Renacido

by seeing_blue

Summary

Bilbo finds kinship with her. They're both so very far from home.

He doesn't realize just how far away she is.

Notes

Renacido (Spanish): reborn

A lot of MGiMEs are always so chill with being transported to a different world. I wanted to write from a different perspective.

Yeah. I knew I was lying to myself when I said this would stay a one-shot. I'm a sucker for modern characters being dropped into fictional worlds. I also changed the title a little bit to
the word is an adjective instead of a verb. For those who read this as a one-shot, I turned it into the prologue of the fic. Then it'll jump more to the past and go over things in detail.

**This will follow along more with the movie plot, seeing as it's much easier to keep up with and reference, but there will be some book elements as well.**
She doesn’t know that Bilbo hears her cry at night.

They usually sleep near each other, two people out of their element, sharing their quiet misery on the hard ground.

Of course, he feels sorry for himself throughout the day—and especially at night—but her well-practiced stifled sobs are something more.


They’ve all asked where she’s come from. She doesn’t tell them. When Thorin finally cornered her against tree, spewing a mix of dwarven and common threats, demanding to know her origins, she just closed her eyes.

She spoke, and her lilted voice fought against a tremble.

*Somewhere I don’t think I’ll ever go back to.*

Bilbo believes she cries about home. It’s the place the mind wanders to before dreams overtake. Her home must have been a wonderful place if she misses it so deeply. She mentions it in passing, occasionally, vague comments as they are. Her parents, her siblings. Her vegetable garden. There is a moment when she forgets the sadness attached to the memories, and her soft smile illuminates her entire face.

She hums songs, as well. Bilbo doesn’t recognize them. He hasn’t mustered up enough courage to ask if she’ll sing one, just yet. They’re very odd, but pleasing to hear when he does catch the melody.

Gandalf speaks with her in privately. Once, Bilbo caught her wiping tears away while the wizard consolingly patted her shoulder. She didn’t truly smile for a week after that—no matter how hard the dwarves tried to make her laugh.

Bilbo finds himself turning her way. She has her back to him; in the silver moonlight, he sees her shoulders quake. She’s so kind to him, even when the rest of the company isn’t, and to have her face the grief alone isn’t fair.

He reaches out and touches her arm. The noise stops, and she stills.

Oh, dear, he’s made a mistake. He should have let her be in a private moment. Bilbo begins to withdraw—

She haltingly turns so she faces Bilbo. It’s hard to see her face in the darkness, but he doesn’t need to. The sniff she makes is an answer enough.

Her hand takes his. It’s slender in nature, and Bilbo swallows. The company thought she was an elf, upon first sight, but apparently she was just an unusually well-groomed, beautiful woman. She kept her black hair plaited, and her olive skin had darkened even more so on their journey.
“I am…I am sorry,” Bilbo whispers to her once he finds his voice. “That you miss your home.”

He can tell she smiles, even in the shadows. “Thank you, Bilbo. Do you miss yours?”

“Every single day.”

She sniffs again. “I, uh, I’m waiting for the day when I don’t cry if I think about home too long. But it just hasn’t come, yet.”

“It will. I promise.” Bilbo could give no such promise, but he had no idea what else to say. She, on the other hand, always does, even to Thorin when he’s in a foul mood. After he sighs, a few more words come to his stammering mind. “Maybe…maybe if you talk about it a little? It might help.”

They lay in silence for several moments. Bilbo’s eyes begin to adjust better to the darkness, and he can pick out her conflicted expression.

Then, “My parents’ house has hollyhocks growing around the front porch. I would hide in them during the summertime as a child. My mother makes this…drink in the summer. It’s full of strawberries and lemons, with a hint of mint. When I grew up and moved away, I learned how to make it. I, uh, I can’t get it to taste the same as hers, but it’s still pretty good.”

“I’d like to try it, someday,” Bilbo says. A small smile flickers across her lips.

“Maybe—maybe when all this is over, I can make you some.”

“I do grow terrific strawberries, after all,” Bilbo can’t help but brag. She snickers.

They whispered a little while longer in the night, until her eyes eventually closed, cheeks dry of tears.

She treks behind Bilbo, occasionally lifting him up so he could reach the broken rock path instead of having to clamber. “How…how are you not—dizzy?” he manages to gasp out. Earlier, she explained the difference in height could cause “altitude sickness” if somebody wasn’t accustomed.

“Oh,” she says, hopping up to the path. Bilbo lends a hand and she takes it for balance. “I, uh, I lived in a very mountainous area before. And I also traveled to a couple places with high elevations.” She flashes a grin and adjusts her pack. “This mountain air actually smells really nice.”

Bilbo slips on a slick rock, and she steadies him before they continue. “You lived in the mountains, eh?” Bofur asks from behind the both of them. “Which range?”

“Not one you’d know,” she replies. It’s in that clipped, withdrawn tone that implies it’s a subject she doesn’t wish to speak about.

“Is it a nice place?” Bofur, pushing the boundaries, keeps the question ambiguous enough that she could answer at the same level.

“Yes. It is. It’s very beautiful. Especially when the wildflowers bloom.”

Bofur hums and doesn’t follow up with anything else.

When night falls, and they take shelter under a craggy overhang, she and Bilbo huddle together. Their cloaks are wrapped around them to try and conserve whatever warmth they have left. She has her hood pulled up. Tendrils of black hair cling to her temples from the misty weather.
Her deep brown eyes fixate on Thorin, Fili, and Kili, all of whom are conversing quietly a ways off. Can she even see properly? Without a fire, she's left in even more darkness than Bilbo and the dwarves.

“Bilbo,” she whispers, and her voice is different enough that it immediately draws his attention.

“Yes?”

“I… I think I realize why I’m here.”

“That’s… er, good?” He winces at how he sounds, but she doesn’t mind. She takes another bite of elven bread.

“Yeah. Guess it is.” She mumbles something in that foreign language neither Bilbo or the dwarves recognize, but it’s done with a smile.

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She hugs Bilbo tightly after he escapes the tunnels. The sun sets low in the sky, and his breath remains ragged. He doesn’t know what happened to her in the pit of the goblin fight, but she bears shallow scratches on her face and neck. Her trousers have been hastily retied. They’re also littered with thin and vicious scratch marks.

“Are you alright?” Bilbo worriedly asks her. She chuckles and steps back to pull her hair in a sloppy bun. The strange hairpiece with fantastic elasticity keeps everything in place.

“I’m fine, I’m fine. The goblins just…” Her face goes pale, and she lowers her hands to put them on Bilbo’s shoulders. “I’m just glad you’re in one piece. I knew you’d make it out.” She sounds so certain, and Bilbo smiles through his exhaustion.

The shrieks and screams of goblins echo through the sparse forest the company has found themselves in. They flee, and when Bilbo struggles to keep up, she throws him onto her back despite her shaking legs.

They’ve both found their reason for running with these dwarves. For staying with these dwarves.

“We’ll get through this, Baggins,” she breathes to him as they race down the mountainside. “We’ll get through this. I promise.”

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The heat of the fire sears Bilbo’s skin. He’s stabbing, jabbing, killing orcs and wargs as they lunge at him. Off to his left, she fights with her twin elven blades. Her black hair whips as she spins, and she curses in that rapid, rolling foreign language.

Fili cries out in pain amidst the blazing fight. He got swiped at by a warg and tumbles to the ground, weapon flying from his grasp. The warg rears back to mangle him, but then she’s there, blades sinking into the warg’s neck. It yelps and goes limp, and Fili gets back up. The young dwarf grins at her, she grins back.

Bilbo sees a figure rushing behind her. He shouts her name, but it’s too late—

Fili screams, “NO!”

The fire loses all warmth, and Bilbo ceases to hear the world.
She stares down at the blade protruding from her chest, tarnished with her own blood. It rips back out, the orc wailing as it’s hacked to death by Fili a moment later. She drops to the ground. Bilbo begins to run to her, but the white warg barrels into him. He lands against a large rock, and all thought then becomes consumed by the snarling Pale Orc towering above.

Is this their purpose? To die together amidst smoke and flame?

Eagles save the company, and Bilbo is swept away in one of its claws. Tears immediately blur his eyes, but he can still see her lying among dead wargs and orcs. A pool of dark, glistening red spreads beneath her. Fili screams and kicks for the eagle carrying him away to let go. He keeps reaching out to her body, but they’re flying away, away, away.

“Valeria,” Bilbo sobs. Her body is blanketed in smoke, and he loses sight of his friend. “Valeria.”

The hobbit, the dwarves, the wizard, weep amongst the night sky.

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She awakes in the cold morning light.

Blood stains the inside of her mouth, and her chest throbs with pain.

A warg corpse stares back at her, tongue lolling out. The one she killed—right before she got killed.

That hurt.

They left her. Fantastic.

She groans and stiffly rolls away from the mat of her own dried blood, examining the gouge in her chest. Through the split leather and cloth, she sees a red, angry—but healed over—patch of skin.

“Hijo de puta,” she whispers.

Then she staggers to her feet, sheathes her nearby swords, and wearily walks to the edge of the cliff.

It’s a long way down.

A moth flutters past her line of sight. “Hey,” she calls to it. “Could you get an eagle for me? I am…not dead. Surprisingly.”

The moth continues on, slightly changing its course.

She sits.

And waits.

Her reason isn’t fulfilled, yet.
Chapter End Notes

Hijo de puta: son of a bitch/mother fucker
“I, ah, thought you might want some dinner before Bombur eats it all.”

Bilbo more-than-hesitantly handed me a bowl of soup. I took it with a small smile. The bottom warmed my hands. The thick wooden spoon resting on the rim still felt a little awkward to use, but I was getting better at it.

“Thank you.”

He started to turn away, stopped, tried to leave again, then failed. “Would—would you, erm, perhaps like some company?” Bilbo haltingly gestured to the empty spot beside me.

The question had to sink in for a couple seconds before I nodded. Nobody had really wanted to sit next to me this past week of strange travel. Bilbo knew me the best just because we were forced to share a pony together after Gandalf advised Thorin to take me, the possible spy in the dwarves’ eyes, with the Company. The hobbit didn’t complain about doubling up. In fact, he actually seemed happy I could handle the reins instead of him. Not so happy about having to lean against a woman for most of the day—and even less happy that the dwarves poked fun at him for it—but I didn’t particularly care.

We managed some small conversations, at first. It began with my shoes. The muddy Nikes were a big hit amongst the Company. My whole outfit was, actually. Athletic leggings and a dry-fit, long-sleeved tee weren’t common attire in Middle Earth. Who knew?

I knew. They knew. And it made them all the more suspicious.

The conversations gradually grew longer the more I grasped the reality of my circumstance, and pretty soon I made my first acquaintance in a fictional world. Bilbo was nice, and I found similarity with him because we both missed home. Even if his homesickness was based off of not having teatime and a proper armchair, and mine was based more off of being in an entirely different planet.

But this was the first evening he had come to me once they made camp. I honestly almost started to cry. I didn’t need to be absorbed in my own dark and lonely mind even more, so the company was much needed.

“Of course you can,” I said, lifting the bowl and patting the ground to my left. “It’s nice and damp.”

“Lovely,” Bilbo sighed. He sat down and crossed his legs to eat his own dinner. It gave me yet another opportunity to stare at his massive hobbit feet. They were like bricks, and I thought they’d be gross since his kind went barefoot, but they’re actually pretty well-kept.

“Oh. And thank you for the soup.”
Bilbo gave a quick smile and started eating. I curled my knees up and sipped at the broth, avoiding the chunks of whatever meat had been chopped up for tonight’s dinner. Eating a plain meal outdoors and near a fire reminded me of work, of friends, of home, and for the millionth time I felt the urge to cry. I trained myself to be good at keeping my emotions hidden and in check, though, with everything I witnessed while doing my job. It was best just to wait until I was alone to get everything out.

We ate in silence, and I watched the dwarves laugh and converse in their own language. Khuzdul, if I remembered correctly. And that’s only because Luis was obsessed with all this shit, so he’d tell me all about it. I never got as much into nerd stuff as he did, but I had always been a casual fan of a lot of things, so we’d share our common sibling interests with one another. I liked seeing the spark in his eyes as he talked. I just liked my little brother.

A few times I could catch that the dwarves were talking about me. They shot glances my way and followed with murmurings. I’d been around enough foreign languages to get the gist of a conversation if I focused on how they spoke with their bodies.

It shouldn’t be me in this place. This world.

I just…wanted to go home.

But Bilbo was too real beside me, and the night air nipped at my skin. I took another breath to stem the ache in my throat. I’d been thousands of miles away from my family, before. I could get through this trip.

Because there had to be a way home.

The best way to remedy homesickness, I found, was to make friends. The dwarves still didn’t trust me. Especially Thorin and Dwalin—but that was just because I threw a rock at Dwalin’s big head when we first came across each other. I’d already informed Gandalf of my true…origins…so there was that, but I had a feeling that he preferred his own company during the evening for the most part.

That left the one person I’d partnered with since the beginning.

“Bilbo?”

Hearing his name caused the hobbit to jump. I shifted so I sat cross-legged facing him. “Mm? Yes?” he inquired mid-mouthful.

“Do you, uh, know any good stories?”

The question caught him off-guard. Bilbo tilted his curly head and considered it. “I…I cannot say that I do. Not the ones that are thrilling, anyway. The Shire holds no great tales of heroes fighting for good and evil.” His eyes then lit up. “But! I do know a few good riddles.”

Right.

I covered my ah face with surprise. “R-really?”

It was a poor act, but Bilbo didn’t see through anything. He was too distracted thinking about riddles. “I do, I do.” He also turned so he faced me. A pang of guilt zipped through my chest. My continual standoffishness left him alone, too, and just to talk about something he enjoyed made him excited. Just like Luis.
He’d be much better off here than me. Or, rather, we’d be much better off here together.

Well, I thought as Bilbo cleared his throat, this is good practice for him.

“I am an insect, and the first part of my name is the name of another insect. What am I?” His mischievous grin at the end of the riddle sealed the deal for the friendship. At least on my part.

It took the better part of a minute for me to figure it out, but after muttering some insect names under my mouth, I snapped my head back up to him. “Bee. Beetle. Beetles!”

Bilbo groaned a laugh, for he was pleased that she found the right answer. “Correct!”

I finished off my soup and rubbed both hands together. “Bueno. I’ve got one for you. Ready?” Bilbo nodded. “You can hold it without using your hands or arms. What is it?”

Literally three seconds passed before Bilbo answered, “Your breath!”

I stared, then let out a huff. “That was fast. Have you heard it already?”

“No.” Bilbo wasn’t afraid to display his hint of smugness. “My turn. I can run but can’t walk, a mouth but I can’t talk, a head but I can’t think, a bed but I can’t sleep. Who am I?”

“Psh. Easy. A river.”

They went back and forth until I ran out of riddles. Bilbo didn’t, though, and by bedtime I had a mild headache. And higher spirits. We even slept next to each other, and I used his dirtied, corduroy jacket as a blanket since I didn’t have anything but the clothes on my back—and the dwarves didn’t want to share with a possible spy.

But as sleep crept in, I thought of my family worlds away. I covered my mouth so nobody heard my sobbing. The last thing I needed was the dwarves thinking even more poorly of me.

So I suffered alone under the foreign stars.

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“Alright, up you go,” I grunted as I gave Bilbo a lift into their shared saddle. His thick hobbit foot pressed into my linked hands, and he hauled himself onto the pony. The sky hung overcast above us. Even the smell of rain on the breeze reminded me of home.

A finger tapped on my shoulder. I turned and found myself looking down at a blond, smirking dwarf. He hid something behind his back. “Lady Valeria,” Fili said with a decent bow. I frowned.

“Yeah?”

He dramatically unrolled the secret present. His cloak. “For you. It’s most likely going to drizzle, today, and you’re woefully underdressed for the weather.”

I narrowed my eyes at Fili, but I took the cloak. Though it was worn, the condition was fair enough. “Thank you.”

“And what about me?” Bilbo shot from atop the pony. Fili grimaced and placated his hands.

“Unfortunately, Master Baggins, the lady must be cared for, first. And I don’t have a spare cloak. Just toss your jacket over your head, and you should be fine!”
Bilbo made a noise. I brought the cloak around me, fastening it, and Fili’s smirk returned. “A perfect fit!” he decreed.

I spread my arms out and looked down. “It’s a little short,” I couldn’t help but comment.

“Aye, but it’ll keep you drier when the rain comes.”

“Fili,” Thorin barked from the lead. He pierced the two of us with an icy gaze. “You’re wasting time. Get ready to leave.”

Something flashed across Fili’s face, but he nodded his head to me and departed. I watched him go for a few seconds, brows furrowed.

None of the dwarves had been this nice to me. Balin and Bofur were probably the most accepting, though they still kept their distance. I hadn’t exactly been super involved, either, nor did I constantly reiterate and prove that I wasn’t a spy for the “enemy.” Even if I already knew who that enemy was, where the Company was going, and what would happen to everyone at the end of this quest. How could I explain it?

Sometimes this situation was still too hard to wrap my head around.

But maybe the dynamic was changing just a little? Or maybe Fili just felt bad that I had nothing the rest of them did, so he offered his cloak to make the both of us feel better. I was accustomed to that kind of giving, in a sense.

I got into the saddle and took the pony’s reins from Bilbo. I hadn’t ridden ponies, before, but I had traveled on mules, donkeys, camels, and even an elephant, once. The older modes of transportation came with work.

Having his hands free, Bilbo dug into his pocket and pulled out a handful of wild strawberries. “Oh, you sneaky little hobbit,” I hissed as I kicked the pony into a lumbering walk.

Bilbo clutched the strawberries close to his chest. “I found them this morning, alright?” He whispered like the fruits were stolen gold. “Don’t tell the others. They’ll demand to have some.”

“Just how many did you pick?” My tone edged on incredulity, and my grin grew. Bilbo glanced around to make sure we weren’t being overheard or watched. Then, his left hand crept down and stretched open his breast pocket. I glimpsed several tiny and ripe strawberries.

But that wasn’t all. He also stashed more in both coat pockets, the right breast pocket, and both trouser pockets. I bit my lip hard to keep from laughing.

“You…you are going to get the shits,” I eventually breathed out. Bilbo squeaked.

“I am not! And it is very impolite to speak like that, my lady.”

I rolled my eyes but stayed grinning. “Give me some, and I won’t tell the dwarves that we have nature’s candy.” I opened my palm and wiggled each finger.

“Nature’s candy,” Bilbo repeated in an amused whisper. “That is a very good description.” He dumped all the strawberries from his hand into mine. I ate one as discreetly as I could. The berry’s sweetness blossomed in my mouth, and it reminded me of Mom’s special summer drink.

I brushed the memory away before I could get too sad.
It does sprinkle by early afternoon, and I tugged up Fili’s cloak hood. Bilbo grumbled at the downpour, as slight as it was, and ate more of his picked findings in a dour manner.

In an attempt to make him feel better, I used the same technique on the hobbit as I did children in refugee camps and crumbling villages.

“I spy with my little eye,” I drawled, “something gray.”

Bilbo snorted. He probably already knew the childish game. Yet, through a mouthful of strawberries, he answered, “The storm clouds. Obviously. Or Gandalf.”

“I spy with my little eye…something stinky.”

“All thirteen dwarves.”

I laughed, and this time Bilbo did, too. After finishing off the last fruit in his hand, he wiped the sticky residue on his trousers and said, “I spy…something grumpy.”

“Thorin.”

I spoke the dwarf’s name too loudly, apparently, as several heads swiveled back to us. Thorin’s included. “Mierda.”

“If you have something to say, woman, say it,” he snapped. “Otherwise, keep your cackling with the hobbit quiet.”

I scowled at the back of his head and hoped he’d feel it. “Pendejo.”

Three beats later, Bilbo put delicately, “I…hope I’m not being rude. But what is that language you speak?”

Yeah. I knew I’d get that question soon enough, especially when I spoke it around Bilbo.

“It’s, uh, Spanish,” I replied. “My first language.”

“Are—are you from the far east? Or across the sea? Is that where the language originates from?”

“Sure?”

Bilbo turned enough in the saddle to give me a dubious glance. “Sure? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Do not pry on doors that are not yet ready to be opened, Master Baggins,” Gandalf rode up beside them on his pony, and I held back a relieved breath so Bilbo wouldn’t feel it.

“I—I was curious—”

“Leave it be.” Gandalf was sure to point his gaze at Bilbo, who shifted in his seat and began eating more strawberries at a disgruntled pace.

I shot Gandalf a grateful expression. He dipped his head. I wasn’t ready to tell any of them. How could I be?

So I straightened my back and stared ahead at the wooded trail we wined through. A great mountain range stood proudly in the distance. I had an ominous feeling that it was in those mountains where trouble dwelled.
“I spy with my little eye,” I resumed, lightly poking Bilbo with my elbow, “something red.” And plucked a strawberry out from his grasp.

“Oh, I wonder what it could be,” he remarked.

The rain lightened, and the sun shone through once more.

Thorin watched the human woman from across the campsite. She sparked kinship with the hobbit, and together they sat and conversed, ignorant of the others around them. Unsurprising. Two people who didn’t belong in this Company were bound to find comfort in the other’s presence.

The cloak Fili gifted to the unwelcomed still hung about her shoulders. The rest of her bizarre clothing fit snugly against her frame, which belied a lean build. The woman exhibited remarkable sprinting skills when she first fled from their encounter, but he would never admit it.

“Do not worry, Thorin,” Gandalf said when he followed the dwarf’s gaze. “I believe she has come to us with reason.”

“And what reason might that be?” Thorin growled. Her brown eyes caught the light of the fire, and for a moment she stared into it before responding to whatever blather the hobbit spouted.

“We will find out, in due time.” Gandalf leaned back against the stone. They took refuge in a small outcropping of rocks for the night. The woman carried no bedroll with her, no supplies, and still she didn’t complain—nor did she ask for anything. Only obliged and followed. Useless. Suspicious. “Her predicament is quite intriguing. I would not dismiss her so easily.”

“A woman has no place among us. She will faint at the first sight of bloodshed and become a burden.”

“Oh, I doubt that,” Balin joined in on the low conversation. He, too, regarded her. “Look at those eyes, Thorin.” The fire illuminated a portion of her face one more. Colors of orange and red and yellow danced across brown skin. “Those are eyes who have seen war.”

As if sensing that she was being spoken about, the woman looked their way. Her smile slackened. Thorin despised the way she viewed him. Like she knew who he was, his innermost desires, his plans.

Valeria.

A name that would bring no good to this Company.

Chapter End Notes

Bueno: good
Pendejo: stupid
Mierda: shit
Armed and Dangerous

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was my first time bathing while with the Company, and oh boy, was it needed. I had gone without bathing for longer periods of time, depending on where my work took me, but I always had baby wipes, bottled water, and deodorant on hand.

I didn’t have those luxuries here.

Bilbo lent me soap, a comb, and some sort of powder I probably guessed was for hair. It smelled faintly of lemongrass and some other substance I hadn’t come across. I thanked him, unable to keep from ruffling his damp curls. Bilbo laughed and ducked away, playfully putting his fists up.

“I wouldn’t do that, my lady,” he said, exaggeratedly squinting one eye. I strained to not call him unbelievably adorable. He looked just like Luis.

“Sorry, sorry, I’ll go before I get a beating,” I joked, and headed off to the stream left unoccupied for me.

“Don’t get yourself into too much trouble, lass!” Nori called. “Those things swimmin’ in the water are just fish!”

I ignored him. They could laugh me up all they wanted. I’d get my chance for revenge against stupid men soon.

The stream, rocky and bubbling, came up to my thighs. I stripped first and used the soap to wash my clothes. Everything was stanky, but because all the material except for the underwear and socks was made for exercise, it’d dry fast enough. The only thing I didn’t try to wash was the cloak. The material was so thick that it would take hours for the moisture to evaporate. Hours Thorin would remind me they didn’t have.

With the clothes draped on a couple branches, I plunged into the water. Better to just get through the initial shock, scrub, and leave. The frigid water locked me up for a moment, but then I brought my head to the surface and breathed deeply. Sunlight dappled the grass and water between emerald leaves. Sweet-smelling, unfamiliar wildflowers clung to the base of trees and rocks, dotting the landscape with whites and pale pinks.

Bathing in a stream reminded me of work. Not that I took actual baths in one, but more often than not the water was always cold, whether it be in China, Kenya, Columbia, or even Mexico.

I should have been in Nepal, by now.

Weeks of grease and grime ran into the stream when I dunked my head underwater again to wash the soap out of my hair. When I came back up, I gave it all a few twists. Excess water ran down my front, and as I followed its paths, I once again found myself staring at the faded, dark pink splotch that sat on the top of my right rib cage.

A wild boar gouged one of its tusks in the spot three days into this world. I had been bathing in a stream then, too, and couldn’t outrun the animal. So I bled out.

And woke up by morning.
Nervous that there was another wild boar somewhere nearby waiting to spear me, I clambered out of the stream and started to air-dry, since nobody offered a towel of any sort. I doubted such necessities existed among a pack of thirteen hairy men traveling to reclaim their lost kingdom.

After checking the state of my clothes—which were close to being good to wear again—I laid out Fili’s cloak and sat on it once my bum wasn’t too wet. I took out Bilbo’s comb and started the long process of detangling my hair. But without conditioner and an actual brush, it quickly became a fight with the angry Hispanic waves.

“Ow. Fuck. Ow! Hijo de puta! Come—on—”

Snap!

I froze.

Half the comb stuck in my hair, while the other half now lay broken in my grasp.

I gritted my teeth and uttered a few forsaken curses. So much for that.

The other half of the comb got torn out from my hair with a grimace. Poor Bilbo. He probably had this comb in his family for, like, five generations or something, and thirty seconds into brushing my own tangles, it got destroyed.

“Is everything alright, my lady?”

The voice that called me was unmistakably Balin’s. They must’ve heard my aching around with the comb and decided to check.

Sighing, I replied loud enough to be heard. “Um, yes! I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

I didn’t get a response, so I set the split comb aside and dressed, smelling infinitely better. The only problem was my mat of wet hair. I could already feel it drying out into a coarse nest.

The dwarves got a good laugh when I came into view. “Fuck off!” I shouted, which then produced a chorus of “oooooohs.”

Bilbo made a sad little noise when I showed him the broken object. “I’m so sorry,” I said. “I—my hair—it was just too much. I should have been more careful. I’m sorry.”

“No, no, don’t worry about it. I’m sure it was just an accident.” Bilbo took the halves from me and packed them away. “There is nothing to apologize for.” He gave a wink for assurance, and some of the weight lifted from my chest.

“Oi, need a decent brush?”

I turned to the speaker. Bofur wiggled a much thicker and durable hairbrush to me. “Looks like you got dwarf hair, lassie.”

“Something like that,” I half-laughed. Bofur tossed the brush my way, and I caught it. Unfortunately, he also saw me inspect the bristles for any…inhabitants.

“Don’t worry! This is a clean head of hair!” Bofur rapped knuckles on his noggin for good measure. “It’ll be some time before you’re itchin’ your head. Unless you use Bifur’s brush, of course.”

The brother barked something in Khuzdul and made a rude gesture. I found myself laughing along
with Bofur. “I—well, thank you. I’ll return it as soon as I can.”

“Aye.”

Bofur walked away to his spot in the campsite, leaving me standing there a few moments longer than normal. But I got ahold of myself and retreated back to my spot for the evening. Bofur’s brush worked exceptionally better against my hair, and after a short struggle, it hung past my shoulders in smooth strands. That smoothness would turn to bushier waves, pretty soon, and I had a black scrunchie on my wrist to pull it back when it did.

“Can I ask what kind of accessory that is?”

Bilbo was, coincidentally, pointing at the scrunchie. I frowned, considering my options. There was no harm showing it to him, right? He’d already seen it in action.

I slipped the scrunchie off gave it to him. “It just keeps my hair in place,” I explained. Bilbo hooked two fingers around it and pulled. A delighted laugh erupted from him.

“It’s so—stretchy!” he exclaimed, and I couldn’t help but grin. “What’s it made of? Where did you get it?”

“Uh, I don’t know what it’s made of. I didn’t make it. And I got it from home.”

Bilbo glanced at me, aware that my home was a touchy subject. “That’s nice,” was all he said and continued to play with the scrunchie.

We got the attention of a few others, too. Bofur, who was only returning to “get his brush back,” Ori, Dori, Fili, and Kili. They wanted to see the scrunchie, so I let them. It got a pretty good reaction. They were all fascinated, and when Kili accidentally launched it a few feet away, he looked at me, shocked, and asked, “Is that supposed to happen?”

I got to my feet and snatched it. “Yeah.” Then I pointed the scrunchie back at Kili and snapped it from my fingers. He let out a yelp when it hit him. The scrunchie bounced off harmlessly, leaving the young dwarf red in the face from such a response—and the laughter from his kin. But he was good-natured about it and handed the scrunchie to me.

“It’s unwise to keep such a dangerous weapon in your possession,” Kili pretended to warn. I rolled the scrunchie back on my wrist and smirked.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

When it came time for dinner, Bilbo and I stayed with the dwarves. The scrunchie got passed around until my thick mane of hair was finally dry, and then I braided it and twisted the hair piece around the end. Gandalf watched me from his comfortable spot, smiling as he smoked his pipe.

But it was his smile that jolted me back into homesickness. For a short while, I’d forgotten how much I missed my family, my bed, my work. My world.

And that I was in a different one.

That night, as I used Fili’s cloak to separate my body from the cold earthen surface, I clung to images of my parents, of Luis and Elena, and I wept.

-
The hobbit spoke to the woman in low tones, but Thorin sat near enough to hear it all in the quiet dark. Neither of them realized his proximity, or otherwise the woman would not have said anything. He and his company were aware she cried at night, since she was not as quiet as she thought. Thorin shook his head in disgust. Of course the woman could not contain her tears.

She couldn’t stem her tears earlier in the week, either, after having a conversation with the wizard. Whatever news he gave her did not sit well. Despite Thorin’s displeasure, he did not stop the Company from trying to cheer her up.

Thorin Oakenshield would not have weeping women on this quest.

“I am…I am sorry,” Baggins whispered into the night, almost afraid of the volume of his own voice. “That you miss your home.”

Thorin stilled.

“Thank you, Bilbo.” He heard that enigmatic smile in the sentence. Why did she always smile? Even as she slept on the cold ground, even as Thorin turned his shoulder to her in frigid exclusion. “Do you miss yours?”

“Every single day.”

A hobbit would indeed miss the soft comforts of his home. The statement reminded Thorin that there was no place for him here. He sank lower against the trunk of the tree, irritation rising.

“I, uh, I’m waiting for the day when I don’t cry if I think about home too long. But it just hasn’t come, yet.”

Why would a woman so far away from the place she loved be here? And why did she not choose to leave? How had she come here in the first place, when she plainly told Thorin there was no clear way of her going back?

Why did she continue on with them?

“It will. I promise.” The hobbit carried more assurance than Thorin expected. “Maybe…maybe if you talk about it a little? It might help.”

Thorin’s attention focused. Any details of her home, any late-night divulgences of her true identity could give a discernable direction to her homeland. Her intentions.

The woman paused to weigh the decision. Perhaps she was choosing her thoughts and lies carefully so as to not give herself away. Smart.

“My parents’ house has hollyhocks growing around the front porch. I would hide in them during the summertime as a child.” A pause. “My mother makes this…drink in the summer, too. It’s stuffed full of strawberries and lemons, with a hint of mint.” Her voice filled with a mixture of wistfulness and nostalgia. “When I grew up and moved away, I learned how to make it. I, uh, I can’t get it to taste the same as hers, but it’s still pretty good.”

The strange cadence and inflection of her speech shined through in the confession.

“I’d like to try it, someday.” Of course the hobbit would say such things. No concern for the larger picture of the information he was being given.

“Maybe—maybe when this is all over, I can make you some.”
“I do grow terrific strawberries, after all.”

“And good at finding them.”

Thorin held back a derisive snort. The woman could betray them at any second, yet there he was, planning to make sweet drinks with her.

“You know,” she said, inching closer to Bilbo. Thorin pressed hard to hear if the next sentence revealed anything. “One time, I left home for a while and forgot to pick my zucchinis beforehand. When I came back, a couple were as big as my arm.”

“Oh, yes, I’ve had that happen. Terrible. They lose all taste.”

“But there’s a trick you can do to use it differently. Just peel all of the zucchini, cook it in a pan for a little bit, and then you have healthy pasta.”

Thorin could tell Bilbo made a face with his tone. “That sounds…not as good as actual pasta.”

“I mean, no, nothing is as good as actual pasta. But it kept the zucchini from going to waste. Or you can cut them lengthwise, carve out some of the middle, and put some ground beef in it—I don’t eat meat, but there are plenty of tasty substitutes. Top it with tomato sauce and a bit of cheese, and then bake it. Turns out real tasty.”

“Now that sounds ideally better.”

Thorin tried to block out their rambling once he realized they were just sharing memories and topics from home. But he could not. Their whispers reminded him of his, of Erebor. What fond memories did he have that weren’t tainted by dragon fire?

What did they know of wandering the world, unable to rebuild a home for their kind?

Nothing.

He was doing this so his kin could whisper the same things the hobbit and the women did about home, undamaged and unburned from the past.

“‘I’m not a spy,’” I muttered for the thousandth fucking time. “*No querría espiar a enanos malolientes.*”

Thorin glowered at the language he couldn’t understand. It’s not like he believed me, anyway, so I wasn’t trying extra hard to prove my innocence. But I imagined he got the gist of the mild insult. He shot another distrustful look before continuing to argue with Gandalf about a ridiculous culmination of things. We were stopped by a burned-down homestead, and I had a sinking suspicion that things were about to get worse from here.

While Gandalf grew more aggravated, I examined the remains. I’d seen a lot of this type of ruin, before. Maybe not from fire damage, exactly, but the hollow despair was all the same.

Balin came up to me as I rifled through bits of broken wood. A dash of blue fabric caught my eye, and I picked up the burned remnants of a doll.

“I’m sure…I’m sure they fled before whatever did this could cause them harm,” he kindly spoke. I didn’t look at him.
“You don’t need to shelter me,” I replied, standing upright. The doll had black-stitched eyes and a red triangle nose. Whatever hair it might have had was burned away. A finger traced the rough-hewn texture. “Those who are undeserving of death... they’re also the ones who fall to it most often. I just hope it ended quick.”

Balin opened his mouth to say something but was too stunned at my words to give an actual response. I smiled, tight at the corners of my lips, and walked away from him. Just as I searched for a place to lay the doll to rest, Gandalf let out a loud, angered grumble, and stormed off from Thorin.

“Everything alright?” Bilbo asked. When Gandalf continued past him, he followed up more anxiously. “Gandalf? Where are you going?”

“To seek the company of the only one around here who has got enough sense in him!” The wizard picked up his pace and moved toward the tree line they’d just broke through.

“And who’s that?”

“Myself, Master Baggins!” Grumbling, he added, “I’ve had enough of dwarves for one day.”

Well, I was right there with him, but you didn’t see me snapping.

Thorin barked for Bombur to get dinner prepared. I continued on my search and eventually found a sparse pile of rocks. Since I couldn’t actually bury the doll without having to dig bare-handed, I gently set it down and began stacking stones atop it.

“I hope you are with those who love you,” I whispered. “And I’m sorry.”

Though I would never know this family, the child who clutched this doll, they heard that I would remember them. That’s all I could do, more often than not. Remember the nameless, the faceless, the forgotten, and continue on.

Bilbo made me jump when I turned around and suddenly saw him there. “Shit,” I hissed, clutching my chest. If he continued to be offended by the bad-mannered language, he didn’t show it.

“What are you doing?” he inquired politely, nose tweaking.

I gestured to the small stack of stones. “A, um, a memorial service, I guess you’d call it.”

His expression fell. “Ah. Right.” Bilbo looked about him, hummed, and picked a couple of dandelions from the ground. He walked over and laid them at the base of the stones.

I smiled and squeezed his shoulder. Together, we walked back to the Company. The smell of stew drifted in the evening air.

That, and decay.

Stopping, I sniffed the air again. And again. “You smell that, Bilbo?”

“Smell what?”

I frowned, and Dwalin, standing nearest to us, turned.

“Aye, what does that delicate nose of yours smell?” he asked dryly. I met Dwalin with a sharp gaze he hadn’t been prepared for.
“Rot. And shit.”

I moment later, I remembered what is was that I smelled.

Right. This stuff happens.

Dwalin now regarded me with differently. He trudged off to Thorin, who sat near the edge of the encampment.

“I can’t smell anything,” Bilbo put in. We went to grab bowls and utensils for the stew.

“I’ve smelled it a lot,” I admitted quietly. “In the thick of it, I can’t smell anything at all. But when it’s mixed with things it shouldn’t, then I do.”

He paused to look at me. Then, softly, “How…how were you in the thick of it?”

I just gave him a sad glance that put an end to the brewing conversation. Bilbo sighed but nodded. “Well. Let’s enjoy dinner, shall we?”

We did. The smell eventually disappeared, but that was probably due to my own adaption to it. Bilbo grew more worried about Gandalf’s absence, meaning he couldn’t sleep, meaning I didn’t get sleep. When he went to ask Bofur about it, the dwarf just shrugged, said something along the lines of “He’s a wizard!” and handed Bilbo bowls of stew for Fili and Kili.

My heart started pounding. What good would I do getting mixed in? Everything would play out the same—probably. Yeah?

I realized I was walking to join Bilbo before I could stop myself. Vas a morir.

“Oh! Valeria,” Bilbo piped when I was suddenly at his side. “I’m not going anywhere. Just need to give the brothers their dinner.”

“Cool. I’ll come with you.”

His brows raised in confusion, but he continued walking.

Luis would have died to be where I was right now.

Fili and Kili had their backs to us when we approached. Bilbo came up between them and handed out both bowls, but the brothers didn’t take their stew. I walked to the side so I could see their faces, and found Fili and Kili rightly concerned.

“What’s the matter?”

“We’re supposed to be looking out for the ponies,” Kili answered, not taking his eyes off the area before them.

“Only we’ve encountered a…slight problem,” Fili said.

“We had sixteen.”

“Now there’s fourteen.”

The smell returned.
Chapter End Notes

No querría espiar a enanos malolientes: I would not want to spy on smelly dwarves
Hijo de puta: son of a bitch/mother fucker
Vas a morir: you will die
Trolls n Tubes

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The sight of a troll—yeah, a fucking troll—set freezing fear into my heart. Bilbo suffered the same symptoms, but unlike me, he got pushed into getting the ponies back before I could stop anything.

Fili and Kili ushered me to a safer distance, though I could still hear the trolls talking in their gravelly voices. Kili started eating his soup Bilbo was kind enough to bring this far down the hillside. Both of them were content to just let the little hobbit do his burglar stuff.

Not me.

I whipped around on Fili, who recoiled a bit at my movement. “Are you fucking insane?” I spat. “He’s going to get killed!”

“He’s a burglar,” Kili reiterated. “He’ll do just fine.”

Fili agreed with his brother. I shifted my gaze back and forth between them, fuming, and then knocked both of their bowls out of their hands out of sheer spite. “Estúpido!” I shouted over my shoulder as I ran back to camp. Fili and Kili both groaned and cursed back at me, shaking the stew off them but joining the sprint. They were fucking slow, though, so I burst ahead in no time and found myself back in the clearing.

I was met with glinting weapons. They must’ve heard me breaking through the underbrush and took precautions.

“Bilbo is in trouble,” I panted out, pointing to where I came from. “Trolls.”

They looked to Thorin for permission to take my word. He pinned me with his stare for a second, then stood and drew his sword. The others followed. I let them take the lead, and upon passing, Dwalin tossed me a dagger the size of my forearm. “Don’t cut yourself,” he said with his usual gruffness.

Fili and Kili hadn’t even made it to camp when the rest of the Company interrupted their ascent, moving down as quietly as they could. Fili gave me a really? gesture as I jogged past him. I shrugged my shoulders, and he fell in line behind me.

I had no idea how to use a dagger. Or any weapon in this world. But I sure as hell wasn’t going to cower. I’d run headfirst into danger, before, no matter the vest color, the helmet color, the armband color. And Bilbo needed help more than I needed to stay sane.

The firelight in the distance drew closer, and closer, and my ears flooded with a thundering heartbeat, feet running solid under me, and this—this—was familiar.

Kili had somehow gotten to the front of the Company. A troll roared in pain, Kili shouted something, and then all became calm in the chaos.

I didn’t stop, even as a massive, oh-shit-that’s-real troll took a swipe at me. I slashed its arm with the dagger and almost lost grip of the hilt. He screeched and got preoccupied with thirteen other dwarves all hacking and hitting him and his troll friends.
Luis could do a spot-on impression of them.

“Bilbo!” I screamed into the disorder. “Bilbo!”

A maroon coat flashed in the corner of my eye—then a massive troll foot preparing to stomp down on me. I dove out of the way, landing hard on the ground, and got scooped back up by Bombur.

Well. More like tossed, since I was suddenly slamming dagger-first into another troll. He reeked of death and something much fouler that I’d only smelled when searching a house with burst sewage three weeks after a flood.

I yanked the dagger out and backpedaled, bumping into Dori. He and the rest of the dwarves all fought so well, like a cohesive unit, and here I was, stumbling my way through a life-and-death battle with a weapon I could barely hang onto.

“Out of the way!” Thorin yelled, and I found myself getting shoved into the ground again just as he blocked a massive club swinging for me. I would have gotten upright, but Ori landed ass-first onto my back. I promptly got the wind knocked out.

“Sorry! Sorry!” he exclaimed, and drug me out of the fray until my breath returned. But as soon as I found my footing, again, and held the weapon in front of me, I froze with the rest of the dwarves.

“Put down your arms!” One of the trolls shouted as he and the two others held a snot-covered, terrified Bilbo aloft, ready to tear him limb from limb. “Or we’ll rip his off!”

He stared at me, pleading for help with wide eyes. I’d seen that same look before in so many others. It set off a near-uncontrollable fire in my chest. I gripped the hilt of my dagger tight, wanting to do something stupid but knowing that if I played it safe, we’d still get out of this alive.

Thorin drove his sword into the ground, promptly followed by the clanging of weapons being dropped. I set mine at my feet more gently than the others, since it wasn’t my dagger to throw around.

Then I got tied up and shoved into a moldy-smelling bag with the rest of the dwarves. “Look ‘ere, Bert! We’ve got ourselves a lady!” the troll who held me by my feet laughed. I thrashed and swore, but it didn’t do much.

“Save her for dessert, Bill,” Bert greedily chuckled. “Women always got the sweetest taste.”

Bill hooted and threw me into the dwarf pile, where I landed right on top of Oin and Fili. “You alright?” Fili whispered while the trolls continued to plot and plan on how they’d cook us. Jellied, sautéed, grilled, and seasoned with sage. The works. Dori, Ori, Bifur, Bofur, and Dwalin were down to their long johns and being roasted on a spit.

I always thought this part was hilarious.

Not so hilarious now, though.

“At least I’m not the one getting eaten first,” I grunted.

“Forget about the seasoning! Dawn ain’t far away. Let’s get a move on! I don’t fancy being turned to stone!”

I tried to get a good look at Bilbo but was at too odd of an angle to see him. This was his moment to shine, right? Right?
“Wait!” he cried out, and I breathed an audible sigh of relief. “You are making a terrible mistake.”

“You can’t reason with ’em!” Dori shouted as he was slowly roasted alive. “They’re half-wits!”

“Half-wits?” Bofur shouted back. “What does that make us?”

Bilbo inched and jumped to his feet, still tied up in the bag, and hopped over to the trolls. My neck strained trying to watch him. He did pretty well, and it was true about what Bofur said. The dwarves couldn’t tell that Bilbo was obviously bluffing. He even did a worse job standing a few feet away from me in real life. But their genuine reactions made it all the better.

“The secret ingredient—the secret ingredient is to…skin them first!”

I got bustled around by Oin and Fili as they caused a ruckus about Bilbo’s betrayal. But if I just kept breathing, kept staying calm, then everything would be fine. I’d already slipped my feet out of the rope binding them together and now worked on my wrists.

“Tom,” the troll talking to Bilbo waved, “get me filleting knife.”

If this hadn’t been so purely terrifying, I’d laugh.

“What a load of rubbish!” the other trolled jeered. “I’ve eaten plenty with their skins on! Scarf ‘em, I say, boots and all!”

I wondered, if I died via being eaten by a troll, would I wake up the next morning in its pile of shit?

“He’s right!” The troll named Bill, who had first picked me up, shuffled to the pile of dwarves. “Nothing wrong with a bit of raw dwarf.” He picked Bombur up by his feet, and thick cords of red beard swayed above Bill’s gaping maw. “Nice and crunchy!”

“N-n-not that one!” Bilbo shouted, jumping a in his bag. “He’s infected!”

“Huh?”

“You wot?”

“Yeah, he’s got—worms! In his…tubes.”

I squeezed my eyes shut at the absurdity of the statement, at the troll’s disgust, at how Bombur landed on a majority of the dwarf pile and made them all groan and wheeze.

“I-in fact, they all have,” Bilbo went on more bravely. “They’re infested with parasites. It’s a terrible business. I wouldn’t risk it! I really wouldn’t.”

“Parasites? Did he say parasites?”

The Company started getting riled up again. Because, you know, dwarves.

“We don’t have parasites! You have parasites!”

“Slander!”

“Parasites? Fuck off!”

I butted my head against Fili and Oin, who were both making a loud fuss. “Shut up,” I whispered.
They stopped just as Thorin gave Kili a good kick in the shoulder. \textit{“Ow!”}\textspace
Silence. Then, \textit{“I’ve got parasites as big as my arm!”}\textspace
\textit{“Mine are the biggest parasites! I’ve got huge parasites!”}\textspace
\textit{“We’re riddled! Riddled, I say!”}\textspace
\textit{“They wiggle out me bumhole!”}\textspace
\textit{“I see ‘em move in my tubes!”}\textspace
I shrieked when I was suddenly picked again by my feet. Fucking Bill! \textit{"Put me down! Bastardo!”}\textspace
\textit{“It don’t matter! Women don’t get parasites!”} he giggled, and his rancid breath rolled onto me. Oh, no. Oh, fuck no. I was going to be eaten. And I didn’t want to wake up in a pile of shit! \textit{“Looks like dessert is gonna come first, boys.”}\textspace
Think! Think!\textspace
\textit{“I—I gave them the parasites!”} I screamed, and Bill stopped lowering me closer to his mouth. \textit{“Eh?”}\textspace
\textit{“That’s right!”} I put on my darkest expression, which wasn’t very dark at all, considering the fact that I was three seconds away from getting my head chomped off. \textit{“I gave them worms through their willies! I carry all the parasites in me!”}\textspace
\textit{That} concept horrified Bill, who screeched and chucked me back into the pile as if burned. I cracked my skull against Kili’s boot. Stars burst in front of my eyes, but it was hardly enough to knock me out. Instead I had to suffer through throbbing pain. \textspace
\textit{“What would you have us do then?”} The troll who Bilbo had been mainly talking to left his post at the spit and stomped over to Bilbo. \textit{“Let ‘em all go?”}\textspace
\textit{“Well—”}\textspace
He thumped Bilbo’s chest with a meaty finger, causing the hobbit to stumble back. \textit{“You think I don’t know what you’re up to? This little ferret is taking us for fools!”}\textspace
\textit{“Ferret?”}\textspace
\textit{“Fools?”}\textspace
\textit{“The dawn will take you all!”}\textspace
\textit{\textbf{CRACK!}}\textspace
Beams of sunlight flooded the troll camp. They erupted into screams, and a powerful wave of rancor and cooking meat hit my nostrils. I watched—literally watched with my own two eyes—as living creatures got turned into \textit{fucking stone.}\textspace
The moment of shock was quickly overcome with laughter and shouts of joy. Bilbo turned to us and to Gandalf—who made his way down to the camp—a look of disbelief scrawled on his face. I couldn’t help but grin at the sight, as shaky as it was.
He did it.

I sat upright. The last of the ropes came free from my wrists. I wiggled some fingers through the bag’s opening and loosened it enough so it’d slip off. When it fell to the ground, I kicked off the loose rope around my feet and went over to Bilbo, ignoring the shouts of, “How’d you do that, lass? Canna ye not help us too?”

He breathed raggedly as I pulled him in for a hug. “Did—did that just happen?” he asked me. The snot covering him had begun to dry.

“It did indeed.”

I worked the bag so he could get out. Bilbo squinted his eyes. “If I recall correctly, did—did you say that you gave the dwarves parasites through their…privates?”

I snorted a laugh. The sack came loose, and I undid the knotted restraints around Bilbo’s wrists. “Uh, yeah. Thought it’d be pretty disgusting to put it that way.”

“Yes, it quite was!” Bilbo, for all his propriety, grinned. He rubbed his wrists when the ropes came undone.

“You’d better go wash up or something,” I suggested. “You kinda stink.”

“Why—of course I do. A troll used me as a handkerchief! A troll, Valeria. Even a troll has a handkerchief, whereas I do not.”

“So terrible.”

“It is!”

- We found the troll cave by mid-morning a day later, when all our supplies had been once again packed up and we’d recovered from the ordeal. I slumped against a rock and fell asleep with the cloak wrapped tightly around me for warmth. The habit of sleeping anywhere, anytime, came naturally. And now that Gandalf had returned, Bilbo wouldn’t keep me up with his constant worrying.

I dreamed I clawed my way out of troll crap in the middle of a Costco.

Bofur gave me some hard tack after I’d awoken. “Here, need to keep your strength up if you’re to be giving more men parasites through their willies,” he cheekily said. I snatched the lunch out of his hand, smirking, and shoveled it down.

With the ponies secured, we trekked the rest of the way on foot. Bilbo had washed his face and got most of the troll boogies off his clothes, though the jacket and vest were certainly looking worse for wear. I had bruises on my ankles and cheekbone where I hit Kili’s boot, but at least my clothes held up pretty well against a troll fight.

Dwalin came up to me as we walked. “Here, lass.” He gruffly handed me the dwarven dagger, which was now sheathed and had a belt to strap around the waist. “Need to learn how to use it better, but you’re gonna need something to defend yourself with.”

“Oh. Thank you.” I stopped and tried to buckle the dagger, but found that there wasn’t a notch for my size. Dwalin sighed, as though inconvenienced, and pulled out yet another, smaller dagger. He
twisted the tip with a generous amount of precision and produced a notch far enough along the belt that it’d stay on me.

“There. Now get on with it.”

I belted the dagger. It sat firmly around my hip. Dwalin nodded in acceptance, gave another grunt, and left to rejoin Thorin at the front of the group.

They still hadn’t told me who they really were. What Thorin, son of Thrain, son of Thror, King Under the Mountain, really ventured to reclaim. No, they continued under the guise of traveling merchants. But they had to see that it was a shoddy cover. They had no items, for one, and far too many weapons. And a hobbit that was their titled burglar. And a wizard.

But I didn’t say anything. If I kept playing along, eventually they’d either want to or be forced to tell me, in which case I’d save my ass from having to divulge all the secrets I knew about the dwarves. Then Thorin would really think I was a spy.

The foul stench of the troll cave hit us from a distance. It got worse as we approached, and by the time we stood at the entrance, some of the Company with weaker stomachs were already gagging.

Bilbo covered his nose with the crook of his elbow. “I—I—I’m not going in there,” he pointed.

“That’s perfectly fine.” A pause. “I am, though.”

“What—Valeria!” Bilbo half-heartedly chased after me. “You act like you’re not even bothered!”

“Oh, I smell it,” I said. “It’s really acidic, isn’t it?”

He refused to go any further when I ducked my head under the cave entrance. Torchlight illuminated the massive hoard, and it echoed with the dwarves’ conversations. I passed Bofur, Nori, and Gloin, who were shoving gold coins in a chest. Yeah, I already knew what their plans were, so I didn’t ask.

Thorin and Gandalf were talking about a pair of cobweb-covered swords, so I left that alone, too. Junk mostly made up the rest of the hoard. I rummaged through a few things out of curiosity but didn’t find much. And here I’d gone hoping that I could get some cool token that would save my life in a perilous situation.

I walked back out of the troll cave empty-handed when Thorin said it was time go. Bilbo waited for me, arms crossed, an expectant look on his face.

“Well? Did you find something spectacular?”

“No,” I sniffed. “But at least now I’ve seen a troll hoard. That in and of itself is an experience.”

Bilbo rolled his eyes. He could be such a snarky little hobbit when he wasn’t too busy being scared or worried.

I saw Luis in the eye roll. Fortunately, Bilbo got called away by Gandalf before he could see me struggle to keep the surge of sadness in check.

Then a hobo on a sled pulled by giant rabbits burst through the brush, and, well, I’d seen it all before. Radagast the Brown. Another wizard. It was cool to get a good look at his…appearance in real life, though.
While Gandalf and Radagast discussed a ways off, I sat with Bilbo and the Company. The hobbit showed me his new sword. I almost said, “Whoa, that’s Sting, right?” But caught myself at the last second.

“What’re they talking about?” Dwalin muttered, shooting a suspicious glance at the wizards.

“Pay them no mind,” said Thorin, though his expression mirrored Dwalin’s. “It is none of our concern.”

*But it will be.*

I thought about the future of this world. Of Frodo and Sam and the Fellowship.

And what if I was still here when that happened? Would I still be sitting in a forest, cloak wrapped around me, a dagger at my side, wondering about the threatening darkness?

No. No, I’ll be home by then.

A low howl diverted my attention. Standing with everyone else, I drew the dagger and held it as best I could.

“What was that?” Bilbo anxiously questioned. “Was that a wolf? Are there wolves out there?”

“Wolves?” Bofur clutched his hammer close to him, ready to swing it at a moment’s notice. “No, that is no wolf.”

Oh, fuck.

A huge, wolfish, distorted beast leapt down the hill, barreling right into the Company. Its snarled teeth glistened in the light, and in two bounds it toppled Gloin over and was snapping down on him. Instinctively, I threw my arm around Bilbo and we ducked from the fight. The sounds growling and shouting in these woods could almost be replaced for bombs and the screams of the innocent.

Another warg attacked us, but it too was quickly dispatched. After the final thunk of a sword being driven into the beast, I lifted my head to check if everything was clear. Bilbo shook head to toe as I lifted him back to his feet. “You good?” I asked the question but didn’t expect him to answer.

Thorin spat on the beast. “Warg scouts! Which means an orc pack is not far behind.”

“Orc pack?” Bilbo squeaked.

“Who did you tell about your quest beyond your kin?” Gandalf demanded, closing the gap between him and Thorin.

“No one.”

“Who did you tell?”

“No one, I swear!” His gaze crossed to me, and I could feel the rising wrath. “It is the spy! She led them here!”

“For the last fucking time, I am not a spy!” I screamed, finally losing my mind. “But it’s not like it’s fucking hard to track thirteen dwarves through the country! You guys leave your shit and piss everywhere you go!”
“Enough!” Gandalf’s voice rose above them all. “You are being hunted.”

“We have to get out of here,” Dwalin said. “Let’s—”

“We can’t!” Ori, running back down the hill from where the wargs came, yelled, “We have no ponies. They bolted.”

Bilbo squeaked again.

“I’ll draw them off,” said Radagast. A glint shone in his eyes.

“These are Gundabad wargs! They will outrun you.”

“These are Rhosgobel rabbits,” Radagast returned. “I’d like to see them try.”

I found myself whispering the iconic phrase. Luis and me always quoted it whenever there was an inconvenience or an improbable chance.

“The game starts in twenty minutes! And traffic is going to slow us down.” Mamma called as she hustled through the door. Luis sauntered out, dressed in his baseball uniform. He slapped the SUV.

“These are Rhosgobel rabbits,” Luis mimicked, rubbing his hand over the vehicle. “I’d like to see them try.”

Elena pushed him into the car, and I was, as usual, laughing at his impression.

Be back by the start of Luis’ baseball season. That was the plan.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you readers are enjoying this fic, bc I sure am.

(Also, I'm translating all the Spanish words and phrases through google translate, meaning that there's bound to be mistakes. If any of you see something that needs to be fixed, please tell me!)

Estúpido: stupid
Bastardo: bastard
We ran until the tree line broke and gave way to plains scattered with jutting rocks. I kept up at an easy pace, despite the lack of proper food and water for these past few weeks. The other dwarves… not so much. They tried sprinting, but it just wasn’t in their forte. I actually wound up right behind Gandalf, who ran super well for an old wizard.

The howling from the wargs and their orc riders speared through the mid-afternoon sky. The only breaks we’d get were when we hid behind rocks and waited for Radagast to lead the pack away again on his rabbit-pulled sled. This went on for the better part of an hour, but we were bound to be spotted before we reached safety.

My dread became validated when we stuck our backs against a large, lichen-covered rock. The dwarves tried to stifle their panting and wheezing. I glanced at the stone surface, and it took me back to hiking in Colorado between work journeys. Craggy rocks and coniferous trees hid lakes and rivers, and mountains reached up to the heavens above and the rest of the world sprawled beneath.

The sound of a warg scrambling on top of the rock we hid behind jolted me out of the recollection.

Thorin put a finger to his lips, then nodded for Kili to take the orc and its warg down.

Oh, no.

I remembered how this was going to go.

Kili breathed once, twice, then nocked an arrow and darted out into plain view. The warg snarled and Kili shot it, but the arrow didn’t land in a fatal spot. As the beat thrashed and roared, the orc attempted to blow a signal horn. Another arrow whizzed into its chest, but that hadn’t been fatal, either. They both toppled down in front of the Company, injured but alive, and got back up.

The orc didn’t need to blow a horn to alert the rest of the pack. The screams and squeals of both warg and rider sufficed.

I hid my eyes behind a hand, grimacing in second-hand embarrassment, as the dwarves hacked their loud enemies to death. “Dear lord.”

The howling began to draw our way. “Move!” Gandalf shouted, and we broke into sprints again. “Run!”

I lost track of time. We just ran. I ended up holding Bilbo’s hand so he wouldn’t fall behind, since his legs were shorter than everyone else’s. If I were stronger, I’d carry him, but Bilbo was far denser than a child, even if he was the size of one.

Wargs darted in-and-out of my line of vision. This wasn’t natural, not natural, not natural. How the hell did I deserve being chased by mutant wolves and the literal spawn of evil?

My foot caught on a hidden rock, and I pitched forward with Bilbo in tow. He yelped as we started to go down, but Balin managed to catch my elbow and pulled me back upright. The old dwarf shot me a wink before focusing once more on the danger all around us.
It didn’t matter, though. That danger started to close in, leaving us closing tight together, our running at an end. Arrows whizzed past, and one landed too close to Bilbo and me for comfort. Weren’t we supposed to be finding a secret tunnel? Right? I couldn’t think about the plot of a movie when there were fucking arrows flying at us.

“We’re surrounded!” Fili shouted. Kili shot arrows back at the orcs, but we still remained outnumbered. Bilbo drew his sword, and I unsheathed Dwalin’s dagger, both of us brandishing weapons we knew nothing about. Stay calm. Stay calm.

“Where’s Gandalf?”

“He’s abandoned us!”

The pack drew further in. I locked in on a warg and its orc. Better I died than Bilbo, because the chances of me coming back were, so far, proven to be substantially better.

Or maybe the boar that killed me was just magic.

But it didn’t account for what happened two days later, when I fell off a cliff in the middle of the night and died then, too.

“Hold your ground!” Thorin commanded. Orcrist—Así se llama, ¿sí?—gleamed a shining blue in his grip.

Bilbo’s sword also glowed blue.

An orc charged at us, and I stepped in front of Bilbo to face it head-on. The orc rider raised its jagged weapon to bring down on me, the warg opened its jaws—

One of Kili’s yellow-fletched arrows brought down the rider, and its sudden shift in weight threw the warg off. It careened past us, and then I took the opportunity to repeatedly, frantically stab the dagger into the warg’s neck. Hot, nasty-smelling blood covered my hand. I refused to falter.

I had to kill, this time.

Bilbo yanked my shoulders. Gandalf shouted something at us from a rock, waving his staff. The dwarves were running to him. All I could hear were the roaring of wargs, but I stood up to full height and grabbed Bilbo’s hand again. We booked it, more beasts snapping at our heels, and fell heel-first into an abrupt tunnel entrance. I got smacked in the neck by one of Bilbo’s brick feet on the way down, which didn’t feel too nice.

“Here, lass.” Oin handed me a dirty cloth. When I took it and stared, he said, “It’s for your dagger. Can’t have blood on it. It’ll rust.”

Oh. I knew that.

I wiped the dagger clean with shaking hands. Better to be shaky and ride the adrenaline through. Being aware of its effects meant that we were safe. Not feeling the adrenaline meant we were still in deep shit.

“I just killed a warg,” I muttered, more to myself than anyone. But Oin responded anyway.

“Aye, you did, lass. Try cleanin’ off your hand with the rag, while you’re at it.”

The blood didn’t come off easily with dry cloth. A fact I was already aware of.
Kili and Thorin were the last to slide into the tunnel. The king gave me a once-over, as though to make sure I was alright, and turned his head back to the jagged sliver of blue sky hanging above us.

Bilbo squeezed my arm, causing me to look down at him. His pale face and wide eyes made sure to show that he was terrified. I should be too. A warg nearly killed us, and had it not been for Kili’s arrow, I probably couldn’t have saved Bilbo or myself.

“Are—are you alright?” he whispered amidst the tense silence. I patted his head.

“Yes. And you?”

“Oh, I’ve seen better days.”

I smiled at Bilbo’s resilience. Seeing him like Gandalf did quickly became clearer and clearer.

Another horn rang out through the air, this one high-pitched and true. Hoofbeats shook the top of the tunnel, and an instant later an orc came rolling into the tunnel we all sought refuge in. I jumped back, knowing that in the back of my mind it was dead, but in the moment forgetting everything but the present danger.

Thorin tapped the corpse with his sword, then yanked the broken arrow out of the orc’s chest. He examined the arrowhead with a mixture of relief and disgust—an expression Thorin Oakenshield had mastered.

“Elves.”

Oh, hell yeah. I forgot about where we were about to go next. Finally, I could get some vegetables in me.

-

Rivendell. Imladris.

Luis and my dad tried building it on Minecraft. They gave up pretty quick.

Here I stood, without them, in complete awe of its…everything.

The dwarves weren’t happy, of course, and they grumbled despite the beauty before and all around them. In all my weeks of being in this stupid world, I hadn’t felt this calm since…since…

I hadn’t ever been this calm, come to think of it.

The elves were, unsurprisingly, beyond beautiful. Just like their home. I failed not to stare at each and every one of them.

And holy shit. I saw Elrond. The Elrond.

Luis would have crapped his pants if he’d been in my place.

Two elven women guided me to my chambers. I got separated from Bilbo and the Company, so we walked alone. Well, I walked. The elves glided.

“Such strange garments you wear, my lady,” the elf with the light brown hair said. Her voice carried an ethereal quality to it.
“Oh? Uh, yeah, they are,” I stuttered. A glance down at my clothes showed they were dirty more than anything.

“Fine weaving, and material I am not familiar with. It’s like nothing I have ever seen,” the other elf said, whose black hair almost had blue hues to it.

“They’re from home.”

“And where do you hail from, my lady?”

I let out a weak laugh. “I, uh, I don’t think it’s anywhere on your map, I’m afraid.”

The two elves exchange glances, though their faces are so well-sculpted that I couldn’t tell what they might have been thinking.

“Very well. I am Tiriel,” the brown-haired elf spoke, placing a delicate hand to her breast.

“And I am Gallien,” said the one with raven hair. She smiled, and I almost fainted from the overpowering radiance.

“I’m Valeria. It’s so nice to meet you.”

Gallien’s smile remained the same, but the inflection of her tone changed near-imperceptibly.

“Your companions may think otherwise.”

“Yeah. I’d, uh, apologize for them? But they aren’t going to be sorry, anyway. So, so just know that I am happy to be here.”

“And we are honored to have you, Lady Valeria,” Tiriel said. “Your name is most interesting. It holds a sacredness to it.”

I thought about what she could possibly mean, trying to remember all of Luis’ lessons and ramblings. When it clicked a few seconds later, my brows shot up. “Right! The…the Valar. Valeria. But, uh, it just means to be strong where I’m from.”

“And strong you must be,” said Gallien, “for traveling with dwarven men cannot possibly be an easy task.”

Tiriel laughed, soft and light. Mine sounded rough and cracked compared to hers.

“No. No, it isn’t. But Bilbo makes things better.”

“Bilbo? The halfling?”

We turned a corner, and I momentarily had my breath taken away by the new, spectacular view displayed in front of me. When I regained some cognitive function, I replied, “Yes. Bilbo Baggins.”

“Hobbits are seldom found away from their homes, I have heard.” Tiriel gestured to an intricate door made of pale gray wood, and Gallien opened it for me.

“No. But he’s…not your usual hobbit.”

They smiled and accepted the answer as adequate. The room had a canopied bed and a writing desk seated against one of the three tall, veiled windows in the chamber. Late afternoon sunshine poured through them, casting an orange glow throughout the room. On the far side stood a full-length
mirror, where I caught a glimpse of my grimy appearance.

I wanted to jump into the bed like a little kid, but withheld the temptation in front of the two most beautiful women I’d ever seen. “Your bathing chambers are through here,” Tiriel said, opening a door near the bed. “All the proper soaps and lotions are at your disposal. When you are done, we will have a dress prepared for you while your clothes are being washed.”

“We ought to have asked, but since you are…different from your dwarven friends, we presumed you would not mind such things.” Gallien bore a twinkle in her light blue eyes. I nodded vigorously.

“Thank you. Thank you so much,” I beamed, and both elves returned with demure smiles.

“Dinner will be in three hours,” Gallien informed. She and Tiriel bowed. I bowed back, though definitely more awkwardly. When they departed and left me standing alone in the room, I covered my mouth with both hands and stifled the bubble of giggles.

I was here. For real. The blankets were real, the walls were real, the floor was real.

The hot water was real.

I stripped and, after a few minutes trying to figure out how to get water into the concave bath seated in the middle of the chamber, it poured out from three sides in delicious, fogging streams. The soaps and stuff Tiriel talked about sat on a low stand made from the same gray wood like my door. The bars were held in glass trays, and vials for my hair and body were contained in matching glass vials. I didn’t know if there was a step-by-step process for everything, but at this point, I wasn’t going to worry too much.

This girl just wanted to be clean.

I enjoyed a long soak before getting to the actual scrubbing. By the end of it, the soapy water was murkier than I cared to admit. But my hair, moisturized and happy, smelled like roses. The scent of something like sandalwood drifted from sparkling brown skin.

And the elves had towels, gracias a Dios. Though they weren’t like the material I was used to, they served the same purpose. I patted myself dry, slathered lotion on from head to toe, and detangled my hair with the brush provided.

The chamber gave me a place to sit in front of a vanity. Kili’s boot bruise still clung to my face, and I’d grown darker in the weeks of travel under the sun. Had that much time passed already? Shit.

The minimalist tattoo hung on the upper part of my chest, lining in the center. I went through a phase back when I taught English in Thailand and got the tattoo there. It wasn’t much; just three overlapping triangles that occupied the space between my breasts. Real white girl crap. It looked good in a super low-cut shirt. I meant to get another tattoo, but damn were they expensive.

And I came here before I could.

Whatever hair wash I used must’ve been magic, because after giving everything a good ruffle, it was practically dry. Still damp by the nape of my neck, but usually air-drying took hours.

“I love elves,” I whispered to myself in the mirror. After I got dressed, I had to find Bilbo.

Tiriel and Gallien were waiting for me when I came out of the bathroom, dirty clothes piled up in
one arm. Tiriel held out a linen bag for me to put them in. I left my shoes out. The Nikes could survive.

They made no comment about my tattoo or the overall state of my nakedness. Not that I expected them to, but the anxiety subsisted until I put on cotton brief underwear and a sheer slip. The dress itself wasn’t as flowy and gauzy as the women’s dresses, but it was still of an incredible make and design. Dusk-blue fabric fell just above the floor, and it hugged my frame—but not so much that I’d be uncomfortable. The sleeves, while long, were breathable, and the collar scooped out wide to give a considerable view of shoulders. Enough that the faded scar of a bullet wound right below the edge of my left collarbone was visible.

Gallien sat me down in front of the full-length mirror and started to do a few simple braids. “You have beautiful hair, Lady Valeria,” she commented. Tiriel nodded as she watched.

“Ha, thanks. It’s frustrating, sometimes, since it’s so thick.”

“I can believe it would be.”

The braids just pulled the front part of my hair away so I wouldn’t have to constantly be tucking it behind my ears. It also made me look more elfy. The dwarves would probably make a comment or two. The rest of the black, wavy tresses flourished behind me, free in their natural state.

Tiriel gave me silver slippers to put on. “There,” she said once I had. “Now you are ready to walk the Valley of Imladris.”

“Again. Thank you both so much.” I gave them quick but meaningful hugs, and the women reciprocated. Gallien even laughed a little. “Now. Could you show me to Bilbo’s room? If he hasn’t gone off to explore, already.”

“Of course.”

Bilbo stared at me, mouth open a little, after he opened the door to his room. I grinned and did a horrible curtsy. “Valeria! You look…” He huffed, then sincerely said, “You look wonderful.”

“Thank you. I’m glad to see you and your clothes are cleaned up.” I poked his chest.

“Yes, so am I. But now I’m starting to wonder why I didn’t get a new set of fine elvenwear.”

“Just ask! I’m sure they’ll give you something.” I stepped back and extended an arm out to the view before us. “Shall we go on our own venture before it’s dinnertime?”

Bilbo promptly bowed, grinning ear-to-ear. “I’d quite like that.”

I lost myself in Rivendell. In a new city, I found, that was the best way to get acquainted. Bilbo hung right there beside me, drinking in the sights and sounds. We passed through halls, through gardens, through galleries and courtyards. Over bridges, under waterfalls, and on and on until a kind elf told us that dinner was to be served for the Company.

The dwarves had already been seated by the time we got there, and some of the displeased to downright offended expressions thrown our way weren’t bothered to be hid.

“Oh, dear,” Bilbo whispered as they took up empty seats. “They’re angry.”
“Because we’re having fun? They can fuck off.”

Bilbo, now accustomed to the curse words I spewed more often than a lady here should, didn’t flinch.

Balin had enough decency to be kind. He leaned over and said to me, “You look quite lovely, my lady.”

I smiled at him. “Thank you, Balin.”

A few pair of eyes bore into my back from the exclusive table a few feet away, but I focused on the salad being plated in front of me. A tiny, personal pitcher full of salad dressing accompanied it. My mouth watered. I missed fresh vegetables, just like I started to whenever I was overseas doing work for long periods of time. While the dwarves sneered and sniffed at the greens before them, I scarfed it down. Fresh baby tomatoes, crunchy spinach and kale, dill, arugula, crisp cucumbers, sliced carrots, purple cabbage, cranberries—all doused in a creamy dressing dotted with poppy seeds.

Basically, the works. The best of the best. A salad of this size and array would have cost about fifteen bucks in Colorado Springs. The golden-baked bread with a smear of fresh butter topped it all off.

Dwalin shoveled through his bowl as if searching for something. Dori prodded his little brother to try some of the fresh lettuce, and he reared his head back reproachfully, asking if they had chips instead. When I came up for air, I had a chance to take in the location. The sunset view was astounding, and light glittered off the dozens of waterfalls falling into the valley before us.

Dividing the two tables set up for the Company sat a small, circular dais.

Familiarity struck.

I swallowed the last of my food and chased it with a gulp of water. We were here, weren’t we? Raucously dining in a place that’d eventually mark the start of legends.

Wow.

“Oi, lass, does that rabbit food taste good to ya?”

Gloin’s cheeky comment snapped me back into reality, where elves played lulling music on harps and lutes that set an ambiance the dwarves didn’t care for. I stared at him for a second then let out a chuckle. His eyes narrowed. “What, ya got something to say?”

“No. No, it’s, uh, it’s just that…my father would say things like that about food like this.” I gestured to my half-empty bowl of greens. “He likes his red meat.”

Gloin seemed to like the comparison. He nodded and stroked his beard. “Aye, and your father sounds like a man with good sensibility.”

Bilbo showcased his hobbit appetite by clearing two plates of bread rolls, his entire salad, and a tray of cubed cheese before I even finished my meal. He was far from being done, too. Damn. I got full just on the salad and bread alone.

My eyes glossed over to the rest of the dwarves, and I noticed Kili smirking at the elf playing the harp. His brows twitched in a slight suggestion that just made me shake my head.

Somebody caught him attempting to nonverbally flirt, and the smile dashed into a look of
indifference. “Can’t say I fancy elf maids myself. Too thin,” Kili said to Dwalin and Bofur. I shifted forward to get a better view of the grizzled dwarf’s expression and found it worth the effort. “They’re all…high cheekbones and creamy skin. Not enough facial hair for me.” After glancing at a passing elf playing another instrument, Kili leaned in and conspiratorially said, “But that one there’s not bad.”

Dwalin also leaned in. “That’s not an elf maid.”

The elf turned and did in fact show himself to be of the opposite gender. Kili’s shock and embarrassment colored his face, and it didn’t help that the entire table started laughing at him. Myself included.

What a fuckboy.

Bilbo overheard the distant conversation carrying over from the table where Lord Elrond, Gandalf, and Thorin sat. Elrond was telling them about the swords they picked up in the troll hoard, and I abstained from looking over my shoulder to watch. Curious about his own blade, Bilbo unsheathed the top few inches. Balin saw it. “I wouldn’t bother, laddie,” he spoke consolingly. “Swords are named for the great deeds they do in war.”

“What’re you saying? That my sword hasn’t seen battle?”

Balin grimaced. “I’m not actually sure it is a sword. More of a letter-opener, really.” The twinkle in his eyes belied the serious statement.

I nudged Bilbo with my shoulder as he put the weapon away, disappointed. “Elves may be tall, but they don’t open their letters with something that big.” I sent a smirk Balin’s way. “He’s just fucking with you. And hey! Even if it doesn’t have a name, it means you can give it one.”

Bilbo smiled a little sadly. “Oh, I doubt I’ll do anything worthy enough with this to give it a name.”

“I think you will.”

He started at the certainty of my tone, brows crinkling together. I just offered a smile.

Bofur interrupted the soothing music for a proper dwarven tune. He stood up on the dais—the dais that would have the Ring placed on it—and stomped his mud-ridden shoes on it. The mess and noise the Company caused from his singing made me, once again, hide my eyes behind a hand. A bit of salad flew into my hair that Bilbo helpfully picked out.

So embarrassing.

At least Bilbo and I had the decency to help the elves clean up after the middle-school cafeteria food fight.

Chapter End Notes
You can't write a MGiME fic without going into great detail about elven-style bathing and dressing. You just can't.

Hope all of you are enjoying the read!

Así se llama, ¿sí?: that's what it's called, yeah?
gracias a Dios: thank god
The time had come to sit down with Lord Elrond and explain my…predicament. I set everything out with careful words, and he listened without betraying any emotion except the slight incline of a brow from time to time.

One: I came here without any knowledge how.

Two: The last moments I remembered before waking up in the middle of the woods were jogging five blocks away from my house. Nothing beyond glancing down at my black Nikes and hearing my breath in my ears.

Three: What I did for work. The places I went to.

Four: I was scared.

Five: I wanted to go home.

With a nervous glance at Gandalf, I decided to divulge more to Elrond than I had him. It might have been for the best.

I knew this world. Some of the events. The defeat of the Dark Lord and the loss of his Ring. What would happen to the Company, as well as dark things that had yet to transpire. Their world—this world—was a story in mine. Nothing more. Beloved by many, but nothing more. I knew of Bilbo and Thorin, of Gandalf and Elrond, of Rivendell and the Lonely Mountain. I’d probably remember more, but pouring it all out at once left me with gaps in memory.

I wished Luis were here.

After a moment of recovery, Gandalf nodded. “That is why you were so willing to accompany us. There was no reason to distrust those you had already been acquainted with. How…remarkable.”

“The reason for your coming may run deeper than originally thought,” Elrond said.

I pursed my lips into a line. Desperation swelled in my chest for a moment, then quelled as I took even breaths. “Look. I just want to go home. Please. Do you know a way?”

Elrond sighed, giving his answer before any words came out. “Unfortunately, such magic is beyond my realm.” He and Gandalf exchanged glances. “As it is for even the wisest and eldest among us. The only being I’d be inclined to think had a part in your coming has not visited this world since the Second Age, when the Last Alliance was forged.” Elrond’s voice was strained, like he struggled to speak of the person he referred to.

“You…Okay? What happened to them?”

“They were banished from Middle Earth and all its heavens.”

“So they’re bad?” The desperation rose back up in my throat again like bile.

“No,” Gandalf said. He lit his pipe and began releasing puffs of smoke into the late evening sky. Elrond pinched the bridge of his nose as if to block unpleasant memories. “They are meddlesome.
Chaotically so. But it could explain your sudden transition from your world to ours.”

“Oh.” Unsure what to say next, I remained silent. The vague depictions left me confused, and I didn’t want to ask more questions they’d deny answering, anyway.

“It is just one of many possibilities, child,” Elrond smiled, returning to his kind demeanor. “Worry not. I am sure the answers will reveal themselves in due time, and returning home may become within reach once more.” He stood, and Gandalf followed. “We will discuss this new information with our comrades when they arrive, if that is alright with you.”

I followed suit and got to my feet. “Oh. You’re…it’s the…” I scrunched up my face trying to remember the movie. “The White Council. You’re all meeting.”

Both men paused. The air stilled. “Yes,” Elrond eventually muttered. I didn’t care for the way he examined me. Not that it was untoward, but I almost felt like I was getting lanced. “I hope to speak with you again, Lady Valeria.” He bowed, and I awkwardly nodded my head because I had no idea what else to do. Elrond said something to Gandalf in elven, gave me one last glance, and departed from the small, gazebo-like terrace.

The first stars began to appear in the darkening sky. In the distance, an outdoor campfire glowed like an ember among bone-white wood. A dwarven entity standing stark against their elven hosts.

“My dear,” Gandalf said, clasping a travel-worn hand on my shoulder to lead us away. “You are very intriguing, indeed.”

I didn’t want to be intriguing. I wanted a way to get home.

Gandalf sensed my discontent. “Now, now. Don’t despair. You may not have the answer you seek. But you may be an answer something else entirely.”

The words struck true.

I wanted to be the answer to people who need help. The answer to fighting fires. To teaching English. To aiding war-torn countries and those within. To preserving the environment. To making the world better in what little ways I could.

But I just wanted to do it on my world.

Gandalf left me at some point, so I wandered down to the campfire. I didn’t want to be alone right now. The grief could crush me unchecked.

As I approached, I remembered I hadn’t told Gandalf or Elrond that I died twice here and came back both times. Once by a boar, and once by fucking falling off a cliff. Terrible, stupid ways to die.

Maybe it’d be best to keep those occurrences to myself. It was always wise to deal with one complicated situation at a time. And I hoped I wouldn’t have to explain the whole popping-up-from-death thing because that meant I fucking died in the first place.

“Ah, our mysterious lady returns!” Bofur cried, earning a scattered round of cheers. I picked out Bilbo seated near Balin and Ori. All their bedrolls had been sprawled out to sleep for the night in defiance and camaraderie. “And what secrets did you reveal, seeing as you’ve come to spy on us?” He laughed and got elbowed by a few of his brother. Thorin stayed at the edge of the camp, separated but included at the same time. A pipe hung from the corner of his mouth, and though he looked relaxed, I could tell he was going to study my every word.
I sat down next to Bilbo, tucking my knees under me to keep from flashing anyone. “I told them how all of you shit your pants when the trolls captured us.”

“Lies! Deceitful lies!” Gloin shouted with a hearty laugh. A spatter of wilted greens were thrown at me. I ducked them as best I could, but a lot still landed in my lap, the collar of my dress and, once again, in my hair.

“You got a mouth on ya, lass,” Dwalin said. He held a flagon of some alcoholic substance in one hand and a hunk of bread in the other. “Do ya speak to your mother with that?”

“My mother taught me how to speak like this,” I corrected with a wry smile. Dwalin grinned and chuckled.

The conversation turned away from me, and I sank back and listened to a mixture of language I understood and Khuzdul. Bilbo placed a platter of sneaked tarts before us, and we shared them. The jams within brought up memories of home.

Just about anything could, it would seem. I let my mind get lost in the twisting firelight. Flecks of cinder drifted up to meet their silvery cousins.

As the night carried on, the dwarves’ talking melted into singing. It started hectic like Bofur’s song at dinner, leaving me laughing into Bilbo’s small shoulder at the lyrics. But slowly—slowly, they transformed into deeper tones of melancholy. Heartache. Mourning. Glistening eyes and somber expressions replaced the grins and guffaws. Low melodies and cadences rose into the night. Though I did not understand the words, I still understood.

They were songs of home.

A wave of grief hit me so powerfully I almost drowned in it. But I bit my bottom lip, scrubbed at my face, and held back the air in my lungs until I could be certain it evened out.

Balin’s hand found my knee. When I met him with a bleary gaze, I hardly saw the kind smile.

“Sometimes…it helps, lass, even if it hurts. Try a song from your homeland. We’d enjoy hearing one. Truly.”

I blinked away the filmy haze. Balin was right. Songs helped. In schools, in refugee camps, in the middle of the night when there was nothing else to cling to but music-tied memories.

It hurt. It always hurt.

Yet solace lay within that hurt.

My fingers laced together, and I stared down at them as my breath threatened to quaver.

A scratchy song poured from trembling lips.

“Remember me
Though I have to say goodbye
Remember me
Don’t let it make you cry

For ever if I’m far away
I hold you in my heart
I sing a secret song to you
Each night we are apart.”

Thoughts of my family made me pause and take a half-sobbing breath. I shouldn’t have picked this one. It always made me want to cry, anyway, especially if I listened to it when I was across the world, far from the comforts of home and loved ones. This was Luis’ and my song, both ironically and unironically. In memes and reality. We watched Coco on a weekly basis when I was around. The only thing that saved me from total annihilation was choosing to sing in English. I wouldn’t have been able to get a single Spanish syllable out otherwise.

“Remember me
Though I have to travel far
Remember me
Each time you hear a sad guitar

Know that I’m with you
The only way that I can be
Until you’re in my arms again…”

I finally broke, and tears rolled down to darken the blue dress beneath.

“Remember me.”

Silence.

Then, Nori handed me an uncorked flagon. I tossed it back, and the mead burned at my raw throat.

I didn’t drink much. Just enough to let the alcohol heat my chest.

“Beautiful song,” Kili said sincerely. Both his and Fili’s eyes were rimmed red. And, the more I dared to look around, the more I saw the same state of the other dwarves.

“Thank you.”

I handed the flagon back to Nori and smeared the tears away with the back of my sleeve. Drained of absolutely everything, I quickly found my head settling on Bilbo’s leg. Cool air soothed the hot grief.

The intent to return to my room before I grew sleepy fled too fast for me to catch it.

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Dawn hadn’t yet blessed Imladris with its beams when I awoke. Inhaling, I recognized the familiar corduroy coat bunched up under my head. In his own spread-out bedroll, the hobbit lay near me, still fast asleep. The drone of dwarf snores disrupted an otherwise untouched morning.

I sat up. A rough blanket slid from my shoulders, and I smiled. What a bunch of softies, though they would never admit it.

The blanket got neatly folded, as did Bilbo’s coat. I moved as quietly as I could, and at these hours, a few missteps wouldn’t go noticed.

It was when I took my leave that I realized I wasn’t the only one up.

Thorin. It had to be Thorin, didn’t it?

He sat on his bedroll, fingers twined mid-braid in dark hair. We exchanged no words. Slate blue
eyes stared.

I simply gave him a nod, ran hands over a rumpled dress, and returned to the solitude of my own room.

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Ori paced pensively outside of the library. He stood on his tip-toes, as if trying to get a peek inside of an open layout of books, scrolls, and other fine literature. The usual bound notebook and traveling writing set tucked firmly against his chest. Bilbo and I were already perusing them, though I didn’t speak a lick of elven. But the writing was pleasing to look at, and I didn’t have much else to do except contemplate my reason for being in this world while wandering an ancient library.

“Hey,” I waved, and Ori jumped as he was pulled from his thoughts. “How are you?”

“Oh, I am—fine,” he sputtered out. I pursed my lips at him and walked over. Bilbo, in the background, mumbled incoherently over some text before giving a delighted shout.

I wasn’t a tall person by the usual standards. Five foot three since seventh grade. So, yeah, it did feel good having some height on the men. Even Dwalin, the tallest, had to slightly tilt his head to meet my gaze in close proximity. So Ori looked up at me from his short view, eyes timid and body skittish. He clutched his writing kit closer.

Putting a hand on his sturdy shoulder, I bent forward enough to be conspiratorial and not demeaning. “Do you want to come into the library?”

“Well—I—Dori said it’d be unwise, since the elves aren’t trustworthy—” Ori glanced down at his shuffling feet. “But…but I would…”

I straightened and looked about for any unwanted dwarven gazes upon us. Finding none—or seeing none, since they were so short—I snaked my fingers under Ori’s arm and yanked him into the threshold of the library. He yelped but didn’t fight the action.

“It sounds like you don’t agree with your brother’s sentiment,” I said. “And I think the elves would be happy to share their knowledge with the dwarves. I’ve found that the more informed people are on any subject, the more relations they can form with good communication and commonality.”

“That is a mighty mouthful.”

“But true, isn’t it?”

“Er, yes. I suppose.”

A sheepish but excited smile began to break out on Ori. We went over to Bilbo, who was nearly hidden behind his fortress of books. I wanted to ask him if there were any documents about people getting transplanted from other worlds, or beings from other worlds, like Gandalf and Elrond had said. But that’d just give everything away, and what would have been the point of keeping it in the first place?

So I sat next to the hobbit and dwarf, who lapsed into eager discussion as Bilbo helped Ori translate some scrolls. I got bored within another twenty minutes since Bilbo no longer spoke to me about his incredible findings and lore. So I got up, said goodbye, and didn’t even get a glance as I left.
I wandered Rivendell, again, only this time alone. It felt pretty cool winding through elven halls in an elven dress. Very nerdy. But part of me whispered that I didn’t deserve this opportunity. Not when I wanted to leave.

Bilbo’s enthusiasm made up for the doubt, and I held onto a remnant of it as I explored.

The lively atmosphere faded into something more somber. I climbed up winding staircases that led to one of the many small, sacred halls of Rivendell. A type of tangible stillness pressed on my shoulders. A sacredness. A sadness.

Then I saw it. The shards.

I stopped in front of the statue bearing them. Luis would know everything about this broken blade, about its significance and history, right down to the Age it was made. I just…I just knew it’d be remade. Aragorn would wield it. Narsil.

My eyes fluttered shut in an attempt to recall something I never had the intention of remembering. “All that glitters is gold—no, all that is gold does not glitter…not all those who wander are lost? Mm. Renewed…the blade or some shit…the crownless shall again be king.” Sighing, I gazed upon the shards once more with a melancholy heart. “Oh, Luis. Necesito tu ayuda.”

I stared at the shards for a little while longer, taking in each crack and edge. *Please,* I whispered. *Don’t let me be here to see this in one piece.*

The mural behind it then took my attention. The Last Alliance. I knew that. Because I knew this scene. This moment. I watched it, over and over, with every family gathering and holiday, from when Luis was little to when I saw him three days before winding up here.

Such bright light against the darkness. Hope against the void. One man, alone against an enemy greater than armies. He faced Sauron because he had to. Because otherwise, all love and goodness would vanish.

It was so easy to understand, wasn’t it? Light fighting dark. So why was it such a hard thing to do?

I wished…I wished my world had such a discernable foe to face. That balance could be restored by vanquishing one giant evil.

It never had, and never would, be like that.

Middle Earth had it so easy.

No. No, I wouldn’t discount all the horrible things the people of this world had suffered just because it was a different suffering than mine. We all felt the same, in the end. Grieved the same. Hoped the same. Fought the same.

Look at Thorin. A man who just wanted his home back from the clutches of evil. I’d seen countless others seek the same.

The Ring, golden and sharp against the mural palates, instilled fear in me despite being such a small—but crucial—detail. How could something that little hold so much power? How could it nearly bring this entire world crashing down?

Maybe…maybe I’d tell Gandalf about what I knew when Bilbo returned with it. Maybe the evil
could be defeated before it fully rose—

*Shut up.*

This wasn’t my world to deal with. My own had enough problems as it was, and I intended to go back and alleviate them as best I could.

*But who are you to turn your back on a problem you know full-well is coming? Who are you to turn away from preventing death and destruction?*

I clenched both fists, anger and uncertainty swelling the longer I stared at the stupid ring.

I’d be home before any of this happened. Trying to predict what I could do for the future meant nothing in the long term. Best just to get over it.

Still, as I departed from the shattered sword and mural, the lingering feeling of doubt trailed on the hems of my dress.

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Chapter End Notes

I know singing Disney songs in a fic is a little cheesy, but the Remember Me lullaby just punches you right in the gut.

*Necesito tu ayuda: I need your help*
A shadow blocked the sunlight. I glanced away from my lap and saw a pair of familiar, mud-covered boots pointed at me.

“Yes?” I asked Dwalin, unmoving from my toe-touch stretches. My body had suffered these past few weeks, and I wasn’t as flexible as I wanted to be. The slight, cathartic burn in my calves and glutes proved it, so I bore down more into the fold and increased the strain.

“What’re you doing, lass.”

“Well. I’m stretching right now, then I was going to go for a jog up this one mountain path.”

“Ya gonna jog for fun?” Suspicion, but not full-fledged derision, edged Dwalin’s voice.

“Yeah. Keeps me in shape. And since we haven’t been traveling the past couple of days, I decided to do some exercising on my own.”

I pressed down hard for a few seconds before releasing the stretch and coming back up. Since Dwalin’s big head shaded me from the sun, I didn’t have to squint at him. I wore the same Nikes and dry-fit clothes I came here in, hair pulled back into a ponytail. Dwalin, it seemed, finally conceded that the elves wouldn’t murder him in his sleep, and no longer donned his heavier armor.

“This is normal for your people?” He had his arms crossed, and I wasn’t sure where the conversation was heading, but I answered.

“Oh, some. It’s encouraged to be fit, but not a necessity. I personally like it.”

“Aye. You’re a fast runner, I’ll give ya that.”

Dwalin didn’t say it like a compliment, but I took it as one. “Thanks,” I smiled. “And, uh, I guess I should apologize for running from all of you in the first place. I was…scared.”

He rubbed the side of his head in remembrance of the rock that struck him. “Pretty good aim for someone scared.”

My smile just turned sheepish. Dwalin started walking away, gesturing for me to follow him. “Come on,” he gruffly said. “You can run for your own amusement another time. Got something that’ll help when you can’t run from danger.”

I rose to my feet, eyeing the dwarf. He didn’t look back at me to see if I was following him, but I ended up doing so. An idea of what we were going to do nagged at the back of my mind. Dwalin didn’t explain himself, though, and I didn’t have much desire to ask. Let it be a surprise!

About five minutes later, the surprise confirmed my idea. I had a heavy wooden sword in my hand that matched the one in Dwalin’s. He showed me the proper was to hold it and where to put my feet, and I asked questions here and there. Though he answered like it was an inconvenience, I took the information all the same. I dealt with rough and annoyed people on a daily basis at work. The attitude rolled off you after a while.
While Dwalin taught the basics, the Company started to gather, little by little, and soon I saw coins glinting in the daylight from the corner of my eye. A training session with an audience. How fun. I even glimpsed Bilbo’s curly mop of hair and corduroy jacket amidst the crowd, as well as Thorin lounging in the back.

“Go on, let’s see some fighting!” Bofur shouted, and the others loudly agreed. Dwalin looked at me, and for the first time since we’d met, I saw a smile directed my way.

It wasn’t a good smile.

“Ready, lass?”

“No?”

Dwalin moved so fast I didn’t have time but block once before the wooden tip of the sword pressed against my neck. My hands stung from the hit.

“Again.”

The next hour ensued with me getting my sword knocked out from my grip and knocked into me with the blows. Though I had muscle and a height advantage, I still couldn’t match Dwalin’s years as a battle-hardened warrior. I maneuvered too slow with the heavy sword, and that got me in trouble.

“Move yer feet, lass!”

“Block! Strike! Block—no!”

“Raise it up higher!”

“You’d be dead with that move!”

“Pay up, Bombur! The lass is still standing!”

“The sword’s too big for her! She need something smaller!”

I dropped my sword and pointed in the general direction where Fili shouted the last sentiment. “He’s right. I’m no good with this size. It’s too big, and this is just a practice sword. Though,” I added, “I’m decent at disarming and hand-to-hand combat. So I’m not completely useless.” I refrained from shooting a glance at Thorin.

“Hand-to-hand, you say?” Dwalin inquired, eyes glinting. He dropped his sword, and I dropped mine, fully aware of what was about to happen.

“Dwalin, no!” Kili groaned. “Don’t hurt Valeria more than you already have!”

His protests were lost in the exchanging of bets. Dwalin crouched a little, putting his fists up. I moved into a different stance, feet slightly apart, hips solid, hands at my sides. The strange form got a good laugh, and the corner of Dwalin’s lip quirked up a second before he struck.

As a fist came swinging, I moved into a natural, instinctive reaction. Arm under his, twisting, shifting the position of my feet. Dwalin’s heavy body rolled over my back—

*Wham!*

The dwarf wheezed on the ground. I stood there and took in the mixture of groans and cheers as
respective wins and losses of the bet got tallied up.

They wouldn’t understand my successful years of self-defense, judo, karate, and taekwondo. Nor would they understand that I had multiple medals and trophies in my childhood room from track and softball. Or my stint with boxing.

I liked being busy. Being active. Same went for my whole family. And with some of the places I went for work, I needed to know how to defend myself.

Throwing Dwalin wasn’t the wisest in a real-life situation, but I wanted to show off enough that my proficiency could get through their thick dwarf skulls.

“Alright, alright,” Dwalin said, getting back up to his feet. A new edge sharpened his voice. “That was fun and all, lass. But let’s get serious.”

He came at me again before the Company could place a second round of bets. I dodged the first punch, then the second. Two beats later, I had him on the ground again, knee digging into his back. His arm wrested up beside me. “Ow! Dammit! I yield!” he shouted into the stone ground. I got off him, laughing, and extended a hand out to Dwalin. He still growled, but gripped his thick, calloused one around mine. I helped him stand up.

“Do we need to get more serious?” I asked him with a teasing nudge. He scoffed.

“No, we do not. But I don’t think the lads are done with this…event…just yet.”

Dwalin gestured to the Company. Both Fili and Kili were rising. I sighed and tilted my head.

“Can’t we save this for another day?”

“Not while I have money on myself, we can’t,” Kili grinned as he approached. Fili hung back, waiting his turn. The brothers were quicker than Dwalin when it came to reflexes, so I had to step up my game.

Kili rushed in to grapple me. I evaded the first attempt, but by the second he had his arms wrapped around my waist from behind. My feet lifted off the ground. The brutal instinct crept in.

I slammed my elbow down on his brow. Kili shouted and reeled back, grip slipping enough that my feet touched the stone. I threw him off me and, as he stumbled to regain his footing, I shifted and extended a swinging foot out. Since I had the height, I didn’t have to bring it up super high to meet its mark. It cracked against the side of Kili’s face, heel-first, and he crumpled to the ground.

The dwarves, by now, were in upheaval. Despite a throbbing elbow and foot, I crouched down next to Kili. He hadn’t been knocked out of his senses, but he was groaning around and holding his face.

“Consider it payback when your boot bruised my face,” I said, and he cracked an eye open. My cheek was still faintly discolored.

“That was an accident, and you damn well know it.” But a wry smile broke his pained demeanor, and I helped him back up as well.

Kili trudged back to Fili, muttering, “Good luck, brother.”

The elder sibling took up a spot a little ways off from me. Despite his casual smirk, those eyes were determined and fierce. He didn’t underestimate me, like Dwalin and Kili had.
I tightened my ponytail.

Unlike the others, Fili didn’t immediately attack. We circled each other, keeping at a cautious length. He wasn’t going to make the first move, the bastard. He wanted me to go so he could react instead of being reacted upon.

Fine.

I rushed in and we locked into a grapple. Fili’s strength could easily overwhelm me, so I needed to use whatever momentum he used as an advantage. When he tried to get me onto the ground, I twisted so he’d go first. Fili responded quickly enough to resist the pin I attempted to put him in, but I got his arm in my grip and prevented him from moving it out by wrapping a leg over the same shoulder and back around his neck. A judo-style pin.

He and the two others were used to just brawling. They didn’t have technique.

Fili’s untrained struggling only fueled his loss. I managed to roll him over, tucking the other leg under his free arm and pulling up so he couldn’t use either. My own free hand ran parallel with the leg and offered extra support in keeping Fili’s arm in place. Then he was on his back again, except this time more restrained.

My own forehead dug into the stone and my ass pressed dangerously close to Fili’s face, but he was pinned. His short legs kicked in the air. The dwarves roared with laughter, and Fili swore.

“You—you win,” he gasped out. I released and moved up on my knees. Fili dropped his legs, rubbing the arm I used to take the rest of him down. When I saw his face, I found a grin. “Where’d you learn how to do that?”

“Oh, you can learn it where I’m from.” I leaned back onto my butt. Fili sat up.

“It wouldn’t help you in a real fight,” Thorin said, voice cutting through the Company’s chatter. I looked at him and shrugged.

“No, not that style, at least. It’s a…what I did with Fili is more of a sport. Not meant for real combat, at least in a sense. I used more actual defense against Dwalin and Kili.” I winced when I saw the bruise already forming on Kili’s cheek where I kicked him.

Thorin said nothing in reply. That was…good? Usually he had some biting remark about me.

“So they let lasses fight like that?” Bofur asked. He loudly clinked money into his coin purse. The dwarf bet on me and won. I should have bet on myself, though I actually didn’t have a single coin to wager.

“Yeah, they do.”

“Hm. Sounds pretty un-humanlike, if I say so myself.”

Bofur was goading me. A little more information from the strange woman in strange clothes who didn’t say much about where she came from.

I lifted my chin. “Then maybe you need to meet more humans.”

Bofur laughed at that. “Aye, maybe I do! If any of them are like you, then I’ll be a rich man from placing all the right bets!” He waved his heavier coin purse at the other dwarves, who scoffed and grumbled at him.
“You’re quick,” said Fili. He turned his head to Dwalin. “She needs smaller blades. Daggers, maybe?”

Instead of arguing, Dwalin nodded in agreement. “Daggers might be too small. We’ll see what we can come up with.”

They spoke like I was expected to continue accompanying them on the journey. My gaze flickered back to Thorin. As usual, he remained unreadable.

Fili stood and held his hand out for me to take. The smirk he wore at the start of our brawl had returned to a smile.

Had he always been this hot? Fuck.

I took it and got up. It was about time for dinner, and Bilbo complained that he was absolutely starving.

-  

“She’s got an arrow wound,” Dwalin said to Thorin. They sat a ways from the fire pit the rest of the Company gathered around. If Valeria felt their gazes upon her, she pretended not to notice. The most likely explanation. She was teaching several of them—including Bilbo and Thorin’s sisters—a card game where you slap your opponent’s hand to get cards. For all its impracticality, they got a good laugh from it. “You think she’s seen battle?”

“I’m not sure.” Thorin readjusted the pipe in his mouth. “But she can choke an enemy out, if need be.” He glanced at Dwalin. “Did you find some blades?”

“Aye. Had to sweet-talk the elves.” Dwalin went to spit, then thought better of it at the last moment. “I’ll give ‘em to her tomorrow. Have Fili teach her more about them. He’s better at handling two blades at once.”

Valeria slapped her hand down on Bofur’s, who howled into the night air. She tossed her head back, laughing and cursing in her foreign tongue, as Bofur collected his cards. Her black curls hung loose around her shoulders, and she constantly had to tuck them behind her ears. As always, the hobbit stuck by her side, and he watched the cards get redistributed with keen eyes.

They’d be leaving soon. Dawdling with the elves would only increase the danger of missing Durin’s Day. Ever since the elf lord deciphered their map, a sense of dread crept up Thorin’s neck with each passing hour. If they timed their stealthy departure right, they could pass unseen from elven gazes.

The woman could not stay here. Though she enjoyed her time far more than the Company, it was less than the hobbit’s own enthusiasm. She exhibited similar signs of restlessness.

And Thorin did not doubt that even if they attempted to leave Valeria behind, she would find her way to them again. Her humble and bright demeanor hid a great tenacity that showed itself in the fight with the trolls, fleeing the orc pack, and besting his three greatest warriors in the group within moments.

Thorin still did not doubt that Valeria would bring trouble to the Company. Her odd traits and shadowed background would make sure of it. Whether she brought any good, though, had yet to be seen.

Gandalf proposed an idea to Thorin this morning. Balin solidified the idea on parchment.
I swung the blades in slow motions, repeating the technique until I got it down enough to move to the next. Fili was a more patient instructor than Dwalin, and definitely much nicer to be around. He was quick to fix my grip and footing, and together we trained.

Being back in an activity brought familiarity. I threw myself wholeheartedly into learning. The blades I’d been gifted with only hours ago were elven. They seamlessly curved upwards and back at a slight angle, and were smaller than the practice sword I held yesterday—but bigger than the dagger Dwalin gave me. Soft and sturdy leather wrapped around the hilt. And yes. They’d glow whenever orcs and goblins were present. So sick.

Maybe I’d get to take them back home with me. Luis would freak.

“Perhaps I can teach you how to work a bow after this!” Kili shouted from where he was seated. The young prince cut and ate slices of an apple with his knife. “Then you can say which brother is a better teacher. It’ll be me, of course, but dear Fili at least needs the chance.”

Without pause, Fili drew a small knife from some hidden place and threw it at Kili. It landed a foot away from where he sat, causing him to scramble. Kili yelled something in Khuzdul and made a rude gesture I’d seen them throw out before. The two brothers exchanged some loud words, but by the end of it, they both were grinning.

It made me miss my siblings. Elena and I would bicker the most, but she was also my older sister, so that was kind of a given. Luis and I only ever joked and goofed off because of our wide age gap.

Fili caught me watching them with more bittersweet sadness than I could hide. He unsheathed his blades again and we settled back into the motions. “You have any siblings, my lady?” Fili asked, not looking my way.

I didn’t look at him, either. It was easier to answer. “Yes.”

“How many?”

“A younger brother and older sister.”

“Ah. So you’re a middle child. It all makes sense now.”

A wry smile collected on my lips. “If you say so.”

“Were you close with them?” Fili tossed his blade up a couple inches and grabbed it in a different position. I tried the same, albeit more clumsily.

“I was. My little brother more so. But my sister and I still got along well, especially in these later years.”

“And where are they now?”

I finally gave Fili a sidelong glance. “Home.”

“Where is home?”

“Far away.”
Fili sighed. I wasn’t going to let up just because we were getting cozy training.

“What are their names, then? That doesn’t need to be kept a locked secret, does it?”

I repeated the slow, slashing motion he made through the air. “Luis and Elena.”

“Curious names.”

“Not where I’m from. All of your names are strange to me.” The motions started faster, and then we were moving across the small courtyard lined with wildflowers and vibrant bushes. White, time-worn and beautiful pillars marked each corner, and blossoming vines climbed up them.

“Truly?”

“Mm hm.”

Though I didn’t see it, I could almost feel Fili smile. “I’m eager for the day when you decide to divulge your whereabouts, Lady Valeria. I have no doubt it will be most interesting.”

“Believe me,” I said, not entirely happily, “it will.”

“Valeria.”

I looked up from spreading flour on the table. The elves had been kind and enthusiastic enough to let me make my own food, and if all went well, then I’d serve it to the dwarves either here in Rivendell or on the road.

Thorin approached, alone and unarmored. He kept something behind his back.

“Yes?”

Stone-blue eyes surveyed the table I was working on, as well as the ignited fire pit and a black, iron-cast skillet. “What are you doing?”

“Oh. Um. Just trying to make some food from home.” I lifted the linen from a bowl so Thorin could get a peek of the rising dough. “I wanted to see if I could get the ingredients right—and that the ingredients here would be suitable.”

“And what food are you trying to make?”

“They’re called tortillas. It’s a type of bread, I suppose, that goes with a lot of meals.” I prodded the dough with a finger, then twisted a piece off the larger bulk. Thorin watched as I stretched it out a bit before slapping the dough on the table. I then took a rolling pin, dusted it with flour, and set to work. “You should set that pan over the fire for me.”

Wordlessly, Thorin moved the pan onto the rack above the open flame. “Did you need me for something?” I asked, rhythmically rolling the pin over the dough and occasionally rotating it.

He dipped his head. “I am here to offer you a place in the Company.” Thorin revealed what he’d been hiding behind his back. A thick, folded piece of parchment, an inkwell, and a quill.

I stopped rolling out the dough. When words wouldn’t come to mind quick enough, Thorin said, “I imagine you are already aware of our true intentions in this journey, but allow me to explain in earnest.” He rose to his full height and met my gaze. “I am Thorin, son of Thrain, King under the
Mountain. I am embarking on a quest to reclaim my home, Erebor, from the dragon Smaug, who laid waste to it and my kin one hundred and seventy-one years ago. We will slay the dragon and take back what is rightfully ours.”

He’d been right. Despite the fact that I knew *everything* already, the stories and conversations I’d picked up about their quest hadn’t been exactly secretive, though they did try at times. But to hear Thorin say it with weight and honesty settled deep within my bones.

I nodded once. “Yes,” I spoke, and my voice came out hoarser than I intended. “I…I knew a bit.” A weak smile dashed across. “None of you kept up a good guise of simple merchants.”

Thorin smiled at that as well. It was the first time I’d been the cause of one. “Yes. Well, you’ve proven yourself to not be…an enemy of ours. I apologize for my suspicions.” He set the parchment and writing utensils on the table, where there wasn’t any flour, and unfolded something similar to what I’d seen Bilbo nervously pour over when he particularly missed home.

“A contract. For you. If you are to continue venturing with us, an official statement of your accompaniment is required.”

I glossed over the terms and conditions. Since the writing here was styled differently, it hurt my eyes to read things. But I didn’t need to go over each technicality. I’d be doing what I had done since meeting them. Running, fighting, traveling. Now it was just *official* running, fighting, and traveling.

Brushing off the flour from my hands, I picked up the quill and wrote out my name where a signature was needed. The ink dripped and splotched because I used it so clumsily, but my name still stood.

*Valeria Juarez.*

“Juarez?” Thorin spoke my last name slowly, and mispronounced the J. “That is your family name?”

I gently corrected the pronunciation before saying, “Yes. And I know, I know, it’s strange here.”

“Indeed,” Thorin said dryly. I rolled out the dough one last time and threw it onto the skillet.

“If you want to wait a couple minutes, you can try some,” I said when I caught him eyeing the process. “It won’t take long.”

Thorin grunted but did not reject the offer. He came around to the other side of the table while I rolled out more dough, falling into the rhythm. “Where is your pet hobbit?”

I shot him a look. “He is not my pet. His name is Bilbo. And he’s nose-deep in books with Ori at the library. A library, I guess I should say.”

Dark brows shot up a smidge. “Ori?”

“Oh, haven’t you heard?” I asked with feigned ignorance. Thorin scowled. “Ori and Bilbo have been in the library a lot since we came here. It looks like the little dwarf’s appetite for knowledge outweighs, uh…everything else. I’m not too clear on why you hate elves for much.”

I did, but decided against revealing that tidbit. Because one tidbit would turn into another, then another, and then I’d be explaining myself in full.
“They refused to offer aid when my people needed it most,” Thorin said, no small amount of malice in his words. “We were left, homeless and roaming, while they sat in their guarded realms, uncaring of our plight.”

“I’m sorry.” I meant it sincerely. Thorin nodded in response. “I… I’ve seen what withheld aid does to people. Displacement is a terrible thing, and I would never wish it on anyone.” My work, in the past couple years, had taken me to camps full of displaced families seeking refuge and asylum. The things I saw there still gave me nightmares.

“You speak as though you’ve seen war and suffering,” Thorin said, tilting his chin. “Have you?”

I just hummed and responded with the usual vagueness. “I’ve seen some, yes.”

“Are there wars in the East?”

My fingers picked up the hot tortilla and placed it in a linen cloth. “There is turmoil everywhere.”

Thorin narrowed his eyes at me. “You speak in riddles like the wizard.”

I gave him the tortilla he was promised and threw another on the skillet. “Maybe so,” I smiled innocently.

Thorin blew on the steaming tortilla, and then took a tentative bite. His demeanor visibly brightened. “This is good,” he complimented.

“Thank you. It’s even better when you can dip it in something or wrap food up into it. I think you’d like burritos.”

“Burritos? Explain.”

Chapter End Notes

Valeria is that type of person who has to be doing something at all times, otherwise she gets bored
I was advised to begin gathering my things. For no reason whatsoever, of course.

Tiriel and Gallien, bless their hearts, gathered things for me when we’d inevitably set out again. Two changes of clothes and four pairs of underwear, not counting what I’d be wearing. Instead of thin exercise gear, I could now wear clothes suited for colder regions. Boots, warm but flexible leggings (that tied up on the sides, which I needed to get used to), wool socks, an undertunic, another thicker shirt, and a supple leather vest that was as soft as it was hardy. I rolled everything into the water-resistant pack Gallien personally had made for me. I also tucked away soap, a hairbrush, hair wash, a toothbrush and some sort of tooth powder to go with it, tweezers, lotion, a foldable compact mirror, a nail file, minor healing ointment, stitches and needles, and absorbent cloths for my “monthlies.”

But I still had two-and-a-half years to go on my Nexplanon. It stopped my periods, thank fuck.

I got a proper bedroll that strapped to the pack. Tiriel slipped extra lembas bread and water bladders in the pack, since I had room left thanks to my practiced way of packing clothes into a small space. My new blades hung off each hip, and Dwalin’s dagger was concealed in my boot.

“And this,” she said, leaning in close like we’d be heard—even though it was just the three of us in my room— “is some special spice for cooking.” Tiriel unclasped the tiny wooden box. A savory aroma hit my nose. It looked to be a mixture of salt, pepper, rosemary, thyme, basil, and another spice I couldn’t discern. Just the scent was relaxing. “Use it if your companions are suffering an ailment of mood.”

“Thank you,” I said, and slipped the box into a side pocket of the pack. “Thank you all so much for everything. You’ve been so generous.”

Tiriel and Gallien dipped their heads. “You are welcome,” said Tiriel. “We’ve greatly enjoyed you and Mr. Baggins’ presences here in Imladris. If—”

“When,” Gallien corrected.

“When you return from your quest with the dwarves, please come visit. We cannot wait to hear the tales.”

I hugged them tightly, and planted a kiss on each of their cheeks. Tiriel blushed, and Gallien grinned. Evening was fast upon us, and the two elves needed to leave so they wouldn’t “see anything” amiss.

“Be careful,” Gallien squeezed my shoulder. Fili’s cloak, cleaned and mended, covered it. “The world is growing ever more dangerous, Valeria. Evil lurks in the shadows, waiting for you to stumble so it can extinguish your light.”

“I will.”

Tiriel and Gallien said something silent to one another before Gallien took out a small, wrapped item. She gently folded back the forest green cloth to reveal a delicate, silver chain necklace. A drop of light sat in the center. “For you,” Gallien whispered, reverence apparent.
My lips parted. The sun had dipped below the valley, plunging us in twilight. “Did…did you make this for me?”

“It is a gift from…from the Lady Galadriel,” Tiriel replied, voice quieter than her counterpart’s. “It contains light that will serve as some protection from the darkness that awaits.”

Speechless, I let Gallien put the necklace over my head and slip it beneath my clothing. “But,” I finally managed to get out. “I—I haven’t even met Galadriel—”

“She is the wisest among our kin,” said Tiriel. “Her seer-power allows her to…to see what one might need.”

Their somber expressions aged them the violet pallor. They didn’t have to tell me what they thought. I was already putting things together.

I would need this to defend myself against evil. But what evil? And when?

And what if it was too great?

I gave Tiriel and Gallien another hug for good measure. The necklace felt pleasantly warm against my skin. Tiriel pulled my cloak hood up. “Novaer,” she spoke.

“Novaer,” Gallien echoed. I fought back the tears and headed for the door.

“Nunca es adiós,” I said to them, managing a smile, and slipped out.

I ducked through empty halls as twilight turned to night, and moved in silent elven boots to join the Company.

Bilbo was especially despondent with each step we took away from the Homely House. He, too, had gotten an elven cloak, but his hobbit clothes remained underneath. I put a hand on his hooded head. “You’ll be back, Bilbo,” I promised.

He sniffed. “I’d like to hope so.”

Lady Valeria.

I slowed, breath stuttering. It was only because of the dwarf pack I walked in that I kept moving. An incredibly powerful being filled the inside of my head, pressing against my skull, blurring the world.

Your presence has worn on my mind ever since you arrived. I am saddened we could not meet in person. But I have bestowed a gift I believe will aid you and the company you keep.

I tried thinking of a response, but I wasn’t too good at the whole telepathic, mind-reading shit. Jumbled, I asked her if she knew what would happen to us.

I do not. But you do.

Yes I did. And I wasn’t sure if I was doing the right thing in keeping it a secret.

There is great danger in knowing the future, child. Treading the path only you can see brings risk—and grief.

But it also brings opportunity, and a chance for brightness where before there was none.
Did she know how I came here? And why? And how could I get back home?

*Be patient, Valeria. All will reveal itself to an enigma such as yourself.*

I sighed, but thanked her anyway. Then—wait—I frantically told her that the Necromancer—the danger—the orcs—it was Sauron.

Sauron.

