at the Rammas Echor, the great round wall that defended the Pelennor, the area around Minas Tirith, rich with fields, farms and villages. They crossed the East Gate showing their pass and rode through the beautiful countryside around the capital city of Gondor; the signs of the devastation of the field battle occurred over one year ago were still visible, like burnt farmhouses not yet rebuilt and fields blackened by arsons.

From the East Gate, the town was about twenty kilometres away; one hour and a half later, they came into sight of its white walls and, in wonder, they pulled the reins of their mounts.

Minas Tirith, the ancient Minas Anor, was a vision truly worth of the Elder Days: built on seven levels, it covered entirely a steep hill – called Amon Tirith – which stretched out from the eastern side of the impressive mount Mindolluin, audaciously climbing on its sides and raising layer upon layer up to over 200 metres above the plain; each layer, except the first, was crossed by a rocky
protrusion, similar to the prow of an immense ship pointing directly eastward and toward Osgiliath. The Citadel was on the highest level, where also the Tower of Ecthelion stood, a snow-white spire over 90 metres high; on the pinnacle that shone like polished silver, a long, black banner flew in the wind. Approaching, they saw that the flag bore the insignia of a white tree under a winged crown and seven stars, Elendil’s coat of arms.

“I had no idea that Men were capable to build such a wonder,” Aryon admitted, greatly struck; only once in his life he had felt like now: when he had first seen Fortvalley, the town of the Ironfist Dwarves.

“The architecture of Minas Tirith has a grace that comes very close to the Elven style,” Nerwen commented, recalling the Grey Havens and Rivendell, “because it has been built by the Men of Númenor, who more than all other Second-born are near to the Firstborn in capability and moral standing; but now their race has almost vanished. The lineage of Isildur’s Heirs kept intact through long centuries, and because of this, in King Elessar the blood of Westermess runs still pure, but only a few others can claim to possess more than some drops of it. Nowadays, no one can build anymore such splendid things like the ancient Tower of the Sun.”

When they arrived at the Great Gate, they halted and showed their pass.

“We were waiting for you,” one of the guards said, a Man with a short, grizzled brown beard, “Please, follow me.”

Inside the city, only the guards on duty and the messengers of the King were allowed riding; all the other people needed a special permission, which had been granted to Nerwen and Aryon, therefore the soldier, too, had a mount; even Kerra was allowed entering town, while Túdhin, as he usually did when they were in particularly crowded places, kept on Thilgiloth’s tail.

Preceded by the guard, they rode on along the main street; in a beeline, the Great Gate and the Citadel were only 300 metres away but, to hinder possible invaders, the road had been built so that one had to cover a considerable distance on each level, before turning on a bend and coming back, each time passing under the rocky protrusion through a tunnel well-lit by lanterns. In this way, the route ran for over one kilometre before reaching the seventh level where, besides the Tower of Ecthelion, stood also the King’s House, the Great Hall of Feasts, the dwelling of the Steward of Gondor, the barracks of the Guards of the Citadel and other lesser buildings, designed to accommodate guests and servants.

When they exited the last gallery, ending directly on the topmost level, Aryon and Nerwen arrived in a large courtyard at the foot of the White Tower, in the middle of which was a marvellous fountain, built under the shadow of a young tree with a snow-white bark; its leaves were of a shiny dark green on the upper side, while on the lower side they were silvery-grey. White flowers full of petals adorned its branches.

Nerwen gaped: if it weren’t for the small size, she would think she was standing in front of Galathilion, the White Tree of Tirion, the city of the Noldor in Valinor, which she and Yavanna had made in the image and likeness of Telperion, one of the Two Trees. Then she realised that this one had to be a descendant of it. Not for the first time, the awareness of the continuity in the tales of Middle-earth struck her, tales that went on intertwining in one another endlessly through the Ages of the World.

At this point, the guard who had escorted them had fulfilled his task and took leave from Nerwen and Aryon; grooms came, taking over their mounts, while the wolf stayed with his two-legged friends.
A tall Man with greying brown hairs arrived, introducing himself as Lindalf, Administrator of the Royal House.

“The king and queen are expecting you,” he announced them, “Please, come with me me.”

Following the instruction he had received, Lindalf didn’t take them to the throne room, but in Queen Arwen’s private garden, located in an inner court of the King’s House, where they found her and her husband. As soon as Arwen saw her aunt, she sprang to her feet and ran to her, arms wide open; Nerwen ran to her in turn and the two embraced, laughing and crying with apparent emotion.

“I’m so happy to see you, Aunt Nerwen!” Arwen cried, her voice trembling.

“I’m happy to see you, too, little niece...” he Aini whispered in a similar tone.

They held tight for long moments, overjoyed; then they drew back from their hug to look at each other, smiling.

“You look very good,” Nerwen declared; it was true: Arwen was more beautiful than ever, surrounded by the peculiar, bright aura of happiness that shines around people who are in love, reciprocated, “I bet it’s all him,” she added, nodding toward Aragorn. The queen laughed and nodded in confirmation, beckoning him over; the Man obliged smiling and hugged Nerwen.

“So long...” he commented, “but you said you’d do your best to meet me again, and you kept your promise.”

The Maia needed a minute to recall their last parting, when she had left Imladris and he had expressed the wish to see her again.

“A promise is a promise, Your Majesty.”
Aragorn shook his head:

“No formalities, in private,” he invited her, “You met me when I was a ten-year-old lad called Estel and gave me lessons in history and geography; I’d feel very silly if you’d now treat me rigidly following the etiquette...”

“Very well... but let me at least make the proper introductions,” she pleaded, turning and reaching for Aryon, who came beside her and took the hand she was stretching out at him, “Aryon, these are their Majesties the King Elessar and the Queen Arwen, sovereigns of the Reunited Kingdom of Gondor and Arnor. Your Majesties, let me introduce to you my husband, Aryon Morvacor, brother of Queen Eliénna Dhillel, High Sovereign of the Six Tribes of the Avari.”

The prince bowed, addressing them the homage due to monarchs; but Aragorn extended his hand.

“Welcome in Minas Tirith,” he told him; Aryon grasped his wrist in the greeting in use among equals:

“Thank you, Sire. Nerwen told me a lot about you and your queen...”

“Then she’ll have to make up telling us a lot about you,” Arwen smiled, casting a complicity glance at her aunt: she still remembered well their confidence in the tree palace in Caras Galadhon.

“I will for sure,” Nerwen promised, amused, “but you two must tell me everything about your tale.”

“Let’s start having the midday meal together,” Aragorn suggested, “We arranged you quarters in the guest wing, where you’ll find your luggage; you can freshen up and change your clothes, if you wish.”

“I can borrow you one of my gowns,” Arwen suggested intentionally, looking at Nerwen. The Aini laughed, recalling they did the same in Lothlórien.

“Yes, but you need to have it shortened or I’ll trip in the skirt and end up across the floor!” she cried, then shook her head, “Anyway, no need for it: I have a dress dignified enough, even if not for a state dining...”

“It’ll be just the four of us,” Aragorn reassured her, “nothing big.”

“And who’s this?” Arwen enquired at this point, nodding toward Túdhin with a smile, “He looks like a domesticated wolf...”

She didn’t finish the sentence, but it was an apparent question.

“He is indeed,” Nerwen confirmed, thinking a denial useless, “but he’s harmless, except if he thinks me or Aryon, or himself, in peril. Come nearer, I introduce you as friends...”

So far, the predator had kept at a distance, watching the scene, scrutinising Arwen in particular; now, on the Maia’s bidding, he came near them and sniffed one hand of both the queen and the king, then he accepted their caresses, friendly wagging his tail.

Eventually, Aryon and Nerwen were taken to their quarters, located in a building next to the King’s House and almost as lavish as the latter, with a large terrace decorated with vases full of colourful flowers. While they were going there, Túdhin addressed Nerwen in a very perplexed tone:

*If I didn’t know this is the first time I meet her, I’d say I know your female friend here.*
The Aini didn’t grasp immediately what he meant, until she remembered that, during his earlier
life, the wolf had met Lúthien, and Arwen was her living image; she explained to him their
relationship and he radiated a feeling of understanding.

“Your niece looks very alike to you,” Aryon observed, unaware of the dialogue between his wife
and the predator.

“She looks very alike to my sister Melian, to whom of course I look alike myself,” Nerwen
confirmed, “In her live again Lúthien Tinúviel’s features,” she added, “the most beautiful creature
in all of Arda’s history.”

Aryon brushed her arm.

“For me, the most beautiful creature in all of Arda is you,” he told her softly, earning one of her
bright smiles.

Arriving at their quarters, they found their baggage and they were asked if they liked having a bath,
but as the night before they had used the thermal baths in Osgiliath, they asked just for a jug of
water to rinse off their hands and faces. Then they changed their clothes, donning their court attires
– which Nerwen had prudently thought bringing with them, given the places they would visit – and
entrusted their dusty garments to the servants, who would take care of them. Finally, when they
were ready, they sat down awaiting to be called for the midday meal; they didn’t wait long:
Lindalf in person arrived to take them to the king and queen.

“Our dog will stay here,” Nerwen announced, having asked Túdhin and heard what he preferred to
do, “Can you have someone bringing him water?”

“Of course, I’ll give the appropriate orders,” the Administrator of the Palace assured them.

They followed Lindalf again to the King’s House, but this time they were led to the southern wing,
to a terrace with a gazebo covered in a blossoming wisteria, in which shadow stood a square table,
covered with a white cloth in embroidered linen and set with rich tableware; the king and queen
were already seated.

“Please, take a seat!” Arwen vivaciously invited them, pointing at the two free chairs, “Yestereve,
when we heard about your arrival, I instructed the cook to prepare one of your favourites, Aunt
Nerwen: trout filet with olives and tomatoes. And of course, a strawberry tart, too.”

“And sweet cider,” Aragorn added.

Nerwen laughed:

“You’ve got both an excellent memory!”

Aragorn turned to Aryon:

“And what is your favourite food?”

“Beef stew in spicy sauce,” the prince answered promptly, “with boiled potatoes and red wine of
Dorwinion.”

“I think that can be arranged,” the king commented, nodding, “I, too, like spicy food,” he then
added, smiling.

“What are the local specialties?” Aryon enquired.
“Oh, there are several,” Aragorn answered, “A square dough stuffed with season vegetables, for instance; frog soup; stuffed veal roast; capon at first boiled and then roasted with various herbs; and a cake made of chestnut flour.”

As they talked, several servants arrived, placing on the table carafes with water and white wine, as well as a tray with fragrant sliced bread and a dish with fish pulp, finely chopped and seasoned with parsley and olive oil.

“This is boiled pike,” Arwen explained, “Spread it on a slice of bread as an introduction to the actual meal.”

The waiter poured two spoonfuls of the chopped fish in each dish, then he left the rest for those who wanted more; Nerwen and Aryon tasted the food, finding it excellent. The wine was pleasurably sour, its colour a golden-green nuance that intrigued the Aini.

“So, tell us,” Arwen invited them, “Did you find the Entwives?”

“Yes, we found them,” Nerwen confirmed, “And it’s also thanks to them, that there were so few Easterlings attacking Minas Tirith.”

Aragorn placed down the mouthful of bread and fish on his plate and looked at his two guests with a flabbergasted face.

“Now I do understand... Indeed, I was very surprised learning the Easterling forces counted only 5000 units. I expected far more.”

“They would’ve been over twice so many,” Aryon revealed, “if we hadn’t attacked them with the armies coming from beyond the Orocarni and the Entwives.”

“The armies from beyond the Orocarni...? Better start at the beginning,” the king commented, intrigued, “Shall we start from when you left Imladris, Nerwen?”

“Then you should prepare for a very long tale,” she warned them smiling, “of which Arwen knows one part...”

As they ate, Nerwen reported her adventures, from Rhosgobel and the failure in meeting Radagast, to Fangorn where she had encountered Treebeard, whose existence she had now no reason anymore to hide; then she went on with her tale from Lothlórien to Eryn Rhûn, where she had met Aryon. From this point on, her husband assisted her as they continued the tale together.

When they came to the moment of the revelation that they were destined to one another, Arwen felt thrilled.

“Would you ever think, Aunt Nerwen, you’d find your partner for life in the middle of your mission?” she asked her.

“Definitely not,” the Maia admitted, shaking her head, “Actually, after so long a time, I thought I had to be alone like Nienna or Arien, and instead came the discovery, sudden like a bolt from the blue.”

“Same here,” Aryon stated with one of his smirks, “I was so dazed that, for a few days, I even doubted it could be real...”

When they finished their meal, they were talking about the encounter with Alatar, in the mysterious dimension outside of Arda.
“A Balrog…” Aryon murmured, pensively, “Like Gandalf in Moria.”

“What?” Nerwen asked, dumbfounded.

“We were forced to cross the mines of Moria,” the king said, “and a Balrog attacked just when we were almost on the other side... Gandalf faced it and threw it in the abyss, but he was dragged into it in turn. We thought him dead, but about one and a half months later, we met him again, returned from Death and transformed: he was Gandalf the Gray no more, but Gandalf the White…”

“Oh!” cried the Istar, “Forgive me if I interrupt you, Aragorn, but the White Wizard was Saruman: what about him?”

“Power went to his head and seduced him,” the king said, gloomily, “He convinced himself that there was no way to defeat Sauron and therefore he planned to ally with him, in the attempt to overthrow him and take his place to lead Middle-earth, seizing the One Ring... but it’s a long story. I’ll tell you when you’re finished with yours,” he stood up, “Come, let’s go and sit more comfortably.”

They went outside, heading for the garden where they had met in the morning; here, they sat on wooden couches, stuffed with many soft cushions, and carried on their conversation.

Nerwen and Aryon continued their tale; as they chatted, servants took care of them, fetching them cool beverages and fruits.

When the tale was over, it was Aragorn’s turn to tell his own tale, since his encounter with the four Hobbits in Bree; he narrated with great detail about the Council of Elrond, the mines of Moria, Lothlórien, the breaking of the Fellowship of the Ring, the long pursuit of the abducted Hobbits, the battle at Helm’s Deep, the role played by the Ents in Saruman’s defeat, the Paths of the Dead, the great battle of the Pelennor Fields, as far as the battle in front of the Morannon, when they had hopelessly faced Sauron’s still large forces, with the only purpose to distract his attention from his own land and give Frodo and Sam the opportunity to reach the Cracks of Doom and destroy the Ring.

“I’m really very glad that, in the end, Treebeard and his Ents decided to join the fight against Sauron, even if indirectly,” Nerwen said, recalling well the Shepherd of the Trees’ reluctance in meddling in matters of Middle-earth.

“Many prodigious things happened in just a few months,” Aryon commented, struck by the number and scale of the events that had merged in a very short time; Aragorn nodded in confirmation:

“To find something like this, you need to go back to the end of the Second Age, to the Last Alliance between Elves and Men and the Battle of Dagorlad, over 3000 years ago; but actually, this fight has been far more important and has determined a more effective historic change than the one occurred between the Second and Third Age.”

“That it is,” Nerwen agreed, “but now, let’s stop speaking about grave things... tell me about you two. How did you meet?”

Arwen smiled softly, looking at Aragorn, who returned her smile and signalled her to start on their tale.

“I had just come back from my stay in Lothlórien, when you and I have met,” she said, referring to her encounter with her aunt, “when, walking around in Imladris, I saw this handsome youngster coming towards me, all clad in white, calling me Tinúviel! I stared at him, frozen, because it
seemed to me as if I was reliving Beren’s and Lúthien’s encounter... I tried to maintain my composure, but I was truly thrilled and I didn’t understand why. It was only after some time that the reason became clear to me: he was my partner for life...”

She smiled again to Aragorn, handing the tale over to him.

“That was indeed the most awesome day of my life,” he admitted, looking at his queen with eye full of light, “because on that day I was turning twenty and coming to age; and Elrond had just revealed my ancestry to me. I was dazed with happiness and pride, I wasn’t able to stay still and so I had gone out to run and dance and sing. I always loved the tale of Beren and Lúthien and now I had found out they were my ancestors; while I was singing the part of the lay telling about their encounter, behold! Lúthien Tinúviel in person appears before me. Can you imagine my astonishment? I thought that some arcane magic had carried me through time and space... but then Arwen introduced herself and I realised my mistake. Mayhap Men are not endowed with the gift of recognising their partner for life as Elves are, but I realised immediately I would love only and forever Arwen Undómiel...” his face became thoughtful, “And I cannot blame Elrond for imposing me very hard conditions to make myself worthy of her: become king of the Reunited Kingdom of Arnor and Gondor, like Thingol at the time asked a Silmaril to Beren...”

“He had no right to do so,” Nerwen commented, furrowing her brow, “One cannot hinder two partners for life: it means hindering Eru’s will. As I reproached Thingol, I’ll reproach Elrond, too...”

“Don’t be too harsh with him,” Aragorn placated her, “He was only a father who wanted the best for his daughter...”

“...but without taking account of the fact that the best were you”, the Maia interrupted him, shaking her head, “Very well, for the love of Arwen and yours I’ll try not to tear him to pieces,” she grinned, in a perfect imitation of Aryon in his most sour moments. Recognising his own expression in his wife’s, the prince grinned in turn, while the other couple was gazing at them, perplexed.

Nerwen signalled them to ignore it and invited them to go on with their tale.

Arwen resumed the narration:

“When I realised Aragorn and I were destined together, I remembered your words, Aunt Nerwen, at Cerin Amroth when you told me I would soon meet my partner for life but it could be difficult for us... You had seen us together, hadn’t you?”

The Istar nodded:

“Yes, precisely there at Cerin Amroth,” she confirmed, but she didn’t specify she had seen them while making passionate love: it would be embarrassing, and it was unnecessary, “I didn’t tell you because visions of the future are not one-hundred percent certain and I didn’t want to give you wrong hints, which would raise hopes or expectations that mayhap wouldn’t come true, disappointing you. This happens to me, too... for instance, I had to meet Mithrandir again, not long after I had met him just upon my arrival in Middle-earth, but instead, an unforeseen event prevented me to and now, I still don’t know when I will see him again. By the way, have you heard from him?”

“He went to Imladris with the four Hobbits,” Arwen revealed, “accompanying my father home. I think he planned going afterwards to speak with Tom Bombadil, but I don’t know where he is now.”

“Well, I’ll see him when I’ll see him,” the Istar concluded with a shrug: she knew she would meet
him again, and that it wouldn’t be very long now.

Arwen resumed her tale, telling them how, about 30 years later, she and Aragorn had met again in Lothlórien; here, he had given her the Ring of Barahir and they promised themselves to one another with an engagement ceremony with no witnesses, except the two or them. More long years had passed, until Aragorn, beyond any hope, had succeeded in his attempt to restore the ancient realm of Arnor and Gondor, of which, as Isildur’s Heir, he had become king. Hence, he and Arwen finally could wed, almost 70 years after their first encounter.

Nerwen’s Second Sight chose this moment to kick in: the Aini saw a lovely child with blond curls like Galadriel’s and grey eyes equal to Aragorn’s and she knew his name would be Eldarion; then she saw three girls equally charming, brown-haired like their parents, one with her father’s grey eyes, the other two with their mother’s blue eyes.

“I’ve seen your children,” Nerwen said under her breath, “They’ll be gorgeous.”

Then she received another vision, this time of a stunning baby-girl with black hair and azure eyes. Her heart stopped as she recognised her as her own blood.

She turned to her husband, her eyes suddenly full of moved tears.

“And I’ve seen also our daughter, Aryon…”

The Avar prince’s breath caught in his throat: a daughter from Nerwen… what a wonderful thing would that be! Overjoyed, he pulled his wife in his arms and kissed her brow, reverently.

“She’ll be wonderful like you,” he murmured.
“And she’ll have quite a temper, like you,” the Maia replied, grinning.

“You don’t joke around, either,” he retorted with a matching grin.

Arwen and Aragorn, too, had joined their hands and were looking at each other, ecstatic. For a while, both couples were silent; at length, Aragorn spoke again:

“We talked for so long, that now it’s almost dinnertime… What about taking a little walk, before having our evening meal?”

“That’s an excellent idea,” Aryon accepted, standing up, “I’m nearly glued at the couch,” he added with a face, stretching his long limbs.

The others, too, stood up.

“Let’s go get Túdhin,” Nerwen said, “He’s been alone all day and he, too, will surely want to stretch his legs.”

“I go,” offered Aryon. Therefore, they agreed to meet in a short time in the Courtyard of the Fountain, under the White Tree.

Once they got there, Nerwen nodded toward the tree.

“Tell me, Aragorn, where did you find it?”

“On the slopes of mount Mindolluin,” he answered, “almost one year ago, with Mithrandir’s help. Evidently, the previous White Tree left an heir, before withering and dying, but the seed took many centuries to ripen before sprouting. It is interesting that it did so just a few years ago, as if it wanted consciously waiting for the return of the king… Anyway, I picked it up and carried it here, where I planted it in the place of its predecessor,” he paused for a moment and turned to look at Nerwen with a piecing gaze, “How much does it resemble to the original, Galathilion of Tirion on the green hill of Túna?”

Nerwen returned his gaze, confused: how did he know she could give him such information?

Seeing her amazement, Aragorn smiled ruefully:

“Mithrandir told me the true nature of the Istari, as well as that you’re best friends; therefore, I supposed you did see the first of the White Trees… as I presume you’ve seen Telperion, too, of which it is the image, and its companion Laurelin.”

“My, my, Olórin and his big mouth!” the Istar chuckled, “Well, then I introduce myself in the appropriate way: Nerwen Laiheri, follower of Yavanna Kementári. And yes: not only did I see the Two Trees, but being a follower of Yavanna, I also witnessed their creation, and after their destruction by the hand of Melkor, I saw Yavanna and Nienna salvage the flower and the fruit that gave rise to Moon and Sun.”

