In Sickness and in Health, In Light and in Darkness

by HereThereAndNowhere

Summary

A young woman drank one too many glasses of wine at a party and promptly made a bet, which resulted in her finding herself in the middle of the forest, playing a role in a passion-project movie about elves and stuff. She then apparently got drugged until she started to hallucinate about silver does and have delusions of her fake ears turning feeling pain. She somehow found her way to an isolated far removed place where she got surrounded by a bunch of strange people, wearing weird clothes, unified by a single accessory - the long pointed ears. Apparently with a leader whom they call ‘the King’.

There was only one conclusion left to make. She got abducted by a cult.

Notes

I was sitting there and thinking that I should probably brush the dust off my writing skills, but then I realized that I haven't written an actual thing in my life save for some writing assignments years ago, so it probably doesn't even count. How did I become known as a 'person who writes and stuff' is far beyond me. So then this story is my attempt to find out whether I have any writing skills to begin with. Plus I'm not a native english speaker. Therefore, any constructive feedback is more than welcomed. I'm atalking like I believe anyone will read this, but I really don't. Seriously, if you have anything at all to say or any tips, feel free to tell me. You won't hurt my feelings or anything. I'm not taking this story too seriously.

Takes place post the Hobbit movies.
The saying was proven to be true. You truly do manage to learn at least one new thing each and every day of your existence. For example, today was the day when one particular one young woman had learned that for all intents and purposes, making any bets while being in a state of absolute drunkenness was quite an abysmal idea.

Although, some would argue that getting absolutely drunk was not such a stellar idea in the first place. For the most part she would agree. She was never the one to seek out a lifestyle of partying and alcohol had never had the same allure to her as it had to some of her peers. Not that she ever had anything against it. She had absolutely no problems with alcohol, parties or people who preferred any or both of the activities. She had simply preferred other ways of spending her leisure time. The little she had, being in her senior year of university and having to write a thesis, the task, which in theory she should have dedicated all of this and a large part of the previous year to be occupied with, but, as it often happens, had left untouched until the deadline peaked its ugly head over the horizon and stared at her with its doom-filled eyes.

In other words, she had experienced a few rather stressful months full of sleepless nights and by the end of it felt that some relaxation was long overdue. Therefore, during the graduation party she had allowed herself a glass of wine. Then another. And one more…

Not that she intended to get drunk. She definitely didn’t set it as one of the night’s goals. The wine was just… good. It was good. Probably expensive and somewhat unexpected at such an event, since the average budget of a recent university graduate didn’t exactly allow for such expensive beverages. It would be a waste of opportunity not to enjoy it while she could.

And did she ever enjoy it.

Before our heroine knew it, she was already heading towards the karaoke machine, utterly convinced in her ability to take that high note. The fact that she was by no means a singer and the last time she had anything to do with music was way back in elementary school, during the voluntarily enforced try-outs for the school choir, had not diminished her determination by the slightest bit. Quite the opposite. She was so convinced in her abilities that she had made a bet. The bet. The one which she had blissfully forgotten once her alcohol affected mind gave in to sleep. Fortunately in her own bed and with no strangers beside her.

Unfortunately, though, the other party which took part in the betting process had not forgotten and wasted no time in presenting full details of the arrangement.

This is exactly where we find her. In the middle of the forest, surrounded by people she had spent years studying with, but barely knew the names of, wearing hair extensions and an elaborate outfit which was simultaneously tight and had several unnecessary flowing parts which served no other purpose than to obstruct her every movement in each and every way possible. Oh, and the fake ears. Don’t forget the fake ears.

Apparently she had agreed to play the role of an elven maiden in the valedictorian’s passion-project, which was to be a short movie about some elves doing… things. In a forest. A huge forest located on the outskirts of human civilization. Because none of the several parks or the cosy little grove within the city limits were apparently not good enough. The setting required tall pine trees covered in moss with ominous branches hanging all around, as if they were in some kind of challenge to scratch as many human faces as possible. Although, to be fair, humans were not
supposed to be there in the first place, and that was possibly the point of the branches.

The movie script was not yet fully read by our heroine, nor was it really supposed to be, since today was a day dedicated to a costume testing photo-shoot and no actual acting was supposed to take place anyway. Besides, she was told that her only role would be just to be tied to a tree and look distressed, not unlike few of the other fairy-tale damsels.

Her costume was not exactly terrible to look at. It was visually pleasing, actually, and likely was also fairly expensive. The seam work seemed nice, sturdy, yet elegant stitching. The fabric was also pleasing to the touch and didn’t feel or look cheap. She would definitely enjoy looking at the digitally re-touched photos of someone modelling it, but being dressed in it herself, she couldn’t say that the experience was at all enjoyable.

Overall, she wasn’t comfortable in her current position.

Let’s start from the less egregious parts. The make-up, for example, was fine. It was not heavy or excessive. Just a few touches here and there to boost up the flattering features and to hide a blemish or two, which, despite all of her best efforts at skin care, had found their way to her face. Some eye-shadows, some lipstick, powder, concealer… nothing she wouldn’t apply herself in case of visiting an event where she aspired to appear presentable.

The lenses she had managed to argue her way out of. Not that she considered her natural grey eye colour, reminiscent of some dusty asphalt, rather than the glittering silver, to be the epitome of eye-colour beauty, but the idea of things being put into her eyes had caused an immense amount of aversion, to which the winning party of the bet turned out to be fully sympathetic and the loser was spared the unpleasant experience.

The hair extensions were where it all started to go downhill. It was bad enough that she had to dye her own hair. The colour of drought-exhausted barley was apparently not good enough for a lady of some elven origin. It had to be changed to a weird mixture of gold end silver, which had probably never at any pint in history had existed on an actual human being. But elves weren’t humans and that was exactly the point. But simply dyeing her hair has proven to be not enough. Her shoulder-length hair was obviously not the length a respectable Elven Lady should possess, it had to at least reach her waist. Extensions had to be attached to her scalp. She tried to argue, but due to the lack of a complain similar to one she had with the lenses, the argument was lost. She didn’t have to pay for the procedure, at least. The amateur film crew had an aspiring hair stylist and needed someone to practice on anyway. The stylist did a decent job and the extensions were of a decent quality. It was the sensation that the future elf-maiden acquired afterwards. The sensation of having the extensions on her head was not that bad in itself, it didn’t hurt or itch, she was simply… aware. She was aware that the extensions were there, which made her want to constantly touch her head, examining the source of this new feeling. Which she couldn’t do, due to her hair being elaborately styled into something which demonstrating her forehead and the ears.

Those damn ears. Whatever discomfort she gained from the hair extensions was nothing compared to the ears. Those horrendous pointy ears glued to her actual flesh ones. Who knew what they were made of and how difficult it would be to detach those wretched things. Fairly difficult, she would assume, since attaching them took a considerable amount of time and effort. They ended up being attached seamlessly and matched her personal shade of ‘I-spend-all-day-watching-tv-series-instead-of-going-out-in-the-sun’ skin colour perfectly. The ears looked like they had always been there, as if they were a completely natural part of her body and nothing could have annoyed her more. Who in their right mind would actually want to have giant pointed ears. Who?

Well, a whole lot of people, apparently, probably most of the people surrounding her right now. But she was not one of them, which was enough to get her annoyed at the silly fake ears.
The outfit… oh, he outfit. The knee high boots and leggings, made from a fabric heavily resembling leather in appearance, but lighter and far more comfortable to move in, she did not, at all, mind. But the weird hybrid of a trench coat and a tunic, sticking to her body far too close for comfort and an actual leather corset were eerily close to being unbearable. Topple that with a heavy silver velvet cloak and you have yourself an epitome of discomfort. The clothes were tight and heavy, she was hot, sweating and balancing on the thin border of having difficulty breathing. To add to her misery, due to having heavy and obstructing clothes she was starting to feel the dull pain in her upper arms, akin to the one one would feel after carrying a heavy bag for an entire day without a rest.

To finish the ever-growing list of complaints, the forest was far from an ideal setting. There were bugs, lack of basic hygiene venues, insects, nowhere to sit since it had rained the day before and the ground was still damp, spiders, bad phone reception and non-existent internet connection leading to no way of occupying herself while she waited for the cameras and lighting to be set up and adjusted, spiders, being in a complete outsider in a group of people who, if not friends, at least shared common interests, spiders…

The newly made elven maiden took a few steps away from the tree she was standing next to once she had noticed a particularly large eight-legged monstrosity hanging from one of it’s branches. The thing was huge and with it’s legs would likely stretch to the size of her fist, with which it should have been crushed, for committing with the sheer fact of it’s wretched existence a grave crime against the very notion of beauty itself. Alas, the damned creature was spared it’s fate, for which it had to thank the impenetrable armour of fear and disgust, repelling quite the large percentage of the human population and ensuring the survival of the eight-legged species.

She sighed, scratching her fake ear. Why was it that all the nice and pretty creatures of the forest, such as bushy-tailed squirrels and frolicking bunnies would not approach her out of fear of humans and the creatures that would approached her were the ones that she herself was afraid of. Such as that tree spider. Or the one on that stump. Or the one crawling up her leg…

With a shrill yelp the would-be actress shook her limb in a futile attempt to get rid of the arachnid offender and once that didn’t help, she hit her leg among the tree to put an end to the spider and it’s undesirable behaviour once and for all. It helped and the pretend-elf hurried to flee from the crime scene in fear of being attacked by the vengeful spider army, carrying their wrath upon the one who had dared to slay their kin.

She hadn’t noticed she was moving further into the forest, straying away from the group of people she had arrived here with. Despite not having moved too far away and the fact that she was still able to hear their voices and see the lights of the projectors, the bet sore loser decided not to head any further. Obviously the spider density only increased deeper into the forest and it wasn’t like she had any business to do among the darkness of the pine trees anyway. There was nothing to see there, save for a few brightly coloured amanita mushrooms, pretty enough to be taken a few photos of, which she would have proceeded to do, if she hadn’t left her phone in the car, together with her regular clothes. She decided to fetch her phone and take the photos, after all, she could not imagine all twelve of her online followers not being interested in such quality content.

Some ten minutes later photos were taken from every angle imaginable and it was nearing the time when she herself, among a few others, was to be subjected to a photo shoot. She took a step towards the camp but was stopped in her tracks by the rustling of the branches behind her. While being the kind of person who had always commented on the stupidity of each and every horror-movie protagonist and therefore, if she were to see a similar setting on a silver screen the would-be elven maiden would snort at how the correct course of actions upon hearing a weird noise in the middle of the forest would be to run towards the nearest group of people. She didn’t follow her
own hypothetical advice and proceeded with turning around. It was done completely on instinct, before she could register what she was doing.

She turned around and…

The time stood still. The birds stopped singing and the wind stopped rustling the tree brunches. There was no sound or movement and the colours of the world had dulled in their shame of not being able to compare to that which stood before the young woman.

In that moment she saw the sight which made all the air leave her lungs in a single sigh. It was… no. It was not beautiful. For the simple word ‘beauty’ was incapable of encompassing all the breathtaking magnificence of the creature presenting itself before her.

It was a doe. A petite creature of pure grace and elegance. If asked to describe the creature, the mesmerized elven-maiden would assert that the animal had fur of silver, except it wasn’t quite the case. It’s fur was definitely not silver. Perhaps, calling it simply silver would almost be an insult. The animal’s fur, if the strange creature even was an animal, was made of the purest radiating light, which made the dust speckles floating in the air around shimmer, as if they were tiny stars orbiting a celestial body. Ethereal.

The creature was absolutely ethereal and completely non-belonging to the world the young woman lived in.

It was so strange. The logical part of her mind was fully aware that what she was seeing wasn’t supposed to be there. That she shouldn’t be seeing it unless she was asleep or had, maybe, enjoyed the mushrooms growing in the forest in more ways than purely aesthetic. Surely, being made aware of her condition, be it sleep or something less natural, would prompt her to come back to reality and regain her senses.

But she didn’t wake up, though. She continued staring at the doe with a gaping mouth, unaware of any other object or sound in her surrounding.

Even more strange, she felt… at peace. As if what was happening should have been happening. As if she was waiting for it to happen for a very very long time and had finally, finally reached the destination she had no idea she was longing for her entire life and possibly even longer. It was as if she was in a trance.

The doe took a step away. The elf-maiden took a step forward. Two steps away. Two steps forward.

Her dazed mind didn’t manage to register how long the ritual continued until the moment the doe took off suddenly and, with a speed not allowing the pretend-elf to even manage to blink, it disappeared from her sight.

The peace and tranquillity were gone as soon as the last spark of silvery light had perished behind the thick rows of trees. The young woman found herself in the darkness of the forest, lost, confused and completely alone.

The fear, of course, wasted no time before setting in.

It was dark. The trees were dense and tall, tall enough to cover the sky with their branches. Or was it the night-time already? How long did she follow the doe for? Why did she even follow the doe? Was that an actual doe? Immediately, the countless stories she heard as a child of evil witches and will-of-the-wisps waiting behind every rotting moss-covered stump to abduct unsuspecting young
maidens who had the misfortune to venture too far into the forest had surfaced in her mind.

She was no longer a child, however. She was a rational adult, a university graduate, for goodness sake!

She took a deep breath. And then another. Surely the others would soon notice her missing, if they hadn’t already. It was highly unlikely she strayed away that far from the rest of the company. They would search for her. Yes, yes, of course they would. She were to hear their voices at any moment.

Although, it would probably wiser for her to yell first. Maybe they were close and would hear her immediately.

She hesitated.

What if her yelling didn’t attract her companions, what if it attracted something else, like…

Focus! Focus.

There was nothing else to attract. There was not.

But if the silver does existed, what else could…

Nothing. Nothing else existed, along with shining silver does, who most definitely didn’t exist. It’s just that the corset was too tight. She had her breathing obstructed for hours. It caused her to… to hallucinate the creature.

Yes. Indeed. Most likely. Her air deprived brain must have sent her the vision. That must be it.

She took one more breath. Being able to rationalize what had happened had helped her to calm down, at least a little.

That was when she became aware of the object she was clutching in her hands. Her phone.

Her phone. Her wonderful, wonderful phone. She retrieved it from the car to take pictures of the amanitas and it was still with her. The elven maiden mentally praised the mushrooms. The phone had no reception, of course. But it already had none when her position was closer to the edge of the forest, it would be far more unlikely to have the signal in the heart of it.

However she would still be able to tell the time and switch on the built-in lantern which, luckily, this particular phone model had.

The distressed maiden switched on the gadget and frowned. The charge was uncomfortably low, far less than a half full and the time… according to her phone she had been wandering for hours. A few solid hours with no human voices calling for her.

Nervous, she took a strand of her hair between her fingers and fidgeted it, while biting her lip.


The phone charge was precious, yet she needed the light, even if for a few moments. She switched on the built-in light, which in her previous experience she had only used to retrieve small objects that one way or another ended up underneath her bed.

So, the surroundings.

spider…

Nothing.

There was not a single thing which could give her even the slightest of hints at which direction to move towards in order to come by anything resembling human civilization in any way shape or form.

Nothing. Nothing. Not a thing. At all.

Switching off the light would probably be the wiser course of action, but she just couldn’t bring herself to do it. It was already eating up the little that was left of the phone charge. Moreover, the lack of light would hide the spiders.

She couldn’t do it, still.

The young woman pulled up the hood of her cloak, for the first time thankful for having that particular piece of clothing on her. First, she did not want to end up with a spider in her hair. Second, it provided the warmth, more than necessary in the middle of a deep dark forest. Third, she wanted to regain at least the smallest speck of comfort, the feeling of being in a shelter of some sorts.

Her hands were shaking. She realized that they were doing so for quite some time now, it was just that only now she became aware of it.

What do they say? The moss grows on the northern side of the tree? Or was it southern? Doesn’t matter. That information was completely useless. Even if she knew which side the moss preferred, it would have been utterly useless. As far as she could see, the moss around here surrounded the trees from all of their sides equally. And it wasn’t like she knew which direction would lead her to people and which would leave her deeper into the forest in the first place.

It was a deep forest. Deep enough to have a few people go missing in recent…

No. Nope. No and no.

It wasn’t the place nor was it the time for such thoughts. She needed her head as clear as it was possible, given the circumstances.

She needed to decide how to proceed.

Climbing one of the trees and looking for the right direction? A good idea. The best idea. Save for the fact that it was rendered undoable by her utter inability to climb trees.

To try and navigate her way through the forest, risking walking in circles until she was so deep that her skeletal remains would only be found only several decades later?

Stay in the same spot and face the gruesome reality of possibly freezing or starving to death until her skeletal remains… Well, you get the idea.

She decided to walk, at least a bit in every direction and yell. She yelled and yelled until her vocal cords could produce nothing but a strained wheezing. She tried the ‘hello’ and ‘please’, ‘anyone’, ‘someone’, ‘somebody’, ‘guys’, ‘people’, all the names of her companions, ‘mom’, ‘dad’ and out of sheer desperation, the name of her childhood pet bunny.

No one responded. Not even the bunny.

Her throat ached from yelling and a swelling lump, accompanied by the burning sensation in her
eyes.

She gasped for air and heard her own pathetic cry. The light of her phone had flickered for that one last time and disappeared, together with the last remains of the phone charge.

With shaking hands she clutched the still-warm gadget to her chest, no longer able to control the tears or the sobbing which shook her entire body.

The miserable elven-maiden fell on the damp ground and cried. She cried, cursing herself, the alcohol, the bet, the entire genre of fantasy… She cried, not giving any awareness to her surroundings until she heard the concerned:

“Are you okay?”

The silver-clad eleven maiden raised up her swollen red face and saw… another female, tall, with the longest red hair, a beautiful face, dressed in an outfit of brown leather and green fabric. And the same long pointed ears.

“Are you hurt?” not getting an answer, the red-haired maiden asked another question.

The one sitting on the ground shook her head, making the hood fall down and exposing her own fake oversized ears in the process. She couldn’t care less at that moment, overwhelmed with the sheer relief of seeing another human being. Even if it was one dressed as an elf, much like herself.

Suddenly, even the forest didn’t seem so dark. She could see the sunlight seeping through the thick branches and hear the singing of the birds. A bug flying around here and there. The distant roar of a running river. The air became warmer and the smell of dampness and rotting leaves did no longer attack her nose-trills. She couldn’t immediately recognize the red-head, but if the beauty-gurus on the world wide were to be believed, a professionally applied layer of make-up could easily create a completely new face, add a wig and you have a completely unrecognizable person. After all, what were the chances of stumbling upon another group of elf-pretenders in the same forest during the same day.

If it was the same day, that is. The aching of her feet clearly indicated that her wandering through the forest might have taken up longer than she hoped it did.

The lost elf-maiden had almost completely calmed down, but a few remaining tears still sled down her cheeks.

The red-head kneeled besides her and put a sympathetic hand on the crying blonde’s shoulder.

“What have you lost someone in the battle?” she asked in a quiet and heartbreakingly sad voice, having the same emotion mirrored in her eyes.

It sounded so… genuine. The question, the voice, the expression on the green-clad maiden’s face.

Was she a professional actress? Was it the part of the scenario which the lost young woman had neglected to read?

The one still hiding under the silver cloak shook her head once more, slowly getting confused and frustrated. She had been lost in the damn forest for hours, desperately searching for any trace of human presence and those… those fantasy genre aficionados were not only not looking for her, they had the audacity to continue with their little play.

“I got lost” she tried to shout channelling her anger, but the hours she had spent yelling in the forest
made it sound like a sad weakened and in every way pathetic yelp.

“Lost? You’re not from Mirkwood, are you? I would recognize your face. Lothlorien, perhaps? There were no reports of any elves living in the Lake Town…” the red-head elven maiden mused as she stood up.

The one with silvery-golden hair followed the movement, her body trembling with exhaustion in equal parts as it was shaking with anger.

“Enough with the elf stuff you obsessed weirdos!” this time even her hoarse voice was able to reflect the sparks of anger burning bright in her heart.

At the sudden outburst, the red-head reached behind her back, her hand grabbing the air and not quite finding whatever was supposed to be there. With a frown on her face she took a step back, her muscles tensed in case the situation was to escalate.

“What is the meaning…?” she started, but was interrupted by the continuation of the angry tirade.

“I was lost in the stupid forest for who knows how long not knowing if I would ever be able to find someone. I might have died there! And you just continue to frolic around the forest in your stupid costumes and with your stupid fake ears! Screw the bet, I’m not going to take part in this any longer!”

It was enough. She had reached her limit. What kind of people did she accidentally associate herself with? Who could have so little regard for another human’s life? Sure, they weren’t really friends before the whole ordeal. They could be barely claim to be acquaintances. But they were not enemies, their relationship were completely neutral. There was absolutely no conflict or confrontation during all the years of studying together at the university. Nothing that would prompt revenge of any sorts. Even though she never was into whole dress up and elves thing, she had never, at any point, expressed any disdain for people who were. She had never scrutinized the hobby or those who choose to partake in it. She might not have been the most enthusiastic in their pretend-fantasy, purely due to the fact that it simply wasn’t her thing, but in what kind of mind would that be enough to earn such level of indifference towards another’s life? A twisted, horribly twisted mind that she wanted nothing to do with.

In all of her anger, frustration and disdain for all things elven, she dug her nails into one of her fake ears and yanked as hard as she could manage.

A cry full of pain had echoed through the forest.

The silver haired maiden slowly navigated her shaking hand to her eye level, taking large breaths in the process.

Blood. There was blood on her hand. Blood on her hand and burning pain in her left ear, the one she tried to tear off.

That… that couldn’t be right.

She touched the part of her ear that was supposed to be fake and felt the cold sensation of her own trembling fingers on the now throbbing ear.

She examined her hand again.

More blood.

Her ear was most definitely bleeding. Her ear. Her fake ear. Her fake ear was bleeding.
Nausea. She felt nausea, which was soon followed by some prominent head spinning. The blonde woman blinked in confusion. She saw the blur of the surrounding trees, the simultaneously worried and horrified expression on the red-head’s face, whom the blonde completely forgot was even there… she barely got the chance to register the darkness enveloping her vision, for she had lost her consciousness in a single shred of a moment, way before she could feel the impact of her body hitting the ground, absent-mindedly hoping that the screen of her phone, still clutched in her clean hand, would not be cracked in the process.
When The Battle Ends

Chapter Notes

'I just need a small paragraph about Thranduil in the aftermath of the battle' I thought and this happened.
First things first. In little writing that I did in the past I was often pointed that I tend to go dark and depressing. Personally, I don't see it that way, but I'm the type of person who listens to feedback.

Therefore I feel the need to write some sort of Disclaimer/Warning. This chapter might be dark and depressing, especially by the end. Read at your own discretion.

As for Thranduil, the ruler of the Woodland Realm, the last few days, or, at this point it could be said weeks, after returning from the Lonely Mountain were exhausting, draining and trying, more so than the battle itself. During the actual combat, at least, there were only two things to focus on. Killing the enemy and, well, not getting killed yourself. The aftermath, however, hit harder, for it didn’t just target the body, it came for ones mind.

Plenty of things were to be taken care of after returning from the campaign. There were injured soldiers to be heal and dead to be mourned, resources to be replenished and army to be reorganized to account for the losses, reports to write and a new chapter to be entered into the history books.

None of it, of course, could be compared with the burden of bearing the news that parents, children, siblings, family members, lovers and friends wont be coming home. Not now, not ever. This time, at least, there were no orphaned elflings.

A true blessing for anyone whose mind was not hard wired to think in terms of long-term politics, thus capable ignoring the implications. Of course no one in their right mind would ever want a small child to lose their parents. No one in their right mind would want anyone to lose anyone. However, in a society where the majority of its adult population were capable of wielding weapons and readily took arms on first command, the absence of orphans in the wake of a blood-spilling battle could only mean one very particular thing.

There were not any children to be orphaned.

Usually, not having many elflings in the kingdom wouldn’t be that big of a problem. Being a race of immortals capable of controlling their own reproduction the elves took issue of having offspring with all the due diligence that it required. On average, elves families had multiple children during their lifetime on Middle Earth, but it often took years, sometimes even centuries, between the first child and the second. The third and the forth were when most families felt the notion of being complete. The young elf would often be at the verge of their adulthood, often even past that, when their next sibling came into the world. It would arise the problem of young elflings being lonely, with no peers to participate in games suitable for their age. That was exactly the reason why most of the elven families coordinated their child bearings.

In other words, elven generations came in waves. As it often happens, the youngest and the least experienced generation has recently suffered a considerable loss. Having so many from the
generation of potential parents dead meant that the wound left in the Mirkwoods population had little to no chances of healing for the time when...

Thranduil let out a heavy sigh, closing the door behind him. Finally alone in his private chambers the king simply stood there leaning on the closed door, eyes closed, not finding it in himself to move or, for a brief moment, even think. Something he was sincerely grateful for, even if he knew it wouldn’t last.

The problems kept piling up and new issuers arose from the places least expected, gathering together and forming one grotesque behemoth, loud, terrifying and unmanageable, that grinned viciously while licking its crooked sharp teeth, ready to swallow the Elven King whole.

In a short moment of weakness, the king wished for the monster to be real, so that it would just bite his head off and leave someone else to deal with everything. Alas, the beast was not there, as wasn’t there anyone else to take the burden from Thranduil’s shoulders.

The king would have to deal with everything by himself. He would. Tomorrow, he would. But not today. Not when the very last of his remaining energy was barely enough to keep his body from giving up to the pressure and loosing the grip on his already dimmed fea.

Gathering what little strength he still had the king crossed his bedroom to where, on a small pedestal, stood a sculptured bust and pressed his forehead to that belonging to the marble likeness of his late wife.

There were never enough healers to timely provide the help required in a wake of a battle, every pair of hands counted. Thranduil eagerly assisted in the healing wing, due to his sense of duty as a king, guilt for leading his people into a conflict, and compassion, natural to all elves. Most of his elven magic was now gone and it would likely be long months before it’s replenish enough to support his already failing eyesight. His left eye was burned on the spot, stolen forever by the dragon’s flame, the same one that turned half of his body into something visually similar to that, which, if seen in a dream, would hinder the person’s chances of waking up. His right eye, however, suffered a lesser damage and it wouldn’t ever heal completely, allowed Thranduil to see.

It had never been a major problem. Not when he was younger and his fea was not yet as worn out by wars and losses as it was now. Not when magic surged through his body like blood through veins. Not when the forest was healthy and ripe with life on its own, when it still known as Greenwood.

In later years, Thranduil could count less days spent in the light and more of those in the dark. He had to prioritize which tasks relied on him being in control of his eyesight and which could do without it, for if he was reckless and used far too much of his magic, he risked to finding himself surrounded by darkness for a long time to come. As it happened now. Only now he was hardly being reckless, he was more than aware of the consequences.

Thranduil had simply deemed the ends to justify the needs.

They ended up no to.

Bur the price was still to be paid.

Thank Eru, keeping the illusion, at least on his face, required bare minimum of the elven magic. As for the eyesight…

Thranduil knew the darkness was waiting for him and if he were to spend the next months barred
of the ability to see he preferred it to be the queen’s face to be the last of what he saw.

The king gently traced the cold marble with his long pale fingers, a familiar movement, almost a ritual. He had stood there on the same spot and performing the same action for so many times in the preceding years, decades and centuries that even blindfolded he would be able to recreate the sculpture perfectly.

Not that blindfold would be needed.

Thranduil remained standing there, concentrated on simply breathing, until his legs could no longer hold him and by the weakness of his own body he was forced to retreat to his bed, on which he then collapsed.

It hurt.

The broken ribs and the neck fracture which the king received when falling from his now deceased mount. He knew that a healer’s song, or even a remedy, would lessen the pain. But the injuries were far from life threatening and the pain was not yet unbearable. The healers had much on their hands as it was. Thranduil knew that like no other, for he had personally participated in healing the wounded until his magic was no more.

For now, breathing slowly and not as deep would have to suffice to lessen his suffering.

The king closed his eyes and allowed the darkness to take the reigns.

It didn’t make him wait and as soon as his eyelids closed the elven monarch felt the heavy pressure on his chest.

‘How was your day?’ the Darkness sang, its voice dripping with honey, which Thranduil knew all too well was spiked with poison.

‘Perhaps you would like to tell me how bearing the news went?’ the creature mused ‘How does it feel, to look a mother in the eyes and tell the poor elleth that her son will not be coming home? And that you are the one to blame?’

It was a familiar routine and having gone through it for as many times as he did, Thranduil knew what the creature wanted and ignored its stabs. For as long as he could, at least.

‘That poor, poor elleth. Does she have anyone left? No? No one? At all? She is probably going to sail to the Undying Lands soon. Many of them will’ the thing continued in a sing-song manner ‘How soon, I wonder, will the Great Woodland Realm turn into a kingdom of nobody?’

The king greeted his teeth.

‘Not very talkative I see’ there were now notes of mocking in the creature’s voice ‘Well, no wonder your son has left then’

His arm twitched. Sensing the success of its attempt to find an opening, the Darkness latched on to the topic of the runaway prince.

‘It was very wise of you to send Legolas to Rivendel, you know’ a fake compliment to make the blow so much more harsh ‘The poor boy might finally learn what an actual caring father looks like by observing Elrond with his children’
Thranduil felt his nails dig into the flesh of his palms. Of course he cared about Legolas, there could be no doubt.

‘You care for him, really? Well, you’ve definitely chosen a unique way of showing it by ignoring your son’s needs and opinions for centuries now’ the creature no longer tried to hide the mocking

‘Remember how the little elfling came to you with his fairy-tale book asking you to read him a bedtime story? What did you answer? Ah, that’s right. You’ve said you were busy. Far too busy drinking and feeling sorry for yourself, wasn’t it?’

It wasn’t. He had reports to go through and…

‘Well, that time maybe. But what about the time you’ve missed his archery tournament? The boy was working so hard on his skill’

Trading agreements. He really wanted to attend, but it was crucial to ensure…

‘Oh! Here’s a good one! Remember his first successful orc raid? The excitement on his face! The joy shining bright in his eyes! How much he had anticipated his father to finally acknowledge his achievements, to be at long last proud of him! Care to remind me of your response?’

Thranduil groaned, well aware of where it was going.

‘That’s right. You’ve scolded him for insubordination and leaving the premises of the palace without his jailer’s, I’m sorry, without your permission’

Legolas was still far too young to hunt orcs when that happened. He was simply worried about his son’s well-being.

‘And I’m sure Legolas knew that this was your actual intent after you’ve carefully explained it to him instead of sending the boy to his room, making him believe that his father has no faith what so ever in his abilities. Just brushing him away. Like you usually tend to do’

The blow had finally hit the target and the creature laughed triumphantly reaching it’s clawed hand to it’s prize.

‘I know. I know. You didn’t want Legolas to suffer the same fate as your wife. Losing her was really hard on you. By the way... Have you ever thought that it might have been hard on your son as well, hm?’

Legolas was too young when…

‘Right. Right. She died before Legolas was old enough to properly meet her and feel her loss the way you did. Did he really deserve to be punished for it’

What?

‘You’ve deprived your son of any chance to ever know his mother. You’ve ordered to destroy almost all of her likenesses save for the one you’ve left for you and you alone. You’ve removed any writing mentioning her from the library. You’ve forbidden anyone from ever mentioning her name...’

That wasn’t why. It simply hurt to…

‘It hurt you to be reminded of her. It hurt you. You. You. How your actions might’ve hurt your son you’ve never bothered to even think. Because why bother, right? When did anyone’s but your
own feelings ever mattered? You’re the king. You’re the only one important. The only one whose feelings should be ever accounted for? Right?"

No.

‘No? Just no? Why am I not hearing any examples proving otherwise? Do you even have any?’

Did he?

‘You don’t. And that’s why your son left. If you asked me, I’d say it’s a miracle that he lasted here as long as he did. The boy must have a heart of gold, anyone would’ve ran away long, long ago. Although…”

Here it comes.

‘He didn’t stay for you, did he? He stayed for her? For Tauriel? Noticed how he decided to leave the moment you’ve banished her? The only person who was really there for him after he lost his mother… and father?’

The king gritted his teeth until his entire jaw hurt, realizing that the talk before was but a prelude.

‘Tell me now, did you truly believe your son had romantic feelings for that elleth or were you simply jealous?’

Jealous?

‘Jealous that your son gave up on ever getting any affection from you and moved on to search a familial bond elsewhere?’

That…

‘What? Not true? Not even a little? Don’t tell me it didn’t hurt. I know it did. I’ve been there with you. When he finally stopped trying to share his feelings and concerns with you. When she was the one whom he invited to watch his tournaments. When she was the one to whom he boasted about his achievements. When he stopped asking you to read him a story book and instead they’ve read to each other? When he stopped needing you?’

It hurt. Thranduil could hear his tormentor triumph when he felt a cold clawed hand reach his fea.

‘So tell me now, what did possess you to think that your son would continue run after you after you’ve turned away from him so many times? You do know that to receive something you should at least sometimes give something in return? Or is it one of those I’m the king I am entitled type of situations? How long did you think you’d be getting your son’s love without giving any in return?’

The king wanted to protest. He loved Legolas more than everything else in this, or any other, world. Did he really fail to…”

‘…fail to show him that. And now it’s too late’

Not too late. When Legolas returned…

‘What makes you think he will want to return? What is it here for him to return to? A kingdom where soon there will be no people left? His friend who is no longer here? His father who isn’t capable of loving anyone but himself?’

That was a lie. He was capable of…
‘I thought we’ve already established that a love hidden so deep that no one but you is aware of it existing is as good as no love at all. Or are you going to tell me now about how you love your wife? The same wife that has been dead for centuries? Is it her that you claim to love? Or is it only her memory that you keep clinging to?’

Her memory?

‘Yes. Her memory. You know how it works, don’t you? Time goes on. Certain parts of the memory fade. The bad parts, usually. You forget the fights and quarrels, the differences of opinion, the annoying little quirks. Before you know it, you have this perfect image of a person, that resembles the original in their appearance. It doesn’t require much to love a dead person, if you ask me. They don’t talk back, they don’t tell you that you’re wrong, they don’t make mistakes. They can never disappoint. Truly, that sounds like the only think you’d be capable of loving’

Lies.

‘Oh well, we’ll never know the truth. She’s gone for good now... ’

Shut up.

‘And you won’t be seeing her in Valinor or the Halls of Mandos, because...’

Shut up!

‘Was being your wife so horrible that she had...’

SHUT. UP.

‘Quit throwing a tantrum. So you don’t want to discuss your wife. Fine. We can go back to discussing Tauriel. Let’s debate on how much your own jealousy played a role in her banishment’

It didn’t. Tauriel acted...

‘Defiantly. How could I forget, you can’t stand it when someone doesn’t comply with your will at all times’

Tauriel...

‘Fell in love with a dwarf. Yes. Well, she had to get love from somewhere. Of all people you should know how miserable it is to exist when no one loves you. Tauriel only had Legolas and you’ve pretty much forbidden her to be around him. You took away the little warmth she had. Can you really blame the poor young elleth for latching on the first person who had offered her some?’

The king chuckled, humourlessly. How truly blind he was.

‘Ever considered how it was for her growing up an actual orphan? With no other living family? Imagine the hope she must’ve gotten when she learned that you were willing to take her in? Imagine that hope crushed when she learned that a lowly forest elf is not worthy enough to be loved by the members of the noble elven aristocracy. Imagine her fears and insecurities being wholly confirmed by none other than the king himself’

The realization slowly crept upon the Elven King. Did he really...
‘You did. You took a girl, down on her luck, alone, parentless and made her feel even lower. Quite literally, mind you. You’ve went out of your way to demonstrate that the High and Mighty Ruler of the Woodland Realms held anyone beneath him. The other kingdoms, undeserving of your help, your own subjects, undeserving your or your son’s presence, your own son undeserving of your attention...’

Thranduil had no more strength to protest. He listened silently as his tormentor named the long and ever growing list of his wrongdoings.

‘So tell me now, my dear king, was Tauriel really all that wrong when she’d said that you had no love in your life?’

Was she? Thranduil knew better than to listen to the creature’s words. It wasn’t the first encounter they’ve had. Not even the second. The creature was there with him for almost as long as he could remember.

His first memory of the tormentor went all the way back to when he was burning alive from the dragon inflicted wounds. He remembered the farkness whispering into his ear, reassuring that it could release him from the agony if only he would give in. He was young then and his spirit was fiercely determined on surviving. The creature stood no chance.

It, however, hurried to return when he learned that the damage done to his body would remain permanent. He remembered it gloating about how no one would be capable of looking at him without pity, that the only reason any woman would want him would be for his status and how his unfortunate future wife would have to be blindfolded during their first marital night together. If he would even be capable of... Even then fighting the creature off was a task he had fairly easily managed. It had been, perhaps, only slightly more difficult than casting an illusion to hide his deformities.

The first really hard hit came when his father, King Oropher, had fallen in battle. The weight of the entire kingdom fell on Thranduil’s shoulders when he was still relatively young and needed his father’s guidance. It came to him every night, suggesting all the ways he could make a mistake and lead the entire kingdom to it’s doom. Some of the ways were rather creative and some were rather valid concerns, he had to admit. But the newly crowned king had learned to use the creature’s whispers for his own advantage. He listened carefully to everything the creature had to say, evaluated it and determined what paths he should avoid and consequently, what paths he should take to take the Woodland Realm to it’s prosperity.

The creature once again was there with him on the docks, watching the ship his mother took to sail to Valinor disappear at the horizon. The only thing the creature had to say back then was that he wasn’t enough of a reason for her to stay. But Thranduil knew this wasn’t the case. By then he knew what love felt like and understood his mother’s reasoning, the gentle touch of his wife’s hand reminded him of that. So the creature stepped back.

When he lost his wife it came back.

It had never left since.

Thranduil could feel it’s presence wherever he went and whatever he did. There were days that were… better. The rare days when he did find time to play with Legolas, the days of celebrations when he saw his people happy and full of joy. Those days the creature didn’t approach for it knew how to pick it’s battles. It would linger in the shadows, waiting for one misstep, one wrongly said word, the tiniest of mistakes. It would be there. Gloating, painting thousands of barely realistic, but all too soul freezing consequences to every single thing that he did wrong. Each of those times Thranduil argued with the creature, pointing the improbability of the grotesque outcomes it had
suggested, coming up with strategies to counteract if some of them were to come true.

There were days when the creature’s arguments appeared uncomfortably plausible, when it came on with more strength and vigour than it had previously had.

He fought back. He had reason’s to fight back. He had his son. He had his kingdom.

His son who has now forsaken him, his kingdom in a state of decline with the Enemy rising in the horizon.

‘Do you regret the dragon’s flame not being strong enough?’

The voice was now calm, steady, almost monotonous. The question came nonchalantly, as if it was always there, from the very beginning, simply unspoken.

Yet, it had stung stronger than every other world the darkness had ever said to him before.

‘I told you, didn’t I? You should’ve given in when I first came to you. You’ve brought this on yourself. On your kingdom. On the people around you’

Thranduil felt the long dark claws dig themselves into his fea and felt his life-force crumble to the touch. He could almost see his fea crack, as if it was made of chalk, small sparkling pieces falling into the darkness and disappearing forever.

‘Imagine how many people would’ve been better off if only you had listened? Your parents would be sad for some time, yes. But they would have eventually had another child. A king needs an heir, after all. Who knows how much better of a ruler and a parent their new elfling would grow up to be’

This was the creature’s endgame all along, wasn’t it? To wear him down to the point where he could no longer retaliate. Piece by piece, grain by grain, dragging his fea into the abyss full of nothing but darkness.

‘You had so many chances to amend for your mistake. One orc arrow missed and your wife would still be here’

She would?

‘She would. Had you perished, she’d have to be the one to rule the kingdom, at least until your son would come of age, if she’d chose to later step down. She would’ve stayed inside the palace, busy with, you know, reading reports and going through trading agreements. Actually caring for her child, loving him. She’d simply have no opportunity to be taken by the orcs. The kingdom would have a wiser, kinder ruler. Legolas would have a caring, loving parent. Even Tauriel would’ve gotten a chance for a real foster family’

The creature held both of its arms around the king’s fea, marred now with cracks and crevices more intricate than the web woven by the spawns of Ungolianth.

Suddenly, the darkness no longer seemed ugly or grotesque. It’s presence did no longer make him feel disdain or anger. Gone was the pressure.

The creature’s presence felt calm, alluring, understanding…

There was something rather comforting in the idea of not needing to struggle any more. Not needing to fight or argue. To leave behind the problems.
‘My poor king’ the creature hushed ‘You’ve dealt with so much loss. You’re tired’

The weight of the millennia lived rested heavily on his mind, even if his body appeared ageless. The time might not have had an opportunity to affect the elven race physically, but it could wear out their souls and chip away at their fea right until it faded into nothingness.

‘It’s okay, you know. To want some rest. To let the others worry’

But…

‘Legolas will take care of the Woodland Realm. He is a smart and capable young elf. He will make alliances. He will strengthen the kingdom. He will have friends to have his back’

Still…

‘Come with me Thranduil. It will no longer hurt, I promise’

With everything the creature lied about throughout the millennia they’ve been together, the king knew that this time it was telling the truth.

It would no longer hurt.

If only he followed the darkness.

He… didn’t want to follow it. Not really. He knew it wouldn’t be the right thing to do. It would be cowardly to run away, to abandon his son to deal with the Enemy and the battle that would arise in the future. He had to… stay.

He had to stay and make up for… everything. To help his kingdom to recover from the recent wound. To amend the bond with his son. To… apologize to Tauriel…

There were so many things he had to do.

So many things he had no strength to do.

So many things he had to make himself do.

The things he had no strength or desire to…

The history, however, has no room for ‘what ifs’ and thus the possible outcome of the encounter the Elven King had with the Darkness that day would not become known, for their conversation was abruptly interrupted by the knocking on the door.

“My Lord” came Ferren’s familiar voice, muffled by the thick walls and the closed doors.

“What is it” the king held his voice steady, with the usual flavour of slight annoyance at being disturbed, which, perhaps, could not be farthest from the truth.

“Tauriel has returned. She claims to have urgent things to report”

Thranduil opened his now useless eyes and assumed a sitting position. The entirety of his body ached. He had to consider the dull pain his arms and legs from having little rest, the pounding in his head resulted from many sleepless nights, the sharp stabbing in his neck and spine reminding of the fall, the laboured and obstructed breathing inflicted by the broken ribs and the enormous amount of energy required to keep his posture straight.

But at that moment, the pain and the fatigue seemed to pale and lessen compared to the relief the
king felt when he felt the cold sharp claws release the grip on his fea.

That new freedom might have been what gave the king energy to stand up from his bed, even if it did make him grimace in pain.

Thranduil opened the door, presented only with pitch blackness the bright contour of his guard’s fea, for he could not at the moment see Feren’s face.

“Inform Tauriel that I will see her in my study”

“Yes, My Lord” came the courtly response, followed by the sound of footsteps.

The king sighed. The only thing left for him was to pray to Eru that whatever news Tauriel had brought, it wouldn’t add to his misery.

Chapter End Notes

Also tell me if it was dark and/or depressing. I'm not sure I understand how writing affects human emotions and whether my writing is (let me find the right word)... whether my writing is at the level where it can have an effect on people, let's put it that way. I'm legitimately interested.

Also also, the 'darkness' thing is supposed to be lying and purposely twisting the facts to make everything seem worse. It's not supposed to be how I, as an author see the situation/characters. Explaining because I have absolutely zero idea how it reads and can be perceived, really. I feel like I'm writing too much and too little at the same time. Too much because I do feel the internal need to meet the 'essay word count' and it ends up with unnecessary details, but too little because it's still not descriptive enough writing to be good/immersive. I don't know...

Maybe I just have a limited vocabulary?

Tell me of you have any thoughts.
A Place To Belong

Chapter Notes

If this isn't my crown achievement of 'it should have been a paragraph but then I got carried away' then I don't know what is. This wasn't my original plan for Tauriel at all, but the whole chapter just... wrote itself. No, really. I was beyond surprised when the thing actually went somewhere. It just happened and I decided to carry on with it, because I kind of had no alternative ideas anyway. It seems I just really wasn't sold on the Tauriel/Kili romance, so I had to reationalize the thing.

This is my version of Tauriel then. Tell me what you think.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tauriel sighed and slowly averted her gaze from the distant silhouette of the Lonely Mountain. Not since the day she had lost her parents, the only family she had or at least was aware of, had she felt so entirely and devastatingly lost.

Long gone was the proud elven posture, dim was the spark of life in her eyes. Her clothes were bloodstained and covered with dust, torn apart and cut through. There were no lightness in her movements, her shoulders hunched and the head lowered. At that moment the young elven maiden resembled nothing more but an ordinary woman, defeated and robbed by another war started for gold, or power, or anything else of which those who suffered the consequences couldn't care less when mourning their losses.

She held a hand to her aching heart and bit her lower lip, suppressing a mournful cry. She had done enough of crying in the last few days which she had spent lingering just outside the mountain, trying to collect herself after Kili’s funeral.

She wasn’t exactly the most welcomed attendee, although seeing the sincerity of her mourning and the depth of her grief for her lost love the dwarves took pity and allowed her to attend the ceremony.

She didn’t stay for long afterwards, for most of the dwarves were, to put it lightly, not fond of her presence. She might have been denied her kingdom, but there was no power in this world which could take her right to be an elf. So an elf she remained. An elf. A former enemy. All in all, the feelings she shared with Kili were strictly their private affair and would be highly disapproved even if they were to become public and the other dwarves became aware of what was happening. The other dwarves shunned her.

Could Tauriel blame them? She wanted to. She desperately wanted to find an outlet for her anger, but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t find it in herself to make the dwarves her target. Her own kind, the elves, had forsaken the kingdom of Erebor when the dragon had arrived all those years ago and then waged a war against them. And for what? A couple of shiny jewels?

Those kind of wounds didn’t heal overnight and there was a long way ahead before the relationship between the two kingdoms would mend.
How fascinating. The kind-hearted and noble elven kind, quarrelling for a few shiny objects.

And yet it were the dwarves and dragons who lived in infamy as the greedy ones.

The irony.

Was she still angry at her king? Or should she start saying her former kind by now? She certainly had been angry at Thranduil, far beyond angry, livid. But it had been a few days ago, which, by now, seemed more like an eternity.

There was something infinitely liberating in having a one single person to blame for everything that went wrong with her life. It never really made the problems go away, or even seem less, but it offered another form of comfort. It absolved the individual from any responsibility and the guilt which stemmed from it. After all, if you knew for sure that someone else had ruined your life, there was no need to rummage through your own actions in an attempt to figure out how your own self might have contributed.

There were days when she blamed the king for losing her parents. They were both brave warriors and had died in a fight with orcs, protecting their kingdom. If only he had sent someone else to fight that day. Not both of her parents. Her only remaining family in Middle Earth. She was but an elfling when she had those thoughts and felt immensely guilty for having them, especially when the king took her under his care. Still, somewhere deep inside the childish mind there lingered a thought that him taking it upon himself to care and provide for her was, at least partially, an admission of guilt. In the end it was her who rejected any and all attempts from the king to become at least a partial parental figure in her life. Though, in all fairness, Tauriel couldn’t exactly recall him ever trying too hard.

Then there was the faithful conversation where the king all but ordered her to stay away from Legolas. She was somewhat taken aback by the news that the prince of Mirkwood could view her as a potential romantic partner and to this day she still didn’t quite believe that it could really be the case. Tauriel understood Thranduil’s concern and desire to protect his only son, but attacking her heritage out of nowhere…

Not her, nor anyone’s heritage had never been an issue prior to this, it was never mentioned or brought up until…

Until she brought that up herself, that is. She was the one who mentioned it first as an argument against herself. Though he did confirm it.

And how did she react?

Tauriel tried to deny it as hard as she could, but it didn’t make the soul gnawing truth disappear. She didn’t approach Kili out of her open-mindedness or any other pure and selfless motive. The force driving her was there on the opposing side of the spectrum.

If Thranduil wanted a ‘lowly forest elf’ then it was a ‘lowly forest elf’ that he would get. And how much lower could she fall than seeking a company of a dwarf?

The young elleth laughed, mirthlessly, at the thought.

It wasn’t the first time she was driven by spite and spite alone and perhaps it was more apparent to Thranduil than it was to her at that moment.

She wondered.
What would she have done if the king tried a different, more direct, approach? What if he stated outright that he didn’t want her possibly flirting with his son because he could see that she didn’t regard the prince as a potential partner?

Would she start to flirt with Legolas on purpose, in the presence of the king, at least?

She would. She did. Maybe not outright flirting, but definitely teasing. She never saw it as anything more but a sibling banter, but from another perspective…

She was always notorious to do the opposite of what she was asked. When it came to her personal affairs, that is. She wouldn’t get her captain rank if she couldn’t obey an order. Just as she, as an elfling, ran away into the stables to play with horses each and every time she was put in a pristine dress. Just as she picked a bow and arrow when they tried to teach her sewing and weaving. Just as she scoffed and went on a hunt for orcs and spiders, returning as blood-stained and grimy as possible, each time some poor sap had gathered enough courage to ask her on a romantic walk.

She would’ve flirted with Legolas due to the simple reason of being not supposed to.

There would be no malice in her actions towards the prince, of course. She and Legolas grew up together, learned together and fought together countless battles together, side by side. She loved the prince as her closest friend, as her brother, even, and more than anything she was convinced that the prince shared her exact feelings as well. She’d gain no pleasure from breaking his heart, but it would have never crossed her mind that the king’s suspicions could hold any truth in them. She’d never think that her teasing or flirting could do any harm.

But it could. Despite growing up together, her and Legolas were never socialized as siblings. Looking back at it now, they were never supposed to even befriend each other. There was always a distance dictated by the difference in their status which the adults around them upheld. Despite that, the two elflings reached for each other united by the similarity of their loneliness and the absence of parents, for even if the king was still there, after the queen’s death he was never there for his son. Tauriel had only seen herself as a sister figure in Legolas’ life and would never think she could be seen as anything but.

And in her lack of thought she could have hurt her brother in all but blood, the only one who had truly been there for her for pretty much her entire life.

Tauriel twirled a red lock in her fingers, barely noticing the direction she was heading towards.

She now saw the reason behind the Thranduil’s actions, even though she didn’t excuse fully them.

It did chip at her anger though.

Still, the king did demean her feelings towards Kili.

The same feelings she did so proudly parade as an act of sticking it up to him, as the small voice in her head added.

It was fascinating, really, how something as beautiful as love could ever stem from something as vile as spite.

It was right, what they’ve said, love truly does find a way, doesn’t it?

Tauriel didn’t regret it. Loving Kili was… it was unlike anything she had ever felt. The feeling was new, exciting, it overtook her entire being. She was overwhelmed, overtaken, drowned and swallowed up. Destroyed and created anew. Each time they’ve touched, every time their eyes met,
it transcended the rules of a mere physical contact which bounded them to this world. It was as if their fea touched and sang together, creating a completely new and unique symphony, heard and understand by them and them alone. And for a brief moment, it seemed that the rest of the world had joined, the trees and the flowers, the mountains and the rivers, the birds and animals alike, each and every colour around shone with a new vibrancy, celebrating their newly bound union.

She felt on top of the world.

And as it is known, the higher you fly, the ever more painful it is to fall.

Tauriel could never forget the feeling of her fea being shred to pieces by the excruciating pain and in that moment could wish for nothing more than for it to be taken away, for all her thoughts to be quiet and senses numb.

She didn’t truly mean it, though. How could she?

Even if the bound was created by an accident and her own carelessness, Tauriel was determined to cherish it for as long as her feet walked in this world.

From the very beginning she was aware that Kili was a mortal and their bound would still perish some mere hundred of years into the future, a mere blink for an elf. He’d never sail with her to Valinor, they’d never meet in the Halls of Mandos and even if he died an old dwarf, Tauriel knew that her pain would be no less then. Not a century, not two centuries, not even a millennia later. No matter how long one spent with their lower, the sorrow of loosing them would always remain the same. Or, perhaps, the more time they’ve spent together, the greater would be the pain, for it would be so much more to lose by then.

Kili died. Relatively soon, for an elf at least, would die everyone who knew him personally. There’d be no one who’d knew him for his kindness, for his sense of humour, his love for his family, for how good of a storyteller he was. There would be no one who Kili not from the history books and tall tales. Except for her. She would live. She would live and with her, the memory of Kili the dwarven prince, a young storyteller who strived to do great things and make his mother proud, would be kept alive.