The pendant flashed hot for an instant. I winced.

A sense of dread and acceptance that wasn’t my own weighed heavy. *I suspected…but wished it wouldn’t be true. We all did.*

*Keep this to yourself. Lest the world be thrown into chaos before it should. And please, do not show me more. It may become too tempting to change what could be, leaving little possibility for the light to seep through cracks of darkness at the right time.*

I told her alright. I kind of got the gist of what she was saying.

Galadriel’s voice grew fainter as we snuck out the same pass we came in. *Be brave, Valeria, and be kind. You have seen much more despair than even the dwarves you accompany, and yet it only compels you to continue doing good.*

Flashes of finding civilians in rubble, carrying a dying child in my arms, fighting fires from consuming houses, and wading through floodwater as rain poured down swept through my mind. I winced at the memories. Each felt like I was back there, feeling the searing heat and freezing cold, inhaling rubble and blood.

*Valeria. You possess a light forged by battling the dark. Let it pass to others. And it may change the hearts of the most stubborn.*

I saw a woman’s peaceful smile, and was left with a mind only I claimed as my own.

Thorin’s outlined figure stood out ahead of me. He led the way for us all.

The dwarves had taken to their own tonight, now that we were back on the road. Bilbo sat up, sewing a new hole that tore in his vest after a tough journey through some prickly brush. I sprawled out on my bedroll, hands laced behind my head, staring at the stars. One of the dwarves burped insanely loud, earning a wave of boisterous laughter.

Bilbo muttered something under his breath. Ever since we left Rivendell, he hadn’t been himself. Quieter, more conflicted. It worried me.

He wouldn’t leave, would he?

“Hey, Baggins,” I said, shifting my position. I raised my hands up and created a dog in the firelight’s shadow. “Look.”

His eyes followed where my hands went. When he saw the dog, he let out an unexpected light laugh. I grinned at the sound.

“That—that is fantastic,” he said, setting his vest aside to get a better look. “Where’d you learn to do that?”
“Oh, I just picked it up.” I changed the dog to a rabbit, then to a bird. “Do hobbits not have shadow puppets?”

“No—or, at least, I haven’t seen any in my life.”

I turned the shadow into an upright rabbit that moved its front paws up and down. Bilbo laughed again. “Show me how to do them!”

With the hobbit in better spirits, I sat up and helped him get his hands in the right position. Pretty soon, he had a goat and I had a bear. I made a fake roar sound and moved the bear’s head toward the goat. “No, don’t eat me, Mr. Bear!” Bilbo squeaked from the corner of his mouth.

“I’m hooongry,” I growled. “Blegh!” The bear turned into twisting fingers and consumed Bilbo’s goat. We both laughed, and then I made an elephant puppet and moved a finger to lift its trunk.

“What’s that?”

“It’s an elephant.”

“An oliphaunt?” Bilbo’s eyes went wide.

I grimaced. Right. “Um, yeah? No. An elephant. Kinda the same. Not as big as an…what was it? Oliphaunt?”

“You mean you’ve seen one? I thought they were only legends!”

“No, they’re real,” I chuckled, hoping Bilbo wouldn’t hear the sour note my tone started to take. I couldn’t help it; whenever I spoke about home, that was how my voice sounded. “I, uh, I’ve seen elephants. They’re very kind. Still big.”

“Do they have great big tusks, too?”

“Yes. But for the most part, they’re never going to use them if they’re safe.” I needed to stay guarded and cut the conversation off, but it was elephants! I’d spent three months on a reserve to help them and other savannah wildlife. I wiggled my finger again. “Their trunk can wrap around you and pick things up like food. They also suck water up them and either spray it out or release it into their mouths.”

“That’s incredible!” The glow had returned to Bilbo’s face, and he listened with intent fascination. “Do you have them where you’re from?”

I made a face. “In—”

“In a sense, I know,” he grumbled, but not unkindly. “Still. That’s amazing you’ve seen them. I’d like to gaze upon one, someday.”

I remembered the oliphaunts in Lord of the Rings and what they did in battle. My smile slipped a bit. But I continued on and said, “Maybe you will, Bilbo. Who knows? Once you’ve gotten a taste for this adventuring, you might not be able to stay put in one place for too long.”

Bilbo scoffed. “I think not. Once this is all done, I’m going to return home, have a nice cup of tea and a poppyseed muffin, and be in bed by nine. No more adventuring for me, thank you very much.”

My brows raised in doubt. “If you say so,” I said, unconvinced, and settled back down onto my
bedroll. Bilbo pursed his lips at me.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

I made an “I don’t know” noise and shrugged from where I lay.

“Yes, you do,” he snapped.

Bilbo’s sudden crankiness made me tilt my head back to him. “Whoa, hey. Don’t be talking to me like that. I’m just saying that at the end of all this, you might like the person you’ve become. It may be miserable now, but just wait until you can look back on it. Then you’ll wish it had never ended.”

An immediate look of remorse deflated Bilbo. He opened his mouth, closed it, then quietly said, “I am sorry. You have been nothing but a friend on this journey. I—I just miss home. Rivendell reminded me of it, and…”

“And you find yourself wanting to go back.” I rolled onto my stomach and propped my chin on folded arms. “I understand.”

He weakly smiled. “Yes. Of course you do. Again, I’m sorry.”

I held a thumb up. “You see this? If I make this gesture, it means we’re good. Nothing to worry about.”

“Does it apply right now?”

“It does indeed, Master Baggins.”

Bilbo haltingly returned the thumbs up. I grinned. “There you go. Now we have a secret sign none of the other dwarves know about.”

He looked down at his thumb, pleased.

“Oi, lass! Get on over here so we can play a game of cards!” Gloin shouted. He waved a deck in his hand.

“Do you want to come?” I asked Bilbo.

“And get my fingers crushed by Bombur? No, thank you.”

“Oh, come on!” I lightly slapped his shoulder as I stood. “You can just watch. But I don’t want you moping over here all by yourself as you tend to a tear in your vest.”

“Well, I can’t just go walking around with a hole in my clothing, Valeria!”

“Yes, you can,” I said, and Bilbo squawked as I lifted him up onto his feet.

“Alright! Alright, I’m coming,” he grumbled. I gave him another thumbs up, which brightened his demeanor, and we joined the Company.

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I hummed as we walked up the path, eyes wandering to the trees and sky. It was quite beautiful, and I wanted to enjoy the moments between life-threatening danger. If I had my phone or Polaroid, I’d be taking pictures.
“What song are you humming, my lady?” Fili called from behind Bilbo and Oin. “I don’t think I ever heard the tune, before.”

“You wouldn’t have,” I replied, glancing over my shoulder at the blond dwarf.

“Let me guess,” Bilbo said. He adjusted his pack, and its shifting weight propelled him forward a couple feet. “It’s from your home?”

“Sí.”

“Well go on, give us the lyrics,” Dori prodded from his place ahead of me. “We need a good song, and if Bofur knows it, he’s just gonna take over!”

“I do not hold myself responsible for whatever my melodious voice produces,” Bofur shouted from the very back. “It has a mind of its own!”

Bifur barked a retort in Khuzdul, and the dwarves laughed. I needed to start learning the language.

“Come on, Valeria,” Kili whined next to his spot beside Fili. “Entertain us!”

I rolled my eyes. “No! If I’m going to sing, I’d better get paid!”

Two seconds later, a silver coin bonked against the back of my head. I spun, glaring at the half dozen dwarves all looking away inconspicuously. Bilbo picked the coin up from the dirt and handed it to me. “Thank you,” I said, and moved my pack around to the front so I could toss it into a pocket. “Now I have one coin to my name.”

“Aye, and we’d better get our money’s worth!” Gloin crowed. “Song! Song! Song!”

The Company joined in on the chanting until I waved for them to be quiet. “Alright, fine! Just if you all shut up.”

I got a round of cheers. After drinking a bit of water, I started singing—oh, Mama forgive me —Despacito. I learned the lyrics partially because I had a hardcore phase loving it, and partially because the song became an ironic meme afterward. My voice wasn’t the best at a louder volume, but singing in Spanish made up for it. I started swaying my hips a little as we walked, hands finding their way up in the air with the music I heard only in my head. I wanted to dance, but kept the desire down to a bit of feet shuffling and finger twirling.

I only sang half the song. When I finished, it earned applause. “Sounds good, lass!” said Bofur. “Now, what do the words mean?”

“Oh, I don’t think you could handle the translation,” I laughed.

“Do ya think so little of us?” Nori questioned. “We’re all adults here!”

I shouldn’t. I really shouldn’t.

But it’s what Luis would have wanted.

“If you really want to know what the song is about, then I guess I can tell you,” I placated. “Um, the beginning talks about getting close to someone and dancing together, looking in their eyes, and as they get closer, they’re starting to think of a plan, and just thinking about that plan is starting to make their heart race. Uh, duh, duh, I want to breathe in your neck slowly, let me whisper things in your ear, and then I want to undress you in slow kisses? Something like that, and be in the walls of
your labyrinth.”

Somebody loudly cleared their throat. “It goes on, and then, I want to see your hair dance, be your rhythm, I want you to show my mouth your favorite places. Let me enter your danger zones until I make you scream and you forget your name—no, last name. What’s the next good part…oh, come try my mouth and see if you like the taste, wanting to see how much love can fit in you, start slowly then savagely, and yeah, it’s all just about sex. Oh! I didn’t sing this part, but it kinda ends with singing about doing it on a beach until the waves scream—”

“Your people sing about things like that?” Kili asked incredulously. I glanced back and saw that there were several reddened and uncomfortable faces. Bilbo was the worst of them.

“Well, yeah. Sex is amazing,” I said, using an overtly-plain voice. “And it makes for a good song, especially if there’s great music that goes with it.”

“It’s—it’s completely inappropriate!” Dori fussed.

“Hey, all of you were just dying to know! Now you do! And no, not all our songs are about sex. It can be about other things like love and loss and all that sweet stuff. But sometimes it’s just about getting pussy and dick.”

I grinned as I earned the collective groans I’d been expecting.

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“What was your mistake?” Fili relinquished the blade from my neck.

“I left myself open too long,” I said. “And I chose to strike instead of defend.”

“Well put. Again.”

I snapped into a defensive position, unwilling to repeat the error this session, and Fili came down with a single sword. I’d gotten to the point where I could successfully fight back with my blades, though I was nowhere near good enough to win in a duel.

Fili managed to grab my wrist and wrench it, causing me to drop the right blade. I came down with the left one, but since it was my off-hand, Fili was quick to block it with his sword. Unable to block something straight-on, I kicked him hard in the stomach. He moved his arm under my knee, though, and as he fell back I went with him.

But my own blade, for once, aimed down at Fili’s throat—despite the fact that his sword was also at mine again.

“Hey, would you look at that!” I smirked. “It’s a draw!”

“Better than a complete failure,” Fili conceded. We both drew back our weapons, and I lifted my knee from his chest. That damn smirk beneath his trimmed blond beard was hard to look away from.

We moved to a low, flat rock to cool off. I drank from my water and ate at a pouch of dried fruits given to me from Rivendell.

“Want some?” I shook the pouch toward Fili.

“Where’d you get that? And yes, I would.” He snatched a dried apricot and popped it into his
“Turns out that when you’re nice to people, they’re nice back,” I smiled. “Since I didn’t bathe in sacred waters and have nightly food fights like the rest of you, I got special gifts from my elven friends.”

Fili sighed but nodded sagely. “I’ll have to keep that in mind.”

“You probably should, seeing as you’re going to be future king and all,” I said, chewing on a slice of dried apple. The comment sobered the prince, and he took a sudden interest in his palms. I swallowed, choosing my words, then nudged him with an elbow. “Hey.” I took a softer approach. “You’re going to be...you’re going to be a great king. Thorin is a good example of how to be one, and you get to watch him every day.”

“There is a difference between watching and doing, my lady,” Fili said. He lifted his gaze to the rocky forest beyond. We’d travel another day or two until we reached the base of the Misty Mountains, and the change in terrain made sure to remind us of what we’d be hiking on pretty soon.

“Well, sure.” I took another apricot and placed it in Fili’s hand. He glanced my way and briefly smiled, as forced as it was. “But you’re still going to be a leader even before you’re a king. And, in my opinion, it’s better to do something and take the chance of failing rather than do nothing at all and fail before you can even try.”

The sports girl in me believed those cliche words more than anything else, but it was the ideal that pushed me to do greater things, be a greater person.

Fili’s eyes turned to me once more. “Wise words. Tell me, Lady Valeria, what are your kings and queens like in your homeland?”

“Ehhh, we’re mostly past the whole monarchy phase,” I said, gazing up at the sky and squinting. “It’s more of a democracy.”

“A democracy? What’s that?”

I gave Fili the overall rundown of a democratic system and how it distributed more power to the people. His eyebrows drew together the more I went on, and when I finished, he asked, “But how can you trust the people to make the right decision? They...do not know the ways of politics and leadership.”

“And how can you trust a king to make the right decision when the source of his power is derived from his own birthright and not the rights of the people?” I countered with a gentle smile. I felt like I was back in a 101 government class again. “People may not be informed in all aspects, but they know what they want, and that’s safety, prosperity, and, at least in my homeland, liberty. Democracy is messy. No doubt about it. But in a sole monarchy, there are more ways to abuse power because the ruler has no checks.”

“Tell me, what has happened to the leaders that have abused power for too long?” Fili seemed reluctant to pose the question, but he’d been keeping up well with the entire conversation. I was actually a little surprised, then scolded myself for thinking he was a feudal simpleton. The dwarf was heir to a great kingdom and nephew to a strong king.

“Generally? Overthrown and executed by the masses.” I made a neck-cutting motion with a sound. Fili grimaced, and I quickly added, “But the good kings and queens? They went down in history.
There’s nothing greater, in my opinion, than a king who has the love of his people. It’s when the ruler disregards the love that things get bad.”

Okay. Maybe that wasn’t completely true. But I wasn’t about to go saying that monarchies absolutely sucked in front of a future monarch. I wasn’t an asshole.

“If all the people are as well-educated as you, then a king would no doubt stay in line, lest he find himself on the chopping block.”

Fili’s kind words and the smooth flow of his voice made me heat up, so I disproved his compliment by noisily stuffing my face with fruits. He laughed at the sight.

“Save some for me, eh?” Fili swiped the pouch from my hand and poured himself some more. I covered my mouth and tried not to laugh so that the half-chewed food wouldn’t go spraying out.

While we sat there, snorting and chuckling in wholesome amusement, boots trudged through the brush behind us.

“Fili.”

We turned. Fili more so like he got caught doing something bad.

Thorin beheld us before his piercing gaze focused solely on his nephew. “Come. Enough foolishness. It is getting dark, and our enemies lay in wait.”

“Of course, Uncle.” Fili bowed his head. I said nothing. Thorin shot me one last look before turning and heading back to the campfire, which I could now see aglow in the dimming light.

On one hand, it was nice that Thorin personally made sure we were safe and needed to head back. On the other, I had a feeling that Thorin probably came to check that the strange woman wasn’t defiling the heir to the throne.

Which was ridiculous, of course. I wouldn’t do anything to Fili. At least not out in the open like this. I had some sense.

“He is…dramatic,” I muttered as I gathered my things.

“He is my king.” I wasn’t sure if Fili meant it as a sincere correction to my comment or he was trying to remind me who I spoke about.

Nevertheless. “All the more reason to be dramatic.” I slung my pack over each shoulder. “Do you look as…oh, what’s the word…fuck, I can only think of it in Spanish. But do you got his look down? The—the serious one. Yeah, that’s close enough.” I did a poor impression of Thorin’s stoic face, all intense eyes and deep brows and strong jawline.

Fili nodded once he understood. “Ah. No. I…I don’t think I’m there just yet.”

A pause, then he swiftly gave a highly exaggerated version of the King Thorin Face. It was much better than mine, and it couldn’t have gotten as good as it was if he hadn’t already practiced the look before.

I tossed my head back and cackled.

“You should see Kili’s,” Fili said, lowering his voice as we neared camp. “It’s uncanny.”

“I’m sure it is.”
With a fair amount of reluctance—which surprised me—I left Fili and wandered back to my bedroll. Next to it, Bilbo fretted over his finger.

“What’s the problem?” I asked, carefully dropping my pack and blades, then unceremoniously dropping myself on the bedroll.

“I—I’ve got a splinter,” Bilbo said irritably. He showed me his index finger, but in the firelight all I could see was pinkish skin.

“Where?”

“Right there.” He pointed to something invisible to my eyes. “It’s completely inflamed, Valeria, and I’ve been trying all evening to get it out. But I cannot.”

“Oh, dude, I got you,” I said, not bothering to correct my speech, and rolled back up to dig through my pack.

“Got…me? Got me how?”

I found the small leather kit I’d been looking for and unrolled it. Tucked in a little pocket was the pair of tweezers. When I held it aloft to Bilbo, he took in a sharp breath.

“How…where did you get those?”

“The elves.”

“They—they didn’t give me anything like that.” He pointed at the kit with his wounded finger.

“Hm. Probably because there were guy elves taking care of you. Women know what other women need. We’re pretty awesome.”

Bilbo huffed but didn’t argue. Which was good, because I’d smear his hobbit ass into the ground on the topic of gender. Maybe hobbits really did have more sense than other races, and that was the reason they lived such good lives.

I took Bilbo’s hand and tilted his finger to the firelight. Once I searched for a few moments, I found the tiny perpetrator and snapped the tweezers together. “Do you need a swig of alcohol? Or leather to bite down on? This could get nasty.”

Bilbo rolled his eyes. “You are incorrigible. Just do it, before I lose my wits completely.”

My thumbnail pressed the splinter upward so the tweezer could get a better grip. And I’m sure that because it was elven, the tweezer snatched the sliver up in no time. I drew it from under Bilbo’s skin, who sighed in relief.

“You had him at death’s door,” I said to the teensy bit of wood. “But you won’t take his life today.”

“Alright, you can stop that.”

I shot a grin Bilbo’s way and released the sliver into the ground. As I tucked the tweezers away and rerolled the kit, he said, “You have a steady hand.”

“Thank you. It’s a good skill to have.”

Bilbo didn’t need to know of the wounds I’d stitched with these steady hands. And the horrors I’d
seen that caused them to shake.

“Dinner is ready!” Bombur shouted over the pot of stew.

“Stay here,” I said, patting Bilbo’s shoulder. “You need to rest and recover from your injury.”

“Oh—really?”

The mad dash had begun, and it didn’t matter that I was a “lady” in the midst of men. When food was involved, I had to fight just like the rest of them. I used my height to an advantage and reached over shorter bodies for bowls and utensils. “Fuera de mi camino!” I snapped playfully at Nori when he wouldn’t move fast enough to give me the soup ladle.

“Don’t be spitting your foreign language at me!” he said back, managing to box me out while he dished his bowl to the brim with soup. “I may not know what you’re saying, but I know the tone! And you’re just gonna have to wait your turn!”

I threw my head back, groaning. After Nori slowly poured himself the last bit, he went to give the ladle to me. At the last second, he pulled it away as a trick. “Oh, come on, you fuck.”

“Hurry up! I’m about to faint from hunger!” Gloin complained.

I snatched the ladle from Nori, who laughed and backed out of the mad crowd. I quickly filled the bowls a decent amount—making sure that Bilbo’s was fuller than mine—and returned to our bedrolls.

“What’s the special today?” I inquired, scooping up a chunk of pale meat.

“Quail, I think? I saw Kili and Dwalin come back with some type of fowl.”

“Nice.” Bilbo held out his bowl to start the regular ritual. I dumped the meat into his soup, then repeated until I was pretty sure I got everything out. He was the only one in the Company who was aware of my… preference. But even though Bilbo didn’t get it, he wasn’t going to complain about getting more meat.

“Hey! I have a riddle for you,” I said midway through dinner. “I just remembered it a few hours ago.”

“Go on, then! Tell me.”

“What makes more as you take them?”

Bilbo tweaked his nose. “Hm. Hm.” Setting the bowl aside, he scratched the side of his curly head. “What…makes more…take…”

I enjoyed the whole ten seconds of Bilbo being stumped. Then he triumphantly answered, “Footsteps!” and I accepted the inevitable defeat. The hobbit lived up to his famed cleverness.

The Company soon lay down to sleep. I couldn’t see in the dark like the dwarves did, so I got out of night watch and enjoyed a full night’s sleep.

I hadn’t cried from homesickness for the past few days. The ache still forced me down into the earth, but I no longer woke up with dried tears crusting my eyes. It was an improvement; I didn’t feel like I was dying in the silent hours. I still had the Chris Traeger mentality of keeping my body moving and mind occupied at all times so I wouldn’t fall into a bottomless pit of despair, but it was
lessening, little by little.

As I drifted into unconsciousness, Thorin and Balin softly sang an old tune from their home.

Chapter End Notes

Despacito is that one song for Valeria where she laughs at it for being so ironic but secretly loves it as well. And yes, Luis would have wanted to see the Company get embarrassed by dirty lyrics.

Novaer: goodbye
Nunca es adiós: it's never goodbye
Sí: yes
Fuera de mi camino: get out of my way
“Lake up ahead!”

By next morning, we’d be heading into the Misty Mountains. The craggy spires of earth rose in front of us, their peaks blanketed by an ever-present fog. They reminded me of the mountains back home, and the Tian Shan range in China. The dwarves would love the sight of both.

Scattered hoots echoed through the marching order. “A lake means a nice bath before we head into the mountains,” Bofur explained to me.

“Isn’t it going to be freezing? It’s mountain water.”

“Aye, lass, that’s the best kind!”

I chuckled and shook my head. “You guys are all insane. But I wouldn’t mind a bath—”

“Oh, no, no,” Dori interrupted. “Begging your pardon, Lady Valeria, but by bath, Bofur means…” He struggled for the right words, but I understood, nonetheless.

“Ahh. It’s less bathing and more swimming. Fun times. And you’re all probably going to do it naked.”

“We wouldn’t want you to be embarrassed, that’s all.”

I rolled my head at him, expression deadpan. “Dori. Do I look like the kind of woman that gets embarrassed over a bunch of cocks?”

“Well—I—I would assume—”

“You’re not trying to sneak a peek at the young heir’s…sword, are ya?” Bofur asked me with waggling eyebrows. My jaw dropped, and Dori shushed him so loudly that it drew more attention than deterring it.

“Uh, no! Fuck all of you. I’m going to go swimming if I want.”

I stomped ahead to find better company.

We made camp about three hundred feet from the lake shore, under the cover of trees. I sat there, fuming, because I had to “keep watch” while the men went off to have a play date in the water. Even Bilbo went, giving me an apologetic look as Bifur and Bofur hauled him off. I didn’t think even hobbits swam.

Apparently, they couldn’t risk having a human woman seeing the king’s mighty manhood. Not that anyone said that exactly, but I figured it all the same. So no. I couldn’t go swimming.

I chucked rocks and pinecones into the brush. Distant laughter and splashing found its way to my ears.

Swimming with a bunch of naked dwarves wasn’t something I sought out. But purposefully being excluded? Not cool. I did not do well with being left out.
A pinecone landed right into Thorin’s bedroll. By the time it hit, I was fishing out my towel from the pack. I gently placed Galadriel’s gift into a side pocket, then stripped my clothes off until I was just in a sports bra and underwear. The nice thing about elven undies was that they weren’t sexualized, so they covered my butt cheeks and a little bit of my thighs. My scrunchie sat on top of the clothes pile. I didn’t want to get it wet and have it smelling like lake water.

I kept my boots on and, with the towel tucked under an arm, trekked to the shore.

Everybody was too occupied with swimming to notice me. Fili and Kili were apparently trying to teach Bilbo how to doggy paddle. Some chicken fights raged on.

Dwalin jumped off a rock overhang into the water, causing a mighty cannonball explosion. They all yelled and hollered in Khuzdul, and Dwalin came up roaring excitedly in the harsh-sounding language.

I set my towel down and took off both boots. Then, skipping over the pebbly shore, I made my way to the overhang. The cool, late afternoon air nipped at my skin, and the rock was smooth under my hands and feet.

When I reached the top, the view from the overhang brilliantly spread out before me. Light reflected off the dark blue waters, and emerald green pines encircled it like a protective ward. Off to the left, the Misty Mountains proudly stood watch. I wished I could take a picture.

But since I couldn’t, I placed two fingers in my mouth and released a shrill whistle. Fourteen heads all swiveled to me from the lake below. I proudly placed both hands on each hip and proclaimed at the top of my lungs, “I’m Valeria, King of the Rock! And there ain’t nothin’ you dwarves can do about it!”


Fili and Kili joined in, and then a few others. Grinning, I took a few steps back, breathed, then ran off the edge with a wild “Whoo!” My legs kicked in the air for a second before I curled into a cannonball, eyes squeezing shut. When I hit the water, its frigid temperature nearly sucked out the air I held in my lungs. I sank, sank, sank, and when my knees gently touched the sandy bottom, I pushed myself back up to the surface.

“Fuck! *Hace frío!*” I shouted once I inhaled a fresh breath. My legs kicked underneath to keep me upright, and I moved my arms back and forth.

“This is no place for a woman!” Gloin yelled at me. “We’re all indecent!”

“She’s part of the Company!” Bofur lent a supporting voice. “Let her be!”

I grinned and pushed wet strands of black hair from my face. I swam leisurely away, teeth chattering, and gave the dwarves a bit of space. I’d gotten my fun time, and I was good leaving them so I could explore.

Though the water was somewhat dark, it didn’t have as much murkiness as I’d expect. Once I acclimated to the temperature, I dove under, eyes open, and crawled on the lake floor until my oxygen ran out. A few ancient, large bottom feeders lazily grazed in their underwater pasture. I let them be, though I was definitely going to tell Bilbo about them later. When light occasionally reached the floor, shining rocks glittered amongst the silt. I swam down and grabbed a couple, then tucked them in my sports bra where they’d hopefully stay secure.

I started swimming back when the sunlight began to disappear. I hadn’t realized I was so far out
until I saw the distance between me, the dwarves, and the shoreline. Fili, Kili, and Bilbo waved to me, and caught faint grins. I waved back and continued swimming sidestroke.

Had the snorkel been invented here? Maybe I could draw up something and have one of the dwarves take a look at making one. It’d come in handy. And, oh, I couldn’t feel my toes. But it was worth it. The rocks settled between my breasts still weighed down.

Okay. I had to take one more dive.

I breathed and went beneath the surface. By now, the light barely broke through the water, meaning that I was almost in complete darkness. The silence of the void, the faint brushing of hair against my shoulders, took me back to swimming in the ocean.

In the near-darkness, something zipped across my line of sight.

Something big. Something recognizable.

Panic spiked me into motion. I desperately swam back up, and splashes of a loud and hasty swim collided with the pounding in my ears.

The shoreline was still pretty far off. Shit. Shit. Shit.

My new friend bumped against a leg, and I involuntarily shrieked. That got the attention from the Company. “Valeria?” Thorin shouted, wading a bit further in.

I didn’t have the breath to shout back, so I swam faster.

“Valeria!”

Teeth sunk into my ankle and drug me under the lake. My muffled screams filled the quiet of the water, and I frantically kicked with my free leg. It connected with a smooth, hard surface.

The hold released.

A shark (A fucking shark? What the fuck?), blending in almost perfectly with the darkening water, swam away, but began circling back around. Its six-foot, prehistoric form glided elegantly in its environment. I wouldn’t have been able to see it at all had it not been for the paler underbelly.

My chest burned, and a dull pain throbbed up and down my leg.

Then, as the panic surmounted to a point beyond comprehensive thought, I became calm. All the lessons and advice I’d been taught about shark attacks—that I never would have thought would be of use—took over.

The shark came back for me. I dodged its snout and wildly punched at its eye and gill area. Though it didn’t feel like strong hits, the shark jerked away and quickly swam further back into the lake. I watched it go for as long as I could before I was forced to resurface.

Thorin and Fili were closer, now, though they didn’t move as fast as I could through the water. I started quickly swimming again, still in the intense state of calm. When I reached them and felt two sturdy hands clasp each arm, I finally let some of the electric tension propelling me release.

“Are you hurt?” Thorin asked. His hair clung to his face and neck, and the genuine concern directed at me nearly took out all the remaining energy I had left.

“I—I’m alright. My ankle’s bit.”
“Can you swim back?” Fili’s grip tightened. The strain of my weight lessened.

“Yes. And, and I should be safe now that I’m not alone.” I just about began spouting random facts about sharks, but Thorin pushed me through the water so I was ahead of them. I robotically moved my arms and legs again.

My mind blanked out for a bit. I didn’t realize we reached the shore until my fingertips touched rocks. The moment I stopped swimming, more hands were there to pull me out of the water.

I found myself on the towel I’d brought. It hung off the edge of the towel. Watery blood ran into the rocks. “What gotcha, lass?”

“Shark,” I answered. “Because of course there’d be freshwater sharks. Fuck.”

“A what?”

I lifted my head and looked at everyone gathered. “None of you know what a shark is? Like a big fish, but gray and has sharp teeth? They only live in the ocean where I’m from. Not a damn lake.”

“Never heard of it,” said Kili. I went to say something else, but pain jolted up my leg. I groaned and instinctively pulled my bloody ankle away, but Oin’s hold was surprisingly strong.

“¡Eso duele!”

“Well, would ya look at that,” Oin said in awe. A bloody—but white—triangle-shaped tooth shone in the early evening.

“Whoa,” I whispered, sitting up. Oin gave me the shark tooth. “It didn’t bite me that hard. Must’ve been a loose one.”

“Never in my life have I seen any sort of teeth like that,” said Dwalin. His statement garnered soft gasps. If the warrior himself didn’t know what got me, then it must’ve been a big deal. “What kind of beast tried eatin’ you up?”

I wiped water from my face and let Dwalin see the tooth. Part of my tattoo poked out from under my sports bra, but if any of them noticed, they had enough sense not to say anything at the moment. “I can probably draw it for you. I just…having one in a lake and not the sea is crazy. But—but I suppose it’s not entirely impossible for some to be here.” Because this was Middle Earth. If it had dragons and trolls and wargs, it would have lake sharks. Why not? Like some damn direct-to-television, low-quality horror shit. “I’m just glad it wasn’t as big as it could have been.”

Bilbo, who had dressed back into his trousers and cotton shirt, solemnly asked, “How did you fight it off?”

“I, uh…” I mimicked a few fist throws. “Punched it. Sharks are sensitive around the eyes and gills.”

Bofur lowly whistled. “You punched a monster away, huh? What’d you do before then? Put it in a chokehold?”
I laughed, then said, “That’s what we’re told to do if one attacks. But it…it was probably more curious than anything. That’s why it didn’t injure me as bad as it could have.” I lifted up my ankle. There were only a few jagged, shallow bite marks now that I could see better.

“You’re being extremely generous to a beast that almost had you for dinner.” Dwalin passed the tooth to Thorin, who ran a thumb across the serrated edge. His blue eyes filled with captivation.

“I was in its territory. Nothing to be angry about. But now I can add ‘shark attack survivor’ to my long list of achievements.”

I got asked some more questions about the nature of sharks before they moved me back to the camp. Fili helped me up, threw the damp towel around my shoulders, and lifted me into his arms princess-style. I went to protest, but he gave me a look with his smirk.

“Do you want to walk barefoot to camp? Or put your boots on and fill one with blood?” The questions, while polite, were pointed.

I glanced at the boots Bilbo carried and sighed. “Fine.”

His smirk sweetened, and I tried not to think of the glimpse I got of his butt after I’d been helped from the lake.

Let’s just say it was nice.

A warm fire crackled in camp. While Bombur prepared dinner, Oin cleaned and dressed my wound. “It’ll be sore for a few days,” he said. “But there should be no permanent damage save for some tiny scars.”

“Thank you.” The old dwarf winked at me and packed his things. I retreated into the woods to change into dry underwear. When I stripped my sports bra off, shiny rocks tumbled out. They’d been completely forgotten. I barked a laugh and picked them back up.

“Here, take a look at these,” I said to Bilbo, sitting back down on the bedroll. “I found them on the bottom of the lake.”

Bilbo seemed stricken. “The bottom of the lake? You swam that far down?”

I shrugged and pulled out my hairbrush, then set to work on detangling. “Yeah? It wasn’t that deep. But aren’t they neat?”

He picked one up and inspected it, though his heart wasn’t in it like I thought it’d be. “Yes. They are.”

Bilbo set the rock back with the rest of the cluster. I tilted my head into the brush, and the sounds of bristles scraping through hair rang loudly between us.

“What’s the matter?”

He glanced at me, then away, then back. Bilbo got twitchy whenever something heavy lay on his mind. Finally, he sputtered out, “There—back there in the lake. You were so far from us. Then, then you screamed and the next thing I knew you disappeared under the water.” Bilbo sniffed and dropped his gaze to the rocks. “For a moment there, I wasn’t sure you’d come back up.” He took a deep breath, like saying it relieved some weight. “We hobbits aren’t swimmers. I doubt I could keep myself up for more than a minute or two, even though Fili and Kili taught me some techniques mere hours ago. I…I have no idea what I would have done if I was in your place.”
Bilbo rubbed the side of his suddenly tired face. “I am…just glad that you’re alright.”

I had stopped brushing out my hair, by now, and listened to him. At the last sentiment, I smiled and reached over to squeeze his hand. “I’m glad, too. That would have been a shitty way to go.” For an instant, I considered telling Bilbo about my…revivals. But the thought was fleeting, and a moment later it had left altogether.

“Well. I already had a healthy fear of water. Now it seems those fears are all the more justified.” Bilbo picked up another rock. “The thought of swimming as deep as you did gives me a stomach ache.”

“You should see the ocean,” I grinned, dropping down to a sneaky whisper. “It’s deeper.”

Bilbo gulped and shook his head. “Nope. Nope. I will hear no more of it, lest I faint right here.”

“Aw, come on! That shark in the lake? It’s tiny compared to some I’ve seen.” I didn’t explain to him the one time I went into a shark observation cage. Bilbo couldn’t possibly understand why we’d willingly put ourselves in the middle of the ocean just to look at great whites that could swallow us whole. “But usually they’re docile. And cute.”

“Cute? Cute?”

“Oh, Bilbo, if you wanna know what’s cute, let me tell you about whales. They’re bigger than this entire camp—”

He clamped hands over his ears and squeezed both eyes shut. I grinned and waved for him to drop them. “Alright, I’m done messing with you.”

“Thank goodness.”

I put the rocks in my pack, save for two. Bilbo got one, and I had Gloin inspect the other so he could tell me what it was made of and if it had any value. Bifur had cleaned the shark tooth of my blood and wrapped a leather cord around it to fashion a necklace. He said something in Khuzdul as he lowered it over my head. I thanked him, and beneath his beard, the dwarf beamed.

Usually, I wouldn’t think it cool to wear a shark tooth necklace. I wasn’t a fifth grade boy or a stoned surfer.

But since it literally came from a shark in the middle of a landlocked lake, I figured it’d be cool.

“I can’t wait to tell my family I punched a shark,” I told Bifur, who laughed in his gravelly way. He clapped my back, and though I couldn’t understand him, I still grinned.

When nobody was looking, I slipped on Galadriel’s gift. I wished she told me what it was made from. The closest thing I could liken it to was…was starlight. Though it didn’t shine as brightly like when I first got the gift, the power emanating from the drop remained.

Ori came into view as I lay on my back, filing my nails and digesting dinner. “My lady,” he spoke meekly, and offered his writing kit. “Would you…mind trying to draw the creature that attacked you?”

I sat up, tapping the file on a knuckle. “Of course I can.”

The young dwarf smiled and gave me his precious set. Instead of having to use a quill to draw, I got a fine-tip paintbrush. Ori, who stood there unsure of where to go without his kit, seated himself
next to me when I motioned for him to. “Alright, let’s try this out,” I muttered, poising the brush above the blank parchment. I wasn’t horrible at drawing, but I’d never used ink and brush to do it.

Ori watched as I lightly outlined the shark. “It looked different from some of the other sharks I’ve seen. It was…older. I didn’t get a great glimpse at it. Meaning that some of the proportions might be off, so don’t take it too seriously.”

“I won’t.”

I did a pretty decent job, though I may have drawn the fins too big and didn’t get the pattern exact. “That looks frightening,” Ori said with a shudder. “Makes me want to never step foot in a lake again.”

“Oh, chances are you’ll never come across one,” I assured. “And I can’t draw it, but I will write it out that sharks have rows and rows of teeth hidden underneath the ones they already have. So if one pops out—” I tapped at my chest where my new necklace sat, “Another one is ready to take its place.”

“I don’t like that thought at all.” Ori paused for a moment. “How do you know all this, my lady?”

I shrugged. “It’s just information I picked up in my life.”

“Do you…live near the sea?”

“No. But I have traveled there a lot.”

He nodded, taking the bit of information about me to ferret away. I also drew an aerial view of the bottom feeders I saw. They were most likely some type of sturgeon, gentle and happy to just exist.

Gloin came back with the rock I found. It was white quartz, though the quality wasn’t anything to brag about. How it ended up at the bottom of a lake, Gloin didn’t know, but he said it’d bring me good luck if I kept it.

I fell asleep clutching the quartz, and awoke the next morning with it tangled in my hair.

Chapter End Notes

You know that irrational fear we have as kids of sharks being in lakes and swimming pools? Yeah, apparently it's valid in Middle Earth.

hace frío: it's cold
eso duele: that hurts
Rain fell in fat icy droplets. Mixed with relentless buffeting wind and the mountain path’s incline, it concocted a sour mood in the Company. Thorin occasionally barked orders from the front of the line, but I couldn’t hear him from my spot in the back. I started in the front with Fili and Kili, but Bilbo had fallen behind the longer we walked. He was unused to marching on such uphill terrain, and it wore him down.

So I slowed my pace until I fell behind him. Bombur and Oin made up the very last in line, and occasionally I helped the oldest dwarf through a particularly rough patch of rock, earning a “Thank you, lassie,” each time.

My legs started burning by mid-afternoon (or what I thought was mid-afternoon), so I couldn’t imagine how Bilbo felt. Despite his hood being up, his russet curls clung to his forehead and cheeks. The hobbit trudged on, and I could almost feel his despondency grow with each step.

Meanwhile, I had *Con Calma* stuck in my head. The bad part was that I only remembered the chorus. I matched my footsteps as best I could with the beat, and quietly sang to myself. It served as a distraction from the muscle strain. Man, I was *not* in the shape I wanted to be.

Bilbo stumbled and collapsed in a heap. I rushed forward and knelt next to him, my legs groaning in relief at the pause. “Hey, hey, you alright?” I asked over the howling wind.

“I—my legs—” he whispered, eyes closed shut.

“I know. Mine hurt too. But we have to keep moving.”

When Bilbo didn’t take the hand I offered, I gently but firmly grabbed hold of his arm and hauled him up.

“What is the problem?”

Thorin made his way through the line, blue gaze drilling a hole in my stomach. His hair had been pulled back into a bun, highlighting sharp and unbroken features.

“Bilbo’s just tired,” I replied, still gripping his arm. “This isn’t an easy climb, after all.”

“If the hobbit is too weak to continue, he can turn back and go home.”

Anger flashed hot. “Everybody is weary, Thorin! We’ve been walking up this fucking path all day with no breaks!”

Thorin’s jaw clenched. He wasn’t accustomed to being talked back to, let alone yelled at. I didn’t flinch as he stepped closer, though Bilbo did. “Do you think the orcs hunting us are resting? Do you think they wait for their weak to recover before journeying on?”

My back teeth ground together, and an unkind smile twisted the right corner of my lip. “It’s a good thing we aren’t orcs, then.”

The comment made Thorin darken. He pointed a finger out to the craggy mountains we weaved
our way through, and I braced myself for the real storm. “Have you seen what orcs will do to their victims? What they intend to do with soft hobbits and women? You have not faced the horrors of war! You know nothing of what I speak, and know nothing of what will come upon you should we make the error of slowing down for the sake of one hobbit!”

The restraint snapped. I felt my eyes go wide with rage.

“I haven’t seen the horrors of war?” I shouted, letting go of Bilbo’s arm to jam a finger in the center of my chest. “I may not have fought fucking orcs and goblins, but I have seen more death and suffering than you could ever imagine! I have seen villages slaughtered! I have carried dying children in my arms to safety, only to realize that they’ll never be safe! I have been buried under rubble for two days, wondering if anyone would ever find me!” I stepped close enough to Thorin to make sure I was looking down on him. “And still. And still I will rest when need be, because otherwise we will be too tired to fight when the actual enemies are upon us.”

Thorin and I stared at each other. My heart pounded against my ribs, and for a moment I was scared that Thorin would push me off the edge of the mountain path. I just about threw hands with a king. That was probably punishable by death, right?

But I didn’t back down. Thorin’s visage reflected nothing but cold fury. I hoped I didn’t betray anything different.

“We. Keep. Moving.”

He spun on his heels and moved back to his spot in the front, fists clenched. The Company backed against the side of the mountain wall to let him pass, eyes cast downward. After he resumed his position, more than a few glances were shot my way. Fili watched me a second longer than anyone else.

The line began moving again. I rubbed a wet brow and sighed.

“How fucking embarrassing.” I murmured to myself. If Bilbo was going to say something, I didn’t let him. “Come on. Vamonos.”

I guided him back in front of me again, and we trekked on in the rain and wind.

Home. I wanted to go home.

We found shelter in a cave by early evening, since the storm made us lose daylight faster. For a few moments, I feared that this was the goblin’s trap cave. But the fight between the stone giants hadn’t happened yet—wait, shit, that was going to happen.

Hoping that none of the dwarves were looking, I brushed my feet across the sandy ground, trying to see or feel a crack. When there didn’t seem to be anything, I unsheathed a blade and set it next to my bedroll. It’d glow blue if there were goblins.

Bofur and Bombur started making dinner. It’d be our last night with a fire, seeing as we didn’t want to draw attention in these parts and didn’t have enough firewood to burn for more than a few hours, anyway.

I undid my hair and combed through it to help with wicking water. We’d all stripped down to our undies so our soaked clothes could dry out, too. Bless Tiriel and Gallien, because my pack kept everything dry inside despite being in the rain the entire day. I threw on trousers and a tunic undampened by water, keeping Galadriel’s gift tucked within my sports bra so nobody would see it while I changed. It was when I tugged dry socks on that the wave of exhaustion finally hit.
Bombur and Bofur argued over how to best prepare the watery soup, seeing as they didn’t have meat or much vegetables. As I lay there, listening to them bicker in the otherwise tired silence, an idea—a remembrance—hit.

I rolled onto my side and dug through the pack, finding a small box near the bottom. Groaning, I got up and shuffled over to the brothers. They didn’t even notice me until I tapped on Bofur’s shoulder. He jumped and turned.

“Yes?”

A yawn hit, and I attempted to futilely wave it off. Bofur waited for it to subside. I blinked away the water in my eyes and held out the box, unclasping it with my thumb and finger. “Here. This might make dinner a bit better.”

Bofur and Bombur leaned in to smell the spices. They both hummed. “Ooh, that smells good, that does,” Bombur said. “Where’d you get this mix?”

“Rivendell. They said it’s something that’ll cheer everyone up.”

“Ah, I dunno if this lot can be cheered up with a bit of thyme,” Bofur drawled, but a smile inched up his cheek.

“It can’t hurt, can it?” Bombur took a pinch from the spice box and deftly sprinkled it over the bubbling pot of stew. An immediate aroma blossomed in the cave. Suddenly, the Company was sitting up and sniffing the air.

“What’s that?”

“Is that dinner? I’ve never smelled anything nicer.”

“Oh, I’m hungry.”

“When’s it going to be ready?”

I closed my eyes for a moment and whispered, “Yummy.”

Bofur looked about the cave and the dwarves with rising spirits. “By my beard,” he said. “Those damn elves were right.”

“Best save the rest of that, lass,” Bombur advised, tilting his head to the box while he stirred. “For other nights like these.”

“Aye. There’ll be plenty ahead, I’ll say.”

I nodded at them, smiled, and returned to my bedroll. Bilbo had even perked up, and tweaked his nose at the fragrance. “That,” he said to no one in particular, “smells quite lovely.”

Instead of saying something back, I just reached over and patted his knee.

My gaze then flickered to Thorin. He’d already been watching me, calmly smoking on his pipe. I didn’t know what to say to him. I wasn’t sorry? But I doubted he’d like hearing that. I was, however, apologetic about the situation in general. I wasn’t the type to harbor ill feelings for more than a few hours. And besides, the rain washed out all the fire I had from our argument, leaving me cold and worn.

So I held up a thumb to him and faintly smiled. Thorin and the rest of the Company saw Bilbo and
I exchange the gesture a lot, already, and were even beginning to do it amongst themselves.

He raised both brows at me, head tilting to the side, and otherwise remained motionless. The bastard.

I lifted the other thumb up and moved them back-and-forth in a Fonzie-esque style. I even opened my mouth a little, ready to say the, “Ayyyy.”

Thorin doubled-down on the stare. Amusement twinkled in his eyes, belying his stoic demeanor. Just as I was about to change the thumbs up into the middle finger, he lifted his fist against his chest and popped a thumb up.

I grinned and flopped back down on my bedroll. At some point I took out my shark tooth to examine, and the gentle rhythm of running a finger up and down the edge put me to sleep for a bit.

Luis hit the baseball all the way into left field. I rose, screaming beside Elena, Mom, and Dad, and watched him and all the three other teammates run to the home plate—

A foot tapped my leg. I jerked awake, inhaling, and saw Fili standing above me. He held two bowls of soup. Fili raised one, and as I rolled up, he gave it to me. “Thanks,” I muttered. I expected him to return to his brother’s side, but once I took the dinner he lightly coughed and sat beside me.

I poorly hid my grin and ladled a chunk of potato floating in the soup. The Rivendell spice had turned a thin broth into flavorful stew, and I could taste things that weren’t actually in the mix.

“How are your bite wounds, my lady?” Fili asked, pointing his spoon at my ankle. I wiggled my toes beneath a dark gray woolen sock.

“They’re fine. A little tight. But the elves gave me this kind of ointment to help with healing, so I’m even better off.”

“That’s wonderful. I’ve been meaning—”

Fili was cut off by his black-haired brother noisily dropping down beside him. Kili failed to keep his grin innocent.

“Hello, brother. Lady Valeria. Master Boggins.”

Bilbo huffed at the purposeful mispronunciation and muttered something into his soup. Kili slurped down some broth. “So? What are we talking about on this fine evening?”

I pretended I didn’t see Fili shooting his younger brother a side-glare. This was something Luis would do, so I wasn’t annoyed by it. Just tickled.

“We’re talking about you,” I said. “And how much you like elves.”

Fili laughed. Kili scrunched his face up. “No you weren’t. Liar. And I do not like elf women! They’re too graceful, I say.”

I just gave him a Look. He’d be liking an elf here pretty soon.

Then he’ll die, leaving her all alone in the world.

The taste of the broth turned foul in my mouth for a second. I tried not to think about the outcome of the three Sons of Durin. Or my place within that outcome.
Some things just needed to stay as they were, no matter how tragic it might be.

I internally punched myself for thinking the thought. Again. How could I be okay with letting people die? People...people I’d grown to care for?

Fili and Kili had somehow gotten into a brawl, and they wrestled around while the other dwarves griped at them. One glance at Thorin, though, showed he enjoyed watching his nephews goof off by the fond smile he wore.

How many times had I wished people lived? How many times did I wish I could save them myself?

Why did I run in to give aid if that hadn’t always been my drive?

I swirled the half-empty contents of my bowl, peering at the potatoes and carrots and onions as if they would reveal some sort of divination. When all they did was bob up and down, I turned my head to Bilbo. He was draining his soup, and once he finished, he burped with a velocity no body as small as his should be able to produce. And, as always, I blurted a laugh.

What would Bilbo do if he knew what I knew?

A stupid question. He’d try his hardest to save them.

“Here,” I spoke, offering Bilbo my soup. “You can have the rest of it.”

His forehead wrinkled in concern. “Are you feeling well?”

“Yes. I’m just not as hungry as I thought I’d be, tonight.”

Bilbo skeptically peered at me but took the bowl. I smiled to reassure him and lay down on my bedroll, pulling the blanket up. I pretended to fall back asleep, turning my back to Bilbo and curling up to make sure the blanket hid most of my face. I took even breaths in hopes of drifting off.

But my mind wouldn’t still.

“Master Baggins,” Thorin said an hour into my failed attempts at sleeping. “Is she ill?”

“Hm? Oh, no. I—I don’t think so. She’s just tired, that’s all.”

“We spent all day in the rain. Sickness might’ve come upon the lady without her realizing it,” Fili added. “Check her temperature.”

I lay motionless as a hobbit hand pressed itself against my cheek. Part of me was tempted to scare Bilbo, but then that’d blow my pretending completely.

“She seems fine?” The hand went to my forehead. “No, she’s not feverish.”

Thorin grunted. “Whoever’s on watch, keep an eye on her. We can’t have illness running through the Company.”

I had enough muscle control to keep a smile from forming.

- -

By the fourth day of travel through the Misty Mountains, my leg muscles had grown accustomed to the incline, and every breath of air took me back home to Colorado. I loved it. The mist rolled
thick in the morning and evening, but it cleared up to a light veil during most of our travel. I was perpetually damp, but it hadn’t stormed like on our first day.

The path itself grew narrower and rockier, with more broken rocks and big enough rubble that we have to climb over some. I kept watch over the dwarves for any signs of altitude sickness. They suffered around the second day, when we really hit higher elevation. My ears filled with pressure a few times, but I hadn’t been away from home long enough for my body to stop being accustomed to it. That was a strange thought. It felt like I hadn’t been home in years, when really it was only about a month-and-a-half. Maybe two. I was bad at keeping track of time here.

Bilbo struggled to get up a large boulder obstructing the path. I grabbed his waist and, like a child, Bilbo crouched and jumped so I could propel him over. He landed on the other side with an oomph.

“Sorry!” I winced, following behind. When my boot slipped on the slick stone, Bofur was there to catch it and give me a lift. These boots, as fine and elven as they were, didn’t have traction like my Nikes. “Thank you!”

“Not a problem, my lady!”

I landed right behind Bilbo and adjusted my pack. He plugged his nose, using the technique I taught him to pop his ears.

“How…how are you not—dizzy?” Bilbo wheezed once we got on the move again. Another sudden rise in the path had us repeating what we’d done just a couple minutes ago. Only this time, Bilbo offered a hand out to me so I could keep some balance climbing up.

“Oh,” I sighed, half-distracted from regaining my footing. “I, uh, I lived in a pretty mountainous area before…all this. And I also traveled to a few places with high elevations.” I wound up grinning at Bilbo. “This mountain air actually smells really nice. And are you still dizzy?”

“Not as much as I was yesterday, thankfully—” Bilbo slipped on a rock, and I instinctively caught him. It’d become a habit as of late.

And, of course, Bofur had to eavesdrop on our conversation. “You lived in the mountains, eh? Which range?”

I pursed my lips. Damnit. “Not one you’d know,” I said, hoping it’d cut the conversation off.

But Bofur always had to push the limits of my courtesy. “Is it a nice place?” He used his playful voice so he couldn’t be accused of being too intrusive.

“Yes. It is,” I exhaled, kicking a stray stone off the mountain path. If I was afraid of heights, I’d be having a come-apart. Though I couldn’t see the bottom of the canyon because of the layers of fog, I could safely imagine how far up we were on a trail barely wide enough to fit Bombur’s girth. “It’s very beautiful. Especially when the wildflowers bloom. The mountains would be covered in them this time of the year.”

Bofur hummed in response and stayed quiet. No doubt a majority of the Company had heard, and now they were trying to think of all the mountain ranges they knew.

The rest of the day’s journey went on uneventfully. Being in single file made it difficult for longer conversations, and I spent the majority of the time lost in my thoughts. I remembered the Tian Shan mountains and my time in China. I loved it there. The people, the places—all so beautiful.
One day, I’d go back.

“Oin!”

The line came to an abrupt halt at Gloin’s shout. Being the tallest, I peered over everyone and saw, near the front of the line, the elderly dwarf slumped up against the mountain’s wall. His brother, Thorin, Dwalin, and Balin crouched around him as best they could.

“Hang on,” I said to Bilbo. “I’ll be right back.”

I didn’t pride myself on being a medical professional. But I did get my CNA senior year of high school, and picked up on a bunch of things with the places I’d been and tasks I had to do.

Weaving my way through, the line, I came up beside Dwalin. “What’s the problem?” I asked him. The dwarf barely gave me a glance, because if he turned his head too far he might lose his balance and go careening off the edge.

“Oin nearly fainted.”

“I’m fine, I’m fine!” Oin exclaimed, trying to wave us off. His skin was clammy, though, and movements sluggish. “Just this damned mountain air’s making my head all funny!”

“You were fine yesterday, and the day before,” I said. “The effects should be wearing off or gone completely.” Dwalin cursed as I used his thick shoulder to step over him and get closer. Balin made room for me, and I managed to have enough space to kneel beside Oin. I unslung my pack.

“How much have you eaten today?”

Oin recognized the questions I prompted him with. Despite his narrowed eyes, he replied, “A couple pieces of jerky.”

“Mm. We didn’t eat breakfast like usual. You been hungry?”

“Aye, but isn’t everybody?”

I nodded, then leaned in close to check Oin’s pupils. They weren’t dilated, thankfully. “You got blurred vision, along with the light-headedness?”

“…Aye.”

“Heart feeling funny? Like it’s shaking inside of you? And are you all shaky?”

“Yes, yes, lass.”

“Alright. I think you just have low blood sugar levels.”

“What’s that mean?” Gloin questioned.

“Means when your body doesn’t get the nutrients it needs, it can make you sick,” I said, trying to explain as simply as I could. “And at your age, Oin, you need to be taking better care of your body, at least food-wise. You can’t be letting yourself go hungry for as long as you did.”

“I think I know what my body needs better than you, lass,” he grumbled. I plucked out lembas bread and unwrapped it.

“Don’t you be getting cranky with me, you stubborn dwarf,” I said back. I snapped the hardened bread roughly in half and handed part of it to him.
“Where did you get that?” Thorin asked me.

“Rivendell. Lembas bread lasts a long time, and it should get your levels back up,” I said, starting out addressing Thorin but winding up speaking to Oin. “They told me they hardly give the bread to outsiders, so be thankful that I have any. Eat until you feel better.”

He grumbled some more, but took a bite. Oin grimaced. “Ack. Tastes like sandpaper.”

“No it doesn’t.” I took a bite of my own piece. “It just tastes like biscuits.”

When Oin began to turn his nose up at the elven food, Gloin heatedly said, “Go on, eat, you old goat! We can’t be waiting here all day fer ya to get back on your feet! If the lass says it’ll help, then it’ll help! You know better than anyone what a stubborn patient is like. Now you’re treatin’ her the same way. Put it to bed!”

The brothers stared each other down, then Oin gave in. He mumbled, “Apologies, lass,” and took another bite of the bread. “It does taste just like biscuits.”

I smiled and gave a thumbs up. “Está bien. We’re all good. Just get better.”

Oin ate about half of the lembas bread when he announced that he was feeling like a spry lad again. Gloin helped him up, and I wrapped the bread back up in the protective, flexible leaf it came in. I instructed Oin to eat some if he started feeling faint, again, and packed the rest into his bag. Thorin also told Oin that if he needed to rest, they would wait for him. Ever since he and I got into it our first day in the Misty Mountains, he’d been more lenient with us taking breaks here and there.

“It seems we have another healer among us,” Balin said with his kind smile. I wiped the wet pebbles off my shins.

“Not a healer. I just know a few things.”

“A few healer’s things, apparently.”

I squinted playfully at Balin, and my face made him chuckle.

Thorin started moving the line before I could get back to Bilbo, so I hoped Bofur would Dori would help him with any vertical challenges. But it meant I was ahead of Fili and Kili, which I didn’t mind. Fili quizzed me on blade techniques, since we hadn’t been able to practice in a few days, and I moved my arms and hands pretending to have them in my grip.

“Oi, Valeria,” Kili called, and I could just tell that he was up to no good. It was that little brother voice. “How many men have you had chase after you?”

He then went oof from whatever Fili did to him from behind me.

I huffed a laugh. “Too many to count.”

“And how many got their love accepted?”

“Um, four? No, five.”

“Five?”

I shot a frown over my shoulder. “You say that like it’s a bad thing.”
“Well—well, I mean, being with five men…that’s…”

I rolled my eyes. “Fuck you. Just because I was with five guys didn’t mean I had sex with all five. And even if I did, what does it matter to you? Who cares if I’ve had sex with more than five men? How many women have you slept with, Kili?”

“Oh—I mean—that’s not—”

“Yeah, see how it feels?”

“I ought to push you right off this mountain,” Fili said to his brother. “Stop being a prig!”

“I’m not!”

“Apologize.”

Kili sighed loud enough that it echoed a bit in the mountains. “I’m very sorry, Valeria.”

“Good. And it’s okay. You just let your mouth get you in trouble, don’t you?”

“He does.” Fili answered for his brother. “All the time. Especially with the ladies.”

“Fi!”

Fili and I laughed. “Well,” I said as I lightly jumped over a rock. “If the first thing you ask them is how many men they’ve had sex with, it’s understandable.”

“I do not start out with that.”

“Sure, brother.” Fili drawled. “It’s sad, Valeria. It really is. He can’t even get ten words in without insulting the lady, somehow.”

“Now I’m going to push you off this mountain.”

“If you do, it’ll save me from watching you embarrass yourself over the next dam that comes your way.”

“Like you’re so charming! Remember that one Dwarrowdam you kissed, then you—”

“Don’t say another word—”

“—Got your teeth stuck in her nice little beard? And ended up pulling out a whole patch?”

I stifled the burst of laughter so Fili wouldn’t hear me cackling at his romantic failures.

“That’s it. I’m going to push you off the mountain. Say your goodbyes.”

“Uncle! Fili is attempting to murder me!”

“I’ll throw you both off this mountain myself if it means I can get some peace and quiet!”

The brothers hushed for a moment, then I heard the distinct thwick of an ear getting flicked. Then it started all over again, but in rapid whispers.

I shook my head at their bickering, but they didn’t see my wide grin. The brothers reminded me of my family.
Sweetness drizzled over the ache.

We found shelter in a smaller cave for the night. No storm yet—no mountain giants or whatever the hell they were called, yet—but the mist had rolled in and created such a thick haze we could barely see in front of us. Without fire and the unobstructed light of the moon, it became difficult to pick out where everyone was in the cave.

Bilbo huddled beside me, shivering from the damp and cold. It’d warm up in here pretty soon, with the small size of the cave and the thirteen living heaters all crammed in it. Fumbling, I rummaged in my pack and pulled out some lembas bread. Three dark figures conversed on the other side of the cave, all standing, all muttering in low Khuzdul.

I broke off a piece of bread and handed it to Bilbo in my partial blindness. He thanked me. Despite not being able to see that well, I continued to watch Thorin, Fili, and Kili. A king and his princes.

Each to be dead, soon.

I think...I think I knew a long time ago what I was finally admitting to myself now. I wouldn’t be me if I didn’t try to save those heading for death. At first, I tried to say that I would do it for Luis and his love toward this world. But I loved this world myself, didn’t I?

And maybe—just maybe—I could make it better by saving three lives.

Because I didn’t want to see them die.

I didn’t want to see Bilbo and the Company grieve over their deaths.

Since I got here, I denied pondering the goal because of what it could do to this world should I change it. I wasn’t some god. I had no letter telling me “This is your right! Your purpose! The explanation of your presence here!” I was as blind on how to do anything like I was in this cave.

But in all reality, I made up my mind when Fili gave me the coarse cloak I wrapped myself up in, when Kili tried cheering me up during my depressive I’m-not-going-home-anytime-soon week, and when Thorin—well, Thorin was never an instant moment, really.

He might not be my king like he was to the rest of them. But he was still a dwarf worth saving.

“Bilbo,” I whispered. He paused nibbling on the lembas bread.

“Yes?”

I fruitlessly wiped my cheek of the fine layer of mist. If I could confide in anybody, it was my hobbit friend. “I...I think I realize why I’m here.”

I anticipated Bilbo’s slow and unsure reaction. “That’s...er, good?”

Smiling, I took a bite of lembas bread and chewed on it. “Yeah. Guess it is. Tal vez esto pueda funcionar, después de todo.”

Bilbo didn’t respond. He curled tighter into his cloak, and we crunched our lembas bread in silence. The faint moonlight that managed to break through the sheet of fog soon grew weak, leaving me blind in the dark. As I lay down to find fitful sleep, I drew my blade from its sheath a few inches. No glowing. Good.

The Durins’ inaudible conversation came to an end, and soon a body settled beside me. I kept my
eyes closed, because it wouldn’t matter if I opened them. Hopefully it was Fili. Please be Fili.

Out of every crazy fucking thing that happened to me in Middle Earth, the last thing I expected was developing a crush. A crush on a dwarf. On a fictional—and incredibly real—dwarf.

It was Fili’s damn smile. And just how nice he was. Always willing to talk, never trying to embarrass me, continuously supportive. He exhibited a little more maturity than his younger brother, but still wasn’t afraid to goof off.

Most of all, Fili cared.

I never thought I’d like a boy shorter than me. Oh, man, I wouldn’t hear the end of it from Luis and Elena. But Fili could take a lot of teasing from them, since he and Kili had such a similar relationship like mine.

But they would never get to meet him, so I shouldn’t have been thinking about it.

And then I made myself sad.

“Valeria.”

Fili’s distinct, faint whisper made me open my eyes to the darkness. It was him. Okay. Cool. Cool. He chose to lay down in very close proximity. Cool.

“Hm?” I shifted and shut my eyes again, pretending to be much more tired than I actually was.

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Fili.”

In a ballsy move, I rolled a smidge over in Fili’s direction, close enough that my forehead pressed against his shoulder. Though he stiffened, he didn’t move away. About a minute later, I felt the brush of a knuckle rest on my thigh.

Shivers ran up my back.

I fell asleep trying to stifle a smile.

Chapter End Notes

I'll probs be posting every other day until I catch up with all I've written. I'm always just so excited to get new chapters up bc I love writing this fic so much.

Vamonos: let's move
Está bien: It's okay
Tal vez esto pueda funcionar, después de todo: maybe this can work, after all
The mist pulled back just to deliver the sight of dark storm clouds looming above us. For the first half of the day, they didn’t do much. Just threatening a downpour. Without the thick fog to hinder our sight, we made better progress. Things were looking pretty good!

Then rain burst from the clouds, and everything went to shit.

Thunder clapped so loud and close that it nearly made me go deaf. Lightning cracked through the black sky, running rampant as it offered split-seconds of harsh, deadly white light. Sometimes it seemed so close that if I reached my hand out, I could grasp a bolt.

It was only in those moments that I could really see. Between the strikes, I was left almost completely blind. Dwalin had a firm grip on my shoulder, and Bilbo hung tightly onto my hand. He was ahead of me, this time around, and I placed my trust in him to guide me through the craggy mountain pass.

Tonight. It was going to be tonight, wasn’t it?

“Ah!”

Lightning raced through the storm. Its temporary light showed Bilbo going down, slipping right off the path. He twisted in an attempt to use me as an anchor, but I only got thrown off-balance, as well. Bilbo careened over the edge, and I followed close behind.

Dwalin’s large hand dug into my shoulder, and he hauled the both of us back from the brink of falling hundreds of feet to our death. I accidentally yanked Bilbo so hard that he crashed into the mountain wall.

The whole thing was over by the time the last of the electric light faded, and I again returned to the cold pitch black.

Still, I found Bilbo’s face and pressed a hand to his freezing cheek. “Are you okay?” I shouted over the wind and thunder. Another bright crack, and I glimpsed Bilbo’s wide-eyed terror.

“We gotta keep moving, lass!” Dwalin yelled. I wanted to cling to the light given to me, but it slipped away.

I moved my hand down and found his. “Lead on, Baggins,” I spoke, blinking out the rainwater from my eyes. I thought I heard a shaky breath, but in the stormy chaos, I couldn’t be sure.

Bilbo tugged on my hand, and we started skirting against the thin path once more.

Whenever I accidentally ate almonds, I always had that Sense of Impending Doom before the anaphylaxis set in. But, after all the years being in my line of work, that same sense lined up with the moments before disaster struck.

Oh, no.

“We must find shelter!” Thorin bellowed. An instant later, thunder swallowed the world with its
sound and lightning tore the sky open.

In the terrifying radiance, a massive silhouette of black rock sailed through the storm.

I appropriately screamed, “HOLY SHIT!”

“Look out!” Dwalin shoved Bilbo and me against the wall just as the rock collided with the mountain. It shattered upon impact and shook the earth so violently that I was afraid the ground would come right out from under us.

As chunks of stone rained from above, I entered a state of panic-induced calm. Where existence slowed and sped up, sounds faded but became louder, and my body went into hyper-awareness. I stopped thinking. Stopped fearing.

The only thing that mattered was acting and coming out of this safely.

“This is no thunderstorm!” Balin cried, pointing a finger to the opposite canyon wall. A piece of the mountain tore itself from the rock, grating and groaning in an ethereal language too beautiful for the sheer brutality it embodied. “It’s a thunder battle! Look!”

Lightning now streaked and scattered at such high volume that it kept me from being plunged back into darkness. There weren’t any pauses between booms of thunder, anymore. Just constant, bone-buzzing roars.

“Well bless me!” Bofur clung to the top of his hat to keep it from flying off in the wind. For a moment, we were all caught up in beholding the sight of something ancient, something primal. “Giants! Stone giants!”

The elemental being pitched another huge chunk of rock our direction, but this time it sailed past us. We watched as another giant stood in the storm, only to get hit with the projectile. It cried out in its beautiful song and crashed back against the mountain, creating another rumble. I clutched Bilbo’s hand and pulled him close to me, taking steady, even breaths.

“Hang on!” I told him, hoping he’d hear over the storm and giant battle.

Because the rumbling did not stop. Our tiny path crumbled more along the edge, and the dark drop below nearly pulled me from my calm. But I took another breath, widened my stance, and got ready for one of the worst roller coaster rides of my life.

The path split, and the mountain wall yawned open. Bilbo screamed and about lost his footing again, but I threw us back against the stone and braced as best I could without any traction on my boots.

Giant song reverberated in my skull, and I watched as from above, another stone creature removed itself from its resting place. I couldn’t even begin to comprehend its enormity. All I could do was press a hand against slick rock and hope we wouldn’t go careening off the giant’s kneecap.

I gritted my teeth as the giant got headbutted by another, pushing it back into the mountain and swinging us to the right. It allowed Thorin’s half of the Company to reach the path undisturbed by giant, but our side was still too separated to do anything.

It moved again, and I stopped trying to see what the giants were doing and focused on keeping Bilbo and myself from falling off. Dwalin still held my shoulder. His grip was so strong that I’d have bruises from it. The dwarves shouted and cursed as we got swung around again, but I was thankful for the gravitational force pressing down. It was what kept us in a relatively locked
Another boulder hurtled right toward our giant, and a second later a shudder rocketed through the stone. It became imbalanced, and we careened around again, this time moving and spinning so far that in the torrent of lightning, I saw Thorin and the other half of the Company pass in front of my eyes. If we’d been just a few feet closer, we might have been able to jump and hope that we’d get caught.

But the giant leaned back, dropping the pressure on us, and for a moment I found myself staring up into the stormy sky. Razor blade raindrops streaked across my cheeks. Bombur pleaded to the heavens, “Mahal, be merciful!”

*We’re all going to be fine.*

The giant’s body swayed forward. We pitched straight into the mountain, and the toppling behemoth blocked out the light given to me. I shielded Bilbo as best I could, but upon impact I went flying and hit the stone head-first. Stars burst in my blackened vision. I lost hold of Bilbo, and Dwalin’s grasp came loose.

The calm turned into distant relaxation. Immovability. Pain centralized right into my head where I collided with the rock.

No. Oh, no, I didn’t want to die again. Not in front of all them. Not at all. Please.

A different kind of darkness enveloped me. One without rain and cold.

Maybe I’d be going home.

—

“…Valeria…”

“…Valeria!”

I groaned at the noise. The pounding headache. The chill of damp clothes. The patting of a thick hand against my cheek.

“Oh, thank Mahal, she’s awake.”

“No quiero estar despierta,” I mumbled. Acrid cotton filled my mouth.

“Can ye open your eyes, lassie?”

Oin’s voice crept through my stuffy head. I cracked one lid open, then the other. That post-awakening sickness soured my stomach.

“Ugh, no me siento bien.”

“You’re speaking in your language, Valeria. What’d you say?”

I swallowed, coughed, then hazily fumbled for the waterskin by my hip. In the darkness, somebody grabbed it for me, and a moment later it pressed to my lips. “Small drinks, lass.”

“I know,” I whispered. I said that same thing to plenty of other people. I’d follow my own instructions.
As my bleary eyes adjusted to the dark, I saw Oin, Fili, Kili, Thorin, and Balin surrounding me. We’d taken shelter in a cave—probably when I was unconscious—and the storm had weakened to light rainfall.

“Do I…is my head…?” I couldn’t think of the word for what I wanted to use in English, so I just gestured a weak hand.

“We’ll have to see,” Oin said, apparently knowing what I referenced. “Why don’t we sit you up, eh?”

I was lifted up and seated against the side of the cave wall. The movement momentarily made me dizzy, but afterward my mind started to clear. That was a good sign. I remembered why I got knocked out, and the sickness began to dissipate.

“Bilbo,” I said, turning my aching head. “Is he—”

“I’m fine, Valeria.” A small figure emerged from the darker side of the cave. Bilbo took my hand and gave it a slight squeeze. “No need to worry about me. Just save your strength.”

I thought I could see something troubling him. I’d gotten pretty good at figuring Bilbo out. What was I forgetting? What happened? Was it just me getting knocked out?

“Your assistance is not needed, Master Baggins,” Thorin snapped. Bilbo swallowed, and I could almost feel the harsh words spear through him.

Oh. Oh. The—what happened after the stone giants—Bilbo hanging off the ledge—Thorin—and fuck, I wasn’t there to defend him like I planned. Shit.

Bilbo went to withdraw, but with returning strength I held tight onto his hand. “No. He’s good.”

“His uselessness nearly killed you—”

“No it did not, Thorin,” I sighed. “I rammed headfirst into a stone wall because I couldn’t see anything. And I got knocked unconscious because my skull isn’t as thick like yours, thank god.” I took another small sip of the tepid water. “Leave him alone. And where the fuck is my pack?”

“She’s back to herself, alright,” Balin said with a light chuckle. Fili handed me my bag, and I rummaged around for the jar of elven ointment. An aroma of lavender and other magically-imbued spices drifted up when I opened the lid. I dipped a finger in, scooped out a dollop, and smeared it across my aching forehead and the back of my neck.

“If this makes me break out, I’m gonna punch a wall.”

The ointment did the trick, as I suspected it would. A soothing tingling sensation, like Icy Hot or something, settled into my skin. Within a couple minutes, there was hardly any pain left. I hummed contentedly and put my pack on. I wasn’t about to lose it if goblins got us tonight.

Well. Not if. When.

Still, I was tired from the arduous day and consequent giant battle. After a small meal of lembas bread, dried fruit, and water, I settled back and wrapped my cloak around me. “How are you, Baggins?” I whispered as I closed my eyes.

“Oh. I…I’m doing well. Still cold. But the rain has let up, at least.”
I slumped further down and shifted so my head leaned Bilbo’s way. “Don’t let Thorin get you down, alright? You are incredibly important.”

He didn’t answer.

The lull of drizzling rain tapping against mountain rock pulled me into sleep, no matter how much I wanted to resist its siren call.

I decided to close my eyes for just one moment.

Just one moment.

“…can’t turn back now. You’re part of the Company. One of us.”

Bofur’s hushed voice and the distinct absence of a little body beside me was like a bucket of water being dumped over my head. I snapped awake, blinking furiously to try and adjust my vision once more to the dark. The moon, unhindered by mist or cloud, cast its silver light upon the entrance of the cave just for me.

I sat up, back creaking from the odd position I’d hunched into upon my not-so-momentary slumber.

“I’m not though, am I?” My heart broke at the sound of Bilbo’s resigned belief. “Thorin said I should never have come, and he was right. I’m not a Took. I’m not Valeria. I’m a Baggins. I don’t know what I was thinking.” One of his bare feet shuffled against the ground. “I never should have come.”

“Bilbo,” I called as quietly as I could, standing to my feet and stepping over slumbering dwarf bodies to meet them. He and Bofur turned to me, and in the dim light I saw his look become only more doubting. “Bilbo, no. You belong here.”

“Aye, she’s right. You’re just homesick,” said Bofur. “I understand.”

“No—you don’t. You don’t understand. None of you do. You’re dwarves. You’re used to—to this life. Living on the road. Never settling in one place. Not belonging anywhere!”

The harsh words toward Bofur—the one dwarf who constantly supported the two of us outsiders—slapped me in the face.

“Hey.”

I put a hand on Bilbo’s shoulder and fixed him with my gaze. He tried to glance away, but I guided it back with a finger to his cheek. “That’s not true. And you know it. Bilbo, you…you have so much greatness waiting for you. This quest—our quest—will only succeed if you’re with us.”

“You don’t know that.”

“But I do,” I spoke with all the soft sternness my mother had taught me.

He wrenched his shoulder free and stepped further back to the entrance. “No, you don’t, Valeria. You don’t know anything—” Bilbo caught his grimace before it could fully encompass his face. He took a breath. “Well. I—I’m sorry. But I must be off.”

“You can’t go.”

My emotions got the best of me and broke the calm I’d maintained thus far. Just imagining what
things would be like without the hobbit at my side hurt more than anything else. “It’s the two of us, yeah? You…I promise, Bilbo, that you’ll get there. You will. Just trust me. Please.”

Bilbo’s eyes gleamed. He bit his lip, clenched his fists, yet didn’t move. I went to hug him, but a faint blue glow on his hip grabbed my attention.

*Fuck. No, no, no.*

I’d been so distracted and tired that I forgot to take out the one thing that could alert us of enemies.

I twisted and yanked my blade out. Blue, relentless light immersed itself in the cave. I inhaled sharply, and my eyes moved past the blade to the other awake figure frozen in its pallor.

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered to Thorin.

Sand hissed into an opening crack in the middle of the floor. Contraptions groaned and creaked in the terrified silence. Thorin bolted upright, kicking Dwalin as he shouted, “Wake up! Wake up!"

I managed to sheathe my blade and shoot Bilbo a fearful, apologetic glance.

Then the ground gave way, and I pitched through the air with Bilbo and Bofur.

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**Chapter End Notes**

Okay, I know this is a relatively short chapter. But the next one is going to be a lot longer, I promise. I had that dilemma where I had to decide whether to go with the short/long or long/short chapter combo. So for those reading, just hang in there.

No quiero estar despierta: I don't want to be awake
no me siento bien: I don't feel well
The next few seconds were dizzying chaos. Dwarves rolled over me—and I rolled over dwarves—as we tumbled through a slick tunnel straight out of an even more deranged version of a Willy Wonka movie. I didn’t even have the chance to get the wind knocked out before I was falling again, screaming and legs kicking. Thankfully, I landed on top of Kili and Bifur, making it far enough on the edge of the cage we’d landed in that Bombur didn’t crash onto me.

“Stay out of sight, Ria!” Kili moved himself on top of me, hastily pulling my cloak hood up. Shrieks and squeals filled the enormous cavern we’d been tossed into.

This was what I wanted to avoid.

Kili shouted and cursed as he was yanked off, and a second later clawed hands were pulling and pushing me upright.

Goblins were horrifying, in their own slimy, rancid way. Though they only came up to my waist, their bulbous eyes, pale skin, and jagged yellow teeth made up for the small stature. Though I tried to keep my hood up and face from view, a goblin yanked the cover down as it pushed me along the rickety bridges we were being herded across. More eager snaps and shrieks bounced off the cavern walls, adding to the cacophony of the subterranean city the Company found itself captured in.

Scaly claws groped my thighs and butt. I screamed savagely, getting a good kick into a goblin and sending it stumbling away. But two more just took its place.

The path opened up into the bulk of the city. The—oh, fuck, what was it called—the Goblin Town. Bridges and ropes twined through the vast open space, and just as many torchlights spattered across the city as skittering masses of goblins. Off-tune drums and trumpets blared down on us, a vicious tune to go with the vicious things the goblins had planned.

An ugly, cracked song burst forth, and in the distance I spotted a swollen mass waving a staff around as he sung. Goblin Town.

*Down down down in Goblin Town.*

Holy fuck, so they *did* sing.

A mirthless, half-sane laugh bubbled up from me before I could stop it.

The Goblin King was even uglier up close. All pustules and goiters, rolls and rashes. The bone crown atop his bald, liver-spotted head looked tiny compared to the rest of his fat girth. As he belted out his final notes of the ear-bleeding song, he shook the flimsy platform we stood on. I found myself near the back by Fili and Bombur. Fili guided me in front of him so I wouldn’t be vulnerable to more goblin violation.
He kept ahold of my hand.

“Canny, isn’t it?” the Goblin King said as he sat his boil-riddled body onto the makeshift throne. “It’s one of my own compositions.” Spittle flew as he spoke.

“That’s not a song,” Balin barked. “That’s an abomination!”

The dwarves voiced their concurrence as the goblins prodded us with prongs and spears. “Abominations, mutations, deviations! That’s all you’re gonna find down here! Strip them of their weapons!”

My glowing blades got ripped out of their sheaths and thrown into a pile with the rest of the Company’s swords and axes. The goblin handling them screeched when he saw it was of elven make and cursed at me in his own language.

They didn’t find the dagger in my boot.

The Goblin King stood back up and rattled the bridge with his giant steps. “Who would be so bold as to come armed into my kingdom? Spies? Thieves? Assassins?”

“Dwarves, your malevolence! And a human woman!”

“Dwarves? And a human?”

“We found ’em on the front porch!”

“Well don’t just stand there! Search them! Every crack! Every crevice!”

I pressed myself far enough back into Fili that they wouldn’t see my pack. I’d lost my bedroll to the fall, so it didn’t stand out as much. The goblins’ height disadvantage worked in my favor, since they missed it completely.

Also, they got distracted by Nori’s items. The dwarf had pilfered junk from Rivendell like candleholders and dining utensils. It put us in league with elves, apparently, and Nori’s defense was a muttered, “It’s just a couple of keepsakes.”

“What’re you doing in these parts?” the Goblin King demanded to know.

Oin stepped up before Thorin could to give an answer, but his stalling didn’t last long. Then Bofur tried at it, but his stalling was even worse than Oin’s, being all, “We went here, but not really here, and then we meant to go here, but ended up here, but it wasn’t really there, and our cousins in the Dunland gave us the wrong directions, and we found ourselves on a path, but not exactly a path, more of a track, come to think of it—”

“Shut uppppp!” the Goblin King roared, causing his giblets to shake. “If they will not talk, we’ll make them squawk! Bring up the mangler! Bring up the bonebreaker!” He pointed at me with a demonic grin, and my legs went numb. “Start with the woman!”

Several claws immediately wrapped around my arms and legs. I screamed and thrashed, trying to hold onto Fili’s hand. He shouted my name, but our grip was severed by a goblin bashing my wrist with a club. As soon as I let go, I was lifted off my feet and thrown in front of the Goblin King.

I stared up at him. The stench of rot and unwashed skin rolled off him. My teeth ground together. Let him come, then. I started reaching down to the boot with my dagger in it. I’d stab his fucking eye out—
“Wait!”

The king’s beady eyes locked in on Thorin, and the grin once directed at me now settled on him. “Well, well, well,” he laughed. “Look who it is! Thorin, son of Thrain, son of Thror, King under the Mountain!” The Goblin King bowed mockingly, and while he was distracted, Thorin pulled me upright and kept a firm hand on my lower back.

“Oh! But I’m forgetting—you don’t have a mountain, and you’re not a king, which makes you a nobody, really.”

The Goblin King’s eyes narrowed, grin turning into a sneer. “I know someone who would pay a pretty price for your head. Just a head. Nothing attached. Perhaps…you know of whom I speak.” He stood back up to his full height, which was daunting this close. “An old enemy of yours.”

Thorin darkened beside me.

“A pale orc, astride a white warg.”

“Azog the Defiler was destroyed,” Thorin growled. “He was slain in battle long ago.”

Oh, how I wished that weren’t true.

“So you think his defiling days are done, do you?” The Goblin King moved over to a shriveled goblin strung up in a seat-like contraption hooked to a zipline. “Send word to the Pale Orc. Tell him I have found his prize.”

The goblin messenger chittered, wrote something down on a crude piece of parchment, and zipped off, cackling as he went.

Then the king turned back to us. His grin returned. “I think our defiling days have just started. Isn’t that right, human?”

In a strikingly fast move, I was snatched up by the Goblin King. His meaty hand wrapped around my entire waist. “Now, what is a woman doing with a band of dwarves? A Haradrim? Easterling spy? So far from home, poor thing!”

He threw me to the ground, and my shoulder cracked against the wood. “Show her the hospitality of Goblin Town, boys!” the king cried.

The dwarves’ shouts were drowned out by the howling of excited goblins. All at once, I was overwhelmed by fetid bodies, each of them scratching and clawing at my hair, face, breasts, and legs.

Screams—my screams—filled my ears. I managed to reach down and pull out the dagger from my boot. It slammed into a goblin’s chest, and a rush of air left him as he toppled over. I threw two more goblins off me, wildly slashing the dagger around so they’d have to give me space in order to avoid it.

I managed to get to my feet, staggering. The shallow claw marks the left on my cheek and neck seared more than they should have. One goblin was brave enough to launch itself at me. I dodged and threw it off the platform.

That only egged the goblins on. “Go on, get her!” the Goblin King bellowed. “Whip! Scratch! Claw! Bash!”
“Valeria! Behind you!”

Fingers twisted in my hair and jerked me backwards. Stars exploded in front of my eyes as my head collided with the floor. A goblin pried the dagger from me, and ten more were there to hold down their plaything.

I screamed and screamed, mixing in both Spanish and English curses. Scurrying goblins tore at the cinches on my leggings, and the second I felt one side come loose they were being tugged down. No! Damnit! Shit!

The goblins flipped me over on my stomach, grinding the side of my face into the splintered and rotting wood. As I helplessly thrashed, I saw the Company fighting to get to me. They got whipped by more vermin and sequestered in an even tighter circle. I wanted to shout for their help, but how could they do anything? They were being assaulted, and the sheer number of goblins kept them separated from me.

This wasn’t how things were supposed to play out.

But I refused to close my eyes. I would not give up.

A surge of manic strength gave me the ability to tear my pinned arm free. I used it to roll over and kick the two goblins pulling my pants down. “Get! Off! Me!” When another tried to wrangle my arm back, I punched it right in its juicy eyeball.

“Such spirit!” The Goblin King stomped on his throne. “Break it! And make sure her dwarves are watching!”

A goblin raised a whip to lash at me. I brought my arms up to shield myself from it—

Radiant light washed through the cavern, filling the world with strange silence. The goblins on top of me were blasted away by the light’s tangible force. I would have gotten up and moved, but the pressure from the light was too great.

All the fear and fight in me subsided for a few blissful moments.

When it faded, a kind of stunned quiet ensued. I sat up, blinking away the residual white spots, and watched a figure emerge from the shadows. Staff, hat, robes, beard.

I broke out into a grin. In the temporary stillness, like a breath before the leap, Gandalf spoke.

“Take up arms. Fight. Fight!”

Then the chaos resumed. I leapt up and hastily retied my leggings, hoping they’d stay up. The glowing blades were easy to pick out from the weapons pile, and as soon as they were back in my hands, I was thrusting them into a goblin.

I’d never killed anything like this before.

But now was not the time to get swallowed in the shock, the ramifications. Because otherwise, I’d be getting speared through the stomach.

And I didn’t want to die today.

All the maneuvers and motions Fili taught me coursed through my body, though combined with the adrenaline it was more brutal than fluid. Once Thorin knocked the Goblin King off the platform,
we were running, jumping, hacking our way through goblins.

We followed Gandalf down bridges and stairs, and it was just like hurdles—except the hurdles could lead to death, the opponents could lead to death, and just about everything could lead to death. Goblins swarmed us from all sides, and a few times I wasn’t sure we’d make it through no matter how much I sliced and slashed. But the dwarves were fierce fighters. What I lacked in skill, they made up for it tenfold.

I ran next to Fili at one point. We both shot wild grins at each other despite the enemy all around us.

Gandalf aimed us to a bridge clear of goblins. Not ten feet in, though, the massive king burst out from under it and climbed his way up. Our stopping meant we got surrounded once more in three seconds flat.

I held my blades up.

“You thought you could escape me?” The Goblin King swiped at Gandalf with his crude scepter, but the wizard dodged both attacks with unnatural dexterity. Behind me, some of the dwarves were fighting off goblins trying to pick us off. “What are you going to do now, wizard?”

_right. Right! Fucking that’s right!

Gandalf jabbed his staff into the Goblin King’s eye. As the monster reeled backward, yelping in pain, Gandalf sliced the fat on his belly, then lunged forward and sliced his throat. Dark blood sprayed onto the bridge, and that bitter smell I’ve come to find belonged to dark creatures permeated the area.

The Goblin King heaved forward, and his weight became too much for the bridge. It groaned and snapped, its last support beams giving way.

_we’re going to fall, aren’t we?

I sheathed my blades just before the thought became a reality.

Screaming, we plummeted into the city below. I clung to a beam for dear life as the breaking bridge shot down, down, down, crashing through other ropes and platforms and goblins. The bridge then caught a dip and went airborne for a few blissful, weightless moments.

My head about popped off from my body with the whiplash of landing on the slippery stone surface. The platform broke apart even more as we scraped into a crevice. It slowed, almost stopped, then dropped another ten feet. The wood shattered upon impact, leaving us in a heap of rubble.

Though I had one giant, cumulative Pain everywhere, I struggled out of the platform while the rest of the dwarves groaned and recovered from the jarring freefall. Gandalf, who had already gotten himself out, pulled me from the mangled pieces of wood.

He squeezed my shoulder and did a once-over. “Are you alright, my dear?”

“Yeah,” I panted. “Yeah, I am. Thank you.”

“Tell me,” he said, leaning close. “Did you know this would happen?”

I nodded. “I tried…I tried to stop it.”
“Mm. Yet some things will be as they are.”

“Well,” Bofur said in the background, “that could have been worse!”

“Watch this,” I whispered, and we turned to the platform just in time to see a very dead Goblin King land on top of the Company. Laughter pealed behind the hand slapped over my mouth at the sheer ridiculousness at it all. Gandalf chuckled beside me, as well. His sense of humor hadn’t left him.

“You’ve got to be joking!” Dwalin yelled.

Gandalf and I began helping the Company from the platform. Not twenty seconds in, though, a horde of skittering howling drew our attention back to the city we just sledded away from. Hundreds—maybe even a thousand goblins barreled right toward us, ready to strip the flesh from our bones.

“There’s too many! We can’t fight them!”

“Only one thing will save us,” Gandalf said, ushering me into a run. “Daylight!”

And with that, we were running once more.

I collapsed onto a tree trunk and unslung my pack. We’d been fleeing for the better part of the day. The primary waterskin I carried had been lost in Goblin Town, but the backup ones Gallien and Tiriel gave me were still secure. I took a swig, barely restraining myself from downing it all. We were only taking a small break; I couldn’t be waterlogged for the next round of sprinting.

“Oi, you alright?” Nori asked me between tired breaths. He pointed to my face. “You got some shiners there.”

The scratches still burned. I nodded, sealing the waterskin back up and changing it out for the elven ointment. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine.”

He raised his busy brows dubiously, but said nothing. I hissed as I applied the ointment. It worsened the burning sensation for a few agonizing seconds, then soothed it over beautifully.

“Where’s Bilbo?”

I jerked my head up at Gandalf, who posed the question to the Company. “Where is our hobbit?” When nobody answered, he repeated the question more angrily.

“Curse that halfling!” Gloin spat. “Now he’s lost? I thought he was with Dori!”

“Don’t blame me!”

“Where did you last see him?”

“I think I saw him slip away when they first collared us,” Nori said.

“Then what happened, exactly? Tell me!”

Gandalf looked to me for an answer. But as I opened my mouth to give him one, Thorin cut me off. “I’ll tell you what happened. Master Baggins saw his chance and he took it! He has thought of nothing but his soft bed and his warm hearth since he first stepped out of his door.”
Thorin folded his arms. “We will not be seeing our hobbit again. He is long gone.”

The wizard watched me frown exaggeratedly and shake my head at Thorin’s accusations.

I was proven right a moment later.

“No,” Bilbo said, stepping out from behind a tree. “He isn’t.”

I grinned and stood, not even bothering to look surprised. Bilbo glanced my way and I winked at him. A bright, nervous smile fluttered across his lips.

“Bilbo Baggins,” Gandalf declared with a boisterous chuckle. “I’ve never been so glad to see anyone in my life.”

“Bilbo,” Kili grinned. “We’d given you up!”

“How on earth did you get past the goblins?” asked Fili.

The hobbit laughed awkwardly and, had I not been paying attention, I wouldn’t have seen him slip something into his pocket.

Some of the happiness in me soured.

“Well, what does it matter? He’s back!” Gandalf said, motioning his staff to Bilbo.

“It matters,” said Thorin. He took a step toward Bilbo. “I want to know. Why did you come back?”

Bilbo tweaked his nose. Brows scrunching, he said, “Look, I know you doubt me. I know you always have. And you’re right. I often think of Bag End. I miss my books. And my armchair. And my garden. See, that’s where I belong. That’s home. That’s why I came back, because…you don’t have one. A home. It was taken from you. But I will help you take it back if I can.”

The humble sincerity and compassion of the hobbit put the dwarves into a sort of stupor. Even Thorin, who just tipped his head to Bilbo and said nothing. A good sign, I’ve come to find.

I walked up to Bilbo, crouched onto one knee, and threw my arms around him. He hugged me tightly back, breath becoming ragged and shallow. “I’m sorry, Valeria,” he spoke. “For what I said earlier.”

“It’s okay. It really is.” I pulled back just so he could see my thumbs up. Weakly, Bilbo returned it.

His eyes scanned my injuries and disheveled appearance. Concern stiffened his countenance.

“Are you alright?”

I forced out a chuckle and stood back up. My scrunchie, thankfully, was still on my wrist after the whole goblin ordeal. I twisted my hair back into a messy bun and secured it with the scrunchie.

“I’m fine, I’m fine. The goblins just…”

As soon as I tried to describe the assault, my throat went dry. I’d always had the ability to overcome even the worst of things in a short amount of time without lingering trauma, but it seemed I hadn’t gotten to that point quite yet.

So I placed both hands on Bilbo’s shoulders. “I’m just glad you’re in one piece. I knew you’d make it out.”

Bilbo smiled through his exhaustion.
Maybe it was because Bilbo had said that I didn’t know anything about what was going to happen earlier, but I lowered my voice and conspiratorially asked, “So, did any of my riddles help you out?”

The smile vanished. Bilbo opened and closed his mouth, making a hoarse, baffled noise. I patted his curly head.

Before he could even get a word out, familiar howls echoed through the mountainside. Our moment of peace had been broken by reality.

“Out of the frying pan,” Thorin started.

“And into the fire,” Gandalf finished. “Run. Run!”

Bilbo was on his last legs, and he could barely keep up even as we raced downhill. I was wearing thin, too, after more hours of running, but I still paused and crouched down, quickly putting my pack on him. “Come on, here,” I said, and gestured for Bilbo to climb on. He did so without protest, and I hooked my arms under his legs and pushed back off the ground. My muscles shook as I caught up with the Company, but if I kept a solid pace then I wouldn’t collapse.

“We’ll get through this, Baggins,” I found myself saying. Because we would. “We’ll get through this. I promise.”

Night was upon us once more when the wargs caught up. I had to drop Bilbo in order to fend off a snarling beast, and when I turned back around to him, I saw his Not-Yet-Sting embedded in a dead warg’s skull.

“Up into the trees!” Gandalf yelled. “Hurry! Bilbo! Valeria!”

I yanked the sword back out for Bilbo and drug him off. The dwarves were already in sickly pine trees, and more wargs bounded down the mountainside. I could almost feel their hot breath on my neck.

I boosted Bilbo into a low tree branch, making sure he didn’t flip right off the other side before I jumped up as well.

“Valeria!”

A warg snapped the space I occupied a moment ago. But I climbed higher, trying to make out the dark branches in the night. The full pack of wargs snarled below us, running through the trees we found ourselves both saved by and stranded in.

I didn’t need light to see a white warg approach, ridden by a large pale shape.

“Azog,” I whispered.

He shouted something in a guttural language, then signaled for the wargs to attack once more. Their ferocity amplified, and the pine trees shook under their weight. One leapt so high and close that I could see strings of glistening saliva in its maw.

Bilbo’s and my tree shuddered and began to tip sideways. “Hang on!” I shouted, and clung to the spindly trunk as it toppled over. The tree smashed into others, creating a catastrophic domino effect. Somehow, I managed to leap from one tree to the other like the rest of the dwarves, and we ended up in the one pine still standing.
Of course it had to be at the very edge of the cliff. Was this fuckery in the movie? Or was it its own horrible set of events?

Whatever it might be, I remembered one thing.

“Gandalf!” I called, trying to hang onto the branch I looped myself around. “Fire! Use fire!”

Though I couldn’t see the wizard’s face, I knew he heard me, for a smoldering pinecone soon illuminated his visage. Once it ignited into full flame, he chucked it down at the wargs below. With such dry grass and trees, it spread fast. Heat vented upward, and the smell of wildfire brought back memories.

One of the dwarves pulled me up fully on the branch. I plucked a large pinecone off and had the fire passed to it by Bilbo’s glowing orange one. I breathed into it, ignored its rising temperature, and then aimed the pinecone at a warg. Now that fire had spread, I had no trouble seeing where everything was.

I threw it at the warg and watched it hit. The beast’s oily fur caught on fire. It howled and fled. Bilbo pitched his own pinecone at another, and it squarely hit the warg’s side.

“Nice shot!”

“Thank you!” Bilbo chimed.

We cheered as the rest of the wargs fled from the fiery scourge—for a moment. Then the tree supporting all of our weight gave in, and the bulk it flung off the edge of the cliff. Pine needles and bark dust covered my head, and I nearly lost my grip.

But, I mean, it’d just be a test to see if I could come back from being a smear on the rocks.

I watched Thorin stand up and start walking to Azog, his sword drawn. “Thorin! Don’t! Don’t! Thorin! No! You dumb fuck!” I cried, frantically grappling the branch I hung on. But my pleas were lost amidst the Company’s own, and we watched as he engaged in battle with the Pale Orc.

“He can’t beat Azog,” I said aloud, not sure if anybody would hear. “Not on the warg. He’s going to die.”

In the rising cinder and smoke, a small, brave hobbit stood on the fallen trunk. I gazed up at Bilbo. From my angle, I viewed the vast amount of strength he held in such a little stature. His sword glowed brazenly in the firelight.

This is supposed to happen, I told myself as I watched Bilbo run down the tree. He was incredibly light on his feet, and weaving through the branches faster than anyone else could have. This is supposed to happen.

The chant did nothing to quell the raging fear in me.

Watching Bilbo go off alone returned some stamina that I’d been drained of. I struggled on the branch, swinging one leg over, then moved upright. Chips of bark dug into my palms. Smoke seeped into my lungs.

And I was ready to fight again.

The white warg mangled his oaken-shielded arm and threw him several feet away. Before he could even get back up, it was crunching down on him, and Thorin’s screams of agony cut through the
night. It repeated the throw. Thorin hit the side of a jutting rock, and when he lay unmoving, another orc dismounted from his warg and approached the dwarven king, ready to finish him off. It raised its blade—

A hobbit slammed into its side with a shout. Bilbo rolled to the ground with the orc, and drove his blade into its chest before it could do anything. Then he was up again, swinging his sword at the wargs now encircling him.

He looked so small.

I found myself up on my feet, both blades raised. I broke into a sprint, jumping and tripping over branches. Others joined my side. We ran into the fire, outnumbered but unafraid.

A fierce scream ripped from my throat, and I plunged my blades into the flank of a warg closest to Bilbo. It yelped and bit at me, but I ducked and jammed the right blade up into its throat. The orc riding it was felled by Fili, and then I was slashing the gut of an orc that charged at me.

“Pinche orco!” I took on another warg, and Dwalin finished it off with a blow from his war hammer. Kili shot down a rider, and I ran it through with the left blade to silence it forever.

A warg drove its snout into my side and flipped me off my feet. I hit the ground hard but scrambled away to avoid its jaws. It barked and backed off when I delivered a shallow cut to its head. I goaded it with, “¡Ven aquí, puta!”

The warg lunged again. A throwing knife lodged itself into the rider’s skull, and the suddenly off-balance beast took its last breath an instant later when I slit its throat. The move felt reckless, and I wasn’t watching my footing, but the fighting was too chaotic for me to concentrate on all the technicalities.

The throwing knife belonged to Fili, who fought a few feet away from me. He cried out as an unmounted warg swiped at him with its massive paw. Fili tumbled to the ground, losing his sword upon impact. The warg reared back to bite down on him, but in the vivid hyper-calm I found myself staring down at my blades, which were now embedded into the beast’s matted fur neck. Foul blood covered my hands and wrists.

I wrenched the weapons out. Fili picked his sword up and stood again. We shared the same kind of grin like the one back in Goblin Town. Wild and sharp.

But I left myself open too long. I chose to strike instead of defend.

I almost felt the blade coming, really.

From somewhere in the smoke and flame, Bilbo brokenly shouted my name. But by then…oh, by then, the orc blade was sticking out of my chest.

It was so strange, staring down at something that shouldn’t be there. Something glistening with my own blood.

The fire’s warmth grew cold, and all was calm.

When the orc’s sword removed itself, blood filled my mouth. It had no taste. Just heat.

Darkness pulled over my eyes. I was swathed in nothing.

I became nothing.
Chapter End Notes

I can't believe we're already at this point. RIP Valeria lol.

Pinche orco: fucking orc
¡Ven aquí, puta!: come here, bitch
"I am sorry I doubted you, Master Baggins," Thorin said to the hobbit, releasing him from the embrace. He hurt; but he hurt because he was saved by the most unlikely of people. He hurt because he was alive.

Thorin owed his life and the future of Erebor to Bilbo Baggins of Bag End.

The hobbit sniffed and weakly smiled.

"But there has always been someone who never doubted you, hasn’t there?" Thorin turned, half-smiling, to the Company. He searched for the black-haired woman amongst the dwarves. "Where is Valeria?"

It was then that the sorrowful expressions, red-rimmed eyes, and absence of answers all came together. At first he thought it was worry for him. But no. No.

No.

Shame and dread weighed heavy in Thorin’s stomach, making his knees weak.

"Where is Valeria?" he repeated.

Thorin looked to Fili, who simply scrubbed at his eyes. The eldest nephew had been keen on her since the very start. Kili held his older brother. Tears flowed freely from them both. Dwalin clasped Balin’s shoulder, the two despondent. Dori dabbed at wet cheeks with his handkerchief. Bofur clutched his hat in his hands.

"Where is Valeria?"

Bilbo sniffed again. Thorin shifted back to the hobbit. Fresh pain blossomed at the sight of his grief.

“She was left behind,” Balin choked out. “She…she…”

“She fell,” said Dwalin. The warrior did not weep like others, but Thorin knew him well enough to see the struggle of remaining stoic.

The air left Thorin. He staggered, and his blurred vision turned to the golden sunrise. It cascaded over the mountains, bathing them in brilliant light they did not deserve.

“We must go back for her,” he said. As much as he tried to steel his voice, a cracked fissured through it, nonetheless. “We cannot let her lie among the filth of orcs and wargs.”

“I’m sorry, Thorin,” Gandalf spoke gravely. Out of all of them, the wizard remained the most composed. “But we are too far away, now. The proud eagles would not take us back for the sole purpose of carrying a corpse.”

“A corpse?” Anger mixed with the anguish. “Is that all she is to you now?”

Gandalf remained patient. His eyes, as sorrowful as they were, did not betray frustration. Only
sympathy. It made Thorin want to fight and collapse all at once. “Valeria Juarez was many things. Many great, valiant, kind things. Her passing—her memory—are what we will carry with us now.” He stepped forward, patting Fili’s shoulder as he went.

“She has not left us. Not unless we will it so.” Gandalf tipped his staff to the northeast. “We must continue on. Otherwise, the pain of Lady Valeria’s death will be but untethered grief without respite.”

Thorin and the Company followed the direction of the staff, until they beheld the meaning of this quest. The place they all wanted to call home once more.

The Lonely Mountain.

It stood in the violet haze of dawn, peaking above brushstrokes of clouds. The sorrow pulled back its veil over Thorin’s soul. He breathed in the cold, morning mountain air atop the eyrie.

Valeria would have called the sight beautiful. She’d always gawk at sunrises and clouds, mountains and meadows. Thorin, in all his ignorant cruelty, thought less of her for it in the beginning. And by the time he’d come to accept—respect—her willingness to pause for the mundanity of the world, she was…she was gone.

Thorin hoped that one day, maybe one day the gutting pain of loss would fade, like breaking in worn leather. He had endured so much of it already.

But that wish would not be granted today.

In a moment twisted by both grief and grace, Thorin chose to see like Valeria as he gazed upon the Lonely Mountain. For a destination, a dream, a future…it had to be beautiful, indeed.

-  

A stiff warg corpse greeted me with its lovely dead face when I awoke.

Dying—at least dying that time—washed away everything. I wasn’t sure I even sensed the sword getting jammed right through my chest.

Now, though? I felt everything.

I groaned into the dry, crackly grass. When I tried lifting my head, I found that old blood glued pieces of it to my cheek. The inside of my mouth tasted like I sucked on quarters. And I would have died all over again if it meant I could get water.

Blood, dried and soaked into both the front of my clothes and the ground, stuck unpleasantly to me as I stiffly rolled away. My chest fucking hurt, like I was one giant pulled muscle. Groaning some more, I sat up in the bright morning light. The orcs hadn’t bothered to carry away their dead. Some corpses had been scorched in the fire, and now only blackened patches of trees and earth remained.

I may have straight-up died, but I was glad I didn’t get toasted while I was at it. I couldn’t imagine how I’d wake up, seeing as all fatal injuries left scars.

The most recent one, as healed-over as it was, looked angry and red. I poked at it between ripped cloth and leather, wincing at the tenderness.

“Hijo de puta,” I whispered. Shit. I died again. I wasn’t sure what my constant reanimation meant in the grand scheme of things, but to me it just said that I sucked at living in Middle Earth.
And even worse? I was a dumbass and didn’t tell oh, you know, Gandalf or Thorin or anyone that when I died, hey! Just wait a few hours and I’d be up and at it again! Like a weed whose roots didn’t get pulled out of the ground.

Because since they didn’t know, I got left behind. And what a dick move on the eagles’ part. Thorin was almost dead, yet they still picked him right up.

Maybe their great bird intelligence told them I wasn’t worth carrying, seeing as I was a lump of useless bones. But still. Incredibly rude.

I briefly wondered if the Company grieved for me—then the mental image of them crying over my death caused a heart-wrenching pain. Of course they did. I didn’t want to even think about Bilbo and Fili, let alone the rest of them.

Well. Guess they had a surprise in store.

“Oh, fuck me,” I wheezed as I staggered to my feet. Had I been this sore the other two times I died? Wait. Yes. The boar tusk left my entire abdomen on fire the next day. And when I fell off the cliff…yeah, my neck and back were all cramped the day after, too.

It seemed that, after dying three times, a lot of the shock factor wore off.

I spotted my blades lying nearby. Black orc and warg blood still smeared across them, but the metal itself no longer glowed. That was a good sign, at least. I bent over and picked them up, reaching behind me for my pack to grab a—

My hand closed around empty air. I rattled off a loud, aching sigh.

“Tienes que estar bromeando.”

Bilbo. I’d given my entire pack to Bilbo when he temporarily took its place. And now he and the Company were fucking right off to the Lonely Mountain. Without me.

I used a dead warg’s matted fur to wipe off as much of the crusted blood as best I could, but without water and cloth, the attempt wasn’t too successful. I sheathed them anyway and trudged to the edge of the cliff. The toppled pine trees were blackened, skeletal victims in the fight, and I could tell where the very last one we clung to had been uprooted.

I stayed a few feet back from the very edge. It was a long way down. I’d had enough mishaps with falling from cliffs. But the view, unsurprisingly, was spectacular. Dawn gleamed on the dark pines, which draped across the other mountains across from me. Straight below, a ribbon of river twirled silver in the bursting light.

No sign of any dwarves. Or eagles.

But there was a little brown moth dotting the air in front of me with its halting flutters. I sucked in a breath as memory and realization flooded into my semi-hazy mind.

“Oye! Hey! Little buddy!” I followed the moth as it continued past me. “Could you—could you get an eagle for me? I am…not dead. Surprising. I know! Wait, you can understand me, right? Oh, shit, please, please be able to understand me.”

I watched the moth change its course and head back to the direction of the edge of the cliff. Whether it was just a moth flying like a moth, or it really heard me, I had no fucking clue.
So I sat back down on the ground, crossing my legs and wishing I had some damn water. I started peeling strings of sticky grass off my cheek while I waited. It wasn’t like I had anything better going on.

Well. Things weren’t all bad, I supposed. When a person really died and didn’t bounce back like me, they peed or pooped. My undies were unsoiled. And I got to close my eyes, too, so I woke up without burning eyeballs. The blade also just missed my tattoo. That was pretty nice.

The con? The front part of me was straight out of Carrie. Completely stained with blood. Did blood come out of elven-treated leather? It didn’t have a tag with washing instructions on it.

I rubbed more blood flakes off my face.

“Mama, Papa, Luis, Elena,” I sighed into the quiet mountainside, “I miss you. I miss all of you. I wish I was home. So much has happened here. So much more will happen. And…” Tears inevitably sprung to my eyes. “And I know what I have to do—what I want to do. But then what?”

I coughed from the combination of crying and being thirsty.

“It’s just so crazy. It’s just so crazy.”

Jolts of sore pain ran through my chest as I broke down into sobs. Tears scraped away blood that stuck dryly to my skin. I keeled over, forehead pressing into the gritty dirt, and let it all out. The cries weren’t stifled and soft like they’d been since the start of my arrival. The delicateness was gone, leaving me screaming into the dirt, with massive strains of silence as I inhaled long enough to unleash another wave of upheaval. Dirt soon coated my cracked lips, and I saw nothing beyond the endless void of grief.

Just as I thought I would die all over again, the agony subsided. Like it always had. Like it always would.

I was left hollow. Hollow and…alright.

The last of stuttering breaths faded from my aching lungs. I opened my misty, hurting eyes, and used the back of a blood-stained sleeve to wipe the dust from my mouth. The whole thing left me thirstier than ever.

I sat back up on my knees and took in the morning sun, which perched on a mountain peak. Its rays dried the residual tears still sticking fresh to my face. The warmth reminded me of Galadriel’s gift, and I unstuck my leather vest, shirt, and sports bra to reach down and pull the droplet of light out.

It glowed as brightly as ever, a bead of starlight in my grimy palm. I didn’t know what to expect from it. Galadriel was pretty vague when she whispered her whisper-things in my head. But holding it settled my stomach and relieved the lingering soreness in my throat. Even if it really did little more than serve as a nightlight, I’d be happy.

Eventually, I let the droplet rest unhidden in front of the dark, rust-red color my vest had taken. I didn’t need to keep it stashed away when I was the only living soul on the mountainside. I pulled my scrunchie out from the greasy, smoke-scented mass of tangled hair and redid it as best I could.

Moving was a little tough when it felt like I got hit by a truck.

Or, I supposed it was more appropriate to compare my pain to getting driven through with a literal sword.

I absently rubbed the scarred-over spot and waited.
These dwarves couldn’t get rid of me yet.

The speck on the horizon grew bigger. And bigger. And bigger.

“Whoa,” I whispered, standing on creaky legs. Was I actually seeing this? Or was dehydration and starvation finally getting the best of me?

The moth I’d chased down like a lunatic flitted back into my line of sight. I lifted a dirty finger for it to land on. Its fuzzy little antennae and legs delightedly tickled my skin. “You are the greatest moth I’ve ever met,” I said to it with a grin. Its dust-gray wings buzzed. “And I’m sorry I don’t have anything for you. But thank you so much. So much.”

I’d seen a lot of crazy shit in my life. Back home and here. Especially here. But to witness a literal giant eagle the size of a small airplane land in front of me definitely made the top ten.

The moth left my finger as gusts of wind rocked me off-balance. The eagle towered over me, nestling its wings against its enormous body. It was so freaking regal, with feathers reflecting gold and bronze in the sun. Its intelligent eyes pinned me with a deep black stare.

The eagle opened its beak a sliver. “Greetings. I am Landroval, brother of Gwaihir the Windlord.”

I stared.

“Forgive us for not rescuing you from the clutches of the orcs.” Landroval dipped his head in the semblance of a humble bow. “We thought you already departed from this world.

Start talking back, dumbass!

“O-oh. Well, well, you weren’t wrong.” I snapped back into the reality of speaking to a living, breathing giant eagle and spread my arms out. I hoped he wouldn’t see how my hands shook. “I seem to have a rare condition where if I die, I pop back up a short while later.”

Landroval tilted his head, keeping true to the bird-like nature. He stepped forward and lowered his head so it was level with mine. Heat rolled off the creature, as well as the scent of wind and rain. “You do not smell of corruption.”

“That’s…good?”

The eagle stared into my soul. I couldn’t look away, despite every primal instinct yelling at me to run from something that could bite my head off in an instant. “You do, however, smell of a land I am unfamiliar with. Not of South, not of East.”

His deep, rumbling voice tingled on my skin. I tried putting on my bravest face. This would have been so much easier if I wasn’t completely alone.

“I…that’s probably because I’m from a different land.”

“And do your kin also return from the dead, alive and untainted by darkness?”

“No. It’s just, uh, just me.” I touched the spot near where I got stabbed. Landroval’s quick, darting eyes went down to it. “I wish I could explain it. I wish I had explained it to Gandalf before all this happened. But…but I can’t go back now. I can only ask that you take me to them.”

“Take you away from here, I can. But Gandalf and the dwarves are in the depths of the Misty
Mountains once more. I fear we shall not find them for another fortnight.”

I sighed and looked down at my mud-and-blood covered boots. “I…was afraid you were going to say that.”

The shakes and exhaustion receded long enough for me to look back up at Landroval. My voice regained a small amount of strength.

“So I want you to take me to Beorn.”

Landroval straightened. “Beorn? The Skin-changer? Why would you wish to seek him? A man he is fair, but a bear he is wild. One does not willingly cross his path.”

“Because I’m pretty sure it’s where my friends are going to head next.” I paused, losing steam, and asked, “Is that alright? Would you…could you take me that far? You’re not obligated to, but…”

The great eagle stood proud and tall. “We have brought dishonor to our kin and master by abandoning you in the dark with naught but your enemies. I will take you to Beorn the Skin-changer. For you bear a pure and kind heart, Valeria Juarez, that has been shaped by hardship like a river stone.”

How did he know my name? What the hell?

Landroval dipped his head again, and the massive tip of his beak nudged at the droplet hanging from my neck. “And you have come into the possession of a great gift. A gift I have not seen since the Second Age.”

“Oh, yeah?” I nervously said as Landroval retreated and lowered himself to the ground. “Lady Galadriel gave it to me.”

He hummed, and with his chest pressed against the dirt I felt the reverberations in my feet. “A gift from Lady Galadriel it may have been, but of elven make it is not.”

“Wait—not of elven make? Then who made it?”

Landroval’s rumbling laughter shook the ground even more. “A person that the Lady Galadriel should not have communication with.”

This sounded suspiciously like the conversation Gandalf and Elrond had about who might have brought me here. Definitely vague, but much more amused than they had been. I didn’t expect to get any answers from Landroval, either, so I exhaled through my nostrils and said, “Well then. Let’s get out of here, Mister Landroval.”

“Very well, Valeria Juarez.” Landroval spread a wing out for me to climb on. I moved delicately so I wouldn’t step too hard or pull any feathers out. Once I settled on the firmest spot of his back, Landroval turned to the cliff hang and walked over. His bipedal gait was unlike anything I’d felt. Muscles corded and shifted underneath incredibly smooth feathers.

“Where I come from,” I found myself loudly saying as nerves tightened my sore chest, “we travel through the air. Giant machines carry us. But we’re kept inside it. This is…this is new!”

“An odd and marvelous creation,” Landroval said. “I would like to see how something not alive can stay in the air.” His talons clutched the very edge of the cliff and two giant wings spread out. I hunkered down low against his back, feeling like I was about to get another terrible Middle Earth roller coaster ride. “But this is how we eagles fly!”
I involuntarily gripped Landroval’s feathers as he left the ground and dove off the cliff. Momentary vertigo claimed me as I stared straight down at the land below. The sudden rush of wind pushed my head back, and luckily, with no air to breathe, I couldn’t embarrass myself by screaming.

Then Landroval straightened, I released my clenched butt cheeks, and gazed upon Middle Earth.

Everything. Everything was so…breathtaking. From the rivers I couldn’t name, to the green and blue of the mountain landscape, to the plains beyond. I could barely comprehend it.

Landroval swept with the air currents, rising and gliding, then dropping and turning. I laughed each time he did, and once we moved so close to mountain rock that I could have reached out and touched it.

I was even bold enough to get off of my stomach and sit up for a minute. Landroval chuckled again, and didn’t say anything about me moving into a different position. I breathed in the crisp air, stuck both hands up above me despite the soreness, and shouted, “Whoo!” into the sublime blue sky carrying us.