Aragorn nodded as to confirm something he was already guessing, then he cast a sidelong glance to Arwen, smiling:

“And now you can also tell me why exactly my wife and her brothers call you aunt…”

Nerwen burst out laughing:

“Sure, there’s no reason I’d keep it from you: I’m Melian’s sister, and therefore you, too, could call
It was Aragorn’s turn to feel confused:

“I wasn’t aware Melian had a sister…”

“Not many knew it, outside Thingol’s family,” Nerwen revealed, “After her husband’s death, Melian returned to Valinor and I never set foot again in Ennor, until Yavanna gave me the task to find again the Ents, and afterwards the Entwives,” she looked at the White Tree, “This is the true image of Galathilion, except for the size; but if it’s so young as you tell me, then it will grow further, even if the quality of Middle-earth won’t allow it to match the original’s dimensions; but I can put something into it…”

At that moment, Aryon appeared from behind the Tower of Ecthelion, escorted by Túdhin, and she paused as her eyes were irresistibly drawn to her husband’s tall, black-clad shape; Arwen smiled, recognising in her aunt’s charmed expression her own, when she gazed at Aragorn.

The wolf trod next to his two-legged friend and, when he joined them, he came beside Nerwen and brushed her thigh with his muzzle, and she patted him affectionately.

“He really looks like a puppy,” Aragorn commented, not hiding his astonishment in seeing such tameness in a predator whose ferocity was proverbial.

“Yes, he does, but not when he sees me or Nerwen in danger,” said Aryon, reaffirming what his wife had said in the morning, then he turned and watched the White Tree, intrigued, “This morning I noticed that this tree impressed you, love: why so?”

Nerwen told him in short its lineage, which Aragorn completed from the moment it had been carried from Númenor to Middle-earth.

At this point, Nerwen announced:

“I’ll give this White Tree a special blessing, so that it’ll become the most splendid of all those that have grown on the Hither Shore.”

She approached the young tree and placed her hands on its smooth bark, as white as snow, like its blossoms; under her palms, she perceived its sap running, fast and vigorous. She extended her thought toward it.

Feeling the touch of her mind, even more than that of her hands, the Tree stirred and his lower branches seemed to bow as if listening, stunned.

Greetings, little brother, Nerwen said, descendant of Galathilion, Celeborn, Nimloth and three White Trees of Gondor. I bless you in the name of Kementári; you will grow strong and healthy and you will become the symbol of the newfound glory of this realm.

I thank you, the tree answered her, radiating a feeling of great thrill and astounded pride.

The Aini drew back from the trunk and nodded to the king and queen, meaning she was finished.

“Thank you, Nerwen Laiheri,” Aragorn said solemnly, “the queen and I are honoured.”

I like this Man, Túdhin declared unexpectedly, and his Elven partner. I feel they love you dearly.

So it is, Nerwen confirmed, smiling at him.
They strolled for some time up and down the beautiful courtyard, which in the year passed since King Elessar’s coronation had been embellished with colourful flowers, evergreen shrubs and small trees, making it look almost like a garden; then they went to dinner, which they had with the highest court dignitaries. The wolf, too, attended to it, eating from a bowl full of fleshy bones of animals just slaughtered, which was very near to his natural food.

Music, songs and poetry followed dinner: Aragorn, grown up in Rivendell, had introduced this Elven custom, the Hall of Fire, in Gondor.

“I never would have believed that a Man could have as great dignity and royalty as Aragorn,” Aryon told Nerwen as they retired for the night in their quarters.

“He is worthy of his title, Isildur’s Heir,” the Maia commented, “In him, the ancient Kings of Númenor revive, of Westernesse lost into the sea; there will be no other like him, in the future, not even his son, even if he’ll be an Half-Elf,” she shook her head, “The world is changing: the Age of Elves is over and now begins the Age of Men, and nothing will be like before anymore.”

“I, too, feel that, deep in my heart,” the Avar prince admitted, “and it’s one of the reasons that make me wish to go West with you: it would sadden me too much, seeing Middle-earth slowly decline into an epoch in which the Grace of the Valar will lessen more and more.”

“Unfortunately this is inevitable: it’s the price to pay for having eradicated Evil from the world, but not its nefarious memory. Because it’ll be in the name of this memory that, in the future, tyrants will rise and fall, in the illusion to succeed where neither Melkor nor Sauron has succeeded; but their efforts will be frustrated by all those who will still keep in their hearts the memory of the Grace of the Valar.”

“So not all is lost… One day, perhaps, the Grace of the Valar will return?”

“Perhaps… but this will be only after the Dagor Dagorath, when the world will be destroyed and forged by Ilúvatar in a new form.”

OOO

A few days later, Aragorn and Nerwen were talking about the lands beyond the Orocarni, in preparation for a map, when a servant announced the arrival of Faramir, Prince of Ithilien, who asked for a short interview with the king. Aragorn gave promptly his consent and shortly after, the tall Man, whom the Istar and her husband had met in Osgiliath, entered into the room.

Faramir bowed low to Aragorn, then he greeted respectfully Nerwen, too.

“Welcome back, my friend,” Aragorn said, “What do you wish to discuss with me?”

“I heard from Éowyn, Sire: she’s on her way. Her message says she’ll arrive the day after tomorrow.”

“Very well! Everything is ready for your wedding. The queen will take care of it.”

“Éowyn and I are deeply grateful…”

“Oh, forget it,” the king hushed him smiling, “She’s delighted she can do it.”
Faramir bowed again, his grey eyes shining with expectation and impatience, and took his leave.

“A wedding?” Nerwen enquired when he had gone.

“Yes: Faramir and Éowyn of Rohan, sister of the present King Éomer, met and fell in love during the days following the battle of the Pelennor Fields and now they’ll wed. Then, they’ll move to southern Ithilien, where in the meantime Faramir got a mansion built for them and those who will follow them. Under the care of its new Prince and Princess, Ithilien will once again be the Garden of Gondor, like it was in ancient times,” his gaze dimmed for a moment, “I’m glad I was able to save them both: they were mortally injured by the Nazgûl, Éowyn even by the Witch-King of Angmar himself…”

“Yes, I saw her,” the Aini nodded; she had told him about her vision, “It’s a deed worthy of the most epic tales of the Elder Days.”

“It is indeed,” Aragorn confirmed, “but what makes me really happy in all this, is that her heart turned to Faramir, because once she thought to be in love with me and I was mortified because I couldn’t reciprocate the love of such a woman.”

Not for the first time, Nerwen thought that Middle-earth would never see again such a noble Man.

“All is well that ends well,” she commented serenely and Aragorn nodded, agreeing.

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**Author’s corner:**

Faramir’s performer is Jared Leto, in an image of cpss I found on Deviantart: I chose not to use the Faramir from the movie because he looks different than described in the book (blond instead of brown), while the handsome frontman of the 30 Seconds to Mars in this picture is simply perfect.

As from recent news it seems that Tolkien was inspired by the Italian town of Ravenna for his Minas Tirith, the typical dishes Aragorn lists refers to its tasty cuisine; while the dish Aryon mentions is the delicious Hungarian goulash, which I adore; and the “golden-green” wine is Verduzzo dorato, one of my favourite Italian wines, which name refers to its colour.

For those who are curious about the precise lineage of the present White Tree of Minas Tirith, here we go: Galathilion (Tirion) à Celeborn (Tol Eressëa – yes, it has the same name of Galadriel’s husband!) à Nimloth (Númenor) à first White Tree (Minas Ithil, then turned to Minas Morgul) à second White Tree (Minas Anor, then turned to Minas Tirth) à third White Tree (Minas Tirth) à fourth White Tree.

What is meanwhile happening in the book, the masterpiece that inspires me? Many things, but I mention only the happiest: on May 1st, Sam Gamgee (a character I love) marries his cherished Rosie J.
Lady Angel
Two days later, Éomer and Éowyn of Rohan, together with an escort worthy of their rank, arrived in Minas Tirith. Arwen and Aragorn received them formally in the throne room, surrounded by the highest representatives of the city; when the official part was over, the king and queen of Gondor dismissed the dignitaries of both sides, but asked the two guests from Rohan and Aryon and Nerwen to stay.

“My friends,” Aragorn said, addressing Éowyn and Éomer, “I’d like to introduce to you two persons very special to me and my queen: Nerwen the Green, Arwen’s aunt and my teacher when I was a child, and her husband, Prince Aryon of Eryn Rhûn.”

Nerwen and Aryon curtseyed and bowed; the blonde Princess of Rohan reciprocated, while her brother, by virtue of his rank as a monarch, simply nodded politely.
“Nice to meet you,” Éowyn said, her eyes lingering on the Istar, “So you’re a colleague to Gandalf, Lady Nerwen?”

“I am,” she confirmed, “And you’re the one who took down the Black Captain: I’m honoured to meet you.”

The princess smiled, then looked at Faramir, who was standing at her side, and her smile became broader and brighter:

“Thank you... but that’s the past: I longed for fame and glory, and I achieved them, but I realised that there are far more valuable things in life. From now on, I’ll take care only of things that grow and prosper and make the world sweeter.”

Farmir returned her smile. Nerwen thought that Éowyn was stunning, both sweet and strong; Faramir was her perfect counterpart, he, too, stunning, sweet and strong at the same time. They were a wonderful match, in every sense, and it was apparent they were deeply in love with each other. Under their care, Ithilien would surely go back to be a lush land.

OOO

They celebrated the wedding three days later in the Courtyard of the Fountain, in the presence of all the most important people in Minas Tirith. King Elessar in person led the ceremony, which was rather different from the one Elves and Ainur had and didn’t provide for the presence of sponsors, but only the exchange of the marital promises between the bride and groom, as they symbolically
tied their wrists with a red ribbon. The eyes of both parts of the couple shined with joy as they looked at each other with such rapturous glances, that all the attendees were smiling, even the stern Éomer, who was watching his sister and newly become brother-in-law with plain approval.

After the nuptials, they feasted in Merethond, the Hall of Feasts, where they had a rich banquet, and sang and danced, and where poets read love poems and acrobats performed their skills, and they had merriment until late, even if the bride and groom retired much earlier: they had to validate their marriage with the conjugal act and of course they were looking forward to it, like every couple in love.

OOO

The guests from Rohan stayed for ten days in Minas Tirith; then, they prepared to leave and go home, while the Prince and Princess of Ithilien would cross the Anduin, heading for their new house.

At this point, Nerwen and Aryon, too, thought it was time to resume their journey; the next stage was Lothlórien, but before, the Maia wanted to stop by in Fangorn and see what had become of the Ents, and they thought it could be a good idea joining the Rohirrim to ride together part of the journey.

The night before leaving Minas Tirith, Nerwen asked Arwen to spend some time with her alone; they went outside for a walk, escorted by Túdhin, and spoke about the future.

“Aragorn will be a great king,” Nerwen said, “He’ll restore the ancient glory of Arnor and Gondor and people will remember respectfully his name for many centuries.”

“Is you Second Sight telling you this?” her niece asked.

“No, just my common sense,” the Istar smiled, “I had no visions about this, but it’s apparent that Aragorn is a great Man, otherwise he’d never achieve all he has achieved, realising all of his dreams: the throne, victory, you…” she paused and her face became very grave; she turned to look at Arwen, “You know what awaits you, in the end, don’t you…” she asked softly.

Arwen stopped in her tracks and looked into her aunt’s eyes.

“I chose this way,” she answered, she, too, in soft tone, “because I rather want to be one hundred years with Aragorn, than ten thousand without him.”

Nerwen nodded: it was the same concept Aryon had expressed when he thought her mortal.

“Your life will he full of blessings of all kind: prosperity, love, health, children, prestige. As long as Aragorn’s life will be, in human terms, when the moment of his departure will come, it’ll seem still too short to you. Therefore, listen to me: stay with him as much as possible, treasure each single moment, because in the end, you’ll keep only the memory of him. I know what I’m talking about, because I, too, have lost a person I felt great affection for and I’m happy for every single moment I had the luck to spend with him; but for you, it’ll be much worse, because Aragorn is your partner for life, and the pain you’ll feel in your heart will never cease. If your life without him will prove unbearable, you can choose between going to the Grey Havens and sail for Valinor, or voluntarily detach your spirit from your body and go to the Halls of Awaiting. In both cases, your pain will be eased,” she grasped Arwen’s hands and squeezed them affectionately, “Forgive me if
I’m saddening you, but I wanted what awaits you in the end to be very clear to you.”

“Thank you, Aunt Nerwen,” the queen said in a low voice, returning the squeeze, “My father told me the same things. I don’t know what I’ll choose, but meanwhile, I will enjoy every minute I’ll be able to spend with Aragorn, as long as it’ll be allowed to us staying together.”

They embraced and stayed so for a long time; then, they returned to the palace, to dine one last time with the guests from Rohan and the newlywed couple.

OOO

The next day, Aryon and Nerwen took their leave from the king and queen.

“Please tell my father and brothers I send them all my love,” Arwen told them.

“Definitely,” the Istar assured her, “I’ll meet them again with great pleasure, and Glorfindel, too.”

And so, at last, they said their goodbyes: Nerwen struggled to hold back her tears, because it saddened her terribly knowing that for sure she would see Aragorn never again, and maybe not even Arwen.

In a bright summer morning, they left the wonderful city of Minas Tirith in the company of the Rohirrim and took the Great East Road, crossing the Fields of Pelennor to the gate that opened in the Rammas Echor facing north, and riding on; just before noon, they arrived to a great forest, into which the road went on.

“This is the Grey Wood, a part of the Drúadan Forest,” Êomer told them, as he rode side by side with Aryon and Nerwen, “The Forest in inhabited by the Drúedain, whom we call Woses; they’re also scornfully called Wild Men, but they’re brave and reliable; and more loyal than some other people – for instance, the Men of Dunland who aligned with Saruman. The Woses have been a great help as we were riding to Minas Tirith to fight against the forces from Mordor, warning us of an ambush of the Orcs on this same road,” he glanced towards the trees looming a few dozen metres away from them, ancient and dark, “The Drúedain are very shy and usually they avoid direct contact with strangers, but for sure many eyes are watching us right now. Because of their support in the war against Sauron, King Elessar has formally granted them the Drúadan Forest; for the law of Gondor, no one is allowed to enter it without their consent,” he concluded.
While Éomer was talking, Nerwen kept staring at the trees, old and gnarled, her special senses aimed to them.

“I’s a very ancient forest,” she commented, “It has seen many things, good and evil, inside and around itself; now it’s at peace and lives in perfect symbiosis with its inhabitants.”

Éomer had been informed about the Istar’s special talents, therefore he didn’t marvel at her statement and simply nodded, agreeing.

They rode on for one more hour, finally reaching the point where the road, with a wide bend, turned east-northeast, going round the high hill of Amon Dîn, where the first watchtower of Gondor was located; together with other six, it constituted the alert communication system between Edoras and Minas Tirith.

They stopped for a quick cold meal – bread, cheese and dehydrated fruits – and then rode on until dusk, when they exited the ancient Drúadan Forest and camped for the night. Éomer invited Nerwen and Aryon to dine with him, and they accepted with pleasure; in the past few days, the young King of Rohan and the Avar prince got along very well, sharing the same warrior spirit.

The day after, they resumed their journey; they advanced all the time east-northeast, the high peaks of the Ered Nimrais on their left, until they penetrated into the Firien Wood; eventually, they came to the river Mering and forded it, entering in the realm of Rohan.

On the evening of two days later, they arrived at Edoras, the capital city; here, Nerwen and Aryon stopped for a few days, at Éomer’s bidding, and got to know better the Rohirrim, the Lords of the Horses, the people who, five-hundred years ago, had come from the north to the aid of Gondor; as a thanksgiving, the Steward of Gondor of that time, Cirion, had given them the uninhabited region of Calenardhon, where now they prospered.
Edoras stood on a steep hill, on the top of which stood the royal residence called Meduseld, meaning the Golden Palace, and even if far from the splendour and grandness of the much more ancient Minas Tirith, it was anyway a beautiful town; Aryon and Nerwen spent here four agreeable days.

Eventually, they took their leave from Éomer and headed northwestward to the Entwash, to a place where they could ford it; after crossing the river, they would ride upstream as far as Fangorn Forest.

OOO

They came to the wood in the late afternoon of the third day since leaving Edoras; they were all – the two-legged as well as the four-legged beings – quite worn out from the full summertime heat, therefore they decided to stop for the night and rest, before going on to the natural terrace where Nerwen had been the first time. That was the very place where Fimbrethil and Olbranch would leave an agreed signal: a pile of stones, topped with a shoot of rowan in case the Ents had refused their invitation to follow them beyond the Red Mountains; without branch in case they had taken off.

In the morning, after breakfast, they broke camp and, still following the Entwash, which was now much reduced in size, they penetrated among the trees. The forest around them was dark and silent, not unlike it had been 80 years before.

They advanced for about one hour and a half, then they turned to the right, looking for the staircase that would take them to the natural shelf. Túdhin, who was preceding them on the vanguard, found it and took them there; as the horses and the mule were unable to climb the high steps, Nerwen and Aryon left them and went upstairs, escorted only by the wolf, who followed them jumping nimbly from one step to the other.

The small shelf looked exactly like the Istar remembered it, except for the trees that had become taller and larger; in the middle stood the agreed pile of stones.

With a twig.

“They didn’t leave,” Aryon noticed in a gloomy tone, turning to his wife. Nerwen nodded, feeling tears welling up in her eyes; her hopes to see the race of the Onodrim, after so many centuries, finally re-united and prospering again, were shattered.

Seeing her so heartbroken, the prince pulled her into his arms and held her; she laid her head on his shoulder as two drops streaked her cheeks. Feeling his two-legged friend’s distress, Túdhin came up next to her and brushed his head against her leg, in a comforting gesture.

After a few minutes, the Maia pulled herself together again; wiping away her tears, she drew back from her husband’s embrace.

“I must speak with Treebeard,” she said firmly, “I want to understand what prevented him and the other Ents from following Fimbrethil and Olbranch and bring back together their race.”

“Yes, I, too, would like to learn that,” Aryon declared; he had adopted Nerwen’s mission when he had realised they were partners for life, and therefore his disappointment was equally great, even if not so crushing.
Nerwen lifted her face to the sky, intensely blue in the summer days of this southern land, where the sun shone bright and hot, and with a sigh she closed her eyes; all of a sudden, Aryon recalled her doing the same gesture, during her first stay in Bârlyth, and how she had revealed she loved the light and the warmness. He recalled also that at the time he had thought that Nerwen was a creature of light. He smiled inwardly: his intuition had guessed her true nature long before she would tell him, but of course at that time he couldn’t even imagine how near he had been to the truth.

They went down the high steps. Seeing them returning, Thiligloth asked Nerwen:

Well, what happened to our friends the Onodrim?

“It looks like the Ents refused the invitation to go to Dor-im-Duin,” Nerwen answered, before climbing on the saddle.

What? the Chargeress cried, snorting, I can’t believe it!

“But,” the Maia informed her. She didn’t even need to shake the bridles, because Thiligloth had set in motion already, radiating a feeling of impatience.

Aryon spurred Allakos, who joined the Chargeress, cantering at her side, and so they rode on, with Túdhin preceding them and Kerra walking behind them; when they came to the Entwash, they turned on the left and began riding upriver.

Recalling the first time she had gone this way, with Treebeard carrying her, Nerwen kept up a fast pace, knowing that, even so, it would take the better part of the day to get to Wellinghall. Luckily, their mounts were particularly sturdy: Thiligloth was a Chargeress of Valinor and hardly knew tiredness, Allakos was a tough warhorse, Kerra a stout and generous mule, while Túdhin was a young and vigorous wolf who could travel large distances without suffering ill effects.

When the chariot of the Sun reached the zenith of its journey, above the dark trees that shadowed the narrowing river, they halted briefly to have a quick meal: smoked meat, dehydrated fruit and lembas, which Nerwen had baked back in Minas Tirith, restoring their provisions. Then, they rode on, never stopping again until nightfall; slowly, the terrain began to rise in the first spurs of Methedras, the last peak of the Misty Mountains, and as the shadows of twilight started to become deeper, they came across a small brook, running down on their right side. Nerwen recognised it as the tiny stream which spring gushed in Treebeard’s Ent-house.

“Here we go!” she announced. Sensing her rider’s excitation and impatience, equal to hers, Thiligloth speeded up her pace to a slow trot, pacing up the rivulet.

And there he was: Treebeard himself, motionless at the centre of the glade in front of the entrance to his dwelling, staring at them with his large, solemn eyes as they came nearer. To their great surprise, he wasn’t alone: at his side stood none other than the First Keeper of the Entwives.

“Fimbrethil!” Nerwen cried, astounded.

“Hullo, friends,” the Entwife said placidly, “Welcome to Wellinghall.”

The Aini was staring from one to the other, totally dumbfounded.

“But… what are you doing here?” she cried, too confused to reciprocate Fimbrethil’s polite greeting; Aryon, too, was as much amazed as her about this unexpected encounter.

“We were waiting for you,” the First Keeper answered, seraphic, “because, before following all the other ones and head for Dor-im-Duin, we wanted to say goodbye and thank you.”
At this point, Nerwen burst into a laughter of pure joy.

“What a wonderful surprise!” she cried, jumping down from Thilgiloth’s back and running to the two Enyd. Simultaneously, Fimbrethil and Treebeard stretched out one hand each; she grasped them – or better, she grasped one finger, given their size – stopping between them and beaming.

Aryon, too, came down from the saddle and joined them, more coolly.