That simple thought was perhaps what kept her from curling into a ball somewhere in a remote cave and slowly fading away from the world. Tauriel clung to it as the very last straw that kept her from drowning.

It truly was the last straw for her. There was nothing else left in her life.

She had no family, she lost both her parents and her lover to the wretched orcs. Her brother not by blood had embarked on a quest of his own. She had lost her kingdom, her place to stay, to what ended up to be a childhood anger she couldn’t outgrow.

It seems that subconsciously she never truly stopped blaming Thranduil for the deaths of her parents and without even realizing it herself she had searched for an opportunity to finally lash out. Oh, did she ever lash out when the opportunity had presented itself and after all those years she felt justified in her anger.

She had been hurt and felt her feeling demeaned, she simply wanted to retaliate. Slaying orcs and spiders could one bring so much satisfaction. Those were mindless targets. The foul creatures died, not knowing any pain beyond physical. A twisted blessing, but a blessing nonetheless. Although their existence was nothing more than senseless carnage upon the world they died not knowing the pain of leaving behind the loved ones and the hate of their enemies had only fuelled their strife for
chaos. No, she no longer wanted a target to inflict mere physical wounds upon. She wanted a target that would feel the same pain she felt. The excruciating emotional turmoil of loneliness, of countless nights spent crying into the pillow, calling for the loved ones who would not come. Who could not come. The shame of being a perentless orphan within the elves society that cherished the familial bond like no other. The lack of physical contact, a warm word of encouragement. The need to rush into a relationship, any relationship, that would finally make her feel lived, needed, appreciated. The hopeless despair she drowned in every time her mind reminded of her lover’s mortality. The frustration of countless obstacles between her and her happiness. All the negative emotions and dark thoughts that she kept bottling up all throughout her life sublimated in her desire to act defiant. Tauriel wanted, needed and outlet. A target. A target aware of her hate. A target who would feel the pain of being hated.

And there he stood before her. In his grime stained armour, with hair dishevelled and blood smeared on his face. An infallible and ever composed authority figure, she finally saw him knocked down from the pedestal. She couldn’t care less about the soldier escort present, if anything, it gave her an opportunity to satisfy her desire for vengeance and humiliate the king in front of his people. An opportunity she was all too eager to take.

Finally, her anger, frustration and pain had found a suitable target.

She had finally felt self righteous and justified, relieved of the emotional weight she was carrying on her shoulders, up until the moment when their eyes met as she was clutching the cold lifeless body of her fallen lover.

Up until the moment when she finally truly saw whom she’d been lashing against this whole time.

She did no longer see as an aggressor, nor an unjust authority figure.

She saw a person who understood her pain of losing a loved one all too well. She saw her loneliness and sadness mirrored perfectly.

She saw a heart broken for centuries, perhaps beyond repair.

She finally saw her actions for what they truly were.

A cry of an abandoned child, desperately longing to be loved.

She walked for hours, submerged in her own thoughts. Hours passed and Tauriel finally found herself on the boarder of the Mirkwood forest, the true destination of her days long journey.

The young elven maiden hesitated.

Should she enter? Was she allowed to enter? Why did she come here in the first place?

The last question, at least, had a rather practical answer.

If she were to continue to roam the earth she needed a weapon, since her bow got, well, sliced in halves. As well as some supplies, for a short while, at least. The lands were hardly safe and only seemed to get more dangerous with each passing day. With orcs, and goblins, and giant spiders multiplied in numbers and grew ever so vicious and bold in their attacks.

Travelling without a weapon would be most unwise. In the best of circumstances she would be given an opportunity to catch a break. To stay in her room a few days and get her thoughts straight. To take a hot bath, relax her aching muscles. To change her clothes and feel once again clean, after so long. She didn’t hold her breath, though. The best of circumstances had rarely, if ever, presented
themselves in the real world. Still, even if worst of circumstances, she hoped that even if she weren’t allowed inside the palace she would at least get some mercy from one of the guards and they would be give her a bow with at least a few arrows. She had to have at least a few people who thought of her fondly.

The redhead swiftly navigated her way through the trees. Now, when she had entered the forest, she could no longer afford to walk leisurely. She was ought to be trying not to get across a band of orcs or a spider nest. Which was exactly what she did when she heard something that she didn’t expect to hear at all.

It sounded like a female crying.

She heard it long before she saw the figure and her elven empathy, as well as her own broken hart, made her approach. The figure didn’t look particularly dangerous. They weren’t big nor appeared to be armed with a large weapon. The person simply sat on the forest floor, covered in a silver cloak, clutching their shoulders and indeed, crying.

“Are you okay?” Tauriel asked softly, announcing her presence.

The figure didn’t answer, only raised her head. Now Tauriel could see that it was indeed, a female. An elven female, the redhead noticed when the hood fell down. She was young, though all elves had youthful faces, the stranger didn’t have the same wisdom in her eyes that comes with the burden of living for millennia. Her eyes were red from crying and the tears smeared dust all across her pretty, as it was the case with all of the elven kind, face. He blonde hair, although styled prior was starting to look like a mess with a few stray strands here and there.

“Are you hurt?” Tauriel asked once again, after not getting any coherent response.

The blonde still hadn’t answered, although Tauriel could clearly see a sense of relief of not being alone any more on the other female’s face. Still, the redhead saw a few tears continue to slide down the stranger’s cheeks. A pang of sudden realization hit her.

Tauriel crouched before the stranger, putting a hand on her shoulder.

“Have you lost someone in the battle?” the redhead inquired quietly, her own pain still fresh in her heart.

“I got lost” the stranger answered, finally.

The simple answer surprised Tauriel more than anything else that the stranger could’ve said. An elf lost in the forest. That was definitely something completely unheard of. After all, elves were known for having a connection to nature, be it animals or trees, therefore even not being from Mirkwood…

Tauriel frowned. The other maiden was clearly distressed, it was definitely not the time to be amused by her lack of navigating abilities. There could be time after she helped, like any decent person would.

Besides, the blonde maiden could have been lost on her way to the palace, couldn’t she? That could provide Tauriel with an excuse decent excuse to appear at the king’s doorstep without feeling like a thrown away puppy who crawled back for the single reason of not having anywhere else to go.

The resolve to help had been made.
“Lost? You’re not from Mirkwood, are you? I would recognize your face. Lothlorien, perhaps? There were no reports of any elves living in the Lake Town...” Tauriel stood up, thinking of possible locations the stranger could have arrived from.

She had no doubt that the stranger was not from Mirkwood. When living for as long as the elves did, it was virtually impossible not to learn each and every face in the kingdom, for you would in all likelihood would see all of them in a week, twice. The elves were not too numerous.

From her thoughts Tauriel was taken out of by the stranger’s sudden outburst.

“Enough with the elf stuff you obsessed weirdos!”

Tauriel immediately became alarmed.

She had been careless. She had approached the stranger thoughtlessly, overtaken by her own feeling of empathy. She herself was still on the verge of crying, therefore seeing another person in a similar distress made her immediately want to comfort them.

That type of mistake, in some circumstances, could have been already proven fatal, in different circumstances.

“What is the meaning…?” Tauriel reached for the bow that wasn’t there.

Then, Tauriel did something which should have done from the very beginning, she looked at the stranger’s fea. What she saw made her freeze in shock, watching in silent horror as the stranger tried to tear an ear of her head and collapse lifelessly on the ground.

It took Tauriel a few moments to finally compose herself.

First she made sure that the stranger was indeed unconscious. She pinched the blonde a few times and received no reaction, though she observed her chest raising and falling in tune with the breathing. Then the redhead proceeded to search the stranger for any weapons, silently glad that them both being females allowed her to comfortably conduct a thorough search through all the possible hiding places. The stranger had no weapons on her. What she did have was a strange object, akin to a small plank, with black glass on one side and metal on the other. There were some weird symbols on the metal side of the object which Tauriel could nor read nor recognize. She promptly confiscated the weird object, deciding to give it up for an examination.

Tauriel bit her lip. She had to quickly assess the situation. Staying alone, she didn’t count the unconscious stranger, in the middle of the forest without a weapon was an idea with an award winning level of disaster written all over it. She had to head out for a shelter the sooner the better, as the evening was rapidly approaching and the sun was already halfway towards the horizon.

But was it wise to bring a stranger with her, especially a stranger who had such oddities around her? The strange object, a confused and disoriented mind. And then there was the issue of the stranger’s fea.

Yet, she couldn’t bring herself to abandon the strange woman to her doom. Tauriel had seen enough death to last a while, she had no desire to contribute to the number of the recently dead. More so, she didn’t want to condemn a life that might still be innocent.

In the end, it was the state of unconsciousness that finally tipped the scales in favour of the blonde. She was unconscious, weaponless and her body was in not trained to put on a fight, of that Tauriel made sure during the weapon search. There really was not much damage the blonde could do in a well guarded elven fortress, should she wish so.
All in all, Tauriel did get her excuse to request access inside the palace. She simply had to report of her odd find.

An elven maiden with no trace of any fea.

Chapter End Notes

I wrote the chapters in that order: 1, 4, 3, 2
Because 1 and 4 were originally supposed to be the chapters, and what is now 2 and 3 were planned as small paragraphs in them. They became too long and I had to split them. Mostly because I like to have chapters more or less evenly sized and if I do decide to carry on with this story I'll be much more comfortable with keeping up with 3-4k chapters than 8-10 ones.

Once again, tell me what you think of my Tauriel and the story in general.

By the way, this was supposed to be a lighthearted/humor type of story. Can't you tell?
It's All in the Ears

Chapter Notes

The last of the originally written chapters. Finally done with the moping around (for now) and back to the point. The heroine (she'll supposed to get a name soon, I'm just procrastinating on researching the eleven naming customs) is trying to makes sense of what happened to her. She comes to conclusions

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Waking up was tedious. A chore, if you will.

The young woman became aware that she was no longer asleep, but still hesitated to open her eyes or make any other movement that would indicate to the world of her status of being newly awake. She was deep in denial, you see.

Memories of the day prior were bright and irrefutably there. She knew that none if it was simply a part of her dream. She did dream of a silver doe. But she only dreamed of one due to chasing it through the forest. At least, that much she remembered. Unfortunately.

There was no way to deny it. Her body still ached from hours of running around the woods and there was still a light, but no less annoying, sensation of discomfort in her left ear.

Still, she hesitated, in the same variety of hesitation which prevented you from opening that rejection letter from your university of choice or a dream job, be it online or on paper. You know immediately what the letter contains, as the headline wastes no time in informing you, yet somehow, somehow, there is still a part of you which against all odds hopes that not opening the letter immediately would, perhaps, change the contents of it. It never did, but people still got lulled by the sweet delusion. Its the dreaded notion of finality, that they avoid. The second that the dreaded hammer of reality hits them right in the face, denying any possible maybe, what if, and it still could be.

That’s why she stayed still and didn’t open her eyes. She didn’t want to find herself anywhere but her own room and her own bed. She didn’t want to evaluate her surroundings, to try and figure out where she was and how on earth she managed to get there. After all, she could remember losing her consciousness but couldn’t recall anything that would happen after that.

There was still some information that she could gain employing senses other than sight.

For example, she was fairly certain she was in a bed. In a nice and comfortable bed, with her head resting on a soft pillow and the rest of her body covered with light, yet warm, blanket. Therefore, she was most likely to be inside of some building, at least. She could also hear some very distant, but regular, footsteps. The sound was muffled, as if there was some barrier preventing her from fully hearing anything. So the second conclusion would be that she was located in a closed room and in a public institution of some sorts. Third, there was the smell. The smell was vaguely familiar. The young woman couldn’t say if she ever had a chance to experience this exact smell in particular, but she could recall a situation when she was acquainted with a scent of similar nature. It was when she was still a child and scraped her knee while trying to climb a garage with a group of local kids. The knee was bleeding and her worried mother applied some herbal smelling stuff to the
aggravated skin while scolding her for the lack of foresight, and her father stood to the side, laughing about how he had managed to actually brake his leg climbing that exact garage as well.

The blonde smiled to the memory, while arriving to a conclusion on her whereabouts.

Public institution, small room, the smell of medicine. She must be in a hospital, after all, what other place would fit into that criteria.

Feeling content, she opened her eye and regretted it immediately.

If it was a hospital, then it was a strange one indeed.

Everything around here looked wrong.

She was in a bed, that much she wasn’t mistaken about, a fairly regular looking bed, save for the ornamental metal headboard and a silky looking blanket. The walls were made of tree. No, not wooden planks, as one might have guessed, but a tree. A single one. As if the room was carved into one. Or was it a trick of light? The dim light coming from what looked like an elaborate oil lamp, which served as a single source of any lighting, for there were no windows. There was also a small bedside table, with a carafe full of clean water, an empty glass and some herbs.

The blonde changed her lying position to a sitting one.

This was solvable. After all, the forest she ended up in was located far from the city. It was a several hours ride on the highway. Maybe when she lost her consciousness she wasn’t taken to a city hospital, but to a small provincial one. She remembered quite a few small towns being there between the city and the forest. She had never properly been to one of those small towns, borderline villages, therefore she had no idea how their hospitals could look like. Maybe that was simply normal. The bed looked fairly regular, the bedside table, the carafe and the glass as well. Maybe just a little bit too fancy, but then again, small town, province. Who knew where all of the furniture here came from? Maybe it was some sort of charity donation, from some old thrift shop. Low budget would also explain the lack of electricity in this particular room. Maybe the hospital owners couldn’t afford to have it in the entirety of the building.

It could be, right?

The woman knew she was stalling. Avoiding. A certain action, a nagging memory.

Why was it that she ended up in this supposed hospital? She wanted to believe that it was exhaustion and quite possibly dehydration. That she was tired to the point of seeing and feeling things that were not there. Like the silver doe or her fake ear feeling actual real pain.

There was, of course, an extremely simple and quick way to check whether her rational part was right or that she was still experiencing the effects of that mushroom she had probably eaten as a part of another stupid bet and just didn’t remember doing it. The mushrooms worked in mysterious ways, probably.

The woman chuckled, nervously. If the latter was the case, at least she would have something to tell the future generation of children, besides shooing them from her lawn, that is.

Suddenly, she remember something else she could do besides examining her ears. Looking for her phone to check time and date and... nothing. The phone had no charge and the room had no electricity, let alone a spare outlet and a charger. She still looked for the gadget on the bedside table, under the pillow and even under the bed. It wasn’t there.
The blonde didn’t despair immediately. She knew that in some hospitals personal belongings sometimes got taken away and stored until the patients or their family came to retrieve them.

Speaking of personal belongings.

She wasn’t wearing the clothes that she had spent her last remembered conscious hours in. No cloak, no boots, no corset. Luckily no corset. She was bare-feet, her hair was no longer arranged into an uncomfortable and elaborate style, it was hanging loose, reaching her waist.

The woman ran a hand through her hair, carefully avoiding the ears. The hair was smooth even, she could not, at all, feel the places where the extensions were put in. She carefully yanked one of the strands, then another, and then a few more. All of them felt natural and produced the same exact sensation. Even the longest ones, which she knew for sure should have been extensions. Perhaps the aspiring hair stylist did make a stellar job with it.

Right?

As regards to the hospital robe she was wearing... Well. None of her night-gowns or pyjamas could claim the same level of fanciness. It was made of light, almost translucent fabric, which shimmered in the dim light of the oil lamp. It was decorated with some elegant looking lace.

Yup.

A thrift store donation. It probably came from some abandoned trunk in an abandoned Victorian mansion which was due to be demolished to give space for a new mall, the original owners were long gone and their last remaining living descendant had moved overseas a few decades ago and couldn’t care less for the mansion or its contents.

Then again, Victorian period was known for its prudish tendencies in clothing and this particular nightgown was rather revealing, perhaps even vulgar, by the standards, of course. By the modern ones it might as well be prudish, considering some things she saw online. So maybe...

The woman sighed. She was stalling again.

She sat on the bed, contemplating.

To touch or not to touch, she mused, tapping with one finger the area of her skin just below the ear.

She realized she was being foolish and that wasn’t the preferred attitude for the situation. She slowly moved her fingers up her ear, nearing the part which was supposed to be fake but was stopped abruptly by a single knock on the door.

She sighed, strangely relieved, letting out a breath she didn’t know she was holding.

The woman contemplated for a moment whether to answer or not, but decided that there was no point in denying the access to the room to whoever was outside of it. If the person standing behind the door were to have ill intentions, they would enter regardless of her answer, or the lack of thereof. However, if the person had good intentions, she would be missing out on possible explanation of her whereabouts and many more.

“Enter” she was surprised by how unsure and still hoarse her voice had sounded. Oh well, at least she still had it, she could have been rendered unable to speak by all the yelling she had done hours prior.

The door opened and in entered two women.
The first one she vaguely recognized. It was the redhead from earlier. With her hair still in an elaborate style and wearing the same, or at the very least extremely similar clothes from the day before. And still with the pointed ears.

The second woman was a bit shorter than the first one, but had a somewhat more of a commanding presence. Despite having a youthful face, the blonde sitting on the bed was somehow sure that she was the older one of the newcomers. The older woman was wearing a simple, yet complimentary, dress. On her waist there was a leather belt with several pouches tied to it. Her skin was of the darker complexion with her hair blonde, but more of a ‘dirty’ or ‘strawberry’ shade, it was hard to tell in the dim light of the room. She also had the ears.

“I wouldn’t touch it” the older woman said sternly, noticing the other blonde’s fingers hovering above the ear.

The young woman immediately folded both of her hands on her knees and straightened her back, feeling like a first-grader who was caught picking their nose. Or a dog chewing on a pair of shoes. It wasn’t a pleasant feeling, yet she couldn’t help it but to obey, due to sheer commanding tone of the voice.

However, she came back to her senses rather quick, mainly due to anger starting to slowly boil, heading to the point of explosion with a record speed.

The ears. The EARS.

No other object in the entirety of her earthly existence has ever earned as much anger spite and disdain as those atrocious pointy things did at that particular moment in time.

The nerve. The nerve!

These people still had the nerve to play pretend.

She jumped up from the bed, eyes flaring, raised her finger and opened her mouth to start on a lengthy rage filled tirade.

She was stopped by cold hands cupping her face from both sides. Her head was turned right, then left, up and down. The movement of her eyes was studied and a hand pressed to her forehead measured her temperature, after which the older woman gave an affirmative nod to the redhead.

“I see no deviations from the norm, besides what we’ve already discussed. It doesn’t seem like she had received any damage during the fall” she pronounced her verdict.

“Is she well enough to leave?” the redhead raised an eyebrow.

The older woman simply nodded and left the room.

The redhead lingered a little longer. She handed the confused woman the clothes, that the blonde didn’t notice she was carrying.

“Get dressed. The King wishes to speak to you” with those words the redhead had also left the room, presumably to give the blonde privacy while she changed her attire.

The simple word ‘confusion’ was tragically incapable of encompassing the large spectrum of emotions which were fighting for dominance in the blonde’s head.

First, there was the aforementioned confusion at the events which took place just moments prior.
Who were this people? What were they talking about? Why, despite understanding each individual word of their speech she still failed to shape them into anything even slightly resembling a normal interaction.

Then there was anger, which was also mentioned before. If they were still in costumes and playing some kind of roles then… then that would be highly inappropriate and questionable. Not mentioning the enormous shade which it threw upon their characters.

The anger was followed by uneasiness. She didn’t recognize those people, therefore they couldn’t be the ones from here previous group. Make-up or no make-up, there was no-one as tall as the redhead in the group. Neither their voices or faces sounded or looked familiar.

What if… what if they weren’t exactly playing roles as a part of the game, what if that was something much more sinister.

Let’s review.

A bunch of people, wearing weird costumes, unified by a single accessory, the long pointed ears in that case. Apparently with a leader whom they called ‘the King’. Taking an unsuspecting young woman to the middle of the forest. Presumably drugging her until she starts to hallucinate and have delusions. Transporting her to an isolated far removed place…

She felt as if the whole tub of ice cold water was poured on her from above.

A cult. She got abducted by a cult.

The blond sat on a bed, slowly, concerned that her now shaking knees might simply give up by themselves.

She took a few deep breaths.

She was never into conspiracy theories. She only watched one, maybe two in her entire life, when they were recommended to her by the mysterious and unpredictable algorithm of the video portal. The young woman only watched those videos out of sheer curiosity, of course, and moved on to watching the regular content, immediately forgetting about the experience.

Still, it was, apparently, more than enough to resurface in her memory and suggest a few, let’s say peculiar, ideas of what type of situation she could have gotten into.

The blonde shook her head, chasing away the unpleasant thoughts. She had to admit, at that moment she would much prefer this entire thing to be a case of a bunch of morally questionable role-players.
Whatever the case was, she couldn’t proceed to investigate while wearing a translucent nightgown.

The young woman changed her clothes and was now wearing a simple green tunic, black leggings and brown ankle high boots. She, of course, carefully examined the clothes before putting any of them on. The fabric was decent to the touch, the seam-work steady and professional, but there were no labels, not even ‘how to wash’ or ‘made in’. No indication that the labels were cut off. Were the clothes hand-sewn? That certainly didn’t ease her mind, longing for a familiar brand logo, even from the cheapest mass produce store. It would give her the comforting familiarity of the modern world society, to which she felt oddly disconnected ever since she woke up.

Oil lamps, floor length dresses, pouches…

The door had opened before she even started to wander whether she should wait for somebody to
come and retrieve her or go outside by herself.

“Come” ordered the redhead.

Not that the supposed cult victim wanted to follow orders from some stranger, she just wanted to know more about her situation and that didn’t seem possible while staying in a small windowless room.

“My name is Tauriel. Follow me” the redhead introduced herself while already starting to walk away.

The blonde followed Tauriel, barely able to keep up, at times switching from a fast paced walking to jogging. Tauriel moved swiftly, easily navigating herself in what seemed to be an elaborate labyrinth of some sorts. Her steps were light and fast and it almost looked like she barely touched the ground when making a step.

After they’ve ascended a few levels, the blonde stopped, catching her breath and clutching her right side.

Noticing that her companion was no longer following her, the redhead stopped and raised an eyebrow.

“Are you well? Should I send for a healer?” she asked, with some sympathetic notes in her voice.

“Just give me a moment” the blonde muttered.

To be quite honest, she wasn’t in that bad of a shape just yet, she simply wanted a moment to look around, for there was quite a lot to look at.

The building, if it could be called one, was huge. Massive. Enormous. Tauriel lead her through several staircases, corridors, galleries, with high ceilings or no ceilings at all, some had regular floor, some didn’t, giving an opportunity to see what happened below.

The entire place seemed completely bizarre and unreal. It didn’t look built, it looked carved in. The absence of windows only supported that theory. There was no natural source of light, at least in the areas she was lead through. The job of lightening the place was given to lamps of any shape or form imaginable. Huge spheres of soft white light in spacious halls, small ornamental flower shapes placed in dozens all throughout the lengthy galleries. Some of them appeared to only have a singular light in them, the others had several floating inside like fireflies. Although, there wasn’t any indication that they were not, in fact, fireflies.

Some walls were bare, with only a carved pattern on them, some had paintings and tapestries, depicting what appeared to be battles of some kind.

The entire place certainly made an impression. The blonde would definitely had enjoyed it if she were to come here on a tour, with people she knew and trusted. Now it only raised more questions and made her feel uneasy, almost frightened.

The young woman couldn’t say she was the most knowledgeable on the tourist sights of the world, but she definitely knew all the places one could visit in her own country. This place was not among them. Was she out for a much longer time than she initially thought? Could she have been transported abroad? No, she couldn’t. She would have known if a place like this existed anywhere in the world. It definitely would have been included in one of those ‘Top 100 places you should visit before you die’ lists that you read through on a very boring bus ride. And she had had plenty of those in her lifetime.
The place was enormous and unknown to the world. Considering numerous levels, absence of windows and the ‘carved’ feel, one could make a few conclusions.

The conclusions were as follows. She was currently located in what by all the evidence present was an underground dungeon, somewhere very deep in the forest, undiscovered by human civilization up to this particular moment in history and surrounded by people wearing fake pointed ears, denying the modern advancements such as electricity, and serving a ‘King’.

By the way. About the people. She had seen a few passing by. Most of them with a similar ‘dirty’ or ‘strawberry’ blonde hair colour, there were fewer brunets and people with black hair. Most were pale, but she had noticed a variety in skin colour. Still, all of them shared some traits. They were all tall, all beautiful and preferred their ridiculously long hair long and elaborate, mostly exposing their foreheads and ears. All of them had the ears. The long and pointy kind.

Suddenly her phone being taken away did no longer appear as an innocent gesture of being stored until retrieval.

The young woman didn’t even notice she started to fidget a strand of her hair with one hand and leaning on the wall with another, hunched as if she were to be sick.

Although, why ‘as if’. She did feel sick, almost about to throw up.

The situation she was in grew bleaker with each passing moment.

Most probably she was saved from actually throwing up by a simple fact of not having eaten anything at least in the last day or so.

She was done with observations. For now, at least. She didn’t really get any information she needed, or maybe wanted. But what she did get put her in a mood far more desperate than she had been since… since ever. She couldn’t remember being in as much distress as she was right now.

The tired young woman nodded to her redhead guide who promptly started walking again.

The blonde simply followed, not paying much attention to the surroundings until she started noticing some subtle, but rather unnerving, changes which stole the last remaining colour from her face and made breathing so much more difficult.

There were much more people around. Not a crowd, or something like that. More like a… watch-guard vigil? Tall, beautiful people, dressed in what seemed to be an extremely fancy and borderline impractical medieval type of armour. Armour accompanied by spears, bows and swords, which appeared to be all too real and not at all like cheap costume props in a local theatre.

Please let it be mushrooms, Please let it be mushrooms, letitbemushrooms, mushrooms…

The captive pleaded, mentally. Her only source of comfort at the moment was the thought of not having any pets that might starve due to her disappearing. Because nobody would probably notice for a long, long time. She wasn’t one to chat daily, her parents lived abroad quite happy with their lives, her best friend was on a month long honeymoon…

Would she be missed? How long would it take before she is officially pronounced dead? Even if her remains would probably not be found? Would they hold a funeral and bury an empty casket? Would they play her favourite music? Would anyone tell her online followers? Surely all twelve of them would be the most concerned… and who would inherit her laptop and electricity bills?

She was so absorbed in planning her imaginary funeral, with calla lilies and a violin rendering of her favourite movie soundtrack that she almost didn’t notice Tauriel stopping and had almost
crashed into the taller woman.

“My Lord” Tauriel started, her tone official and cold “I’ve brought the newcomer”

The aforementioned newcomer finally raised her head.

Somewhere, at the very back of her mind there lingered a phrase ‘A sight worth dying for’ said by one of her friends when commenting on a movie character who died while looking at something… oh, who cares what they were looking at.

The young woman had always considered this phrase to be absurd. But if there ever were to be a moment when she would at least come near to understanding it, it would be now, for never in her life had she met a man who would make her gasp for air quite like the one sitting on a throne before her.

To say he appeared regal was to say nothing. One look at this person was enough to know that you were in a presence of royalty. It was in everything. From the seemingly relaxed, yet somehow assertive pose he rested in to the arch of his eyebrow, it was far more than apparent that the men held power around the place.

She couldn’t help but stare, silently admiring the lines of his face, his hair the colour of white gold, even without an elaborate hairstyle it overshadowed anything she had seen today, or ever. Then there were his eyes, the clear eyes of icy blue that were as beautiful as they were cold.

And then there were the ears.

Chapter End Notes

Eventually I might even get to write some basic action/interaction scenes. Funny thing, I'm the person who skips descriptions when reading something, but then when it's me writing...

You know the principle 'show, don't tell'. Wll, I feel like my writing is showing, not much telling.

This chapter was one of those 'lighthearted/humor ones' but now when I'm re-reading it... I'm one step away from admitting that I don't get the correlation between human moods/emotions and writing

Anyway, this is all of what I have so far. Time to log off forever and forget I've ever posted anything.

Any thoughts, though?
In Which We Bid The Common Sense Farewell

Chapter Notes

I'm not that keen on posting my work online, if I'm honest. So when I posted this I thought that something must have been wrong with me that day. Guess what. I was right. I turned out to be sick and spent the next few days lamenting my own existence. Then I logged in to delete the thing (a standard practice for me) and surprisingly found out that it was actually read by people. And now I feel like I have to continue. I don't know what's the moral here, there's probably none.

But seriously, huge thanks to everyone who read it, it feels nice to know that there's interest. So here's the next chapter which was collecting dust as just a draft for the longest time because I had no idea where to go with it. I do now, and for the story in general as well, at least for a while (yeah, I'm writing this pretty much as I go, so factor that in). Next couple of chapters should be more fun.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She stood there franticly trying to find a spot she could stare at, something, anything but the person sitting on the throne before her. Not that she didn’t want to look at him. Quite the opposite, in fact. Looking at him was exactly what she wanted to do.

Who wouldn’t, the woman thought, searching for an argument to defend her desire to stare at the man, to study every little detail of his appearance, to admire the lines of his face, to marvel at the gold of his hair. Even the ill-fated pointy ears did nothing to spoil the image. They almost seemed fitting. Otherworldly ears to the otherworldly beauty. It was simply an aesthetically pleasing sight. Even his attire, the design of it, although unusual to her modern sensibilities, was in undeniable harmony with the rest of what she had a chance to observe today, it was clearly made from an expensive silver fabric, definitely his colour, and if she had to guess, she’d say the entire outfit was probably custom made, because the way it perfectly fit his well-trained body…

Okay, okay, wrong train of thought.

It was definitely not the place, not the time, nor was it really a decent thing to do. Although, if you really think of it, she wasn’t exactly the one to start with the indecent behaviour. These people started it first by bringing her to their lair without her knowledge. And before anyone pointed that out, whether she would or wouldn’t prefer to be left unconscious in the middle of the forest was a whole other issue. The point here was that those were her personal boundaries that were infringed on first, therefore…

Appalled by her own lack of self control, after all it was her potential captor she could be glaring at, the woman was only grateful for the dim lighting and the distance, which would hopefully make it harder to discern where her eyes were, despite all attempts of restraint, constantly drawn to.

There was, however, something that she did manage to take note of while her gaze was running around in all the different directions. The lighting. It did no longer rely solely on the lamps and firefly lanterns. There were a few natural rays of sunshine coming right through the ceiling. The ceiling that looked like nothing other than myriads of interwind branches, which would only belong to trees of an unimaginable height.
First, she noted that when she had previously imagined the insides of the small room she woke up in to be carved in a tree, it might not have been a detail coming purely out of her imagination. Second, even if the lower levels of this weird city-like structure were located underground, the upper levels were not. The upper levels in all probability were above the ground, significantly so. Which posed a question, was it at any rate possible for this place to be left unnoticed by the modern satellite technologies and thus unknown to the world?

But, whether luckily or not, she didn’t get the chance to muse about the depth of the conspiracy and the number of governments involved.

“Is this our new guest?” the strong commanding voice echoed throughout the hall.

“Yes, this is the one” answered Tauriel, who was standing a few steps away from the woman she had brought with her. Far enough to stay outside of both of theirs comfort zones, close enough to intercept any possible attacking movement.

“Introduce yourself” the king’s voice was cold and even, immediately creating an impression of a person who was well used to being in charge and was quite comfortable in the position.

“I… uh…” she hesitated.

I all truth, she should have anticipated this question and came up with an alias to introduce herself with, yet her mind was preoccupied with other issues. Giving her real name, or any other identifying information, of course, was completely out of the question. With each passing moment she was rapidly losing the last remaining remnants of her understanding of the situation. She had no idea where she was, who were the people around her, what were their intention and the level of actual danger she could currently be in. At the very least, she shouldn’t risk giving out a lead to her family.

Her hesitation, however, was perceived differently.

“Do you not know own name?” the king raised an eyebrow, resting his head on his hand, showing slight annoyance.

And if she continued to not give any proper answers that annoyance would only be slight for now, the woman thought, grimly. Who knows where could that lead. She had to figure out a way of answering without giving any actual truth and had to do it pretty soon.

“I’m afraid that I don’t’ she stared at the floor, hiding her eyes. She could lie, well, more like act, when there was she was given a script and some time to practice, otherwise, why would she even be invited to star in a movie. When it came to improvisations, though, they didn’t come to her as easily, not without at least an approximate idea of what was required beforehand. However, with the amount of stress and pressure she as under at that moment, the woman preferred to give shorter answers and hide her face, at least until she would manage to grasp the role she was supposed to play.

“And what do you know?” the emphasis was made on the word ‘do’, clearly suggesting that she was required to give explanations.

Explanations of what? Her identity? That couldn’t be done, for various previously established reasons. Her presence here? They were the ones who brought her.

“What would you like to know?” she was well aware that she didn’t make an impression of someone who would be winning any awards for her intelligence any time soon, but in her
experience she had learned that there was a surprising amount of situations where simply playing
dumb was the only right course of action. Maybe if they deemed her naive and inept she would be
eventually let go.

“On what account have you entered my forest?” the annoyance has raised to a couple of more
degrees, to the point where it was slowly but steadily starting to near hostility.

His forest? Oh, so she was apparently trespassing. Then that would explain why she was taken as a,
there really was no other way to put it, prisoner.

“I didn’t mean to enter where I am not allowed” she started to explain, carefully choosing her
words and simultaneously wondering whether she should have been adding something akin to
‘your majesty’ to her answers “My memory is quite foggy, for I engaged in a celebration of my
friend’s engagement and misjudged the amount of wine I could handle. I remember me and my
friends were simply passing by, we didn’t mean to stay for long. I can’t recall any signs forbidding
entrance and I don’t think I ever heard anything about the forest being restricted to visitors”

“Is that so?” his voice lowered and she immediately understood that her words were not believed
“Your friends, who are they?”

Not the question she had expected. Was he asking for their names? Their occupation? Did he
suspect them belonging to any particular groups or organizations? She knew nothing of the latter
and not much of the former. She knew only a few names in the group she visited the forest with
and wasn’t close enough with any of them to know any other personal information. And on the
issue of names it was already decided.

“My friends? Just ordinary people as far as my awareness goes” she tried to keep her voice steady
and even, but anxiety was slowly starting to sip through.

“Ordinary people? Were they elves? Humans? You weren’t by chance travelling with any wizards
or halflings?” the king spat in anger.

The woman tensed, fighting the urge to take a step back, revealing her fear. She stayed, however,
using all the restraint she had in her nearly shaking body. There was nothing any more that she
could claim any understanding of. What even was a halfling? She knew about elves because she
was to play one in the short movie, but there weren’t supposed to be any other… creatures?

“Humans, I was in company of humans” she answered after a few calming breaths “We are from a
town nearby” that much was safe to say, there were several towns around the forest, she wasn’t
saying which one she was from specifically “We weren’t planning to stay, we intended to go back
soon. My friends, perhaps, had already returned...” she added quickly.

“The only human town nearby was by the lake and it was recently burned by the dragon” the king
smiled, dangerously “So tell me where exactly were you planning to return to?”

A dragon? What?

The last of the remaining grip she had on reality had finally bid her farewell and disappeared into
the nothingness, whispering ‘see you soon’ to her composure. Despite her best efforts to explain
the situation she was clearly sinking deeper and deeper into the Mariana trench of
miscommunication, which was by far not the position you’d want to find yourself in when you
were surrounded by people who were clearly stronger than you and carried sharp weapons.

“I… I was not aware” her voice raised, but, being still hoarse from all the yesterday’s shouting, she
sounded rather pathetic “All I can say is that I was invited to a get-together road-trip, we made a stop by the forest and intended to depart soon, yet by a brief moment I got distracted by an animal and the next thing I know I’m completely lost in the forest and my friends are nowhere to be seen” she felt anger, but wasn’t sure whom it was directed towards. The people who abandoned her in the forest? Her captors? Herself for getting in this situation?

She turned away from the interrogator and found herself meeting gaze with Tauriel. The blonde woman was surprised to see sympathy, mixed with a certain degree understanding. Perhaps the so-called ruler of the forest wasn’t the most benevolent leader in general and his ill-temper affected his own subjects as much as those unfortunate to stumble on his kingdom by accident.

“Which animal?” the aforementioned leader seemed to have completely ignored her little outburst.

“Oh?” she blinked, surprised by a seemingly random question “A deer. A female one, I think. Silver and… glowing, like a ghost”

The woman sighed. That part of the story appeared to be the least plausible to her, but considering these people were in all seriousness talking about dragons, wizards and some kind of halflings, and the overall state of the situation she was in, well, if there was still something to lose, it wouldn’t be significant enough not to just tell the truth.

“I see” the man tapped his long fingers on the arm of the throne, thinking about something.

Dear Lord was she in trouble. Wait. Dear Lord. It kind of sounded like Deer Lord, didn’t it? She was lead here by a deer. Deer live in a forest. The man claimed to be the king of the forest and his crown did have a resemblance with antlers. Yup. A Deer Lord.

Literally.

The woman bit her lip in an attempt to suppress a nervous laughter, but failed and a weird chuckle, with a slight resemblance to a sob, did escape her lips.

“Is there something that you find amusing?”

No. Yes. Nothing. Everything. None of it. The entire situation. It wasn’t amusing that it was happening to her, but it was amusing that it was happening to at all. Of course, being lost, trapped and barred of any understanding of the world around her was not by any means amusing. Not the slightest little bit. However… However. The sheer principle, the mind boggling absurdity, the butterfly effect, if you will.

Go out of your comfort zone they’ve said. Do something new they’ve said. Well, she did. She went out of her comfort zone and went to a party. She did something new. Engaged in karaoke. And where did it get her? For sure, the new experiences were plenty and the people she met were far beyond remarkable.

But! But. But…

How exactly was any of this working in her favor? How was she supposed to benefit from any of it? How? How!?

If… no, not if, when, definitely when. When she got out of it, she wouldn’t just build a rigid comfort zone, she would erect an impenetrable fortress of comfort, surrounded by a trench of staying at home, the barb-wire fence of no travelling, with a social circle so small and strict that in order to enter it all potential candidates would have to undergo a background check so thorough, that it would go all the way back to stone ages. Even beyond that, maybe. And most definitely,
without a trace of doubt, absolutely undisputable, if a person or any of their relatives have ever read any fantasy books, they would be forever banned from her life. For. Ever. Until the world ended. Until the sun exploded. With zero possibility of parole.

But, instead of proudly proclaiming her plans for the future, the woman decided on a different course of action:

“Forgive me my disgraceful behaviour” she slightly shifted the character she had been previously playing. She chose to speak a manner she would imagine people spoke in fantasy stories, something closer to medieval literature. Still, she held herself no different than she would hold herself in any other social situation. All the previous conversations in her life happened between people equal to each other, simply of different status. This, however, wasn’t the case. If this, let’s say world, was any similar to what the medieval time was described like, then the kings and commoners were not, at all, equal “I was born and raised among humans and until yesterday believed myself to be one as well. I had not been educated about the ways of other people. If any of my actions were inappropriate, it was simply out of my own ignorance, not malice”

Absurdity. She was surrounded by the purest absurdity she has ever had misfortune to experience. Rationalizing didn’t help, trying to act cautious didn’t help, playing stupid didn’t help. The only thing left for her was to give in to the absurdity and dive deeper into the rules in this weird situation, playing along, hoping it would…

Help. It did help.

“Lord Thranduil” Tauriel spoke for the first time after she had announced their presence at the beginning of the conversation “It might be she is telling the truth. The humans might have…”

The blonde noted that Tauriel was rather careful with her words, almost hesitant. Yet, she still chose to speak up. Perhaps her initial theory was right and the redhead did have compassion for those intimidated by the elven monarch, most likely stemming from the personal experience of being in the same position. Multiple times, possibly.

“I thought you were an expert on dwarves Tauriel, not humans” the king let out a snide remark, but added after a pause “Continue”

The redhead grimaced at the initial comment, but her brows did fly up in surprise when she was invited to further share her thoughts, as if she was completely unused to it.

Deriving from that, Tauriel definitely wasn’t in relation nor did she have a position high enough to back talk the king the way she did. So it was purely her personal feelings which made her defend the woman she had found in the forest only a day prior, the blonde noted. A compassionate girl, but probably acts before she thinks.

“She might have been abducted as a child and brought up among humans. She might not have known she was an elf and that’s why…”

“She tried to rip her ears off?” the king finished the sentence not waiting for Tauriel to do it herself, further proving his lack of patience.

“Her ears could have been hidden from her” Tauriel made a pause “It could be done with magic”

“Yes, I am aware of that” the corner of his mouth twitched before the answer, as if something about that last detail displeased him “But do answer me one question Tauriel, why would anyone go to such lengths?”
“I...” the redhead visibly didn’t have a definitive answer “Ransom? Maybe her parents are of a high
descent...”

“If an elven child of a high descent were abducted in recent history it would have been widely
known. I haven’t heard of such instances in the latest centuries and she is clearly not old enough to
be aware of not ageing too differently from humans” the king pinched the bridge of his nose, either
being annoyed or tired from the conversation. Possibly both.

The blonde woman stood quietly, shifting her weight from one leg to another. She didn’t mind
being talked about as if she wasn’t there. In fact, she preferred to be left alone with an opportunity
to collect her thoughts. Yet, the collecting of thoughts didn’t happen, as she was prevented from
doing so by the words such as ‘centuries’ and ‘ageing differently’. At this point, the words no
longer bothered her, nor did they give her any distress. She was simply amused and took them in a
‘sure, why not’ kind of manner, for she had decided to abandon any attempts to write any of what
was happening under the rules of her world-view. After all, her world-view wasn’t simply
challenged. It was stepped on and shattered, with it’s pieces peculiarly arranged in short yet
poignant plight spelling ‘Help me’. Sadly, there weren’t enough solid pieces to form the word
‘please’, so the potential help didn’t seem to be in a hurry.

“Maybe she is not from our domain, she looks like she could be from Lorian...” justified the
redhead.

“I would still have been known” she was once again interrupted by the king “Why return her now
then?” he added, more to himself than any of the females.

It was starting to become apparent that he didn’t ask for Tauriel’s opinion because he was
particularly interested in hearing it. He simply needed someone else’s words to push off his own
thought process.

“It could be that her caretakers were not aware of her being an elf. If she was put under a spell to
hide her ears and left as an infant to be raised by humans...” Tauriel mused.

“Until she discovers she is an elven princess and has every royal heir fighting for her hand in
marriage. I suggest you to be more selective in the kinds of literature you read Tauriel” the remark
was made in more of an amused tone than a snide one, which didn’t stop Tauriel’s face from
turning nearly the same colour as her hair.

The other woman sighed in silent solidarity. She too would be rather embarrassed if her well
hidden affinity for literary masterpieces involving shirtless pirates, charming princes and
distressing damsels were to be made public, but she kept her secret hidden and her small collection
of well-read tomes was safely hidden in a box underneath her bed. And now that she has
potentially disappeared forever her living area would eventually be searched for the clues of her
whereabouts, the stash would be discovered and years from now some bored amateur sleuth would
be trying to solve her cold case.

‘What is going to happen to me?’ she didn’t notice the moment she stopped paying attention to the
conversation and submerged into her own, rather gloomy, thoughts.

Another thing she didn’t notice was her hand finally raising to her ear, touching the warm flesh,
tracing the nail marks, sending a slight twinge followed by a wave of shivers down her spine.
The ear was real to the very tip of it, with the same scope of sensations as every other part of her
body. The case wasn’t different for the other ear as well, save for the lack of the nail marks.
Everything surrounding her was also real and no amount of conspiracy theories could ever cover or
explain it with any degree of plausibility. She was not sleeping or dreaming, the pain in the ear had
already confirmed that a moment prior. Not by experience, of course, but by the word of mouth she was aware of how many of the drugs worked. She hadn’t heard of anything which would produce such prolonged, detailed and realistic hallucinations. Stories of being in a coma or brain shutting down in a state of extreme pain came to mind, but even then, none of the stories she heard involved fantasy elements. However, not everybody lived through such experiences and perhaps that was the reason why she didn’t hear anything.

She shook her head.

No.

She refused to succumb to such thoughts.

If nothing could be explained in a rational way, then… then rationality be damned. She would try to negotiate her way out of the tree carved fortress and if she failed to do so, then she would try to appear as non-threatening and well meaning as possible, to be kept alive, free and to run away as soon as opportunity would present itself. She’d take supplies to last in the forest for however long it would take for her to get out. She would get out. Get out and reclaim the normalcy in her life.

Definitely.

The resolve was made and spread through her body with the warmth of newly found confidence, thawing the ice of anxiety and fear which took over her entire being in the last couple of hours. All in all, it was beyond clear that she held very little control over the situation as it was. It would not help to lose control over herself as well.

“I speak the truth when I say that my trespassing was not intentional. I never meant to enter where I am not welcomed and would gladly leave. I have no ill intent towards you or anyone in the kingdom. I understand I am in no position to ask, but can only hope for understanding of my situation and maybe a bit of compassion” she stated as polite and respectable as she could, while still keeping her voice firm.

She based her little speech on what she heard and read in fiction about medieval times, the exact time period she was reminded of by her surroundings. With any luck she should sound sincere and authentic.

“I am afraid that I cannot let you leave” the king didn’t sound particularly moved by her improvised heartfelt plea, but neither had he been angered or annoyed, which, considering the previous interaction, was probably as good as it could get.

“May I know why?” genuine curiosity, not accusation, she guided her voice when asking the question. She already strongly suspected this would be the answer, but she needed the reasoning behind it.

“You are remarkably well-spoken for someone who claims to be uneducated” he said in a manner which clearly indicated that the comment was anything but a compliment “Besides, you are yet to tell us about the origins of the object that was found with you” a raised eyebrow and an almost sinister smile. Definitely an ‘I got you’ moment.

She sighed, for a numerous time in a span of a few hours. So he did see though her little charade. She stood no chance of fooling the king from the very beginning, in largest part because she had forgotten about her phone. Regarding the part of her being too ‘well-spoken’ to be uneducated… That was exactly why she preferred for her roles to be scripted by someone else. Not all actors could also be writers and she had still a lot to learn.
The king, however, wasn’t angry with her, though. He almost seemed amused. Maybe even intrigued. Trying to figure her out. She could work with that and maybe even use it to her advantage. She would work on her ‘legend’ and figure out the level of information she could afford to give to keep his interest, enough to not appear uncooperative. Short, vague, with not too much detail, to not be caught lying.

“That, however, is something we can discuss another time” there was a slight change in his voice, but she couldn’t quite figure what it was, until she looked at the king with more observant eyes.

From the very beginning of the conversation, the king was resting his elbow on the arm of the throne, supporting his head with his own arm. She believed the position indicated boredom, but now started to notice the lean on his hand becoming much more prominent. She could also clearly see his chest raising and falling in tact with the breathing. If his breathing had been heavy enough to be this visible, it wasn’t noticeable enough for her to see when she had previously studied his… clothes, let’s leave it at that.

He was tired, maybe even exhausted. To a degree when even complete stranger was able to take note of it.

Sitting on a throne and instilling fear in everyone around you must be a very draining practice, the woman thought, with a certain amount of spite. The king might have had to offer much to look at, but being in a near proximity of him for a prolonged period of time was an experience way below average.

She was quite content with being dismissed, even though she knew that she’d have to endure his presence again in the nearest future.

“Tauriel, find her accommodation. It shouldn’t be too hard, we have a lot of space emptied recently” his face was now hidden in the shadow, making it impossible to fully discern his expression. But, judging strictly by the sound of the king’s voice, there was no room to assume it could be anything positive.

Morbid. That comment sounded very much morbid. Borderline threatening. Or was it intended to be a threat after all? A hint of what happens with those who cause trouble? There was hardly any need for that. People with spears already had the intimidation factor largely taken care of.

Tauriel nodded, gesturing the blonde woman to follow her. The blonde had no choice but to oblige, nor did she have any desire to disobey. Accommodation sounded nice, especially if it involved dinner, since once the stress started to slowly step back, the hunger crept up in it’s place.

She followed the redhead and was already wondering whether she could possibly negotiate for a shower, or a local equivalent of a shower if they didn’t have those, when she was stopped in her tracks by the same commanding voice which interrogated her for what seemed like hours.

“Do you really not have any name to introduce yourself with?” the voice asked, with an expected level of indifference.

“No” she answered shortly.

With names like ‘Tauriel’ and ‘Thranduil’ it was abundantly clear that it wouldn’t be possible for her to come up with a believable sounding alias. She couldn’t introduce herself with a modern sounding name, it would raise suspicion and unwanted questions which she couldn’t answer. Nor did she have any knowledge on the local naming customs, therefore creating a completely new name out of the thin air wouldn’t be the best option as well.
“Minai, you can introduce yourself as Minai”

Chapter End Notes

Minai means single/unique in Sindarin. Courtesy of the RealElvish website.

I'm slowly figuring out why I've avoided writing fiction for so long. With other forms of self expression that I've tried you can actually get by purely relying on technical skill alone. Like drawing, painting and sculpture. Recreate a photo number-by-number and people will be impressed, far more so than by whatever unique art style you've spent years on developing. This might be just my personal experience, but I had a few acquaintances share similar stuff. With writing fiction specifically, it's more personal and technicality will only get you so far. You can know everything there is about the Chekhov's gun, the three act story structure and have a dozen synonym dictionaries in your disposal, if the plot/idea behind the story doesn't work... well it just doesn't work and no amount of polishing your writing style will ever help you.

Thus, if I re-draw a photo of a flower and get criticism, I'm only criticized for what my hands can do. But when I'm criticized for my fiction writing, it's my thoughts and ideas that get criticized. In other words, it's much harder to not see critiques regarding my writing not to be directed towards myself as a person. Still I'm starting with writing this fan-story, something I'm not entirely emotionally attached to (am I lying to myself here?), as means to overcome my fear and eventually get to writing my own stuff. Okay? Okay...

Yeah, I'm just trying to justify writing this. I sort of want to do it, but there's this constant nagging feeling that I could probably be more productive with my time.

Thank you for reading and any feedback would be appreciated.
The Leverage

Chapter Notes

This chapter was not easy to write, mostly because even though I knew which outcome I wanted from this scene, I was not completely sure how to achieve it. This chapter deals with one third of what I had originally planned for it, but, once again, the scene which was intended as a paragraph or so had stretched to a whole chapter, even exceeding my word-count goal. I went more in-depth than intended. Fiction writing is weird. Like... things just happen. Scenes, plot points, characters. Everything comes from somewhere and I'm not entirely sure that it's my imagination because somehow I find out 'Oh, so that's where this is going' after I write it. Weird. But fun.

If you stare into the void for a long enough time, the void will inevitably stare back at you. That much of the saying was true, perhaps. Be as it may, the saying, and by that extent the ones who chose to use it in conversations, especially as an advice of a chastising nature, do often imply that you would be the one to engage the void in a staring contest. You'd be the one to approach it first and camp right outside of it's presence, eagerly awaiting for the void to notice you. Not at all different from a shy young lover who in the middle of the night hides under the balcony of the one who holds their affection, hoping that they would be graceful enough to gift the moonlit yard with their presence.

Alas, if that was indeed the case and pursuers of the void did walk somewhere in the world, they were definitely few and far between. More commonly than not, it was the void who sought out your presence. Unparalleled by any other, the void did not, at all, bother with taking on a mask of a lover nor was it shy by any of the known standards.

Unceremoniously, the void would sneak right from behind and grab the shoulder of it’s unsuspecting prey, turn them around against their will and lift their chin up, until their eyes met. And in that moment, the prey was done for. It could not fight back, it could not even twitch underneath the void’s piercing gaze. It could only stand still, in silent agony, feeling the void’s tendrils sip through the their retinas, reaching the very core of their being, demolishing all that it reached and leaving nothing but a few lonely specs of dust in it’s wake.

Her self esteem fell first, less like a house of cards, swept away by the playful gust of the wind and more like a sand castle, intentionally demolished by someone’s foot, as it often happens, accompanied by an evil triumphant laughter.

The self image and self worth went out together, hand in hand, as the old partners that they were. They gave out a sad smile each, apologizing for their weakness before the obstacle they had to face and could not overcome. There was no blame she could give them. They stood no chance.

A light tap on the shoulder. There was no need to turn around to know. Her trusted ally, the one she could always rely on. The head held previously proudly was now slumped in shame and defeat. They gave each other a solemn nod before the outline of her dignity slowly faded, until it was no more.
She now stood alone, without a thing to rely on, desperately clutching her last line of defence, the last stronghold, the last retreat in the face of the unbeatable adversary.