“Do you enjoy the freedom?” Landroval asked me. Despite the wind rushing past my freezing ears, I heard him clearly. He caught an updraft and I leaned back down onto my stomach.

“Yes! This—this reminds me of a time when I did something called hang gliding! And skydiving!” I shouted back. “But much, much better!”

“Your dwarven friends were not as fond as the height as you are, my lady.”

“They have a hard time appreciating spectacular things!”

I laughed again and rested my head down on folded arms, watching mountains and waterfalls and clouds pass by. Landroval’s feathers were impossibly soft to lay upon. They were probably the nicest thing I’d felt since leaving Rivendell. No, since leaving home, where one day I’d get to sleep on my memory foam mattress and gel pillows again.

With his warmth radiating into me and the returning fatigue of everything that happened in the past twenty-four hours, my eyelids grew heavy. I initially fought it. One would think that after dying, you’d come back up well-rested. Like a nice snooze. But you’d be wrong!

I was fucking tired. Now that I had no worry of getting off the cliff and meeting back up with the Company, all the stamina had left me again.

“Rest, Valeria Juarez.” Landroval’s soothing voice lulled me even further into sleep. “Rest, and awaken whole.”

As if by his command, I shut my eyes and drifted off to the sound of gliding wings and my own heartbeat.

Chapter End Notes
Took the eagles talking from the book bc it's so cool that they are capable of speech. And now we're past the prologue/one-shot!

Hijo de puta: son of a bitch
Tienes que estar bromeando: you must be joking
The House of Beorn

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

I was in and out for the rest of the journey. At one point I woke up, hungry and thirsty as usual, to a rich golden sunset that made the clouds pale pink and lavender. Another time I had rolled onto my back, so I found myself staring up at an expanse of stars so brilliant and pristine that I almost couldn’t believe I was conscious. A tendril of whatever galaxy this world nestled in broke through the night sky, white and gold and blue. I wanted to stay up and gaze at it more, but it was better to sleep and ignore the gnawing hunger riddling my entire body.


“We are here.”

Landroval’s voice brought me from my daze. I tried wetting my lips and the inside of my mouth, but saliva was hard to come by without any moisture. Not to mention I still had blood stuck in my teeth and gums. Getting murdered made for horrible breath.

I sat up, much less stiff now that I had slept for an eternity, and scrubbed the crusties from my eyes. Beneath us was a patch of open plain, gleaming with green grass and surrounded by forest. The Misty Mountains stood proudly the rearview. I didn’t think I was going to miss them that much.

Ahead sat a rather large farmhouse. I couldn’t remember if it looked like the one in the movie, but to me it seemed unthreatening for a dangerous man such as Beorn. It had a barn, a vibrant, fenced-off garden, some sort of orchard, and a small field off to the left. Old, lush trees shaded the house itself from sunlight.

“It’s pretty,” I said to Landroval.

“Yes. Let us see if its inhabitants will allow you to dwell.”

He tucked both wings and descended. I squinted my eyes so they wouldn’t dry out too bad. The ground drew near, and I had to come to terms with the fact that my private commercial flight was at an end.

The grass rippled in waves as Landroval brought his wings back out to soften the landing. His back shifted as he touched the ground once more. I sat up, stretched, and slid off the side of the right wing as best I could. My feet stumbled from long disuse, but I caught myself.


Unfortunately, I was still in the awkward stance when the massive door to the house swung open and a great, hulking man strode through. Or. Sort of a man. At around eight feet tall and with grizzled hair running down his back, I could tell that Beorn was not of human make.

“What is the meaning of this?” Beorn boomed. “An eagle? And a woman? Stinking of orcs and death?”
“That’s my bad,” I waved. “I…Hello! I’m Valeria Juarez.” I walked forward, fingers brushing on Landroval’s feathers in slight reassurance. Beorn folded his arms and stared down at my blood-covered self disdainfully. He was all sorts of fierce, with wild golden eyes and pupils too large to be human. It was like looking up at a skyscraper.

Was this how Bilbo felt compared to literally everybody? Teensy?

“I do not know you,” Beorn grunted.

“No. Of course you wouldn’t! But I, ha, I know you! In a sense. You see—I have friends that are coming this way, soon, and I was wondering if I could stay—”

“Friends? What friends? I do not expect nor want any friends of yours, if the scent of dwarf on you is true.”

Silence. Then a nervous laugh on my end. I glanced back at Landroval. He watched the exchange intently.

“Yes. I’m sorry that you probably smell a lot of bad things on me, given my current state. But. Yes. Dwarves are one of them. Gandalf the Grey accompanies them, as well as a hobbit from the Shire.” I took a deep breath and began fidgeting with the droplet. “I myself am not from around these parts. But, um, the leader of the company is Thorin Oakenshield—”

Beorn’s eyes went to the droplet. They widened, and his arms dropped. He uttered something in a twisting language and took a knee. I froze. His finger lifted under the droplet and slid it from my grasp.

“You bear a seal,” he muttered, voice suddenly overcome with reverence. His golden eyes met mine, and my mouth went drier than ever. “No. You are not from here. You hail from another realm entirely, don’t you?”

I couldn’t find the words to answer, so Beorn stood and addressed Landroval. “Fear not. I will bring her no harm. She is welcome here.”

Landroval dipped his head in gratitude. “Many thanks, Beorn the Skin-changer.” His gaze turned twinkling when it fell upon me. “Farewell, Valeria Juarez. You have been a fair companion. May we meet again.”

I threw my arms around Landroval’s neck and pressed my face into his feathers. He rumbled a laugh and bent his head down so it nuzzled mine. “Thank you,” I said. “I’m sorry I slept for most of the way. When we see each other again, I can’t wait to talk more.”

“As am I.”

I let go and stepped back. Landroval backed away, spread his wings, and lifted off the ground. Beorn and I watched him ascend and become nothing but a small speck in the summery, mid-afternoon sky. Seeing him leave tugged on my heartstrings. Even though I knew the eagle for only a short time, his calming presence would be missed.

Then it was just Beorn and me.

“Come.” By the time I turned, Beorn was already halfway back into his house. “You are in need of a bath and a change of clothes. You stink of blood.”

“Well—” I huffed as I jogged to catch up. “Can you really blame me?”
Beorn did not answer. Rather, he said, “You have a tear in both your leather and shirt. Yet you are uninjured.”

“Yeah. I, uh, I got stabbed by an orc sword up in the Misty Mountains. Died. Came back healed.” This time, Beorn paused and glanced back at me. I shrugged my shoulders. “It’s a long story, alright? And I’ll be very happy to explain it to you.” I hastily pointed a finger at him. “If—if you tell me what the heck this thing is—” I held up the droplet. “And how you know that I’m not from here.”

Sunlight dappled the ground as we came into the cover of the trees. The buzzing of great honeybees drew my attention, and I slowed to observe the apiaries dotting the area to my left. The bees inhabiting them were super-sized, and I immediately wanted to hold one and love it.

In fact, all of the brewing tension concerning Beorn’s knowledge and my true origins dissipated when I saw all the animals. Goats, pigs, chickens, and ducks roamed freely. So did a few wooly cattle and their calves.

A particularly round goat trotted up to me and playfully butted its horns against my leg. I bent down and gave it a good scratch behind its ear. “I don’t have any treats for you,” I spoke. “I’m sorry.”

“Are you fond of animals?” Beorn questioned. I stood straight and continued on to meet him at the large, barn-like entrance of his home’s door.

“Yes. I love animals.”

He grunted and unlatched the door’s bar. Beorn beckoned me inside and went in. I gave the goat one last pat on its head and followed.

The pleasant scent of wood, spices, and hay hit me when I entered. This end of the house was like another barn, with a couple fluffy cows penned on each side. Along the right wall were barrels of what I assumed were some kind of alcohol. Clean piles of straw for the stalls also dotted the entryway. I couldn’t help but pet one of the cows as I walked by, and its thick black eyelashes fluttered gently.

Beorn led me to a wing of the house that had a bathing room. One giant wooden tub sat in the center. A stand with a couple soap bars stood next to it. Interestingly enough, above the tub was an open hole in the roof. Sunlight poured in. A kind of duct tipped into the opening.

Oh, please, please let water come down from it.

“Wait here.” Beorn left me in the chamber, and from another room I heard some rustling. He came back with a huge, thick tunic and a strip of leather. Underneath them was a folded linen towel, also extra-large. “This is my wife’s. You can wear it until your clothes are cleaned.”

Wait.

“Your…wife?” I sputtered out dumbly. Beorn cracked an almost-smile.

“Aye. She’s not here right now. She’ll be visiting our son and his family near Fangorn for the next month. But I imagine she will be disappointed to have missed a guest such as yourself.”

I thought Beorn was the last of his kind. Right? Or had I forgotten that part completely?

“Thanks. Thank you.” He set them on a mirrorless vanity.
“Start and stop the water by pulling on the rope over there. Then you can wash your clothes afterward out back.” Beorn didn’t give me a chance to get another word in. He left and closed the door with a resounding thud.

I peeled everything off me, grimacing at the sensation of dried, sticky cloth remove from my skin. My sports bra, thankfully, was black and wouldn’t have a stain when I washed it. The gray elven underwear, unfortunately, would be perpetually blemished, and I didn’t have high hopes for my shirt, trousers, or vest, either.

If I just had my pack with me. With any luck, Bilbo would still carry it.

I hoped he and the Company weren’t too sad about me. All their grief would be for nothing once they came here and saw that, surprise! I wasn’t dead.

The fresh scar running down my front was set about an inch underneath my tattoo. The scar itself measured about six inches in length. I hadn’t noticed how big it actually was until now, and I expected the one on my back was the same.

I pulled my scrunchie out. My hair could have stayed in the same place if I really wanted it to, since it was so greasy and crusted. I really hoped I hadn’t made Landroval stinky with all my sweat and grime.

After I tentatively pulled on the rope Beorn told me to, the sound of rushing water filled my ears. A few moments later, a stream fell from the duct and splashed into the tub. I stuck a hand in and felt the temperature. Cool, but not as freezing like the water I had to bathe in more often than not. Also, bonus points for it being more of a shower instead of a bath. I preferred not to sit in a stagnant pool of my own filth.

I stepped in and got to work. The tub had a grated wooden hole in the bottom that allowed the water to pass through. I took the liberty of using the nearby soap and lathered up. Face, body, hair. It was all scrubbed repeatedly until I was free from blood and dirt. Then I rinsed my mouth out and drank some of the falling water, hoping that it wouldn’t make me sick. But, from my experience, I’d been lucky with the cleanliness. I supposed that if I could come back from the dead, I could drink unfiltered water.

When I was done, I tugged on the rope again to stop the stream. Then I patted dry with the towel given to me, chuckling at its sheer size. I didn’t even need to unfold it all the way for it to wrap around me completely. I was sad I didn’t have any kind of brush or comb, but I figured ratted hair was better than the greaseball it’d previously been.

With all of my clothing dirty, I went commando under the tunic—which was more of a dress that fell past my knees. Its material, however, was thick enough to not show any private parts. I realized Beorn had given me the leather strip to tie around my waist and cinch the tunic around me so I wouldn’t be completely swallowed. I mean, I still looked swallowed up, but it wasn’t as bad. I had to roll the sleeves up several times to see my hands, and the collar showed a generous amount of shoulders because of its width.

The delicate, silver chain of the droplet necklace contrasted with the leather cord that held my shark tooth.

I gathered my clothes and boots and headed back out. The worn floorboards felt grainy under my bare feet. I followed the sound of chopping wood and went out another door of the house by the kitchen area.
Beorn split wood in two with an axe built for his size. He saw me and the makeshift dress I wore and barked a laugh.

“You are tiny.”

“Yeah, yeah, tell me about it,” I wryly said as I approached. Beorn gestured to a washing area with soap and fresh water a few yards away from where he worked.

“Clean your clothes. The animals do not like the stench of orc and warg.”

“And don’t forget goblin.”

I sat down on a placed stump and threw everything but my leather vest into the tub of water. As the water grew murky from washing, I said, “So explain to me what you know, Mister Beorn.”

He stopped chopping and leaned on the giant haft of his axe. “You are not the first person I have met who is born of another world.”

My working hands stilled as my heart picked up pace. “W…what?”

Beorn wiped his brow with the back of his hand. “When Azog the Defiler came down from the north, he enslaved and killed many of my kin. We suffered all manners of torture from the orcs for sport.” The recollection twisted Beorn’s face into a snarl, and he spat on the ground. “But one night…One night, a shadow moved through the fort and killed a number of orcs without raising the alarm. She came across my family and a few other remaining Skin-changers. The shadow told us that she had come for Azog, but found that the orc had gone south to war.”

I slowly began resuming my laundry washing. “The war…Moria. Was it Moria?”

“Aye. The shadow was upset, but she freed us and made sure we all safely escaped. When we made it out of the mountains, she told us she would return east. That was where she came from.”

Beorn nodded to my necklace. “She bore the same casing of starlight as you. Only it had been driven into the center of her left palm. And she carried the same scent as you, faint as it was.”

I leaned back and propped an elbow on one knee, processing all the information. “And what was her name?” I finally managed to ask. “Do you know?”

“Her name was Amelie.”

My jaw dropped into an open-mouthed grin. “Amelie? Amelie? Yeah—yes, that is most definitely an Earth name. Wow. Wow!”

Beorn was pleased with my reaction. “I owe my life and my family’s life to her. I have not seen her since then, but I hear the birds’ whispers from their travels in the East; a strange woman walks with two blue wizards, moving from tribe to tribe, city to city. What words they speak is still unknown.”

I stared at Beorn. Two blue wizards. The wizards that Gandalf can’t even remember the names of! And there’s a person like me with them! Holy shit. Holy shit.

“Do you…do you know why people like us are sent here? And who brings us?”

“It was explained to me by the woman Amelie that those who watch over this realm cannot control the waves a soul from another world creates. You are not bound by fate here. You are untied. Whether or not that is for the good of Middle Earth is yet to be seen.”
Okay. So Beorn just straight-up gave me an answer I’d been searching for since the second I came here. An answer Gandalf and Elrond couldn’t provide. An answer Galadriel straight-up freaking swerved.


Beorn tilted his head and sighed. “I know not the name. Only that it is forbidden from uttering, lest the Valar strike you down.”

“You know, I’m starting to get the general consensus that whoever brought me is not well-liked among the heavens.”

“No. They are not.”

“So does that mean I am not well-liked?”

“ Probably. But there is nothing they can do about it. Or they choose not to. I do not assume to know their plans for the unplanned.”

Beorn’s bluntness made me huff in a way Bilbo would be proud of. I turned my attention back to the laundry, which by now had turned the water a solid brown.

“I have told you my part. Now you tell me yours. And why you would be lowered so much as to seek the company of dwarves.”

“Alright. Let me…let me start from the top. Then maybe I can sway you towards letting these dwarves stay for a short while. It’ll be like a sales pitch. But anyway! I was jogging a few blocks away from my house on Earth, when \textit{bam!} Suddenly I’m rolling down a grassy hill…”

- 

I stared up at the dark. My poor vision could barely make out the ceiling’s wooden beams. I slept in the pile of straw just like they did in the movie. Beorn offered me his own bed, but I declined, saying that I wouldn’t make much use of the space. He liked being reminded of how small I was, so he conceded that I could make my bed with the animals.

Not that I minded. Four chickens settled on top of me and two goats flanked both sides. A countless number of mice burrowed every which way. The animals came into either Beorn’s house or went to the barn for the night. They kept me from feeling too lonely.

This Amelie. I didn’t know why she stayed in the East. Maybe she was aware of something I wasn’t. But it sounded like she tried cutting off Azog’s head before the orc could stir up shit. Though she came a little too late, she ended up saving an entire race of people. That was a win.

I wasn’t the only one.

I wasn’t the only one.

The simple thought of that made me grin in the dark.

Another chicken clucked its way over and plopped right down in the crook of my neck. If I had the option of moving earlier, I didn’t, now. The rules of having animals on you were simple; once they found their spot, you had to stay still for the entire duration.

Beorn had come back from his patrol about an hour ago. Once I told him about how Azog was hot
on the trail of Thorin Oakenshield, he went all bear-mode after a dinner of vegetables roasted in a heavenly spice—and tortillas. Cooking was another way I could repay him for letting me stay. Beorn liked them a lot, too, so that was a success.

I hoped the Company was alright. Beorn confirmed Landroval’s estimation. They wouldn’t be out of the Misty Mountains for another couple of weeks, and that wasn’t counting how many times they needed to dodge orcs. I just couldn’t wait to see them.

How would I break my alive-ness?

“Hey guys! Guess what! The orcs couldn’t put me down!”

“¡Soy un fantasma! Ay, just kidding!”

“Oh, haven’t you heard? I ain’t dead.”

Or I could just hide behind something and surprise them all when they came in. That’d be hilarious. And possibly morally wrong.

I couldn’t wait to see all of them again. No matter what.

Particularly Fili. If he still liked me after watching me suffer a terrible death, that is. Witnessing something that traumatic might have been a turn-off.

I lightly petted one of the goats beside me. If anything, Fili would want to stay away from me because I smelled like all these animals I was cuddling with. But if that was the case, then I didn’t need his negativity, anyway.

Bilbo would probably want an answer to how I knew about the riddles. I’d tell him. And I was going to tell all of them about my “foresight” or whatever you should call it. No point in hiding it since I was already here.

He was going to like it at Beorn’s. After all the traveling and hardship, being able to see a garden and eat a hot meal with fresh fruits and vegetables would delight him.

Maybe they’d finally get to try breakfast burritos.

-

An emptiness followed the Company.

Gandalf led them, and for the first time, he did not receive any arguments or dissents on which way they should travel. And with orcs practically hanging off their coattails, there was little time for rest. When it did come, conversation was light and short.

The dwarves were familiar with loss. They coped in their own ways. Gandalf, too, kept to himself and mused longer than usual as smoke drifted from his pipe.

Bilbo Baggins, however, was not accustomed to death. He’d lost his parents, of course, and mourned their passing for some time. But they did not leave suddenly. They were not torn from this world in violence and fire.

The spot beside him should have Valeria.

Oh, how upset she would be if she saw him like this. All curled up and despondent, shivering on the ground without blanket or bedroll. Nor would she be happy that they ate all her lembas bread,
when she so obviously meant to save it.

But Bilbo doubted Valeria could stay too mad. Her pack was the only one that survived the goblin attack. It was the lembas bread, dried fruits, and extra waterskins that kept them from falling days ago.

He did not touch most of Valeria’s other belongings. Not her tightly-rolled clothes, the kit she pulled out for a plethora of problems ranging from slivers to sewing, or the box of elven spices used to remedy a suffering soul. But smelling it would only increase his grief, because he would just remember Valeria more. Even the general scent of the pack brought tears to his eyes, because it was her. Lingering.

Bilbo had, however, found her stash of quartz she found at the bottom of that lake near the base of the Misty Mountains. It all seemed so long ago. He still had the one she gave him in his right breast pocket.

They were supposed to bring luck.

So why had she been lost?

He rolled the quartz between dirty fingers calloused by this quest. “Remember me,” Bilbo sang to himself, voice barely even a whisper. “Though I have to say goodbye…”

Fool that Bilbo was, he couldn’t recall the rest. But he knew the tune because Valeria would absentmindedly hum it to herself on occasion. She did that a lot, humming songs from her homeland without noticing. Bilbo never said anything because he always enjoyed listening.

Now he wished he would have asked her to sing more. Captured the memories in the quartz and sealed them away.

Bilbo’s mind played the scene of Valeria’s death in his head again without permission. He had dreamed of showing her the Shire once all this was over. Finally bake the famed peach pie he had boasted about to Valeria and watch her reaction as she ate it. Give her the comforts of home they both longed for.

But now all he saw was the light leave her brown eyes. It was the same repeating nightmare this past week.

If Bilbo had just been closer. Then maybe, somehow…

He glanced away from the quartz and to the blond-haired prince. Fili rested against a tree, eyes closed, expression blank. Did he see the same thing as Bilbo? Thinking of all the ways he could have prevented Valeria’s death?

Bilbo couldn’t find the right words of comfort for Fili. What should he say? The dwarf prince had…affection for Valeria. It was always the talk of the camp whenever the two went off for sword practice. Bets had been placed. Opinions spoken. Jokes shushed—especially when they thought Thorin would overhear. They were worse than the hobbits of the Shire about gossiping. Bofur even swore up and down that he’d have a ballad composed for the two by the time Erebor had been reclaimed.

What happened to that ballad? Did it lie crumpled in the back of Bofur’s mind, now, half-composed, never to be finished?

Bilbo found himself sitting upright and grabbing Valeria’s pack. He lifted the soft leather fold that
protected the top, and then uncinched the opening. Though Bilbo had steeled himself for the initial scent of Valeria’s belongings to waft up, it still made his throat ache and rekindle the yawning grief. But he reached down, anyway, and drug up a tightly-rolled cloak. One that Valeria had said needed drying after the tumble with the stone giants. And when it had dried, Bilbo watched her tightly roll it with practiced precision and tuck it into her pack.

Then he went and undid all of it. Once it was unfurled in Bilbo’s hands, he got to his feet, smartly being reminded of how exhausted he was, and walked over to Fili. When the prince did not open his eyes, Bilbo cleared his throat.

“Yes, Master Baggins?” Fili sighed, voice hoarser than he expected it to be.

“I, erm, I figured you might want this.”

Fili was forced to look at Bilbo. But his blue eyes never saw the hobbit. Only what he held outstretched.

“I…I thought it was lost to the goblin cave,” Fili whispered as he sat up. He tenderly took the cloak from Bilbo—and for an instant the hobbit wanted to cling to it a bit longer because it was her, it was Valeria—but let it slip from his fingers.

“No. She, she was always one to be prepared,” Bilbo said, trying to muster a smile. It didn’t quite work.

“Yes.” Fili stared at the cloak like it was a dream, like it was all the fortunes of Erebor. “Yes…she was.” He finally looked up at Bilbo, who chose to ignore the sudden gleam in the prince’s eyes.

“Thank you.”

“You’re—you’re welcome.” Bilbo slightly bowed and turned stiffly on his heels. He refused to look back at Fili. The prince needed whatever privacy he could manage, and Bilbo noticed how pointedly the rest of the Company did not turn their gazes to Fili.

He lay back down in his pitiful spot. The area next to him remained woefully vacant.

- 

“Beorn! Look!”

The Skin-changer paused from picking vegetables to see me carrying a wooly red calf in my arms. It was almost as tall as me, but it didn’t seem to mind that I had picked it up under its front legs. Grinning, I nuzzled my face against the back of its furry head and peppered it with kisses.

Beorn chuckled. “You are spoiling him.”

“No I’m not!” In a baby-talk voice, I said, “If he wants love, then he’s gonna get it! Isn’t that right?”

The calf licked his wet nose in agreement. I gave him more kisses before setting him back down on the ground. I still wore Eira’s—as I found Beorn’s wife was named—shirt as a dress, but I put my boots back on so I wouldn’t be walking around barefoot. I didn’t have the constitution of a hobbit, and despite the callouses, I still preferred to wear shoes outdoors. I also put on my sports bra and undies. The black straps of the bra were visible with how the collar of the dress slid off my shoulders.

“Come, put yourself to good use and help me. You are much closer to the ground than I.”
Unable to argue with that statement, I went over to the garden and unlatched its large front gate. Though Beorn’s animals were unusually well-behaved, it didn’t stop them from trying to eat the finer greens in life.

I made my way through lush rows of vegetables, noting not for the first time the red strawberries standing brilliantly in their patch. I’d make sure Bilbo got some when he arrived. They were still roughly another week out, and I passed through each day like swimming in molasses.

But the animals made it better. Really, if I had to wait in any sort of place, it’d be here. Beorn, for all his famed fierceness, kept a quiet and loved farmstead. I think he enjoyed the company, too, with his wife away. When he wasn’t patrolling the area and chasing off a few small orc packs, we hung out. I was easy to entertain because of the animals and small chores Beorn gave to me. I was pretty sure he liked me more, too, when I told him in detail about my time working at animal preserves. In the evenings, we took up playing chess on his Skin-changer sized board. I had to sit on a crate on top of the chair, like a toddler in a booster seat.

This amused Beorn to no end.

He pointed out which vegetables he wanted me to pick. I tugged out carrots, radishes, and onions, then threw them in the half-full basket nearby. With the late summer sun reaching its full height, Beorn went down and sat in the shade, leaving me all by myself.

I stood straight and said, “What, you put me to work just so you can get out of the sun?”

“Yes!”

Beorn laughed heartily and pulled out a pipe. I shook my head at him but continued picking. The garden had some fabulous ripe tomatoes and beautiful zucchini and yellow squash. Like, oh man, I couldn’t wait to show Bilbo this garden.

The crowning jewel of the garden was, in my opinion, the little jalapeno bush pressed up alongside the garden. Beorn said he got the seeds from a South Gondorian merchant. His wife didn’t like them that much because they were spicy, but Beorn enjoyed putting them in his food from time to time. To me, the jalapenos were on the mild side of mild, but I was coming to find that Middle-Earth—at least this part of it—didn’t use any sort of heat in their meals. It was sad, really, but then again, there were a whole lotta white people here.

I plucked a few small, ripe jalapenos and put them in the basket. I was going to try my hand at making salsa. Because, like, Beorn had cilantro, too? No blender, unfortunately, but he did have a handy mortar and pestle for me to grind everything together. I had a little time to perfect it, too, before the Company arrived.

They’d be disappointed that they couldn’t eat any of the livestock. Beorn lived a vegetarian life, like me. We did eat eggs, however, so the Company wouldn’t bemoan the lack of anything but green food. I told Beorn to make sure we were stocked up on eggs and other things in his pantry, because there were thirteen dwarves on their way, and thirteen dwarves ate a lot. Just ask Rivendell. They probably still hadn’t recovered from the sudden depletion.

Beorn and I fell into the evening routine. Dinner, chess, then bed for me while he went to patrol. The salsa turned out to be slapping with fresh-baked tortilla chips, but I wished it was spicier. If I could come back from the dead, then why couldn’t I get a decent heat to my food?

I cuddled a goat named Basil. Beorn taught me how to say “hello,” “good morning,” “good night,” and “you are cute!” in animal speech. The livestock went crazy over it, and even if I couldn’t
understand their responses, I was happy that it made them happy. And happy that I could talk to animals! Who wouldn’t be?

When I got home, I’d try it on the animals there.

Home.

Where Luis and Elena and my parents were. Where all my friends were. Where my work was.

Home didn’t have wizards and dwarves and hobbits. Home didn’t have Bilbo. Or Fili. Or Gandalf. There’d be no fighting back the darkness with swords and magic. No laughing around campfires and sleeping under the stars.

No lake sharks, thankfully. No goblins or orcs or dragons. Or Sauron.

No dying. Maybe.

But was there a going back at all?

I fumbled with the makeshift pocket between my chest and sports bra, pulling out the droplet. It always seemed to know when it was being noticed, because its light grew a fraction in the darkness of the farmhouse.

It was like looking at my phone screen in the middle of the night with the brightness too high. I squinted and a few disturbed chickens clucked unhappily.

“Sorry, sorry.”

I closed my hand around the droplet so just a tiny sliver of light shone through a curled index finger. Another person like me—like me, from the same world—carried one, too, but it was apparently embedded in their hand. How uncomfortable. I mean, the jewel was quite small, but still.

How long had they been in Middle-Earth before even helping Beorn? He didn’t know when I asked him, so I was left to my own imagination. Probably a while. Which sucked to think about, because it meant that if they couldn’t go home even though they had whatever the droplet was, then I couldn’t, either.

Or what if they could go home? And they chose to stay? Better yet, what if they could go between here and Earth?

I would actually like that option a lot. Then I wouldn’t be divided.

Without much hope, I shut my eyes and poured a wish into the droplet. Send me back home. Send me back home. Please send me back home. Please.

What could this thing do?

Maybe it was a key. A key to the door back to Earth.

As I silently pleaded to the drop of starlight, it burned hotter in my hand. So I wished more strongly, fervently, and I found myself sitting upright and bowing over it, clutching my fisted hand to my chest. “Please,” I uttered, and I squeezed my closed eyes tighter, as if it could help manifest my desperation into reality.

“Please.” I reached out further beyond broken and plain begging. “Whoever you are, send me back
The droplet seared my skin so suddenly that I cried out and let go. The area erupted with light, which seemed to find its way into every crook to chase the shadows out. The animals scattered, all flaps of wings and hooves against the floor. I went to stand and find water to run my burning palm underneath, but when I started to move, a wave of extreme exhaustion hit me. The kind that’s not right, not natural. The kind that pulls at the back of your hair and keeps you from reaching the surface for air.

I struggled, weakly grasping out to empty air and hoping that I’d find something real to cling to. But it failed, and I fell back limp onto the pile of straw.

Chapter End Notes

Don't worry, Valeria didn't get insta-killed again.

And guys, she really, really loves animals.

Thank you for all the love and support you've given this fic. I don't usually respond to comments, but know that I read and gush over every single one. ❤❤❤

Lo que sea: whatever
¡Soy un fantasma!: I'm a ghost
Homemade Salsa

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was raining.

I sat on the farmhouse’s backdoor steps, absently munching on a small apple packed with flavor and enjoying the cooler temperature. Beorn had left four days ago. He said he might be gone a while if the orc problem worsened. Part of me knew he was going to be okay. The other part naturally worried.

But I could handle being here without burning the entire place down. The animals and I hung out, and when I wasn’t distracting myself outside, I was cleaning up the farmhouse. I ate meals alone, picked the garden alone, and fed the animals alone.

I was never the type of person to enjoy being on my own for long periods of time, though. It drove me up the wall to not be interacting or just having people near me.

Besides, being alone meant I had time to think of all the ways I could fuck up this entire thing.

On the dinner table, written in splotchy Spanish, was a list I looked at for too long.

- Make it to Beorn’s.
- Go to mirk. G leaves bc bad guy.
- Get lost in mirk.
- Spiders.
- B frees everyone. Invisible.
- Barrel ride down river. Orcs show up. K poisoned.
- B gets the white stone.
- Bard kills dragon. Laketown displaced. Go to the ruined city.
- T goes crazy over gold. B gives stone to elf king and Bard. G comes back?
- B leaves with ring. End.

I had no idea about the time frame of this whole ordeal, or the events of The Lord of the Rings. If I knew I needed to be nerdier with Luis, I would have paid more attention to his factual interjections.
during the movies. And looking at the lame list reminded me of how woefully uninformed I was.

But somehow, somehow, I’d see to it that the three dwarves would live by the end of the battle.

Exactly how that’d happen, I still didn’t know. But I was okay with improvising! I thrived off high-stress environments. And hey, it didn’t hurt that if I died doing something stupid, I could just pop back up in in a few hours and try again.

I bit into my apple and found that I’d unknowingly munched it down to the core. The bitter flavor of the seeds bloomed in my mouth. With a huff of air, I spat the seed out from the protection of the farmhouse roof and into the mud. A couple of pigs were the only ones willing enough to sit out in the rain, hoping to get some treats from me.

Well. They wouldn’t wait for nothing.

Snapping the apple core in half, I tossed the pieces to them. They snorted in delight and made the cores disappear a second after.

I smiled and grabbed another apple from the basket next to me. Summer thunder rolled in the sky, like the gentle hum of a half-remembered song. Nothing at all like the rains of the Misty Mountains, where each deafening strike of lightning was a death threat.

My gaze wandered down to my other empty hand. Though faint, the droplet’s burn left a distinct scar. That seemed to be a thing for me, these days. It was almost as if it marked the spot where it would reside in the future. I winced at the thought of having anything jammed into my palm.

The incident didn’t give me fancy visions or promises of returning home. I didn’t even die. At least, I didn’t think I died. I woke up without that feeling of, oh-shit-you-actually-came-back-from-the-dead body ache.

The droplet and I made a tiny bit of progress, though. If I willed it to gleam brighter, it would. If I wanted it to dim, it’d dim. The whole burning-then-passing-out deal aside, I kind of had a telepathic flashlight. Which was cool. It’d come handy in Mirkwood.

I hoped.

More thunder rumbled. The pigs perked their heads and suddenly sniffed the air. The thunder came again, only…only this time, it was grating. Metallic, almost.

I shot to my feet, breath hitching.

“It’s not thunder.

Before Beorn left, I jokingly told him that in what I’d seen (more specifically, watched). He chased the Company all the way to his front door and subsequently locked his bear ass out of his own home. Beorn thought that quite rude, and now that he knew the dwarves were my friends, he wouldn’t try to tear their heads off. Though he might be wilder and more aggressive as a bear, he still maintained a higher form of reason.

“But I might just give chase, anyway,” he said with a twinkle in his deep golden eyes. “Because dwarves need a good scare every so often.”

I turned on my bare heels and booked it inside. The “thunder” grew in its intensity.

“Beorn, you piece of shit,” I whispered with a grin.
The grin vanished when the farmhouse’s front entrance slammed open, and in tumbled an entirety of thirteen dwarves, one wizard, and, somewhere in the mix of shouts and scrambling bodies, one hobbit.

“Close it!” Gandalf boomed. “Quickly!”

The dwarves all braced their bodies against the large doors and started to shut it. I watched from the kitchen area, half-hiding behind one of the smooth wooden columns that made a corner. There was another roar that shook the house. Dori screamed higher than he should have, as he was the one right between he cracks of the two doors—which then split back open as a massive bear head barged its way through.

I’d never seen Beorn in bear form. Even knowing that he was most likely playing around still floored me as I took in the enormity of the bear. His head alone was the size of a compact European car, I swear.

“Close it! Close it now! Push!” Dwalin ordered, pushing the door back against Beorn’s huge muzzle. They gave one unified defense and heaved their bodies into the wood.

Lemme tell ya. A bear that size could easily mow all these jabronis down. But, bless Beorn’s heart, he let them think they got the upper hand on him as his head slipped out. I noticed Bilbo standing beside Gandalf, brandishing Not-Yet-Sting, bravely willing to lay down his life to protect his friends.

I broke out into a grin and came all the way around the corner. I should have been nervous; these were people who were about to find out in a very jarring way that I wasn’t dead.

But really, I just wanted to see them again. Two-and-a-half weeks of not being in their midst sucked nuts.

Dwalin brought the wooden latch down on the door, and the Company breathed a collective sigh of relief. Kili turned to Gandalf—

And his eyes brushed past the wizard to me instead.

He promptly screamed.

That had the Company up in arms again. They all spun around to see what he was yelling about, saw me as well, and joined in on the screaming. Bifur whipped out an axe and hurled it at me, but since they were all in such a frenzy, it arced wide and solidly embedded into the wooden column instead of my head. I shrieked and jerked away.

Bilbo, of course, fainted. The sound of him hitting the floor was lost in shouts of Khuzdul.

“What wicked place have you brought us to, Gandalf?” Dwalin, always the first one to jump to the worst possible conclusion, asked—well, more like shouted. “Where we see bewitched apparitions?”

Bifur unslung another hand axe and aimed to throw it at me again.

“I AM NOT DEAD! CALM THE FUCK DOWN!” I screamed at the top of my lungs. I thrusted out a thumbs up like it was some sort of token to prove my existence. When they all stilled somewhat, I wheezed out a half-laugh and treading forward. “Okay, yeah, I—whoo! This is crazy,
right? Holy shit!” I took a massive bite out of the apple I forgot I still had in my hand. Through the fruit I noisily chewed in my mouth, I said, “Like, I can’t imagine how freaked out you guys might be! But it’s me!”

I did a little run-in-place. “Orcs can’t put me down! Too fast!”

Gandalf approached with more than a touch of wariness. “How have you come to be, my dear?”

I recognized the tone. He used it back when they first found me running wild a couple days outside of Bree. Not unkind, yet not unguarded.

My shoulders threatened to slump. I told myself this would happen, prepared myself for this to happen. Of course they wouldn’t just be like, “Hey, Valeria! How goes it? Glad you ain’t dead!”

I swallowed my mouthful of apple and set it on a wooden stand about as tall as I was. Beorn lived a life scaled to his height, after all.

“That…that is a complicated story,” I drawled, untying the knot that kept my thin leather belt in place. The back of my neck suddenly felt hot. Why was I getting all bashful now? “One that I’m happy to explain.”

“I do think that would be best,” Gandalf said patiently, his bushy gray eyebrows lifting up a touch.

Once the belt was in my hand, I grabbed the bottom of my dress and lifted it up. Some of the dwarves had the decency to initially avert their gazes at the sight of a lady becoming immodest, but soon all eyes were back on me.

On the vertical scar running down the lower half of my chest, to be exact.

“I did get run through,” I said. Explaining it out loud to the Company felt strange. I’d rehearsed it so many times in my head that at some point it stopped being an inevitable reality. “I did die.”

I turned around and bunched up the dress to the side so they’d see the matching scar on my back. It didn’t lay right on my spine; the sword had glanced off the bone when it entered, so it instead ran parallel.

“But…” I dropped the dress and retied the belt. My stare glossed over the entire Company so I could address them all. Bilbo had awoken, all bleary, and was being propped up with the help of Bofur and Nori. He still carried my pack with him. Good. “I have this weird thing that when I die, it’s not permanent.”

Gandalf hummed, tilting his chin up speculatively.

“Go on.”

I shrugged and splayed my hands out. “That’s—that’s all there is to it, really. I die, I come back, I die again, I come back again.”

“And what do you see when you pass into shadow?”

“Uh, shadow?” I grimaced at how lame that sounded. “I don’t remember anything. It’s just like I’m sleeping.”

“Hm. Truly, you see nothing?”

I stared at Gandalf. What was he fishing for?
When the answer miraculously struck me through hazy memories of Luis and the movies, I tilted my chin up and said, “No. I don’t see white shores.”

He straightened, those old blue eyes filling with concern. “Curious. Curious indeed.”

Gandalf stepped closer to me, and from the sleeve of his gray robe he extended a large hand. My heart involuntarily began to beat faster as it reached out to my face. I didn’t move, though, and Gandalf placed a thumb in the center of my forehead while the rest of his fingers rested against my temple.

I continued looking right into Gandalf’s eyes, trying to take steady breaths. He murmured something I couldn’t understand, whispers like water cascading on rocks.

Light swallowed my vision for an instant, harsh and truthful and good, but so, so terrifying. Then—then—

Then it was gone, and I found myself gazing up at Gandalf once more, blood pumping almost painfully in my ears. His serious expression had been replaced with joy, and a great smile encompassed his face. I grinned back.

“Oh, my dear Valeria,” he said through the beginnings of laughter. All the fear melted away as if it never existed at all. I threw my arms around the wizard’s sturdy waist, and he returned the hug with love and care. “It is good to have you with us once more.”

When I let go, another, smaller person was waiting for his turn. I scooped the hobbit up in my arms and squeezed Bilbo so tight his ribs creaked under the pressure. Whether he was laughing or sobbing, I couldn’t tell. “Hey there, Baggins,” I whispered.

“Hullo, Valeria.”

The sound of my best friend’s voice caused me to renew the hugging vise I had him in. Bilbo finally squeaked, so I reluctantly set him down. He dabbed his eyes with the back of a dirty corduroy sleeve.

I didn’t have empty arms for long. The Company practically piled onto me, and I wished I could embrace them all at once, because I loved them all.

I loved them all so much.

Dwalin ruffled my hair and heartily proclaimed, “Nice ta see you’re not an evil spirit come to haunt us, lass!”

“Well, would ya look at that! You’ve put some meat on those bones of yours! What’ve ye been eating here?”

“Ouch! Not enough meat, I say! Just got stabbed by a hipbone!”

“Have ye gotten taller? Or is it just me?”

“Fight another lake beast while we were away?”

I hadn’t laughed this much for this long in weeks. My cheeks ached in a good way, and as I let Kili go from yet another bone-crushing dwarven hug, I then slipped into Fili’s arms.

He held me tight, but it separated itself from the others I’d received. On his damp shoulders was
my cloak—his cloak—and I felt all the little hidden daggers and throwing knives within the folds of his clothing. “Mahal, I never thought…” Fili murmured in my ear, low voice covered by the raucous talking. His arms wrapped a fraction more around me, and I let myself rest my cheekbone against his head. “I am happy to see you live.”

Fili didn’t sound like he was pleased with his words, for some reason, and let go with a tiny, frustrated sigh. I still beamed at him. We’d have plenty of time later to sort through all the awkwardness and unresolved sexual tension that came with my whole not-being-dead thing.

“Thorin,” I said when I found myself face-to-face with the king. “Glad to see you’re alive, too.”

He cracked a smile. Movie Thorin always had his hair down, no matter the weather or terrain. Real Thorin was much more practical. He had his hair twisted back into a bun, and strands of black still clung to his damp skin.

We shared a quick, meaningful hug. “And you as well, Valeria,” he replied with a hint of dryness. Then Thorin turned stoic, as I assumed he would, and asked, “How did you know to come here? We made no intentions of fleeing to this exact place when you were…”

Thorin couldn’t say “alive,” so he trailed off. My heart tightened. These poor guys. All the processes of grieving they’d gone through for me were invalid, now.

And yet the shocks weren’t over.

I gripped his shoulder in a firm dwarven-fashion I’d picked up from the Company. “I’ll tell you everything,” I promised. “But first, let’s get all of you dried off and some food on the table. You’re a few days late; and I didn’t expect all of you to come when it’s raining. I’ll get something set out quick enough, though.” Shit, I was even starting to talk like these assholes. So proper and in Ye Olde English. “Beorn would hate me if I was a poor host in his place.”

“Beorn? Who is this Beorn?” Dori inquired. “And how has he fended off such a beast that gave us chase? These lands are not safe, no indeed!”

Gandalf and I shared a look. My forehead wrinkled from arching brows and a slow-forming wince. “Beorn,” I said when the wizard stayed awfully silent. “Beorn is the bear who chased you.”

The Company burst into furious chatter. “Hey! Hey! Shut up! He just chased you because he wanted to scare you! Right? It was a joke!”


“Yes! Believe me, if he wanted to kill you, he could have. And—and now that I’ve already talked all of you up, you’re not going to have to persuade him to let you stay!” I broke out into a shit-eating grin. “He’s already given you a warm welcome.”

“By my beard!” Bofur proclaimed, clapping me hard on the back. “She’s as cheeky as ever!”

Clothes, cloaks, and one hat hung strewn about the barn section of the farmhouse. I set out food from the pantry as the dwarves gathered around the large, Skin-changer sized dinner table. The only person who had adequate proportions for it was Gandalf.

“What is this—mush?” Nori inquired, suspiciously examining the jar of salsa.
“That is a cultural staple of my food,” I said, setting out a heaping bowl of fresh-baked tortilla chips. “And all of you have to try it.” I took a chip and scooped a heaping amount of salsa, then offered it to Nori. Suspiciously, he accepted it, and sniffed at the food.

“Bah. Smells like vomit!”

“Shut the hell up and just eat it!”

Nori stuck the tip of his tongue out and barely touched the salsa with it. Then he made a disgusted face and gave it back to me. “Tastes like vomit, too.”

“You are so fucking rude!”

I ate the chip and salsa myself, then slapped him upside the back of the head as I continued getting enough food out to satiate these starving parasites. I’d practically been thrown back to my waiting tables days when I was a junior in high school.

And these greedy bastards wouldn’t even bother to tip.

But, eventually, I was able to sit down and serve myself up some bread and jam with a slice of light, slightly sweet cheese. “What, no meat?” Bombur had to complain as he inhaled food at a perilous rate. “We saw pigs and cows outside!”

“Those pigs and cows are here just to be cute,” I said, taking a bite of my bread. As expected, I got a multitude of head shakes and noises of discontent. My eyes rolled, but I couldn’t wipe the smile off my face.

“Ye mean we’ve been running for our lives this past month, and still we don’t get a hearty meal?” Oin, too, griped. I spread my arms out at the table incredulously.

“Look at all this! It’s a fucking feast! And it seems like all of you are more concerned with lack of meat than you are with the fact that I’m alive and well!”

“I’m happy you’re alive, Valeria,” Bilbo said in the ongoing ruckus, true as ever. His head barely peeked above the table we sat at. I smiled at him.

“Thanks, Baggins.”

The loud joyfulness that came with a large family bonding over food didn’t last as long as I’d hoped. Really, I wished that everyone would forget that this was my destination before it ever was theirs, and we could get on with our lives. There were much more serious things to worry about besides me, anyway.

But the king slammed his mug of mead (that was really more of a juice in terms of alcohol) and garnered the table’s attention. I shot a hesitant at Gandalf, who saw it and only gave a nod of encouragement. If he thought it was okay to tell them, then…then I guess I could.

“Silence,” Thorin commanded. The table hushed, though many tried—and failed—to continue eating quietly. His eyes settled on me. “I do believe a proper explanation is in order.”

I finished eating my apple slice and nodded. “Agreed.” Wiping my fingers on my dress, I stood so I could get a clear view of everyone. It felt kind of dumb to talk about all that I was about to when I looked like as much of a kid at the too-big table with the rest of them.

“Okay!” I clapped my hands together, took a deep breath, and said, “I’m from another world.”
No reaction other than slight confusion. Balin squinted his eyes a little. “What?”

“I’m from another world! Like, you know, in the stars?” I pointed up at the ceiling for extra effect. “This is Middle-Earth. My world is just called Earth. Similar names, different solar systems. Maybe different galaxies? A different universe entirely? I’ve tried not to think about it too much.”

“But—but that’s impossible!” Bilbo interjected, suddenly clammy. I sighed and looked down at him.

“You’d think so. But here we are. It makes sense, though, doesn’t it? My clothes—the clothes that I came in—couldn’t possibly be made here.” I snapped my black sports bra strap. “Spanish isn’t a language you speak here, either. That’s why I was so homesick! Because, like, how can I ever get back to where…where…”

Where my family is.

A sudden wave of sadness hit me, but I rode through it, just as I always had.

“Listen. I’m telling the truth. Gandalf, back me up.”

The wizard took the stem of his pipe out of his mouth and lightly coughed. He shifted in his seat and said, “Er, yes. Lady Valeria speaks without lie. She hails from another world not our own. How she has come to be here, I know not, but the timing of her arrival is not coincidental.”

I didn’t think it was an appropriate time to mention to Gandalf that Beorn met another Earth person like me. There’d be a chance later.

“And what is the reason for your descent from the heavens?” Thorin questioned. He had his hands laced in front of him, lancing me with that piercing gaze. I’d developed armor for it, though, and didn’t falter.

“That? I’m not sure. I have no connection to this world whatsoever. And I didn’t ‘descend from the heavens.’ My world is…fuck, it’s messier than this one. If anything, I ascended. Though, I do miss all the technological advances this one lacks. Oh, and I should mention that there are only humans on my world.”

“What do you mean?” Ori, who I hadn’t noticed pulled out a journal, was hastily scribbling in it with a quill looking worse-for-wear. I placed both hands on my hips and swayed side-to-side.

“I mean that there are no elves or dwarves or hobbits or wizards. There are no shape shifters and dragons. Nothing. We have humans. We have science. That’s it. The only darkness that we’ve fought has come from our own kind.” I stopped swaying and touched my chest, right above the visible part of my sports bra. “I myself am Hispanic. My family is from a country called Mexico, but we live in another called the United States of America. And yes, in case you’re wondering, there is a lot of racism where I’m from. Human beings can be that way to one another. And, apparently, it’s here, too.” Dourly, I added, “Unfortunately.”

“And do people where you’re from simply…pop back up from the clutches of death as you so do?” Balin said with a humorless chuckle. His pallor, along with mostly everyone else at the table, had taken on a pale sheen.

“Ha. No. No, death is typically as permanent there as it is here. Nobody has ever been immortal. Religious figures aside.” I shot a glance at Gandalf to see if he showed what he was thinking. Other than furrowed brows, the wizard betrayed nothing as he smoked on his pipe.
I bowed my head for a moment and took a breath, readying myself.

“So. If you thought that repeatedly coming back from the dead and being from another world is weird, check this out.”

My hands clapped again and rubbed together. Nervous habit. “This world? We know this world on mine. In fiction. Books. Films. This world is not meant to be real because it was a made-up story. You—” I moved a finger across the gathered Company, starting with a stricken Bilbo on my left to a somber Fili on my right. “You were all supposed to be imaginary. So that was a real shock to me when I saw…when I saw you guys right before my very eyes.”

“How can this be possible?” Thorin wouldn’t let me tear from his gaze.

I shrugged helplessly. “Honestly, I have no idea. I really don’t. This—but this story—what’s happening right now, it’s been written down. It’s been filmed.”

My breath came out less steady than I hoped. I stared at Thorin and said, “And I know how it ends.”

He was practically standing himself, by now, and he spoke just above a whisper. “What becomes of this quest, Valeria?”

The back of my neck became flushed. This was it. This was the moment. Tell them of their fates so we could prevent it. So that they could live.

*Or what if I’m just sealing their fates by revealing it to them? What if I ruin it all before I even have a chance to reverse it?*

I was afraid.

“You reclaim Erebor,” I spoke with a smile, and the Company gasped and cried out. They started clapping each other on the back, calling in wages, and making plans for celebrations.

But I was a bad liar, and I was pretty sure Thorin saw through it. Though he released a shaky exhale upon the revelation, he did not celebrate like everyone else.

“And what of Smaug?” Kili shouted above the rest. He grinned ear-to-ear. “Who slays him? It’s me, isn’t it? Come, Valeria, tell them of my victory so that they can overcome their grief before it happens!” He shoved off a swipe Fili took at him.

I laughed a little, hoping that I could ease my tense heart. Would it be a bad sign if I just keeled over from a coronary?

“Actually, Kili, I’m afraid that it won’t be you. It’s…” My smile slipped the longer I thought. “Oh, shit, I actually can’t remember his name. Have to look at my notes. But he helps us out later on, I promise.”

Unless I’ve changed things so much that the path I was familiar with suddenly diverged into unknown territory.

Kili was undeterred. “Then, tell me, do readers dote over me? Am I the hero they sigh about in the candlelight?”

I wanted to say, “In the movie? Hell yeah. But they thirst over Thorin more.”
But I wasn’t about to give the little shit gratification. Or mortify Thorin to an early grave. No, I’d wait until he got on my nerves enough to divulge the information.

“Sorry, but no.” I sat back down in my chair before my legs got too shaky from the residual adrenaline pumping through me. My hand found its way to Bilbo’s curly hair and ruffled it. “The main hero of the story is, in fact, one Bilbo Baggins.”

It was a poor time to say that. Bilbo, the nervous eater that he was, stuffed his mouth with an assortment of fruits and cheeses while I talked. When I announced that he was the protagonist, Bilbo choked and spat out nearly everything, then threw himself into a fit of red-faced, apologetic coughing.

The model of a hero.

Dwalin, used to Bilbo’s behavior, still curled his lip at the sight of the wheezing hero.

“Ye can’t be serious, lass.”

“Oh, I’m serious,” I smirked, patting Bilbo’s wracking back like he was a child. “The book you’re all in is literally called The Hobbit. Not Thirteen Stinky Dwarves Stomp to The Lonely Mountain Complaining All the Way.”

“That’s rightly unfair,” Bofur said, surreptitiously whipping out his own pipe. The dwarves, overall, seemed miffed at the fact that Bilbo outranked them all in terms of the story. Except for Fili, who hid his smile behind a large tankard of mead. Gandalf blatantly laughed at it all. The wizard was basking in his smugness for being right about bringing the hobbit along.

“Whoa, hey, I can’t do anything about it. Bilbo was my favorite in the version I’m most familiar with. He’s my favorite in this version too.”

Bilbo, still coughing, waved me off.

“But,” I continued, hoping to help the dwarves heal from their injured pride, “people still loved a lot of you guys, too. Bofur and Dwalin, you were my brother’s favorites.”

The two instantly lit up. Dwalin, for all his roughness, couldn’t resist raising his mug to me. “Aye, sounds like a smart lad.”

“Incredibly,” Bofur agreed, and puffed out a happier trail of smoke from his pipe.

“Is he a warrior like myself?” Dwalin asked me, a proud glint in his eyes.

I laughed. “No. No, he isn’t. We don’t really have warriors in my world. We’re long past the days of swords and arrows. But he likes to swing sticks around in the backyard and pretend to be one, even at his age.”

“And how old is he?” Balin’s kind smile had returned, and if I knew him like I do now, Bilbo would have a hard contender for favorite. “Your brother.”

My head tilted, and I poked at an errant blueberry on my plate. “Luis is seventeen. Eighteen in a couple more months. We have an age gap between us, but he’s always been close. He’s the reason why I know anything at all about you guys. He was way more into this stuff than I ever was.”

“An age gap, indeed!” Oin said. “You must be four times his age!”
I drew my brows together. A confused smile crawled up my lips. “Wait,” I slowly said, “do any of you actually know my age?”

“You’re around forty,” Kili said with a sure nod. “Perhaps nearing fifty.”


“Do none of you really know how human years work?”

“They’re shorter, aye,” Bombur nodded sagely as he munched on a hard biscuit.

“But…but they’re a lot shorter than I think all of you realize.” I ate the blueberry I was playing with, and its sweetness burst on the side of my mouth. “You idiots really do need to meet more humans.”

“What, so you aren’t nearing fifty?” asked Kili.

I scoffed. “No! I’m fucking twenty-six!”

The table went silent. Bilbo’s coughing had ceased, so he too stared at me open-mouthed. Raindrops struck the roof of the farmhouse.


“Why, you’re just a babe,” Bofur uttered. He, like the rest, looked at me differently. Like I was suddenly a fragile object that somehow got tossed into a rucksack.

“I’m an adult,” I reminded gently—but firmly. “And I’ve done a lot in my life already. Even in my own world, I was considered…adventurous.”

A poor way of putting it, but I couldn’t describe my endeavors to them without going into longer details.

“So I guess in a twisted way, it makes sense that my next big thing would be this.” I plucked another blueberry up and ate it. “You’re all acting as if me being twenty-six was a bigger deal than coming back to life and being from another world.”

“Forgive them, Lady Valeria,” Gandalf said. “I do believe they are struggling to come to terms with human mortality. How quickly they forget that you and mortality have a…unique relationship, as it so happens.”

We shared smiles. Then, disgruntled by the quiet that befell the Company, I slammed a fist on the table and shouted, “Come on! Ask me about home! You’ve all been dying to hear about where I’m from since the very beginning. And I’m dying to finally tell you.”

“Very well.”

Fili, who had taken up the chance to speak, reached for a tortilla chip in the bowl and scooped up a heaping amount like I had earlier. I slightly grimaced. The prince held it out to me like a toast, smiling and unaware of whatever reaction the salsa might cause him.

But damn, was he cute doing it.

“What is this lovely dip made from?”
He answered his own question by valiantly shoving the entire thing into his mouth. At first, Fili
hummed pleasantly at the taste and nodded. But his expression went from amiable to tense to red-
faced. He opened his mouth and did the whole “Hoo” thing, as if air would quell the spiciness.

The Company returned to humor at the prince’s expense. They laughed at Fili, who swallowed the
salsa and quickly gulped down his mead.

“Oi, look at the little princeling! Can’t even handle his lass’ own food!” Nori cackled, and I
pretended not to hear the possessive pronoun.

“The salsa is made from fresh ingredients in Beorn’s garden,” I explained, taking the jar and
pouring myself some on the plate. I grabbed a handful of chips and started eating them.
“Tomatoes, onions, cilantro, and jalapenos. It’s lacking in a few other ingredients, but it’s a taste of
home for me. And the heat to it? It’s nothing but flavor. Like, it’s not even spicy.”

“Must’ve gotten something burned off, then,” Fili coughed as he recovered from the ordeal. I shot
him a grin, and if he wasn’t already red in the face, he might have blushed.

“Nah. You just got white people palates.”

I giggled at my own comment. Having saved the conversation from a depressing lull, Fili sat back
in his too-big chair and nursed on a biscuit while I got questions thrown at me. I didn’t need to look
at him again to know that he was smirking.

The Company wasn’t my blood-family. There’d be no replacing them. But we were bonded
through battles of blood, through long days and summer nights, through death and revival. Ori
jotted down notes while I spoke, Bilbo listened with keen interest and a mouth stuffed with food,
Kili asked how cute my sister was, Dwalin wanted to know about our army, and Bofur made me
promise that I’d sing more songs from my home. All the while, Thorin kept us under his watchful
gaze. He smiled whenever I glanced his way.

A family like this was good enough for me.

Chapter End Notes

I don't think this chapter could have ever been perfect for me, but I hope you enjoyed
it for what it was. The Company has their Valeria back!
Beorn arrived later the same night, once the rain stopped and left the sweet scent of its gentle storm on the cooler breeze. The dwarves, for all their excitement, had dropped like flies once dinner was over. As they lay down for the night in piles of straw, I showed them my neat trick by plopping into it, spreading my arms wide, and proclaiming, “Come to me, *mis bebés!*” Then, in a swarm, I was blanketed by chickens, goats, mice, ducks, and even a wooly calf.

They weren’t as impressed as they should have been. But it made Fili grin, so he was definitely in the clear.

I had to sneak and shimmy my way out of my sleeping companions to meet Beorn. He was eating the plate of food I’d left out for him on the table. The warm glow of candlelight illuminated the dining area.

“There is an axe sticking out of the wall,” muttered Beorn as I came in and climbed into a chair.

“Yeah. Surprising dwarves isn’t always a good idea.” I propped my elbows up on the table. My black hair tumbled loose around bare shoulders, since the dress I wore was still tugged down enough to expose them. I took to picking out bits of straw from the strands.

“I did not think they would arrive today,” Beorn said, then groaned tiredly as he took a seat. “You said it would be sunny.”

“Obviously I’m not always right.”

“Mm. That could be dangerous in the future. Almost knowing, but not.”

I let out a sigh of my own. “I know.” Then, with a smirk, I said, “You just couldn’t help yourself, could you? Chasing them?”

Beorn chuckled. “They were not harmed.”

“Physically. You might have given nightmares to some.”

“Bah. Doubt it.”

We shared smiles. A stray mouse who’d gotten tangled up in my hair found its way out, so I picked up the tiny thing and cupped it in the palm of my hand. It curled up and went back to sleep under the gentle brush of my thumb.

“So did you tell them?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“Everything?”

“Mostly everything.” I did not look at Beorn, and because of this the Skin-changer grunted and chewed on a strawberry.

“’Tis a hard thing, holding possible futures in your grasp, unknowing to which the right one could
“Or none of them could be right, and I’m just a dumbass who thinks she can do anything about it.”

Beorn patted me on the head, his thick hand enveloping the top of my skull. I laughed, as faint as it was. “Worry not. You are strong and resourceful. I am certain that whatever may pass, you shall weather it.”

“Thanks, Beorn.”

“Now go back to bed. I’m sure tomorrow will be as busy for you as it was tonight.” He smirked half to himself, half to me. “Since you wanted them here so badly, you can worry about feeding them until the orc numbers clear enough for travel.”

“Rude.” But I chuckled and pushed myself out of the chair. My feet landed softly on the worn wooden floor, and I held the little mouse close to my chest. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

I left Beorn to his own late meal and returned to my patch of straw and animals. Thorin, though he was sleeping, sat upright against the wall, arms folded across his chest, head tucked down. He’d probably fallen asleep making sure all of us were still being watched over.

Bilbo slept deeply on my left side. A couple of hens had found their way to him, too, and huddled close. He and some of the other dwarves had been given blankets and pillows where they could be spared, so while he currently enjoyed the warmth of a green blanket covering him, his corduroy jacket was turned into a makeshift pillow. Or, rather, something to separate his head from the straw.

The clothes Bilbo wore—the clothes all of them wore—looked ratty and stained with dirt and sweat. His vest was missing buttons and the necktie looked like little more than a raggedy piece of cloth at this point. I doubted that even if the clothes got washed, they would never be really clean.

And yet we still had so much ahead of us.

To the right side was Fili. I would have been pissed if he picked a different place to sleep other than next to me. The prince was curled on his side, one hand tucked under the pillow he’d been gifted with. My cloak—his cloak—covered his lower half. Fili, like practically everyone else in the Company, was no longer under constant threat of death, so he stripped of his armor and weapons and lay in a cotton tunic.

I reached over and touched the spot on Fili’s forearm right before it disappeared underneath the pillow. Delight radiated through me.

Fili, the light sleeper that he was, shifted and opened his eyes. I could barely see in the darkness, but I recognized his smile. He pulled his hand out and placed it over mine. A calloused thumb grazed my skin.

“I missed you, Ria,” he whispered, so soft that it might not have been spoken at all.

“Missed you too,” I whispered back, and closed my eyes while a sleepy, ear-to-ear grin encompassed my face. I would have rolled closer to Fili, but I had an obligation to the animals surrounding me. And maybe it was for the best. I wouldn’t have wanted the entire Company butting in and gossiping about our cuddles.
So we held hands in the quiet farmhouse broken by familiar choruses of snores.

And though my eyes were shut, I didn’t sleep for a long while.

- 

The rain left the early morning air cool. It hadn’t turned muggy yet, and I was going to take advantage of the temperature before it ended.

Fili had turned over on his other side at some point in the night, breaking our chaste connection. Or my arm had fallen asleep and I moved it. It didn’t matter either way. I sat up, brushed the animals off me, and grabbed my pack Bilbo had so dutifully guarded.

My Earth clothes were tucked away just as I left them. The pack itself was considerably lighter, seeing as it was no longer burdened with lembas bread or extra waterskins. I expected as much.

I pulled out my clothes, cinched the pack up again, and left to go get changed. It felt nice being in leggings and tennis shoes again. Though I wore my long-sleeved shirt outside, it promptly became too stifling to wear, even in the cooler temperatures. So I slung it on a fencepost, leaving me with my sports bra visible, and walked out to where the horses were getting started on their grazing.

“Hello!” I called in animal speech. They perked their heads up, ears twitching, and gave low whinnies of delight as they trotted over. I scratched below their chins and kissed a few soft noses. In English, I said, “Do you lovelies want to go for a run?”

I stretched, feeling the strain of tight muscles, and started off. The herd loped beside me, playfully kicking and nipping in the crisp air as they went.

Soon my lungs were burning. Two weeks of not doing much left me a bit softer than I wanted. But I ran and ran, occasionally touching a nearby horse just to remind myself that yes, I was jogging beside creatures twice my size and twice as gentle.

We went only a couple of miles from Beorn’s house. Too much further and we’d be beyond his borders, and orcs could snatch me up. That’d be more embarrassing than anything. The horses and I stopped by a small stream, and I splashed water on myself to cool down.

After, I stretched out on my back and stared up at the early dawn sky. The horses took to grazing again, and whenever one came close enough I drew it in for a few smooches on their face. Crickets still chirped their morning ballads, and the peaceful rushing of water in the stream nearly put me back to sleep.

All was calm.

Away from prying eyes, I took out the droplet from its usual resting place within my sports bra. I made a small disgusted noise when I grabbed it, since it was soaked in boob sweat. My shark tooth didn’t suffer the same fate; I left that out so it wouldn’t cut me while I ran.

I wiped as much sweat off as I could from the jewel and held it aloft so I could peer into its facets. The longer I looked, the more I discovered things. Its cuts, for one, weren’t symmetrical. Some were too long and others too little, but it was so smooth and small that I didn’t initially notice. The delicate necklace chain also didn’t have a hook or a loop that connected it to the droplet. The two just…stayed together. But when I tried pulling them apart, nothing happened.

Not that I wanted to damage otherworldly property.
Once I felt rested up again, I made the run back with the herd. I was tempted to stop and pick wildflowers, but by the time I reached the farmhouse again they’d be wilted and close to death because of the movement.

As I was making mental plans on everything I was going to do with the Company and what food to make, I heard the clanging of metal before I saw a short, lone figure working outside the barn area.

Thorin didn’t notice me approach until he got distracted by the sudden influx of horses coming through. He found the small blacksmith forge on the side of the barn and was taking something to the anvil. When he stopped and looked up at me, I waved and slowed to a walk.

“Good morning!” I called, slightly out-of-breath. The heat from the forge vented out from the entrance, so I didn’t go all the way in.

Thorin went back to his work. His hair had been tied back again. “You’re indecent,” he said over rhythmic hammers. I pressed a hand over the scar on my chest and felt the faint twinge of indefinite muscle scarring.

“It gets hot when you run a few miles,” I replied. Thorin didn’t mind as I hopped up on a closed barrel and watched him work. The king had also stripped down to just his tunic and rolled the sleeves up past his elbows. Sweat glistened on his skin in the forge’s firelight glow. “What’re you doing?”

“I informed Beorn that we could offer services as payment for his hospitality,” Thorin said. Distracted by a familiar work, he held no bite or brunt to his words. “He needed more horseshoes, a new axe, and some hinges. So here I am.”

“When did you talk to Beorn?”

“This morning, before he left to patrol.”

I frowned. “Aw, man. I wanted to say goodbye to him.”

“Where did you go? Tired of us already?” A faint smile crawled up the corner of Thorin’s mouth. I snickered.

“I went for a run with the horses. Not too far; just a couple miles out. Now that I got my tennis shoes back—” I lifted up my feet to showcase the dirty black Nikes, “I can be freaking fast again.”

“Did you see any orcs?”

“Do you think I’d forget to mention if I saw orcs?”

Thorin’s smile grew. He picked up the half-finished horseshoe with a tong and stuck it back into the forge. I began toying with my shark tooth.

“If you’ve seen other pressing things, your priorities might have gotten changed.”

I tilted my head and squinted. “And what other ‘pressing things’ could have been more important than orcs?”

Thorin paused and lightly tossed his hammer up and down. “Pretty birds? A nice cloud? An interesting rock?”

My jaw dropped in exaggerated offense. I pointedly ignored the fact that I almost stopped to pick
wildflowers. Thorin chuckled and went back to blacksmithing. “Rude! I’m not dumb!”

“No.” His smile turned to wistfulness. “You are not.”

I crossed my legs on the barrel. Thorin sighed, suddenly overcome with something, and let his hammer fall silent.

“Did it…did it hurt?”

His question was so quiet that I almost didn’t hear it. Thorin looked to the visible scar, and I’d never seen so much remorse fill his expression.

“No, it didn’t. Not this time.” I touched the other scar on the side of my waist. Thorin followed the movement.

“What happened there?”

“Wild boar.” I half-smiled at the ridiculousness of it. “A few days into this world. It hurt like…it hurt like hell.” The hand went to the back of my neck, where I felt straight vertebrae bumps. “The time after that I fell off a cliff. I think…four days before I met all of you? That one left no scars. I just broke my neck. I don’t even remember much from that one. But getting stabbed—no, I didn’t feel anything, really. Just the—just the shock of looking down and seeing that there’s something sticking out of me.”

I could remember it all so clearly that if I thought hard enough, I’d be back there, among fire and battle.

“So, had it not been for your…abilities…you would have died before you could even join us?” A wryness touched Thorin’s voice.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m shit here. But I was pretty good at staying alive back in my world.”

He nodded his head to my shoulder, where the old scar rested. “And that is a testament to it?”

I glanced down. “Oh, yeah. Bullet hole. We have weapons—guns—that shoot out these tiny little projectiles called bullets. They go so fast that you can’t even catch it with your eye. And the impact is so brutal that, in the right place, it can kill you instantly. The bullet went clean through me.” I turned so Thorin could see the exit scar, bigger and splotchier.

The information created a kind of excited tension on Thorin’s face. He crossed his arms, still holding the blacksmith hammer. “How did you come to receive it? You are no warrior.”

“I went to an active war zone not to fight, but to save lives and get people out of there. But often times, there is no place for anyone to flee to.”

I waved myself off. “I won’t get into the details of the horrors of refugee lives. You…you know
their plight. Displacement, having others turn their backs on them. Nowhere to return and nowhere to go.”

Thorin nodded once.

“Active war zone means shooting and bombs. I was simply standing in the street when bam!” I splayed my hand out past the back of my shoulder. “I’ve been shot, I’m down on the ground bleeding, there’s shouting and gunfire, and civilians are dead next to me.”

I bowed my head a little and stared down at my Nikes. Nikes that cost the same amount of money that some people I’ve been around make in a year.

“I went home after that. Took a while to recover, both physically and mentally. But being with my family helped a lot. Then I was back at it again that summer, fighting fires and planning to go back to do humanitarian aid.”

“Fighting…fires?”

“We get a lot of forest fires where I live? Since it’s so hot and dry in the summer. So there’s literal people who go and try to contain and put them out.”

Thorin raised a brow. “And is it successful?”

I grimaced. “Fires destroy no matter what. Success is relative.”

He hummed low and went to start up the smithing again. “You sound like your goal in life is to throw yourself into danger for the sake of helping.”

“Well—yeah.” I sputtered out a laugh. “It’s been like that, sometimes. Often the people who need the most help are the people in the worst places.”

“True words. So it seems that being here with us is not entirely unfamiliar. We are, after all, trying to get our home back, facing a perilous journey, and need your help to do so.”

It took a little while for me to respond. There were a million different ways I wanted to go, but I ended up with, “I’m not sure if you exactly need me, but I can help. And no, it’s not a complete shock. Not anymore. But I think…yeah, the main difference is that I…”

My throat clogged up, but Thorin didn’t mind waiting while I controlled it. His hammering rang in my ears, like a pulse all on its own, and I wondered how peaceful this work was to him.

“The main difference is that I could always go back home. You—you know that I could actually talk to my parents and siblings even though we were separated by thousands of miles? All thanks to technology. I could see their faces each night and tell them about my day.”

“And now you have no promise of returning,” said Thorin. “You are separated from them completely.”

“Mm hm.” I groaned and stretched both hands upwards. “But you guys have to get your home back. And if anything, all I’ve ever wanted for the people that I helped was for them to have a home again.”

Thorin wouldn’t likely know soon about the countless bodies I covered up with sheets, carrying starving children who were barely clinging to life, wading waist-deep to drag life rafts that’ve crossed the ocean onto the shores of Turkey, or seeing such depths of poverty that it was barely
comprehensible.

But he recognized the pain. The weight. The desire.

“Go clean yourself up,” Thorin instructed with the gentleness that always caught me off-guard. Then it turned back to its typical tone. “The Company should be waking soon, if they’re not up already. Make them help you with breakfast. They shouldn’t be lounging.”

I smiled again and hopped off the barrel. “I’ll have someone come get you when there’s food ready.”

“Thank you.”

Thorin was left to his work. I took my time walking back to the farmhouse, languidly stretching as I went. And, of course, I had to stop and pet all the animals that I came across.

Couldn’t we all just stay here? On a farm with fresh produce and cute animals?

Beorn could stand me—and probably Bilbo and Gandalf. He’d kick everyone else out, though. But still! We’d make do!

I threw my shirt back on and went inside, leaving behind yet another fantasy where we could avoid any strife. Gandalf was already up, smoking a pipe at the table and skimming through one of Beorn’s books. He heard me enter and partially turned. “Ah, good morning, Valeria.”

“Good morning, G,” I said back. The wizard chuckled at the new nickname. “Are you the only one awake?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“You hungry?”

“Mm. Peckish is a better word.”

I strode past Gandalf and to the rest of the sleeping Company. If I could turn on a light or open any curtains, I would. It’d be gentler.

Instead, I cupped both hands around my mouth and shouted at the top of my lungs, “Wake the FUCK UP!”

That did the trick.

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Breakfast was at the same level of chaos as Wal-Mart on a Saturday, but compressed to a shape shifter’s kitchen. Lots of yelling. Plenty of swearing. At least three brawls. Food everywhere. I kept them from going completely savage like they had at Bilbo’s own house (he certainly looked like the disorder gave him a traumatic flashback), but dwarves were dwarves, and boy were they hungry.

I made them help wash and put everything away, too, and they were both delighted and disturbed to hear that yes, I saw them all at Bilbo’s own home, and yes, if they cleaned up there then they’d have to clean up here.

Then it was time for laundry. The Company left me to go a little downstream of the creek Beorn got his running water from. I showered myself, then tended to the garden in Beorn’s absence.
Gandalf never got dirty—I blamed his wizard cheats—so he took up a spot under the shade of an oak and puffed on his pipe.

I should tell him about the droplet. About the other person from Earth who also had one. Gandalf, of all people, would definitely be like, “Hmm, interesting,” in his deep voice, then give me a look with those raised, bushy brows that was always a little intimidating.

But every time I turned to go to Gandalf, I…stopped. Like there was a failsafe in me. Not yet. Not yet.

I wondered how long I would tell that to myself. Maybe tomorrow? When we meet back at Erebor? After I’ve saved the three Dumbass Durins?

When they set on a quest to destroy The Ring?

Nope. Nope. I wasn’t going to be here that long. I’d tell him. For sure. Sometime later.

But speaking of The Ring.

Bilbo found me by the apiaries a few hours later, once his clothes had dried and he himself had bathed. I looked up from the paper detailing all the events that’d happen and grinned at him. The paper got refolded and tucked into my sports bra.

“Looking good, Baggins!” I hooted, and the hobbit spread his arms out and gave a complimentary spin.

“You have no idea how long I’ve wanted to wash,” he began to laugh, but abruptly stopped when a fat bee buzzed his way. Bilbo started to swerve it in a panic.

I laughed at him and said, “They don’t sting. Look!” I shifted and showed Bilbo my left shoulder, where a happy, plump bee perched. “They just want to say hi.”

“Oh—bee. Hi. Hello.” Bilbo did his awkward wave to the one buzzing around him. It then drifted off to a nearby patch of wildflowers growing at the base of an oak tree.

“You’re…you’re quite comfortable here, aren’t you?”

He came and sat down beside me. My hair had been pulled back into a half-pony, and the rest of the wavy black tresses hung down my back. Today’s color of shirt-dress was cream, and was barefoot since this part of the farm was covered in soft, green grass.

“I am. Aren’t you?”

He smiled and relaxed against the tree. Bilbo’s hands and hobbit feet dug into the grass, and a look I hadn’t seen since Rivendell encompassed his expression.

“This reminds me a lot of home. The Shire.”

“Yeah?” I placed my foot next to Bilbo’s and compared the sizes. “It is kind of like the Shire, isn’t it? Green and good.”

He stilled, a musing smile flickering. “I—I was excited to show you the Shire. It’d be quite the surprise. But come to find out, you’ve already seen it. It’s, er, well, I don’t quite know how to put it. Is that normal?”

“Uh, I honestly don’t know.” I slouched further against the tree and laced my hands on my lap.
“Believe it or not, but this is my first time ending up in a world that was, by all means, fictional.”

“Not so fictional now, though, right?”

I giggled. “No. No, no. It’s definitely not. But! I will be surprised to see the Shire no matter what. Because it’s the Shire. It’s famous.”

Bilbo glowed with a smidgen of pride. “Then my own anticipation shall remain ever steadfast.”

The bee on my shoulder lifted and bobbed away back to its apiary. Maybe the insect could feel the peace slipping from me as a harbored question came forth.

“Hey, um, Baggins.” I couldn’t look at him, so I instead stared out at a giant apiary and started playing with the shark tooth. “So. Back there in the goblin caves…”

Shit. How could I even talk about it? And this was after hours of rehearsing the conversation in my head.

“Bad. Bad stuff. Truly.” Bilbo was oblivious—or intentionally avoiding—to what I was trying to allude to. “I still have nightmares. And you must, as well, with what all you went through. The dwarves, they—they told me a bit about what they tried to do.” He swallowed, horrified at just the thought of it.

“Nah, I don’t have nightmares.” I still gazed out at the apiary. “But…but I wanted to…to ask you about what you found in that cave.”

It was my turn to swallow, since my mouth suddenly went dry.

“You mean this?”

A flash of gold caught my eye. In Bilbo’s open palm, small and shining underneath the shade of the tree, lay it.

The Ring.

He tentatively smiled. “Figured you might know about this, too, so I shouldn’t bother hiding it, eh? It’s a handy little thing, isn’t it?”

I expected some kind of temptation, or a recognition of evil, emanating from it. Because, like, holy fucking shit, this was The Ring. The One. But the droplet didn’t even burn against my skin, and I was left to gape at the little piece of jewelry shrunk down to fit a hobbit-sized finger.

“Bilbo, güey, that is…whoo, that is some bad shit right there.”

He frowned but didn’t close his fist. “What do you mean? It’s just a ring with some sort of invisibility charm on it. Here. Take it. I don’t mind. I trust you.”

But I didn’t want to take it. Wasn’t that, like, the opposite effect it’s supposed to have?


“Bad shit, man, bad shit.” I pointed to The Ring. “Bad. Shit.”

“What—Valeria—”

Bilbo squeaked as I closed his fingers around The Ring. “You’re gonna need this. You are. So
don’t lose it. But it’s probably best if you put it away. And not be obsessing over it in the middle of the night.”

“I won’t. I won’t.” For the first time since I’d met Bilbo, I saw a twinge of fear in his eyes because of me.

I leaned back, realizing that I had grown close from the intensity. He snuck The Ring back in his vest’s small pocket, and once it was gone from view, I let out a breath.

“What is it?” he inquired again. A slight quaver went with the question.

Did he mean: what is wrong? Or what is The Ring?

I didn’t want to answer either. This whole deal of having insight about futures and fates was a crappy one, because I had no idea on how to handle it.

“It’s…complicated,” I eventually muttered, and sighed at how stupid I sounded. “I’m sorry.”

A silence lulled between us. Bilbo fidgeted.

“So you’re not going to tell me.” I opened my mouth to say something, but Bilbo cut me off with his infuriating sternness. “And don’t try to be all dodgy, Valeria. You’re a terrible liar. At least be honest.”

I threw my hands up in the air. “Shit, Baggins, why you gotta call me out like that? Damn.”

He fixed me with a stare that I couldn’t tear away from. “Valeria.”

“Okay, okay, fine, I’ll—okay.” I scrambled to find the right words while Bilbo patiently waited. My voice lowered. “Look. I don’t think I can tell you some of the things I know. Because… because it’ll mess everything up! And some very important things are going to happen that I’m not sure should change.”

“Are they bad things?”

Pained sorrow filled me. Bilbo clearly saw it. He rubbed his mouth at the revelation and slumped against the tree once more. “Am…am I the cause of these bad things?”

“No.”

Hopefully that was convincing enough, especially since Bilbo no longer looked directly at me. He wasn’t the reason! That piece of shit ring was.

“But, like, Bilbo, these things. Events. They’re fucking huge. And if I change one thing, what else will that change? And after that? One person might not do one thing, and if they don’t do that, other things might not happen and because of that, the whole world could—”

I swallowed hard to keep from saying what I was about to say. The whole world could be destroyed.

“The whole world could be in even greater danger.”

That was a softer blow. Maybe.

It didn’t comfort Bilbo. He took to scrubbing his entire face. “Oh, dear,” he moaned. “Oh, dear.”
His distress made me want to freak even more, but I refused to fall into that trap. I was a big girl. Or, at least I pretended I was a big girl.

“Hey, hey, Baggins.” I turned and gripped him by his little shoulders so he faced me, as well. “This stuff? This is my deal. Don’t worry yourself about it. Okay?”

“But—but how can I not?”

“You just have to.” I scrunched my brows. “Do you trust me?”

He huffed, then said, “Yes. Of course.”

“Then trust that I got this. I’m...I’m going to do my best. And if I fuck up and die, then guess what?” I offered a smile, as scared as it was. Bilbo weakly returned it with his own. “Then I come back and try again.”

Better it be me than anyone else.

“That’s an awfully big responsibility, Valeria.”

“I’ve had lots of big responsibilities.”

None as big as this, no. But hadn’t I always wished to know the future so I could stop all the horrors I’d seen? Here, I did. At least to a tenuous degree.

“I’m sorry for freaking you out.” I gave Bilbo’s shoulders a final squeeze and let go. “Keep that ring. And...well, I guess when the right time comes, I’ll let you know what it all means.”

If. If the right time came.

But Bilbo nodded, satisfied with my words, and hooked his thumbs under his suspenders. He tweaked his nose. “Well. I was promised a tour of the garden. Shall we?”

I grinned at Bilbo’s adaptability. Whether it was for my sake, his own, or just his nature, he bounced back from our unhappy conversation in the blink of an eye.

“We shall.” I stood and helped Bilbo upright. We walked from the shade of the tree and into the afternoon sun. “Let me get my shoes on first, though. I don’t have hobbit feet. They’re tender.”

“And incredibly small.” Bilbo pointed down at them. “Look at them! Absolutely tiny!”

“Don’t be fucking rude.” I gave him a playful push, and Bilbo’s laughter restored some of the joy that I lost so quickly in those few minutes by the apiaries.

Gandalf had been right to make sure that a hobbit came on this quest. I didn’t know where I’d be—where we’d be without him. Bilbo was an anchor to the Company, and while the dwarves would dwell on their darkness, he’d spring back from it. He kept them going (and would keep us going until the very end) in places they’d otherwise give up.

And he wasn’t even aware of it, was he?

No, Bilbo’s sole concern at this moment was determining if Beorn’s garden could rival a hobbit’s own. And I was okay with that.
I wanted to write Blacksmith Thorin. And I still haven't found a fic that does Bilbo's character justice, so I'm trying my best.

(Oh, also, it's not a coincidence that Valeria doesn't feel any temptation from The Ring. )
Calm Before the Mirkwood

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Fili twisted his sword against mine and did that stupid thing where he made me lose my grip. My own blade flew into the grassy meadow. We trained a ways off from the farmhouse, purposefully distancing ourselves from prying eyes. The sun had just dipped beneath the Misty Mountains to the west, leaving the world in the afterthought of bright, pale blue and purple light.

It was one of those late summer evenings that reminded me of high school, where the car windows were rolled all the way down, feet propped up on the dashboard, singing whatever was the hit song of the season, on our way to the school’s football game even though we didn’t care about the sport itself.

Damn, I missed home.

“I hate it when you do that,” I said to Fili as he stepped back with a smirk.

“Get better and you won’t have to worry about it happening to you.”

He had shed his shirt, like me, at the start of our session to avoid dirtying the garment he just washed yesterday. Because none of the dwarves could ever fathom doing laundry frequently, as I found.

Not that I minded in this case.

I picked up my blade and raised them both to start again. Fili lunged, and thus began the almost rhythmic clang of metal hitting metal. I’d lost a lot of practice during the separation, and it showed. Fili didn’t help it, either, with his playful teasing and quips. I almost missed the days when we weren’t as familiar, and he kept a more polite attitude because of it.

When I had a blade poised against my throat for the thousandth time, I finally let frustration get the best of me. Fili laughed as I threw both weapons down and walked a few feet away. “Oh, come on, Ria, it’s not so bad! You’re doing better than you believe.”

Ria. I’d never been called that, before. It was always Val or Vali. Kili used it back in the goblin caves, and now Fili had taken it up, too. I liked the difference.

“Sure, sure, keep telling me that,” I said as I shook my hands out. “I died because I thought I was better than I really was.”

The words struck Fili more harshly than I intended, and his lively demeanor sank. The details—the aftermath—of my third death hadn’t been discussed. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to hear the grief I caused and doubted that the Company sought to recount it.

“You’re right.” Fili nodded to himself more than anything. “Perhaps I was too soft on you. The fault lies with—”

“Whoa, whoa, hey. Ima stop you right there.” I closed the gap between Fili and me. “Nothing was your fault. Alright? It just—happened. And I think in the back of my mind, I wasn’t as careful as I should have been because I figured I’d come back.”
When Fili didn’t appropriately respond with his kind smile and twinkling blue eyes, I gave his shoulder a shove. Unprepared, he stumbled back with a surprised yelp. I crouched a little and pointed.

“Wanna make me feel better?” I asked with a smirk. Fili’s eyes narrowed, and the corner of his lip twitched upward. “Let me demolish you in some hand-to-hand.”

“Demolish?” As quickly as it left, the smile I’d grown to enjoy looking at returned. “My lady, you can demolish me any time you’d like.”

I barked a laugh and lunged. Fili dropped his blades and caught me in the grapple. Part of me hoped that he’d be too proper to touch the bare skin on my arms and waist so I could take advantage of it, but his hands gripped them without restraint. Fili wrestled me to the ground using his strength in hopes to pin me before I could win with technique.

But my arms and legs were longer than his, and after a couple of minutes, I had Fili in a judo-style scarf hold. He almost got free by nearly lifting me up off the ground with sheer force, but I spun into an armbar and locked in tight. I put just enough pressure on it for him to shout, “I yield! Mahal, woman!”

I released and rolled so I was laying next to Fili in the cool grass. Panting, he wiped his brow. “Give me a moment,” he said. “Next round, I’ll have you.”

“Sure,” I drawled, and Fili shot me a side-glare. It didn’t last long, though, and he ended up breathlessly chuckling. Fili turned on his side so he faced me. We were close, and I was sure that, like myself, he hadn’t forgotten the heat of our skin touching.

“You wound me!”

I shifted to prop a head up on my hand. Fili had a ring of gold around his pupils, as bright as their kingdom’s treasure they sought to reclaim, a centerpiece to the Durin blue irises. His breath had evened out from our tussle, and a sculpted chest rose and fell in a calm rhythm. It took a lot to not glance down specifically at the visible muscles within touching distance.

“I would never,” I said, almost tasting how sweet my smile was the longer I stared at Fili. His precious breath hitched again, almost imperceptibly, and he glanced away to softly chuckle. The edges of his dwarven ears dusted to a shade of pink.

“Valeria…” The way Fili spoke my name gave me shivers in the twilight air. He reached out and brushed the back of his finger down the curve of my shoulder and against my upper arm, so gentle that it might have just been a breeze. But the world was still, and crickets sang out into the violet-gray sky. “I must confess something to you, for I fear that if I don’t, these unsaid words will torment me to madness.”

Ah, how I loved the way men in Middle-Earth spoke. If they were ever capable of sending unsolicited dick pics, they’d at least give a beautiful preface.

“And what words are torturing you?” I asked, taking Fili’s hand once his finger trailed down to my wrist. He shuddered, and a nervous, dimpled smile appeared.

“Mahal, I think you already know.”

I didn’t even notice the gap closing. All that I felt was Fili’s lips pressing to mine, his chest against my own, and the cool, evening grass on my back.
Every inch of my skin that touched Fili’s lit on fire, ecstatic and eager. Had I really been this starved of something I didn’t even realize? Because this… I couldn’t withstand. Deeper and further into the pit of passion I fell, unable to stop my own descent.

Fili had no better restraint. Once he recognized that this sudden, pent-up desire poured from me, he readjusted so he lay fully on top, kisses going from soft and chaste to hot and longing, tongues sliding across each other. I ran my fingers up from the base of his back to his scalp, twining them in his golden hair and tugging. Fili moaned and nipped at my lower lip, then trailed his desperate kisses to my cheek, jaw, and neck.

I hummed at the pleasure blossoming wherever his lips went. My legs bent up on either side of Fili so he could get a better position. There was no denying the hard length that settled against my core, and it ignited a new wave of yearning. Fili wasted no time in moving his hips into mine, which set off soft gasps from the both of us.

Were Middle-Earth boys supposed to be this naughty?

I mean, that was fine by me.

A surprised laugh came from Fili as I used my strength to roll us over so he was the one laying on his back. Face flushed and gaze heady from our rapid undoing, he didn’t look away from me as his hands found my waist, and his thumbs grazed the bottom of my sports bra. I was tempted to take the whole thing off myself, but I did maintain some preservation.

We were, after all, in the middle of a flat meadow with the farmhouse not that far in the distance. And even though it was getting darker the longer Fili and I stayed out here immersed in our activities, dwarves could see pretty well at night.

I wasn’t ready to be found out by anyone half or full-on nude just yet.

Still, I settled back onto Fili’s chest and enjoyed his undivided attention. The goosebumps rising on my skin were created by his intentional touches and movements. I rotated my hips from time to time, and with each one Fili’s grip flexed and his breath came out in shudders.

Then my hand, which was cupping the back of Fili’s neck, started to burn, and I pulled away from the prince’s lips. “Ow,” I grimaced, sitting upright on Fili and examining the area where the annoying pain radiated from.

“What is it?” Fili, for all his concern, still massaged the sides of my thighs.

I squinted and peered closer. In the near non-existent light, I could barely pick out two tiny puncture marks in the center of a spreading redness.

“Aw, damnit. I got bit by a spider.” I shook my hand out.

“I’m sorry. Let me take a look.”

With our amplifying tryst abruptly ended by a spider bite, Fili sat up while I reluctantly rolled off him. He took my hand and tenderly brought it close to him for examination. I smiled at his sincerity.

“It’s quite swollen for such a little bite.”

“I have… allergic tendencies toward spider venom,” I admitted. Fili glanced up at me, brows drawn.
“Meaning?”

“Meaning that in an hour, my entire hand is going to look like Bombur’s,” I chuckled. “And stay that way for another two days, if untreated.”

“That sounds serious.”

“Oh, it isn’t. I’m sure slathering on some of that elven ointment will bring the inflammation down. It’s almonds that you have to worry about. I’ll be dead ten minutes if I ever eat one.” I leaned in for another kiss, and even if it was quick, it held more meaning than I expected it to. Fili willingly returned with his own, and his thumb traced the curve of my jaw.

When I pulled away enough to talk, I felt my own resistance to the separation along with Fili’s. Fuck, I wanted to just...stay here and give in. But I’d already tried out the whole sex-outdoors-on-the-ground, and it ended up sucking ass.

Also, the Company was heading into Mirkwood, which, from what I remembered, was not an optimal place for having some good sex. And who the hell knew how long we’d be in there?

“You’re about to say that we should head back, aren’t you?” Fili, though sighing, grinned and leaned back. “How cruel.”

I laughed and grabbed our nearby shirts, tossing Fili his and then pulling my own over my head. The athletic fabric didn’t do anything to help warm me up, since it was as cold as the air.

“It’d probably be crueler to keep you here and have somebody come searching, only to find that their prince is busy banging.” I stood up, grabbed my blades, and sheathed them.

“And you? What made you like me?” I jutted a hip out
and did a childish, “Ooooo!”

Fili brought my knuckles to his lips and kissed them. “Well, I did think you beautiful the moment I laid eyes on you.”

“Before or after all of you chased me through the woods?”

A shy chuckle. “…After. That was when I got a good look at you.”

“You liked me? Even though I don’t have a beard?” I scratched my chin with a quickly swelling hand for good effect.

“Yes. I thought your hair very pretty.” Fili took in a breath. “But, in all honesty, I saw how kind you were, even when none of us were particularly kind in return. And then that kindness remained. You’ve proven yourself to be incredibly brave and selfless despite—despite being from another world. If any of us had known your spirit, we would have welcomed you with wide arms into the Company from the very beginning. It is something we’ll regret for the rest of our lives.”

We neared the farmhouse. A campfire was indeed going, and a few members of the Company gathered around it. My skin flushed from the sudden influx of genuine compliments. “Oh, well, don’t be too hard on yourself,” I muttered with all the shyness of a teenager. I had been mostly joking when I asked why Fili liked me, but I should have expected such an answer from someone as sweet as him.

He gave my hand one final squeeze before letting it go. “Come. Let us face the true test of will.”

“Getting through a bunch of dwarves who are definitely going to tease us, because for some reason they’ll just know that we were up to no good.”

“No good, my lady?” Fili glanced up at me with that mischievous smirk which made his blue eyes stand out. “I’m not sure about you, but it felt very good for me.”

I gave him a shove, and his delighted laugh made my insides melt. It was so distracting that I couldn’t think of a retort. Instead, I wound up with the back of my neck all hot and wishing Fili and I could continue what we stopped in the meadow.

But instead we walked to the campfire, which was situated away from the pens and gardens. Blocks of wood and blankets were strewn across for sitting, and about half of the Company took up spots.

“Well, well, they’re finally here!” Bofur proclaimed through a mouthful of dinner. “We were wondering if we’d even see you before tomorrow morning!”

“And miss out on your campfire songs? I would never, Bofur.” I plopped myself down on a vacant blanket. Fili sat in the same space but at a comfortable distance away.

“Dinner is inside,” Dori said, pointing to the farmhouse. “Bombur made a stew.”

Since this was Beorn’s house, there’d be no meat in the stew, so I didn’t have to worry about flinging any parcel over my shoulder. Fili offered to get me some—as well as ointment for my mitted hand—and as he went to go into the farmhouse, Bilbo came out carrying a bowl filled to the absolute brim with a massive hunk of bread held between his teeth.

Hobbits and their food, man.
I waved for Bilbo to join me. The scent of campfire was starting to settle in my hair and clothes. Just like the good days of the quest, where we didn’t have to worry about being attacked or falling off a mountain face.

He let me take the bread from his mouth because I figured he wanted to talk. But instead, Bilbo immediately slurped at his broth, which was about to spill over at any moment. My expression went forcefully flat.

“Mm, thank you, Valeria,” Bilbo eventually spoke once his stew was out of the danger zone. He took the bread back from me.

“I live to serve, Baggins.”

The sarcastic cue flew over Bilbo’s head, and he ate in happy oblivion.

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Unclouded stars shone above the Company as we lounged outside. The fire staved off any cold, and with hearty servings of stew and bread in our bellies, everyone was content to tell stories and sing songs while others listened while they smoked their pipes.

The thing about dwarves was that many of their stories and songs intertwined. So as Thorin weaved the story of Durin I, Durin the Deathless, he stepped back and forth from his rich timbre to a low, unbreaking melody sung in the language Bilbo, Beorn, and I would understand. At those points others would join, since they knew the lyrics.

Bilbo and I listened in a trance. The dwarves of the Company listened intently, too, even though they would have heard the tale since their childhood. But the way Thorin spoke entrapped them as much as it did us.

“The world is grey, the mountains old,
The forge's fire is ashen-cold;
No harp is wrung, no hammer falls:
The darkness dwells in Durin’s halls;
The shadow lies upon his tomb
In Moria, in Khazad-dûm.
But still the sunken stars appear
In dark and windless Mirrormere;
There lies his crown in water deep,
Till Durin wakes again from sleep.”

The same eyes that Durin the Deathless most likely bore swept over the attentive group. Even Beorn had let himself fall into the trap of the storytelling.

“One day, we **will** return to reclaim Moria,” Thorin promised, a fist clenching over his chest. “And Durin will awake not to filth and evil, but to a kingdom worthy of his gaze. Worthy of his descendants.”

The dwarves all nodded in concurrence, and puffs of pipe smoke rose more rapidly into the night air.

I’d already heard of how Moria was lost, when the quest had just begun and I sat secluded at the edge of the campfire instead of near it.

Durin’s Bane.
They had no idea just what Durin’s Bane was. Only that it was an awakened evil that slew both King Durin VI and his son, King Nain, and forced the dwarves to flee. It was the Nameless Terror, the reason why Khazad-dûm had been given its second name: Moria. The Dark Abyss.

But I knew what lay in the lost kingdom’s depths.

A Balrog.

I kept that information to myself, for now. It’d ruin the atmosphere and snuff the pride in the dwarves’ hearts at the thought of not getting back just one kingdom, but two. If Erebor would become theirs again—as I so stupidly promised—then what could stop them from the other?

Oh, just a literal demon, that’s what.

Gandalf, as if sensing my darkening thoughts, sent me one of his signature looks. One that calmed, one that said, Do not worry just yet, my dear. But remember.

So I eased back on the blanket, elbow propping me up, and said, “The dwarves were created by Mahal. Aulë. Before the elves? And…and he was one of the Valar, right? He wasn’t supposed to. But the first Durin was one of those original dwarves.”

Several nods. “Aye, lass,” Balin said with a smile. “Though the elves may have been the first to dwell in these lands, it was our ancestors who were the first to step foot on it.”

I smirked. “Sounds like Mahal was naughty.”

“We like to use the word impatient. And how could he not be? When something is beautifully crafted, it should not be hidden away. It should be shared. Used. Appreciated.”

“That’s cool. So…” I tilted my head back and paused to consider if my words would offend or amuse the dwarves. “Mahal was kind of…rebellious. Meaning that you all are living, breathing proof of a big ‘fuck you’ to the elves.”

Gandalf coughed out pipe smoke a little too loudly, but his sputtering was lost to the laughter of the Company. Beorn, too, allowed himself a mirthful chuckle. “Don’t be tellin’ that to them, lass!”

Dwalin howled. “It’d make their shiny hair curl!”

Kili, Bifur, Bofur, and Nori all rolled back onto the ground as their laughter overcame them. The rest looked close—Thorin included. I managed to restrain myself from falling backward, though I had to admit that it was a habit I’d picked up from them.

“Oh, the Valar will strike us down, I swear,” Bilbo bemoaned, hunkering down as if bracing for a heavenly lightning bolt. Being irreverent wasn’t a trait among hobbits.

I patted him on the back with my significantly less-swollen hand. When the raucousness died down, I jerked my chin to Beorn. “And you? Where did the Skin-changers come from?”

He exhaled a long stream of smoke. “The first of my people were blessed by Oromê with the ability to change into forms of animals. They pledged themselves to protect beast and bird alike, for though the hunt is great, it is not to be spoilt. Shape shifting also gave them a better chance to defend and pursue dark creatures.” A faint but fond smile ghosted across Beorn’s mouth. “We may not be as we once were in numbers, but we continue to uphold our promise and fealty to Oromê. Lest our gift be taken.”

“And though ages have passed, the blessing has not,” said Gandalf, nodding. “And I doubt we shall
see its diminishment in ages yet to come.”

I bumped Bilbo with my shoulder. “What about you, Baggins? I’m on a Middle-Earth history roll right now. Tell me about where the hobbits came from.”

“Ah. We were—we are descended from Man. Big People.” He waved his pipe around and tweaked his nose. “Don’t know exactly when that happened. Our genealogy does not go back that far.”

He jumped when I blew a raspberry. “Boo. You do not come from humans.”

“It—it’s true!” Bilbo’s eyebrows scrunched. “At least that’s what we believe is the truth.”

“Hey, G, is this for real?” I asked.

“Though my wisdom far surpasses any of yours…” Gandalf was sure to raise his brows to add to the dryness of his tone. I rolled my eyes. “The origins of hobbit folk is beyond me.”

“Okay, look, I’m not a biologist or anthropologist or whatever—”

“A what-a-what-ist?” Bofur had to interject. I ignored him.

“But I you ain’t from Man.” I flicked at Bilbo’s massive foot, and he squawked. “At least not entirely.”

“So what do you suggest Master Baggins is, eh?” Fili questioned, trying—and failing—to maintain a neutral expression.

I went with it and rubbed my nose in thought. “Maybe a…hybrid? Dwarf-elf-human? Dwelman? Ew, that sounds ugly. But that wouldn’t explain how you ended up the shortest race. Also, if you were descended solely from humans, wouldn’t you think that your lifespan would be similar to theirs? And humans don’t suddenly sprout pointed ears like you have. Or eat their literal weight in food.”

Bilbo sniffed. “You make it seem like those qualities are a bad thing.”

“No, no! I’m just saying that things still don’t add up. Hobbits are awesome. Everybody loves hobbits on my world.”

“And what about dwarves?” inquired Dori.

“Meh. I think it depends.”

They grumbled at my response, but I continued. “Maybe you are descended from—what did I call it? Dwalins? But that just means that you have the best traits of all three races.”

“And whatever would give you cause to believe that we have any bad traits?” Kili gasped. He clutched his chest in affront.

“We’ll be up ‘til morning if I start counting them off,” I said, and Kili groaned as if he’d been shot.

I went back to my musings. “Or, or, hobbits were plopped into this world like the other races. You just don’t remember when it happened—or if another Valar was naughty like Mahal. Which one of them was the saint of eating ten times a day and wearing dapper clothes?” I went to flick Bilbo again, this time on his vest, but he deftly smacked my hand away.

Gandalf rumbled with deep laughter. “I fear your questions will have to go unanswered for the time
“Ah, that’s okay, G. I’m done asking shit for the night.” I lay back on the blanket, lacing my fingers behind my head.

“Aye, you’ve been asking alright, but what about a story?”

I craned my neck to look at Nori. “You want a story? From me?”

“Why wouldn’t we?” said Fili.

With a small grunt, I sat up again and propped my arms on both knees. “I’m terrible at telling actual stories. Not in the same sense as yours.”

Then my eyes widened a fraction, and a faint, innocent smile appeared. “Wait. Hold on. I do think I have a story to tell.”

The only story I’d ever been told enough times to remember. The story that Elena and my cousins would tell to me when I was little to scare me. The story that I, in turn, told Luis so he’d be scared —scared enough that he peed the bed because he was too afraid to get out at night to use the bathroom.

A story that wasn’t scary to me anymore, because I was an adult and had seen real horrors during my work. But a story that nobody in Middle-earth had ever heard until now. They were severely lacking in the fear department.

Awesome.

“I wanna tell you guys about La Llorona.”

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That night, the Company slept close to each other. And, well, in hindsight, I should have waited on painstakingly describing The Weeping Woman and her penchant for stealing children because she drowned her own. We were about to venture into a place literally called “Mirkwood.” It didn’t need more fuel for inducing nightmares than it already had.

But I just couldn’t stop myself.

And…it didn’t help that in the middle of the night, I hoarsely wailed to mimic La Llorona.

Screams startled the livestock.

Chapter End Notes

That slow burn went from 0 to 100 waaay faster than even I thought it would.
I made up the whole thing about Orome creating the Skin-changers, bc there was never exact information on where they came from. And I'm not about to settle for freaky bestiality. There's also no details about the origins of hobbits; only that they descended from Men a long time ago. But that just doesn't make sense to me, so I'm Big Mad about the lack of information. It seeped into Valeria's conversation.

La Llorona is a classic boogeyman story in Latin America. It's a really tame thing for Valeria, but she used the Company's obliviousness about scary stories to her advantage.
“I wish there was something I could give you.”

Beorn looked down, fondly smiling, and patted my head. “Worry not. You gave me nice company, and you cared for the animals and garden while I was away. All I can ask is that you return some time to meet my wife. She will wish to see another from the world of our own savior.”

“I will.” I then sprawled myself onto the ground and got swamped by animals. “And I’m going to miss my babies! Ay, mi corazón! It’s almost too much to handle!”

It hurt to leave Beorn’s house. We’d all been given so much respite, and now we were going to a place that’d rip away all this calm.

But it inevitably had to happen. I was sure of that more than anyone, as much as I didn’t want it to be.

Beorn hauled me upright once my animal attack subsided. He gave me my pack, acting like a father sending his kid off to school. Only, school was the trek between Mirkwood and the Lonely Mountain, the test was Smaug, and the final was a fucking army.

It was like Beorn thought the same thing. “Be cautious.” He gripped both of my arms with massive, steady hands. “You may return from death, but it does not mean you should throw yourself into its grasp.”

“I won’t.”

“Good. And do not be afraid to crack a few dwarven skulls if they become too difficult. They are stubborn enough as it is; Mirkwood’s mind-addling enchantments may worsen their…condition.”

“Oh, I know.” I looked over my shoulder at the gathering Company. Bifur and Bofur were trying to haul Bombur up on one of the massive draft horses. When he about tipped backward, Fili and Kili rushed in to provide extra support. The rest just laughed as they watched.

They had no idea what was coming for them. And even when I would warn Thorin that they were about to get fucked up, it wasn’t going to change anything. We’d still have to go in there.

Gandalf walked toward us, intent on having a private conversation with Beorn. I gave one final farewell to the Skin-changer and left to toss Bilbo up on a horse.

I said goodbye to many people I didn’t want to leave. The separation process was easier—you had to do it quick and keep your feet moving until you were in a private place to be sad. But the ache of departing never waned.

The practiced brave face stuck true as I mixed back in with the Company. Bilbo stared up at the horse we’d be sharing, rightly aghast.

“This…this is a big pony,” he uttered. The draft horse gently nickered.

“I think she’s trying to say that she’s not a pony,” I said. My pack weighed comfortably on my
I had my hair bound back in a tight French braid. The day was heating up, meaning that so was Thorin’s temper. He wanted us out of here probably thirty minutes ago. Mirkwood was a full day’s ride, and our window of opportunity to slip past orcs unnoticed grew slimmer the longer we dallied.

But breakfast had been good, and all the dwarves had to take shits because of it, so that set us back.

“Alright, here we go, nuggito pequeño.”

I propelled Bilbo’s hobbit foot up. He grappled onto the saddle and, after a few huffs and Shire curses, swung his leg onto the other side of the saddle. I followed much more easily, and settled into the familiarity of Bilbo and me sharing a horse. We were just a lot further from the ground than before.

The wizard finally mounted on his horse, signaling to Thorin that he was ready. I gave one last glance back at Beorn, back at the farmhouse, back at the little patch of green and lovely land, imprinting the sight in my mind as best I could.

Bilbo followed my gaze, and our wistful expressions mirrored each other. I wrapped a tight arm around his little waist to keep him from falling to his death, noting that he had significantly less of his hobbit tummy.

“D’you think we’ll ever be back?” he quietly asked me as our horse followed the herd.

Bilbo? Definitely.

But myself?

I mean…I wanted to go home. On another planet. Wrap this story up and try to get out of here. And I had a continuously sinking feeling that I couldn’t pop back here for the weekend if I wanted.

Still. It didn’t hurt to stay hopeful. For Bilbo and the Company’s sake. For mine.

“I do,” I said back. The landscape opened up before us, and the horses picked up their gallop. Bilbo clung to the front of the saddle with white knuckles. “It’s too nice of a place to not return to, isn’t it?”

“Very true!” Bilbo had to yell because of the speed we were at, but it felt like nothing more than a brisk bike ride. “This is—this is very fast, wouldn’t you say?”

“Yeah. I’ve been in faster things, though.”

“Oh, my! Like what?”

“Back on Earth, we have—” I had to swallow from the rush of air drying out my mouth. “We have cars. They go…very fast, if you want them to. If we were traveling in one, we’d be at the Lonely Mountain in a few days. Oh, and we also have planes. They fly in the air so fast with us that instead of days, we’d be at our destination in a couple hours.”

“No!”

I grinned. “Yes. It’s like…flying on an eagle, but you’re inside so you don’t feel the wind. You can see the world from how high up you are. It’s pretty spectacular.”

Bilbo went to respond, but I was pretty sure a bug flew in his mouth because all that I heard was
coughing and sputtering for the next minute.

Mirkwood should have been beautiful. The towering, entangled trees should have been lush with green leaves, and the gates should have been a peaceful sight to see.

Instead, twisted brown vines crawled up the archway, and the leaves had prematurely died. Peering further into the unnatural dimness evoked a sense of dread. Not even the sunlight filtered properly.

“This forest feels…sick,” Bilbo said, coming up to me as he, too, solemnly gazed at the daunting shadow before us. “As if a disease lies upon it.”

I adjusted my pack’s straps. “That’s because it does.”

“Must…must we go through this place?”

“Yeah, buddy, we do.”

Gandalf heard us talking. “It is either this, Master Baggins, or travel two hundred miles north. Or twice that distance south.”

I walked to meet him as he ventured further into the forest. Gandalf stopped at a tall statue swathed in the same brown vines. It had elven features, and even though she was an inanimate object, the care that went into sculpting her brought life.

She shouldn’t be covered in the same illness that riddled Mirkwood. But Gandalf, lost in his own thoughts, ripped the vines off for a different reason.

He inhaled sharply as the they tore away to reveal what—who—had defaced the statue with a jagged, violent red brand.

“Hey, uh, G.”

Gandalf half-turned to me, and I wanted to shrink back from the intense pressure of his gaze. “I just…yeah.”

I lowered my voice, and I was afraid I’d be drowned out by my own heartbeat.

“Yeah. He’s back.”

I’d never seen Gandalf pale since being on this quest. Not even when I surprised them all with my revival. But those simple, soft-spoken words made the wizard’s pallor whiten considerably. His complexion matched the knuckles that wrapped around his staff.

He leaned down enough that his face was just a few inches from mine. “Are you certain?”

I nodded once.

“You…you have to go. You won’t be able to beat him. But he can be slowed. I think.” I didn’t dare pull out my notes to double-check the facts.

Gandalf made a noise between a hum and a grumble. He straightened. Two bushy gray brows lifted toward me. “Am I safe in assuming that war is upon us?”

“Oh. Yeah. Yeah. War is coming.”
I glanced back at the Company. At Bilbo.

“And a lot of it.”

Something mumbled under Gandalf’s breath that wasn’t any language I understood. Maybe it was the wizard-angel-whatever equivalent of a prayer. Or a curse.

“Tell me, my dear Valeria…”

The voice didn’t sound like he was speaking to someone dear.

“Could you prevent these wars is you but uttered a few sentence?”

I opened my mouth, but for a few moments nothing came out. This was the Gandalf I didn’t like interacting with. The one that suddenly exuded power, that made my body seize up because instincts told me that he wasn’t human. He was something more.

My eyes fluttered shut. The back of my neck grew hot. “I—I don’t know. I want to make things better, if I can. But I’m afraid. Afraid I’ll only make things worse by saying things I shouldn’t. I don’t know what I’d do to this world if I tried fucking—sorry, messing—with stuff.”

Apparently, that was what Gandalf wanted to hear. His demeanor visibly softened, and I almost felt a weight come off me. “It would be wise to err on the side of caution. If what you say is true, then not only will Middle-Earth become more perilous, but also your choices of when—and if—you shall intervene. What may be changed might not need be; and what can be changed should not.”

He clasped my shoulder, and I wanted so badly to beg him to stay because Gandalf was *Gandalf*. He could lead and protect us in this horrible place.

But I meant what I said, so I kept my mouth closed.

Wrinkles from a small but fond smile surfaced around the corners of Gandalf’s eyes. “You are full of wonders, Lady Valeria. Were it anyone else burdened with your knowledge—and I assume the responsibility you’ve accepted—I may not have faith in their abilities, their reasoning. But you bring me great hope for this quest, and we may see an even brighter end than the one you have witnessed. Thanks to you.”

I smiled back, though it was bittersweet. “G,” I whispered, finding my throat all achy. “I’m gonna miss you.”

“And I, you, my dear. Take care of the dwarves and my burglar. And most importantly, take care of yourself.”

Gandalf and I embraced, and I tried clinging to the warmth of his divine presence long after he got back on his horse and raced away to tend to stuff that I was glad I didn’t have to deal with myself.

I told him that there’d be wars. A war at the Lonely Mountain, and wars in the near future.

But as I looked at Bilbo, who stood idly while his fingers dipped into the pocket of his vest, I wondered if I could stop it all. Toss The Ring into Mount Doom before it all went to shit.

*That’s a dangerous thought, girl.*

Yeah, no. I wasn’t ready to shake things up like that quite yet.

“Are you alright?”
I blinked and automatically smiled at Fili. “Oh. Yes. Just contemplating the possibly shattering effects of my actions here.”

His forehead creased a little. “Sounds terrible.”

“A little.”

Fili looked around as if he wanted to do something. I half-hoped he would, despite the fact that the Company was near. But his fists clenched at his sides before making themselves useful and unnecessarily adjusting the coil of rope slung over his shoulder.

It was alright. I understood Fili’s hesitancy, so I shot him a darting wink.

“Let’s be off,” Thorin said, ready to lead us into Mirkwood. If he was afraid of what it held, of what it could do, he did not show it. Not that he ever would for the sake of those who follow him.

And I, being one of those loyal dummies, took tentative steps on the leaf-strewn path with fourteen others.

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It rained. Because in a place as awful as this, it might as well happen.

Fili gave me back his—my—cloak. I had it wrapped around me. The weather had been warm just outside of Mirkwood, but now that we were in the forest, it was as if the season had suddenly turned.

We couldn’t start a fire, either, because any warm light drew the attention of swarms of moths. Their pillowy wings nearly suffocated poor Ori during our second—and failed—attempt. I doubted he had quite recovered, either.

So we were left in the dank and dark, where things creaked in the trees and howled in the distance. I wasn’t affected by whatever powerful magic lay upon Mirkwood. It had gone unnoticed in the beginning; the first week passed in relative calm. Our little path steadily wound us through the forest, and when it got too dark for me to see, I held onto whatever dwarf was nearby.

Usually Fili.

Then Gloin thought he saw his wife walking amidst the trees, and it went downhill from there.

The mutterings were usual. Occasionally, a dwarf would start wander off, and it’d be up to me or somebody else lucid enough in the moment to pull them back. The worst was when the dwarves would get paranoid or irritated and cause arguments.

But I was good! I mean, I was always on edge because the forest freaked me the fuck out and I expected to go off the deep end at any second. That didn’t help with the exhaustion of being a nanny to the Company. But it was better than being as bad as them.

I devoured my small ration of dried fruits before they could get soggy in the rain. The Company usually behaved better when they were settled in for the night, so I wasn’t as alert. Songs were sung to lift spirits. I tossed one in earlier; when it was in Spanish, nobody would ever know when I made up lyrics.

My sight diminished until all I could see was the faint outline of my hand inches from my face. I
popped the last dried apple into my mouth, sucked out all the flavor, and swallowed the mush it turned into. Then I settled against a tree trunk and closed my eyes. Nobody could lay flat on the ground because of how wet it was, so we were consigned to be even more uncomfortable.

One of the tree’s roots shifted underneath me, and a moment later I felt a small piece of it wrap around my ankle. Instead of panicking, I thumped my head against the back of the trunk and said, “Please, none of that tonight, árbol dulce.”

They liked it when I spoke Spanish to them. I think they liked it that I politely acknowledged their life in general. I found that if I was nice to the trees and occasionally touched one while saying a compliment, the path we followed was clearer of roots and tangles. It got the dwarves to be nice to them, too, instead of, oh, hacking at them with weapons.

Because everything in Middle-Earth was alive. And anything alive just wanted to be shown respect and love.

The tree root slipped off a moment later. I smiled and nestled further in. “Thank you.”

“They’re active tonight, aren’t they?” Oin commented. He was near enough to me to catch my conversation.

“I think it’s the rain,” I said, and speaking those words made me shiver. “They’re soaking it all up.”