“A truly unhoped-for encounter,” he declared. Hearing him, Nerwen left the Entwife’s hand and invited him to join them; the Avar prince took up the suggestion and grasped his wife’s hand, placing his other hand on Fimbrethil’s finger.

“Thus, Olbranch and the other Ents have left?” the Istar asked, guessing so from what the First Keeper had said earlier.

“So it is,” Treebeard confirmed, “but my sweet Fimbrethil wished to see you and your partner one last time, and I, too, wanted to see you again, Ancient One.”

“I’m so happy to learn this, you’ve got no idea how much I’m happy,” Nerwen admitted, “Treebeard, allow me to introduce to you my husband, Prince Aryon Morvacor from Eryn Rhûn. Aryon, this is Treebeard, the Shepherd of the Trees.”

The Ent bowed in his typical, stiff way.

“Honoured to meet you, Aryon Morvacor,” he declared.

“The honour is mine, Shepherd of the Trees,” Aryon replied, bowing slightly in turn.

“But come, my friends,” the Entwife invited them, “Night is falling and in our abode we will be more comfortable. Leave here your mounts, if they prefer staying outdoors: they will be perfectly safe.”

“That’s fine,” Nerwen accepted immediately, “We’ll need just a few minutes to unload Kerra and unsaddle Thilgiloth and Allakos.”

The two Enyd waited patiently for them to complete their task, freeing the mule from her load and the horses from their harness, so that they could better rest.

“You can even sleep lying down, there’s no danger whatsoever here,” Nerwen reassured them.

_In case, I’ll protect them_, Tûdhin cut in; the Aini reported his offer and both Kerra and Allakos expressed their gratitude to the wolf, whom now – after over one year and a half spent together – they trusted completely; of course, Thilgiloth did need no protection at all, but she appreciated the predator’s attitude, willing to defend his friends.

After leaving their four-legged friends in the clearing, Aryon and Nerwen followed their hosts in the Ent-house; they passed by the shining trees, which stood at both sides of the passageway leading to the niche at the bottom of the cleft in the mountainside, and the Avar prince gazed at them in wonder, because he had never seen such a marvel.

On the stone table, Nerwen noticed the two vessels radiating light, exactly in the same place where she remembered them: it seemed that just one day had passed since she left Wellinghall.

They got comfortable, Aryon and Nerwen sitting on the shelf that had been the Istar’s bed, Treebeard and Fimbrethil standing in front of them.
“Do you wish to eat only your food, or would you like also a little of our draught?” the Ent asked politely.

“We spent the whole day on horseback with just one stop and we’re tired,” Aryon said; he had learned about the Entish potions during their stay in Dor-im-Duin, “therefore a sip of your fortifying drink will help us to recover.”

Nerwen nodded her approval, so Fimbrethil filled up two bowls – small in Entish terms, but definitely large for their guests – and handed them to the Maia and the Elf, while Treebeard poured the draught into two much larger jars for his partner and him. They drank in silence; the Istar recognised the pleasurable taste of iron, basil and thyme she remembered, and Aryon, too, appreciated it. Both felt an intense prickling all over their bodies, while the potion was taking away their weariness and had their hair growing a little.

“Tell us,” Nerwen exhorted the Ents, while Aryon was taking a packet of *lembas* from one of their saddlebags, “It must have been very thrilling for you two, meeting again after so long.”

“It was,” Fimbrethil admitted, placing down her jar on the table, “Olbranch and I came to Fangorn undisturbed; we tried to avoid towns and villages, in order not to frighten anyone, but we know we have been spotted a couple of times, because we saw people bolting madly.”

“It would be difficult for two Enyd going unnoticed,” Aryon observed, sharing the crisp cracker with Nerwen.

“True,” the First Keeper admitted, “but we felt sorry, because we certainly didn’t want to scare anyone. However, we reached Fangorn by the end of May and began to stride up the Entwash, calling out loudly.”

She paused, signalling her partner to go on.

“Can you imagine my joy, when I heard the never forgotten voice of my beloved Fimbrethil?” Treebeard asked in a low and vibrant voice.

“Oh yes,” Aryon answered, clutching his wife’s hand and squeezing it while looking into her eyes, “Nerwen and I have been forcibly separated for some time.”

The Istar reciprocated his gaze and squeezed his hand in turn, in a reassuring gesture; even if almost two years had passed since her return from the strange dimension where the Dark Portal had hurled her, during the nights Aryon still held her in his arms; the memory of his terrible sorrow during the decades of her absence would maybe last forever, but fortunately, the quality of the Undying Lands where they were headed would ease it.

“So you will understand why all of a sudden I became hasty,” Treebeard said, “I rushed toward this voice, dashing downriver along the Entwash to reach it.”

Both Aryon and Nerwen depicted in their minds the peaceful Ent rushing along the riverbank, running over any and all obstacle in the way to his aim; surely, his passage must have raised a real hurricane in the forest.

“When I saw him turning up,” Fimbrethil went on, “I felt like struck by lightning. The joy of our reunion was so great, that in our language it would require many hours to be described.”

“I can guess that,” Nerwen smiled, “And Olbranch?” she asked then, “I suppose she, too, had a partner: did she find him?”
“She did,” Treebeard answered, “Unfortunately he was the first of us who let himself become *vegetal* and *fall asleep*. He was the only one I have not been able to *awake*; so I brought Olbranch to him in the hope that, hearing his partner’s voice, he would rouse, but it did not work: alas, he sleeps too deeply, so deep I fear he will wake up never again.”

“Oh no...” Nerwen whispered, greatly sorry for the Entwife.

“Mayhap *you* can succeed,” Aryon suggested.

“Mayhap, who knows...” she murmured, thoughtfully, “I can certainly try,” she asserted then with a sudden decision, looking at Treebeard, “Could you take me to him, tomorrow?”

“Of course,” the Ent confirmed.

“It would be wonderful, if you succeed,” Fimbrethil rejoiced, but Nerwen shook her head:

“I cannot guarantee I can make it, only that I’ll do my best.”

“It will surely be much more than anyone else in Middle-earth can do,” Treebeard observed softly.

“Well, that’s true,” the Maia admitted: after all, she had assisted the Queen of Earth during the creation of the Ents and only the Valië could do better than her, about them.

They were quiet for some time, then Treebeard resumed the narration:

“I immediately informed the nearest Enyd of Fimbrethil’s and Olbranch’s arrival, and these Enyd in turn proceeded to spread the word in the entire forest and beyond, as far as Isengard. Ah, mayhap you do not know that good King Elessar granted us permission to take care of that fortress...” at his two guests’ positive nod, he went on, “The day after, all of us met at Derniddle for another Entmoot, after only three months from the previous one, that is, as you can guess, something totally extraordinary.”

“There, we told them our story,” Fimbrethil continued on her partner’s signal, “The abandonment of our gardens beyond the Anduin, caused also by the wrong conviction that our partners did not care anymore about us; our long peregrination that took us around the Orocarni, until we came upon the land we now call Dor-im-Duin; and your coming and the battle of Ichidoragon. Then, we invited them to follow us.”

“A few hesitated,” Treebeard went on, “because they blamed the Entwives for their desertion, while many were not keen on the idea to leave Fangorn: as you know, we love the forests and the great trees, while the Entwives love the fruit trees and the saplings; but Fimbrethil and Olbranch told us about the large woods in the East, near their land, and they have been very convincing, so that at the end of the debate – which lasted six days – we decided unanimously to leave.”

“However, I wished to see you again,” Fimbrethil said, “and therefore, I asked Treebeard to wait here for some time. He, too, wished to see you again, Lady Nerwen, and to meet you, Lord Aryon, hence he accepted gladly. You said you would come to Fangorn, if you would decide to leave for Valinor, therefore I placed the agreed signal to show we had not left, sure that you would come to Wellinghall. If you had not showed up by next spring, we would come to Eryn Rhûn, before joining the others in Dor-im-Duin.”

“So, we are all departing: you are eastbound, we are westbound,” Aryon considered, this symmetry striking him.

“So it is,” Treebeard confirmed, “The hour is late now,” he added then, “I suggest we rest.
Tomorrow morning we go to Taerlalf – Olbranch’s sleeping partner – and Lady Nerwen will try to awake him.”

Nerwen and Aryon took their leave: they would sleep outdoors, because the shelf was too narrow to let them sleeping side by side, embracing one another as it was their habit.

OOO

The next morning, Fimbrethil woke them up singing a song in the slow and booming language of the Ents, a song sweet and fresh, ancient and at the same time young as the Spring of Arda, when the Valar had just finished forging the world according to Eru’s vision. Most likely, Nerwen thought, listening rapturously, it dated back precisely to that period, when the forests had begun growing and Yavanna created the Onodrim.

“Good morning!” the First Keeper greeted them when she was finished, “I hope you slept well.”

“Yes, thanks,” Aryon answered, “You and Treebeard, too?” he asked then politely. Fimbrethil swung back and forth, her way to nod.

“Treebeard went picking fruits,” the announced, “He will be back soon, but if you like to soak yourselves, you can do so.”

It was the Entish way to say washing yourselves; Aryon and Nerwen made use of the small creek coming from Wellinghall to wash their hands and faces, putting off a possible bath to another time. Then, they prepared and lit a fire to heat some water; as they waited for their bergamot tea to be ready, Treebeard appeared from between two trees at the margin of the clearing and joined them.

“Good morning, friends! I brought you something I think you will appreciate, happily granted by trees who are friends of mine.”

He stretched out his enormous hand, on which he was carrying a variety of fruits: round plums, red and juicy; small pears of a dark green; medlars of a rich orange colour; there were also blueberries and raspberries and, to Nerwen’s delight, even wood strawberries.

They thanked the Ent for his thoughtfulness and enjoyed the fruits; Túdhin came and laid down beside them.

Did you find something to eat, my friend? Nerwen asked him.

Yes, the wood is full of food and I had no trouble, the wolf answered, satisfied.

When they finished with their breakfast, Nerwen and Aryon put out the fire; Treebeard told them:

“Come, we take you to Taerlalf.”

They realised immediately that he meant if literally: they were lifted on the Ents’ shoulders – the Istar on Fimbrethil’s, the prince on Treebeard’s – and they were carried through the forest for about one hour, more or less northwards. They eventually came to a large elm tree with a wide crown, which once must have been tall and slender, but now it was bent and covered in ivy.

Nerwen and Aryon were set down next to the tree; the Istar approached it, while the prince,
knowing he could do nothing more than watching, stayed back.

Nerwen brushed lightly the ivy plant, then the underlying bark, dark and scaly.

“This is not good,” she said in a reproaching tone, talking to the ivy, “You’re choking the tree that supports you. Leave it and find another one, but be less intrusive.”

At first, the ivy expressed a certain irritation in hearing someone talking to it in this way, but then it recognised in Nerwen a disciple of Kementári and it emanated awe. Slowly, it uprooted itself from Taerlalf’s bark and moved crawling on the ground, toward another tree nearby; it wrapped itself around the trunk of its new host, carefully positioning itself so as not to suffocate it.

Satisfied, Nerwen sent her approving thoughts, then she turned again to Taerlalf; she placed her hands on the trunk and searched for the mind of the sleeping Ent. She found it, but it was very distant, more than the mind of the beech who had showed her the place where she had found Treebeard.

_Taerlalf, do you hear me?_ she called for him; getting no answer, she tried stronger, in the equivalent of a shout, _Taerlalf! Wake up!

Nerwen felt the elm quiver slightly under her hands.

_Who are you...? What do you want?_ she heard his faint voice, _Let me sleep...

No, Taerlalf, you must wake up!_ the Aini exhorted him, _Olbranch is alive and is waiting for you. Don’t you want to see her again?

_Olbranch... I do not remember her... I do not remember anything... I only want to sleep..._ 

_Your partner, Taerlalf! I found the Entwives and the Onodrim are complete once more. Your companions of Fangorn have already left for the land of the Entwives, beyond the Orocarni. Here with me are Treebeard and Fimbrethil, who are waiting only for you to leave in turn!_

Discouraged, Nerwen perceived only the elm’s complete indifference.

_Come, awake! The Ents and the Entwives are back together, Entlings will be born and the Onodrim will prosper again! You’re the only one missing!_

Taerlalf didn’t answer. The Istar didn’t give up and persevered with her calls, increasingly heartfelt, using all of her power and talent of persuasion; but after many useless calls and commands, she gave up and drew back. She staggered, exhausted, and Aryon promptly ran up to her and supported her.

“I’m sorry, my friends,” the Maia said, tiredly, “Taerlalf has become too tree-ish for me to call him back, and anyway, if he doesn’t want to come back, I cannot force him. Only Kementári in person could mayhap convince him,” she shook her head, “I’m sorry,” she repeated, truly embittered because she had failed.

Treebeard’s and Fimbrethil’s eyes reflected their sadness as they watched for a long time their sleeping companion.

“Don’t lose heart, Ancient One,” the Ent said, “We have seen you trying your best and with all your might: you cannot blame yourself because you did not succeed. There are things that even a Great Ancient One cannot do, and this is apparently one of those things.”
They returned to Wellinghall, where Fimbrethil gave Nerwen some of the Ents’ special draught, which made her take heart again.

At this point, there was nothing keeping the two Enyd in Fangorn, therefore they decided to leave the next morning.

OOO

On the late afternoon of the next day, they came out from the shadow of the trees to the plains of Rohan; here, they lingered a little for the goodbyes.

“Thank you for your commitment, Ancient One,” Treebeard said solemnly, looking at Nerwen with his immense, round eyes, “Because of you and your partner, the Entwives have been found again and we have been able to reunite with them. At last, Ents and Entwives will be all one people again.”

“Please thank Kementári on our behalf,” Fimbrethil went on, “because she gave us this possibility to prosper again.”

“I’ll do it,” the Istar reassured her, “May the stars shine upon your path, friends; from here to Dor-im-Duin and wherever you’ll go.”

“May pure water and good land never lack in your life,” Treebeard answered gravely, bowing stiffly the way Ents do. Nerwen and Aryon reciprocated bending their backs sitting on their horses.

Finally, Fimbrethil and Treebeard walked away in long strides on the grassy plain of Rohan, hand in hand, heading for the Anduin and beyond, in Wilderland, to go round the Orocarni and eventually come to Dor-im-Duin.

Aryon and Nerwen stayed still, watching them for some time, aware that they would see them never again.

“Let’s stop here for the night,” the Aini suggested, “I’d like to contact Yavanna and tell her about the outcome of our visit.”

“Yes, it’s surely a good thing,” Aryon agreed.

They got off their horses and quickly set up their bivouac; they lit a fire to cook something, for Aryon to prepare some food, while Nerwen was occupied in her journey, so she could have it as soon as she would return from the interview with her Mistress. Nerwen hadn’t spoken to her in months, since the end of April, when she had informed her about her decision to return to Valinor with her husband, news that had gladdened the Valië.

As usual, Nerwen visualised the door acting as a symbol of the communications between them, and knocked on it. Shortly after, the Queen of Earth opened and smiled at her.

_It is always a pleasure to see you, my dear_, she told her, stretching out her hands in a welcoming gesture; Nerwen grasped them, then they embraced like sisters. Around them appeared the garden of Yavanna’s and Aulë’s palace in Valimar, where they took seat on a small sofa stuffed with green and yellow cushions, its iron structure wrought like a flowery bush, placed under the shadow of a willow.
How is your journey going? the Valië enquired.

Fine, thank you, Nerwen answered, We have been in Minas Tirith to see Aragorn and Arwen, who are radiant in their marriage happiness. I have foreseen for them beautiful children, a boy and two girls; and I even saw a daughter for Aryon and me, at some time in the future, she concluded with a smile.

Really? That would be wonderful! Yavanna cried, smiling in turn.

Yes, it truly would, Nerwen confirmed, thrilled, but we’ll have to wait some time, before knowing if it will happen for good.

The Valar had no children, nor did the Maiar, with the only two exceptions of Melian and Galadhost, who joined with Elves; therefore, the Istar would be just the third of this race to have a child and such a rare event could only be seen as a marvellous and extraordinary thing. However, the Second Sight showed only the highest probabilities in the moment it came and couldn’t mean an absolute certainty; thus, they couldn’t be completely sure this was really going to happen.

Getting back to our journey, the Maia went on, we are now in Fangorn, and the reason I contacted you is to tell you that there are no more Ents here: they accepted to go to Dor-im-Duin and reunite with the Entwives. Only Fimbrethil and Treebeard had stayed here waiting for us, to say goodbye and to thank you for having given them, through me and the mission you entrusted me with, the opportunity to piece their people together again, she paused for a moment, recalling Taerlalf, Unfortunately, one Ent has become too tree-ish to wake up from his lethargy and start off, she concluded with a regretful sigh, therefore, they have been forced to leave him behind.

She told Yavanna about the sleeping elm and the Valië saddened.

Unfortunately, this is his choice, and only his, Yavanna whispered, You explained the situation to him, told him about the finding of the Entwives and his partner, about Dor-im-Duin, but despite all this, he refused to rouse from his torpor. It is his choice…

Nerwen thinned her lips, unsatisfied; but her Mistress was right: nobody has the right to decide for someone else what is good for him or her and what is not, not even one of the Powers of the World.

Will you go to Lothlórien, now? Yavanna asked, changing subject.

Yes, we’ll stay there for a while; then we’ll cross the Hithaeglir heading for Imladris and finally we’ll go to Mithlond.

The Queen of Earth nodded, showing she had understood; Nerwen asked her:

How’s Melian?

Fine; and she cannot wait to see you again and meet your husband. She said that she gives up your dwelling to you two and she is already building a new one for her.

Actually, I had planned to do the reverse, that is, giving up our old house to her and building a new one for Aryon and me, the Istar laughed, but if she prefers doing so, then it’s alright. Please, give her my love and tell her that I, too, am impatient to see her again.

I will do this, the Valië assured her, See you soon, then; meanwhile, may the road raise to meet you…

A few minutes later, Nerwen opened her eyes and saw Aryon’s beloved face bent over her.
“Weren’t you supposed to cook?” she asked, smiling.

“Done,” he answered, smiling back. “Mushroom soup, thickened with a little bit of lembas. I left it cooling down.”

The Maia felt something touching her arm and, turning, she saw Túdhin who was watching her with his yellow eyes, as he always did when she returned.

*Is everything alright?* the wolf enquired.

“Everything’s fine, thanks, my friend,” Nerwen answered, sitting up and stroking his side, “Melian is building a new house for her: she has decided that she’ll give up the old one to us,” she told then to her husband.

“I’m sorry she’s going through all this trouble for us,” he said, as he poured the soup into a bowl.

“I, too, but apparently she prefers this way...”

After they had their meal, Aryon and Nerwen laid down on their pallet, gazing at the sky as the stars were appearing and a crescent was emerging over the rim of the world; the crickets were singing in the grass, playing a relaxing concert, and the air was full of summer scents. They fell asleep serenely.

OOO

The first sunrays awakened them. They broke their fast with the fresh fruit Treebeard had plucked for them the day before, adding some lembas, then they broke camp and, after saddling their horses, they resumed their journey northwards, keeping Fangorn on their left and the hills of Estemnet to the right. They rode on all day and the better part of the next; at sunset of the second day, they reached the Limlight and camped on the south bank. They crossed it the next day and then rode on, still northwards, now on flatland.

In the later afternoon of the fourth day since they had bid goodbye to Fimbrethil and Treebeard, they glimpsed a line of very tall trees, their barks silvery grey and their leaves shiny dark green on the upper side and silvery on the lower side; recognising the place, indeed changed little or not at all in the decades since she had left, Nerwen smiled.

“We’re here,” she informed her travel companions, “We better camp here, openly, waiting for a patrol to find us. Even if Sauron has been defeated at last, I don’t think the Galadhrim have stopped watching their borders,” she mused.

Aryon nodded, agreeing: Eliénna, too, had never ordered to cease the borderland patrolling because, after all, not all foreigners are always welcome.

They prepared their encampment for the night, spreading out their blankets, and lit a fire. As they were about to begin the preparation of their evening meal, Túdhin cast a warning to Nerwen:

*I smell several two-legs coming this way...*

“We’re going to get a visit,” the Istar reported under her breath, without stopping what she was doing.
Feigning indifference, Aryon stood up and prudently placed his hand on the hilt of his sword.

A few moments later, they saw half a dozen Elves appearing from among the trees, wearing grey-green garments, holding bows in their hands but without notched arrows; among their dark heads, a fair one stood out, whose owner Nerwen recognised right away.

“Haldir!” she called for him, standing up with a smile. The tall Elf signalled the other ones to stay still and came quickly near.

“Lady Nerwen!” he cried in a joyful tone, “Welcome back to Lórien!”

Aryon instantly relaxed; Túdhin had slightly bared his teeth in a silent growl of warning, but perceiving the easiness of his friends, he calmed down.

“Thank you, I’m glad to be back,” Nerwen declared, then turned to her husband, “Aryon, this is Captain Haldir of the Galadhrim; Haldir, meet my husband, Aryon Morvacor of the Kindi Avari.”

The two nodded to each other, watching one another with mutual curiosity.

“Lady Galadriel told us to wait for you here,” Haldir revealed; Aryon was surprised but, seeing his wife simply nod, he didn’t ask for clarifications, putting it off for another moment.

Nerwen supposed her ancient friend had seen them in her Mirror, clearly enough to guess roughly the time and place of their arrival, so she had called for this welcome.

“How are they, she and Lord Celeborn?” the Istar enquired.

“Fine, as you’ll see for yourself tomorrow: I’m in charge to escorting you to Caras Galadhon, where they are waiting for you,” Haldir answered.