The adversary smiled, taking the front of a dozen or so elven maidens, tall, beautiful and graceful, with their now loose long hair, straight, wavy and curly, brown, black and blonde flowing freely, hugging the delicate curvature of their bodies which possessed such refinement that it would undoubtedly be forever elusive even to the brush of the most skilled and experienced of the mortal painters. There wasn’t a single article of clothing on any of them, or anywhere else in sight, for that matter. Their bodies were absolutely bare with nothing but perky… demeanour.

Their demeanour was the thing that was perky. Or cheerful, yes, cheerful. That was the word that should have come to her mind when she was standing there presented with the cheerful… smiles of the young elven women, while holding tight to the towel wrapped in a cocoon like manner around her own body.

“Do you need any assistance?” one of the pointy-eared folk asked with a sincere eagerness to help.

“No, I’ll manage” came the reply through gritted teeth.

She was no prude nor did she have any previous self-image issues. She had always considered herself to be in a decent enough shape, by regular human standards, at least, and stood very firmly by the belief that it mattered more to ensure that an individual would be comfortable in their own body no matter how it looked, rather than trying to force everyone to fit a certain shape.

But that was exactly the issue. A dozen of immortal goddesses with ever-youthful bodies and not a single unwanted hair on them did make her feel uncomfortable.

Very, very uncomfortable.

Long story short, private bathing areas were the prerogative of the noble families and the military higher-ups. The regular workers, soldiers and overall commoners had to do with the public bathhouse. Not that she expected to receive any sort of special treatment. It would definitely be nice, yes, but the likelihood of something like that happening was pretty much non-existent all the way from the beginning and the woman, who had recently started go by Minai, didn’t bother to get her hopes too high up.

She didn’t mind spending time among the regular people, or rather regular elves, since they were anything but regular for her. They might have been regular seamstresses, soldiers and chambermaids within their own society, but, as an outsider, Minai found such company to be working to her own advantage.

Her legend, devised with some significant aid from Tauriel, was as follows: her mother and father hailed from Lothlorien, another elven domain allocated near Mirkwood, where she currently resided. Her father, a soldier and her mother, an aspiring writer with passion to study cultures different from that of the elves, had eloped at a young age and embarked on a journey to explore the world.

At this part Tauriel let out a sad longing sigh with a faraway look in her eyes. Minai made a mental note of that but decided against pressing the matter any further for she didn’t feel that they were close enough to share backstories quite yet.

Anyway, Minai’s made-up mother took notes and studied the world around, while her equally as made-up father protected his new wife from the dangers around. They’ve spent a few happy years together, until they had both realized their joy to not be complete without a child. Thus, Minai
herself came into the world and spent her childhood and adolescence living in several different human cities, which resulted in her being more accustomed to their cultures. When she had entered adulthood, her parents understood that they had given their daughter much knowledge about the ways of humans and not enough of that of the elves. They decided, in their assumption that their daughter shared the same passion as her mother, to send Minai to Mirkwood, which would be completely new to her, opposed to Lothlorien which she would already be somewhat familiar with through the stories her parents told her. Minai was accompanied to the forest border by her human friends, but they then left and the blonde elf came into Mirkwood alone, with a letter to the king, explaining her situation. The king agreed to fulfil her parents’ request and allowed her to stay in the Woodland Realm, especially since the people here were currently needed.

Whether such a legend held any plausibility or not Minai knew nothing of, but Tauriel insisted that it was fairly believable and wouldn’t give much opportunity to be proven false, in the nearest future at least. Therefore Minai recited the tale whenever she was approached by someone new, which happened quite a lot, with elves being the curious and sociable creatures that they were. The elves seemed to, so far, believe her.

One more advantage of the legend was that it gave Minai an opportunity to openly study the elven culture without drawing in too much attention. She asked questions about their ways and customs and when encountered with something unfamiliar, a pair of pointy ears were there to listen to her grievances and assist in whichever way it was possible.

The elves, in general, were simply nice like that. Kind, responsive and easy-going, which made Minai question their leadership choices all the way more, but enjoy being in their company nevertheless. That’s why, despite not being the first volunteer to join a big company, Minai found the daily meals, which always happened in a large hall full of people, well, elves, to be the most enjoyable part of the day. There were plenty of various dishes, to cater to anyone’s taste and a variety of beverages with all the different degrees of alcohol in them, Minai stayed away from the stronger drinks due to where the previous experience with them had lead her. The breakfast was full of chatter and sharing dreams from the night previous, during the dinner the most recent news, events and plans were discussed and the supper was accompanied by songs, ballads and all the kinds of interesting stories.

But, where there was a favourite part of the day, there had to be the least favourite as well. That honour, without a doubt, fell to the bath taking procedures. Not really because the clothesless elleths, she could gradually recover from the initial shock it had given her, but more so because she was simply the type of the person who preferred her privacy. Besides, the whole procedure didn’t make her uncomfortable enough to beg for a private bath area, thus risking to cause a scene and fall further out of grace with the local government leader and potentially hindering her chances of getting out of here.

Those were her favourite and least favourite parts of the day. But what of everything in between, one might ask. Well, to than there was a simple answer. There was not much of ‘in-between’.

The life in elven kingdom started early in the morning, the time which Minai usually spent snuggled underneath a warm blanket and woke up closer diner than to the breakfast. Then the diner took place and after that the elves returned to their daily routine, as it was especially busy in regards to recent battle, of which Minai knew very little about, due to the elves preferring to discuss more light-hearted topics during the meal time and Tauriel not willing to talk about it at all. Once again, Minai didn’t press for it. Yet.

There was nothing in particular the blonde could occupy herself in-between the diner and the supper. She wasn’t the most talented in the arts of music, weaving and painting, prompting her to
not be interested in joining any of the related activities. She wouldn’t feel happy and content with her level of skill among the adult elves and would find herself in a position beyond any reasonable definition of awkward if she were to find herself in a class full of children. If there even was a class of children around here, for so far she had seen none of the younglings running around. She had also never learned any manual trade skills, rendering her incapable of assisting seamstresses, carpenters or forgers. Especially the forgers. And, as it was previously mentioned, right now everybody simply seemed to be a bit too busy with their own duties to teach her to do anything.

There were, however, times when Tauriel took Minai with her to the training grounds where the blonde was granted a chance to observe and admire some very impressive archery skills. Tauriel didn’t seem to be occupied with anything in particular as well. Minai had noticed her in the company of some elven scouts, and although their conversations were always lengthy and profound, testifying to Tauriel’s previous involvement, the redhead didn’t exactly go to any patrols with them.

Minai wondered if she should just go ahead and ask Tauriel to teach her how to handle a bow. She couldn’t say she was that interested in wielding a weapon, she was, in general, quite alarmed with all the distant talks about the battle and the weaponry skills she had a chance to witness so far. But it would give her something to be occupied with and get her closer to Tauriel, which could lead to gaining an information source with a deeper insider knowledge.

The blonde had made up her mind about approaching Tauriel and had all the intentions of doing so during the evening meal, but something happened to shift her priorities a little, at least in regards of their motivation.

When she entered the dining hall, Minai had immediately noticed something to be different. Not the good kind of different, not at all. It was quiet, far too quiet, she figured out right away. It was the evening, usually the liveliest time when the chores were done and the work finished, the elves were supposed to chatter about anything and everything that happened during the day and with little exception indulge in leisure activities, such as singing, dancing and storytelling.

Yet it was quiet. No sound of the music instruments, no friendly banter, no young couples murmuring all kinds of pleasantry into each other’s long pointy ears. Although, she hasn’t seen much of that anyway, which did rise some questions, given that she already knew the elves to be capable of romance through Tauriel’s outstanding affinity for such matters. The blonde elleth had nothing against eating in silence. Truth be told, that is exactly how she preferred her meals prior to coming to this place. This place, that was so different from her own way of life. And because Mirkwood was so different, having the dining hall be this quiet seemed wrong. Eerie, even.

Minai sat at her usual spot, her eyes immediately beginning to scan the surroundings for any kind of clue as to what could possible have caused the disturbance in the elven vision of normalcy. All of her usual table neighbours were at place, frowning, looking down to their plates. Nothing outside the ordinary on the both sides of the table to the left of her. On the right, the row of pointy-eared heads, sombre, but not much beyond that. On the right across the table, one, two, three… nine.

Across the table on the right nine seats from her Minai saw the possible culprit.

The girl, no longer a child but not yet an adult. She was a rare guest over the dining table. Here one day, away the other. Pale and slender built, one step away from appearing malnourished. The dress sat unevenly on her shoulders, one side of it almost falling down her arm, her hair at complete disarray, loose strands sticking out, not a hint of the usual shine. Dark circles underneath her eyes.
Her eyes red and puffy.

It was beyond obvious that the young elleth was previously crying, and doing so quite heavily, as it was obvious that it was only a matter of time before she would start crying again.

Minai, inconspicuously as possible, bit the inside of her lip. Not that she was a nosy person, her levels of curiosity would not compete too much with those of an average cat, and it was widely known what curiosity did to the members of the feline family. She knew better than to risk sharing the same fate. In this particular case, it was not the curiosity, it was the feeling of being left out. She was already an outsider and being the only person who was unaware of something in a giant hall full of people who were aware… it was unnerving, to say the least.

The blonde was taking a sip from from her glass when the silence of the hall was broken by a single sob. She didn’t have to lift her eyes to know where it came from, but she did so anyway, putting on a standard expression of concern. She wasn’t as naturally empathetic as the elves were, and somewhere deep down pondered upon what it told about her as a person. As a consequence, she could not, on her own, feel the same levels of compassion for the girl as those around her, adding to that was the factor that the girl was a dear friend to many of them and a complete stranger to Minai herself. The woman resorted to her acting abilities, as she often did recently. She didn’t want to appear unfeeling and cold, but not too eager to console either, the attention would be unwanted.

She wanted to observe. The results did not make her, or anyone else, wait.

A slam on the wooden surface. A woman. On the left across the table, still young, but already an adult and had been one for quite some time already. Broader built, scar on the bridge of her nose. A scout or a soldier? A soldier. The scouts were leaner.

“How many more lives are we going to lose to the king’s whims?” the soldier’s voice thundered across the hall, echoing in the farthest corners.

The sobbing girl started to shake, the first tear sliding down her reddened cheek.

“The soldiers fell fighting the enemy” responded another feminine voice, less roaring, but equally as strong.

This one belonged to a woman of more delicate features, wearing a dress. She was evidently older, though it did not show on her ageless face, only by the wisdom and distance in her eyes, and, judging by the built of her body and hands free of calluses, she was not engaged in the army or any of the manual labour.

“How dare you speak in such a manner” the soldier spat in anger “You know nothing of it. When I and other soldiers were fighting you and the rest of the noble ilk were sheltered here in safety with your flutes” she threw an accusation, nostrils flaring.

Instinctively, Minai nodded, barely noticeable and not even registering that she had done so. What she had noticed, though, were the approving faces of other younger elves, predominantly women, most of them looking as if they hadn’t spent a single day holding a weapon.

“Do not speak to me like that” the other woman’s voice went dangerously low “I’ve lost my son in that battle, I know what I am speaking of”.

This time the silent support came from elven men and women, mostly older and mostly combat built. They were, however, severely outnumbered, by the sheer fact of there being more women
and those who belonged to younger generation overall.

Oh.

Whoa.

The pieces had finally started to fall into a broader picture.

What do we have?

A recent military conflict of which no one wanted to speak of. Definitely not a heroic conquest and not a fearless defence from an outsiders’ attack. There would be otherwise at least some stories shared of individual or collective valour, for if the cause was noble there would be as much of uplifting tales as there was grief.

And there was only grief.

Minai’s eyes widened at the realization.

Of course there was grief. The elves were mourning. Yes, they held up their faces, they sang and danced when they were in large groups, but right outside the dining hall or the bath house they scattered each into their corner diving deep into work. That’s why she felt so left out. That’s why they didn’t engage her in their daily activities. A collective of elves were one close family, trying to cheer each other up. An individual elf closed up within themselves, shutting the rest of the world out.

Next there was the demographic situation. The elves did not age physically once reaching the adulthood, or so they claimed, but it was still usually possible to tell which stage of life one was at. The youth outnumbered the elders by far. Most of the older elves occupied the positions of power, higher military ranks and the seats on the council, almost never seen among the common elven people. Minai hadn’t encountered much of them, but knew of their existence through asking related questions. Although women did appear to serve in the military, to an extent, and went on scouting missions, clearly the majority of them took on less dangerous occupations. There was a serious breach in the elven population and a large amount of those capable of defending the kingdom were now gone. Worse than that, Minai hadn’t seen any children and young couples were scarce, therefore… Therefore the gap in the population would likely to just remain there for however long it took to mend it starting somewhere from this moment.

The older and by extent probably more influential people people supported the king, as seen from who nodded to which statement in the upcoming brawl. They were few. The younger people showed the sign of displeasure with the current ruler. They were many.

And the king… she only had one brief encounter to base her judgement on, but the shared sentiment of the elven people was now there to support the opinion. The king was by far not the easiest person to deal with, double the achievement considering the overall kind, empathetic, compassionate and social nature of the rest of the elven kind. He wasn’t kind to strangers, nor to his own people, apparent by how he had treated Tauriel who was… who was also in a sense excluded and possibly even sacked from her position. She did train and move around freely, spent much of her time talking to the scouts but she wasn’t officially assigned to any missions. Thus, the king’s decision regarding his people as a whole as well as individual members were not exactly gracious. Adding to that… Well, that last point was more on the speculative side, but…

But.
The king did not appear to be in the best health. The elves did not get sick, as she was told, but there was clearly something not right with the elven ruler. Looking back at their conversation, it had only seemed long due to her being mostly at the receiving end of the king’s bad temper. In relation to the actual time it took, it could be called relatively brief. And it had still left the king exhausted by the end of it. Was he injured? Poisoned? That was most probably of no matter, what matter was that whichever malady had taken over the king’s body, it was a bit too apparent not to be noticed.

Summing up, a demographic crisis, the youthful majority displeased with the power-holding circle and especially with the king, who possibly was in a declining state of health.

Minai bit one of her nails, deep in thought.

What an ugly situation. Considering the predominant medieval-esque features of the place.

How long was it until the bloodshed revolution?

Probably long. The elves did not seem to be at all capable of lifting up the arms against their own kind, at least these elves. She knew nothing substantial of the other elven domains. Besides, it was only natural to have people to discuss their rules less than favourably in the aftermath of a conflict which did not end all that triumphantly.

“Your son would still be with us if the king did not wage war on the dwarves for a piece of jewellery” in the meantime, the verbal fight continued. The remark came from someone else on one of the other tables, it was hard to tell whom.

“A dozen of dwarves atop the mountain would have done nothing to our people. It was impossible to anticipate the orcs” one more voice had chimed in. The brawl no longer seemed unlikely.

A dozen dwarves, a single piece of jewellery, an entire army. Initially, an intimidation tactic. It was an unaccounted force that did the most damage. Therefore, to be fair, the king did not lead his people to slaughter over nothing. To be even more fair, he did not see it to be beneath him to use clearly unfair tactics to achieve his goals. His less than noble goals, if it was only the jewellery at stake. Was there something else involved? Previous hostility between the dwarves and the elves? Something like collective pride wounded? There had to be some leverage to rise an army for the sake of reclaiming a shiny trinket. Even so, either the elves were loyal beyond any mortal comprehension or their leader was an exceptionally skilled orator.

Still, the elves had followed him. Ingrained loyalty, fear or was it only due to the recent events that the king’s reputation had suffered?

“We wouldn’t have to fight the orcs if our army did not go to the Lonely Mountain in the first place” the comment was followed by the supportive murmur from one side and disapproving hissing from the other.

“The orcs would not spare our forest once done with dwarves and humans. We had to fight!”

Hmm, interesting.

That last opinion came from the group of younger elven boys. They were ready to jump to arms in order to protect their kingdom. Even if a moment before they were all nodding in agreement that the losses were unacceptable.

Quite unsurprisingly, the elves did then believe in collective gain against the individual. They were exceptionally loyal and would follow their leader through anything if they believed it to be in
favour of the kingdom as a whole. Whether it was protecting the lives or the pride of those living inside the forest.

Ah, yes, Minai smiled, those were the good kind of people to rule over. After all, it would only take a speech convincing enough and they would go to wherever you had whims to lead them.

So.

Had the king taken advantage of that and used his army to intimidate the dwarves into submission but it horribly backfired when the orcs had shown up?

She had to admit, so far the image she got of the king did not give her much optimism for the future. Sooner or later she would have to meet the person and try to negotiate her way out and honestly, right now she saw no opportunity of doing so, given that her opponent appeared to have little to no regard for anyone or anything in a blind pursuit of his own gains.

Or was there anything she wasn’t seeing quite yet?

“The king withdrew the army once he had seen the damage” this one came from the group of mostly older elves, with few of the younger ones in-between. Dressed in simple linen clothing of lighter shades, their hair braided tightly, not to get in their faces. The healers.

An interesting side to get the perspective from. The healers were not taking part in the active combat, thus not experiencing much damage themselves, yet, arguably, they were the ones who had to deal with the consequences of it the most.

One more argument for the king to not be willing to cause harm to his subjects. So the safety of his people did matter to him, at least. Good. That was good. It meant that she wasn’t dealing with a complete monster here.

Although, whether his actions themselves were a good or a bad thing, or rather, whether they would be perceived as such, well, it was up for a debate.

It depended. It heavily depended which point of the battle this had happened at.

If it happened somewhere near the end of the battle, where the victory of the presumed ‘good’ side was imminent and the enemy was at that point only fighting to drag as many people as possible to be doomed with them, then yes, even though unfair to the dwarven and human armies, then yes, perhaps, that could be an argument for the decision.

Yet, if the order was made in the middle of the bloodshed, then… Then the necessity of the elven army even being present during the conflict and the impact it had done in defeating the enemy was thrown into some serious question, making the whole argument of ‘we had to fight’ nearly invalid. Because it would mean that there was a chance that the dwarves and the humans would get by on their own and elven deaths were, indeed, for nothing.

“If the king were to be blameless, why would he hide like a coward from his own people?” the question blew up in a cacophony of murmurs.

Why would he indeed. Was he aware of the people talking and truly was afraid to face the public scorn? Doubtful. She remembered the king’s figure on that throne. The domineering presence of a person comfortable to be in charge. Him being afraid to face his own people wasn’t, the very little bit, likely. Then, was he too unwell to hold a conference, or anything of the sort? Once again, she was more inclined to say no. This whole point was largely based on her own speculation from the beginning. The king could as well be in perfect health and him being tired of their conversation
could simply mean he was engaged in more draining activities prior to that.

Then why? Why couldn’t he hold an audience for his own loyal subject but granted one to her, a complete stranger.

Was it that he…?

Minai felt her lips curl up in a devious smile. She felt herself nearing the conclusion she needed and was excited to finally get a possible insight into the inner-workings of the king’s mind. She knew that so far she was dealing purely with her own conjectures, but even that would be better than nothing, she just had to know a few more things and…

She felt being stared at. The feeling alarmed her, instantly and she started to look around searching for the source of the gaze, hindered by the need of being inconspicuous. If she was caught smiling in the midst of a heated debate regarding the need of being inconspicuous, she simply could not afford to appear even more suspicious. Thus, the search presented zero results, but the feeling of someone’s eyes on her did not go away and she made a mental note to be more aware of her own emotions and the ways in which she expressed them.

“‘The king does not hide. He spent days and night in the healing wing, attending to the injured’ once again, this came from the healers. Of course.

“Then where was he yesterday, when her father succumbed to the poison” the soldier elleth who had initially started the verbal skirmish pointed at the catalyst of the conflict, the young girl who was now openly crying into someone’s shoulder.

So that’s what happened.

Well, that explained the king’s fatigue then. Although, not entirely. It was now known that he had spent several days in the healing wing. Until recently.

Why?

Was his condition the result of overworking or the reason for withdrawing from the public’s eye, including the healing wing?

Minai resisted the urge to drum her fingers on the table’s surface, or biting her nails, for that matter. She still wasn’t sure whether she was still watched or not. Judging by how she felt, it was most probably the former.

What she could allow herself to do, was to sigh.

In the long run, the king’s health was of no matter to her, what mattered was that she had finally managed to catch what she was chasing all throughout the conversation.

Guilt.

The king was guilty and very much aware of being so.

That’s why, presumably, there was no official address to the public. That’s why he choose to face a stranger before he did his own people. That’s where the need of overworking himself in the healing wing despite there already being plenty of capable healers around came from.

Leverage. She finally got her leverage.
But…. But.

Even the best of leverages would have easily been proven devastatingly useless if one was not aware what the leverage was meant to be used against. Well, who to be used against, in that case. The king was a polarizing figure. Contradictory, even. On one hand there was waging wars for the sake of jewellery, using openly unfair tactics against the opposing side, not even a full enemy, lashing out at strangers as well as his own people, but on the other hand there was him trying to protect his people from slaughter and healing the injured to the point of exhaustion.

Man was this difficult. Was he difficult.

Against the king there was the youth, the ones who possibly just got their first experience in the real world battle, the common folk who stayed far from the matters of the court, the ones for whom the king was a distant authority figure making the decisions which they questioned the reasons behind.

In favor the ruling monarch were the ones who were older and thus serving the king for the longer time and perhaps those in a way personally acquainted, like the healers.

Ha!

Minai had to bite the inside of her cheek to keep the non-expressing look on her face.

She needed a person she could talk to. Someone who was among those who were younger. Someone who was not entirely pleased with the king’s latest decisions. Yet, someone who was, or, at least, at some point had been closer to the king. Close enough to be nearly made fun of on a somewhat personal basis. She needed…

Tauriel.

Turns out the odds today were in her favour, presenting this many opportunities to further her cause. She was lucky.

At that conclusion Minai had to give herself a mental slap of a lifetime.

That thought was inappropriate.

The poor girl did lose her father recently and Minai did not want to insinuate that such a thing was in any way beneficial.

She just happened to profit from it, she wasn’t… she wasn’t seeking this outcome.

Still, it made the blonde shift uncomfortably in her seat. She raised her eyes to look at the girl and to her own surprise found the young elleth no longer crying. Her face was still stained with tears and her eyes glistening in the light of the lanterns, but together with the grief, there was an expression of different nature.

The girl stood up.

“My father” she said quietly, but with no trace of quiver in her voice, making everybody else to fall silent and listen “My father fought bravely and gave up his life protecting me, my mother and our kingdom” she gulped and drew in a breath, but no sobs came out “He had always said that… that… he was ready for such an outcome and would not regret it for a single moment and…” a few more breaths and a pause, during which there was nothing but the silence around “…and the healers, including our king, did everything in their power to save his life until… until it was apparent that
there was… there was nothing that could be done” the girl finished her speech and almost collapsed to her seat, her lower lip trembling.

There was not another word said during that evening. The elves remained quiet, each in their own thoughts.

So was Minai.

The blonde was quiet, speechless, she could only stare in awe at the girl, unable to imagine the bravery it took for her, almost a child, during the moment of her greatest despair to stand up to the entire hall of quarrelling adults.

It was a beautiful moment, yet, more so it was sad.

It was sad to see someone’s childhood to end in such a way.

She never wanted to see something like that again. She never wanted for something like that to ever happen again. But that, just like every single other aspect of this world, recently including her own life, she had not a single spec of control over.

With heavy thoughts Minai had left the dining hall, unnoticed by anyone, save for a single pair of eyes seeing off her exit.

Chapter End Notes

You know, for someone who criticizes others for their attitudes, the heroine clearly needs to check her own moral compass. Or it will be checked for her. Spoilers for the next chapter.

Anyhow, I'm starting to feel like the description to the story should be something like 'Nobody wants to listen to me ruining fantasy worlds with real life consequences so I'm gonna make a story out of it'. I hope nobody was expecting any romance from this, because clearly I'm far more interested in discussing the elven world order now. But seriously, I forgot to add 'romance' in the tags and at this point I'm just sitting here and wandering if I should even bother. It's clearly not here. But 'slow burn' is there, so don't tell me you haven't been warned.

Really, though, I'll get to it, eventually, I hope. Just let me pretend for now that I have an actual plot. I swear I have a reason for all of this.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

I once again woke up not being a celebrity millionaire and since I had no red carpets to attend I had to settle and write a new chapter. Seriously, how long the injustice will go on?

It's one of those chapters that seems fine when I write it and then I press 'publish' and wonder if it would turn out better if I just took a trashcan and rolled it around the keyboard. I guess the chapter's fine, but so far, the thing that bothers me most about writing is the possible disconnect between my intent and the readers' understanding. This makes it extremely hard not just to spoil the entire thing at once. But overall, I'm happy with how much I'm learning by writing this. Makes me want to continue.

Anyway, averaging from 4k chapters to 6k chapters now. I clearly need to leave the 'required word-count' mentality behind.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Silent, quiet, muted, unnoticeable, undetected, inexistent and many other adjectives which Mini desperately desired to be at that moment. And all of which she, unfortunately, was not.

She sat in a chair, focused on the sole task of not making a single sound, pressing her back into the back of the chair hard enough to create an impression that she strived to blend into the soft fabric and become one with that particular piece of the furniture. Alas, the chair was far less than willing to give in to such an unusual union and remained solid in all of it’s wooden glory, leaving the poor woman to fend for herself alone.

Across the room there stood the reason for the blonde elleth’s distress. The tall and menacing figure of the elven king towered in the rays of the morning sun, casting a large looming shadow which fell all the way across the room.

Ominous picture.

It would be quite a beautiful morning if not for the events which had transpired about an hour or so earlier. The sky was the absolute brightest pink colour and despite the usual winter chill, plenty of wildlife had started their usual morning routine of waking up, for example the bullfinches and the waxwings were already chirping loudly and welcoming the start of a new day in all of their fluffy-feathered excitement.

Indeed, the morning had all the necessary attributes to be an excellent one. Yet, due to many circumstances, all of which were not only completely unforeseen but also absolutely unforeseeable, the morning would likely become one of the worst if not actually the last in her relatively short, especially compared to the elves, life.

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It had all started rather innocently when the evening prior, just a few hours earlier, she went on her quest to find Tauriel and discuss the possibility of having some archery lessons, the very basics, at
least. What she didn’t account for, though, was that there were only three locations she was capable
of travelling to without a guide. The dining hall, the bath house and her small private room. She
knew how to get from one to the other and then the third, but that was about it. Even the shooting
range, which Tauriel had previously taken her to, would pose a considerable challenge to find.
Besides, it was by that point already dark and highly unlikely that there would be anyone there this
late in the evening. Inconveniently enough, Tauriel was not present at the diner that evening either.
Therefore, in all actuality, Minai had the absolute zero of ideas on where to search for the redhead.
Something that she should probably have accounted for before straying away from her usual path
and ending up in a place completely unfamiliar. Although, maybe it wasn’t completely unfamiliar.
The elven palace seemed to look vaguely familiar to Minai no matter when she went. Mostly
because it just looked the same everywhere. The same wooden walls, the same firefly lanterns.
She made an attempt to use the numerous paintings scattered around the fortress as a source of
navigation, but, after the dozenth or so painting depicting the elves looking heroic and the enemies
defeated she had to completely give up on the idea. The paintings looked the same as well, which
only hindered her case instead of helping it. As if just to spite her, there weren’t that many elves in
the halls that evening for Minai to go ahead and ask for directions. It was, as it was already
previously mentioned, pretty late in the evening and the recent brawl probably made the pointy
eared kind to crawl into their burrows and sulk.

Typical.

Well, maybe not exactly typical. Minai couldn’t claim to know the elves for long enough time to be
sure of what was and what wasn’t considered the all time norm for them, but being as angry and
annoyed as she was at that moment, she didn’t bother much with the accuracy of the adjectives she
was subscribing to everyone and everything she could possibly think of.

The only ones around were the guards, but Minai could think of a whole laundry list of reasons as
to why approaching people with weapons was not the most stellar idea around, first and foremost
being that not knowing which area of the palace she was located at any given moment it could as
well be somewhere where she was not supposed to be at all. Therefore she tried to avoid the
guards. Luckily, that wasn’t that much of a hard task, at least today. For one reason or the other,
the pointy eared didn’t seem to be, for the lack of any other term, sober. The two of the left
definitely weren’t, pretty apparent from how loudly they snored nestled to each other and a few
empty bottles standing not too far away.

Stellar discipline.

Then again, knowing what she did now, could she really blame them? She couldn’t and even more
so she couldn’t with all honesty say that she wouldn’t join them if offered to. The memory of what
alcohol led her to the previous time was still fresh in the woman’s mind, however, exactly because
of everything that had happened she felt like a drink or two were well deserved.

Unfortunately, no one offered her to join in on the wine drinking and she had to continue her lonely
stroll through the elven palace in complete solitude.

The last time she got so completely lost she ended up here. How nice would it be if this time she
ended up back home?

Exceptionally nice.

Probably that’s why it hadn’t happened.

Suddenly, she felt a gust of wind brush it’s chilly hand through her hair. Surprised, but hopeful, she
followed the direction to find the source of the wind, thinking that maybe, just maybe, luck would
smile upon her this time and she would find a way which would lead her to freedom.

A path to freedom was not what she found though. Instead, she ended up on a balcony which, judging by the view which opened from it, was located quite far up, definitely on one of the upper levels of the palace.

Even if it wasn’t exactly what she was looking for there was a certain use she could make out of it. Minai entered the balcony and sat on a railing ignoring the cold, which, surprisingly, didn’t even bother her that much to begin with. The woman carefully looked over the landscape which presented itself before her.

First, she observed the night sky. It was calm and clear, without a single cloud. Stars were a plenty and the moon shining bright, veiling the world in it’s cold translucent light. It was a pretty sight, indeed. Minai had never seen stars like that. Her whole life she had lived in a city, quite a large one, where the light pollution prevented people from enjoying the starry night sky in it’s full glory. Even during the few nights which, around the age of seven, Minai spent in the countryside when her parents visited some family friends, she could not recall the stars being quite like that. She studied the intricate gleaming patterns carefully, wondering whether or not she would be able to find any familiar constellations, if there were any constellations that were to any degree familiar to her. She knew about the big dipper, but that was about where her astronomy knowledge stopped and even if the big dipper was present anywhere in the sky that night, she could not locate it through the sea of other stars.

She wouldn’t have minded just looking at the stars under the warmer and more convenient circumstances, however, today she had other goals to achieve, therefore the woman moved her gaze downwards.

There wasn’t much she could see in the darkness, even considering the light of the moon. There were trees, but what kind of forest didn’t have those. Forest. More forest. She could only see the snow covered tops of the pine tress for as far as her eyes could reach. Although, if she squinted, she could almost make out a silhouette of a mountain far far away.

Wait, a mountain?

She remembered no mountains anywhere near…

Minai sighed. It appears she was still somewhat clinging to the idea that she somehow was in the same forest she had entered in several weeks ago. Clearly she was not. It was not the same forest, she didn’t count on it. Not consciously. What she did count on was seeing signs of any other civilization. A small town, a tiny village. Anything which would give her hope that if she just made an effort and waded through the damn forest she would end up somewhere that she could at least ask for help and refuge.

Her hopes were crushed.

Not for the first time, as of late.

The woman sighed, in a twisted way enjoying how cold and miserable she was at that moment. It certainly matched her mood.

Maybe if she just froze here to death her misfortune would finally be over.

Minai shook her head.

No.
She wouldn’t allow a small temporary set back to crush her spirit. After all, the balcony only
opened the view of one side of the forest. Maybe her salvation was simply hidden on the other side
of it. Why couldn’t it be the case? It could and therefore there was no reason to give in to the
melancholy.

With determination once again shining bright in her eyes Minai decided to head back to where it
was warmer, because, certainly, warm places generated warm thoughts and cold places could, well,
give you a cold. She wasn’t going to risk finding out whether she had the same immunity to the
illnesses as the elves did.

She turned around and was immediately frozen to her spot with the force which had nothing to the
with the low wintery temperatures.

She was no longer alone at the balcony. There, with her, was the person whom she was prepared to
see the least at that particular moment and probably any other moment ever as well.

The ruler of the elven kingdom in all of his glory. Just standing there silent and unmoving.

He did not have his crown on this time around which still did nothing to lessen the intimidation
factor in any way possible. And due to it still being dark, Minai couldn’t tell anything about the
king’s mood, since she wasn’t able to see the expression on his face.

That was unnerving.

At least he didn’t seem to mind her presence. He didn’t react to her being there in any way, as if he
didn’t even acknowledge her existence. Not that she wanted to argue with that. In other
circumstances, maybe, she would feel a decent amount of annoyance with being treated as an
empty space by someone, but, considering who that someone was this time… Yeah, she was pretty
content with the way things were.

Let her be an empty space, she would even play along to that, never mind the cold.

The blonde woman turned away and continued to study the horizon line, slowly and silently, not to
make rapid movements or anything else that might have resulted in negative attention.

Meanwhile, the scenery has started to change. At first the changes were rather subtle, close to
being unnoticeable, but with each passing second they started to be apparent more and more. First,
the pitch blackness of the night eased into the darkest shade of purple, gradually moving to the
lighter hues until the horizon presented a thin stripe of bright pink, clouded by the wintery mist. It
remained like that for a few more moments and then…

The first ray of sun grazed the tops of the trees with it’s ethereal presence, making the darkness
bow down in respect and recede in the farther corners of the world and then down into the forest,
it’s own little sanctuary, hidden in the deepest parts of it, where the trees stood so close to each
other that no light would ever be able to penetrate. There, the darkness would lie dormant, until the
sun’s watch would end in the evening.

Minai couldn’t help but feel her smile growing wider and winder with each new ray of sunshine
that banished the darkness from the world and subsequently from her own mind as well. Forgotten
were the sorrows she felt just a few moments prior, replaced by the beauty of the sight she was
granted an opportunity to see.

She could definitely now understand why anyone would risk exposing themselves to the harsh
winter temperatures just to be a witness to such bright and colourful sunrise. Even the king…
Although, perhaps not the king. With it being much lighter now, Minai could see the expression on the elven monarch’s face. He looked completely unfazed. Indifferent. Dejected. His gaze, still and unmoving as the rest of his figure, directed to somewhere unknown from underneath the half closed eyelids.

Well then.

Not that she was surprised the very least. In fact, she would probably be more surprised to actually see any positive emotion on his face. That was something she couldn’t even try imagine. To her utmost dismay. Not out the regard for the king’s feelings, goodness no. It was just that his attitude could potentially and rather directly affect the entirety of her future and that made her feel anger and fear more than anything even vaguely resembling genuine compassion.

However, the fact that they quite peacefully coexisted on that balcony, even if she was being completely ignored, was a sign if not of progress then of things not being all too bad between them. Maybe she managed to demonstrate how much of an ordinary and non-threatening being she truly was by the act of cohabitation with the elves in a mundane and uneventful manner.

Maybe if he saw how unremarkable and uninteresting she was she would be let go and…

A small red-chested bullfinch suddenly flew close enough to her face to touch the woman’s cold cheek with the feathers of it’s wings. The said woman yelped, taken completely by surprise, and flinched away, loosing the grip on the railings she was sitting atop of. She barely managed to steady herself, falling, fortunately, to the side of the balcony and not off it.

What transpired next, required her being much more alert than she was when startled by the bird, because, if she was but a fraction of a second late in her reaction, a sharp blade of silver steel would have recreated a tragic departure scene between her neck and her head.

“What the hell!? What was that for!?” she yelled, still on the floor but moving away from the sword, which was still pointed at her.

In a feat of righteous wrath she threw a venomous glare at the offender who, in turn, appeared no less shocked that she was, eyes wide but for some reason avoiding to look at her directly.

“How dare you sneak in here” he sneered through gritted teeth.

Wait, what? Minai felt her blood boil, immediately ridding her body of any trace of cold.

Really?

Really!?

She was the one sneaking up on people!?

REALLY!?

“I was here first!” there wasn’t much left in her capable of caring for politeness and social norms since every other emotion was burned away by the sheer anger that she felt “I was sitting here minding my own business long before you showed up. Didn’t you...” she blinked then, putting more attention to the fact how much his eyes didn’t focus on her “You didn’t...” she fell quiet in sudden realization.

He wasn’t avoiding looking at her.
The king was blind.

***

That was the story of how she ended up in the king’s personal office or however would they call it here in the land stuck in mediaeval times? A study? She ended up in the king’s study. Desperately trying to deduct the level of trouble she was in. That appeared to be a significant struggle, possibly due to the fact that the level was so far beyond her comprehension that no amount of brain work would ever make her capable of seeing the top of it.

Minai was now convinced that she should have, at some point, bothered with writing her last will. Not because she had that much of valuable stuff to give away, but she did have certain ideas about the colour of the casket and the specific photo to be engraved on her gravestone. Although, she was never the biggest fan of the engraved photos. She appreciated sculptures much more, especially the ones made out of white marble. She wouldn’t want a sculpture of herself, though. She would much prefer something different, like an animal or a bird. But not a dove or a swan, those were too cliché.

Another type of bird would suit her more.

A frigging bullfinch, for example! The absolute worst type of bird and so ridiculous looking as well. Weren’t the bullfinches supposed to be a winter type of birds? You know, winter, when there’s snow and everything’s white. Why on earth then the bullfinches had red chests, huh? Because they were pompous show-offs just asking to be hunted down and turned into a stew, that’s why.

Her train of curses for that specific avian breed was stopped when the king’s low voice had pierced the silence.

“You do realise” he paused, not turning around to face her “that you must not speak of your discovery” his voice was calm and collected, yet she still could only see his back and had no idea what the expression of his face was.

“I understand” she lied. She did not understand. She had the absolute zero understanding how something like that could be a secret and could have been kept a secret and… and many more things which she wanted to ask but would never even imagine having an audacity to do so “I will not tell anyone” this time a truth.

She wasn’t ever the type of person to use someone’s blindness as a blackmail material and even if she was, being nearly sliced into several parts gave her a rather graphic demonstration of why exactly this would be a tremendously bad idea.

“Good” the king stated coldly, his tone clearly indicating that she didn’t really have an option of answering in any other way.

Can I now run to my room hide under the covers and have a mental breakdown was what she wanted to ask, but for the reason of saving her face had to settle for something different:

“It really was not my intention to...” she started her explanation.

“I do not care for your intentions. How did you end up in that part of the palace?” quite unceremoniously he cut her off.

By the virtue of your guards being a bunch of drunkards, was another remark she refrained from sharing.
“Your palace in unfamiliar to me. I got lost” was what she said instead.

“Is there anything else you do with your time besides getting lost in the places where you shouldn’t be?” he finally turned to her, disdain clearly read on his face.

What’s your problem with other people’s hobbies, was one more thing she had to bite her tongue once more not to say out loud.

“I did not mean to trespass…” there really wasn’t a wast variety of options she could reply with.

“And yet you did” he, at this point, didn’t seem to be capable of letting other people to finished their sentences.

Oh, come one. Wasn’t it obvious that if she was doing that on purpose she would have came up with a better excuse beforehand? Perhaps the thought had crossed his mind as well, because the next instance he changed the topic.

“What sorcery do you use to hide your fea?” he asked moving from just standing out there to a more comfortable position of sitting behind the writing table.

“My… fea?” Minai blinked, confused.

Was she supposed to have some type of fairy flying around with her? Other elves didn’t have that, so it was probably something else then.

“Are you truly ignorant or just pretending? Yes, your fea” if there was anything but annoyance in his voice it was absolutely impossible to tell “Your life source, your spirit, whatever is the terms that humans use”

“I am not hiding anything” the woman simply stated instead of expressing any scepticism towards the existence of a ‘life force’. Not that she denied it, but until a solid proof was presented directly to her she would reserve her right to have a certain amount of reasonable doubt.

“Then why can’t I see it?”

She opened her mouth and then closed it, biting her tongue until it hurt. There had to be some other meaning to those words, because otherwise…

“One does not need eyes to see fea. It is more of something that you sense” the king explained, probably well aware of what exactly went through Minai’s mind.

Of course. That made more sense. If you believed in that type of thing. Which Minai didn’t. Still, it wasn’t the most pleasant of experiences to be called, basically, soulless. Then again, if assuming that what he said was true, it would explain why the king was startled with her presence earlier. If he could see the ‘fea’ of others then he would know if anyone was around even when unable to directly see them, but she came out of nowhere, completely undetected.

That would be a useful skill for a spy or an assassin.

Oh.

So, archery then. She desperately needed to learn archery. Because there were far too many bullfinches flying around and she was determined on mending such blatant travesty of justice. “I do not think I know anything about it” she finally said, allowing her voice to tremble just a little. It wasn’t even an act, she legitimately was nervous and even afraid, it’s just that she wasn’t sure
about showing the full extent of it.

“There is a river in the forest. Did you touch it?” came a question, seemingly random and out of nowhere.

“No, not that I’m aware of” she shook her head.

She didn’t come across any rivers during her time in the forest, at least not during the time she spent there conscious.

“Is there anyone you know who might have done this to you?”

“No”

“Have you encountered anyone in the forest?”

“No”

“Do you have any actual memory loses?”

“No”

There was no one in her life that would have anything to do with any type of magic or spirits. Save for that one classmate she had in high-school nearly a decade ago who believed she could write horoscopes that were actually true. Tauriel and the deer were the only ones whom she met in the forest, not counting the spiders. And no, to the best of her knowledge, her memory was complete intact and it seemed that the king didn’t by into her lie about loosing memory either, since the wording he used was ‘actual memory loses’.

Minai remained calm and didn’t say anything. She was enjoying the funeral march in a bullfinch chirp rendering which was going off inside her head. A delightful symphony, compared only to that of long yellow nails brushing along a blackboard.

In the mean time, the king opened one of the table’s drawers and pulled out nothing other than her phone. Minai let out a sigh of relief after seeing that her gadget was in the same condition as it was when she had seen it last time. Screen not cracked, without any visible scratches or dents.

“What is the purpose of this object?”

Ah, here we go. Minai spent several days thinking of a plausible enough explanation for her phone with the limited amount of information about the world around her that she had. She had to pick out something simple and common, something that she had already encountered here and something that would have, at least vague, resemblance to that particular piece of technology. The best she could think of was:

“It’s a travelling mirror” the woman stated, putting on the most convincing of her smiles, even though she realized that in this set of circumstances it would be a rather useless attribute “I know it doesn’t look like one, but...” she started to explain, predicting the possible questions which might arise about the difference of appearances between the phone and a mirror “…it’s made that way so it would not reflect sun as brightly as a regular mirror. That way there is less chance of giving away your location to possible foes and it won’t accidentally burn your face when you look at it” she was initially going to say ‘you won’t blind yourself with the reflected light’ but seeing the corner of his mouth flinch slightly when she said ‘burn your face’ she started to doubt whether she made the right call in changing her words.
She suspected it wasn’t the best cover-up story and would crumble into dust once anyone had the idea of taking the phone apart and discovering everything that was inside of it, however that would require knowledge of such an option even being available in the first place, therefore Minai made her bet on that.

“Then, if the things are as you are telling, you will have no objections to me keeping your mirror for now?” he tilted his head ever so slightly, just about as much as he believed her story.

“None at all” she breathed out in defeat.

“Tell me now, why shouldn’t I just throw you in the dungeon? Maybe that would make you talk” he returned the phone to the same drawer where it had rested, locking it with a key.

What could she answer to that? If he was the type of person who threw people in the dungeon just because, Minai wouldn’t be too surprised to find out that was the case, then the only thing there was to question was why he had not done so already. She couldn’t say that. Was she supposed to plead her case? Not that either, the king had made it abundantly clear that her lies were useless around him. Then…

Then the only option was to tell her exactly how she saw it.

“The reason would be, I guess, the same one that explains why I wasn’t thrown in the dungeon right away. But what that reason is I can claim no knowledge of” she also wanted to add ‘because I obviously can’t read your thoughts’, but that did leave room for wrong interpretation, since her experience with saying the same things to other authority figures in her life, such as parents, teachers and university professors, presented rather abysmal consequences.

Whatever was the reason for Minai to still retain her freedom, the king seemed to be in no hurry to share it. There was different kind of information for him to reveal.

“I’ve sent inquiry to other elven domains. None of them had anyone matching your description leaving their boarders recently enough to fit your age” he spoke slowly, stretching his words, though nothing was clearer than the dangerous undertones behind what was said “Yet here you are, coming into my kingdom, dressed in elvish clothes, well mannered and educated enough to adapt to our society despite not knowing any of the customs and” there he made a pause, but only for the briefest moment “speaking our language perfectly”

“I do not speak your language, I speak my language!” the woman exclaimed jumping up from her seat.

She immediately sat back down, seeing how swiftly the king’s arm moved to the hilt of the sword. Despite that movement the king seemed to be somehow pleased with her reaction. Was there anything in particular he wanted to check with that statement?

Of course. Of course there was. She claimed to have no knowledge of the elven culture, right? Right. So if she spoke their language… How did she speak their language? Were their languages the same? They had to be.

She was still thinking in the same language she was thinking for her entire life. ‘Language’ she mentally recited ‘L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E’. Yup. Nothing different.

“What are you muttering there” the annoyed voice took her out of her musings.

She heard what he said and she understood what he said. The only problem was that now that she was brought into awareness of the fact, she could clearly notice the mismatch between his actual
words and the meaning that she got out of it.

“I...” she started but could not go on. She knew what she wanted to say, but the sound leaving her mouth was completely different.

Her nails dug deep into the chair’s soft armrests. She felt her hands trembling, as well as her knees. If Minai wasn’t already sitting she would surely fall on the floor. She tried making a breath but was rendered unable to by panic’s cold hands clutched tightly around her throat.

Minai made a small pause in her attempts to grasp a breath, counted to three and then, slowly, drew in a little air into her lungs, feeling the panic release her neck, while still lingering behind her shoulder.

Breathe in, breath out.

Honestly, after the ears, why was she still surprised with anything…

Breathe in, breath out.

If anything, it was more convenient that way. Who knows what could have happened to her if she had absolutely no means of explaining herself?

Breathe in, breathe out.

She’d later think it through. She needed her calm now. Calm, steady, no suspicious movements, no crying or rising her voice. There would be plenty of time for that later… if she managed to live this room ali… Nope. No. Fine. Fine. Everything would be fine.

“I only speak the language I was taught” the woman stated quietly.

This wasn’t even that big of a lie. She did fully intend to speak her language, it was out of her control that it came out differently. Luckily enough, there was no way for the king to know that. As far as he was concerned, she was simply unaware that the language she spoke was elvish.

“Who taught it to you” the interrogation continued.

“My parents. They were ordinary people. Humans” the woman answered, doing her best to hide the nervous tone of her voice, but despite that, it could still be clearly heard.

“Answer me now and answer honestly” the king’s voice was low and commanding, allowing no interjections “Were you given any specific instructions before entering my forest?”

‘You’re an elf now. Think like one. Act like one’ was the specific instruction that she was given right after the, formerly fake, elvish ears were glued onto her and before the actual photo-shoot started. However, even in her distressed state, she couldn’t be unaware of how this would sound if spoken aloud.

“No” was the short answer she gave. The same one that she already gave to several questions before. The shorter the better, since longer sentences would open multiple possibilities of being detected as a lie.

She was screwed. Lies didn’t work. The king, despite his terrible temper, was definitely intelligent and perceptive enough to detect if he was lied to immediately and in almost all of the cases. And the truth… she spent enough time here to know that these people knew nothing of the modern world and if she told the actual truth she would be, in the very best case, written off as insane.
There really was no way out. She was completely cornered with the abyss of despair behind her and the sneering beast that was already showing his teeth, ready to snap the thread of her existence in front of her.

Ah, the beast or the abyss.

She could give in to the despair or patiently wait for the beast to finish the job.

Or…

Deep breath, eyes closed.

She counted to ten.

And then she made the leap of faith.

“I fully understand how my situation looks to you as I am aware that your demeanour towards me is only driven by your own concern towards your kingdom” the woman started. There. Admitting her own faults, putting him in the right. She paused, catching her breath and desperately trying to hide how absolutely terrified she was of her own words “As I’ve stated before I intend no harm” another pause, she could almost be glad he was blind and couldn’t see her, only stopping herself from feeling so by how wrong it seemed to feel glad about something like that at all “It’s not the stranger’s presence that needs your attention within the kingdom”.

Her full body was trembling from head to toe and she had to clench her teeth afraid that the nauseating would make her throw up. It was a huge leap that she was making. She just had no choice. She didn’t want to challenge the tall and menacing figure that was capable with a single word to deprive her of a chance to ever see the sunlight again, to let her rot away in the dungeon deep underneath the elven fortress. Who could end her life with one single move of his hand. She did not want to do that. But she had to. She had to do it and with all her might pray to everything she did and did not believe in to make any of her previous deductions and speculations to be a fraction of a degree true.

“Do elaborate on that” there was no attempt to hide the disdain and the unspoken warning that if she now chose to back away now, her story might not have a happy ending today.

“I’ve lived among your people for several weeks now” steady, steady, steady she chanted hoping it would keep her voice from trembling “I’ve heard them talking about… about the recent events” one more pause, to check on the king’s reaction.

She saw him frowning, the right corner of his mouth stretched to the side, his jawline harden and the muscles tense on his arms. He knew exactly what she was referring to. She knew it and the subject brought him no joy to discuss. There was nowhere to back away now and therefore she continued.

“Many people have growing concerns about the outcome and your actions in regards to it” she couldn’t bring herself to use the word displeased “They need their worries to be addressed by their king or…” she didn’t finish her sentence. There was no real need to do that.

She watched him turn away, perhaps for the reason of not wanting his face to be seen. She could only judge his reaction by his breathing becoming less regular and more heavy.

“And what do you suggest I do about my people’s concerns?” he finally spoke after a long pause, when it was apparent that Minai would not say anything else.

Every single red flag and every single alarm went off in her brain as she watched his still unmoving
face. It was the calmness with which he spoke. He was encouraging her to speak. To speak and choose her words very carefully, for what she said next would decide her fate today.

Minai knew there was absolutely no way he would ever allow a person with zero experience and no credentials what so ever to tell him how to rule his kingdom. Therefore, the question had to have another goal behind it.

Then she realized.

“There is nothing I suggest, I am in no position and have no right to do so” there, let him see that she was aware of her lower status “I am simply stating what I have observed” and nothing else.

The king sighed and rested his elbows on the surface of the table, pressing his forehead to the intertwined fingers. He stayed like this for the longest time, leaving Minai questioning if he still remembered of her presence and if she was now allowed to walk away.

“How fascinating” he suddenly laughed with a weird mix of mockery and bitterness “Even a homeless cultureless stray is more capable of being cautious of her actions”

Minai could physically feel her face getting paler and a wave of burning cold running down her spine. She expected a reaction, but not that strong of a reaction. She was shooting in the dark and accidentally hit the target. A target that was stronger and more powerful than her in any possible sense of those words. That was a stupid thing to do. So very very stupid.

“Get out” the words were quiet but still audible enough for Minai to make out what was said to her. It was an order. A clear one.

Oh, the relief she that felt. The woman was beyond happy to oblige the command. Never mind being called names and ordered around. Who cares. She wished for nothing more than to escape and run back to her room at a breakneck pace, unconcerned with who or what she might encounter on her way there. The only think she could think about was the large closed she had there, standing besides one of the walls. She would just sit there under the dark protection of a wooden sanctuary, covered with a blanket, rocking back and forth and having a nice long emotional and mental breakdown while reminiscing every bit of new information that she had managed to learn today.

Minai stood up and with just a few quick steps crossed the distance between her and the door. Her pale hand at the doorknob, Minai threw one last glance at the king’s figure. Her eyes followed the slump of his shoulders and then the curtain of hair shielding his face from being seen. The proud and infallible figure she saw was now defeated. Defeated by her. Wasn’t that what she was aiming at?

She was just aiming to leave the encounter alive, not to hurt him.

She reached her hand, almost wanting to come closer and comfort the king, immediately taken aback by the sheer fact of such a thought even appearing. She was beyond terrified of that person just a moment ago, he could deal without her being kind to him. Still, she knew now much he cared about his people and even then was shocked by the extent of grief her words have caused him.

Yet… didn’t triumph feel nice? Wasn’t she at least a little bit satisfied with the effect she could achieve? How gratifying it felt to fight back and win?

It did feel… nice. To lash out and be righteous in her retaliation. To heroically triumph over the enemy. To be the victor of the situation. It felt nice and she hated it. She hated feeling joy in
hurting someone and even more she hated how easily she could justify her actions. Therefore, even though it was only to ease her own qualms about her moral qualities, she decided to say one more thing before she left.