“So are we,” said Kili. “Bloody storm. I’m drenched!”

“The noise will drown out all the unnatural creepers, at least.” Fili was closest to me, and once his watch duty was over, we’d coincidentally find ourselves shoulder-to-shoulder.

“Mm. Creepers.” I folded my arms tighter against my chest, which made the scar tissue twinge. “That reminds me: there are giant spiders here in Mirkwood. They’re going to web us all up if we’re not careful.”

“That would have been nice to know earlier,” Thorin growled. I shrugged.

“I forgot until I looked at my notes this morning. But you’re all gonna be pretty fucked up by the time that happens, so I’m not sure if it can be stopped.”

“Are you going to try to stop it?”

“Obviously.”

I didn’t think it best to mention that Bilbo would be the one to save their asses, seeing as most information about his future deeds made the hobbit frantic.

“Will they get us tonight?” Though I couldn’t see Ori, I was sure that he wrung his hands while asking the question.

“Nah, I don’t think so. I haven’t seen a lot of spider webbing. When we start seeing a lot of it, I’ll be sure to speak up. Not that any of you will pay attention to me. Like, I mean, all of you are going to be really fucked up. More than you are now.” I paused for a moment, then added, “Please don’t try to kill me. I don’t want to die in Mirkwood.”

“We would never lay a hand on you,” said Thorin, and I believed him. Maybe now that I told them that their minds were going to get messed with even more, they’d be able to sense when it was
happening.

I stopped talking and let the sound of cold rain pattering on leaves lull me to sleep.

Luis tried to throw a softball from underneath a leg, but it went wildly off-target. I ran to catch it and felt the solid weight of the ball land in my mitt.

“Oof. Sorry!”

In retaliation, I threw the ball particularly hard back at Luis. But he effortlessly raised his own mitt. His grin shone bright in the sun, and he wagged the caught ball.

“Round two!” Luis spun so his back was to me, and he chucked the softball up over his shoulder. It was short, so I lazily jogged forward. But the ball got lost in the sun, and as I looked back to my brother, I saw him standing there, mitt on the ground, orc blade sticking from his chest.

I cried out. Luis’ blood ran into the green grass beneath us. He choked on my name, and from behind me I heard my mama shriek as she watched her baby boy die in front of her.

Then I was running in war-torn streets, helmet bouncing lopsidedly on my head, scrambling to help a woman who’d been partially trapped within rubble from an explosion. Crimson ran from her temple, soaking a dark hijab, and she clung to me as if I was the only person in the world. Gunfire popped, a discordance in the hazy air.

We ran into a building—

Fili, Kili, and Thorin lay before me on the snowy bank of a frozen river, eyes glassy and bodies bloodied. The Company wailed as their king, their princes, were lost, just as it had been designed by the divinities that watched over this world. That watched me fail and fail again with scorn.

“How were you even here?”

Bilbo stared up at me in disdain, anguish, betrayal. He slid The Ring onto his finger. My brain exploded in agony, filled with fire and darkness and the distinct impression of a force grabbing onto me and shaking my soul from its body. I fell backwards onto the ice, but not even its freezing temperatures could quell the flames of... of complete and utter doom.

And I sat in the clinic, distributing water and food to people who weren’t sure they’d see tomorrow. Who weren’t sure if tomorrow was worth seeing.

That paralyzing alarm rang, followed by the sound of an aircraft flying low, and three beats later the building was crumbling down on me. I couldn’t breathe, couldn’t breathe, couldn’t breathe. The world shook and I clawed at the cracks of light between the building burying me, but all faded to black. Dust and despair filled my lungs.

I was going to die alone.

The only thing I could do was scream.

“Hold her down!”

The weight on me was warmer, lighter, and squishier. I thrashed, finding my arms and legs mostly
pinned. More screams ripped through my throat. It was all black, so black, and I needed to get out —

“Valeria! Valeria!”

Fili. Fili.

I’m not dead. I’m alive. I’m alive.

And I was in Middle-Earth. Mirkwood, specifically, with thirteen dwarves and a hobbit on our way to get a kingdom back.

Shit.

I calmed. “I’m okay,” I breathed, inhaling the scent of wet wood and wet dwarf. “I’m okay. You can get off me.”

The weight lifted, and a hand grabbed mine to help me sit up. I blinked numbly in the night. “Did I have a bad dream.” It wasn’t so much of a question since I could guess the answer.

“Bad dreams do not include screams like that. Or cause an attempt to run into the woods.” Thorin’s voice, while gentle, cut through.

I rubbed my chest scar. Everything had been so, so vivid. Like I was back in everything, watching it all unfold while I helplessly stood by. Then there were things that definitely did not happen, and yet I remained rattled by its clarity.

“You were speaking in another language, lass,” said Balin, and I tilted my head in his direction. “Not the language we speak, and not the language we’re familiar with you speaking.”

“Oh. Must’ve been Arabic. It’s…I picked up some of it during my work so I could talk with the people I was involved with.” I propped my knees up and pressed my forehead against both shins. I was just…gutted.

“It was more than a dream, wasn’t it?”

I kept still and answered Thorin. “Probably.”

“Then it seems this accursed forest has found a way to worm itself into your mind.”

Something felt off. My chest scar hurt more than it should have, like it, too, was another old wound resurfacing to bring me anguish.

“If that’s the case, you’d better get used to the screams.” I sighed and stood up to stretch the sore abdomen muscles. My entire backside was sopping with muck, which felt so nice. “Because I’ve got a shitload of traumatic experiences and fears.”

Fili guided me back to the resting spot I had moved from in my night terror. I curled against it so my cheek pressed into the rough bark. Despite the darkness, I could sense tangible gazes upon me. They probably recognized that the shivers stopped being from the cold.

Yet I closed my eyes and hoped that I could find sleep again. The moment I drifted onto the cusp, a bullet shot through my shoulder, and the world sank into screams and heat and pain.

I jerked awake, breathing rapidly through my nostrils. A solid presence was beside me, and I stumblingly reached out to it. Not a moment later, Fili’s hand held mine. He pulled me close to
him, uncaring of who watched.

I let him envelop me with an embrace.

But even the safety Fili provided could not keep away the terrors springing, clawing, biting their way out of my skull.

Chapter End Notes

I thought, "Hm, what's another way to make Valeria as miserable as the rest of them in Mirkwood?"

Mi corazón: my heart
Nuggito pequeño: small nugget
Arbol dulce: sweet tree
A lifetime ago, Luis told me that there was an enchanted river or something in Mirkwood that would cause anyone who touched its water to fall into a deep slumber.

I figured *this* specific river was the one, seeing as the bridge crossing it was conveniently broken and in its place were hanging vines and roots for an ultra-safe passage. And though the water was slow-moving, there was no telling what lie beneath—or how deep it went.

Bilbo went across first, since he was the lightest. I watched with gritted teeth each time Bilbo’s foot slipped on the damp vines. When he paused, staring down at the calm, algae-covered surface, I clapped my hands and jumped up and down. “Look alive, Baggins!” I hollered. “This is magic water! It’s gonna try to put us asleep!”

I saw the hobbit rigorously nod his curly head and forge onward.

“You heard her!” Thorin said to the rest. “Fight its trickery. And be careful.”

Bilbo slipped on a vine and went down on it hard. He squeaked at an awfully high pitch, then after sat unnaturally still. His legs stuck out in an upside-down V, shoulders trembling. We all winced and groaned for him.

Thorin added, “Don’t do that, either.”

I was yawning again as I called, “You alright?”

Another squeak. Then a wobbling thumbs up. Bilbo staggered upright, mumbling things that I was too tired to catch, and managed to land on the other side of the bank. His clumsy fall was softened by a patch of mushrooms, and afterward he crawled next to a tree and curled up at its base.

“Poor guy,” I said to Fili and Kili. “A hit to the scrote is lethal.”

“Aye, that it is, my lady,” Kili nodded. We readied ourselves to jump onto the vines. Bombur was in front of me, and he steadily grabbed one and put a foot out. “Be glad that you women do not bear such a burden.”

“Crotch shots hurt for us, too.” I put my foot right where Bombur had and repeated the motion. The vine underneath wobbled, but I stayed balanced. It was just like being on a lily pad at some swimming pool. Only instead of falling into chlorine water, it was enchanted, and it could induce a magic coma.

Maybe that was what I needed, though. I was so fucking tired. The nightmares had only worsened, meaning I got no sleep, meaning that I ended up shuffling through Mirkwood half-awake while simultaneously trying to keep fourteen lives from cutting short.

“Oh?” Fili followed after me, genuinely amused and interested in our conversation. It was probably too inappropriate for such a dark and mysterious forest, but such an important topic couldn’t be ignored. “How is that?”

“You hit bone,” I replied. “Straight bone. Like, you know when you hit your elbow on something
—Wake up, Dori!—and it makes you want to cry?"

“Of course.”

“It’s like that with your coochie. Only worse.” I hauled myself over to the next vine that Bombur was on as well. He had stopped, so I nudged his back with a hand. “Hey, snap out of it, we’re halfway there—"

A grating snore interrupted my sentence, and I yelped as Bombur, now unconscious, toppled backward. I managed to careen out of the way so he didn’t crush me. But once Bombur hit our roped vine, its elasticity bounced him back up and off. And, like a trampoline, if he bounced, I bounced.

Was it bad that part of me hoped I could sleep for the next few days?

Bombur hit the water, and a second later I splashed in. The foulness of it burned my eyes, and the rocky bottom dug into my palms and knees. The temperature of the small river wasn’t as cold as I expected it to be, nor as shallow. It did, however, carry a filminess with it that clung to my skin. But I was very much awake. Damnit.

I stood up and my head broke through the stinky surface. “Blegh!” I shouted. “Yuck! Yuck! This water reeks!”

Bombur floated face-down beside me. I immediately rolled him over and slapped at his thick face. “Hey! Come on, wake up!”

“It’s no use!” Thorin yelled from his safe point on the bank. I scrubbed the nasty-ass water from my eyes and blinked. The burning had faded, fortunately, but I was still left smelling like something I couldn’t place. “The enchantment has taken him.”

I raised my arms above the water, which came up to my breasts. I was wet, smelly, and not asleep.

“Fuck, güey, este lugar es el peor!”

A rope smacked my face. I sputtered as it splashed and got nasty water in my mouth. Of all the places I could get dysentery or giardia, this was the least appeasing prospects.

“Think of it this way, lass!” called Bofur. He was one of the last to jump off the vines and onto the other side. “You’re in there, which means that we don’t have to be. It’s a win for everyone!”

I looked down at Bombur, blissfully lost in the sauce. The sheer force of his snores should be causing ripples in the water. The sight infuriated me, if only because I was jealous.

At least I wouldn’t have to carry him.

“Whatever,” I sighed, and said a few things in Spanish that the dwarves wouldn’t have liked to hear. I took the rope, wrapped it around Bombur’s girth, and tied it in a knot. The dwarves heaved him to shore while I waded behind. The water felt too heavy, and it squelched in my boots.

“Are you unhurt?” asked Fili.

“Yes, I am, thank you for wondering,” I said back, shooting everyone else a glare for their failure to worry about my well-being. “But you probably shouldn’t touch me—or Bombur. We got water on us. Could make you sleepy.”
On cue, Bifur yawned, then I yawned, and it caused a chain reaction. Bilbo was the last victim. He hadn’t been able to stand again, and his cheeks were pale.

I took my pack off and found that, hell yeah, everything remained dry despite being dunked. That was good to know. I was tempted to change into dry clothes, but that meant lugging around my wet ones—boots included—so I opted to carry a couple extra pounds in the fabric. Besides, everything was elven made; their fabric dried quickly enough.

The Company was tasked with fashioning a crude stretcher to carry Bombur on. I was too tired and irritated to help. Not to mention that I didn’t have good enough eyesight to pick out viable pieces of wood in the forest.

I undid my greasy, river-stink hair so it could dry out and not grow mold. Bilbo got a pass, too, because he beamed himself so hard he could barely move. We sat against one of the too-dark trees, basking in our misery.

“Oh, Baggins, aren’t we just a sad sight,” I said. He huffed a laugh, and it was a good sound.

“We are indeed. I honestly don’t understand how you’re still on your feet.”

“I’ve had to work with no sleep like this before,” I answered. “But yeah. If Mirkwood doesn’t drive me crazy, then sleep deprivation will.”

Bilbo glanced at the dwarves, who were griping about trying to get Bombur onto the stretcher. Nori suggested that they just leave him. Disagreements were slow to come, as if they actually considered the proposition.

I snorted and shut my eyes. Their tempers hadn’t been in a bad bout, today, so I wasn’t going to worry about Bombur getting dropped like excess baggage. Bilbo let me rest for ten blissful minutes, until the sound of arguing dwarves was drowned out by wails of despair as families found their loved ones rotting under tarps after the hurricane. The stench of death and stagnant water overwhelmed me, and a body under one of the tarps moved, its decaying hand slipping out from underneath and clawing for the life it would never get back—

“Hey, hey, Valeria!”

Somebody was holding tight to my wrist and shaking it. I awoke in the middle of yelling commands.

“—Apply vapor rub to block out the smell, and if you have to vomit, please use the bag—”

I drew in a breath. Bilbo had grabbed me so I wouldn’t go walking right back into the river.

“Hurricane flood water,” I said to myself, still dazed from the horror of memory and imagination. “That’s what it smells like.”

“You alright?” Bilbo gently inquired. I blinked and turned, then forced a smile.

“Yeah. I got a bit of sleep. That’s what matters.”

He didn’t believe me. He didn’t have to.

Bombur got hefted up with unanimous curses. I wished it were me.

“Come on,” I said, jerking Bilbo’s arm up so his fingers wouldn’t dip into the vest pocket. “If
you’re gonna obsess, wait until I can’t see you do it.”

“I’m not—” He cut himself off with an irritated sigh. We started walking on the path again, and I wondered how long it’d be until we lost it. “Is it truly that obvious?”

“To me. But that’s because I already know what to look for.” I pursed my lips. “But I doubt I’ll pay much attention soon; with all the sleep I’m not getting.” After a moment of sincere consideration, I wondered aloud, “Maybe I should kill myself so I can get a few hours in.”

“You will do no such thing.” Bilbo shot me a warning look over his shoulder.

“Yeah…At least until Bombur wakes up. Then nobody will have to worry about carrying two people.”

“Valeria.”

“Okay, okay, I’m done.”

With the dark humor gone, we were left with just darkness.

They veered from the path when I couldn’t see anything. And come the dim light of the morning, we were in an even more unfamiliar place.

The Company’s descent into delirium furthered. They would wander off in search of the path, thinking they’d seen it, and then get scattered. If it wasn’t for me taking on the job of wrangling them, Mirkwood would have eaten at least two dwarves a day.

Five days into aimless trekking, I had the Company tie themselves together with a rope so I could lead. Fifteen minutes later, half were untied and heading right to a cliff drop. I doubted they could unbreak their necks like me.

I…I was unraveling. No sleep and constant surveillance gnawed away at my motivation, and a lot of the time I thought about falling over and letting the forest all-too-eagerly consume me.

Bombur awoke two weeks later. He was lucid for a while, which was great for me, but he wasn’t happy to find out that we were getting low on food. In another couple of weeks, we’d be out completely. Nothing in this forest was safe to forage, and I hadn’t seen a single animal since entering. And even though not a single one of us was in the right state of mind, we weren’t so far gone that we’d consider eating any of the mushrooms that blanketed the forest floor, sometimes so thick that we had to step on them to get across.

At night, I’d see strange bugs floating beneath the thick canopy of trees. They didn’t glow brightly enough to bring any light, but they swirled around in psychedelic patterns, changing the colors of their light from orange to yellow to white, then to pink and red and violet. I thought I was imagining it from the lack of sleep, since it looked like something straight out of Fantasia, but the dwarves saw it, too.

The trees were more active as well—and trickier. They’d like to grab at our ankles to trip us up, flick branches at our ears, and I swore they’d move around so when he may have doubled back, we felt like we were in a different area. They probably saw how bad of a shape the dwarves were in and took advantage of it.

I would have laughed about it if I wasn’t close to losing my freaking mind if I heard another dwarf
cry, “I need air!”

It seemed the trees felt the same way. Bofur, a moment after bemoaning the most common phrase this past week, let out a hearty scream that snapped us out of our haze. I watched as he was flipped off his feet, dragged face-down through a patch of mushrooms, and into a thick bunch of trees.

“Bofur!” Thorin shouted, running after the abducted dwarf. We raced behind, and the sudden surge of action rudely pointed out how slow I’d become without proper rest.

“Somebody! Bloody! Help me!” Bofur got dragged over a pile of roots and unleashed a flurry of Khuzdul swear words that I knew were bad.

I passed up Bombur, Dori, Ori, and Bilbo on our chase. That made me feel a little better. Bofur got jerked around another tree bend, but went in a direction that could allow me to run diagonal and intervene before he got sucked away forever.

Footsteps followed behind me as I veered off, but I didn’t bother to look to see who it was. I jumped over a fallen, decaying tree trunk like it was a track-and-field hurdle. Bofur’s passing form dotted in and out of view, and in the gray, dappled light, I saw that he wasn’t being drug by one root. He was getting passed from one to another in a sinuous fashion. If they heard Bofur’s threats of cutting them up and using them for firewood, they paid no mind. Or it made them angrier.

“Shut the fuck up, Bofur!” I yelled, as hoarse and breathy as it was. I jumped over another fallen trunk, closing the gap between me and the abducted.

“Save me, lass!”

“I’m trying to—Oof!”

I didn’t see the sudden decline, and as a result I went catapulting into the air before hitting the ground and rolling Princess Bride-style down a small dip. When I came to a stop, sputtering out crunchy leaves from my mouth, I was met with a familiar…sound.

My head lifted as I got up on all fours. Bofur had been raised off the ground by a root wrapped around his leg. His hat somehow miraculously remained on his head, and he thrashed and kicked with his other leg to try and escape.

But I didn’t care about him.

I cared about what sat a few feet in front of me. A screen of static snow wobbled and waved on the front of a bulky black VCR, complete with the little flap for a VHS tape to go in at the bottom.

“What the f…”

The Company crashed through, some rolling like I did and some maintain their footing. “Help! Help me!” Bofur cried frantically. “These trees are gonna turn me into one of them!”

“Stop! Calm down!” I raised my voice enough to be heard, and thankfully, the Company listened. Scrambling to my feet, I pointed a finger not at Bofur, but at the root holding him. “Put him down, and I’ll help you with this…problem. If I think this is what it’s about. You want your TV fixed? Huh?” I then pointed the same finger down at the outdated technology.

The trees around us groaned and creaked so suddenly that it made me jump. The dwarves brandished their weapons in defense, but they did not attack the vegetation at random. Bofur was plopped onto the ground, and he landed in an awkward heap.
“Okay, good. That’s good.”

I got back down on my knees and stared into the TV. “What in the name of Mahal is that?” Thorin questioned, leaves crunching as he stalked forward. I didn’t look at him. The static was almost entrancing, whisking me back to a childhood where I sat in the exact same position. Except instead of dead leaves covering the floor, it had been a thick rug from my abuelita, and I had a plate of chicken nuggets in front of me as an afterschool snack.

“It’s a… it’s something from my world,” I murmured. My hand neared the screen, and a ghost of a smile curved my lips when I felt the static prick at my palm. “Question is: what the fuck is it doing here? In the middle of Mirkwood? With no electricity?”

I craned my neck around to see where the plug-in cord went—only to find that there was none. A manic laugh bubbled up. If the Company wasn’t here to see this, I would have thought that I finally lost my grip on reality.

“What does it do, lass?” Balin, ever the scholar, inched toward it with his weapon still raised. I leaned back.

“It’s a television. It plays shows and movies.” I glanced around at the trees and said, “Is this what you all do? Watch stuff? That’s why you made us come here? So it could get fixed?”

Another cacophony of shuddering wood. I laughed again.

“Oh, of course you would. It’s a fucking television! Duh!” I checked once more to see if there was any outlet, but all that surrounded the television was leaves and dirt and roots. To Balin and the Company, I said, “This has to have some type of magic on it. Otherwise it would just be a hunk of junk with no signal or power.”

Still, I could barely contain my excitement as I began to fidget. I switched the channels, first, but when all I got was either static or a vivid blue screen, I tried other methods. Like banging the top of the TV, the sides, and the back.

“Is that how ye make it work?” Dwalin asked dubiously. I snickered.

“Sometimes it gets things back in focus.”

I placed both hands on the sides of the television and started rocking it side-to-side, then back-and-forth, trying to jostle whatever cord or receiver back into place. The trees moved nervously, but that nervousness turned to joy when—in a blast of sound—the static flashed to moving picture.

“Mahal!” Gloin exclaimed as he, with several others, reeled back. “What in the name of all the Valar is that?”


Blanche said something funny, and I pealed with laughter. The trees shook in delight, and leaves cascaded to the ground.

The Company had been told what a television was a while back at Beorn’s house, but I didn’t think they actually got a good picture of what it looked like or how things showed up on the screen. So, as enraptured like I was, they found themselves sitting around the television with wide eyes.

Changing the channel got a good ooh from them. A vintage commercial for Hot Pockets blared. I switched up. A weatherman predicted the 1992 Fourth of July weekend forecast in Pocatello,
Idaho.

“See that date down there?” Static coated my finger as I tapped at the screen. “This was a year before I was born. That’s crazy.”

“What is that oddly-dressed man doing?” Kili had to ask.

“He’s telling us the weather for the next few days. Not the weather here. The weather on my world. Twenty-seven years ago from my perspective. So trippy.”

I changed the channel again. Cher belted out *If I Could Turn Back Time* on MTV, and for a little bit I sang along. Then another change. Will Smith was in the middle of roasting Carlton, and it followed up the laugh-track. I beamed.

The trees shook again, and I raised both hands and settled back. “Alright, yeah, we’ll leave it here. I freaking love this show, anyway.”

When the opening finished and went into the show’s song, I enthusiastically sang with it—complete with voice inflections and expressions. Then, once the show went to commercial break, I turned to Thorin.

“Can we watch at least one episode? Please?” I didn’t need to put any emphasis on my begging, because I genuinely, desperately wanted to stay. The oppression and exhaustion had lifted from my soul for the first time in almost three weeks, and I didn’t want to let go of it yet. “You’ll really like it. I promise.”

Thorin only pretended to consider the idea. He nodded. “One. Then we must be on our way.”

I grinned again and flipped back around to watch television. Advertisements blared in both color and sound, and though they were all old, they were a piece of home. A piece of home in the depths of Mirkwood. I didn’t bother to understand the reality of it, the logic. I found that in Middle-Earth, sometimes it was best to accept that things just were, no matter how strange or inexplicable they were. My mind was already on the brink of breaking. To consider what this meant, how it got here, who put it here…

Nah. I wouldn’t do that to myself. Not until I had a repaired mental constitution and got some Vitamin D in me.

So the Company settled in to watch *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, complete with over-saturated and slightly blurry visuals, peak early nineties clothes, and jokes that initially I only laughed at. But once the thirteen dwarves and one hobbit started picking up on the humor, it got even better. Bilbo liked Carlton (not surprising), several voiced the attractiveness of Hilary, and they thought Will was a complete riot.

And when the episode ended, Kili blurted, “What, that’s it?”

“Episodes are thirty minutes long.” I leaned over to look at Thorin, eyebrows raised high up on my forehead. “We *could* watch one more…”

He grumbled, but said, “Fine. One more.”

One more turned into another, then another, until all light had receded from the forest and we were bathed in television light. Dinner got passed around, and I found myself next to Fili, head resting against his, enjoying his long-hidden laugh even more than the comedy itself.
“This is what people who are together do in my world,” I whispered to him. “We watch television. In a house, not a forest, of course, but right now you’re getting a taste of what we’d do.”

“It’s quite lovely. And I do think I’d like it much better if we were not in this accursed place.” In a quieter voice, he added, “And alone.”

I smiled at the implying comment, and my hand moved to cover his. “You would.”

“Does your home look like…that?” Fili gestured to the Banks’ fancy interior.

“Ha. No. It’s a lot smaller. This family is rich. But one day…one day I hope to have a big house to live in, with a big kitchen and a big backyard for a garden.”

Fili did not say anything else. I was too tired to try and decipher his reasoning. We watched the rest of the episode, and when it was over, the channel moved on to infomercials. The Company decided to stay the night here, seeing as we were all comfortable and temporarily out of the enchantments’ haze.

I did not sleep. I stayed awake, laid out on my side, and watched television through the night. When MTV played one of Selena’s live performances, shining as she sang *Como la Flor*, I let myself cry. I cried because the television brought a massive wave of homesickness, because Selena was singing in a language I only heard pour from my own lips the past six months, because I was tired beyond description, *because*…

Because I wanted to go home.

Because I didn’t want to go home.

Fluorescent bugs replaced the stars above, twirling in their euphoric way. Between the soundless sobs, I hoarsely whispered lyrics I alone understood.

And when Fili, laying nearby, touched my back with absolute tenderness, I wanted to sink into the ground and die without revival.

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“…And if it gets this way again, just give it a shake like I did until reception comes back,” I explained to the group of trees that had moved a lot closer to us during the night. “It’s probably a good idea to keep some of these tiny roots out of the VHS thingy.” My finger wiggled the plastic flap. “But you’ve got a lot of good shit to look forward to. TV just gets better.”

The station we were on currently played reruns of *Happy Days*. “That funny man,” said Dwalin, pointing to Fonzie, “he does what you do.”

Dwalin put both thumbs up, and several others copied it. I grinned back. My dried-out eyes ached.

“It’s a pretty common thing where I’m from. But he’s popular for doing it.”

I gave a thumbs up and wandered off to be alone for a bit while the Company finished breakfast. I couldn’t eat like I wanted; the nausea made me almost throw up what little food I got down. Because I had stopped eating properly, a new kind of weakness set in. The one where it felt like my legs were floating and all my bones shook.

Once I was by myself, I crouched down into some tangled roots and slipped out the droplet. It was still its lil old self. When I gripped it with the same hand it left a scar on, the droplet warmed. I let
out a soft breath and placed it close to my chest. Mornings in Mirkwood were always chilly, so I tried absorbing what little heat it provided.

“Please,” I whispered. “Let me make it out of here. Please.”

The droplet only continued to radiate warmth. Uncontrolled tears pricked my eyes, and I looked up to the thick canopy of dark leaves. The movement made my head dizzy.

“I just…wanna feel the sun.”

The trees heard my plea. A root gently wound itself around my thinned-out waist and lifted me off my feet. I didn’t even struggle. Instead, I sagged, relieved from the pressure of supporting my own weight. Wood groaned and creaked, but in my half-delirium I heard a rhythm. Patterns of noises. Melodies.

They were speaking to one another.

Were they scared of what their forest had become? The gloom that settled in the air? The creatures that tainted green life with black?

I was set on a high, sturdy branch, and once I had good enough footing, I climbed the rest of the way through the canopy on my own. Held-back desperation tightened my joints, and I forced myself to breathe evenly so I wouldn’t fall off in the clamber.

For the first time in weeks, I felt a breeze kiss my skin, and then—and then—

Sunlight blinded me so gloriously I thought I had died for a final time.

Then I laughed. It was ragged and unburdened. Tree bark dug into my bare palms, the wind made my ears cold, and this was real. There was a world outside of Mirkwood, outside of blighted darkness. A world where I could sleep without evil finding a way to torment me.

Leaves fluttered, and a symphony of butterflies, dark-winged and matte, sprung from them. Further above, birds flew in the early autumn-blue sky, and memories of home—untwisted by nightmares—tasted sweet.

And to the North was the Lonely Mountain, solitude in its grandeur, its absolute certainty.

“We’ll be there soon,” I promised, hoping my words would carry on the wind. If it didn’t, then it was a promise to me. We would not stay in this forest forever. Its hold on us would pass, just as all things did.

I stayed up above for a little while longer, soaking up cool fall sunlight. The weather made me crave Starbucks and warm donuts. Then, when I heard distant voices calling my names, I reluctantly descended back into the depths, where the light cut off and despair seemed to drag me by the ankles so it could drown me.

“I’m here,” I called to the Company, who had started searching for me. I could not pick out who they were, since my eyes had not yet adjusted. “I’m here.”

“Aye, and what’re ye doing there?” Gloin’s voice shouted back.

I didn’t have it in me to tell them that I was about to have a come-apart. They’d only worry, which would then take up what precious lucidity they could grasp throughout the day.
Hopefully nobody would see the way my limbs shook as I climbed down unaided. My feet landed on the forest floor. An ankle lightly twisted from an uneven root, but I couldn’t be bothered to acknowledge the twinge of pain.

“I wanted to point us in the right direction,” I spoke. Hopefully my exhaustion would mask the lie. It didn’t help that I felt like a complete dumbass for not thinking about doing it earlier. “The Lonely Mountain is that way.”

I pointed in a rough northward direction. “So we go that way, yeah?”

The only problem was that what lie beyond the tip of my finger was an even deeper blackness, yawning and terrible, beckoning for us to tread within and grow even sicker from its corruption.

Thorin, who had heard me talking, trusted my words. “Then we press onward,” he said, then barked a few commands in Khuzdul. As they prepared to depart from this special little grove, I leaned up against a tree and gave it thanks. It was the least I could do. The tree reverberated something I couldn’t understand. Did it know who brought the television? Would it even give me an answer if it did? They must have known that the TV and I were from the same world. So who gave it to them?

When I opened my eyes, I found that I stared at the droplet. I forgot to hide it after I took it out.

It went back into the confines of my sports bra. The moment I felt its weight return to the familiar spot, Fili’s hand touched my shoulder.

“Are you ready?”

I turned to him, seeing those blue eyes gloss over in concern at my appearance.

“Yeah.” No. I wasn’t. But we had to go, anyway.

Night awaited.

Chapter End Notes

A tv in Mirkwood? That's a normal thing, right?

Also, fun fact, I grew up around Pocatello. It's kind of a dump.

I should probs mention that I have a tumblr. If ya wanna follow me, it's http://i-dropped-the-chief.tumblr.com/

Güey (wey): dude
Este lugar es el peor: this place is the worst
Though his head be full of cotton, Thorin watched Valeria as she managed to drift into a fitful, shallow sleep. Her eyes never stilled beneath their lids, and soon she’d either try to wander off or scream herself awake.

Valeria had kept them from walking straight into their death on an almost daily basis, when their grip on the real world loosened the most. And she did it without complaint—at least none that Thorin heard.

_How steady of a soul she is._

But Thorin and the Company did not fail to see how darkened her eyes had become, how sallow her cheeks sank, how she rarely ate, and, within these past two days, how her eyes darted as if she heard things they could not. Sleep loss was taking a cruel toll on Valeria’s body, and Thorin worried part of her would forever be lost in this vile realm if they did not make it out soon.

He absently chewed on the end of his pipe. They’d run out of pipe-weed a week into Mirkwood, but he liked the familiar weight of it. The forest was ripe with sound, tonight, chitters and chatters of creatures unseen. Most likely discussing how they would eat the Company. Valeria told them of great spiders who intended to feast on dwarven and hobbit flesh. And, as of recent days, more and more silk webs appeared, and the trees were quiet—somehow eerier than when they had been active.

The woman herself did not make it any better. Valeria stood, eyes still shut, and began muttering in her native tongue. It was rapid and pleading, and she motioned to a figure present only in her dreams. The sleepwalking initially disturbed the Company. Now, they mostly managed to block it out, unless Valeria stepped on them in her wanderings or produced an unholy scream.

Then the language slipped into one Thorin understood mid-sentence. “—Not your real name. Please. You can tell me. You’ll be safe, now, and once we get the paperwork handled—”

Valeria stopped as if she’d been interrupted, lips pursing and head nodding. “I understand. I understand. But we cannot process you if we don’t have full credentials—No. I understand. Yes. Yes.” She reached for something invisible. “Here. You and your children need water. Have you been to the medical tent for that hand?”

A pause, then a sigh. “I understand.” She turned as if she was glancing around. “Look. Go to the medical tent, please. Tell them that Valeria Juarez sent you. Valeria Juarez. Yes. Tell them that your papers are in process.” Valeria’s hand moved as if she was writing, then she stretched it out. “Give them this note. But please. Come back afterward. We can get this sorted out—”

Thorin recognized the abrupt change in her dreams. The sudden tension, the labored breaths, the twitching fingers. “No. No, no, no. I—I was going to save them! Please, _please_, no!”
Valeria dropped to her knees and let out a low, desolate wail that struck Thorin cold. This was loss. Unbearable, terrible loss.

“I was…I was going to save them,” she sobbed, and if there were light, her tears would have glistened. “They were mine to save. Please—please—please, they’re my reason.” Valeria’s chest heaved, and she clawed at the scar left behind from the orc blade. “I don’t want to live again and again and again if they were—if they were always going to die.”

What were these words? Whom did she speak of?

A slow-building sense of dread sickened Thorin’s stomach. Valeria had seen the future. The outcome of this quest. But he had seen the flicker of deception on her smiling face as she told them of their success. What did she hide? And why?

Valeria gasped and wrenched back as if she had been stabbed again. It almost rose to a scream, but was then cut off with a choke. Her teeth bared in a savage way, and as she drew dreaming, smothered breaths, she spat out one word.

One name.

One curse.

“Sauron.”

Thorin’s blood curdled, and the pitch black bore a tangible weight so crushing that, for a moment, he thought he would suffocate.

But then he found himself gripping Valeria’s thin shoulders so tight he knew it would leave bruises. He shook the woman to wake her, but her eyes did not open, and the choking noises grew more faint. The wild fear that clutched Thorin’s soul a second ago turned to fervent panic, for Valeria limply slouched forward. The nightmare that stretched out its hand to strangle her cut off all air, and he could see the muscles on her neck tense and strain.

Just as he was about to shout her name, Valeria jolted with a furious shriek. Thorin held her steadfast until she was finished with her bout of initial thrashing. “Ria, Ria, it is me. Calm yourself.”

Frightened eyes looked where they thought Thorin to be, flickering in the blindness of the night. Valeria struggled to swallow.

“…Thorin?”

Uttering his name broke Valeria so devastatingly that he almost heard her insides shatter like glass. She crumpled into a new wave of tears, tipping forward so that her head rested on his shoulder. He did only what he could do—pull her into an embrace until it all subsided.

This grief…he had not seen it on Valeria before. It wrenched her entire body, and she clutched Thorin’s dirty coat as if it would keep him from…from…

From death.

It all came together, twisting his mind until it almost dislodged completely. Thorin took in a shuddering breath, and Valeria’s whispery wails stitched the dreadful tapestry together in full. Her reason. Her reason.
“Oh, Mahal,” he whispered, pleaded, wondering if it would reach the Valar’s ears through Mirkwood’s endless canopy. Sharpness splintered his chest.

*He was meant to die.*

Valeria sobbed like scratches on a post until there was no air left in her lungs. Thorin’s arms had stiffened as the terms of his future solidified to stone, so they continued to hold her even though she was spent. His voice was nowhere to be found, for it had fled with the waves of shock that crashed through his being.

And she had said *they.* Thorin was not alone in his end. But who else? Who else would—

“Uncle?” Fili roused from his slumber, finding the spot beside him empty. Thorin opened his mouth to speak, but the second revelation hit him with such force that he almost ceased to exist. His nephews. Nephews. Sister-sons. Fili and Kili, heirs to the line of Durin, his *nephews.*

For they would follow him to death unflinching.

Death, which would soon grasp Thorin.

“Is she alright?”

Fili stood and met Thorin, who could only stare up at his nephew, golden-haired from his father, blue-eyed from Durin the First, and carrying a heart consumed by the Woman from Another World.

This should not be. Cannot be. Thorin promised his sister, swore on his *life* that he would return her sons to her in a kingdom they reclaimed.

But what use was an oath if he walked the Halls of Mandos?

Perhaps this was not true. Perhaps Thorin was wrong. Yes. Yes, perhaps this was all a misunderstanding born from one of Valeria’s cryptic nightmares.

But *Sauron* she spoke, and Thorin could not deny it.

He blinked and cleared his throat. Fili crouched down beside the two and patted Valeria’s head. “She has fallen back asleep,” he muttered. “We will see how long it lasts. Take her.”

Fili heard the weight in his voice, but he only gave his uncle a curious look.

Valeria was lifted from Thorin’s arms. “Ai,” Fili sighed, “she’s light as a feather.”

And, Thorin noticed, void of sound. He pressed a finger to her neck and found that blood still pumped. “Uncle? What’s wrong?” Fili held Valeria closer to him, concern emerging. She did not stir.

“She has not been this quiet during sleep for a long while.”

“Maybe peace has finally found her.” But Fili did not find surety in his own words, and he moved so he could lay her back down the crumpled cloak. Their movement and speech awoke others, and soon Dwalin and Kili were sitting upright, hands halfway to their weapons.

“Is she dead?” Kili asked nervously.

“No,” said Thorin, “but something is not right.”
“What happened? You must know,” Fili said, and Thorin was reminded of the pain wrapped around him like chains. But he did not betray much, and instead tried waking her.

“She was despondent from a nightmare. It overwhelmed her, and once her cries faded, she was still.”

“’Tis unnatural,” Dwalin muttered. “She’d be up on her feet again, or speaking. Doing something active.”

Frustration flashed through Thorin. He needed answers only she could give, and now, of all times, she would not move? But shame immediately placated his rising temper. Valeria was sick. Sick in ways Thorin could not understand.

“Ria? Ria, wake up,” Fili said, patting her cheek. Her head shifted, and her lips parted, but Valeria did not return to them like she should have. His nephew tensed. “Valeria?”

Fili pressed his ear to her chest. “Her heart beats sure, but…”

Oin, who had been shaken from his slumber by Kili, shuffled over. “Let me see, laddie. Give her a little room.”

He knelt down and listened to Valeria’s chest with furrowed brows. The rest of the Company had risen, now, and they began to gather around their human companion. “What is it?” Bilbo questioned, and though he did not get an answer, he kept repeating it until Oin was done with his examination.

“Aye, her heartbeat is regular, but her lungs sound irritated. And…and by Mahal, it’s as if she was strangled.”

Fili snapped his head to Thorin, a fuse igniting. He raised a hand to his nephew to calm him and quickly explained. “In the throes of her nightmare, Valeria acted as if…something was choking her.”

The name she spoke echoed in his mind. Thorin pressed on before it could further spread its poison. “She awoke in the midst of it, wept, and then fell silent.”

“I understand dreaming as if you were being choked,” Oin said, scrubbing his beard, “but having physical evidence of it? What tormented her so? What evil is powerful enough to reach through?”

An acrid taste filled Thorin’s mouth. The name, the name, beat in his head like drums.

“Will she be alright?” questioned Fili. Oin sighed.

“That remains to be seen. This illness does not stem from the body. It stems from the mind. And one can take only so much torture before cracking.”

When my eyes opened to dim light filtering in through the leaves above, I sensed a wrongness.

It was more than the way my throat was on fire. More than how my lungs rattled. It went deeper than the physical. Deeper, deeper.

Then I remembered.

He had come for me. The figure shrouded in such blackness that it was like staring into the void.
And the void reached out to me, took me, and tried to pry my soul away. When I fought—when I fought back—he almost killed me.

Sauron.

Had he always known that I was here? Or had he just found me, weak and unprotected in this cursed forest?

It didn’t matter. All that I mattered was that he wanted me. And for a moment there, he almost had me.

And maybe he did take something. Because as I lay there, staring up at burgundy-black leaves, I did not feel whole. Even after I passed out in Thorin’s arms after having a meltdown, the nightmares didn’t return. They didn’t have to.

Their job was complete. To break me. Break me so that next time, I couldn’t resist the evil that wrapped its claws around my throat.

I should have been terrified beyond thought, beyond belief. But the dread that blanketed me since my first nightmare in Mirkwood had become another appendage. All I could do was live with it until it killed me.

Hey. Maybe if I died, I could come back better. That’d be nice.

“Oh, thank Mahal,” I heard Fili say next to me, and I slid my gaze his way. He grinned and picked up a limp hand. Warm lips peppered cold knuckles. “You’re awake. She’s awake!”

Conversation burst forth, but Oin beat them all to it by coming into my line of vision. I should have been able to return his smile, but all I could do was lay there. “How ye feeling, lass?”

I didn’t reply. Couldn’t. The pain was too great, and it shocked me a little more into reality. Oh, fuck, I was freezing.

“Your throat took quite the beating.” Oin’s eyes clouded with concern. “Can you tell me how that happened?”

No. Not even if I was able to speak.

So I shook my head the slightest amount. Even then, another wave of fire seared at my throat. “That’s alright. I’d advise that you not try to use your voice for the next couple of days.” He took my hand from Fili. “Now, what about movement. Wiggle these fingers for me, eh?”

My index finger twitched. Oin’s smile turned tight. I probably just needed to fucking de-thaw.

“Are ye hungry?”

Another small shake.

“Thirsty?”

The tiniest of nods. My waterskin was put to my lips, and I allowed a teaspoon of water into my mouth. Swallowing it hurt, but I was expecting the pain, so I took it with a grimace and hoarse whimper.

“We must be on our way,” came Thorin’s voice, and I glanced over at him. His eyes penetrated me more than they should have, and the way his jaw set implied some sort of anger—no, distrust.
No. Fear. It was fear. Of me? For me? I was too hazy to discern.

But I saw him die last night, just as I saw him and his nephews and more die every night.

“The girl can’t move, let alone walk,” said Oin. “If we’re to venture on, she has to be carried.”

“Then somebody carry her.”

An awkward silence followed. It usually went that way when Thorin was unnecessarily—or uncharacteristically—harsh. But Fili, bless him, picked me up as gently as he could. The new position gave me a better view of the Company. Bilbo muttered and paced in a neat line he had made in the dirt, Dori and Nori were already arguing, and Bombur was sneaking a piece of hard biscuit that he shouldn’t have.

Aw, man.

These assholes were going to die.

All I could do was rest my head on Fili’s shoulder, live through the pain, and watch as the Company fell apart without me to keep them together.

Around us, gauzy webs covered life like a layer of mold.

- 

“Look!” Ori exclaimed. “A tobacco pouch.” He held it inches from his face, then had it taken away from him by Dori.

“There are dwarves in these woods.” He suspiciously looked about as if he would see them.

Kili unslung my arm from over his shoulder and let me rest against a rock. I had been able to reuse my legs two days later, but they were still wobbly. I tried keeping Kili close to me, even though he wanted to go see what other damn dwarves were in Mirkwood. I found that whoever was assisting me throughout the day stayed more lucid than if they weren’t.

My voice, however, hadn’t come back, and Kili didn’t hear me whisper near-soundless pleas to him.

“By my beard,” said Bofur, examining the tobacco pouch. “This is exactly the same as mine!”

“Because it is yours.” Bilbo said what I couldn’t. “Do you understand? We’re going ‘round in circles. Without Valeria, we’re even more lost than we were before!”

I weakly smiled at the hobbit’s defense of me.

“We have been heading east, just as she directed,” Thorin snapped back.

“That was nearly a week ago!”

“We’ve lost the sun,” Oin bemoaned. “We have no way of knowing if we’re still going the right direction!”

Not for the first time, I watched from a distance as the Company argued themselves silly. Bilbo, however, spoke to himself, glancing from his feet to the obstructed sky several times.

I glimpsed him mouthing, “Sun.”
Wait. Wait.

Fuck. Shit. No. I wasn’t ready for this. Not yet! Not while I was a fucking vegetable!

Bilbo spun around to me, coherence unmasking the veil over his mind. I bit back a groan and pointed a shaking finger up to the canopy. I guessed if it had to happen, it might as well. Spiders attacking meant elves swooping in, and elves meant getting da fuck outta Mirkwood.

He scurried over to me and crouched. “Is it safe?” Bilbo hissed. “Is it safe to climb up?”

I swallowed, then whispered, “You…gotta. Yes.”

His eyes darted to try and find more meaning to my words, but I slapped him on the arm with all the strength of a wet noodle. “Baggins. Go.”

After a quick nod, Bilbo began climbing the nearest tree, tutting and grumbling at the cobwebs sticking to his palms. Several feet away, the dwarves really got into it, going to far as to push others and let the volume of their arguing escalate while the logic behind it dropped lower.

So this was what would happen to me. Get bound up by the spiders and wait to be saved.

What a sucky prospect.

I craned my neck up at Bilbo, feeling the strain in my throat renew. I examined it with my little mirror this morning and found that mottled bruises still darkened the skin. There wasn’t any specific handprint left over. No, I distinctly remembered Sauron’s hand wrapping completely around my neck. He could have snapped it like a toothpick.

Fucker.

Spite rose in my empty stomach. Him and his fucking spiders and this fucking forest.

I hoped he heard me when I said, “You’re going to lose.”

Nothing happened. For some reason, I smirked. Saying that out loud brought back some light to my vision that the sun couldn’t provide. As I watched Bilbo climb higher, I started to laugh at it all. Mirkwood was the culmination of every Billie Eilish song ever recorded, and there was no way in hell that I was going to let myself sit here and be burritoed by giant spiders.

The dwarves didn’t notice me stand and begin following Bilbo up the tree. My entire body shook the moment I applied upper muscles, and on the second branch it almost gave out entirely. But my mama didn’t raise no bitch, so I clenched my butt cheeks and tried again.

Bilbo, the deft little shit he was, had already made it to the bottom of the canopy by the time I was only a quarter of the way up. Sickly sweat broke out on my forehead and neck.

By all means, I should have been well-rested since the dream encounter. I stopped having nightmares. Instead, I was consumed by bone-crushing darkness that trapped me in its realm until someone was loud enough or the light was bright enough to draw me back. Which was fan-fucking-tastic.

I mumbled half-formed Spanish curses as I climbed. It didn’t help my vocal chords at all, but I couldn’t give a shit. Not when the promise of fresh air and sunlight was so close. Not when I could almost hear spiders coming for us. I still had no idea how well I’d get pieced back together if I got swallowed up, and I did not want to find out.
Bilbo squawked when my hand grabbed his ankle. He ducked his head down from under the canopy and let out another yelp at the sight of a half-dead, sweaty Valeria staring up at him.

“V-Valeria! What are you doing up here?”


“Better get ya sword out, Baggins.”

Trees in the distance started snapping in a consecutive pattern. Bilbo and I looked in the direction where it was coming from. I gripped the hilt of one of my blades. Anticipation filled me with a vigor I hadn’t felt in a long time.

A fight was on its way.

The hobbit leaned a little too far out, though, and suddenly he was careening forward. We both reached out for each other. His hand clasped mine, but I wasn’t strong enough to pull him back up, so instead he slipped away, barked an, “Oh, come on!” and toppled into the forest with a yell.

I froze.

That…that was not how this was supposed to go.

“Fuck me,” I coughed, then promptly released any and all judgement the same time I pushed off of the tree. Bilbo clotheslined down three branches, a trail of webbing following behind him, and the second he caught onto one, he realized that it was not a tree branch at all.

The spider whose leg he clung to emerged from the cloud of webs. It opened its maw to bite down on Bilbo—

The sound of air being let out of a soda can hissed through the forest, followed by a hundred-and-five pound Mexican hitting the spider straight on its swollen back. My neck just about broke on impact, but the blade I had whipped out lanced into the spider’s abdomen. It screeched and hardened, its limbs curling up underneath it. Bilbo swung himself to another tree branch before he could fall again.

Despite spotty vision, I yanked my blade out and rolled off the spider. As soon as I had tree underneath me instead of arachnid, the corpse tilted and fell to Mirkwood’s floor with a heavy crunch.

I held my throat and winced. That stunt probably just ruined any healing it’d gone through. Not to mention that all my limbs felt like rubber, and not-good pain shot up the arm that held my unsheathed blade, which was covered from tip to hilt in spider ooze.

Bilbo’s frightened voice sounded dim, like several feet of water separated us. “…thinking? Eh? You could have gotten yourself killed!”

He didn’t like the smart look I gave him. I missed how he did it, but the hobbit had moved from the branch he hung on to mine.

“More coming.” I fumbled to sheathe my blade. “I…I’m fucked up. But you, Baggins…”

“No, no, I know what you’re trying to say. No. I am not leaving you.”
Damnit, I was so stupid. I should have just left myself to the spiders like a good girl. Or, really, I should have killed myself so whatever the hell was wrong with me would get fixed. Like a reboot.

I trained my eyes on Bilbo so he wouldn’t go out-of-focus. “The dwarves are going to be spider food. You need to go. I…I will follow. I promise.”

“Valeria, no.”

“You have to. It’s…essential—ow, fuck!” I clenched both fists at the sharp pain in my throat and punched down at the tree branch. Nothing more than a scratchy whisper came out, and it hurt like hell. “Bilbo. You have to go. Now.”

His face went through a complete journey until it finally landed on reluctant acceptance. I got a stern little hobbit finger pointed at me. “Fine. Fine. But—but I will be back for you. Do not under any circumstance try to play hero.”

I smiled at Bilbo’s directiveness. He made me so proud.

“Bien.”

He pursed his lips like he was about to say something more, but then on second thought dropped it. Bilbo squeezed my shaking leg and repeated, “I’ll be back.”

Soon-to-be-Sting unsheathed, catching light in its metal despite the gloom. Bilbo squared his shoulders, took a breath, then hurried off, jumping down onto a lower branch with surprising dexterity and disappearing into the dark.

Oh, crap.

I forgot to tell him to use The Ring.

Eh. He’d be fine.

Whether or not I would be fine was a different story. I mean, my chances of doing alright were higher if I stayed here like Bilbo wanted.

But I think we both knew that I wasn’t going to stay. Serious injury and/or death on my part was likely. But did I give a fuck? No. That was why I went feral on that spider just a minute ago.

I pulled the droplet’s chain over my head and wound the silvery, flexible metal between my fingers and wrist so the droplet lay in the center of my palm. “Okay, listen here,” I said to it. “You’re gonna help me. Got it, pendejo?”

Though I didn’t expect a response, the droplet warmed and brightened. I closed my hand around it so tightly that it burned, and the light illuminated my skin until it was almost translucent. Strength and stamina flooded into weakened muscle and bones. The injury to my throat receded.

As I stood, fist a small beacon, I accepted that this was only temporary. I could feel the weakness behind a closed door slowly creeping back in underneath the gap. How much borrowed time I got, I didn’t know, but I wasn’t about to waste it.

This was when you’d cue the rock music, right?

I jumped down onto the branch Bilbo had with less sound than I expected. The droplet spread warmth, and, glancing down at it as I moved through the tree branches like that one hooded guy I
watched Luis play in his video game, I saw that the warmth was blood. It glistened a crystalline red in the droplet’s light.

In my right hand I gripped a blade. It glided through spider webs, and when the first spider found me running and jumping through the forest that it claimed as its home, the blade cut through it, too, and I kept moving.

Something built inside me. A wildness. Otherworldly energy was getting pumped in with every heartbeat, and I couldn’t spend it fast enough. It was every mad dash to the home base, every sudden lead in track, every teeth-gritting move to keep an opponent pinned underneath.

Spiders shrieked and chittered around some invisible opponent about two hundred feet away. On the ground below were thirteen bodies wrapped in white silk. I headed away from Bilbo, who was producing a cacophony of screeches, and down to the dwarves.

Because I heard more snapping in the trees fast approaching, and Bilbo and I were only two people.

I did something to my knees when I landed on the ground, but the droplet’s vitalization pushed the pain away. Mushrooms were squished underfoot as I ran to them, kicking up fungal mush behind me.

“¡Espabílate! Come on!” I crouched, set my blade by my side, and tore off the webbing from a dwarf’s face. Nori. “Get up! Get up!”

He only groaned. I moved on to the next. Kili. “Wake the fuck up!” I yelled in his ear. Barely a reaction. Great. So they had some venom in them. Copper tinged the back of my throat. The wildness cranked up another notch, and this was what it felt like to be hopped up on cocaine, wasn’t it?

I dove back for my blade and charged into the fray of spiders too close to ignore.

Once they were dead and I was covered in their rancid ichor, I spun back around to the Company. They were wiggling more, which was a good sign. I helped strip off their cocoons. When I got to Fili, he had to blink at me a few times before thickly saying, “Valeria? Whatreyouu…”

His gaze dropped to my glowing, bleeding fist. “Trying to keep your insides from being liquefied,” I said, and pulled off a large piece of webbing from his blond hair.

Somebody to my right retched. I stood and surveyed the Company. Dwalin, Bifur, and Thorin were up on their feet, but they were unsteady. Up from above, Bilbo had led the spiders away, but the whole forest was awake, now, and we would have enemies bearing down upon us in another minute.

I swore under my breath. “Up, up!” Thorin commanded. “Gather your wits!”

He looked to me and the droplet’s obscured light. When his eyes begged an answer, I just shrugged in an “I’ll explain later” way and helped Fili to his feet.

Though half the Company was still groggy, they had shaken off the worst of the venom. We broke into a run with Thorin leading. Spiders gathered around us, crawling down from their trees and through thick veils of webs. I slashed into one, then another, coinciding with the rhythm of the Company’s fighting.

It felt good to be this energized, again, even if that energy was baking me from the inside out.
One spider lunged from my left side, and its pincer sunk into my thigh. I shouted as burning venom flooded into muscle. Dwalin rammed his axe into the spider a moment later, and I finished it off with my blade. Two more tried for us, but we ended their lives in quick succession.

Carcasses littered the forest, and in the brief moment of peace, I sheathed my blade and held onto my other wrist, forcing the droplet’s light to dim. If I held onto it for much longer, I wouldn’t be able to contain the ferocity that it created.

The light faded, and I opened my hand. I sharply inhaled at the sight.

In the center of my palm, bloodied and shining, sat the droplet. It had burrowed part of itself in like a tick. Once I unwrapped the chain, I took a breath and pulled the jewel out. It dislodged with a wet sound.

The weirdest part was that it didn’t hurt like it should have. I put the chain back around my neck before the droplet could try to sink into my skin again. As soon as it was settled, every ounce of pain it had been staving off returned in a fury of fire.

All air left me. I hit the ground face-first.

“Ria!”

The agony squeezed at my throat, twisted my knees, and thrummed through my body. Empty despair that the nightmares left behind took up its position once more. But in all of the storm, the center of this hellish torment resided in my thigh where the spider got me.

Fili rolled me over. “S-spider v-v-venom,” I panted, clawing at the wound. But he didn’t remember the brief conversation so long ago, and I got hauled to my feet.

“Quickly! There are more coming!” Thorin shouted. I found myself half-running, half-staggering against Fili as another wave of spiders closed in. “Come on, keep up!”

The Sense of Doom washed through me. Fuck, fuck. No. Not like this. I didn’t want to die like this.

A crawler descended in front of Thorin. As he brandished Orcrist to fight it, arrows streamed through the air. The spiders died almost all at once and were replaced by long-haired, agile figures who launched arrows so fast that their arms seemed to blur.

One specific elf landed right in front of Thorin, aiming an arrow right at the dwarf king’s forehead. His blond hair still shone in the dreary forest, and his pale blue eyes were deadly. “Do not think I won’t kill you, dwarf,” Legolas, Prince of Mirkwood, spat. “It would be my pleasure.”

Holy shit. He was beautiful.

I couldn’t throw up in front of him, so I held back the rising bile and rode through the waves of nausea that tipped off the first portion of anaphylaxis.

Kili cried for help in the distance, and Fili spun to shout his name. The movement was too sudden for me to handle, so I dropped to my knees. It was closer to the ground, anyway, meaning that I wouldn’t bust up my face even more by falling forward again.

Several members wanted to rush to my aid, but elves separated and searched the Company. One with hair the color of red autumn leaves knelt in front of me. Though her gaze was intense, she tilted my chin up gently for inspection. Unlike Legolas, she was beautiful in a sharp and wild kind of way. Full of grace, yes, but also full of lightning.
“And who are you?” she asked, but I could only wheeze as my poor throat clogged and lips swelled. She frowned when she saw the deep bruises on my neck. “Have these dwarves hurt you?”

“Step away from her, elf!” Balin shouted, overhearing my soft interrogation. He was usually mild-mannered—except when it came to their pointy-eared enemies. “She is under our protection!”

A scoff. “This does not look like protection, dwarf.”

My eyelids drooped. Weight pressed onto my chest, pushing out oxygen from my lungs. I’d never gotten further than this stage. I always had an Epi-Pen on me plus a fast trip to the hospital, and my last reaction happened when I was thirteen. From almonds, too, not a dumb spider bite.

Legolas, who was searching Gloin, found his locket and popped it open. “Hey! Give it back!” Gloin yelled. “That’s private.”

The prince sneered. “Who is this?” he inquired. “Your brother?”

“That is my wife!”

“And what is this horrid creature? A goblin-mutant?”

“That’s my wee lad, Gimli!”

The she-elf was surprised to hear me hiss out broken laughter. “He…” I gasped, unable to find breath. “He said it.”

Luis would be so happy right now.

I keeled onto my side, laughs turning to wide-eyed desperate attempts for air. The redhead shouted something in elvish. Fili then remembered my words, my tiny reaction at Beorn’s, and saw the puncture wound bleeding on my thigh. “Spider venom. Spider venom!” He tried shaking off the elf guarding him, but was held back from running to me. “It’s spider venom! Please, she needs medicine! It’s in her pack!”

Oh, cariño. I doubted some ointment would help me at this point.

“She needs a healer!” Oin roared. “Let me through! Let me see her!”

He was ignored. The elf pressed a hand to the puncture wound. Her words turned quick and instructional. Then Legolas’ voice, calm but firm. She responded with a bite that even I picked out in my state. A few moments later, something cool was spread over the injury. All it did was soothe the worst of the fire. My heart still beat too rapidly, and a foreign—but familiar—weakness crept in.

It looked like I was going to be resting real soon.

I held my thumb out and raised it against my chest so the Company could take comfort from it. It would be okay. It would be okay.

“Stay with me,” the she-elf spoke to me, and through the dim gray coating over the world, I saw her genuine care.

It’s Tauriel, the last fragments of my consciousness said. Tauriel.

She had hazel eyes.
“Stay in the light.”

My dying breaths were wasted on a question.

“What light?”

Chapter End Notes

*Happy Together starts playing as the scene cuts out*

This was a wild chapter. Sorry if you spot like a million grammatical errors; I typed everything out a little too fast.

Okay, you guys have no idea how much music I went through writing this chapter. First it was sad and mysterious instrumental music, then Billie Eilish (that's why I mentioned it), then Cardi B, then 80s rock, and then it finished up with some good ol Hozier.

Yes, the hooded guy in a video game reference is a shoutout to Assassin's Creed, which my husband obsesses over (and wishes he could be one).

Everyone who was like, "Oooh, spider bite foreshadowing" a couple chapters back gets a figurative high-five from me. Good job

Bien: good
Espabílate: wake up
Cariño: sweetie

And honestly, Valeria kicking the bucket again was a long time coming. She needed a break.
“Uuuhhhhhhhhh.”

Bilbo Baggins, currently invisible, slammed his back against the wall of the small room. The wood elves had enough decency to prepare their fifteenth companion for a burial service after her untimely demise in their realm, and she rested on a wooden slab with stark white linen covering her.

Still. Watching one rise from the dead did not make Bilbo feel comfortable.

Especially when she was making disturbing sounds from underneath the sheet.

“Uuuhhhhhhh.”

He pressed into the wall even further, fingers splaying against the cold stone, watching with half-shut eyes so he could close them the instant this became too much for him. The linen rose with the exhale of a breath. Bilbo squeaked. Was she—was it—

“Uuuhhh—ack—pbbbt—what da—”

Valeria sat up, tugging the linen out from her mouth with a sputter. But the sight before Bilbo shocked him into heart palpitations and pushed him one step closer to an early grave.

She was ethereal, composed of translucent matter that was not quite in this world and not quite out of it. What were once brown eyes were pale balls of light. The scar from the orc blade marred her front in a dark charcoal, as well as the scar on the side of her waist. But all of that would have been more bearable to look at, were it not for the droplet of light burning a hole into her chest. It did not cast a blueish-gray glow like the rest of Valeria; no, it was so deep and endless that it could have been a piece of Varda herself. The droplet was almost too powerful and consuming to gaze upon at all, and the ring singed his finger.

“Bilbo?” Valeria’s voice, just like the rest of her, did not belong entirely to this realm. She looked about the small chamber, starry eyes moving over him without pause. “I can hear you, Bilbo. You’re breathing really loud.”

He tore himself away from the blinding void of the droplet and frantically slipped the ring off before it would sever his finger entirely. Then Valeria was there, brown-skinned, black-haired, and in solid form. Her brows jumped up at the sudden sight of Bilbo, but it was followed by a happy smile.

And Bilbo, of course, would have smiled back, but his heart hammered too loudly for him to respond in an appropriate manner.

“H—hello, Valeria—it’s good to, it’s good to see…you.”

The smile turned to an amused grimace. “Really? It doesn’t sound like you are.” She looked down at the gauzy white gown she wore underneath the linen. “Were the elves getting ready to bury me?”
“Yes. Yes, I believe so.”

Valeria ran her fingers through loose tresses. Her expression brightened. “Ohh. They washed my hair for me.” The delight then halted. She tossed the linen off completely and inspected her arms. “And washed the rest of me, too. *Pervertidos.*”

Bilbo swallowed and regained his functions. He must, if they were to escape from the Elvenking’s halls.

“Aw, man, I’m thirsty as hell.” Valeria rubbed at her neck. Her eyes widened. “Oh, hey, my bruises are gone. So are all the other hurts. Sweet.”

“What—what, if I may, did that to you? Hurt your neck like that.” Bilbo couldn’t help but ask. Valeria wandered about the room, seemingly searching for something. She paused for a moment when she heard the question but then continued on.

“Nothing you need to worry about right now, Baggins,” came her gentle—but firm—reply. Bilbo made an *ah* face. So it was one of those things. Future…stuff.

Valeria said not to be worried, but worrying was a habitual Baggins trait, and so he did anyway.

“Where’s my pack? And all my clothes?” Valeria tossed her hair back over a shoulder. The gown she wore was obviously meant for elves, as it copiously draped over her feet and pooled in silken waves on the floor. Beautiful in its simplicity, yes, but not meant for someone as slight as she.

In the front of the gown lay her shark tooth, and half-concealed behind it was a small jewel, discreet and unthreatening.

What *was* it?

Bilbo forced his eyes back up to Valeria’s and found that she was waiting for him expectantly. “Oh-oh,” he stammered, remembering the task at hand. “Yes. I do believe the elves took your belongings to one of the offices.”

“Do you know the way?”

“Yes.”

“Then let’s go! We probably don’t have much time. Did you get the keys to the dwarves’ cells?”

The initial surprise at Valeria’s knowledge took Bilbo off-guard for a second, and he had to remind himself that it was normal. The ring of keys he had haphazardly stuffed into his trouser pockets jingled when he patted them. She gave a thumbs up and a grin. “Awesome. Now let’s get outta here.”

Bilbo turned to open the chamber door, but as his hand hovered above the latch, he tweaked his nose and spun back to Valeria with a pointed finger. “Don’t think that I’m not upset about you not staying away from the whole mess,” he chastised. “Look where it got you! Right where I said it would.”

She didn’t even have the decency to even *pretend* to be ashamed. Valeria hiked up the bottom her dress so she wouldn’t be tripping over them while they walked. “Yeah, okay, I didn’t stay put. But how could I? And look at me now, Baggins!” Valeria squatted—noticeably favoring the right leg—then kicked her feet out as if she was doing a little jig. “I’m even better off. Dying really is good for the body.”
“How did it happen? One moment I was gone doing what you told me to do—”

“You would have done it without me saying anything—”

“—And the next I’m watching your corpse get thrown over an elf’s shoulder.” He placed both hands on his hips and stared up at Valeria. “So?”

“Don’t give me that look. But here. This is what happened” Valeria moved her dress up the side of her left leg to reveal the lethal wound. Bilbo poorly stifled a gag at the sight of it. She frowned at him. “It’s not that disgusting, ya little shit. A spider got me. I had a bad reaction. It was a pretty horrible way to go…but I guess every way I’ve died has been horrible.”

Bilbo begged to differ about it not being disgusting. The single puncture wound was a mass of dark colors, and the hole itself was still a hole. It sunk a little ways into Valeria’s skin, unevenly puckered and too fleshy to be natural.

She dropped the gown and huffed. Bilbo let out a loud sigh of relief, causing her to roll her eyes. “Oh my gosh, come on. Before you puke all over the place.”

Dying didn’t make me less tired, but it didn’t make me more tired, either, so that had to be a win. I was clean, too, though I felt sorry for whatever elf had to give my stanky-ass corpse a sponge bath.

Bilbo led the way down through twisty, turning halls and stairs that I couldn’t keep track of. The fact that he remembered where everything was attested to his keen mind. I followed the pats of his hobbit feet against the stonework, paused when they stopped, and moved when they started up again.

Like all my other fatal wounds, the one in my leg hurt like a bitch. I tried not to make my limp too apparent, but when I had trouble zooming down some steep and spiral stairs like Bilbo, he popped off The Ring and looked back to me.

“You alright?”

“Yeah. My leg just aches still.” I had more of a pant to my voice than I would have liked, but at least I had a voice again. “And this dumb dress isn’t helping. Are we almost there?”

Bilbo’s head dipped. “Almost. The office will be at the bottom of these stairs and the second door on the right.”

I hadn’t really bothered to wonder why Bilbo was so jumpy around me after I first woke up. I figured that when you see a dead body suddenly become not dead, it was understandably unnerving. But just now, he hadn’t quite met me in the eyes, and his fingers got all twitchy. Was there something wrong? Or something that he hadn’t told me?

I would have asked, but Bilbo put The Ring back on and descended the rest of the stairs. I moved as quietly as I could in my condition. We had avoided a few elven guards milling the halls a few floors above; I didn’t doubt that there were more down here.

The thought of Luis telling me to play more video games swam up in my mind. All this sneaking and stealthing made me feel really stupid, considering I had no idea what I was doing. Why was I crouching in an open hallway? Don’t know. Tip-toeing around when the guards had ultra-sensitive hearing? Don’t know either. If I played video games, I might have had a better go at it.
But nothing could have prepared Bilbo and me for an elf coming out of one of the doors in the hallway we were trying our best to creep through. He was probably a servant, since he wore soft earthen-colored clothes instead of armor. Our eyes locked onto each other.

I stopped. He stopped.

Bilbo squeaked. But Bilbo was invisible. Great for him. Not great for me.

The elf paled so instantaneously I thought he was going to faint. It took me another second to figure out why.

*I was supposed to be dead.*

My lifted dress dropped to the ground with a faint *whoosh*. There was a moment of paralyzing doubt. But I could either run and get imprisoned instead of buried, or I could scare the shit out of this poor servant and hopefully, hopefully, make it out clear.

I was a horrible, terrible actress. A complete idiot when it came to lying in any shape or form.

Once I moved, there was no going back. I had to fucking commit.

My face twisted into a mask of malice and despair. All the nightmares I had for the last month really helped me tap into my character. White dress? Dead? Mexican? I was no longer Valeria Juarez. No, I was La Llorona, and I had an elf to terrify.

I let out a ragged, despairing wail, and the elf backtracked. “¡Estoy hambrienta! Mis pies están fríos!” My arms raised above me, hands clawed, and I treading forward. The elf tried crying out, but his voice was lost to the fear. I tuned my throat back to the horrible way it sounded after I got choked out by the Dark Lord himself. “¡Manzana! Gato! Colorado! Estás asustado, y me estoy quedando sin palabras!”

The servant finally got feeling in his legs again and booked it down the hall with some elvish prayer. He skidded around the corner, leaving me standing alone with my teeth bared. I dropped my arms and coughed to clear my throat.

Bilbo took *The Ring* off. “Was that scary?” I asked him. “Be honest.”

“Y-y-yes, yes it was.”

I gave Bilbo a weird look as he scurried to the office door. “Wait,” I said, trailing behind. “Did that actually scare you?”

“I mean—well—no, of course not. I was objectively, er, saying that it was scary.” Bilbo opened the door and peeked his head in, then slipped into the office. I followed. “Not scary at all in actuality. Actually.”

The office had low-burning candles to light it. I spotted my pack on top of an intricately-carved desk and walked over. Bilbo stood guard. “Okay, buddy, you’ve been acting funky ever since I woke up. Did I do something?”

“No—” Bilbo made a noise when he turned to talk to me and found that I was moaning him as I pulled up a cleanish pair of undies. The elves had taken the ones I wore when I died. Perverts. “Ack! Valeria!”

“What? It’s just a little bum!”
“You’re—you’re naked!”

“Not anymore!” I mean, I was still topless, but I quickly threw a tunic on and then unrolled a pair of trousers. My sports bra was somewhere in the bottom of my pack, and I didn’t have time to wrap a breast band around my chest. I found my scrunchie lying on the desk. It had probably fascinated whoever worked in here like everyone else.

I threw my hair up in a ponytail. My boots were nowhere to be seen, and I didn’t want to have my sneakers ruined with the upcoming barrel ride we were about to get into. So, sadly, I stayed cold-toed and barefoot. They didn’t have my—Fili’s—cloak anywhere, either, which sucked.

“You didn’t answer my question,” I said with the pack secure and my modesty returned. Bilbo glanced back at me with more than a fair amount of hesitancy. I fastened my blades onto my hips. “What happened? Did it freak you out to see me come back?”

“I—no. Well.” Bilbo nervously scratched his head when he found no words to explain. I walked back to him and squeezed his shoulder. We were running out of time, and whatever it was could wait.

“Hey. It’s alright. You can tell me later. But we should probably get out of here, huh? Before more elves come to investigate La Valeria?”

When Bilbo smiled, weak as it was, I grinned and playfully bit my tongue between my teeth. “Yeah, there’s the hobbit I love!”

“Yes, well, let’s be off…” His eyes dropped down to the extra item in my hand before I could hide it behind my back. “What is that?”

I ushered him back out into the hall, which, thankfully, remained empty. Echoes of laughter and music drifted from several floors above. Was there a party going on? Is that why slipping through had been easier than I thought?

If that were true, then I would have to reevaluate the pride I’d taken in sneaking.

“The elves took the clothes I wore, including my vest, shoes, and undies,” I said, holding the item Bilbo spotted in front of me. His brows scrunched at the clear sight of an inkwell. “That’s a pretty dick move, don’t you think?”

“I understood only half of that.”

“It’s rude, Baggins. They also locked up our dwarves, right?”

“…Right?”

“That’s rude, too. And I’m pretty sure that Legolas told Tauriel to let me die, which is a complete dick move.”

“Legolas…Tauriel…?”

“The elf-prince and the redhead. Come on, Baggins, keep up!”

“I’m going to bop you on the head, Valeria.”

“Anyway.” I stood straight and popped open the inkwell’s stopper. “I think, if they’re poor hosts, then we should be poor guests.”
I faced the wall we stood by and dipped a couple fingers into the inkwell. Black, viscous liquid coated them, and it reminded me of spider ick. “What…what are you doing?” Bilbo gasped when he saw me press my fingers onto the wall and begin making a large horizontal 3 shape. “You’re defacing an elven palace!”

“Oh, I don’t think there’s anything facial about this,” I muttered with a stupid smirk. I channeled my inner teenage boy (basically Luis) and continued on with my work of art. Bilbo’s jaw gradually dropped as he saw the masterful mural that came to life.

“V-V-Valeria! That’s a…that is…”

I completed the tip of the fat, giant, lopsided dick. “One of the greatest things I’ve ever drawn? Yes, it is.”

It was as Bilbo had to stare at my spider puncture all over again. He groaned and grimaced like any proper hobbit would. I didn’t blame him. I made it a really unattractive wiener. The ballsack had nasty little hairs covering it, there were squiggly veins, and, as a finishing touch, I dashed out lines that represented an explosive ejaculation.

And the whole time I shook with snorting giggles.

“Are you quite done?” Bilbo huffed. His face contorted in revulsion after another glance at the Monster. “It’s going to give me nightmares.”

“Don’t be so rude, Dildo Baggins.”

“I have no idea what that means, and from that awfully childish look on your face, I do not want to.”

I set the inkwell on the floor and blew a kiss to the drawn penis as Bilbo dragged me away.

“Adios, mi niño. You will be missed.”

We left the massive dick in the hall to go and rescue some dwarves.

“-I’ll wager the sun is on the rise,” Bofur lamented. “Must be nearly dawn.”

Ori sighed, and sorrowfully said, “We’re never going to reach the mountain, are we?”

Bilbo popped into view, then me, grinning ear-to-ear. “Not stuck in here, you’re not,” the hobbit said with a jangle of the prison keys.

The dwarves rushed to the prison bars confining them. They shouted our names with well-earned excitement, but Bilbo shushed them all. “There are guards nearby!” he hissed as he unlocked Thorin’s cell door. The key to all of them was the same, so I watched the Company get set free while I waited at the bottom of the stairs.

I got a lot of quick but meaningful hugs from the Company and a big hug from Fili. “The elves were suspicious of us,” he said, taking my hand and kissing it. “We did not act…appropriately to your death.”

“Wait, what?”

“Well, since we were all quite certain that you’d pop back up from the clutches of death like a
“Happy spring daisy,” Bofur said cheerily, “we weren’t, oh, how’d you say…”


“Right. We’re not a trained theatre group, I’ll have you know, so our tears and wails were a little forced. And a little too loud. But we did our best under the circumstances!”

“Kili tried composing a poem for you,” Fili promptly informed. He couldn’t contain his smile. “It was awful.”

“Oh my gosh, can you please repeat it for me when we’re not trying to break out of this joint?”

“You said you wouldn’t tell her!” Kili punched Fili in the arm, and his brother would have returned the hit, but Bilbo stamped through all of us in a huff.

“Let’s get a move on! We could be caught at any moment!” he chastised. “Follow me.”

Bilbo took up the lead and hurried down the steps. With Fili there to support me, I didn’t have to solely rely on my own strength to keep up. “Where are we going?” he whispered to me as fourteen dumbasses and a hobbit fled down staircases. I didn’t have time to appreciate the architecture of the elven palace; all I knew was that we were partially underground, and if I craned my head up I could barely pick out natural light.

“To the cellars,” I said back. “Bilbo’s got a way out for us.”

Fili nodded once. We had made it down another floor when he said, “Oh, I forgot to mention.” I glanced at him and watched as he shimmied, and then pulled out tightly-rolled cloak that had been partially tucked into his pants and covered with his tunic.

I gasped and hissed, “Yes!” I didn’t bother to even think where Fili had stashed it.

“Thought you would want it back. Nicked it before the elves could take your stuff. Said that it had sentimental value.”

“I bet you put on your saddest face.”

“Ah, it didn’t take much acting. I was telling the truth, after all.”

This guy.

Fili gave me our cloak to put in my pack. I shoved it in while we half-stealthed, half-ran down the last flight of stairs and into the cellar. The scent of wine and wood hit my nostrils, and I heard running water more clearly. I shivered at the cooler temperature. Suddenly, the prospect of being tossed down a freezing river in a barrel wasn’t all that appealing.

A couple of elven guards were asleep at one of the tables, overindulged in wine. My eyes locked on their half-eaten platter of cheese and bread. The sight of it sparked the ravenous hunger in my stomach that I managed to ignore so far.

And so, while the dwarves quietly argued with Bilbo about the validity of this plan, I snuck off and began stuffing my face as silently as I could. It was all I could do to not moan out loud. The cheese was bomb, the biscuits were even better, and the small sip of wine I washed it all down with was divine.

“Valeria, where’s Valeria?” came Bilbo’s curt whisper. He walked around the barrels the dwarves
had shoved themselves into and saw me picking at the food like a greedy rat. Bilbo put his hands on his hips.

“Oh, for—really?”

I splayed an arm out in defense. After horking down one last biscuit, I tip-toed back over and examined thirteen dwarven heads peeking out from the top of the barrel stack. “Dying makes you hungry, Baggins. And I haven’t had the best time eating, either—”

“Alright, yes, I understand, now will you please get into a barrel?”

I took a couple steps toward the last available one. I supposed that if I had to escape down a river (and possibly evade orc attacks at the same time) at least I wouldn’t have to do it swimming.

Then a thought struck me dumb. Oh, hell. How could I have forgotten?

Spinning back around, I grabbed Bilbo by the shoulders and shook him. “You dumbass, you can’t swim!”

Bilbo’s startled expression mirrored mine. Apparently, he hadn’t even remembered the serious fact, either.

“Will the two of you hurry up?” Thorin growled, poking his head out like a badger. “Or we’ll never make it out of here!”

I swung my pack off and made Bilbo put it on while he tried to whisper-argue with me. “You don’t—I need to—this is part of my plan, Valeria. It’ll be fine! Just get in!”

“Don’t fucking try to be bossy with me,” I said back, shoving him toward a barrel. He tried fighting me, but I had a good two feet on him and more muscle—even after starving in Mirkwood—so I ended up partially packing Bilbo down with a bare foot. Up from above, I heard guards shouting. “Shit.”

I went back to the lever. Fili lifted his head out to see what I was doing. His eyes widened when he saw that I was several feet away from the barrels and not specifically in one. “Ria! What—”

Bofur interrupted him. “What do we do now?”

I gave them a reassuring smile. “Hold your breath.”

Then I cranked the lever back and listened to the surprised cries of the Company as the floor beneath them tilted, and they rolled into the river below.

Instead of watching the last of them go, however, I jumped onto the platform. My left leg gave out from the sudden strain, so the two-second improvised plan of running after the barrels got turned into a sliding scramble. And, shamefully, I wasn’t as graceful as the elves that rushed down the cellar stairs to find the escapees.

Tauriel led them, and I got a clear picture of her palpable shock when she saw the not-dead woman flopping down the uneven floor like a fish. I did feel bad for Tauriel. If the dwarves’ reactions were anything to go off of the first time they saw me very much alive, she was probably having a rough time processing the sight of my awkward tumbling.

So I shouted out a half-hearted, “Sorry—aaah!”
The sight of the elves abruptly disappeared. The floor vanished, and then I was plummeting through the air. Trained instinct put me into a vertical position with my arms crossed over my chest. I managed to suck in some air and hold my breath before I plunged into icy cold water. When I swam to the surface, strong hands were there to haul me up and into a barrel.

I came chest-to-chest with Fili. Both of us were soaked, and our barrel was half-filled with water. His brows quirked. “Are you comfortable, my lady?”

The barrels started moving with the current, and the rocky overhang that we were under pulled back to reveal undeniable, glorious sunlight. I tilted my head back while the river was still calm and grinned.

“Right now, I am.”

His arm wrapped easily around my waist. To keep me secure, of course.

I looked over Fili’s head and sighed through my shivers at the nasty course before us. “In my world,” I explained a little too-calmingly, “we have this fun thing called white water rafting.”

The barrel spun, giving Fili a good look at the small but roaring waterfall before us. His smirk vanished. “And is…this like that?”

“Not exactly.”

There was that rush of adrenaline, the kind that pumped through you right before the drop of a rollercoaster, or as you stared at the world beneath you as your feet toed the edge of the plane door, or when your body was certain that what was going to happen in just a few moments was completely and utterly unstoppable.

I braced numb hands against the barrel. Fili locked up and his breathing hitched. “It’ll be okay,” I spoke, despite the terrified yells that accompanied the barrel drops in front of us. “Just hold your breath and hang on.” The rush of rapid water filled my ears. “And don’t drown.”

If Fili had something snarky to say, it was lost as our barrel pitched off the edge. There was a moment of weightlessness. Water misted my face. Then we were dunked into the river again and violently whirled around its current. I held my breath despite the river’s attempt to tear it away from me, and my head cracked against Fili’s.

Then cloudy dark burst back into bright daylight, and I drew in a shuddering breath the same time I opened my eyes. Fili hacked water out onto me, but it didn’t matter in the grand scheme of this shitshow.

I cleared my vision just in time to see a round of rapids. Bilbo, a ways in the front, hung onto dear life as all of us were bounced and thrashed through the churning waters like pinballs. The barrel scraped against rocks faster than I could try to steer away from them. In front of us, Ori’s barrel tipped forward and spun him head-over-heels before tossing him back up. He cried for Dori, but there was nothing any of us could do for each other with how fast the river moved.

Then a shrill horn sounded, and oh man, we weren’t going to make it past the gate like I hoped.

“Crap,” I said after spitting out a mouthful of water. The river grew narrower and steeper on the sides, and as we came bobbing around the bend, the elven-guarded checkpoint stood stark against the otherwise beautiful autumn day. One of the guards raced down the stairs and pulled the lever to close our only way through. The heavy metal creaking of the gate was a shrill companion to the roar of the river.
We got backed up like boats in a delayed ride through *Pirates of the Caribbean*. But while the dwarves readied themselves to be drug up from the river, I happened to look to the forested embankment on our right.

Figures, discolored and clad in armor, carrying blades that would happily run right through me again, swarmed through the trees like a plague. I forgot about the little dilemma in front of us and diverted all attention to the *big* one.

It felt good to have my voice back so I could scream at the top of my lungs.

“ORCS!”

One of the elven guards who had snapped around to see where I was looking did a Matrix-esque move and narrowly avoided an arrow. I reached down and pulled both blades out, giving my left one to Fili. We were in ridiculously tight quarters, but it didn’t hurt to have a weapon when orcs—bellowing and screeching—descended down on both dwarves and elves alike.

I hadn’t seen them since one killed me.

Several launched themselves onto the Company. I rammed my blade into an orc’s gut while Fili repeatedly stabbed another that landed on the side of the barrel. The weapons, along with Orcrist and Sting, sang blue in the daylight. I didn’t think as the water roiled black with orc blood. I didn’t think about the fact that the freezing river was replaced with the heat of flames all around me. I just sank my blade into whatever orc body that came near enough, feeling the scrape of metal against bone and muscle—

“Kili!”

When I swiveled around, I saw what I swore to myself I would try to prevent.

An arrow, nasty and big, protruded from Kili’s leg. He had tried to pull the gate’s lever open himself. I got so caught up in killing orcs that I didn’t remember to make him *stop*, to let me go instead.

Because the sight of shock and pain on Kili’s face was enough to make me let out a wordless yell. That was *Kili*. My family. And I didn’t give a flying fuck about what the books or movies said. Right now, right now, he was on the ground with an orc planning to chop him in two. All the elven guards who were posted on the gate had been diverted off to the embankments in the fight, making him all alone. He was going to die.

He was going to die.

I tried scrambling out of the barrel with Fili, the both of us screaming. But those screams were cut off the moment an arrow hit the orc with such force that it toppled back into the gate’s wall.

*Tauriel.*

I would have looked in the direction of the elven redhead, but Kili threw himself back onto the lever and cranked the gate open. The barrels surged forward. Kili rolled back into his, and he let out a strangled cry as the arrow shaft snapped on the rim. I tried grappling his barrel to see if he was okay, but we were thrown over another waterfall. I almost got dragged out by the current.

The barrel bounced back up just to be plunged back under again. Another fall, another moment when I held the breath I didn’t have, and then repeat. A couple arrows embedded themselves into Fili’s and my luxurious transport. It was only because we moved so erratically through the rapids
that they didn’t hit their targets.

And no, I didn’t want to find out what an arrow to the freaking skull would do to me.

“Ria!”

I jerked to the side so Fili could take a swipe at an orc on the rocky embankment we grated against. The orc squealed and fell into the river, disappearing underneath the white froth of water. But there were more. So many, many more. Their yellow broken things for teeth glistened in the sun, and their weapons were dark and jagged.

Through the icy numbness of the river, I felt my chest ache.

My fingers fumbled for the droplet’s chain as our barrel bounced spun. Fili shouted things to Bifur and Kili, who were nearby, as they tried to strategically take out orcs as best they could. Elves darted along the embankments, arrows loosing from their bows and blades whirling a second before an orc dropped to the ground.

Amongst them was Legolas and Tauriel. They worked with each other in a way only hundreds of years of practice could perfect. I would have watched them longer, but an orc hurled itself at us. Two matching blades entered its gut, and inches from my ear the orc let out a horrific howl.

Its body was dumped aside. In the sparse moments of not being assaulted, I found the delicate chain underneath the sturdy strap of leather and pulled it over my head. The droplet fit warmly in my palm, as I suspected it would. Fili watched me manage to wrap the chain around my fingers and wrist like I had before in Mirkwood. His gaze sharpened with the memory. I wouldn’t have blamed him if he thought it was just a hallucinogenic effect of lingering spider venom.

But the droplet shone strange in the full daylight, and when I squeezed it tighter, blood welled up between the creases of my closed hand.

My heart spiked. The world, as chaotic and dizzying as it was, became understandable in my mind. The ragged fear the orcs had reignited left me. All that remained was excitement and an unhealthy amount of energy.

The river tossed the Company around a bend. Legolas took the chance to literally step on the dwarves’ big fucking heads to shoot at orcs. I was glad the droplet pulled me out of the numbing panic, because otherwise I wouldn’t have been paying enough attention to watch how hella extra this elf was. Legolas even did a *twirl* on Dwalin’s shiny noggin as he simultaneously shot three orcs down. When he finally jumped off, Dwalin spat Khuzdul curses at him, and I laughed while Fili defended the both of us from enemies.

Legolas heard my laugh, apparently. He spun around, unnatural eyes searching for me. When I passed into his range of vision, I gave an open-mouthed grin and raised a proud middle finger right his way. Legolas did not seem as shocked as Tauriel had; rather, great confusion dawned on his face. It wrinkled his beautiful forehead and drew his lips into a frown the same time he shot two more orcs down—all without looking away from me.

And then the barrel whirled me away, and the hellish, meth-fueled battle resumed.

“Up ahead!” Thorin bellowed. The light of the droplet dimmed, and terror crept back in through its wall.

Orcs lined up on both sides of the river’s low, rocky walls. Thick, large arrows were primed to be loosed from their bows, and with them came paralyzing howls that rose above the thunder of the
water.

What. The. Hell.

This wasn’t how it was supposed to go, right?

The dwarves screamed, Bilbo ducked into his barrel, and I did the only thing I could do. My closed fist lifted into the air. The creaking of bow strings filled my ears. In a few more moments, we’d all be dead, and I would be the only one who’d come back. Just the thought of returning to this world without any of them beside me, with me, was enough to draw a furious, adrenaline-fueled screech from the pit of my stomach.

I opened my hand, and the droplet shined.

It was like being swathed in starlight. Relentless, searing, consuming starlight that unleashed its brilliance through the expanse of millions of years. Heat burned up my left arm and lanced right into my jaw, but I held the light for as long as I possibly could. It drowned out the sound of the river, the orcs, the blood beating through me—leaving nothing but a cracking silence.

For a second, I almost felt like I was between worlds, existing in a place that held nothing but blank emptiness. It wasn’t comforting.

Not the pain, but the pressure became too great, and with another cry I closed my fist around the droplet once more. The light winked out, and it ripped away the energy it gave me, leaving my body shaking and weak from the abrupt cut-off. Had the water always been this cold? Had my muscles always ached like this?

When I managed to lift my gaze, I saw that we were out of the worst of the rapids and now floated down a swift—but calm—current. Blood poured from my hand and into the water-logged barrel, turning its color murky.

I followed the collar line of Fili’s tunic, noting the strings that had kept it tied shut were now loose. It went from that to his collar bone, then the trim of his beard, then up to his utterly baffled expression. He opened his mouth to say something. All that came out was a hoarse scratch.

What could I even say back?

So I turned my head back down to my hand and lifted it from the water. Rivulets of red dripped off. When I unclenched my fist, Fili shakily inhaled. The droplet, like before, had burrowed itself into my palm. I wanted to yank it out again, but I was afraid it’d slip out from my grasp and be lost to the river.

“What…” Fili gulped as if his throat was dry, even though we were absolutely drenched. “What is it?”

I answered honestly.

“I have no fucking clue.”
Late night chapter! I start school up during the summer, unlike most colleges, so I'm posting this before the week gets too crazy.

Okay, but I seriously had a lot of fun writing this. A lot goes down, I know, but I figure most of you will love it, anyway. And I'm sorry for those who wanted Valeria to meet Thranduil! It just didn't pan out in a way that had him involved. But don't worry--they'll get their chance down the road.

-To the elven servant:
¡Estoy hambrienta! Mis pies están fríos!: I'm hungry! My feet are cold!
¡Manzana! Gato! Colorado! Estás asustado, y me estoy quedando sin palabras!: Apple! Cat! Colorado! You're scared, and I'm running out of words!

Pervertidos: perverts
Adios, mi niño: goodbye, my child
Twenty minutes of shivering and hand-paddling later, we reached a sloping rock shoreline. The bleeding had stopped, and it was replaced with an unnatural feeling of something starting to sink and hook its way underneath my skin.

I wished Fili’s reaction to the light was as calm as Thorin’s.

As soon as our barrels scraped against the ground, I watched him march toward me, expression stormy and scary. “Whoa, wait, hold on—” I tried to explain, but he put my arm into an iron-forged vise and yanked me out.

“Thorin!” Fili yelled as I was half-dragged a few feet away. I immediately fought back, but I was a soggy, starved, weakened mess, and I couldn’t put in a whole lot of resistance.

“Let me go! Let me go!” I writhed and twisted my arm. Thorin grunted at the exertion, but he didn’t release me until we were further onto the rock. I wasn’t thrown, thankfully, but Thorin wasn’t gentle, either.

“What manner of magic was that?” he demanded, looming over me. I scrambled back from him and propped myself up on my elbows. “Tell me!”

“I was fucking going to!” I yelled right back, which notched up his anger even more. The Company had crawled out of the barrels, by now, and they listened to us from their respective spots on the rock. They might have gathered closer, but the barrel riding had exerted all energy, and they were left exhausted. I was exhausted, and still I had to deal with shit.

I sat up, and in doing so I happened to glance down at my chest. At some point my tunic had gotten tugged down, revealing more cleavage than I liked, and though the fabric wasn’t see-through, it clung really tightly to my breasts—which, I realized, didn’t have any support from my sports bra or binding. And because of the cold, I was full-on nipping.

So yeah. That fucking sucked.

With a grunt, I unstuck the tunic from my titties. Thorin folded his arms and waited for an answer, fuming so much that I could have sworn steam was rising from him.

“First of all, you’re welcome,” I said when I managed to get a voice back. The statement did not improve his mood, nor did I expect it to. I then opened my palm to him and displayed the droplet embedded within. “Second of all, this is what did it. Not me. Not entirely. I mean, I can get it to do what I want. Shine more, shine less. But every time I hold it, the stupid thing likes to try and make itself a part of me. Do I have any idea what else it does? No! Lady Galadriel had the elves back in Rivendell gave it to me, but it’s not even from her. It’s from somebody else. Somebody that nobody in this fucking world will even talk about! So if you want answers, Thorin, you’re not gonna get anything more than that.”

I wiped away the residual blood from my palm and unwrapped the chain. Thorin didn’t speak. He just watched me pull the chain up. The droplet followed—with more resistance, this time. I tugged on it harder, and something below the jewel moved. My grimace grew. I gave it one final yank—
The droplet popped out with a squelch. Thorin’s eyes narrowed in a wince. But when I lifted the droplet, it had some friends come out with it.

“Oh! Oh, yuck, yuck! Yuck!”

As the droplet rose up, silvery, hair-thin, bloodied tendrils emerged from the tiny gap in my palm. I felt them dislodge from their positions, and twinges of pain ran up my hand and wrist. “What in Mahal’s name…” Fili uttered as he, too, watched the spectacle unfold.

I let out a few pants as the last bit of the tendrils were removed. Before I could morbidly examine them, though, they disintegrated and drifted away on the breeze. I almost dropped the jewel out of disgust and fear.

Blood started gushing out again from the hole it left behind. I hung the droplet back around my neck and looked up at Thorin and Fili. Their expressions made me feel just as helpless and lost as they were.

Fortunately, Kili diverted the attention to him when he threw up dark bile onto the rock. Watching me pull out what I had probably spurred the nausea on. Fili helped me up, and the two of us went over to him with Bofur and Oin.

“You’re hurt, brother,” Fili stated as he examined the black hole the orc arrow had left behind.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” he said back, but his breathing was labored and skin pale.

I searched for Bilbo, and when I found him shivering on the rock, I beckoned him over. “Could you give me my pack?” I asked. Nodding, Bilbo unslung it and handed it over to me. His hands slightly shook, and he wouldn’t look directly at me—repeating the same sort of display like in the elven palace. ¿Qué?

The contents of the pack remained mercifully dry. What little water that had gotten in was absorbed by the cloak sitting on top. I fished out bandages and ointment. After hurriedly wrapping my bleeding palm, I refocused and turned back to Kili.

“Is the arrowhead still in there?”

“No. No, I don’t think so,” Kili managed to reply. Oin and I looked over at the bile he’d left. Our eyes met, and the concern matched the other’s.

“Ye did some damage, that’s for sure,” Oin said. I unscrewed the ointment’s lid and scooped up a dollop. Kili watched me. He tensed when I hovered my covered fingers over his wound.

“Hold him down,” I instructed Fili and Bofur. He’d been poisoned with something dark, and I had an inkling that elven medicine might cause a volatile reaction. Though I doubted that it would draw the poison out completely, it may stem the effects.

“It’s nothing,” Kili tried to protest. I heard his own failed conviction in his voice.

My brows drew up and together in empathy, and I gave a sympathetic frown. “I’m sorry, honey. This might hurt.”

I smeared the ointment over the puncture. Kili recoiled, but his body was restrained and mouth covered by Bofur when he let out an agonizing cry. I didn’t let his pain get in the way of the work. I made sure it was evenly coated, then I swiftly but carefully bound it with a fresh bandage. Tears leaked from Kili’s eyes.
“Easy, lad, easy,” Oin comforted. “It’ll be over soon.”

“We must be on our way,” Thorin cut in. I glared at him over my shoulder. “The orcs will be upon us again if we stay any longer.”

“Your nephew literally got shot,” I said, hearing the venom in my voice. Kili’s uneven, audible breaths were muffled by Bofur.

“Do you think orcs care?”

This conversation produced an eerie sense of déjá vu. I scrunched my face up and turned back to the bandages. The ointment mixed with Kili’s dark blood and had already started seeping through the white fabric. His pallor had grown a sickly white. “I think we’ll be out of here before the orcs can catch up, vato.”

The foreshadowing went completely over Thorin’s head. He just wanted to be upset with me, and that was all that mattered.

The creak of a bowstring interrupted our conversation and subsequently saved me from being chewed out.

A man had sailed so quietly into the small dock near the northern end of the bank we had crawled onto that not even acclaimed dwarven hearing picked up on him. He wore a thick coat for the cold weather that fell upon us, ragged as it was, and his black hair was pulled back to keep out of his face.

While the dwarves readied themselves for a fight, I smiled and sat back on my knees. “Oh, hey,” I said, pointing to the man. “Guys. This is Bard. He’s gonna help us get into Lake-town.”

The man’s bow lowered a fraction as his expression sharpened on me. For the first time since coming here, I found myself gazing upon a person who didn’t have entirely white skin. Bard’s complexion was more olive. I couldn’t help but feel a little kinship.

“How come you upon my name?” Bard questioned, his arrow directing at me. Kili, with help from Fili and Bofur, sat up. I raised my hands and slowly moved onto my feet.

“That is a funny story. But why don’t I redirect you to my, uh, associate over here.” I gestured to Thorin. “He’ll tell you everything you need to know about us!”

“Valeria,” Thorin growled. “We cannot trust this human.”

My smile vanished and was replaced with a harsh glare.

“My smile vanished and was replaced with a harsh glare.

“Thorin, I swear to god, I’m gonna fucking sock you in the jaw if you don’t cooperate.” I lowered my voice to a not-so-quiet whisper. “You’re not going to succeed if you try to be all secretive, anyway. So just...be honest...and we’ll be fine, okay?”

We had a stare-down until Bard darkly said, “Explain to me what a company of dwarves is doing with battered barrels from King Thranduil’s halls. Before my suspicion outgrows my patience.” An accent I hadn’t heard before accompanied the threat.

I mouthed to Thorin, “I’ll kill you” when he didn’t immediately answer. His Durin blue eyes were alight with fury, but he reluctantly stepped forward and addressed Bard.

“I am Thorin, son of Thrain. We have come to reclaim Erebor from the dragon Smaug.” He didn’t
try to hide how much he hated saying the words, and I got a lethal side-eye before he continued. But how could he argue against me? I was that bitch who knew every important thing that would happen on their quest. “We…request that you take us to Lake-town, where we may seek counsel with the master and find shelter against the elements.”

Bard’s expression turned even more severe. I stayed optimistic.

“You would dare go into that mountain and awaken such a monster? It would lay waste to my home.” He fully lowered his bow, however, and jerked his chin to our sad barrels. “And who would do such a thing, eh?”

I stepped forward myself to match Thorin. “Orcs,” I said, and Bard’s lip curled.

“If orcs are after you, then you truly have no right to ask for shelter in Lake-town. They would slaughter my people in their sleep before the dragon could burn it to the ground.”

“No, they won’t.” I placed a hand to my chest. “Believe me. We…we have money we can give you to pay for transportation, if you’d like.”

“Do you think I would sacrifice the lives of my family and kin for a bit of gold?”

Yikes.

“I think that great things are in store for your family and kin,” I spoke slowly. I wasn’t a natural at using persuasion and eloquence, so I had to try extra hard to make it work. “Because…because you are Bard, descendent of the Lord of Dale, right?”

Never had I felt such intense gazes upon me from all sides. With Bard in the front, Thorin at my side, and the dwarves behind me, I was stuck in the impromptu, revelatory information I’d just given.

“Are you a witch? A seer? How do you know of this?” Bard’s bow and arrow, though lowered, tensed as he treded towards me.

I put my hands up more. The bandage around my palm was stained with crimson, and any time I moved it, a small hole smushed. “I am…I am, an idiot, most of the time,” I said with a meek smile. “And these dwarves even more so.”

Beside me, I heard Thorin mutter something indecipherable. My bare foot lashed out and landed a solid hit to his calf.

“But I try to help in what ways I can. Because…yes, I do know certain things that transpire at certain times between now and, uh…”

When Bilbo and Frodo leave for the Grey Havens, thus ending the trilogy. I didn’t glance back at the hobbit. For some reason, my throat started to burn and a confusing mixture of emotions rose up and wavered my voice so suddenly that there was a tangible shift in everybody’s senses.

Getting randomly emotional while talking about the future I knew of didn’t sit well with them.

“And a while longer yet,” I finished lamely. I cleared my throat and stabilized. “But with these dwarves going to the Lonely Mountain, it means that Dale will…Dale will be returned.” I extended a hand out to Bard. “And it’s gonna need someone to lead it.”

*It’s gonna need someone to make sure it’s still standing after the battle.*
Bard’s intensity shifted to Thorin. “Does what she say is true?”

A single nod. At least he wasn’t pissed enough to deny my abilities.

I shivered as a fall breeze passed through my wet hair and clothes. Bard’s expression belied great thought, and I didn’t blame him. He’d just been hit with a whole bunch—and under less comfortable circumstances like the dwarves had.

But, but, he eased up a fraction and said to me, “If these dwarves journey with company such as yourself, they must have some sort of wit.”

Nearby, Gloin grumbled.

“I do not know if this future you speak of is forthcoming, but you may travel with me to Lake-town.” Bard slung his bow around him and gestured to the beaten barrels. “Come. Help me get them on the boat.”

I tilted my head to Thorin and found the deep glower I expected him to have. “You heard the man,” I sarcastically murmured loud enough for him to hear. “Get the barrels, Thorin.”

He growled something in Khuzdul, but I picked up “woman” and “human.” Whatever insult it might have been, it didn’t stop Thorin from barking to the dwarves that they collect the barrels for the barge.

Kili was able to get to his feet with a little help and stay up on his own. I walked back over to him and collected my pack, then felt his forehead and pulse. “How’re you feeling?” I asked. He shot me one of his signature smirks, but it was strained.

“Like I could fight an army, Ria.”

Five minutes later we were sailing out onto the lake. The gentle lapping of water against the side of the barge tempted me into sleep. I rubbed my eyes and fought it. “Go on,” Fili urged from where we sat with our backs against the wood. “Rest. You need it.”

He didn’t smile when I jokingly scoffed. “Are you kidding? I can’t do that.”

“Valeria. You have not slept more than a handful of hours for nearly a month. We are beyond the forest, now. Take this time to rest while you can.”

I looked around the barge. The dwarves seemed as beat as I felt, too tired to even be suspicious of their ferryman. But maybe they didn’t need to be since I vouched for him. Bilbo was even making conversation with Bard while he steered.

Still. If I fell asleep, something bad could happen.

Which was a ridiculous thought, especially considering that I had more knowledge than anyone about what was to come.

“I…I don’t want to,” I spoke more softly. My knees curled up to my chest. Bones were too sharp under my skin, shins tapping against ribs and clavicle. “Doesn’t quite feel right. I mean, I’ve gone this long.”

Fili sighed, and he pursed his lips in exasperation. “Valeria,” he repeated. “Sleep.”

Was I being paranoid? Or had I just gotten used to the constant tension and relentless fear, which
was then followed by fighting and death and more fighting these past twenty-four hours? The absence of it all left me freaked out.

I didn’t get the chance to sink into anxiety, though, because Fili took the cloak out of my pack, threw it over me, then pulled me close to him. We both stank of river water and orc blood, but he was warm and his heart beat a soothing rhythm. “You need to get something in your belly when we reach the town,” Fili commented while I was quickly pulled to sleep. “You’re naught but bones.”

“It’s a technique,” I said drowsily, lips barely moving. “If Smaug snatches me up, I’ll just be annoying bones for him to pick from his teeth.”


“What is it?”

“I did a bad thing in the elven palace.”

“Oh?”

I managed to smile, as tired as it was. “I drew a big penis on the wall before we went to go find you. Like, a fucking giant, fat, ugly dick that the elves will have to scrub off their walls.”

Fili slid a hand down his face as silent laughter overtook him. We were both so exhausted that its funniness heightened. He pressed a chaste kiss to the top of my damp head. Hoarse giggles wracked my frame. “Mahal, you are terrible,” Fili eventually breathed. “And I do believe once the rest of the Company hears of this, you’ll be elevated to as high a status as our ancestors of old.”

“Do you think Mahal would be proud?” I inquired, words slurring once the laughter faded. I’d be gone in another few moments.

“I do.”

“And Thorin?”

“The proudest.”

“And you?”

“I think you already know my answer.”

My smile lingered after a blank, blissful unconsciousness took me.

- 

The master of Lake-town was, in other words, disgusting.

I remembered thinking, “Oh, wow, the movie really went that hard in making a repulsive character, didn’t they?”

But standing in front of the human version of the Goblin King, I realized that they spared the audience.

It went beyond looks, beyond his yellow-toothed smile, beyond the weasel of a man who lurked behind his bulbous figure. It was how he flippantly commented on how the poor and starving people of Lake-town deserved their state of living, how the riches of Erebor would get him a bigger
manor, and how he was the embodiment of everything—everyone—I despised at home.

Grossly Rich. Apathetic. Uncharacteristically white compared to the darker people of Lake-town.

A lavish party was thrown in celebration of the dwarves’ quest to reclaim Erebor, and with it, as Thorin promised, forthcoming prosperity to Lake-town. I got a small, private room with a hot bath, and servant women took my dirty clothes to be washed. One spoke to me in a language I hadn’t heard here before, but she wasn’t offended when I told her that I didn’t understand. What I wanted to tell her—but couldn’t—was that I was just a simple brown girl from a different world.

Instead, I asked her what life was like here in Lake-town. At first she was reluctant to respond. But I got what I needed to know, thanked her, and was left to scrub and soak.

The gouge the droplet left stung in the water, but I cleaned it anyway. It’d leave a nasty, inconvenient scab, but there wasn’t any terrible damage. My spider wound, by now, had simmered down to a forgetful throb. Strength returned to my leg.

All in all, I could have been in worse shape.

The servant left me with a simple maroon dress made from thick fabric that cinched around my waist with a belt. The sleeves came down to my wrists, but the collar, which was lined with white stitching on the edges, dipped low enough to reveal the bumps of chest bone, sharp collar bones, and a small amount of cleavage from the way the dress pushed my breasts together.

I left the shark tooth visible, but the droplet stayed hidden underneath the dress. Its chain was so thin that nobody would notice it, anyway.

The sound of chairs and tables scraping mixed with faint conversation floated up from the floor beneath me. The party wouldn’t start for a while, so I’d probably spend the next couple of hours napping, taking it easy, maybe finding Fili alone so we could continue where we left off in the meadow—

The harsh knock on the door interrupted my thoughts. I groaned and stood to answer it.

Thorin stared up at me with not exactly a glower—but it was definitely far from pleased. I notched my brows. “Yes?”

“We need to talk.”

“Uh…okay.”

What did he want to talk about? There were a million things, especially since the Lonely Mountain was in arm’s reach—as well as the dragon that lived there. Oh, and then there was the war afterward, and Azog, and the Arkenstone, and the elves, and Gandalf, and Kili’s wound, and who’d kill Smaug because I hadn’t yet told them that it was specifically Bard who shot the arrow…

I needed to get my list out.

Thorin shut the door behind him as I crossed back to the other side of the room. I poured him a cup of wine to distract myself from the rising nerves. Hey, maybe Fili told him about the big dick I drew and I was just overthinking? “And what,” I said, handing the goblet to him and then sitting down in the lounge chair that had seen better days, “is it that you want to discuss, Señor Oakenshield?”

A few moments of his looming silence distinguished Thorin’s usual pissiness from something
more serious. He sat opposite from me in the worse-looking chair that had some mysterious stain on the threadbare fabric. After an uncharacteristically heavy drink of wine, Thorin wiped his mouth and took a breath before he spoke.

“Valeria.” His voice was lower, softer, and it set me on edge. I hated how he could pin me down with his gaze and truly affect me. So it wasn’t about the penis. “What becomes of my sister-sons and me?”

Thorin stiffened when he saw my forcefully neutral expression. “Tell me.”

Fire crackled in the hearth, and a drizzle of rain spattered against the dirty windows. This was a second-story room. If I jumped out head-first, would I break my neck and die so I could escape the question? Wait. No. I’d just wake back up and still have to answer it. Fuck.

“Thorin, I don’t think…” I started, but my throat felt achy. Don’t get emotional. Don’t. Please. But the thought of the harsh truth that Fili, Kili, and Thorin were bound for death twisted my resistance, and I could not keep a mist from settling over my eyes. The dreams in Mirkwood I had about their fates haunted me. Blood leaking out of the corner of Fili’s mouth, staring vacant into the ash sky, blond hair dimmed.

I was going to save them.

If Mirkwood had heightened the nightmares of their deaths, then it had also fortified my resolve in preventing it—no matter what.

No matter what.

“It isn’t your problem,” I wound up saying when I met his gaze once more. My tone had changed; addressing something so big aloud set me into a cold finality. We would not discuss it. If I said but a single word, my entire idea of what would play itself out could change. I tested it with Bard and Lake-town and the master. I would not test it with the lives of the three heirs of Durin on the line. “You take back Erebor. That’s all that matters.”

Thorin gripped his goblet. He was controlling his temper, but he hated riddles and vague answers. And the fact that I was purposefully talking that way didn’t ease his troubled mind.

“That’s all that matters?” he repeated, and I felt like I was staring into a storm that hadn’t quite reached me yet, but when it did…

I sat still. My hands were placed too properly in my lap, but if I moved them, they would shake. “Yes.”

Anger flashed in those ancestral blue eyes. “You would keep me from the truth?”

“I’ve told you the truth.”

“Not all of it.”

When I chose to stay silent, Thorin set the goblet aside and rubbed his brow, abruptly looking tired from it all. Tired and weighed down. If he was trying to guilt me, it—it wouldn’t work. Probably.

“Mahal,” he whispered more to himself, like a half-prayer. I shifted in my chair. A long silence followed, and I took to playing with my shark tooth while Thorin was lost to his thoughts. I was pretty sure that at this point, because of my silence, I had given an answer.
So I stared into the low fire and hoped that he would just leave.

But then.

But fucking then.

“You whispered a name in Mirkwood.”

I hadn’t thought Thorin could get any more serious, but his unsettling, gravelly words sent a chill down my spine that then crawled into my stomach. I could not look at him. Would not.

That memory was hazy at best, and in Mirkwood, dreams and reality blended together. I doubted that I had ever uttered that name aloud. But…but the way he looked at me the morning after it happened should have been a clue. I just didn’t even stop to think in the moments of lucidity.

“Did I?” My lips barely moved. A phantom hand wrapped around my throat, and my soul felt weak. The fire’s dance of orange and yellow became entrancing, beckoning me to step away from reality so I wouldn’t have to acknowledge it.

“You whispered—” The chair scraped as Thorin leaned forward, his tone quickening and turning almost…scared? I didn’t blame him. I was scared beyond thought, beyond humanity, beyond existence when he tried to unmake me.

A sour taste filled my mouth. The fire did not give off enough warmth.

He tried to finish his sentence again. “You whispered…his name. The servant of evil. The darkness that all of Arda fears. Why? Why?”

To hear true terror pour from Thorin’s lips was strange. The kind of terror that was almost silent, because if it became too loud then the nightmare would become real.

But, I supposed that in a sense, it already was. He already was.

I slid my gaze back to Thorin, to the dwarf king who stared at me the same way in Mirkwood, only this time unbridled. I could track the desperation etched into his visage, see the plea stranded on his parted lips.

A surge of the truth rose in me like nausea. I wanted to tell Thorin—I wanted to tell him everything, just as I always had, just as I always would. The air in the room seemed to have pulled back to make the both of us vulnerable, with only the meager hearth to keep us from dying in the dark. I wanted to tell him.

Tell him.

Tell him.

Another truth struck—the one that was darker, deeper, and nearly unbearable to face. Its was like being stabbed with a cold blade all over again.

But I could not hide from it, no matter the ties, no matter…no matter the love.

Voice empty, expression blank, I said to Thorin:

“I don’t know. I’m going home before I find out.”
Oof. If only their biggest concern was the big dick, right?

Also, I wanted to make the Northmen of Lake-town, like, darker people? Because they technically should be, sitting so close to the Eastern border? At least in my opinion.

Chapters are probably going to be posted later at night like this one is now, at least in my part of the U.S. Evenings/nights are my new time slot for writing my fics.

¿Qué?: what?
Vato: dude (but Ria says it derogatively)
Fili came into the room and saw an upturned chair, a spilled goblet of wine, and me, sitting on the edge of the bed, crying.

“Mahal, what happened here?” he asked fervently, coming around to kneel in front of me. His expression dropped when he took in my swollen eyes, tear-stained front, and how I clutched the droplet like a rosary.

When those blue eyes lined with gold filled with concern and love for me, I broke again.

Wordlessly, Fili quickly sat on the bed, cradled the back of my neck, and pulled me into his embrace. My sobs were muffled by his new Lake-town coat, and through the salt and snot and grief, I smelled whatever crisp soap he had used.

“What happened, Ria?” Fili whispered. He gently pried the droplet from my hand before it could burrow and placed it back around my neck as best he could. “Tell me.”

But I couldn’t. Not all of it. Hardly any of it.

Once my crying had gotten under control, I adjusted the droplet chain and sat back, though my hand still tightly held Fili’s. His thumb gently stroked the spot right above my wrist, skin calloused but kind. Always so kind.

You’re the worst. You know that, right?

Yeah.

“I, uh,” I started out, voice thick and gaze cast downward. My bare feet barely touched the floorboards. They were cold. “Thorin came to talk to me.”

Fili tensed but said nothing. I wiped my runny nose with the back of the dress sleeve. “It…it did not go well.”

“What was the conversation about, if I may ask?”

I gave a slight head shake. “No.” A fresh wave of tears loomed, blearing my vision once more. “No. Please. I…not right now.”

Fili breathed in like he was about to say something more, and I closed my eyes to brace for it.

Then he lifted the hand he held and gave it a chaste kiss. “Very well. I would not cause you more despair than what you already face.”

Tears leaked out, raking lines into my raw cheeks.

“But you will tell me another time, won’t you?”

I nodded. It was the only thing I could do, because if I opened my mouth or eyes, then I would lose everything I fought to regain. And out with it would come the truth. Something I couldn’t…I couldn’t bear to watch consume Fili. Not only would he have to carry the knowledge of his and his family’s deaths, but also the fact that I…I was going home. I didn’t have a way, yet, but the intent
stayed the same.

And it would break his heart, just like it had mine.

Fili removed his coat and boots, and before I realized what he was doing, he had moved further onto the bed and guided me to lay down. The frame creaked with the movement, but I let my head hit the worn pillow. A deep exhaustion settled heavy, and Fili, recognizing where I was about to be taken, moved the blanket around so it covered my cold feet and weary body. He pressed a kiss to my forehead—the only part on my face that wasn’t wet—and went to leave.

I squeezed his hand, though, which hadn’t entirely slipped out, yet, and murmured, “Stay.”

He paused for only a moment before a warm and familiar weight settled next to me. Fili brushed black hair from my face, unsticking strands caught in the tears. “How can I say no to that?” he breathed, and I heard the smile in his voice. I managed to open my eyes, which had been partially glued shut from crying, unable to resist looking at him.

Fili continued to smile, and I didn’t have it in me to feel ashamed about what I was doing. Not right now, when he was under the blankets with me, the both of us too fully dressed for the bed. I craved the security, the intimacy that Fili brought. That he willingly gave. Though it would cruelly hurt the both of us later, I was too selfish to deny it.

I shrugged off the fatigue and found myself kissing Fili. There was no pretense, this time. We had a bed, we had privacy, and we had each other.

The desperation bled into our kisses, our touches. Almost as if Fili had a sense that time was running out for him. I wanted to cry again while he hastily untied my dress and I stripped him of his shirt, but I would not allow myself to crumble again.