“Excellent,” Nerwen commented.
“Shall we camp together?” Aryon suggested, nodding to the other Galadhrim.

“We have a flet not far away,” the blond Elf answered, “If you like, we can dine together and then we get there.”

“Gladly,” Nerwen answered, gazing at Aryon for confirmation; the prince nodded: she had told him about the custom of the Galadhrim to dwell on platforms built on trees and he was quite curious to see them.

The other Elves joined them, greeting them courteously; Nerwen studied them to see if Beriadir was among them, her friend-in-love who, with his sunny disposition, had gladdened her previous stay in Lothlórien, but there was no trace of him.

Haldir stared pensively at Thilgiloth, who was grazing nearby with Allakos and Kerra, and he found it odd that the splendid mare, even if she was a mearh, didn’t look one day older, in spite of the almost eighty years that had passed; but it was not for him to question an Istar’s business, therefore he didn’t ask anything.

Putting together the food of both groups, two of the Galadhrim prepared a tasty vegetable and pulse stew, seasoned with wild fennel flowers, and then distributed it to everyone. They dined chatting pleasantly; when they finished their meal, they put out the fire and scattered the ashes.

While night was falling, they entered the wood, heading for the flet, which they reached in about half an hour. Leaving their mounts with Túdhin, Aryon and Nerwen, along with the Galadhrim, climbed on an imposing mallorn, coming to the wide platform built among its branches.

Following Haldir’s directions, they positioned their pallet in a corner, then they sat down with their guests; two of them brought out a harp and a flute, and began to play and sing. They spent a couple of hours in amusing entertainment; finally, they wished goodnight one another and laid down for sleep. As usual, Aryon pulled Nerwen into his embrace and held her near him: by now, the long years of separation had become only a memory, but this had become a pleasurable habit and neither of them wanted to change it.

Author’s corner:

Several people asked me on what exactly I’m basing my theory about the survival of the Entwives; so, here’s the source of my inspiration: an extract of Tolkien’s Letter no. 144 about the destiny of the Entwives:

"I think that in fact the Entwives had disappeared for good, being destroyed with their gardens in the War of the Last Alliance (Second Age 3429-3441) when Sauron pursued a scorched earth policy and burned their land against the advance of the Allies down the Anduin (vol. II p. 79 refers to it). They survived only in the ‘agriculture’ transmitted to Men (and Hobbits). Some, of course, may have fled east, or even have become enslaved: tyrants even in such tales must have an economic and agricultural background to their soldiers and metal-workers. If any survived so, they would indeed be far estranged from the Ents, and any rapprochement would be difficult – unless
experience of industrialized and militarized agriculture had made them a little more anarchic. I hope so. I don’t know."

Well, “I think” means “I’m supposing”, and this makes me think that maybe even Tolkien himself hadn’t definitively decided if the Entwives had necessarily died or not. To my own ends, I hook up in the sentence regarding the possibility, which he himself points out, that some may have fled east. Besides, the Professor ends his writing saying expressly I HOPE SO, I DON’T KNOW. If HE doesn’t know it, I think it’s plausible hypothesising (and I repeat “hypothesising”) that they’re alive.

Anyway, even if I’m boasting that I’m staying as much as possible canon, mine is only a fan fiction, written just for fun and I’m surely not thinking I’m writing a new “Lord of the Rings” XD

Thank you from the bottom of my heart, to all those who read.

Lady Angel
Chapter LXI: Among the Mellyrn

“How did Lady Galadriel know about our arrival?” Aryon asked Nerwen; after breaking their fast with dehydrated fruit, honey cookies and tea along with the Galadhrim, they were now heading northeastwards for the Celebrant, walking among the mellyrn.
“The Lady of Lothlórien is one of the great wises of the White Council,” Nerwen reminded him, having told him about Galadriel and Celeborn, “and her eyes see very far away; but how this happens, is her call, not mine.”

“I see,” the Avar prince nodded, frowning slightly: he didn’t like not knowing things, but he realised that one isn’t free to share somebody else’s secrets, not even with his or her partner.

Haldir was escorting them, walking next to them; as he had no horse, Aryon and Nerwen, too, were walking.

“How’s Ireth?” Nerwen asked him, recalling his betrothed.

“We married at the end of the traditional year of betrothal,” Haldir told her, smiling, “two months after you left. We have a son, who’s now sixteen years old and is turning out to be a good musician and singer; I think he’ll become a very talented minstrel, like his mother,” he concluded with apparent fatherly pride.

“I’m happy for you,” Nerwen declared, glad to learn this; she had had no chance to get to know better Haldir and Ireth, at the time of her previous stays in Lórien, but she liked them both, “And what about Beriadir?” she asked then, wishing to learn how the charming Elf was doing; she didn’t forget he had stayed at her side in a difficult moment.

“He found his partner for life,” the captain answered, “last year, during the battle that tore down Dol Guldur. Her name’s Nariel and she’s one of the commanders of King Thranduil’s army; when the war ended, Beriadir followed her to the Wooden Realm and they married this spring.”

“That’s good news!” the Maia cried, genuinely glad that her old friend-in-love had found the
person who he would spend the rest of his life with, like her.

When they reached the Silverlode, they walked downriver for several kilometres, until they arrived at the ferry pier; the boat was on the other side, and as they waited for it to cross, Haldir took his leave.

“You know the way,” he told the Istar, “and you’re awaited, therefore you can go to the palace safely by your own.”

“Sure,” Nerwen agreed.

“Nice having met you again, Lady Nerwen, and nice to have met you, Lord Aryon,” the blond Elf said, bowing to them; they reciprocated, then Haldir turned around and went back to his patrolling area.

Shortly after his leave, the ferry arrived and Nerwen and Aryon got on board; as usual, Túdthin radiated a feeling of uneasiness at the idea he had to stay on a boat, even if for a short time, but he didn’t complain and followed docilely Thilgiloth, Allakos and Kerra.

Once on the other side of the Silverlode, Aryon and Nerwen got on their horses and took the path leading to the main road to Caras Galadhon, where they arrived about half an hour later. At the gates, the sentinels stopped them, but as soon as they learned their names, they let them pass through; apparently, they knew about their arrival as Haldir had.

Seeing again the marvellous city of trees was a great joy for Nerwen, who kept a beautiful memory of it in her mind and heart; she looked around, smiling, then, noticing her husband’s astonished gaze, her smile broadened: of course, Aryon was used to trees, having been born and raised in Eryn Rhûn, but he surely had never seen trees as gigantic as these ones, or entire buildings among their branches; and he hadn’t seen yet Celeborn’s and Galadriel’s abode. Indeed, his eyes widened when he glimpsed at the immense *mallorn* that held their host’s mansion.

“Great Oromë, it’s incredible… it looks like coming straight from Valinor!” he exclaimed, very impressed.

“So it is, in a certain way.” Nerwen affirmed, “because this is the only place this side of the Great Sea where the *mellyrn* of Aman grow.”

“Oh… now I understand why I feel like being in an otherworldly place,” the prince commented; he couldn’t know that this was due not only to its appearance, but also to the power of Nenya, the Elven ring in Galadriel’s keeping. However, it was not for Nerwen to disclose this information, as it wasn’t about the Mirror.

Eventually, they arrived at the long staircase leading up to the branches of the *mallorn*, where other sentinels were standing. One of them recognised the Istar, having met her during her first two stays.

“Welcome back, Lady Nerwen,” he said, “The Lord and the Lady are waiting for you and your husband. You can leave your mounts and luggage here; someone will take care of them.”

Aryon and Nerwen entrusted the servants with Allakos, Kerra and Thilgiloth and then, escorted by Túdthin, they climbed the stair that wound around the colossal trunk. When they arrived to the top, they entered the hall, where Nimgil, the Palace Superintendent, welcomed them with a curtsy.

“Please, follow me,” she invited them. She led them to the throne room, where they found Galadriel and Celeborn; the Lady and Lord of Lórien were sitting on their high seats decorated with
gold foil, their attitude solemn, but as soon as they saw them, they stood up and descended the three steps of the dais, approaching them with welcoming smiles. Aryon looked at them slightly in awe, an utterly unusual feeling for him, due partly to their stature, which surpassed his own, even if for just a few centimetres, but above all, due to their appearance, which was nobler than any other he had ever met to this day.

“Welcome back, thousand times welcome back, Nerwen,” Galadriel said warmly, stretching out her hands, palms up, to her old friend. The Aini clutched her slender fingers, smiling, then both set aside the formalities and embraced affectionately.

“My dear, I’m so happy to see you,” the Lady of the Galadhrim declared with apparent joy, “When reports of walking trees reached us, last year, we realised that the Ents were on the move and we thought about you… but you’ll tell us later,” she turned to look at Aryon, “Will you introduce us, my friend?” she asked.

“Of course: Lady Galadriel, Lord Celeborn, allow me to introduce to you my husband, Prince Aryon Morvacor of the Kindi, brother of Eliènna Dhillel, the High Sovereign of the Six Tribes of the Avari. Aryon, these are the Lady and Lord of Lothlórien.”

The prince bowed in the homage due to royalties: even if not in name, Celeborn and Galadriel were fully-fledged king and queen.

“I’m honoured to meet you,” he declared, “Nerwen told me much about you.”

“Welcome to Lothlórien, Lord Aryon,” Celeborn said solemnly, “It’s been a long time since we had the pleasure to meet someone of your kin.”

Galadriel made eye contact with the black-clad prince and held it; sharp as a spear it was, and deep as a well of immeasurable memory. He felt pierced through; it was like she was reading his very soul. For a moment, disquiet caught him; but then he recalled what Nerwen had told him: this was a High Elf, born in Valinor during the Years of the Trees, and her grandfather was Finwë, first High King of the Noldor. There was no other, among the Elves in Middle-earth, of higher lineage than she was.

“Our guest is something more than a noble Avar,” Galadriel observed softly. In the light of the knowledge of who, and what, she was, Aryon wasn’t surprised of her perspicacity; he nodded in confirmation.

“My father was Galadhost of the Maiar, follower of Aldaron,” he admitted, and she nodded as to confirm something she had already guessed.

“I’m glad to meet you, Lord Aryon,” she declared, “Your ancestry is rare; so far, we knew only about Lúthien, daughter of Melian,” she looked at Nerwen, too, including her in her next words, “I’m very happy you two found each other,” she concluded.

“We have quarters prepared for you,” Celeborn interjected, “We’ll gladly have you as our guests for as long as you’ll like to stay with us.”

“Thank you, Lord Celeborn,” Aryon said, gratefully, “We’ll happy to stay for some time, before taking for the Caradhras to cross the Hithaeglir, heading for Imladris.”

At this point, the Lord of Lórien glanced at Túdhin, who so far had been sitting very quietly next to Nerwen’s feet.

“Hello, friend wolf,” he said, “I know you, if I’m not mistaken.”
The predator rose, watching him and Galadriel carefully.

_I know them!_ he cast his thoughts to Nerwen, _I’ve met them in the past._

“You’re not mistaken, Lord Celeborn,” Nerwen confirmed, “and he, too, remembers you. You knew him as Sinyelómin, but now we call him Túdhin.”

“Oh, yes,” the tall Sinda nodded, “now I see. I’m glad to meet you again, Túdhin,” he said; the wolf lowered and raised his head in a respectful greeting and Celeborn smiled, “Always well-behaved, as I remembered,” he commented. When Nerwen translated, Túdhin radiated satisfaction.

“You can go in your room,” Galadriel invited them, “We expect you later, to have our midday meal together and talk.”

Celeborn signalled to a servant, who approached them and bowed; taking their leave from their hosts, Aryon and Nerwen, with the wolf tailing them, were taken to their chamber – a larger room than the one the Istar had during her previous stays at the palace – where they found their luggage in a corner and a jug full of lukewarm water, as well as soap and towels.

While Nerwen was freshening up, Aryon took clean clothes from their travel bags.

“So, what do you think about the Lord and Lady of Lórien?” the Maia asked him.

“Lady Galadriel is… disconcerting,” he declared, sincerely, “Her eyes do not only see very far, but very deep, too,” he paused briefly, “Like with the Entwives, I feel very young, compared to her, and it’s not a feeling I’m used to,” he went on with a certain amount of self-irony, then his expression changed and became pensive, “Her eyes remind me of my father’s and my sister’s eyes… but she isn’t a Maia, in full or half,” he concluded, furrowing his brow, perplexed.

“No, she isn’t, but she’s been born beyond Belegaer and, even if she’s not an Aini, in her eyes there’s the light of the Undying Lands,” Nerwen explained to him, “This light is also in your eyes and in your sister’s, because you’re half Maiar; Galadriel has seen it and that’s why she realised you’re not _only_ a noble Avar.”

Instead of lighting up in comprehension, Aryon’s face became even more pensive; he turned to look at her and Nerwen, who was drying off her arms, returned his gaze with a slight disquiet.

“How is it, that I don’t see this light in _your_ eyes…?” he asked.

“Because my appearance has been _dimmed_,” she explained, “When I met Gandalf at the Grey Havens, he told me it was better if I looked more appropriate to Middle-earth and I chose the appearance of Humans, like all the other Istari, even if they preferred the elderly look that I avoided. This veiled the light of the Blessed Realm in my eyes; however, who was born in Valinor, like Galadriel, or has a near ancestry with one who was born there, like you and your sister, or Elrond of Imladris, is able to see my double appearance, the one walking in the visible world and the one walking in the invisible,” she paused, “When we’ll take the Straight Way for Aman, I’ll go back to my original looks and I hope you won’t find me too different than I am now…” he concluded in a low voice. If Aryon had been impressed my Galadriel’s looks, what would he thinks about hers, once she would be back to her _luminous_ appearance as it was in her _Ainurin_ nature? All of her efforts as to not look needlessly elevated in his eyes would be useless and he would feel in a state of inferiority even if being the son of a Maia…?

Then, he smiled unexpectedly – his rare, full smile that, precisely because unusual, was so bright and heartening – and he dispelled all her doubts with a single sentence:
“You’ll always be the light of my life.”

Nerwen felt deeply moved, and relieved: she hadn’t been able to completely get over her worry on this subject, and she wouldn’t until she would have the proof that she needn’t to, that is, when they would arrive to Valinor. She dropped the towel she was using and hugged her husband.

“I do love you so much, Aryon, there aren’t words to express it,” she murmured, resting her head on his chest. He held her and laid his chin on the top of her head.

“This goes for me, too,” he assured her.

They stayed this way for some moments, then she withdrew.

“You go, now, freshening up,” she invited him, “And what about Celeborn?” she enquired, while changing her garments.

“He, too, makes me feel young,” the prince declared, “but somehow less... mayhap he’s younger than his wife, like me and you?”

“No, actually they’re roughly of the same age; I think your different feeling is due to the fact that, unlike Galadriel, Celeborn was born in Middle-earth.”

“You told me that he and Galadriel met in Doriath, right?” seeing her nodding in confirmation, he went on, “If I didn’t get it wrong, you and Celeborn are related...”

“Yes, by marriage: his grandfather was Elmo, younger brother of Thingol, who was my sister Melian’s husband.”

“And their only daughter married Elrond of Imladris, who belongs to Melian’s lineage...”

“Did you memorise my family’s entire genealogy?” Nerwen laughed, “Yes, so it is: two family branches have reunited,” she confirmed then, “Like Arwen and Aragorn.”

“I know it may sound bizarre, but I find genealogy an interesting topic,” the prince revealed, “that’s why I’m so curious. Tell me about Galadriel’s ancestry and family...”

They were still discussing about the family relationships of the Lady of the Golden Wood, when a soft knock at the door interrupted them. After Aryon’s invitation to come in, a servant appeared on the threshold.

“Lady Galadriel and Lord Celeborn are awaiting you for the midday meal,” he announced.

“Thank you,” Nerwen answered, “I know the way, no need for you to escort us,” she added to dismiss him. The servant bowed respectfully and exited.

A few minutes later, Nerwen and Aryon stepped into the private dining room of the Lord and Lady of Lórien; the table was covered in a white cloth, embroidered with a pattern of leaves and flowers, and on it stood fine ceramics dishes, golden goblets and silverware. The windows were wide open and the sunlight, sipping through the foliage of the gigantic mallorn, bore a fresh, green touch. Their hosts entered a few moments later, Galadriel’s arm linked through Celeborn’s.

“Please, take a seat,” Galadriel invited them graciously, sitting on the chair Celeborn had pulled for her. Aryon imitated him, pulling a chair for his wife and then waiting for Celeborn to sit, as the etiquette required, before doing the same.
“What do you think about our land, Lord Aryon?” Celeborn asked in a courteous tone.

“It’s indeed superb,” the Avar prince answered, sincerely, “As I told Nerwen, it feels like being in an otherworldly place.”

Sadness clouded Galadriel’s eyes.

“Thank you, Lord Aryon,” she said in a low voice, “Unfortunately, this condition won’t last much longer: the destruction of the One Ring freed the world from a great evil, but the price we must pay is the loss of power of the Three Elven Rings, one of which I have the honour to keep,” she smiled slightly at Nerwen’s amazed start at her unexpected, open statement in front of someone who, for her, was a stranger, even if the spouse of her best friend from the Years of the Trees, “It makes no sense keeping it from your husband, now that Sauron is no more,” she explained to her, stretching out her hand, where suddenly, by her will, a mithril ring with a flower made of diamonds had appeared. Aryon looked at it in admiration: it was one of the finest jewels he had ever seen.

“Now that Sauron is no more, many secrets that before had to be kept to ensure his opponents’ safety can be disclosed,” Nerwen commented at this point, “even if not all, and not to everyone. I, for instance, have been allowed to reveal my true nature to those I thought appropriate, but except to my husband, his family and Aragorn, I didn’t tell anyone.”

She said this to make the Lord and Lady understand they could speak freely in front of Aryon, and both of them nodded in agreement.

Celeborn rang a small silver bell and a moment later, a maid entered, carrying a tray with three crystal pitchers.

“Water, wine and sweet cider,” she announced, placing the three jugs on the table; Nerwen smiled: Galadriel knew well her love for the latter beverage.

Some moments later, a second maid entered, pushing a cart, from which she served them three different kinds of soft cheeses, raw vegetables dressed with olive oil, and bread. Nerwen had
warned Aryon about the Galadhrim custom to have a large breakfast and dinner, while their midday meal was very light; should they be still hungry – as usually she was – they would have a snack later.

“Your mission was successful, wasn’t it, Lady Nerwen?” Celeborn asked.

“Yes, it was: Aryon and I found the Entwives,” the Istar confirmed, “and we convinced them to take part in the fight against the Dark Enemy. If you want a full report, you’ll have to take the afternoon off,” she added chuckling, recalling how it was with Arwen and Aragorn.

“We thought so,” Galadriel smiled, “therefore we postponed our schedules.”

“You, too, have things to tell us, from what I heard: Haldir hinted to the battles you and the Silvan Elves fought against Dol Guldur...”

“Yes, we had our share of battles,” Celeborn confirmed, “but please, you go first.”

As it had happened in Minas Tirith, Nerwen and Aryon told about their adventures, from the moment Nerwen had left Lórien to the encounter with Treebeard and Fimbrethil in Fangorn Forest. They needed the better part of the afternoon, and when they were finished with their meal, they moved to the terrace, where they took their seats on the wicker couches, cushioned with silken pillows. They had fruit juice and, at a certain time, a snack, too, with marzipan-and-honey pastries.

“And so, Ents and Entwives are reunited,” Galadriel commented in the end, “The Onodrim are a whole people again, in a new land on the far east of Ennor. That’s wonderful news!”

Then Celeborn began his tale, speaking about the assaults the Orcs of Dol Guldur had launched against Lothlórien; the army of the Wooden Realm, led by Thranduil in person, had come from the north and had joined the battle alongside the Galadhrim. A few days after the destruction of the One Ring, they had overran the enemy fortress and had begun demolishing it, going on down to the foundations; now there was nothing to witness its past existence, except for a few chipped stones and dug up ground.

“Thranduil wasn’t interested in taking back the southern part of Mirkwood,” Celeborn concluded, “and so, I’m thinking about expanding our dominion beyond the Anduin and making Amon Lanc – as we resumed calling the hill where Dol Guldur was built – a second town for the Galadhrim.”

Nerwen noticed a fleeting sceptical expression on Galadriel’s face, but she preferred not asking anything, because she didn’t want to pry, and anyway, the Lady of the Golden Wood changed subject:

“The sun is setting and in a short time it will be time for dinner: I suggest we rest from all the talking we had in this long afternoon, before we sit down again to dine.”

“I think it’s the best thing to do,” Aryon approved, standing up with Nerwen; they took their leave from the Lord and Lady of Lórien, agreeing to meet again in a couple of hours for dinner.

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The next morning, Aryon accepted Celeborn’s invitation to join him in his daily practice and they went fencing together, both curious to compare their styles and learn something new from one
another; Galadriel instead suggested to Nerwen a stroll to her garden, where they sat on a wooden bench.

“It was here, that I had the first vision of Ayon,” the Maia recalled, looking around: the place hadn’t changed a bit, except for the flowers, which now looked more abundant.

“I’m so happy for you, my friend,” Galadriel smiled at her, “Finally, after all this time, you found your partner for life! And now you’re going to Valinor...”

Her voice trailed off, a a shadow of sadness clouded her stunningly beautiful face. This time they were alone and Nerwen decided to go into it; she grasped her hands.

“There’s something tormenting you, my dear... would you like to tell me?”

The Lady of the Galadhrim sighed and nodded.