“There was a girl who had her father die recently. She was clearly grieving, but she still said that she doesn’t blame you and there are many like her who are on your side so… it’s not all lost to you”

That came out pretty awkward, but Minai really didn’t know whether her words would hold any weight to him. To her, the king didn’t seem like the type of person who would accept words of comfort from a stranger and it wasn’t out of concern for him that she said it anyway.

The woman then hurried to leave the room then not waiting for a reaction to her words if there even would be any and closing the door behind her.

Oh look, there were the guards. The ones that were drunk. They woke up now, alarmed by the sound. They gaped at her wide-eyed.

Right. She left the king’s private study in the earliest hours of the morning with her knees weak and legs trembling, looking completely dishevelled, which she knew to be the result of the wintry wind that ruffled her hair on the balcony and her having other, more pressing, matters at hand than to deal with any grooming. She knew that. The guards didn’t.

“Can someone please escort me to my room” she wasn’t at all helping her case with how weak and tired her voice sounded, but at that moment it was the least of her concerns.

It wouldn’t be a medieval kingdom without a certain type of rumours regarding royalty flying around.

It just was really unfortunate that she had to be the catalyst.

Chapter End Notes

You know, the best thing about this is she could just go on ahead and try to be a decent friendly person with the other elves. She would have eventually made friends and found someone who would be sympathetic to her case and could probably get her to freedom. She would then be left alone in a forest with orcs and spiders and end up dead pretty soon. Then she runs around plotting schemes, uses people to her advantage and imagines herself as a poor innocent soul wronged by the universe, when she pretty much brings everything on herself with her own actions, and when an opportunity comes for her to execute one of her 'genius' plans she almost faints because deep down she is a coward. And that's what gets her to live another day. Also, taking into account that most chapters are from her point of view, she is adamant in not referring to Thranduil by name, what's up with that.

I guess I'm trying to establish an actual glaring flaw in her personality and attitude, not something like 'she is too pretty' or 'she cares too much'. My intent is to have her actually grow as a person throughout the story, but at some point I have to wonder if she comes of as unlikeable.

Also, keep an eye on that bullfinch. He will be making more appearances.
There probably should be some explanation about how I was busy and life got in the way and that's why I'm posting this chapter later than usual, but I'm feeling honest today and that's why I'll just downright admit that I've just procrastinated and prioritized other things in life.

So, yeah, I planned on having weekly updates but that probably won't be happening because I'm lazy and unmotivated (you can try and see if commenting will help, but who knows)

It's the 'cursed' middle part of the story thing. Establishing the characters and the setting can be fun and easy and after you're done with that you just want to write that one glorious chapter/scene/moment near the ending that every other story is basically written for, but you can't because you need to take the characters from point A (the beginning) to point B (the escalation/ending). And you, as a writer rarely care for that, you just want to write that one thing. Or is it just me? Anyway, I have a few story/character arcs planned so hopefully that will keep enough of my interest to write until I finally get to the payoff.

The rest of the day was spent in the comfort of her room. Although, how much the room could truly be claimed as hers remained to be discovered, since it was highly doubtful that anything in this kingdom would be given into her complete ownership. Not that she wanted any of their stuff anyway. The less ties she had with the elves and that one elf in particular the better.

The room could be described as fairly small and simple, but it would only be small and simple to a person who had never been a college or university student, as it is widely known that living conditions for this particular segment of society were often at a fair distance from being luxurious. Not to get in to too much details, but after having shared a room, smaller than the one she was currently occupying with two other people, Minai would be among the last to complain about the size of her temporary den.

It had enough room to fit a one person bed, a wooden chair with a small writing table, pen and paper sold separately, and a closet. There in the closet were the clothes she had originally wore when she arrived into the forest, which were returned to her after a few days, a nightgown, probably the same translucent one that she woke up in, a few tunics, several leggings and a floor length dress, which she tried on but never tried to wear in public after tripping when she took a few steps in it.

Overall, many of the elven-maidens of the Mirkwood forest preferred to wear long and flow-y dresses, pants and leggings were reserved mostly for scouts on duty. If she had to guess, Minai would say that her original attire was what played a significant role when her wardrobe was composed. She was wearing leggings then and the elves could have easily assumed that it was her outfit of choice. Not that they would be wrong. She was rather fond of the idea of the fancy dresses, but the lack of practice had rendered her incapable of wearing them and when she tried to
amend that it only left her with a few bruises all over her legs.

By the end of the second day of her self imposed confinement the woman started to truly wonder why wasn’t she more hungry. Was it because she was an elf now, the idea that she wholeheartedly refused to seriously entertain, and the pointy-eared kind could go longer periods without any king of nourishment? They, as they themselves claimed, had an unparalleled type of immunity and could not contract any diseases or illnesses, so a higher level of tolerance for hunger would then be quite logical as well. She should probably ask Tauriel about it. The archer had shown up a few times to call her to eat and would probably knock on her door once more in an hour or so and that would be her opportunity.

All in all, Minai decided to end her almost complete seclusion. Almost. Because even if her desire for solitude was great, her desire to take baths and be clean was even greater. She had her appointment with a mental and emotional breakdown and now, when her emotions calmed down, she was getting rather bored.

To pass some time she stared to wonder about the whole language conundrum. For the sake of saving her own sanity, the blonde decided to completely ignore the glaring issue of ‘how’ and ‘why’. The decision wasn’t at all easy but it had to be made. Of course she wanted to know, but with the knowledge currently at her possession she had no means of solving the mystery and would have to rely on the outside sources to either give her an answer or drop enough clues sooner or later.

Sooner much preferred.

Instead, Minai decided to figure out the logistics of this new translator that she apparently had built in.

First things first. Everything that she tried reciting in her head sounded exactly the same as it was supposed to. Words, sentences, the alphabet, the numbers, that one poem that she for some reason remembered… All the same.

Speaking to herself felt weird. After all, everybody knew that speaking to oneself was the first sign of madness.

Minai touched the tip of her now pointed ear.

If speaking to herself would be her first and only sign of madness, she, perhaps, would at this point only be grateful for that.

Moving on.

The only thing to explore, then, was the writing. There was only one obstacle, she had no writing materials on her.

Although…

Minai took the chair closer to the closet and climbed on top of the wooden surface.

Aha!

Just as she expected. The top of the closet had dust on it. Lots and lots of dust.

Never in her life had the woman been more excited to see dust. Well, maybe except for that one time, a few years away from being exactly two decades ago, in the summer camp when she started
to suspect that one of the girls she had shared the cabin with could be stealing her trading cards. To catch the culprit she had collected some dust from underneath the bed and strategically placed it near the cupboard where the trading cards were hidden. After returning from a swim in the nearby river she was delighted to see the shoe-print which turned out not to belong to any of her cabin mates but… But that wasn’t what mattered right now.

Right now, the focus of her interest were the words she had traced on the dust covered closet.

The words looked exactly as she expected them to. The same letters corresponding to the same pronunciations as she heard in her head.

She would have probably written something else if it wasn’t for the light sound of knocking. Startled, the blonde lost her balance on the chair and fell right back down to the hard wooden floor, hitting that one spot of her elbow, you would instantly know which one if you ever had a misfortune to hit it as well, which made her see stars that could out-shine even those she observed a few days ago on the balcony. Another thing which the sudden fall had made her do was to shout out a few very particular words which, to no surprise, remained completely unchanged in all of their primeval glory.

Well.

She’d be far more surprised if the posh and proper elves had anything even nearly resembling to what she said in their beautiful melodic language.

The knocking continued and after nursing her elbow, and muttering a few more un-translatables under her breath, Minai discovered that it didn't come from the door. It came from the window and was produced by a…

Bull-friggin-finch!

She never knew she was capable of having such strong feelings towards another living being. The fact that the feeling was hate and the object of it was a bird only made the situation worse. So much worse.

The avian perpetrator had ignored the death-glare which came its way and continued to knock on the window, feeling entitled, for some reason, to being let inside. The very last thing she wanted to do at that moment was to welcome the feathery fiend with open arms. But, as usual, there was a but. She needed another living being to talk to. Sure, the bullfinch could never be a proper interlocutor, but it could still make her feel significantly less awkward when she spoke to herself. Therefore, Minai opened the window and in came Sir Bullfinch the Face Crasher, the One, the First, the Only.

Yes, indeed, it was Sir Bullfinch and not at all a Lady Bullfinch, testimony to that being the bright red feathery chest, puffed for the whole world to see. As regards to whether it was the same bird that had caused her all the previous trouble Minai knew nothing of. She just decided to pretend that it was indeed the same finch. That way it was easier to personify him and start the one-sided conversation.

“Helloooooo bird” she sang, carefully listening to the sound.

The sing-song voice. Translated.

“Howdy feathery fella”

Accent. Translated.
“Howwasyourday?”

Speaking rapidly. Translated.

“How was your day?”

“How was your day?”

Speaking rapidly. Translated.

“How was your day?”

Speaking rapidly. Translated.

Fiber optic cable network”

Her-world exclusive modern words. Not translated.

She then tried a few phrases she had picked up on when watching foreign dramas. She couldn’t claim to having learned that particular language enough to survive in the originating country but the phrases she spoke were familiar. Those were translated.

The following language she tried was the one she had learned all the way back in high-school. She had forgotten a large amount of it due to the lack of practice, but could still recall quite enough. That was translated as well.

Minai remembered the foreign exchange student who came to her university during one of the spring semesters. He was eager to teach his course-mates a few words here and there. Most of the words were in the similar category as the ones she had yelled when hitting her elbow, which still hurt by the way. The proper words that she learned from the student were translated, as they should have been.

Except for a few, but that, as Minai expected, could be blamed on the fact that they didn’t have the exact meaning that she was told they had and were among the un-translatables as well.

Oh well. Not that she would miss an opportunity to play a similar trick on someone.

Something else came to her memory.

A long forgotten phrase from a children’s cartoon that she had watched many years ago. She remembered the phrase as it was sort of an iconic moment in the animation history. She knew the phrase were proper, as there was no parents’ outrage following it, however she never quite bothered to figure out what was the exact meaning of the phrase.

It wasn’t translated.

She tried a few more things, like that list of ‘I love you’ in different languages, more phrases from the foreign-dramas, the ones she wasn’t sure about the meaning of. Words with intentional mistakes. Sentences with the changed structure and so on.

Sir Bullfinch sat there, on the windowsill, patiently, inserting a few cheerful chirps in the conversation here and there and hopping back and forth like a red bouncing ball.

“So, what did we learn today?” Minai asked Sir Bullfinch, happy that for once she didn’t have to bother with complicated sentence structure and other ‘high society’ medieval speak. Then again, in the light of her recent discoveries, was there ever a point in doing that?

The results were as follows: when she knew the meaning of what she was saying, no matter the mistakes, intentional or not, her words were changed into the elven language. When she didn’t know the meaning or if the words were of the nature that couldn’t exist in her current circumstances, then the words remained the same.

Fascinating. Not particularly useful at the moment, but fascinating nonetheless.

Now that her little experiment was over, Minai had started to wonder about the most effective way
of showing her feathery guest the door, or, rather, the window. She wasn’t in the market for a pet and even if she was, the entire bullfinch kind would be excluded from the list of possible candidates for the obvious reasons.

She was just about to start calculating the trajectory that she needed in order to throw her shoe in a way that would scare the bird into flying away without harming it when her intellectual work was interrupting by a knock, this time on the door.

Minai put on her shoe and went to opened the door. It was about time Tauriel showed up today, especially considering that the blonde elleth did finally start to feel somewhat hungry. Not hungry enough to be tempted by the perspective of a roasted bullfinch, but still a considerable amount.

She twisted the doorknob and…

Well, you’ve guessed it.

It wasn’t Tauriel.

They stared at each other in complete silence for a few moments. Then again, between the two of them, Minai was the one who did all the staring.

Damn was he tall. Although, in all honesty that was actually kind of not that bad of a thing since...

Her brain was immediately sent to have a long heartfelt meeting with the common sense. The meeting took place and a conclusion was reached. Her common sense had carefully reviewed the statement and came into agreement with the brain by finding it to be undeniably true. Above the average height was very much suitable for this particular individual who stood in her door-frame.

Fiends.

It was clearly a defence reaction. Considering how much stress she was under lately it was only natural for her brain to latch on any distraction it could find. Especially one that was so visually appeal…

Anyway. How old were you when you realized that you were long overdue for a brain replacement surgery?

“May I enter?” asked the king of the Woodland Realm.

She noticed the wording immediately. After spending so much time focused on language and the different ways to use it it was still there on her mind making her take note of the smallest details. He was asking for her permission and doing so in a rather polite manner in both, the words and the tone of his voice.

The woman let out a breath she didn’t know she was holding and relaxed. Just a little bit. Whatever was the aim of his visit, it was unlikely that she had to be worried about being in any immediate danger. Still, it wouldn’t hurt to remain cautious and alert.

“Of course” replied Minai making a few steps to the side.

She glanced at her room and the impeccable condition of everything within it: the dust bunny sitting comfortably in one corner, the pile of clothes sprawled in another, the chair still lying on the floor since she didn’t bother to pick it up, the un-made bed, the bullfinch merrily pecking at the stale remains of a week old cinnamon bun which she had brought from the dinner hall but forgot about the existence of.
What? Typical bachelorette’s apartment.

The woman closed the door and went to pick up the chair. She accomplished the task and looked back at her visitor who remained at the exact same spot where he previously were.

Oh. Right.

Minai mentally pleaded with the universe to give her any viable knowledge of how to act under the circumstances she was given. The universe, as usual, remained impartial and uncaring in its refusal to share anything which could ease Minai’s struggles even the least amount of bit.

He seemed to have no problem navigating in his own study. Right. The place where he knew exactly where everything was. But her room, even if only temporary, was her personal space and there was no way for the king to know how the things were arranged around here.

She pleaded the universe once again, this time to ask to change places with the bullfinch and be the one pecking at the stale bread, a much more desired occupation right now. Once more she was denied in her request.

Minai took a deep breath and carefully approached the elf. Just as carefully she reached her hand and touched his arm with the very tips of her fingers, ready, at any moment, to jump away from the sword being swung at her. However, it seemed that there was no need for that as the king made no other movement than turning his head slightly to face her.

She decided to take that as a sign that she was allowed to proceed.

“Here, there’s a chair you can sit on”

He silently followed her lead, not saying anything in reply.

From that Minai concluded that whatever he came her for it was probably not a matter of just few words. Overall, it seemed strange that he came here, to her room, instead of exercising his status as a king and summoning her to his study. He had the right and the means to do that. And yet he came to her territory, asking for a permission to enter.

So, perhaps, that meant that she was given a fair share of control over the terms of the meeting and was not, entirely, going to be spoken to from the position of power.

Possibly.

Maybe.

They now sat in front of each other in silence. Since she had to give up the only chair, Minai had to occupy the bed, just as she was doing the rest of the time anyway. And yes, with her shoes on. Now, not being so stressed out and tense as she was during the two of their previous encounters, Minai could finally take an honest look at the king.

No crown, that was the first detail which she had noticed. Without having anything to hold them together, a few loose strands of hair fell on his face. That was a bit unusual by the local standards. Most of the elves she saw had either some type of elaborate hairstyle with multiple beads and ornaments in it or, at the very least, a couple of thin braids to keep the rest of their long hair from getting in the way. But, against the expectations, his elven majesty didn’t bother with doing anything with his hair. Weirdly enough, it was this seemingly insignificant detail Minai could somewhat relate to. She remembered the braids she had to have for the photo-shoot and the sensation they gave her. It wasn’t the most pleasant thing in the world and made her constantly
aware of her hairstyle, which was annoying. And really, if there was anything that the elven ruler
didn’t need any more of it were the reasons to be annoyed.

She took a closer look at his beautiful yet tired looking face with dark shadows underneath his
eyes. With the auro of absolute superiority gone, for the lack of any other way for her to describe it,
he looked more human that way, which made her see him a bit more as a person and a bit less than
an obstacle standing between her and her freedom, something she only now realized that she
regarded him as.

She really couldn’t envy his situation. He had to live with, inadvertently, having the blood of his
own people on his hands and accept, perhaps well deserved, the growing displeasure of those who
were alive. On top of that, she had it finally confirmed, his health was failing rather significantly
and he couldn’t even let it be known because… because that would surely affect the already
tarnished image his people had of him.

And then there was Minai herself, a person who, in a wake of a major conflict in a world where
magic and illusions existed, looked, talked and was dressed like an elf but had no knowledge or
belonging to any of the elven domains and, apparently, had no soul, which somehow made her
almost completely undetectable to him personally.

Could she then truly blame him for how he acted back then?

Well, he...

Would she be kinder and more understanding in similar circumstances?

No. She couldn’t fully blame him.

“I came to a realization that my recent behaviour towards you was not… proper”

Silly her, thinking that it was her elbow that she hit after falling from that chair when it was
actually her head all along.

To say that those words were among last on the list of what she expected to hear from him would
be to lie completely. Because nothing even remotely similar to that could ever be on that list. Ever.

“I meant no harm towards you personally when drawing my sword and I should not have used the
language that I did”

Well, yeah, that ‘uncultured stray’ comment definitely wasn’t anywhere near pleasant and
regarding the sword…

She understood it. She really, truly did. It was beyond scary to be threatened with that blade. It
made her afraid. But… she made him afraid as well. If she was an actual assassin, then, on that
balcony, she would have had all the chances for an attack, a lethal one.

He still, however, held her captive, after she did nothing but lie but still, and for that he was not
apologizing.

It was still confusing.

Why was the ruler of this entire kingdom even trying to apologize to her, an absolute nobody. In
the grand scheme of things what he had done against her wasn’t even by any means significant, her
opinion meant nothing and there were other people…
The realization dawned on her and with it came the sadness. The grudge she had against him was probably relatively minor compared to what some other people in the kingdom felt. And the less significant the transgression was, the easier it was to be forgiven. Besides, the fact that her opinion did not particularly matter, well, it mattered. She wasn’t one of his people and her opinion of him did not reflect or influence theirs. He was not her king and she was not one of his subjects.

The woman blinked, recalling some recent events. In her indecisiveness she doubted which formal address to use and as a result used none, thus not directly acknowledging his status. In her desperate fear fuelled attempt to lead the conversation away from discussing her fate she ended up being the one telling him the truth to his face and when trying to resolve her own issues with her personal behaviour she offered him kindness.

Whatever was her motivation, to him she was someone who wasn’t particularly concerned with his status and despite lying about her identity was honest in her opinions.

So, whether or not she decided to grant him that apology, the way he saw it, her answer would be sincere, unaffected by the status given to him by the crown.

And that was the saddest part of it. There must have been none in the elven kingdom, friend or relative, who could offer him any comfort, so in his desperate need to be forgiven by at least someone has driven him to the doorstep of a stranger.

The woman reached her hand but withdrew it immediately. That wasn’t a good idea. Regardless of the miserable picture her imagination oh-so-eagerly eagerly painted for her to feel sorry for him, she still remembered how short of a temper he had and she couldn’t be sure that his attitude wouldn’t suddenly change. Besides, the difference of status was still there and it didn’t seem that the elven culture allowed any more familiarities with the royalty than the human culture did.

Still, however long he were to remain in such a mood, it was not likely that an opportunity like that would present itself again any time soon, if ever.

She once again looked at the figure before her, noticing the stark contrast between her first impression of him and the sight she had before her eyes now. She couldn’t even see his face as his head was lowered and the long hair of pale gold obstructed the view, but whatever she could still see was enough. She remembered the king sitting proudly on his throne with his back straight and head held high. The one she was looking at now was the opposite of that with his back hunched and head lowered.

It wouldn’t be kind of her to remain silent for much longer.

“I do see reasoning behind your actions and do not hold them against you” she finally spoke “I understand how my situation appears to you. Allow me to leave and I promise you will never have to see me again”

“Indeed. I will never again have to see you”

Minai blinked.

Then she blinked one more time.

And after that she had to cover her face with her palms.

“That’s not… I didn’t...” the woman muttered underneath her breath.
The king, however, didn’t look angered or even annoyed. She could almost swear that she saw a hint of amusement on his face. Was that on purpose? Did he want her to suffer like that?

The atmosphere, however, all of a sudden seemed somewhat lighter.

“I am afraid that in current situation there are no people I could assign to escort you” he tilted his head slightly to the side, ignoring her muttering.

“There is no need for escort” never before since coming here had Minai felt so close to freedom “Just tell me which direction the nearest city is, I can get by on my own”

That was really all that she needed. To find other people. She could beg for transport or communication means there. She was even ready to say goodbye to her phone forever if trying to negotiate for it meant she would harm her chances of getting away.

“Is that so?” he raised an eyebrow “Tell me then, what weapons can you yield?”

“None” Minai was a little bit taken aback by that question.

“As suspected” he stood up “I think there is something that you must see before leaving”

Minai followed.

And for some reason so did the bullfinch.

Chirping loudly the bird flapped his tiny wings and landed on one of the fingers offered by the eleven lord.

“You’ve decided to keep a pet?”

“No. I just opened the window and he flew in. Probably seduced by the bread I had on my windowsill” never in a million years was she going to admit that she let the bird in as a conversation partner.

The bird chirped loudly at her words.

“He believes he was invited in on purpose” the elf stated, now clearly entertained.

“The bird told you that?” the woman asked, her voice full of scepticism.

“You do know that elves can communicate with nature?”

No, she didn’t know that.

“You can talk with the bird then? Really?” still the scepticism.

The animals were sentient in this world? Why weren’t they integrated in the society? Why didn’t they have a society of their own? How much of a monster she was for...

“Birds, or any other animals, are not sentient” he explained as if knowing what went through her mind “A full dialogue with any of them is not possible. They can share their intent and emotions. Sometimes the past memories”

“Right”

She had heard a lot of hardly believable stuff lately, but this was where it had started to push the boundaries.
The bird chirped vigorously at the last remark, jumping left and right.

“He would like to inform you that he regrets making you fall from the chair”

What the…?

“Well then… please inform Sir Bullfinch that his apology is NOT accepted and he is to become a stew for disclosing highly. confidential. information” the last three words Minai had to speak through gritted teeth.

Because all of her previous misfortune was clearly just not enough she also had to cursed with a feathery snitch.

Wait… wait… wait…

She made a deep breath.

She was going to just accept that. Just accept the bird talking. Accept it. Accept. There was no use in rationale anymore. She’d figure everything out once the opportunity presented itself. Until then – accept. For the sake of sanity. Just accept.

“Sir Bullfinch?” the amusement in his voice was now accompanied by an evident smile.

“I didn’t get the chance to get his name yet” the woman muttered feeling the heat rising up on her cheeks.

The bullfinch fluffed his feathers and graced the world with a few more chirps.

“He would prefer for you to give him a name” the elf translated.

“This is not going to be a long-term relationship” Minai crossed her arms on her chest.

“Keep him with you” the elven king suggested “It will be easier to know when you are around”

“Is it because the bird has… how did you call it?”

“Fea. Yes, that is the reason”

“Okay then”

That made sense. Well, no, in her version of reality it very much didn’t. But the elven reality was different, she had to play by its rules now and it seemed that the inconvenience keeping the bird would bring to her was rather minor compared to how easier it would make it for the king. Therefore, she allowed the bird to land on her shoulder where it stayed, thankfully, not chirping into her ear.

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Walking through the halls, as usual, was exhausting. Minai made an honest effort to memorize the way but after the third or so turn had to admit that she wouldn’t even be able to find her way back to her room. Sure, after a few weeks she got used to the fast pace that the elves had and did no longer need to stop and catch her breath every two steps, but she was wearing light clothes that didn’t obstruct her movements and the man, well, elf, walking before her had a heavy long robe on him. Still, it was her who could barely keep up.

“Why is this place such a labyrinth?” she couldn’t hold in an exasperated remark.
“Is it?” he asked slightly surprised.

“It is. There are so many levels and turns and everything just looks the same. I have no idea how anyone can get anywhere around here”

“The halls were built around the trees. More often than not they simply repeated they repeat the shapes and twists of their branches. I suppose it can serve a purpose in confusing some unfortunate trespassers” he turned to her at that statement and the woman had to fight the urge to make a face “It does become easier to navigate with time. After a few centuries it becomes easy enough to walk around with your eyes closed”

The woman blinked. Her question was answered before she ever managed to figure out how to ask it in a polite enough manner. Then again, her intention must have been rather transparent. Nevertheless, that interaction showed at least some level of benevolence from his side. That was reassuring.

Where he was leading her, though, remained a mystery, but whatever was the destination it was located on the lower levels of the palace.

One more question came to her mind, the one that she could ask easily:

“Those ornate patterns with dots underneath the paintings, is that how writing looks in your language?”

“Yes. From your wording I assume that you can not read it”

“No, I can not”

“Are there any skills that you do have?”

Plenty of those that you don’t, was what Minai wanted to say with all of her heart but, unfortunately, could not.

The woman pursed her lips imagining how much fun she would get from watching the high and mighty elven lord struggle with some simple ordinary and mundane things if he was the one who ended up in her world. How she would have to, very much condescendingly, explain him what a coat zipper was.

As regards to her skills though, she had a driver license. So anger management, rage suppression and the art of not killing people were a given, also:

“Operating under pressure, cooperation and dealing with the most unreasonable people”

The emails she wrote to the university professors asking, and sometimes begging, for a deadline extension, therefore:

“Casual letter exchange. Business correspondence, deal negotiation”

Considering that she did make friends with the exchange student, had many acquaintances around the world via internet and spent plenty of time enjoying foreign dramas, she could easily add:

“Establishing intercultural relationships”

She often watched multiple series at once and the same was with the books. Keeping up with all the names locations and plots without mixing them together did require a certain set of skills as
well, so:

“Keeping track of certain types of knowledge, archiving”

Plus she did write the thesis for herself and for the guys who partied the entire semester but had lots of money to spare, consequently:

“Partnership agreements, research”

There. It’s all about how you present it.

“I’m surprised I didn’t hear ‘creative truth’ on that list” was the response she got.

Get eaten by a dragon your elven majesty, Minai narrowed her gaze, by a huge fire-breathing dragon.

“That’s just a side hobby” Minai admitted after not noticing any malice in his voice or facial expression “My true passion is trespassing”

At that there was something slightly resembling a smile on his face.

“What you described is similar either to a scholar or an ambassador” the king suggested.

“Yes, I suppose scholar would be the right term” she answered as her mind went to wonder about the average education and knowledge level of people in this world.

“Then it is unfortunate for you to not end up in Imladris” there was a strange note of melancholy in his voice when he mentioned the other elven domain.

They remained quiet for a while, until Minai caught a glance from one of the rare people in the halls. There was something strange in that gaze, as if…

Ah, right.

“Say, aren’t you concerned that people might get the wrong idea from seeing me in your company this late in the evening. I mean, if there are rumours…”

“Once you are in the high enough position there will be rumours about you regardless of whether there are any ground for it and there are already enough rumours about me going around. It’s in people’s nature to gossip. If that bothers you I suggest to simply ignore it”

Minai sighed. Once again he guessed the true intention behind her words. She was indeed bothered by the possible rumours. If nothing started when she left his study that morning, it was sure to start now. And, unlike the king here, she didn’t have the luxury of just shutting the rest of the world off. She still had to interact with multiple people daily. And answer question. And catch all of the glances.

And hear whispers. That wasn’t the type of reputation she wanted to have. But then again, if all went well then she were to leave soon. He would have to be the one to deal with the long-term consequences.

“Still, won’t your people disapprove…”

“At this point” he stated coldly “My people won’t care what I do and who I’m seen with if that will keep me from getting involved in any more wars”
Minai frowned noticing the slump in his shoulders. She initially expected he would end up being annoyed or even angry. Instead, he sounded tired and somewhat beaten. She wondered. It couldn’t be that what she said back then affected him that much. But it could have been the last straw. If that was truly the case, that kind of weight on her conscience brought her no joy to have.

Once again she had to refrain from reaching out her hand.

Nothing was said either.

Lately, silence started to unnerve her. A lot. Enough, apparently, to resort to seeking a bird as a conversation partner. It wasn’t only the silence either. By the end of the second day during which she had only really left her room to take a bath and stayed away from any conversations, the woman realized how much she was in need of companionship to keep her distracted from all the different thoughts she had about her situation. None of them were uplifting, to say the least.

Thus, being actually around someone and have them be this silent and detached felt particularly wrong. She wanted to break the silence but did not dare because the chances of saying something wrong and further aggravating the elven lord were all time high.

Minai could only guess, but by her estimates they were now below the ground level. Probably somewhere around the level she woke up at, although whether the actual place was near or not she could not tell.

The pathways narrowed and there was now an increased amount of guards standing around. Soon Minai found herself staring at rows and rows of barely lit barred cells going down several levels.

He wouldn’t, right?

Sure, she made a few, let’s say questionable, comments, but none of them warranted such drastic measures, right?

Right?

The king must have noticed her footsteps no longer following him and stopped as well.

“I have no intentions of leaving you here… yet” the tone of his voice was akin to that of annoyed parent talking to a disobedient child.

“Then why…” she silently cursed at the tremble in her voice.

“Since you are in such a hurry to leave” the king’s voice echoed throughout the dungeon “I thought it would be a good idea to demonstrate you some of the local fauna which you’d have to deal with on your way”

Something about the way he said it made chills run down her spine.

None of the woods around the area she lived in had any dangerous predators in them, but those weren’t her woods any more. She never considered that. What kind of creatures could live here? Wolves? Bears?

They approached their journey’s destination and as they did, Minai let out fear fuelled scream, amplified by the downwards tunnel.

The dim lighting of the dungeons did nothing to hide or diminish the affect of what hid inside that particular cell.
Giant, dark, hairy. It was the size of a car. An entire SUV. The primal embodiment of all things evil in this world, or any other world for that matter. Or planet. Universe. Nowhere, not in a single place, known or unknown, there could exist a sight more disgusting, nauseating, sickening, disturbing, frightening, terrifying, creepy, unnerving, horrendous and hair rising than this forsaken creature inside the dungeon. The living manifestation of a wretched nightmare plaguing generation after generation of sentient beings and beyond. The beyond words grotesque eight legged horror with an equal amount of pure black eyes which reflected nothing but the intent to kill and hatred. The sound of it’s pincers clicking against each other alone could make one’s blood freeze up inside the veins, stopping the beating of the heart and thus bringing death to a person with the sheer fact of it’s accursed unholy existence.

“What… what… is… that” her entire body was trembling and the tongue refused to cooperate in forming words.

“A spider” the reply was nonchalant and calm, indicating the mundane nature the arachnid had for the king “The healers asked to keep one around, since it’s venom is used in the creation of antidote”

“That… is not a normal spider”

“It is the one you will inevitably run in to if you venture into the woods alone”

Only when the spider was no longer to be seen or heard did Minai realize that she was being lead away. Another realization came when she noticed that when her knees almost gave in to the fear, she had clung to the nearest thing possible which happened to be the left side of the elven king. Once she became aware of the fact, it shocked her to recognize that he did not show her away immediately. No, he allowed her to cling to him as she trembled in fear, putting his arm around her shoulders in an almost protective manner. His touch was slight and she could barely feel it but there was no denying it was there as there was no denying that it brought her comfort.

Minai realized her eyes and then immediately made a couple of steps back.

“Sorry” the woman muttered but got no reply.

She didn’t think her grip on him was that hard, but the expression she saw on his face was that of pain. She wanted to ask but there was no telling how he might react to that. Most likely, the woman thought, he was injured in a battle and it had not completely healed yet. And if it was something else then it was rather doubtful he would want to talk.

Minai, therefore, said nothing and the trip back to her room went by in a complete silence.

Her thoughts were preoccupied with the spiders in the grim fate she would inevitably meet outside the palace walls. The freedom which seemed so unbelievably close just an hour earlier was now far beyond reach and the worst part was that there was none she could blame for that.

No words were exchanged until Minai recognized the door of her room. It did seem a bit wrong to part ways without saying anything still.

“Lord Thranduil” such a formal address felt infinitely weird but rules were rules “Thank you for warning me about the… local bestiary. I don’t think my current skill level would be enough to make it on my own”

He stood there for the longest time with a pensive expression on his face before Minai saw the corners of his mouth go slightly upwards.
I was originally planning on making it to be a moth that would disguise itself as a hair ornament, but come on, bullfinch is such a funny sounding word. I just couldn't pass it by.

I've debated long and hard on whether to reveal her education major or not. So far I've concluded that it's better not to. I mean, there really is no good way to do it.

First I specifically didn't want her to be associated with modern medicine, engineering or anything else which had the potential to become a story about a "modern saviour" or anything like that. Those are really not my thing at all.
If it was something like IT or modern science, or anything else which doesn't even remotely exist in Middle Earth, then it would do nothing but give her a modern topic to talk about and honestly there are enough of those if I need them, there is no need for niche education.
If it's something neutral like tourism, languages and whatnot then it's just there. What's the point in revealing it? A mention for the sake of mentioning. Why?
And anything art related I avoided as well. If she was artsy then she would just fit in with the elves, make lots of friends and basically there is no way then to have the rest of the story. Plus it would be just a 'thing' that she does. It's just not my thing when a character has a thing that doesn't impact the plot in any shape or form except for having compliments from other characters.

Basically, if it serves no purpose for the plot then leave it out.

And by the way, this is the amount of 'spider' and 'dungeon' you'll get in the story. I'm sorry guys, if anyone was waiting for the moment when the heroine gets caught/bitten by an arachnid. I just can't. I don't like spiders and even thinking of writing this sort of scene... no. Just no. The dungeons as well. I feel that if she ended up there that would be "a point of no return", as in, I really don't see the way she could get out of there and if she did she wouldn't let something like that slide, ever. So yeah, that's what happened to our beloved Mirkwood tropes.
Gather around my friends for I'm about to tell you the scaries horror story ever. Ready? Here it is: Writing this chapter. Yeah, I know it's pretty short, but it's the 'you had to be there' sort of thing. I didn't even procrastinate on this one, I just had to re-write it completely several times. It just didn't seem right no matter which scenes I've included and excluded. The worst thing is that I had this chapter planned from the very-very beginning, but it was a little bit different back then. Mostly shameles fluff and now it's... well you have to read to know what it is now. I still wouldn't say I'm happy with this, but I've reached the point where I had to admit that it won't be getting much better and I was just endlessly messing with the semantic of words. But wording matters in this chapter. Like really matters. I did put an actual effort into this one so I expect to be praised for it. I'm joking. But if you want to write some nice comments then I'm not. If you want to write not nice but constructive criticism comments then by all means feel welcomed as well. Anyway, here you go.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The woman submerged herself completely into the body of water and stayed there for quite some time, until her lungs could no longer make it without a breath of air.

She resurfaced with a gasp and rested her head against a railing.

Oh how ecstatic she would have been just a day prior to be left completely alone in the most luxurious of baths, made with the whitest of marble and filled with the clearest of water imaginable, with an entire row of sparkling soaps with every flowery and fruity scent to choose from.

The place was beautiful. And huge. The bath itself was the size of a pool in an average suburban yard. The water shimmered in the light of countless firefly lanterns and if you cupped some of it in your hands and then threw it in the air it fell down in a rain of tiny diamonds making the most melodic echoing sound.

It was nice calm and relaxing.

She should have been enjoying herself right now.

But no.

No.

Her ability to feel happiness and any type of enjoyment were stolen from her in the most cruel and unceremonious of ways. After the embarrassment and humiliation she had to go through to get here it was hardly a decently sized compensation.

To explain the full extent of the situation, let’s go back to a few hours earlier. To the very early morning. The very very early morning.
Being an absolutely ordinary and completely unremarkable member of the twenty-first century society one of the last things on the list of things which didn’t even remotely make the cut to the list of things that were theoretically possible was to be woken up at sunrise one day and be personally bossed around by an entitled royalty.

But no. It had to happen. It just had to happen for who knows what’s sake.

Why on earth it had to happen?

Because.

Because apparently she was the one who gave him the idea.

Yes. Really.

Which only goes to prove that no matter how particular you are in your words, how carefully you think about what you say and how meticulously you choose the phrasing, no matter all of that, people will only hear what they themselves want to hear.

Go figure.

How else would you explain that her nice and polite ‘Thanks for not feeding me to the spiders’ was interpreted as ‘Sure, by all means, do send your servants to wake me up at a criminally early hour’. How?

Easy.

She was the one to create the impression that she was okay with being awake at this time.

Yes. Really.

The only thing was, she ended up at that balcony that early because she wandered around the palace all night long and she just didn’t go to sleep that nigh at all. And by no means because she just happened to wake up and be a fully functioning sentient being at sunrise.

She would usually use the term ‘human being’ but apparently…

Apparently.

Minai took a light-pink vial and emptied it’s strawberry smelling contents into the water, making a few circling motions with her hand to create bubbles.

Long story short, the elf now apparently decided that he had nothing else to do with his life than to personally supervise her training.

But of course.

His own people were obviously beyond tired of him and his nonsensical orders at this point and torturing them could result in some serious consequences. And by the cruel twist of fate, there she was, a perfectly unsuspecting stranger.

She was no fool to expect that he would suddenly, completely out of nowhere, feel for her situation and would want to help her out of pure altruism. Ha. Double the amount of ha. If that were the case he could have easily assigned someone else to do it, Tauriel for example.

Nope.
He wanted to train her himself and she started to get a nagging suspicion that she knew why.

The king was all about formalities, that was beyond clear during their first meeting. The huge throne on a pedestal, the crown, the array of armed and armoured guards. Nothing about that said ‘down to earth’ or anything even remotely close to that sentiment. So to think that he would just happen to be that compassionate towards an unimportant stranger would be to delude herself completely.

She remembered him being amused by her attitude towards the bullfinch.

Yup. There it was.

She was an amusing and entertaining distraction, like an actually sentient animal of sorts.

Minai sighed.

Maybe she was being mean. But you should have seen…

You should have seen his attitude, okay?

He said that for the first day he just wanted to assess her overall physical state. To know what he had to work with. The dialogue went something like this:

“We will be using my personal training grounds for your morning practice”

“To what do I owe such honour?” was what she said while meaning: seriously your majesty, don’t you have better things to do with your life? Like ruling the kingdom and such?

“I assumed you wouldn’t want to demonstrate your impeccable skills to others quite yet”

She wasn’t just hearing things, right? That was a veiled insult.

“While my skills can not be on par with those of the elves” she started, directly alluding to the fact that the elven kind with their eternal, presumably, lifespans would automatically be better than her at pretty much anything due to the fact of having much more time to master the skill “I assure you I am not that bad” she finished, still maintaining the politeness. Barely. Internally she was seething.

No, really. She couldn’t be that bad. She did have a gym membership. Once. Now, whether she actually used it or not could be discussed at another time, but it was certain that she had been to the gym before. An unspecified amount of times. Not to mention the PE classes back in high-school. Which was years ago, but still…

“Need I remind you that the heelers performed a physical assessment on you when you were unconscious?”

“I am aware of that”

“From what they’ve gathered, it would be quite surprising if you were able to lift something heavier than the bird on your shoulder”

Well?

Come on.

Do share your thoughts on how she was unfair in her judgement.
What?
Still have something to say in his defence?
Okay.
Listen further.

After she, obediently, with the bare minimum amount of complaining and grumbling, had followed each and every one of his commands and instructions for what felt like hours, after she patiently performed all of the necessary amount of exercises, after she displayed the monumental strength of character and refrained from throwing a snowball at him, after all of that…

You know what he said about her performance?
Nothing.
No.
Worse than nothing.

After the session has ended, Minai confronted the king with the question.

He, wait for it, turned his face away from her.

You know why people did that? So that they wouldn’t have to look at someone when they informed them about bad news. Not to look the other persona in the eyes. Because it would be awkward or something. But. But! BUT! He already didn’t have to do that. He already wasn’t looking her in the eyes or even at all.

And he still turned away.

The atomic bomb of all insults!

Was it her fault that up until a few weeks ago she was a mere human and not an immortal divine being with super strength, super stamina and super immunity?

Was it?

Say what you will, but nothing would convince Minai that anything like that was or ever could be her fault and that in this particular situation she was undisputedly wronged by the rich, spoiled, inconsiderate…

Minai moaned and retreated back under the water pleading and begging the universe to grant her a pair of gills and allow her to stay there until the entire damn eternity ended.
The universe didn’t grant her gills. It only granted her a nose full of water, which only made the woman’s mood even gloomier.

To add an insult to the injury, the water was slowly starting to near the mark when it would be getting cold and that meant that she had to leave her temporary sanctuary rather soon.

Splendid.

Grudgingly, she finished her bathing procedures, put on a robe, left for her to wear by one of the maids, and threw a towel over her shoulders so that her still wet hair wouldn’t soak into the soft fabric of the robe. Elven or not, her hair still presented a rather poor sight if it was dried over-
zealously with a towel, which Minai didn’t doubt would happen in her current angry state.

With her body already starting to show its aversion for the day’s increased physical activity by spreading the nagging pain all throughout her limbs and muscles the blonde woman slowly crawled out of her sanctuary filled with steam and fruity smells and into a much smaller room with a vanity mirror-table, Sir Bullfinch casually perching at the top of it, and a few elven maids with an entire arsenal of hair brushes and the like.

Minai eyed the maids suspiciously. Their presence had a dubious nature. Where and why did they come from? She decided to leave that question in the same realm as other unsolvable mysteries of the world like what divine lottery did her former room-mate win to be able to eat sweets in industrial quantities while always being in perfect shape without much exercise and whether one had seen the same wild bird twice in their life. It didn’t matter in the long term and she was in no mood to brush and dry the hair herself so she allowed the maids to do their thing while staring at her tired reflection in the mirror.

To be this tired before she was even supposed to wake up.

Horrendous.

In a state of half-daze she participated in regular maidens’ small-talk. It was kind of nice to, for once, to chirp about nothing, remembering the far away days of sleepovers she had with her friends. She was asked pretty standard questions and gave equally standard answers, but nothing more was even required. How was your bath? Warm and relaxing, thank you. Which scent of soap do you prefer? Strawberry, but jasmine is also nice. How do you find Mirkwood? Very different from what I’m used to but it has its own charm. Whipped cream cupcakes or cinnamon buns? Depends on a mood. You decided to have a pet bird? Something of sorts. Does he have a name? It’s a work in progress. Braids? Just one, loose. Pink or blue ribbon? Lavender. Square-cut dress or v-neck? No, no dresses.

“Wouldn’t you want to dress up?” one of the girls asked.

“Not particularly” at least not until she mastered the skill of moving around in a floor length gown.

“What about the etiquette?” another elleth chimed in.

“What about it?” Minai tilted her head in confusion. The etiquette was perfectly fine with her wearing leggings and tunics before. What changed?

“If I am not mistaken you have not lived in the palace before?” the first girl smiled kindly “The etiquette requires you to dress proper for your dinner with the king”

That explained the maids.

Well, here we go again with misinterpreting. If she remembered correctly her exact words were ‘All this running around made me hungry’ and not… whatever it even was that he had heard instead.

She tried to give what she thought was a sweet smile to the girls tending to her hair, reminding herself not to make them suffer through her own displeasure since one of her former room-mates worked in retail for years and she was quite aware of the woes that the regular workers felt when dealing with angry customers over something that wasn’t by any means their fault. Unfortunately her expression reminded more of a crooked scowl.

“I assure you, it is not that kind of arrangement” she shook her head.
That elf was clearly evil to the very core of his being. She directly communicated her opinion on a certain type of rumour which already had all the possible grounds for spreading through the elven domain. That was just adding more fuel to the fire. He, of course, didn’t care. You know. After being exposed to being a centre of attention for centuries if not longer. After having all the time in the world to accept and learn to live with the gossip. After having the ability to order everyone out of his side of the palace and have everything he needs brought to him on a whim and not deal with the glances and whispers. Yeah. Absolutely comparable to a girl who at most in her life had twelve subscribers to her account, half of whom were probably spam-bots.

“It’s not?”

Well, one of the elleths seemed particularly disappointed and not entirely convinced. Ah, the power of gossip.

“We understand, but etiquette is etiquette”

The other was far less disappointed, if at all, and much more sympathetic to the entire situation.

“There is no point, he won’t even...” she stopped herself right before blurtling out something she shouldn’t “I’m sure your king doesn’t care much for what I am wearing. He made it abundantly clear that due to his opinion of my manners and upbringing he did not expect much of me in terms of knowing etiquette and I honestly see no reason to try and change that”

He did call her ‘uncultured’ after all. In anger, yes, but that only meant that it was already somewhere on his mind.

The sympathetic elleth shook her head slowly in silent agreement and, perhaps, a certain amount of disapproval. The other just slightly frowned in confusion.

Minai felt a slight pang of discomfort and maybe even a little bit of guilt. Something at the back of her mind nagged the woman about the underlying consequences of her words. He already had enough problems with his image and there really was no need to contribute to it like that. Besides. She eyed the bullfinch who looked back at her fluffing his feathers. ‘Don’t you dare fly to him and snitch on me’ said her piercing stare when she glared at the avian. The bird gave no response, none that she could decipher, at least. The ball of feathers only tilted his head and chirped.

In the end they’ve settled on a simple dress of deep-blue silk coming to her ankles and a silver robe, made from a warm fabric she couldn’t exactly identify, to shield her from the winter chill which was still present even within the walls of the palace. That way her attire remained formal enough and there wouldn’t be an opportunity for her to step on it.

After all the matters of her appearance were solved, Minai obediently followed to wherever she was lead to which happened to be an area that, having more knowledge about the modern world living arrangements than those of the medieval times, she would call a living room. It was quite spacious yet had a certain air of cosiness to it. It had soft carpet, as soon as the maids left she took of her shoes end enjoyed the fluffy surface with her bare feet. The walls were decorate with intricate tapestries meticulously made by a hand of a skilled weaver. She walked around the room admiring the craftsmanship. One side of the room, however, was a giant window the size of the entire wall with stained glass of various shades at the top and a magnificent view over the snowy forest. Sir Bullfinch flapped his tiny wings merrily, greeting the sight of his proper home.

Somewhere between the middle of the room and the wall opposing the window there was a decent enough sized coffee table with lots of temptingly smelling food. Around the table there a couple of armchairs and the medieval equivalent of a sofa, all made of dark oak and red velvet upholstery.
She approached the sofa and gently touched the textile covering.

Soft!

Minai wasted no time hopping on that sofa with her legs and even Sir Bullfinch.

Yeah, yeah. Lack of manners, whatever. She was having a dinner with a person who not only made up his mind about her manners but also had absolutely zero ways of knowing she wasn’t sitting the proper way. Unless the bird tattled. To avoid that she took a juicy looking strawberry, a pleasantly surprising sight in the middle of the winter, and slowly circled it around the bird’s beak, tempting the avian to leave her shoulder and migrate to the table where he promptly proceeded to peck at the red treat.

The woman pressed her back to that of the sofa and closed her eyes.

“This is not too bad” she hummed to herself, justifying that with the presence of her feathery companion.

“Enjoying yourself?”

At that she jumped up on the sofa somehow managing to hit her leg at the corner of the table. It hurt. She stayed quiet for a few moments, biting her lower lip in order to refrain from blurting out any words which might compromise her position by revealing the strange peculiarities of her language.

“Lord Thranduil” she greeted when finally taking control of her emotions “I’m sorry, I got startled. I have not noticed you come in”

In her heart she felt endless compassion for all the lower level workers who had to smile and be polite with their annoying stuck-up upper management. She finally understood how it felt. Excruciating.

“Then that makes us even” he stated in an almost bored manner.

Minai let out a sigh of quiet irritation.

The bullfinch, meanwhile, already managed to finish gorging himself up on strawberry and prompted his little body up in the air, landing on the king’s shoulder, chirping.

Well, the bird had already proven his inability to keep his beak closed.

“Sir Bullfinch is in a rather disagreeable mood today. I am afraid he might say all kinds of untrue nonsense” the woman smiled, it helped to better navigate the tonal differences in her voice.

“How unfortunate” he also smiled, but it was a different type of smile, more akin to a smirk “I suppose then you don’t look lovely in that dress”

Minai raised her eyes to the ceiling in a silent plea. Why? Why him? Why her? There were many nice, sweet and amicable elves found at every corner of this place. Why was she cursed with this one? Why?

“Perhaps, if one is to base their opinion on that of a bird it is indeed so” she crossed her arms on her chest. It was going to be a long day.

“What was that put the bird” he made a special emphasis on the last word “in such a disagreeable
mood?"

The woman tilted her head observing the elf who, contrary to the every norm of social politeness stating otherwise, sat there on the opposite side of the sofa. Seriously, what’s wrong with the two perfectly nice chairs? But with that alone she could have lived, the sofa was placed in the most convenient position towards the table after all. It was the pose that he took. It was clearly a statement with that imposing lean with one of his legs thrown over the other, his elbow rested among the back of the sofa and his head supported by his arm. In such a position he took twice as much, if not more, space on the sofa than she did and she couldn’t help but to see it as at last some form of asserting dominance.

Because him having an unreachably higher social status, being older, taller and, let’s face it, much prettier than she ever had a chance to be clearly wasn’t enough for him to feel superior. He just had to take the sofa as well.

“There is no way for me to know” she chose to play dumb and pretend to not take the hint that it was not the bird’s attitude he was inquiring about “I was not granted the ability to properly communicate with animals”

Unfortunately, the underlying sarcasm and mockery attached to the insinuation of one being able to talk to animals was completely lost on a person who had an actual ability to do that.

“If the two of you to coexist together then your grievances should be resolved and spoken about in a timely manner, otherwise it will become hindrance” he made no effort to hide being aware of what she was doing.

Well then.

“I suspect he doesn’t feel comfortable telling me about what displeases him. I am the one to give him food and shelter. A position of dependence is not favourable for complaints”

There. Hopefully he’d take the hint.

There was a subtle change in his expression but she couldn’t quite place the meaning of it. Not that she tried too hard. There were more important things on her agenda like that particularly tempting looking cupcake. She reached for it when a sudden thought came to her.

“Is there something I can assist you with?” she asked.

“Describe the arrangement on the table” he replied after a few moments of silence.

Hesitantly she moved a little closer to Thranduil to better see the perspective from his position. She then proceeded to give a short and precise description of the items on the table. He nodded as she finished describing the picture and reached his hand for a particular item. Minai observed the slow and careful movement of the elf’s hand until his fingers lightly touched the smooth glass surface of the bottle. He then grabbed it with a much more confident motion and repeated the procedure with the glasses. She couldn’t help then but to notice how much of a habit drinking wine must have been for him by the precision with which he poured the liquid into the each glass.

Minai took a glass that was offered to her from his hands, fully recognizing that on the scale of the idea ranking that particular one was somewhere down at the bottom. She knew it. She simply made a conscious choice to ignore it for the sake of wanting to relax, maybe just a little. A tiny little bit. She deserved it.

“This tastes amazing” she smiled after trying out the drink.
The woman finally reached for the desired cupcake, thoroughly ignoring the expectant gaze of Sir Bullfinch. Traitors did not deserve cupcakes. After not getting what he wanted, the bird hopped to the other side of the table where he was immediately awarded an entire blackberry muffin. An entire one! Twice the size of the bird’s body.

“I am not sure it is a good idea to give him a treat this big. If not for his health then definitely for his attitude. He might decide that he prefer to be your companion now” the woman voiced her concerns.

“He chose to bond with you” the king explain “He won’t change loyalties because of one treat”

“I wouldn't know. I was never lucky enough to be in a position where anyone would pledge their loyalties to me”

“Do you think that is a position of luck?”

“I am not sure I can make a valid enough judgement without the proper experience. But such a position often comes with wealth and power and I’ve always wondered how it would feel to have more money than I have lifetime to spend and a horde of people ready to act out every single one of my whims” she smiled at the possibilities.

“Might I ask what would you do with all those riches and servants?” he asked with a healthy dose of scepticism.

“Do you mean before or after I finish decorating my marble palace with chandeliers made of pure white diamonds?” she asked in a tone of the most undiluted wonder, clearly indicating that she wasn’t by any means serious with her answers.

“Those chandeliers would be far too bright to look at” he took a similar approach to the conversation.

“That is exactly the point of it. If anyone decided to express their grievances with how I spend the kingdom’s, or what have you, budged I would require the meetings to take place in the chandelier room. Nobody would be able to stand such bright light long enough to justify their complaints to be worth it”

“Your kingdom would be very short lived”

“But my mark in history would be everlasting”

“I dread to imagine” he smiled in a relaxed manner.