So I pressed myself against Fili, sinking into hazy and breathless pleasure, and forgot about the truth, the lies, the reality. There was just us, underneath the blankets, with my cold feet and Fili’s warm body. I couldn’t let go of him, wouldn’t let go of him, half-afraid that if I did then he’d be gone and I’d be left alone with nobody but myself to blame for all my failures.

Fili moaned, soft and low, when he entered, and the sound itself made me hold onto him tighter, hands splaying against his taut back. His hips rolled with mine, and Fili was kind enough not to completely ram into me like I partially feared he would. But of course he wouldn’t do that; he wouldn’t intentionally do anything to hurt me. This golden-haired dwarf, who now shared a piece of himself with me in the confines of my room, whose lips were languid and hot as they moved over the skin of my neck, couldn’t hurt me if he tried. It just wasn’t in his nature.

I hadn’t thought it was in me.

Still, I clung to him, legs bent up at the knees and soft gasps escaping at each strike of pleasure. Fili whispered my name a moment before he was undone, and it was more than a name, more than sex. It was a confession comprised of a tangle of vowels and consonants that, up to this point, were mine to own, but as Fili professed them with his forehead bowed on my shoulder, they wrapped around his bones, his being, becoming part of him.

And though I didn’t dare think the words, they had already come, flowing through my veins, because how could I be this happy and still so sad? How could the thought of going home fill me with such despair? How could the thought of staying bring me hope?

When Fili lifted his head to kiss me, I smiled at him. And it was real.
“You’re rather late to the party,” Bilbo had to chime in when I silently sat next to him. My presence went unnoticed in the loud disarray of the festivities, but I wouldn’t put it past Bilbo to see the rumpled state of my dress and add things together.

“I was sleeping,” I muttered, grabbing a stray slice of bread. It was partially true; almost immediately after, I fell asleep curled next to Fili. When I awoke, he was gone, but I didn’t blame him. He currently sat with Thorin and Kili at the head table with the Master of Lake-town and other important shits. He caught me staring and grinned, subtly raising a goblet toward me. I grinned back.

Then my gaze shifted to Thorin, who was not grinning as he stared at me.

I turned my attention back down to the bread in my grasp. The feast hall’s smells were overpowering; wine and bodies and spiced foods did not make a good mix, and for all the excitement that surrounded the thought of eating, my appetite dried up.

“Valeria? Is everything alright?” Bilbo asked. He had to raise his voice a little to be heard over the noise.

“Mm. Yeah.” I shifted so I faced him. The little, curly-haired hobbit with crumbs on his threadbare vest, whose feet swung a few inches above the table bench, looked downright adorable and genuinely concerned.

If the thought of leaving Fili and the Company and this world was bad enough, staring at my first friend, one of my best friends, in all his halfling sincerity, just about killed me for the fifth time.

I smiled and leaned over to give his forehead a quick peck. Bilbo squawked, but it was a good kind, and he came away grinning.

“I’m going to step out, güey,” I told him. “This party stuff really isn’t my…thing.”

“Are you certain? I—I mean, not that I blame you, but there’s decent food, good wine…” Bilbo caught my resolute expression and changed the course of his thoughts. “Do you want me to come with you? I don’t mind. I do like to think that I’m wonderful company, after all.”

“You are,” I smirked. “But you enjoy yourself here. People are far more enamored by a hobbit than they are with plain ol’ me.”

“Plain? Where?” Bilbo scoffed. I rolled my eyes.

“Okay, well, I mean, there are some interesting things about me—but things that would make them shit their pants.” I stood back up and patted the top of Bilbo’s head. “Don’t drink too much.”

“I won’t. Are you sure you’re fine to go on your own?”

Bilbo had noticed something was off with me, but if he accompanied me to wherever I went, whether it be back to my room or out into Lake-town, I wouldn’t be able to keep things from him. It’d undo the emotional recovery I managed to achieve.

“Yes, yes.” I winked at Bilbo for extra effect. I wasn’t sure he bought it, but he let me leave by myself. I went back to my chambers but soon found it to be stifling, so I grabbed a coat gifted to me, my pack (I didn’t trust the Master’s people enough to leave it behind), and headed outside through one of the side doors.
Lake-town was illuminated by candlelight lampposts that sidled the dock-like streets. It stank of fish and poopy water, but those scents were mellowed by firewood smoke that drifted from the chimneys and the crisp autumn air.

The people who weren’t soldiers or had a high enough standing with the grotesque Master had taken to their shanty homes, and the lights in their curtain-drawn windows cast soft glows. I wandered from light to light, home to home, until I was wholly lost. The damp cold seeped into my feet and fingers, and I couldn’t feel my nose or ears. Visible breath billowed from my lips. My thoughts slipped from one to another, moving too quickly to be tethered to any single emotion. Besides, if I cried now, it would only make my nose run more.

My boots scraped against the damp planks that held up Lake-town. A lazy fog settled over the world, and the nearly-full moon was hidden by an endless veil of clouds. I started mumbling a song in Spanish. The appetite I’d lost earlier came back, causing my stomach to tumble with hunger. I wasn’t as good as keeping track of time without a watch like the rest of everybody in Middle-Earth, so I couldn’t be sure how long I meandered through the stilted streets.

But I was glad that I chose to do one more loop around some random houses before trying to find my way back to the Master’s house. The sudden creak of a door swinging open gave me a reason to pause. I hadn’t seen a single person out walking except for the occasional random person a ways off tending to some things near their home. Warm yellow light flooded onto the house’s narrow stairway, and out came several men and women, huddled and murmuring farewells to each other and the man standing at the door. They dispersed into the night, shielding their faces from the light of the house, and the few who caught me staring at them cast suspicious glares before treading quietly into the fog.

I looked back at the man from my spot underneath a sagged awning. His intense gaze had pinned itself to me once more. Yet, despite the tension radiating from him and the others, I couldn’t help but smile.

So I lifted a couple fingers in greeting and walked to the bottom of his steps. In the light, they glistened with the perpetual slick of water.

“Hello, Bard,” I said, and my voice sounded loud in the night. He tilted his chin up, mere seconds away from retreating back into his home and slamming the door shut.

“What are you doing here?”

There was no point in being dishonest. I shrugged. “I hate the Master of Lake-town. Hated his party, too. So I left and stumbled on…” My eyes glanced around. “Whatever this was.”

“And where are your companions?”

“At the party. They were having more fun than I was.”

Bard surveyed the area before half-slipping back into the entryway. “Go back,” he said solemnly. “You have no business here.”

I lightly leaned on the post at the foot of the stairs. Its cold surface made me shiver. “Bard,” I said just as solemnly, but the bearing of a smirk gave me up. “Are you planning something naughty?”

That only made him more serious. “I said go—”

“I can help, you know.” I tapped at the side of my head, and made a mental note to cut my damn fingernails at some point. “I’ve got information, remember?”
“You are a guest of the Master. I would not trust anyone who steps foot in his halls.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, okay. You trusted me before, remember? Like, it literally hasn’t even been a day.” I took a couple steps up the stairs, and Bard tensed but didn’t retreat further. “You’re a salty guy. I get it. Who wouldn’t be when you have to deal with that disgusting fuck? But…” I took a breath, and it billowed back out like the fog around us. “Would you trust me when I say that I’d be willing to help?”

Bard glanced around again, then huffed. I waited for his verdict with lifted brows. He looked almost pained to speak. “Quickly,” he gestured, holding the door open for me. “Before unwanted eyes catch us.”

I stifled a smile and trotted up the steps to Bard the Bowman’s home. The heat of the interior kissed my face. His house was small and cramped, but comfortably so, like a home overflowing with family and love and comfort. The scent of dinner lingered, and three children were currently cleaning up when I came in. The two girls—the eldest and the youngest, I assumed—were fairer, probably like their mother, but the son took more after his father.

“Da? Who’s this?” the oldest asked. The cloth she used to wipe the worn table down wrung slightly in her hands.

“This is Valeria,” Bard said somewhat reluctantly. I waved and took my coat off from the sudden exposure to warmth. The little girl lit up while her two older siblings held a mixture of surprise and caution.

“The magic woman? The seer?” the little girl spoke excitedly. She rushed forward and clung to her dad, looking up at me with wide blue eyes. Bard patted her head, and his harsh demeanor was softened by her presence.

“Oh, so I’m magic?” I grinned at him.

“Are you?” the littlest asked in earnest.

“Hush, Tilda,” Bard chuckled. “Why don’t you ask her if she wants some dinner?”

“Do you want some dinner?”

Since I was raised in a Hispanic family, it wasn’t in me to ever decline an offered meal. “That’d be wonderful,” I said to Tilda, and she scurried off to her older sister, who was actually the one to dish me up whatever leftover soup remained in their pot. Bard took my coat and hung it up on a wall hook. He motioned for me to take a seat at the table bench. I saw the ragged parchment plans strewn on the table. It only took about four seconds for me to figure out what they were.

“Are you going to smuggle all these things out at night?” I inquired, looking at one parchment in particular that had hasty scrawls of how many baskets of produce could be supplied. Bard went to hide it from me, but thought second of it. Tilda served me dinner with a shy but enamored smile, and her older sister offered a goblet of some tame ale. “Thank you.”

“While the Master’s attention is diverted to pleasing the company of dwarves, we took the opportunity to meet. To plan,” Bard explained, and he let out a small groan as he seated himself opposite of me. “Your words did not bring me comfort. You were careful about how you spoke, meaning that there is something you’ve hidden so as to not frighten me—or your companions.”

I guiltily took a bite of bread. It was dense and delicious. “The dragon. He will awaken, won’t he? You know of this. I can see it in your eyes.”
With a grumble, I set the bread aside and ran fingers through my loose hair. I forgot to bring my scrunchie, and I had no idea how to use leathers and beads for braiding like the dwarves did. “Yeah,” I eventually sighed. “He does. At least from what I’ve seen—which has been known to change. But yeah.”

Bard’s gaze grew distant. “And the lake will shine and burn,” he murmured. “We will return to Dale because Esgaroth will be destroyed by Smaug.”

Instead of focusing on my knowledge—and my inability to properly talk about it—I simply returned to the scattered papers. “It’s a good idea to get things smuggle out. Just in case. That way, you won’t be taken by surprise.” Another pause, then I asked, “Are you planning on doing the same with people?”

He grimaced. “That’s not as easy. But it’s a possibility. The Master’s spies are everywhere, and they’ll throw me into the cells if I so much as stand in one place too long.”

“You’re really that hated, huh?” Before Bard could answer, I smiled again and dipped my bread into the soup broth. “That’s okay. You’re...you’re a man of the people, right?”

“I am a man, and only that.”

“Don’t talk about yourself that way, father,” said the eldest daughter. She sat down by him, becoming more comfortable with my presence, and talked to me. “He has fought hard for the people of this town. But the Master does not take kindly to resistance.”

Those were good words to hear.

I took a drink of ale, then wiped my mouth with the back of a hand. “Bien. Okay. If...if it’s alright, I’d like to go over the details of this—this plan.”

Bard looked at me curiously. “And why would you wish to us little folk in this way, when your dwarves carry such a brave and frightening quest?”

“Because caring about other people is what I do best.”

I’d been laying in the lumpy bed, staring at the ceiling while the hearth fire crackled low in the room’s mantle, when quick knuckles rapped on the door. I could tell who it was just from the knocking’s pace and sound.

“Valeria?” came Bilbo’s timid voice, trying to be quiet in the late hours of the night.

“Yeah? Come in. I’m awake,” I called back, and the door creaked open. The manor’s hallway light spilled into the room, and a child-sized form slipped in.

“Sorry for interrupting.” He sounded a little nervous. I frowned and tossed the blankets off. I was given a nightgown to sleep in, and I still had on the woolen socks from Rivendell to keep my feet warm. “It’s Kili. He isn’t doing well, and Oin was wondering if you, ah, could spare some more of the ointment.”

The steady and focused calm that always accompanied work set in. “Of course.” I grabbed my pack from the chair and followed Bilbo out. Fili, Kili, and Thorin’s room was three doors from mine, and when Bilbo opened it, I saw Thorin, Fili, Balin, Dwalin, and Oin dispersed about the chamber, with Oin and Fili by the bed where Kili lay.
My gaze went to Kili, then Fili, then Thorin, who sat near to the fire. He did not acknowledge my presence. I refused to feel the sting.

“There ye are, lass,” said Oin. I unslung my pack and dug around for the ointment. “Sorry if Mr. Baggins awoke you.”

“Nah, I couldn’t sleep,” I said. I found the ointment and pulled it out, then sat on the edge of the bed to examine Kili. He offered me a smile, but it was weaker than before, and he was undoubtedly feverish and skin a sheen of gray.

“Hello, Valeria,” he rasped, and despite Kili’s pain, I could hear his attempt at being humorous and light. I smiled back, not letting the worry show. “We…missed you at the party.”

“I know. I’m sorry,” was all I said and unscrewed the lid. Oin had unwrapped the bandages we put earlier on his leg. The infection, the poison, had spread, but I assumed the ointment had helped stave it off a little. “Has he been vomiting again?” I asked Oin.

“No, but the fever’s worsened. He seemed well, but it was after the party that he took a turn for the worse.”

“Mm. Alcohol weakens the immune system. The infection’s most likely spread because of it.”

“So…you’re saying that my suffering is caused by…by merry indulgence?” Kili’s snark barely broke through his sickness.

“Yes. But you wouldn’t have gotten better, anyway.” I intentionally turned my head down to scoop the ointment onto my fingers so I could avoid eye contact. “The arrow was coated in poison. I tried…I wanted to stop you from getting hit, but there were so many orcs coming at us and I just —” I breathed in through my nostrils. At this point, I was basically swirling my fingers in the salve rather than taking some out. The sharp, herbal fragrance wafted up. “Well. It didn’t happen. And here you are.”

“Poison?” Balin repeated softly, horror woven into the word. “What kind of poison?”

I kept my expression neutral and finally slathered the ointment over Kili’s festering wound. The medicinal scent suddenly mixed with something acrid, something rotting, something unnatural. The dwarf stifled his cries of pain, and Fili was there to hold his hand through it.

“I don’t remember the name. But it’s the bad kind. Either it will kill him, or it will turn him into…oh, what is it called?”

“A wraith,” Dwalin finished darkly. Oin wordlessly handed me clean bandages most likely procured from the Master’s servants. I started to wrap them around Kili’s bare thigh. I hadn’t even realized that he wasn’t actually wearing pants until now; just haggard underwear and his even more haggard tunic.

“Hm. Yeah. A wraith.” My voice sounded too disjointed from what was bubbling up inside me. My failures, my sorrow, my fear—it was all caught by the placid expression I learned to wear when treating patients or working in high-stress situations.

“You knew of this, and yet you told no one.” Thorin’s growl reverberated throughout the room. I firmly tied Kili’s bandage and leaned over to check his vitals the best I could without medical equipment.

“I know a lot of things,” I responded. If Thorin wanted to throw things around like he did earlier in
my room, let him do it. Then somebody could calm him down and keep me from being tossed into
the lake. “But I’m sorry for not telling someone earlier. I meant to—but I died before I could.” My
refusal to place emphasis on the word died had its own effect. “And then everything got so crazy
that I didn’t have the chance until I watched it happen right in front of me.”

“So what will happen to him?” Fili questioned fearfully. I pushed strands of Kili’s sweat-soaked
hair from his forehead. Unlike his older brother, he didn’t seem afraid. Sick, but still strong
underneath.

Kili spoke before I could. “I won’t go to the mountain, will I?” He wouldn’t let me look away from
him.

“No,” I answered, and a weight fell upon the chamber. “You won’t.”

“And will I live?”

I blinked, then smiled. Some optimism returned to Kili’s hazy eyes. “Obviously,” I said, and I
meant it. He’d live through this. He’d live through what came after. He’d live. “Otherwise I’d save
the ointment for something more useful.”

“You wouldn’t,” Kili grinned, and I noted that his gums were dark. “You’re too kind. And…if I
were to live anyway, then the ointment wouldn’t be necessary, now would it?”

“True,” I chuckled, and leaned back. “But you’d probably be shitting your pants right now and
hallucinating if I didn’t put some on.”

“And I thank you for that, my lady.”

I addressed the rest of the room of dwarves and a hobbit, who had somehow found a piece of bread
for nervous eating. “He’s going to be fine. I’ve, uh, already procured a place for him and everyone
else who is going to stay with him, since I don’t think the Master will want us staying here if we’re
not getting him his gold.”

“And what place is that?” Dwalin folded his arms and leaned up against the wall.

“Bard’s house.”

“Bard? The bargeman? When did you speak to him?”

“Just a little while ago.” I glanced at Thorin. “I’m not always useless when it comes to things like
this.”

“Nobody said you were,” Fili reminded, and I smiled at him, nonetheless. He turned to his uncle.
“If Kili is to remain here, so shall I.”

Thorin bristled. He rose to his feet. “Don’t be a fool. Your place is with the Company.”

Fili initially went to back down and adhere to his uncle’s commands, but something in him
snapped, and his gaze grew hard. “I belong with my brother.”

For some reason, I loved watching Fili stand up to Thorin. It made him hotter.

Oin eased the tension by saying, “Aye, I’ll stay with the laddie, also. If I’m being honest, Thorin, a
healer has no place in the heart of that perilous mountain when there’s sick needing to be tended
to.”
Thorin nodded once toward Oin, and I was glad he didn’t speak so his wrath could be unleashed upon all of us.

Then it was my turn. “I’ll stay, too. Help Kili and Bard and Lake-town while all of you are away.”

“N-no!” Bilbo protested, and I shifted to him. “You’re meant to come with us, Valeria.”

I smiled sadly. “I wish I was. But I think this is for the best. The Company already has their burglar; they don’t need me messing things up.”

“You’ve never messed anything up.”

The sight of Bilbo so distressed by my news almost broke the calm I forced myself under. I wanted to hug him, to cry, to confess everything. Because I had messed a lot of things up; I just hoped that if I stayed away from the Lonely Mountain, I wouldn’t waste all my luck before it I actually needed it.

“Hey, listen, Baggins,” I said to him, voice firm enough so it’d divert his attention from a nervous breakdown concerning my absence. He was close enough to touch, so I reached for his shoulder. “Since I’m not going to be there, I’ll give you some advice. In fact,” I straightened and turned my head to Thorin, Dwalin, and Balin, “all of you had better listen. Smaug is not dead. He’s buried himself underneath the gold, and at some point, Bilbo, you’re going to wake him up. But—” I went on before he could open his mouth to spout terror-induced ramblings. “But it’s a good thing. You’ll see what I mean. And it could be an even better thing if he’s awake and you dwarves manage to kill him while he’s still in the mountain. That means Lake-town will be safe. Otherwise, Smaug will torch this city.”

Bilbo swallowed but continued listening.

“Bard is already prepping for the worst-case scenario. While you travel to the Lonely Mountain these next couple of days, I’ll be helping him smuggle shipments of food, blankets, supplies, and—hopefully—families to the western shore. So if you guys don’t manage to kill him, things might not be so devastating.”

“If we cannot kill him, who will?” questioned Dwalin.

“Bard.” Dwalin and Balin murmured with each other, and Thorin glowered. “I haven’t said anything to him; that way there will be less pressure on his success. He’s got a, a black arrow or something? Left over from Dale.”

“Girion was his ancestor, you said?” Balin stroked his beard. “Upon the shore of the lake when we first encountered him. Interesting. It must’ve been passed down through the generations.”

“How could he possibly manage to fire it at the dragon? Without the arrow’s mechanism?” Thorin demanded to know.

I shrugged and simply said, “He’s creative.”

“And the Arkenstone? Will our burglar find it?”

Bilbo darted his eyes back to me. The rest of the room waited to hear my answer. I turned my head back so it was directly facing Bilbo’s, and nobody else could clearly see it except for the hobbit.

“No,” I answered, and Bilbo managed to keep his cool even though he saw the clearly-etched lie. My voice, however, didn’t betray me, and it held the appropriate amount of resign and worry. “But
maybe something will change.”

“Let us hope,” Balin muttered.

I busied myself by pouring Kili some water and getting him upright to drink it. He was shaky, but if everything went in the chronological way that I knew, the baby boy would be okay for at least the night. While the others conversed by the fireplace and Bilbo doubled down on the nervous eating, Kili spoke to me in a hoarse whisper.

“Ria…Ria, come close.”

My brows drew together. Even when deathly ill, I could still tell when he was up to no good. I wrung a cloth out in the water basin and pressed it to his hot forehead.

“Yeah?”

“Tell me, how am I healed? What cures me?”

I didn’t smile, but it shone everywhere else. “More like who,” I whispered back. Kili intensely waited for me to talk more. “She’ll be here, soon. She heard…she heard you were hurt. She doesn’t like orcs running around. Made for the perfect combination.”

Kili almost couldn’t believe the words I was saying. “…She?”

“She. Her.” I gently pressured him to lay back down on the bed so he wouldn’t die prematurely from the shock. By the time Kili had settled his head on the pillow, I was smiling again. Her name rolled off my tongue in a small breath.

“Tauriel.”

A moment passed. Then Kili grinned and weakly laughed. His hazy eyes became bright, and a bit of life returned to him just with the thought of her.

“Tauriel,” Kili repeated, relaxing with the utterance of her name. He gazed past the ceiling, past the clouds, to the thought of love and starlight and an elf with autumn red hair. I’ll save him, I swore, I’ll save him.

With a mind preoccupied with far better things than the poison pulsing through him, Kili thankfully fell asleep. I draped a freshly-wetted cloth over his forehead and looked to Fili. He paused in his discussions with the dwarves to return it.

Fili smiled, and my heart ached.

And I’ll save him, I swore as well, but it came with a swell of unshed tears. And I’ll save him.
Late-night chapter? Heck yeah.

Sorry for those who want smut. I don't really write it, which is why this is Mature instead of Explicit. But yes, Ria and Fili did the deed 😊 But under angsty circumstances on her part 😘

I love you guys, your comments, and your interest in this fic. It really keeps me going.
Whatever soft things Valeria murmured to Mr. Baggins were lost in the noise of the eager crowd. The Company would be departing for Erebor—without a few members. Fili accepted the pain in his chest and endured. For Kili, for Valeria, he would.

Fili watched while one arm supported his brother. She was encouraging him, reassuring him, but it did little to ease the hobbit’s anxious mind. He wore a Lake-town coat slightly too big for him and an ill-fitting guard’s helmet. Valeria leaned down and gave him a tight hug. Mr. Baggins returned it, his knuckles white as they gripped her own Lake-town coat.

Thorin barked for Mr. Baggins to join them on the skiffs they’d be taking to the edge of the lake. She smiled one last time at him, patted his shoulders, and sent him off. Valeria did not bid farewell to Thorin like she had the other dwarves, and he continued refusing to acknowledge her presence.

What transpired between them yesterday was beyond Fili, no matter how hard he tried to think of what it might be. His best guess was that it had something to do with the future, and uncle did not enjoy hearing what it held. The thought made Fili uneasy, as well, but he did not show it to Valeria or anyone. She had regained her steadiness in spite of being ignored by Thorin just like she had when she first joined the Company. He would not take that away from her just yet.

Fili did not hear the Master of Lake-town’s presumptuous, overstuffed speech signifying the departure of the Company. He only saw Valeria, with her curly tendrils of black hair framing her face and her brown eyes surveying the departing dwarves with worry. She always showed her worry, Fili found, when she thought nobody noticed.

He took her hand in his. She immediately smiled and turned her gaze downward at Fili. *We will be fine,* he wanted to assure her, *we will see these people are safe if the dragon comes.*

But Valeria knew more of the future than Fili, and so he stayed silent.

Despite the cold weather, Valeria’s skin was still soft. Fili wanted to lose himself in it again, lose himself in *her* again, now and until the Lonely Mountain itself crumbled with the weight of time.

She did not talk of love, though, of the heart. And if Fili did, would she return it? Their confessions for each other lay only in touches and tight-gripped passion, as yesterday was. Why did she cling to him so? It almost seemed to be born from fear. Then what was she afraid of? They would reclaim Erebor. Smaug would be slain. All would be well.

Would it?

Once the Company was beyond the borders of the town, the crowd began to disperse, and Valeria adjusted her pack. She needed a scarf, Fili thought, with her slender neck bare to the colder temperatures. Perhaps Ori could knit her one once they were reunited.

“Alright. Let’s get to Bard’s house,” she said. Valeria never noticed when she slipped into an authoritative, leader-like figure, but Fili did. Her shoulders grew straighter, jaw stronger, eyes focused on things Fili could not see. She would not freely speak about her hardships on Earth as a conscious, clear-headed woman. In Mirkwood, however, when Valeria’s mind could not discern past from present, when her memory happened in the moment, he caught snippets of murmurings.
and confessions. Whether they were to Fili or not, he could never decide, but he listened anyway.

Bodies buried under the weight of buildings, children screaming as poison ate away at their face, women weeping over their deceased families. Corpses of humans and animals floating bloated because cities—cities larger than Rivendell, Minas Tirith, Erebor—had been viciously consumed by the sea. Sweeping fires, starving babies, rotting flesh. Shock, blood, war.

Valeria could not smell death because it was so familiar to her.

In all her twenty-six years, Valeria had seen more calamity and horror than Fili, and still she shone bright. Mirkwood nearly stole it from her; maybe it was a kindness that she had died so she would not have to endure its disease a moment longer.

Fili wanted to ask more about the television and her world’s peculiar technology. Television. Such a funny word. Such a funny thing. Those people were not in the box, Valeria had to remind, and yes, the colors of their clothing really were that bright. Valeria said she did not know Master William or Master Carlton personally, but Fili saw the way she looked at them as though they were friends, family.

And that woman in the glittering violet, with skin brown and hair black like hers, whose mother tongue rolled off her dark lips in stunning song…she caused Valeria to weep, and her tears were caught in the forest floor, feeding the knotted mass of trees older than the first light that touched the world.

Home. She missed home.

Was Fili not home enough for her?

No. No, how could he possibly be? He could not be an entire world, a blanket of familiar stars, the laughter of her mother and father, brother and sister. He could not give her sharp spices for food, televisions, or the sight of a Colorado sunset.

But he could give something.

Bard let them into his small house, suspicious eyes picking them apart before scanning the town. “You’re late,” he muttered to Valeria, voice all grave and gravel.

“The Master likes to fart from his mouth,” Valeria responded. The littlest bairn, innocent and fair-haired, giggled at her choice of words. Fili wasn’t able to keep a smile from his face, either. She always made him smile and laugh. More than William or Carlton or any television could.

“Lie him down here,” said the eldest girl, similar in appearance to her sister. She had prepared a small but comfortable-looking cot for Kili by one of the house’s dirty windows. Fili and Oin—and Bofur, because he had slept too long and the Company couldn’t find wherever he had passed out before leaving—guided Kili to it, and Valeria began conversing with Bard in low tones.

“It takes two days to reach the Lonely Mountain,” Fili heard Bard say, and probably not for the first time. “We have a few smuggling shipments in the day, but we will be busier at nightfall.”

“The Last Light of Durin’s Day comes from the moon, not the sun,” Valeria responded, and Fili drifted toward the conversation. “So you’ll have all day tomorrow, too, and some of the night.”

“Do you acquire assistance?” he asked, and the two humans turned their heads to him. Valeria’s gaze was much softer than Bard’s. “Dwarves can see well in the dark. If you intend on smuggling without torchlight, you could use my sight.”
“That’s not a bad idea,” Valeria shrugged. “He can go with you tonight. Tomorrow, though, we’ll need him here.”

Bard looked as if his tooth ached. “Exactly why I did not want them under my roof in the first place.”

Fili felt shame, but he did not let it show. Orcs were on their way. That was how things must be.

“But you’re not a cruel guy, and so here we are,” Valeria smiled. She removed her coat, and Bard did not miss the hilts of elven blades on her hips. “You should go; we can take care of things here. The Master wouldn’t harm Thorin Oakenshield’s nephews, nor the family who housed them.”

“You do not know the Master.”

“I know people who like money. But if he really does want to harass us, I’ll just stomp on his toes. Gout makes that a sensitive area.”

Bard almost smiled at the sentiment. He kissed his daughters goodbye and motioned for his only boy to follow him out the door, quivers on both their backs and bows unstrung.

Then they were left with the sound of simmering flame, Kili’s fevered breaths, and the gentle lapping of the lake beneath the house.

Valeria moved over to the eldest, taking off the belt that supported her blades, and rinsed her hands off in a basin. “I can help with that dough,” she said.

“Oh, no, it’s really no matter—”

But Valeria had already started sprinkling flour on a section of the table, took a bowl with risen, raw dough in it, and set to work with expertise. “Fili,” she called, “this is Sigrid, by the way. And that’s Tilda. Their brother is Bain.”

“Fili, my ladies. At your service.” He bowed to both of them, and they grinned in turn. Sigrid curtsied as best she could at her spot at the table, and Tilda imitated it. Oin and Bofur took the opportunity to introduce themselves as well, and Kili told them his name with a flourish of a clammy hand.

While Valeria and Sigrid worked to make hard biscuits for the smuggling venture that night, Fili gave his attention to a very attentive Tilda. Those blasted elves took all his blades, knives, shivs, and daggers back in Mirkwood, leaving him with nothing but calloused fists to fight. So instead he unsheathed one of Valeria’s blades, admiring their weightlessness and elegance, and beckoned Tilda toward it. “You hold it like this,” Fili said, showing her the proper way to grip the hilt with his left hand. He gave Tilda the right blade and observed her handwork. “Perfect. You must be a natural.”

Tilda giggled and brandished the blade a fraction. Fili became comfortable, mind easing from the tension caused by an ill brother and the retaking of a mountain. Teaching was his delight, and he taught Tilda how to stand with a blade in the small confines of their shanty. She was slight, even for a human bairn, but as Fili found with Valeria, the slightest were not the weakest.

He could not stop himself from sparing a glance toward Valeria, with loose curls brushing against her temples and white flour stark on her jawline. She said something that made Sigrid laugh before separating more dough on the tabletop.

And, though darkness loomed, Fili dreamed.
Fili and Bofur went with Bard and Bain to smuggle shipments of food, items, and some families with infants, young children, and elderly to care for. The few able-bodied parents, children, and grandchildren would watch over the shipments as they trickled in.

Sigrid put Tilda to bed and tried staying up, but stress about her father and brother’s well-being made her too tired to keep her eyes open, so I told her I’d keep watch over the house until they returned. Oin, despite his best efforts, couldn’t stave off the exhaustion that came with tending to Kili for over thirty-six hours. He snored in the house’s only armchair, his beard bunched up from the way he propped his chin on it.

There hadn’t been this kind of silence for a while. I sat next to Kili in a chair, humming softly while I took the time to sew up a hole in one of my tunics. “W…water,” Kili gasped, jolting from his feverish dreams. I reached for a waterskin and helped him hold it.

“Hey, take it easy,” I said, pulling the water away when he tried chugging it, but Kili didn’t get the Nacho Libre reference, so he simply gave a weak smile at my voice.

“Ria, tell me,” he rasped, and I freshened the wet cloth on his forehead. At this point, all we could do was make him comfortable. Fresh kingsfoil was on-hand, but Kili wouldn’t be cured without an elven touch. I recognized the same scent in the Rivendell ointment.

“Tell you what?” I softly inquired when he threatened to drift off again.

“Tell me…about her.”

“Tauriel?”

“Yes.”

What was there to say about her? She was a movie character added in for a half-assed attempt at the female representation the books lacked. She fell in love with Kili fast, Kili died fast, and the last we saw of Tauriel was her crying over his body.

So I did the best I could. It wasn’t exactly hard. Tauriel exuded life and beauty and wildness that even I felt it in my dying moments. “She fights for what is good and light.” I said, going back to sewing. I needed to sleep, as well, but at least Mirkwood gave me the endurance to fight it off.

“When Thranduil closed off the gates to their palace to seal themselves off from darkness, she left before she could be trapped.”

“And she…left for me?” Kili’s eyes were closed, but he was smiling.

“I’d like to think that you were what pushed her to action. It’s not every day that somebody defies their king’s orders.” I finished the stitching and knotted it together. The snap of string was loud in the quiet room. “She’s tall, isn’t she?”

“Very.”

“Are you willing to stand on your tip-toes to kiss her for the rest of your life?”

“If I weren’t…would I have fallen in love in the first place?”

I smiled. “Fair enough. I think the funniest thing I’ve found, with you, Tauriel, and all the stories I’ve heard, is how fast everyone falls in love here.”
“What do you mean?”

“You fell in love within a day of meeting her, Kili, and she you. Beren and Luthien, all the other elves, your mother and father, basically every other romantic story… love occurs as soon as you lay eyes on them.”

“Is that… is that such a bad thing? Being doubtless?”

“No. But the whole ‘love at first sight’ isn’t a thing that happens in my world. Instant attraction? Maybe. But that’s not the same as all-out love.” I gave Kili more water before he could ask. “If it does happen, people think it’s silly. Not real.” Quickly, I added, “But here it’s real.”

“So you did not—” Kili coughed then continued. “You did not love my brother at first?”

I snorted. “From the first time I saw him? No. You guys were all chasing me through the woods. And then I was shunned for the first few weeks by all of you.”

“But after?”

“After?” I hummed and set to work on patching one of Kili’s socks. “My world, my experiences, have taught me to be slow with love. There is less hurt when love is not the first step.”

“If not love, then what?”

“Interest. Care. Similarities. You don’t know anything about Tauriel other than the fact that she loves the stars and hates the darkness of this world.”

“Well, we did not have as much time as you and my brother,” Kili sniffed.

“Plus, you were technically her prisoner.”

“Simply details, Ria.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle. “Yeah. Maybe… maybe this world and the people in it are just better with their emotions. It’s easy to love, it’s easy to hate. There isn’t much conflict in matters of the heart. But perhaps that’s just for elves and dwarves, and we humans have to deal with the complications.”

“It… makes sense. For you.” Kili’s voice grew quieter. “You have complications.”

Though I hummed again, I did not answer until I had patched the sock halfway. “Of course I have complications. I’m from another world.”

“And love cannot cross the two?” Kili shifted so he could look at me sitting next to him, my head tilted down to sew his sock, expression carefully blank. “Because you do love him.”

“Sometimes, Kili, it’s not always about love.”

“You lie. You… have done nothing that wasn’t for love. Not in this world. Not in yours. Why keep it… why must you keep it from yourself now?”

Why?

Why?

I finished patching the sock and broke the string. Kili did not protest when I slipped it back onto his
foot. By the time it was pulled over his ankle, he could no longer resist the strain of the fever, and he had sunk back into its depths.

Then I was left alone with my thoughts and a hungry stomach.

I wished...I wished things were easier. I wished there was a door that I could step through that would take me back to my little house-apartment ten minutes away from my parents’ house. I wished that door could bring me right back here to the Company, to Fili.

And I wished that I knew why I was sent here at all to suffer through this.

But when Fili came back an hour before dawn, the knotted mass of my heart did not stop me from sinking into his arms and sleeping for a few blissful hours next to him.

-“Ah, damnit,” Fili swore as he looked at who was pounding on the door in the middle of the afternoon. “The Master’s rat is here.”

“Father said he would,” Sigrid spat. She gathered Tilda up and ushered her little sister to their bedroom. I glanced at Sigrid; her face had gone pale, teeth gritted, eyes angry. I’d seen that look before in countless other women.

“He’s come onto you, hasn’t he?” I asked her. Then I corrected my language before she could be confused. “He’s been inappropriate.”

“That gaze is inappropriate enough,” Sigrid muttered heatedly. “But he’s caught me in the market when Father or Bain isn’t around. Tries to touch my arms and back, leaning in close with that awful breath. He’s done it with most of the girls my age.”

Oin spat something in Khuzdul, meaning that he thought his words were too crude for Sigrid to hear. I picked up “head” and “shit.” Bofur nodded in agreement at whatever Oin said.

“And he gets away with it.” The pounding grew louder, and Alfrid’s muffled voice demanded to speak with Bard.

“Always,” Sigrid huffed.

“Somebody needs to toss him into the lake,” Fili said, coming up beside me near the door. I paused, a smile flickering.

“That doesn’t sound like too bad of an idea.”

Sigrid stayed out-of-view when I opened the door. Alfrid was mid-knock, so his fist abruptly caught air and threw him off balance. He scowled, straightened himself, and sneered, “Where is Bard? By order of the Master—”

“He’s not here,” I interrupted. “Those of us who were unfit to venture to the Lonely Mountain are staying under his roof. His hospitality is far greater than the Master’s.”

Alfrid’s scowl deepened. “We have reports that he has been shipping illegal goods—”

I looked over Alfrid’s lanky, hunched shoulder. All I saw was a small crowd gathering to see what was happening. “You have no soldiers with you. This isn’t an arrest. You’re just coming to intimidate.”
Alfrid took a step closer. He was taller than me, but I felt stronger than him, and I didn’t cower away. And holy shit, Sigrid was right about his bad breath. “I’ll come back with soldiers,” he spoke lowly, trying to sound threatening. And maybe it worked on the people of Lake-town.

But we weren’t from Lake-town.

“The soldiers won’t need a reason to arrest Bard. He’ll be locked up, and soon his head will be on a pike—”

Fili came into full-view in the doorway. It startled Alfrid to see Thorin’s nephew—the heir to the throne—next to me. Righteous anger rolled of him. Alfrid must’ve sensed it, for he took a step back. His heels edged the drop of the staircase.

“And what will my uncle, King under the Mountain, think when he hears of the mistreatment of Bard? The one who rescued us from orcs, who housed us and our ill kin? Do you truly believe he will look kindly upon you and the Master for what you’ve done? Perhaps he will reconsider the promises of gold he gave to you? Or, better yet, he will see the corruption of the Master himself and pay for changes to be made. How does that sound to you?”

I stood proud next to Fili. We didn’t need swords to protect us. We just needed better threats.

More people of Lake-town stopped to watch the altercation. I placed a hand on Fili’s shoulder and gave it a squeeze. Alfrid was caught between sneering and running. The sight of him and all he stood for filled me with surprisingly sweet rage. I guessed all my suppressed emotions from all the injustice I’d seen on my world and this one broke through. Now that I could do something and get away with it, I was…unable to stop myself.

“You’ll hear from my master, and you’ll be sorry, I swear it—”

Before Alfrid could decide what to do, I made the decision for him. In one swift move, I tossed the Master’s rat off the side of the staircase’s railing and into the lake water below. The crowd gasped—then laughed and cheered. Alfrid’s greasy head came bobbing back up, his equally greasy hat floating beside him.

“Mahal, Valeria!” Fili exclaimed through his sudden bout of laughter.

“Go swim back to your master, rata!” I stuck two fingers up in a V at him. “And think real hard before coming back here!”

Alfrid shouted for help, but the crowd dispersed the louder his cries got. Fili and I went back inside the house. Bofur roared with laughter as he and a delighted Sigrid watched Alfrid try to get back up onto one of the street docks all by himself.

“I can’t believe you’ve done that,” she said to me when the door closed resolutely behind us. But her grin betrayed any fear or criticism.

“I was a woman possessed,” I said back with a grin of my own. “We have more important things to worry about than Alfrid. The orcs will be here tonight, as well as Smaug.” I paused, then asked, “The Master can’t really stop people from leaving, can he?”

“He’s going to try.”

A new idea started sparking, forming. I couldn’t believe I hadn’t thought of it sooner.

“Then we better get some dwarven-approved evacuations.” I looked to Fili, Bofur, and Oin.
“What’d you say? Wanna save people from being turned into nothing but a pile of ash?”

Bofur pulled out his tobacco-less pipe and stuck it in his mouth. “Lady Sigrid,” he drawled, “D’you happen to have some ink and parchment?”

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“By order of King Thorin, citizens of Lake-town are to depart immediately! The terrible calamity named Smaug has been prophesied to raze the town tonight! Take only what you can carry! There is shelter on the eastern shore! Women, children, and the elderly travel first! The great calamity named Smaug comes tonight!”

The three dwarves swept through the city, brandishing forged papers listing the order and signed by Thorin. When soldiers finally came to try and stop them from panicking the public, Fili simply shoved the parchment in their faces, spouted some bureaucratic stuff, and then went on his way again, ushering people into dinghies and repeating key words like, “Destruction! Calamity! Dragon! Evacuation!”

The soldiers couldn’t do anything. I heard that the Master stayed in his mansion, fuming over the schemes of dwarves and Bard, but he wouldn’t risk his chance at riches. I wondered if he would leave before nightfall like most of the townsfolk, or if he thought he was too good to follow the likes of peasants.

I was pretty sure he died? So I wondered how it’d all pan out with what I changed.

Kili couldn’t keep water down, and his fever spiked. The whites of his eyes were jaundicing. The arrow wound had blackened even more, but not in any way I’d seen. It wasn’t necrosis; it was the effect of Morgul poison, and it turned Kili’s veins and gums charcoal.

He couldn’t keep up humor or speech. I was relieved when the pain took him into unconsciousness. When he was awake, he screamed in delirium. I kept applying ointment and whispered to him, “She’ll be here soon. She’ll be here soon.”

But my worry would not abate, and neither would Fili’s. When night came, and Sigrid and Tilda had packed up bags for themselves, their brother, and father, the dwarves returned from their well-intending propaganda. Fili was by Kili’s side in an instant, holding his sweaty hand and murmuring things in Khuzdul. “He does not look well, Ria.”

“He’s not well.” I gazed out the window, where specks of lantern-lit dinghies and boats made their way from Lake-town to the shore, and prayed that I hadn’t changed something so Tauriel wouldn’t show up. “But he just needs to hold out.” I leaned close to Kili. “You hear that? You need to hang in there.”

“Where are your father and brother?” Oin asked Sigrid. “Ye need to get leaving.”

“I’m not sure,” Sigrid replied, concern creasing her brows. No doubt the same question had been on her mind. “But they should be returning.”

“Aye, it’s getting dark out there.” Bofur adjusted Tilda’s shawl around her shoulders. “Maybe the Master did do something with them. Purely out of spite.”

Sigrid put a hand to her stomach. “Oh, I hope not.”

The possibility concerned me too much to let it go. I looked to the bunches of herbs and garlic loops hanging above the table, catching the single black arrow hanging up there. I had half a mind
to take it, but if something bad were to happen to me, I’d just be putting the only chance at killing Smaug in jeopardy.

Instead, I grabbed my coat and tightened my blades around my waist. “Where do you think you’re going?” Fili demanded, taking my wrist.

“See if I can find Bard and Bain.”

“You cannot go alone.”

I squarely faced Fili and cupped his bearded jaw. “You have to stay here. The girls and Kili can’t be undefended when—if—the orcs come.”

Fili tried pinning me with the kingly gaze he learned from Thorin, but I had grown immune to it. I pressed a kiss to his forehead. “I’ll be back. Have some faith in me.”


All I said was, “I know.” Then I looked to Sigrid, who was pointedly trying to ignore Fili’s and my conversation. “Take your things down to the dinghy. Might as well start preparing to leave.”

She nodded once and began gathering up their bags. I swept my eyes over the room one last time, then memorized once more the color of Fili’s irises in the firelight. Before I could think about leaving, my feet carried me out of the house and into the chilly night.

Halfway to the eastern port of entry Bard said he’d be sailing from, a rumble shook the lake. It rattled the posts, and shingles from a nearby house clattered to the ground. My heart lumped up in my throat. Families who dragged their feet in getting out of the town were suddenly running, shouting, screaming.

I quickened my pace. The urge to set the droplet in the center of my palm again doubled.

It took the better part of half an hour to reach the port by foot. I tried jogging, but my body had been damaged by the month in Mirkwood, so just running a little had me panting. I decided to conserve what energy remained. The port was busy, but thankfully, thankfully, at the center of the madness was the Bowman I’d been looking for.

“Bard! Bard!” I waved my hand at him over the crowd. He found me and made his way through fleeing bodies. Bain followed close behind.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing—I was just afraid that you had been taken or something,” I said, and he breathed in relief. Something tiny and dark flitted past his shoulder. I didn’t see what it was and if I should be concerned at all about it.

“No, fortunately. I got caught up helping the people. They—”

“Da,” Bain interrupted. He pointed to one of my blades. “What is that?”

I glanced down and yanked up the hilt of my right blade. It shone blue in the moonlit night. I snapped my head back to Bard, who was now even more grave and fearful.

“Just kidding,” I said, turning and going into a full-sprint despite my body’s resistance to the speed.
“Something is wrong!”

Another quake from the Dragon in the Mountain jarred the world, but it didn’t slow me, Bard, or Bain, who followed close behind. I was thankful for the moon’s light, because I spotted orcs crawling on the roofs of emptied-out houses. I drew both blades, glowing magnificently in the dark, and shouted, “Hey, fuckface! Over here!”

One of the nearest ones heard me shout. It screeched and jumped down from the roof, shaking the deck and scrambling upright to charge. I met its crude sword with the left blade, and the right one jammed itself beneath its sternum. The orc’s armor was weak, and it let out a small squeal before slumping. I twisted it down so it’d slide off the blade.

Bain clung to his father, shocked and paralyzed. Bard kept an arm in front of him to put his body between Bain and the orc. “That’s only one of them,” I panted.

“Remind me again why I let you and those dwarves into my home?”

I saved my breath and didn’t bother to answer Bard. Instead I kept running, trying to track the orcs who didn’t stop for us. With the way air wheezed in my lungs and stitches gathered on one side, I wished I had stuck the droplet into my palm earlier. But I couldn’t stop to do it, now, because another orc had finally dropped from a roof and assaulted us. This one was bigger than the other, and wielded a heavy mace instead of a sword. I went on the defense in hopes of finding a weak spot in its armor. Both hands that gripped the blades shook from exertion. I should have eaten something.

Right as the orc was about to clip me in the shoulder with its mace, an arrow pierced its neck. The orc collapsed without a sound.

Bard strode past me, bow in hand. “We must hurry.”

“What, we weren’t doing that in the first place?”

The sounds of screams and fighting could be heard from a block away. More orcs swarmed around Bard’s house, and he and Bain did not wait for me to keep up with them. Arrows flew from Bard’s bow at orcs on roofs and on the balcony of their damaged home, taking one down with a single blow despite the poor lighting.

I wondered, for a split-second, how he managed to hit with such precision.

Then I saw the tiny form flit by him once more. And, against the backdrop of the house’s illuminated window, I managed to catch the silhouette of a little bird. It zipped back beside Bard’s ear, who then turned to his left and loosed an arrow that sunk right into an orc’s eye. It toppled from the roof and crashed into the water.

I glanced into the window again. There was a flash of red hair, followed by a feminine-sounding yell. I grinned, even though I shouldn’t have been. She had come. She was here.

Bard and Bain broke through the orc swarm at the door and entered the house. I went to join them, but three orcs jumped from the neighbor’s roof and advanced on me.

“They say you died in the Misty Mountains,” one of them spoke, guttural and deep. He pointed his sword at me. I brandished mine the way Fili taught. “Yet you walk.”

“Yeah. Too bad you’re not going to be walking after I’m done with you.”
The orc beside him laughed. “Sharp tongue. Sharp tongue. I can’t wait to wear it around me neck.”

All three roared and swooped in. I drove one blade deep while the other blocked a swing. I didn’t hear my own shouts or feel the strain in my arms, abs, and legs—only unnatural growls and the clang of elven-forged steel on orcish iron. This was survival. And I was not going to die just a few days after being revived again.

Then an arrow with different fletching from Bard’s suddenly stuck through the front of one of the orc’s forehead. It toppled down, and I used its distraction to slice through the last orc’s neck. What they lacked in skill, they made up for in brutality and strength. But sometimes the lack of skill gave great opportunities.

I forced myself not to think about killing another living thing and looked to the blond-haired elf striding across the deck I had been ambushed on. I grimaced as all the exertion came flooding back into my aching muscles.

“You are meant to be dead,” Legolas commented, slinging his bow across his chest and looking straight ahead at the fleeing pack of orcs. Fleeing, or regrouping?

“That’s what they tell me,” I said back. Orc blood spattered the side of my face, sticky and acrid. Legolas unsheathed his sword and twirled it around. It wasn’t a show-off movement; it was a pissed movement.

“Your dwarves are waiting for you.”

I watched Legolas disappear into the night, cutting down stray orcs who had fallen back to try and stop him. I went to sheathe my blades, swearing that I’d clean them when I had a better moment—Wait. Wait a fucking minute.

Head craning over my shoulder, I looked to the calmed-down home. Tauriel’s voice, though muffled, was audible since the door hung ajar. She did not seem to be leaving. But Kili—Legolas—the orc he’d be fighting—the orc—Kili—

I sheathed the blades long enough to do what I should have done nearly an hour ago. The droplet centered into my palm. The chain wrapped between my fingers and wrist. I squeezed it and let the blood flow, let the world sharpen, let the energy fissure through.

The droplet didn’t get in the way of holding my left blade. The leather on the hilt might get stained from blood, but the gem itself had sunk further than it ever had, before, becoming almost level with my skin. I walked across the deck, ignoring the mountain’s shudder, and tasted the thick breeze of the lake on my tongue. Both blades still glowed their pale blue. Their pallor seeped into the rising mist, which collected fragments of the ghostly colors.

I followed the sound of Legolas fighting orcs and broke into an easy jog that my body hadn’t known since the last time I used the droplet in Mirkwood. The soles of the elven boots hardly made a sound as I slunk through the mist. An orc jumped from the shadows to gut me, but I ducked its swing with more flexibility than I truly possessed and let the blue glow of my right blade disappear for three seconds into the orc’s abdomen. I couldn’t remember if I even stopped moving as I killed him.

Two more orcs came. The droplet gave me better sword-fighting abilities; it just gave me the strength, stamina, and edge to act on everything I learned. Without fatigue or trepidation, the fog glided past me until I came upon Legolas and the big orc that would murder Kili in front of Tauriel.
Neither of them saw me; they were so consumed with killing each other that I went unnoticed as I slowed and stepped over more orc corpses Legolas left on the ground.

The orc (was his name Bulk or something?) threw Legolas into a wooden pillar, and it cracked with the force. Legolas grunted but regained his footing before he could slide to the ground and become vulnerable. His sword caught Boog’s misshapen weapon and deflected it. They parried three more times, but it wasn’t until the orc’s back was fully turned away from me that Legolas, now facing where I stood, finally saw my form in the fog with two, slight-curved blue elven blades. Bowl caught his shift in eye movement and tossed Legolas back to see who the elf had been staring at.

But by the time he turned back, the right blade was already sinking up into his chin, slicing through muscle and brain and skull. The tip of the blade hit the orc’s metal plating hammered into the top of his head and came to a scraping stop. It didn’t matter, though. His one good eye went dead, and I shoved him back. The blade drew from his skull. Its shine flickered out.

“Bolg!” I exclaimed, using humor to hide from the horrifying fact that I just straight-up assassinated someone. “That’s his name.”

Legolas stood up and wiped the blood leaking from his nostrils. He staggered over.

“Why did you follow me?” he demanded.

“Because I remembered that you’d be fighting him.” I pointed to Bolg’s corpse with the left blade. “And he needed to die.”

Instead of regarding me with slight animosity, Legolas’ visage shifted into curiosity. “You know of the future?”

“Some. To a point.” I crouched down and wiped the foul orc blood off with Bolg’s loincloth. My lips twisted into a grossed-out frown. “Ew. This guy has a literal skull codpiece.” I stifled the sudden interest to know what an orc dick looked like. Probably nasty.

“You just killed the spawn of Azog,” said Legolas. He handed me a cloth to wipe my blades with instead, seeing my struggle at finding appropriate material to use. Bolg wore mostly leather, and the distracting skull kept getting in the way. I accepted it with a muttered thanks and stood straight.

“Oh—yeah. That’s right. Well.” I shrugged. Legolas’ eyes darted to my left palm, which retained its faint glow and made the blood shine. “He was gonna die anyway. I just quickened the process.”

“You have altered what will come to pass.” Legolas didn’t say it accusingly; if anything, he was too neutral to be normal.

“Yep. I did.” I pursed my lips and sheathed both blades. He took the cloth back and began cleaning his sword. “I’ve kinda come to terms with what I’m trying to do. Hopefully it’ll turn out alright.”

Realizing that there was less and less reason to be guarded, Legolas’ shoulders relaxed. “The accent you speak with—I have not come across its type in my travels.”

“Haven’t you heard? I’m from another world.”

Legolas froze midway through cleaning his blade, staring. I smirked and began walking back to Bard’s. “Come on,” I gestured. “You don’t need to go off chasing Bolg, anymore. You can help the rest of us. Because in case you didn’t know, there’s a dragon coming to light up Lake-town.”
I didn’t glance back at Legolas, and by the time he sighed and walked forward to join me, I finished grinning.

But after a heavier, longer quake caused by Bilbo and the dwarves trying to kill Smaug, any real smiling ceased for the rest of the night.

Chapter End Notes

We're, like, at the end of the second movie? Meaning that this fic is two-thirds of a way over??

And I've been meaning to lay into the canon divergence. Hope it was a good read.

As always, your comments mean the world to me, and I love all of you who've invested time and appreciation into this fic. If you still wanna read about Valeria's story in Middle-Earth, there maaaaaaay be a second part to the (still unnamed) series that'll come out after I've finished this one? That'll cover Lord of the Riiiiings?

So just a heads up about that 😊

Rata: rat
“I’m sorry I missed out on the whole healing thing,” I said to Fili after embracing him. “There was something else I decided to do.”

“And what would that be?” I didn’t miss how his eyes went to Legolas, who guarded the door with his back to us. Whether Legolas took his position out of concern for more orc attacks or didn’t want to be near Tauriel and Fili, I didn’t know.

“Killing Bolg.”

Fili paled. “You…you killed Bolg? How? He must have been thrice your size!”

“He was. I…it didn’t happen as cool as you might think it did.” I went over to my pack and used the remnants of my clean bandages to wrap my left hand. It still slowly trickled with blood. Fili watched me cover the droplet, but he didn’t voice his concern about its remaining presence in my body. “Legolas had him distracted. I snuck up on him. When he turned, I just…” I made the motion of shoving a blade up into Bolg’s head. Thinking too hard about the feeling of ramming my sword up Bolg’s skull made me queasy. I didn’t want to talk about it much longer. “Shink. Then he was dead.”

“But why? What did Bolg mean to you?”

I grimaced. Giving even the slightest glance at Kili would have betrayed my already unconvincing omission, so I kept myself fixed on Fili. “He, uh, he would have stirred some shit that I decided to put and end to before he could.”

Fili eyed me with a fair amount of suspicion. I was being pretty vague, after all. “And what would that trouble have been?”

“Look, Fili,” I huffed, ignoring the swell of nervous bile in my stomach, “there’s some—”

“You must go,” Bard declared, interrupting all conversations in the house. “Smaug will be upon us any moment. I will not have my children feel the heat of his fire.”

“Da? What about you?” Sigrid questioned, wringing her hands. Bard answered by reaching up in bunches of herbs hanging from the ceiling and pulled down the black arrow. Sigrid gasped, and Oin breathed something incredulous in Khuzdul.

Bard held it out in front of him, eyes fiercer than I had ever seen them. “I’m going to finish what my ancestor could not.”

I slung my pack over a shoulder and took Fili’s hand. “The bell tower,” I said to Bard. “You’ll find you can shoot him there.”

“There is a dwarven windlance strong enough to fire the black arrow atop the Master’s mansion. I plan on going there.”

“Uh, I think the windlance is the first thing that gets destroyed?” I shook my head and headed out the door. There wasn’t any time to argue. “But don’t listen to me. Just—the bell tower is your
I descended the steps before Bard could get another word in.

Kili, though drained, was now able to stand on his own. He hobbled down the stairs with Tauriel behind him. She stayed tense, at the ready to catch Kili should he slip or stumble. At the edge of the deck outside of Bard’s house, Legolas took up the dinghy’s pole to get us through Lake-town. “The children should have departed long ago,” the elf said. The world shuddered in agreement.

“Things don’t go according to plan,” I said, emphasizing the world to mean “my plan.” Legolas softly scoffed. He caught Tauriel trying to help Kili into the boat, muttered something semi-sharp in elven, but firmly took Kili’s arm and guided him until he was securely seated. Tauriel said something back, and I didn’t bother trying to interpret the emotions in their foreign language. There was too much else going on, and I kept an eye on the looming, black mountain in the distance, waiting for a winged beast to burst from it.

Tilda cried as she was separated from her father and hauled into the boat by Tauriel. “I’ll be back, my sweet,” Bard promised to her. Despite his fatalistic demeanor, he had tears glistening. He will, I wanted to echo, but some things were just too perilous for a promise to have meaning. Bain wanted to go with his father like he had with everything up until this point, but Bard made him swear to look after his sisters until he returned.

I was the last one to get in the dinghy. “Tell me, Valeria, what will happen after Smaug is slain? Will prosperity return to the land? Will there be a dawn to this darkness?”

Bard’s question made all eyes turn to me. The dinghy swayed with all our weight, and the sticky blood on my hand almost stung in an acidic way. “Yes,” I said, except I couldn’t lie. I couldn’t give him—any of them—hope that this was the worst of it. That once Smaug was dead, they could turn to Dale with hope of never tasting fear of mass death again.

So I took a breath, tasting how the air had turned foul with the stench of dead orcs, and looked Bard straight in the eyes, expression grimmer than his.

“But first, there will be war.”

Bard wasn’t as shocked as he should have been. I supposed he might have put it all together, with the dwarves’ return and the orcs attacking, and how I mentioned that Dale would need a leader for the upcoming days and weeks.

“War?” Fili repeated. He made me turn my gaze to him. His visible hurt sent a pang through my heart. “What do you mean?”

“We can speak of the future later,” Legolas cut in. He pushed off the deck with the dinghy’s pole. “Right now, we must live through the present. Farewell, Bard. May your aim be true.”

Tilda cried more. Sigrid held her little sister tight, her own tears threatening to spill over. Bain had half a mind to jump back out of the boat and join his dad, but Bofur kept a firm hand on his shoulder to keep him in his place. Bard watched us leave. I couldn’t see what he might have been feeling; the fog shrouded him, and soon I saw nothing of the bargeman.

The town, thankfully, was empty as we drifted through. Its only residents now were us and the solemn sheet of mist. Legolas moved with haste and expertise, like he, too, could sense the dragon’s heat on the back of his neck. “War, you said,” Tauriel spoke. Veiled moonlight caught in her red hair. I didn’t miss the way Kili stared at it. “When will it be?”
“Soon,” I replied. The sound of the pole cutting through the water was too loud, and I shivered. “Too soon. The army—they’re going to come up from the earth. They use wheel…wheel worms? Something like that.”


“They have not been seen since the Last Alliance,” Tauriel said with horror. “How come they upon such creatures?”

I didn’t speak. Still, I felt Fili’s eyes on me, searching for an answer.

“Thirteen dwarves and the Men of Dale cannot possibly hold off an entire orcish army,” Legolas went on. He steered us into the eastern portion of the city. Above us, ravens loudly cawed. “It will not be war; it will be slaughter.”

“The elves—your people—will come to fight, too,” I said. Legolas spared me a dubious glance.

“My father would not fight for either.”

“I think…uh, he comes to initially fight with the dwarves?” I made a noise, then added, “There’s gonna be more dwarves coming from the Iron Hills.”

“Our kin would not let us be vulnerable after reclaiming Erebor,” Kili smirked, as pale and exhausted as he was.

“Careful, lad,” Oin warned. “Remember; they would not aid us at the beginning of this quest. They come because we will have taken the mountain back, not because they had faith in our doings.”

“They come because their king commands it,” said Fili. “And with the Arkenstone, he is King.”

The mention of the Arkenstone made me worry about Bilbo and what was to come. Maybe I could…maybe I could just hit Thorin really hard and make him snap out of it? Stick him with a pin? Smear some elven ointment on his stupid forehead? Then his whole bout of madness could be avoided before it got in the way at all.

“With the Arkenstone, he is doomed.”

Legolas just had to put his two cents in. I grimaced at the statement as the dwarves’ ire raised.

“I remember when his grandfather became consumed by the Arkenstone and his gold,” Legolas continued, balancing perfectly on the boat while he pushed us along. “To lay one’s kinship in gemstones and minerals brings weakness. The mountain was rank with Thror’s dragon-sickness before Smaug even buried himself in its treasures.”

“You watch your tongue, elfling,” Oin growled. “Do not make light of the decimation of our kin.”

“Youkin would not have been decimated if your king lay his strength in his people.”

“Alright, alright,” I interceded before the boat capsized because of a brawl. I put a hand on Fili’s tense chest. “Don’t get all high and mighty, Legolas. Your father isn’t the greatest, either.”

“My father has kept the Greenwood protected since the beginning of this age.”

“Oh, what? It’s not called Greenwood anymore. It’s Mirkwood. Because it’s so fucking dark and dank and crawling with spiders.”
“The lady speaks the truth, *mellon.*” Tauriel spoke with both caution and courage. “Your father believes that as long as evil does not touch the palace itself, we are protected.”

“It’s called denial,” I added. Even though I knew the many, many faults of the dwarves, I also had great love for them. Hearing Legolas’ criticism made me prickle. “Your dad was willing to seal himself away to pretend that everything is fine.”

“You have not faced the darkness that he has,” Legolas defended, but he didn’t sound riled enough to be convincing. “He has good reason to keep his people safe.”

“I’ve seen plenty of darkness,” I shrugged, but I was turning sharp. “And I’ve found that one of the greatest ironies about being safe is that true protection only happens when you make sure that others are safe. Putting up walls and guards and trying to shut the world out doesn’t equal safety.”

“It makes a cage,” Tauriel said lowly. I nodded.

“It makes a cage. And it creates Us and Them. There’s never been a more dangerous mindset than Us and Them.” I hoped that the elves, dwarves, and humans all in this cramped little dinghy heard what stewed in my mind ever since I started my humanitarian career. “Better keep that in mind these upcoming years.”

Legolas tilted his head to me. The eastern port was in sight, and the last of the citizens were getting into boats. Far on the shore were campfires, and lamplights on skiffs and dinghies dotted the black surface of the lake. I started to worry more. They weren’t supposed to light fires.

“What will happen in the years to come?”

I didn’t answer him. And I didn’t need to, for a great crack split the world. The lake shook as though it, too, was terrified of what approached. The shouts and screams of fleeing people were drowned out by an ear-splitting roar. I watched in detached horror as a winged beast, larger than anything I had ever seen, rose from the silhouette of the Lonely Mountain and up into the moonlit sky. It moved fast—faster than I could have imagined. My human eyes could hardly keep track of it in the night.

“Smaug has come,” Legolas declared too-calmly. He went to row us out further into the lake with the rest—

But I grabbed his arm and squeezed it. Something didn’t feel right. Something wasn’t right. Years and years of work taught me that nothing, nothing could ever go this easily when danger was so close—and smart. Smaug was not mindless; I made sure Bilbo knew that, and I made sure that I would not forget it.

My gaze drifted back over to the distant shoreline fires, the smattering of lights on the water, and the empty town behind us. Then it went up to Smaug again, who in just a matter of seconds had flown far past the ruins of Dale. I could almost see the glittering red and gold of his scales. Almost.

And I saw how he veered East, draconic laughter-roars rumbling through the winter-night sky.

Something small flitted past my head. Glancing over, I was finally able to view Bard’s little friend in full. The thought niggled in the back of my mind that Luis told me about it a long time ago when I scrolled Twitter and gave half-listening “mms” and “huhs” while he talked.

The bird, tiny and quick, perched on Bain’s finger, but all three children translated a language nobody else on the boat could decipher. After a series of urgent chirps and whistles, Bain snapped his head to me, eyes wide with panic.
“Smaug knows the town is deserted. He flies for the shore.”

The spoken confirmation didn’t provide any relief to my suspicion. It only shoved the barbs in my heart further, made my stomach sicker.

But my mind stayed clear. The droplet weighed firm.

“If he reaches the lake, then all of our work would have been for nothing,” I spoke, rising to my feet. The boat swayed then stilled. How did my voice sound so resolute? I was fucking terrified of what I was about to do. “And even more people will die. We can’t have that, can we?”

“Valeria.” Fili’s tone sounded warning. “Whatever you’re thinking of doing…”

I wondered if my lips formed a smile or a grimace. Maybe it was both. I began unwrapping the bandage around my palm.

“Smaug needs to be drawn back to the town. Bard has the only thing that can kill him.” The bandage dropped, and the droplet shined enough that I could see the bones and veins in my left hand. Everybody in the boat squinted at it with gaping mouths and shocked expressions. I made the jump from the boat to the dock, and the dinghy bobbed behind me.

“Ria! No! You cannot!”

Fili stood, as well, and he hastily followed me to the deck. Was my pack still in the boat? Yeah. Good. And I had my blades in case of…something, and my scrunchie was tight, and the laces of my boots were secure—

“Ria!” Fili reached up to grip my face so I was forced to look at him. I blinked, taking in the blue ringed with gold, and I wanted to promise him that I’d be back. But how could I predict my own fate? I didn’t have the luxury to carry the knowledge of my own while carrying the fates of those around me. “Surviving Smaug—it’s impossible! No dwarf, no man, can do it alone!”

I gently removed his hands and held them. They were warm with a future I feared to see, a future I desired. “Then it’s a good thing I’m not a man.”

He let out a helpless cry. “Mahal, Ria! Then at least let me go with you—”

I cut him off with a short but fierce kiss. When I drew back, I whispered through the sudden ache in my throat. “No. I can’t risk you dying.” Smaug’s roar drove through the sky once more, closer now. Underneath it, with tangled desperation and calm, I said to Fili, “I love you. I love you.”

Using the droplet’s strength, I shoved him back into the boat and shouted to Legolas, “Get them out of here! Now! If I die—look for me in the morning!”

The dwarves shouted for me to stop, but Legolas had swiftly pushed off the dock so I wouldn’t be followed. I could trust him to do the right thing, not the wanted thing. The bird dashed above me twice before disappearing again. The wood was slick under my feet, and I shed my coat so I could sprint without it getting in the way.

What the fuck was I doing?

The question never got answered. Once I was away from the port and further into the palpably quiet town, I climbed the stairs of a house, hopped onto a railing, then leapt up so I could grab the edge of the roof. It splintered and I almost slipped, but the droplet’s strength allowed me to swing myself up onto it. I clambered higher up, shingles falling behind me, and braced myself against the
I wondered if the Valar were watching me right now. I wouldn’t let their people still die by fire a few miles away. I wouldn’t let the shore burn, and after this, I wouldn’t let the Line of Durin blink out. Whether they liked it or not…well, I didn’t give a shit.


The droplet seared hot, and from it burst a part of myself, a part of something more, manifesting in LIGHT.

I shielded my eyes from its blinding power, shouting. All went oh so silent, and a wind not of this world whipped strands of hair across my cheeks. I could taste the pain that came with the light, which laid my existence out bare. In its unshielded radiance, I couldn’t hide from anything. Not my flaws, not my mistakes, not my hypocrisies—not my love, my grief, my wants—nothing.

The light faded, and I blinked the spots from my vision. The sky was now cloudless. The chimney beside me had crumbled away due to its proximity to the center of the celestial storm. It was a wonder the house I claimed hadn’t been torn apart. I sucked in clean breaths of air and watched as the connecting veins in my hand and arm pulsed with light. The source of the brightness was the droplet, which shone white-hot like molten steel.

“What is this?” a deep, guttural voice boomed in the sky. Smaug tilted his great leathery wings and swept back toward Lake-town. A breeze carried his dragon-scent. It was ripe with putrid reptile and metal. “A taste of another world? It has been so long.”

Smaug’s chest glowed yellow, and I didn’t have time to register what was happening until flames tore through the air and ripped into Lake-town. The suffocating heat of wildfire—no, Dragonfire—stole the oxygen from my lungs. I raced to the edge of the house as flames licked the back of my heels and vaulted off, arms wind-milling. When I landed onto the crispy but intact deck below, I rolled and started sprinting further into the city.

“Why so timid, mouse?” Smaug questioned from above. His words carried a saccharine poison to them. “The Thief in the Shadows was much more polite to me. Come, now! Come! Tell me riddles and stories like your burglar! Are you, too, a Barrel-rider? A Luckwearer? For I smell him on you, just as I smelled you on his tattered clothes! The smell of a human! A human not from this realm.”

The grating growl came a second before a fury of flames scorched over me. The wall of fire ate away at homes and streets, so I propelled myself in another direction, any direction. Ash coated my throat, stung my eyes. My fist clenched the droplet.

“I did not believe what I smelled on the burglar in the mountain,” Smaug hissed, “but now I am certain! And you, you know nothing of the power you hold.” He circled up high and rained fire down, trying to trap me. “Power that was not meant to be wielded as foolishly as you do. Your
burglar fears it, for he has seen how it does not belong in this world, just as you do not. How does it feel to be unwanted? To have no fate in a world that was not designed for your existence?"

I screamed and shielded my face from the fire that spilled in front of me. Wood crackled and the soles of my feet seared. “Give the light to me, and I will not kill those you have so rashly lay your loyalty in. Be good, now, good and sensible.”

My right hand clutched my left arm as a support to send out another wave of light. Buildings collapsed around me, groaning as they fell into the lake. I almost went in with them, too, for when the light faded I stumbled to adjust to the absence of its pressure. Smaug snarled from somewhere above. I jumped across a broken section of the street and continued sprinting—

A great wind knocked me off my feet. I hit my brow bone against the wood, clawing to keep myself from sliding into the lake. The tips of my boots touched the water. Smaug landed atop the blazing homes, golden eyes gleaming in the torchlight of Lake-town. He was about two hundred feet away from me, but I could feel my limbs tremble and panic begin to crawl up my throat. I pushed myself back up onto both knees, though, stubbornly unwilling to break underneath him.

Smaug grinned, his draconic mouth stretching wide and splitting the sides of his great skull open to reveal rows of razor teeth. “I know of a lord who would reward me greatly if I delivered you to him. He serves the same dark master as I. And I would not think it wise to let another one of your kind slip from our grasp.”

I staggered upright against the roiling heat that blistered my skin, managing to raggedly shout, “FUCK YOU!”

His head tilted in a feline-like way. Smaug entreated further, crushing the homes beneath his weight. He was so big, so big, but I would kill myself over and over until there were no lives left before I let him take me.

I held my palm up to Smaug like some stupid fucking hero. It didn’t look cool. I shook too much for it to be. The weight of the droplet seemed to increase. I wasn’t sure if it was from fear or exhaustion or something else entirely.

“Or maybe I will kill you myself and rid this world of another meddlesome Worlds-walker.”

Smaug released his fountain of flame. It billowed straight at me, disintegrating all in its path, and I was going to die, I was going to die, I WAS—

The light turned solid, and it rolled the fire off its surface. I couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think; the world was a battlefield of white and orange. Flames streaked past me on both sides, and the heat scorchd the sweat from my bleeding brow. I didn’t realize I was screaming at the top of my tight lungs until the deafening fire subsided. The droplet’s power retracted back into itself, shooting energy into my buzzing, half-numb bones.

The space between Smaug and me was gone. What blackened, skeletal remains of the buildings that rose haphazardly from the inky water reflected their licking glows on the surface.

I dropped my arm, wheezing. The deck I stood on ceased to exist less than two feet away.

Smaug tossed his head back and laughed so loudly that it must have been heard all the way to the Lonely Mountain. I coughed, and an agonizing pain wracked through my lungs. “Such STRENGTH! I am impressed! But I am the Calamity, the Last of the Great Dragons! I have laid low cities and civilizations!” His body sank into the buildings, and they groaned their dying
breaths underneath him. Smaug’s grin turned into a snarl. “You are but one mortal. One human. You cannot withstand my fury.”

My shoulders straightened as Smaug spoke his last sentences. I smiled, and the drake took it as defiance rather than confidence. Good. He liked the sound of his own voice so much that he reminded me of something important. Someone important.

I wasn’t just one mortal. One human amidst smoke and fire.

There was another. And he just needed the right shot.

“You think…you think you can win against me?” I shouted, sucking in an unhealthy amount of ash lacing the air. If Bilbo could talk to Smaug, then so could I. The courage of hobbits would not die out in me. “You got chased out of your mountain! By just a few dwarves! You are not any calamity! You are—you are weak! Weaker than me! Your flames can’t even touch me!”

He reared his long neck back—still not enough to expose his chest—and snapped his jaws together. “You DARE? I am Smaug! I flew and slayed those beneath me in the War of Wrath! And I will do so until the End Times! You? You are but an insect! And I will revel watching your insignificant, unwanted soul be consumed by the misery the Dark Lord will unleash upon you! You cannot win! You cannot ESCAPE.”

I bared my own teeth and shifted into a defensive karate stance, fists clenched and raised. The droplet pulsated to life, and my veins became the tendrils of a galaxy on a moonless night. “Then come and FUCKING GET ME!”

Smaug’s roar nearly shattered my eardrums, and he barreled through the wooden graveyard of Lake-town left in our wake. I leapt to the edge of the broken deck and pushed off like I was back in track and field. The droplet flared, blinding Smaug and causing him to shout in agitated pain. He shot upwards, opting not to catch me in his giant maw, but managed to catch me with his back claw. I cried out in pain as one of the talons pierced through the skin above my shoulder blade. My arms weren’t locked in Smaug’s grip, however, and so I continued shining the light as best I could. Each of Smaug’s wingbeats and rippling power of his form jarred me up and down. Through the frenzy of dragons and flight, I watched the ruins of Lake-town sprawl out beneath me. But the windlance survived despite my prior warnings, and in the distant firelight, I caught the movement of a grim man who did not turn from peril.

“Perhaps first, I should finish what was started. You will watch the measly Lakemen burn under my power! Yes! Yes! You will watch, and you will despair.”

I would have shouted something back, but all I could do was try not to lose consciousness from the pressure on my brain and lungs.

Instead of keeping my fist raised, I directed it as best I could toward Smaug’s chest so it shined light upon his thick scaled armor. We climbed, higher and higher, until the heat was replaced by cold, and Smaug’s claw threatened to prematurely squeeze the life from me. I hadn’t thought about what I was going to do now—there wasn’t any time or chance. All I could do was face acceptance for whatever would happen.

This far up, with nothing but the heavens above, the earth below, and the might of a dragon, I thought of my families both here and there—and how I was being crushed between them.

Then a black arrow found its mark in Smaug’s chest, sinking deep and true.
The fire drake let out an unholy shriek. His grasp weakened and I was flung from it, arcing and tumbling away. The gusts of his erratic wingbeats pushed me further through the air, and it was as if Smaug flew to escape death.

But death would not be denied.

Smaug, the Last of the Great Dragons, the Calamity of Erebor, rattled out his final, choking breath, and fell to the lake below.

For a moment, I didn’t feel like I was falling. I seemed to float, staring up at the multitude of stars so very, very far from me, holding memory and life, but if I could reach out and touch one, then maybe, maybe I’d get to see Mom and Dad and Luis and Elena and—

I plummeted back to Middle-Earth.

The light started twining around me beneath its shine when I couldn’t find the rational part of my brain. I’d been skydiving, hang-gliding, and had sought out all manners of extreme activities for the sake of fun and adrenaline. Yet nothing registered like it had all those times before as I catapulted down. Nothing but panic and terror. My limbs flailed and strained in their sockets. Razors upon razors seemed to slice my bare skin. Wind howled in frozen ears, and I heard my own pitiful whimpers and cries inside my head. Before I shut my eyes to the force at which I fell, I caught sight of the eastern shore, still lit with fires, alive and whole.

For them, another death was worth it.

But fuck—this was gonna hurt like a bitch.

Five pounding heartbeats later, I crashed into the Long Lake. A sledgehammer of freezing agony wrought through me, crushing and grinding everything I claimed to be mine. Fluid rushed into my lungs like wet concrete. It swallowed me up, and the light blinked out of existence.

Chapter End Notes

I wanted this chapter to be longer, but it just...didn't happen, so I'm kinda annoyed. I hope that all of you liked it, at least. Now I'm gonna start writing a ten page paper that I wish I could put in half the enthusiasm that I do into this fic.
Bilbo’s dirty nails scraped against one of Dale’s decrepit rampart walls he had half-collapsed on. The heat from Lake-town carried on the breeze, for it had become a battlefield of fire and light.

“She got everyone out, laddie,” Balin assured, though the dwarf’s voice was strained and wavering.

“Aye,” Dwalin added, his gruff tone unusually soft. “Cannae ye see the lights on the shoreline? Smaug was flying there…but she drew him back. Smart girl.”

“I don’t care that she’s smart,” Bilbo snapped. He moved to look back at Dwalin, but only his body turned. His eyes could not be torn from the burning town. “She’s there. She’s there, alone, and—and she shouldn’t be!”

“Perhaps Fili is there,” Nori mused. “Or the elf lass she swore would come is with her.”

Bilbo scoffed. “Don’t be daft! Look! Look at that town!” He pointed a shaking finger at the bonfire upon the lake. “Valeria wouldn’t let anyone but herself be in there! She went—” His throat closed, up, causing him to choke. “She went alone! Because we couldn’t kill Smaug like she told us to!”

“And how did you expect us to kill him, eh?” Gloin questioned almost defensively. “That’s a fire drake! We barely made it out with our lives!”

“She cannot be alone, Bilbo,” said Balin. He came forward and clasped Bilbo’s trembling shoulder. “Remember? Remember what she said? Bard is there. This will not go on for much longer.”

“I don’t want it to go on at all,” Ori whispered. He had curled up on the rampart further away, unable to look upon the destruction.

Bilbo’s panic was interrupted by a great blast of flame rolling off a sudden shield of white. It decimated that area of Lake-town; buildings were flattened by blazing fire and rebellious light, and the breeze turned sharp and pronounced. The taste of Smaug terror’s turned to Valeria’s courage. Bilbo nearly toppled right off the ruined ramparts.

Bifur shouted something, and what was left of the Company found themselves pressed against the rampart to gape at the collision. Then Dwalin bellowed a war cry, and the dwarves followed suit, bringing their guttural cheers up from the depths of their stomach. Bilbo did no such thing; he took ragged breaths, tears stinging his eyes, beaming so widely that it hurt his cheeks. He hoped Valeria heard the dwarves. He hoped she knew she wasn’t alone, that they were with her, that she was strong and good and capable and—

Smaug’s roar drowned out their own, and though the light flared again, the dragon beat his great wings, leveling more houses, then reared back and brought his hind claw forward. It disappeared in the veil of the light.

It—she—lifted with Smaug’s abrupt, screeching ascent, and Bilbo’s grin turned to a mask of horror.

He veered back toward the Eastern shore. The Company had fallen into silence, too stunned to
move, to speak, to do anything but pray to Mahal and Yavanna and any Valar that would listen for
the safety of their foreign Valeria.

But she was indeed smart. Valeria kept her terrifying light on Smaug’s breast to illuminate the
black pinprick amidst his crimson armor. Bilbo felt the dragon’s breath billowing upon him, asking
questions about the smell of dwarves and humans—of a human, whose scent was unlike the others.
Smaug made a mistake in mentioning Valeria, though; he was reminded of her steady courage,
which would not die in Bilbo under the mountain.

She would live, if she were to die—except Bilbo did not want Valeria to die at all. Dying had been
different each time, she said, and she could still feel the orc blade set in her chest if she sat still
long enough, or the spider venom burning her leg. Why should she be burdened with yet another
trauma? Another memory of death?

Bilbo did not want Valeria to die. He wanted her to live so she wouldn’t wake up thirsty and sore,
then feel obliged to make light of what had happened so others could feel better. None of them ever
asked if Valeria felt better, if she was better after what unfair cards had been dealt to her.

So Bilbo prayed straight to Eru himself, wherever the supreme deity over Arda was. He had never
been the pious sort, but Valeria’s insanity had a tendency to drive him to such lengths. Let her live,
he repeated over and over, until it no longer became words and instead an intense emotion
pounding synchronously in his head and heart.

Then Smaug was pierced with Bard’s black arrow, and the dragon thrust Valeria from his clawed
grasp. The light seemed to float, if but for an instant, hovering like a star that had come to close to
the lake. Then it plummeted from the heavens, falling, falling, falling, and a moment after Smaug
crashed into the own fiery grave he had made, Valeria collided with the Long Lake, and the light
vanished from the world.

Bilbo covered his mouth to stifle a strangled cry. He fled from the ruined rampart, unable to look
upon the lake a moment longer. Nobody stopped him. And Bilbo would have kept going once he
took a few stumbling steps down the rampart’s crumbled staircase had it not been for a sole figure
standing at its base.

Thorin did not notice Bilbo come to a scraping stop. No, the king did not even watch Valeria stand
alone against Smaug in the searing heat of Lake-town, or see her snatched up by the beast felled by
a black arrow.

He gazed upon the gaping entrance of Erebor, unmoving as the mountain.

Bilbo’s panic pooled into a cold dread. His eyes hardened and jaw clenched. And though he did not
touch the weight on the inside of his coat pocket, he could feel the Arkenstone pressed up against
his left ribcage like a growing tumor.

Valeria lied that night. She’d always been a terrible liar, and Bilbo saw the twitch in the corner of
her mouth that gave her away. And the very next morning, right before he departed for the Lonely
Mountain with the remnants of their Company, Valeria softly whispered that he needed to keep it
hidden. Now Bilbo was sure of her cryptic meaning. Valeria was becoming quite good at speaking
in veils and shadows, like Gandalf, though Bilbo doubted she’d take that as a compliment.

The sight of Thorin already consumed by dragon-sickness oddly grounded Bilbo. He would need to
remain calm until Valeria, Fili, and the rest of the Company reached the Lonely Mountain. Do not
act suspicious. Do not reveal the Arkenstone. Do not let the dragon-sickness possess his own
mind.
Bilbo dipped his finger into his vest pocket, brushing the smooth metal of the ring. He couldn’t bring himself to resist. He would tell Valeria what he sees when he looks at her with the ring on. He would. She deserved to know.

But it would bring up the subject of it, again, and eventually the subject of Bilbo’s relation—no, there wasn’t any relation. It was just a silly ring.

Except it wasn’t. And Valeria would interfere—

He yanked his fingers out of the vest pocket and wiped them on his dirty trousers. Disgust rose in Bilbo, and with it the definite conclusion that not only would he tell Valeria of her altered appearance from the ring’s perspective, but then he would give it to her. Whatever it did to him… whatever it would do… he did not want to be any part of it. No, thank you. Dragon-sickness be damned; whatever this—this ring was, it contained its own disease. But Valeria would be immune. Yes, he was sure of it. She’d take it off his hands and do more good than he ever could.

Bilbo composed himself, tweaked his nose, and treaded back up to the ramparts.

- 

Cold. Cold.

I was separated from the corporeal. I had to be, because I couldn’t move, because there was nothing for me to move…

Then the barest of groans escaped from numb lips, and the pain erupted like fissures in a glacier.

“Your awake.”

The world rocked—no, a boat, small and creaking, bumping against ice chunks in the water. I wanted to puke, but what was left of my body was too exhausted to try.

Bard the Bowman broke through the bleary haze and came into view. His olive skin looked gray in the somber hours of dawn. “Thought you to be dead.” Bard took off his jacket and lay it on top of me. Some of his residual warmth soothed the icy spikes under my skin. “But I found you floating face-up in the lake, still breathing.”

So I didn’t die. I just really, really felt like shit after slamming into the water. How did I survive?


I honestly didn’t know if I would have been worse off if I died. I was still in an incredible amount of pain.

Bard straightened and returned to his oars. Had he… had he found a dinghy in Lake-town? Even after it had all burned away?


Oh, fuck, I wanted to cry.

“That…” I rasped as Bard’s oars cut through the water. “That was a fucking nightmare.”

“Aye, I reckon you’ll never get a good night’s rest again. But sleep, now. We will be at the shore in a half hours’ time.”
I was already going back under by the time Bard finished speaking. “Oh, and Valeria,” he added, distant and muted. “Thank you for saving my people.”

-  

“…Mija.”

It was my mama’s voice that woke me up again, but I did not see her in the small tent I lay in. A winter breeze snapped against the canvas, and daylight brightened the inside. The pain throbbing in my body was more manageable, now, so I risked shifting under the blankets piled on top of me. The clothes I’d been wearing had been removed, which was good. I was probably in the stages of hypothermia when Bard rowed me back to the shore. But my breathing was normal, I didn’t have any chills, and there was no dizziness.

The tent flap opened, bringing a burst of daylight before shutting again. I smiled when I saw Tauriel. The tall elf had to stoop a great amount to fit into the size of the tent. She smiled back. “I heard you awaken. Your dwarf wanted to come and check on you himself, but you are indecent, and I wasn’t sure if you wanted to be mauled by him.” Tauriel picked up some folded clothes nearby. They looked like a pair I had left in my pack. “Here is something to change into. Do you require assistance?”

“Nah, I’m good.” I groaned as I sat up. The cold air of the tent hit my bare shoulders, so I pulled the blankets higher around me. “Thank you, though. Are we still on the Eastern shore?”

“Yes.” Tauriel handed me the clothes, and I began dressing with a series of wincs and oofs. And the more I looked at my skin, the more I realized that I was just one giant Bruise. “But they are preparing to leave for the ruins of Dale this afternoon. Some will walk with the larger carts and animals. Most will travel by boat.”

“Nice. Guess I better get off my ass and help out.”

Tauriel regarded me sharply. “You stood against Smaug, my lady—and fought him. Nobody expects you to do such things.”

I slipped my shirt on, then pulled the blankets off so I could sorely shimmy into the trousers. “I think we both know the kind of person I’m like, even though you’ve just met me. Do I look like I’ll just sit around when people need help?”

“You have already helped,” Tauriel sighed, fixing me with her hazel gaze. “You diverted Smaug’s attention long enough for the Bowman to pierce him with the black arrow. That is a feat few races in Arda have ever accomplished and lived to tell the tale.”

“Yeah, well, if I died, I’d just come back,” I muttered wryly. I pulled some socks over my cold feet. “How’s Kili?”

Tauriel stilled, then let out another sigh and sank to her knees so she wouldn’t have to crouch. “He is well. The poison’s effects have left his system.”

“Good.”

She tilted her head, lips parting as if she was considering not saying what she wanted at all. “You…knew of my coming.”

“I sure did.”
“Then you know of the future.”

“Well, that’s kinda relative.” I remembered killing Bolg and grimaced. “I’ve done a few things that have changed it.”

Whatever Tauriel was going to say next was abruptly bottled up and stuffed deep down. She nodded once and gave me my boots to put on. “Hopefully,” she spoke, “it will be a better future for all of us.”

“I’d like to think that it might be,” I smiled, tugging a boot onto my foot. Then the smile turned sly. “Why, you wanna know something about you and Kili?”

Tauriel got to her feet and backed out of the tent. “Hurry, now,” she hastily said. “You have loved ones waiting.”

I chuckled as Tauriel left, but once she was gone, it faded. What the hell was the future even going to be?

And honestly, would I even make it better for the future? Or was I just giving Fili, Kili, and Thorin a future itself?

I pressed both palms into my eyes and took steadying breaths. Don’t cry. Don’t cry. There was still so much to do, still such a long ways to go.

With a final sniff that sent a twinge of pain up into my skull, I lowered my hands, blinked away whatever mist had formed, and grabbed the coat laid out for me. It was Lake-town style, long and layered underneath with sheep wool and yak fur, the fabric a dark green. I put it on, wincing at the strain on my skin and muscles, then staggered outside.

Daylight seared my already stinging eyeballs. I barely had time to adjust to it before arms were being thrown around me, followed by loud dwarven speech and heavy-handed claps on my poor back.

“The great Valeria returns!”

“Thought you’d be nothin’ but a pile of ash! Smaug’ll do that to ya!”

“Aye, but he didn’t do that to her, now did he, Bofur?”

“No! He didn’t! Best thank Mahal for that!”

“Best thank that light!”

Fili shoved Bofur, Oin, and Kili away from me. “Mahal, give her some space! Can’t you see she’s battered?”

I grinned and cupped my own cheek. It hurt. “I am battered, aren’t I?”

Fili took my left hand and kissed the back of it, refraining from showing a public display of affection in front of dwarves, elves, and humans. I wouldn’t have minded if he couldn’t resist, but I understood.

Oh, shit.

I said that I loved him.
Okay, well, who could have blamed me? I was diving headfirst into fire. And I didn’t want to find out if I’d be reborn from the ashes like a fucking phoenix or whatever. Honestly, I’d probably be looking like a slimy Frank Reynolds when he slid out naked from the couch in It’s Always Sunny.

“You’re beautiful,” Fili said, suckering me with—just—just him. “And incredibly, horribly courageous.”

“Aye, you’re lucky you faced a furious dragon,” Bofur put in, not bothering to hide that he and the others were eavesdropping on our conversation. “Otherwise you would have had to face Fili’s fury.”

I raised my eyebrows at Fili, who had the decency to be bashful. “Oh? You were mad?”

“Of course I was!” he quietly exclaimed. “You pushed me back into the boat then ran off!”

“We had to hold him down,” Kili said factually.

Fili huffed at my amusement. “You’re not supposed to think it’s funny,” he scolded, but he didn’t sound convincing. “And I still mean to give you a piece of my mind, woman!”

But his flustering only made me grin more, and I had to cover it and force myself not to laugh too hard, otherwise I’d bust an organ. “So go ahead, give it,” Kili goaded, crossing his arms. “Let us hear you chastise the woman who battled Smaug.”

“It wasn’t really a battle,” I tried correcting, but nobody listened to me.

“Oh, yes, get right on with it,” Bofur said. He stuck his empty pipe in the side of his mouth. “Just repeat all the things you swore you’d say to her.” To me, he added, “Nearly tipped the boat over with the fuss he made.”

“A fuss was made? By Fili? Wow,” I drawled. “I wish I had been there to see that.”

“You still could,” said Kili. “If brother would just remember his words. Let me get you started. ‘I swear on Mahal and Yavanna, that woman has no sense. Something, something, can’t be reasoned with, something, cursing, foolish woman.’”

“I’m going to kick you right where that arrow got you,” Fili growled at Kili, who only beamed like the shithead little brother he was. “Then we’ll see if Tauriel can speak a few elven words to heal it back up again.”

The elf paused at the mention of her name. She was packing two heavy bags of grain to a skiff. Her eyes narrowed at Fili before she continued. Kili, suddenly distracted, hobbled after her on his one good leg.

“Hey,” I said, drawing Fili’s focus back to me. “I am sorry. I didn’t…things didn’t go how I wanted, so I…improvised. But I come back from the dead. You don’t. In that moment, it was safer for me to go back alone.”

He sighed again, but this one was like the release of a weight. “I understand, Valeria. I do. Forgive me for acting rashly. I was terrified of what Smaug would do to you.”

I wanted to kiss Fili, but I kept it to squeezing his hand. “And now I faced a dragon,” I smirked, hoping to lighten the mood. “So you can’t ever be mad at me again.”

Fili gave me a look. “We’ll see about that,” he said dryly. “You have a tendency to make those
around you want to pull their hair out. But,” he drew my hand up to kiss the back of it, and the airy sensation in my stomach was a nice contrast to the ache, “I am beyond glad that you are safe. Now come; we must travel to the Lonely Mountain.”

My smile switched to a frown.

Bard strode up to us. “I heard you were awake.” He gave me a stiff, slight bow. “If—”

“Make way! The Master is coming through! Make way, you cretins!”

My frown switched to a scowl.

Alfrid shoved the few people who had either congregated around the dwarves and me or busied themselves with hauling supplies to boats. The Master of Lake-town strode behind him, puffed up with his robes and collar and gout. “How the fuck is he still alive?” I hissed to Fili and Bard as they approached.

“Sheer unluckiness, I suppose,” Fili muttered back. Then, unable to help himself, he said with a smile in his tone, “No thanks to you.”

I would have punched him in the shoulder, but I was too owie to be violent.

“My Lady Valeria!” The Master declared, throwing his arms wide open. I made an audibly disgusted noise. “What thanks do we have to give! You spared all our lives from the great and terrible dragon! The sacrifice! The bravery! The…”

When the Master couldn’t come up for another word, Alfrid leaned over and said, “The care, Your Grace.”

“The care!” The Master finished with a fake, yellow-toothed grin. “We owe our lives to your dedication!”

“No, you owe Bard your lives,” I snapped, pointing a bruised finger at the bowman. “He killed Smaug. And, correct me if I’m wrong, but weren’t you trying to stop us from getting everyone out of the town?”

The Master opened his mouth, but I kept going, redirecting my finger to him and Alfrid. “You’re Master of nothing, now, aren’t you? Lake-town is gone. So it means I don’t have to listen to your bullshit, and neither does anyone else.”

“Watch your tongue, dwarven whore!” Alfrid spat, and a second later he was doubled over, wheezing for air. Fili withdrew his fist back to his side and calmly returned to my side. I stopped scowling. Instead, my expression reflected the ideas weaving together in my head.

“Bard is the leader, now,” I spoke, steady and fast. More people started to gather to hear what was being said, and upon my statement, agreeing murmurs swept through the crowd. “He planned to safely deliver goods to this shore and ensured that the people got there, too. Then he went and killed a dragon for them! He loves these people! Do you?”

“I—bah! This is preposterous!” The Master shouted. “I am the Master! I hold the power! Without me, these peasants would have died long ago!”

The Lakemen, in response, booed and yelled back at the Master. He flinched at the assaults. “Without you,” Bard finally said, drawing himself up to full height, “Lake-town would have prospered, and my people would not have starved every winter the last fifteen years.”
He was backed with cheers and support.

“You cannot—you would not—”

The Master’s cries were drowned out. “We go to Dale!” Bard decreed. “There we will prepare to defend ourselves against the dark forces approaching! And we will rebuild! Smaug is gone from the land; we will no longer fear his terror. What was once good and green shall be so once more!”

I grinned, despite how it stung, and watched as the Northmen returned Bard his crown, his kingdom.

But he was and always would be a man of the people, and no claim or title could ever change that. As Bard and his children were congratulated—and the Master and Alfrid pushed away into obscurity—I found myself being tugged to the lake. “Come, Ria,” Fili said. “We must be on our way.”

It took me a couple of seconds to process Fili’s words, but once I did, I stopped. My shinbones creaked with pain. “Wait, what? No. We can’t go.”

Oin and Bofur were readying the dinghy. I glanced off to the side and saw that Kili may have been having some similar conversation with Tauriel. Legolas, too, watched from afar while he held the halter of a horse. Was he staying? Were they both staying to help? I supposed I killed Bolg, so Legolas had less reason to follow him off to wherever they went. Gummy bad? No, that wasn’t right, but I was close. I was close.

“The people are safe, Ria. They do not need our assistance. But our king needs us.”

He’s not my king, I almost said.

“Oh, come on, Fili, do you really wanna up and leave?” I sighed, taking my hand away. Fili gave me an exasperated look. “After all this, you think it’s alright to just abandon them?”

“We’re not—” he began with a raised voice, then corrected himself and spoke lower, stepping close to me once more. “We are not abandoning them, Valeria. But it is time to leave.”

I scoffed a humorless laugh, then grimaced and rubbed my chest. “You know that it’ll take just a few more hours to get them settled into Dale, right? It’s not going to change much.”

“Valeria, Thorin—”

I growled and squeezed my eyes shut for a moment. “I couldn’t give a flying fuck about Thorin, right now. Do you know who I care about?” I splayed a hand behind me. “All these people! I’m not gonna leave them.”

Fili riled at my words. “You signed a contract, remember?” he said. “You owe your loyalty to him.”

I was getting more frustrated. “Listen, Fili. Listen.” I cupped his face with less gentleness than I hoped for. “Thorin is…Thorin will not be himself when we get back. He’s become corrupted with the dragon-sickness.”

Blue eyes went wide. “What? No. No, that’s impossible. Thorin would never…he saw his grandfather…”
“It’s true. It’s true, believe me. Fili, he’s not going to notice another day of our absence.” My expression grew firm. “But if you really must leave, then just go without me.”

“Mahal, I’m not going to do that,” Fili breathed. He removed my hands from his face and held them. “Why did you keep this from me? I could have…I could have gone with my uncle and perhaps…changed something.”

I dropped my gaze. “It…I’m not very good at saying things at the right time, okay? I find that out more and more. But—” I looked back to Fili. “But I am good at helping people. This? Aiding and assisting people who have been displaced and terrorized? This was my job back at home, my entire life. You can’t possibly think that I’d just walk away from them. I have—I have followed all of you across the country, in a world that’s not even my own. For once, can you just…follow me? For a few hours? And take the time to help?”

Fili turned to the boat, where Oin and Bofur stood, confused and hands on their hips. “What’s the hold up, laddie?” Bofur called. “Your mistress tellin’ ya no?”

He just made an array of distressed gestures and a strangled noise.

“Fili,” I said seriously, bringing him back to me. “I’m not going.”

He clenched his fists, bringing them up with an infuriated growl. “You are…a stubborn woman.”

I smiled mirthlessly. “Only when I need to be.”

Then I spun on my heels and hobbled away, wishing for an asston of Tylenol.

A few moments later, I heard Fili shout a sharp command to Oin and Bofur, and then the scrape of the boat’s bottom as it was hauled back onto shore. I found Tauriel in the moving crowd and walked up to her. “So you and Legolas are staying, too?” I asked. She spared me a glance and nodded.

“Yes. We felt it wrong to leave the Lakemen. My lord Legolas also has questions for you which he requires answers.”

“Hey, I’m fine with that,” I shrugged, though the movement was a mistake. Tauriel flashed a wry smile.

“I see you command the dwarves, now.”

Chuckling, I stooped beside her and picked up a light sack of what was most likely blankets. “Nah. The trick is just to shame them.” I didn’t mention that it helped to have a dwarf love me, as well.

“I will keep that in mind.”

“Mm hm, you probably better.”

Tauriel opened her mouth to say something in blushing retort, but a blond dwarf interrupted our conversation as he stomped over. “Give me that,” he said brusquely, taking the sack away from me. I was left standing there emptyhanded and biting my bottom lip to keep quiet.

Kili followed his older brother, smirking and hardly hiding that he was making heart eyes at Tauriel. He picked up a heavier sack of grain, threw it over his shoulder, and dramatically muttered to me, “So bossy, Ria. So bossy.”
“Shut the fuck up.”

As I bent over to grab another sack, though, I was smiling. I watched Fili take supplies to a skiff, and while he mingled, the people warmly welcomed his help. He eased up considerably and began making conversation with them. Kili, Bofur, and Oin joined in.

Then I happened to glimpse the palm of my left hand. The droplet was still there, small and firm, and I curled my fingers over its hard surface. It had saved me from Smaug’s fire—it had saved me from the fatal fall. What else could it do? Smaug wanted it. Maybe more than he wanted me. He was just going to FedEx ship me to the Dark Lord himself, but the droplet? That would have had to be his.

And, for the thousandth time, I asked it:

*What are you?*

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Chapter End Notes

Valeria and Fili’s first fight? Something like that. They aren’t the kind of people to fight in the first place, but basically Valeria can’t ever be told to ignore people in help.
I rode with Bard on his boat as we sailed to Dale. Fili and Kili entertained Tilda, Sigrid and Bain stared forlornly out onto the remnants of their still-smoldering town, Oin slept, Bofur whittled away to make some toy for Tilda while whistling a jaunty tune, and Tauriel and Legolas whispered in their elven language at the front of the boat.

“So,” I said, folding my arms. The lake breeze cut my bruised skin, and I wanted to sleep but denied the impulse. “You probably heard the entire conversation with ol’ Smaugy and me.”

A silence filled with the lapping of water and the creaking of the boat. Then, “Aye.”

“So you know the truth about me. That I’m from…a different world.”

“Aye.” Bard drew in a long breath, then said, “You…you are not the first I have heard possessing the strange ability of the light.” He nodded toward the limp hand at my side, where the droplet stayed. I was too afraid of pulling it out, now, and decided that it was maybe best to keep in me until the upcoming war had passed. “I’ve heard tales of an Eastern woman bearing a palm containing starlight. It’s because of her that we’ve not had Easterling incursions in decades. She’s their queen or something of the sort.”

“Oh. Yeah.” I had thought about her a lot after going toe-to-toe with Smaug using the droplet. “Her name’s Amelie, I think. That’s what Beorn told me. She’s possibly from the same world as me. But I didn’t know she was a queen. Or that she’s calmed the Easterlings. Honestly, I don’t know much about them. Just that they’re…in the East. And the dwarves had problems with them a long time ago.”

“Perhaps you will meet. I hear she does not age. It is possible that neither will you.”

Well, damn.

I pulled my coat tighter around me. My knuckles were swollen and stiff, and I was beginning to feel the throb of the stitch work on my upper back that laced together what Smaug had torn open. “So it doesn’t scare you that I’m from another world?”

Bard almost smirked. He adjusted the boat’s handle to direct its course.

“I have much more to be frightened of than a person from a dot in the night sky.”

Really, the thought of another world should be terrifying. It was for me. On Earth, it was generally agreed upon that there had to be lifeforms on other planets, even though we could not fathom much beyond single-celled organisms and alien bacteria. I know I had a come-apart trying to grasp the reality of this world—although that also had to do with its fictionality.
So even though Bard’s statement may have been out of wryness, or denial, or his Northman way of thinking, it made me smile for an instant. But that smile soon faded and I was left with a hollow longing to be back on my dot in the night sky.

I didn’t expect Bard to keep talking with the resolution of his previous words. But, ever-so-softly, he whispered in the winter daylight, “You have a mark upon your head, Valeria. Darkness seeks to claim you.”

It took me a few moments to realize what Bard was getting at. When it registered that not only had he heard Smaug say that I was from another world, but he also heard reference of my delivery to the Dark Lord, I couldn’t help but scoff. I was undoubtedly being irreverent toward such a topic. “I’ve known for a while,” I then admitted just as quietly. Bard tilted his head as if he wished to regard me, then thought better of it and continued to stare ahead. Maybe a person from another world didn’t scare him, but the mention of the Dark Lord certainly did. I saw how his jaw had clenched and knuckles tightened on the steering handle.

“And yet you speak so casually.”

“He doesn’t scare me.”

But I felt his hand around my throat, and the enormity of an incomprehensible evil swathing my existence.

“He should.”

I couldn’t tell Bard that I had every intention of finding a way home and being free from his grasp. Neither could I tell him that the very prospect of being separated from this world was a greater sorrow than anything Sauron could inflict upon me.

“I’ll be fine, Bard,” I instead assured, though it was flat and unconvincing.

“His army will be upon us soon. They will surely try to capture you to be taken to him.”

“Yeah. They can try.”

He let out an almost inaudible sigh of frustration. “You do not understand the severity of this.”

I frowned and pressed a hand to a cold ear in a poor attempt to warm it. “I do. More than you think. But I can’t dwell on it. Not right now, when there’s so much else to keep me up at night.”

This time, Bard did regard me for a second. “Do not confuse your bravery with stupidity. If you are to fight, you must be careful.” He then fell silent, but it was like the draw of a bowstring before unleashing a fatal arrow. “If you are to be captured…I pray that your blade may be swift enough to find its way to your heart.”

My hand lowered.

“It is better to choose to die than to face what awaits you in the realm of darkness.”

Suicide. I’d confronted death more times than I could count; the executioner came in many forms. Bullets, drowning, disease, fire. Being my own executioner had also been an undeniable consideration when it came to perilous and bleak circumstances. But it always remained a hatch in the bottom of my mind, locked and buried until the threat of men who wanted to rape and kill me and the women I was with bore down. It never came to fruition, though, and I managed to keep it locked in all my years of work.
I understood Bard’s reasoning. And I most likely would choose to kill myself rather than live to see what the Dark Lord had in store.

These were strange times, however, and I had a stranger condition of coming back from something final. A blade to the heart would not mean the end.

The realization made me feel small and helpless.

“Thank you for the advice,” I muttered. Bard did not say anything else.

To try and make myself feel better, I looked to Fili. He had resorted to teaching Tilda how to hold a dagger (I didn’t know where he had found it), and Kili was enthusiastically miming all the ways in which to stab an enemy. If Bard noticed them, he didn’t say anything about it. It was probably best for Tilda to know how to fight a little, at least, with war approaching.

Then I thought of seeing barefoot kids holding assault rifles in dusty, dry country, and I despaired. For them, For Tilda, For Sigrid and Bain and all the other children who had and would taste war.

Another wave of exhaustion swelled in me, lasting longer this time, like an inevitable contraction toward unconsciousness. I thumbed the droplet, hoping that the touch would somehow provide me with a boost of vitality. But it could or would not, so I wordlessly wandered away from Bard, slumped down beside Oin, and let my head rest on his shoulder. My gray, drifting thoughts were filled with all that was to come and all that I could not foresee, and death and love and worry.

Through it all, however, remained a smidgen of light. The calm excitement of seeing the Company again, seeing Bilbo, kept me moored.

Dale, for the dragon-burnt ruin that it was, stood strong. Snow drifted down from the blank, indeterminate sky, and the sun was a pale, tame orb hanging above us while supplies, animals, and people were unloaded on the shore of the River Running.

Everyone worked with efficient haste. The air was getting colder, and they did not have much time to get somewhat settled before night fell. I lost myself in the routine of unloading and passing, walking and lifting, smiling and asking, then repeating the process. I’d spent days doing this exact thing back home. And, compared to the places I had done it at, the ruins of Dale were a pretty nice place. Just a bit of snowfall, numb fingers and toes, and my own pained body. Everyone had food, though, and everyone had blankets.

Perhaps the greatest difference here was that everyone still had their families, despite the destruction of their town.

I helped make sure of it. The reminder sent a spread of warmth throughout my chest, and I was renewed with vigor that my muscles were sure to feel in the morning.

“The handkerchief is a nice touch,” Fili said when he finally sat beside me, balancing a bowl of stew and a hunk of hard bread in his hands. I touched the gray piece of fabric one of the women had given to me to keep flyaway hairs from my face while we worked.

“Thank you. I like what you’ve done with your hair, too.”

At some point, Fili had loosely braided his hair back and tied it with a leather cord. We both smelled of cold air and sweat and campfire, but unlike me, he bore no outward fatigue. My own bowl of stew held only remnants of broth and strips of untouched meat, and my bread was long
Because Legolas and Tauriel had nowhere else to go (and because Tauriel and Kili were unofficially a thing, now), they had joined us around the small campfire identical to the dozens of others illuminating Dale. Legolas ate tiny bites, his body half-turned from the campfire as if to distance himself without being entirely removed. Tauriel was caught between indulging in Kili’s attention and abstaining from it. Without the need for ferocity or courage, she was left skittish more than anything.

Two elves, four dwarves, and a bruised human. We must’ve been quite the sight.

Fili held out his bowl for me to dump the leftover meat into. “I will be sad when we reach the Lonely Mountain,” he admitted, though low enough that it was heard only by me and with that familiar playful tone. “Because then Mr. Baggins will be the recipient of such gifts once more.”

“He’s a hobbit, alright? He needs to eat a lot more.”


We both chuckled, our heads close together. Fili went to press a kiss to my forehead, believing that nobody was watching us, but a smooth voice interrupted our moment.

“There are answers I desire from you, Lady Valeria.”

I lifted my gaze to Legolas. He had shifted so he squarely faced me from the other side of the fire. Embers reflected in his pale elven eyes.

Our campfire had gone silent, leaving the world to be filled with distant conversations from other campfires.

There was a brief pause on my part, then I set my bowl aside to make a submissive gesture. “Alright, yeah, it was me.”

Legolas only lifted a brow. I went on plaintively.

“I was the one who drew the big monster penis on your wall.”

Bofur keeled over, coughing on pipe smoke. Kili’s eyes went wide as saucers, and he looked about the camp like a child eager to see chaos unfold. Fili rubbed at his mouth and tried neutrally clearing his throat.

Then Oin went, “Eh? What’d the lass say? Mister squeamish?”

Fili choked, and Kili tossed his head back and laughed. “What, Valeria? You drew a cock on the elves’ wall?” Kili exclaimed. “Why have I not heard of this until now?”

Tauriel narrowed her eyes at me, though she feigned most of her malice. “That was right outside of my quarters, I’ll have you know.”

I slapped a hand over my eyes and began laughing as well. “Oh, man, I’m so sorry! I made it—it was super ugly, too, and—and—and—”

“And seed seemed to spray right onto my door,” Tauriel finished dryly. That sent Kili and Bofur on their backs, and Fili was not far away from crumbling, either. I doubled over, holding my ribs so they wouldn’t jostle too much from the hysterical wracking.
Just as it subsided, Tauriel also reminded, “You terrified one of my guards, as well, pretending to be a vengeful spirit wandering the halls and speaking in strange tongues.”

Kili froze and sat back up, now deadly serious. “Valeria,” he breathed, “don’t tell me…”

I raised my hands in claw shapes. “La Llorona struck again,” I spoke, unleashing a new bout of raucous dwarven howls. “Oh, the poor bebé! I nearly forgot I did that! I scared him so bad!”

“Nobody understood half of what he was saying until it was too late,” said Tauriel, painting a fuller picture of what I’d done. “And it did not console him to find out that you had indeed risen from the dead and barreled down the river with a company of dwarves.”

“If you see him again, tell him I’m sorry,” I said sincerely, though I still couldn’t contain all my giggles.

Tauriel’s smile and laughter was rich like the perfect autumn day. The thought of the dwarves’ imprisonment in Mirkwood brought forth a chest of memories, and even though it had really only been a few days ago, I had it in my mind that the incident was years in the past.

Leaning forward, I eagerly asked Tauriel, “Did you believe that they were sad about my death?”

She scoffed, and even that was beautiful. “Their reactions were too dramatic to be realistic, yet too foolish to be malicious.”

“Oi!” Bofur protested. “We acted our hearts out! Kili even tried composing a poem!”

I gasped upon remembrance, and Kili threw his spoon at Bofur. Legolas, at this point, sunk back into a dour demeanor with how derailed the conversation had become—but I wanted to believe that he was enjoying himself more than he cared to admit.

“Kili! Holy shit, Kili. You have to recite the poem!”

“Bah! It wasn’t even a poem! And I hoped that would stay in those cells where it belonged,” Kili growled, shooting another glare at Bofur.

“Please, Kili,” I begged. “I need to hear it.”

“Go on, brother,” Fili said, putting his arm around my shoulders and pulling me close as though to amplify my pleading state. “She’s tired, and in pain, and she needs the comfort of your poetry.”

I loved him so much.

Kili growled something in Khuzdul, and I was pretty sure the dwarven word for “fuck” was somewhere in the midst. His face grew red.

But still he straightened, loudly cleared his throat, and placed a hand over his heart while he looked directly at me.

“Sweet Valeria,
Gentle as wisteria
You are gone
And we long
For you to return.

Skin of brown
Eyes crowned  
With curtained curls  
And laughter unfurled  
Like a blossom in the meadow.

You are gone  
But not for long  
Your breasts full—"

“Kili!” I shouted.

“That’s where I ended! I swear!” He was even redder, now, and he threw up his hands. “I ran out of things to describe! And I meant to say ‘bosom!’ But the words got all jumbled up, then I got booed at by everyone else, and I never got the chance to fix it!”

Through his desperate ramblings, I began shaking with laughter. When Kili was in the middle of trying to say that my breasts, while fine, were not to his liking, but they were to anybody’s liking, but not that he disliked my breasts, I cut him off before he could dig himself a deeper hole right next to Tauriel.

“Kili! Kili, it’s fine. It’s fine, I swear.” I was grinning so much that it hurt my tender cheeks. “You really had something good going there! I mean, up until the tits part, I didn’t think it was bad at all.”

He sniffed, then said to Fili, Oin, and Bofur, “There. You see? The lady said it was just fine.”

“Except for the tits part.”

“…Except for the tits part.”

“Keep working on it, lad,” said Bofur, happily puffing away at his pipe again. I didn’t know where he had found some pipeweed, but he wasn’t going to let it go to waste. “You’ll make a fine poet.”

“Someday,” Oin added. “Not today.”

Kili opened his mouth to give some sort of explanation to Tauriel, but under her faux-withering look, he slumped. Fili and I laughed, and merriment was restored to our souls. It felt good, being this light, hearing the sounds of warmth and joy. Fili kept me close to him, Tauriel and Kili not-so-discreetly touched pinkies, and Bofur launched into a story about the time he, Bifur, and Bombur were set upon by bandits in the Blue Mountains, and all the hilarity that ensued. Because it was a story, not an account, and stories were far more entertaining than accounts—especially when it was told by Bofur.

My heart eased.

Tomorrow, we’d venture to the Lonely Mountain and see what had become of Thorin and the Company. Tomorrow, realities would be faced once more.

But for now, in the ruins of Dale, I was among friends, in the arms of my lover, and free of worry.

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Legolas stood on the shoreline, seeking the sight of something beyond vision. Ice crunched between rocks as I tressed up beside him. Mist hung thick in the air, and Legolas’ figure reminded me of when I killed Bolg, how the blade felt as it sunk through skull and brain, the flicker of blue
“Alright, I’m here,” I said. My voice sounded odd in the hush by the quiet river. Standing next to the six-foot-plus Legolas made me feel short, so getting back into the midst of thirteen dwarves and a hobbit sounded even better. “Ask away.”

“Is the dwarf’s love for Tauriel true?”

I stalled. Out of all the questions I expected Legolas to pose, that one caught me off-guard.

It took a couple moments to regain my train of thought, but once I did, I said, “Yeah. They both love each other. Deeply.”

There was barely a pause. “And what becomes of them?”

The mist clung thick to my clothes, my throat.

But Legolas was strangely sound, and I sensed no venom in him, only concern he tried to detach himself from. He cared just as deeply about Tauriel, but perhaps in a different way than I thought. In a different way than was portrayed.

Without explicitly stating the details, I replied, “They…they have unhappy endings.”

“How so?”

I did not want to say it out loud. Doing that could set it in stone. Make it unavoidable.

So instead, I went with, “Bolg’s death changed things. I honestly don’t know what’s to become of them now.”