“You hit the mark,” she admitted, “As I said yesterday, with the destruction of the One Ring, a great evil has been wiped off from Arda, but at the same time much good is destined to fading, because all that has been created with the Three will decline and dissolve, not kept intact any longer by their power, which was linked to the Ruling Ring. This means that my beloved Lórien, too, will disappear, swept away by the waves of Time... It’s a thought I cannot bear. Celeborn plans to expand our realm beyond the Anduin, calling the new lands Eastern Lórien, but knowing that everything is destined to vanish, I’m not able to feel the least enthusiasm for this,” she sighed again, “The longing for Valinor, always latent in my heart, with the weakening of Nenya has suddenly increased; not to mention the wish to see my only daughter again... I’m afraid that, not being able anymore to recreate a slice of the Undying Lands, I won’t stay much longer here in Ennor. I’m seriously considering going to Mithlond and take a ship carrying me beyond Belegaer... I told Celeborn about this, but he isn’t tired of Middle-earth yet and isn’t convinced; however, leaving without him would break my heart... I don’t know what to do,” she concluded in so low a voice, that Nerwen barely managed to hear her. As much as she was barely able to believe that her friend, who was regarded the greatest amongst all the sages of the High Elves on the Hither Shore, was at a loss about what to do; but when sentiments are involved, wisdom often fails, as the Aini had learned during her long life.

“I’m sorry, I’m really sorry, Galadriel,” she whispered, “You’ll have to choose the lesser of two evils, realising what between them is the one you really cannot stand: whether staying in Middle-earth despite the fading of the Elven race, or leaving your husband for some time. Because your separation would anyway be only temporary: for a long time the Elves are leaving Ennor and from now on, the exodus will be even greater. The Age of Elves is over and the Age of Men is about to begin. Sooner or later, Celeborn will follow you and join you beyond the Great Sea,” she paused, and then went on, “The Avari, too, who once refused the invitation of the Valar, will end up leaving their lands and head for the West, and Círdan will wait until all had arrived to the Grey Havens, and so the Last Ship will set sail for the Blessed Realm.”

Galadriel pondered her friend’s words.

“You’re right,” she said at length, “When Frodo offered the Ruling Ring to me and I resisted – barely, I admit – the temptation to accept it, I realised I could end up leaving Middle-earth. I’ll try staying here with Celeborn, but if I cannot, in the end I’ll leave,” she looked at the Aini, her cerulean eyes clear and firm once more, “Thank you for showing me the right path, Nerwen.”

“I did nothing,” Nerwen dismissed the topic, “You already knew everything I told you; I only expressed the facts from an objective point of view, while you perceived it from a subjective point of view. It’s always like that, when we’re too much emotionally involved.”
“You know, about Arwen and Aragorn, I did as you asked me: I didn’t hinder in any way their love. When Aragorn stopped by with the Fellowship of the Ring, I had a feeling that he and my granddaughter would marry in spite of Elrond’s opposition, so I gave him the Elessar, the gem Mithrandir brought me from Valinor, predicting I would give it to someone who would receive the same name and would become a healer and a bearer of renewal.”

“His Second Sight may be not so sharp like when he was Olórin, but in this case, he got it right,” Nerwen considered.

“Yes, he did... Talking about it, was it your Second Sight that revealed to you that Aragorn and Arwen were destined to one another?” the Lady of Lothlórien asked.

“Yes,” the Maia admitted, “and I wanted to save them as much as possible the troubles Lúthien and Beren had to endure, securing them at least one ally. I never got over the fact Thingol opposed their relationship and I anticipated that Elrond would do the same.”

“So it was indeed, but as he loves Aragorn like a son, in the end he gave his complete approval to their marriage – not that he would be able to prevent it, if he didn’t approve – even if this means he won’t see his daughter anymore, until the end of the world.”

“I can well imagine that for him it hasn’t been easier than for Thingol, but one cannot and must not oppose Ilúvatar’s will; and like I told Arwen, better one hundred years with your partner for life, than ten thousand without.”

“Absolutely right,” Galadriel confirmed.

Several days passed; Nerwen and Aryon broke their fasts in their chamber whenever they wanted, then they went out visiting Caras Galadhon or taking a riding trip, for instance to Cerin Amroth. Then they had their midday meal wherever they were, sometimes at the palace with Celeborn and Galadriel, sometimes around town, or they brought with them a picnic basket; eventually, they dined with the Lady and Lord of Lórien.

The Istar was in no particular hurry to go on, as this was the last time she would see the Golden Wood, which had become her favourite corner of Middle-earth, even more than the Forest of Neldoreth in the vanished realm of Melian and Thingol.

So it was that, one fine August morning, Aryon and Nerwen rode upriver along the Silverlode, looking for a place Galadriel had told her friend about, where she and Celeborn sometimes took shelter when they wished or needed to be alone, away from everything and everyone, to be just husband and wife.

The site was far from the usually treaded paths and, even if not particularly difficult to reach, it was hard to find and without the accurate directions they had received, they wouldn’t make it.

They penetrated in what looked like an inextricable thorny thicket, very little inviting, and, following a hardly visible path, barely wide enough for the horses, they came to a small brook that, further on, flowed into the Celebrant. They went downriver for about two hundred meters until
they found a place where the creek expanded into a small mere with pristine water; small cascades fell into it, coming from a mound rising steeply in the middle of the wood. They dismounted and set the horses free, while Túdhin wandered among the trees, curious to explore this new location.

“It’s stunning!” Nerwen commented, looking around. Aryon nodded:

“Yes, it is indeed. It looks a little like our place…”

He was referring to the location where they had made love for the first time and that they had visited again the year before.

“You’re right,” the Maia agreed, “Now I understand why Celeborn and Galadriel come here, when they feel like being alone together…” she smiled, imagining them while relaxing for a few hours, being just two people in love, away from their court duties.

They spread out their mats in the sun and laid on them their towels, then placed their saddlebags with the food in the shadow of the beeches surrounding the pond.

“The water is very inviting, by this heat: I go swimming straightaway,” Aryon announced, beginning to take off his clothes, “Coming with me?”

Nerwen peeked at him, looking admiringly at his sculpted torso; she had seen it every day since they were a couple – except for the period she had been in the strange dimension beyond the Dark Portal – but she never got tired of staring at him. It wasn’t just because of his undeniable handsomeness, it was above all the fact that she loved him and, for her, there was nothing more appealing to look at in all of Eä.

“Sure!” she answered enthusiastically, discarding her shirt.
They left their garments in a heap beside the mats and entered the small lake; the water was quite cold but, given the scorching heat, after the first shock, it wasn’t unpleasant at all. The bottom of light-coloured, roundish pebbles was clean and just a little bit slippery, so they had no trouble walking in the water; the mere was enough deep to allow them swimming easily.

“How wonderful,” Nerwen commented, talking loudly to surpass the sound of the waterfalls.

“True,” Aryon agreed, smiling at her, with his eyes rather than his lips, “but for me, it would be wonderful anywhere, with you, you know that.”

She returned his smile.

“Yes, I know that. And that’s how I feel, too. You, too, know that.”

The Avar prince nodded; he came near her and embraced her from behind, kissing the top of her head.

“I know,” he confirmed; Nerwen leaned backwards, her back against his chest, and he held her tighter. He began swaying, rocking her, and the Istar closed her eyes, caught by a feeling of happiness so great, it almost overwhelmed her.

They stayed like this for a few minutes, enjoying the mutual closeness, which was not only of their bodies, but also of their souls and hearts. Then Aryon, taken by curiosity, moved.

“Let’s go taking a closer look at those waterfalls,” he suggested. Nerwen nodded and followed him; they swam up to where the nearest cascade fell into the pond with a pleasant sound and approached it, but the force of the water was excessive to allow them positioning themselves under it, hence, they moved to the left, skirting the steep shore that, in this place, was rocky and partly covered in turves; a few metres away, the rock formed a smooth shelf, large enough to sit on; Nerwen hauled herself up on it, laying back propping on her elbows and lifting her face towards the sky, her eyes closed, the sun caressing her. Aryon felt his heart starting to thump faster: in his life, he had met indescribably beautiful females – beginning with his sister Eliénna, and then Meledhiel, Arwen, Galadriel, just to name a few of them – but only Nerwen was capable to take his breath away and turn his knees to jelly merely looking at her. Even completely dressed up… let alone if, like now, she wasn’t wearing anything.

He felt the pressing need to be joined with her, to make his heart vibrate in unison with hers, melt his flesh with hers, mix his breath with hers, becoming whole like only the joining with his partner for life could make him feel.

Perceiving his gaze upon her, Nerwen cracked her eyes open and turned her gaze to him; she met his bright blue eyes, burning with love and longing, and she felt her stomach flutter. She sat up and stretched out her hand; Aryon grasped it and kissed her palm, then the inners side of her wrist, and finally he placed her hand on his cheek, never taking off his eyes from hers.

Seduced by his stare, Nerwen felt her womanliness tingling and flaring up; she drew nearer and the prince grabbed her waist and lifted her, bringing her back into the water, to stand in front of him. The Istar slipped her arms around his back and raised her face in a manifest invitation; Aryon didn’t hesitate to close the distance between them, gluing their bodies together and placing his mouth on hers. He kissed her lips, several times; then, he caressed their seam with the tip of his tongue, asking for access, and she granted it to him at once. They kissed, sensuality equal to sweetness, in a tender as much as explosive way, expressing to one another the sentiment, the passion, the desire, the veneration they felt for each other.
Slowly, Aryon’s hands moved on Nerwen’s body, at first climbing under her long brown hair, caressing her back, and then going back down and brushing her soft curves. Against her abdomen, the Istar felt clearly the irrefutable evidence of his desire for her, and a hot shiver crossed her depths.

She lowered her hands on her husband’s firm rear and pressed him against her body, slowly rubbing herself on him; Aryon lost his breath. He left her mouth, bending to kiss her neck and throat, brushing her skin with his lips, lightly, tempting, alluring. A sigh escaped Nerwen’s lips, as her heart rate increased.

Wanting to reciprocate Aryon’s loving ministrations, she put her hands on his chest, pushing him slightly back so she could caress him; he straightened his shoulders to indulge her and Nerwen placed her lips on one of his nipples, brushing it with the tip of her tongue. She felt him start and heard him uttering a faint cry; she skinned her hands downwards along his hips and slid one between their bodies, until she placed it on his solid virility. Aryon started again, harder, and another, louder groan fell from his lips. Encouraged, Nerwen caressed him boldly, but after a few moments, he grabbed her wrist to stop her, too aroused to stand it much longer. He drew back a little, just to have enough room for manoeuvring, and he cupped her breasts; he bowed and peppered them with kisses, until he reached the peaks and tenderly nibbled at them, returning the seductive caresses she had bestowed on him earlier.

Nerwen uttered a stifled moan; her head was spinning and her legs threatened to give way. Clinging to her husband’s shoulders, she arched towards him, her breath laboured, her rushing blood like a roar in her ears.

Not content yet, Aryon moved his fingers downwards and skilfully brushed the core of her intimacy; gasping, Nerwen lifted one leg and draped it around his, allowing him better access.

Aryon touched her sensually; underwater he couldn’t judge how ready she was, therefore he listened attentively to her moans, which were becoming increasingly louder, until he felt satisfied. At this point, clasping her hips, he hauled her up and placed her back on the rocky shelf; then, he lowered himself slightly bending his knees and slowly, looking into her eyes, he made his way inside of her.

Feeling him filling her – soul as well as flesh – Nerwen sighed in contentment and held him tight, melting into his embrace and entrusting him with the lead of their dance, keeping up with his movements. They hadn’t spoken anymore, but their reciprocal understanding had no need of words: glances, expressions, postures, sighs were more than enough.

They made love to one another tenderly, in no hurry, manifesting their mutual need, which was spiritual even before physical; they climbed the peaks of pleasure gradually, in a continuous crescendo that brought them higher and higher, pinnacle after pinnacle, again and again, until they reached together the uppermost summit, enjoying each other with the ineffable intensity that came from their shared love.

They stayed close, in each other’s arms; slowly, the spasms of their bodies calmed down, as well as their breaths and the frantic beating of their hearts, exchanging delicate caresses, Nerwen’s head on Aryon’s shoulder, Aryon’s cheek on Nerwen’s hair.

“Blessed Valar, how much I love you…” the Maia whispered with a blissful sigh. He kissed her temple.

“As much as I love you,” he replied in a low voice, then he drew back a little to look into her eyes, “Making love with you is always wonderful,” he stated, “but this time it was even more.”
Nerwen had had the same feeling and therefore, she wasn’t surprised that her husband had felt the same way.

“I don’t know if it’s this place, so similar to our, but… it was really special,” she confirmed.

They stayed still for some more moments, and finally, they reluctantly separated. They swam a little in the pond, then they returned onshore and laid down in the sun.

This wasn’t the only time they made love, on this day: as if a spell had ensnared them, they sook each other repeatedly, hungry for one another without being able to get satiated, until dusk, renewing what they had experienced during the very first days of their love, not so much for the number of embraces but for the fervour that was overwhelming them, which made them forget even to have their midday meal; only in the late afternoon, the hunger pains forced them to stop for a while and eat the food they had brought with them.

Seeing them very busy, their kelvar friends kept at a distance all day. At last, as the light was fading and the shadows were growing long, Nerwen and Aryon decided to go back to Caras Galadhon, quite bruised but terribly satisfied; when they arrived at the palace, they retired immediately to rest from their marathon of love, sending their apologies to Galadriel and Celeborn because they wouldn’t keep them company for dinner.

OOO

“It’s time we resume our journey,” Aryon announced one evening, a few days later, as he and Nerwen were dining with the Lady and Lord of Lórien; the prince and the Istar had talked about this in the morning and decided it was time to take their leave.

“We’re sorry to see you go,” Galadriel declared, “but we understand that you must. The season is progressing and if you wait too long, you could find snow on the Caradhras.”

“Since Sauron’s defeat, we have seen or heard nothing about Orcs, at least in our area,” Celeborn revealed, “I think you can travel up Nanduhirion and the pass with no danger.”

“All the better,” Nerwen commented, pleased, “I’m glad those foul creatures have withdrawn.”

“Unfortunately, they haven’t completely disappeared yet,” the Lady said, “There are still a number of lairs, such as Gundabad in the far north of the Misty Mountains, or in the easternmost part of the Ered Lithui, north of Mordor; but at least, here there aren’t any more.”

“As they’re not feeding on the power of the Eye anymore, they’ll become extinct,” Celeborn affirmed, “even if this will require years, probably decades.”

“Yes, so it will be,” Galadriel agreed, as her face became grave, “They were created in mocking of the Eldar and therefore it’s only fair they’ll vanish with us.”

Indeed Melkor, the Dark Lord of whom Sauron had been but a servant, had shaped the Orcs during the Elder Days, before Sun and Moon lighted the skies of Arda, not only to have his own army, but also to deride Ilúvatar’s creation.

The symmetry of the situation struck them all, and they nodded in agreement.
The day before their departure, Nerwen and Aryon dined one last time with the Lord and Lady of Lothlórien; the meal was particularly rich, with dishes of meat and fish, and excellent wines from Dorwinion. In the end, a peach tart with sweet cider.

In the early morning, they met again to break their fast together; Túdhin, who wished to say his farewell to Celeborn and Galadriel, escorted his two-legged friends and laid down in a corner, waiting for them to finish their morning meal.

And at last, the hour of the leave-taking came.

“May the Valar accompany you safe and sound to Imladris and beyond,” Celeborn said, formally embracing Nerwen first, and then Aryon. Galadriel did likewise with the Avar prince, but hugged affectionately her friend. It was no farewell: sooner or later, they would meet again, this side or that of Belegaer.

Túdhin came near and looked at Galadriel, who smiled at him and stretched out her hand to stroke him; the wolf licked her fingers and then did likewise with Celeborn.

_It was nice to see them again_, he said and the Istar reported his words to their hosts.

“It has been nice for us, too, seeing you again, Túdhin,” the Lord of Lórien answered courteously.

Eventually, with a bow, Aryon and Nerwen exited and descended the long stair to the foot of the mallorn, the wolf on their tail; here, they found two grooms waiting for them with their mounts, who were ready to go. They saddled up and followed the road to the city gates; after exiting Caras Galadhon, they cantered along the path leading to the Celebrant, which they would follow until leaving the Golden Wood and then going on along the Dimrill Dale to the Redhorn Gate and finally crossing the Misty Mountains.

It was the fifteenth day of August.

As Celeborn had assured them, during their journey through the vale they did see no sign of Orcs, but nevertheless they stayed constantly alert; after all, as Elladan and Elrohir had told Nerwen, it was exactly on the Caradhras pass that their mother Celebrían had been abducted, and danger could still be lurking, in spite of the lack of sightings.

The Redhorn was less difficult than the High Pass north of Rivendell, but wasn’t anyway easy to cross, so they preferred going through on foot, leading their mounts by the bridles.

Once they had descended the western side of the Misty Mountains, they proceeded along its slopes almost due north, to Imladris, where Nerwen planned stopping briefly to say goodbye to her relatives, before turning westwards to the Grey Havens.
One week after they had left Lothlórien, it was Aryon’s birthday. On this day, they took things easier than usual, getting up later and stopping longer for their midday meal. Nerwen ate little: for some days, she had a strange feeling, like a slight nausea, not exactly bothersome, but unusual. At first, she had attributed it to the crossing of the Caradhras, but habitually height didn’t affect her and therefore she had found it odd; but the persistence of the feeling was troubling her. Hence, she decided to examine herself to verify what it was about; after warning Aryon about her proposal, so he wouldn’t worry, she turned her senses inside. Her gaze became empty, while it was turning to the inside analysing her organism, starting from the outside with skin, deep epidermis, muscles, then going through her internal organs and finally her bones and sinews; but the reason of her vague indisposition was clear to her in a flash, as soon as she examined her womb.

She returned immediately outside and turned to Aryon, who was putting away the dishes they had used for their meal; her sudden movement alarmed him for a second, but then, her radiant expression reassured him at once.

Without a word, the Aini stretched out her hands to him and he reached her, sitting by her side, his face puzzled.

“T have a special gift for you,” Nerwen told him, grasping his hand and placing it on her abdomen, “Our babygirl has arrived.”

For a long moment, Aryon stared glassy-eyed at his hand spread over his wife’s belly. Then, he raised his eyes, wide with bewilderment, and plunged them in hers.

“The child you’ve seen...” he finally breathed, “Our daughter!”

Nerwen nodded, her eyes shining. She hadn’t expected her vision becoming true so soon and her joy was beyond words.

Aryon lowered his gaze again and slowly caressed her belly, still flat but that, as weeks and months would go by, would swell up because of the new life it was carrying. Then, overwhelmed by happiness, he tightly embraced Nerwen.

“Oh, love, this is the best gift you could ever give me...” he whispered in her ear, his voice trembling because of the deep emotion that was shaking him inside.

“It was you, who gave me this gift,” she contradicted him, equally moved. He withdrew to look at her.

“But it’s me, the one who’s having birthday today,” he reminded her, addressing her one of his infrequent, sunny smiles, “When did it happen?” he asked then.

She had seen the degree of development of the embryo and figured it out.

“The day we stayed at Galadriel’s and Celeborn’s special place,” she answered, “This explains our eagerness for one another... our daughter wanted to be conceived!”

“She shows already a great willpower,” Aryon grinned, proudly.

“I told you, she’ll have quite a temper,” she grinned in turn.

“My temper and your beauty?” he suggested, “There won’t be anybody who will be able resisting her charm...” he concluded, before bowing his neck and peppering his wife’s face with kisses.

Having perceived her friend’s great emotion, Thilgiloth had come near them, but she had stayed at
a certain distance because she didn’t want to disturb a clearly emotionally intimate moment between the two partners. Seeing them parting after a long embrace, she contacted Nerwen:

*I feel in you an immense and visceral joy…*

“It’s the right way to describe it,” Nerwen commented, standing up to approach the Chargeress; she stroked her affectionately, “I’m pregnant,” she announced. Thilgolith radiated a feeling of great marvel, then she lifted her neck and gave out a joyful neigh.

Hearing her, the other horses and Túdhin turned to look at her; the wolf came quickly to them and asked:

*What’s up?*

Nerwen repeated the news for him and the predator, too, after the first moment of amazement, manifested his joy, at first howling, then leaning against Nerwen’s leg, and finally Aryon’s, too.

*I’m very happy for you both,* he declared, licking the prince’s hand.

“I suggest we don’t ride on, today,” Nerwen said at this point, “so I can contact Yavanna to inform her and take a rest. I must also set my body on its new condition, so I can eliminate the slight stomach trouble I feel and avoid the future ones.”

“Good, so when you’ll finish talking with Kementári, I’ll go hunting: a bit of fresh meat at dinner will vary our diet,” Aryon commented and the Maia nodded in agreement.

When the door symbolising their link opened, Yavanna welcomed her a little surprised: after Fangorn, there was no reason to meet again, hence she guessed that something unexpected had occurred. Her disciple’s radiant face told her it was good news.

*Hello, my friend,* she said smiling, *How are you?*

Wonderfully well, Nerwen answered, *Do you remember the daughter I’ve seen in the future, mine and Aryon’s? She’s already here!*

*But this is wonderful!* the Queen of Earth cried, enthusiastically, *I am so glad for you…* she embraced her affectionately, *Melian, too, will be happy about this news!*

*I didn’t expect it so soon,* Nerwen admitted, *Both Aryon and I are totally dumbfounded, so much happy we… well, we almost cannot breathe,* she concluded, not sure on how she could express the immense joy they were feeling.

*Will you continue your journey, or will you stop to give birth to her in Endorë?* Yavanna enquired.