The king seemed to be in better mood today and the conversation they were having seemed to entertaining him. Minai decided to use that opportunity to ask a question which was occupying her mind for quite some time now.

“If you don’t mind me asking, and I do apologize if I’m intruding on what I’m not supposed to” she made a brief pause to better consider the words she would use “How come you were there on that balcony?”

He didn’t answer at first and she started to think he wouldn’t at all, therefore when he did finally break the silence it left her surprised.

“The sun is the brightest in winter and that balcony has the best view on the sunrise. I’m sure you’ve noticed yourself, it’s quite the spectacle” he fell quiet for a moment “I wanted to see it as
well”

The woman blinked, carefully considering the wording of the answer she was given. The key word were, perhaps, ‘brightest’ and ‘see’. He wanted his sight back. Of course. She watched enough medical dramas in her life to know that doctors checked the patients’ ability to see by shining bright light into their light because if there ever was something their eyes could still perceive it would be that. So that was what he was trying to do as well.

“Thank you for answering”

He simply nodded in acknowledgement of her words.

It didn’t take too long before her one glass of wine turned into the second one. It really was good. And strong.

“I probably shouldn’t drink too much” she added, more to herself, really.

“What is the reason?”

“The wine makes me do all sorts of things” she sighed, remembering the karaoke “Like wanting to sing”

“Is there something wrong with that?”

“Believe me, my singing is not something you would enjoy hearing. I am not particularly good at that”

“But song and music are natural to elves, I can’t recall there ever being one who wouldn’t have at least some level of affinity for it”

“I must be a defective elf then” she snapped. Elves were great and better than her at everything, she got it. What was the purpose of reminding that at every single opportunity?

“Oh? So you believe that not having a certain ability makes one defective?”

Have you ever been hit on the head with a heavy dusty cushion? Because that was the exact feeling Minai got after hearing those words.

“That is not what I meant” she let out an exasperated breath.

“What was it that you meant then?”

She looked at the king carefully. He didn’t appear angry but it was rather clear that he wasn’t exactly teasing her either. She was expected to give an honest answer.

If only she had one.

“That is not what I think of you” it was the only thing she could say and it was the truth.

“And how I am to know that you are being honest with me and not being creative with your truth the way you usually are due to, how did you put it, position of dependence?”

Fire. Hellfire. If only the ground would crack under her and swallow her. She would then compliantly fall into the embrace of the flame of eternal damnation, silently grateful for being saved from having this conversation.
Meanwhile he was still looking at her with his unseeing eyes underneath the half-closed eyelids.

She was no longer afraid of him or his reactions but that didn’t make it any more comfortable to be in the position that she was.

“I can only say that this time I am telling you the truth and that comment was made without much thought put into it” she twirled the now half empty glass in her fingers.

“Fine. Let’s suppose we were to switch places and it was me who made a thoughtless comment, but, unlike me you keep quiet about it instead of telling me that something bothers you. How do I know my actions or words cause you grief if you do not tell me because you feel you are in no position to do so? How long does it take before irritation grows into something deeper, something that can not be solved with just one conversation clarifying the intent?”

Oh. So he was not offended by her comment. He was making a point of it.

Minai begged the universe for a correct answer and when she was once again denied, she turned instead to the rest of her wine to ask for bravery. The alcohol was much more receptive to her pleading and bravery, if it was indeed that and not foolishness taking the guise, was provided to her.

Unfortunately.

“Your Lordship” the woman started “You ask me for honesty but you give none yourself. I understand, of course you, a king, do not owe any to me, an uncultured nobody, but then how can you expect me to believe that you would exercise the power your position provides you in that situation and would abstain from doing if I am to say something you might not like?”

“In which instance am I not being honest with you?” he tilted his head to the side.

“The sudden desire you have for keeping me as your company is not something I can make any sense of” it was perhaps the fanciest way she’d ever said ‘what the hell do you want’ in the entirety of her life.

“What do you think that purpose might be?” there was genuine curiosity in his voice.

“I think that your previous jester has quit and that left you bored, so you need another source of entertainment. I know you are the king and you feel entitled to have your need met but I don’t appreciate being treated like a circus animal”

“Entitled?” he repeated in a quiet voice, almost a whisper “Do you feel forced against your will?”

Minai skipped a breath, frozen to the spot by the expression on his face. It was that of that of genuine shock and confusion.

The woman bit her lip.

“It’s not that. I…” she couldn’t quite get the right words to properly communicate her opinion and thus should have stopped right there. Alas, she didn’t “I just don’t know how to properly act around you or what to even make of you. It’s like… like there are two different people. You chastise and discipline Tauriel but then you own guards are openly unafraid to be drunk on their duty. You boldly march your army into a war and then pull back when it starts. You obviously care for your people and spend days in the healing wing but then you completely detach yourself from the rest of the kingdom and make everyone think that you don’t care. You come to me with apologies but then still make fun of me this morning. This is so difficult and complicated. How am
Minai bit her nail when the full realization of what she just said finally dawned on her. She didn’t get a proper sleep, she was more tired than she could ever remember being and she was way more drunk than she should be in this position. There was no way it wouldn’t end up in a disaster and so it did. The woman lowered her eyes and patiently awaited repercussions. But nothing followed. It was silent, uncomfortably so. Even the bird hid somewhere out of sight, not making a single peep.

Minutes passed and she finally raised her gaze.

He must have heard her stir.

“See? You’ve stated your grievances and nothing happened to you” if there was even the smallest hint emotion in his voice then she failed to hear it.

“Oh..” she suddenly felt as all the words in the vocabulary escaped her.

“As for me making fun of you today, that was not what I intended with my words. But do allow me to give you an advice. If there are things in life which you have not yet mastered and that aggravates you enough to be upset when the subject is brought up then hiding behind the excuses such as having an imaginary ‘defect’ or not having as much time for practice is not the best mindset to have. It will not lead you to the path of improvement if that is what you seek. And if it is not then it should not bother you at all what anyone thinks of your abilities. Understand?”

She once again lowered her gaze feeling like a child that was scolded for throwing a tantrum. He was right. There was nothing she could bring up in her defence. She allowed her insecurities to cloud her judgement and severely misinterpret his actions.

“I understand” she said quietly.

“Good. That’s good. Now leave”

“I...” she had no idea what she was going to say, but that was of no matter.

“You’ve made it abundantly clear how much being in my presence burdens you” he didn’t let her say anything “I have enough issues as it is and would rather not be known as someone who coerces women into doing what they don’t want”

“Listen, I...” she didn’t want to leave with the things being how they were, it felt simply wrong to do so.

“No” once again, he was unwilling to listen “You should go. Now”

Minai hesitated. She studied his expressionless face, the empty eyes and rigid posture, searching for the slightest betrayal of any emotion. There wasn’t anything. Nothing that she could make any sense of.

She left her glass on the table and stood up, reluctant to make any further movement. She remained standing at that spot for quite some time but as the minutes passed there wasn’t any reaction. With a sigh she moved to the door, each step slow. Her hand lingered over the doorknob, fingers lightly touching the metal. Her bird flew the half way and landed on one of the chairs, as if sensing her hesitation.

So she would now leave and go hide in her room like a cowardly snail in it’s shell. She would once again sit there sulking and lamenting her fate, awaiting the magical solution to all of her problems.
The world didn’t work that way. Idleness only ever turned the situation for the worse and never towards any kind of improvement. She was the one in the wrong in this situation and if she ever wanted to apologize she would have to do it now, because after she would go through that door she would never be given an opportunity to do so. She knew he would not come to her again and she would not be granted an audience no matter how many times she’d ask.

She gave a small nod to herself in a silent resolve.

With more confident steps she crossed the distance back to the sofa and sat right beside the king who gave no indication that he even noticed her returning.

She took a deep breath.

“I was wrong. You’ve apologized to me and made an effort to help, and I still judged you through the lens of my own insecurities, that was not a right thing to do. There were stressful changes in my life lately and in my fear and frustration I was eager to isolate myself and see the world and people around me as hostile enemies. Neither my actions or judgement were fair and… I apologize for that”

It wasn’t easy to admit and much harder to say. She accused him of being contradicting in his actions while completely ignoring her own behaviour. For weeks she lamented being trapped and made zero conscious effort to find the way to escape, choosing to be passive and only migrate between her room and the dining hall to no end. She suffered from loneliness but never approached anyone or tried to have a conversation, not to mention any kind of friendly relationship. She held a grudge for being treated rudely ignoring the reason for it being her own constant lies.

She had no right to accuse him of anything.

She was no better.

For a while it was quiet and then he laughed. A hollow lifeless sound.

“Be glad” he wasn’t facing her still “Be glad you’ve realised it now, with your conscience free of irreversible mistakes and your entire life ahead of you not to make them. I sincerely hope you will remember that lesson and learn from it”

Her hand moved without her even realizing it at first. Very slowly and carefully she touched his shoulder with only the tips of her fingers, gradually moving her hand further to his back. There was no attempt to throw her hand off and she proceeded to lean forward and, with her other hand, reach out and even more carefully than before guide his head to her shoulder. She met no resistance.

“I think I might have hurt you with my touch last time, please tell me if this is okay”

Instead of a reply she felt him move his own hands until they were lightly touching her back.

“I don’t think you are a bad person and you have not coerced or burdened me”

He only sighed and pulled her closer as she rested her head against his.

They stayed like that for a while, being silently observed by a small red bird sitting on top of the chair.

Chapter End Notes
Look at this, I've actually made some type of conclusion with them somewhat mirroring each other. Let me tell you that it was not easy to cleverly lead to this revelation completely on accident. Yeah, I wrote and then it hit me like 'Wow I actually did a thing' Seriously, this was never in my plans and it's like a plot-twist which probably should alarm me more as a writer.

I guess that sort of wraps up the first arc/part of this story or something like that. That's the good news. In not so good news I have very little idea what to write next. As I've said, I know what everything is supposed to come down to, but how it will get there... So if there won't be updates for a little while then I'm figuring this out. But if it's something like half a year and there was no notice then consider me gone forever. It can happen due to... reasons, so be warned.

Basically, in regards of the romantic plotline this thing is supposed to have there are a few things I wanted to make very clear:
1. Not to make the lead heroine fall for money/status/appearance. So I've set some counterpoints to that. Money - not worth it because the first impression on personality. Status - in a shaky position. Appearance - for how long with the health issues. Like that.
2. Exchanging affection for favours - now, this can work if the gift is something very thoughtful/has deep personal meaning/was extremely hard to get. And in movies and other visual mediums, Beauty and the Beast for example (the library scene) it has to be done for time constraints and such. But this work has no word count/chapter/time limit so I've set a goal to avoid any type of 'I like you now because you gave me a sparkly tiara' stuff
3. The obvious power imbalance. I wanted it addressed and make it clear that whatever happens (or doesn't) next is the result of her conscious choice completely uninfluenced by the power dynamic at hand

I've been slightly concerned with maybe moving this too fast but then almost 50k word and nine chapters later without anything even nearly romantic happening is probably against the rules in this genre. I just have this deeply ingrained fear of having my characters be mary sues and stories having no plot and substance so I had to make sure...

Okay, that was a rambly and long author's note, but I find them helpful to organize my own thoughts
Interlude

Chapter Summary

A compilation of scenes that for one reason or another didn't make it into the actual story. Just some extra stuff, not mandatory to read to comprehend the main plot.

Chapter Notes

Sometimes you write a scene and you like it but then you notice that it doesn't fit into the overall narrative. I have a few of those. Some just got written out naturally, some I wasn't happy with, some had to be excluded due to not fitting into certain rules I've set for the story (like puns and wordplay). There's also a stupid AU idea.

I am actually working on the next chapter and while I do that I decided to just put the 'extra' stuff here. Semi-canon meaning some could have actually happened but I will not bring any of this up in further chapters.

Anyway, here are the scenes, not good enough to be used in actual chapters but not terrible enough to never be seen.

The ‘alternate ending’ I was thinking of posting on april 1st but then decided not to.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Summer Camp

Dear Mom and Dad

I'm sorry for not writing earlier. I've finally got my hands on some pen and paper or should I say quill and parchment.

The summer camp is weird. Maybe because its actually winter.

The brochure did not lie though, they do stick to the whole ‘medieval’ theme as promised.

You'd be glad to know that every morning starts from exercising, but I think any normal camp would lose it’s licence if they made you climb a tree without any sort of safety net. The horseback and archery lessons have not yet started. They say I should first learn how to climb the horse by myself and have enough strength to pull the string.

I'm sure you would approve of me eating healthy. We are only given naturally produced products, snacks and junk food are strictly forbidden. Yesterday I had a dream of a land where grass is made of fries, hamburgers grow like mushrooms, soda flows in a river and chips fall from cotton candy clouds. Please send something that is bad for me. ASAP!

Electronic devices are not allowed, we’re encouraged to communicate with nature. There’s not a single outlet to charge my phone. I feel stranded. Have not gotten any outside news. Have not been on the internet in ages. Never thought I would miss SPAM letters. I had to write one to myself and
had it delivered via bird.

Forgot to mention. I have a pet bird now. Have not decided on the name yet, have any suggestions? Can I keep him? Please say NO.

I haven’t made any friends yet but I’ve definitely met people. There is this redhead girl. I think she’s nice. She is an advanced archer already, I wanted to ask her to teach me some of her skills but it seems she got suspended for having a disagreement with the camp director. I almost did too, but it’s okay now. I think.

I miss you a lot. Please come take me back home if you can. I promise I won’t change my mind when you arrive this time.

Sincerely

Your Daughter

The woman sighed and carefully stored the letter into the drawer knowing quite well that she had no means of sending it. She tucked the quill behind her pointy ear and sighed. If only she just had to wait for her parents to get her.

***

The Shoe Growing Tree

One of the biggest pros of having a wild bird as a part-time pet was the bare minimum amount of effort it took to take care of it. Leave the window open and, even if you forget to grab a handful of berries during the breakfast, the bird will successfully feed itself. Especially if you currently reside in an elven domain where, even in winter there are plenty of food for the local fauna to choose from. The bird-feeders were a plenty, not to mention the rowan-berry trees.

The cons of keeping a wild bird around were, well, everything else. First, one would have to abandon any hope of leaving a bird and a muffin in the same room alone and return to see both of them in the same state they were when you departed. Second, the bird would have no concept of personal space in any viable amount. Your own bed, your clothes and even your hair could at any time be deemed as a completely acceptable place to perch and you would not be given an opportunity to say anything about it. The third and the most aggravating aspect was this: the sunrise chirping.

Oh yes, my friend, you’ve heard it right. First ray of sunshine – first peep. And then another one. And another. You would not be safe on any day of the week, even the weekends. Even your day-offs. The bird would peep and tweet and chirp, greeting the birth of a new day as you would desperately try to cover your ears with your hands, your pillow, your blanket. The efforts would be futile and you’d soon come to conclusion that desperate times required equally desperate measures.

And that’s how the elves acquired a magical pine-tree which seemingly grew shoes on it’s branches overnight. But only few would know that this event was connected less to magic and more to one particular elven-maiden needing her window replaced.

***

Cultural Exchange

“And this is the elven gesture for goodbye, farewell and let your trip be safe” the redhead archer held a hand to her heart.
The blonde nodded having successfully learned another one of the elven customs.

“That is not how we did it where I am from” she noted.

“How did you do it then?” asked Tauriel, her curiosity peaked.

“Oh, let me show you” Minai controlled her smile and raised a hand to her head.

She then proceeded to make an angle type of gesture with her index finger in a vertical position her thumb took a horizontal one, in line with her forehead.

“Like that?”

“It’s perfect” replied the blonde as she marvelled at the result of her efforts at enriching the elven medieval style lives with her modern day knowledge. She had successfully integrated the ‘loser’ sign into the posh and proper elven culture.

***

Priorities

“Please, a little while longer” the woman pleaded, not wanting to give up that which she so thoroughly enjoyed.

“Lady Minai, it is time for your etiquette lesson” answered the maid.

“Just five more minutes”

“I am afraid that would be the third extra five minutes in a row”

“Not yet, I need more time”

“There will be more time tomorrow”

She sighed and obediently followed the maid to where her presence was required.

Due to her utter dismay, the horse’s mane would remain tragically unbrushed.

***

Choosing words

With a seemingly last air leaving her lungs she quietly slumped on to the ground struggling for breath. She deed two push-ups. Two! Two entire ones. Up and down. Two times. Two! That was whole one and a half more push ups than yesterday. Of course she was now tired and wanted a well deserved break.

Sadly, not everyone shared the same opinion.

“I don’t recall telling you it was time to rest” the source of her torture states somewhere from behind.

“How do you even know I’ve stopped?”

“Well, for once there’s no complaining. Second, your breathing is now too even”
“Maybe I’m just improving”

“I find it unlikely to happen in such a short amount of time”

“And I find it that you should get eaten by a dragon” the woman muttered underneath her breath.

“I am afraid I didn’t quite catch that. Could you please repeat that last phrase”

She turned her head to give him a glare and was greeted with the sight of him holding an unsheathed sword and checking it’s sharpness with one of his fingers.

“I said I’ll get my feet dragging”

The training session continued.

***

**Tale as Old as Time**

The soft light of candles, the steam swirls slowly rising from little teacups and silver trays with delicious cookies were essential ingredients for friendly sleepover filled with tales and stories of all sorts.

Several young elleths sat in a small circle, all wearing the most comfortable of nightgowns and the cosiest of the robes, with their hair braided ready for a good night sleep though neither of them were in a hurry to give in to Namo’s land of dreams quite yet.

There was one elleth who still had to share her favourite fictional tale.

She knew the exact story she wanted to tell. It was a story of love and woe. One of the, if not the greatest romanced ever written, by humans, at the very least. A tale of two young lovers who briefly met but even the shortest of meetings was enough to ignite the feeling strong enough that it had enveloped their entire beings, leaving no room for anything or anyone else. Alas, it was not easy for the lovers for they belonged to two different worlds, two sides which were at odds with each other and could not coexist or allow for the love to bloom in open. Thus, unable to be together in live they’ve bonded forever in death. Or, to be a little more precise – the undeath.

“It all started when a human girl named Bella moved in to live with her father...”

***

**Alternative Ending**

They approached their journey’s destination and as they did, Minai let out fear fuelled scream, amplified by the downwards tunnel.

The dim lighting of the dungeons did nothing to hide or diminish the affect of what hid inside that particular cell.

Giant, dark, hairy. It was the size of a car. An entire SUV. The primal embodiment of all things evil in this world, or any other world for that matter. Or planet. Universe. Nowhere, not in a single place, known or unknown, there could exist a sight more disgusting, nauseating, sickening, disturbing, frightening, terrifying, creepy, unnerving, horrendous and hair rising than this forsaken creature inside the dungeon. The living manifestation of a wretched nightmare plaguing generation after generation of sentient beings and beyond. The beyond words grotesque eight legged horror with an equal amount of pure black eyes which reflected nothing but the intent to kill and hatred.
The sound of it’s pincers clicking against each other alone could make one’s blood freeze up inside
the veins, stopping the beating of the heart and thus bringing death to a person with the sheer fact
of it’s accursed unholy existence.

The camera-man silently observed the woman who yelled at the top of her lungs while staring at a
coin-sized spider hanging on it’s web from a tree that she was clinging to.

“Actors” he shook his head and walked away, not noticing a half-eaten mushroom right beside his
right shoe.

***

Modern Coffee shop AU

Recently graduated from the university young woman spends her days leeching wi-fi from a coffee
shop nearby her apartment, uploading another meaningful and valid argument filled entry to her
video-blog, anonymous of course, dedicated to conspiracy theories on why ‘Successful Company X’
is most likely run by reptiloids. Not that she sincerely believe in all of that stuff, the blog posts
have humorous nature but the content found it’s niche. One day she receives a mysterious e-mail
letter with a short and weird message ‘Want to uncover a real conspiracy?’. The message wouldn’t
be so strange if it didn’t come to her private e-mail address, which she never revealed to the public.
Still, she chooses to ignore it thinking that it might be one of her friends or relatives playing a
prank.

The next day she wakes up to find that every trace of her on-line presence was wiped-out from
existence. All of her videos and written entries, all of the discussion boards, each and every
comment. Even all of her personal accounts she had under her real name and unassociated with her
conspiracy hobby are gone. Her phone makes a sound and she reaches for it only to find it void of
all contacts and messages. Except for one. A date, a place and time.

Knowing quite well that she should not but unable to resist she follows the instructions only to
discover that she was appointed to a job interview at the richest and most influential company
‘Mirkwood Inc’

Chapter End Notes

Can someone tell me if there is humour in my writing? Because I have zero concept of
what makes most people laugh. I do make people laugh sometimes, but the thing is I
get that reaction when I'm not trying to be funny on purpose. People think I'm joking
when I'm actually just legitimately cynical or something like that.

I'm not exactly trying that hard to make people laugh/be mildly amused with my
writing but I've been told that it reads like I do. I'm just wondering if this is the case
with this particular story or not? Whatever the answer is it doesn't affect my feelings,
it's just pure curiosity. But it is a weird feeling like there is this some kind of pressure
to keep doing something that I wasn't aware I was doing and have no idea how to do?
And yes, in case someone's wondering, my belonging to the human kind has been
questioned. A lot.
Chapter Notes

This one is more of a transition chapter with the slightest hint of foreshadowing. The new arc will properly start from the next one. It's mostly goes into the parts of Tolkien's lore about elves and romance, Basically how/why I'll try to make this work. I kind of realize that any effort on my part to abide by the canonical rules is at this point is useless since I wrote out the main rule of 'love at first sight'. In my understanding that type of romance is supposed to work because the elves have their fea connected/bonded upon their first (?) meeting or something like that and right now this is not an option with our protagonist for obvious reasons. Therefore I'm going by the old fashioned route and having relationships develop through interaction and that type of stuff.

Also. Very important note. There will be no love triangles or misunderstandings based jelousy subplots in this story. So whatever other characters get involved in this it they will never assume it's for the 'romance' reasons. Those tropes are not my favourite and I don't think I would be able to pull either of them off.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On one hand it was a good thing. It certainly brought a lot of joy to many people. It was nice to see them smile when they finally felt that they and their skills were once again needed and could be practically applied. She was glad to be the source of happiness for them.

On the other hand, unfortunately, it did take a toll on her self esteem to have people rejoice at her absolute lack of skill, manners and knowledge.

But it was what it was and she had to deal with that. To have teachers, private tutors and instructors flock around her and go on and on about how fortunate it was that she was completely ignorant in their respective subjects. She understood it. There weren’t many young children around and the need to teach anyone anything was not as demanded. Her ineptness gave them a purpose. Her understanding of the situation, however, did not make it any less annoying.

Regarding the languages, the honour of teaching Minai was given to Tauriel who already knew the legend about her origins, which Minai told other people, to be false. There were two languages that she was to learn. The elvish language and the human language. She already had an advantage with elvish. She only had to learn which sounds certain symbols were supposed to produce. This in turn gave her the ability to read the text. Read, but not yet understand. Her ingrained translator only affected spoken words. Therefore she first started with reading books aloud and having them be translated in her head, gradually moving away from such ‘training wheels’. As for the human language, the alphabet and overall language rules were more similar to those she was accustomed to in her world, meaning that it did not pose that much of a difficulty as well.

The horseback lessons she took onto with a lot of enthusiasm. Yes, she was that type of little girl when growing up. The type that constantly begged her parents to buy her a pony. A pony, at lest a living one, was never bought to her, of course. Neither did she manage to get the horseback lessons as a kid. There weren’t any in close proximity and neither of her parents had enough free time o
their hands to drive her. Oh well. She got her wish now and she definitely wasn’t going to allow all the other circumstances to spoil her fun. Something nice actually happened to her and she was going to savour it.

The archery lessons though. The good news was that she could indeed lift a bow. She tried it when observing one of Tauriel’s practices. Sadly, the same couldn’t be told about pulling the string in needed capacity. Yet. It was truly a moment of ultimate shame and she had to thank the valar, that’s what the local analogue of pantheon was apparently called, that a certain person wasn’t around to witness it. That wasn’t something she could have lived with.

The lessons in manners, etiquette, history and culture she didn’t mind. Even though the history sounded more like an ancient myth with all-powerful magical beings running around, it was still a history and an array of long unpronounceable names and a long list of names did their job in making her bored much greater than anything else that could have retained her interest. Those lessons were relatively harmless. Besides, history and culture, and even etiquette perhaps, could potentially save her from getting into any embarrassing or dangerous situations.

It were choreography and vocal lessons that she considered herself to be perfectly capable of living without. With the former, no matter how hard she tried she couldn’t grasp the need of her to learn proper posture, both sitting and standing, how to properly walk, yes, there was a proper way to walk apparently, and dance. Dancing maybe. Maybe. But how would having her movements to be more graceful help with anything? The answer was they wouldn’t. And same went for the voice lessons. When she followed all the instructions in changing pitch and timbre of her voice to make it sound more pleasant, melodic or whatever it made her sound… differently. Almost like another person. She didn’t like that. It felt as if she was being stripped of her personality.

Such were her days now. Filled with studying. Because clearly pre-school, elementary, middle and high school, college and then university just were not enough. With a workload this heavy Minai almost didn’t notice the signs of changing season.

Spring came and with it came longer days, warmer air, the sounds of birds and animals ready to start their new families. The sun eagerly thawed not only the snow but also the air of sombreness which overtook the elven forest. The ground was still cold and damp and the night air was definitely chilly but it did not stop many young elleths from changing their heavy long attires into shorter and lighter dresses that twirled and danced as the maidens moved across the halls with their flighty steps. Cheerful conversations, although still scarce, left the dining hall and other places of group activities and started to spread around more freely.

The elves became more cheerful and, to Minai’s greatest joy, lazier. Although, lazier might not be the right word to use here. The world relaxed would be much more fitting. Relaxed and more inclined to favour leisure activities instead of work.

Thus a regular evening lesson which should have been dedicated to learning the inherent intricacies of different ways of doing a curtsy was suggested, by her tutor no less, to be turned into an evening of tea, cookies and sharing stories.

Far it be from Minai to protest that change.

The members of the impromptu tea-party were as follows:

Minai, formerly a human and now an elven-maiden in training with her not-so-trusty companion Sir Bullfinch the Nameless.

Tauriel, an archer and a former scout, currently tasked with, due to her loafing around and having
nothing of substance to do, helping Minai to integrate into the pointy-eared society.

Lady Librarian, an older elleth. She, as one could have guessed from her title, was indeed a librarian and had the exact personality of one. She taught history, culture and languages.

Miss Prima. As in prima ballerina. Young positive and chirpy, an excellent dancer and a melodic singer. Her responsibility were the vocal and the choreography.

The last but definitely not least was The Duchess. Posh, proper and aristocratic woman with impeccable manners, perfectly picked ensemble of clothes, a piercing gaze and an unfortunate desire for gossip. Her subject was the etiquette.

Now, of course all of the aforementioned elleths had their beautiful and meaningful names, but for easier understanding of their personalities it would be better to refer to them by the nicknames which Minai gave them. Well, that and the fact that she forgot their names the second after hearing them and it was too awkward to ask again.

Minai sat in a chair, cross-legged, with a tea cup on one arm of her seat and a bowl of delicious smelling cookies on her lap. Before anyone makes any comments, there were enough different cookie plates for anyone and the plate she took for herself had an almost perfectly identical double out there on the table. The Duchess gave her pupil a disapproving glare to which Minai smiled charmingly, the same type of smile she has been made to practice for hours by the Duchess herself, and reminded that an etiquette of a friendly get-together required a relief of certain manners to create a relaxed atmosphere fitting for that particular event. The Duchess had no choice but to shake her head at having her own teachings be used against her like that.

“...and that’s when my brother realised it was aralia and not the elderberry. Sufficed to say he didn’t get to participate in the tournament that day” Miss Prima finished her story and sighed. Her brother’s spirit had departed to the Halls of Mandos in an already known event.

“I do know what you’re talking about dear. When both of my children were still elflings...” the Duchess went on to recount her own tale of mistaking a poisonous berry for an edible one. Both of her children were alive and well, her son being one of the guards and her daughter learning the art of healing in Imladris. It was her husband who perished.

“It is the same every year” Lady Librarian shook her head “The same berries the same mistakes”

“I do wish more people had your knowledge” the Duchess agreed.

Minai coughed quietly. The previous week she was taught the art of brewing and serving it with cakes, muffins and other sweets. She mistook sweet amber for blueberries. In her defence she wasn’t even aware that it was a part of the test. Not that knowing it would help any but still.

The entire conversation didn’t have any particular purpose or value, it was nothing but a small talk, but Minai welcomed it wholeheartedly. Her poor skull could barely contain all the useful and important information which was pretty much hammered in it every day of her new existence for the last several months. The one who suffered was probably Tauriel. That girl was clearly more of an outdoor warrior type and was used to spend her time with those of a similar mindset and occupation. So far she didn’t engage in the conversation despite all the efforts from the other females and stared into the window absent-mindedly even though it was actually her choice to be there.

Meanwhile the bullfinch left the backrest of the chair and landed on the cookie bowl with a clear intention to feast on the goods.
“Not so fast buddy” Minai shook the bowl disturbing the bird and making him chirp in an agitated manner, still refusing to surrender his position.

The bird was out of grace since he decided to nest on her tunic during the night and took a piece of stale bread with him. In her usual state of morning drowsiness she put on the tunic and had to deal with having itchy breadcrumbs all over her body.

“Buddy?” Lady Librarian asked in bewilderment.

Minai immediately bit her tongue. She slipped. The elven language didn’t have an analogue for the word ‘buddy’ since it was not a proper term, it was more or less a part of a slang. She had to improvise and fast.

“It is a colloquial term in the human language” it wasn’t a complete lie and the largely isolated elven community had no means of finding out whether or not this was the case in some far away human village “It means ‘friend’ and I’ve decided to name him that because it reminds me of my home” she didn’t even realized how true the last statement was before she spoke it. Besides, it was quite clear after a few months that she wasn’t getting anywhere with coming up with an actually meaningful, in elvish language at least, name for the bird. Therefore Buddy was as good as any.

“Did you have other pets?” Miss Prima interjected.

“Oh yes, I once had a bunny, her name was...” the chit-chat continued.

It remained pretty harmless until…

“Where did you say your parents are from, Lothlorien?” asked the Duchess looking at Minai over her cup of tea.

“Yes but they’ve left it a long time ago” Minai stuck to her legend.

“Do you have any relatives who are still living there?”

“My parents didn’t like talking about their families”

“Really? No aunts or uncles? Cousins maybe? I swear your face seems almost familiar”

Full disclosure. Minai was definitely aware that this comment made by the Duchess in all probability was not sincere and was made with the sole goal of digging up any information about her background and her potential societal status. She knew that. Would that take away from her joy of being told that she in her appearance looked similar and right at her place among the ever-beautiful elves? No, of course not.

“I’m not aware of any relatives I might have”

“Wouldn’t you like to find out?”

“I am not sure. There has to be a reason for my parents’ estrangement”

She was more or less prepared for that sort of interrogation. What she wasn’t prepared for was what came next.

“Do you are not planning to go to Lothlorien then?”

“Not any time soon”
“Are you enjoying your stay here then?”

“I’ve never been treated this well in my life” Minai said politely avoiding the direct answer.

It was true that the conditions of her living were far more luxurious than anything she was used to prior. Her food choices were plentiful and readily provided, she didn’t have to ever worry about being hungry. Same with the clothing, her basic necessities in that department were covered and she didn’t have any particular need to chase the fashion trends for those did not really exist here. She was being helped and educated. She even got a fancier room now with a private bathing area no less. The official reason was that she was moved closer to where her teachers and tutors lived, which was on the upper levels, so that she wouldn’t waste too much time running around the halls every day. The not-so-official reason was pretty much the same except for it came about after several weeks of her being constantly late due to being lost. Her navigation skills were that one constant that just refused to improve.

She technically had excellent living conditions and very little to complain about but to say that she enjoyed staying here… It wasn’t that she didn’t enjoy it but if she was being honest she’d rather be in a tiny apartment which she shared with several other people eating nothing but instant-noodles if it meant that she got to go back to the world she knew with her family, friends and even modern conveniences such as cinematography.

“That is nice to hear dear. Does the king treat you nicely as well?” the Duchess smiled with the same expression in her eyes that a fox gets when seeing a particularly plump rabbit.

Minai mentally groaned. Of course. How could she be so utterly naive and not to see the reason for the woman who collected gossip to have this sudden desire for a tea-party with her, a person who was probably the biggest breeding ground for rumours in years if not longer?

“Yes, he is being courteous” she gave a very short answer specifically avoiding any words which could have had any other register than neutrally polite.

“I have to admit it is surprising for him to take such a substantial interest in someone” Miss Prima chimed in a little bit too quickly for it to be simple curiosity.

“I think I might simply be a novelty. I’ve travelled and it seems there have not been many elves raised among humans before” she avoided their gazes concentrating on Buddy the Bullfinch who pretty much buried himself in those cookies while not being paid any attention to.

“I can’t recall our king ever having much interest in matters outside our kingdom” Lady Librarian shook her head.

Et tu Brute.

The other two Minai could understand. The Duchess with her love for such things ingrained into her by an aristocratic status and Miss Prima due to her youth and bubbly nature, but Lady Librarian… The woman seemed so serious, so professional. Minai had faith in her. It was now shattered.

“I’ve heard a guard saw you exiting the king’s private study in the earliest hours of the morning”

“We were simply discussing the prospects of my studies”

“What about the two of you walking down the halls in the evening”

“You all know by now how prone I am to getting lost. He was simply showing me the right way of
getting to my room”

“He often invites you for dinner I’ve heard”

“I reassure you it is a novelty thing. My lack of elvishness is amusing to him”

“You have to admit the fact that he chose to train you personally...”

Minai could only sigh. The absolutely worst thing was, she couldn’t even fully blame them. If she was as much of a bystander as they were she would have the exact same perception. In fact, she would be very hard pressed to find arguments against interpreting the situation in that particular way. But it just wasn’t like that. It wasn’t. Too bad she couldn’t say so and explain everything. There were far too many secrets involved from her said as well as from his.

“She is clearly uncomfortable with your insinuations. Besides you all know that what you are implying is not possible”

Tauriel to the rescue. The redhead, who stayed absolutely quiet during the evening, finally decided to let her voice known.

“Tauriel, dear, what would you know of such matters” the Duchess smiled pleasantly but her tone was pure of snide.

“I know that the king had a wife and elves only bond for love once”

“That is not entirely true” Lady Librarian objected “Do you not remember the tale of king Finwe and his queens Miriel and Indis?”

“I remember the part where Finwe forever lost his chance at being re-embodied because it is forbidden for an elf to have two wives”

“It is so but only because we are to meet our loved ones in the Undying Lands and there are rumours that our queen...”

“We’re not here to discuss rumours”

Poor Tauriel. She definitely didn’t get the memo.

“It wouldn’t be a rumour if Idhren would just tell us. It is a common knowledge that she is aware of the queen’s true fate. She just won’t tell. Just because she was king Oropher’s trusted healer doesn’t give her the right to be this haughty” there were now subtle notes of anger in the Duchess’ voice.

“Maybe she doesn’t tell because it is none of your business?” it was Tauriel’s turn to be snide.

Minai didn’t want this to turn out into a heated argument. Besides, since this particular line of conversation started there was a certain thing that irked her about it.

“Isn’t the solution not to get married then? People can love each other without it” she noted sheepishly.

“It is like that with humans, yes” Miss Prima nodded “But it’s different with the elves. Once a couple decide to link their fea in an act of love it signifies their marriage”

Oh boy.
Minai shifted uncomfortably.

“But that’s because the elves are re-embodied in Valinor, right?” she bit on her lip.

“Yes, why?”

Because reasons, that’s why.

“So uuum… are humans re-embodied as well?”

Minai gulped. She had to get out of this place. Soon. Very soon. She could already hear the sirens of the divine police coming to get her and put her in the spirit-jail until the eternity ends for having an illegal harem. Her partner count was… well, it doesn’t matter what it was but it was more than one.

“No. Mortals are not re-embodied” it was Lady Librarian who answered.

“Oh” what a relief “So if I understand it correctly, an elf can be with multiple mortals during their lifetime, right?” she just had to be sure.

“No elf would ever live through the heartbreak of losing their lover twice” Tauriel said that in a low quiet voice and hurried to leave the room.

Minai had no idea what was it about what she said that upset Tauriel but she still felt the urge to follow the redhead. Plus she didn’t want to stay and be further subjected to further cross-examination by the Mirkwood’s club of amateur detective-gossipers. Unlike Thranduil who knew how to get the information he needed without Minai even realizing what was happening, their methods of interrogation were sub-par and not at all clever. Besides, there was one more thing she didn’t like about the situation.

“Riddle me this. If you truly think that your assumptions are true then how is it wise for you to try and get on my bad side by prying into my personal life. If you don’t believe in all of this however, then you are just deliberately enjoying the process of making people uncomfortable. So which do you lack more, foresight or morals?”

There. She doubted it could stop gossip in any capacity but there was a chance that her little speech would brand her as a disagreeable person to deal with and she won’t be pestered with similar interrogation events for the time being.

By the time Minai exited the room Tauriel was already nowhere to be seen. Great. Not only she didn’t know where to look but even if she did, with her topographic prowess it wouldn’t be much of an advantage. She sighed and felt Buddy landing on her shoulder.

“You wouldn’t know where to find Tauriel, would you?” she asked. Her animal communicating skills were still missing but she took a habit of talking to her feathery companion nonetheless. Even though she didn’t understand him, he seemed to understand her to a degree. Ignoring the little guy felt like giving him an undeserved, or rather not always deserved, silent treatment.

The bird chirped and took of from her shoulder and further down the hall.

“Wait… was this always an option!?” Minai yelled following the bird.

Did she just endure weeks of embarrassment, humiliation and scrutiny she had to endure due to being permanently late to each and every event when she could just voice the location and an avian GPS would have taken her there in no time? Was it always that easy!?
The bird chirped.

Yeah. That was a good point. It really was to her absolute advantage that she unlocked this ability only after her tardiness earned her a fancier new apartment.

She was making her way though through the labyrinth that was the elven kingdom, silently hoping that the bullfinch would be as ready to show her the way back. Tauriel, if she was indeed the one whom they were heading to, was somewhere on the ground level. Minai soon started to recognize the scenery around her. The bullfinch lead her to the shooting-range and landed on one of the targets.

She could have guessed.

And there she was, Tauriel, sitting on a haystack with one of her legs still on the ground and the other pulled close enough so that she could rest her chin on her knee. The girl was sobbing.

The blonde just stood to the side, unsure of whether she should approach or not. She knew Tauriel was aware of her presence, she was still a skilful scout capable of detecting any movement around her even in her most distressed state. A few minutes passed without either of them making any movements until Tauriel nodded her head towards another haystack, inviting Minai to sit.

“I see there is something bothering you. I understand it might not be my place to ask, but if you choose to share I would be glad to listen” Minai said after some more time passed in silence, with her voice warm and compassionate.

Tauriel was the one who had showed her kindness from the very beginning by not leaving her unconscious in a spider infested forest and then stood up for her. Twice. She wanted to return the favour somehow even if all she could do right now was to listen.

“It is not a short story. Nor is it a happy one. I don’t even know where to start from” after the longest moment of silence Tauriel finally answered.

“You can start from the beginning. We are in no hurry. As long as you are comfortable with telling” encouraged the blonde.

Besides, it wasn’t like she had anything else to do with her time anyway. Moreover, she did feel a pang of guilt over causing distress to Tauriel with her not-so-careful remark. Not that she could have foreseen this type of reaction. Still, causing pain to someone who had not wronged her in any way was not something that she would ever enjoy doing.

“The beginning?” Tauriel pondered for a moment “I think it actually starts with the conflict between the dwarves and the elves which in itself started when...”

Minai listened. She learned about the origins of animosity between the two people and that no one was quite sure which side to blame, though neither side would ever admit it. She listened then about the fall of Erebor and the dragon attacking. The elves refusing to come to aid the kingdom in need.

She wanted to blame the elves for doing that. To valiantly proclaim that if she were the one in charge back then, she would, without a trace of hesitation, command her army to rush right into battle, and yet...

And yet she couldn’t.

She knew, that if she was the one in distress she would want nothing more than to receive any help possible in fending off the enemy, rescuing the people, tending to the injured, being provided food
and at least a temporary shelter.

And yet.

Even though she knew which decision was the right one from the point of view of morality, decency and humanity, for the lack of other term in regards of neither of the parties being quite human.

And yet.

If she was, back then, an ordinary elven woman, would she want to lose her loved ones defending the people who, in her most probable point of view, had committed an act of great disrespect, stolen a relic and proceeded with insults and spreading misinformation about her own people? Would she want to lose anyone in a campaign which had no stakes for her people? No interest? No profit? And if she were in charge, would she be able to command her people to die defending pretty much an enemy? Would she be able to look in the eyes of grieving parents and lovers and spout something about morality?

Would she be able to do it? Would she?

With all that was good in her she wanted to say ‘yes’. And with all that was honest she knew the answer to be ‘no’.

Thus, she reserved her judgement, silently grateful that she never was and would never have to be the one making such a decision.

She could even feel a sort of understanding and compassion for the elven king and the difficult decisions he had to make throughout his life because she herself would not be able to bear well in such position.

And then Tauriel proceeded to move forward with her story, to the part which concerned herself, a dwarf named Kili, prince Legolas of the Woodland realm and yes, the king, as it seemed.

Even though Tauriel had admitted to her own missteps in the situation, it was more than clear, in Minai’s opinion, that the redhead’s wrongdoings could be easily written off as youth, loneliness and the overall nature of one’s mind being clouded by first love, especially when taken into account everything she had managed to learn so far about the elven romance. But if there ever was a way to handle the situation in any way more wrong…

He was clearly the older one, he should have known better. Having lost his wife and all.

Although… an at that moment Minai had to bite the inside her lip as hard as she could, not to let anything appear on her face, she could see how anyone would want to pressure Tauriel out of having an affair with a mortal, once again, if subscribing to the elven belief system. The greatest misjudgement on the king’s part was the depth of Tauriel’s feelings towards the dwarf. Perhaps, if at that point it was not yet love, but something like a crush, the fear of being exiled and losing everything she had would outweigh her not yet present feelings for Kili and she would return, rethinking her rash decisions and thus saving herself the heartbreak of losing a lover forever.

She could even see where the king was coming from in his desire to protect his son from unrequited feelings. Once again, knowing what she knew now about the elven love, she could admit why one’s feelings not being mutual would be a borderline tragedy, but...

But that was just it. She was speculating. It was funny though. Had she heard Tauriel’s story a few months prior she would be there among the first to condemn Thranduil for how he handled the
situation. In fact, she was actually intending to do just that one point. And now she was making
excuses for him because... because she knew he was far from the monster she imagined based on
her first impression and hearsays. She then remembered their conversation about stating the intent
and communicating grievances. The purpose of it was so much clearer now.

“It hurts so much knowing that I am never to meet him again, not in Middle Earth, not in Valinor”
Tauriel finished her sorrowful tale, clutching both of her hands to her heart, tears visible in the
corners of the eyes.

Minai moved a little closer to the redhead, allowing Tauriel to bury her face in her shoulder. The
blonde gently put her arms on the other woman’s back. What could she say? ‘He was a mortal
Tauriel, you can still get your chance at happiness’? Even if that was true it wasn’t something that
should be said in such situation. Sometimes there was no use for logic and arguments. Sometimes
one simply needed to have their sorrows heard.

“I know, I know...” Minai kept saying even though that could not be farther from the truth.

The truth was that she didn’t know. She didn’t know loss beyond losing a pet or two. Her family
wasn’t big, she had no aunts or uncles, therefore no cousins either and her parents married quite
young, so all four of her grandparents were alive and well. She was lucky enough to have death
avoid her circle of friends as well. Everyone she cared about were fine. They were fine.

It’s just... there was a high probability she’d never see any of them again.

The blonde felt a familiar lump in her throat, accompanied by wetness in her eyes.

She gritted her teeth.

She couldn’t allow such thoughts. She would get back. She would be fine. Everything would be
fine, she mentally chanted fighting back tears.

“Ah, I apologize for being gloomy” Tauriel attempted a smile, taking Minai’s tears as an act of
elvish empathy, which they were, but only partially.

“Don’t apologize!” the blonde exclaimed. She was already feeling guilty enough for inadvertently
being the reason for Tauriel crying to begin with, she didn’t want to be apologized to for her own
weakness “I am glad you chose to share. I wish I could do something” she sighed. That much was
true. She did feel the need to it make up to Tauriel.

“Well” Tauriel attempted a smile wiping out her tears “Want to make another attempt at archery?”

“Sure” Minai smiled in return “Maybe this time I’ll actually manage to pull that string”

Tauriel laughed and although weak, her laughter was still genuine.

“I’m sure you will, you’ve been training hard” she paused “How is it though?”

“Huh?” Minai wasn’t entirely sure what exactly the question was directed at.

“Lord Thranduil has not been seen in public a lot lately. Is he well?”

“You’re worried about him? Even after...?” she avoided the direct answer.

“I was an orphan. He took me in. Even if the king did not care much about me emotionally, the
opportunities in life he gave me were as close as the ones given to the prince as it could be and...”
Tauriel shook her head “I know the king cares for his son deeply and the falling out they’ve had must not be easy on him. I am not the one to hold a grudge against a person who is already paying for his mistakes”

“That’s wise” was all that Minai could say knowing quite well that her own behaviour in a similar situation would probably be far from that.

“Such wisdom” Tauriel sighed “Can only come from experience. But you did avoid answering my initial question, didn’t you?”

“My relationship with the king is not anything close to a friendship where he would feel compelled to let me in on his well-being” Minai finally managed to come up with something resembling a diplomatic answer without being an outright lie. She tried to stay away from lying as much as she could lately. Call it a wisdom coming from experience as well.

Besides, what she said was not necessary a lie. It was truth. Thranduil really didn’t brief her on the matters of his health and emotional state. She became aware of that by other means. So technically she still didn’t say anything akin to ‘I don’t know’. Not telling the whole truth wasn’t downright lying, right? It was slightly… Well. No. Maybe it wasn’t all that much better, but she wasn’t lying for the sake of lying, she was simply keeping her promise so it had to do.

“People talk” Tauriel noted looking somewhere into the distance.

“I’ve noticed” the blonde nodded.

“Times of uncertainty are upon us. The people need to see a strong brave leader, capable of leading them through it”

Easier said than done, the blonde thought to herself.

“You want me to tell him he needs to get out in public more?” Minai was simply glad that Tauriel wasn’t the type of person with whom formal speak was necessary. She wasn’t the most eloquent in her words today.

The redhead didn’t say anything right away.

“I’m saying that it might be beneficial if such topic naturally came up in your conversation”

“Very wise” admitted Minai remembering the king’s reaction and the mere implication of being told what to do.

“Experience. Years of experience” Tauriel laughed “Now let’s get you a bow”

Despite days growing longer, it was already dark that evening. Then again, darkness rarely affected the efficiency of a simple string pulling.

Chapter End Notes

I feel like many of the creative works in out culture romanticize baing a royalty in ye-olden times. And I mean yeah, fancy dresses, jewelry and servants who do your biddings are nice but what about the aspect where you'd actually have to take on responsibility for the lives of people? I felt like I needed to make her think about that
in some way and also show that she is actually learning/changing her attitude.

It's just one of those 'meh' chapters. I pretty much hate it. But to be fair I think I've hit one of those periods where everything I ever make is the worst thing ever, every 'like' was pressed by accident and every comment was written out of pity so I better just delete everything and then wipe out the hard drive to cleanse it of my pathetic attempts at doing anything. You'd think I'm exaggerating but this is how I've said farewell to a project I've been working on for years, only add to that a couple of hours of shredding my hand-written notes as well. Now if you find one day this story is deleted you'll know what happened, the flimsy construction of toothpicks and chewing-gum I have instead of a normally functioning brain had once again malfunctioned and decided that the list of my regrets in life is not long enough.

But really just ignore my ramblings. The next chapter is actually supposed to be lighthearted fluff. The type I've been promising for a while now. I finally found a way to organically incorporate that in the actual plot.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Well guys, there it is. The lighthearted fluff I promised. This is closer to what I originally planned for this story to be until I've made a turn in a wrong direction and decided I wanted to have something resembling a linear plot. This kind of chapter is rather quick and easy to write (the only thing to be concerned about here is semantics, which admittedly I'm concerned about alot). But it's actually hard to write into the overall story without it being there just to be there. I think I managed to do that okay this time but that's it. I have no idea if that'll happen again.

I was thinking about keeping a schedule, but then realized that it's better for everyone if I just publish those chapters once I feel like I'm done with editing because the longer it sits on my hard-drive the higher is the chance of me deciding that I don't like it any more and should rewrite it for another week or so. By the way, editing is torture. I have to actually read what I wrote and let me tell you, you are so lucky not to see the draft version of this. I somehow manage to skip words, phrases or even sentences or sometimes write completely different word from the one I wanted to use and it takes hours to understand what I actually wanted to say with all of that nonsense. My brain is not the best team player, apparently.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

One would be rather hard-pressed to find a person who doesn’t occasionally enjoy experiencing one of those warm and sunny spring afternoons, free of worldly matters. When soft, but not yet burning, rays of sun lazily soak through the blanket of freshly grown light-green leaves. With butterflies and other tiny critters dancing their merry waltz among the young flowers which already have their buds big and heavy, ready to, at any moment, burst with colour and bless the rest of the world with the gift of their bright splendour. When it seems that, at least for the shortest moment, the time stops its boisterous race and graciously changes it to a hasteless pace, leaving an opportunity to take a brake from usual concerns and take a moment to simply breath and enjoy the gentle breeze softly brush along your features, playfully run through the hair in a brief reminder that our lives can be full of beautiful moments if only we allow ourselves to notice them.

One inhabitant of the elven forest in particular had always been the kind of person who eagerly awaited for such an afternoon to come by so that she could appreciate all of it’s benefits with all the due diligence that such an even requited. Situated currently on a particularly comfortable maple tree branch with her legs crossed and her back rested against the tree trunk she was conveniently shielded from the rest of the world with the star-shaped leaves, absent-mindedly twirling one of them in her left hand and holding a small well-read library book in her right one.

It was a tale of the elven princess Luthien and her mortal lover Beren. A romantic epic about love so grand that no force in this or any other world could oppose it. The story about a maiden who tricked evil and yielded even the will of death itself for neither stood stronger than her pure and unfaltering feeling.

It was simply one of those books. The one you’d either passionately love it for it’s unapologetic over-exaggerated grandeur or hate with passion just as strong and surprisingly for the very same
reasons.

In her current mindset Minai enjoyed the story thoroughly and found it to be the most relatable of the ones she had a chance to read lately. Not the part about the romance though. While being a stern admirer of the genre, Luthien’s story did seem to her to be just a little too much in terms of believability and the blonde woman remain sceptical of the prospects for such strong feelings to exist. The part about the world-transcending singing was the one which drew her attention. Luthien’s song was able to return her lover from the elven underworld. Minai’s singing was what seemed to have her kicked out of her own world.

Fairness, if it ever existed, seemed to have left this world a long time ago. Luthien was given the gift of song by the right of her birth. She had also been given the opportunity to choose whether to remain an eternally young elf or become a human and grow old with Beren. The princess chose the latter.

So it seemed that what happened to Minai was not entirely unique. At least it was apparent that powers capable of performing such things existed and perhaps they were the ones she should seek after she is fully skilled and capable of embarking on her journey to find a way home. Although it seemed that to have even the slightest chance of coming face to face with such powers it would require sailing to Valinor which, according to everything she had learned lately, was a major point of no return and she could only base her judgement of whether or not it was worth it on some old fairy-tales.

A very trustworthy source of information indeed.

The woman sighed and had the sound mirrored with a soft hum from the small red bird sitting on the nearby branch as well. Unlike the others of his kind, Buddy the Bullfinch didn’t depart to the colder parts of the world after the winter had ended. He stayed, assuming the full responsibility of his self-appointed duty to be a proper animal, well, avian, companion.

Minai hopped down from her branch and gave her back and limbs a good stretch with Buddy following her example and stretching his wings while making a few circles around the tree. Without having any goal in particular the woman slowly walked through the inner courtyard observing in silence the elves who had actual tasks to do today. There was an artist painting his giggling muses sitting under a cherry tree in bloom and a harpist giving the scene the much needed musical arrangement. A poet was sitting on the grass not too far away, surrounded by an array of crumpled papers and a look of pure inspiration on her face. A couple of slightly younger elves were hanging birdhouses and having a lively chat with each other. And, oh, what was it that she saw in the distance? Was it a blushing young elf giving a shy push to the swings occupied by the one who held his affections? It appeared so.