“So you killed him with their future in mind?”

“Yes.”

Legolas did not move, nor did he speak for several seconds. I stood still as well, taking in the itchy sting of the cut on my back, the pain in my knees, the droplet’s weight in my palm. The mist remained unbroken.

“What will become of my father?”

“Uh, I think he’s fine?” I never paid much attention to Thranduil’s character. All I knew was that he was played by Lee Pace, who was the lead character in Pushing Daisies, he was a dick, and he rode a big moose-elk-thing into battle. He was also hella dramatic.

“He will be here, soon,” Legolas went on. His carefully-crafted neutral tone began to falter. I couldn’t place the emotion breaking through. There were hundreds of years of a complicated father-son relationship. I doubted even Legolas fully comprehended what he felt. “Word of Smaug’s death and Oakenshield’s reclamation will reach Mirkwood.”

Legolas finally tilted his head toward me. A touch of pain distorted his otherwise ageless visage. “He will come to take what the dwarves owe him.”

I thought hard and gazed back out on the river. Fog crawled over it, slow-moving and tender. “He...your father, he wants, um, he wants jewels, doesn’t he?”

“The White Gems of Lasgalen. They were my mother’s. My father gave them to the dwarves to
have several of the gems be set into a necklace.” He paused, then softly informed, “she perished before her gift could be completed.”

A pang of ache went through.

“I’m sorry.”

Something like curiosity edged Legolas’ brows. “Do not be. It happened long ago. When my father went to retrieve the finished necklace, King Thror would not return it and the rest of the gems to him. It means he has waited hundreds of years to tear down the mountain and slay every dwarf in his path to get the White Gems of Lasgalen back. They are all that is left of my mother.”

I paused, then muttered to Legolas, “No. It’s not all he has left. He has...he has you.”

The curiosity increased. The hint of a smile flickered on the corner of his lip. “It is not every day that a human pities an elf.”

“It’s not pity.”

“Then what is it?”

I made a small noise and said, “It—it’s compassion. Empathy. That’s not so strange, is it?”

Legolas’ smile grew. “No. I do not suppose it is.” His smile disappeared, though, replaced by concern again. “Nevertheless. The dwarves saw my father’s revenge once. They will see it again if the gems are not given back.” His gaze intensified. “Before any army of orcs arrive.”

“So is this you trying to tell me to find a way to get ahold of the gems?”

“No. Simply the necklace.”

“Right. The necklace.” I shuffled my feet. “I’ll try my best.”

Surprisingly, humor reappeared in Legolas. “And your loyalty to the dwarves? To Thorin? Are you unafraid of the consequences should your treachery be found out?”

“Okay, one, it’s not treachery. And two, I may be loyal, but...but I’m not loyal like a dwarf.”

Admitting it made me feel like I was saying something wrong, yet something true.

“Loyalty gets them in trouble. They often confuse it with being right. I love Thorin. He—he can be a bastard, sometimes, and infuriatingly stubborn like the rest of them, but he’s a good person. A good king. So they follow him. I follow him.”

“Yet you are not blind like they are.”

I tried smiling, but it ended up being grim. “I don’t have the dwarven perspective, no.”

“It has served you well.”

“Yeah,” I sighed, “we’ll see if it’ll stay that way once I get those gems for you.”

“For my father, you mean.”

“Nah. Your dad sounds like he’s got issues. Plus, I really don’t know the guy. But you love him, and I like you, and I think as much as you don’t want to admit it, you’d rather see your people and
at least a few of the dwarves safe than go to war.”

“Oh? You like me?”

I scoffed and kicked some pebbles loose from their icy encasements. “Yeah, I guess so. You’re a lot nicer than you let on.”

The tone of my words were too connotative. Legolas caught it, and his demeanor changed. Still amused, but his shoulders were stiffer, eyes sharper.

“Lady Valeria,” he spoke lowly. I forced myself not to struggle like a rabbit against the snare enclosing around my throat. Legolas had somehow moved closer, though I didn’t notice when. I refused to crane my head back too far. “I have one final question for you.”

I stayed silent, mouth closed into a firm, unflinching line.

“What becomes of me?”

My chest involuntarily tightened. A faint, frigid breeze brushed Legolas’ unnaturally golden strands of hair. The humid smell of the mist mixed with the sudden scent of forest pines.

Remaining still, trying to slip out from the snare before it was too late, I replied like my voice was the veiled fog itself.

“Your future, Legolas? Your future would only frighten you.”

And then I left him alone on the shoreline, leaving as soundlessly as I came. For now, I was free from ensnarement.

But if I could not go home, then I was bound to be caught again. And then…and then I wasn’t even sure I wanted to escape.

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The entrance to Erebor loomed in front of us, a gaping hole surrounded by massive, broken chunks of ancient stone and a dusting of snow. I passed a decapitated head of a sculpted dwarven sentry, taking in his stout, intricate details and his firm—but vacant—stare.

A hollow wind blew out from the mountain, rattling like something taking its first breaths.

Or its last.

With the stagnant wind came the festering stench of a dragon. Smelling it again sent a memory of flame and ash through me, and I clenched my fists to stand against it. The droplet moved faintly as skin and muscle and bone tightened around its presence.

Inside the mountain was darkness broken by the dim light of torches and candles. Like a furnace beckoning us in, like Smaug’s golden shine.

I hurt. And I was not ready to face the new King Under the Mountain. I was not ready to see what Thorin had become.

But Fili enveloped my fist, relaxing it with his touch, and did not guide me in, but let me begin moving on my own with him at my side.

We entered the Lonely Mountain.
It was not a moment of pride and grandeur. The dwarves did not holler for their kin announcing their arrival. Something other than the darkness and cold pressed down on us. The sounds of our boots echoed too loudly on the rubble-marked floor. I stepped on something hard and shiny, and when I lifted my boot up, I saw a single coin. It had most likely been dropped when Smaug fled from the mountain and set his sights upon Laketown.

Bofur finally spoke, but he tried to keep his voice low. “Where is everybody? Hello?”

“They must be further in,” Fili said. He did not let go of my hand, and as I withdrew from my haze of muted terror and dragon teeth, I noticed that he tightly held it. My sore bones and ligaments ached under the pressure, but I didn’t complain about it.

We hit a patch of darkness untouched by the torchlight. I shivered in the blindness, thumbed the droplet, then cupped my palm in front of me. At the barest thought, it breathed life into the chamber with a white gleam. I cringed at the abrupt change in light along with the dwarves, but our eyes adjusted again.

“That’s, oh, a pretty neat trick there, lass,” said Oin. “Be mighty fine fer ya in the unlit parts of the kingdom.”

And a kingdom it was. I increased the droplet’s power, whose flood revealed an entire city—no, civilization—abandoned in the expanse of the mountain. I drew in a small gasp at the endlessness of pillars and stairs, the ancient tapestries still hung on walls with no end to them, the way the light tunneled into empty streets and homes—everything gilded with timelessness and strength so it could await its people’s return.

We stood in reverence of Erebor, for all it was once, for what it could be, for we few who believed in its dream and listened to its call.

Everything, everything, had been worth it. The nights on hard ground, the trolls, the tears, the homesickness, the stone giants, the goblins, the orcs, the spiders, the dragon, the death.

I grinned, breathlessly at first, then noise bubbled up from the back of my aching throat, spreading with the light. “Whoa. Like, whoa! You guys! Holy shit! Ah!”

It broke the spell of awe. Our laughter brought a brightness beyond the light. Renewed with excitement, we hurried up a staircase, excitedly calling for everyone. The light traveled with me, turning the city of Erebor into a moving shadow lantern that we were the center of. It wasn’t until later that I realized the light had washed away the oppressive air left behind by Smaug, leaving us joyous and unburdened.

Then a voice I longed to hear called, “Valeria? Valeria?”

My light receded when we came upon a well-lit bridge. Down from the staircase on the other end came a hobbit, his large feet swiftly carrying him to us. “Valeria!” Bilbo exclaimed, beaming ear-to-ear. “Oh, thank Eru you’re here!”

“Baggins! What is up?” I exclaimed, reflecting his grin and jogging forward with groaning legs. He came more than halfway across the bridge when we finally embraced. I nearly softball-slid to him, but instead a knee dropped to the ground and I found myself enveloping Bilbo in my arms, squeezing him with all my shaking strength. His curls tickled my cheek.

“Valeria!” Bilbo pulled away. Tears glistened in his eyes. “I—I was so worried! With you and Smaug and the light—” he gulped, too emotional to go on, so I laughed warmly and pulled him
into another hug.

“I’m alright. Just a little bruised, that’s all.”

“Yes. Yes, I can see that.” I let go of him so he could examine my face in the brazen torchlight. Bilbo tutted with concern. “Eru preserve me, you are absolutely ragged!” He snapped his gaze to the dwarves close behind me. “And I suspect none of you stopped her from working herself even more!”

“As if we could even succeed with that, Master Boggins,” Kili scoffed. Bilbo huffed at the purposeful mispronunciation of his name, but it was done fondly. We both stood back up so Bilbo could hug and greet everyone else.

“Tell me, where are the others?” Bofur questioned. “We haven’t seen a lick of life, save for the fires!”

“They’re further in. I—have been wandering more so than they.” Bilbo’s jovial visage slipped as the conversation turned. He directed his next sentence at me, nose tweaking, fingers twitching. “Valeria, you…you were right. Thorin. I’ve tried talking to him, but he won’t listen. Not to me, or Dwalin, or Balin—not anybody. He’s been down in the treasury for days. He doesn’t sleep, he barely eats. He’s not been himself. Not at all. The—the—the dragon-sickness. It’s consumed him.”

The oppressiveness returned, leeching into our skin, our souls.

We looked further down into the city, where a light unlike the torches spilled through large pillars. They upheld a wall decorated with patterns similar to the style here, the golden gleam pouring through them as well. The wall blocked off the rest of the treasury from our view. But Thorin was down there. I could almost feel him already, wandering aimlessly among the ocean of gold and treasure.

Silently, we descended more bridges and stairs and open hallways. The stink of dragon increased tenfold, and this time it was me that reached out to grab Fili’s hand. “It will be well, amrâlimê,” he whispered to me.

No, it wouldn’t, I wanted to reply, but his simple conviction eased what I could not.

Bilbo stopped on the platform of a staircase winding around the top of the treasury wall. We followed him around the corner to gaze upon the gold expanse. We

Shock, at first, bolted my feet to the ground. There was no end to the wealth, no end. It spilled past the treasury area, overflowing into halls and rooms, swallowing stairs and pillars. Large braziers sat haphazardly atop the piles of gold, turning the appearance of individual coins into molten rivers streaming down to the floor.

Down to the floor, where Thorin Oakenshield wandered.

The shock gave way to pure and utter disgust.

Not just at Thorin, but at the shrine to greed and gluttony, hoarding it all away just because it could be done.

Angry sickness welled up in my chest, biting and snapping, so sudden and unstoppable that I did not know I had come to stand at the edge of the platform, nearly unbound from the swell of long-repressed rage at the sight of such excess. I pulled my lips back into a helpless, heated snarl and shouted:
“Thorin!”

Thorin!...Thorin!...Thorin...Thorin...Thorin...

He only responded to the final, faintest echo before it folded into nothing.

And when he looked up at the six of us, he did not fill with gladness at the sight of his nephews, of me. His Durin blue eyes did not shine. Only the treasure did.

“Gold.” Thorin spoke to himself, not us. He shambled across the sea of coins, the thick, kingly robes he had found dragging behind him and clinking coins against each other. His once well-kept hair was lanky and disheveled. “Gold beyond measure...beyond sorrow...and grief.”

Beside me, barely audible, Fili prayed.

“Behold,” Thorin—not the Thorin I knew, never the Thorin I knew—spread his arms wide to the Disease of the Lonely Mountain, “the great treasure hoard of Thror.”

In a burst of movement that surprised us all, Thorin pitched something through the air at Fili, who caught it and examined the hefty, blood-red ruby that caught torchlight. Anguish visibly filled him, so much that his grip on the gem slipped, sending it plummeting back into the mass of golden plague below.

Thorin did not notice. He touched the spot where his sickened heart lie. A single tear cut into my cheek.

“Welcome, my sister-sons, to the Kingdom of Erebor.”

Chapter End Notes

Tbh, the whole Legolas/Tauriel/Kili love triangle thingy was not my style. I feel like Legolas, if anything, would just be super protective of Tauriel and loves her like a sister. So that's the spin I'm taking with this fic.

But despite all the gloom and doom, Bilbo and Valeria are finally reunited 😍 the BFFs ❤ not writing them together has felt like an eternity.
I came out of my room five days later, because whoo, was I in a *fucking coma*. Turns out when you spend a month only getting an hour of sleep at a time, die, get chased by orcs down a river, evacuate a whole town, fend off a dragon, fall a few hundred feet into a lake, relocate a town, and come to terms with a dwarven king raging with dragon-sickness, you get pretty tired!

“Ho! She lives!” Bombur cried heartily when I shuffled into the common area they took residence in. Though the Company had an entire mountain to themselves, it was almost as if they feared it would infect them with its disease like it had their king.

Still, I yawned and smiled, then bowed slightly with my arms spread out. “Your lady has returned.”

“The lady looks like shite!” Nori exclaimed, which got a laugh from most of the Company. Then he got punched in the shoulder by Fili, who stood to walk over to me. My arrival seemed to ease their restlessness, pausing absentminded card games, coin counting, and weapon cleaning.

“How do you fare?” Fili asked me.

I gave a hefty stretch, rubbed the back of my matted and greasy hair, and replied, “I’m starving.”

“I’ll put some stew on!” Bombur announced almost too excitedly, ready to jump on any excuse to keep himself from boredom and worry. “Should only be a couple hours, ready in time for supper!” He then rambled off listing the spices and vegetables from Laketown he’d use. Pots and cooking utensils clanged loudly in the room.

“Best have a snack while you wait, my lady,” said Dori, handing me a bundle of cloth. Inside was a good amount of sliced cheese, dried apples, fresh mushrooms. He also gave me a flagon of tame wine. I started inhaling the contents.

I scanned the area. Kili, Balin, and Dwalin were gone. Thorin was, too, but I expected it.

“You slept for a long time,” Fili said matter-of-factly. I rolled my eyes, but it was done with a huff and a smile. “Some of us were worried you had finally passed on.”

“I wasn’t!” Bilbo had to pipe up. “I wasn’t.”

“Thank you, Baggins.”

“It was the dreams, honestly, that affirmed your state,” said Fili as he led me to a spot where I could sit beside him. “You would toss and turn sometimes.” It sounded like he meant to say something more on the subject, but thought better of it.

If I had dreams, I didn’t remember them, which was a blessing. Thinking hard enough about them brought up vague and hazy memories of scales and fire, darkness and loss, but they slipped through my fingers like sand. So I didn’t chase after them.

Instead, I asked questions so I could get caught up on what I missed the past five days. Aside from Thorin’s state of worsening madness, nothing much had gone on. Kili visited Dale every day to “help with reparations and go to trade,” but really it was just to be with Tauriel. She and Legolas
were still there, and Legolas constantly reminded them that their father would be at their door demanding what he was owed very soon. They also had a proper burial service for the dead who had not made it out of Erebor when Smaug invaded. I was almost glad I missed it. The sight would have just conjured wearied memories of loss.

The armory had been cleaned out, and braziers were regularly relit and replaced to provide some light to the mountain. The water system worked—it never stopped working, apparently. Everything in Erebor had been designed to last until the days of Dagor Dagorath. So. A very long time.

Dwalin spent most of his time watching over Thorin to make sure he ate what little food he did and wouldn’t turn violent. It turned his demeanor even more sour, so the Company tried avoiding conversation with him most of the time. Balin had busied himself with tidying the archives, but really he hid from who Thorin had become and the pain of watching another king succumb to the sickness. Only Bilbo visited him. The rest would only despair if they stayed too long.

“And you?” I quietly asked Fili when the conversation shifted away. “Are you alright?”

He nodded once, but his eyes were faraway. “It shall not last forever, the sickness. He will recover.”

Then Fili looked at me for assurance, because I was the one who knew the future, because I held all truths.

Only I didn’t, and Thorin would eventually snap from the dragon-sickness just to die afterward with Fili and Kili.

The thought of this made me reach for Fili’s hand. “Come on, let’s go walk around. I’ve slept for five days; I need to stretch my legs.”

But with the mountain too oppressive and our minds too distracted, we wound up back in my room, sitting in a bath full of fresh, hot water, and more food and alcohol within reach. The conversation at first was quiet and small. We mostly shared fond smiles from our respective ends of the deep stone tub.

Then, as Fili’s hand stroked my outstretched calf, he asked me with curious blue eyes, “Ria, tell me of home.”

I raised both eyebrows. “Yeah? You wanna know about more about my home?”

“You are always so bright whenever you speak about it. We have the time.”

Smiling, I said, “We do have the time, don’t we? It’s kind of weird, actually, having the world be this calm.”

“Yes, and I’m sure you’ll find something to do when you’re bored of it,” Fili remarked. I laughed and splashed water at him. He flinched involuntarily, then pretended to shield the food. “Careful! You’ll make the biscuits all soggy.”

“Sorry, sorry.” I moved so I settled against Fili’s chest. His arms wrapped around my waist, and he pressed a kiss to my wet shoulder. “Where to begin?”

“Tell me about your family members. What do they do? What is it like with them?”

“Okay. I… I was a happy kid from a big, happy family. Mexican families are tight, you know, so we all take care of each other. Before I came here, Luis had a job at an ice cream shop. You know,
ice cream? Frozen milk dessert thing?"

“Mm, yes. I ate some in Hobbiton a few hours before going to Mr. Baggin’s home. Had strawberry in it and everything. You have entire shops of that?”

“With, like, a bunch of different flavors beside strawberry.”

“And what is your favorite?”

“Honestly, I can’t even decide. It’s probably a tie between cookies and cream and strawberry cheesecake.”

“They sound very intricate. And delicious.”

“Oh, they are.” We shared fond chuckles, and then I went on. “My sister, Elena, is a graphic designer. I won’t even go into the details of that because it’s all computer-y and stuff. Even I have trouble getting it. My dad’s the manager at State Farm—an insurance company. Where, like, you pay to have things like homes covered by a company so if an accident happens, they’re the ones to cover it.”

“I see.” Fili didn’t see, but I kept going because I didn’t want to explain boring insurance stuff.

“My mom’s a dental hygienist. She…she helps make sure people’s teeth are clean and don’t have any cavities or other problems. You know, like tooth aches? They have, uh, healers for that. My mom does that kind of thing.”

“Is that why you’re so particular about your teeth, then?” he asked, humor in his voice.

“Yeah. I like having healthy teeth.” Instinctively, I ran my tongue over a filling on my bottom molar.

“Most of the dams back home are healers,” Fili said. He absently circled a thumb over my stomach, right beneath the scar that reminded me how I died in cracking flames and snapping jaws. “And you don’t want to be on their bad side when they’re setting bones or curing a toothache. My mother has healer skills, as well. But she does more than that.”

“Like what?”

“Politics, mostly. While my uncle worked to keep the family afloat in the early days after Erebor fell, my mother worked to strengthen ties and trade and finances. She has the mind for it.” He chuckled, albeit dryly. “Sometimes she’s a little too good. I was politicked into eating my vegetables as a child on more than one occasion.”

“And now?”

“Well, right before I left, she was trying to have me married off,” Fili admitted with a sigh. “A political arrangement, mostly.”


“It never came up,” he tried to defend, but it ended weakly, so I held his hand tighter. “I came on this quest because it was my duty, and because my uncle needed as much help as he could get. But…”

“But it also got you away from marriage.”
“Something like that.”

“And do you like the person you’re meant to marry?”

“Mahal, no. Can’t much like a stranger, can you? I think…she felt the same way. Tif is her name. A Broadbeam from Belegost. She is sweet. Bookish and smart, too. But very young by dwarf standards.”

Carefully, I questioned, “And do you think once this is all over, you’ll find that your mother has finalized the arrangements?”

“Ah, no. Mother is cunning, but not so heartless as to go behind her son’s back while he’s away.” After a moment, Fili added. “We never spoke it aloud that it would also be unfair to Tif if I died while she was promised to me.”

“Well,” I huffed, hiding the pain caused from the very mention of Fili’s death, “you won’t die. Now what?”

“…Now, I believe I could not bear to wed Tif, for my heart belongs to another.”

“¡Soy yo!” I softly exclaimed, and Fili grinned.

“Sí,” he spoke just for me. “It is you.”

We did not speak of marriage and what was to happen to us after the battle had come and gone. Part of me thought that reality ceased to exist after it. That I’d go home. I didn’t know why. Maybe it was premonition. Maybe it was denial.

But I indulged in fantasies of marrying Fili, and warmth blossomed in my chest. I was aware of what it meant. That staying would hold happiness and love and life. It concerned me that I didn’t feel the ache of homesickness at the notion.

“Did you wash my clothes while I was out?”

“…Was I supposed to?”

“Uh, yes! I don’t have anything clean to change into.”

“That means you can do it the dwarven way!”

“And smell like lake water and/or dragon? No thank you.”

Fili hummed and kissed my shoulder again, this time deeper and longer. I relaxed into him and closed my eyes. One of his hands moved just underneath my breast. “Then I suppose we will just have to stay here, amrâlimê.”

“Mm,” I smiled, voice low in the back of my throat. “I like the sound of that.”

- 

I found Dwalin on the southern edge of the treasury, where Fili told me he would be. Bombur had indeed made a good supper, and before anyone could offer to take some to the warrior, I said I would.

He sat against one of the pillars, his gaze fixed on the king. Thorin wandered, muttering things too quietly to hear, unchanged from when I saw him five days ago.
“Hey, Dwalin,” I said as I approached him. He tilted his head toward me, and I caught the sight of the same tired dwarf I’d seen in Mirkwood. Only this time, his mind was not filled with paranoia-inducing magic. Just grief.

“So you’ve awakened,” he drawled, voice uncharacteristically hoarse. “Did you get enough beauty sleep?”

I rolled with the sudden bite to the question. “Something like that. Kinda looks like you might need to get the same stuff.”

When I knelt down next to him and offered the bowl of soup, Dwalin initially pushed it away. “Not hungry.”

“Too fucking bad.” I relented, and though I got a glare, Dwalin at least took it. Sitting more comfortably, I shoveled some soup into my mouth and chewed through a deliciously soft potato.

“Why did you come here?”

“Because I wanted to check on Thorin.” Then, more honestly, I added, “And I wanted to check on you.”

Dwalin scoffed. He absently picked up his spoon and swirled it in the broth. “And why,” he sighed, “would you want to do that? Have you already tired of the prince’s fawning?”

“Well, I mean, we fucked, so it’s all good.”

Dwalin let out a chuckle with a hint at his usual bawdiness. I think such spontaneous joy surprised him the most. “Aye, I imagine it is.”

There was a lull so I could figure out the right words to speak. After my sixth bite of soup, I said, “Hey, Dwalin. He’s…he’s gonna be alright.”

The dwarf sharply regarded me. “Are you certain, lass?” It almost sounded like a plea.

I nodded once. “Yeah. It’s—well, I don’t know when he’s going to snap out of it. A lot has changed, and a lot more may change. I only know one future, and I don’t think we’re headed in that direction, anymore. At least not entirely. But,” I took a breath, “Thorin is bound to return to his normal self.”

“And what will cause him to do that? Will it come naturally?”

“Uh.” I scrunched my face up a little, trying to remember. When my brain wouldn’t move fast enough, I set my half-eaten dinner aside and dug into the confines of my sports bra. I pulled out the worn piece of paper from Beorn’s house and unfolded it. Though the ink had become smudged from heat and use, it stayed dry in my pack. And now that I was in a safe environment, I could go back to carrying it close to me.

I didn’t know why I thought all the answers could be found in my list, though. It wasn’t like anything miraculously had been written by me since I folded it up in Beorn’s kitchen so long ago. Still, I skimmed through it, muttering, “This happened, this happened, this kinda happened…”

“Tell me you didn’t write down everything to come,” Dwalin said flatly. I snorted a small laugh.

“I wasn’t going to remember otherwise. Besides, writing things down helps the memory.”
“Anybody could see it.”

“It’s in Spanish. Does anybody here speak Spanish?”

Dwalin huffed for his response.

-B gets white stone.

-Bard kills dragon. Laketown displaced. Go to the ruined city.

-T goes crazy over gold. B gives the stone to elf king and Bard. G comes back?


“We’re right between here,” I pointed, and Dwalin leaned in to examine, though he would only be able to pick out Bard’s name and individual letters.

“And what do they say?”

“Thorin goes crazy over gold.”

“And what else?”

“That’s it,” I somewhat lied. “Like, that’s all that I wrote about him right now.” My eyes briefly went to Thorin below, who ran gold coins through his fingers. I frowned.

Dwalin growled and shifted in his position. Sourly, he retorted, “Well, we all know that, don’t we?”

“Hey, don’t fucking get mad at me,” I hissed back. “Everything on this list is broad! That was the point. But it has reminded me of things.” I refolded the paper and stuffed it back in. “I think—

okay, here’s what goes down. I think. So, did Fili tell you about the battle coming up?”

“Yes. And thank you, lass, for telling us all about it earlier. It was truly appreciated.”

I ignored his ire. “Thorin, like, won’t let you fight because he’s all crazy. Even though you know that dwarves and elves and men are dying on the battlefield trying to protect Erebor from invasion. ‘Where’s Thorin?’ Dain shouts, or something like that. ‘Where’s Thorin?’ Because a lot of people are dying.” I realized what I said, and my voice grew somber from memories of death and rot. “A lot of people die.”

Sensing my withdrawal, Dwalin placed a hand on the side of my arm. “Then what?”

“He…you come to him. He’s on the throne. You argue because he won’t let you fight. Because your kin are dying for you.” I rubbed the side of my face. “So, naturally, he threatens to kill you.”

Dwalin stiffened, but he let me keep going without interruption. “But the conversation refocuses him. I mean, he hits rock bottom, first, but then he pulls himself back up. Then you all go and fight. It’s all very heroic.” I kept the conversation going so Dwalin wouldn’t ask me the inevitable: “And then what happens?”

Because nobody wanted to know that. Because…I had long convinced myself that nobody wanted to know that.

“Is that how it’s exactly going to play out, though? I’m not sure. I—well, I killed Bolg, so…”
“Eh?” Dwalin blinked as though he hadn’t heard me right. “You killed Bolg? As in, spawn-of-Azog Bolg? Why have I not heard of this?”

“Probably because you’ve been here,” I said with squinted, teasing eyes. “Missing out on listening to all the great stuff I’ve done.”

“No, not all. I saw you stand off against Smaug,” Dwalin corrected, leaning back against the pillar and picking up his bowl. He ate more willingly, now. “Lovely fireworks, that. Then,” he lifted his hand with a finger pointed down, and whistled while it lowered. “Like a star falling into the lake. Seen better, but it wasn’t bad.”

“You so fucking rude,” I laughed, starting to eat again as well. “I got picked like a cherry! Wouldn’t have happened if you’d done your damn job at killing him!”

“Bah, it ended up alright. No dead dragon in the mountain. No dead Lakemen. And no dead Valeria.” He paused, then asked, “You didn’t die from that, did ya?”

“No, fortunately,” I spoke in a mocking, deep voice. “But it was like hitting solid stone.”

Dwalin smiled again, but it grew softer. Fonder. He roughly patted my knee. “Aye. You’re a tough lass, though.”

I smiled back. If I were younger, I might have said, “We’re having a moment!” aloud. But I didn’t want to be annoying, and Dwalin was expressing a side he rarely ever displayed. So I let it be.

“I am, aren’t I? But anyway. I killed Bolg.”

“How’d ye do it?”

“Well, uh,” I snickered, “Not in a very cool way. I kind of snuck up on him when he was fighting someone else. Then he turned, and I stuck him through the skull with my sword.”

“Who was he fighting?”

“The elf prince Legolas.” I enunciated his name in a poor British accent. Dwalin rolled his eyes and groaned. “He was holding his own, though! I just finished what he wouldn’t have been able to.”

“So does this bode well for our fates?”

I thought of Kili and Tauriel, and I smiled once more. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m pretty sure it does. He would have been a tough fucker to kill otherwise.”

“Don’t doubt that,” Dwalin grunted. “Who would have killed him if not for you?”

“Legolas.” His name was followed with the waggle of my eyebrows and another mouthful of soup. Dwalin thumped the back of his head against the pillar. “The blade would have gone into the top of Bolg’s skull and not the bottom.”

“Praise Mahal that it was you, then.”

I skirted around the inevitable meat in the soup. Dwalin caught me trying to do it inconspicuously and clinked his bowl against mine. “Give it here. Can’t fathom why you don’t eat the best part of any meal.”

“I’m a vegetarian,” I said to him, and not for the first time. I dumped the chunks of meat into
Dwalin’s bowl, which he promptly scooped up and ate.

“Aye, aye, and Yavanna is probably praising your name,” he said back, also not for the first time. But the statement only added to the brewing question that had been in my mind for a while. My brows furrowed, and I became contemplative.

“You think they watch me? Yavanna and Mahal and…the others.”

He grumbled in slight discomfort. “’Tis not for me to say.”

I hummed and drained the last bit of my soup. “Me neither. But maybe they do. I am, after all, from another world messing things up here. They probably don’t like that.”

“No, lass,” said Dwalin, and we kept our eyes on the dreges of our dinner. “I don’t think you’re messing things up here.”

With all my clothes clean and too much time on my hands, I put on the outfit I wore when I fell into this world. As I walked out in athleticwear and Nikes just after breakfast, I garnered the attention of the Company.

“And what’s the occasion?” Nori asked me. He counted his earned or stolen coins for the hundredth time. “It’s too cold to go out like that.”

“I’m going for a run,” I responded, starting my stretches. “I’m, like, super out-of-shape. Mirkwood took all that out of me.”

“Do you wish for me to join you, my lady?” Fili offered. I smirked at him.

“Sure. If you can keep up.”

He scoffed a laugh. The other dwarves oohed at the remark.

“Did you not just say you are unfit? Perhaps you would not be able to keep up with me.”

“Fili, cariño, I’m out-of-shape for me. Also, my workout routine is, shall we say, different from yours.”

But that only made Fili stand up and casually flex. “It cannot be so bad.”

“I don’t know about tha-at,” Bilbo quietly sang while he helped himself to more fried potatoes. Fili gave him a sideways glare. Bombur, Oin, and Gloin, however, nodded sagely in agreement.

“Well, if you wanna,” I shrugged, “you can.” Then I grinned, and Kili audibly shuddered.

“That’s an evil grin. I fear she will have your life, brother.”

“I have had a full life,” Fili proclaimed. “If I shall die in these halls and buried alongside my ancestors, then so be it.”

I scoffed to hide the spike of anxiety that came with his joking sentence. “Come on. We’ve got some sweating to do.”

“Have fun!” Bofur called. Before we were fully out of earshot, he chuckled and said, “Poor lad.”
Despite the banter, Fili earnestly listened to me as I explained the importance of stretching out. Then I pointed where we’d be running and, if I was accurate, wind up back here. After, we’d be doing some light upper body exercises. He took off his tunic in preparation for the workout and bound his hair back.

I gave him a light kiss on the lips to seal his utterly demolishing fate.

It wasn’t just running; it was repeatedly running up and down stairs for about three miles. I tripped over some because of the damn darkness, but bruised knees were nothing compared to what I had just recovered from. And, if anything, Fili’s presence made me fell better about my own struggle; not only was he almost a foot shorter than me, but extensive cardio was not a dwarven thing. What started as a steady pace turned into bursts with breaks in them, and during the breaks Fili tried catching his breath between swearing up a Khuzdul storm. When he ran out of expletives, I taught him Spanish ones. The mixture of two tired languages echoed in the mountain, and I was sure that the Company got a kick out of it.

But when we made it back to the start of where we began, I gave Fili a high five and tossed him a towel I had carried from my room to wipe the sweat off. “Mahal, you don’t even look tired!” he groaned, throwing the freshly damp towel back at me. I caught it, laughing.

“I am so! That run kicked my ass. I just wouldn’t have, uh, taken as many breaks, you know, if I had done it alone, so that really helped.”

He narrowed his eyes at me, but it was accompanied with a begrudging smile. “So…you run and you wrestle. Is there anything else I should know?”

Too hot for the shirt, I took it off and cast it beside Fili’s. The air of the mountain soothed my skin. “Uh, well, I wrestled competitively. And I ran competitively. So it’s not just random things I like to do for fun. I mean, it is fun for me, but I did it for more, too. I also played softball, but it’s just another kind of sport that’s hard to explain in this world.”

“I see. So your world is so advanced that you’ve turned survival skills into amusement?”

“Ha! Sometimes that’s the case. ‘Advanced’ doesn’t mean ‘peaceful.’ But we try to find fun and success where we can. My whole family is way into sports, actually.” Fili slumped against the wall to cool his back as well as listen. “Luis plays a similar sport to softball as well as fútbol and track. Elena did track as well—okay, all three of us do track, which is basically running to win.”

“Understandable.”

“Elena also did judo and karate, like me, and my dad played minor league baseball. My mama did kickboxing, too, but I never got around to it.”

“Sounds dangerous.”

“My mama is dangerous.” We both laughed, and I reached down to drink out of a flagon. Handing it to Fili, I went on. “A big part of it was that we supported each other. Sports can be divisive, but I loved bonding over it with my family.”

Fili regarded me expectantly, as if he was searching for something on my face. I tilted my head. “What?”

“Ah, it is nothing,” he said, glancing away. “You…it is just nice to see you speak of your family without sadness.”
I stopped, and Fili saw the change in my expression. He came forward to me, saying, “It is not that I think you don’t miss them, anymore, Ria. But I am glad that you can talk about them with the love you have always wanted to convey. Love unburdened by loss.”

Was it because I had lost them long enough? That I accepted my separation from them?

So I smiled and nodded, turning away from Fili to get ready for the second part of our workout. He made a noise like he was going to say something else, but nothing came out. I’d stow Fili’s words and my reaction away until night came and I could stare up into the darkness thinking about it.

“Alright, Mr. I-Can-Keep-Up, ready for some more?”

He groaned and joined me. “If I use my legs much longer, I will collapse, and you will have to carry me and my shameful state back.”

“Oh, don’t be so dramatic,” I said. “You’re probably going to be a lot better off with this stuff. Now, you may feel a bit silly doing them, but believe me, they’re going to target all the right muscles.”

“I will follow your lead, my lady.”

“You say that, but I don’t think you’ve ever done burpees.”

No, Fili hadn’t. He struggled the most with them and some plank stuff because of his weak legs, but to be fair, so did I. We were both panting and wilted by the end of the short fifteen-minute workout. “Never,” Fili panted, sprawled on the floor, “have I been so thoroughly whipped in such a short amount of time. Valeria, you beast.”

“Honestly, that’s such a great compliment you could give me,” I replied with a weary but earnest smile. “Now you know how I felt yesterday when we were training.”

“Now who’s the one being dramatic? That was naught but a feather-light walk compared to this!”

I drained most of the water and gave the rest to Fili. He gratefully took it, and after, we gathered our things and began walking back to our room to bathe and dress in clean clothes. Our hands intertwined, as clammy and hot as they were. “So, Fili,” I pondered aloud, “how do you like being with a woman taller than you?”

“It’s quite lovely,” he replied, gazing up at me for extra effect. “Do you wish to know why?”

“No.” Except I was giggling when I spoke, and so he answered.

“It’s because I can do this.”

Fili halted and drew me close to him. Once his arms were around my waist, he buried his head right between my boobs. I shrieked and shoved him off, but I howled with laughter as he stumbled away.

“You fucking animal!” I hollered. Fili slapped a hand over his eyes, head reared back mid dad-laugh. I gave him an extra shove before his arm snaked around the lower part of my waist. My own arm then loosely draped across his shoulders, and we continued on.

We’d have to separate for the sake of propriety when we reached the group, but for now, we’d just be. And our own light and joy would repel the gloom of the mountain.
Chapter End Notes

And I'm back! This last month has been finals, so I wasn't able to write what I wanted. But I'm free, now, and the sudden absence of stress has left me feeling weird. Like, what is this calm?

Anyway, hope you guys liked this chapter ❤️ I've been wanting to write a work-out scene for a while.

Soy yo: it's me
Cariño: sweetie
“Come, come, down through here,” Bilbo said, gesturing for me to follow him through an unfamiliar part of the mountain. The way he spoke and how his feet carried him told me that we were going was so far away from the rest of the Company for a reason. Though the braziers remained lit, I saw more rubble, dust, and cobwebs. The pressure of our increasing depth seemed to grow.

“This way. Just a little further.”

I listened to Bilbo without response. My mouth set into a grim line, and the tightness in my stomach outmatched the tightness in my limbs from the workout with Fili. I knew what Bilbo was going to show me.

We reached a chamber with a lit brazier inside it. The room, however, wasn’t warm, meaning that it hadn’t been going for a very long time. Bilbo must have planned ahead. I would have given him a hard time about being paranoid, but because of where we were—and what he had—I didn’t. In fact, it was good of him to. And because he was a good hobbit, he had even laid out some furs for us to sit down on.

I tugged my coat closer to myself. Bilbo slid the chamber’s stone door shut with a little grunt and then turned, his back braced against it. Sweat faintly glistened on his brow. “Hey, Baggins,” I said, motioning for him to come closer to me. “Take it easy.”

“Oh, Valeria, things are not good, not good at all,” he sighed, moving forward and plopping down onto the furs. I joined him and tucked my sore legs underneath me. My fingers absently curled and brushed against the droplet. “I’m worrying myself to death.”

“Well, stop. Stop it right now.” I wished I had some food to give him to calm his nerves.

“It’s not that simple!”

Bilbo’s exasperation wasn’t meant to be amusing, but I found myself unconvincingly pursing my lips to hide a smile. He plainly saw it and frowned at me. “Valeria. This is serious.”

“It is! It is. But…” I groaned and put my head in both hands. “At some point, things are so bad that they’re funny. You know what I mean?”

He huffed, then said, “Of a sort, yes.”

I composed myself and sat straight. “Alright, Baggins, what have you got for me.”

Despite our complete isolation, the hobbit glanced about the room to make sure that, I don’t know, a dwarf didn’t spontaneously appear to accuse him of mutiny and cut us both down. When he was certain, he dipped his hand inside his Lake-town coat and, rather slowly, pulled out the Heart of the Mountain.

I stared at it, breathless. The Arkenstone shone with a light I had never seen, a light that pulsed with life and memory and power. Veins of gold and red and violet and blue spun and whorled until it knotted around the center of a captured galaxy, where a deeper light countered the one encasing
it. Like the core of the Earth, it seemed to be compressed into liquid, a molten dark blue that held something I could not comprehend.

Bilbo placed the Arkenstone in my hand. I didn’t realize I was even gesturing for it until the weight settled in my palm. It was either warm from being inside Bilbo’s pocket or from radiating its own heat. Specks of gold and silver spattered across the veins like stars. The light rippled and moved on its own accord. It made me feel like the chamber was underwater, and the sun refracted its light through the waves.

I wasn’t sure if I had laid my eyes on anything so beautiful.

So, appropriately, I whispered, “Wow.”

“It is as though Varda herself made the Arkenstone.” Bilbo also spoke in a hushed, awed tone. “And Aulë grew the mountain around it. It is…it is something of both heaven and earth, is it not?”

“Yeah.” I moved my hand, the one with the droplet inlaid in its palm, around the curve of the Arkenstone. The droplet warmed considerably, but not so much that it became uncomfortable. “It is.”

We sat in silence for a long while, admiring the Arkenstone. Not that it gave us any bad thoughts or temptations; it was simply stunning, and the longer I looked at it, the more I would see. To us, the Arkenstone was not a prize. It never would be.

“Here,” I eventually said, giving it back to Bilbo. He tenderly took the stone. “Better tuck it away again. Does anybody else know about it?”

“Balin. I…implied that I may or may not have known the whereabouts of the Arkenstone. He told me to keep it safe, for if Thorin should know that I had it, he would surely kill me and take it for himself. Then there’d be no returning from his madness.”

I nodded once. Bilbo tucked the Arkenstone back into his inner coat pocket, and the world became a darker, colder place.

“Good. Let’s keep it that way.” I moved into a cross-legged position and tucked my hair behind both ears. Bilbo tilted his head, and a small smile surfaced on his otherwise worry-creased face.

“You have your hair down,” he commented. “It looks nice.”

“Oh—” I ran fingers through the loose strands, puffing out one of those I-don’t-know-how-to-respond-to-a-compliment breaths. “Thank you.”

“Do you remember when you broke my comb trying to brush it out?” Now Bilbo was smirking, and an old brightness that I had missed seeing in him returned.

This time, I let out a genuine laugh. “Yes. Man, I felt so bad! You gave me something that was yours and I busted it. That was when I was new, too, so having that happen mortified me.”

“Ah, it was nothing.” Bilbo winked again, just like he had when I first gave the broken pieces back to him. And again, some weight lifted off my chest. “Just wanted to remind you of how gracious I am.”

I snorted. “Well, speaking of hair, you, sir, need a haircut. Can you even see through those shaggy bangs of yours?”
Bilbo tutted. His brows lifted up as he pulled a curly auburn lock outward to examine. “Yes, it has been quite a while. I do believe the dwarves wish for me to grow it out more just so they can braid it.”

“Oh, I bet that’s exactly what they’re planning,” I grinned. “They want to do it with my hair, too, but I’m a lady, and so no man but my own husband may lay their fingers on this mess.”

The moment I spoke those words, I realized what I had put myself into, and a sly smirk turned Bilbo’s lips upward. “But do you wish for your hair to be braided by someone?”

“Hey. Shut up.”

He raised his hands placatingly, bearing a look of feigned innocence. “I was merely asking a simple question.”

“Yeah, yeah, nuggito pequeño.” I clambered back to my feet, groaning as I did so. Bilbo followed, patting the spot where the Arkenstone was for extra measure. “Come on. Let’s go find something so I can give you a haircut.”

“What—you’ll really do that for me?” Bilbo’s eyes turned hopeful.

“Don’t look so eager; I may just end up making you look like shit.”

He laughed. “I suppose we shall see, then.”

Smiling, I helped him gather up the furs he had so considerately laid out for us. As we headed for the door, however, Bilbo slowed enough for me to notice. I looked back at him, surprised to see some kind of doubt—or some kind of fear. “Everything okay, Baggins?”

The question snapped him out of his state. Refocusing, Bilbo smiled at me and continued past, taking the lead. “Yes. I am quite alright, thank you.”

My gaze lingered on his back, but eventually I closed the chamber door shut and walked on.

Naturally, Dori had some hair-cutting shears that were used for his beard more than his hair, but he generously let us take his entire kit to use. I offered to give Bilbo an undercut, but when I described just what that was, he refused. Vehemently.

“Well, how about I just cut it all off?”

“No.”

“High and tight?”

“No.”

“Edgy?”

“Valeria, if you offer one more suggestion like that, I will walk away!”

“Fine, fine—how about I cut it short but leave a little long piece at the nape of your neck. Right here! You can play with it when you’re bored.”

“Absolutely not. How can something be both little and long, hm?”

“Do we wanna go into penis jokes?”
“No thank you.”

I let out a laugh and ran an unbroken comb through Bilbo’s damp curls. I’d given haircuts to Luis and other volunteers before, so I wasn’t full of anxiety. Were they ever the best? Probably not. But would Bilbo know the difference between my work and a professional’s? Nope.

Kili, Fili, Nori, and Bofur had to watch, however, putting some of the pressure on. “Five gold says she’ll nick his ear by the end of it,” said Bofur.

“I’ll wager against that,” Fili replied, backing up his girl. “Ria has a steady hand.”

“You would know of the ability of her hands more than anyone else, brother,” Kili said idly. Before Fili could punch him in the shoulder or thigh, I had grabbed a thick-bristled hairbrush and threw it with lightning reflexes that my mama would be proud of. Kili only had enough time to widen his eyes at the incoming missile before it clocked him square in the forehead. He toppled backward, groaning and cursing, while the rest of us laughed.

“I barely saw that thing, ‘twas moving so fast!” Nori exclaimed with a hearty laugh.

“By my beard, I daresay that was the exact replica of when you fixed Dwalin with that river stone!” Bofur added, earning another round of laughter from all of us—except Kili. He tried throwing the brush back at me, but it went wide and clattered against the ground on the other side of the chamber.

“Damn you, woman,” he grumbled, rubbing his forehead. “You and your aim are positively cursed!”

Still grinning, I shrugged and went back to trimming Bilbo’s hair—who, by the way, did not get a nicked ear from the sudden throw. “You can thank softball for that.”

“Well there’s nothing soft about being nearly killed by a hairbrush!”

“Calm yourself, brother,” Fili faux-soothed. “Or have you not experienced the capabilities of Tauriel’s hands?”

I stopped cutting Bilbo’s hair to throw my head back and let out a loud cackle with the rest of the dwarves. Kili burned bright red and spat something in Khuzdul, but that only made them laugh more. When Bilbo and I settled enough to get on with the haircut, I said to the hobbit, “There’s this saying in my world, you know. ‘Don’t dish it if you can’t take it.’”

“Oh, then I do say that dear Kili may need to keep his helping to himself until he learns better,” Bilbo giggled.

“Mm hm.”

The attention turned away from us while the dwarves slipped into a conversation in their own language, and I finished cutting Bilbo’s hair in peace. I wasn’t focused enough to pick up on any words that I might have been familiar with. Instead, I hummed softly while I trimmed and snipped, watching slivers of auburn hair fall onto the canvas of a threadbare tunic and the nape of a neck.

“How does the song go?” Bilbo quietly asked me, our conversation lost to the usual loudness of the dwarves. Just like the days where we spent our nights under a canopy of summer stars, where a fire crackled and the earth was cool. When I used to cry myself to sleep, and Bilbo would touch my turned back to offer whatever comfort he could.
Smiling, I sang pieces of lyrics just as quietly for fear of being overheard by anyone but Bilbo.

“Don’t break me down
I've been travelin' too long
I've been trying too hard
With one pretty song

I hear the birds on the summer breeze, I drive fast
I am alone in the night
Been tryin’ hard not to get into trouble, but I
I’ve got a war in my mind
So, I just ride”

Bilbo listened. When I finished, he simply said, “That is lovely, Valeria.”

“Sure,” I snorted, ruffling Bilbo’s hair to get any extra strays out. “I think I’m the only person in Middle-Earth who doesn’t have a fantastic singing voice. But I try my best.”

“You give yourself too little credit.”

“Well,” I said, putting the shears down and stepping so I faced Bilbo, “hopefully I gave myself enough credit when it comes to haircuts. Because I think you’re done—and no nicked ears. Here. Take a look.” I grabbed the hand mirror and held it in front of him. He grinned enthusiastically and squeaked.

“Oh! This is impressive! Quite so.”

“Hey,” I called to the dwarves, “what do you guys think?”

“Amazing!” Nori shouted back. “Looks like a proper knob!”

Bilbo and I gasped, affronted. “Don’t be fucking rude!” I yelled. “He looks wonderful!”

As I went to ruffle his hair again, a fantastic idea struck me. “Oye! Hey! Baggins! You want me to style your hair like someone from my world?”

“Ooh, yes, I’d like to see that,” Fili said, nodding vigorously. Egged on by my love, I picked up some dwarven pomade and unscrewed the lid. It just smelled like Dori, since I associated it with him.

“Now, hold on one minute. As much as I’d like to see one of your—er, world’s hairstyles, I do think I am just fine”—Bilbo went to move out of his chair, but I pushed him back down.

“It’s gonna be fun,” I steamrolled, lathering my fingers in pomade. “Fun, Baggins! You need more of that in your life.”

“The last time I thought something was going to be fun, I wound up traveling without a proper handkerchief!”

“Oh, so you mean this whole adventure.”

“Did I not make myself clear enough?”

“Now you’re just being cranky.”

Bilbo squawked as I ran my fingers through his hair, starting to sculpt it. It solidified his fate, so he
slumped back down in his chair, grumbling in a very hobbit-like manner. Even more interested, the
dwarves got up from their spots on the ground and gathered to witness the transformation.

I had to do it in a more old-school fashion, since his hair was still a longer length all around, but
eventually I managed to lay down a part and get some volume going. “Bilbo, *mi pepito*, you look
gorgeous!”

Kili scratched his scruffy beard, contemplative. “He looks…actually, Mr. Boggins rather looks
quite swell. Don’t you think, brother?”

“Mr. Boggins does indeed."

“Here,” Bilbo huffed, “give me that mirror so I can see what has been done to me.”

Once it was in his hands, he initially expressed shock over it. Bilbo’s hair had been swept back out
of his face and parted off to the side, and though some of the curls remained, a lot of it had been
smoothed out by whatever concrete Dori used for his own hair. He was very dashing.

“You look like a 1940s pilot,” I said, even though I knew I was the only one who’d get it. “And
you’re going to a dance to impress all the other soldier girls. Definitely worthy to be in a Lana Del
Rey music video.”

“Whatever that means, thank you.” For all his griping, Bilbo suddenly sat pleased in his chair.

“Hm. I wish I had a camera for this,” I whined to myself. “I’d like to keep this image of my little
modern hobbit with me.”

“Ria, just do what I do to remember,” said Kili, placing himself directly in front of Bilbo. He
squinted his eyes and concentrated really hard. It made Bilbo properly uncomfortable. Then, after a
few seconds of us laughing at Kili, he relaxed and nodded. “There. Now, I shall never forget what
Bilbo looks like with his hair done like the men of Ria’s world.”

Fili muttered, “You are an idiot.”

“I am *intellectual,*” the little brother corrected, horribly reminiscent of Luis. He tugged Bilbo off
the chair so his modern hairstyle could be paraded around to the Company.

“You are, Kili,” I affirmed, packing everything back into Dori’s kit. I’d need to find something to
sweep up the excess hair on the floor later. I didn’t want to leave a mess.

“Oi, I’ve got a question I’ve been meaning to ask you,” said Nori. He came up beside me, arms
crossed and eyes speculative.

“Yeah? And what’s the question?”

“How come you got taken *all* the way to Beorn’s house by one of those eagles, and we were
dumped off only an hour away from where we were nearly killed? Then abandoned on a *highly*
unsafe eyrie? And after, we barely escaped the orcs chasing us while you were pickin’ carrots and
lounging about?”

Everyone kind of…stopped to think about what Nori said, myself included. Fili frowned comically.
Bofur scratched underneath his hat. Kili had an invisible math equation floating around his head.
Bilbo scrunched up his face.

“Well?” Nori said impatiently. “What’s the reason?”
What was the reason?

“Well, I mean…” I shrugged, then thought about it hard. “There was, uh…”

“Were the eagles simply not fond of dwarves?” inquired Bilbo. “I’ve come to find that’s often the case with dwarves and, well—everybody else.”

“Oh! It’s Us and Them!” Kili cried, enthusiastic about remembering what I said on the dinghy when we were escaping Lake-town. “Us and Them! Of course.”

“No, it’s not Us and Them,” I said flatly, and a moment later I waved a hand up as the reason came to me. “It’s because I just knew where you guys were going before you did. That’s all.”

“Ah,” they all muttered and grumbled.

“And, like, if you want to blame anybody, blame Gandalf. He’s the one who took you to Beorn. Maybe he had it in mind all along.” Dryly, I added, “But I don’t know, I’m coming to find that I think he acts like he’s got everything more under control and planned than he actually does.”

“Do you know when he’ll be back?” Bilbo said to me.

Another shrug. “Soon? I’m not familiar with a specific timeline.”

“But before the army comes, right?”

“Yes.” A pause, then, “Yes. I’m pretty sure.”

“‘Pretty sure’ doesn’t sound all that certain, lass,” said Bofur.

“Okay, fine, I’m sure. There.”

It felt wrong to state the future so out in the open, but I didn’t back down. But it appeased those wanting a straightforward answer. Nori, having the dilemma stewing in his brain for who knows how long solved, stuck his pipe in his mouth and patted me on the shoulder as he passed.

I smiled at them, taking in the memory with much more subtlety than Kili practiced with, and caught up to Fili. He waited for me, and once I was at his side, he held my hand and abruptly shouted, “Oi! Bofur! You owe me five gold!”

-

Alone, I looked to the East like I would see this Amelie herself somewhere among the sloping, snow-dusted hills. But all that came from the direction was a bitter chill that numbed my skin with its cold breath. Standing outside, however, was better than being inside the mountain. Thorin had moved from mindless wandering to bouts of rage, calling for Fili and Kili, Dwalin and Balin, to come and be with him while his madness worsened. But the change would give me the opportunity to sneak into the treasury unnoticed and unheard. Perhaps I could find the Gems of Lasgalen and sneak away with the necklace.

So I turned my gaze upward, to the gray, overcast sky. It hid the early winter sunlight and left me feeling yearning for something I couldn’t place. When I couldn’t find what I didn’t know I searched for, the droplet became the center of my focus. It usually did once I was alone and had nowhere else to direct my thoughts.

I tugged on it with my fingernails, feeling the twinge of discomfort in my arm that came with the
pull. The droplet was in me, now, its veins laced all the way up to my shoulder where the sensation ended. And I wondered: if I removed it, would I die?

“Valeria.”

Jumping, I spun around and faced Bilbo, who stood in the balcony’s open doorway. “Ay wey, Baggins, don’t scare me like that.”

His grim expression flashed with guilt. “I—I’m sorry.”

The wind turned colder, lashing loose curls around my face, and I clung to my coat tighter.

“What’s up?”

Something was wrong.

Bilbo took a hesitant step forward onto the balcony. His feet shifted as though they were trying to walk backwards, as though something was attempting to control his own movements.

“I—I—you see, something…there is something I’ve been meaning to ask you.”

“Yeah?”

His hair ruffled with the shift in the wind. What once traveled from the East now came up from the South, and it bore a humidity with it that sunk into my bones and made me shiver like I was sick.

Bilbo wetted his dry lips and moved his hand slowly into his vest pocket. I stilled.

Atop the balcony, with no one but us, the hobbit revealed the Ring. It shone an unnatural gold against the backdrop of the muted, depressed surroundings. So small, too, as it rested between Bilbo’s thumb and forefinger.

With a slightly trembling arm, he extended the Ring out to me. I wanted to backpedal against the balcony’s solid railing, but I remained planted, as if I had become part of the mountain’s stone. A statue frozen in the face of such powerful, unassuming evil.

Bilbo, frowning but steadfast, took another step forward. He seemed to move through water—and I felt like I was drowning in it, my lungs burning while the current tore all life from me, leaving nothing but a husk. “I want you to have it,” he spoke, voice firm. “Please—Valeria. You must take it from me. I fear…I do not know what I fear, but this thing has, it has a will of its own. Please. You were not affected by the dark magic in Mirkwood; you won’t be affected by the magic of this ring. I—I saw your resistance to it at Beorn’s home. Please.”

The words came out all at once. “Bilbo, I can’t take it. I can’t. Remember what I told you back then? I can’t mess anything up! I—I’m already doing more than I should already, and, and, and what if I go back home? Then what?”

“Then it will be safe!”

“Then I won’t be safe!”

His jaw set, and I saw something dark rise in Bilbo. It terrified me more than the Ring did. I hated it all the more, because that was what it did—twisted all who were good, what was good, in this world.

Tears pricked my eyes, and a foulness rode with the wind.
“You are not going home! You have no way—no chance! Valeria, do you understand me? You are stuck here. Why can’t you grasp that? Surely you cannot cling to such impossible notions!”

“Bilbo!”

The broken crack in my cry reached him, and he surfaced from the darkness that sought to claim him. Stifling a sob, he threw a hand over his mouth and squeezed his eyes shut. I came closer, steps halting, hands half raised. The air turned what was once warm tears into icy tracks that traveled down splotchy red cheeks.

“You must take it,” Bilbo finally said when he choked everything else down. “Please. So that I may not say such cruel things ever again.” He was no longer steady. He was desperate. But I was desperate, too. Desperate not to ever touch the Ring. What would it do to me? I didn’t want to be corrupted. Holding it, holding it could further bind me to this place, these people, and the future. I’d break what I said to Thorin in that silent room in Lake-town—this way, I would find out what it all meant in Mirkwood. Doing what Bilbo asked would only bring me closer. Closer to him, whose fingers I could still feel wrapped around my neck, crushing everything from me, wanting something I could not, could not, give.

“No,” I whispered, fingers curling, courage fading. I wilted like a flower in an early frost. “I’m sorry. I can’t.”

But I didn’t move as Bilbo neared, soft and slow, the Ring proffered. He stopped when he stood in front of me. The wind faded, leaving us in a place where time did not exist. Only cold. Only us. Only the Ring.

It emerged into my view, now laying flat in Bilbo’s open palm. “If you cannot take it permanently, at least have it for just a little while.”

Take it just so Bilbo could get a break. Not forever. Just...just until he needed to use it again, which shouldn’t be that far away. Wait. No. Still a bad idea. But if I took it, Bilbo could get a hold of himself and detox from the Ring’s presence. It’d stay in my coat pocket, never leaving. I wouldn’t look at it. Or I could shove it into my pack and be free of its close proximity to me. Yeah. Yeah. That could work.

For Bilbo, I’d do it. I mean, it wasn’t as if I’d go marching to Mordor and yeet the Ring into Mount Doom myself. I’d just bury it in my pack and worry about far more important issues.

Sniffing, I muttered, “Okay. For a little while.”

He smiled, but it wasn’t happy. “Thank you, Valeria. Thank you.”

Numbly, my fingers uncurled. Bilbo took the hand in his to support it.

Nothing will happen, I chanted to myself. Nothing will happen.

The Ring glimmered in absent sunlight.

And it touched my skin.

The garden in my backyard flourished. My feet were bare underneath the slightly uneven path that ringed the back porch. Faded wood fencing shielded the backyard from the rest of the neighborhood. In the distance, a sprinkler ran. My grass needed mowing. I’d call Luis to have him
and Papa load up the mower in the truck and bring it here. Was the zucchini ready? Or the
tomatoes? I’d take some to Bilbo. His vegetables would always be bigger and grander than mine,
but he assured me that my produce could be tastier than his. I doubted it was true, but I wouldn’t
deny him the act of kindness.

I pushed myself off the white plastic patio chair barely shaded by the house. Remy said her
boyfriend was coming to visit tonight. Maybe I’d grill hot dogs and burgers and jalapenos for
dinner. Pick up a case of lite beer. Hey! I’d introduce them to Fili. He was inside, fixing the
Internet.

Oh! The strawberries—

My left hand burned, but light did not shine and I could not close it. Lucidity came with terror.

This isn’t a dream.

This isn’t a dream.

This isn’t a dream.

The sky above roiled black. Everything beyond the backyard was black, and I no longer rested in
the shade because there was no sun. The only place floating in the void was the garden, too green
and too changing to be real. But if it was a dream, I’d be awake. If it was a dream, I wouldn’t feel
so cold, like stone pressed against my back and something worse pressed against my front. It was
familiar.

I tried whimpering. Nothing. I was bound to silence in my own mind.

A figure stood at the edge of the garden, tall and alone, turned from me. Silvery hair fell down his
back, beautiful in nature. It didn’t catch light so much as it gave off light. But this light was not the
light I held in my palm, the light in Gandalf’s staff, the light in Rivendell. It was a cold light, an
unforgiving light, a false light. He wore fine black robes that fell all the way down to the green,
green ground, and what it touched turned a memory of life into a memory of death, leaving
blades of grass charred and hollow.

“What a lovely place,” he commented, back still turned. His voice was low and smooth and wrong.
I shuddered, all breath leaving me.

Please, I prayed to the gods here, my own god, anything, anyone. Please, help me. Save me. Save
me. Save me.

That familiar fear simply grew, though, and the tears that fell from my cheeks and onto the dreamy
grass below were the only things that moved in my paralyzed state.

“Hush,” he went on. “Do not be frightened. You are wondrous.”

An invisible touch brushed against my jaw.

“Wondrous…and elusive. Do you think I shall let you go now, Starbright? After you have escaped
me before?

“I think not.”

The sky rumbled. My left hand remained splayed open, trapped by the power to keep it unfurled
and the droplet powerless. The right, however, had been forced closed, keeping the small object
inside it secure—no matter how hard I tried to cast it away.

“Take me somewhere interesting.”

My left hand burned with an intensity of resistance, but it was not enough. Instead, I was wracked with tremendous, soul-scorching pain. It felt like my brain was being pulled through my eye sockets, and I wanted to scream—except all that surrounded me was silence. The grass shriveled and blackened. Everything, everything shriveled and blackened, including my skin, my bones, my blood, until all that remained was the false light of his hair. Fingernails raked through my brain, searching, tearing, violating.

And then he found what he wanted.

BOOM!

The impact of a nearby bomb shook the ground. Buildings trembled, and rubble fell from their sandstone architecture. Jets flew overhead and soldiers shouted over heavy artillery fire. Civilians screamed. Blood soaked the ground. But the stench of metal and rot and heat acted as a smelling salt, jolting me from the haze of terror. Oh, the terror was still there, but I could blink again, breathe again, think again.

This isn’t real.

No, not real. This was memory-of-memory, a reflection of reality I had seen and then rearranged in my mind. It was the seamless culmination of dreams and nightmares, pictures and experiences. It was everything I had never wanted to go back to. But in it, I found strength again.

“Now this,” he said, and I could hear the smile in his venom, “is what I have sought for so long.”

Another bomb dropped nearby, and I was pelted with rubble. Its brash and welcome memory-pain spurred me. I took a step forward, then another, breaking free from the chains of paralysis. The heaviest imprisonments weighed both my hands down in their respective positions, but it was a start. “Get out of my head,” I uttered, barely making any noise. I went unheard or ignored. The onslaught of modern warfare and cries of casualty heightened.

The droplet wouldn’t awaken. There was too much disconnect, too much dark power in our way. I needed more.

I took more steps, approaching him. The ozone of fear sat like rancid syrup in the back of my throat. It mixed with the dust I breathed in.


But they had not come to me in all these months I was stranded in a world not my own. They would not come to me now.

More tears fell. I kept moving.

“I said get out of my head,” I growled, teeth baring. He stiffened, and the black sky above growled back, churning more wildly. “Get out of my head. Get out of my head. Get out of my head.” The layer of fear broke in my throat like a fever, and I sprung forward at the Enemy, the Dark Lord, without care or restraint. All that mattered was being free from this hell he had turned my own mind into. “Get out OF MY HEAD—”
A brutal, invisible force swung into me. I flew backwards and hit the ground hard, head ricocheting off the desert street. I coughed, and a mist of blood sprayed up into the air. The sky moved in amusement of the spasming pain, oppressive against the warzone. I wanted to give up, should give up.

My eyes began to close. The coldness increased, and from afar, he laughed in monstrous delight at the scene in front of him. I wished I could search the sky for a sign of light, a sign of hope that it so often carried. But this was not the sky; it was him. And no such things were to be found.

“…Valeria!”

The haze was expelled once more—and this time, by a distant voice, little and faint. It spanned the consciousness, sinking into my heart and renewing my reason to fight.

I did not speak the hobbit’s own aloud. When I glanced over, I saw that he did not seem to hear my name being called.

*He’s weakening,* I thought. I coughed again, and blood did not come up. *He’s weakening, the fucker.*

Grimacing, I propped myself up on my elbows. I tried putting power into the droplet. And…and *there.* The tiniest bit of power. But it was there. It was coming.

“You,” I panted, getting back onto my feet. He paid no attention to me. “You *will* get out of my head.”

“…Valeria, wake up…”

I would. I would.

So he wanted to play around in my mind?

With a vicious cry, I forced a memory of a bomb dropping right where he looked. Everything exploded in a deafening wave, and a gust of searing heat pushed me back. Through the dust and debris, I screamed, “GET OUT OF HERE!”

I could not see him. Nothing had settled, and I was left in a sandy brown fog. He chuckled low, and it sent a bone-rattling shiver through me. Just as I opened my mouth to shout again and send another mind-attack-thing, a massive hand, clad in black armor and shadow, lashed out and wrapped its fingers around my throat. I choked, thrashing, and got lifted off my feet.

“We are not finished.” His voice had taken on a guttural undertone, and if this hadn’t been in a mind-scape, I would have shit my pants. “Show me more, Starbright.”

My eyes, filled with tears and terror, widened as I saw the outline of his front. The dust protected me from the full vengeance of who he was, and in a desperate attempt to further shield myself, I conjured more rubble.

“Show me *all of it.*”

The rubble started to dissipate counter to my wishes. It was his doing. Through earthen mist emerged two void-like cinders, burning with hatred and desire and appetite, and they alone began to draw my life force from my body.

My fingers twitched.
Seething with my own violent rage, I snarled, “I’ll show you this.”

My left hand slammed over the right, and blinding, celestial light erupted from it. His presence was banished by something more powerful than the darkness he carried. The pits of hellish purgatory that were his eyes could not withstand the fury of the heavens contained in the palm of my hand. What should have broken me was resisted by my own growth and the droplet’s. His grip on my throat loosened, then gave way completely. I dropped into the expanse that the light had created, slipping from the memory-of-memory he had trapped me in.

“We will meet again,” he spoke, his voice grating like the pits of a volcanic furnace, and his words carried something cursed that leached into me like dormant poison. “and when we do, Starbright, your sliver of the Sublime’s power cannot withstand my WRATH. For I will—”

I unclenched my right hand and severed the connection.

- Ting ting.

The Ring rolled onto the stone floor of the balcony before spinning sidelong and clinking to the ground, sounding almost musical with its light-pitched sound.

The sky above was winter-gray. Fresh, sticky blood rolled from both nostrils and into my loose hair beneath me. I lie on my back, hands limp. They were numb with cold. I was numb with cold. The only sources of warmth were the trickling blood, the droplet, and Bilbo’s small hands cupping my bloodied cheeks.

“Oh, Valeria,” he sobbed. I hated seeing him cry. “I thought—I thought you were gone.”

I did not speak. Could not speak. Bilbo collapsed onto my chest, whispering, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” over and over again.

I stared up at the sky. It was winter-gray. Winter-gray. Blood slowly ran from my nose. Numbness deadened me. Bilbo wept.

But I was okay.

Fuck, I was okay.

He started when he felt my chest shaking. He had to wipe the tears from his eyes to make sure that what he saw was correct; I began laughing, as faint and unmoving as it was. A swell of residual horror came with it, but that was swept up with the grim humor, too. My own leftover tears spilled out, running down into my hairline. A flare of pain rose up in my throat. I ignored it.

“What, what is it? Valeria?”

I only moved my eyes to the Ring, where it lay just in range of my peripherals. Bilbo followed my gaze, and when he saw it, he gave me a doubting look. I just reaffirmed him with whatever muscles in my face that worked.

Bilbo stood and hurried over to the Ring, where he deftly picked it up and tucked it back into his pocket. I couldn’t feel the wind from where I was sprawled out like a stiff corpse in a wake; hands at my sides, hair fanned behind me. The balcony’s staunch railing offered protection. I silently thanked the mountain.
Kneeling back down next to me, Bilbo took out the washed but perpetually dingy cloth he reluctantly called his handkerchief on this adventure, though he did that just to make himself feel better about using a piece of Bofur’s nasty-ass shirt whenever he blew his nose. With a shaking hand, he gingerly wiped it across my cheeks and around my nostrils in an attempt to clean up the blood. Once most of it was gone, he took a part not soaked and dabbed my tears up with it. I let him. What else could I do but stare up at the winter-gray sky and think about what just happened?

*Starbright.*

I would forever revile the name. Just the thought of it being uttered in his voice sent an uncontrolled quiver through me. Bilbo saw it and took my hand in his, unable to do anything else but wait. I imagined he saw the same symptoms from back in Mirkwood—only this time, it was much worse and caused by a specific thing. Had he heard me speak like Thorin did? Perhaps. I’d ask when I got my functions back.

Bilbo, the nervous talker he was, began to speak in soft, broken tones. “It all happened so fast, Valeria. You fell back, and you grew so…so very cold. But I could not run for help, could I?”

I managed to move my head in a millimeter shake.

“Yes…yes. I thought you dead. Except your heart…your heart raced.” He became misty-eyed again and squeezed my hand. “What felt like an eternity passed. I—I tried taking the ring from you, but your fingers were closed so tightly I did not have the strength to pry them open. Then the light, your light, burst so suddenly that I had an even bigger fright.” Bilbo gave a weak chuckle. My heart ached. “Blinded me for a few moments there.”

The corner of my lip twitched.

“And here you are.”

And here I was.

Chapter End Notes

And so they meet again.

Like, Poor Bilbo and Valeria tho. When will they get a break? Not anytime soon, I'll tell ya that!

Oh, I'm also on Tumblr if you wanna chat or follow or whatever https://i-dropped-the-chief.tumblr.com/

Nuggito pequeño: little nugget
Pepito: nugget

And the song Valeria sings is Lana Del Rey's "Ride"
Oh, Dios.

What had I done?

I doubted I had ever been so fucking stupid in my entire life. And that was saying a lot, because I often suffered from a case of Major Dumbass. I just…I just wanted Bilbo to be happy. But it created a major lapse in judgement, and now neither of us may ever be happy again.

“Bilbo, Bilbo, look at me,” I said, snapping my fingers in front of his fretting face. He wanted to know what happened, what the Ring was all about, what it truly did, and all that awful stuff he wasn’t supposed to find about for another hundred fucking years or something like that. “Hey! Bilbo. Look at me. Listen to me.”

“Valeria, why—”

I gripped his shoulders tightly and bent down on one knee so we could speak levelly. “Bilbo.”

The desperate and impatient tone of my voice cut him off, and he stopped talking with a frustrated sigh. I switched to speaking to him firmly, vehemently. “You will not speak of this to anyone. You will not ask any questions to anyone. You will not ask any questions to me. What happened will stay out on that balcony. You will keep the Ring with you and use it like you normally would. And that is final.”

“No, it is not. You—you touched it and—”

I gripped his cheeks with the same hand once clenched around the Ring. Though weakness still coursed through my veins, I was able to recover more quickly than I had in Mirkwood. I attributed it to the droplet. It got Bilbo to stop talking, and I applied a little pressure; not enough to hurt, but enough to show my seriousness. He stared at me with wide eyes.

“Bilbo Baggins. You will never speak of this again.”

My hand dropped, and he rubbed away the splotches I had left on his skin. “You cannot possibly expect me to never mention this, Valeria.”

“I can. And you won’t.”

He regarded me with such a look that I almost felt shame. “You…you are not acting quite like yourself.”

My shoulders slumped a little, and hot dread eroded away at my heart. “No,” I murmured softly. “I’m not. I’m sorry. But what’s been done today…” Could change everything. And it’s all my fault, and I have no idea what to do now. “Well. It can’t be undone. So.”

A heavy silence followed. Bilbo fidgeted. Then, slowly, I pulled out the shark tooth from underneath my shirt. He watched me take the tooth in my left fingers and raise the others up.

“Do…” I spoke in a detached sort of reverence. “You people here do blood oaths, don’t you?”
Bilbo, who had already been washed of color, crossed into another clammy pale shade. He nodded once, but I saw him getting ready to shut me down. “I won’t make you,” I said. The back of my neck was hot. “I’d never make you do anything. But it’s all I have. Because…” My throat grew irritatingly tight. “Because you’re right. I may never go home.”

“Valeria, I…”

“If I’m staying here, then I need to be sure that you’ll keep quiet. No one—no one—can know.”

Staring into my friend’s eyes broke my heart. What had I done? I may have put him danger. Sauron could have located where the Ring was—right here in the Lonely Mountain. It could mean a bigger orc army. It could mean they look for Bilbo as well as myself. It could mean they take the Ring and—

Guilt and shame clawed through the tough demeanor I was trying to keep. As if I hadn’t cried enough today, blameful tears singed on my raw face.

“Promise me, Bilbo, please.”

He pursed his lips and bowed his head. I held my breath.

“…Alright. I’ll do it.”

I released a ragged sigh. I was hurting him, I knew, and that hurt would sit in me for the rest of my life. I almost withdrew and simply took Bilbo’s word for it. I trusted him with everything I had. But this…this was more, now, and I needed to accept that. What I had done may irrevocably hurt many more. And very soon.

“I’m, uh, not sure how to do it,” I eventually whispered. The empty chamber that led to the balcony beyond shielded us from the wind, which had picked up with the approach of a storm. A dim light barely illuminated the space. My voice did not reverberate against its walls, but I shivered anyway. I wondered if I would ever truly be warm again. My fingers felt so cold.

“I’m afraid that neither do I.” Bilbo rubbed his hands against his thighs, palms scraping against the worn and rough fabric of his trousers. “Oaths…blood oaths…are not a common practice among hobbit-folk.”

I extended a thumb out and pressed the tooth against the lower digit. The cut would have to be conspicuous; both our marred and bandaged palms would arouse suspicion. Dwarves were a superstitious lot, too. I was sure that any sort of pact involving promises and blood didn’t sit well with them.

Just as I was about to run the tooth over my thumb, Bilbo stopped me. “Wait.” Haltingly, he then offered his own little thumb, calloused from the journey we had both embarked on. “I’ll go first.”

He only winced a little when I dug the tooth in. It had retained most of its sharpness despite the wear. Blood beaded up in the uneven cut. Before it could spill down, I slashed the tooth against my own skin. This one was deeper. I deserved it. Bilbo winced at the scraping sound my skin made as it was torn open.

I held my right hand up. Blood had already reached the other side of my palm. Bilbo placed his hand with the cut out as well, and I clasped it with my own. For a moment we just froze there, both shaking from what had happened, what could be, and what was. I did not drop my gaze. Nor did he.

The words brushed past my lips, gentle unlike the wind that howled outside.
“Swear to me.”

“I swear…” Bilbo faltered, and I held him tighter. Blood welled up through our fingers, but I barely felt its heat. “I swear that I will not tell a soul what happened here today.”

Then it was done. If there had been any magical powers that bound us, I didn’t sense it. Maybe there never would be any mystical pull. We weren’t elves, after all, and there were no ancient words to speak that’d seal the oath in perpetuity. We had nothing but the fear in our hearts and the drips of our blood spattering against the floor. It was enough, though. It was enough.

I let go and examined the smears of red against my palm. I couldn’t stop shaking.

“Oh, dear,” Bilbo murmured, as if some tea had been spilled instead of our blood. He took his poor handkerchief—which had turned hard and crusty from my own blood he cleaned up earlier—and ripped off a less used bit. He wrapped it around my thumb, and the rag quickly darkened.

Wordlessly, I took what was left of the handkerchief and did the same. By the time I had tied the bandage into a knot, I started crying again. I really wasn’t okay. Fuck, I’d been so selfish thinking that. Nothing was okay right now. Nothing might never be okay again.

“You need some food in you,” Bilbo said, getting to his feet. Though he wobbled a bit in both tone and stature, he decided to take the lead for a change while I sat in my crumpled, overwhelmed state. “It cures all unhappiness.”

I didn’t want him to pretend cheerfulness. But one of us had to try, and it wasn’t going to be me. Bilbo extended his uncut hand. I took it and stumbled upright. “Food,” he repeated. “Food is what we need.”

Though I was sick to my stomach and soul, I let him lead me back into the mountain.

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Fili stroked my freshly-washed, lightly damp hair as we lay in our makeshift bed of furs and blankets from Lake-town. A fire lowly burned in the mantle. I couldn’t look at it, for the glowing embers reminded me too much of him. Though three days had passed since the incident, the trauma lingered.

But Bilbo had not spoken of it, and we feigned smiles at each other, waiting for them to become real again.

“Ria, does something trouble you?” Fili inquired. My back was to him, and though both he and the room were warm, my fingers remained cold, and I had finally become distant enough for him to notice. Guilt transformed the insides of my chest into cotton stuffing, and it suffocated me.

“Hm? Oh, I’m fine,” I answered, turning so I could rest my head into the crook of his arm. Fili automatically held me close to him, and it was here that I actually felt safe. “This mountain is just shit, that’s all.”

He hummed in agreement. “It will not be this way forever.” His own chest, however, constricted, and I lifted my head so I could see him better. What I got was a canvas of worry that darkened his eyes.

“What is it?”

Fili let out a sigh and absently played with my hair. “The elven king arrived in Dale this evening. I
am certain he will demand what he believes he is owed tomorrow. The prince has made sure we are aware of that fact."

“Well, you know where I stand,” I said. “Just give him the gems.”

“It is not that easy.”

“Yes, it is.” I adjusted so I could prop my head up. The bottom of my shirt cinched with the movement, and Fili fell into the temptation of touching my bare stomach. “You don’t have to listen to Thorin, you know. He’s…he’s not his right self.”

“But even if he was, he would not give anything to the elves. They did not aid our people when we needed it most.”

I refrained from rolling my eyes. We had this conversation several times before, alone and with others, and it always turned circular. The dwarves were stubbornly loyal to Thorin. And I couldn’t say they were wrong, either. Thorin harbored great disgust toward Thranduil and the Mirkwood elves; even lucid, he wouldn’t make any peace with them. He hadn’t in Mirkwood.

A darker revelation bloomed in my mind. “It means the orcs will be here soon, too,” I said, closing my eyes with the weight of the words.

“It means war, yes.”

I settled back down and stared at the dark ceiling above us. But soon it reminded me of a roiling black sky, so I turned more to Fili, where the firelight turned strands of his blond hair to vibrant gold. “Hey, Fili…” I said, words slow to form. “What, uh, what do you know about the…the…”

It was as if I was saying fucking Voldemort’s name, I was so scared to utter it aloud. Fili waited, brows slightly furrowed, for a finish to my sentence. Eventually, I gave up and went with, “The Dark Lord.”

He tensed a fraction, curious more than worried. “Well, which one are you thinking of? Morgoth, or his servant?”

Oh! Ha! Yeah! There were fucking two of them. “His servant.”

Fili clicked his tongue. “Well, he was once a Maia of Aulë. Mahal. He was taught a great manner in the power of creation. Smithing. Handiwork. But he was tempted by the darkness. Morgoth convinced him that he could achieve his dreams and desires of building a perfect world if he did so without Aulë and the constraints of the Valar. I’m not quite educated on the intricate details. Balin would have more stories to tell you.” He made a noise. “Oh. And he also made the Rings of Power. Hadud khazâdzubûdul ni aban-dumizd. Seven for the Dwarf-lords in the halls of stone.”

I forced my body to stay relaxed.

“My great-grandfather, Thror, bore one of the seven. But it went when my grandfather Thrain disappeared, and it has not been recovered. The rest of the rings are lost to time.”

Holy shit. How the hell did I not know this?

Fili’s brows twitched as I propped myself back up, hair spilling over my shoulders.

“But—like, isn’t that ring bad? It was created by, by him.”
“We dwarves are a sturdy sort. Sauron could not corrupt my folk despite wearing the rings he gifted.”

I frowned deeply. “That doesn’t sound right.”

“Well, look at what happened to the men who wore them. They are wraiths. We are not.”

His brows furrowed more when I made a loud doubtful noise. With a scrunched-up thinking face, I said aloud, “Luis…freak, what did Luis say? Rings…the rings the dwarves wore, they didn’t turn them into wraiths like they did the men. But, uh, but they did something else.” I slid both hands up higher so they raked through tresses of hair. Fili and I sat in silence for several moments while I tried remembering. When nothing came to mind, I dove into the space of the mountain, from the architecture to the graves, the weapons and even the dwarves themselves, until finally my thoughts landed on Thorin and the treasure—

I snapped my head up to Fili, who had gone from curious to confused to concerned in the span of our little exchange. “Not wraiths. Gold. Greed. The rings…” I sat up and crossed my legs as if getting into an upright position would help all the words flow better. “The rings enhanced the dwarves’ desire for gold and treasure, causing them to be consumed by so much greed that they—they’d go mad. So in the end, they had just as terrible fates as men did. Or, at least I think that’s what happened.” Quietly, I added, “Luis knows a lot more than me.”

Fili, by this point, had sat up as well. He leaned forward and asked me solemnly, “Do you know what becomes of my grandfather and his ring?

I started to shake my head, then remembered that one time Luis and I watched extended stuff. He talked the whole way through it, telling me the differences between the book and the movie and what was this and that. I should have paid better attention to him. But how could I have known that this was where I’d end up?

“He—I don’t think he makes it.”

“And the ring?”

I did not say who brought Thror to an end and most likely retook the ring. So I just said, “It’s lost, as well.”

Fili huffed out a small breath, but it was not in anger. Resignation, perhaps, or possibly relief. “Then let it remain so.”

Another silence rolled over us. Despite the exhaustion that made my joints ache, I couldn’t close my eyes and let them stay closed. I remained in a stasis, bobbing up and down in unfamiliar water and waiting for the current to turn deadly. When Fili’s breaths turned slow and even, I reluctantly rolled out of his arms and reached for the little piece of folded paper buried underneath a heap of clothes. I faced the fire; its dim orange light filtered through the parchment, but my own handwriting was visible enough.

-T goes crazy over gold. B gives stone to elf king and Bard. G comes back?


-B leaves with ring. End.
Was Gandalf here already, watching the Lonely Mountain from Dale with his stormy gray eyes? Did he talk with Legolas and Tauriel? Thranduil and Bard? There was so much I wanted to ask him, tell him.

A deep, uncovered ache sprung up in my chest. I missed the wizard—much more than I let myself acknowledge. He provided a rock when there were no others, and his low and caring voice could ease the tangled knots I had created inside myself. He’d take a look at the droplet embedded in my palm, raise his bushy brows in a serious manner, and say to me, “My dear Valeria, what have you gotten yourself into?”

Maybe he’d have all the answers, too. Maybe he figured out a way to send me home while he was gone. Or maybe not. Bilbo’s words up on that balcony stuck with me. Despite the nature in which he said them, they carried truth.

Still, I wiped away a tear from the corner of my eye before it fell.

The “tower thing,” I found, was actually called Ravenhill. The dwarves built it as a post, and there it was inhabited and handled by ravens. Talking ravens that lived a long time. I saw Oin lowly conversing with a raven yesterday, but I couldn’t make out what the bird said. Maybe I could ask him if he’d tear out Azog’s eyes for me. Shit, I should have just gone with the thought of blowing the whole place up. That would have…made things different, right?

I turned back enough to see Fili, whose faint snores signified that he was actually asleep. I would have recognized his fake-sleeping; he’d never been told that he snored when he slept, and I’d keep it that way so he wouldn’t start. I refolded the parchment and tucked it away where it had first been, slowly got up, and quietly put on my trousers, coat, and boots. The door slid open almost soundlessly, and I thanked whatever dwarven architects that had constructed it.

They wouldn’t be thanking me, though, with where I was heading.

If Thorin and the dwarves would not make peace with Thranduil, then I would. For Legolas. For them. And let it be known that a pitiful human mended what mighty dwarves and elves could not.

Distantly, I heard some indiscernible conversation between a few members of the Company in the common room ahead. I went the opposite way, letting the light of the braziers guide me down to the treasury.

I had put it off for too long. I wouldn’t wait another night, because this may be my last one spent in the Lonely Mountain.

Thorin shouted in the distance. He did not rest, anymore, even in such late hours. I heard Dwalin and Balin both placating him. With all the nerves coursing electric in my body, part of me kicked myself for just not asking Bilbo to retrieve the White Gems under the invisibility of the Ring. But after all that happened between us, I couldn’t say much more to him than “Hello” and “How are you doing?”

If a grown dragon could completely submerge itself in the treasury, then my two little legs had a lot of ground to cover. Fortunately, Fili had referenced seeing where the gems were in passing a few days ago. Along the northeastern side, where bars of gold had been stacked to the ceiling as if they were pillars themselves. The necklace itself sat upon a pile of the gems, and they gleamed bright despite the gloom of the mountain. When the light of the braziers faded, I dared to use the tiniest bit of light from the droplet to guide me through the darkness of gold and greed heaped up on both
sides of the path. An old path once carved by Thror, and carved out once again by Thorin. I saw shuffled footprints in the thick layers of dust that had settled on the floor. It scared me more than the stench of dragon mingled with the tang of metals.

I quickened my pace as much as I could. The fury of Smaug’s fire and the gleam of his massive teeth still hung in my dreams, and there were times I woke up sweating from a heat that did not exist outside of my mind. But since I held the Ring, even the dragon’s fire could not warm up the tips of my fingers.

Other dreams plagued me, too. Dreams of Thorin killing me when he found out I took the gems, or killing Bilbo when he uncovered the Arkenstone from the hobbit’s coat pocket. Dreams of Fili dead with Ravenhill looming over him. Dreams of everyone dead.

Dreams of darkness, at times so vivid that I thought Sauron had come back to finally claim me. Bard was right; I should have been more scared.

To stay focused, I held the droplet close to my chest, where its light filtered out between my fingers and illuminated the bones and veins in my hand. Its warmth comforted me, bringing a clarity I would not have otherwise had.

If I shined the light on Thorin, would it bring him clarity, as well? Would it drive the veil of shadow from his eyes? It could work. I mean, what didn’t this droplet do?

A particularly loud shout in the distance made me jump. Anxious, I let the light dim until it was almost nonexistent. Thorin raved in Khuzdul, but it soon faded, and I began walking again. Everything prickled against the cold, and my heart beat too frantically in my chest. Its thump-thump must have echoed through the mountain. The shadows the droplet cast almost made it look like dragon scales moved under the gold. I swallowed the hard ball of fear forming in the bottom of my throat and kept moving. A cold sweat broke out on my forehead.

Like a child, I sang Bidi Bidi Bom Bom to stave off the increasing dread that had me skittering like a deer at every imaginary sound. I wished Fili was here with me, or Bilbo, or any of the Company. I didn’t want to do this alone.

It begged the question: was I even doing the right thing? At all?

I received no answer when I found the gems two hours later. They lay where Fili had described them; the dwarves had stacked hefty gold bars like a Jenga tower all around the area, and I did not dare shine the light bright enough to see where they ended. Gold coins, as usual, littered the area. There would be no getting rid of them, even if all the treasures of the mountain were swept out to sea. They were like confetti or glitter.

The gems themselves glistened with a whitish light similar to the droplet’s own. Not nearly as powerful, but beautiful enough for me to pause as I stared at them. They refracted the slightest light from the droplet and turned it stronger. I had to immerse myself in complete darkness so they wouldn’t pump the place up like some fucking EDM concert. Before I did, though, I caught a glimpse of the necklace meant for Legolas’ mother. It was crafted from silver spun so thin it looked like spider silk, and the gems were starry drops of dew. The necklace would have spanned across her collar bone and dipped down to the middle of her chest, the intricate chains weaving a complex and breathtaking pattern. And, I mused to myself, she would have loved it.

Blindly, I groped for the necklace and tucked it into the outer pocket of my coat. A few loose gems sprinkled to the floor, but I doubted the sound would carry. Hopefully, the necklace wouldn’t become so tangled in my pocket that Thranduil couldn’t undo those shitty little chain-knots
formed the second any kind of necklace was set down. Silently, I apologized to Legolas’ deceased mother. I didn’t mean to desecrate her heirlooms.

If she was anything like Legolas, though, she might have found it amusing. He only acted stoic and tough, and merriment found its way through the cracks in his character.

Now in a hurry to get the hell out of here, I backtracked my path and let the light guide me to safety. Thorin had gone silent, which became a tormenter of its own. What if he was waiting for me? He…he wouldn’t actually kill me, would he? They were just the gems, after all, not the Arkenstone. Bilbo was more at risk.

However, the White Gems of Lasgalen meant collusion with the elves. In Thorin’s state, it could mean death. I’d bounce back, obviously, but that’d fucking suck. Simply the thought of it caused a pit to form in my stomach and tears to spring up.

I couldn’t wait for all of this to be over.

And then what came after? When the snow and ash had settled, when the blood had dried on the frozen ground, what would I do then?

The first, immediate thought was being with Fili. He…he had become more to me than I ever thought possible. I loved him, and by now I had uttered it without the fear of dragon fire and death looming over us. His death—his death was unfathomable at this point because I had chiseled the fate I would create for him, Kili, and Thorin into stone. I meant what I said when I promised him that he’d live.

Staying with Fili, staying here…it did make me happy. I rolled with the prospects as I snaked my way back through the treasure horde. I could stay here in Erebor, but I’d go visit Bilbo in the Shire and see Bag End. I’d make my mama’s strawberry drink for him, and we’d discuss the best way to prepare the vegetables from his garden. I could see Beorn again, too, and cuddle with his animals. I could finally meet Dis and hope she thought I was good enough for her son.

I could…I could stay and help the Fellowship if I lived long enough.

An old sense of mourning washed over me; I promised myself that I’d be back to see my family. Luis’ baseball season would be starting up in the springtime, but the spot on the bleachers where my parents sat would have an empty space next to it because I’d be gone. No more humanitarian work, either. My dreams of running an organization would vanish.

Good work could be done here, though. Here, I’d still be loved. Here, I’d still make a life.

When I returned to the room unseen and unheard, Fili continued to sleep. He wasn’t snoring, however, meaning that I’d be inevitably found out. For a second, I considered leaving the room again. But it’d make no difference; Fili would just get up and follow me.

So I shed everything I had put on and crawled under the heavy fur blanket with him, waiting for the time when he spoke. Until then, I softly wrapped my arm around his waist and curled myself tight against him. Something blossomed inside me as I let my body relax because of the comfort his provided. Something always blossomed inside me when I pressed myself as close as I could to him. I nuzzled my face into his back, letting my eyes shut and losing myself to love for those few precious moments.

“Your nose is cold,” he muttered about thirty seconds later, voice throaty but clear. “Where did you go, amrâlimê?”
“…Sneaking,” I whispered back, too afraid to lie. It would make no difference trying; I was already caught. Fili turned and faced me, and I was surprised to see such distressed worry etched into his features. He brushed my hair back and cupped a cheek.

“We are so close, Ria,” he said. His voice cracked with emotion. The sound of it sent a jolt of pain through my heart. “Please…please, do not jeopardize what you do not have to.”

“Fili, I…”

“Thorin has been suspicious of you. More so than the others. He has been speaking as though he does not know you at all. As if you are a spy for the enemy.”

The revelations stung me. Fili put his forehead to mine.

“I would not have you give him more reason for paranoia. Please. I cannot bear to have anything happen to you when danger is already so near. Promise me that you will stay far from trouble’s reach.” He let out a poor laugh. “As hard for you as that may be.”

He took my hand in his and tried warming up cold fingers. “Ria. Promise me.”

“I promise,” I spoke. Fili then held me to his chest and twined his fingers through my hair. It was good of him to do it, because he couldn’t see my face and the dreaded betrayal that inevitably surfaced.

Because the promise had been broken before it was made.

Chapter End Notes

Believe me, it's only gonna get more angsty and dark from this point on, since we're reaching the climax of the story. But! But I promise the ending will bounce back up to happy goodness. So just hang in there!
I braided my hair slowly, meticulously. The sports bra fit snugly, and the fabric of the athletic shirt brushed cool against my skin. My leggings, though worn, hadn’t yet gotten any holes in them. Since my ankle socks had, I wore the thinnest pair of wool socks with my Nikes.

Then I put on the coat holding the White Gems of Lasgalen, took a breath, and headed out of the room.

Fili had left earlier this morning to council Thorin on the matter of the elves. I told him I’d be joining, but that was a lie. He may have been too stressed to notice, or he did notice but decided not to stop me. Neither gave me comfort. But he kissed my knuckles, anyway, and said that all should be well, that Thorin would see clearly once more and trust that I remained loyal. *Just wait a little longer, amrálimê.*

I couldn’t, though.

Was I doing the right thing?

Yet again, the answer eluded me as I cinched my blades at both hips. Fili taught me more about wielding them, but I still a long ways from a proper fighter, let alone a warrior like he was. I took Bolg by surprise back in Lake-town. The army of orcs and trolls and all manner of dark creatures wouldn’t be in the same circumstance. Before I killed Bolg, I used the blades to kill spiders…and then I died. Before the spiders, I used the blades to kill orcs and wargs…and died.

Maybe using them again was an omen that death reached out once more. The dread that wove together my entire stomach warned me that it was approaching. But I didn’t want to die. I didn’t want to die.

To counteract the omen, I fished the single coin I’d been given near the beginning of the journey from my pack and put it in my other coat pocket. And, for extra luck, I also grabbed the white quartz I found at the bottom of the lake and tucked inside as well. The coin and quartz clinked together.

I stood alone in the room, letting the silence sink in. My hands curled tight to stop them from shaking. I had always known this was coming. But, like most momentous things, it evaded reality until the last second, when the waves were already crashing against the rocks.

Would I drown?

A soft, mirthless laugh broke the silence. Too late. I had been drowning for a while, now.

The best thing to do was just swim further down until the world flipped and I wound up breathing air again.

I whispered a prayer I barely heard myself. Then I left the room with the finality that no matter what, something would change.

What even was loyalty? I remained loyal to Thorin—to the Thorin uncorrupted by dragon-sickness, to the Thorin who hadn’t seen me as a spy for months. I remained loyal to Bilbo, whose
loyalty lay with the same Thorin. We were both going so far to break that loyalty to remain loyal.

And when those loyalties conflicted? My loyalty to Fili, my cariño, would twist and strain because he told me that it was best for both of us if I stayed quiet and unassuming. And it may have been best for us. This plan, though, had long been in the works before the foundation of our relationship solidified and grew roots deeper than I could have imagined. My loyalty to the rest of the Company, even, was at risk, because the Thorin they followed would have me punished for my actions. And they were bound by dwarven tradition and love to do his bidding. My broken loyalty could force them to break theirs to Thorin because of their own love for me.

I didn’t want to hurt anybody. If it meant peace, though, if it meant saving lives, I’d do it.

Bilbo sat alone in the common area, and he jumped when he saw me approach through the hallway. For the morning hour, it felt late, like time had stopped after I picked up the gems. “Oh, Valeria. Good, you’re awake,” he said, picking up a plate of food and hurrying over to give it to me. “I saved you some breakfast. It’s gone cold, but you should eat up anyway.”

“Thanks, Baggins,” I smiled, taking it from him and biting into a cold biscuit. Bombur’s baking should have been savory, but as I chewed, the biscuit turned to dry sand in my mouth. I had difficulty swallowing.

He rubbed his hands on the sides of his trousers and glanced around. “The dwarves are in a meeting. I—I slipped away just for a spot of something to nibble on. Aren’t you supposed to be with them?”

“Yeah.” I took one last reluctant bite of biscuit and set the plate aside. Bilbo took what I didn’t eat for himself. “But I can’t go. We need to get out of here right now, before Thranduil decides to assault the mountain without leverage.” I pointedly looked to Bilbo’s coat.

“And…and you?” he whispered. “Did you get them?”

I patted my coat pocket. “I did.”

The Arkenstone was to halt war between the elves and dwarves. The White Gems of Lasgalen were to broker a longer peace. And both needed to get the hell out of the mountain before Thorin’s fury came swinging down on us.

“You should—you should stay.” Bilbo took one of my hands and gave it a nervous squeeze. “Let me take both to the king. I will take the blame.” With a quiet ruefulness, he added, “I am, after all, a burglar.”

My smile, however sad, was genuine. I crouched so we were eye level, and before I knew it, I was hugging him tightly. Bilbo hugged me back. His breath suddenly hitched. “Oh, Baggins,” I whispered. “I love you.”

“And I do believe I love you as well, my dear Valeria.”

Bilbo gave me hope. Fresh breath returned to my lungs. I let go, and Bilbo dabbed away at his tears with the back of his coat sleeve. “I’m going with you,” I spoke. “I’m afraid that if I stay, Thorin will still accuse me of conspiring with you. And…and he won’t be wrong…” I weakly chuckled. “But it could mean that I won’t be safe.”

“But Fili will protect you! They all will,” Bilbo responded fervently. I gave my head a shake.

“I can’t count on that. And besides…” I sighed, looking up as if I could see my loose plan
formulating above me. “I need to be out of the mountain.”

Bilbo peered at me speculatively. His nose tweaked and he fidgeted a bit before sighing and throwing his hands up. “Alright. Alright. I know there’s no changing your mind. You can be as stubborn as those bebothering dwarves.”

“Hey, you’re one to talk. Those big ol’ hobbit feet are like bricks that plant you down when you don’t want to do something.”

Bilbo huffed and puffed, but when he couldn’t come up with an adequate response, he ended up just giving me a look. I stood upright and held onto his hand again. Beneath the collar of his shirt, a bit of shining chainmail peeked out. Good. He’d need it, and so would his nephew. Bilbo also had Sting strapped to his hip. Despite the relative peace, he too was ready for confrontation.

“Let’s blow this popsicle stand, pepito.”

“Pepito,” Bilbo repeated as I grabbed some spare rope laying untouched in the room ever since the dwarves reclaimed the mountain. “Nuggito pequeño. You call me these things, yet I do not know what they mean.”

“It means that you’re a little nugget, Baggins.”

“Yes, but what does that mean?”

“If you don’t get it now, you never will. Besides,” I gazed down the empty hall that would deliver us to the front and lowest balcony of the mountain, “I don’t think now’s the time to have an in-depth conversation about it.”

“Right.” Bilbo’s newly-trimmed curls bobbed with his head. He didn’t let go of my hand, and he didn’t comment on the coldness of my fingers or the scabbed over cut on my thumb. “Yes. Let us leave this place.”

I slung the rope over a shoulder and began the journey outside of the mountain. Thorin had everyone gathered in the treasury; our absences would undoubtedly become suspicious, but hopefully by the time they came looking for us, we’d be on Dale’s porch steps.

We moved down a flight of stairs more slowly than I wanted in order to keep any sound muted. In the far distance, I could a hazy, pale light spilling into the mountain from the balcony. Thorin had the entrance Smaug ploughed through to be barricaded, so we couldn’t get out that way. I wanted Bilbo to put the Ring on so it’d look like I alone was escaping if I got caught, but I kept my mouth shut. He’d just say no. What happened to me—and what happened to us because of the Ring—was still too fresh. But I hoped that he’d use it when he absolutely needed to.

Which was very soon.

The thought of Bilbo Baggins in the midst of war made my gut twist tighter. I glanced down at him, imagining his washed face become smeared with grit and blood, dust and sweat, his breath billowing out from him as he fought for his life and the lives of others.

What if I changed so much that Bilbo’s own fate had been changed as a consequence?

A wave of heat started at the back of my neck and traveled down to my feet, making me feel sick. I almost stumbled, but it was only because of Bilbo’s steady pace that I kept going.

What if you can’t save anyone? What if you’ve just made things worse?
I audibly growled as I shoved the thought away. I wouldn’t be torn apart by doubt.

“Baggins,” I said to him while we moved, hoping that talk of the past would conjure some relief, “do you remember that evening in Rivendell? When we sat by the waterfall and watched the sun set? And the elves sang that song while the sky turned to twilight?”

“I do, yes. My clothes had been cleaned, too. And you wore that lovely gown.”

“You remember my dress?”

“Of course. It was gauzy, and the color reminded me of lilacs in bloom.”

I smiled. “I forgot about that dress. It was pretty, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. Fili thought you looked pretty in it, as well. You were absent when he said it in passing, but he mentioned how fair you were.” Bilbo paused, then added, “Of course, he was teased mercilessly for the comments. Admiring a human creates such things among dwarves.”

“Yes it does indeed.” We headed down more stairs. “That was such a long time ago.” I swallowed and said, “I’d like to go back. Enjoy it more.”

“I would as well. Perhaps we can go together? Once this is all said and done. Another adventure. And maybe one more after that.”

“See? I told you that you’d want to go on more adventures after this.”

“Yes,” Bilbo said dryly, “forgive me for not believing you back then in all my misery.”

We looked up and down the next hallway before crossing it. “Do you still believe what I said back then? That you’ll wish this had never ended?”

He let out either a scoff or a laugh. I couldn’t tell which. “Ask me again in a few days. Then I shall give you a proper answer.”

“Deal.”

A span of silence followed. I could begin to feel a breeze on my skin, and I briefly told myself that I should have grabbed the scarf Ori knitted for me.

“Valeria,” said Bilbo, his eyes meeting mine for a second. “We…we will be alright, won’t we?”

“Yeah,” I automatically replied. “Of course we will.”

“And I mean ‘we’ in reference to yourself as well.”

“I don’t know my own future, Baggins.”

“Then be safe, please.”

Bilbo’s genuine care and concern struck me, just as they always did. “Your…coming back from the dead has created a recklessness in you, I fear. Do not let it drive your choices.” He took a breath, willing himself not to be overcome with emotion. “I would much prefer to see you live.”

He did not make me promise anything like Fili had, or like when I had made him swear his own promise. It was simply a Bilbo request, which always came with a dose of common sense, love, and a bit of reprimand.
With a similar hobbit-like wryness, I replied, “I will try. I’d prefer to stay alive as well.”

We reached the balcony, and a wall of cold air and pale sunlight hit me like a truck. I hadn’t been outside since I held the Ring, and standing outside pulled for sour memories to resurface. I adjusted the rope, though, and gritted my teeth. I’d see this done.

Bilbo looked across the barren stretch between Erebor and Dale. “I think I can spot elves,” he mentioned while I unwound the rope and found a solid piece of stone to begin wrapping it around.

“How the hell can you even see that far?”

“I have very keen eyesight, Valeria,” Bilbo stated objectively. I, in turn, rolled my plain ol’ human eyes at him.

“Come on, help me—”

The cry of a raven pierced the air. Both of us snapped our heads up to the awning above and watched in horror as the massive corvid took flight.

Right into the mountain.

“Oh, fuck.”

With time now against us, Bilbo and I worked as quickly as we could to get the rope tied securely. “Stupid crow,” I hissed. “Estúpido espío. El pequeño soplón. Odio los pájaros. Fuck! I hope a fucking orc eats it.”

“Hush! You can make death threats later!”

The end of the rope hit the water below with a faint splash. Before Bilbo could speak, I lifted him onto the flat surface of the balcony with a small grunt. “Hurry,” I breathed, looking up at him. “And I’ll be behind you.”

Bilbo’s attention went from me to the space behind my shoulder. Half a second later, I heard a voice I hoped I would not have to hear while standing in this mountain.

“Valeria.”

My blood turned to ice.

Slowly, I turned back around. The soles of my sneakers scraped against the stone beneath us.

Thorin stood in front of the entrance to the balcony. He was still garbed in kingly robes. Spots that had been gnawed on by moths and time faintly stood out against the dark fabric and fur. His dark hair tumbled down, disheveled and knotted up in the heavy crown he wore on his brow. A sword hung at his side.

Those piercing eyes that once regarded me with familial love now burned with hatred. I almost shrank away.

“Bilbo,” I whispered, hoping he’d hear me. “Go.”

But a small hand grasped my shoulder, and I sucked in a ragged gasp. The hobbit would not be leaving my side today.

*What have you done?*
“I have been betrayed,” Thorin said, his voice grating against his throat. He took a step forward, and I tensed. Bilbo hopped back down off the ledge, staying behind me. I felt him reach for the Ring, should he need it. “Betrayed…by my own.”

“Thorin,” I said, moving a hand in front of me as if it would maintain the distance between him and us. “Hey. You just gotta listen.”

“Listen?” He chuckled, and it sent shivers of fear down my spine. It was reminiscent of Smaug’s. “For what…purpose…would I have to listen to lies and deceit?”

“We wouldn’t lie to you.”

The sound of hasty footsteps preceded the rest of the dwarves coming through the balcony’s entrance and screeching to a stop upon the scene. I locked gazes with Fili for a couple moments. He displayed only anguish, and he mouthed my name with a silent despair that made me want to weep. Had he known that the promise was futile?


“Uncle,” Fili said, attempting to soothe the confrontation. “Perhaps you should let them explain themselves before passing judgement.”

“Do not speak to me, boy, on matters you cannot understand,” Thorin growled. Fili didn’t blanch; his fear for Bilbo and me only grew. There was no reasoning with Thorin. We had no adequate words to defend ourselves with because explanations didn’t matter when the decision had been made.

“Return what you have stolen, and you shall not lose your heads.”

“Thorin!” Bilbo shouted, coming out from behind me despite my attempts to draw him back. He pointed a chastising finger at the dwarf. “Thorin, you are not yourself! Dragon-sickness has claimed you for too long. The—the Thorin I knew would not threaten his friends!”

“Friends? The same such friends who would slither out of this mountain to ally themselves with elves and men?” Thorin’s eyes narrowed, and he sneered. “Those who betray my trust forfeit their relationship.”

My calm began to fray. “You forfeited your relationship with us the moment you laid eyes on that fucking treasure horde!” I shouted. Thorin’s face darkened with fury. “You’ve gone so fucking crazy that we have to run in order to save our lives!”

“You lives would not need saving if you were loyal!” Thorin roared back, his yells echoing off the mountain. I flinched but did not otherwise move. The Company shifted uncomfortably. Fili, Kili, and Dwalin tensed. Balin gazed out at Dale with tears glistening. He then went quiet, voice growing softer, deadlier. “I am…I am a king. I will not tolerate mutiny.”

“This is not a mutiny,” I snarled, fists balling. The droplet was hard against my skin. Perhaps if I could get closer, I could use its power to cleanse him of the poison. “This is us trying to prepare for war!” Rage boiled over at Thorin, at this war, at my uncertainty. “Because some of us haven’t forgot the rest of the world! We haven’t holed ourselves up like some rat, ignoring everyone and everything while we rolled in our own filth!”

“Watch your tongue!” Thorin surged forward a few steps. I shoved Bilbo behind me, both afraid and unafraid. “I have seen you clothed, fed, and protected, and this is how you repay me? By
insulting me in my very kingdom?”

“THIS ISN’T A KINGDOM! It’s a fucking prison! Look! Look at your own kin! They’re absolutely miserable here!” I sucked in a deep breath before unleashing another torrent. “Their kingdom was wherever you were, Thorin, but now you’re not even you! You’re just some insane piece of shit who’d rather watch thousands die at his doorstep rather than fighting!”

“Do not…” Thorin had grown deadly, again, and he moved closer. I, in turn, shuffled back with Bilbo still shielded by my body. His lavishly-ringed hand strayed to the hilt of the heavy dwarven sword. “Speak to me about death, woman.” A smile flickered on Thorin’s mouth, but it appeared manic. I swallowed and tried to control how wide my eyes became. “Though you do know it so intimately, I suppose. Like a lover. How do you fare, Valeria, sleeping next to my nephew knowing that he will soon become a corpse?”

A fell silence cast itself over the balcony.

I clenched my jaw. Anger roiled with the kind of terror that came with a terrible secret being laid out.

“Uncle,” Kili, this time, called out, though he could barely be heard. “You must not think of these things. It isn’t right.”

“Right? Tell me, my sisters-son, is it right to withhold the nature of one’s death?” Thorin didn’t break eye contact with me. Tears, however, sprung up in them, taking me aback. Teeth gritting and voice shaking with tumultuous emotion, Thorin asked, “Is it right to lie about the lives we would have, when in reality, we have none at all?”

Everyone cast their gazes to me. Though I shook, I did not sway.

“I didn’t lie,” I said, and I felt shock burst from the rest of the Company like a crack of lightning amidst a storm.

“You evaded saying the truth outright, which is enough of a lie.” Thorin tilted his chin up in a challenging way. I had half a mind to try and strike him so he’d shut the fuck up. “How does it come to pass? How do my nephews and I meet our end?”

“You don’t!” I spat back, but it came out a twinge frantically. “You don’t.”

Thorin tutted. “Always such a poor liar.”

I corrected my grammar. “You aren’t going to die.”

“Because you know for certain that you will succeed, hm?” When had Thorin gotten closer? “That you have enough power to change the course of fate.”

I glanced at Fili and Kili. Both stared back, frozen. What could I say to them? Convey to them? Nothing, for if I did then I would expose the truth. Thorin extended a hand, and in a calm voice that didn’t match the frenzied intensity of his eyes, he said, “Give me the Arkenstone and the gems, and I shall keep them from battle. You have my word.”

“You word?” I laughed, stepping further back. Bilbo clung to my coat. “Your word is shit. I’d trust Smaug over you at this point.”

The hand Thorin extended curled, and the façade he attempted wiped away with the biting wind. “Give me what is rightfully mine. Or we shall see if your burglar returns from the grave.”
Pure *malice* spiked inside me, stabbing up through my stomach, lungs, heart. “You won’t lay a finger on him!”

“Or what? You shall kill me? Is that not what you’re trying to prevent?” He glowered, paranoia shifting, and I swore I could feel the heat of his venomous hatred. “Perhaps I have misjudged. Perhaps you will not speak of my death because it will give your true intentions away. I die, and Fili becomes king with you as his queen.” He half-turned his head to look back at his nephew. “Perhaps that has always been your plan, you mutinous whore.”

“Thorin!” Fili yelled, voice sharp. It got his attention. “Your tongue is as twisted as the dragon’s! Please, it is as Bilbo said: you are not yourself.”

He began turning away from me, snarling at Fili. “You *dare* insult your king—”

I lunged, hearing Bilbo yelp as I tore out of his grip and surged forward. The droplet illuminated, and I let out an involuntary, vicious noise from the back of my throat. My left hand raised up to smack him with divine light instead of an elven blade I was truly tempted to use for a few moments.

Instead, Thorin backhanded me so hard that I saw my own burst of technicolored lights dance in front of my eyes. I hit the balcony’s railing, dazed, and cupped the spot on my jaw where Thorin had landed his ruthless and coordinated blow. Dwalin and Bofur held Fili back so he wouldn’t attack or be attacked by his king, but they shouted for Thorin to have peace, to stand back, to spare me.

He didn’t listen to them. The sleek sound of a sword leaving its sheath brought my senses back. Grunting, I braced myself against the railing. “Bilbo,” I said as I stared Thorin down, watching his attention glide over to the hobbit and a new vile plan form. Cold, calculating survival kicked in. The muscles I worked so hard to regain coiled in preparation. “Run. Now.”

When Thorin went for Bilbo instead of me, I screamed ferally and launched onto his back, ripping and tearing at his hair. He bellowed and rammed me up against the back wall on the side of the mountain. I managed to spare my head from slamming on it, but my grip loosened enough that Thorin was able to shake me off. I stumbled off and away. Blood from the strike he delivered to my jaw turned my mouth to iron. “Thorin,” I muttered, getting into a defensive stance. I hadn’t trained for dodging a whole-ass sword, but I’d have to try my best. He did point it my way, after all. But that was good. As long as it wasn’t toward Bilbo or Fili or Kili or anybody else but me. “Don’t do this. Come on.”

The weak plea was one final attempt at diffusing the situation. It wouldn’t work, of course, but hey, at least I tried. “Valeria! Valeria!” Fili beckoned for me to join him and the Company. Several of them, himself included, had their weapons drawn. If they could not fight Thorin for me, they could at least barricade me behind them. I wanted to run to their safety. I did. It’d mean a better defense, a better chance at not dying. Fili reached out to me with his free hand, and I hadn’t seen such a look on him since a blade got shoved through my sternum on the Misty Mountains.

He thought I was going to die if I stayed where I was, facing who I was.

I did, too.

But I had a poor penchant for striking instead of defending.

Bilbo was right; I relied on recklessness, ready to jump into death. But it never was part of the plan. I swear. Things just...*happened*.
Thorin raised his sword, teeth baring. He shouted a Khuzdul phrase that I didn’t recognize. I was scared. So, so scared of him. Part of me wished that he would die. Die, and then escape the burden of having to live with what he was about to do for the rest of his reign.

Sorrow welled with the light. I vaguely thought I heard myself shouting his name as the droplet’s power collided with Thorin’s deluded outrage. The force of my palm hit a bearded cheek, blinding those who the light swathed. Divinity scorched away all that was dark and corrupted. It retook and rebuilt what had been corroded, sealing the cracks and fortifying the structures of the consciousness. And for what seemed like less than a moment and the span of an eternity, I felt that all had become good again, all had become complete. In the celestial expanse, presences not on this balcony, not on Middle-Earth, watched as the mind of Thorin Oakenshield was returned to him, cleansed and whole.

Then a field of red flowers surrounding cold metal blossomed on my side.


Thorin stood in stupefied horror, lucidity awash in his expression. The elevation the droplet gave was gone, leaving me with nothing but treachery and anger and a sadness so immense that it overpowered the sword embedded in me. The tears that raked down my face burned hotter than the blood soaking my coat and streaming down my thigh. They burned hotter than dragon fire, than suns, than sin.

*So this is betrayal.*

His sword ripped from my waist and clattered to the ground. Blood rose in my throat and spilled out.

*So this is betrayal.*

“No, no, no no no no,” Thorin cried. He caught me before I fell, arms sure and tight. “Valeria, no!”

*So this is betrayal.*

Thorin wept and wailed in torture. His knees hit the ground, a hand desperately trying to stem the flow of blood pouring out of me from a fatal wound of his own making.

Why wouldn’t death come as it had all the times before? Painful but quick. Why did I continue to listen to Thorin’s cries? Why did I have to feel blood enter my organs and funnel through my nose? Why did I keep crying tears hotter than existence?

I hated Thorin more for it.

“You,” I gasped through wet dredges of breath. Thorin stared at me, beyond horror, beyond despair. Hellish scorn flowed with blood. I craved the consuming desire to hurt him as he hurt me. “You are no king.”

Thorin merely keeled over, clutching me to him, his sobs heavier. Cold exhaustion began to seep in, but it was unable to quench the heat of my tears, which ran faster than the tributaries of red. I began choking and seizing, experiencing the throes of death with each violent jerk of my body. I needed to shriek, to howl, to unleash the torment I had become trapped in. It cut deeper than the wound, pushing me to the brink of madness. All that came out were faint, tinny wheezes. Thorin whimpered for my forgiveness.

I didn’t want to wake up from this death. I didn’t want to remember it. I didn’t want to remember
who killed me. I didn’t want to face anyone when my eyes opened once more. I didn’t want to face myself and my failures.