*I didn’t think about this yet…* the Istar considered, *Lúthien needed only sixteen weeks to be born and, from what I’ve seen, my daughter will do the same. Three already are gone, this means that there are only thirteen left. We could arrive at Mithlond and reach Valinor, but I’d have to ride with a baby bump and I’m afraid this would be very uncomfortable. Mayhap it’s worth stopping at Imladris and wait for the baby to be enough grown up to make the journey with us,* she concluded.

*Then let me know when you give birth to her,* Kementári asked her, *I would like to be there, as I did for your nuptials.*

*Thank you…* Nerwen murmured, moved: among the Eldar, it was customary that the father, the mother of the mother and her possible sisters would attend the delivery, but of course, Nerwen
hadn’t a mother. Melian could maybe get here in time, however she had to ask the Valar for a special permission, no more and no less than the one given to the Istar, and Nerwen didn’t think it appropriate to bother the Powers of the World with a personal matter; but Yavanna could be there in spirit, as she had done the day of her wedding.

_Fine, then I will wait for your call_, the Queen of Earth concluded, _May my blessing be with your child until the moment it will see the light, and then may the stars always shine upon her path._

Nerwen bowed her head, very thrilled in accepting her Mistress’ wish for her daughter. Eventually, they parted and the Istar _returned_.

“Yavanna is very happy for us,” she reported to Aryon, after taking some refreshment with a few morsels of _lembas_, “She’ll attend the delivery, as she attended our wedding; and she blessed the baby...”

“Really?” the prince was stunned, “This is a great honour...”

“It is indeed,” she confirmed, still moved, “but she’s my Mistress and we love one another very much... it’s natural that she wishes me well, and with me, you, too, and our daughter...”

“Yes, of course... but for me, it’s still extraordinary. It thrills me incredibly much knowing that it won’t be long till I see the fabulous Valinor and meet the Valar... and I’ll see my father again...”

Nerwen grasped his hands:

“I was thinking better stopping at Imladris for awhile,” she said, then she explained to him about the quick pregnancy she would have and her worries in travelling with a baby bump. This meant they had to wait about one year before leaving, that is, when their daughter would be nine or ten months old.

Aryon understood her reasons.

“One year more or less doesn’t change things that much,” he considered, shrugging, “Valinor won’t run away, will it?”

“Of course not...”

_OOO_

They resumed their journey the following morning; from that moment on, they proceeded slower and for a lesser number of hours each day; after setting her body in consequence to her new condition, Nerwen felt no nausea anymore, but it was advisable not exerting herself too much.

So it was that eventually, on the tenth day of September, they came to the ford of Bruinen; Elrond’s protective magic still defended Imladris, therefore Nerwen, as she had done almost exactly 80 years before, opened a passage to get through. After crossing the ford, she closed the passage and they rode on along the path that led to the hidden valley, where the Last Homely House this side of the Misty Mountains stood.
Author’s corner:

Celeborn’s origins are controversial: in his first scripts, Tolkien affirms he’s related to Thingol and met Galadriel when she came in exile in Doriath along with the Noldor, and this was the approach Christopher Tolkien chose for “The Silmarillion”; then, in “Unfinished Tales,” Tolkien himself points out that Celeborn is grandson of Elmo, brother of Thingol, and this is the version more largely accepted. However, in later scripts, Tolkien affirms he’s a Teler of Alqualondë, grandson of Olwë, Thingol’s other brother; but this late version contradicts things already established in the appendices of “The Lord of the Rings” and in “The Road Goes Ever On” (poetry collection written by Tolkien), therefore it isn’t usually taken into consideration and so I did the same.

So, Nerwen is pregnant! What do you think about it? One more thing I didn’t foresee, and that turned out on its own initiative. Personally, I’m very thrilled, and I hope you are, too.

Only two chapters to go! I really don’t know how I will be able to return from Middle-earth, after spending there so much time. I will be like Sam Gamgee: always divided in two. Until one day I’ll see the rain turn into silver glass and open up, revealing white shores and a green land under a swift dawn...

Thank you to all those who followed and/or favorited this fan fiction: I am very flattered. I’d like to contact you personally one by one, but I’m afraid to bother you and therefore, please accept my thanksgiving here.

Lady Angel
Chapter LXII: Annadiel

Lindir was awaiting them, in the same place where he had met Nerwen the first time she had come to Rivendell, just beyond the bridge crossing the gorge on which bottom the Loudwater ran.

“Welcome back, Lady Nerwen,” he told her, bowing respectfully after taking three steps toward her, then he bowed to Aryon, too.

“Thank you, Lindir,” Nerwen said, “This is my husband Aryon Morvacor, prince of the Kindi Avari.”

“Welcome, Lord Aryon,” Lindir greeted him with another bow, “Please, leave here your horses,” he added, pointing to the grooms that had come forward. Recognising one of them, Thilgiloth followed them docilely; Kerra and Allakos did equally, while Túdhin stayed next to Nerwen.

Lindir cast a glance at the wolf who, in any event, had wrapped himself in the canine looks and was sitting quietly beside the Istar.

“Your dog is very well-behaved,” the Elf observed with a smile.

“Yes, he is,” Nerwen confirmed, smiling in turn.

“Please, follow me: Lord Elrond is waiting for you,” Lindir invited them, turning to lead the way; shortly after, he introduced them in the same parlour where Elrond had received Nerwen the first time.

The Lord of Rivendell was sitting on an armchair and, in another next to his, sat one more old acquaintance of the Maia: Glorfindel. They both stood up when she and Aryon entered in the room; the blond Vanya smiled broadly, while Elrond kept his usual stern expression, but his eyes shone
in contentment.

“What a great pleasure to see you again, my friend!” Glorfindel cried, hugging Nerwen warmly, then he turned to Aryon, intrigued.

The Aini quickly introduced them.

“Glorfindel, Elrond: meet my husband, Aryon Morvacor, sister of Eliéanna Dhillel, High Sovereign of the Six Tribes of the Avari. Aryon, these are Lord Elrond of Imladris, and Lord Glorfindel, an old friend from Valinor.”

“It’s an honour to meet you,” Aryon said, addressing them with a bow, which the Vanya returned, while Elrond, by virtue of his rank as the local ruler, simply nodded.

“The honour is ours,” Elrond said, “I never had the pleasure to meet someone of your kin, so far.”

His courtesy favourably struck the Avar prince, who therefore replied with a second bow; Nerwen had told him long about both him and Glorfindel.

“So, you got married,” the Vanya commented, looking at his old friend, “I’m truly happy for you. You must have – I mean, both of you – loads to tell us...”

“We’ll talk later about this,” Elrond intervened, “Has your journey from Lothlórien been good?” he enquired then, looking to his guests.

“Yes, thank you,” Aryon answered, “We saw no sign of Orcs, Trolls or others of that sort, on the entire way.”

“Very well,” their host nodded, “There are still a number of lairs, here in the north, but it looks like they barricaded themselves in and have no intention to come out.”

“They won’t,” Nerwen affirmed, “Their master is no more, as well as the very purpose of their existence, therefore they will extinguish like flames deprived of air.”

“Did you see it?” Glorfindel enquired. She shook her head:

“No, it’s just the conclusion Celeborn has come to, and I agree.”

Elrond nodded:

“I see, and I, too, agree”, then he changed subject, “I learnt that your search for the Ents was successful.”

“So it is,” the Maia confirmed, “but it took me to another search, this time for the Entwives... it’s a very long story.”

“You will tell us everything after taking a rest,” the Lord of Imladris said, “As soon as I perceived the opening in the barrier at the ford, I ordered Gloriel to prepare your quarters... the same you had last time, Nerwen,” he added.

The Aini needed a minute to remember who Gloriel was: a sweet blonde Elf who was part of the service staff and Lindir’s friend-in-love. This made her think of Gaerwen, who had become Elladan’s friend-in-love at the time of her previous stay in Imladris, and wondered how she was; surely, she would see soon.

Elrond sent for Gloriel, who took them to their quarters, not much to show them the way, as
Nerwen knew it perfectly, but because the court protocol required it.

“I’ll come and get you when dinner’s ready,” she told them with a polite smile, “If you need anything, just ring the bell.”

Aryon and Nerwen thanked her and entered, finding their luggage neatly piled up on a chest at the foot of the bed; they took out their house garments, while Túdhin went out on the terrace, where he sat in the shadow of a trellis covered in a plant of sweet-scented jasmine.

Nerwen and Aryon freshened up and changed their clothes, then they exited in turn, taking a seat on the wicker couch under the gazebo to rest and enjoy the golden light of the declining day. The prince wrapped his arm around his wife and held her tightly against his side, as she rested her head on his shoulder.

“When is our daughter due, exactly?” he asked her softly.

Nerwen placed her hand on her belly, which was beginning to show the evidence of her condition.

“The sixteenth week expires on mid-November,” she answered.

Aryon covered his wife’s hand with his, feeling moved to his bones. If he kept this up, when he would attend his daughter’s birth, he would burst into tears – so much for his surliness and introversion...

“Annadiel,” he said all of a sudden; Nerwen looked at him puzzled and he explained, “The name for our daughter. What do you think of it?”

“It’s stunning, Aryon...” Nerwen whispered, struck, “because she’s truly a gift, the gift we are giving one another with our love,” she bent her neck backwards to better look at him, “Yes, it’s the perfect name for her.”

The Avar prince bowed his head and kissed her lips with great sweetness; then she laid her head again on his shoulder and they stayed like this, embracing and admiring the panorama.

After a while, Nerwen observed in a low voice:

“You gave up so much for my sake... your people, your homeland... and now a daughter comes as a reward.”

The prince pondered those words.

“That’s not how I see it,” he commented at length, “Sooner or later, all of the Elves – including the Avari – will end up sailing to the West, or they’ll vanish from the face of the world. Between the two, I think the first choice is the better one, no matter what; but as I have you, this choice becomes the only possible, for me. At this point, Annadiel isn’t a reward, but what a child is always for its parents: the crowning of their shared love.”

His words comforted Nerwen: since he had announced his decision to go to Valinor with her, she had felt a little uncomfortable, even if it was inevitable that one of them had to give up his or her world. However, in the way Aryon had posed it, the choice he had made was truly the best for him.

She leaned into him, kissing him very tenderly, as he had done with her earlier.
Later, Túdhin raised suddenly his head and perked up his ears.

*Someone’s knocking at the door,* he announced.

It was Gloriel, who had come to call them, as agreed, to tell them dinner was about to be served.

Before heading for the hall where in the evenings Elrond dined with his court, they asked Gloriel to fetch food and water for Túdhin, who would wait for them in their quarters, and she answered she would see to it personally.

When they arrived at the dining hall, they caught sight of Glorfindel, whose tall, blond shape towered above all the others, and joined him.

“Good evening,” the Vanya greeted them, then he nodded to someone behind them, “Oh, here are your nephews…”

“Aunt Nerwen!” they heard a delighted cry. The Istar turned, smiling, and was literally swept away by two hugs.

“Elladan! Elrohir!” she greeted them, laughing and returning their hugs. Afterwards, she introduced her nephews to her husband, who found them undistinguishable, like her at the time when she had first met them.

Gaerwen joined them; Nerwen greeted her gladly and introduced Aryon to her, and she learned that the redhead Elf was still Elladan’s friend-in-love. Finally, Elrond joined them and everybody took their seat to dine.

After dinner, instead of heading for the Hall of Fire, the Lord of Rivendell invited his guests to follow him in his parlour, along with the twins and Glorfindel.

Here, first thing first, Nerwen and Aryon reported Arwen’s and Aragorn’s greetings, and then, once more, they told about their story; the accounts that most impressed their hosts were the finding of Pallando and Alatar and then, of course, the meeting with the Entwives.

When they finished, it was very late, over midnight, and sleep now weighed on everybody’s eyelids; therefore, they bid their goodnights one another and went to bed.

On the following day, after breaking their fast in their quarters, Nerwen and Aryon went for a stroll in the palace gardens, escorted by Túdhin; the September sun was sweet in this sheltered dale and kept still the golden blaze of full summer.

While wandering lazily along the narrow paths, they glimpsed a tiny white-haired figure, sitting on a wooden bench, bent over an open book laying in his lap. Drawing nearer, they noticed his large feet, devoid of shoes and covered with a thick layer of curly hair.

“Oh,” Nerwen breathed, “a Hobbit! I wonder why he’s here in Imladris…”
“A Hobbit? Like Frodo Baggins and Sam Gamgee?” Aryon asked, in turn watching closer the Halfling, engrossed in his reading.

“Precisely,” she confirmed, “Good morning,” she then greeted the Hobbit, as they came up to him.

The old Hobbit raised his nose off the book and looked at them, squinting his vivid eyes in the light.

“Good morning? Yes, it’s a good morning, I’d say, sunny and pleasantly warm. Therefore, good morning to you, too, lady, and to you, sir.”

Nerwen blinked in surprise: she felt as if she knew this old Halfling, but she wasn’t able to recall where she had met him. The only one she had dealt with in a quite significant way was…

“Bilbo Baggins? Is that you?” she asked, hesitantly.

The Hobbit straightened his back and looked closer at her.

“In flesh and bone, yes… and you are…” he furrowed his brow in the effort of remembering, “Nerwen the Green!” he cried then, lightening up; his book tumbled on the ground, “Well, stone me, it’s truly you!”

He pushed off the bench and slid to the ground, then took an accomplished bow, exactly as he had done on that evening of over eighty years ago.

“You know each other?” Aryon asked, intrigued.

“Yes, we do”, Bilbo confirmed smiling, “We met one evening at the Green Dragon and we had dinner together… You look exactly like when we first met, Lady Nerwen,” he said, “You didn’t change a bit, like old Gandalf… actually, you’re even more beautiful!” he turned to look at Aryon, “And you are…?”
“My name is Aryon Morvacor,” the prince introduced himself, amused by this pantomime, “I’m Nerwen’s husband.”

“Husband? Ha, now I understand your luminous aura, Lady Nerwen… you’re expecting a little Wizard, aren’t you?”

Both his interlocutors were startled.

“Your eyes are very sharp, Master Baggins,” Aryon commented.

“Oh, it’s all thanks to a magic ring I had a long time ago: it left me with some extraordinary abilities, like seeing beyond the evidence,” he made a nonchalant gesture, “For instance, now I see well that you are not at all a woman of the race of Men, Lady Nerwen, but something more… and you, too, Lord Aryon, are not only a common Elf. Both of you remind me of Gandalf, in a certain way, but I really cannot explain why.”

He looked from one to the other, seeking clarifications; Nerwen nodded:

“This is because the three of us belong to the same race.”

Bilbo furrowed his brow again.

“Really? So Lord Aryon is a Wizard, too?”

Aryon curled his lips in his typical half-smile:

“In a way, you can say so, at least for one half.”

“Ha, you’re as much evasive and mysterious… you look truly like Gandalf’s copy!” the old Hobbit blurted out, then at once he laughed, “But your looks are far better than his, for sure!”

Aryon and Nerwen, too, laughed at his witty remark.

“Come on, sit with me and tell me something about your deeds!” Bilbo invited them, changing subject, “Did you visit faraway lands? You know, I really love drawing maps and there are so many places in Middle-earth that have not been charted yet, or that are, but only roughly…”

They spent the rest of the morning chitchatting with Bilbo; the old Hobbit did many sketches following their directions, at least when he wasn’t busy staring at them in wonder, wide-eyed, while they were describing him the lands of the far east, beyond the Orocarni.

Hearing the bell calling for the midday meal, they stood up and headed for the palace, Nerwen and Aryon adjusting their stride to the Hobbit’s shorter and slower one.

“I see you met our excellent Perian,” Gaerwen greeted them, as they came across her while entering the dining room, “We see him very rarely for dinner, but he never misses the midday meal.”

“This, my dear lass, is because I’m not so young anymore to be eager feasting every night,” Bilbo explained smiling, “I get sleepy early and therefore I go to bed.”

“Except when you decide to recite your new poetries,” they heard Elladan’s amused voice, as he arrived this moment hearing the last sentence.

“Exactly, my dear prince,” Bilbo answered, pretending haughtiness, “and usually they’re appreciated… even if I don’t know if it’s my skills or your good heart,” he concluded laughing.
“I like this *Perian,*” Aryon said in a low voice, talking to Nerwen. She nodded in agreement: she remembered well the nice evening they had spent together, in Bywater in the Shire.

Shortly after, Elrohir joined them, and then Elrond and Glorfindel, and little by little all the other courtesans who would share the meal with them.

Bilbo, blissfully sitting between Nerwen and Gaerwen, turned to the Istar:

“My dear, I hope you and your husband will stay for a while: in a few days, it’s my one-hundred and thirtieth birthday and I’d be happy if you come to my party.”

“Actually, we planned on asking for lodging through the winter,” Nerwen revealed, turning to Elrond, sitting a couple of seats away at the head of the table, and voicing what she and Aryon had discussed in the previous days.

“Of course!” the Lord of Imladris accepted courteously, “I’m glad to have you as my guests for all the time you need,” then he tilted his head to one side, looking intently at her, “You are asking this for a special reason…”

Nerwen smiled: like Galadriel – and Bilbo – Elrond, too, had very sharp eyes.

“You guessed it,” she admitted, grasping Aryon’s hand and exchanging with him a lovingly gaze. At her signal, the prince made the official announcement:

“We’re expecting a daughter.”

For a moment, all those who had heard froze. Gaerwen was the first to recover.

“This is wonderful!” she declared, “When is she due?”

“Around mid-November,” the Maia answered, “The pregnancy goes on very quickly, like for my sister Melian.”

At this point, in this place and in these circumstances, there was no reason to hide her true nature; besides, there were already many people here knowing who she really was.

“Another Lúthien!” Elladan observed, “Congratulations!”

“What will you call her?” Elrohir enquired.

“Annadiel,” Aryon answered.

“Gorgeous name,” Elrond approved.

“I agree,” Glorfindel said, looking with a smile at her old friend, truly happy for her.

“This deserves a toast,” Bilbo affirmed, raising his goblet full of wine; the other ones joined his toast, even Nerwen, who was able to prevent the alcohol reaching the embryo and therefore could drink without a problem.

OOO
To celebrate Bilbo’s birthday, Elrond had sent for all his Dwaven friends who were still alive, with whom, almost eight decades ago, he had shared the extraordinary adventure to conquer back the Realm of Erebor, under the leadership of Thorin Oakenshield. So it was that, one week later, from the High Pass came a company of Dwarves; Bilbo rushed to meet them and hugged them, laughing and weeping in joy; but the usually grumpy Dwarves, too, were visibly moved, their beards damp with tears.

Later, Bilbo introduced the Dwarves to Nerwen and Aryon: the imposing Dwalin, the corpulent Bombur, and then Dori, Nori, Bifur, Bofur, and Glóin, who had come with his son Gimli, who was one of the Nine Fellows of the Ring. Nerwen of course won them all immediately, greeting them in her perfect khuzdul; but she kept from them that she had met Thorin, because she didn’t want to ruin the joyful atmosphere reminding them their fallen friend and relative.

The great day, on September 22nd, they had a wonderful feast, quite chaotic because of the Dwarves, but the Elves of Rivendell knew them well and didn’t get upset. Their songs and music were less refined, more boisterous than the Elven ones, but nonetheless enjoyable and lively, and everyone had a good time.

At the end of the party, they had some spectacular fireworks, which Elrond had commissioned to the Dwarves, who were masters in this art, as his personal gift to Bilbo. All the inhabitants of Imladris stayed almost half an hour with their noses up in the air, watching golden fountains, silver trees, blue flowers, purple rains, red rings, yellow spirals, orange wheels, green javelins travelling all over the night sky in every direction; and finally, in honour of the Hobbit’s great adventure, a huge golden-red dragon crossed the starry vault from one side to the other of the vale, spitting fire and flames out of his mouth and nostrils and uttering a terrifying roar that shook the walls. Bilbo laughed his head off, and then told everyone about the party for his one-hundred and eleventh birthday at Hobbiton, when Gandalf had scared to death all guests with a dragon very similar to this.

The Dwarves stayed about ten days after the party, then they took the way home, before risking snow on the High Pass. They bid their farewells to Bilbo with great emotion, knowing that it was extremely unlikely they would meet again, given the old age of the Halfling and the distance between their abodes. After their departure, Bilbo was very taciturn for days, but after a while, his natural Hobbit good mood prevailed again.

OOO

The weeks passed quickly by and Nerwen’s belly swelled up more and more each day; Annadiel was growing inside of her, healthy and lively, and Aryon, hearing her moving, felt his hear burst with joy.

Eventually, in the morning of the twelfth day of November, as she was sitting on the couch in her quarters, in front of the blazing hearth, the Aini felt that the baby was ready to be born; hence, she called for Aryon, who was busy polishing his sword in the next room. The prince hurried immediately to her.

“It’s time,” his wife announced, serenely. In spite of her calm tone, Aryon felt tension grip his stomach, but he forced himself not losing his head; after all, they had talked often about how he had to proceed.
He pulled the cord of the bell to call Gloriel, who came at once.

“Here we go,” he said, concisely. The beautiful blonde Elf took the hint and nodded:

“I’ll call for Lady Nesta and get the birth tub ready,” she answered, turning and running swiftly away.

Unlike other peoples, the Eldarin females used to give birth to their babies in a tub full of lukewarm water, so that the baby would pass easily from the inside of its mother’s body, warm and liquid, through a similar ambient to the air of the world of which it was seeing the light.

Lady Nesta was the best healer in Imladris, student of Elrond; even if very young, she was as skilful as he was, and Nerwen was very glad she could rely on her.

As they waited, Nerwen sent her thoughts to Yavanna to inform her about the imminent delivery; a few moments later, she perceived her Mistress’ ethereal presence at her side and smiled happily.