Idyllic.

It was rather strange though. She had spent several months here already and it seemed that today was the first time when she was really looking at this place and taking time to really see it. The Mirkwood forest really was going through some very harsh times when she had first arrived and, perhaps, some wounds would never heal completely but it didn’t mean that life had to stop altogether.

Minai stopped walking and slightly tapped the top of her head with the book she had in her hands, chasing the mushy thoughts away. It was the spring. It did a number on the elves and slowly crept upon her as well seeing as she was one of the pointy-eared kind right now as well. Or could it be that she was always this mellow and the atmosphere of calm and relax simply gave a way for her to fully embrace that part of her personality?
“You know Buddy” speaking with the bird had completely lost it’s awkwardness several weeks ago “I feel sorry for those unable to enjoy this warm and wonderful day that the spring gave us”

She was of course referring to Thranduil whom Minai had not seen in over a week. One day she simply woke up at noon and realized that no maids came to inform her that it was time to get up for her morning practice. The same happened the next day as well. And the day after that. From that Minai deducted that the elven lord was simply busy with doing what he actually was supposed to do – ruling the kingdom for if it was something more sinister she would imagine there would be more alarm among the people of Mirkwood.

It would be truly a convenient conversation starter though. Yes, the weather. The most common and unimportant topic which had historically served as nothing else but small talk between people who barely knew each other and had absolutely no desire to change that situation. She could start with the suggestion of enjoying the spring and then gradually move to the overall discussion of the ‘public’ aspect of being a public figure.

Yeah, right.

Based on previous experiences she either had the subtlety level of a boulder rolling down a steep hill or being the king and over the years having to constantly be around people who in many cases had less than sincere intentions might have given Thranduil an unparalleled ability to see people through. Or it could be a combination of both.

So would it even be actually wise to try and dance around the subject at all? But then how should she even bring it up without risking to be subjected to royal anger? Although, would he even be angry this time around? Maybe not. He wasn’t actually an aggressive or a hostile person and their interactions lately were not at all unpleasant. It’s just...

Okay. Imagine yourself and your colleagues badmouthing your management in the break room because they’ve yelled at you for checking up on social media instead of working on a project or something like that. Now imagine said management was standing by the door and heard the entire conversation. You then apologize and they say that they say that they forgive you without even applying any disciplinary measures but the awkwardness between you is now a thousand times stronger than what you felt that one time when you’ve replied ‘Thanks, you too’ to the waiter who wished you to enjoy your meal. Therefore you do everything in your power to not bring any attention to yourself and be a quiet little employee.

Imagined? Good.

Minai felt something like that in regards of bringing up topics which could be potentially painful for Thranduil to discuss. She had already excelled at that so much that even her reflection in the mirror and Buddy the Bullfinch had both looked at her with disappointment when she returned to her room that day. That incident was never brought up afterwards and both parties acted as if it never even happened. But it did happen and therefore the woman felt the need to be particularly mindful of her words.

She sighed.

Could there even be a gentle way of saying ‘I know you are not feeling well and all that stuff but nobody really cares so just put on a smile and act like nothing’s wrong or else’? No, there wasn’t. Besides, he was probably aware of all of this himself.

“What even is my life?” she moaned and raised her arms to the sky demanding answers but, as usual, got none.
She knew that life sometimes took unexpected turns but she held onto the sincere belief that such an expression referred to changing your workplace or starting a relationship with a person who is the opposite of your type or moving abroad. She definitely could never have imagined waking up one day in a medieval society of immortal people and proceeding with getting herself involved in a royal conspiracy.

The woman suddenly heard a rustling sound nearby and turned to the sound as quickly as she could but the only thing she managed to see was the fluffy little tail of a bunny running away after being scared by her small outburst.

And then there was an idea.

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Several more days passed where Minai got to loiter around, read books and overall enjoy the elven lifestyle. Then there came a Friday. Although, whether that particular day was an actual Friday or not the woman could not know nor was it of any relevance. With her thoughts preoccupied with everything that was happening she forgot to keep track of days and ended up not knowing what day of the week or even month would she be in if the calendar was the same here as it was in her world.

Minai did not at all despair over this fact. She rejoiced. To her was presented a unique opportunity, a power which knew no equal, a chance to have authority over the time-flow itself. She took it. She took the reigns and made her decree. She didn’t do it just for herself, no. She did it for everybody. For those from times long gone, for those living in the present and even for those who were not yet born. For everyone who ever suffered and cursed the merciless cruelty of fate. She did it. She wiped out the scourge plaguing the humanity for years to no end.

The dreaded Monday was no more.

To be fair, there was little need for dividing time into weeks or even giving them names. Her schedule was shifting constantly and did not repeat itself in anything remotely similar to a loop. Therefore the need to have week days was rather arbitrary and at any given moment it could be any random day of the week. Still, the world seemed a tiny bit brighter knowing that no matter what day it actually was, it was not a Monday.

There were plenty of Fridays though. Sometimes several in a row. That particular day was a perfectly nice Friday as well. It started quite well with a nice breakfast and an entire lap she managed to do sitting on a horse entirely on her own. The instructor claimed she needed to connect with the horse achieve more significant success. Little did he know that her success was already very much significant for her since her ability to communicate with animals on the same level as the elves, if she even had it, has not made itself known yet. After being done with the horses for the day Minai went on and did some writing exercises, she finally learned not to apply too much pressure to the quills and the rate of them snapping in her fingers had lowered to an almost inexistent level. After having dinner, which turned out to be just as nice as the breakfast, Minai made her way into the inner courtyard and climbed on her favourite maple tree with the intention of immersing herself into the bright and colourful world of fairy-tales.

She did not get to enjoy her book for too long though. Less than half an hour later a guard came searching for her. She knew this one. It was Feren who had a mercifully short name which posed no difficulty to remember. Officially he was indeed a member of the guard. His actual duties were fetching people and delivering an occasional order on behalf of Thranduil. Such was the case this time as well.

“The king wishes to see you” said Feren after Minai had jumped off the tree branch.
By the look of curiosity in the guard’s eyes Minai could easily guess that he was just as unaware of
the purpose of such summon as she was. The woman doubted it was anything to be worried about.
Otherwise Feren would probably look a lot more concerned, the elves were compassionate
creatures after all. She followed the guard and was eventually lead to an already familiar door – the
king’s personal study.

She knocked and after getting the permission to enter it was exactly what she did, immediately
noticing a few key details which shed plenty of light to the mystery of the elven lord’s two weeks
long absence. First there was the not entirely closed wine cabinet, a few empty bottles scattered
here and there and not a single glass in sight.

Classy.

Nevertheless he did not seem to be particularly drunk at the moment. Besides. Not like she had any
proof what so ever that he could even drink anything else. She remembered at some point in her
life hearing a story about a king who was from the very early childhood given small amounts of
different poisons to drink and thus develop an immunity for them. Unfortunately the monarch still
died long before his time after drinking none else than regular clear water. His body was simply
unprepared for that. Maybe this particular individual worked by the same principle.

“How are you going to just stand there?”

Right.

Minai made herself comfortable in the chair, partially mimicking Thranduil’s pose and resting her
chin on one of her arms.

“How may I be helpful to you today Your Lordship?” she initiated the conversation since the king
didn’t seem to be in any hurry to do so himself.

“You can start by explaining what it is that I’m hearing about you insulting your tutors?” he asked
in a bored manner.

“What!?”

“That crotchety old h...” the woman cleared her throat “That is not what...”

“No. That is not the correct answer” he cut her off with voice not more emotional than before.

“I’m sorry?” Minai blinked, slightly confused.

“When presented with such accusations, especially in a situation where it is just your word against
someone else’s, it is not wise to immediately take a defensive position. To the third party that is
almost a direct admission of guilt” the king explained slowly.

“Oh. What would be a correct way of reacting then?”

“The proper reaction would be asking to clarify the specifics. The specific time-frame of the
accusation and the source. Only after receiving the details should you give any indication of
knowing what exact occurrence is being referred to, mainly that, if it indeed happened, you had an
interaction with that particular individual on that particular date and only then your version of the
event and what transpired”

“Makes sense”
"Would you care to share your version of events then?"

"Well…"

She weighted her options.

‘They were asking me questions I didn’t like’ sounded petty and too much like an excuse. Then again, that was exactly what it was. An excuse. To not be an excuse but a reason it would have to be an extremely good one considering that the other women were by default, since she had pretty much none herself, of a higher social status and background than her. The world was not a fair place and even if morality dictated otherwise, the centuries old social norms and those who lived by them were biased with whom they chose to support. She used to be more mindful of that, but, and she wholeheartedly hated to admit it, spending plenty of time and having a certain degree of familiarity with the king did give her a bit more feeling of self-importance than she was allowed to have in her position.

‘They were making bets on how dead your wife is’ was even worse. Suppose she said that. Suppose even that would make Thranduil take her side in this conflict. Then what? Whom would it look good for? For her? For using her acquaintance with the king to retaliate on anyone who dared say a single word she did not want to hear? For the Dutchess’ innocent children who would have to live with the consequences their mother’s tiny mistake? For the king who punished the poor war widow based on an accusation from a woman who literally came from nowhere a few months ago?

“I didn’t act in a suitable manner” she finally said.

“Yes, that is the type of answer you should give in such situations” Thranduil nodded “I hope that in the future you’ll find a better use for your time than arguing with old hags”

Minai couldn’t help but laugh. It was rather clear from the tone of his voice that the king was not particularly fond of that woman. Perhaps that was not the first petty complaint she tried to file directly to him while using her status as a means of doing so. That last remark also clearly indicated that she was far from being reprimanded which was most definitely a good thing but it left quite a room for speculating about her purpose for being here today then.

“I thoroughly apologize for unleashing the curse of the nag upon you Your Lordship” she made an attempt at a solemn voice.

“Enlighten me then, do you think I should move your schedule around to start an hour earlier now that there is a lot more daylight?”

The worst thing was that with the tone of his voice being unemotional and bored most of the time she had no way of telling whether he was teasing her or not.

“I’ll re-evaluate my behaviour” she gave him the most charming smile.

“How are your studies going?”

“Not too bad” Minai quickly gave a short run down on her current skill level.

She could now read and somewhat write in the elvish language, read relatively basic texts and manage a simple small talk in the language of humans, since she didn’t have the luxury of it being translated for her as well, the writing she had not yet mastered at all. She would be able to properly hold herself during an official dinner or dance at a celebration, she did no longer fall from a horse moving with a moderate speed, and she knew the proper posture and hand placement when holding a bow. She was far from hitting the target but could shoot an arrow nonetheless. Maybe it wasn’t
much for someone else, but considering the short time-frame she was given the woman was quietly proud with her achievements.

Thranduil seemed fairly content with what he heard as well although Minai was still left wondering about the reason.

“It seems you have quite the amount of free time on your hands now”

“I’ve been studying the elven culture and society via the method of immersion”

“Feel free to share your findings”

Small talk? Did he really want to hear her opinion on the elven way of life or was he more interested in the current state of things? She assumed the latter but due to the manner the question was asked in she decided not to be too obvious in her answer as well.

“I must say I was surprised to discover how much the elves are in tune with nature. It was rather quiet during the winter but now it seems that everything around is coming to life. I used to barely meet anyone in the halls and sometimes wandered for hours because there was no one to ask for directions but now it seems that there are people everywhere. Everyone’s more calm and relaxed now. It is nice. It kind of reminded me that amidst everything it is important to sometimes just temporarily leave all worries behind and enjoy yourself”

Wow. Who knew that ‘I just remembered that I’m lazy and can’t be bothered’ could be said in such a poetic and eloquent way? She managed though. She managed.

While she spoke she carefully observed the king’s reaction. He didn’t really change his seemingly bored position, the changes were rather subtle and she would likely have missed them if she was not looking on purpose. A slight tilt of head, a small raise of eyebrows and even eyelids, the line of his mouth shifting just a little. He was listening to her and doing so rather attentively.

Minai smiled. It seems that she guessed correctly and gave him exactly the answer he needed from her.

“You did just that I would assume?”

“You could say so, yes. I think I found a new appreciation for tree branches” that much was true, she couldn’t even remember a single instance of trying to climb a tree before coming to Mirkwood “Although I think I’ve managed to scare off a bunny”

“Rabbits and hares are skittish creatures”

“That they are but I don’t think I’ve noticed animals being wary of any other elf” and it kind of hurt. A little. Okay. A lot. It hurt her self esteem a lot to be the only person whom the animals avoided.

Buddy the Bullfinch was an exception. Only that he was not. The bird most probably had zero intent of approaching her originally. He brushed his wings on her cheek by accident and caused her plenty of problems by doing so. Therefore his intentions could not be counted as genuine. He didn’t approach her to be her companion, really. He was serving his time.

“Animals don’t have an ability to judge someone’s personality. Their behaviour is based on intent, and that they can sense from an elf’s fea which in your case can not happen”

The woman sighed. Soulless. Even the animals knew that.
“It doesn’t mean that you don’t have fea, it is likely to have been shielded from being viewed by someone” Thranduil must have heard her sighing.

Minai didn’t really expect him to say anything in regards to that but she appreciated him doing so nonetheless.

“Say...” she took in a deep breath “You are the king of this entire forest, right? Animals live in the forest, so wouldn’t that make them in a way your subjects as well? And as I’ve seen you can communicate with them”

“You are correct” he replied with a slightly confused expression on his face.

“So I’ve been thinking. Could you maybe just… tell the animals to come to me? For a short while? At least a bunny or two? Please?” she looked at him pleadingly, just to be extra sure.

Some people had the shiny and the sparkly as their weaknesses. She had the cute and the fluffy.

He didn’t reply at first and then she heard him… laughing.

Minai could only stare, mesmerized. Such an open and sincere expression of joy was so far away from the set of reactions she assumed him capable of having that she would never have expected this to ever be possible. And yet it was. The woman smiled, genuinely happy that she managed to bring him this moment, even if she didn’t know how.

“Almost word for word. My son had once asked me to get him a couple of bunnies because he needed guards for his pillow fort” he said with a far away look of longing on his face.

How strange. She already knew about his family from gossip and learned about prince Legolas from speaking with Tauriel and yet, she suddenly realized, that was the first time he ever brought this subject up with her himself.

“Did you get him the bunnies?”

“I did. Only they took their newly appointed guard responsibilities far too seriously and never left his side afterwards. Legolas was beyond happy at that. The maids, however, not so much. I can still remember their glances at those animals”

“I think my parents would relate to that. They’ve made the mistake of getting me a bunny as well but their regret must have been pretty strong because I’ve never been able to convince them to get me another pet”

They sat there for a while in a comfortable silence, each reminiscing about the happier times they’ve had with their families.

“I suppose being around animals might help you to restore your connection to nature”

Minai blinked in disbelief. Her silly little plan just worked.

Easy!

Too easy.

Suspiciously too easy.

But hey, who was she to question her own success like that.
People. Were. Looking.

They were not staring, no. They would not dare to stare openly. But they were looking. Minai could almost physically feel each pair of eyes directed towards her. Their curious glances crawling up her spine. They thought they were subtle. They weren’t. By far they weren’t. And she had to just act as if she didn’t notice any of it. Back straight, eyes forward. She was somewhat used to the attention being there when she was in Thranduil’s company but somehow she forgot to take into account the increased number of people in the halls and in the yard. It was a bit overwhelming yet she knew that her only option was to ignore, not only because that was pretty much the only correct way of how to carry yourself in such a situation but also because she didn’t want him to think that being in his presence made her uncomfortable.

Therefore she continued to walk beside him, paying very little attention to the people around and at the back of her mind being grateful that the elves didn’t have cameras or social media. Otherwise she’d find her face plastered on countless articles, one more ludicrous than the other, and would potentially have to cover her face for several weeks when going outside.

“You know, I’ve always wondered about the purpose of these boulders” she broke the silence.

“Which ones?” he stopped walking, correctly understanding her warning.

“The ones that are all around the yard. Like this one” she tapped a particularly large rock which reached up to her knee with the tip of her shoe “I saw plenty of them in the parks where I am from as well. Did they simply remain here after the castle was built or someone brought them specifically for decorative purposes?”

She once tried finding an explanation regarding this issue in the world wide web. The one she stumbled upon involved time travelling aliens or something of a similar nature and although the presence of an immortal pointy-eared king beside her made that explanation seem agonizingly less implausible than it has ever been before she still made an attempt to uncover a version of events she would have far less difficulties believing.

“They are what’s left from when the castle was built but were specifically brought in the yard as decorations after some artists insisted they needed those for composition”

Minai nodded. She would also prefer the subject of her paintings to sit on a boulder instead of an ornate bench that was infinitely harder to portray.

She continued to lead him to the particular pine tree where she saw the bunny. The animal must have had a nest somewhere around the area since she continued to notice it being there a few times after the first sighting.

“There” she finally spotted the tree she needed “The bunny was underneath that pine tree on the right, the one right in front of us with the lowest hanging branches” she continued to point at the tree, mostly to appease the people who still continued to throw occasional glances in her general direction.

Thranduil pressed a finger to his lips, signifying that the following procedure would require a certain amount of silence. He then kneeled in front of the pine tree and extended one of his arms. It didn’t take too long before there was some movement deep inside the tree branches. Slight at first, easily mistaken for being a result of a gush of wind but more confident with each passing moment. First there was a roundly shaped snout with long white whiskers sniffing the air, then a long eared
head followed accompanied by the fluffy body covered greyish red fur with a pattern that just had to spell ‘pet me’ in at least one of the existing languages, of that Minai was absolutely sure.

There was no need in telling her to be quiet, the woman stood completely still, trying to make her breathing as silent as possible. She watched the animal shyly approach Thranduil’s hand, sniffing the air for any signs of danger. Minai then shifted her eyes towards the king.

She skipped a breath.

It was as if she was looking at a completely different person. How did the saying go? To learn the person’s true nature observe how they treat those who do not bring them any benefits? Minai couldn’t recall the exact wording, it was only the general thought of it that she remembered. And yet that was exactly the expression which resurfaced in her mind when she saw how benign and gentle was Thranduil’s face and how careful were his movements when he picked up the small animal from the ground. The woman couldn’t help but to smile. She knew she got to witness something which very few others were allowed to see, in a very long time at least. It was really unfortunate though, wasn’t it? She wouldn’t mind seeing him like that more often, calm, relaxed and with such a kind expression on his face. Without even realizing it, she took an instinctive step towards the king.

Minai reached out her hand and felt her fingers touch the soft warm fur of the rabbit after she gave the animal plenty of time to sniff her arm and deem it not to be dangerous, she tenderly traced the line of the animal’s ears and giving them a light scratch. She closed her eyes and let out a soft sigh remembering the carefree times of her childhood. What wouldn’t she give to go back there for just a day, maybe even an hour. A mere hour.

“Thank you” she said not quite knowing what exactly was her gratitude directed towards, having a chance to pet the bunny or the memories that were brought back. Maybe both.

“They will be less wary when you approach them from now on” Thranduil ran his hand through the animal’s fur and released it back to it’s natural habitat.

The woman glanced at the elf but turned away rather quickly. She suddenly realized that similar to what she was doing before, he was studying her behaviour as well. The knowledge of being observed this closely when she was blissfully cooing at the bunny, well, it did make her blush and she just couldn’t face him like that. There was just something in his smile, that she couldn’t quite put the name on. He too witnessed the version of her that she didn’t demonstrate to the world all that often.

“I think that was the first time I ever saw a wild animal this close. Or any animal that is not a pet probably” Minai frowned trying to remember any such instances. There weren’t many strays where she lived and her parents never really took her to a farm with a petting zoo or anything like that. They were more of a museums and amusement parks type of people when it came to leisure activities with their child.

“Your society only keeps animals as pets?” genuine surprise was easily read on his face.

“No. It’s just that I lived in a city centre which comprised of living areas and market places” or, in other words, houses, apartments and malls “There was some manufacturing on the outskirts” more like warehouses though and even then she only saw them from a car window when passing by “Farms were located closer to fields which were outside the city limits, I’ve never really been there” Minai explained the situation to the best of her ability considering the need to keep certain facts a secret.
“Do you not need horses or other mounts for transportation?”

Ah.

What could she even answer to that? Even if one day she would decide to reveal the complete truth about her origins how would she explain… everything? How would she explain cars and engines? Her understanding of how they worked was rather approximate and even then it involved far too many words that simply didn’t exist in any of the local languages. She wouldn’t be able to properly explain planes, computers, even her phone that did come with her to this strange world, not to mention the internet, unless she wanted to put a huge stain on her entire civilization by proudly proclaiming ‘Yes we do have the ability to access pretty much the entirety of our knowledge we’ve accumulated as a civilization at almost any moment in time and we use this divine ability to watch cats being clumsy’. And even ‘watching cats being clumsy’ was probably far too generous of a statement because, and lets be real, everybody knew it, the most sought after content on the world wide was… well, you know what it was. There was no way she could boast about that, especially considering that she wasn’t even judging the society for what it was in that regard because she was exactly like that herself. The part about watching cats that is. And then there were the divorce lawyers. She couldn’t imagine a more soul-crushing concept for the elves who viewed love and marriage as a sacred bond created to last for an eternity.

Anyway.

She couldn’t tell the truth. But she couldn’t lie anymore either. Especially to him.

“It’s… I don’t think I can answer that. It’s not because it is a dangerous secret and not because I don’t want to tell you personally, but...” she struggled to pick out the correct words.

“It is not something you are ready to tell yet?” the king suggested.

“I… yes. Something like that”

“Then don’t feel obliged to answer”

During the conversation they’ve moved to an area of the garden which was a little more secluded and free from the people’s gazes. Although, Minai had to admit, she got used to it rather quickly and it didn’t bother her as much as she imagined it would. She simply couldn’t sense anything but sincere curiosity in those glances. There weren’t really any malice or suspicion. Maybe Thranduil was right and the elves wouldn’t mind a random stranger being around their king all that much as long as nothing bad came from it.

She made herself comfortable sitting on a boulder underneath a tree which she didn’t know the name of with the king leaning against the same tree right beside her.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but I do have a feeling that flower-crowns should be popular among your people” the woman mused.

“You guess is correct. There are many who wear them, especially in the summer when the flowers are in full bloom”

“Oh joy” Minai said in a mockingly excited tone “What a time to be a person who doesn’t know how to make one”

“Surely you jest” he raised his eyebrows in disbelief.

“Oh, I wish. Friendship bracelets I can more or less manage, but the skill of making flower-crowns
I have not mastered” the woman slowly shook her head remembering her abysmal attempts to make anything but a stain on her clothes with the flowers.

“Then be sure to mention that aloud at the dinner table and I guarantee you will not be allowed to leave until you not only know all the techniques but are well-versed in the history of the craft as well”

“Thank you for the warning. I am afraid I’m running out of space to store all the knew knowledge that was bestowed upon me in the past months and my head will simply explode if I try to stuff it with more”

“That would be most unfortunate” he smiled with a somewhat pensive look on his face.

Nothing was said for a while. Minai simply observed the king who seemed to be deep in thought now. She suddenly remembered that she still had not figured out what was his purpose for seeking her today.

She heard the wings fluttering and on the nearest branch landed none other than Buddy, of the bullfinch variety. Where has he even been and when exactly had he gone missing? She tried to but couldn’t pinpoint the exact moment. Not that it was that much of an unusual occurrence, he did go on his private adventures which didn’t involve her here and there but that tended to happen mostly when she slept or was taking a bath, or any other activity when his presence was not welcomed, not during the daylight and definitely not when he was supposed to be doing that one thing which was the one and only reason for why she was even keeping him around to begin with – being a substitute for her, hopefully just temporarily, missing fea.

She side-eyed the bird who didn’t even bother to acknowledge that he was being glared at and completely ignored the angry ‘I’ll talk to you later young man’ message he was being sent.

Zero discipline.

That just had to be some kind of bullfinch thing. Just like dogs were bred to be loyal and to protect, the bullfinches must have hailed from a long line of last cookie eaters, tunic ruiners and responsibility avoiders. Certainly being around a person who could easily go drinking for several weeks in a row without any notice and another person who used that as a chance to loiter around and sleep all day long had nothing to do with it.

Nothing.

Nothing at all.

“Do you miss being around humans?” Thranduil’s voice broke the silence.

Minai almost fell off her rock. The question took her completely by surprise.

“Just humans? In general?” she decided to specify before answering.

“In general, yes”

It was a very interesting question indeed, one that couldn’t be answered right away if she hadn’t given it plenty of thought already. Of course if she had to answer what she missed the most she would, without any hesitation, say it was her family and friends. Then there would be such sentimental things as her movie collection, her favourite cafe and the park she visited to read a book on a sunny Sunday. In the list of things she missed there would also be modern conveniences, such as showers, readily accessible at any moment, and various means of transportation, and yes,
including the public transportation. The ability to travel without the risk of being eaten by a giant spider or captured by an orc would have taken a significant position on that list as well. But when it came to humans in general?

“I think I do”

Being around elves was different. She couldn’t say it was better but neither could she say that it was in any way worse. It simply wasn’t what she was used to. She missed being around what she was used to. And that included humans. Yes, in general.

“Would you then accompany me on a diplomatic mission to Dale?”

Minai blinked. Yeah. Figures. Everything made so much more sense now. There she was, silly and naive, starting to think that she was so clever and managed to outsmart him into going outside with her today when all of this time it was actually him who wanted to assess how she carried herself and how well of a companion she would be in public situation. She just happened to play into the narrative like that.

Oh well.

Not that she was particularly shocked by this revelation.

In the grand scheme of things, it was really of no matter compared to the opportunity to finally see the world outside the palace walls. Thus, trying to hide excitement but without the slightest hint of hesitation she replied:

“It would be an honour”

Chapter End Notes

Starting the next arc and that means new locations, characters and me pretending that I'm smart enough (spoiler alert: I'm not) to write about socioeconomical impact of an armed conflict on various settlements in a high fantasy context. In other words you'll see what I've done to Dale an it's inhabitants.

I actually found out that some people upload their stories on different platforms and promote them on social media. And I'm here just... nah. I don't want to chase attention. If I simply post my story then whatever feedback I get I'm happy with. But if I try and make a conscious effort of attaining more likes/comments then that would mean that I care about the amount I get. And if I care about the amount then it means I have expectations about it. If I don't get the amount that I expect then I'll feel like I failed and why would I want that? The only way not to fail is not to try. A horrible motto to live by, honestly, it gets you nowhere, but it's too late for me to change so there.
Journey to Dale

Sometimes I just wonder if this story gives anyone a tonal whiplash. It's all over the place. In some chapters I'm going for deep character drama and serious issues regarding governing of a kingdom and in another chapter I go for a feud with a bird. Lately I've been having doubts whether those moods/tones should even be combined. Like... does the story reads cohesive to you? Would you prefer if I stuck more towards one rather than the other? Which one I'm better at? Honestly, the chapters seem okay to me when I write them and edit them but then I upload it and suddenly it's the worst thing ever. But not the 'terrible' kind of worst, just kind of bland and uninspired and I can't figure out the reason. Maybe it is the tonal shifts that suck, maybe it's just the author.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Thranduil never said it aloud but he never had any need to. Minai knew exactly why he decided to take her with him on that trip and it was neither her company, as a person, nor the need for her to learn the geography and learn about the other habitable areas surrounding the elven kingdom. The latter was sort of given as an official reason for her being there. After all, according to her ‘legend’ she arrived to Mirkwood to study the elven culture and by that extent the way the elves handled the relationships with other settlements was an important part of the overall picture.

She of course tried to, inconspicuously, ask the king about the entire situation and how come no one else beside her had figured anything out by now since the elves were very curious and attentive people who were rather far from being oblivious. ‘It is temporary’ was the only answer he gave her and not much beyond that, evidently not being too fond of discussing this topic. Of course Minai wanted to know more about it, especially how long the temporary was supposed to be since, apparently, she was now involved in this. Ultimately she decided not to pry even though he didn’t directly forbid her from asking. Thranduil accepted her not wanting to talk about her origins quite yet and it was only a decent thing to do, to show him the same courtesy.

Therefore, Minai simply decided to carry on with this new role of hers. If the king decided to help her with integrating into this world even though she had gave him a lot of reasons not to so, she was going to take the opportunity to return the favour.

With that she had absolutely no problem.

Really.

That wasn’t the issue here.

What was the issue though was with how the things were at this particular moment, she had very little chances of surviving the ordeal with her blood pressure high up in the sky, her face redder than Buddy’s feathered chest and her life expectancy melting by the second with the approaching heatstroke.

Minai gritted her teeth and concentrated on keeping her breathing silent and looking directly on the road before her and nowhere else. Paying zero attention to anything but the road. The road and the
forest around it. The horse, for example, was a really beautiful one. It was white, with its flanks grey and decorated with dalmatian-like spots, with tufts of hair on its strong legs and its long and thick mane intricately braided and decorated with leaf-shaped silver clasp-pins. She listened to the sound of hooves rhythmically hitting the ground underneath them and observed small rocks scatter around in all the different directions, creating clouds of dust in the process. She frowned at the low hanging tree branches which had all the potential of hitting a person right in their face if they weren’t too careful. She nodded to the bullfinch who was sitting comfortably between the mount’s ears and responded with a chirp of acknowledgement at her gesture. She listened to the sound of the guards’ horses somewhere behind, they held their distance.

Yes.

This is what mattered.

This was all that existed for her in that moment.

Nothing else was there.

Nothing.

Not...

“Is something the matter? You are unusually tense” Thranduil’s voice came from right behind her.

Oh yes. They had to share the same horse. ‘Because she wasn’t experienced enough to handle the road by herself” was what he said to the guards accompanying them. And it, of course, among the other reasons, was also true. But.

But.

Have you ever tried keeping your cool when being in such an extremely close proximity from someone who was to the highest degree, how to better put it, visually appealing to you.

It wasn’t easy! It wasn’t easy at all.

“I’m still a little nervous to ride a horse to such a long distance” Minai answered, somehow managing to control her voice almost perfectly.

Almost.

Curse the elves and their enhanced hearing.

“Do not worry my dear, this particular horse is very well trained and has a very calm temper” he leaned closer and whispered into her ear.

First, you might wonder where did ‘my dear’ come from. Well. The same place where her ‘your lordship’ originated, apparently. Yes. She asked. Besides, he pronounced it in the exact same manner and with the equal amount of reverence and sincerity. Which was none.

Second, him whispering to her like that sent a wave of shivers down the woman’s spine and made her shoulders twitch ever so slightly. Not slightly enough for him not to notice though.

“Come now, it can not be that bad, can it?”

Just the way that he said it. The most subtle implications in his voice. It was enough for Minai to start to suspect that the elf wasn’t exactly referring to her made up horse problem. But how could
that be? He was an elf and from what she had learned, the elves were supposed to be pure and innocent creatures therefore how would he even know.

“Your hair brushed down my neck. I would have this reaction no matter which object did it” she stated dryly.

“I do apologize. Let me amend that” he tilted his head in the other direction, making his hair fall on the other side of her neck “Is that better?”

That’s it.

How could she forget.

It were the other elves who were pure and innocent.

The only thing pure about this one was his evil.

“A lot better Your Lordship” Minai managed a tight lipped smile “I must say though, your forest is truly magnificent, especially the pine trees with their prickly branches. But I’ve noticed that they are hanging a little bit too close to the road. In my opinion, at least, if someone is not careful enough they could get a face full of needles” she said in the most innocent of voices.

Or if someone else forgot to warn the person in question about the branches. It could happen, there were a lot of things to get distracted by after all.

Even though the escort was at a far enough distance to be outside the hearing range, she whispered her words quietly so that only he could hear them and, hopefully, take the unspoken hint.

“I am grateful for the warning, it is indeed better to take precautions” with those words he leaned forward and rested his head against hers.

Yes, of course, that way if there really was a branch which needed to be avoided he would immediately know it when she moved her head to avert the collusion. It was very logical, if you’d think about it, yes.

But.

Really!?

Evil elf.

Evil evil elf.

The worst thing though?

She didn’t hate it. At all. The opposite, in fact, was true. She enjoyed that, even though never, not in a million years, not even under torture, would she ever confess it to him.

Never.

The woman sighed, but it wasn’t the sight of annoyance or anger.

“Enjoying yourself?” she asked after he stayed in that position and didn’t move for quite some time.

“Would you prefer if I kept distance?” came the immediate reply.
She could easily hear it in his voice that the words were sincere.

Come to think of it, wasn’t she the one who initiated the physical contact and loosened the boundaries back then? It wasn’t really that unnatural for him to assume than she wouldn’t be against something similar, after all, he wasn’t doing anything outside of what she already showed to be okay with. He wasn’t wrong. It actually felt kind of nice to have the warmth of another living being by her side, she missed having that. She only spent several months apart from people who could give her the affection she desired and it already made her feel very much out of the norm. And she, to the best of her knowledge, wasn’t even really an elf. The pointy eared were, from what she had observed so far, much more social than she ever was in her entire life and, she was willing to bet, didn’t fare too well without any physical contact either.

Therefore she was completely okay with him not keeping that much of a distance in that regard and wasn’t nearly spiteful enough to deny him that just to retaliate for the teasing which took place earlier.

“I appreciate you asking. I don’t mind it” she gave her answer in a warm tone but in a more regular voice she added “But I am starting to think that I’m not being paid nearly enough to be teased like that”

What? That was the absolute truth. She wasn’t being paid enough. She wasn’t being paid at all.

“Oh? What kind of currency would you prefer? Gold, jewellery, favours?” he clearly made a choice to carry on with the teasing.

Well then.

“Would you give me favours?” her curiosity was peaked.

“Depends on what you’d ask for”

Not that she would ask anything for herself. It would feel a little too much like using her position to get special treatment. She wouldn’t be really against the special treatment if it was given to her. But asking for it? Not really. There was, however, a certain something that she wanted to bring up but didn’t know how to approach the subject. Now was probably as good of an opportunity as any she would ever get.

“Could you at least consider pardoning Tauriel? It is really hard on her, not to be able to carry out her duties and not go on the scouting missions”

It wasn’t really that difficult for Minai to notice during the time she spent following the redhead around the palace. The way Tauriel looked at other scouts, the way she tried to find out each and every detail about their quests, the way she followed them with her gaze when they left. How visibly uncomfortable she was anywhere but the shooting range. Minai would have to be completely oblivious not to pick up on all of that and she really wanted to repay Tauriel for teaching her archery and standing up for her, which had occurred more than once already.

Thranduil sighed, no doubt thinking about what transpired between him and his former scout. For a few moments he remained completely quiet and still.

“I’ll see what can be done” he finally replied.

“Thank you” she expressed her gratitude after hearing the sincerity in his voice.

“Can I assume that it mean you are giving me the permission to continue with the teasing?”
The sigh was definitely an angry one this time.

Still, Minai just had to wonder, when and how the cold an unapproachable elven lord started to act the way he did right now. She thought that shift to be strange at first, but if she tried looking at a broader picture, then, perhaps, she could make some guesses.

First, she had to admit, whatever he did, she pretty much started it herself first. Granted, her behaviour was the subconscious result of not fully recognizing him as the authority figure that he was for his own people due to her upbringing and the still lingering sensation of the overall unreality of the situation. In other words, her modern world mindset did make her out to be a little bit too informal and maybe even to a certain degree disrespectful. Which, if she were to meet him a couple of months earlier than she did, would probably earn her an eternity in the dungeons, in a cell right beside the one of that ugly spider.

That wasn’t what happened, because she just happened to barge in when he was pretty much completely alone and really down on his luck, which was somewhat a direct result of his previous behaviour. It was rather clear that this lesson was very costly for him and it was, perhaps, why he wanted to make a change of his attitude.

Why was she the one whom he had approached though? As much as it would stroke her ego to think that she was such a special person, she had to begrudgingly admit that she simply happened to be there. She wasn’t that special herself, she was just a foreigner without much knowledge of who he was and without having much of the previous experiences with him. By this extent she would be the one with the least predisposition and the least reason to put on an act of politeness out of fear. This made even more sense when she remembered how upset he was when she brought up difference in their status and all of what pertained to it.

This still left a question or two to be answered. Was his behaviour towards her sincere or was he just in some way following her lead with how he acted? Was the personality she was witnessing right now a genuine one or an act put on by a person who simply tried to, at least partially, copy her model of behaviour because he spent far too many years consciously detaching himself from the rest of the society and therefore ended up not knowing how to properly act in an informal situation?

On the other hand, there was, perhaps, a much better question to be asked. Did it matter? Not even in a grand scheme of things or any similar type of context. Did it matter to her, personally? Minai tried, but she couldn’t come up with a single tiniest reason of why should she be concerned with how much of Thranduil’s true personality she was really seeing as long as he treated her in a relatively courtly manner. Moreover, if she did start to concern herself with such things it would eventually turn up to be rather detrimental when it would be time for her to finally leave.

It was better for all the parties involved if she kept distance from everyone around here. Emotional distance, at least.

Suddenly, her eyes spotted a dash of white silver among the darkness of the trees.

“Hey, it’s that deer again!” the woman exclaimed.

“A deer?” he sounded slightly confused.

“The one I followed when I got here. It was on the left but it slipped by so fast that I can’t even be sure that what I saw was the deer and not a flicker of sunlight” Minai explained “Is it a regular species that lives in your forest?”
She looked up only to see the king’s head turned in the direction that she named, searching for the deer, or it’s fea, more likely.

“Yes, they do live in the forest but the species is not common anymore. They’ve become quite rare, especially in the latest years. You are either incredibly lucky to see one each time you enter the forest or you have one of them following you”

“Why would a deer ever follow me?”

“That, my dear, I do not know”

Fair enough, she thought and decided to change the subject.

“You never really told me about the city we are visiting” she mentioned. Although it took more than a week between the moment she learned about the trip and the actual departure not much was revealed to her and she was left wondering.

“The kingdom of Dale belongs to the race of men and is located underneath the Lonely Mountain and the dwarven kingdom of Erebor. Several decades ago both were devastated by Smaug the great fire drake of the North. The people of Dale migrated to the town on the lake and only recently returned back to their kingdom after the Lake Town was destroyed. That much you should be aware of if you’ve been paying any attention to your studies”

Not really. This particular event was not yet entered into the history books and thus was not discussed during the lessons. The elves gave pretty much scattered accounts, concerned more with the parts which involved them specifically, which was understandable but skipped a few important details. Tauriel was even less of a reliable narrator since her point of view was very narrow and clouded with emotions.

Otherwise, she knew about the names of these neighbouring kingdoms, she knew about the recent battle and that a dragon was somehow involved. Most of the information she got one way or another told the story of the elves and the dwarves, humans were skipped for the most part by pretty much everyone. To Minai, who stubbornly continued to view herself as nothing less than a temporarily pointy eared human, that almost felt as an insult to her pride.

“What is the goal of our visit?” she made the decision not to argue about the elven tendency to skip over the importance of humans in the overall narrative. Starting up an argument with someone you shared a car with was pretty much a sign-up for a voluntary torture, she had no desire to do any practical research on how much worse in comparison would it be to quarrel with someone you had to share a horse with.

“What would be your opinion on that?” Thranduil answered with a question.

Minai frowned. Did the king want to evaluate her cognitive performance or her socio-political prowess? Wait. Didn’t he think that she was some kind of a scholar ambassador or something like that? That was probably the case. In a momentary impulse to boast about her skills she might have told one or two things which looked good on paper but didn’t hold up when asked for a demonstration.

It was like lying in your resume and still getting the job. Sounds amazing right up until the point when you actually have to perform what is required and then a you can kiss goodbye to your reputation and credibility because you have zero knowledge of what to do.

She really should have chosen being a mine-worker as her career path. No, really. That would be a
world wide sensation. A historical uproar when she would single-handedly make way to the centre of the earth itself. After all, was there ever another person who had such an unparalleled raw talent for digging holes and throwing herself right into them?

“Well...” she stretched the word trying to make an impression that she was thinking about how to answer the question when in reality she was simply stalling for time “I would assume it would not be for any kind of celebration. If people only returned to Dale a few months ago there wouldn’t be much time or resources for that. The same can probably be said about trade. They wouldn’t have anything to offer quite yet. Then, the way I see it, they are asking you for a loan, either monetary or resources. I’m leaning towards monetary since we are not bringing that much stuff with us and I suppose you are willing to at least negotiate, otherwise why even travel that far to say a ‘no’ to their request” Minai settled for thinking her response aloud, that way, even if she arrived at a wrong conclusion, she would at least demonstrate how and why she did that instead of simply saying the wrong thing.

“That is correct. Now, what do you think they intend to do with the gold, if they get it?” he asked the next question.

Well, that was a bit too much already. She had a peace treaty with her brain. It had agreed to just accept this entire situation and cope with it in the least destructive way possible while she promised not to unnecessarily overwork her thinking centre with anything harder than a life long debate of what to eat for breakfast. Getting into serious discussions where she actually think was definitely a huge breach in the agreement. On the other hand, this was clearly a case which fell under the clause that easily overrode the aforementioned treaty and went under the name of ‘Death before revealing that we are not as smart as we want to appear’. Therefore she once again had to think.

“My first guess would be that they need to repair their economy. However if I understand it correctly, Dale was pretty much turned into ruins first by the dragon and then by the army of orcs. So…” Minai made a pause, collecting her thoughts “… I would say that their first priority should be properly rebuilding the living areas so that the people would have shelter, which is what they should have been doing for the past several months. The next step then would be establishing a steady production of trade-able goods, but, accounting for several decades of not being used and the natural tendency for some materials to wither with time, they might not have the necessary tools for that. They do need the tools and the materials and while I think they could get rocks for their homes directly from the mountain and the wood from the nearby trees, it would be a little more difficult to attain more precise tools, utensils and other equipment which requires metal and more intricate skills to produce” it suddenly clicked “The dwarves are smiths, right? They need the money to trade with the dwarves?”

“That they do. What would be your reasoning for accepting and denying their request?”

“Accepting and denying?”

“For each one, yes”

At this point, Minai was somehow starting to get invested in the discussion. It did appear to be an interesting and even engaging way of passing time on the road.

“As I’ve already mentioned, I think you are leaning more towards a ‘yes’, so I’ll state the reasons for denial first. This is obvious in my opinion. It is rather unlikely that they would be able to repay you the loan any time soon and if there is an interest attached to it, then that date would probably be never. The elves have enough riches though, right? Pardoning a loan some time in the future wouldn’t be that much of a detriment for you. The reason for a denial, in that case, would be the lack of any tangible reasons to accept. There is nothing to gain from Dale in the short or long term
run. Even when they rebuild their kingdom, they are likely to remain dependant on trading with you since there are things you can offer them, but there isn’t much that they can offer in return. And I don’t see them ever trying to wage a war on the elves, especially trying to attacking your domain. That would be just foolish. Therefore signing a peace treaty or alliance with them isn’t a priority either”

“That is one way to put it” he agreed “What arguments can you then propose for fulfilling their need when you’ve already said there are none?”

“I’ve only said there are no tangible reasons” the woman objected “I think your reasoning is of another nature”

“Which nature is that?”

She sighed.

“Do you want me to give you the publicly acceptable answer or the more practical one?” she asked, with a certain sense of unease.

“Are those different?” by the tone of his voice it was easy to guess that he wasn’t surprised by what she said in the least.

“They are” she confirmed.

“Then start with the publicly acceptable one”

“Well, the elven kingdom is far from living in poverty so helping others and sharing what you have is not only an act of kindness and good will but also hum...” she cleared her throat “just decency”

“And the practical reason would be?”

“Public image. Not for Dale but for your own people. You’ve, um...” there wasn’t really a nice way to put it “You’ve showed your willingness to...” still, she tried “...go to great lengths for the sake of jewellery once before and that...” she decided to skip whatever she was going to say next. He knew what happened, there wasn’t any need for a reminder “Providing help and giving gold to those in need would maybe create the opposite perception. That’s what I would think to do, at least, basing my action on how compassionate and empathetic the elves tend to be” she fell silent, thinking whether it was even a right thing to bring that up or not.

“Which of the reasoning I’ve chosen in your opinion?” he asked after a long pause.

“I...”

“Say what you really think, not what I want to hear”

“To be strong and unified, a kingdom needs to have a wise and benevolent king whom the people support and are willing to stand behind. It would only be good foresight on your part to take both of these reasons into account” it wasn’t at all easy to find the right words for the response.

“Well, you have been on target with your answers so far. Do tell me then why I am still withholding the praise that you deserve for it?”

“Why?” the remarked not only confused her but also instilled a little bit of irritation for she couldn’t come up with a legitimate reason for not getting the compliments if those were rightfully deserved.
The only thing which came to her mind were similar type of statements from teachers who refused to give their students the highest mark on a project, which the students indisputably deserved, because the pedagogues didn’t want them to ‘stop striving for improvement’ or any other nonsense of similar sentiment. The blonde woman never even tried to understand what went behind this kind of logic and treated it with nothing but pure resentment.

“Because” he made a small pause “While you definitely excelled with the precision of your judgements over the situation, by the end of it you failed completely on your presentation”

“How come?” Minai scoffed. She was very attentive to how she presented her answers, especially by the end of it.

“You need to stop trying to walk on eggshells around me. And before you say anything, it is noticeable and while it is no mystery to me why you are acting in such manner and the reasoning you have for it. I would prefer it if you didn’t. The effect it creates is the opposite of what you are trying to achieve. It is demeaning. Hearing a word I might not like is more desirable than being treated like I’m on my deathbed”

She immediately wanted to protest and argue. To explain that no, she wasn’t trying to walk on eggshells, she was simply trying to be more attentive of how she spoke but something stopped her. What did he say to her? Being immediately defensive was not a good sign? What if she then asked him to provide examples of what made him feel like that? He would probably point to her stumbling over her words and omitting certain details. Her intentions were never to demean but whom would it matter for if he still felt that whey when she continued to act the way she did? It was, perhaps, a much deeper issue and she didn’t want to make him feel inadequate with how she treated him. Therefore she didn’t protest. Nor did she immediately apologize. It was important to make sure that her apology would be phrased right but not the type of ‘right’ she had previously held on to.

“I admit to my mistake. I won’t be trying to coddle your feeling anymore” she stated firmly and added in a nonchalant manner “Now feel free to give me my all the praise that I believe you’ve said I deserve”

There. The last thing he’d want her to do now would be to create a scene with lengthy apologies and tear-filled swears to never repeat the same offences ever again. Not that she’d ever act that dramatic anyway, but she did realize that being sensitive and overly emotional with her response would be doing the exact thing he asked her to avoid.

If Thranduil wanted a sincere discussion then that was what she would get him. Besides, she got really engaged in the conversation herself and, to a certain degree, gained a newfound appreciation for having this type of exchange. She did have to challenge her mind but it was nice to, for a change, do so in a more casual sort of way instead of trying to, well, problem-solve hers way out of what she perceived to be a life and death situation. In retrospect, however, she often created this type of situation completely by herself. Why she did that though was entirely another issue, one that she didn’t want to delve into right now. Right now she felt like being complimented for all of the hard mental work she done so far.

“Praise can not be valid if you go out of your way to ask for it” the teasing tone was back “Better luck next time”

Well then.

Minai scanned her surroundings. They were somewhere near a river by now, judging by the sound of it. The prickly pine trees were much more rare now, replaced by branches with softer and less
harmful leaves. Perfect. Her eyes caught a particular branch right by the side of the road. The way it was located, the branch would go right atop her head and directly into the face of her elven companion. The woman wouldn’t even have to anything. In fact, not doing anything was exactly what was required for the plan to work. Wasn’t it beautiful?

It was. But even more beautiful was the pay-off when the leaves, albeit lightly, brushed across Thranduil’s right side of the face, making him shake his head trying to get rid of the nuisance.

“Oh no, I’m so sorry” she sang in the most saccharine voice she could possibly master “I must have forgotten to warn you about this one”

That’ll teach you.

He didn’t react. He didn’t say or do anything for quite some time, actually. This gave Minai a certain sense of triumph. It was his own fault anyway. No, more than that. He specifically asked for that kind of treatment after he made such a huge point out of telling her to be less considerate towards his feelings. Granted, that might not be quite what he meant. Still, the notion of plausible deniability was on her side in this conflict and she could always claim it if she needed a defence.

Meanwhile, the trees became rarer and rarer until the path cleared almost completely, directly following the river on the left side of it’s bank.

“The following part of the road is relatively easy. You simply have to follow the river until you see the lake” he finally broke the silence, simultaneously placing his hand’s over hers, which were holding the horse’s reins.

Minai was puzzled by the movement but her confusion didn’t last for too long. The next moment he made some sort of sound which she had no choice but to assume to be a command for the horse to run much faster. Because that’s what the animal did. It ran, leaving Minai to let out a helpless yelp and cling to the reins hard enough for her knuckles to turn completely white. Despite the desire to shut them completely, she had no choice but to keep her eyes wide open and wondering where did the willpower to do so came from.

“This is unbelievably petty of you!” she almost yelled, with each sound of a hoof hitting the ground becoming stronger with her resolve not to apologize for that branch.

A different person might have done that and asked him to slow down the horse thus ending the ordeal. She would hold her ground. She was ready to suffer for her convictions. And her current conviction was that the elven king was, in the most eloquently put phrase, a petty, vindictive…

“It’s okay” he whispered into her ear “You won’t fall, I’m holding you”

Minai felt his arms at both sides of her as he held the reins atop of her hands, with his fingers gently placed over her tense hands. He continued to calm her down with softly spoken words and she allowed him to do it, feeling the tension gradually leave her body. She relaxed and as she did so, she was silently wondering if his voice really did sound this kind and caring or if it was something she just wanted to imagine.

“What about the guards?”

They were already holding a distance from their escort, enough to be outside of the hearing range, at least. Now they were going to be almost entirely off their course.

“They’ve been given instructions” he brushed off the concern “Just tell me when you’ll see the
It didn’t take too long until the reservoir presented itself before here eyes. Ten minutes, maybe, give or take.

“There it is” said Minai when she was completely certain that it was the lake in question and not the bank of the river simply becoming wider.

“Can you see the town?”

“Well… there is definitely something out there in that lake. I’m not sure that I would call it a town though” she narrowed her eyes trying to take a better look at the distant construction that looked like nothing more than a pile of rubble. Shiny rubble, for some reason.

“Stir the horse closer to it”

She followed the instructions and, when she managed to guide the horse to the part of the lake which presented the best view over the mysterious construction, he gave a signal for the mount to slow down and eventually come to a halt.

Thranduil dismounted the horse and helped Minai to get down as well. The bullfinch took flight, after, most likely, being disturbed by the bumpy ride. The woman waited for her feathery companion to make his way to her shoulder, after all that would be his direct duty in this situation, but the bird seemed to have other plans in mind and, with just a few flaps of tiny wings, disappeared from sight. Not for too long though, after making a few small laps around the area he safely returned to his place between the horse’s ears and there he stayed, making no indication that he would move from his spot any time soon.

Well, someone just lost his cookie privileges.

Minai took a deep breath and observed her surroundings. The running river, the lake glimmering in the sun, the green forest, the massive mountain, even the ruins of a town in the middle of the body of water. For months she was confined to the elven fortress and now she was standing in an open field with the most picturesque view, if the ruins were to be ignored. She couldn’t quite describe her emotions. One part of her was glad to finally change the scenery and look at the world outside but another part of her… She expected it. She stopped deluding herself a long time ago. And yet it still pulled a cord in her hearth to finally get the confirmation that no, her home was not just outside the elven forest. It was far outside her reach.

She halted that train of thought right where it was, knowing quite well where it was so rapidly heading. Moping around wasn’t anywhere in her plans today.

Minai sat on the ground, observing the lake and Thranduil follow her lead. She was surprised, at first, by how close he was to her, close enough for their shoulders to touch. However, she became far less surprised when she took a moment to consider the location and the environment. It was an open plain far away from the forest, the elven castle and it’s inhabitants. With Minai being the only sentient being around, for some time, at least.