*I didn’t—want—this—*
Elves, humans, and a wizard gathered on the northern edge of Dale, drawn first to the light that had burst from the front of the Lonely Mountain. In the cold winter morning, they watched thirteen dwarves and a hobbit walk the road from Erebor to the ruins. The Company of Thorin Oakenshield formed a procession, heads bowed, steps muffled.

Thorin led them. In his arms was a brown-skinned woman. Her head lolled back and an arm hung limp.

They crossed the threshold of Dale’s decrepit gates. The people of Lake-town did not part for the Company; they parted for the woman with blood stained on her lips. The woman who saved them from Smaug’s destruction. Her braided hair had become unkempt, and she bore no smile.

The elven army did not part for the Company. They stood armed behind the King Thranduil, the crownless King Bard, and the wizard Gandalf the Grey. Manwë hid the sun behind a veil of endless clouds, casting a dim pallor over Arda.

Thorin did not meet the gazes of his judges. The heir of Durin had been laid low, and his shame bade him to lower himself further from those he once thought superior to. He was, after all, no king. Thranduil examined him coldly and curiously. Bard burned with anger and sadness as he looked upon both the dwarf and the woman. Gandalf muttered inaudible words under his breath, a different, older kind of grief overcoming him.

“You will have your peace,” Thorin said to them. “You will have your promised treasures. But please. Let us lay her somewhere sheltered from the cold.”

Several moments of silent, tense exchanges passed between Thranduil and Bard. Then the elf king inclined his head in the semblance of a nod. He regarded the woman in full, as if he expected to find something she did not have.

The first death had come to Dale.

Dale, however, would find it impermanent for the woman who held starlight in her hand.

I awoke to the resonation that my time in Middle-Earth was near an end.

Slowly, the trails of some forgotten dream slipped off my senses. Memories soon returned to me, linking the view of a fine canvas tent to that of a mountain, where life left my body through the gaping wound crafted by a dwarven sword.

“Oh, my dear Valeria,” a low voice grumbled gently. “You have experienced more peril than the contract you signed stated.”

With blood cracking on my skin as I shifted my head to the side, I met the kind gaze of Gandalf the Grey, whose eyes were etched with care so deep that it transcended mortality.

He smiled a smile I had missed so much, that I had needed so much, and I burst into tears.
“Gandalf,” I sobbed. The wizard leaned forward and took my hand. His love unavoidably mixed with concern. I shook my head back and forth despite the spiking pain. There was nothing I could say that’d convey the things I barely understood in my state. “It’s—I can’t—I can’t—”

“It’s alright. You are not expected to bear such burdens unflinchingly.” I lifted an arm over my eyes, too emotional to respond. Electric shocks rode through each ragged gasp of breath. The pain was worth screaming over, except I had no strength to do anything but cry. “But the weakness you believe yourself to have is, in fact, a sign of incredible strength. Strength that shines bright, even in dark hours. You must believe me, Valeria. I have crossed the paths of ages and ages of Men, and rarely has there been a soul like yours.”

I just cried harder until everything emptied out. Then I was left exhausted of spirit. Gandalf waited in silence, still holding my hand. When I rubbed the tears away with a blood-crusted sleeve, I set my arm down and stared up at the canvas again.

“We’re in Dale,” I whispered, throat groggy from the breakdown.

“Yes. You are resting in a tent provided by King Thranduil. It is about three hours before dawn.”

I glimpsed past Gandalf and saw a sliver of darkness past the tent’s entrance.

“Where is everyone else?”

“Evading sleep. They believe war is upon them. They are right.”

I didn’t ask about Thorin. The kiss of his blade kept me from forming the question on chapped lips.

Instead, the night stoked a further memory of darkness, of the eyes of evil and its hunt for me.

“Gandalf,” I said again, voice softer, more scared. “Something…something bad happened.”

His head tilted a fraction, but he gestured for me to go on. If I hadn’t already cried out all the tears in me, I would have begun doing so again.

“I—I saw him.”

The wizard paled like he had on the outskirts of Mirkwood, when I had told him that Sauron was back. He squeezed my hand tighter and seemed as though he wanted to say a lot of things, but all he eventually uttered was, “Go on.”

Head still turned to him, I closed my eyes and said, “He came to me in…in Mirkwood. The dark magic over that place helped him. He wanted me. I—I was able to escape that time. The second…”

I shuddered. “He found me again in the Lonely Mountain. And I was barely able to get away. He saw, he saw my world, Gandalf. He saw the destruction in a war zone. That’s what he’d been hunting for in my mind. He would have—he would have searched more because he was so much stronger, but…” I swallowed thickly, feeling his grip on my throat. Gandalf took the hand he was holding and laid it palm up. His thumb padded my cold fingers as if for proof. “But I got away. I banished him. I think. I, I don’t exactly know. But I’m so scared, Gandalf. I’m scared of what’s going to happen because of it. I’m scared I’ve set this world on a darker path that the light can’t break.”

Silence permeated throughout the tent. Then, “And how, Valeria, did you banish the Servant of Morgoth?”
I opened my eyes and slid them back to Gandalf. I was too tired and hurt to care anymore.

My left hand lifted and opened up to him. Gandalf’s breath left him. I had seen him angry, scared, happy, confused—but never shocked. Not like this.

Tenderly, Gandalf exchanged my right hand for the left. He laid two fingers on the droplet, and warmth rose up like a relaxant. “Herinya…” he muttered, though it was not to me. I studied Gandalf’s features as best I could in my position. An ancientness emerged in his gaze, profound and undeniable. It was as if he was seeing something from long ago—or someone—and he became stuck between insurmountable sadness, joy, love, and loss.

Gandalf managed to pose a question both absently and directly. “Where did you come upon this?”

“…Lady Galadriel.”

His eyes, now bearing that intensity that made me want to shrink away, bore a hole into me. “Lady Galadriel?”

“It was when we were leaving Rivendell. Tiriel and Gallien, the elves that helped me there, gave it to me. They just…they just said it was from Galadriel, and that it contained some light to help protect me from darkness.” I shifted uncomfortably. Laying down irritated my body, so I struggled to sit upright. Gandalf assisted me, and after a wave of dizziness passed, I managed to get my bearings and drink some water. I wiped the excess that dribbled down my chin and found the coat sleeve stiff and coarse with dried blood. “She spoke to me for a little bit. I…I told her about Sauron. About him returning.”

Gandalf nodded as if he had some understanding of the information. “She came prepared to Dol Guldur, I shall say.” He began to stroke his beard contemplatively. “Your banishment of the Dark Lord makes more sense, now. He was weakened considerably by the time the Council came to my aid. Lady Galadriel cast him and his lieutenants out of the fortress and to the East.”

“Mordor,” I whispered. Speaking the place out loud took ten years off my life. Sitting upright still hurt. Thorin’s sword had gone very deep. I crossed my right hand over to the left side of my waist and under the coat to apply pressure to it. My clothes were still torn but glued together with blood. Someone had at least wrapped a few bandages around the wound out of kindness.

“Yes,” Gandalf rumbled. I kept the droplet on display.

“Did he mention me?” I asked with a weak, bitter smile.

“No. For good or ill, I do not know.”

“Me, neither.” I looked off to the side, searching for something I couldn’t find. “My own presence wasn’t a factor in this world.”

“So it was not. But this…gift,” Gandalf said, motioning to the droplet, “signifies that though you may not have been expected, you were welcomed.”

“Okay,” I took as big of a breath as I could without mortally wounding myself again, “who the hell made this? Landroval said even if Galadriel sent it to me, it’s not elven.”

“Hmph. So you revealed this to the Great Eagles, but not to me?”

I turned bashful and didn’t bother to mention that I also showed the droplet to Beorn. “Sorry, G.”
He grumbled, but it was in his pretend-mad tone. “It is done. There are much bigger matter to worry over.” Gandalf closed my fist to conceal the droplet. “I am afraid that I have been unprepared for this…revelation. I must consult others before I can provide an answer.”

“Who.”

I raised both brows at Gandalf. Metal that the water hadn’t washed out still lingered in my mouth. “Look. We both know that I know that you aren’t just a wizard. You gotta consult your gods or whatever? Fine. But just be straight up.”

“Straight…up…” Gandalf repeated, and I regretted saying it. That look of amusement mixed with trouble never meant anything good. “I assume you mean that I speak with honesty. Very well. But I can only ask the same of you if I am to do so.”

My shoulders hunched, and I held back a fearful scowl. We both had things we could talk about, but doing that might set loose all the things that we worked hard to contain just so the people we cared about would be safe. In other words, being honest could be…disruptive. For each other, for ourselves, and for everyone else.

“I want to be straight up with you,” I finally muttered, wincing at a stab of pain in my waist. “I do. I…understand that sometimes that can’t happen, but it’s not completely impossible.” I briefly lifted up my closed fist. “The…the gift, the light it contains, it makes me feel powerful. But in a scary way, G. Every time I use a lot of it at once, everything inside my head turns inside-out. Like it sees all the things I am—all the things I want and don’t want.” I drew in a shaky breath. “I’m not sure I can even handle it.” In a quieter voice, I added, “I’m not sure I deserve it.”

“Those who question the power they hold are often most worthy to hold it in their grasp.”

Gandalf’s words did not bring any comfort. If anything, it just hollowed me out. I hurt, and I wanted to go back to sleep.

Still, I said, “Thank you.”

Sensing that I was closing off, he patted my leg and stood. His hat nearly brushed the top of the tent. “I’d advise you to try and rest,” Gandalf said with that look of his, “but I know that will not occur. So at least refrain from exerting yourself; death unwound still carries a weight you must be sure to recover from.”

I nodded once. As Gandalf retreated, I was tempted to tell him of the Amelie in the East. It had turned into a long overdue conversation. But before I got it out, another preceding question intercepted it. One I had fought hard to shove in the back of my mind because it just made me sad and confused and frightened.

“Gandalf.” I pulled my unfocused vision back up to him. He paused and turned to me, inquisitive.

“Yes?”

“Who sent me here?”

He turned grim, as if he hoped he’d get out of the tent without being asked the question. I placed both hands on the edge of the cot.

“My dear, I believe you shall find out soon enough.”

I didn’t frown. The hollowness increased.
“So you feel it too.”

The end. The closing.

Gandalf didn’t nod. The answer shone in his old eyes.

I wiped an errant tear that managed to form. “Well.” I attempted smiling. It only made my breath hitch as another bout of sobs threatened the stillness of my body. All the things I wanted to say to Gandalf couldn’t form; it bore more enormity than the space my broken heart could tolerate. “See you around then, G.”

He dipped his head, remaining silent, and left the tent. I appreciated that Gandalf didn’t say anything. It would have only solidified the notion that I was leaving, whether through death or portal or reincarnation or however I came here in the first place.

But why? I wanted to stay—

I sucked in a lungful of air. It viciously stretched and twisted newly-healed muscles and bone.

No. Don’t think like that.

It didn’t matter. I knew it in my heart, no matter how battered and beaten it had become. No matter how many times I died…no matter who killed me.

The hate had already abated with the revival. As much as I wanted it to stay and strengthen and shield me from what I didn’t want to feel, it was leaving, leaving, leaving.

Was I meant to experience this?

My eyes fluttered shut, and I imagined myself kneeling beside my bed, arms propped on the mattress, gazing up at the worn wooden cross my abuelita gave me two years before she passed. Mexico had been ingrained in it, darkened with traditional Catholic conviction and Hispanic hardship. It hung a little crooked to remind me of my mortal imperfections.

Was I meant to experience this? I’d ask it. And the Holy Ghost would whisper what I could not hear, but I’d continue to carry my rosary with me no matter the place in the world I found myself in, holding it close with shaking hands when the things I saw almost grew too great for a single human heart.

The droplet’s chain used to weave itself through my fingers like the rosary beads. Then, at some point when I wasn’t paying attention, it fell off and left the droplet alone in my palm, unmovable and unignoreable.

I clasped my hands together and bowed my head, knuckles pressing into my brow.

Maybe I was meant to experience this. Maybe I wasn’t.

But I would not waste the suffering.

I found myself standing, hands coming loose. The pain came like a staunch partner.

Suffer so I shall.

Because, inevitably, it’d lead me back to love.

The tent’s flap whipped open, and I watched with disjointed surprise as an elf strode through. He
carried himself with pride and certainty. His unnatural gaze swept the area, landing on me last and staying there. A circlet of immaculate silver crowned head, and pale blond hair reminiscent of another elf flowed down his shoulders and back. His clothing, fine and dark, lay underneath finely crafted armor that gleamed in the tent’s candlelight. The elf was cold and beautiful, and he deemed me a curious creature, however inferior.

“You must be King Thranduil,” I said to him as I slowly shuffled off to a low stand that my blades rested on. My fingers could barely move.

“I am. You are Valeria. A revenant, so it seems.” Out of the corner of my eye, I watched him glide further into the tent. He was even taller than his son and made grander by his status.

“Just tired,” I corrected. The blades weighed heavier than I remembered. Hopefully they’d grow light again when it mattered. “And, uh, right now isn’t a very good time to have a long and political conversation.”

“Oh? Are you not under my protection?” Thranduil’s cape grazed against the ground as he shifted, a brow raising. I began to strap my blades to me, however gradual the process was. “I provided a resting place for you in order to have the exact kind of conversation.”

“Wow. Sneaky.” I managed to get the belt cinched right above my hips. “But I think you’re going to be disappointed. I’ve got a lot to do.”

I faced Thranduil again. Compared to his might and elegance, I was a crusty little booger.

His head tilted a fraction like a mildly interested cat. “How could I be disappointed? The great Thorin, son of Thrain, carrying a dead human in his arms to Dale? The very same dead human who was carried into my hall mere weeks ago? The one my son claims has knowledge of what may come to pass?” Thranduil evaluated me more harshly. “I will admit, you are…less than I imagined.”

“And you were hotter in Pushing Daisies. We’re both disappointing.”

Thranduil let confusion glimmer for less than a moment. Then he regained his detached demeanor.

“You would go back to your dwarves? After what they did to you? Kinslaying is punishable by death in dwarven culture; but as you are not one of their own, and you remerged from the Halls of Mandos yet again, there shall be no justice.”

“Living with what’s been done can sometimes be enough justice,” I responded, approaching Thranduil. Looking up at him made me painfully aware of the blow I had been dealt on the side of my face. “You should know the feeling, I bet.”

His sculpted expression hardened, perfecting thousands of years’ worth of disdain and offense. It didn’t affect me. “Hey, listen, I…I can’t stay here. We’ve both got important things to take care of. I’m sure you had very prepared things to say to me. Maybe some threats. Questions. And I’m sure you still wouldn’t see me as an equal. That’s okay.” I let out a small breath of a laugh. It hurt. “If I cared right now, I might try to prove you wrong.”

I reached down into my pocket and pulled out the White Gems of Lasgalen. When I saw their sorry state, I grimaced. “Oof. Sorry.”

The beauty of the necklace had been ruined by my blood. Silver chains and starlit gems were now coated in a heavy, dried layer of rust. “I—they weren’t supposed to look like this. I’m sure a rinse will fix it. Shoulda…should have put it in my other pocket.”
For the first time, I saw a deep, genuine emotion rise up in Thranduil’s being. He was filled with memory unseen, coldness cracking, as he held his slender and ethereal hand out for me to place the necklace on. I did, and if the tent hadn’t been so quiet, I wouldn’t have heard his minuscule intake of breath. It sounded like sorrow so old and untouched that the slightest acknowledgement brought it back like a torrent of rain.

“Legolas asked me. Because he loves you.” I managed a smile. “And…he’s going to help Middle-Earth a lot. It’s the least I could do.”

I was downplaying the request. The gems fueled the loss of my life. Many things did, though, Thranduil’s ego included. Was it worse for them, seeing me as a live reminder rather than dead? I’d imagine so.

Without anything else to say, I slipped past Thranduil’s tall figure. He stopped me, however, holding fast to my shoulder. I grunted at the abrupt halt.

Avoiding a direct stare, he softly questioned, “Why must you do this?”

I saw the glimpse of darkness outside of the tent’s entrance, again. It didn’t scare me as much as it had before, now that I was more aware.

An old Latin phrase struck me. “While I breathe, I hope,” I replied. I didn’t sound strong or sure. Merely…truthful. “And usually when I’m not breathing, too.”

After a moment, Thranduil lifted his hand, letting me leave him alone with his thoughts in the privacy of the tent.

I would not bury my suffering like Thranduil, who let his lie in his soul until it turned into a callous and isolating cancer. Untreated, it inflicted more suffering upon him and others. That wasn’t me. But maybe Thranduil and elves didn’t get the experience of suffering altogether. Perhaps it was more of a human experience, where suffering did not have to be permanent; it was transformative. Healing, even, when shared with others who mourned.

I actually pitied Thranduil a little. It must have been lonely, suffering in hopelessness.

The cold winter air numbed some surface pains. I limped past the elven guards who took up positions on other side of the tent’s entrance and into the courtyard where it had been set up. Other armed elves patrolled the perimeter or stood by braziers to warm up. Their glinting gazes followed me.

“You should not be out here.”

Steady hands took my arm and offered support. Legolas let me keep walking. His steps were small so they wouldn’t outpace mine.

When I didn’t provide a response, he asked, “My father did not strain you, did he?”

“No.” I hummed as my mind moved to another topic I forgot to discuss with Legolas and everyone else earlier. His presence in the cold dark reminded me. “You would have followed Bolg to Gundabad. There is a secondary army coming from there. But I wouldn’t worry too much about it.”

“And why not?”

“Because they’ll be taken care of.”
Legolas had enough sense to stay quiet about the matter. He led me to the courtyard’s exit. I glanced out and saw the snow-dusted path empty. Good. I didn’t need more looks. “Where is the Company?”

“Go left, and you shall find them in the ruins of a stonework home.” I felt Legolas’ intensity on the back of my neck. I didn’t want to crane my head up at him, though, so I kept focused on the path the moon lit for me. “Are you...certain you wish to see them?”

He tried to distance himself from the genuine care in his tone. I faintly smiled.

“No.”

“Then stay here. Rest. You shall be safe.”

“I’m not the kind to rest, Legolas. I don’t live a quiet life. But thank you. I’ll...see you tomorrow.”

He lightly bowed toward me, letting my arm slip from his grasp. I wobbled, then kept on going. Fuck, I needed a cane. But if I fell, I doubted that I’d be able to get back up, and then Legolas would have to come back to help me, and that’d be pretty embarrassing. So out of sheer stubbornness, I made myself move uprightly. I hung close enough to the path’s edge that I could brace a hand against a wall if I felt too light or weary. A few people passed me on the road, but it was dark enough that they couldn’t get a clear sight of me.

After about forty minutes of hobbling through Dale, I came upon the home Legolas described. Inside its broken and gaping interior was a fire, drawing in a dark-eyed and solemn Company to its heat. I used the darkness to conceal my figure as best I could from them. Part of me longed to limp into the crumbling home, offering a smile and some sort of comfort. But this wasn’t like when we met again at Beorn’s house or the prison cells. I doubted I could say the right thing to them and vice versa. It left me stuck in my place, watching them wordlessly.

Fili was the only one asleep. Kili sat next to him, more joyless than I had ever seen him. I figured that Fili had probably been drugged. It explained why he wasn’t at my side when I awoke. He would have fought to be otherwise.

The ache to be with him was sharper than my wounds. I bit back a swell of tears. What did he think of me? I lied to him, to all of them. What kind of person would keep the truth of their deaths hidden?

For a moment, I tried to make myself believe that Fili hated me. It’d be easier to walk away if that were the case. It’d be easier to leave. But I was fooling myself; Fili wasn’t selfish enough to hate me. He was the heir to the throne. Those kinds of things had been removed from him in order to rule the kingdom better. He’d simply continue to love me. If he had done the same as I did, I would keep loving him as well.

Thorin faced the fire. He was the most haggard of them all, and my pity for him was far greater than it was for Thranduil. The deep bruises on the bridge of his nose and underneath both eyes indicated that he had been beaten, or at least squarely hit in the face. I couldn’t quell the slight vindication at it. Thorin had, at least, shed his kingly robes and crown. He wore the clothes he always had.

Just when I glanced at Bilbo, the hobbit coincidentally looked up and saw me.

I quickly put a finger to my lips as he opened his own mouth. Then I receded into the shadows and away from the home. By the time I managed to make it to the other side of the house, the hobbit...
snuck out unnoticed. He treaded as quietly and quickly as he could to me, and when I was within reach, he sobbed and pressed himself against my body. One arm gently wrapped around the uninjured side of my waist. I patted his head. “Hey, Baggins. What’s up?”

He shook his head vigorously and let go. “No. Do not do that,” he said, pointing a finger at me. “You cannot pretend such casualness.”

My lips formed a tight line. “I don’t know how else to act. Do you?”

Bilbo faltered. When he couldn’t come up with a right answer, I took his hand and began walking with him beside me. “Is everyone…are they handling it?” I asked.

“ Barely. Valeria, I…” Bilbo inhaled and gave a humorless chuckle. “To see you die by Thorin’s own sword was horrific. Completely horrific. Then to see him realize what he’d done…” His voice turned throaty. “Fili, oh, Fili nearly killed his own king. Dwalin and Kili had to tear him off. But Thorin carried you here. He made peace.”

The moonlight shone brightly in Bilbo’s unshed tears. “How can anything ever be the same, Valeria?”

We both slowed to a stop. Distantly, I heard the sound of movement from Lakemen and the subtle scent of food. My stomach complained of hunger and thirst, but I ignored it and ducked us into an alcove with snow drifts piled up on the sides.

“Let me tell you a secret, Baggins,” I said. “Nothing will ever be the same. That’s not the way the universe works. We just…have to accept it and continue on.” A resolute gentleness overcame me, and I put a hand atop Bilbo’s head once more. Seeing his distress created a calm that eased my own fears in some strange way. “Go forward, yeah?”

“You say it so simply.”

“All the hardest things are simple.”

He allowed himself a small smirk, and seeing it returned some strength to my frail body. “You have turned into quite the poet, haven’t you?”

“Nah. I just talked to Gandalf a little while ago. His way of talking rubbed off on me. It’ll go away soon, I’m sure.”

Sighing, Bilbo scrubbed at the side of his face. “In all my fifty-one years of existence, I never thought I’d be…here. It’d be incomprehensible if I did not stand with you right now.”

I blinked and made a face. “Fifty-one? I thought you were fifty.”

“I, er, turned fifty-one last month. In Halimath.”

“What? Why didn’t you tell me?” The graceful manner that I spoke to Bilbo in disappeared as soon as it came.

“Because it was not important.”

“Of course it’s important.”

Bilbo folded his arms. “Would you tell me your birthday?”

“Yes,” I said tersely. “My birthday is in March. So, like, at the beginning of the year.”
“Would you really?”

“Yes.” I think.

“Well, it doesn’t exactly matter anymore, does it? We were wandering Mirkwood on that day, and things haven’t been pleasant to have a celebration.”

I scoffed and absently held my wound to stem the pain. Bilbo watched my movement hawkishly. “Bullshit.”

“What, are you going to celebrate now? The night before an orc army is meant to attack?”

He suppressed a squawk when I began to back up. “Just, like, stay here for a moment. I’ll be right back.”

“Valeria—”

But I was already tottering off to the encampment, putting all plans on hold just for thirty minutes. Despite his protests, Bilbo was still waiting for me when I came back. A single flame illuminated my throttled face as it slowly ate away at the thin little stick jammed into a hard chunk of bread. Bilbo ducked back into the alcove and tried putting on his best stern expression. It didn’t last long, however, as I prompted Bilbo to kneel down in front of me. His confusion was dampened with a look of frustrated endearment only he could achieve.

I bit back any visible pain and whispered a hoarse song to him.

“Happy birthday to you
Happy birthday to you
Happy birthday dear Bilbo
Happy birthday to you.”

Smoke curled up from the stick as fire inched down it. It was the best I could do for a candle, even though the tiny flame wound up in the middle of the stick instead of at the top. I smiled and waited for Bilbo to blow it out.

Something inexplicable overwhelmed the hobbit the longer he stared at me. My smile slipped a bit. I wouldn’t have been surprised if he felt the ending of this story as well. But we held tight to the moment before reality found us again in the snowy alcove and pushed us forward in our suffering, no matter the resistance.

Bilbo drew winter air into his lungs and blew the candle out.

Chapter End Notes

Dum Spiro Spero: while I breathe, I hope. I thought it was pretty fitting for Valeria. And I hope this chapter was consistent with emotions and characterizations. Deep
things, especially in an aftermath, are hard to write. The dialogue didn't make it easier, either.

All of your comments from the last chapter were amazing. I'm always so happy and grateful when I get an Archive of our Own email notification. You guys rock, and I can't believe I have such awesome readers.
There's Something in the Wind

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I’m going to Ravenhill,” I told Bilbo once he helped me stand back up. “That’s where everything is going to happen.”

“In your condition? I should think not!”

I pretended not to hear his objection. “Go back to the Company. Keep them safe. Tell Fili that I love him, and that…that I’ll be okay.”

“No, you won’t, Valeria.”

I headed out of the alcove. Bilbo followed behind me, face heated despite the cold temperature. He grabbed my wrist and held it tight. “What did I say about being reckless?” he hissed.

“Uh…”

“That you shouldn’t be reckless! Is that so hard to grasp?”

“That’s the only thing I can be,” I said back, cupping my jaw as a pulse of pain shot through it with the statement. “Do you think I actually like running around like some rabid bitch?” Bilbo involuntarily twitched his fingers at the curse word I directed at myself. “No! I love planning and preparing. But this damn world really just takes that option away from me, mano. It sucks balls. But I still have to do what I have to do.”

“And just what exactly is that?” Bilbo neared me so he could lower his voice. The path we stood in remained empty, but we could easily be heard if somebody got close. “Eh? You have kept your secrets, Valeria, and I haven’t asked because you are my friend and I trust you. I do. But I shall not let you traverse alone to only Eru knows where in the middle of a war. I shall not stand by—” He suddenly swallowed, blinking away a rise of tears. Bilbo cleared his throat and continued softly as to not let his voice break with emotion. “I shall not stand by again and let you die.”

My shoulders sank. “Bilbo…”

“I trust you, and you trust me. So please…” He stepped closer and didn’t yield his gaze. A kind of small bravery shone in it, a bravery that burned despite fear. “Just tell me, Valeria. Is it about what Thorin said in the mountain? That he…that they are meant to die?”

Listening to Bilbo saying it out loud still got to me. I hunched, clutching my side tighter, as sickness crept up the back of my throat. “Valeria?”

“Yes.” I looked down at my Nikes. The white rubber soles were bright under the moon. Had I really…? Had I said…?

Bilbo inhaled but was otherwise unfazed. He had prepared himself for the truth. “So, Fili…”

The second his name was spoken, my lower lip began to tremble. “Oh, Valeria, I am so sorry.” Bilbo gave me another gentle hug. I leaned as best I could to return it. “I am sorry that you have had to carry such responsibility this whole time. Ever since…my goodness, ever since the cave, isn’t that right? When you whispered to me that you realize why you’re here. To save them.”
“Something like that,” I choked. If I started crying again, I’d only make myself hurt. “I can’t believe you remember all that stuff. But…it’s all lead up to this. Right? Thorin, I guess he heard me having a bad dream about them dying in Mirkwood. He figured it out.” I sniffed and wiped my nose. “Maybe…maybe if I talked about it more with him, he wouldn’t have…”

Bilbo held my hand.

“Anyway. Yeah. That’s why I killed Bolg. In Lake-town. He…he woulda killed Kili. Right in front of Tauriel. And that fucking Azog—” Anger burned my stomach hot. “I should have tried harder to kill him in the Misty Mountains. But he’s not going to succeed.” I almost surprised myself with how deep of a growl came with the promise. “Because I’m going to stop him. Simple as that.”

“But alone?”

“If I do it alone, then he can’t murder Thorin and Fili right in front of my fucking eyes.”

“And how, exactly, are you going to accomplish this? Who’s to say that he won’t simply kill you and then be on his merry way?”

“Well shit, Baggins, don’t put that in my head.” I mean, it was already in my head, but I didn’t need another person voicing it.

“Then let me come with you. I—I will stick him with Sting while you distract him.” He made a jabbing motion. I smiled. “I’ll be invisible. Quiet, too. We can do it together!”

“You and me?” I weakly chuckled. “Nothing good will come of that.”

“Nothing good for them.”

A dog barked in the distance, cutting me from fantasies of a heroic duo who saved the dwarves they loved. It’d put him into unforeseen danger. Bilbo saw the demeanor change in my visage. He darkened. “We can—”

“No.” I patted his head. “I’m going. You stay here. You’re needed.” It was vague enough that any kind of lie wouldn’t immediately be noticed. I got one last look at the curly-haired, courageous little hobbit and suddenly grinned. It was full of pained joy. “It’s hard, Baggins, to not think you’re adorable when you’re mad. But I’m telling you: stay here. Don’t follow me. And don’t be sneaky with the Ring, alright? Go back to the Company before they suspect anything.” I began backing up. His fists were clenched, but he made no move to come after me. “And don’t tell anyone where I’m going.”

He stayed silent, his eyes trained on me as I made my way down the rest of the path until I turned a corner and disappeared from view.

I was uneasy about leaving Bilbo behind, though. Everything felt nebulous, like I was being swept down a dark current in a tunnel. Was I doing the right thing? I thought I was, but that was because I was doing the thinking. Had I become disillusioned with heroically altering the fates of the Durins? Was I heading to Ravenhill for no reason?

Possibly. This was it, though. And, if anything, I didn’t feel heroic. Just tired and hurt and sad. And there was a whole lotta blood crust going on that made certain places itchy. Heroes didn’t want to go knuckles deep in their asscrack. Heroes didn’t want to stop and grab more food even if it meant showing up too late. Heroes didn’t want to just collapse in a snowbank and become an unproblematic chocolate creamsicle.
What I wanted was to be with Fili. He was the better fighter, after all. The better leader.

He almost killed Thorin. For me. Dying almost ruined everything.

I was glad I didn’t see the aftermath of it. Whether or not Fili ripped my corpse from Thorin’s arms when he started beating him. If the fighting smeared my blood over the stone. The Company bore haunted faces before battle had even begun.

What could I ever say to Thorin? Knowing him, he’d shackle himself to my death as eternal punishment. Dwarves liked to hold onto things for a long, long time.

*You weren’t yourself,* I’d say to him, if the moment ever came to pass. *It’s okay. I lived.*

*It’s not about you living,* he’d say back, anger directed solely at himself. *I succumbed to what I swore I would not. I betrayed you and all I stand for. I do not deserve your forgiveness, nor shall I ever have mine.*

I supposed I wasn’t making anything better by willingly going to Ravenhill to potentially die again —for him. But hey! At least Thorin could never, *ever* say anything bad to me again, because then I’d come back with, “Well, you killed me!” Or “Well, I saved you from the clutches of death!” Nobody could have a better response.

I still had it in my brain that I’d be staying after the battle. Past me would be shaking myself right now for clinging to the hope that I would.

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Sneaking out of Dale and trekking to Ravenhill was an absolute fucking bitch. Fortunately, the faint light of dawn revealed a narrow, windy path up to the watchtower. Walking did some good for the newly-healed muscles in my side; it still hurt, but they had been stretched out in a post-surgery kind of way. I did pack some snow and put it against my face until it all melted. Thorin clocked me good. Killed me good, too.

Panting, I made it to the top of the hill. Dawn had grown, and its pale violet light revealed the place I had seen in Mirkwood while trapped in my vivid nightmares. A snow-covered tower on one side, a rocky outcropping on the other, and a frozen tributary of the River Running that cut between them.

It all seemed so surreal. This place. This moment.

I trudged forward. Untouched snow crunched under my feet. Ravenhill was void of orc-stench, thankfully, meaning that I still had time to find a good hiding spot before they came. Then, of course, I’d have to somehow take one by surprise, kill it, smear a good amount of its blood on me, then hide the body. The Company made sure to teach me that orcs had a keen sense of smell; if I was to be up here, then I needed cover. Hopefully, I wouldn’t throw up when I doused myself so the scent couldn’t be detected.

Dale and the Lonely Mountain laid out beneath me. The barren land between the two kingdoms was empty, but one day it would be good and green again. Even the mark of the dragon could not last. Once this winter passed, new saplings would sprout, and their roots would sink deeper than the blood left behind in the battle to come. I couldn’t wait to see the earth blossom with life.

*But will you even be here to see it?*

My expression hardened. I turned away from the view and toed the river’s ice-hardened bank. It
was sturdy, and I ventured out a little to test the stability. No sound of cracks. Just my own shuffling and breathing. Nervously, I unsheathed one of my blades a few inches to see if they glowed blue. They remained their sleek silver color. Then I dipped into the right pocket of my coat and toyed with the coin and quartz. They, too, had gotten some blood on them, but not nearly as much as the White Gems.

Poor Thranduil, handing off his late wife’s necklace to some elven servant and ordering the blood to be cleaned off couldn’t have been dignified no matter how he might have put it.

I held the quartz between my thumb and forefinger. I missed traversing through the land between Rivendell and the Misty Mountains; that was when the Company laughed and sang all day, when summer heated the air and the stars shone bright. If only we could go back. If only I could go back and truly appreciate those days for what they were: wonderful.

But even then, I knew that this was where I’d end up. Just…not this battered. Not this sorrowful.

The quartz fell back into my pocket with the coin I’d gotten thrown at me by one of the members of the Company. That was when…that was when they wanted me to sing a song, so I belted out a horrible rendition of Despacito, and then they got all bashful when I translated the lyrics.

“Despacito,” I muttered to myself as I headed to the tower. A faint smile traced my lips. “Quiero respirar tu cuello despacito.”

Not the most appropriate place or time to be singing the song, but it was better than consigning myself to a forlorn silence.

I easily found an entrance to one of the upper levels. Ravenhill was a mess of halls and stairways, and just from a preliminary glance, I could tell that there’d be plenty of places to hide myself and whatever orc I’d slaughter. I hoped I could give them a quick death. Even they didn’t deserve torment. Then I’d face Azog, covered in one of his soldiers’ blood, and make sure that I’d be the one to end him before he could end any dwarf ever again. Bilbo’s doubts be damned; I envisioned it so fiercely that it had to become reality.

Love couldn’t fail me. Sometimes…sometimes it did its job.

Okay. I was fucking ready.

With a breath that cooled my throat, I took a step into Ravenhill’s passageway—

“VALERIA!”

Shock and anger broke the calm I worked so hard to accomplish. I backpedaled out of the entrance, gaping, and saw the very last person I wanted to see in this fucking place.

Fili stormed across the snowy bank, fists clenched, face red, mouth twisted. I had half a mind to make a break for it into Ravenhill nonetheless, but he’d just follow me up with the two idiots named Kili and Tauriel trailing behind him.

So this was the dwarven rage I missed when I skipped out of the boat to fight Smaug. I would have been cowed—had it not been for the fact that I was beyond pissed and on the verge of having one of those heart attacks where the heart just exploded in my chest, leaving nothing but a ball of fiery mush behind.

But Fili was pissed, too, which made for an unpleasant combination.
Fuming, he stomped up to me with a furious wave of his arms. “What the FUCK are you fucking doing?”

“Fili!” I yelled back, stalking toward him. “¡Pinche cabron, Fili! ¿Qué estás haciendo aquí?”

“What am I doing here?” he repeated with an impressive amount of sarcasm, scorn, and anger. Damnit! I shouldn’t have taught him any Spanish so he couldn’t have responded as smoothly as he did. “What in Mahal’s name are you trying to pull? Going off alone like some madwoman? You’ll be overwhelmed! Useless!”

We met toe-to-toe. I tried to use my height over him while he tried using his kingly glare on me. Neither worked enough to be intimidating. For all my gushing about love and shit, I wanted to punch him right in his stupid nose.

“You don’t even know what I’m doing,” I sneered, even more mad that I was genuinely getting yelled at by Fili for the first time since I landed ass-over-teakettle in Middle-Earth.

Fili barked a scathing laugh. “Oh, but I do,” he answered. “Master Baggins told me.”

I stopped for a moment to let the revelation sink in. Bilbo…he hadn’t…

“That little shit,” I muttered. Bilbo didn’t say anything in response when I wanted him to promise me not to tell on me. Doing that excused him from any real commitment. “That little shit.” I flipped the middle finger in general directions. “I know you’re out there, you tiny bastard!”

“Do not curse him for your inability to see reason!”

“Please,” Kili interrupted, feigning airiness. Tauriel appeared quite strained beside him. Her eyes darted to several places in case of enemy sightings. “If you’re going to fight, at least do it where we’re not out in the fucking open.”

Fili grabbed me by the arm and attempted to drag me forward. I yanked away, but the sudden movement made the wound in my side flare up. Swearing, I clutched it and attempted to regain even breathing. Concern split through Fili’s frustration. He sighed and regained control over himself while I waited for the pain to subside back to a throb.

It was hard, trying to stay mad when I loved Fili so much.

Luckily, I reminded myself that we were on Ravenhill. On the morning of war. The day that he was supposed to die. Right here. That really helped keep the fire going.

“I see an outcropping that will provide adequate hiding from unwanted eyes,” Tauriel said, gesturing to a spot on the other side of the frozen river. It was further down the cliff; I didn’t like how much distance it put between Ravenhill and me, but if Fili’s gaze couldn’t work on my disposition, then Tauriel’s did. She stared at me like the captain she was, all command and duty. “Make your way there; I must cover our tracks.” Tauriel deadpanned to me, “Your footprints are too fine to be considered a goblin’s.”

As I stewed over the fact that I forgot about the fact that I’d leave prints in the snow, I limped past Fili, saying, “You’re so fucking dumb.”

“Oh, I’m dumb?” He walked beside me, letting out a mirthless chuckle. I couldn’t outpace him right now. “Out of all the idiotic, maddening, unhinged things you’ve done, this is by far the winner.”
“So Bilbo told you my plans, huh?” I asked bitingly. “Then he must have told you why I’m here.”

“To cut the head off the snake.” We made it across the river. Kili waited for us by the outcropping. It was a small but sudden drop to the platform-like formation below. He deftly jumped first, then raised both arms up.

“Come, Ria, I’ve got you,” he said. I hopped down, and even though Kili tried to soften the landing for me, the jolt still made me groan. Fili jumped down, then not fifteen seconds later, Tauriel joined us with a silent landing.

“That was fast,” Kili commented. Her shoulders bumped.

“‘Twas not a difficult task.” Still, Kili smiled at her in a way that made me melt for a moment and then harden back into metal.

“‘Cut the head off the snake.’” I didn’t hide the curl of my lip as I said it. “I think Thorin says that in the movie, you know, then he takes you and Kili and Dwalin up here.” A sudden weight pressed itself upon me, and I braced myself against the rock wall for support. The air changed when tears shone in my eyes. I didn’t dare blink or shift my focus for fear of any falling. I was so sick of crying.

“You come up here,” I went on, voice quiet and low to keep it from wavering, “not realizing what’s about to happen. Bilbo comes to warn you, but it’s too late. It’s a trap. And…and then…”

I found myself looking at Fili, who had let all anger vanish from his face. I loved his blue eyes, and I thought of when we rolled around in that meadow away from Beorn’s house, our skin warm from working out and the late summer evening cooling off lazily. How I was finally close enough to see the gold in them.

“And then you get cut off alone in Ravenhill. The army from Gundabad swarms the tower, and they take you, and they bring you to Azog, and he stabs you in the back and drops you from the top. You die. You die.”

Fili stared, unable to make a noise. I didn’t let myself linger on him. I turned to Kili and continued before I could break. He bore a look of cold horror. “You go after your brother’s murderer. Instead, you find Bolg. Thorin finds Azog. Tauriel and Legolas also come to fight and help you. She gets to you first. You fight him for a little while. But he kills you, too, right in front Tauriel. He goes to kill Tauriel, but Legolas comes in and finishes the job.”

Then I looked back out to Dale, where Thorin was. “Thorin kills Azog. Azog kills Thorin. All three of you die right here.”

The world was still. I forced down the sob in my chest, but my throat wouldn’t quit burning. “There,” I whispered. “Now you know why. I killed Bolg for Kili. I still have to kill Azog.”

“Ria…”

Fili took my hand and turned me to him. He pressed a kiss to my knuckles. “Why did you keep this from us?”

“Because why would I want you having your deaths hanging over your heads? It’s—I—I—Fili, why the fuck are you looking at me like that?”

His gaze had grown into soft resignation, an understanding beyond me. My sorrow twisted with dread.
“Amrâlimê. I know you are doing this out of love, and my heart breaks because I cannot carry this burden of yours. But…” His brows furrowed, and I prepared myself for whatever was about to come next. “But if it is Mahal’s design for us to perish, then perhaps it may be. We cannot change the will of the Valar. I could not fathom what it should do to you if the fates are set against your desires.”

Something dark rose in me, clawing and biting its way up in such a torrent that I thought I’d die before it reached the surface.

My hand tightened around Fili’s, turning his skin white. His eye twitched in discomfort. “So you’re saying you don’t care?” I growled. My chest felt like it might burst from all the heightened rage. “You don’t care that you and your brother and uncle are going to die? You don’t care? Just what the fuck are you on? That—that if you knew Kili and Thorin were going to die beforehand, you wouldn’t do anything you could to prevent it?”

I ripped my hand away, seething. Fili opened his mouth, but I cut him off. “No. You don’t get to say anything right now. Sólo estás diciendo esto ‘Oh, it has to be’ kind of bullshit because your death is involved. Do you know how that makes me feel? Como—like you don’t even care that I love you! That this is what everything has been for! Everything, Fili. Dying, killing, dying again, fighting—I have been moved between heavens to be here! Right here! With you. To have you say that—it’s fucked up, Fili. ¡Te amo! I’d face a hundred more deaths so you don’t have to taste a single one! Aquí es donde—Gah! This is where is has all led to! Me. Right here.”

I took a ragged gasp of air, fist clenched and shaking. I felt sick. Sick because the person I love could even imagine such things. Sick because I was terrified that it might be true. Had the whole world heard me? Had I even been really yelling? Was it in English?

“If you die…” The words stabbed me in the gut. I wanted to look away from him but refused to let up. “If you die and I’m still standing in this fucking world all alone, then what will it have been for? Why would I be here?” I pointed a finger at Fili, uncaring that it shook. Sand had filled my mouth from the rant. “If you actually loved me, you’d understand.”

An ever-growing kind of despair spread across Fili with each grating, Spanish-accented word. I had never felt such soul-shredding wrath, and as a result, I started slipping into my first language. It was with the final accusation that he visibly reacted as if shot.

He loved me, I knew he did, he loved me and I loved him—but how could he say things like that to my face? When we were so close to the end of it all?

The damage had been done. I looked at the small bit of Ravenhill from our vantage point, hoping that I hadn’t blown our precious cover just by yelling. Because right now, I didn’t want to fight. I just wanted…wanted to hug Fili and never let him go.

But we stayed apart. That incessant and elusive shame made my bones brittle. How could I fight like this?

It didn’t matter. As long as I fought. As long as I did what I swore I’d do.

“She’s right,” Kili muttered, breaking the tense quiet that had fallen over us. He had leaned against the rock, arms crossed, face grim. “I would move Erebor itself if it meant saving you. But you have been taught to welcome death bravely, unselfishly, as a king would. As the younger brother, however, I’ve been able to entertain more selfish behaviors.”

He came to Fili. I took his movement to back off, going to the furthest edge of the platform to keep
my eyes trained on Ravenhill. A soft fog rolled off the cliff, but sunlight made it transparent. No orcs in sight.

“What use is dying honorably when we are left behind? Would you be so calm if I went willingly to my death despite having the opportunity to avoid it? If Valeria went to her death? Thorin?”

At the soft utterance of a “No,” my taut shoulders sagged a little. Kili did have a way of speaking reason when he needed to. I should have handled my response like he did. Everything just—burst out.

“Now, I know you were just trying to be princely and all. But it backfired. Badly.” Kili let out a small chuckle. “Don’t you see, brother? You have spent your life protecting those you love. And you can spend your life continuing to do so if you let yourself be protected by those who love you.

“And, if I have learned anything on this journey, it is that Valeria heeds no mind to the fated songs the Valar have sung.” Mischief faintly added to his tone. “They have not struck her down yet. Not all is set in stone. Not even for us dwarves.”

I dared a glance back at the Durins. It made my jaw twinge. Kili had clasped Fili’s shoulders, and he was smiling a little.

“I’m sorry,” Fili said to his younger brother. It was raspy from trying to contain his emotions. My heart wrenched. “I…”

“I am not the only one owed an apology.”

As soon as Fili looked to me, I stuck my gaze back on Ravenhill. No sign of life yet, but my heart beat fast for some reason.

“So what are we going to do now?” I found myself saying. I couldn’t deal with another emotionally draining moment. It’d make me puke. “You guys ruined my plans.”

“What…were your plans, exactly?” Tauriel inquired.

“Sneak up on an orc scout. Kill it, cover myself in blood to hide my scent, then kill Azog.”

“…I see.”

“It wasn’t a very calculated plan, alright? I was just going to see what happened and improvise until I got what I wanted.”

“And the entire army you said is hitting from the north?”

“Eagles take care of them. Beorn, too, and Radagast.”


“He hates orcs more.” I paused, then added, “and he might have seen you and Ori playing in the pens with the goats. Gave him a better impression of dwarves.”

Kili sputtered and Tauriel grinned. “It was not playing, Ria. I was merely inspecting their stock. They were sturdy goats.”

“Oh, yeah, scratching behind their horns and letting them climb onto your back was definitely inspecting.”
He made a disgruntled noise. “I didn’t think anybody was watching.”

A horn blast cut our recovery banter short. It carried across the valley, stirring Dale. I caught glimpses of elven armor that the early morning sun shone off of. The faint scent of metal reached my nostrils. A tremor ran through my body. It smelled like war, like shrapnel and vehicles and weapons.

Then, for the first time in my life, I heard the marching of an army.

“Speaking of goats,” Fili said too plainly to be plain, “Dain has arrived.”

The army from the Iron Hills moved swiftly to Dale. Many rode on large goats or in weaponized carriages pulled by them. Those on foot carried shields with their heavy armor. Some sort of ballista machines were hauled in the back. Dain himself rode a large boar.

“Oh,” I murmured to nobody in particular. My eyes squinted to get a better look at the army. “I got killed by a boar like that.”

Tauriel perked up. “What?”

“Yeah. My first death was by boar. Horrible way to go. Super lame.” I patted the spot opposite of where I got cleaved just a morning ago.

“How…how many times have you died?”

We watched a rider go through the gates of Dale to meet Dain and his army. From the stature and color, I could tell it was Thorin.

“Yesterday made it the fifth.”

“What do you see when you pass into the beyond?”

“Nothing,” I replied, crossing my arms. Thorin and Dain both dismounted and embraced. Neither the elves nor Lake-men made a move to fire upon them. “I’m probably not allowed to see since I pop back up a few hours later.”

“So it is simply darkness?”

I shrugged. “Nah, not even that. Well, I mean, at first it is, like you’re too tired to keep your eyes open. It’s also cold. There’s just…just an absence of anything between dying and waking up. If I do see something, I don’t remember.”

Absently thumbing the droplet reminded me of something I wanted to ask Tauriel. “Hey, you know…you’re an elf, right?”

“Do the ears give it away?”

I snorted. “Something like that. But what I was gonna say was if you know what herinya means.”

Dain motioned for the army to move closer to Dale. “They’re leaving the mountain unprotected,” Kili commented. His brows furrowed and he brought a curled finger up to his lips in contemplation. “Why would uncle let them do such a thing?”

“It holds the most vulnerable,” Fili replied. “Erebor is but an empty husk now. We collapsed the bridge over the moat; it will have to do. Besides, it gives us an advantage. Azog will not be able to divide the armies and hit from two fronts.”
Two more figures rode from the city. I squinted harder.

“Is that…Bard and Thranduil?”

“Yes, it is,” Tauriel answered. She wore a bemused mask that hid greater confusion and hope.

“Maybe Dain won’t skewer either of them,” I said. “I’d like to avoid an unnecessary skirmish. From what I remember, the elves and dwarves are supposed to go at it for a bit. If they don’t, then they can be more unified when the real enemy attacks.”

“And when will that be?” said Kili. I scratched at my bruised jaw.

“Um, I don’t know. Soon. If you feel the ground shaking, then it’s most likely them.”

“Ah. Right. Were-worms. Forgot about that lovely detail.”

“Nobody answered my question,” I reminded pithily. “What the fuck are we going to do now that we’re here?” I was brave enough to give Fili a strong side-eye so he’d feel it, and my words connoted that both he and Kili should be down there with Thorin and Dain.

When neither dwarf princes said anything, Tauriel spoke. “Well, we’re here. We might as well complete what you set out to do.”

Even though I hadn’t had much interaction with Tauriel, I recognized the edge in her voice. It was the same that I carried in mine. She’d just been told the fate of her dwarf without my intervention. To hold that kind of information so close to the actual time it occurred was…not fun.

Thranduil, Bard, and Thorin turned and rode back to Dale while the Iron Hills army glided past them. They filtered into the ruins. The first thing I learned in battle tactics from the Company was that it was best to fight from a defensive, guarded position than it was to fight in the open. Get the opposition up against the walls, and then hit them with cavalry flanking from the sides. The ballistae were already being propped up on the broken ramparts. It wasn’t the best fortification, but it was better than nothing.

_I did this_, I thought, and I shoved the consequent swell of pride back down. No time for that. But still. It was nice being able to prevent more bloodshed—even if I had to shed a bit of mine to make it happen.

Tauriel placed her hand on my shoulder, delicate like an autumn leaf. “Herinya,” she spoke lowly, “means ‘my lady’ in Quenya.”

My lady.

I looked down at the droplet, then up to the pale morning sky where the stars lay hidden until twilight revealed her domain.

“Oh, of course,” I half-smiled to myself. I dropped my voice until I barely heard it and held the droplet over my heart. The rest of Dain’s army entered Dale. The city remained peaceful. Somewhere in there, Gandalf might have been praying to his lady. The lady I heard so much about from Bilbo when the stars were bright and the nights warm, when the elves in Rivendell sang of her like a reverent lullaby that put me to sleep. “I hope I’m worthy, herinya.”

Tauriel stiffened a fraction. My smile turned to an awkward, embarrassed grimace. I forgot about those damn elf ears. So I tilted my head up to her and was met with expected severity. “I’m sure you had your suspicions,” I said in the same low tone. “You elves are close to her, after all.”
“We have…she…”

“It’s alright. Let’s just keep this between ourselves for the time being.” I stared straight ahead again and folded my arms. The droplet warmed as if it recognized when it was being spoken about. In a normal voice, I said, “We’ve got a lot more to worry about.”

“We do indeed.” Tauriel snapped back into a soldier. She glided to the platform where we had lowered ourselves down and deftly climbed up.

“Where are you going?” Kili questioned.

“To give us some cover,” she replied. “Azog’s cowardice has sent him here to Ravenhill instead of fighting with his army. It is…not a bad idea, actually, to hide our scents with orc to protect our locations from discovery.”

I gave a stiff smile. “I learned it from The Walking Dead a long time ago. Are the undead a thing here?”

She barely paid any attention to me. “But we require more if we have any chance of success.” Her brows twitched upwards, and I saw the ghost of a grin. “I have a few simple magics that can offer assistance to our endeavor.”

“You know magic?” Kili went back to being enamored with her.

“Hardly. I will coax the wind and water to create a layer of heavier fog. It shall further diminish orcish eyesight; their appearance in daylight already decreases the ability to see well.” She leveled us with a serious stare. “When I hopefully come back with a corpse, you all better have come up with the rest of a plan. Or at least half. Nothing less than a fourth.”

Kili gripped his heart. “Such little faith, Tauriel! Worry not. We will have mapped a solid battleplan by the time of your return.”

She smiled at him before disappearing back over the rock formation.

Kili’s confidence immediately slipped. “We…we will have a battleplan, right?”

I said nothing, and instead absently rubbed my jaw as I thought what our next step would be. My free hand was hesitantly taken up by a familiar touch.

Fili and I shared the same apologetic faces. After a few moments of communicative silence, I whispered, “Don’t ever say anything like that again.”

“You have my word,” he whispered back. His loving eyes were glossy, which made mine the same as well. “Amrâlimê.”

“Cariño.”

He squeezed my hand, and he had my forgiveness. I’d kiss Fili later—hopefully before the world turned to complete chaos and we wielded our weapons to stay with the living. Snow would not cover him like linen, turning him so cold that he could not warm me.

The earth rumbled ever-so-faintly. The three of us became grim. They’d be here, soon. We wasted so much time; I wouldn’t let any more slip through my frigid fingers.

“Okay. Let’s get this finished so I can take a bath and eat some hot soup.” I ignored the gnawing
feeling that this was all surmounting to the end. My end. I ignored it because I wanted to eat hot soup with Fili and the Company, because I wanted to see an undarkened dawn, a night without dread. I was never able to have a reachable, foreseeable hope like this on Earth.

Fili, Kili, and I gathered around each other and began conspiring.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I swore that I'd get to writing at least the beginning of the battle, but THAT DIDN'T HAPPEN. Emotions happened instead! I hope I'm not dragging things out too much. I swear that the next chapter will have some long-awaited action. Like, shit's going to get crazy.

As always, you guys are awesome, and I love all the comments you leave. Your love seriously fuels me.

Mano: bro
Pinche cabron: fucking dumbass
¿Qué estás haciendo aquí?: what are you doing here?
Sólo estás diciendo esto: you're just saying this
Como: like
Te amo: I love you
Aquí es donde: this is where
La Batalla de los Cinco Ejércitos

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I smeared putrid orc blood on my face. Fingers raked it down my neck in an almost ritualistic manner. The four of us were silent as we covered ourselves in sticky dark ichor. Tauriel ran it through her hair without complaint or grimace. It turned her autumn tresses to wet brownish mats. I wiped it up the sides of my head like gel. Fili and Kili bound their own treated hair back in buns.

A thick veil of fog rolled over the outcropping, adding to the eerie unease that gave me a faint stomachache. Never mind that we had just doused ourselves in blood, and that steam rose from the orc’s slit throat to mingle with the mist. I disassociated myself from the task.

We left the corpse on the uneven rock and climbed back up as quietly as we could. Errant flakes of day-old snow melted underneath it. I closed the orc’s glassy yellow eyes before leaving. Fili watched me, his Durin blue eyes stark against the camouflage we all bore. He held my hand for an instant. Neither of us shook. Our plan to skirt across the river closer to the frozen waterfall would keep us from accidentally running into bigger forces, and Tauriel’s cover allowed us to walk in the open without being seen. She could keep the fog up as long as she willed, but it’d dissipate if it proved a hindrance. The rest was left up to chance; we’d get as far as we could without raising any alarm, and then after that, we’d make do. There was a bigger entrance to the tower near the waterfall—our target.

“The tower was not built for dwarven ilk,” Fili warned us. “It was the home of Erebor’s ravens. We shall not find tactical coverage other than crumbling rocks in a place designed for winged messengers and their keepers. But neither shall they.”

A hush had befallen Ravenhill, but the longer I listened to the emptiness, the more the I found that there was life within it. Orcs moved through the mist on the other side of the frozen river, muttering quiet commands in their own tongue. Tauriel, the most seasoned commander in our group, led us through the mist. Every once in a while, I spotted its tendrils curling around her arms and legs like sensory extensions. With the fog and the blood on her, she looked like a mythical warrior from ancient legends come back to battle the darkness once more. Kili and Fili moved as though they had been born for this moment, their eyes sharp and unforgiving, doused in the blood of their enemies to set terror in their hearts. I did not know what I had transformed into, but I felt that rampant wildness lying beneath the hyper-calm, same as the icy river we treaded across. The blood on my face hardened as if it was a kind of armor.

Tauriel killed the first goblin that made the unfortunate mistake of taking a piss near the other side of the bank, where our course had been set. She caught him before he fell and laid him onto the snowy ground. We moved on to the ruin. I hadn’t unsheathed my blades, yet. Their blue glow would give our position away.

Fili sunk one of his many hidden knives into the neck of an unsuspecting orc. The snow padded its landing. He then handed me three small knives while we slowly made our way up a dilapidated set of stairs. I tucked two of them in my coat pocket and kept the other in my hand. Fog rolled around
us to both hide and reveal. The three orcs standing guard at the top of the stairs didn’t see the metal coming for them until it had sunk into spots that silenced them. Their gurgles escaped into the dampened air.

An orc stumbled into me. It got a knife in the eye. Hot blood spurted onto my hand, and the knife hilt almost slipped from my grasp.

Our presence was bound to be noticed sooner or later. As Tauriel led us to the base of Ravenhill, an orc snarled out into the haze. “Assassins! Assassins—”

The soft creak of a bow drew my attention to Tauriel. She released an arrow, and it cut through the wall of fog. A second later, the orc’s shouts were cut short with a pitiful squeal.

Kili, Fili, and I all had to take a moment to stare at Tauriel. I grinned, blood cracking on my face, and gave her a thumbs up. Kili and Fili did the same.

“Ya smell that?” an orc asked another in the unseen. “Smells like…something. Must be close.”

“What something? What you on about…”

The fog pulled back for us to assault them. There were four of them, wearing heavier armor compared to the scouts we encountered. One of them pointed a crude sword at us, shocked.

“There! They got themselves covered in—”

*Thunk.* The hilt of one of Fili’s knives sunk into his throat. I unsheathed a glowing blade and dove in. The clang of weapons hitting echoed in the mist, giving away our location to nearby soldiers. More charged through the wall of fog encircling us. As I let out a grunt and slit an orc up from navel to neck, I considered just taking off on my own up into the tower while the rest distracted the soldiers trickling in. But we’d been made; I doubted I could take on whatever orcs that swept down from the tower all by myself, and I didn’t want to risk dividing the group.

The fog receded more and more, until it only settled above us to act as a shield from the eyes in the tower. Tauriel and I brushed past each other, and I heard her murmuring an elven chant to keep the mist in place.

A particularly surly orc slammed into me with a snarl that rattled my insides. I broke free from his grip before I could get stabbed with a simple judo move, kicked at his kneecap so he’d falter, then sliced through the center of his face. A fresh spray of blood added to the thick mixture already on me.

I faced the next orc. It roared. I roared back and charged at it, only for one of Kili’s arrows to hit it right in the forehead. A growl reverberated in my throat.

Then the growl turned into a rumble that shook the earth, growing and growing until I realized it wasn’t a growl at all, but the sound of the ground being churned and changed. I swallowed, pushing away the memory of what it felt like when Smaug burst from the Lonely Mountain. A sudden whoop of chattering cheers mingled with the mist, which had risen high enough to give us a clearer view of Dale. We actually stood precariously close to the cliff drop, having been pushed by orc forces to the edge.

Massive, malignant creatures tore through the other slope of the valley, chunks of Arda falling from their hideous, gaping maws. Fili uttered a Khuzdul prayer, causing me to notice how close he’d been to me. Was he there the entire time? Of course he was. Although I barely registered the flashes of blond hair in the midst of fighting, now I could recognize it.
The four were-worms receded back into their tunnels, and several pounding heartbeats later, the orc swarm poured into the valley. The blast of a deep horn rang from above Ravenhill, past the mist that covered us. Whatever forces that kept us occupied had receded, and from what I could hear, it was into the tower where they’d get an advantage. Shit. That was something we didn’t want to happen.

Another horn blasted from Dale, sounding deeper and much more rebellious. As soon as Azog’s army was close enough, a hail of arrows—dwarven, elven, human—launched from Dale’s walls, followed by catapults that released into some sort of spinning contraption. When they hit the army, they left a smear of black remains across the ground.

“Quickly!” Tauriel snapped, leaping toward one of Ravenhill’s entrance. “We have a chance while they are without the bulk of their forces! We still have our cover of blood and fog; let us not waste it!”

“It’s a long way to the top,” Kili commented as we followed. The sounds of battle echoed below us. “You were right, brother. I should have run with you and Valeria.”

“Aye, you should have,” Fili chuckled. The sound of his laughter replenished the fight in me. I took one last glance at Dale, almost hoping that I’d see the individuals defending the city from up here.

War had come.

Let them be safe, I prayed, clenching my fist tight around the droplet. I thought of Bard and his children, Gandalf and Bilbo, Legolas, Thorin and the Company, the people of Lake-town, the dwarves, the elves, and all those who had never faced such death and destruction before. All I could hope was that less blood would be spilled and that more people could live to see the sun set this day because of what I tried to do.

Fili, Kili, and Tauriel jogged in front of me. Let us be safe.

We transitioned back into stealth as soon as we reached the lower level of the tower. I had to restrain the wildness, winding it back up in my chest and holding it until it was time to let loose. Orcs scurried and shouted further within. I sheathed my blade, snuffing out the bluish glow. This had to work. We had to work. I could not doubt at this point. Only hope.

The first level was vacant, as was the second. When we reached the third, where part of the tower had crumbled away, we found orcish archers waiting for us outside of the broken hallway. As soon as we passed, they’d fire. They couldn’t smell us, though, and Tauriel could smell them. She had us double back around to take them by surprise, despite Fili and Kili’s wordless objections. The brothers wanted to simply burst in there. I added my vote with Tauriel, however, and women in agreement were the automatic victors. Going with Tauriel’s idea, however, meant climbing as silently as we could over uneven rocks that the tower had been built into.

And man, it was a long way down.

It didn’t help that we had a clear view of the onslaught below. Trolls pounded at the city walls, arrows flew into orc ranks, and cavalries rampaged on goatback and goat-pulled chariots against warg riders. I could imagine the chaos in the city, where orcs undoubtedly trickled in from successfully crushed walls. Where the Company fought to protect those who needed protecting. I hoped Thorin was down there, rallying his soldiers to him and commanding forces like the king should. And I was sorry. Sorry that his nephews came running after me instead of sticking with him.
We followed Tauriel’s exact same footsteps until we could smell the rancid orcs waiting above us, their bows creaking. I braced myself against the rock. Its cold seeped through my bloodstained coat. The frigid wind that came off the tower numbed my nose. If I wasn’t so concentrated on facing a literal army and killing Azog, I would have been hyperventilating. I mean, I’d done a lot of brave and epic things because I was that cool bitch, but nobody wanted to be teetering on a sheer rock face with less than a foot of space to stand on. I had gone through the Misty Mountains once; I didn’t want to relive a similar ordeal under much more dire circumstances.

Kili, who was directly behind Tauriel, made a confused gesture as to how we were going to get up to the orcs. From our angle, I could glimpse their discolored heads and wicked armor.

Tauriel flashed a grim smile, grabbed Kili, and threw him up into the orc archers. He bowled into all six of them, his dwarven density bringing them down as short grunt of surprise blended with their shouts. I didn’t have time to react before she grabbed the collar of my coat and threw me upwards as well. My stomach floated for less than a second (and I was overwhelmed with the fear that I’d fly backwards and fall to my death a hundred feet below) before I landed on an orc struggling to get back up.

We toppled down, and I hastily brought my hands around his neck while he struggled to throw me off. The droplet warmed once more, giving me a strength I would not have otherwise had, and the orc’s windpipe crushed under my force. The last thing he saw was my face pulled back in a snarl heated by survival. I wanted to be sick at the sound of a crunching throat, but in the thick of it, nobody had the time to sit and think about their actions. The only thing that mattered was living until the chance could come.

Another orc grabbed my braid and yanked me off—only to get an elven sword through its gut. I stumbled upright and drew a blade in time to swipe at an archer coming for me. It dodged in time to remain uninjured, but the state didn’t last long. The orc bumped into Fili, who punctured his sides repeatedly with two daggers.

I looked around and saw Kili and Tauriel both still standing. Someone had disemboweled an orc and left its entrails hanging off the edge. “Snuff your hand out,” Tauriel instructed as she strode past. I glanced down and saw that it glowed enough to be visible. “The orcs could sense the presence of such a light.”

With a shake, the droplet’s power receded. We moved back into the hall, and I dared one last look over our carnage to Dale. Azog’s army had broken through one of the front walls, but it seemed they had trouble getting through. Good. Just last a little longer.

Up the fourth, fifth levels we went, killing under the pretense of semi-stealth. It took about an hour I didn’t want to spend. Up this high, the tower’s walls gave way entirely and left us with broken staircases and precarious bridges. A few orc bodies, dead or not, dropped off the sides. A couple times we nearly did, too. But our morbid advantage proved far more useful than I originally thought; even if the orcs could get a whiff of us on the breeze, they couldn’t pinpoint an exact location until it was too late.

We rose above the layer of gifted fog, and a more intense chill cooled the sweat on my forehead and neck. My hands had been reduced to angry beehives from all the sword fighting. But we were close, so close. The orc forces had been getting more persistent, but there weren’t as many as I expected. We cut them down—or, more like Tauriel, Fili, and Kili cut them down while I jabbed a few stragglers.

“Look,” Kili pointed to Dale as we came to a landing that led even more upward. Azog had to be up there. “We are holding them back!”
With a hopeful breath stuck in my throat, I watched as orcish forces were pushed back from the main point of the city they’d broken through. A large ball of fire rolled through the ranks, crushing those it did not set aflame. At other weak points where trolls had set up ladders to climb over the wall, those brave enough to stand at the precipice poured boiling water over their enemies. I didn’t dare grin, but I sure damn wanted to.

Just as I was about to turn away, three reverberating horn blasts from the top of Ravenhill shook the tower. The bulk of the army outside the city divided, and the swiftest contingent of warg riders broke off and headed back in the direction of the tower.

“You must be fucking joking,” Fili swore. Hope buried itself back into the pits of my stomach.

Tauriel gripped my shoulder. “Hurry. We must hurry.”

We dropped our stealth and raced across the landing. I was bounding halfway up the steps when the sound of a releasing arrow cut through the blood pumping in my ears. In front of me, Kili let out a shout of pain as a shaft suddenly protruded from his upper shoulder. He tumbled back, but I managed to catch him before he toppled into the foggy abyss below. Fear rose at a nauseatingly fast pace. Had he been killed—no—please—

“Again?” Kili hissed, and I let out a ragged breath. Tauriel fired a responding arrow, and from one of Ravenhill’s adjacent tower, a goblin let out a wheezing moan as it plunged from its hiding spot. More arrows flew at us, but none hit their mark. I hauled Kili with me, stronger with the droplet and feeling that crackhead side effect of energy. It pulsed to life, and it got us to the top of the staircase.

Where we were met with about twenty orcs, all armed to the grotesque teeth.

Tauriel fired her arrows into the throng. Fili threw what extra knives he had left, and Kili shrugged me off him so he could brace himself to fight. No. No, we were so fucking close! I could see the signaling flags on the final platform! The horn!

No, not like this.

On the last broken bridge, with the four of us on one side and too many orcs on the other, a defiant rage filled me until it was tearing through my throat in a screeching howl. I burst past Fili and Tauriel, screaming, meeting the orcs that took my charge as a sign of attack.

So they thought I acted recklessly?

I’d show them reckless.

The light flared so violently that jolts of pain ran up my arm, but it did not falter in its raised position. The divinity blinded those who toiled in the darkness, and their wails were offered up to the mid-morning sky. It solidified like it had in Lake-town, colliding with the first orc unfortunate enough to lead the charge. I bent my arm up parallel to me like I wielded a shield and barreled through the soldiers, hearing them fall of the sides of the bridge. I remained unbowed and unrestrained and fucking furious.

I realized I had made it to the other side of the bridge when I caught an orc up in the light and smashed him against the wall. His bones and organs crushed under the weight of the light and my own force. Fetid blood smattered onto my face as he coughed up a last breath. I dropped him and unsheathed a blade I’d briefly forgotten I had. Behind me, Tauriel and Fili picked off the orcs who hadn’t been tossed off the edge during the bulldozer. Kili jogged behind them, clutching the
broken arrow shaft on his shoulder. He showed no signs of giving up. I didn’t expect him to.

“Go!” Tauriel shouted at me. “We will follow!”

I was already off before she finished speaking. The world was a cacophony of adrenaline and terror. I vaulted up the stairs two by two. Distantly, the wound in my side throbbed like a fire. The droplet’s mercy kept its effects at bay, leaving room for the bloody whirlpool of hyper-focus and wildness.

An errant orc jumped from behind the corner of the stairs. I cut him down without a second thought and continued up and up and up—

The North sprawled beneath me, endless in all directions from its dizzying height. I didn’t see the secondary army sweeping down yet.

The three orcs waiting for me weren’t Azog. The second they tried to come for me, I propelled them off the top of the tower with a burst of light. Where was he?

The second I spun around, whatever power the droplet had twined in me reacted on its own accord. I was pulled down by a force acting in my body to narrowly avoid being beheaded by the Defiler’s bladed arm.

He let out a bellow and swung at me again. I blocked it with my blade this time, in control once more. My muscles didn’t buckle, and I stood solid against Azog.

The Pale Orc was a monstrous figure. He towered over me, and his muscles made him at least twice as wide. He gave a vicious grin. “So this is the star,” he seethed while we fought. He was brutally fast, and it was all I could do to keep up without being sliced or gutted. His thick armor prevented me from dealing any real injuries. “I shall bring my lord both your head and your hand, along with the heads of the Durins!”

“Your lord has been banished,” I yelled back through the incessant clang of metal. Azog made a grab at me with his free hand, but I dodged it and brought my blade upward, inflicting a shallow cut on his arm. He growled in annoyance. “And your son is dead! I killed him! And I’ll kill you too.”

At the mention of Bolg, the orc’s pale eyes filled with not pain or sorrow, but pure hatred. He let out an animalistic bellow and came to strike me again. But as soon as Azog was close enough, I brought my left hand up and burned him with the light. His angry roars turned to angrier cries. I brought my blade up to slay Azog the Defiler and be fucking done with it.

He wasn’t done with me, though.

Azog resisted the radiance through sheer will and punched me square in the face. Another kind of light flooded my vision, pain in technicolor. I stumbled backward, the light flickering. Blood poured from my undeniably broken nose.

He went to run me through with his blade, but I reacted quickly enough to protect vital organs thanks to the power coursing through my system. His blade, however, sliced across the same spot where Thorin had cleaved into me with his own sword.

I let out a strangled cry and stumbled sideways. I couldn’t find my breath, and for the first time since leaving the outcropping doused in blood, panic surged up. The gash, though minor, hurt like a fucking bitch. I couldn’t hold it, either, since my right hand held my blade. It bled freely, and the familiar sensation added to my rising panic.
Inadvertently, I thought of Thorin and how he was the first one to cause this pain. But thinking of him steeled me from the fumbling fear that’d be my death. I was doing this for Thorin. For Fili. For Kili. I wouldn’t let them down, couldn’t let them down.

I sniffed and let the shock of my broken nose bring back a sharp sense of clarity. Then I hit Azog with a blast of light. He careened backwards, and before he could get his footing, I did it again. Again. Again. Silently, without a growl or a curse or a yell. I pushed him back so he couldn’t come close to me and neared the edge of the tower, where a snowy grave awaited him.

He snapped something at me in Black Speech as he struggled to stay from the edge. I charged up to send him flying off, where he would have no heroic death that his kind would find honor in. Just a drop off a tall tower that’d shatter his bones and make him choke on his own blood.

Screeches split the air, and Azog’s sneer turned into an even uglier grin. I looked to the right and was immediately overcome by a hurricane of leathery wings and needlepoint claws. Azog’s laugh set loathing into my soul, and as I fought off a torrent of oversized bats, I watched him put his arm up and be lifted off the ground by one of the black creatures. He called for the rest of his forces to regroup with him at the bottom of Ravenhill.

“FUCKING COWARD!” I screamed at Azog. He fucking escaped. He was fucking right there and I let him get away. Shit.

The light almost exploded my entire hand when I had enough of the shitty bats trying to claw and bite me to death. It consumed the top of Ravenhill in a deafening thrall of silence. When it faded, I was left with rage and dead bats falling all around me. Those who hadn’t taken the brunt of the light crookedly flapped their way down to the valley where the bulk of the battle waged.

I took three rapid, pained breaths, then started awkwardly running to the edge of Ravenhill. The droplet would soften my landing. It had to. Did he think he could get away? That he could fucking escape me?

“Valeria, wait!”

Thick arms wrapped around my waist and hauled me backwards. I kicked and thrashed so vehemently that Fili had to drop me. His own blood from a cut on his forehead mixed with orc. Tauriel and Kili were behind him, and she supported the younger dwarf who still had a foreign object sticking out of him. “You cannot jump!”

“Oh yes I fucking can—”

Something in the middle of the valley ripped the ground apart. We watched in abject horror as two more were-worms sprouted from the earth, rubble raining down from their skyscraper bodies. They pulled back in, causing the ground to shudder. Yawning dread froze my body and numbed my pains as I waited for what I prayed I wouldn’t see.

Like ants from a colony, all manner of orcs and goblins erupted from the holes the were-worms left behind. I felt like I’d been stabbed again.

“No,” I whispered as all my failings crashed upon me. “They—this wasn’t supposed to happen—”

Azog’s army thundered in triumph as their Gundabad kin came to join their ranks. Dale couldn’t hold against so many, and oh Dios, they just kept coming and coming. Dale blew their horn twice to signal a retreat further into the city. On the banks of the river, the warg riders had made it to Azog and what was left of his Ravenhill forces. We were stuck up here, injured and tired and
helpless. The panic in me twisted to hot despair. Tears stung my eyes.

Sunlight had broken through the blanket of snow-laden clouds above us sometime during the fighting. But it was without warmth. Fili alone kept me standing on my feet. We had to find a way...something...we couldn’t...

Tauriel’s gasp was loud enough to cut through my grief. “By the Valar—the eagles! The eagles have come!”

No fucking way.

Compared to the bat shrieks, the cries of the eagles were a symphony that banished the darkness which had seated itself in my heart. I found myself laughing with joy at their sight. The sunlight reflected off their golden feathers, and as they speedily drew near, I spotted a figure on one of the eagle’s back, and two on another.

A newer, more reckless plan was born.

“LANDROVAL!” I yelled at the top of my lungs, shaking Fili free. “LANDROVAL!”

Two of the eagles split off from the rest of the group and dove lower. My Nikes squeaked under me as I boldly sprinted to the edge without restraint. I jumped off and hurtled through the air, arms pinwheeling.

The great gust of wind from Landroval’s wings took the air from my lungs, but his talons were soft as they securely wrapped around me. I wasted no time. “Down there!” I pointed. “Drop me on that pasty fucker!”

“As you command, my lady!” I thought I heard a tinge of amusement in Landroval’s reverberating voice. He unleashed a mighty screech that set the wargs bucking in fright. Azog turned to see the eagle swooping over him and a little Latina in his clutches. I locked eyes with him and smirked. He gnashed his teeth at me, but whatever he was about to say was lost the moment Landroval released me. I used the light to blind him from my descent and crashed both feet into his skull. Landroval, meanwhile, collided with several of the warg riders and lifted them up into the air. They yelped and barked, unable to do anything but plummet off the side of the waterfall. Landroval rejoined the descending eagles that intended to massacre the Gundabad army.

Azog threw me off him, but not before my blade cut deep into his stupidly bare thigh, the fucking thot. Fili, Kili, and Tauriel were given a much softer landing from their eagle, unlike Landroval’s bomb drop. It also took a few wargs and their riders with them with its ascent.

“Why must you do things like this to me?” Fili sighed. We readied ourselves against Azog and his thirty or so soldiers, plus their eight warg riders. I twirled my blade once in my hand like I’d been taught. The three beside me would be protected no matter what.

“Stop whining,” I said with a small smile. “Let’s fuck shit up.”

The Pale Orc stood tall despite the heavy slice on his leg. He pointed his bladed arm at me. The orcs and wargs crooned and beat their weapons and shields together, circling around us. Fili and Kili shouted back, and Tauriel’s eyes bore the flame of combat in them. The rush of battle fueled me on, persistent and pressing.

“You. Will. Die!”

Azog lifted the blade to give his soldiers the command to attack us. I offered one last prayer to the
Valar, to God, to whatever listened. I was ready for this. The only place Azog would escape to was the shadow of death. The droplet readied itself, and I could almost taste the light on my tongue.

One small rock abruptly thwacked Azog on the side of his head, causing him to flinch and growl. Kili wheezed a surprised laugh. That was...I’d seen a similar kind of rock flung from a specific slingshot before, held by a pensive dwarf who liked the quill more than the blade.

A voice grated against the ruins of Ravenhill.

“NOT IF YOU DIE FIRST!”

Life bloomed inside me.

Thirteen dwarves, a hobbit, and a wizard rushed up from the area where we had hidden ourselves earlier. Thorin led the charge on a ram, and he sunk his sword into the nearest goblin. Dwalin and Bilbo were right behind him. The Company let out dwarven war cries, charging through the ranks and cutting down their enemies before they had a chance to retaliate.

He’d come.

I tossed my head back, let out a war cry of my own alongside my beaten squad, and threw myself back into the fight with Azog.

Except this time, I was not alone.

Azog was bombarded by four swords and a singular light coming from all directions. The other orcs or wargs that tried to get in the way were deflected by the rest of the Company, all who had their own bloody war paint on them, Bilbo included. Some had been unseated from their rams; others still charged through, using the beast’s horns to deliver blunt force trauma. I spun and shoved Azog’s incoming sword back up. Fili sunk a knife between the chinks of his armor. Tauriel kicked him in the abdomen. Kili sliced his calf muscle. We were one cohesive team working in a larger scheme. In all the chaos, there was order, and that order was the Company. Orcs and dwarves whirled around me. I caught flashes of Bombur and Nori, Dwalin and Gloin, Bilbo and Gandalf, Thorin and Bifur. Their fighting styles were reminiscent of battling Tom, Bert, and Bill in the Trollshaws, going up against the same enemies in the Misty Mountains, and launching a semi-amphibious assault on them in Mirkwood. Ridiculous, badass, and unified.

“Watch out, lass!”

A warg came at me, snapping hungry jaws glistening with gore and saliva. Bofur’s sword came down on its neck, however, saving me from having to deal with it. He offered a wink. “Terrible way to go!” he shouted through the din of battle.

I went to reply, but the battle in the valley caught my attention. One of the were-worms had emerged once more next to the city. It reared its head back and produced such a sickening, thunderous, baleful noise that it gave all the Company pause. I became paralyzed not from the were-worm itself, but from the fact that it was about to lay waste to a large portion of Dale. They could withstand forces with the help of eagles and Skin-changers, but a were-worm? Something larger than most buildings in my world?

It’s not supposed to be like this.

My knowledge of the future was lost. I could not account for the lives about to be snuffed out by the beast. I’d failed this time—failed without a chance of redemption.
“Watch! Watch the ruin of your kin!” Azog declared with a vile laugh, and he smacked Tauriel out of the air. She hit a slab of rock and faltered. The pain that flashed on her face meant that it had hurt her badly. I called her name and went to rush back into the fight, since it’d give me the chance to look away from the nightmare about to occur.

But something…happened.

Another were-worm burst from the ground next to the city, only this one was bigger, more armored, and a lot sleeker. It let out its own shattering roar at the army’s were-worm then *bit down on its head.*

Purplish ichor rained down onto the city, turning the ruins of Dale into a canvas of blood. Steam from its heat created a unique kind of fog over the area most heavily inflicted by the downpour. The were-worms thrashed. They made cracking noises like boulders being split open as they fought for dominance, but the one who had the advantage continued to clamp down on the other, using its circular teeth to further shove the smaller worm down its gullet. The rock-splitting noises heightened until they overpowered the sounds of fighting on Ravenhill. When the smaller were-worm’s movements grew weaker and weaker, the larger one lifted back and slunk into the ground once more, dragging the barely resistant beast out from its hole and back into the one it had made. Iridescent colors reflected off the dying worm’s exoskeleton before its thick tail disappeared into the earth.

I stopped for a second and blurted:

“What in the *ass?*”

As soon as the were-worms were gone, a lighter-sounding horn carried across the battlefield. It announced the arrival of a large cavalry coming from the Eastern side of the valley, where the slopes were lower and the path to Dale was clearer. I could hardly believe what I saw unfolding before me. I didn’t think any of us could. Certainly not Azog. He simply assumed another victory.

“Allies from the East!” he decreed while he defended himself against Fili and Dwalin. Kili had gone to protect Tauriel with Bilbo and Dori. I ducked an incoming axe and shoved my blade into the orc’s stomach.

Thorin somehow found himself next to me. I was mildly surprised that his presence was a welcome relief, like the first warm spring day after a hard winter. We said nothing to each other. We didn’t really look at each other. But together we battled and watched the cavalry close in on the city.

*Allies from the East…the East.*

*The Easterlings.*

Before I could utter her name on my lips, the Easterling horn sounded again. The cavalry, donned in dark colors and carrying spears, shifted their position to form an arrowhead-like shape behind a single rider. The leader lifted their hand—

A crack of white electric light jumped from the rider and bolted through the ranks of the Gundabad army in the blink of an eye. Their armor and weaponry were like conduits for it to leap from trolls to goblins to orcs. It was as if I watched lightning crack against dark thunderclouds, except instead of vanishing after less than a second, the lightning continued onward and onward, rolling and coiling until nearly a third of the outer army had been decimated by the strikes.
I found myself struck as well.

Thorin, whenever incredulous, always spoke in an overtly-plain voice. “Can you do that?” he inquired when we had a pause from fighting.

“Hell no.”

The cavalry crashed into Gundabad like a wave of dark-robed reapers. Combined with Dale, the eagles, and two massive bears, they were shredded from their powerful siege. Radiant light electrified enemies in smaller groups as the leader rode through the swarm.

More hope swelled in me, defiant against the despair of war and death.

Thorin and I faced Azog, whose look of hateful confusion when the Easterlings proved to not be his allies was priceless. The number of orc soldiers was dwindling, but their leader still stood in spite of the blood staining his pale skin and armor. Azog had managed to get ahold of that stupid chain with a hunk of stone at the end and was swinging it against all those who dared to engage with him.

“Damnit,” I muttered. We started jogging back into the fray. I gritted my teeth when the cramping in my side doubled down on the whole hey-pay-attention-this-is-a-serious-injury thing. Not to mention I had taken on a nasally voice from my broken and blood-clogged nose. “He wasn’t supposed to get that.”

“It shall be his undoing,” Thorin said. An orc still on its warg bounded at us. With pitiless efficiency, Thorin sliced the warg’s neck open. As it tumbled down, I swung my sword and decapitated the rider. Its head squelched as it hit the frozen earth.

I went quiet for a moment, then said, “We cool?”

Used to my slang by now, Thorin understood the question and sighed sorrowfully.

“My actions…”

“Hey, we cool,” I repeated. “And we can talk about our emotional trauma when that fucker is dead.” I pointed my sword at Azog, who saw me doing it. He locked target with the Star and the Durin, the two he wanted dead above all else.

“Agreed.” Thorin and I readied ourselves. “But…I am sorry. More than my soul can bear.”

“I know.”

Azog shoved past Dori, Dwalin, and Gloin, cursing in his guttural language. At a glance, I could tell he favored the leg I hadn’t gotten a good dig at. The remaining soldiers shouted indecipherable commands and formed a rough line that divided us and Azog from the rest of the Company. I spotted Bilbo hacking away, and I was sorry that I didn’t get a chance to say anything important to him. That I didn’t get a chance to say goodbye.

Gandalf, his grey wizard robes soiled with dark substance, shared one final look with me. He gave a hint of a nod. I did the same.

“Uncle! Valeria!” Fili shouted. He joined with Dwalin and Balin to break through the line, fighting more desperately than anyone else.

Fili.
How could you ever appropriately say goodbye to the one you loved most?

I should have kissed him.

Azog swung the rock at us, and although it was heavy, it was easy to dodge. Thorin and I couldn’t initially get close enough to him, but the crude flail made for erratic movements, and in them there was opportunity to strike. Thorin lunged in the space created when Azog aimed for me. As I leapt back, he came up from the side and landed a solid hit in the Pale Orc’s pelvis. His strength broke through the armor that so many others couldn’t, and Azog let out a howl of uncontrolled pain. Seething, he retaliated by bringing the flail down on Thorin, but the move was too slow, and as he brought it back up, I closed in and brought my blade down hard on his back. It managed to find the base of his neck and a weak spot along the spine. Azog arched his back and unleashed another deep cry.

I backed up to miss the flail, and found my foot slipping on ice. When had we gotten so close to the river? I slipped forward, landing on my elbows, and saw Azog return the opportunity of an opening.

“Ria, move!”

I pushed myself into a frantic roll as the flail came down. It landed so close that I could smell the stone and rusted iron. “Ooooo,” I squealed when Azog swung in a wide circle to keep Thorin at bay and make another attack at me. The flail landed too close for comfort again, and I scrambled back up to my feet. I wound up on the ice, though, which was…unfortunate.

Instead of swinging for me, Azog slammed the flail into the ice, which cracked and broke apart. Beneath the ice rushed a deep blue river, whose current I could hear more clearly now that it was exposed. One fissure snaked up beside my foot. Too close for comfort.

But.

If this was unfortunate for me, then it’d be unfortunate for Azog, as well.

I wagged my blade, taunting him to come out onto the ice. I slid backwards, hoping that the ice skating lessons I took when I was seven would miraculously return. Maybe I could perfect a double axle as well. “Come on, you fuck,” I spat, ready to raise my hand up and use the droplet’s power.

Azog took the bait. He strode out onto the ice, flail dragging behind him. Thorin adapted to the tactical change. He flanked the orc with his sword—which I noticed was Orcrist—gripped in both hands. As soon as Azog whipped the flail at me, I raised my hand and let the shield of light deflect the stone. It propelled me further onto the ice, but it staggered Azog like I hoped it would. Thorin swung in sharp with Orcrist, and Azog had to react by clumsily defending himself with his arm blade. It worked to Thorin’s advantage, and he let out a yell as Orcrist cut through the front of Azog’s chest. Blood sprayed onto the ice, blackish brown against the whitish blue. His agonized roar penetrated the air.

But he still just wouldn’t go down.

I let out a loud, frustrated noise. This was taking too long, and Thorin and Azog were fighting each other one-on-one while I stood like a fucking dumbass in the middle of the river. I broke into a hazardous run, seeing the continuing fight between the Company and the orcs in my peripheral. The droplet flared.

Azog heard the incoming. He spun, lashing out with the flail. Instead of dodging it, however, I
charged my insides with fortification from the light and tested out an incredibly stupid thing at an incredibly stupid time.

The stone smashed into my chest, but I took the brunt of it without insta-dying. The second I realized I had **caught** the heavy end of the flail, I somehow grinned at Azog in all his shock—then chucked it in the direction of the waterfall’s edge. He soared with it about halfway before he let go, and while the flail careened off the side and into the frozen pit below, Azog and I slid on the ice and stopped about five feet away from each other and ten feet from the waterfall. The ice splintered beneath him, but he ignored its danger and got up.

I ignored the danger too. Even if I couldn’t adequately reach any soft spots around his neck, head, and shoulders, Azog was vulnerable enough to have his blade arm properly chopped off.

He shrieked like a wounded animal. A fountain of blood gushed on the ice in thick pools. I’d finish what Thorin started, finish everything, and leave the world a better place with Azog’s death. I glanced at Thorin, who tried to close the distance I purposefully put between us. From the fuming and frightened look on his face, he knew I had done it intentionally.

I raised my blade up just like Fili taught me to deliver the killing blow.

Azog the Defiler was cunning, though, and his psychotic hatred burned stronger than the pain of losing more of the same arm. With his intact hand, he pulled a dagger from his belt and shoved it up under my armpit. I screamed as the world filled with piercing agony. The blade crunched ligaments and scraped against bone. I was lifted off my feet, and for an instant I thought the darkness would consume me before I could complete the task I had set out to do from the very beginning.

He spread his jaw wide, inhaling a sort of boarish sound that roiled in his throat. The sight of his rows of demonic teeth was enough to snap me back to full consciousness. I was **not** going to die with my face being torn off.

My arm was numb. I held my blade out of muscle memory, but it wasn’t going to lift. Thorin got closer. Eagles screeched and Dale blew the city’s horn melodiously.

I wrapped my legs around Azog’s bloody waist and threw myself backwards. The knife was still sunk in me. He couldn’t keep his footing on the ice, and without either arms to balance himself or an uninjured body, we skidded closer to the edge of the waterfall. I twisted again and again, using Azog’s uncontrollable, faltering momentum to benefit the weight I pulled with.

The last thing I saw was Thorin and the beloved Company rushing toward me. I wished I could wipe the sad looks from them.

I wished I could have said goodbye. I loved them all so much and in so many ways.

I wished they could have known that I departed from this world thinking of them.

Thinking of Thorin.

Thinking of Bilbo.

Thinking of Fili.

Since I couldn’t do anything like that, I raised a numb hand from behind Azog’s back and stiffly formed a thumbs up.
The sound of Azog’s feet slipping off the frozen waterfall sealed my fate, and we plummeted off the edge of the world.

I lifted from Azog. Wind clawed at my skin. In one final act, I used the strength the droplet provided to grab the collar of the orc’s armor to pull him close enough and drive one of the elven blades Dwalin gruffly gave me in Rivendell into Azog’s neck.

He gurgled and died before the river could claim him.

I became limp. The blade drew out. From the battlefield, Landroval tried flying fast enough to reach me in time. I never got to thank him. I never got to do a lot of things, really, but I’d die bittersweetly accepting that I’d miss everyone in this world because I didn’t want to leave them.

This had been a good story. A very good story.

Starlight consumed my vision, and cold consumed my soul.

Chapter End Notes

Don’t fret, it’s not over ☺️
I was jogging.

The neighborhood was particularly quiet, today, despite the mid-morning hour, and April had gifted Colorado Springs with nice, sunny weather. I’d make the run quick; my coordinator needed some paperwork done for Nepal, and afterward I had to reply to the state congresswoman about ideas for developing a refugee integration project. I didn’t have a taste for lobbying-esque activities, but this was for a good cause, and I was excited to put the work in.

My mom was making dinner for the family tomorrow. I’d probably bring a couple liters of Diet Coke, since that was all my parents drank. Elena was succumbing to it, too, and I doubted I was that far behind. Luis, though, Luis was still a Fanta guy for some reason? I didn’t think Fanta was even a thing, anymore, but I’d bring him a bottle. He’d say he couldn’t drink it because he was gearing up for baseball season, but…

But...

My pace slowed.

“Hey, you coming?” my running partner asked. I glanced over at her and glimpsed long, olive-toned legs in running shorts. She wore neon yellow tennis shoes.

“Yeah,” I said, and picked up the jog.

Baseball season. Luis.

“Nice day, isn’t it?”

“Uh huh. It’s warm. I haven’t been warm in a while.”

Why did I…what?

“Oh, man, I know. But at least it’s nice here.”

I glanced again and saw long, slender fingers splayed out enthusiastically as she spoke.

“It is.”

“Don’t you just wanna live here forever?”

“Well, I mean, I’d like to go back and visit…”

Visit where?

“But that’s only a visit,” my partner said. Her shoes didn’t make any noise as we jogged down the sidewalk. Still no other people or passing cars. “I’m talking about staying here.”

“Oh, I don’t know, I like to travel a lot. I might find some place that I love more than Springs.”

“Yeah, yeah, I get that, but I’m asking ya, do you want to stay here?”
I faltered again. Why was the street so empty?

My running partner stopped beside me, and I felt her tall height without seeing her. Why couldn’t I see her? Every time I tried to look, all that I caught were legs and arms, fingers and fabric.

“I, um…”

She waved a hand off. Her voice lilted in a faint accent I’d never heard on Earth or Arda.

Arda. Middle-Earth.

I couldn’t breathe.


“Of course I want to go back!” I shouted. The clench of my fists reminded me of the droplet. I lifted it up so I could get a closer look. The jewel was dim and dormant, caked-on blood surrounding it. “But—but I’m home.”

I gazed back at the street, and a realization hit me like a truck. “Unless…unless I’m…”

My running partner barked out a loud laugh. She clapped me on the shoulder with her large hand. “No, pequeña estrella, you’re not dead. Though you’re pretty familiar with being dead, ain’t ya? Ha! Nah, you’re luckier than most in your circumstance. You left alive, and you’ve come back alive! Those who watch over Middle-Earth are kinder than others. And they needed you alive if you were going to get kicked out.”

“I got kicked out?”

“More like ‘honorably discharged when the time was right.’”

“Oh.”

I tried hard to look at my running partner (even though I now knew that she was definitely not a running partner of any sort. Possibly not even human, either) but still couldn’t get a proper view. “Don’t strain your eyes, pumpkin. I have been redacted as a stipulation.”

“Were—were you the one who got banished?”

“Yes,” she sighed dramatically. “It was a whole big deal. Completely unnecessary in my opinion.”

“Are you…you know, one of the Valar?”

My running partner cackled. “They wish! Nah, I am…an aficionado of interplanetary relations and personage reassignment. Let’s put it that way.”

“Why were you banished?”

“Because I don’t like seeing people die.” An edge set to her tone.

I frowned. “But I died. Like, a lot.”

“Technicalities, technicalities.”

A cool spring breeze passed through us, but it felt heavy, like it was a manifestation of the weight
on my mind.

“So if you sent me there, and the Valar want me gone, then—”

“Why do you have that funky little friend in your hand?” she finished. “Because herinya sees things from my perspective. She’s the Queen of the Stars, after all. She understands the expanse, the universe.” My running partner’s voice grew fond. “And she loves. She wants to see all races live and love and grow underneath her firmaments for as long as possible.”

I heard her clear her throat. “She’d understand if you wanted to stay. She’s felt your longing cross voids and galaxies. But the power you have was bestowed upon you for a reason. She has faith in you. They all do, though most of them wouldn’t like to admit it.

“Staying, leaving—leaving, staying…The choice is yours, Valeria Juarez.”

I didn’t want to make a choice. I wanted to be in both worlds. I wanted to be home—but home was in two places, and I could only remain in one.

My eyes filled with unshed tears. “Will…will I ever get to come back?” I whispered.

“Hm. Maybe. There’s a permanence to these things.”

It was a unique feeling to have my heart irreparably shatter from a decision. I crumpled to my knees, sobbing. “Please,” I rasped, my tears finally falling over. As I wiped them away, dried flecks of blood fell to the faded gray sidewalk. “Please, don’t make me do this.”

She simply remained silent. I cried harder, clutching myself and shaking my head back and forth. I wept because the decision had already been made. I wept because it had been so easy to choose when it should have ripped me in half. All that I wanted ever since I was taken from my world was right here. Those long nights of crying in the dark, thinking of my family every waking minute, and wishing for all the comforts of home could come to an end, and yet…and yet…I had to go back.

“Fuck—shit—Gah!”

I threw my head back and let out a long, miserable wail.

A soft silence followed. My tears subsided, and though my insides burned, the air was lighter, warmer. I stared up at the blue, cloud-dotted sky, taking in the immensity of its color, its reach. The last sky I stared up at was wintry and unforgiving. It blanketed a battle we had won, and the thought of that brought the taste of proud victory to my tongue.

The vibrant azure color also reminded me of a darker blue shade. A deep blue flecked with gold and filled with love I had not known, nor would I ever know again.

Fili.

I felt gutted for not feeling bad about choosing to leave the world I so desperately wished to get back to. For him. For all of them. For the future. For the light.

Voice throaty and low, I asked my running partner, “How long can I stay here?”

“Let’s say two weeks.” She stretched beside me. “You can get your shit in order. And,” she added gently, “you can say goodbye.”
I teared up again.

“…Okay.”

As she lifted from her toe-touches, she helped me back up to my feet. I faced her, and yet I couldn’t see anything more than the shift of a t-shirt and a willowy-shaped body verging on unnatural.

“Go to your backyard when it’s time, alright?”

I nodded, my throat too clogged to speak further.

My running partner tapped an oddly long and nimble finger on my nose. I flinched, expecting a burst of pain, but instead felt the buzzing of something ancient underneath her skin during the momentary touch. “Don’t worry about your owies. I got them covered. Just run home fast.” I heard the crooked grin in her voice. “You look like super scary shit.”

Then I was staring at empty air. The sounds of the city rushed in all at once. I jumped, breathing rapidly. Had it always been this loud? Everything was grating and driving and living. I could smell a put-out cigarette, old gasoline on the pavement, fried food from a restaurant; they crashed together in an overwhelming way, but man did the smells evoke a million memories.

As much as my heart hurt, I grinned. I was back in Colorado Springs. Earth. With my house three blocks away.

I put both hands to my head while I began to laugh—laugh because of how fucking absurd my life had become. The motion reminded me that I was covered head-to-toe in blood and gore, and that I was standing on the side of the road in the middle of a residential neighborhood.

“Shit.” I booked it back down the street, the memory of where my apartment resided coming back as if I had never left this world. I kept grinning, as open-mouthed and grimaced as it was. My muscles screamed in protest, and the air burned where my nose had been broken. The first car that drove by slowed down to check out the messy murder scene bitch doing an all-out sprint with swords hanging from her hips at nine in the morning.

I hoped the cops weren’t called on me.

My Nikes held their traction as I came around the corner. A man walking his dog jumped at my sudden sight and yelped, “What the fuck?!” The dog, a corgi, sniffed tainted and otherworldly blood and began to wildly bark. When I showed no signs of moving around the man, he panicked and scurried to the edge of the curb. The corgi, however, stood bravely against me. I jumped over his thick, long little body and kept running. Echoing his first statement, the man shouted more incredulously, “What the fuck?!” in a higher-pitched voice.

The next car that rolled by honked at me. The third didn’t do anything. A spry, elderly man who definitely enjoyed mowing his lawn way too early in the year saw me from the other side of the street. He plucked the joint hanging from his mouth, waved it in the air, and called, “Go easier the next time! Then you won’t be tweaking! Heh heh!”

The little two bedroom home with faded yellow paint, a chain link fence around it, and a little silver Honda parked in the gravel driveway awaited me. I vaulted over the fence instead of flipping up the gate’s flimsy latch and ran around the house to the backdoor. It usually stayed unlocked, and my dad said Remy and I would get robbed or murdered one day because of it.

Well. I’d gotten murdered more than most people, and I came back just fine.
I flung the screen door open and hauled my ass into the house. My chest heaved from excitement more than exercise. The same clean, citrusy smell hung in the air when I technically left on my run five minutes ago. My phone was on the kitchen counter. The dishwasher churned water from being started right before I left. Morning light filtered in through the living room window.

Dazedly, I began walking forward through the kitchen. My fingers fumbled to undo the straps holding my swords. Once it came loose, I let them drop to the grayish-white linoleum floor. Next came my shoes. The Nikes skittered behind me when I kicked them off. I moved forward until I reached the carpet. Why hadn’t I appreciated how soft carpets felt under my feet? I wiggled my toes as I peeled off my poor, tattered Lake-town coat. It was so matted in blood that it had taken on the mold of my body and stayed the shape when it fell.

Ugh, I *stunk.*

The very unsexy trail of clothes led to the bathroom, where I finally got a good look at myself in the mirror for the first time in a long time.

It was a gruesome sight.

Orc blood cracked and flaked down my face and neck. I could see where my fingers left tracks as I smeared it on just a couple hours ago. Had it only lasted that long? All that death and darkness and fear seemed to stretch on for days. The blood turned my hair from black to an oily brown, and crusty strands near my hairline stuck out like they had too much hairspray in it. My nose, though healed, still had brighter splotches of my human blood surrounding it. Never mind the dark circles beneath my eyes and the gaze of someone much older than who I saw in my reflection. I looked crazed; a woman who had risen from the depths of hell, dragged back down, then clawed her way back up. Was I the sacrifice? Or the sacrificer? I couldn’t decide.

My sports bra had finally been ruined by Azog’s knife. I slowly removed it and my underwear, wincing, and examined the sealed-up wound right under my armpit. Then I unwrapped the stained bandages put on me after I’d been killed by Thorin. They too had been damaged from the stupid slash Azog had dealt in the *exact same fucking spot.*

Thorin’s sword left a deeper, longer, and thicker scar across my side, dark and puckered. Azog’s blade was more diagonal and slimmer. Both of them created a sort of X marking, like a permanent spot that screamed, “Hey! Hit me right here!”

The spider bite had healed over like a large, circular burn. The puncture mark from that frustrating boar had faded into a scar just a couple shades lighter than my skin color. And then there was the vertical scar on my sternum beneath my tattoo.

I brushed a finger against it, then moved up to the tattoo, thinking of Fili’s hands on my skin. How he screamed my name as he tried saving me from Azog the Defiler with the rest of the Company. How I should have kissed him despite the chaos. How much I *loved* him.

Everything came snapping back into place. I braced myself against the sink, war-streaked hands shaking. The sounds of metal and roars and wind echoed in my ears. I squeezed my eyes shut. Tears pricked at the corners. I couldn’t stop thinking of all their faces now that I wasn’t sending myself off a frozen waterfall. Fili, watching the woman he loved die *again* and being unable to stop it. Bilbo, who found himself too far away and too helpless to do anything after he swore he wouldn’t allow it to happen. Thorin, reaching out despite the distance, shouting my name with an indescribable anguish shining in his eyes. Tauriel’s disbelieving, grieving shock did not come from watching Kili die right before his eyes—it came from watching me die while she could do nothing. Even Gandalf, whose premonition matched mine, could not hide the genuine despair at the sight of
my end.

But that hadn’t been the end, had it?

I was going back.

They just had to wait. Just a little while.

I gazed back up to the mirror, bleary-eyed and breathing heavily. I’d get to say goodbye to my family.

A tear spilled over, tracking over the blood.

Then I turned and started the shower. The sweet sound of hot, running water falling into the bathtub was a symphony. I let it reach sizzling temperatures before taking out my scrunchie, which had stayed intact despite the hell we both went through. It definitely had more crunch than scrunch to it. I set it on the sink and stepped in.

For a little while, all I did was stand there. The water streamed down my body, swirling down the drain with a faint pink hue. I had so many layers of blood caked on that the initial streams didn’t do anything. I had to take my poor loofah and smack a gob of body wash on it. Hopefully, Love Beauty and Planet’s Murumuru Butter and Rose could overpower the smell of rotten blood and old sweat.

Flowers and rancor mixed with the rising steam of the shower. I fought back flashes of how a sword slowed when it gutted someone, how a windpipe felt when it collapsed underneath my hands, and how a blade could scrape so viscerally against my insides when it stuck into me.

It didn’t work. I couldn’t fight what was far stronger than my mental constitution.

After barely washing my hair out for the third time, I sunk to my knees. The porcelain of the bathtub was cold against my skin, contrasting with the burning water. Could it burn away the growing grief that stabbed me with every breath I took? The sight and sound of war every time my eyes shut?

My forehead pressed against the tub. I curled up directly underneath the shower stream and stayed that way for a very long time.

-

A woman sat before me amidst gauzy fog. She wept and collected her tears in a white basin held in her silver hands. I could not see her eyes, for she wore a gray hood that concealed most of her face. Its color was reminiscent of a wizard’s robes. The woman’s chest cavity was exposed, bones bent back to reveal a beating red heart. Crimson spilled from the opening.

She knew me. Her heart sung to my pain. I knew her. My sorrow had called to the lady.

I looked down. Blood poured from all the wounds that had killed me.

My tears fell into a basin composed of starlight.

I awoke in my bed. Evening light shone through the small window. I went to grab my phone on my nightstand to check the time, but I realized it still sat on the kitchen counter. At some point, I had dragged myself from the shower and tossed myself underneath the blankets. My hair was still damp and matted from sleeping on it.
Suspended in the gloaming of my room, I patted the spot underneath my right eye. It was wet. It would probably stay that way for a long while.

The house was silent. Remy had just left for work and wouldn’t be back until the end of the month. Her job as a flight attendant kept her away for long periods of time. If I left in two weeks, I wouldn’t even see her. That sucked, but it was also handy.

Because things were about to get weird.

I got dressed into clothes I spent about a minute smelling and blow-dried my hair. Before I delved into the grind, I wouldn’t waste any more time being apart from my family.

With a Band-Aid on the droplet, I threw a sweater on, grabbed my phone and keys, and hopped into my car. I could have walked, but the impatience was rising in me like a fever. I’d gone long periods without driving in the past, so getting into the car wasn’t as shocking as it might have been. I pulled out of the driveway, gravel crunching under the tires, and drove the six blocks to the residence of Pedro and Lupe Juarez. The radio murmured some advertisement for a bank on the way there, then started to play *Old Town Road*. I blanked out for most of the song, too concentrated on the road and the passing houses and vestiges of the Colorado sunset.

How was I getting out of the car? The door slammed so loudly behind me. Both my parent’s car were parked in the driveway, and Luis’ piece of shit Grand Am sat up on the curb. The sign my dad was proudest of hung on the door: BRONCOS FANS WELCOME. RAIDERS, CHARGERS & CHIEFS NOT ALLOWED.

I walked up the three low steps of the porch. It was too early in the year for my mama’s hollyhocks to begin growing. I bit my bottom lip to keep from crying about not getting to see when they’d been in full bloom. Once I had recomposed myself, I knocked twice on the door and let myself in.

The house smelled like tamales. In the living room, my parents and little brother watched *John Wick* on the television. “Heyy, Vali,” Luis drawled. The sound of his voice broke everything in me. “What’s…up…”

My mom jumped to her feet, aghast, and rushed to me. “Valeria! ¿Que le pasó a tu cara? Are you alright? What happened?”

Dad and Luis followed suit. I simply started crying and threw my arms around my mom, inhaling her smell and holding onto her as tight as I could. “What happened? What happened, baby?” she kept repeating, but she held me like I wanted her to. I buried my face in her shoulder, ignoring the tenderness from all my bruises.

She rubbed a hand up and down my back. “I’m going to call the police,” my dad said. “Lupe, sit her down and—”

“No.” I lifted my head and shook it. “No. You don’t need to call the police. I’m fine.”

“Obviously not!” my mother exclaimed. “Vali, come on, sit down and tell us what happened!”

I simply stood there and shook my head again. “No, Mama. There’s…” I shoved my hands in the pocket of my hoodie. I hadn’t thought of how I’d explain to them how fucked up my face was. After a long silence, I sighed and came to a poor conclusion. “The police can’t handle it,” I muttered. It was partially the truth.

My parents darkened, and they exchanged worried glances with each other. My intentional vagueness led them to one conclusion. I always tried to deny their fears because they were super
outlandish. Why would my work be anywhere or do anything illegal?

But standing here in their living room, bruised up and crying, did what I never had to speak, even if it wasn’t true.

They asked a few more questions that I didn’t give a clear answer to before deciding that whatever I had gone through didn’t put me in the state to be grilled. I settled down between my parents and leaned on my mom’s familiar shoulder. Luis threw a Denver Broncos blanket on me. I held my dad’s hand and curled up underneath the flannel. “Luis, calientas unos tamales,” my mom said to him. He nodded and hurried to the kitchen. I heard a fridge opening, then the cupboard, followed the clack of the microwave shutting and its buzzing. How had I missed those sounds so much?

A minute later, Luis brought me a plate with two unwrapped tamales on them. They wobbled on the flat surface. I brought my hands out and ate them despite the heat.

If I hadn’t been so cried out, I would have started again. I never thought I’d taste my mama’s food again.

John Wick beat up bad guys on the tv while I sat on the worn suede couch, still weary from the fighting I’d just done. I didn’t want to fight again for a long while.

But I was here, surrounded by the comfort I wanted to feel during all those nights under the open night sky.

Being with my first family, though, made me miss my second.

I let my sorrow be.

Chapter End Notes

A shorter chapter, but oof was it exhausting to write.

Pequeña estrella: little star
¿Que le pasó a tu cara?: what happened to your face?
Calientas unos tamales: heat up some tamales
I spent the night at my parents’ house and awoke early in the morning. I half-expected Fili to be here. When reality sunk in, a deep, yawning sadness threatened to consume me.

Then I got out of my old childhood bed, said my goodbyes, ignored my family’s worry, and went back home.

The first thing I did was clean up the trail of clothes I left. I set my blades aside and fished out the single coin and quartz in my coat pocket. Everything else, including my Nikes, was bundled up and set aside to be burned.

I sent emails to my coordinator explaining why I couldn’t go to Nepal, and I quickly typed up ideas to the congresswoman—but told her that I wouldn’t be able to offer my involvement like we originally planned.

Before I left the house, I grabbed the Lord of the Rings movies. Because, amidst all my woe, I had a plan and I was going to follow through with it. My running partner never stipulated that I couldn’t bring anything with me, nor that I couldn’t go crazy over researching Middle-Earth and all its shit.

So that’s what I’d do.

I had about seven thousand dollars in my bank account that needed to be spent now that I wasn’t traveling internationally. Usually, I’d make a list outlining all that I needed to do, but I was in too big of a hurry to take the time. This was going to be a chaotic, stupid, mad dash to get everything done and ready before my two weeks were up.

And I’d already wasted one day.

My body went on hyper-alert. I took a shower—actually enjoyed it, too—and got dressed into comfy clothes suitable for both intense studying and staring at computer screens, as well as frantic errand-running.

Since I had so many things to do, I just plucked one item out of my brain and went with it. Printer paper. I needed lots of it. Printer paper and Red Bull and a ton of mason jars and newspaper for wrapping, plus anything else I saw fit as an impulse buy.

So Target run?

Target run.

Five hundred bucks later, I came home with a car full of groceries that would hold me over the next two weeks, as well as everything I bought for the return. Target didn’t have mason jars—but what was alright, because everything else was in stock. I bought Two cases of yellow Red Bull, two reams of paper, three cartridges of printer ink, the biggest binder I’d ever seen, Polaroid film, lotions, shampoos, conditioners, body washes, argan oils, as well as tennis shoes, leggings, shirts, and a handy dandy label maker.
I popped in the *Fellowship of the Ring* into the Blu-Ray player, made myself a heaping bowl of Special K chocolate cereal, and took out a blank sheet of printer paper to begin jotting down notes. After that, I repeated the same with *The Two Towers* except with some microwaved tamales my mama sent home with me (my vegetarianism got put on hold explicitly for tamales), and then, when I needed to crack into the Red Bull, it was time for *Return of the King*. By the time I finished the movie, I had five pages’ worth of crammed notes in semi-legible handwriting, all coded in different colors just to differentiate from the madness.

It was all in Spanish, too, just to be precautious.

I slapped those papers through the three-hole puncher and stuck it in the Binder. By then, the sun was well on its way to rising through the window. I set a timer on my phone for two hours, pulled a blanket over me, and passed out.

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The alarm went off. I jolted upright, put in the *Fellowship* again, toasted a bagel with cream cheese, and got onto Amazon. I ordered an asston of mason jars and packaging paper, and then went on to add an assortment of seeds to my cart. We’re talking jalapenos, peppers, tomatoes, tomatillos, squash, corn, cilantro, oregano, rosemary, and every variegation in between.

Then it was time for the books. I finally took a breath and paused. I was getting books for *them*. Fili, Bilbo, Thorin, Ori, Balin, Tauriel, and Fili’s mom. The thought of meeting Dis made my heart stutter. I was actually going back and meeting her.

What if she didn’t like me? I was human, after all, and of Easterling or Haradrim countenance. But, as the Battle of the Five Armies proved, the Easterlings actually made it *Six* Armies in Erebor’s favor. That couldn’t hurt, right?

According to all the things Fili told me about her, Dis was a rational woman, and she was the one who made sure that Thorin and her sons kept political standing despite their kingdom being held from them for over a hundred years. I had at least *some* chance of winning her over.

Books, I remembered, were a good way to her heart.

I got classic, contemporary, postmodern, fiction, non-fiction, medicinal, travel, historical, and political books, as well as all sorts of poetries and plays. That racked up another six hundred bucks. Then, while perusing, I realized that I had missed out on one big thing: Bilbo’s love of maps.

“Oh, he’s gonna pass out when he sees this,” I muttered gleefully to myself while I added maps to my overstuffed cart. There was the world map, of course, and then close-up maps of the seven continents. I also got him a map of Colorado, a map of Japan, New Zealand, the UK and Ireland, China, Thailand, Mexico, Italy, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. The travel books I ordered were also geared toward the hobbit’s interests. Like, I totally would never read *The Gentleman’s Guide to the Scottish Highlands: How to Be Back at the Inn by Teatime*, but I’d stake all my lives on it that Bilbo would.

At some point, I took a shower and cleaned up the residual crusty blood stains leftover from the baptism of returning to Earth. War was still fresh in my mind, but I could manage its presence by distracting myself with the thousand duties I had to complete. Still, I visibly grimaced whenever I thought about how Azog’s blade felt when it pierced me, and how much everything stunk.

Speaking of stink.
Once the sun started going down, I grabbed lighter fluid, matches, and the bagful of my ruined Middle-Earth shit and headed outdoors. Since burning something in the city probably violated some ordinance or another, I thought it best to drive into the country and dispose of it there.

As I was throwing everything into the trunk, though, headlights blared on me. I squinted and tried shielding my eyes from it. Gravel crunched underneath tires. No flashing police lights, though, meaning that nobody had figured out that it was me running like a psycho in broad daylight.

The lights turned off with the car, and two doors opened and slammed shut.

“Vali?” Elena’s voice cut through the dusk air. “What the hell are you doing?”

She came up to me, keys jingling in one hand. Luis followed behind her. Both of them were dressed for the brisk temperature. How could I tell them that they looked ethereal in the dusk, the dreams come alive when I was a universe away? Elena with her high-waisted jeans and a wool-lined denim jacket, Luis with his baseball sweater and joggers—it was really them, wasn’t it?

And their black hair stark against the encroaching twilight…it was the same as mine, and I had to take solace in the fact that I’d be carrying that small part of them with me when I left.

“Vali! Hey! I asked you a question!”

I smiled at Elena’s bossy voice and came back into focus. “Hi,” I said.