“Kementári is here with us,” she informed her husband. Aryon, even if he knew this would happen, felt agitated, adding more trepidation to the moment already full of emotion, and he felt his knees trembling. As an intrepid warrior, he would face more calmly a horde of infuriated Orcs; but the idea of leaving his wife in the moment she was giving birth to their daughter never crossed his mind, therefore he appealed to all his willpower to face the emotional wave threatening to overwhelm him, and tamed it.

Nesta arrived at once, alerted by Gloriel. She quickly examined Nerwen and agreed that the delivery was imminent; with Aryon, she escorted the Maia in the room of birth; two stoves on the opposite corners heated it well, and in the centre stood an oblong tub full of water at body temperature. Here, they helped Nerwen disrobing and entering the tub, where they aided her sitting down; Aryon took off his jacket and shirt, sat behind the tub and her back and embraced her, kissing her hair, tied up in a bun at the top of her head. Nesta instead positioned herself on one side of the tub, ready to intervene.

There was no labour, not in the traditional meaning of the word: controlling the pain of her contractions, Nerwen simply opened the way for her daughter, and the baby slipped into it, exiting from her mother’s body in the waiting hands of Nesta, who kept her underwater for a few moments before making her emerge. The baby screamed, but it sounded more like a cry of joy than a weeping, and her father roared in joy as well.

OOO

From beyond the Great Sea, Yavanna Kementári attended to the birth; she felt deeply moved by this miracle of Ilúvatar and by the immense joy that she perceived in her beloved follower and in her husband. When Annadiel made her voice heard to the world for the very first time, the Queen of Earth sent her her blessings, so she would be healthy and happy and her path in life free of hindrances; then she retired.

OOO
“She’s lovely,” Nesta said smiling, placing the newborn baby in her mother’s arms; behind her, thrilled, Aryon embraced them both. He was unable to utter a word as he stared at the baby’s tiny face, his daughter and Nerwen’s, their reciprocal gift; he was staring at her but seeing little, because tears blurred his vision.

Nerwen, too, was unable to stop staring at Annadiel; she thought she was the most stunning being in all of Eä. She wondered vaguely if all mothers thought alike of their creatures.

“She’s wonderful,” she whispered, her voice cracking with emotion, “Oh Aryon, our daughter...”

“Yes,” the prince murmured, gulping the lump in his throat, “Our daughter.”

The baby opened her eyes, slowly blinking, and made eye contact with her mother.

“She’s looking at me!” Nerwen whispered, her eyes tearful; Aryon kissed her temple, unable to speak.

Nesta was looking at them, feeling deeply moved; she hoped that one day, not too long from now, she would feel their same joy.

She waited until the umbilical cord stopped pulsating, then she cut it; shortly after, Annadiel moved, putting one hand in her mouth, then she turned toward her mother’s breasts and placed her hand, wet with her saliva, on one nipple, making it swell. Finally, she took it into her mouth and began to suckle.

Unable to restrain his tears any longer, Aryon surrendered and let them flow freely.

OOO

Annadiel became quickly the court’s darling; it was a long time since the last baby had been born in Imladris, and therefore the event was sensational. Bilbo was the most enthusiastic of all and he often cradled her as the tenderest of grandpas, and the baby seemed to enjoy his attentions very much.

Weeks went by, then months; winter was characterised by unusually cold temperatures and deep white snow covered the secluded valley, as the waterfalls turned to lace of sparkling ice; then spring returned and the snow melted, the trees blossomed and green grass covered the meadows and the sides of the mountains.

Annadiel was growing fast, lively and curious, sleeping much, suckling copiously and constantly monitoring at first only her mother, then her father, too, who made sure being as much as possible there for her, and finally, all those who moved within her visual range. She seemed to recognise them all and watched them solemnly with her grey-blue eyes – identical to Aryon’s – and then produced smiles and faces that melted even the stern Elrond, to whom she recalled his beloved daughter Arwen.
One day in April, Elrond sent for Nerwen; leaving Annadiel in Aryon’s care, the Istar went to him in his office.

“A little while ago, I perceived Mithrandir at the Ford of Bruinen,” he announced, “I thought you would like to go and meet him.”

“Of course!” Nerwen cried enthusiastically, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Elrond answered with the shadow of a smile.

The Aini headed for the bridge where Lindir had welcomed her, when she came alone the first time, the second with Aryon; the Palace Administrator was already there and she greeted him while passing, then she ran to saddle Thilgiloth. Fifteen minutes later the Chargeress was dashing at full gallop across the narrow bridge with no railing; any other mount must be led by the bridle, but obviously Thilgiloth was no ordinary mount, and anyway, when Nerwen had told her they were going to meet her old friend Olórin, she had been enthusiastic and this, too, was the reason of her sprint.

They came across Gandalf almost halfway between the palace and the ford; mounting a magnificent mearh with a silvery-white coat, the Wizard was wrapped in a snow-white cloak and he seemed to shine in a vague pearlescent light.

“Mithrandir!” Nerwen called for him, as Thilgiloth approached him at the maximum speed allowed by the well-kept path. Seeing her, Gandalf beamed in such a wide smile, it almost cracked his face in two; he incited verbally his horse who, obediently, sped up. When they met, both riders dismounted and ran to hug each other.

“My dear Nerwen!” the Wizard cried, picking her up and making her whirl around; his apparent age often deceived a beholder, because even if he looked very old, he was actually vigorous like a
“My friend, how are you? You look great”, Nerwen said, laughing, when he put her back down. Gandalf puffed out his chest.

“Is that so? Thank you… as you can see, I changed my colour.”

“So I’ve been told; Aragorn recounted me Saruman’s story.” she shook her head, “So sad that such a great Maia allowed himself to be corrupted by Sauron…”

“The greater we are, the louder we are when we fall,” Gandalf considered bitterly, “But tell me about you: I heard you found the Entwives and got married?”

“Who told you?” she laughed, “Yes to both, and not only: five months ago my husband and I had a daughter!”

“But this is wonderful!” Gandalf yelled in joy, hugging her again, “What did you call her?”

“Annadiel…”

“What a beautiful name!”

Meanwhile, the mearh had approached Thilgiloth and now he neighed a respectful greeting. Gandalf turned to look at him and smiled:

“He’s recognising one of his kin,” he commented.

Indeed, the mearas descended from the Charger Nahar, Oromé Aldaron’s mount, so obviously he was able to identify one of this magic race.

Thilgiloth returned the greeting, recognising him in turn as a distant relative.

“Our mounts are making friends,” Nerwen confirmed, smiling.

They got on horseback – the mearh’s name was Shadowfax, Gandalf told Nerwen, and he didn’t want neither bridle nor saddle – and they began slowly riding to Rivendell, deep in conversation; but there were so many things to talk about, from both parts, that when they arrived, they were not even through a quarter of the whole story.

Lindir was waiting patiently for them on the other side of the bridge.

“Welcome back to Imladris, Mithrandir,” he said.

“Thank you, my good Lindir,” Gandalf answered, dismounting and entrusting Shadowfax to a groom, while Nerwen was doing equally with Thilgiloth, “How are you?”

“Fine, thank you, and I hope you are, too…”

He took them at once to Elrond, who was waiting for them in his parlour. The two Keepers – one of the Ring of Air, the other of the Ring of Fire – exchanged a formal embrace, but they were plainly happy to see each other.

“We need to talk,” Elrond said then, gravely.

“Yes, but if you don’t mind, I’d like to do it later,” Gandalf affirmed, “Now I am very eager to meet Nerwen’s husband and daughter.”
“Of course,” the Lord of Imladris nodded, sympathetically: he knew that the two Istari were best friends, “Your usual quarters are ready for you. We’ll talk in the afternoon.”

Nerwen took Gandalf to her lodgings, where she found Aryon reading a book while watching over Annadiel’s sleep, who was blissfully laying in her cradle.

“Aryon, may I introduce to you Olórin?” Nerwen said with a bright smile, “The Elves in Middle-earth call him Mithrandir and the Men Gandalf. My friend, this is my husband Aryon Morvacor, of the Kindi Avari.”

She already told him about his origins, therefore Gandalf addressed him with the courteous bow used among equals; but Aryon came near and embraced him formally.

“It’s a great pleasure and a great honour to meet you, Mithrandir,” he declared in a solemn tone, “Nerwen told me a lot about you.”

“I hope she said only good things!” the Wizard cried, laughing, “And the pleasure and honour are mine… but now I beg your pardon because I’m dying to see your daughter.”

“Come, then,” the prince invited him, leading him to the cradle, which stood in a quiet corner of the room.

As soon as they came near, Annadiel stretched and opened her eyes; she stared directly at Gandalf and smiled, uttering a little cry that sounded through and through like a greeting.

“Hey, hullo, little one,” the Wizard said, with such a sweet voice, it was almost unrecognisable, “I’m an old friend of our mother, but you grasped this already, didn’t you?” he chuckled, amused.

Aryon grinned:

“Well, Annadiel is claiming another victim… nobody resists her charm, I said it since Nerwen saw her in our future.”

“Ha, she has for sure all the charming grace of her cousin Lúthien,” Gandalf commented, laughing, “Anyway, their mothers are both Maiar, and sisters, in addition to it.”

Nerwen took Annadiel and looked at Gandalf:

“Would you like to hold her?”

“Gladly,” the Wizard accepted, handing his staff to Aryon, then gently he took the baby, who immediately slid her little hands in his beard and pulled, making him laugh heartily.

Gandalf stayed a few minutes more, then, on Nerwen’s suggestion, he headed for his lodging to rest before the midday meal; they would talk in the afternoon, telling each other their adventures through the eight decades that had passed since their last encounter. Of course, Nerwen and Aryon already knew about the Wizard’s deeds, but it would be entirely different hearing him narrating them; while Gandalf, except for the general news about the finding of the Entwives and Nerwen’s wedding, would hear their story for the first time.

OOO
Later, Aryon and Nerwen headed for the dining hall, leaving Annadiel in the care of a nanny. Gandalf was already in the hall and was talking to Glorfindel. They joined them and chatted for a while, until a happy voice interrupted them:

“My dear Gandalf, what a pleasure to see you again!”

It was Bilbo, who had just entered the room. Gandalf turned to him and a broad smile blossomed on his bearded face.

“Bilbo Baggins, my old friend…”

The Wizard kneeled and opened his arms; Bilbo ran at the maximum speed his old legs would carry him and they embraced warmly. They had met at the end of Frodo’s mission, one year and a half before, when Gandalf had escorted the four Hobbits for the better part of their journey home, but nevertheless, they were very glad to see each other once more, because their friendship was deep and sincere.

After their meal, Elrond and Gandalf retired to speak; later, the Wizard joined Nerwen and Aryon in their quarters.

“Elrond has confirmed his decision to leave,” he announced, while they were sitting on the terrace, enjoying the spring sun. “We wait for Galadriel’s choice: it would be appropriate for the three Keepers of the Elven Rings sailing together for Valinor, but of course we cannot force her to leave.”

“She would like to,” Nerwen revealed, “but leaving Celeborn is very hard for her.”

“This is understandable,” Gandalf admitted, “and anything she’ll decide, we’ll accept it. Anyway, we’ll leave only in a few months. Elrond will tell his sons today,” he looked at them, “Will you come with us?”

“We were already planning to sail for the Blessed Realm,” Aryon confirmed, “but we wanted to take care of Annadiel first. If, as you say, you plan to leave in a few months, our daughter will be enough grown up for travelling and therefore we’ll come with you.”

“Do you know what Radagast is going to do?” Nerwen asked, “Will he come with us?”

“No,” Gandalf answered, “Not yet, at least: for the moment, he wants to stay in Middle-earth; but sooner or later, he’ll take a ship and go the Straight Road to Aman.”

The Istar nodded, thinking of Pallando.

“I have still many things to tell you, my friend,” she began, “and I already know that one in particular will impress you much…”

Once more, she and Aryon narrated their adventures; as she had foreseen, Gandalf was very impressed learning about the finding of Pallando and Alatar.

“Do you think that Pallando will stay forever in Yòrvarem?” he enquired.

“I don’t know,” Nerwen admitted, “Most likely, yes, until his amnesia will last; but who knows, should he regain his memory, he could feel so homesick that he might decide to leave his adoptive people and come back to Valinor.”

“Only time will tell,” Aryon commented.
“And what about your people, Lord Aryon?” Gandalf asked him, “Do you think they’ll decide to go to Valinor, in the end?” he leaned toward him, “The Valar have never forgotten the Avari nor, even if sorry about the ancient refusal, have they ever resented them: your people would be welcome.”

The prince nodded:

“Yes, Nerwen told me and my sister the queen. Eliénna had the news spread in our realm, but until our departure, nobody seemed interested in leaving. However, if with Men’s domination the world will truly darken, surely some of them – many or few I cannot tell – will change their minds. However, I wonder how much longer they’ll find a ship that can take them on the Straight Road…”

“As long as the last Elf, whatever his kin, won’t leave Middle-earth, Círdan will wait in Mithlond with the Last Ship,” the Wizard assured him.

They broke off the account for Annadiel’s afternoon feeding time, then they finished and it was Gandalf’s turn to tell them about his deeds. When he concluded, it was almost dinnertime, so they went together to the dining hall; at the table, they noticed at once that the twins were very upset, and so were Glorfindel and Gaerwen. They guessed that Elrond had informed them about his decision to leave and they were sad; however, this decision was inevitable because it was linked to the destruction of the Ruling Ring and the resulting lessening of the power of the three Keepers of Nenya, Vilya and Narya: an irreversible melancholy was creeping in their souls, and it could be eased only in the Undying Lands.

Author’s corner:

_Tolkien never specified the length of pregnancy of an Elf (much less, for obvious reasons, of a Maia), so what I wrote is my utter fiction._

_The description of the water birth (except the absence of labour, unique because of the mother’s nature) as well as the baby’s behaviour on her mother’s breasts derive from information I found on the internet, not my personal experience, therefore, if I wrote nonsense, please tell me and I’ll correct it._

_Annadiel’s picture comes from the site “123RF” and is property of Elżbieta Popczyk (it’s written exactly this way!)._

_Thousand thanks to those who had the patience – or maybe the courage – to follow this fiction so far; and a special thank to those who took the time to offer me a review, opinion, constructive criticism, correction: all this has been very useful to me!_

_The end is now very close (hum, it sounds like a threat but it’s not, I swear haha!): the next chapter will be the conclusive, for better or for worse. I’m already fibrillating, out of anxiety and of regret because I must leave my characters, whom I love madly; unfortunately, their adventures in Middle-earth are almost over… I think I will cry for days; but if someone will cry with me, my sorrow will be eased._
Lady Angel
Chapter LXIII: Into the West

Lindir entered into Elrond’s office, where the Lord of Rivendell was talking with Nerwen and Gandalf about their leaving, which was drawing closer.

“A message from King Thranduil, Sire,” he said, handing him a rolled up parchment.

“Thank you, Lindir,” Elrond answered, taking it; with a bow, the Palace Administrator left the room.

“Thranduil? How is he?” Gandalf asked. The king of the Silvan Elves of the Woodland Realm was his good friend, even if they had had their differences during the Battle of the Five Armies, in front of Erebor.

“He’s fine,” Elrond answered, unrolling the parchment and reading it quickly, “I told him about our departure, and he’s informing me he wants to come and say goodbye to us. His son Legolas will come, too.”

“I’m glad having the chance to see them before leaving,” the Wizard commented.

For the time being, indeed, the king and his son looked like they didn’t want to leave. Eventually, they would decide heading for the Grey Havens, but they couldn’t know how long it would be until then; and anyway, there was always the off-chance they would rather stay in Middle-earth.

“I’m looking forward to meet King Thranduil,” Nerwen declared, “and his son, too; both have done much, in the fight against Sauron.”

Indeed, Legolas had been a member of the Fellowship of the Ring, and Thranduil had victoriously led his army in the battles against the Orcs of Gundabad, which had taken place at the same time of
On the twelfth day of May, the guests they were waiting for arrived. Adequately escorted, they came from the High Pass, after transiting through the land of the Beornings, located between the Woodland Realm and the eastern slopes of Hithaeglir. Nerwen and Aryon met them on the evening, when they went for dinner.

“Thranduil, let me introduce to you my relative Nerwen the Green,” Elrond said, “and her husband, Prince Aryon Morvacor of the Avari. Nerwen, Aryon, meet Thranduil, King of the Woodland Realm.”

Nerwen and Aryon performed the bow and curtsy due to a monarch and Thranduil responded with a courteous nod; he looked at them in a composed way, but his ice-blue eyes sparkled with curiosity.

“A colleague to Mithrandir, then?” he asked, gazing at the Maia, who nodded in confirmation, “and an Avar… It has been a long time since I last met one of your kin, Lord Aryon.”

For once, Aryon had to raise his head to look into his interlocutor’s eyes, because Thranduil’s stature surpassed even Galadriel’s and Celeborn’s.

“Actually, it’s too a long time we haven’t contacts with the Woodland Realm,” he admitted, “but now things have changed. I cannot speak for my sister the Queen Eliénna, but I tell you what I already told to the Lord and Lady of Lórien and to Lord Elrond: if you send ambassadors to Eryn Rhûn, they’ll be welcomed.”

“I did already,” Elrond revealed, “and the answer was positive.”

“I’ll do so, too,” Thranduil declared.

At that moment, Elrohir and Elladan joined them; the twins greeted Thranduil cordially.

They were chatting pleasantly, when a blond Elf with ice-blue eyes joined them; he looked very alike Thranduil.
“This is my son Legolas,” the king introduced him with apparent fatherly pride.

“I’m honoured to meet you,” the prince of the Woodland Realm declared, smiling, “My friend Gimli told me he had met you, last September.”

That an Elf would describe a Dwarf as his friend was unique, these days; but Gimli had told Nerwen and Aryon about the special bond that had arisen between him and Legolas during the long months of their mission as members of the Fellowship of the Ring, therefore they didn’t wonder at his statement.

After dinner, they headed for the Hall of Fire for the usual evening entertainment. Bilbo had decided to join them to meet the newcomers, and was happy to see Thranduil again; even if, during his adventure 80 years before, they had their disagreements, things had smoothed out between them in the end, and now both respected one another.

“Dwarves in barrels!” Bilbo grinned, arousing Nerwen’s curiosity; the old Hobbit was more than glad to grasp the opportunity to narrate, to her and Aryon, as well as to a small group of other people, this particular event: his escape with his thirteen Dwarven companions from Thranduil’s underground palace, where they were being kept prisoners, hiding into a number of empty barrels, propelled down the Forest River to Laketown. Bilbo had caught a huge cold because of this.

“In the end, I was able to speak in a barely indelligible way,” the Hobbit concluded with his usual humour.

Then, it was time for music and dance; Nerwen and Aryon danced gladly, as well as Elrohir, and Elladan with Gaerwen. Legolas, too, joined the dances and, as he was an excellent dancer, he was highly sought-after by the ladies.
The day after, Nerwen took a stroll in the garden with Annadiel and Túdhin, as Aryon was busy fencing with Glorfindel. The baby was now just over six months old and had started to teeth, with the subsequent illnesses, such as swelled and aching gums, a slight fever, disturbed sleep and irritability. To ease her discomfort, Nerwen used light touches of thaumaturgy, at least to have her rest in the night, and massaged her gums with olive oil infused with chamomile and nightshade.

The Aini sat on a bench, humming a lullaby; the wolf lay down next to her feet.

Shortly after, Annadiel was blissfully sleeping in her mother’s arms, one thumb into her mouth, her long black eyelashes shadowing her chubby and rosy cheeks.

Nerwen hummed on; shortly after, she saw Legolas coming. Catching sight of her in turn, he drew near.

“What a nice baby!” he cried, looking at Annadiel. The Maia laughed softly, as to not awake her daughter.

“Thanks,” she said under her breath, “Her name’s Annadiel.”

“Oh!” he said, “What a beautiful name. How old is she?”

“Six months… Would you like to sit with us, Lord Legolas?”

“Gladly,” he accepted, sitting down, “And who’s this?” he enquired, looking at the wolf, who was staring at him, intrigued.

“He’s Túdhin,” Nerwen introduced him, “and I think he likes you.”

So it is, the predator admitted.

“I like him, too,” Legolas declared, “I always liked dogs… but wait…” he watched him closer, “He’s no dog, is he?”

“Actually, he’s a wolf, very polite and loyal,” the Istar confirmed, “He has proved a great friend, not only in this life, but also in his previous one.”

“It’s rare meeting again someone you met in the past,” Legolas pondered, “It never occurred to me.”

“This was my first time, too.”

“So, you’ll leave with Mithrandir and the others, won’t you?” the prince of the Woodland Realm asked.

“Yes, I will,” Nerwen answered; Legolas was silent for a moment, then went on:

“They say that eventually, all the Elves will leave Middle-earth; but my father and I, for the moment being, have no intention to leave. I’m sorry to see Mithrandir and Elrond go, and possibly Galadriel, too; but all of them have strong reasons to do so.”
“True,” Nerwen confirmed, “Mithrandir will find himself again, Elrond will see again his wife, and Galadriel her daughter, and her parents, too. However, you’re right: eventually, all the Elves will leave Middle-earth and sail for the Blessed Realm,” she paused, “The time of the Elves is almost over,” she concluded in a low voice.

“So assert Elrond and Mithrandir, too,” Legolas commented, in such a sad tone, that the Maia felt sorry, “Are therefore beauty and grace leaving these lands?”