It finally dawned on her, the amount of trust she had been given. Minai never thought about it, not in an extensive way. Truth be told, she had no idea how she felt about it or even how she should be feeling. She had never been in that sort of situation before and all of her experience with sharing trust amounted to doing one of those exercises where you would fall back and the person standing behind was supposed to catch you. It could never compare. She had no idea what her course of actions should be. She only knew that she didn’t want to fail at it.
She gently placed her arm halfway around his and was amazing by how easy the movement came to her. She didn’t have to think about how her actions will be perceived and what type of gossip would spawn from it. It was something else, to be so far away from everyone’s eyes and just… be. How strange it was to feel alone and exposed surrounded by so many people in a well guarded castle and to be so calm and free in an almost complete wilderness with just one person by her side.

“Are those the ruins of the Lake Town?” she asked, trying to make out a single still standing building, a task with which she had no luck with “Why are they shining?”

“It’s not the remains of the town that are shining. It is the dragon”

“The...what!?” she couldn’t believe her ears.

“The dragon” he confirmed in a completely as-a-matter-of-fact type of voice “it wasn’t a priority to deal with what remained from the beast and it was left there. It will sink, eventually”

It took her a few moments to properly take in that information.

The silhouette, which she still couldn’t recognize as anything, looked enormous and judging by the state of the rubble, it used to be very much deadly. She saw numerous paintings and the tapestries around the castle depicting noble elven warriors facing against the fire breathing menace but she never perceived it as anything different from similarly composed pictures in one of the fairy-tale books that she read as a child. It was one thing to hear the stories and look at the paintings and another to get the confirmation presented before her own eyes.

She looked at the sky, alarmed.

“We are not going to get attacked by one, are we?” she voiced her concerns. That spider, all of a sudden, didn’t even seem like that much of a treat compared to a beast capable of demolishing entire populations in a matter of hours, if not minutes.

“No. That was the last Great Drake which remained alive to this day. You need not fear of being attacked by one” his voice, although still having the usual bored tone acquired certain undertones which Minai couldn’t decipher yet.

From a purely scientific point of view, the loss of dragons in the world without getting a chance to see one alive and in it’s prime could be taken as something akin to a tragedy. But Minai never had a scientifically wired mind. Her goals and desires were much more down to earth, so to say. Like, for example, staying alive and unburned. And thus at the news of a reptiles’ demise she silently rejoiced.

“Why… I mean how… how many armies did it take to take that thing down?”

“None. The beast was slain by a single man”

“No way!” the woman exclaimed after hearing the statement “A man? A human man?”

“Yes. I’m sure you will have plenty of people willing to retell you that story once we arrive to Dale. The people chose the man as their king, after all”

A sense of pride for the entirety of humankind had spread throughout her body and warmed her heart. Elves had magic and advanced healing, they had stronger bodies and a proven promise of getting a second chance at life even if they got killed in this world. Humans had none of that. Their bodies were weak and they had nothing but the unknown to face in case of their death. And yet a human, a mere mortal, still stood up to the dragon and ended it’s reign of terror. She found it to be
Minai, of course, never said anything of it aloud. It wasn’t an issue of hurting anyone’s feelings, it was basic decency. No matter how she phrased it, if the elf sitting next to her did at some point know someone who gave up their life fighting a dragon, saying something like that would be beyond insensitive.

“Have you ever seen one alive, a dragon that is?” she allowed curiosity to take the lead, just a little.

“I have” he fell silent for a moment “I’ll tell you. One day”

“Can I ask you something?” she finally gathered enough courage to bring up the subject which occupied her mind for quite some time now.

“I can’t recall you needing a permission before”

“Why did you chose to...” she wasn’t entirely sure how to put her question in a way so that he would know exactly what she was asking “Why did you chose me as your companion for the trip?”

“Why did you agree?” his answer was another question.

“I just… did” Minai shrugged, more or less to herself. She didn’t have a definitive answer for that. She understood exactly why she was invited but at no point did she question it. She agreed to it. Just that.

“Let that be an answer to your question. Because you just did’

Minai wasn’t sure she understood entirely what he meant by that but she didn’t press further. Maybe he wasn’t ready to share his reasons or maybe, similar to her, he didn’t have a definitive answer. Perhaps she was the one he asked because she would be one to just agree.

She closed her eyes and leaned against his arm. He responded with a relaxed sigh. That was the way they stayed, enjoying the quiet moment together, away from the society and it’s constant vigilance, until it was once again the time to return on the road and continue their journey towards the human city called Dale.

Chapter End Notes

It's just amazing how she thinks about everything so much and then simultaneously she doesn't think at all. I mean, she sits there trying to figure out what hidden motive he has to keep her around but she completely skips the possibility that there might be none. We're mostly stuck with her point of view, but let's just look at how things appear to him:

He needs to have someone to accompany him on the trip and there is already this girl who knows about everything and doesn't need any extensive explanations but she kind of made it clear once that she is not too fond of being around him but then, in the previous chapter she actually expresses her desire for his company and not only doesn't mind helping him but also figures out how to do it in a way so that other people wouldn't figure out the situation. On the trip itself she is kind of tense (plus she makes it obvious that she finds him attractive) He asks ‘Are you okay?’ to which she just
plays along. She previously allowed him to rest on her shoulder so he checks if she's still okay with that. She confirms and pretty much encourages it. At some point she went on a tangent about her 'intercultural relationships' skills so he engages her in a discussion of a somewhat similar topic. She appears interested and proves herself to be a decent conversation partner. She goes on and on about how people and gossip bother her so he takes her to relax by the lake and how does she respond? She hugs his arm and puts her head on his shoulder.

I mean, what should he think after that?

In her defence, she's basically been given a lecture about how 'this visual novel doesn't have a romantic route for that character in particular' by Tauriel and the gossip squad plus there are those romance novels that she reads where 'romance' is bursting into churches with 'stop the wedding' and stuff like that so she just doesn't pick up on more subtle cues, probably. But that's my point with this. I wanted to show more subtle/gradual way towards romance (put in in the background in a way) so that it would feel natural/earned by the end.
Dear Readers

Not an actual chapter, sorry. I'll probably delete this when/if I upload the next chapter.

Okay. So.

I'm not exactly having the best time right now. It's been a thing that was building up for a long time and the finale is beyond predictable. It's not the kind of thing when I'm just sad and need to hear nice words. No. It is a legitimate set of circumstances and I'm probably to blame for the most for it anyway and... well, this isn't important.

The thing is, I'm not exactly at the best place right now and I used writing as a means to distract myself but it got to a point where it doesn't do that anymore. I want to continue writing this story, I kind of enjoyed it so far, but I'm not sure if I'll be able to in the long run. Again, it's not the issue of skill or that I don't think I'm good at writing. It's other things, completely unconnected.

I'm not sure why I'm posting this. It might happen that I continue with regular updates as is, or I might disappear for some time, or even forever.

I guess I write this to just let everyone who is reading this now/some time in the future know what happened/might happen and that I didn't quit because of hating my work or not getting enough attention or anything like that.

Once again, this is not about the story itself. I'm not fishing for compliments and hearing those right now would probably make me feel bad more than anything.

Sometimes there are circumstances and situations where it just sucks. Sometimes it just does to the point where you just know it can't get much better anymore. That can happen. It's unfortunate, but such is life. Please don't write something like 'it'll get better' as a response because it won't. That's not how I feel about the situation, that's the harsh reality of it.

Anyway.

Very very big Thank You to everyone who read, liked and/or commented my work. You are amazing and the reason why I even continued for so long as I did already. It was fun to interact with you guys. Let's hope then that it will continue that way.

Please, please don't think this is for compliments/attention/pity. It is really not.

Thank You

Bye
Leaving the author's note up because remains relevant.

Fun fact. The better I feel the less productive I am. But if I'm doing not so great then that gives me insomnia and a dire need for distraction so I have more time and will to write chapters. Basically all of you are profiting from my misery and that includes myself. Okay, I am joking. I just had this chapter planned for a long time and had most of it drafted already, it just wasn't supposed to happen until later. But I really didn't like what was originally supposed to be here so I moved a few events around for a better flow and now it looks much better.

This and the next one will still be lighter type of chapters and then, well I've not completely decided yet, but just in case, enjoy reading about the characters having a good time while you can. Seriously though. Sometimes I think about the ending for this story and how I follow the movie-verse and that technically only Legolas was shown to be alive and well in the LOTR trilogy so that gives me, you know, room for creativity. But I am trying not to be too creative with that.

Buddy, we’re home.

That was the first thought which came into Minai’s mind when she saw a puddle. To anyone else it would be just another ordinary dirty puddle. Either nothing special not worth the attention or an annoying nuisance obstructing the way. Not to Minai though. To her it was not a simple puddle. It was a proof, a testament, that she had finally entered the domain of humans with all of it’s flaws and imperfections.

Dale was not a densely populated city, which came as no surprise at all, especially after seeing what little there was left of the people’s previous refuge – Lake Town. But, it seemed, whoever did live in Dale had gathered to look at the elves.

No, not to look. To gape.

It was hard to blame them, really. The elven procession was by all accounts remarkable and impressive. Minai could easily sympathize with that sentiment because truth be told, she was to a certain degree impressed as well. First, the horses that were currently lead away by the stable boys. They were all like one, large healthy steeds bred for generations no doubt, with similarly braided manes and reins decorated with intricate patterns of gold and silver. The most gorgeous horse of all, of course, was the one that Minai had to share with Thranduil. Well. Okay. The horse that he had agreed to share with her. It doesn’t change the point. The guards were also dressed in matching attire. Tall and beautiful, as it was with all the elves in general, men and women dressed in earthy tones, green fabric and brown leather. Since it was a peaceful visit and not a military campaign they didn’t have their golden armour on but were all still armed with bows, arrows and daggers of various lengths. Minai had to slightly bite the inside of her cheek not to laugh and the serious expressions plastered all over the guards’ almost stone-like faces. Some of them were the same elves whom she saw sleeping on their duty, drunk and nestled with each other. She also recognized
Feren, the glorified delivery-boy. Minai didn’t doubt the skills of the elven guard, not at all, she just knew how much of an act their current attitude was.

The elves were a bunch of pointy-eared show-offs, plain and simple.

Minai herself was fancy-fied a bit as well, if that was even a real word. Her outfit resembled, somewhat, the one she was wearing when she had originally entered the forest. She was dressed in earthy tones, just like the guards, but hers were of lighter hues and included such elements as a delicately made brooch in shape of a flower, decorated with some kind of shiny jewels and a matching head piece holding her braid together. Briefly, Minai wondered if those were rental property or a legitimate gift which she would be allowed to keep and take with her on the day of her departure. So far all of what was given to her remained to be in her room but she had not the slightest of ideas what her claim on any of those objects was. It was a tricky issue and asking directly could produce two potential reactions. If the things belonged to her now then she was risking to insult the elves by not believing in their generosity and sincerity of their intentions. If she was only allowed to use them temporarily, then she’d had a claim of greed to wear for the remained of her stay. Do you see the issue here?

It was a really pretty brooch though.

And then there was Thranduil. Obviously. Beautiful and imposing as ever. Maybe even slightly more so than usual. Minai, by now, was kind of used to seeing him in a more casual context, often times without his crown and in a more practical clothes since most of the time they’ve spent together was during the training sessions in the morning and doing any physical exercises in long robes was an idea on the opposite side of being bright. Today, however, was a different occasion. A special one. Thus the elven king presented himself in all the regal glory pertaining to the status, dressed in embroidered silver and with an intricate circlet adorning his head.

All too well Minai knew the nature of the looks he received, predominantly, but not only, from young women. Boy was it hard not to look smug in that situation. Almost impossible. That’s why Minai failed at keeping the ‘look at where I get to be and you don’t’ from being written in bold all over her expression.

She knew such attitude to be wrong and managed to take her emotions under control quite soon. It’s just for the first time the increased attention she got from being around the elven king, holding his hand in this particular situation, was not being a constant hassle. Not surprising though. Dale was simply a place she would visit for a few days and then return back to the forest. It didn’t matter if the people stared as it didn’t matter what they would think and gossip about afterwards. She wouldn’t have to deal with that any of that in any capacity. Therefore she allowed herself a small moment of enjoyment. There was no harm in doing that.

That was until she realized that some of the admiring glances were meant for her as well which made her blush and simultaneously smile happily. The elves were nice, kind and courtly. For the most of them there would only be one person in their lives at whom they would look in that particular way. To Minai, with her still human mindset, that seemed to be sweet and even respectable, but she would be lying if she said that she didn’t miss every once in a while receiving one of those looks.

She couldn’t help herself and gave a small wave to a young man with whom she briefly met eyes and let out a quiet giggle when she saw his face turn bright red.

“I almost forgot how beautiful and round the human ears are” she whispered under her breath.

Even Buddy the Bullfinch, who finally found his way to his rightful place on Minai’s shoulder,
joined the overall mood of inflated self importance and puffed his feathers to appear bigger and
more impressive that he actually was. After all, he was indeed a bullfinch, a winter type of bird,
and it was the middle of the spring so that did warrant him a glance or two from the littlest ones in
the crowd, at least.

Minai wondered, however, why the spectacle was even needed. If the outcome of the negotiations
was decided upon by Thranduil before even accepting to attend the event, why bother? Why go all
the way from Mirkwood to Dale? Why fancy clothes and jewellery? Was all of this needed? Why
was it needed? Just to be stared at by people?

She then realized that yes, it was needed, but not to the elves. It was for the people of Dale. Minai
could clearly see it in their eyes, the hope, the amazement, the wonder. Their eyes were shining
even though their clothes were worn and not all of the houses were completely rebuilt. The elves
were a spectacle for these people. A much needed one.

These people had to go though many trials with remnants of shadow still looming over their heads.
The times they had to live in weren’t at all easy and many challenges were still right ahead of them.
They would have to persevere, to work very hard for their future. And, considering the shortness of
human lifespan, especially in such dire conditions, many of them wouldn’t even be striving for
their own future but for the future of their children.

Why not give them a small miracle then? To have fairytale-like beautiful elves come and help
them solve at least one of their problems. To preserve the spark of magic and wonder in their
hearts?

Minai turned her eyes to the elven king and asked herself whether or not this was one of his
intentions as well?

She’d like to think that it was.

***

Not much else happened on that particular day. The elven delegation was understandably tired
from the journey and most of them were lead to where they could rest. Most, because several of the
guards still remained outside holding their posts. Minai gave them a compassionate look. The
elvish, just like with many other things, excelled in staying awake for longer periods of time than
humans. Still, because someone could do something didn’t mean that it was good for them in the
long-run. But such were the guard’ duty and in all probability they were generously remunerated
for it. This little fact did chip away on Minai’s level of compassion though.

The room she stayed in was a modest one, it definitely couldn’t compare with what she had back at
the elven forest, but Minai liked it nonetheless. It had a distant, not even a resemblance,
atmosphere of a summer camp cabin. It was also a nice change of scenery. Intricate elvish patterns
and heavy drapery were of course very much nice, but there was a special kind of charm about
looking out of your window at night and observing the town about to go to sleep, with light still
shining in some windows but slowly dimming one by one.

The most unbelievable, strange and never before seen thing happened the next morning when
Minai woke up with the very first ray of sunlight, even before her little pet bird did. Therefore, the
very first thing she did after opening her eyes was to gently flick Buddy from the headboard as an
act of justified revenge for all those times when he was the one to disturb her sleep with his
inappropriately cheerful, considering the early hour, chirping. The bird, as expected, wasn’t
particularly happy about that but, seemingly at least, accepted the retaliation as fair.
While the bullfinch gave his tiny wings a good morning stretch, the woman changed her nightgown to a simple tunic with leggings and opened the window, welcoming the fresh morning breeze. It wasn’t for no reason that she woke up this early. She had certain plans she wanted to accomplish on this particular morning.

Minai knew that any official procedures wouldn’t take place for several more hours and therefore her presence wasn’t much required for anything quite yet. This gave her a decent amount of time to take a walk around the city of Dale and to properly enjoy it’s, well, humanness in all of it’s imperfect glory starting from that murky puddle and ending with a crude word carved on a dreary old wooden cart. Not the most beautiful and elegant things to exist, perhaps, but Minai found them incredibly enjoying nonetheless.

Not to disturb anyone who was still sleeping and not to alarm the guards she decided to use the tree growing outside her window for it’s natural purpose and climbed down it with a few well practised movements. Buddy did not follow her this time around. She guessed the bullfinch to be still angry at her for waking him up. Oh well. Let him be grumpy. Not that she had any particular need for his company anyway. It did feel slightly unpleasant though, to be forsaken like that. Still, Minai refused to be affected by a spoiled bird’s temper tantrum.

The city of Dale was slowly waking up.

Slowly, gradually, but one by one the people started to leave their houses and get on track with their day to day lives.

There was a round mustached baker who opened the windows of his bakery and started to heat his furnace. A lanky young laundress carried a huge hip of clothes, bigger than herself, almost, to be washed. A freckled shepherd boy and his bouncing four-legged canine partner guided a heard of fluffy cloud-like sheep to the pasture for a nice morning graze. There was an old lady near the well with several empty buckets.

Having woken up from the right foot that day, Minai approached the elderly woman and offered her help with drawing the water from the well and bringing the buckets inside the house where, once the woman’s grandchildren woke up, the water would serve a good aid in a session of long overdue spring-cleaning. Minai was pleasantly surprised of how easy of a task turned out to be. All of the exercising she had done in the past months did do her good and she didn’t even lose her breath from carrying multiple water-filled buckets. Once the elleth was done with the task, the old lady had offered her a reward and while the blonde began to resist she couldn’t continue to do so for long once she had learned that her reward would be none other than home baked grandmother cookies.

Delicious ones.

After thanking her for the cookies and saying goodbye to the old lady Minai continued her small tour over the human city. She allowed her inner child, or, perhaps, it was her inner elven self this time around, to have a little bit of fun and went on to ask the shepherd for a permission to pet his sheep. The permission was gladly granted and she didn’t even have to mention how it would be her first time touching the wool which was still on the animal and that she had always wanted to do so. She let the sheep eat grass right from her hand and didn’t let to slip by an opportunity to check how far into the wool would her hand be able to submerge.

It was mid-way to her elbow.

She even aided the baker, who was not granted by nature a particularly notable height, in getting the fullest and the brightest lilac flowers from the bush by climbing to the near standing tree and
reaching for the top. The flowers were, of course, meant for decorating the pastries and not at all as a baking ingredient.

It was neat, kind of. To have all of these new skills and abilities, to get to experience new things entirely by herself and, for once, not just read about it from the screen of her device or by seeing it in a drama that she was watching. She still missed those things though.

Minai walked through the streets of Dale, giving each building a nice long look, smiling at all of the peculiarities and subtle, yet giveaway, details which immediately betrayed who lived inside, approximately, at least.

Take that one symmetrical building, for example. The shutters on the windows were most ordinary, with regular, instead of heart shaped, holes in them. There were no flower pots on the windows and the curtains were of single colour with no pattern to decorate them. The door was made of ordinary wood, no carvings and the knocker was but a simple ring made of metal. It was unlikely for a family with children to live in that house. Nor could it be a person with an artistic type of mind. It would be someone with a pragmatic mind, like a medieval accountant, perhaps.

An artist clearly lived in the nearby building, though. It had a huge not yet mended crack on the side which, with a few touches of a paintbrush, was turned into a blooming cherry branch. A weaver would likely to be found on the opposite street where in the window there could clearly be seen a tapestry, instead of a curtain. A large family with children had their residence a few houses down the block, which could be easily guessed by a long ropes full of clothes of all the different sizes from small to large getting dry outside the windows as well as a carving of a duck and it’s ducklings on the door. Ant that cosy looking house over there most definitely belonged to older people, judging by quite a few snoring cats curled up on the stairs and a rocking chair with a plaid on the porch.

Each and every building was unique and had an individual personality to it, even those that weren’t still all the way through with being rebuilt. Unlike the elves, the humans were not concerned that much with the longevity of their constructions. They knew their lives to be short and they knew that after they perished, their homes would belong to someone else, their next of kin, perhaps, or maybe even someone entirely unfamiliar. They new inhabitants would style their new home to suit their own personal preferences, and so would the next ones, and so on and so on. Intricate patterns were traded for simplicity, aesthetic unity for convenience and luxury was gladly exchanged for functionality. Most humans didn’t build their homes to last centuries, frozen in time in the prime of their beauty and elegance. They built them knowing that a mere decade or two in the future all will be almost torn down and created anew.

It was almost the same in her own world, Minai noted. When she visited her parents’ home, the one she grew up in, during the days of summer vacation she always wondered how it seemed the same yet simultaneously completely different. Some smaller shops changed from one chain to another. The neighbours had new cars, some moved away completely, someone’s children grew up and therefore there were no longer toy in the yard, someone always had to paint their house a new colour and someone couldn’t help but replace the roof tiles even though there wasn’t a particular need for it. Old buildings got torn down and replaced by different ones. Young trees were planted on an alley and an old one had to be removed because it’s trunk was rotten on the inside and could fall on the children’s playground during a particularly windy day.

Minai had always liked the feeling she got upon returning. It was almost like getting re-connected with an old friend, finding out that some of their habits had not changed at all and discovering that you still shared some interests together. Learning about their new hobbies and telling about yours.
With a smile the blonde found out that she wasn’t lost at all. With the buildings unique and memorable she had perfectly remembered her path and would be able to find her way back at any moment. That’s what she would do, quite soon. But not before she enjoyed the swings.

The elves had swings, of course. Those enchanting carved constructions, patterned with leaves and flowers, with ropes decorated by a few shiny gold strands in them. The elven swings beautiful, delightful, a true work of art. Minai could never bring herself to sit on any of those. They kind of seemed to be way too fancy for her garden variety behind. Not these swings though, attached to a tree carved only with a few human words which Minai knew not the meaning of but wouldn’t be too surprised if they were of the variety that could not be translated to elvish. The rope was old and in a few places weary one, the wooden plank had seen the better days as well.

Minai took her place on the swings and they responded with a quiet creak which at that particular moment in time sounded like the most melodic thing she ever had a chance to hear. The woman closer her eyes and took a few swings, up and down.

A memory came to her mind. It was her tenth birthday, a milestone of the utmost importance to a young child. The day started with her not being woken up for school but allowed to sleep for an extra hour. When she opened her eyes she discovered that both of her parents were at home, they had taken a day off room their respective work places and decided to surprise their daughter with an entire day at an amusement park where she was allowed to take all the rides that she wanted and for as many times as her little heart desired. She laughed at the faces her mother made in the house of mirrors until there were tears in her eyes and had a few moments of triumph with her father when riding bumper cars. She was allowed to choose where they would go to eat afterwards and of course her choice was a fast-food restaurant which was not by any means healthy but ever so fun to a little kid. Closer to the evening she got a chance to feed the ducks and the squirrels at a local park, not that far away from her own home. There were swings in that park as well. Old and relatively rusty. She of course wanted to have her turn on those as well. Her mother asked if she wasn’t tired from having rides all day. She answered ‘no’ and happily ran to the swings where her father gave her a push while mother went on to buy ice ream.

Such a happy happy memory it was.

She would, perhaps, enjoyed it for a little while longer if it wasn’t for an unknown voice interrupting her reminiscing.

“Such an unexpected meeting I must say, but definitely a pleasant one”

Startled, to a certain degree, Minai had almost fallen off the swings but managed to hold on, turning her head to see the source of disturbance.

And what an interesting source it was.

The one who took her out from her trip down the memory lane was an old man with long grey beard and equally grey bushy long hair and eyebrows. He was dressed in old worn-out grey robes which almost looked as ancient as the old man himself and were covered in dust at the bottom and other hints of long travel all over it. And his hat, oh, his hat. Long and pointy, akin to those of stereotypical fantasy genre wizards. Come to think of it, wizards were mentioned to exist in this world.

Minai stared at the old man suspiciously, there was just something in his smile that she didn’t find entirely appropriate for the situation. It was wide and cheerful, too much so considering it was the very first encounter she had with this man and, consequently, the very first he had with her as well.
“I beg your pardon” she stated politely with just a hint of suspicion in her voice “I don’t believe we’ve met”

“I never said that, why would you assume that is what I implied?” the old man replied in an indignant tone which would suggest that she accused him of something.

“But you did say you were pleased to meet me, did you not?” Minai was starting to get slightly perplexed with the man’s reaction.

“Is it your belief that one can only be pleased to see someone they have been acquainted to before? Would you not be pleased to encounter a stranger who is pleasant? Or do you not believe yourself to be a pleasant person to meet?” the man gave out a tirade of questions, each right after the other.

“I think I am confused” she decided to ignore the questions and get closer to the point “Who are you?”

“Do you not know me? Not even a little?” he raised his eyebrows and stared at her with the most sincere surprise all over his wrinkled face.

“You are a wizard?” Minai took a guess.

“Ah, so you do know who I am” the old man sounded pleased.

“Not really. You just look like one” the woman frowned, slightly.

“Do you believe all wizards to look the same? How many of them have you seen to make such judgement? What were your criteria of assessment?” his tone was now accusatory.

“I have not met any wizards, not that I know of” she had started to get her suspicions about Buddy lately though. The amount of food that bird could wolf down in one sitting was truly astounding for an avian of his size “But I cannot think of any other who would wear that type of hat” not willingly at least, it was definitely a ridiculous headwear “You recognize a king or a queen by the crown, a baker by the apron and a wizard by the hat” the woman laid down her line of reasoning.

“I am indeed a wizard. My name is Gandalf, you must have heard of me at least” he stared at her, expectantly.

“Mmmm, no” she felt almost bad for saying that with how sincere the disappointment on the old man’s face was after the words have left her mouth.

“What have I done to fall this far out of favour with the Mirkwood elves like that?” the old man lamented.

“What makes you think I am an elf from Mirkwood?” her confusion had gradually morphed into annoyance during the conversation and she wanted to give the old man, Gandalf, a taste of his own medicine.

“You are an elf, judging by the pointedness of your ears and you are dressed in green, the colour of choice for those of your kind who dwell in the forest”

Gotcha!

“Well, I must inform you that I am not from Mirkwood, it is only a place I currently reside at and if I have to be honest I wouldn’t be so sure I am an elf either, it is possible to give this shape of ear to anyone, I know the means” Minai smiled, triumphantly, remembering that one news article telling...
about a person who went through a surgery to change the shape of their ears to resemble those of
the elves.

The old man seemed strange enough to the point where she felt no apprehension in telling him all
of this. He wasn’t, in all likelihood, someone whose opinion of her and whether she was truly an elf
or not would have much influence on her life and if he was indeed, as he claimed, a wizard then he
might even shed some light on that mystery. She hoped.

Alas, in vain.

“Is there any qualms you have with the elves for you to not want to be one of them?” Gandalf the
wizard asked his next question, this time, judging by his voice, one that was supposed to be
answered.

“I never said that” Minai protested, weakly. He guessed right but it wasn’t the conversation she
desired to have.

“You were the one to start the game of guessing. That is my guess, based on the centuries known
truth that no elf would ever entertain the possibility of not being one. Some serious hurt must have
taken place for you to think that way”

“There is no grudge I hold against the elven kind, but aside from the shape of my ears there is
nothing that would suggest I am one” that thought has never left her mind from the very beginning
and voicing it seemed strangely comforting.

“You do not considered yourself to be one?” the wizard asked.

“I have lived my entire life as human, up until few months ago, and so far I only have proof of still
being one” the woman shrugged.

“Have you tried thinking of yourself as an elf to see if that would help you becoming more like
one?” came the suggestion.

“I would prefer to return my life as a human, thank you very much” Minai crossed her hands on her
chest.

“Do you not enjoy the life you have now?” the wizard sounded almost compassionate.

“It simply is not my life” Minai stated in a firm voice. Her stay at Mirkwood was nice, lately, but it
wasn’t the place where she believed she should be at.

“How can it not be your life if you are living it right now?”

Head spins right-round, right-round, right-round.

At this point Minai couldn’t even remotely remember where the conversation started and how on
earth it lead to some serious existential crisis she was about to have.

“I do not belong here” was all she could say to the wizard’s question.

“Is that so? Have you decided that for yourself or had anyone made you feel in such way?”

“I have decided you are not capable of not speaking in questions and it is giving me a headache.
I’m pretty sure elves can not have a headache therefore that proves that I can not be one of them.
And if I am not an elf then I do not belong among them and should return to where I do belong.
Preferably soon. This is a logical conclusion I came to. And if you are truly a wizard then you could give me some assistance with that” she was bluffing, of course.

The logic was never present during the conversation and by this point it was most probably not even alive.

“There is unfortunately no help I could offer you with your situation for I am not the one responsible for it nor can I tell you who is responsible” the wizard took out a pipe and started to stuff it with herbs of unknown, to Minai, origins and effects.

“Do you not know who is responsible or do you know but do not wish to tell?” her mind caught a particular wording, she wasn’t even trying to hide her annoyance.

“Why would it matter to you if I do or do not know the answer when you are still not getting one in the end?” he smoked his pipe letting making a few doughnut shaped clouds in the process.

Minai watched absent-mindedly the smoke rings thin out and then disappear completely into the air. She then sighed, heavily.

“Well, if there is nothing of substance you are willing to tell then I must bid you farewell” she stood up from the swings and made a few steps away. She had already been absent for longer than she intended to and it was probably not the best idea to continue doing so.

Her opinion of wizards was on an all time low level. Not much of an achievement considering that prior to that day she didn’t have any particular opinion on wizards at all. Now that she had though, it was not a very favourable one. If Gandalf was really out of favour with any other elves at Mirkwood then she would not hold that against the pointy eared at all.

“If someone had brought you here then they must have had a reason. What purpose do you think it might be?” the wizard’s voice came now from behind of her.

“How would I know!?” Minai scoffed in an angry voice.

“There has to be something you excel at. What skills or knowledge of yours would you consider to be of value?”

The ability to binge watch the entire season of a TV-show in one night and be an almost functional sentient being the next day. Without the single drop of coffee. That wasn’t a skill though. That was a superpower. One she was happy to be proud of until she ended up in a society of elves who could go on without sleep for longer periods than any human Minai had ever chance to know and to whom pulling an all-nighter was not a problem at all.

But in all honesty, she was not particularly special at doing anything. Nor was she particularly upset by it until this exact moment in time. She only ever had thoughts about maybe being as good as elves. Not much worse, at least. But to be better at something than everyone around her? Well, it took a wizard to bring up that insecurity.

“I would not consider my set of skills to be of an excelling value” unless you counted the ability not to explode out of sheer annoyance.

“Perhaps there was something you want to achieve and this ordeal is meant to help you with that?” Gandalf continued, completely ignoring the woman’s sour demeanour.

“I...”
What did she want to achieve?

No, really.

What was it?

There had to be something.

Was education her goal? Did she strive to get a degree? Or did she go for it for the simple reason of society dictating that it is a must? Did she choose her major based on any passions of hers or was it something she picked up because it seemed easy and achievable enough without too much effort put into it?

It wasn’t education.

Was it getting a well-paid job, perhaps? She did want to earn money… No. She wanted to have money. The need to earn that was simply an unfortunate consequence. She wanted to get the maximum amount of profit for the least amount of effort. It was a desire, but hardly a goal that she was actively working towards. There were a few things that she wouldn’t do no matter how well she was paid for it, but aside from that it didn’t even matter what she had to do to gain the money.

So her passion wasn’t having a career.

Was it something deriving for that? What did she need the money for? Did she want to travel and see the world like many of her peers? Not particularly. She was okay with where she lived. It wasn’t, maybe, the best place in the world but it was comfortable enough and she was used to it. Was she into fashion? Again, not really. As long as her clothes were not worse than the local average she was content. Hobbies then? None apart from watching movies and even if that took a certain amount out of her pocket it was not detrimental since she was not into collecting any merchandise or anything like than.

Was watching movies or reading books her passion?

What was her favourite genre? There were the ones that she did not prefer, but what were her favourite ones? What were the franchises she followed? Did she engage in discussing what she watched with anyone? Sought after people who shared similar interests? Had she ever wanted to craft a story of her own? Or did she just mindlessly watch whatever had the highest score on a database?

Then, perhaps, her goals were not of the materialistic nature.

Did she want to start a family? She never thought of it in an extensive manner. She had a few relationships which did not go anywhere. She did not actively look for a commitment nor did she have any plans of getting into one. She was not exactly against having a spouse but the idea of settling down and having children seemed to be rather foreign to her.

Minai blinked.

Right now her goal was to return to her previous life, but…

What was that life?

Minai shook her head chasing away the unneeded thoughts. The smoke from that pipe had clearly clouded her mind and spiralled her further down the hole of confusion.
“You know, not everyone has to have this grand goal. Not everyone is meant to be famous for something, not everyone is meant to make any grand discoveries, not everyone is destined to go on a grand quest to save the world!” she almost shouted in anger.

The woman kicked a small rock with her foot.

What was wrong with having no goals anyway? Or any ambitions. Or hobbies. Or particular interests.


Absolutely stupendous!

Have you ever had everything you had in your life taken from you in a single moment only to, a few months later, learn that there wasn’t anything of value that you had to begin with?

Wait. Why nothing? She had her family.

The same family who had their own perfectly sorted out lives abroad, never bothered to show up at her university graduation and only called her every once in a while to the point where she actually had to wonder how many weeks it would take them to notice her disappearance. Of course they loved her and she loved them. She never doubted her family would be there for her if she really needed them. She was an adult and did not require as much attention as a little kid did. But the truth was, her family, her parents, had enough going on in their lives without her. They had their own goals and desires, places they wanted to see and new experiences to have.

She didn’t.

Then, of course, there were her friends. Her best friend who embarked on her honeymoon and had plans of having a kid right after and wouldn’t have as much time, if any, to hand out. Her friend had found the most important person with whom to share the entire life with and had future plans set out for years to come. This was absolutely normal. She was supportive of that.

She just didn’t have anyone to whom she would also be important.

Multiple room-mates could also be mentioned, the names of whom she could barely even remember. She was a temporary part of their lives at some point or another.

Never a constant.

Why was she thinking about it now? It didn’t bother her at any previous point in her life. Why now?

Now that she was taken from her usual environment and left entirely on her own without any means of modern entertainment, such as movies, to distract her from having any real serious thought about her life and where she was heading with it. Now that she was constantly put in a position where she had to realize her shortcomings as a person.

Now that after finishing her studies she had basically agreed to go out with people she barely knew into the middle of the forest to do stuff she was nowhere near being interested in just because there were so little other activities going on in her life.

Now, after being deprived of usual time-wasters she became so bored out of her mind that she went around snooping for conspiracies and making plans of using other people’s misfortune to her advantage.
Now, when after drastic change of social circle she was put face to face before the fact that she lacked certain skills and abilities she overcame with jealousy to the point of throwing a temper tantrum instead of working on self improvement.

Now that when she was stripped of her surroundings she was only left with what she was.

And what she was she did not like.

Because there was nothing to like there.

There was nothing.

At all.

What cruelty of fate, she had been in such an excellent mood this morning in particular.

Why must have it been ruined!?

Why?

Why did that wizard even show up? Was that even a wizard or just some strange looking old man who had no one else to talk to and she was the only one polite enough not to run away from the get go?

It was the latter, wasn’t it?

Minai sighed. She always knew her kindness would be taken advantage of.

What?

Any amount of kindness could be taken advantage of. She never claimed to have an excessive one.

“Not everyone is given the purpose to save the world, that much is true. But a purpose is not at all something that can be given to you by anyone. It can be offered to you, yes, but in the end it will be your and only your decision to accept it or not. You can decide to wait for a purpose to come and find you or you can go and find one on your own. Your purpose is whatever you want it to be and it will be as grand and important as the value you put in it. If you only help one person it will not difference to them whether the rest of the world was helped at the same time or not. And there is nothing wrong if the person whom you help is yourself”

She finally turned to face Gandalf the Wizard but there was no one behind her. Nor there was anyone in front of her or to the either side. There were no wizards or anyone else on that street beside her.

She was alone.

The woman sighed. That was… cryptic.

The wizard showed up and hinted that there might be a purpose for her to be here. He then said that her purpose might be to fulfil that purpose. Or to find a purpose. And that if someone did indeed had a purpose in mind for her then she should ignore it. Unless she didn’t want to ignore it. The purpose mattered. And then it didn’t. Then finding a purpose for herself mattered just as much as saving the world because it didn’t matter what the purpose was but what was accomplished in the end. The world would be still saved if it was saved by a person who believed themselves to be destined to save it or by a person who decided to save it because that is what they wanted to do. A difference made in someone’s life would not matter less depending on the amount of people helped
before them or after them. So it didn’t matter who helped that person, a renowned hero or a casual passer by. Therefore it was not a requirement to position yourself as a hero and vow to save everybody in order to have a purpose in life.

It only mattered to do the right thing and live your life according to your values. Within the reasonable limits, of course. Don’t cause harm to others and all that stuff.

If she enjoyed her previous life then it would not be wrong to continue to live it in the same way that she did. Nor was there point in regretting it. But if she didn’t enjoy it anymore then she was free to change it at any point.

And wasn’t it what she was doing already? She was working on her skills and improving in many aspects of herself. She learned new skills and addressed her flaws as a person. It could all be turned around at any moment, right?

So once she returned to her world, there was nothing stopping her from forming closer relationships and finding some hobbies and whatnot.

She just had to live her life the way she enjoyed it and that would be her purpose.

She wasn’t at all without a purpose. She simply outgrew her previous one, whatever were the means of her coming to that realization, and the next one was waiting right around the corner.

Was her purpose of coming here to realize that?

Well, even if there turned out to be no hidden meaning to the entire ordeal, well, she could at least always say that there was something that she learned from it. You know. It’s not the destination, it’s the journey. Things like that. She had never been a particular fan of those ‘inspirational’ phrases but they were always nothing more than an empty sound to her. It was one thing to have somebody sent you a picture with a quote and completely another to come to certain realizations which in one way or another helped you to cope with the situation at hand. She just wondered if she would have enough of those to keep herself calm until the situation finally resolved.

Anyway.

Why was she approached by a wizard? Why was he pleased to see her? Did he or didn’t he know who was responsible for bringing her here?


And not a single answer.

Typical.

Oh well. At least she now had something to occupy herself with while waiting for the resolution and if she didn’t return to where she had to be her absence would actually be noticed without it having to take several weeks for it to happen.

Wasn’t it ironic though?

The person who made her think, who helped her her realize the need for self improvement, who challenged her cognitive skills as well as physical ones was someone whom she only met a few months ago and couldn’t even properly claim to at least be friends with.

Minai grabbed that tree branch and pulled herself up, climbing the tree to the temporary room she
was allowed to occupy through the window where she was promptly faced with her pet bullfinch and for some reason a distraught looking elven king who, instead the usual words of greeting asked in a tone ranging from concern to accusation:

“Where have you been?”

Chapter End Notes

I was sitting there thinking 'Should I include Gandalf in this? Would he have enough time to escort Frodo back to Shire and come to Dale?’ but then I kind of realized that with all the other liberties I took with the canon already... I mean, I dread to think how many details I got wrong and how out of character everybody is. Plus I really wanted to write Gandalf in. He is fun to write and he definitely knows something.

Okay. You've probably noticed how vague I was with everything concerning the heroine's previous life and this is the 'grand reveal' of why I did that. Because it doesn't matter for the story or even for the character herself. She went through her life not thinking too much and doing the bare minimum of stuff so that the society wouldn't question her behaviour or the lack of thereof. Why mention her education major, her country/city, if it had absolutely no effect on her as a person? Even her original name did not matter because when she was given another one she just went on with it. Now, why is she like that... who knows, we might even find out at some point.

With all of this 'purpose' talk I just wanted to show that her character arc in this story is not just having romance and such but to also set some goals for herself, to rethink her values, to better herself, to become the version of her that she would actually like. Will she succeed? Let's wish her luck.
Slightly shorter and less edited chapter this time. I thought I had a solid idea for this but no matter what I did with it it just turned out very bleh. So I've reached the point where I just had to accept it for what it was. Wanted to go in a slightly different direction with this but... I don't know, I just don't feel it anymore.

Minai expected her absence to be noticed, yes. But that wasn’t exactly the way she imagined it would happen. She could maybe see a guard being sent to fetch her if she didn’t show up for several more hours or so, but her actual detour was nowhere near that long and she never truly lost the track of time. As far as she was aware of, schedule-wise she was still in her full right to go for a walk, be asleep or do whatever else she pleased.

What she most definitely did not expect was coming back to where she temporary stayed only to find there a worried looking elf who then promptly grabbed her by the shoulders demanding to know about her previous whereabouts.

To say that she was surprised would be to say nothing. She wasn’t simply surprised, she was almost shocked and maybe even a little bit frightened. She wasn’t scared of Thranduil, of course. Even though his grip on her shoulders was firm, he wasn’t hurting her, nor was he really trying to restrict her movements. It was more as if he believed she would disappear should he let go and he didn’t want for that to happen. Her concern was of another nature.

“What’s wrong?” she asked “Did something happen?”

For all she knew there could have been news of dragons not being truly extinct and flying in herds to burn down all that was alive. Well, maybe not that degree of dramatic but it had to be something serious to lead to that reaction. It was hard to imagine Thranduil get this distressed over nothing.

“Where were you?” he repeated, not letting the woman go.

“I just went out for a morning walk, I was planning on returning sooner” she tilted her head awaiting any kind of reaction.

The elf released her but continued to stand there, frown deep on his face.

“A walk?” he spoke slowly, almost as if trying to find the hidden meaning behind the word.

Minai raised an eyebrow. Was this all that happened? She was absent for a brief period of time? The woman could, with a stretch, see how this might have been surprising but it was still hardly an event warranting such a reaction. Not like she did anything wrong here. Maybe, just maybe, there was a room to chastise her, ever so slightly, for not notifying about her intentions beforehand, but what was she supposed to do? Leave him a note?

“Where did you think I was? Kidnapped by a bunch of orcs in the middle of a well guarded city with your own people holding vigil around the building? Decided to run away and start a new life
in Dale?” as if wizard inflicted existential-crisis wasn’t enough she had now to deal with an overreacting elf.

That was just ridiculous. How far would she even go without supplies, money or even knowing the language properly. Not to mention orcs, trolls, goblins and other wonderful fairytale creatures shed have to deal with without having the necessary experience of doing so. Plus she had no map, nor map reading skills for that matter.

See?

Ridiculous.

“If that is what you wish to do then by all means be my guest” Thranduil released his hold on Minai’s shoulders.

The woman pinched the bridge of her nose thinking how she should probably run down the street and look for Gandalf to tell him that she apologized for every single thought she had about wizards since their encounter. Because she took it all back. Especially the part where she considered the wizards to lack any kind of sense. Clearly such honour belonged not to the ones with pointy hats but to those with pointy ears.

The elves and their royalty.

Of course Minai wasn’t going to stand there and pretend that an idea of her running away would have to be taken completely out of nowhere. After all, she did claim her place to be among humans and made her desire to leave the elven domain quite clear. But. If Thranduil to that degree didn’t trust her to stay and act through on their agreement then why take her to Dale in the first place? If he didn’t trust her and still made the decision to bring her along then that just had to mean that his concern for her presence was quite low and there wouldn’t be a point in making any kind of deal out of it, especially one this big.

That wasn’t the case though.

Trust had to be the integral part of his decision for taking her along.

So he did trust her.

Why then jump to the conclusion she would run away.

She brought that up herself but only to ridicule such possibility. He was reacting as if that was a legitimate intent that she just announced.

Minai took a deep breath. Something clearly wasn’t right in this situation. There just had to be a clear miscommunication of some sort. She re-winded her memories to a few minutes prior to when she climbed into her temporary room through the window. What was it that she saw there? An upset elf. Was he initially angry at her though? No. He wasn’t angry. He wasn’t even annoyed. She was the one who started to get miffed because his reaction to the situation seemed ludicrous to her. Obviously they didn’t have the same perspective on what happened and if she was the first one to stir it towards a conflict she had also be the one to take the metaphorical step back.

Besides. She was dealing with an elf. A forest creature who had a tendency towards stronger emotions in general. It wasn’t something she could blame him for.

“I’m here. I’m back. I only went outside for short while. I wasn’t going to run away” Minai said in
a calm voice “Please tell me what’s wrong”

“These lands are dangerous, your safety can not be guaranteed outside the forest. You should not
go outside unarmed or without a guard”

Well, that was a whole new level of achievement right there. She actually got annoyed at someone for being sincerely concerned for her safety.

Bra-vo.

It wasn’t in any way his fault she was inexperienced with forming emotional bonds with people to the point of mistaking a legitimate worry for accusation.

“That’s...”

Silly.

That’s what she wanted to say.

It was the middle of a city inhabited mostly by caretaker women, the elderly and children since many who could even hold a weapon perished in battle. There were human guards patrolling the boarders who would at the very least notify about the impending danger beforehand. Not to mentioned the well armed elven guard that pretty much guaranteed that even if there was a person who bore ill intentions towards an elven maiden quietly walking down the street they would not dare to risk causing her any harm.

It was silly to assume something substantially bad could happen to her even in theory.

Silly.

From a logical point of view, that is. Or from the point of view of a person who, just a few months prior, didn’t have to witness hundreds of her own kin be brutally slain by an army of orcs and their broken covered in blood bodies scattered on the ground.

Here.

In Dale.

Of course he wasn’t acting rational.

“I understand. I didn’t mean to make you worried” Minai said apologetically.

“You are not restricted in your right to leave if you so choose. I only ask you to tell about your intentions” Thranduil visibly calmed down but a slight frown still lingered on his pale face.

“I’m sorry”

She made a step forward and pressed her forehead against his chest, immediately feeling his warm arms around her.

Somehow, Minai would almost feel better if he yelled at her right now.

Why was she so bad at this? Which party was the issue with? The elves for being for taking everything too close to heart or her for failing to take emotional side of things into account? Was it a cultural thing? Was she emotionally unavailable? Because it wasn’t just Thranduil she was having this issue with. She once managed to actually make Tauriel cry. Not on purpose. Not even
close to being on purpose. Still, with each passing day her desire to have an instruction manual on how to be nicer to elves was growing stronger.

Or better yet, an instruction manual on how to be a better person in general.

Because good people couldn’t lack of close relationships in their lives to the same abysmal degree as she did.

Damn it.

It got to her.

“This is no fault of yours” the elf said quietly “It is obvious the life you had was a peaceful one. The fear of loss is not the emotion that immediately comes to your mind and believe me, it is not a bad thing at all”

Minai remained where she were for a few moments enjoying the comfort of Thranduil’s embrace and simultaneously despising herself for seeking comfort from a person she had just wronged. She wanted to better herself. She wanted to be more understanding. However. With how things were, wasn’t it a good thing that she continued to make these mistakes?

He was waiting for her return, he was worried about her safety and even though it did make her selfishly happy to learn those things, deep inside she knew it wasn’t right.

She needed to keep her distance.

With a heavy sigh the woman pulled away and dragged her feet across the room and crawled on the bed, taking on a sitting position. The elf followed, visibly confused by the sudden change of mood.

Minai allowed her eyes to wonder across the room aimlessly, while she herself was submerged deep in thought. Suddenly her gaze caught onto something which made the gears in her brain to finally turn.

You see, there was something which was clearly missing from the scene from the very beginning. Something small red and feathery.

There it was, the cowardly culprit in the farthest corner of the windowsill.

“Sir Buddy the Bullfinch!” she called in ire.

Ah, the magic of a full name. Not even the smallest creatures roaming the earth were free from understanding the terrifying implications of one being used on them. With the speed of a rabid rocket the avian prompted its round body into the air and with just a few rapid flaps of tiny wings hurried to find another refuge which just so happened to be Thranduil’s shoulder.

It wouldn’t be nearly as bad if the elf didn’t then tilt his head in a way for the bird to get conveniently hidden behind a curtain of pale blond hair.

“Release the tattletale Minai” once again sighed “The fiend came snitching to you about my absence when I simply went for a walk, didn’t he?” the woman crossed her arms on her chest “He wanted to get me in trouble for waking him up in the morning, did he not?”

She tried sounding angry at the bullfinch, but her voice came out as defeated.

She somehow managed to ruin her relationship even with a bird.
Great.

To her utter dismay the elven king did not give in to the demand.

“He was concerned about you finding the way back. In his opinion you are not the best with directions” Thranduil smiled and it wasn’t at all in the mean way.

But it was still beyond clear that he shared the bird’s opinion. If it even was the bird’s opinion to begin with. Which Minai very much doubted.

“For the bird’s information, I found it quite easy to navigate my way around this town” she recounted “It has a somewhat familiar style of architecture and the houses our built each in their own unique way. There is truly beautiful house across the street. The building itself is regular but there has been a mural which depicts...” Minai suddenly realized she was going on a tangent.

“Why did you stop?” the elf raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“I imagine you wouldn’t be interested in hearing about me just walking around” she shrugged.

“You talk about it in such an excited manner. Why wouldn’t I want to find out what is it that you find so alluring about this town?” he asked smiling, though it didn’t quite reach his eyes.

Or maybe he was simply curious about the appearance of the human city overall, she realized.

“I think it is the air of familiarity I feel around this place. It is not exactly like my home but there are many elements that are similar. Sometimes we also paint murals on our buildings. But it is often done at night and in secrecy because it is not allowed on an official level. I do believe though that the mural I saw today would be allowed to decorate the wall for quite some time. It depicts a scene with the dragon and...”

Minai continued to tell about all the various things she saw that morning. About the different shapes and sizes in which the houses came, about her observations on whom lived there, about the cats on the porches and flower pots in the windows, about the broken old cart repurposed to be a hay container for the horses and about the kite stuck on a tree which she fetched for a little boy along with the lilac flowers she retrieved for his father the baker.

She shared the observations about how different the hues of the morning sky appeared now that she got a chance to observe them from a ground level and not from a high standing balcony. She mused about how invigorating it felt to not lose breath over carrying a few water filled buckets and how she never would have suspected that she was that curious about the depth of a sheep’s wool.

It did feel nice to share her experiences like that. It made her, albeit temporarily, to forget about her worries. She looked at the elf sitting beside her, relaxed and with his eyes closed, and wondered if maybe he was trying to imagine the picture she painted with her words.

“It is quite the simple city, especially compared to the elven forest but there are certain aspects of it that I can’t help but find close to my heart for I am reminded in a way of a place where I grew up” Minai had reached the end of her tale.

“Would you have preferred to end up among the men?” Thranduil opened his eyes but didn’t face the woman sitting next to him.

“Tourism and immigration Your Lordship, important concepts, not to be mistaken” Minai knew right away that neither of those words were familiar to her companion “When one travels to a new place with the purpose of simply visiting they find themselves relaxed. There is no daily routine
and none of the people know them which eliminates the pressure of meeting any expectations. There is less need to watch your conduct or public’s perception because none of it will matter upon leaving that place. This is one of the reasons why I am so excited about the city she explained But with a permanent move all of the previously mentioned remains relevant. There is the routine, the responsibilities and the need to care about the public’s opinion. Besides...” Minai reached for the object on the nightstand “If I really were to run away, this is the first thing I would take with myself” the woman carefully placed the hairpiece into Thranduil’s hands “The world of men doesn’t quite operate the same as that of the elves. I doubt anyone out there would be kind enough to give a stray elleth food and shelter for free. And certainly nobody would be too concerned if I could make it on my own out there. So no, I would not have preferred to end up among man because even if their society is closer to my heart, there are certain aspect where I have to give it to the elves” she stated with a grin on her face.

“So it is the elven generosity that you admire taking an advantage of?” the elven king asked in an amused manner.

“There is that, but I also must admit that you all are very aesthetically pleasing to look at” Minai answered, stating the ages old truth.

“Why didn’t you put it in your hair?” the elf gave her a curious look.

“I was planning to do that after I came back”

That, of course, was an obvious lie.

She wasn’t going to decorate her hair with anything not after she came back, not at any other point of the day.

She lacked the skill.

Not because she was unmotivated to learn to braid her hair or just generally lazy.

Nothing like that.

Well.

Okay.

That was exactly the reason.

But what reason was there to dwell on such trivial matters.

Would you like some assistance with that? he asked tracing the design of the jewellery with his fingers.

“I would appreciate that, yes” Minai gave a court answer.

She had to make a small pause before saying that. Not to seem far to obvious.

First, of course she needed assistance with doing her hair. She learned that lesson the hard way due to an incident in middle school involving one of those circular hairbrushes and a hair dryer.

Second, why would she ever say no to someone as good looking as Thranduil brushing her hair?

She gave the elf the hairbrush and took a comfortable position.
Minai felt her entire body relax as the wave of warmth spread through it when her ran a hand through her hair.

“You are really good at this!” she smiled looking at her hair in an actual travelling mirror she brought with herself.