“Hi? That’s all? Mom said we needed to check on you—make sure you weren’t, like…” Elena trailed off, leaving the unsaid hanging in the driveway.

Luis came around and checked out what was in the trunk. As soon as he got close enough, his face scrunched up and he recoiled. “Oof! What’s in there? It’s freaking rank.”

Elena came to examine the contents as well. I shoved my hands in the front pocket of my sweater, slouching. I’d only make things worse if I tried stopping them, but it didn’t keep me from tensing up. She had a similar reaction and put the back of her hand up to her nose. “Holy shit, Vali, what’d you got in there? A fucking dead body?”

Did it smell that bad? I knew it wasn’t pleasant, but maybe I had gotten more used to the stench.

“It’s just stuff I need to burn,” I said with a shrug.

“Burn?” Luis squeaked. “So it is a dead body?”

I scoffed. “No! It’s—well—okay, I can’t explain it, but it’s just some nasty shit I need to burn.”

“Why?”

Elena’s eyes sparked with unsettling concern. “Vali…is everything alright?”

No.

The tears came naturally, but I didn’t let them fall. “Look, guys, I just…” I took a deep breath to keep my voice from shaking. “I gotta get rid of this. For my sake.”

Several moments of silence passed. Then Luis nodded, his black hair bouncing lightly, and said, “Okay. Then we’ll go with you.”

Elena, surprisingly, immediately agreed with him. “Yeah, you’re looking a little…sleep-deprived.”
Luis shut the car trunk and swiped the keys from my hand. “I know a place.”

“Where?” Elena asked accusingly. “What were you doing, burying your own rotting corpse?”

“Nah.” He got into the driver’s seat, and I had no choice but to walk around to the passenger side. Elena opened the back door and slid in. “Went to smoke weed there once with some friends. I ended up just being sick.”

Elena and I laughed. “Pinche débiles,” my sister muttered, her gleaming grin shining in the rearview mirror.

Yeah, I was, too.

Luis’ secret weed-smoking places wasn’t all that secret. It was basically a campsite off a nearby mountain trail. But, since it was still cold, we were the only ones in the area.

“Okay, okay,” he admitted as he got out, “I may have not remembered correctly.”

We walked for about two minutes until we reached a long unused firepit. I tossed the trash bag in the middle of it and started unscrewing the lighter fluid.

Elena shuffled forward and prodded the bag with her foot. “So what’s inside this thing, huh? Smells like rotting fruit and diesel.”

“And ass,” Luis said.

“That’s not important.”

“I cannot believe you, Vali.” Luis stooped down and started untying the bag with one hand while the other held up the flashlight in his phone. “Acting all shady and shit! We gotta know! I’m not going to be in the dark about something I’m criminally complicit in!”

I made a panicked noise and frantically pulled back the lighter fluid I was two seconds away from dousing Luis with. “Oye! Get back!”

Luis just broke the bag’s plastic ties and loosened it up. He exaggeratedly gagged. “Whew! Shit’s rancid!”

“Dude, can you please get back?” I didn’t hide the edge to my voice.

All my time in Middle-Earth had glorified my little brother. I didn’t ever remind myself enough how much of a little bastard he could be.

He ignored me and dumped the bag upside down. All the contents spilled out.

“Luis! Get away!”

Finally picking up on my tone, he snapped his head up to me, a look of confusion filling his face. The flashlight went between the clothes and me.

“…Clothes?”

Elena became softer, her concern rerising. Luis tensed but didn’t move back.
“Yo, this isn’t contaminated with some plague, right? Like, you’re not involved with some chemical warfare shit?”

“Luis, be serious.”

“I am serious!”

“Will the both of you shut up?” I snapped. “No, it’s not contaminated! It’s just fucking nasty and I needed to get rid of it!”

“Oh,” they both muttered.

I should have said it had some sort of disease, though, because that meant Luis grabbed the Lake-town coat. In the white pallor of the flashlight, he and Elena saw just how covered it was in blood.

“Whoa, Vali…you really did kill someone. In a fucking ugly coat, too.”

I riled because of what he called my coat. My coat, which kept me warm from the depths of the Lonely Mountain, the northern winds, and the misty pale gloom of Ravenhill. Alright, I’ll admit, its dark green color was rendered to a murky brown because of all the blood, but it had personality. I was actually pretty sad I had to say goodbye to it.

“It’s shit,” I said flatly.

“Liar. This smells worse than shit.”

“Yeah, and that’s…not exactly your style,” Elena drawled. “It hasn’t really been anyone’s style since…1440.”

“Vali, you stole this from a museum, didn’t you? It’s a—you’re turning into one of those vigilante art thieves!”

“You’re so stupid, Luis, if she stole this from the museum she wouldn’t be burning it. And it isn’t art.”

Luis yelped as lighter fluid came squirting out of the metal can. He scrambled back, light flashing everywhere. “Don’t blow me up with it!”

“I told you to get back!” I yelled. With him out of the way, I doused the pile of clothes and tennis shoes. “Match or lighter?”

“Match,” said Elena. “You’ll burn your whole face off if you use the lighter. Man, did you use that whole can? Smells even worse, now.”

I took a match out of the box and lit it against the side. Its fire was familiar; the warm glow was the glow of campfire, of summer nights at the base of the Misty Mountains, of hearty laughter and crude dwarven jokes.

I could see the glow of the same firelight in Fili’s eyes and its shadows dance across his smiling face. He smelled like campfire and the wilderness, and—and I could almost feel him beside me, warming my cold fingers with his sure hands.

My cold fingers, which could not truly be healed from His touch even galaxies away.

The match flicked out from the same fingers, sailing through the air and landing squarely on top of the coat.
The pile of clothes erupted in flames. It stunk to high heaven, but orc blood was apparently extremely flammable all on its own, and in a matter of moments everything was a mottled, burning mash. My Nikes popped, the coat’s yak fur curled, and the ashes of two worlds rose into the early night sky.

Elena and Luis had the decency not to say anything while I silently wept.

-

All my shit from Amazon arrived. While I waited for it, I got busy printing every single thing I could from the LoTR Wiki page. Man, who knew people were so dedicated to everything?

And who knew that Tolkien thought the only way women could die was from childbirth and sadness? Eowyn being the only exception, of course.


If I had known all who Elrond had lost, though, all he had seen, I would have given him a hug. I would give him a hug when I saw him again.

And Gandalf. It felt a little weird pouring over his info, but all the Red Bull coursing through my veins inhibited a lot of common sense. I found out that he served a few Valar. First it was Manwë and Varda, then Irmo, and finally Nienna. But Nienna was the Vala he learned the most from, and that was why I saw so much compassion and love in his eyes while he gazed upon grief and desolation.

He would still have that same look in his eyes when he walked with the Fellowship, and when he went with Frodo and Bilbo to the Undying Lands.

I printed information on all of the Fellowship and the events of the Lord of the Rings just in case. I could be dead long before the events transpired, but having it wouldn’t hurt.

Tolkien clearly preferred fawning over his elves and their g.d. history and language. When it came to the dwarves, I was disappointed in how much stuff was missing. I printed everything I could find, anyway, but I did it while muttering curses. I already knew a lot of it because of my time spent with the Company: Durin the Deathless, Aulë was Mahal, Moria had been taken, the Seven Rings were lost, the War of the Dwarves and Dragons. The way the dwarves retold their stories and histories was a lot more interesting than some Wiki.

I may have upended some prophetic timelines or whatever by keeping Thorin, Fili, and Kili alive. But whatever. The Valar didn’t stop me, did they? So they must have been cool with it.

Thirty minutes later, I got all of my Amazon stuff unpacked. I had to find the little bright sides to leaving; no Amazon on Middle-Earth meant that I no longer had to feel bad about being a consumer of unethical corporate products and labor.

…Still. I’d miss two-day shipping.

Traveling across the world accumulated a bunch of backpacks, totes, and duffel bags. Who knew what I’d do with them when I got back, but oh well. I packed all the books and maps, first, since they were the easiest, then got to work on transporting everything into mason jars and labeling
them. I had to switch off the trilogy; it started giving me hardcore anxiety along with my millionth Red Bull for the day.

I didn’t dare watch *The Hobbit* for obvious reasons.

While I worked, *The Bachelorette* played mutedly on the tv, and I hummed a dwarven working song.

- 

A familiar dwarven working song echoed through the Lonely Mountain, distant and deep. Kili would have preferred to be with them; it was warm inside, and if this wind kept up anymore, he would have to plait his hair back so he wouldn’t be spitting strands out of his mouth every five damn seconds.

Fili conversed with Thorin and Balin in front of Kili. He wandered behind them, half-listening to family names being thrown this way and that, brewing politics, and construction for both Erebor and Dale. The city had been dealt devastating blows during the battle; part of him was surprised any of the walls still stood, let alone the rest of the already ruined city.

Bard was a good man, however. He would ensure that Dale stood strong once more upon the shores of the Long Lake—and Erebor would stand beside it. Two cities, one goal: to see their people prosper.

And, well, Erebor had enough gold to achieve it.

Kili thought of Tauriel as he followed, and how her hair would ripple in the breeze that drafted up the carved mountainside. She would look far more lovely than he imagined himself to be in the moment. Mahal, he doubted she could *never* not be lovely.

She had returned to Mirkwood to answer for her desertion. Kili begged (well, not begged, but calmly *suggested to*) Uncle Thorin to let him accompany Tauriel back. Despite King Thranduil’s assistance in the battle, those elven prison cells were a sharp memory, and he did not entirely trust the king.

Although, he supposed that if he had not *been* in that prison thanks to Thranduil, he would not have met Tauriel.

Kili smiled a fraction. What a very Valeria way of thinking.

Ah. There it was. The pain that surfaced with just a whisper of a thought of her.

Fili walked with upright shoulders, of course, and his gaze gleamed with interest as he listened to his elders. It was a very brave act. Of course, they all had to act bravely this past week for the sake of each other and their returning kin. But, by the light of a low fire when there were no eyes on them, they grieved.

He grieved. His brother grieved. Thorin grieved. Master Baggins grieved. Even Tauriel grieved, her hazel eyes turned dark and her mouth twisted in sobs. She had not wept for Kili that day like Valeria forewarned, but…but she still lost the same person they all had, for she loved Valeria in the short time they knew each other.

The tears shed on Ravenhill had forever marked the ground. Kili could not look in the direction of the tower without nearly being swallowed up by despair.
It should not have been her in their stead.

\textit{Valeria, gentle as wisteria.}

She had not been gentle then. No, she had been a force, relentless and reckless. Driven by the desire to protect those she loved to the point that it quite literally pushed her off the edge of a cliff.

Kili did not like to think of how Valeria threw herself off with Azog the Defiler in tow. Those teeth baring savagely, eyes burning with resolve, tears streaking her cheeks. Her thumb jutting upright to show them—to assure them in spite of the chaos.

\textit{You are gone, and we long for you to return.}

Dying for them had been her plan all along. Or, at least Valeria had been ready to die for them. Kili simply…merely…

Thought she would come back after it.

But they did not find her body in the pool beneath the waterfall with Azog’s, nor along the banks of the River Running. They searched the next day, and the day after that, and they even asked the damned elves for aid because of their oh-so-mighty abilities…

Valeria had been swept up by the river, however, and any hope of finding her grew slimmer with each day. Hopefully by spring, the ice will have thawed and…and perhaps then.

Kili thumbed the stone token in his pocket. Their mother would be here, soon, meaning that he would have to explain to her just how he came to love an elf. Kili let a bit of a grimace slip; Mother held resentment toward the elves, though perhaps not as much as Uncle Thorin did. But maybe her heart could be swayed! And besides, the Mirkwood elves did fight side-by-side with the Ironhill dwarves, and Tauriel protected him, Fili, Thorin, and the rest of the Company during the peak of the battle. Not to mention that he and Tauriel could single-handedly restore the alliance between the two kingdoms.

Bah. If Valeria were here, she would give Kili advice. That woman knew much in the matters of love.

Sacrifice, too.

The meeting adjourned, and Kili nodded sagely as though he had been paying attention the entire time. Fili did not say where he was off to now, but the three of them knew where.

That heaviness weighed deep in Kili’s stomach.

When the patrols ceased to begin supplementing labor forces in both cities, Fili took it upon himself to continue. He did not believe that Valeria was dead—that she had not been swept up by the river, but by the starlight—and it pained all of them to see such a desolate hope in him.

Optimism like that was not the dwarven way.

But stubbornness was, and so the crown prince would scour the banks of the river and lake until sundown.

Fili’s hope, however, itched at the back of their necks like a rash that would not go away. If he had not given up, then it allowed them to not entirely give up, either. Giving up, no matter how rational it was in light of all that happened, could not completely be given into.
For Valeria had done some things that would not be believed had Kili not been there to witness it.

So the Company clung to that scrap, that ragged cloth. If she could not be found, then she could not definitely be dead. In the uncertainty, there was possibility.

Kili stayed atop the mountain’s carved hall, his hair finally plaited, and watched as two figures rode from the mountain. A twinge of surprise jolted him, followed by amusement. Ah. Master Baggins accompanied him today. He had to give the hobbit credit; should Fili’s hope falter, Bilbo’s would hold it steady.

You are gone, but not for long.

“It is foolish, this dream.”

Kili glanced sidelong at Thorin, whose eyes were locked on Fili and Bilbo while they departed. The wind had covered the sound of the king’s approach. He shrugged, though, and put up a nonchalant guise.

“Maybe. But you have not crushed it, nor given them the command to cease.”

Thorin’s silence challenged the mountain itself, stoic and stony.

“Could it be, uncle, that you wish for them to succeed?”

For a while, Kili thought he would not receive an answer. Then, under the low howl of the wind and the sun-breaking sky, he heard:

“Yes.”

We call you to return once more unto your home.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaahhh, I didn't get another chapter posted before my new semester began. So here we are! Guys, I'm SO CLOSE to being done, but postings will probably slow down because of school and work. This chapter was also hard for me to write because it's not exactly a filler - but not exactly unimportant, either.

But hey, Kili found a better ending to his poem.

Pinche débiles: fucking weak
I watched Luis play *Shadow of Mordor* on the television in the basement. He had the game memorized, but he still like to play it for fun. Coincidentally, I didn’t have to ask about it; when I went over to my parents’ house, he had just started it up.

In the past week, I had to learn terms like “canon” and “headcanon” and “canon divergence” and all that shit while I was doing research. *Shadow of Mordor, Shadow of War,* and all the characters within them weren’t official, leaving me to wonder if they’d appear at all. Then again, Tauriel wasn’t meant to be “canon,” and yet there she had been, her perfect hands applying pressure to the puncture wound in my thigh, uncaring that I traveled with dwarves and that I was already close to death.

And, well, I hadn’t been canon, either.

Under the Broncos blanket that covered me, I absently touched the mangled scar on my thigh. It was, in my opinion, the ugliest. It also reminded me that I needed to grab an EpiPen or two before I went back. They had an expiration date, but it wouldn’t hurt to have some in stock for a little while.

“So Glorfindel—” I began.

“Celebrimbor,” Luis corrected.

“Right. Celebrimbor. He made the Rings, and now he’s in Talion’s body?”

“Yeah.”

“And when’s it set again?”

“Between *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings.*”

“Oh. And he becomes a wraith? Like one of the Nazgul?”

Luis slammed his fingers down on the controller as he executed some sick combo move on the orcs—no, sorry, Uruk-hai. It made me wonder if I met Talion in real life, would he be as epic as he was in the game? Because none of the dwarves were as hyped-up as they had been in the movies when it came to fights. Maybe I was the only one that looked cool. Because, you know, that’s just how I be.

Once Luis blew up some shit and then had Talion mount up on a cara-whatever, he answered, “Nah, not exactly. He’s not corrupted like the Nine are. Just kept alive by a wraith.”

“That…okay.”

I’d have to Wiki everything about the game, just to try to make sense of the information and be sure that I had it in case.

“Why’re you so interested in all this, anyway?” Luis began fighting more Uruks.

I shrugged, even though he wouldn’t see it. “I’m just curious. I’ve always liked this stuff.”
He went silent for a moment. “Seems like you’re spending time with me because you’re getting ready to leave again.”

Luis kept his voice casual, and he didn’t let his gaze stray from the television screen. Exaggerated sounds of sword fighting and beasts snarling filled the basement. Why was I ready to jump back into a world where those sounds were real, again? My family was right here. And, with less than week left, my time with them dwindled.

I sat up straighter and tucked both knees under my chin. Luis kept playing because he knew that if he paused it to look straight at me while I answered, I would clam up.

“I… I’ve gotta go, Lui,” I said barely above a whisper.

“How long are you going to be gone?”

“I’m not sure. A while.”

“Are you going to be doing illegal stuff? Like, blowing up things and killing human traffickers and poachers?”

I couldn’t help but smile. That was where they all thought I was heading. Going in deep. Losing myself to a cause that extended beyond the law.

“Not as much as you’d might think.”

“Are you going to die?”

“No. I promise.”

Luis hummed, and when he decided that he didn’t want any more questions answered—or figured that I wouldn’t go any further—he stopped the game and stood up. I watched him stretch, and he said, “Alright. Well, we better go get some fucking ice cream, then.”

I smiled at my baby brother. The thought of leaving him ripped my heart again. It couldn’t even be torn in half because that happened within the first few minutes I returned to Earth.

“I’m really craving some cookies and cream.”

“Of course you are, you basic b—”

I threw a throw pillow at him.

—

With my accounts and subscriptions canceled, bills paid, Nexplanon removed, and items packed, the last thing I had to do was one of the things I wanted to do the least.

The pictures, framed and unframed, developed and Polaroid, were taken down from my walls. I was obsessed with photos more than anything else. Not in the realm of photography, but in the realm of memory. It was precious, and the value of my pictures now reached an innumerable length, for it would connect my worlds when I alone could not.

I had photos from everything and with everyone. Sports, work, parties; candid, posed, blurred; cities, villages, ruins; mountains, deserts, beaches; family, friends, strangers. They all meant something. They would always mean something.
Since I planned on taking as little plastic as possible back, I slipped all the photos from my entire shelf of albums and carefully packed them all in parchment. Out of everything I was taking, these were the most precious. I was going to show Fili and Bilbo and Thorin and everyone glimpses of life here, of my life here. Though they could never meet my family, they could see what they looked like. Though they could never understand the cities I described, they could see sprawling buildings reaching high into the heavens. Though they could never know my world, they could see its captured moments.

I went to my parent’s house when nobody was home and swiped some pictures in my mama’s albums. They were mainly the ones of Luis, Elena, and me as children. In some photos, we were with our parents. In others, we were with each other. Rarely were we ever by ourselves. I was…I was glad that it was me that would be by myself. That they’d have each other.

Still. It hurt a lot.

It was easy to put on a smile, though, when I spent my last few days with my family. Elena, Mom, and I got our nails done, and afterward we met up with Dad to go to the ice cream shop Luis worked at. A day later, Mom and I went and got massages together, then went and got ice cream again. In the evening, Luis, Dad, and I went and threw a ball at the nearby park. It ended with Dad pulling a calf muscle and crying around on the grass while Luis and I laughed at him and his exaggerated pain. When we got back and he laid himself up on the couch, Mom kept flicking his injured muscle and giggling when he jumped around from it. Nobody else knew, but Luis and I also went and got tiny little matching tattoos around our pinkie fingers. The day after, the last day, we had a barbecue, and the freshly grilled jalapenos went well with my vegetarian mix of cauliflowers, avocados, cilantro, and bell peppers. Everyone else had steak and chicken. I was almost tempted to take a bite just because it smelled so good, but I already had a whoopsie with those tamales, so I couldn’t bring myself to do it.

In the midst of it all, with our family in the kitchen, baseball playing on the tv, food on the table, and the sun setting through the window, I could almost forget that I’d be leaving, soon. Leaving them.

I stayed at the house late into the night. When Elena went home, and mom and dad went to bed, Luis and I watched Coco together in the basement. A big bowl of popcorn sat between us, making our fingers buttery and our mouths salty. Luis fell asleep halfway through the movie. It was for the best; he didn’t see me sob into the blanket while I listened to our music, our language, our people.

Once the credits began rolling, they told me my time was up.

In the dim basement lit only by the slim, white font of the credits, I sat there for a few moments. The blanket kept me warm, and Luis was curled up against the arm of the couch. I breathed out slowly, softly, like all the other breaths I had taken right before the life within me flickered out. The gentle, heated air from the vents pressed kisses upon my wet cheeks.

An old kind of sorrow began to wrap around my bones, and I would come to learn that it never left. I could only carry it, on and on, through and through, until death claimed a final, sweet victory over me. But even if I had the choice, I would not let it go. Because in that sorrow was memory and love.

They could not exist without sorrow, and sorrow could not exist without them.

I shifted the blankets off of me and stood up. Luis didn’t stir. I came over to him and crouched down, a hand resting on his thick head of black hair. My hair. Though it had to have been my imagination, the droplet warmed for a moment.
“Te amo, Lui,” I whispered, then pressed a kiss to his temple containing all the love I could muster within the barest of touches. “Te amo. Te amo. Te amo.”

He slept, and I departed.

The sunlight came as if it knew my reluctance. Gray, early morning clouds masked the dawn. They were the color of the lady who wept, who bore the same shroud that veiled my own eyes.

My bedroom was emptied. All the clothes I wanted to give Elena were stacked neatly on the dresser. The rest I wasn’t going to take with me had been donated. My bedsheets, comforters, blankets, and pillows had been left in Remy’s room; the only blanket I packed away was my Denver Broncos one.

I ate my last meal on Earth, Special K, while my laptop played old videos that I recorded on my phone. They were mostly saved Snapchats and Instagram stories, and I focused on clips of Luis’ baseball games, and eight seconds of Elena’s and my laugh-screaming at something only funny to us. I also watched recordings of Thailand, China, Mexico, and other countries, with people that had hearts bigger than me, and children who had more light within them than the droplet in my hand.

When I finished, I shut down my laptop and left it on the counter. Then I showered and got dressed into a fresh pair of exercise leggings, much like the ones that I wore when I first tumbled down that grassy hill in another world. A broken-in, black sports bra and a soft white t-shirt came next, followed by a yellow, red, green, and black jerga hoodie. I put on my new black Adidas shoes.

I waited for my hair to dry naturally. Once it dried, I told myself I would go.

The sun continued to rise. I shuffled around the apartment like a spirit ready to depart but reluctant to leave.

I laid my blades out on the table, alongside the quartz and single coin that I salvaged from my coat pockets. As much as I loved my weapons, I decided to leave them here as guardians.

“Watch over him. All of them,” I said, voice ghosting across the elven metal like a rune being engraved. I silently sheathed the blade I spoke to and then made sure that the folded note was visible beside the weapons and trinkets.

On a college-rule notebook page, in my handwriting, was:

Lui

*They’re all yours. They served me well.*

*And the car is yours.*

*I love all of you. I’ll be safe.*

With my bank account closed, I left the remaining couple thousand dollars in an envelope. I’d let them decide who should get what.

And that was…that was all, wasn’t it?

The crashing came quietly, softly. I stood alone, fingers threading through my dry hair. I did not shake.
And suffer so I shall.

It would lead me back to love.

But fuck, man. *Fuck.*

I gathered my big backpack, small backpack, and four overloaded duffel bags. Within the small backpack, which was little more than the size of a satchel, rested my abuelita’s wooden cross and my Instax Square camera. I’d run out of film, but at least I could get a few pictures there. They’d matter.

Just like my running partner told me, I made my way out to the backyard. Off my bagged shit weighed me down, and I hoped that it’d all carry over with me. That’d fucking suck if it was left abandoned on some semi-green, weed-spotted grass. But I supposed that it would leave an even bigger mystery around my disappearance, too. Perhaps I’d get my own segment on *Dateline.*

The morning was cool, and I breathed in the air deeply, trying to imprint the feeling of Earth’s oxygen in my lungs. Would I ever taste it again? Be here again?

I hoped so. If this was the last, though, I…

Well. I wouldn’t extinguish that hope.

Breathing again, I tilted my head back and gazed up at the pale blue, spring sky. It was clear. I quietly whimpered, and my chest constricted.

It was time to go.


The droplet burned bright. I closed my eyes. I thought of my family, my families—

Then there was nothing but an empty backyard, and a fading winter breeze that smelled of a lonely mountain in the North.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, it’s a pretty short chapter, but y’all KNOW things are about to pick back up again in the next chapter. I really hope to get it updated soon, but I can’t promise anything. School and work, work and school, you know how it goes.

Thanks for reading
Uncle Bilbo scurried around the smial, muttering and huffing to himself about all order of things, from the way the pictures hanged too crookedly to the bouquet of fresh flowers picked this morning by Hamfast Gamgee not standing right in their vase. Uncle Bilbo had on his nicest vest; it was a forest green with gold, embroidered flowers delicately climbing up it. The vest’s brass buttons shone bright each time he crossed by a window.

His trousers and white tunic had been freshly pressed, and though his kerchief was perfectly knotted around his neck and tucked into the collar of his tunic, he kept complaining about its crookedness. Each time Uncle Bilbo passed a mirror, he had to stop and readjust the kerchief, though it largely remained in the same position after half a minute of fussing.

The kettle had been set, and the scones were fresh out of the oven. Uncle Bilbo laid them in a basket lined with white cloth. He tutted over the placement of the butter knife next to the tray of butter and jam for quite some time. Neither did he care for the bed linens in the two guest bedrooms because they had one-too-many creases in them, the blankets were uneven, and the pillows were too lumpy.

But for all of Uncle Bilbo’s brow furrowing, hand wringing, and nervous shuffling, when three quick knocks on the door echoed through the smial, he leapt up, beaming. “Come, come!” he said eagerly. All worry vanished from him, and he appeared exceptionally joyous. “We have a visitor!”

Uncle Bilbo adjusted his kerchief one last time, straightened his back, and cleared his throat. Then he promptly turned the doorknob and opened the door. The bright light of the summer sun flooded the entrance, and it was made all the cheerier as Uncle Bilbo’s and a woman’s laughter filled the hobbit’s home.

“Baggins!” the woman cried. “What is up?”

“You did not have to travel so far, my dear!” he attempted to chastise, but his grin betrayed him. “Not in your condition!”

“What do you mean?” she gasped. “Baggins, are you insinuating something about my weight?”

“I well—no—” He tried to frown and wagged a finger at her, eyes narrowed. A dry laugh escaped past his lips, and soon he was back to grinning. “Oh, you are simply awful! And why are you still standing at the entrance like a stranger? Come in!”

The woman came fully through the threshold, the sun against her back. She was one of the Big People, and she wore a pale blue dress with strangely short, loose sleeves that ended midway on her brown upper arms. A simple leather belt wrapped around her waist, cinching the dress just above her swollen belly. Her hair, a dark, shining gray color, was bound up in a prettily braided bun.

Behind the woman was an older boy. He looked similar to her, and he wore comfortable but fine clothes. His shoulder-length black hair had been pulled back from his kind and keen face. Clinging to the boy’s leg was a smaller girl of similar countenance. Her dress was the color of sunflowers.

“Where is he?” the woman inquired, looking about the smial. Uncle Bilbo jumped, realizing that
he was alone in the entryway.

“Oh—where is he indeed! Frodo!” Uncle Bilbo’s gaze landed on his young nephew half-hiding around the corner, and he gestured for him to come forward. “I want you to meet one of my dearest friends! She came all the way from the Lonely Mountain to see you.”

The woman smiled at Frodo, and it was a smile of warmth and love.

It was the smile of a mother.

Tentatively, Frodo walked forward. The woman lifted her dress so she could crouch down on a knee, despite her large, pregnant stomach. “Hello,” she spoke, voice like warm syrup. “You must be Frodo.”

The young hobbit nodded once, his dark curls bobbing up and down.

Her smile grew. She gently pulled him into a hug as though she already knew him. Frodo squeezed his eyes shut and clung to her, unable to stop himself from imagining that it was his mother in her stead.

“It’s so very nice to meet you, Frodo. My name is Valeria.”

Snowflakes drifted from the winter sky.

I breathed in a different kind of air, one that was sharp and cold. My eyes fluttered open, and I saw the Lonely Mountain standing in the distance. Dwarven banners swayed at the gaping entrance, which still hadn’t been completely repaired from Smaug’s destruction. It had, however, improved.

When I glanced back, I saw Dale. It, too, had flags posted on towers and at gates.

The River Running steadily flowed not far from where I stood, muted by the thick sheet of ice covering it. Not far from the river was the pool of frozen water that Azog and I had crashed into. I glanced up and saw that I stood close to the both the shadow of the towering waterfall and Ravenhill.

A shudder ran through me. I didn’t like being reminded of my departure. It brought back the echoing thrum of new scars.
So I looked back to the Lonely Mountain, and I thought of all those who awaited for me. Shit, they must have thought that I was dead—or that I was gone, and I wasn’t coming back.

Fili was in that mountain, safe and alive. All of them.

I grinned and let out a soft laugh. Holy shit. I came back.

In spite of the sadness that still gnawed at my bones, I was...I was happy.

Shifting the asston of stuff weighing me down like a sack of bricks, I began shuffling forward to the Lonely Mountain, to home.

“You decided to come back, then,” a voice called, and if it hadn’t been for the extra baggage, I would have leapt into the air.

I spun back around as quickly as I could in my overburdened state. Where—who?

A dwarf that had not been there a second ago now crouched on the ground, his back to me. His fingers pinched at the frozen earth, and he put what little he had picked up into a small pouch on his waist.

The droplet pulsed gently in recognition.

He stood slowly and turned to me. My throat went dry.

The dwarf was dressed in simple clothes, his skin tan and arms peppered with the same scars that Thorin had—scars from working in a blacksmith’s forge, where sparks and searing debris constantly came into creation.

His onyx black hair was pulled back into a half-bun, and his eyes, the color of forge-fire and hot steel, burned into me. The dwarf’s beard had small, silver-and-gold-beaded braids that shone like jewels intertwined throughout it, stopping just above his chest.

He smiled, and though it was caring, I still wanted to shrink back.

It did not take much to realize that I was in the presence of a celestial being.

Mahal came forward, wry amusement in his unrelenting gaze. “I must confess, I was surprised when I heard that you had made the decision to return to Arda. It could not have been a simple one.”

I gave my head one slow shake. My heart thrummed.

“And yet here you stand!” His voice was rich and full, but it sounded like it walked the line between humor and wrath, and it couldn’t quite decide which tone to take. “And here you stand, Valeria Juarez, alive and prepared to distort even more of the song that was sung before time itself had been born.”

When I remained silent, Mahal raised a thick, black brow. “Well? What do you say for yourself?”

“If—” I blurted, “If you really were mad about me messing things up, then you would have stopped me a long time ago. Or you would have kept things the same, no matter what I did.”

“Ah, and who is to say that I am not furious? That I shall not strike you down right now for being a willful pebble that knowingly started an avalanche?”
I would have started crying, but I knew that dry, dwarven humor by heart, now.

“I think you like me,” I said back, and holy shit was I actually saying this to one of the Valar?

“Oh? And why should I like an irksome human who has no business in this world?”

“Because I love a dwarf,” I replied. There was passion in my simple words. “Because I love this world, and so I made it my business. Because I’ve died for your dwarves, and I’ll die again and again for all of them if I have to. I’ve wrecked a bunch of shit, I know, but I don’t…” My voice faltered for a second, then it picked back up. I stood within the searing heat of Mahal’s gaze with the heat of a forge in my blood.

“I don’t regret any of it.”

A smile cracked Mahal’s impenetrable expression. I caught the scent of metal and leather and stone. “Good.”

He glanced up at the sky as if proving a point to people I could not see. “You have changed the song, and you will continue to do so. Tossing yourself over this waterfall with the Defiler while the Sons of Durin watched etched their fate into permanency. You ruined a few prophecies doing that.”

I shrugged as best I could with my baggage. “Prophecies just get in the way and, uh, make everyone do dumb things. I don’t really feel bad about that.”

Mahal let out a hearty laugh, and I found myself smiling, too. Should I be joking around with one of the fucking Valar? I didn’t know! Everything went shit-sideways a lot faster than I expected it to.

“Careful, now! I doubt you wish to finally be struck down by those of us who weave these prophecies.” But his eyes twinkled like merry embers in a fire. An instant later, they transitioned into soothing but stern gems. “You saved my children, Valeria Juarez, and faced fire and void to do so. You will carry on the pride of the dwarves, and you will stay them from their stubborn faults. And for that, I thank you.”

“Is that a prophecy?” I asked, head tilting. His smile broadened, and I thought of my dad.

“Merely hope for the future.” He began nearing me once more, and I realized that though he took the form of a dwarf, he was as tall as I was. Or perhaps he was taller, or perhaps I was incredibly small, like a mouse against a mountain. Mahal’s immense gaze softened. He took my left hand in his calloused palm and placed a thumb over the droplet while the rest of his fingers laid themselves upon my cold ones. “Darkness has touched you, and it will come upon this land once more.” The earth faintly shuddered, and for the first time, I heard the wrath in Mahal’s voice more fully. It scared me. Then, in the next sentence, it had calmed again. “Do not forget who has chosen you to carry this light to fight it. And do not forget your strength, for it rivals even the might of the dwarves.

“I must depart. This world encloses upon you once more, and the mountain is eager to embrace you. But I could not leave without giving you a gift, lest I dare disappoint my beloved wife, who is joyful that you love the earth like she. Though it is small in comparison to the one you already bear, it will serve you well.”

Mahal kissed the center of my forehead, and for the briefest of moments, I felt as though I was as solid as the stone itself, as though I was as old as the earth that formed Arda. I smelled the wet rock of the Misty Mountains, the dry basalt of Rohan, the cold granite of Gondor, the sandstone of Rhûn
—all at once, I was part of it, part of everything—

And then it was gone. Mahal withdrew, smiling. I gasped, trying to cling to the sense of being, but it was too great to hold. Maybe that was for the best.

I bounced back and quickly scrambled to unzip one of my duffel bags. “Wait—wait.” I rummaged through my assortment of food and drink (mainly alcohol) and undid the knotted cloth that held a bundle of pink conchas in it. I had two other bundles for sharing and eating, but I wasn’t about to say goodbye to a fucking Valar without giving him a gift in return. “Here. It’s food from my home.”

A look of sincere amusement crossed Mahal’s face, though it mixed with something deeper that I couldn’t place. He gingerly took the concha, and once it was gone from his hand, I gave him another. “For your—for your wife.”

Then, at the last second, I frantically dug back down and found the small mason jar labeled: habanero seeds. Before I left, I thought about bringing ghost pepper or Carolina reaper seeds, but I didn’t want to bring yet another scourge upon Middle-Earth. So habanero would have to do.

I unscrewed the mason jar and plucked out a couple of seeds. Mahal let me place them in his other hand that wasn’t holding the conchas. “She might…uh, she might have them already, but they’re pretty hot peppers. Might make for a pretty spicy meal. If you guys eat.”

His smile had turned merry once more, and his voice was like molten gold. “I do not doubt that she will love them. Thank you, Valeria Juarez, for your kindness. Farewell.”

I caught one last glimpse of Mahal before the heat of a furnace made me squeeze my eyes shut—

When I opened them again, he was gone.

I looked around disbelievingly. That just…did that…wait…holy… “Uh, what?” I whispered. “What?”

It took a little while to recompose myself. I mean, man, I had traveled back and forth between worlds, fought a dragon, ditched the Dark Lord, and found a tv in the middle of Mirkwood, but apparently, the crazy shit I experienced had to outdo the last.

Oh hey, Thorin! Good to see ya! Guess what? I saw your god and I gave him some fucking conchas! Do you wanna try some too?

Just like I always did when things got too damn crazy for me to comprehend, I started laughing. “Fuck me,” I wheezed as I began shuffling to the Lonely Mountain. “Fuck-a me.”

But, if anything, being in Middle-Earth has taught me how to roll with weird shit. And besides, I waited too long to see the faces I loved.

I trudged along and tried to remind myself that I brought a shitload of stuff for a reason. It didn’t make for a grand return because I looked like a human pack animal. So, when I finally crossed the couple miles between the base of the waterfall and the Lonely Mountain, I ungraciously but gently dropped everything from my shoulders and back and stared up at the entrance to the fortress.

The two dwarves stationed on the lowest-hanging balcony stared down at me from their post. They were dressed in armor, and neither were any members of the Company.
“And what business do ye have with the Kingdom of Erebor?” one of the dwarves shouted down. I smiled back up at them. That was the same balcony I’d been killed on, wasn’t it?

“I, uh, was hoping somebody could come down and help me get all my stuff inside? I’ve traveled a long way,” I called. “And could you tell Thorin that I’m here? Or Fili?”

“You dare address His Majesty and the Prince by such improper titles—”

I lifted my hand up and let power flow into the droplet. It glowed enough to shine light like a starlit torch amidst the winter day.

The dwarves fell into an awestruck silence. “Please? I think they’ll want to see me.”

They moved so fast that they nearly slammed into each other as they both turned to run into the mountain. I laughed while I watched them disappear. My jerga hoodie wasn’t doing so great against the cold elements, and I wanted to get inside, soon, or be wrapped up in an embrace that’d keep me warm.

For what seemed like an eternity, I stood there, a solitary woman facing a solitary mountain.

“Does it feel better?” I asked it. “Not having a dumb dragon inside you? Having the king of carven stone come unto his own?”

It did not reply, but I smiled, anyway.

The faint sound of familiar running footsteps grew louder, and louder, until it was a thunder that I remembered well. They were the same sprinting feet that ran from orcs outside of Rivendell, that ran from goblins in the Misty Mountains, that ran from an elven prison cell—well, okay, there had always been a lot of running from involved.

This time, though, they were running to.

Fili emerged from the entrance first, with Thorin, Kili, and Bilbo in tow. The rest of the Company flocked behind them, even Gandalf, whose eyes twinkled with mirthful shock.

My chest suddenly seized, and I beamed. It was them. It was them.

They came to a stop several feet away from me, as if they could not believe I stood before them, just how they could not believe I stood before them in Beorn’s home so long ago.

I locked tearful eyes with Fili and only Fili, and I did a little run-in-place with a grin only a moment away from turning into a sob. “Orcs can’t put me down. Too fast.”

The world burst into the light of laughter and joy. I found myself living in Fili’s arms, my feet off the ground and legs wrapped around his waist, and my face buried into his shoulder. His fingers twined themselves through my loose black hair, and he held me tight to him that went beyond our physical forms.

“My Ria,” he whispered hoarsely in my ear. I never thought a voice could taste so sweet, like honey in my heart. “My Ria. Amrâlimê.”

I let out happy, weepy whine and started crying. My vise constricted, but Fili and I were able to pull back just enough to find each other’s lips, and I nearly died again. My hand moved to cup his bearded cheek, and when I opened my bleary eyes, I was met with gold flecks amidst a tapestry of blue.
“So I’m back,” I whispered through a tear-stained smile.

“Aye,” Fili managed to choke out. He tucked my hair behind an ear. “And shall you be staying?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I will.”

Fili gave me one more kiss before reluctantly setting me down. I had barely a moment to breathe before I was swept up again in the arms of the Company.

“Couldn’t give up on us dwarves, eh?” Gloin boomed.

“I think this is the longest record yet!” Bofur shouted. “Nearly forgot ‘bout you, we did!”

“Nothing could ever be more untrue!” Ori retorted.

“Did ye have a good nap while the rest of us worked ourselves to the bone, lass?” Dwalin barked.

“You must be hungry!” Balin remarked. “Bombur will cook up something special for you!”

“Indeed, I will!” Bombur nodded.

“Valeria! I finished the poem!” Kili exclaimed. “I think its power called you back!”

Within the celebration, I managed to find Bilbo smashed between all the dwarves and hefted him up into a hug. “Hey, Baggins,” I whispered, and by now my cheeks hurt from grinning so much.

He didn’t hide his sobbing laughter. “Hullo, Valeria.”

We embraced for some time, and when I eventually let go of him, he stared up at me and pointed a finger. The skin around his eyes were red from both tears and using a handkerchief to dab away the tears. “I shall—I shall have you know that I did not give up hope for one moment. None of us did.”

I stared at all of them, my shining, beloved Company. None of them had been spared from weeping, including Gandalf. I settled on Thorin, who had not shed any tears, but his Durin blue eyes glistened in the pale winter sunlight.

“And you?” I asked him somberly, softly. “Did you not give up hope?”

“No,” he gravely replied, and my forgiveness toward him renewed tenfold. “I did not.”

Memories of battle resurfaced, and my smile twisted into a half-grimace. I surged forward and hugged him, uncaring of title or decorum. Neither did Thorin, for he let out a shudder when our arms enveloped each other. What words that could have been spoken were left unsaid for the time being, since there was nothing to truly say. Not when we were this happy.

With a chuckle, I let go and scrubbed at my eyes with the back of my scratchy jerga sleeve. “Oh, uh,” I throatily said, “I kinda didn’t exactly die. I just went back home. Which is why—which is why I’ve got all that stuff.” I pointed back at the momentarily forgotten bags and packs. “Because I brought gifts! And food! And booze! And a whole bunch of other things!”

The mention of booze got a raucous response from most of the Company, but Kili’s boyish grin faltered first as a realization came upon him. “You…you went home?” he repeated. I gave a nod, trying to ignore the pang of homesickness that wanted to mar my delight. “And you came back to us?”

After a moment of silence, I just shrugged and said with smile turned bittersweet, “Why wouldn’t
Gandalf’s low rumble of laughter was enough to keep the Company from falling into a kind of despair I didn’t want. “My dear Valeria,” he said, “you truly are wonderful.”

The smile went back to its full strength. “Thanks, G.”

I clapped my hands. “Let’s get inside! I’ve got so much to show all of you! And it’s fucking freezing out here!”

“Aye, the lass is right!” said Dwalin. “We cannae have a proper outside the mountain!”

With some direction on how to pick up my bags and what to be extra careful with, the Company started to make their way back into the Lonely Mountain. Before I got myself swept up by Fili again, I managed to catch Gandalf alone while we started walking back. Not only did I give him another hug, but I quietly said, “Hey, G, I, um…so a few freaky things happened.”

“Oh? You speak as though such occurrences are irregular for you.”

I scoffed, and Gandalf chuckled. “Yeah, yeah, whatever. But really. I, um, well, okay. So…” I touched the droplet in my palm. “I know who gave this to me, now. I didn’t meet her, but I did meet the person who sent me here.”

Although Gandalf’s gaze sharpened, he did not have any other reaction. “And?”

“She was nice, I guess. Gave me the option to come back.” I sighed and lowered my voice more. “I…I also saw…the other lady whom you serve.”

This time, Gandalf did slow to a stop. He leaned on his staff and peered down at me, intrigued and serious. I reached out and took a piece of his loose gray robe between my thumb and forefinger and focused my gaze on it. “The one who, who wore a gray hood. Same color as this. I saw her in a dream. Maybe more. She was…she was with me, I think, in my saddest moments. Across worlds.”

I let my hand drop and looked up back up at the wizard. He was no longer just Gandalf; he was the name he had come West with, the student that she had taught. He was not simply a meddling wizard; he was a disciple of the higher forces that created this world, who cared for it so much because of the many ways the Weeping Lady taught him compassion.

Gandalf patted my head, and there was love in his touch. It was such a simple thing for him, wasn’t it? Loving those who suffered.

“Have you consorted with any other Valar, might I ask?” he inquired, bushy brows raising. I abruptly smirked, and his brows shot back down.

“Just one, just one,” I said placatingly. Gandalf huffed, and we began walking again to catch up with the rest. “Right when I returned here, I had a nice chat with Mahal. He basically said I was the best thing to ever happen to Middle-Earth.”

“Is that right?”

“Well—the best thing to happen to the dwarves.”

“Really?”

“Fine—a good thing. How about that?”
He laughed again, which caused me to do the same thing. “It seems you are quite popular, Valeria.” Gandalf gave me a knowing side-eye, and his humor faded halfway. “Their attention does not always bode well for those who garner it.”

I found Fili a little way ahead. He had enough decency to let me talk to Gandalf in private, but he kept checking over his shoulder to see if we were done. When he saw me staring, he grinned. Even Bilbo showed impatience at our dallying. “Hurry along now, Valeria, Gandalf!” he called promptly.

“We’re coming!” I hollered, then dropped my voice to continue. “And I don’t doubt it. Guess I’ll have to be on my best behavior for the rest of my life here, huh?”

It was Gandalf’s turn to smirk. “I would not set expectations you cannot meet.”

I gasped. “G! Whoa! Rude!”

He found himself pretty funny, so I gave him a light, parting smack on the arm and trotted forward to rejoin Fili. He took my hand a pressed a kiss to the knuckles. “News of your return will spread to Dale and Mirkwood within hours. I suspect you should prepare yourself for prolonged festivities.”

“That’s okay,” I said. “I’ll be happy to see everyone again.”

“And…” Fili swallowed. We passed into the mountain, and I was welcomed with the roaring cheers of hundreds of dwarves. It stunned me, but I waved to all of them as we walked through. Thorin ordered who were most likely servants to begin cooking and setting up his private dining chamber. The whole mountain had been sent into a tizzy, and a buzz echoed through its cavernous halls.

“And what?” I managed to repeat over the noise.

Fili had gone red in the cheeks. “Concerning festivities,” he went on brusquely, “there may be more to come, if you so choose.”

“I mean, I’ll probably be good after this…”

I trailed off as a new awareness set in. Fili cleared his throat. “Yes, I assumed you would be. But, if it pleases you, there would be festivities due to an, er, engagement of sort.”

Flowers bloomed in my stomach.

“What kind of engagement?” I drawled, unable to stop myself from being a little shit. Fili heard it in my voice, too, and he huffed, but there was a fond smile to it.

“Mahal, woman, ours. Or shall I drag this conversation out into next week?”

“I think if you did that, then somebody else would have just done it for you,” I answered cheekily. It hardly took a look around to notice that every single member of the Company shot us not-so-sneaky glances while we passed through the rest of the crowd.

“They would not let me live it down, either,” Fili muttered as he shot glares at those who got caught peeking into our moment. Then his voice turned gentle, expectant. “But…what shall it be, Lady Valeria?”

I puffed my cheeks out and blew a long breath. “I mean, since you couldn’t wait until we were alone to ask, you must be pretty desperate for an answer.” The flowers in my stomach bloomed
more, and they released something into my blood that made me tremble with excitement. Before Fili could come up with a retort, I had already turned my head to him and said, “I made my decision a long time ago, cariño. It always was and always will be yes.”

He let out a sputtering, relieved laugh, and he moved his arm so it linked with mine more formally than our hand-holding. “Good. I am…I am glad.” In turn, I bit back a stupidly wide grin.

The mountain’s illumination surrounded us, its braziers gleaming like white-and-gold gems. All this pain, all this loss, all this grief, it had led me back here, into Erebor restored, which no longer bore the foul stench of dragon, but the vigor of a kingdom.

It led me back to Fili.

When we made it to Thorin’s private dining chamber—a spacious but not luxurious place with a long table meant to sit a Company-sized group—Fili was called to Thorin’s side. With him away, I immediately scurried to Bilbo’s side.

“Hey, Baggins.” I put a hand on his shoulder to get his attention.

“Yes?” He gave me an all-too-pleasant reaction as if he was trying to hide more prominent emotions. Poorly.

So he already knew. Hobbits and their nosey-nosiness, man. It was like a superpower.

Still, I slyly arched an eyebrow. Was I glowing? I had to be glowing, and not in the droplet’s way, either.

“How long are you going to be staying?”

Chapter End Notes

My dudes, once I started typing this, I legit couldn't stop. I've been SO EXCITED to write all of this. A glimpse into the future? A nice chat with a Valar? An engagement??? It was too much to contain, so here it is, two days after I posted the last chapter
The Easterling

Chapter Notes

The Easterling

The Company gathered around the piles of photographs, passing them around and being careful not to get any food on them (which I had never seen them do with anything else, so that was new). They leaned and squinted and laughed and wept over all the photos. They saw me as a soot-streaked firefighter, a hair-frazzled volunteer, a sweat-gleamed teacher. They saw me with my family, with friends, with children. They saw more and more, and I had to explain in a raised voice about what each picture depicted. It didn’t help that I cracked out the booze.

“Oliphaunts? You—you’re riding an oliphaunt, Valeria!” Bilbo squawked out the happiest laugh I’ve ever heard.

“Elephant. They’re a little smaller.”

“What’s all this getup?” Gloin waved the photo around.

“Firefighting gear. Keeps us protected from some of the heat.”

“Mahal! That’s a lot of children!” Dwalin crowed. “And you all look like you’re sick!”

“It’s a class of children. I had another teacher helping me. That girl right there—yeah, we taught them English together in Thailand. Thailand’s hot, so that’s why we’re all sweaty.”

“Is this you as a babe?” Fili inquired, leaning in to shove a photo in my face.

“Ha! Yeah, that’s me, and that little demon with cake on her face in the background wearing the Elmo sweater is Elena.”

“Ria! Ria! What are these clothes you wear?” Kili shoved another photo in my face.

“Uh, my karate—no, taekwondo clothes. You wear them when you practice the techniques. By the way, when can I kick your ass again? And when is Tauriel going to come?”

Between all the explanations and laughter and eating, I also got filled in on some of the highlights during the battle. While Fili, Kili, Tauriel, and I were fucking around on Ravenhill, a few interesting things happened in Dale. Thorin, for one, saved Legolas right in front of Thranduil’s eyes, Bilbo jumped off a building and did a kill-shot with Sting to a troll’s head, Bard and his men shot down an entire squadron of orcs within the span of three seconds, the Ironhill dwarves completely demolished a pack of wargs, and the Mirkwood elves took the brunt of the bloody downpour from when that one were-worm bit off the head of the other.

Which brought us to the Easterlings.

Most of the forces had returned home, but a small bulk stayed. They waited for me, most likely. Their leader, a woman named Amelie who had the fury of a star in her own palm, was with them. Thorin sent word that I had returned, and we would convene at her camp tomorrow afternoon. Not terrifying at all. This lady who was probably over a hundred years old wanted to see me!

Luckily, I had great distractions. Bilbo almost fainted when he saw how many books I brought, and Fili told me that the books meant for his mother would undoubtedly make her love me. There
was talk of wedding arrangements—which Dis had to approve of before the king himself could, though he gave his full support. Gandalf examined the old wooden cross with deep intrigue. Bombur had to meticulously smell all the spices in their jars and comment on which ones he was most excited to taste.

The rest of the night whirled around in a blissful blur. I would have thought it was a dream, had it not been for Fili’s hand in mine, or the pungent smell of tobacco smoke, or the soup and alcohol warming my insides.

And then, somehow, when all the partying was over, I found myself in the same bed as Fili, our bodies tangled and hot. We pressed searing kisses wherever we could, and we were both giggling, whispering, moaning. The mountain had been sanctified anew, and we no longer had the dark seed of worry in the back of our minds about the future. We were together, and we were unburdened. All that mattered was Fili’s touch, Fili’s love.

Afterward, we lay there, rememorizing each other’s faces in the firelight, smiling, confessing tiny truths until the weight of the day finally carried us off into sleep.

- 

I awoke with Fili’s tan arm wrapped loosely around my waist. His soft snores tickled the base of my neck that he pressed his forehead to. Though the fire in the hearth had almost completely vanished, I saw rather well. The shading was off; I’d been submerged into an ocean of gray. Hm.

Fili felt me stirring and woke himself up. He pressed lazy kisses to my bare skin, and his hand sleepily ran up and down the side of my waist. It snaked under the loose t-shirt I had thrown on and found a breast to cup. “Did you sleep well?” he murmured, voice groggy and deep.

“Yes,” I chuckled. “What little sleep I did get was nice. And get yo hand off my titty. We got stuff to do today!”

I rolled away from Fili, stretched, and sat up. “Mahal, you really cannot relax, can you?” he asked, half-laughing.

“You just wanna have more sex,” I replied. Fili loudly scoffed.

“Me, my lady? Do you think I do not have the power to refrain from such urges?”

I shrugged and started digging around in one of my messy duffel bags. I pulled out jars of shampoo, conditioner, and soap, and headed for the bathroom. “I mean, yeah. But if you really don’t, then you won’t mind if I take a bath by myself?”

Fili grumbled but flung the furs off himself. I laughed at him and quickly felt his hand pinch my bare butt. “Alas, but you are too irresistible.”

“Alas, but I am!” I echoed.

We got frisky another time in the bath, so that slowed getting ready down a bit, but at least it made us bright-eyed when we wandered into the same private dining hall from last night. It seemed that this was where the Company usually hung out, anyway. Bombur had the right idea to start breakfast, and when we arrived, about half of them were seated at the large table.

“Ria! Brother! You two are simply...glowing,” Kili remarked with a cheeky bite of his biscuit.

“Thank you, Kili,” I said. “I’m sure one day you and Tauriel will have the same glow.”
His grin dropped, and Fili and those who heard me guffawed. I patted his head as I passed and plopped down beside Bilbo, who already had a book propped up in one hand and a spoonful of oatmeal in the other. “Enjoying it?” I asked him. I leaned over and saw the title. *The Princess Bride.*

“Oh. Mm—yes. Very much so,” he said, managing to give me a quick, cheerful glance and a nod before returning to the page.

“Look what you have wrought, Ria,” Fili said. He dished the both of us up some breakfast. “For all of Master Boggins’ worrying over your return, this next morning he has entirely forgotten your presence!”

Bilbo put down the book and leaned over to give Fili a terse look. “I have not.” To back up his point, Bilbo directly faced me and gave a small but direct bow. “Valeria. Good morning. I am happy to see that last night was not simply some fanciful dream of my own imagination!” For extra effect, Bilbo hopped up on his chair and gave me a peck on the cheek. I then locked my arm around his neck so he couldn’t escape when I gave him a slobbery kiss back on the forehead. Bilbo squawked and only escaped after I let him.

“It’s alright, go ahead and read,” I laughed. “That’s why I brought them!”

“Ye mind if my bairn Gimli takes a look at some of these books?” Gloin said. “He has a smart mind—”

“Aye, smarter than yours!” Bofur interrupted. “Gets it from his mother!”

Gloin ignored Bofur, as most of us did when we didn’t want to waste the energy to glare at him. “—And I think he’ll take a liking to some of them.”

I tried to hide the deeper emotion that surged up at the mention of Gimli’s name. Everything, everything I had researched, studied, memorized—it involved my friend’s son. Gloin’s son, who was still just a boy. Eventually, he’d be old enough to embark on a journey that would set this world into a new age. Before then, everything would be so, so dark, but he was still just a boy, and hadn’t we just gotten through this veil of darkness? Why did there need to be another one so soon? One that’d infect this whole land? He was still a boy.

Gloin’s expression suddenly fell, as did the noise at the table.

Fili rested a tender hand on my shoulder. I wiped away the tears that suddenly began streaking down my freshly-washed cheeks. “Oh, man, sorry,” I weakly chuckled. “I—wow, I guess I’m still raw. But yes. Of course he’d be able to read as much as he wants.”

“Better eat, lass,” Dwalin spoke, voice pretending to be gruff and coarse toward my state. “It’ll make you feel better.”

I nodded and started putting food on a plate. Conversation returned, somewhat forcefully, to its regular loud volume. I stuffed my face with bread and cheese and oatmeal, choking down food to quell the burning in my throat. Why’d I just completely lose it?

Because I was scared for the future here. Because I still missed home. Because thinking of Gimli inadvertently made me think of Luis, who, by now, may have gone into my empty apartment and found nothing but inexplicable swords, trinkets, and a letter. Then he would have called my parents and Elena, and they all would have realized that I was really gone. They’d cry over me; either Elena or my mama will have tried to call my phone just to hear that the number was no longer
available, and they’d cry more. They could not reach me anymore than I could reach them. We were worlds away again, and this time, it had been my choice to create that distance.

By the time Thorin came to the dining hall, I had regained some composure and was in the middle of telling Fili what the new tattoo around my finger meant. He listened with focused, sincere attention. Just the sight of that made me start smiling again. We hadn’t discussed any formal wedding arrangements, yet; apparently that would wait until Dis arrived, which would not be for another week until the caravans from Ered Luin got here. Meaning, I had a week to stress over meeting a woman who could decide whether or not I could marry her son.

“Fili, Kili, Dwalin, Balin, Valeria—ready yourselves. We depart for the Easterling encampment within the hour,” Thorin said. I missed his way of naturally commanding, especially since I had learned the difference between being bossed by some fictional dwarf and being truly instructed by the leader I chose to follow.

I perked my head up and looked around. “And what about G? Shouldn’t he be coming?”

“The wizard had other business to attend to. He shall not be joining us.”

“Like what?”

“If I was privy to the affairs of a wizard, Valeria, I would most certainly provide you with an answer,” Thorin replied dryly.

“The Easterling’s chief has not provided us with an explanation as to how she possesses the same power as you,” Dwalin said, nodding toward the hand which currently had a half-eaten hunk of bread in it. “Perhaps we shall receive an answer today.”

I frowned and went silent. My brain tried retracing its steps through the course of my entire time here and every mention of Amelie. The frown deepened. Had I really…no…wait? Wait. I must have, somewhere…wait. No. Nope.

“Please, Ria,” Fili said lightly, propping his chin on a fist, “enlighten us with the reason for such fierce and tumultuous expressions.”

“I don’t think—ha! No, I never ever told you guys, did I?” I chuckled and jokingly winced. “So, uh, I’ve known for, like, a long-ass time that the Easterling chief, Amelie—the one who shot literal star-lightning out from her hand or wherever—is from the same place as I am. Earth.”

Thorin’s face went uncharacteristically flat while the rest of the dwarves went characteristically into uproar. My wince broadened. “How long have you known?” he asked me all-too quietly once the Company settled back down.

“Uh, since Beorn’s house?” When Bofur threw a piece of bread at me and the other dwarves cheered him on, I stood up and yelled, “What was I supposed to do? Say, ‘Hey, guys, I’m from another world! And guess what? So is this other girl who lives in the East! Has for over a hundred years! Cool, right?’ There was never a good time!” I paused, puffed out my cheeks, then quickly added, “Also I mostly forgot about ever mentioning it because there was some super crazy shit going on all at once!”

“Hold a moment, she has been alive for over a hundred years?” Fili asked, but his question was drowned out by more loud sentiments and me whacking flying food out of the air. Bilbo curled around the book in his care like it was a newborn infant and exclaimed for all this nonsense to cease immediately.
“Enough! Enough,” Thorin shouted, his voice rising over the rest. “It has been spoken. We shall enter into their camp with more knowledge as to why she has remained to meet Valeria.” He pierced me with his deep Durin blue gaze and lowly inquired, “Any other forgotten truths you wish to bring forth before we depart?”

I continued eating my bread. “Nope! Not right now! But I’ve got a shitload of stuff we still need to talk about when we have the time!”

He didn’t smile, so I grinned through the bread stuffed in my mouth.

-  

I rode up to the camp primarily outfitted in clothes from Middle-Earth and not my own, surprisingly. It was mostly due to the fact that we would be riding in the harsh winter temperatures; I needed thicker trousers, boots, and a coat. I did wear a thermal long-sleeved shirt underneath and wool socks, however, and I had my hair packed up in a bun and secured with a scrunchie.

The small satchel I had with me had a couple gifts in it.

We came over the Eastern hill that was the gateway to the Iron Hills. At one point, this seemed to be the edge of Middle-Earth itself. Aside from the dwarves, the rest of the land was filled with savage and strange people who pillaged their way through the history of the West.

Well, the same savage and strange people arguably saved a large bulk of the forces already positioned in Dale.

For being a “small bulk” of the remaining forces, the camp was still over a thousand. I made a small “oh” noise when I saw the rows and rows of pitched tents sprawling amidst the dry-brush, black-rock riddled land. Dots of men and horses roamed the speckled winter streets created by the tents. As soon as we began the downward descent on the other side of the hill, the same shrill horn I heard as the Easterlings charged into the battle blew twice in two short blasts. The routine of the camp remained relatively unchanged.

“Is it weird that I feel nervous?” I asked Fili, who rode beside me.

“’Weird,’ my lady? I myself have a rather large pit forming in my stomach. It is not unusual, however; it seems to sprout whenever we have meetings with the chief and her advisors.”

I smiled. “What does she look like?”

“Fierce. But not as fierce as you, I can confirm.”

“Is she old?”

“It is only in her eyes. The rest of her remains unaged.”

“She is not quite unlike you,” Kili commented, dropping in on the conversation.

“How?”

“Observant,” Dwalin said before Kili could blurt out whatever he had in mind. I was glad but a touch disappointed that I wouldn’t be able to immediately roast my soon-to-be brother-in-law. “And the lives of the innocent are forefront in her mind.”

didn’t brush up on français at all. Pero el español es mucho mejor. Mais…uh…il n’ya pas de wifi ici.”

“Yet another language?” Kili groaned. “Mahal, Valeria, how many are there where you come from? And do you speak all of them?”

“Uh, if I remember correctly, probably over six thousand languages.”

Dwalin lowly whistled. “That’s a lot.”

“And I speak about five. Eight—no, nine, if you count a handful of phrases that translate into, “Where is the bathroom? Sign these documents. It will be okay. Are you injured?” And, “I’m a volunteer.”

“What other languages?” Fili asked me, legit one of the true dudes to actually care about my abilities and interests. Guess that was one of the reasons why I loved him.

“English and Spanish at the forefront. Then, more loosely, Arabic, French, and Chinese. I know enough to understand basic questions and responses in Thai, Swahili, Turkish, and Greek.” I shrugged my shoulders. “Not that it matters in this world. Unless Amelie speaks one or more of those languages. In which case, we will have yet another thing to bond over.”

“Language can be powerful,” Thorin said. “It has a sacred place in this world.”

“Oh true. Or, should I say, vrai.”

The ground leveled out, and as we drew closer to the camp, the droplet warmed. I gripped the reins more tightly, and I felt my expression fall back into something cooler to make it look like I had some semblance of control and dignity. Snow started to lightly fall from the gray sky. I longed to see a sky that didn’t remind me of war and death, of bleeding out on frozen stone, of the grip of a hand on my throat. I wanted the sky to be blue and warm again. It would remind me of the days when we first started out on our quest, and the songs the dwarves sang were loud, and the streams were cold, but the rocks were hot from the sun.

It would all pass, though. This grayness. I probably didn’t like it because it reflected the lingering gloom still within me. But one day, maybe soon, maybe not, I would realize that the grayness had been gone for a long time, even though I wasn’t sure there’d be an end in sight. It would not be a grand moment where the light burst through the clouds; it would be small in its power.

The thought of healing made me look at Fili and let a faint smile break through the guise.

A person on horse awaited us at the camp’s western entrance. She rode a horse, as well, but upon closer examination, I saw that this horse was leaner and meaner looking. Its neck and legs were longer, and its tail didn’t have horsehair. Instead, it was thin and whip-like. Thick, purple-dyed fabric wrapped around the tail, and at the end it had small, heavy leather whips attached.

The woman, who wore matching purple-dyed clothes underneath straps of dark leather armor, brought down her cowl. She had a darker complexion, and her black hair was bound up in intricate braids. I realized with slow astonishment that her lower canines protruded like miniscule white peaks from her bottom lip.

She swept her neutral gaze over us before they settled on me. “They said you were the one who carries the Light.” Her voice carried an accent I had never heard before. It was immediately entrancing. “Prove it.”
I lifted my left hand and, as my fingers waggled, the droplet’s light glowed.

She nodded once and turned her horse around. “Come. I will escort you to the chief.”

“You continue to disrespect our king,” Dwalin barked to the woman, who did not bother to look over her shoulder at him. “Are you that impudent to not acknowledge those above you?”

“I am not of this land, nor do I particularly care about rank outside of my own society’s,” the woman blithely replied, and if I wasn’t mistaken, she sounded a bit amused. “So no, I am not impudent. It is more along the notion of willful disregard.”

Dwalin went all growly. “Easy, there,” Fili said. “It is of no importance. Right, uncle?”

Thorin only grunted. He didn’t want to say he didn’t care because that would invalidate Dwalin’s chagrin as well as admit that proper titles weren’t a big deal. If he did agree that titles were important, then he’d look like an asshole. I mean, he did that job all on his own enough already. No need to make it worse.

“What’s your name?” I called lightly. The woman spared me a glance over her shoulder.

“Iksa,” she replied, the name clicking off her tongue. “And you?”

“Valeria.”

The Easterlings in the camp were dressed similarly as our escort. More wore the same shade of dark purple cloth, but some had on deep reds and blues, or black. I didn’t fail to notice that many had the same lower canines as Iksa, while others had pointed ears but human physiques and features. Their skin colors varied between lighter and darker browns; some, however, had skin that verged on grayish black, green, or blue—similar to orc skin.

I didn’t look to Fili or Thorin. This was even more exciting than I could have thought, and I wanted to find out for sure before I made any assumptions.

Middle-Earth was becoming much, much larger.

The camp seemed to all connect to the central tent. It was made of the same material of all the other tents, but it was larger and had two soldiers posted outside. Both of them, a man and a woman, had the same dark purple fabric underneath their leather armor. They looked similar to Iksa, if older, with the man’s lower canine’s slightly larger than the woman’s canines. I had seen a multitude of banners on our way in, but now I was certain that the color I had seen most often reflected the chief’s tribe. The banner posted outside the tent waved in the wind; dark purple seemed to suck in whatever sun that filtered down, and I could make out some foreign symbol composed of swirling horizontal lines and sewn in gold string.

The man pulled back the flap of the closed tent and gestured with his head to go in. We all dismounted, and Iksa continued without pause. I briefly felt Fili’s hand touch my arm. For some reason, I took one last glance at the sky above.

The tent radiated warmth. A brazier suspiciously lacking smoke burned in the center. There were two cots with furs piled atop them, a stand with a wash basin and pitcher, and a table with half-strewn scrolls and writing utensils. The tent itself allowed a surprising amount of light in despite the thick canvas. It smelled of faint and pleasant incense.

Two people stood by the table, interrupted from whatever conversation they were having while they inspected the contents of a scroll.
The man was tall and dark; his brown dreads were pulled back, displaying prominent pointed ears and an angular but strong face. His eyes were a light gold, and the only differentiation from his armor and Iska’s was that he wore a simple, dark metal pauldron on his shoulder. He stooped slightly due to the height difference between him and the woman, the Easterling, the bearer of the same light.

Amelie.

She too dressed the same, but the fabric reached up and wrapped around her head as a hijab. Thin black eyeliner topped her upper lids, and her brows were lightly colored in. She was probably a couple inches shorter than me. Unlike the man, she was visibly armed. A blade rest at her hip, and two daggers were tucked under her leather belt.

Our expressions mirrored each other. Eyes wide, shoulders stiff, mouths parted.

Recognition.

A gust of wind snapped against the tent canvas, bringing fresh breath into my frozen lungs. Then, in a burst, I gasped out:

“Tahir?”

She beamed and briefly covered it with her hand, then slightly hunched forward as air rooked back into her own lungs. When she brought it down, she began silently laughing.

“Of course. Of course it’s you,” she whispered, coming around the table. Tahir reached out to me with her hands—I took them and squeezed like they were the only thing that could keep me alive. My body had begun to tremble, and I couldn’t stop myself from crying like the other woman before me.


She pulled me into a strong embrace, and even though I was slightly taller, I felt fully wrapped up in her arms. “I thought…I thought you were gone,” I gasped into the soft fabric of her hajib. “They told me—they told me—”

“And I am gone,” she replied smoothly. Age layered her voice, and a new accent heavily mingled with her French-Arabic one, but it was still hers. “I am gone there, and I am here.”

While we continued to hold each other, the man who stood beside Tahir wryly said, “Well, what a fortuitous turn of events.”

Tahir pulled away and cupped my face with a gentle, calloused hand. She laughed again. “Mon amie. Nous vivons dans un monde étrange.”

My French came out much more ragged and poorly accented. “Mais nous sommes toujours aussi heureux, non?”

Hearing one of her languages from Earth took more breath from her chest.

I gave only a simply reply. I could barely talk, let alone in a language I wasn’t as steady with. Tahir
brushed her thumb across my skin. “Ay, so soft! You’ve been moisturizing! You’ve been luxurious, haven’t you?”

I laughed and placed my hand over hers. “Yeah, yeah. I…I got sent back to Earth for a little bit. Got a hold of some of that good shit.”

Tahir’s eyes filled with soft surprise and sorrow. “We have a lot to go over, don’t we, Val?” Lowly, she whispered, “Your hands, they are cold, cold like the dark.”

“Yes, er, I would most definitely like an explanation,” Kili piped up, not hearing the quieter part of the conversation. He only grunted a little when Fili stepped on his foot and Dwalin simultaneously elbowed him in the ribs.

Tahir dropped her hand and gestured for everyone to take seats on some pillows I hadn’t noticed before. They were near the brazier with muted but warm colors. “And you all shall receive one from both of us. Please, rest your feet.”

She, the man, and myself were much more comfortable with sitting on pillows than the dwarves were. Though they had spent countless days around a campfire on the hard earth, they wound up either sitting on the edge of the cushions or off them completely.

“Before we get started,” I said distractedly as I brought my satchel around to my front, “I bring…a gift. Had I known it was you, I would have got something nicer, but…this will have to do.”

I pulled two glass Coke bottles. They were cool to the touch. Tahir gasped at the sight, and she took it tenderly as if it was a fragile heirloom. “Val. Val. Do you realize how long I’ve gone without having a cold Cola? Too freaking long. My god, too long.”

I laughed and leaned back on the pillow. Tahir took out one of her daggers and popped the cap off with the edge of the blade. She sighed when she heard the fizz and inhaled the smell of soda. We both took long swigs of it. Tahir held the soda in her mouth longer than I did, but when she swallowed, she smacked her lips and held the glass bottle aloft. “Ay, that is heaven, isn’t it?”

She passed it onto the man, and I did the same with Fili. “I have some more back at the mountain. Not enough for all the Company. I was just going to drink it when I had a craving until it ran out.”

Fili sniffed the rim of the rim. “It’s sweet,” he said. “Is it ale?”

“Uh, no. It’s just soda. Non-alcoholic.”

Dwalin grunted. “Then what’s the use of drinking it?”

“Because it’s the shit!”

“That cannae be your explanation for everything, lass!” Dwalin murmured none-too-quietly. Kili poorly hid his snicker while Thorin and Balin masterfully concealed theirs.

Fili tentatively took a small drink. He then sputtered and coughed. “Ma-Mahal!” He beat his chest and his eyes watered. Everyone else, myself included, laughed at him. “That’s—that’s like drinking acid! Or orc blood! How can you stand it?”

I took the bottle back and drank from it some more. “Stop. You’re being dramatic. It’s just like drinking syrup that has a bit of fizz in it.”

The man with Tahir still had his bottle. He drank from it normally. “It is similar to that winter
drink in Shahal, no?"

“This is the same thing I was telling you that it tasted like,” Tahir explained. He hummed and gave it back to her.

“Val,” she said, gesturing to the man, “this is my husband, Avrien. We have been married for, what, two hundred fifty or so years?”

“More like two hundred seventy-five,” Avrien corrected fondly. His voice was rich and soothing, flowing with his accent so well that I could fall asleep to him reading a story to me.

“Right,” Tahir chuckled. “Making my name, well, Amelie Tahir-Cendiriov.” I didn’t fail to notice her pointedly glancing at Fili. I’d tell her the news later.

“And *my* name Avrien Tahir-Cendiriov,” her husband went on. “But our posterity carry Tahir, and thus the tribe.”

“Tribe, huh? So all those people are your kids and grandkids?”

“Something like that,” Tahir replied with a laugh. “Our children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, great-great-grandchildren, nieces, nephews, and then great-nieces, great-nephews, in-laws and so on and so forth.”

I blew a small raspberry. “Damn, Tahir, you’ve been busy, haven’t you?” I leaned forward and pointed at her while I addressed Avrien. “You know, she always said, ‘I’m only gonna have one or two kids. Paris is too expensive! London is too expensive! Everywhere is too expensive!’” Over her laughs, I asked, “How many kids did you end up having?”

Tahir grumbled. “Ten.”

“*Ten*? Guess the cost of living is exponentially cheaper here!”

“You’ll find that everything is cheaper here,” said Tahir. She picked up the loose bottlecaps from off the ground and put them in her pocket. “Rana and Kisk will like them. They have an affinity for buttons and baubles.”

Avrien hummed in agreement. I readjusted on the cushion and tucked the bottle between my crossed legs. Then I rubbed my cold hands together, cleared my throat, and said, “Alright, *vatos*, let me set a few things straight. First, this is in no way a coincidence that Amelie Tahir and I know each other.”

“Providence,” Tahir put in. “Otherworldly, outsider providence.”

I nodded, remembering my running partner and Gandalf’s words. “With the help of insider providence. There is a plan. Our coming here was not accidental, though I’m sure we are not the only ones who could have ever accomplished what we did.”

Tahir regraded Thorin, Fili, and Kili with her deep gaze. She was more than the woman I remembered, now. “That may be. But when I came down from the East when our scouts reported that all armies were converging on the Lonely Mountain, I thought that I would not see any of the Sons of Durin alive, let alone three. Much less did I expect that there was no war between men, elves, and dwarves. You have changed much, Valeria. I am unsure anybody with less tenacity than what you hold would not have saved the dwarves that I look upon.”

I ducked my head and avoided looking at anyone directly for a moment. “Anyway, Tahir and I
worked together for a refugee integration organization that helped families seeking asylum find resettlement in Europe. I did more of the grunt work; she was on the team of lawyers that went over the legal process for each refugee.”

“Lawyer?” Balin inquired.

“She knew all the legal rules,” I explained. “Probably still does.”

Tahir smirked. “You can’t be chief as long as I have without memorizing all the rules.”

The dwarves nodded. I went on. “We worked closely from time to time on our teams. Then, a couple years ago, I received news that she had died.”

“Brain aneurysm,” Tahir said, tapping the side of her head. “I survived the first one. Not the second. Means that a vessel in my brain popped and leaked blood everywhere.” She drank her Coke. “Come to find out, it isn’t good for your health.” She gestured with the bottle toward me. “And you? How’d you die?”

I made a high-pitched noise and scrunched my eyes. “Well, uh, I didn’t die. I was just jogging and, and then I was here.”

Tahir tapped the bottom of her chin. “Interesting.”

“But… I can die without it being permanent.”

After a pause, she took a much more serious drink. “Wish I had that. Or, at least I’ve never dared to put it to the test.”

“I wouldn’t recommend it. Dying is… unpleasant.”

A more somber air came upon the inside of the tent. I glanced at Fili to reassure myself that I was alive, but doing so also reminded me of how many times I had died in front of him. In front of all of them—and that one of my deaths had been at the hands of the dwarf who sat on the other side of my betrothed.

“How so?” Tahir asked gently.

I took a breath. “It’s—each time was different.” Had I ever really talked about this before? “But it is hot. And it hurts, feeling blood come up into your throat, feeling everything give out, feeling the panic. Then everything becomes cold, and I succumb.”

“And what have you seen?”

“Nothing. Or nothing I remember. It’s dreamless. Like…I’m not there. I’m just gone, and then I’m back.”

“That’s terrible,” Tahir frowned. She took my hand and held it. “I’m sorry.”

“Ahh, it’s okay. I… well, it’s not like I try really hard to stay alive, since I know I’m going to come back.” I tried to smile. The corner of Tahir’s mouth flicked upward.

“You never were one to take a rest, either. Perhaps it is natural for you to return to the living. Because if you stayed dead, who would do all the work?”

We both shared small laughs. Tahir took the hand she was holding and turned it upward so she could see the droplet. “When I saw the light falling from Ravenhill, I thought it was a star
descending from the heavens. Then I felt warmth from my own.” She extended her own left hand so I could see the single white jewel embedded in hers. I could tell that it was much older than mine, and while my droplet was tear-shaped, hers was a small diamond. “And I knew that another like me had been called to fulfill the duty of preserving, preserving and creating, some good in this world. So, in a way, you had come from the heavens.”

Tahir placed her hand atop mine. The gifts we were given almost touched. “La dame des étoiles has entrusted both of us to protect all who look up to her realm at night. They all have. From the mountains deep to the rivers running to forests green, it all needs protecting.

“And Valeria, you were so good at it back home. I cannot even begin to imagine what miracles, small and large, shall be brought by your hand. This hand. These hands.”

She switched to French so none of the dwarves could understand what she spoke next. “Tu sais ce qui nous attend bientôt. Nous devons rendre ce monde fort.”

I gave a slight nod. “Je sais.”

“Good.” She leaned back and spoke to everyone. “My people will be departing within another week. Until then, we shall do as much work as we can to bring our people together in both alliance and trade.”

We were going to need it.

Thorin accepted. “Very well. I shall inform my council.”

“Don’t go too far,” I said, smiling a little. “Il y a un mariage bientôt.”

She chuckled, looking back to Fili. “Oui, oui. Le hobbit est-il toujours là?”


Tahir giggled some more. “I’m glad. They are another kind of light in this world.” She turned to Avrien and spoke something to him. He nodded and stood up. “Food and drink are being brought. We have much more to go over before the day is through.

“First: do you like my Were-worm?”

I busted out laughing, and color returned to this gray, wintry land.
describe more of the Easterling army, which is a whole other can of worms I'm proud of. While sticking true to canon that the Easterlings are "dark" and whatever, I added a whole bunch to make them cooler and not just oversimplified, racist depictions.

Hope everyone had or is having a happy holiday!

Here's the buttload of translations:

Pero el español es mucho mejor: but Spanish is much better
Mais...uh...il n'ya pas de wifi ici: but...uh...there is no wifi here
Mon amie. Nous vivons dans un monde étrange: My friend. We live in a strange world
Mais nous sommes toujours aussi heureux, non?: but we're still happy, right?
لقد مر وقت طويل: it has been a long time
نعم: yes
La dame des étoiles: the lady of the stars
Tu sais ce qui nous attend bientôt. Nous devons rendre ce monde fort: You know what's coming soon. We have to make this world strong
Je sais: I know
Il y a un mariage bientôt: There will be a marriage soon
Oui, oui. Le hobbit est-il toujours là?: Yes, yes. Is the hobbit still here?
Il est mon meilleur ami: he is my best friend
“They call my kin the Unwilling,” Avrien had explained in that gentle voice of his. “The Avari. We did not journey to Valinor. Instead, we spread across the land, past the Western world and into the East. We have dwelled longer in Arda than anybody else.

“We grew without the arrogance or superiority of our cousins who traveled back into this realm. It was my kin who came upon Man, and it was my kin who taught Man how to survive, how to thrive. We would not be who we are without Man, nor would they be who they are without us.

“It was my kin who were captured by Melkor when he stalked Arda’s land. It was my kin who were turned to the first of the orcs, the first of the goblins.

“And it was my kin who sought out those who had been corrupted and, little by little, bade them to return home and retake the light that was stolen from them.”

I flipped through the Big Binder once more just to make sure I hadn’t missed anything, but I was positive that no Wiki page said anything about orc-elf-man integration. That’d be a big enough deal to write about if it did.

The dwarves were still perturbed by this news, this revelation that the orc-filth they had been hellbent on slaughtering for so long were not, in fact, wholly evil. The ones who served Sauron and Morgoth, sure, but that was their choice. And, for the most part, they did like their choice. However, there were many orcs and goblins who fled to the East in search of refuge. Many of them were women and the weak, but there were those who had dared to think about those they hunted other than weaker prey. There were those who wanted to feel the light without being frightened or blinded by it.

Generations had bloomed with mixed blood, resulting in the likes of the people I had seen at the encampment.

Iksa, one of Tahir’s great-grandchildren, was a quarter orc. “We felt no remorse killing our distant kin in battle,” she had said. “War is war, and they fought on the side of evil. The Dark One would not gain a foothold in the North. It only angered us to look upon what darkness continues to twist.

“We did, however, manage to take prisoners in and find the location of one of their brooding pens. It is near Gundabad. We sent out a number to liberate the she-orcs and children being held there. We have also accepted most of the prisoners into our tribes. They will be watched over and rehabilitated until the light returns to them.”

Fili sat on the edge of his bed while I turned to another page in the Big Binder. My hair was down, and I ate a sweet, hard cookie baked by Bombur that were leftovers from tonight’s meal.

“Brooding pens,” he muttered, and not for the first time. “Brooding pens, Ria. I had always known that the ways of the orcs were far from kind, but…brooding pens. Kept like animals, they said. Mahal.”

Dwarves revered their women. That came with its own problems, but the thought of their own being kept in pits and cages like stock to be raped throughout their lives and give birth to children they will never know filled them with bitter rage. Fili’s mind had not yet settled over it.
“The West had good reason to think badly of the Easterlings,” Amelie had explained. She kept the Coke bottle in her hand long after the soda was gone. “Animosity still remains between many of the more nomadic tribes, especially the existing Wainrider factions. I have done my best to quell such hatred, but there is still work to do. Both sides have done horrible things. Do you know what Gondorians call us, Val? Swarthy Men. What a load of racist shit.”

“Yep,” I said to myself, tapping the Spanish word on the page about the Easterlings. “There it is. Aywey. What a load of colonist garbage.”

“Of course,” Amelie had continued, “There were large tribes that served Sauron. But they would have served anyone who promised them Western land. The rest...well, the rest were lumped in the same group, even though a vast majority would never condone it. Besides, many of the larger kingdoms and city-states wanted the tribes to be wiped out; it meant they wouldn’t have to deal with raids from them anytime in the future.”

Amelie had stilled, gaze growing distant. “Also, several of the Eastern nations had to deal with… the other lieutenant.”

I decided to ask about it later, when we were alone and could speak freely about the past, present, and future.

Amelie Tahir, who dwelled in Middle-Earth for around two hundred and fifty years, wrangled many of the nomadic tribes into unification through cleverness, compassion, trade, a few one-on-one duels, and, on one special occasion, a marriage. Though she never pushed arranged marriages for her children or grandchildren, most of them chose to wed with the thought of further solidifying ties in mind.

She continued to wear her hijab even though she was worlds away from her religion. Her reason was the same as why I had my cross propped up on the dresser. Faith was a funny thing. A strong thing.

“It sucks, doesn’t it?” I sighed as I continued to look through the binder as if it was an ancient text. I mean, if I lived as long as Tahir, it might wind up to be. “Realizing that bad things in the world are happening, and that evil isn’t as straightforward as you thought it to be.” I craned my head over my shoulder to catch a glimpse of Fili sitting on the bed. Firelight danced off his golden hair, which had been pulled back into a braid for the night. My own hair was in a loose ponytail. “I brought a couple of philosophy books. Those will really blow your mind.”

Fili groaned as he stood up and sauntered over to me. His arms wrapped around my waist, and he placed his head on the side of my shoulder. “It does not help that for much of my life, I was told that the Easterlings would take our treasure in a moment’s notice if they had the chance. That they would pillage and plunder their way through the countryside, stealing dwarf children on their wargs. But they were the saviors of many lives on the battlefield, and for longer than I have been alive, a fair-hearted woman has been elevating them. That, and they have successfully done what the West has largely failed at, which is coexisting together.” He chuckled. “Men and elves make such a big fuss about Beren and Luthien over here, but look to the East, and it has been a common practice for thousands of years.”

“You’re right about that.” I picked a tab labeled “B” and sought out the name Beren. “Now, I know the story is supposed to be super romantic and fateful and brave, but, like, why do elves just straight-up die when their lovers die as well? And only the women. None of the stories talk about elf dudes dying after their wives or whatever have died. I don’t think I’ll ever get over that fact.”

“Elves are delicate,” Fili responded matter-of-factly. I laughed.
“True. But Luthien did talk Mandos into letting her and her snag return to the living. Pretty cool.”

Fili trained his gaze on the title “Beren” and all the Spanish writing beneath. He could only pick out words that I had either taught him or that he knew because it belonged to Middle-Earth. “So does this hold prophecies and deep secrets of the world?” he inquired.

“Nah, not really. Just a lot of history and some of the future. It’ll make me look smart about things, but most of them will be about elves and men and the Valar and the wars. Basically, it just sums up that shiny things made by sketchy elves fuck everyone up.” Fili chuckled at that. “But I’m still going to need a bunch of lessons on the dwarves. Though, I do know a lot more than I originally did about you guys.”

“Aye, Balin is already preparing his lessons. He’s wee bit more excited about it than he lets on. You’ll go through the same tedious scrolls and recitations as Kili and I did when we were lads.”

I laughed. “I’m excited. I love learning. I’ll probably be one of his best students ever.”

“Now that I do not doubt.” Fili reached for my hand and kissed the knuckles. “So what does the future have in store for this world, eh?”

He meant it lightly, but I had developed the bad habit of going from happy to serious in 0.4 seconds these days. Luckily, he had learned to roll with the swings without missing a beat.

I turned so I faced Fili. I cupped his jaw and let my fingers graze his beard. His touch was warm on my hips. “A lot,” I said softly. Fili read my expression and became solemn but aware. “It is… I think it’ll be best if we talk about it with Thorin.”

“And Gandalf? Bilbo?”

I shook my head once. “No. I have already, um, done damage in that area. Besides, Gandalf already knows what he needs to know for now. This will just be between the three of us. The king, the prince, and me—”

“The princess,” Fili interjected. I scoffed and patted him on his smirking cheek.

“Please, don’t remind me about that.” I led him to the bed, where we both settled down atop the furs. “Anyway. The whole reason Thorin and I were so…” I couldn’t find the right words, so I simply pounded my knuckles together a few times. Fili hummed in understanding. “Was because he heard some stuff in Mirkwood. Then some other stuff happened, and basically it’s only up until now that I’ll have the chance.”

“What ‘other stuff?’” Fili repeated speculatively. I splayed my fingers out and regarded them.

“You’re not going to like the answer. You really aren’t going to like the answer. Hell, I don’t like the answer.” I curled my fingers into my palms, feeling how cold they were compared to the rest of my hand. When I opened it again, I saw the tiny, fresh scar on my thumb that matched the one on Bilbo’s own thumb. It was indistinguishable from all the other tiny scars that scattered my skin. I wouldn’t mention the Ring yet. Our oath under the mountain had to remain a secret still.

“Remember that night in Mirkwood? When it was like I had been strangled, and I couldn’t hardly move for a while?”

“Yes, then the spiders tried to eat us, and you died. Pleasant memories.”

I let out a small laugh. “Yeah. And that tv those trees watched? I don’t think about that fact
enough. That was batshit crazy.”

“But that was batshit crazy.” Fili echoed, and I laughed some more. I rolled into his open arms and let my head rest in the crook of his muscular shoulder. Fili easily enveloped me, and his fingers found soft black hair.

“It’s Philadelphia, but you got the tune right.”

“Ah. Right. Perhaps we shall seek out that contraption again? And you can bring Lady Tahir with you. She would enjoy seeing something from her world.”

“Mm. Yeah, she would. Though, for as long as she’s lived, I wouldn’t be surprised if she saw a similar thing or two. But anyway—that strangulation was on purpose.” I briefly put my hand around my throat. “Nearly got choked out by a total geed.”

“So it was a being? A personage?”

“Unfortunately.” I stretched and made a noise. “We can talk about it more tomorrow, when there’s alcohol nearby for you and Thorin. For now, though…” I curled back into Fili’s side and firmly wrapped an arm around his chest. “Lemme hold you.”

My breathing grew soft, and I let myself bask in the soft happiness of being in a lover’s arm, trying to memorize every part of Fili in the low firelight.

“Sing to me,” I whispered. “Please.”

He smiled in that sweet, honeyed way, and proceeded to sing a sweet, honeyed song in Khuzdul. His low lilts and reverberating notes made it seem like the song was created just for this moment in time, this moment between only us, swathed in our love and the sanctity of the mountain.

After the song had ended, and I drifted away from the waking world, Fili pressed a long, lingering kiss to my forehead. “I cannot say how much I love you,” he said. “And I doubt that I will never find enough words even in all the eternities we shall spend together.”

Eyes closed, I replied, “So just show me, cariño.”

Another kiss on my forehead, somehow softer than the one before.

“That I can do.”

The next morning, there was a small silver clasp in my hair. It had been placed beneath my ear so it was in plain view. The clasp matched the one in Fili’s hair in a similar place.

I wore my hair down so it wouldn’t be hidden.

A small envoy from Dale crossed the barren land to the fractured mouth of the Lonely Mountain. I waited at the entrance with Fili, Kili, and Bilbo. The hobbit had been lured away from his books to spend some quality time with his fave human: me. Though, I didn’t miss how his big flat feet sometimes tapped against the stone as if he was itching for another fix.

“So the message did not lie,” Legolas remarked from atop his horse, his pale blue eyes sharp but amused and glad. I grinned and waved.
“Why would they lie about the best thing to come to this mountain?” I laughed.

“Aye, that is true,” said Bard while he got off his horse, then helped Tilda off. She ran to me and gave me a nice, genuine hug.

“I’m so glad you’re alive!” she exclaimed, her wide eyes looking up to me. “Da said you turned into a star! Is that true?”

I gave her a serious look and said, “It is.”

“What did you see while you were up there?”

“I saw this world. It is very blue because the oceans are so big.”

“Bigger than Mirkwood? Bigger than Gondor?”

“Much, much bigger. As big as the blue sky.”

Sigrid chuckled and drew her sister back to her side. Bard and I exchanged entertained and knowing glances. “And I am glad to see you live, too,” she said. “We all are.”

“You saved our people twice,” Bard said. He wore no crown, nor were his clothes any finer than they were two weeks ago, but he looked healthier, happier. “My people are indebted to you and courage. And,” he added, looking wryly at the clasp in my hair and the one in Fili’s, “I heard there is a wedding in order.”

Bard reached into his saddlebag and pulled out some rolled fabric. It was a dark green, a typical color of Laketown fabric, but thick and warm. I took it from him and unrolled it. “A shawl,” Bard explained. “Sigrid and a few other women in the city spent some time working on. It is not a queenly gift, but they have kept many a women in Lake-town warm during the harshest of winters. May it keep you warm in that cold mountain.”

I held it close to my chest. “Thank you. Really, thank you. It’s perfect.” I stepped forward and hugged him and Sigrid. Then, to Tauriel, I asked, “Did you help out with this?”

“Ah, yes,” she admitted, “but I was slow at first. I was unfamiliar with the stitching; fortunately, the Lake-town women were patient with this elleth.”

“Why wouldn’t they be?” Kili asked, hearts practically in his eyes. Tauriel genuinely melted a little at him. Legolas didn’t hide his own eye roll.

“Come,” said Fili, “though the mountain may be cold, it provides shelter from the wind. We have much to discuss, and we shall do it over warm food and drink.”

As the horses were taken care of, we passed back inside. “I believe that you two are the first elves to have crossed into the realm of Erebor since even before Smaug’s time,” Fili mentioned. “You are making history.”

“Let it be better than the last time an elf came into this kingdom,” Legolas had to reply.

I sighed. “You really just can’t stop yourself, can you?”

“He certainly has gotten better,” Tauriel said. “He sneers much less. Broods less, too. It is almost as if stepping outside of his kingdom has given him a fresh perspective on the world.”

“Quiet,” Legolas grumbled.
That was good. He’d need it soon enough.

I gave the prince a half-glance from his position behind me. Legolas did look brighter, actually, less burdened. Maybe some distance from his father did him some good.

We at least made it halfway to our destination before things went to shit.

In all my euphoria of returning to Middle-Earth and being with the ones I loved again, I had completely forgotten that Dain was a dwarf who existed.

In retrospect, it all happened comically. As we came out of the hall that led us to the common chambers, Thorin, Dain, Dwalin, Balin, and six unfamiliar faces exited the very chambers that we were intending to use. During the few moments where everyone from the opposing groups got a good look at each other, letting everything sink in, there was a moment of peace.

Then Thorin mouthed, “Fuck,” and Fili whispered, “Shit.”

“What is this?” Dain growled. “Elflings? Humans? In our kingdom? Allowed to walk in freely?”

“They are here to discuss trade and rebuilding efforts, cousin,” Thorin said, managing to not sound like he was intentionally soothing Dain—merely stating the facts. “We did join together in a dark hour, after all, and set aside our pettiness to fight back the filth attempting to take all our land.”

“Aye, and I will forever be grateful for their assistance. But I see no war now! Have ye already forgotten what that princeling’s father did to our people? Ye cannae wait to break bread with the enemy?”

Thorin’s expression darkened a fraction. “And you quickly dismiss who showed which side they were on during that day.”

Dain ignored his patient warning. “To think what your father, your grandfather, our ancestors would do should they be here to witness dainty elves step foot in their home? It is—it is desecration, Thorin!”

“It was an elf who stood proud with my nephews and niece to fight Azog.” Thorin’s eyes glinted. “Where were you, may I ask?”

Dain sputtered, and I vaguely realized that Thorin said I was his niece.

With how close in proximity we were to the other group, I could feel a hot roil of anger from the dwarves who were most likely Dain’s advisors. To insinuate that Dain wasn’t where he needed to be was…oof.

Squaring up with Thorin and red in the face, Dain shouted, “We came to our king’s aid! We defended these pitiful humans and prancing elves!” He sent me, me, a baleful, disgusted look. “And if it were me, my king, I would not have had to thrust myself off a cliff and perish in order to dispose of an orc.”

The tension in the air snapped with the words. It let loose a torrent of wrath from the present Company.

“You will hold your tongue!” Fili roared, rushing forward with a dagger suddenly in his hand. Kili was close behind him, yelling similar responses. Though I understood what they were saying, it sounded…weird. Like I was hearing them speak in both a foreign and familiar accent.
Balin held Dwalin back as best he could from Dain, who was, after all, still a noble. His own advisors were suddenly shooting insults back. Though they didn’t outright start to brawl, Thorin kept Fili and Kili at bay only due to the fact that he was their uncle and they his nephews. One of Dain’s advisors, the only one who wasn’t wasting his breath on insults, snagged arms and pushed chests to keep his own from engaging any further.

I glanced down at Bilbo, frowning. The hobbit watched the scene anxiously. “You can understand what they’re saying, right?” I asked. He gave me a confused look as if I had just said the dumbest words ever.

“What—no! They’re all raving in Khuzdul!” He huffed and brought a firm little fist up. “Though I would not mind giving that ol’ Dain a piece of my mind myself!”

It was endearing to see Bilbo getting riled up on my behalf. I wasn’t too mad—more mildly annoyed. Dain seemed to be an asshole, so I wasn’t going to take him as seriously as the others.

I turned my attention back to the dwarves.

“You speak to your mother like that?”

“Dwalin, calm yourself! We cannot be having another Spring Fest incident!”

“A human woman! You’d have our bloodline tainted by Man? What has become of you! The Thorin I knew would have shaved his welp of a nephew’s beard for even putting a promise in her hair!”

“To insult the very army that saved you from death! It is unfathomable! Dishonorable!”

“Enough! Enough of this madness, or I will throw all of you out of the mountain like the children you are!”

“You’d let him speak like that, Uncle? Speak about Valeria like that? Speak about Tauriel?”

“I’ll cut out your tongue!”

“Let me at him! I’ll show that bastard why it was us who fought life and limb to get to the mountain and not him!”

“Oh, Mahal,” I whispered quietly enough so nobody else would hear. “I almost wish I didn’t understand all this.” A small smile appeared, however, and I followed up with, “They really are obstinate, aren’t they?”

I might have imagined it, but I felt the same kiss on my forehead given to me minutes after returning to Middle-Earth.

They really were obstinate, and I was about to marry into that obstinance.

Bard had his children semi-protectively behind him. Tauriel watched with concern. Legolas watched with amusement.

I let out a whopping sigh and patted Bilbo’s shoulder. “Better back up if I were you, pepito.”

“Why—what—Valeria!” Bilbo called after me while I walked toward the dwarves. Dain saw me approach and snarled. Thorin’s arm holding him back dropped when he stilled enough no longer need restraining. The same went for Fili and Kili.
“Do you not even know your place?”

“Do *you* not know your place?” Kili snapped back. It would have been cooler if he didn’t sound like he, a fully-grown dwarf, was mimicking another fully-grown dwarf.

The dwarf holding Dain’s people back quietly muttered, “My lord, *enough.*” His voice was soft enough to make me wonder if he was really a he at all.

It didn’t matter at the moment. I gave Dain a condescending smirk when I came to stand in front of him. The revel of forcing him to look up at me was not lost.

There would be times when the fact that I wasn’t a dwarf would give me an advantage, just as it had throughout my time here. There would be times when I could step in and say, “Okay, you stinky dwarves, chill the fuck out,” and they would listen.

But this time, *this time,* I took the route I knew the dwarves would be proudest of.

“No,” I replied in perfect Khuzdul, “*I was just wondering where I should place this.*”

Then I slammed my glowing fist straight into Dain’s shocked face.

All hell broke loose in the mountain. I was punching, wrestling, screaming, and kicking. All my instinctive moves from martial arts classes came in clutch, and, at some point, I body-slammed one of Dain’s dwarves into the stone. On one side, Fili punched a dwarf in the gut, and on the other, Thorin head-butted Dain. Even Balin couldn’t resist getting into the brawl; out from the corner of my eye, I saw his shock of white hair a moment before the sound of a fist colliding with a cheek followed.

In the distance, *Danny Boy* probably played.

Dwalin, at one point, had two dwarves under each arm, and he threw both of them right into the wall. Kili got pinned to the ground, but Fili delivered a kick to the dwarf’s stomach so he’d relinquish the younger brother. Fili and I briefly made eye contact; we shared the same wild grins we always did whenever there was madness all around us. It had always been a sign of love, hadn’t it? Even in the depths of the Misty Mountains, it had always been us.

I backed into Dain, who had managed to shake off Thorin. He blocked my initial punch, but he couldn’t block a sweeping, so-perfect-it-was-almost-unreal kick to the side of his head. There was a fifty-percent chance that I’d fall on my ass doing it, but Mahal looked kindly upon me beating the shit out of his children, so I stayed standing.

The brawl came to a stuttering end. I stood over Dain, panting, my hair disheveled and fists clenched—one of which faintly glowed. “Come on,” I goaded, “say shit like that again.”

He spat out a bit of blood on the floor, then grinned madly with red still shining on his lips and teeth. “Well, by my beard, the lass *can* fight! Never been kicked like that before! Woke me right up!”

“Pardon my father,” the dwarf who had attempted to restrain Dain’s men said. They reached down and helped him up. “He is…how can I even begin to explain it?”

“Pay no mind to my daughter,” Dain said while he straightened himself. “She unfortunately has the temperament of her mother and sees flaws in her father’s ways.”

“I can’t imagine why’d that be,” I deadpanned. Dain’s daughter, who truly was indistinguishable
from the men in both stature and clothing, shot me a smile. Her beard was a little shorter, but that wasn’t really an immediate sign that she was the opposite sex. Dwarves hid their women in plain sight, I found, and nobility was no different. Early on, Balin even suggested that I should travel with them looking like a man. But the fact that I couldn’t grow a beard and I did terribly at talking in a deeper voice kinda extinguished that possibility.

“My king, princes, forgive me. I spoke out-of-turn.” Dain bowed to Thorin, Fili, and Kili, who took the apology and smoothly bowed back. I stifled a laugh. Dwarves were a funny people. If it had been any other race who said the same things about me, they wouldn’t be forgiven for three centuries. One of their own, though, had preference, and the whole thing was over as soon as it began.

“Speak out-of-turn in that manner, cousin, and I shall have your head,” said Thorin.

Dain just belted out a big laugh. “Aye, I’m sure you will! Sure the prince and his lass will, too!”

“Don’t you need to apologize to some other people?” I asked very innocently, gesturing back to the audience. Dain had apparently forgot that two elves and a human family watched the whole scene unfold.

He made a mild noise like he was having a stroke. Legolas didn’t help by making himself look extra superior. Bard, as usual, remained impassive, but he kept his children gathered behind him. Bilbo somehow found himself beside Tauriel, who had a protective hand on his small shoulder.

“I…”

Dain coughed. Legolas’ brow piqued. He went to open his mouth, but from behind Dain, he saw me raise a warning finger at him. Mercifully, he chose to remain silent.

“…Apologize.”

I looked at Fili and grimaced. He helplessly shrugged his shoulders.

“Well then!” Balin, ever the diplomat, chimed in. “That settles it! Now, let us continue on our way as we were before.” He shot me a wink and gathered Dain’s company. The two parties still gave each other a wide berth, but after they had departed from the space and vanished around the far corner of the hall, Fili, Kili, Bilbo, and I all gave a collective sigh of relief.

“Mahal, I think one of them Iron Hill bastards chipped my tooth,” Kili complained. He went to me and opened his mouth. “Ria, your mother was a tooth witch, tell me what you see!”

“She was not a tooth witch. I don’t know what the fuck Fili told you.” I grabbed Kili’s face, however, and raised my left hand up to use the sacred droplet as a flashlight that illuminated the inside of Kili’s mouth. “You need to floss, my dude, but no, you I don’t see anything chipped. Just got banged up, a little blood—it’s all good.”

“Well,” said Legolas, walking on as if nothing had happened, “what a lovely distraction. May we continue?”

“Where did you learn to speak Khuzdul, Ria?” Fili asked me. I let out a light chuckle and attempted to soothe my now-disheveled hair.

“Why don’t we talk about that later, yeah?” I replied out of the side of my mouth. Fili took the hint and dropped the subject. “Anyway. We shall continue, Mr. Legolas, because I know how much you’re dying to talk about river tolls and perimeters and food.”
“What a way to start the day,” Bilbo said with an air of cheeriness. “Speaking of food, is there any that we can eat?”

“Despite what Dain said about you, after you knocked him on his arse, he talked as if he had never spoken ill toward you in his entire life,” Thorin reported. He smiled fondly at me. “You made the right decision. Any woman who thoroughly beats him and his men will have his respect.”

“I imagine Lady Glifs will be happy to tell her mother about her father’s thorough whipping,” Fili smirked. The three of us, as promised, were gathered in Thorin’s private chambers. I had on comfortable leggings with a small, long-sleeved tunic and my green Laketown shawl draped over my shoulders. A cup of hot cider brought a touch of warmth to my cold fingers. My feet, at least, were protected from the stone by thick wool socks.

“Wasn’t that kick amazing?” I repeated. “I mean, man, that kick was amazing. Like, one of the top ten best moments of my life.”

“Can you do that anytime there will be political tensions?” Fili sat down beside me with a dense slice of bread with butter that had my name on it. “It will be a grand sight to see all those old proud dwarfs look as shocked as Dain was when they see your heaven-sent fist flying toward their face.”

I laughed a little. “Heaven-sent. I like that. I am heaven-sent, and I’ll vibe check anyone I need to.”

Thorin sat down and leaned back in his chair. There was nothing comfortable in the Lonely Mountain quite yet; the only reason we had chairs was that, hey, they were made from stone! Because why would dwarves make anything from wood? The chairs we sat on had furs thrown over them, but even that only did so much. Dis, apparently, was bringing more digs with the caravan. Nothing, however, would truly be up to what it once was until enough dwarves returned to renew commerce in the mountain.

I finished my bread and washed it down with the drink. Fire softly crackled. The last time I was in this similar setting, I evaded Thorin’s question about the name I uttered in Mirkwood. He was probably thinking the same thing with the look on his face.

After a sigh, I ran fingers through my hair, stared into the fire, and said, “So. You two wanna know about the future of your kingdom and of this world.”

They both flatly hummed.

“Well, one, I…I’m not exactly sure how things are supposed to turn out now that you three are alive. We…I, uh, I kinda ruined a prophecy. But I’ll get to that later. Right now, though, oof. Right now, things are going to be okay. It’s a few years down the road that…the way becomes dark.”

I took another drink and braved looking to Fili and Thorin. Their expressions were so similar that they could have been father and son. “The name I spoke in Mirkwood, Thorin. It was Sauron.”

Fili appeared as though he had been stabbed through the chest. Thorin wasn’t much better, even though he half-expected it. The dark drink in my hand gave a faint reflection with the firelight in the room. “I told Gandalf. Galadriel, too. Um…it’s him. He is the necromancer. He’s back, and, oh, if I remember right, roughly seventy-six years from now, there’s going to be a massive war with his resurgence. Armies like you’ve never seen before. He’ll be hunting for his ring. The One Ring.”

The fire no longer crackled softly. It was disjointed, hollow.
“Ze ruthukhmizim nazurîzdel, ze ruthukhmizim umkhûhîzd,” Fili whispered.

“Ze ruthukhmizim tashfabîzdel ra ni narag balhîzd,” Thorin finished.

I understood their words even though I did not need to.

One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them.

One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them.

With Fili stunned into silence, it was left up to Thorin to continue asking questions. “And are you aware of the Ring’s whereabouts, Valeria?”

His voice was lower than the fire in the hearth, but it did not yield the danger like it once had before.

“Yeah.”

My index finger grazed over the scar on my thumb. “But you cannot tell us, can you?”

“No. It’s…too dangerous. For everything. For everyone. It—it is not only a war. It’s an entire shift in the world. I don’t want to alter that shift.” Groaning, I rubbed my forehead to stave off the impending headache this was going to give me. “Do you think I want to talk like I know about the future and all that? I sound so fucking stupid. But I am scared. Scared of what I could do if I changed much, much more than I have already.”

Thorin nodded once and merely gestured for me to keep going.

“So yeah. The Dark Lord himself is going to come, the entirety of Middle-Earth could fall…fun stuff.” I paused and made a face. “Then there was that whole thing Tahir was saying about the other lieutenant in the East? Also, speaking of Tahir, her presence alone will alter the war to come. The Easterlings were supposed to side with Sauron and attack this whole area—Dale, Erebor, and Mirkwood. But she’s definitely made it clear that she has long planned for that not to happen. Who will we face instead? What’s going to happen? I’ve already lost sight of a big portion.

“In that battle, Dain was supposed to die alongside Bard’s descendant defending the Lonely Mountain. Because, ya know, Dain was meant to be king. Does Dain have a son?”

“Not yet,” replied Thorin.

“Okay, yeah, well anyway, his son was meant to be Thorin Stonehelm III—I don’t know if that’s going to happen, anymore. Stonehelm is supposed to have a descendant who is the reincarnation of Durin the Deathless—his name will be Durin the Last because he’s the last direct descendant of Durin the I. Have you guys heard of the prophecy at all?”

They shook their heads.

“That’s because the prophecy was meant to be given after the Battle of the Five Armies. After you all died and Dain became king. But Dain isn’t king, is he? The prophecy has been unwound, and—and—he said I ruined a few other prophecies when I got in the way.”

“Wait, who said that?” Fili questioned. I gave him a short, dismissive wave.

“We’ll get to that later. But don’t you guys see? So much has already changed. If I overstep, if I get too arrogant, bad things could happen instead of good things. Shit, there still might be bad things
that will come because all of you are alive.”

I set my cup aside, crossed both legs, and held my ankles so they stayed in place. “But back to Sauron. He, well, I think he used his magic to reach me in Mirkwood, since his sickness had already seeped into the land. Got me through my dreams, tried to suck the life out of me—actually, he pretty much did back then. But I got away, right? But he found me again in the mountain.” I didn’t mention just how he did so, hoping that Thorin and Fili would be too enraptured by the details to note that there was a piece missing. “He got me, and he was stronger, this time. He wanted to see inside my head. Did see inside my head.”

My voice became quiet. “He wanted to see the wars. The…the utter destruction of them. He wanted to see the weapons, the techniques, everything. And—and he would have, but…” I briefly lifted my left palm up and wagged all five fingers. “I cleansed him from my head, thanks to the droplet. But he had me for so long that, um, his touch…”

I cradled my left hand in the other, pressing on the cold fingers. “It lingers on me. Even back on my world, I couldn’t shake the cold. Don’t think I ever will. It’s just a reminder of how…strong he is. How strong he will become.”

“You looked upon him?” Fili whispered as though he couldn’t quite catch his breath. “You saw him in all his darkness?”

“Mm. Yeah. It…” Tears sprung to my eyes. “It was so bad. Oh my gosh, it was so bad. Bard had heard the conversation Smaug had with me in Lake-town. He…he spoke of how he was going to take me to the Dark Lord and whatnot, how others like me had slipped past them before. Which, by the way, Bard knows about where I’m from. Not sure if I told anyone that.” I sniffed and blinked to rid the world of a bleary film. “Bard told me that I’d be better off killing myself than facing the Dark Lord. I honestly…I mean, I can’t die, for one—or at least I couldn’t die—not so sure about that now. But…but I’ve seen a lot of evil things in my time. A lot of very bad people and very bad places. He, he was by far the worst thing I have ever encountered and then multiply that by a million.

“I figure I’ll probably meet him again or one of the Nazgul if I have longevity like Amelie. Maybe it’ll prepare me. Either way: shit, man.”

I drained the rest of my cup. The abrupt intensity of the drink made me cough a little. Fili leaned over to refill it.

“But whatever, right? It’s not going to be for a little while. We can prepare in the meantime and enjoy everything that you’ve taken back.”

“That we have taken back,” Fili mildly corrected. I faintly smiled at him.

When I tucked some hair behind my ear, I brushed against the silver clasp. “Okay. Last thing before we get into any major questions. This…um, this was new. I didn’t expect it, you know? But honestly, it all worked out. Okay. So. First of all, this droplet here is from Varda. No big deal, makes sense that both Amelie and I have one, we’re from outer space after all, and that’s Varda’s whole thing. Don’t know if anybody made that connection.”

“Mm. Balin mentioned it once or twice,” said Thorin. He had pulled out his pipe and absently smoked on it. “He had his suspicions. Oin and Gloin are quite nearly obsessed with their portents and prophecies and magics, too, and they concurred with him. The cleansing properties it possesses are akin to the powers of Gilthoniel. How poetic,” he mused, “that you should bear her gift.”
“It’s not lost on me,” I sighed. “And besides, I’m too afraid to take it out now. Remember when I ripped it out of my hand after that barrel ride? And it had all those icky tendrils like some parasite? No offense Varda, it’s not a parasite, it just looked like one.”

“Yes, I remember,” Thorin said, wincing the same way he did when he watched me yank the droplet out with all its legs. “No doubt that it has spread through your body. Detaching it would cause you serious harm.”

“That’s what I think. But it’s all good. Tahir said she’d help me learn how to use its power better. Then maybe one day I can go all Thor on an army like she did.” I tilted my head up. “And then there was, oh, there was Nienna, but that was only a comforting dream. What I think will really matter to you is the other Valar that has, uh, interfaced with me. That’s the point I’ve been trying to get at.

“When I came back here, somebody was waiting for me before I could trek to the mountain.”

I lightly winced and cringed back into my chair. “It…it was Mahal.”

Thorin choked on his pipe smoke and broke down into ragged coughs. Fili astral projected into space or whatever for a few seconds before being violently shoved back into his own body. I tentatively sipped on my drink.

“M…Mahal?” Fili sputtered. “How—what—how in all of Yavanna’s good green earth could you fail to mention that you met Mahal?”

“There just wasn’t a good time!” I whined.

“That is what you always say!”

“Because there isn’t! But, speaking of Yavanna, I gave Mahal some habanero seeds for her—”

“Oh, so you touched him? Mahal? Mahal, Valeria.” Fili stood up and filled up Thorin’s empty cup so he could get his coughs under control. After, he began pacing the room. I stiffened and shrank further down. “Mahal,” he muttered as an expression, then let out a mirthless laugh and waved a hand about. “Mahal! Quite literally!”

I let out a closed-mouthed scream. “Do you want to hear what happened or not!”

“Of course I do! Bah!” Fili stalked back over to his chair and forcefully sat down. Thorin recovered from his coughing spell; it was probably a good thing he couldn’t talk because then Fili would have another dwarf on his team to shout at me.

I raised my eyebrows at him. He grumbled and whipped out his own pipe to discontentedly smoke its contents. He wanted to show me just how disgruntled he was, but they both let me continue.

“Long story short, he just wanted to say hi and give me a hard time about coming back even though I had the choice to stay. He was the one who said I messed up a few prophecies, but he also basically said that I wasn’t, like, going to be struck down for interfering.” I slowed my talking and took a breath. “We didn’t have a long conversation. He came to warn me of what was coming and remind me what I hold. He also basically told me he loved me and that you’re lucky I’m around.”

Fili gave me a flat stare. “Oh? Were those his exact words, Ria?”

“Exactly, Fili. Exactly.”
He begrudgingly smiled. I winked at him and got back to the conversation.

“Mahal warned about the dark future ahead. He told me not to forget I was strong. Strong like the dwarves.” I smirked. “Then he said that even though his gift couldn’t compare to the one I already had, he thought it’d help me out. Then he smooched me on the forehead, and, and, shit, I can’t even begin to describe what it felt like. Like I was the land itself.”

I shrugged nonchalantly. “And, hey, the gift has worked out well. I can see in the dark like a dwarf, now, and I don’t need to spend time learning your language. I’m all set, baby!”

“You can see in the dark?” asked Fili. I made a face at him.

“Uh, yeah, you haven’t noticed how I’ve literally just been walking around in our room without light?”

“I thought you saw by the light of the fire.”

“The fire is basically out by morning, Fili.”

He puffed on his pipe a few times before muttering, “I…did not take that into consideration.”

I grinned at the sight of him. “Mahal was cool-looking. His eyes were the color of a forge. He…he looked like a blacksmith.” To Thorin, I smiled, “I guess he thought it was important for me to see him that way.”

Thorin didn’t smile back, but something in him silently brightened.

I threw a hand up. “Alright! That’s all the preliminary stuff I got. Follow-up questions about the fate of the world and the Valar, please! We’ve got all night. Also…” I started giggling, unable to help myself. I even slapped my leg like my dad when he thought he was too funny. “Before we forget—remember how I kicked Dain in the face?”

Chapter End Notes

This turned into a much longer chapter than I previously anticipated. But hey, Mahal’s gift was finally revealed. I hope you guys enjoyed it!

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