“Part of them will stay forever,” Nerwen affirmed quietly, “Even if mayhap darker times come, similar to Sauron’s domination that we have narrowly escaped, a sparkle of light, however small, will still shine. After all, this is the work of the Valar,” she reminded him, pointing all around, “the realisation of the Ainulindalë by the permission of Ilúvatar, and as such, even if corrupted by the Evil Melkor introduced in it at the beginning of Time, it cannot lose all of the grace they infused in it. There will be *always* persons who will perceive and keep it, in times to come, until the Dagor Dagorath.”

Legolas pondered her words and finally he nodded.

“Thank you, Lady Nerwen,” he said, “So, do you think that my father and I will take a ship, in the end?”

“Yes,” Nerwen nodded, “When you’ll feel that the light of the world has dimmed to an intolerable level, surely you, too, will head for Mithlond; I cannot say when this will happen, if in a few years or in many centuries, but it’s inevitable. Otherwise, you’ll become rustic woodland spirits.”

Again, they were silent for some time.

“Do you think the other races will miss us?” Legolas asked, in a low and sad tone.

Nerwen mused.

“Yes, they will,” she answered at length, “Oh, not all of them, and not in the same way. And not forevermore. When the Elves are gone, slowly the memory of their existence will fade: with the passing of centuries and millennia, they will become legend, and then myth. However, there will always be especially sensitive souls who, through their dreams, will catch reminiscences in their ancestral memory and know that, once upon a time, the world was more beautiful, and they will feel wistful. And thanks to these souls, the grace of the Valar will never completely disappear from the world.”

ODO

Spring ripened and became summer; the big valley of Elrond’s realm cloaked itself in the thousand colours of flowers and the thousand nuances of green of meadows and woods. The air was warm and full of the scents of fruits growing on the trees and of flowers swaying into the breeze, and the sound of the waters falling into the Bruinen was musical as never before.

Thranduil and Legolas returned to Mirkwood, now renamed Eryndisgale, or Wood of Greenleaves.

In early July, a messenger came from Lothlórien: Galadriel had at last decided for leaving and she planned to join them in Rivendell by the first half of the next month. And so it was that, on the
tenth day of August, the Lady of the Galadhrim arrived with her escort, and she was welcomed by Elrond and Gandalf.

The Three Keepers of the Elven Rings had gathered

Two weeks later, after a great farewell feast, Nerwen and Aryon left Imladris following Elrond, Galadriel and Gandalf. With them came Bilbo Baggins, too: to all the Ring-bearers, may they be the Keepers of the Elven Rings or those who had carried the One, a passage into the West had been granted, now or later.

Aryon and Nerwen took their leave from Allakos and Kerra: they preferred leaving them in Rivendell instead of having them making the long journey to Mithlond and then sending them back again. It wasn’t easy saying farewell to the two faithful kelvar, whom in time they had come to love, and therefore they were sad.

“You’ll get along well with Glorfindel,” the Avar prince said to Allakos, who he had given to the noble Vanya, and stroked his neck, “Don’t worry for me, I’m going to a wonderful place.”

Nerwen translated to the horse, who didn’t protest, but snorted, resigned; he, too, was sad because of the parting.

Kerra was deeply distressed; she had never shown a particular affection for Nerwen or Aryon, however it wasn’t because of lack of love, but for her reserved character, and now she was sorry she had to part with them.

We cannot take you with us, Nerwen explained softly to her, but don’t worry: you’ll stay here in Imladris with the Elves. They’ll treat you well.

I know this, the mule said, but it won’t be like staying with you. I’ll miss you.

Thank you… we’ll miss you, too, the Maia declared, caressing her one last time.

Túdhin instead would escort Nerwen, Aryon and Annadiel, but only as far as the Grey Havens: there was no place for him, on the ship sailing for Valinor, as much as there wasn’t for Allakos or Kerra, nor any other horse, Elven or not; only to Thilgiloth the passage was granted, because she was a Chargeress of Aman.

The day of departure, all the inhabitants of the realm were there to bid their farewells to those who were leaving, beginning from Elladan and Gaerwen, Elrohir, Glorfindel, Lindir and Gloriel, down to the last subject. The crowd stood for a long stretch on both sides of the path that, from the bridge over the Bruinen, went down to the ford.

Besides Elrond’s family, many others were weeping; the parting could even be temporary, but it was anyway painful.
A few days later, Gandalf took his leave, because he wanted to go ahead them and announce their arrival to Círdan the Shipwright.

“I’ll see you soon,” he told Nerwen with a reassuring smile, then he urged Shadowfax on with one word; the horse sprang forward and disappeared in a cloud of dust.

The journey continued with no hindrances; the company rode peacefully along the Great East Road from the Ford of Bruinen, crossing the Last Bridge, passing by Weathertop where the ruins of a large sighting tower still stood, to Bree and beyond, coming at last to the Brandywine Bridge and thus, the border of the Shire. Here, they left the road and took a detour to the south-west, entering the Woody End. Bilbo was staring around him avidly, his tired eyes sparkling because of the joy he was feeling in seeing again his land. In the months that had passed since Nerwen and Aryon had arrived in Imladris, one year earlier, he had aged much and had become very senile: he didn’t remember things well and he didn’t seem to fully understand the reason he was journeying. However, he insisted on riding, at least for a few miles each day, except later going on in a waggon that the Elves drove in turn, where he dozed, comfortably laying on the many pillows that cushioned it.

On the evening of September 22nd, they met two Hobbits, sitting in the soft shadows of dusk, with their ponies grazing at a short distance. Elrond pulled his horse’s reins and the whole company halted.

“Hail to you, friends,” he said in a solemn tone, “I’m very glad to see you.”

The two Hobbits stood up and responded with a bow. Galadriel, who was riding next to Elrond, smiled at them:

“Well, Master Samwise, I hear and see that you have used my gift well. The Shire shall now be more than ever blessed and beloved.”

The younger and fleshier Hobbit took another, lower bow, but didn’t answer, in an obvious state of emotion and awe in front of the glimmering beauty of the Lady of Lórien.

Nerwen, who has riding next to Bilbo’s small, calm grey pony, saw the old, half-sleeping Hobbit opening his eyes.

“Hullo, Frodo!” the elder Hobbit greeted him, “Well, I have surpassed the Old Took today! So that’s settled. And now I think I am quite ready to go on another journey. Are you coming?”

“Yes, I am coming,” Frodo answered in a grave tone, “The Ring-bearers should go together.”

“Where are you going, Master?” Sam cried; Frodo answered and the younger Hobbit began to weep, “But I thought you were going to enjoy the Shire, too, for years and years, after all you have done.”

“So I thought too, once. But I have been too deeply hurt, Sam. I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me. If must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: someone has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them.”

The great wisdom contained in these few sentences struck Nerwen greatly; she already admired this little Hobbit: with incredible courage, greater than the greatest heroes of the past, who had been warriors or kings, with his servant and friend he had accomplished the impossible mission to
destroy the One Ring in the very heart of the Enemy’s land; and now, her admiration grew even more.

Frodo kept talking:

“But you are my heir: all that I had and might have had I leave to you. And you also have Rose, and Elanor; and Frodo-lad will come, and Rosie-lass, and Merry, and Goldilocks, and Pippin; and perhaps more that I cannot see. Your hands and your wits will be needed everywhere. You will be the Mayor, of course, as long as you want to be, and the most famous gardener in history; and you will read things out of the Red Book, and keep alive the memory of an age that is gone, so that people will remember the Great Danger and so love their beloved land all the more. And that will keep you as busy and as happy as anyone can be, as long as your part of the Story goes on. Come now, ride with me!”

With these words, he mounted on his pony, and a few moments later, Sam did the same; then, Elrond and Galadriel resumed their ride, and after them came Nerwen and Aryon with Bilbo, and all the other ones.

The Third Age was coming to an end.

OOO

At the slow pace they were going, they needed a few days to get to Mithlond. They left the Shire, crossed the White Downs, the Far Downs and the Tower Hills, while the new moon waxed night after night as Tilion steered it.

At last, they came upon the gate enclosing the Grey Haven, where Círdan the Shipwright welcomed them, evidently warned about their arrival; beside him was Lady Eärwen.

His eyes shining like stars, Círdan looked at them and bowed, while his wife curtseyed.

“All is ready,” he simply said.

They dismounted and entrusted their horses to the grooms; the mounts would spend the winter at Mithlond, and then someone would take them back to Imladris in spring: Círdan would see to this. Túdhin instead had other plans, as he had told Nerwen.

Passing through the gates, Nerwen cast a smile at Círdan and Eärwen and they returned it.

“It’s nice to see you again, Nerwen Laiheri,” Eärwen greeted her, walking next to her with her husband, “I see you have news,” she went on, hinting to Annadiel, who the Aini was carrying in her arms; the baby was staring at her and Círdan, intrigued.

“This is my daughter Annadiel,” Nerwen introduced her, “and this is my husband, Lord Aryon of the Avari of Eryn Rhûn.”

Aryon bowed slightly, never stopping his pace, and the Lord and Lady of Mithlond returned it.

“And this,” the Maia went on, pointing to the wolf, “is Túdhin, an old friend who wanted to escort us so far.”
They walked on in silence for a few minutes, heading for the piers.

“And so, the Third Age is ending,” Círdan commented slowly, “The time of Elves is over and the time of Men begins. How will it be?”

“Only Eru knows,” Nerwen answered softly; then, suddenly as usual, her Second Sight came to her and she caught a sight of a far, far future. Struck, she stopped abruptly; as with Aryon, Círdan and Eärwen she was at the head of the group, along with Galadriel and Elrond, also all the other ones stopped, looking at her in surprise.

“Men will achieve great things,” Nerwen announced in a strangely sonorous voice, almost amplified, “Wonderful and terrible things; they will raise to unimaginable levels of science and technology, but won’t always know how to use them wisely, because wisdom won’t grow in step with their power. They will accomplish extraordinary deeds, but often they won’t be able to distinguish between Good and Evil and they will constantly walk the wire…”

The vision ceased and Nerwen returned to the present moment. She blinked and looked around, noticing that all the stares were on her.

“What a strange destiny,” she commented, confused, “There will be more light in the world, but at the same time, also more darkness… I don’t understand,” she concluded, shaking her head. Everybody kept a perplexed silence, until Annadiel uttered a puzzled cry, as if asking why all were still, this way breaking the spell that had bound them.

“No use in wondering about the reason,” Galadriel observed serenely, “Ilúvatar’s wisdom goes beyond our ability to understand.”

“You’re right,” Nerwen admitted. As they resumed walking, Aryon relieved Nerwen in holding Annadiel.

They finally reached the pier, where a large white ship was waiting; and on the jetty, there was a white horse and a cloaked figure, equally white. When the figure turned and moved towards them, they saw it was Gandalf.

Frodo and Sam ran to him and he squatted to hug them. The Elves began to go on board the ship, led by Elrond and Galadriel, but Nerwen and Aryon lingered on the jetty with Gandalf and the two Hobbits, and Bilbo joined them.

“I’m very sad, Master,” Sam was saying to Frodo, his eyes full of tears, “The parting feels very bitter to me, and more grievous still the road home.”

Exactly at this moment, they heard the sound of galloping horses; and here there came two ponies with very tall Hobbits upon them.

“Merry! Pippin!” Frodo shouted, happily surprised.

The two newcomers jumped down and ran to him.

“You tried to give us the slip once before and failed, Frodo,” said the younger, Pippin, laughing amid tears, “This time you have nearly succeeded, but you have failed again. It was not Sam, though, that gave you away this time, but Gandalf himself!”

Frodo looked at the Wizard, in wonder.

“Yes,” the latter admitted, “for it will be better to ride back three together than one alone.”
“You’re absolutely right,” Merry confirmed, slipping his arm around Sam.

The five Hobbits surrounded Gandalf; their faces, usually cheerful and carefree, were grave, and tears sparkled in everyone’s eyes, and on the cheeks of some. The Wizard caressed them all, one by one.

“Well, here at last, dear friends, on the shores of the Sea comes the end of our fellowship in Middle-earth. Go in peace! I will not say do not weep, for not all tears are an evil.”

Bilbo hugged them all; on his wrinkled face, his eyes were shining again, lively as Nerwen recalled them from the first time they had met, in the inn called The Green Dragon.

Then it was Frodo’s turn to hug them all; he kissed Merry’s and Pippin’s brow, and at last Sam, too, with whom he shared a longer embrace. Finally, he wrought his arm around his old uncle and, escorted by Gandalf, they moved to go on the ship. Shadowfax followed them: as his race came from Nahar, Oromë’s mount, and by virtue of his services and his friendship to the Wizard, the Valar had granted him exceptionally the passage into the West.

Eventually, it was time also for Nerwen and Aryon to take leave from their friend the wolf; the Istar crouched and looked into his yellow eyes.

“Farewell once more, my old, old friend,” she said softly, “You’ve been faithful and brave, and you helped us more times one could count, or repay.”

*Friends don’t owe one another,* Túdhin commented, with his simple but deep wolf-wisdom, *My task at your side is over. I’m sorry to see you go, but this is your destiny.*

Nerwen hugged him.

“Go with my blessing,” she told him, “May you always find enough prey to feed and wide plains to run free,” she received another vision, even if this time only a flash, “Go and find you partner for life,” she smiled at him, even if tears were blurring her sight, “You’ll be the chieftain of a great pack founded by you and her.”

The wolf licked her face, in his race’s equivalent of an affectionate kiss. Then Nerwen stood up and took Annadiel from Aryon’s arms; it was the prince’s turn to crouch.

“Thank you for your friendship, Túdhin,” he said, “Rarely I had a companion as loyal as you have been. Be happy.”

*Thank you, you too,* the wolf reciprocated, and Nerwen voiced it for her husband, who nodded and then hugged the predator; Aryon, too, received a lick in the face.

At this point, Túdhin turned to Thilgiloth.

*Farewell, Flash-of-Light,* he said, using the name he had given her when their first met, during the First Age, *I was glad to meet you again.*

Nerwen voiced it to the Chargeress, who bowed her proud neck and patted Túdhin with her muzzle on his side.

*Farewell, friend wolf,* she answered, *May you have a long and prosper life.*

Túdhin rubbed himself against one of Thilgiloth’s legs as a leave-taking sign; eventually, he turned and went back, with the swift and soft trot of his race, and vanished into the evening shadows, he
himself a *Shadow-of-the-Evening*.

Annadiel seemed to feel her mother’s distress and put her small arms around her neck, as if she wanted to comfort her. Moved, Nerwen held her tighter; a few moments later, Aryon joined the embrace and they stayed like this for a long minute.

Finally, they noticed they were the last ones and that the other ones were waiting for them. With one last nod to Círdan, Eärwen and the Hobbits, they hurried down the quay, followed by Thilgiloth, and got aboard.

The sails were set, the wind blew and slowly the ship glided away down the long grey estuary.

Standing on the deck, Nerwen and Aryon looked at the shore withdrawing from them; beside them were Galadriel, Elrond, Gandalf and other Elves, as well as Bilbo and Frodo. The shapes of the Lord and Lady of Mithlond and of the three Hobbits became smaller and smaller. Then, Frodo took something from his pocket and held it high; it was a phial of finely carved glass, containing a liquid that flared up in white light, similar to the star Eärendil. It gave out a flash, as if a last goodbye; and then the twilight swallowed the shore, by now far away, and with it, Middle-earth.

OOO

Navigation proceeded peacefully, except one night when a storm suddenly came, which as much suddenly stilled; Gandalf and Nerwen presumed that Ossë, vassal to Ulmo Lord of the Waters, had unleashed it whimsically, and Uinen his spouse had intervened to calm him, as she often did.

And then, in a sunny day, the white Elven ship found the Straight Road and left the Curved World, heading for the Blessed Realm in full sail.
Often, Frodo stood at the prow, alone; Bilbo was always tired and sleepy, and hence, for the better part of the journey, he stayed in their cabin and slept. Sometimes, Gandalf kept him company, but more often, the Wizard conferred with Elrond and Galadriel. Therefore, Nerwen and Aryon were together with the younger Hobbit. At first, he was very brooding, then, as the journey continued, his mood improved, also thanks to Annadiel and her irresistible little grimaces and vocalisations. The baby had been a little seasick, at the beginning, but Nerwen’s thaumaturgy had cured her; and so, she could be the cure to Frodo’s melancholy.

Little by little, as he got to know his interlocutors, the Hobbit began to tell them his own part in the War of the Ring, as people had named it. Much had already been told them by Gandalf, but hearing it first-hand gave to Frodo’s and Sam’s incredible deeds a heroic dimension worthy of the most epic tales of Middle-earth: two small Hobbits had accomplished a task that would make weep in fear the most valiant warrior and the most powerful king. Nerwen didn’t wonder anymore that the Valar had granted Frodo the grace – so far unheard-of – to go to Valinor, and with him Bilbo as the first Ring-bearer; and in the end, the Aini suspected, this grace would be granted to Samwise Gamgee, too, who even for a brief time, had been a Ring-bearer.

One rainy night, just before dawn, Nerwen woke up full of joyous anxiety. She got up, trying not to disturb Aryon, but the prince had the light sleep of warriors and heard her.

“Where are you going, sweetheart? Annadiel…?” he asked her under his breath.

“Annadiel sleeps peacefully,” she assured him, “I think we’re very near… I feel it in my bones…”

She found her boots in the darkness and slipped them on; realising her intentions, Aryon, too, got up.

“I come with you,” he said, lighting a lantern, “I think we can leave Annadiel alone for a few minutes: she’s safe in her cradle…”

Nerwen cast a glance to the baby who was sleeping peacefully, one thumb into her mouth. There was a special bond between them that, since she was in her bosom, allowed Nerwen to know how she was in every moment, even when she was in another room; they would actually be just a few metres away, as their cabin was located on the prow and she was planning to go precisely there.

“Very well,” she accepted. They donned their rain capes, then exited quietly from the cabin and climbed the ladder to reach the deck. It was raining, but not too hard, and the sea was calm; the eastern horizon was just beginning to pale in the imminence of dawn.

To their surprise, they found Frodo standing at the prow; the Hobbit heard them approaching and turned. Recognising them in spite of their hoods, he nodded to them in greeting and resumed looking ahead.

Aryon and Nerwen halted behind him, staring at the horizon that was slowly becoming brighter; in the air, they felt a fresh fragrance, and they began to hear singing coming from beyond the waves. The first rays of Anar surpassed the rim of the World and the grey curtain of rain seemed to change into silver glass, then opened up, and revealed white shores and a green land under a swift dawn.

Frodo’s face lightened up in joy and marvel; and Aryon was entranced and in awe. Nerwen filled
her eyes with this wondrous sight, tight throat, bated breath.

She had come back home.

Author’s corner (VERY long this time, but I hope you'll forgive me, as it is in closure of the entire story):

And so, after 63 chapters and about 320.000 words, I got to the end…

In the book, it is implicitly affirmed that Gandalf comes unexpectedly at the Grey Havens; but there’s a bond of great friendship and respect among the Three Keepers of the Elven Rings, so it looked more plausible to me that they had all agreed on leaving Middle-earth together and therefore he had just gone ahead of them. I apologize for the change, one of the truly very rare I have consciously brought to Tolkien’s invaluable masterpiece.

The meeting of the Elves with Frodo and Sam, and later of all of them with Gandalf on the pier of the Grey Havens, the following arrival of Merry and Pippin, and Frodo’s arrival at Valinor are copied straight off the book (with the obvious differences given by the presence of my original characters).

I intentionally based Thilgiloth’s farewell to Túdhin on the famous Vulcan greeting in the Star Trek universe, my other great passion.

The writing of this fan fiction took me over two years and a half, not to mention the time to translate — as best as I could — in English. Never would I imagine it would result in such a long story! But I got carried away, or better, I let myself be carried away, and allowed it to take me so far, through good and less good moments of my life, representing sometimes a lifeline, a breath of air away from the stifling daily responsibilities, a support in hard moments. The thought I must let it go saddens me greatly but, as Chaucer says, “all good things must come to an end”, and so this story, too, in which I infused all my love for Middle-earth, created (or, perhaps, recalled) by Tolkien’s genius, which I wrote with the highest respect for the original work, with the sole intention to have fun and make have fun those who read — or at least, so I hope. It never was my ambition to write a new “Lord of the Rings”, nor to come near, not even in the least, to the masterpiece of the Oxfordian Professor. It’s just a fan fiction! XD

I tried my best to translate in an enough correct English, sometimes a bit archaic to give an “antique” tone to the story (given its setting), and to describe things in the most exact way I could; nevertheless, I surely made some mistakes: grammar, syntax, orthography, even concepts, but I don’t expect to be infallible or omniscient, and therefore I ask for your clemency (and please, point out my mistakes, as someone has already done, thanks!). So, I hope that my effort is appreciable, even if the result is not even in the least perfect; and it cannot be, as I’m not Tolkien, and not even a professional writer. My only ambition was to have you spending a few pleasant hours, and I hope I succeeded.

If you have any question or perplexity, that is, if I explained badly or in an insufficient manner facts or situations, or if you think that something isn’t plausible (taking account of the fantasy
I learned a lot writing, both from my – almost obsessive – researches, which I did to be as faithful as possible to the canon plot and descriptions, and from translating into English – I surely improved much in this language, even if I won’t ever be perfect.

If you liked my story, I’d be very glad to learn about it, so please write to me, just a few words to tell me. Thank you in advance!

I thank greatly all those who supported and encouraged me in this unlikely endeavour. And above all, I thank you: you who passed on to me your love for reading when I was a child, who introduced me to science fiction and fantasy, who gave me my first copy of “The Lord of the Rings” as a birthday gift when I was sixteen, and who have always been my first and most passionate fan, since when I first began to write – now many years ago – until, sadly, you passed away in 2012. I know you would have liked this story very much. With all my love, I dedicate it to you, mum.

Lady Angel

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!