The woman sighed thinking about the last time something like that was done for her as a gesture of good will and not as the part of their duty, as it was with the elven maids. Probably back at elementary school by her mother.

“Practice my dear, years and years of practice” said the elven king “But my dear, you have exceeded the amount of sad sighs you can make before having to explain the reason that caused you such melancholy” Thranduil set the hairbrush aside and put a hand on each of Minai’s shoulders.

“Was I sighing? I haven’t really noticed” the woman lied.

She did notice but there wasn’t a short and plausible enough lie she could think of at the moment to explain such behaviour.

“Something happened during your walk?” he insisted.

“Nothing save what I’ve already told you” The woman didn’t see it right to start lamenting about her personal issues. Especially to the elven lord who was had to deal with much more important matters daily. It almost felt childish to complain about, basically, not having more friends and a hobby to someone who held faith of a kingdom in his hands.

“Tell me then, what is it that I’ve done to earn such distrust from you?” he spoke softly but with a clear sincerity of the question in his voice.

“I am not sure what you mean” she lied once more.

It was just a matter of time before he came to that conclusion.

“You are vehemently unwilling to share any kind of information about yourself. You are under no obligations to do so, of course and I do understand that there are certain things that you can not share, but what sort of serious thing could have possibly happened this morning for you to be so hesitant to speak about it?”

“It is the opposite. I do not wish to speak of it not because it is a serious matter but because the issue is not worth bringing up” Minai stated firmly “Besides, I believe we do not have that much time for our hands for talking”

It felt terrible.

But it had to be this way.

For both of their sakes.
Not all leaders looked the same, apparently. There was no chance of mistaking Thranduil’s status even when the elf didn’t wear his crown. The man in charge of Dale though looked absolutely ordinary. He was middle aged, with hair starting to go grey around his temples. His clothes were plain and not much different from the rest of his people. Still, there was something in him similar to what Minai often saw in Thranduil, even without all of the regalia. There was just something in both their presences. Something which didn’t allow for a mistake of who was in charge.

There was also the overly official tone in which those in power spoke. Minai had troubles staying away from the death’s threshold to which the boredom pushed her when listening to all the official-political speech in her own language. And when it came to the language of men here in Middle Earth, the language that she barely understood, well, the results were highly uninspiring and predictable. Her brain pretty much switched off after the exchange of greetings and introductions and she absent-mindedly followed the rest to what she guessed would be a dining room.

Minai, however, wasn’t the only one who fell out of understanding.

Bard the King of Dale, although this particular title could be questioned on account of him being an elected leader and Dale being more of a town than a kingdom, therefore, perhaps, a mayor or burgomaster would be a more befitting name for his position, moreover the building they were currently in resembled a mayor’s office much more than it did a palace, so anyway, Bard, whoever he was, had three children.

Sigrid, the eldest daughter, had barely stepped on the threshold of adulthood. She had a faraway look in her eyes, a giveaway evidence that her mind was preoccupied with her own thoughts at the moment. It wasn’t even that hard to guess what sort of thoughts they were, judging by a flower in her hair and a slight blush. Bain, the middle child and the only son, was the only one who tried to not only listen but comprehend the conversation held by the two kingdom leaders but it was apparent that despite knowing the language, much of the meaning escaped him still. The youngest girl, Tilda, had her attention on none else than Sir Buddy the Bullfinch, who chirped merrily, basking in the attention he had been given.

The dining hall was not much of a hall at all. It resembled more of a room. A decently sized dining room for a family gathering. That’s what it probably was. With all honesty, Minai would say she preferred it that way instead of crowded hall. As for the food.

“Elves brought half of this, right?” Minai asked after everyone was seated, trying to use the language of men as best as she could.

“The majority of our food is aid from your people” the human king explained.

First - bonus points for the pointy eared for not abandoning humans in their need. Almost amends for not mentioning their existence like ever. Second - ‘your people’. It felt weird. After, for months, feeling like an absolute outcast among the elves to finally be in company of humans whom she considered to be her people and to be just like that rejected as not one of their own was...
It was one more entry in a long list of reasons to feel sad on a sulking day, which Minai planned to have when the weather was particularly nasty and rainy. Preferably a thunderstorm. Right now there were more pressing matters.

“Yes. But its easy to guess who made what” she pointed a finger to the ceiling as she spoke “Like muffins. These ones” she tapped the plate with blueberry pastry “Elves. But these” she did the same things for a plate containing sugar frosted cupcakes, which were in her eyes just another type of muffin “These are by men” she went through some other dishes in a similar manner “And this
she tapped the wine bottle.” Him in particular the woman pointed at the elven lord sitting next to her “Elf food is healthy. Men food unhealthy but fun. Am I understanding elven culture by now?” she asked Thranduil.

You are, yes” the elf replied with a certain dose of sarcasm in his voice, no doubt wanting to dispute certain parts of her statement, he then added, after correctly guessing the surprised looks from the humans “Lady Minai was raised among men. She is still learning the ways of the elves”

“You didn’t mention chips” came a giggling girls voice which belonged to Tilda.

“The potato chips” Minai took the bowl with snack into her hands “Is not by men or elves” she made a dramatic pause and raised the bowl in the air “It is gift from above” she stated in the most serious of tones.

The children laughed while Thranduil, in a very much sceptical manner raised an eyebrow.

“Gift from above? These things?” he asked.

“Yes. Regular food satisfies hunger. Chips bring joy and happiness”

Not only that. The potato chips were a cornerstone of human civilization. A starch based glue which held the society together. The chips were the main contributor in success of a movie night with friends. Chips were the snack which restored the much needed quiet on a multiple hours long car ride with children. And most definitely it weren’t salad leaves that you’d offer, as an excuse to start the conversation, to a casual acquaintance whom you’d like to upgrade your relationship status to being friends. It were the chips. A mere sliced and seasoned potato bringing together adults and children alike. You could munch them at the beach. Take with you to a camping trip. Enjoy in the comfort of your own house. They picked you up in the moments of sadness and made the happy moments even brighter. Whenever, wherever and with whomever you were, chips would instantly made the situation better.

The ultimate snack.

None of this, of course, Minai could say out loud for the simple fact that her knowledge of the local language did not exactly allow it and resorting to using elvish all of a sudden would seem a little bit rude, therefore Thranduil would have to receive his lecture about the inherent importance of over-salted fried potatoes at a later date.

But it was now on the agenda.

Minai placed the bowl with chips right in front of her and heard a demanding chirping from her shoulder.

Of course.

The woman took one chip and, after breaking it into halves, handed the piece to Buddy. The bullfinch completely ignored what he was offered and nose-dived right into the bowl.

Of course.

Minai was in no mood to put up with such behaviour. She reached her hand into the bowl and gently grabbed the feathery fiend. She held the bird lightly, not to squeeze him too hard but also tight enough so that he wouldn’t have any room to accidentally hurt himself if he were to make any sudden rapid movements.
“No. Chips are bad for birds” with each word she carefully, barely touching the feathers, tapped Buddy on the head with her finger.

After being released the bullfinch, very much defiantly, flew across the table and landed on Tilda’s shoulder with an indignant and prideful peep. That prompted him an excited giggle from the girl and whole plate of muffins for the feathery traitor.

Minai only shook her head and turned back to her chips and gasped, almost in shock, at hat she saw.

When somewhere around two decades ago, give or take, she claimed to have her slice of cake eaten by fairytale creatures, fairies or pixies most probably, to trick her mother into giving her an extra one she never expected that one day it would be a legitimate problem she would have to face in a form of a fantasy creature, an elf in this particular case, stealing her chips.

Sure. Why not. If giant spiders and dragons existed then why not karma.

“My Lord?” she asked, getting over her surprise.

Was that a retaliation for implying that elvish food was boring?

“My dear, it was impossible to resist after hearing you praise them like that” he answered with a smirk.

Yup. It was exactly that.

Still, Minai smiled, being secretly proud of her contribution into the cultural exchange.

Besides.

There was something to be noted here. So far the teasing was confined to the times when no one else was around but lo and behold. That was even nice, in a sense. Not the part about the teasing itself, but the fact that it was sort of a confirmation, intentional or not, that yes, there was no need to constantly look over her shoulder and put harsh restrictions on her behaviour in order to appease the public’s opinion.

Oh no.

Did she just legitimately enjoyed being teased by the elf?

The woman focused on her food to avoid any more world-view challenging realizations and for a while nothing of any particular importance happened for anyone but the bullfinch who was having what appeared to be best day of his avian life.

Not only was he showered with food and attention, he got to show off his acting skills as well. You see, Tilda decided to find out how Buddy would look with something vaguely resembling the bunny ears. The little girl took a few camomile petals and carefully wedged them between the feathers at the top of the birds small head.

Cute, but there was only so much time one could invest in observing a pompous bullfinch hopping around the table and putting on a show to beg for berries and whatnot, therefore Minai averted her attention from the scene pretty quickly.

Bad move.
Very bad move indeed.

Unfortunately, just like it always is with those types of realizations, this one did not come on time. Far too late did Minai realize that taking her eyes from the bird would be to her greatest detriment in the long run. For her lack of foresight she had to pay with her strawberry, the one she had been really looking forward to eating, when was unceremoniously snatched from her cupcake by an impudent blur of red feathers. With a sour face and pursed lips the woman had to watch the bird bring his loot to his new human friend, who gleefully accepted it.

War.

That meant war.

Minai reached her hand towards a long leaf of green salad and a few slices of bread. She made a small tower with the bread pieces and placed the salad atop of it. To one side of the salad leaf she placed a particularly large bread crumb. The woman put her archery lessons at a good use, calculating the needed force and trajectory, adjusting the salad in accordance with her calculations.

She narrowed her eyes and aimed.

One swift movement of a hand and the bread crumb was catapulted into the air and, after making an elegant arch, hit the target at its feathery head, knocking down one of camomile petals.

Cue the angry chirping, why made completely unnoticeable by the children’s loud laughter which Minai gladly joined.


But.

And this time it was a very big but.

Minai had months of acting proper, minding her manners, abiding a cramped schedule, wearing full set of clothes and styling her hair each and every day, she learned two new languages, she took on archery and horse riding lessons, she diligently studied culture, customs and history of an entirely foreign world, she only read literature that would be approved even by the starchiest of guidelines would approve, she minded her manners, posture and language, she called things lovely, sublime and alluring. She got up at the earliest hour every morning and went exercising. Exercising! She even discussed the intercultural relationships between kingdoms, for whatever’s sake!

There weren’t any no pants pyjama days. No soda and popcorn TV-drama nights. Not a single even remotely lewd joke. Not a single movie with cars exploding at a higher rate than the frame-rate. Time wasted on the world wide? None. Friendly get-together at the mall? Nope. No-leaving-the house weekends? Not in this world. Discussing who of the celebrity actors had a better a...

Ahem.

Anyway.

Forget about it!

She needed it. To do something silly, unproductive and borderline nonsensical. Something unbecoming of a proper elven lady the role of which she had to play for what seemed like an eternity by now. Something that would take her mind of her, apparently non-existent, soul being crushed by a wizard this morning.
Amidst the laughing Minai turned to look at Thranduil and check on his reaction. She didn’t want to act completely out of line to the point where it would undermine the reputation of the elven kingdom. Even if he didn’t exactly see what was happening, he could still hear the commotion.

The elf didn’t look disapproving though. Quite the contrary. He was smiling and didn’t seem to mind what happened at all. But, for the briefest of moments, she thought she saw another emotion deep inside the his icy blue eyes. It disappeared so fast that she couldn’t even be sure whether it was actually there or not. If she had to guess, she would say it probably was just hr imagination.

After all, what reason was there for him to be sad?

Chapter End Notes

And there we are. Where that 'there' is I have no idea. I've finally reached the point where I REALLY don't know what to write next. It's like: open the text editor and sit there staring blankly at an empty page for three hours because... I don't know. It's as if someone wiped out every single idea out of my mind in one moment. I had them. I was excited about writing them. And then there's nothing. Legitimately can't remember. It's a real shame that you can replace a corrupted hard-drive but can't do the same with a clearly broken brain.
Long time no see. Although I still say that unless it's been half a year it is not late. I bet some of you are wondering if I couldn't write the chapter because of my life situation and whatnot. Well, no. I just downloaded a game to my phone and was more interested in playing it. Because, honestly, my last remaining brain cell does not have the capacity to differentiate between real and manufactured accomplishment.

In other words, I can either work for days, if not weeks, on writing a chapter and get like, one comment or I can simply press the 'autoplay' button and enjoy all the praises getting my way. There is pretty much no difference. So from now on I expect each of you to write like ten comments to every chapter (ten comments from each to each chapter, not ten in general). Otherwise I'm much more interested in saving the Candy Kingdom from crushing. I hope you can tell that I'm joking here.

But if I'm to be serious, I just really didn't know what to write about. This is the sixth draft. Not the sixth version of the same draft. The sixth completely different chapter taking the story into different direction that I tried writing. At least I figured out what where my ideas went. But that I'll write about in the end note.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

First arrow.
Missed.
Second arrow.
Missed.
Third, fourth, fifth…
Missed.

“You shouldn’t be trying to hit the pine-cone itself, try aiming for the space where you think it will be” Tauriel explained in a patient voice and gave her apprentice an encouraging smile.

“Easier said than done” grumbled Minai, more at her own mishaps than at anything else.

“It does appear intimidating when you start, but once you get a hand of it…”

The redhead threw a pine-cone into the air, closed her eyes and, surprise surprise, the flying target was hit within less than a second.

“How did you do that!?” the blonde couldn’t happen herself but to be utterly amazed by the display she just saw.

“I simply had an extra century or two of practice” Tauriel stated humbly, but there was just that hint of pride on her face that just couldn’t be chased away even by the best intentions of humility.
Minai could not blame the other elleth for that. Not at all. In fact, if she herself possessed that skill, you bet it would be mentioned to each and everyone that she met as well as demonstrated in the most self-congratulatory manner to every single person who would express even the faintest interest of seeing it. Don’t forget the social media profiles. And the resume.

Because if you could do such thing, it meant that you were a dedicated person, loyal to your craft and capable of dedicating countless hours to honing your skills. Precisely what the employers of the world valued, was it not?

In any case, actual bragging would have very little to do with it.

Yeah, right.

“I guess I’ll have to settle for having my eyes open then” admitted Minai.

“Start counting the seconds. Calculate how fast the target is moving and the speed of an arrow, then try shooting the space where the target will appear between that time period” advised the archer.

Math.

The ancient foe of everyone who had less than scientifically inclined mind.

You’d think that of all places magical medieval fantasy land would be the very last one where it gets you.

But no.

The all-seeing and ever-present eye of calculus never slept.

Damn it.

“I stand by my previous statement, said much easier than done” Minai sighed.

“You know we could always go back to making flower-crowns” the redhead laughed.

“No thanks” but pulled the string of her bow to continue the practice.

With all the aching muscles and calluses on the fingers, the one thing that archery didn’t do was that it didn’t attracting bees and other insects and that made it by default a much more preferable type of activity.

It had been a little bit over a week after she returned from Dale and after assessing Minai’s ability to hit a standing target, Tauriel decided that it was about time to make a gradual move to practising with an object that didn’t stand quite so still. After all, out there in the wilderness there weren’t many motionless objects that presented any real danger. It were the ones with the ability to change their position that were to be feared.

One more arrow flew into the air and missed the target.

And then another.

And another.

Sixth, seventh, eight…
Missed, missed and missed.

It wasn’t until the arrow numbered fifteenth or so that something of substance happened.

“Did you see it?” the blonde proclaimed with excitement.

She did not quite hit the pine-cone. Not really. It was more of a light graze at the very corner of it. But it was there. It was definitely there. Even if it could be just an accident or a matter of pure luck. Still. There.

Of course it was a small kind of achievement. And yes, luck most probably had something to do with it. But, as Minai learned lately, it was much healthier to allow yourself to acknowledge even the smallest of your achievements than be forever hanged up upon a long row of failures.

“See? I told you it’ll one get easier with each next arrow”

“I’m just lucky enough to have such a patient teacher”

“You might need to learn to practice on your own as well since I’ll be back to my scouting position starting next week” Tauriel smiled.

“That’s wonderful!” Minai exclaimed.

Tauriel did seem a little cheerier than usual. It was nice to hear what the reason for it was.

“I think I have to thank you for that” the tall elleth said.

“What did I do?” Minai was surprised by the statement.

She had absolutely no doubt that Thranduil would go on and admit to anyone that he had done anything upon her request or suggestion, even that even was the case here. There was simply no reason to do that and besides, it would only get her much more unneeded attention and gossip which the elf clearly knew she detested.

“Maybe not directly” Tauriel shook her head “But I do think that your company has a positive effect on our king”

“No, I think you are misunderstanding the situation. My presence doesn’t change much, I just hand around” the blonde thre her hands into the air laughed with just the tiniest hind of nervousness.

Minai had to admit, Thranduil did change for the better a considerable amount, from her first impression of him at least, in the last few months but it was through his own will and effort to do so. She never tried to influence his behaviour and most of the time she just stood there.

“You might not understand the value of simply having someone near you. Having someone want you to be near. I never gave it much thought myself until I was faced with the possibility of not having my only close friend around. Even if there were many other elves around, none of them were seeking my company as a person. It felt lonely and I desperately wanted to have someone who would want me as me. Kili was that person. He wanted my company, not any random ellet’s, he wished to listen to my stories and tell me his. This seems like nothing from the side, but after being in that position I don’t think it should ever be overlooked” Tauriel closed her eyes and stood there quietly, leaning against the tree.

It was clear that saying those words was by no means easy to the elleth yet after she finished there was a certain wave of calm wash over her face. There were some scars whether on body or soul
that could never fully close, but talking to a friend could ease the pain, even if a little. It was like that for Tauriel. Perhaps speaking about her mistakes and what she learn from them was the way the redhead healed.

“I think I know what you mean” the blonde said recalling certain realizations she had made about her own life recently “But I still have a very hard time agreeing that it was me in particular who affected your king’s behaviour. It could be anyone in my place”

Minai had learned her lesson when simply knowing Thranduil had upped the degree of arrogance in her behaviour. She now knew better than to heat up that little pot of self importance.

“It could be anyone, yes, including someone who wouldn’t want to be at your place” was Tauriel’s reply.

Minai didn’t say anything to that. What could she say? That back then, that distant morning she found her way up to to the balcony it wasn’t exactly the strive for altruism and helping others that were guiding her? That she wasn’t exactly thinking about anyone but herself when making that decision? That it was a moment when she looked deep inside of her and saw a face of something truly ugly? That whatever she did next was simply a result of her trying to distance herself from that?

But, since the conversation stirred that way anyway, there was a question that Minai wanted to ask for quite some time now.

“Doesn’t it bother you, the elves, that some random nobody just appeared out of nowhere and started spending time with your king?” Minai finally asked.

“Would something like that be an issue where you are from?” Tauriel tilted her head in slight surprised.

“I’m sure some would find it unusual” Minai simply shrugged.

It, of course, depended on an individual. However, in general, when a younger person with lower status and no apparent wealth to their name suddenly started to spend a suspicious amount of time around someone rich and influential, quite frankly, it was very much perceived as insincere, was usually frowned upon and societaly condemnable.

Not to mention the term with which that person would be called.

And, sadly, even if she could not at the moment come up with any concrete examples, Minai could not with all sincerity say that never in her life had she participated in that way of thinking, on a very subconscious level, at least.

“People will think what they want to think. There will always be people who will disapprove of your behaviour in one way or another simply based on your background” Tauriel let out an annoyed sigh “But the well-being of our kingdom does depend on that of our king and if your presence brings improvement then most will be willing to close their eyes to your lack of noble status or anything along the lines”

Minai nodded.

That, perhaps, made sense.

It also vaguely resembled the words of that wizard. When help is needed, it doesn’t particularly matter who provides it, a world-renowned hero or a simple passer by.
Maybe she already started to suspect that herself, but it was still nice to have that confirmation from someone who was an actual part of the elven society.

“In that case I’m glad to be useful” Minai smiled.

She never gave it much thought before, but knowing that she was making, however small, a difference was nice. It had a certain sense of belonging to it.

Belonging and purpose.

“Shall we give it another go?” Tauriel winked while tossing a pine-cone up and down in her hand.

“Good idea” Minai reached for an arrow.

The pine-cone flew up into the air and the arrow pursued.

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Maybe not most, but some people would certainly be able to relate to a situation when, after spending a considerable amount of time, effort and other resources, one had to simply admit to not being smart or otherwise capable enough to accomplish the task.

That was the conclusion Minai had to come to about a week or so of trying to find that one needle in the stack of very sharp and scratchy hay. It was a week spent almost exclusively in the library, despite the weather begging anyone who listened to come and enjoy the world outside. Another time the woman would, perhaps, give in to the nature’s pleas, but she no longer had the luxury of doing so.

That conversation with Tauriel had lead her to thinking. Thinking about things that she, perhaps, should not have been thinking at all. And thus it lead her to have a very much rude awakening. And no, it wasn’t in any way connected to her meeting with the wizard. Although that had played a role as well. Not as big of a role though.

No.

The discovery she made was of completely other sort.

It had more to do with her relationship with Thranduil and her place in the king’s life.

It sucked.

Not the relationship though.

On the contrary.

It was terrible exactly because it wasn’t terrible.

Nothing in her life so far sucked nearly as much as the realization how nice and warm it was to be held in Thranduil’s arms and the twinge of joy she felt knowing that he actually cared for her. It sucked to realize just how much she enjoyed their interactions, even the teasing. It sucked to realize how grateful she was to him for leading her to a path of self improvement in term of both, physical skills as well as the intellectual. It sucked, because she was acutely aware of where it would lead her if she continued with the things the way they were. She didn’t want to accidentally develop any inappropriate feelings because she knew darn well that there could never be a chance at reciprocation because…
Because.

Because he was an elf. A beautiful eternal being, in tune with nature and highly dependant on emotions. She, on the other hand, was definitely not magical, had animals avoid her and her level of emotional competence didn’t let her go by a single day without making at lest someone upset. Apparently.

Because he was a king and had more responsibility on his shoulders than she could ever fathom while she drowning in discomfort when someone dared to look at her for longer than a few seconds. She could barely take it to stand in his shadow, she wasn’t nearly strong enough to be by his side.

But also.

Because he was married. Even if the wife was no longer in the picture. They would be reunited again in that land beyond the sea, however it was called.

And then what?

Minai had a very illustrative example right there.

Tauriel.

The blonde woman saw quite well the pain and the despair of love that could not be shared. She didn’t want the same for herself. She wanted to go back to her own world and build her life there only remembering this whole incident as a very very distant dream.

Besides.

Even if the impossible happened, the stars aligned and Minai would get a definitive confirmation that whatever path she chose to pursue here in Mirkwood she would only receive a green light on her journey, even if all of that happened. Even if. What guarantee there was that whatever mysterious force that decided one day to bring her here wouldn’t just as suddenly change it’s omnipotent mind and decide to press the metaphorical undo button?

That would be a disaster on a skyscraper amount of levels.

Even the best case scenario could easily turn into the worst case scenario on a whim of something far beyond the woman’s control.

That’s why when Tauriel went on her scouting mission, Minai made the library into an almost temporary residence. All of her free time she spent reading book upon book, scroll upon scroll, parchment upon parchment. Historical texts, memoires, fiction, fairytales.

Anything.

She had to find anything. Something. The least bit of information that could give her the tiniest of the clues. Just a single speck of information. A name, a date, a location. Anything she could latch on, to know the direction in which to further the research.

Nothing.

There was nothing.

So far.
The library was huge and had the largest and the most ancient tomes Minai had ever seen in her life. Going through all of them would take years and for that the blonde was almost grateful. She had her schedule full and any chances of bumping into someone she didn’t want to face close to a zero. And she had her thoughts completely preoccupied.

Well.

Most of the time. Save for that little detour over the reasons of why she was sitting here instead of learning to make flower-crowns or any other stuff that wouldn’t help her to get home any way faster. But in her defence, Minai found that particular book to be pretty much unreadable. Either that or she really simply wasn’t smart or knowledgeable enough to comprehend anything of what was written in there. It didn’t even have anything to do with the language. The studies helped and she could read elvish perfectly fine and in the instances when she wasn’t she could still try and read it somewhat aloud for it to be automatically translated.

But no.

It wasn’t the language. It was the terminology. The elves, it seemed, didn’t particularly believe in footnotes or explanations. Every now and then she encountered a term which she had to cross-reference with another book and then cross reference the terms she encountered in the explanation one more time to gain any bit of actual understanding. Besides, most of the explanations were of the following nature: What is a flower-crown? A headpiece made of flowers. And what is a flower? Something you make a flower-crown with.

Go figure.

Sufficed to say, the research was going absolutely nowhere and all Minai managed to accomplish so far was getting bored out of her wits.

The woman rested her head on a smaller pile of books. She wasn’t even concerned of being scolded by the librarian because first, after a certain incident the librarian simply chose to avoid her and second, she was so well hidden from the rest of the world by an entire fortress made out of books that chances of being discovered were not that big to begin with.

Minai sighed and had the sound somewhat repeated by a prolonged and solemn chirp.

The bullfinch wasn’t any more entertained than she was. Even less so, perhaps. He was a bird. He belonged in the nature. Not cooped up in a dusty dim library.

The woman let out even a deeper sigh and once again had it imitated by Buddy. To the best of his ability, of course.

Fascinating.

It was definitely most fascinating how deep the rabbit hole of boredom could go once you stopped pretending that venturing right into it was not the sole thing on your agenda.

Alas, the true depth of boredom was never meant to be discovered. At least not by Minai and not on that particular day. She didn’t manage to achieve any procrastination enlightenment or a catharsis of excuses. That venture was abruptly interrupted and indefinitely postponed.

Minai was completely startled out of her dazed state by the sound of books falling in massive amount. It made her rapidly jump up and knock even more manuscripts down on the floor. Such commotion, of course, attracted inevitable attention from the librarian who peeked from one of the
shelves. But, as soon as she appeared, she vanished out of sight once again when she saw who was the one that dared to disrespect the library’s property.

It was Thranduil.

No.

Wait.

It was a person who looked exactly like Thranduil. As in, he had the same facial features and was dressed in similar fashion since no one else at Mirkwood was ever noticed wearing a crown. Even though it appeared to be kind of crooked now.

But that was where the similarities ended.

Because the elven king that Minai knew could never have this type of expression on his face.

The expression of happiness and almost childlike excitement.

“How may I help you?” the woman muttered in a state of complete bewilderment.

“Come with me, I want to show you something” Thranduil smiled, completely oblivious to the havoc he just caused.

Remember that tangent about how much wiser it would be to just stay away from him and avoid getting involved too much? Well, neither did Minai. Okay. She did. She remembered all of that perfectly well. But. There had to be some kind of balance between establishing an emotional distance and being downright rude. Right? Right. And besides. There were certain things in this world that she simply would never be able to refuse, no matter how strong her initial resolve was. One of those things was knowing the reason for the usually stoic and brooding elven lord acquiring the same facial expression as that of a child whose parents decided to have an extra birthday party for them when the actual birthday was six months away.

Saying no in such circumstances was simply undoable.

“Sure, let me just pick up the...” she tried not sounding like a person who was all too eager to be saved from death by boredom. Ahem. She spoke like a person who was politely agreeing to temporarily take a break from an important research. That, and Minai started to have some doubts on whether she’d be allowed into the library after what just transpired. The king might have knocked down half of the books, but the other half was on her.

“It will get sorted out” he extended his hand in an offer, not picking up on her concern, probably due to impatience.

Minai took the elf’s hand and followed him out of the library, giving the librarian an apologetic look which hopefully communicated something along the lines of ‘I’m very sorry about the books, but I simply must abide the authority here’. Hopefully. It would be rather unfortunate if it was more of ‘Ha-ha, that’ll teach you to be a gossip’. Because even if she wanted to be the bigger person and rise above the pettiness, some of it still lingered somewhere in the back corners of her conscience.

The woman had to admit, her curiosity wasn’t just peaked, it was skyrocketed right into the outer space, fuelled by an undiluted confusion. She couldn’t even begin to guess. No, really. There wasn’t a single thing, plausible or implausible which she could imagine getting this type of reaction from the elven lord. Fine. There was, perhaps, a certain option which did indeed come to
her mind. But Minai couldn’t really smell any alcohol which, she imagined, it would have taken a rather considerable amount to cause such an effect. She was therefore left wondering.

She wanted to know though.

Who wouldn’t!?

Alas.

All of Minai’s attempts of finding out ahead of time did not turn out to be successful. Thranduil just simply refused to tell which only lead to frustration and even more curiosity. Still, Minai couldn’t bring herself to feel the least bit annoyed nor did she want to, really. It was simply impossible to even think about annoyance in such circumstances.

“What point is there in keeping it a secret if you are still intending to tell me?” she whined, playfully.

“I must admit, I am surprised to hear you being against keeping secrets” he laughed in a lighthearted manner.

Minai rolled her eyes.

First of all, how dare he.

Second of all, fair enough.

Even if he didn’t mean that as an accusation, she did feel a slight pang of guilt at his words. Which in most cases was a telltale sign of actually being in the wrong.

As if she needed any signs to know that.

It was completely wrong how she just brushed off his sincere concern for her back in Dale. It even, perhaps, came harsher than she intended for it to be.

Minai knew perfectly well that her behaviour was not the most rational in this situation. Thranduil had shown her nothing but trust so far. She did the opposite. She guarded her little secrets even more fiercely than the dragon warded it’s gold.

Damn.

He probably knew a thing or two about wizards and could explain what her encounter with Gandalf was all about.

But.

She couldn’t.

No matter what, she couldn’t bring any of this up.

The personal woes she went through, that was all she had in this world. It was the very little she had that belonged to her and her alone. It was her own little world where she and only she had access to. The only thing which could not be taken or stolen or talked out of existence as it happened with the perfect life she thought she had.

It was her only line of defence, her sole frontier and she just wasn’t brave enough let anyone else inside.
Not because she was afraid of not being understood.

Not because she believed that her inner turmoil would be ridiculed, called insignificant or anything else even remotely similar to that.

No.

She was not afraid of any of those things.

It was the opposite that she feared.

Being understood what the exact thing she feared so much.

It terrified her, to think that Thranduil would just accept her, with all of her worries, that he would treat all of her little concerns as valid, that he would just welcome her as the person that she truly was with all of her flaws and shortcomings. It would just be completely horrible in how happy it would make her feel and how far it would throw her beyond the point of no possible return.

Minai didn’t want to risk it.

There were far too many ‘ifs’ and ‘buts’ and whims of fate ready to destroy whatever little she tried to build.

It was not her world. She did not belong here.

She couldn’t gamble with the risk of wanting to stay.

Minai therefore accepted her defeat and continued to follow Thranduil in silence even if it did take some effort to keep up without making it appear as if she had to run. That was preposterous. Despite all that training she did, she was still so much slower than most of the elves due to the virtue of the pointy-eared being taller and thus having longer legs.

Yeah. The world was not a fair place.

What else was new?

Actually, there was something.

It was a realization that despite having walked through half of the palace hand in hand with Thranduil, Minai didn’t notice any gazes turned to her. That wasn’t because the stares weren’t there. They were, most probably. She simply didn’t pay enough attention to notice them. There were more things to be preoccupied with. Most of them related to the fact that, indeed, her hand was indeed held by the elven king. Her mind didn’t even properly register when or how it happened. It just happened so quick and pretty much naturally.

It wasn’t the first time something like this happened. But back in Dale it was more out of necessity. There wasn’t much of necessity now. Was it, perhaps, his way of making sure that she was still there and following him? Could be. Even though her breathing and loud footsteps would have been enough of an indicator by themselves. Yeah. She might have learned to keep up with the elves’ pacing but it was a long road ahead before she even began to match any of them in stealth and grace. If it even was anywhere near the realm of possibilities.

Minai definitely had her doubts about that.

Sooner rather than later she started to recognize the approximate destination. This only made her
intrigued even more. What could be so exciting at a place like this?

“Hey, I think we’ve passed the entrance” the woman was quite surprised to see the gate leading to the stables, which she presumed to be the place they were heading to, be left behind.

“Not quite” the elf answered, leading her further away.

Not too far though.

It was almost right behind the first construction. Minai hesitated to call anything in this forest a building. Buildings were build. Everything in Mirkwood was pretty much made out of weirdly shaped trees, which looked neat but raised some questions about the terminology.

Thranduil stopped beside the, wooden of course, door and gestured for his companion to be quiet. Still a little bit confused Minai gave his hand a light squeeze to indicate that she understood the request. Trying not to make any noise she followed the elf inside and…

Minai let out the quietest most excited gasp in her entire life.

The simple word ‘cute’ would never be able to properly describe picture which unfolded before her eyes. It wasn’t just cute. It was the single cutest, most adorable sight she wouldn’t even be able to imagine for herself.

“Oh, so they really do have the spots” the woman whispered gingerly.

It was a baby deer she was looking at. A tiny little thing, with it’s fluffy ears seemingly too big for it’s small head, thin legs, tuft of a tail and the eyes, those big dark eyes framed by the longest eyelashes. And the spots. Those white spots specked on it’s back.

The animal couldn’t be more than a day or two old for it couldn’t even properly hold it’s shaky head up for too long, choosing instead to snuggle against it’s mother.

The mother.

Thranduil was a very tall elf, but even his height no longer seemed that impressive compared to the female deer.

The female deer.

What did the male one look like then?

A memory stirred somewhere back in Minai’s mind.

The throne.

It was decorated with a pair of huge, no, enormous antlers which she, in all her naivete, considered to be another wooden carving made strictly for aesthetic purposes.

No.

Apparently not.

Primordial… respect, let’s call it that, was what she felt towards the animal.

All the more sure she was in her resolve to admire the baby deer from a distance, without making any attempts to come closer and especially to pet it.
One thing to know about animal mothers.

They rarely reacted well when a human touched their babies uninvited.

For example, stray cats could easily abandon their litter once they felt a foreign scent on their fur. Rodents, even domesticated rabbits, could easily harm their own progeny. And if you saw baby wild boars, well, the wisest thing to do would be to climb the nearest tree as high as possible long before you see their mother and then wait for the porcine procession to pass you by and hide far far away into the forest. If you value your life, that is.

Therefore Minai stood to the side with the widest grin on her face, slowly melting away into a puddle of ‘awwws’ and other incoherent sounds one would make to express their glee. Meanwhile the elf she came there with didn’t fare too much better. He went on to pet the doe’s head, whispering something into the animal’s ear. Minai looked at him with in a pensive kind of way. Those deer had to have some real importance if seeing a newborn could make Thranduil this happy.

“I can’t believe something so tiny will grow up to be this big” Minai wondered aloud.

“It will be several decades before he matures and will be grown up enough to serve as a mount” the elven king answered.

So the baby deer was a he.

Wait.

“You ride on those?” her eyebrows flew up in surprise.

Although, what was there to be surprised by? The whole deer aesthetic was far more than apparent from the very beginning. The antlers on the thrown, the peculiar crown. The fact that the kingdom was located in the middle of a very dense forest. Moreover. Those deer, or elk, or whatever they were definitely had all the attributes to serve as mounts. They were supposedly big enough and the males’ antlers would be enough to scare half an army away.

“They’ve served my family for generations. The little one’s father was by my side in many battles”

By the solemn tone of his voice Minai could easily guess what happened to the baby deer’s father. And, counting the months, it was fairly clear when that happened as well. All the more clear became the reason of why was this particular animal so important to the elven king.

The deer’s birth really did have a lot of meaning to it and was significant in more ways than one. It was a sign, a physical tangible confirmation, that wounds left by the winter’s battle were slowly starting to heal. That the forest and the kingdom of elves and the forest weren’t completely dying off. It was indeed a joyous occasion to Thranduil. And she, Minai realized, was the one with whom he wanted to share this happiness with.

For the briefest moment it was as if all the air had disappeared and she could not make a single breath.

No one had ever valued her like that.

Suddenly her dusty grey eyes met with the dark brown ones and the woman felt almost… studied.

“Are you sure she is okay with me being here?” Minai asked warily, throwing a glance at the mother deer.
“She is simply surprised to see a new face. Give me your hand” Thranduil answered reaching out his arm.

The woman did as she was told and placed her hand into the elf’s. He then proceeded to position her hand onto the animal’s muzzle. There were a few moments when nothing happened. Then Minai felt the animal lean into her touch, which sent a wave of warmth throughout her body. She let out a breath she didn’t know she has been holding.

Accepted.

The animals accepted her.

No, you don’t get it.

It was one things to not be shunned by adult animals, even the wild ones. But being recognized as a decent being by an animal mother with a newborn was on a completely other level. It was the purest form of being told that she was not a bad person. Not that she ever considered herself to be particularly terrible, but being confirmed that there was good in her was... nice.

It was really really nice.

“Awww, good girl, beautiful girl” Minai cooed while petting the animal’s fur, which turned out to be much softer than she imagined it would be “I can’t believe she likes me”

“Why wouldn’t she?” the elf asked in a half amused tone.

“Well, you know. The whole situation with me being the only living thing in this world who doesn’t have fea. Not only she is not able to sense my intention, she probably can’t tell what type of creature I’m supposed to be” the woman shrugged.

“She can see you are an elf”

“Can she? What if I just cover my ears?” Minai did just that and looked at the doe who observed the interaction with her head slightly tilted.

“You will still be an elf” Thranduil insisted, more persistently than before.

That was interesting, to say the least. He sounded pretty adamant on the idea of her being one of the pointy eared. It definitely couldn’t be because he thought that being an elf was a desire of hers. The fact was well established that she saw her true place to be among humans.

“Does it make any difference if I am one or not?” the woman asked a question which was only partially rhetorical.

“Of course it does. Mortal lives are much shorter, it would be sad to see you go too early” he said in a half joking manner.

“Hopefully I’ll be able to return home soon enough so there probably wouldn’t even be any time for you to notice me starting to age” she, however, failed to notice that even if Thranduil was trying to make his words appear as a joke he only managed to do so partially.

What she did notice though, was how much more strained his smile appeared after she spoke those words.

“Tell me something about yourself” he asked all of a sudden, facing away from Minai.
“Why would you want to know?” the woman asked, very much surprised by the request.

“It came to my mind that there is a lot you know about me and there is next to nothing that I know about you. You can consider that to be an issue of fairness” Thranduil explained “It doesn’t have to be anything significant or anything you do not wish to tell”

Minai sighed.

“But you already do know pretty much everything there is to know about me. You know about my education, what skills I possess and thus the type of role I occupied. You know that I grew up with my parents, that I like animals and that I had a pet bunny” it was rather shocking to Minai herself that her biographical summary amounted to just two sentences but oh well “Apart from that, I guess I enjoy reading fictional stories in my free time” and by ‘reading’ she meant streaming from online services, but that would be a tiny bit difficult thing to explain right now.

Yeah.

Who was to blame that all the stuff that was more or less worth telling about happened to Minai after her arrival to Middle Earth?

Okay, okay.

The question was purely rhetorical.

No need to point fingers.

“What type of stories do you prefer?”

A simple kind of question, at the core of it. But in reality, one of trickiest ones he could have asked. Minai never had a strong preference for any of the genres, but neither she could just name any one at random. First, of course, her secret stash of romance novels. She already knew Thranduil’s opinion on those. It was also unlikely that an elf would have any sort of appreciation for a good detective story because the pointy eared society had a remarkable lack of inner crime which was, of course, extremely admirable but didn’t leave much room for telling a murder mystery. Anything involving space exploration or science fiction was out of the question as well. And fantasy stories, the ones that would be the most appropriate in this type of scenario, was the one genre she knew the absolute least about.

What was left out there?

Well, there was something. Actually. Minai read plenty of elvish tales in her pursuit of learning their language. Many of them were similar in nature to fairytales, which was perfect. Most of the ones she knew were rather harmless and didn’t have anything in them that would arise any questions she could not answer.

“The stories I enjoyed at home are not that much different to the ones you have here”

“Is that so?” Thranduil asked, thinking about something “Tell me one, so I could compare. They, I think, wouldn’t mind listening as well” he nodded to the pair of deer that were both sitting quietly but awake.

“Hmm, why not?” Minai agreed, even if not completely understanding the motive “Come here” she made a few steps towards a comfortable enough looking stack of hay and sat on it.

The elf followed, yet, instead of taking a place on the haystack, he opted to sit on the floor and…
Well.

Minai didn’t have much in her possession. At that particular time of her life time or even in general. But, whatever little she had, she’d give away the good portion of it to anyone who could, with definite proof of course, explain whether or not such gesture was natural elvish behaviour stemming from their social nature and different cultural norms pertaining physical proximity.

Also, some blood pressure regulating medicine would be nice.

A sudden thought pierced the woman’s mind. She raised her eyes to face the doe and gave the animal the best ‘if you say a single word about this I’m having venison for dinner’ look she could possibly manage. The doe didn’t seem particularly phased by the threat, she closed her eyes and, Minai would bet what little that was left of her stuff once she paid off the elven anthropologist, the deer was laughing at her.

Anyway.

There she was sitting at the haystack, completely red in the face and right beside her was the elven king with his head rested comfortably on her knee.

Yeah.

Admittedly, not the worst situation she could have found herself in.

Not the worst at all.

Back on the track though.

Fairytales.

What were the ones that she knew?

Well, she knew that one story about a deer, but it was definitely out of the question. Everybody knows what happened in that one.

Snow White wouldn’t be the right story to tell either. Not to Thranduil at least. But Tauriel, on the other hand, might be the one to actually appreciate it. For obvious reasons.

The Little Mermaid? No. Not about the mermaid either. Minai had no idea whether the mermaid existed in this world, in fiction or not. She would be risking having to go on a tangent explaining what mermaids were and why such concept even existed. Plus it ended badly.

Sleeping Beauty, maybe? Probably not. Sleeping for a hundred years wouldn’t seem like much of a tragedy to an elf.

Wait.

There was one with just the right amount of magic and nothing that would require any additional explanation.

“In a small village there once lived a merchant who travelled a lot to sell his goods” Minai started the tale “One time he settled to travel far far away and so he asked his three daughters what each of them would want to be brought as a souvenir. The two eldest daughters requested jewels a plenty and expensive fabric to craft a dress that would make all the neighbourhood maidens jealous. The youngest daughter, who was known across the village as Beauty for her remarkable appearance,
didn’t want to put a strain on her father and requested but a single rose...”

That particular fairytale, the ‘Beauty and the Beast’, at least the version that was told to Minai most often, was not exactly the best example of a story crafted with logic. First of all, why were the eldest sisters painted in a negative light right from the beginning? The father was the one who offered the gifts. Not like they demanded anything. Besides. At those times the only way for a woman to succeed in life, quite unfortunately, was to find a wealthy enough husband. And that task required pumping up one’s appearance. Therefore the sisters weren’t greedy. They were trying to score a future which would help them support their father when he grew old and frail as well. But no. Let’s praise the naivete and condemn the foresight.

Typical.

“…when the merchant return home he told his daughters about the encounter with the Beast and the demand to take Beauty to the palace...”

And this part was even worse. The fairytale portrayed the father as a sympathetic figure. Why? First of all, he did steal. Was that necessary at all? Like, weren’t there roses sold in their home village? Didn’t they grow on the flowerbeds all across the village? Weren’t there wild roses? Even if there weren’t, it was rather doubtful that a girl who requested just a rose would be crestfallen over not getting nothing at all. Moreover, if the father didn’t want to give Beauty away, why tell about the whole ordeal in the first place? He knew the kind of person she was. He knew she’d volunteer to go.

Minai’s theory was that the merchant wanted to get rid of Beauty. First of all, Beast was clearly rich. Yes, maybe his appearance was not the best, not to mention the character traits, but he had a castle and likely a vault full of gold. Second, Beauty clearly wasn’t capable of thinking about the future herself. So yeah, why not give away the daughter who in a few years would be a huge hindrance.

Okay.

Minai took it back.

The father was a sympathetic character. A clever man who could think more than one step ahead. Just like two of his eldest daughters.

“...thus beauty came home bearing gifts. Her family was beyond happy to see her and didn’t want to part this soon. Therefore the sisters had shifted the clock...”

Yeah. What’s with that part? If the sisters wanted to get Beauty in trouble with the Beast then shame on them, of course. But Beauty did claim that he was at that point a changed person and so he shouldn’t mind her being late a day or two. Who could have predicted that the Beast could quite literally die if Beauty didn’t come back on time? No, really. What if the poor girl accidentally twisted her ankle or something similar to that nature preventing her from returning?

Seriousy.

“...and they lived happily ever after” Minai finished the tale, running a hand through the elf’s hair.

The woman didn’t really notice when was she started doing that as well as that she continued with it pretty much throughout the whole tale. She, of course, stopped, once it came to her attention. But then again, it’s not like there were any objections from his side. It was just so nice. His hair, that is. So smooth and silky and pretty. If it weren’t for those pointy ears…
Although.

The ears weren’t that bad, were they? It even looked cute how…

No.

Just no.

Minai had absolutely no problem with admitting that she found someone to be good looking. Stating objective facts was a completely natural thing to do. However. Finding that certain small details of their appearance were particularly cute, especially if that opinion wasn’t there before, well, that was a little bit different.

What would that difference be, one might ask?

You see, plenty of people could easily admit to finding a celebrity person attractive. But how many of them would switch to a mode of complete denial when one day out of the blue they woke up thinking that a colleague they’ve spent months working side by side with has a very cute smile?

Exactly.

There’s your difference.

“It is a nice story” Thranduil sighed in a somewhat wistful manner.

“Really? I always thought it was a little bit silly. This is a fairytale and certain things I can forgive, but the part where the Beast quite literally dies of sadness the moment Beauty is late is a little bit too much in my opinion” and not so little bit as well.

“Do you really find that funny?” his voice sounded unexpected serious and almost hurt.

A distant memory stirred in Minai’s mind. What did Tauriel say back then? No elf could survive heartbreak twice? Minai took it as a figure of speech, an exaggeration. But now, seeing Thranduil’s reaction she started to doubt her initial reaction.

“Can… something like that actually happen?” the woman asked carefully.

“What if it can?”

Then on her next birthday Minai would like to request a golden plaque with an engraving ‘I am a terrible insensitive person’ or something of a similar sentiment.

Sure, such plot element was a convenient target to harp on in fiction. In fiction. To die of a heartbreak. Because it seemed ridiculously unrealistic.

But.

Was it really?

Even in her own world, there were people who were born with a heart condition and whose well-being did directly depend on their emotion.

Would she find it funny if she found out a person died of a heart attack when they learned that their loved one died in a car crash?

No.
Never.

And if a similar thing happened to an elf after their family member or significant other was, let’s say, slain by an orc?

Of course not.

Neither of these scenarios were funny.

“I would never consider anyone’s suffering to be amusing” Minai tried to make her voice as kind as she possibly could “But Beauty was simply late”

“Loneliness is not an easy thing to live with, but it is still possible to get used to, with time it does begin to seem natural. Beauty gave the Beast hope than even with the flaws and his hideous appearance there was someone who could find it in her heart to at least feel sympathy for him. When Beauty did not return that hope was taken away and that is next to impossible to live through” Thranduil stood up but didn’t turn to face Minai.

“It was just a fairytale” she stood up as well and lightly touched his shoulder.

“Tell me. Do you consider my appearance to be pleasant?”

What!?

Was that the aspect of the story which resonated so strongly with the elf?

He had to know what he looked like.

If he didn’t consider his own appearance to be pleasant then what kind of opinion could he possibly have about the look of all the other world’s inhabitants.

“You are quite agreeable to look at, yes” Minai stated politely. Perhaps ‘agreeable’ was not quite the word that she would normally choose for such a situation but just in case it was a way to bait her into giving compliments then she refused to bite.

“What if I was not? Would you still agree to spend your time in my company?”

The important thing was the scale of the issue.

Most of the instances when Minai paid more attention to someone’s appearance than usual was when the person was significantly more attractive to her personally. Or when admiring a particularly well put together outfit and makeup.

In the rest of the cases she didn’t acknowledge more than would be required to create an identikit. A very approximate one.

But.

To be fair.

A giant sentient spider, no matter how good of a conversationalist, would be the one whom she would find it a really hard time to look at.

“I’m not sure I understand” Minai admitted.

No matter how she tried, she couldn’t grasp the direction in which the conversation was going and
the destination it was supposed to arrive to.

It couldn’t be because of that one time she joked about preferring to stay with the elves because they were nice to look at, could it? It was a joke. It was obviously a joke. He had to know that she wasn’t being any kind of serious when she said that.

“Then allow me to explain” Thranduil finally turned around to face her.

Against her will the woman took a step back and covered her mouth with a hand. Somewhere out there, at the very deepest darkest corners of her mind, well hidden even from Minai herself, she was almost glad that he couldn’t see her expression.

His face.

The left left half of it.

Parts of the skin and maybe even flesh were completely melted away and missing, exposing the charred torn apart muscles. The burn, and that was exactly what it was, went down to his neck and no doubt the rest of the left side of his body. His left eye, barred of an eyelid, was murky white and the right one, while retaining an icy blue iris, presented nothing but a still and lifeless stare. And, whether it was really the case or the trick of the dim lanterns, the colour of his face seemed almost sickly pale with the shadow underneath the less afflicted eye much more prominent than before.

Minai stood entirely still for a few moments, very much aware of her own breathing, while the shock of the situation started to wear off. She knew that just standing there like some kind of speechless column was by no means good but all the thoughts in her head had scattered around and she simply could not find an appropriate reaction.

She suppressed the initial impulse to say something along the lines of ‘I’m sorry this happened to you’. This was true. Minai would never wish such a thing upon anybody. However. Before he was rather clear about his desire to not be pitied.

Neither could she say that it was barely noticeable or anything of a similar nature. Anyone who would say that a violently inflicted burn covering, what seemed to be half of a person’s body, would be a liar.

She wanted to say that it did not matter.

And yet.

That wasn’t something to be told, was it?

“What is the matter my dear? You are unusually quiet” Thranduil spoke in his usual deceptively half-bored manner.

Minai by that point was well aware that the facade of indifference was just that. An act. She could only guess what emotions were hidden underneath the mask of indifference and even less she was aware what kind of reaction he wanted to see from her.

But that was just it.

Not always in life one would be given a chance to ponder over their actions and calculate all of the possible outcomes with their consequences. Sometimes a person were simply not given enough time to find the right answer. Other times, the single ‘correct’ answer was simply not there. People’s interactions and perceptions, their standards of what was right or wrong varied. In one instance the action decided everything. In others, it was the intent that mattered.
A relationship, whatever was the nature of it, could not be built on pragmatism and calculated moves. Eventual mistakes were inevitable and at times like this, waiting for too long to find the right answer was the only irreparable error that could be made.

Minai took a step forward and slowly reached her hand, very gently removing a few loose strands of hair covering Thranduil’s face.

“Does it hurt?” she asked.

The only response she got was a slight rise of the eyebrows.

“Back then in the dungeons” Minai explained the nature of her question “When I grabbed on to you, I think I hurt you”

“It doesn’t hurt now”

Good. The woman bit her lip. It was a rather risky thing to do, but she knew that right now no words could ever replace a single small action.

Minai carefully placed her hand against the burned part of Thranduil’s face, with this gesture saying that she was there, she was not afraid or disgusted, that she would not run.

“When I first saw you” the woman started “I thought that surely there existed no other who could ever rival you in appearance, not back at home, not here in the forest. And then you spoke to me and I could not be more sure in my resolve to never approach you again for no appearance would ever be worth putting up with that demeanour. I’ve learned since that appearances as well as first impressions might be deceiving. I am not Beauty from the fairytale, I do not know how would I have acted if this was the face I saw from the beginning. But I can tell you this, for me, the only measure for being in your company was the kind of person I believed you to be and it will remain that way no matter what appearance I see before my eyes”

Minai was ready for her hand to be slapped away, to be told off on her insolence.

Neither happened.

Instead, she felt herself being pulled into an embrace. Warm. Comfortable.

She absolutely hated how much she enjoyed it.

Weird, huh?

How willing she was now to be there for him.

Even though it was the same person she pretty much wished the worst upon just a few months ago.

Although.

He was not the same at all.

They were both completely different people back then, weren’t they?

When Minai raise her head too look once again, Thranduil’s face looked the same way it always did.

“Was that the encounter with the dragon that you’ve mentioned?” by no means did Minai want to pressure him into giving answers. But if he chose to share the story, she wanted him to know that
she would be there to listen.

He didn’t answer right away and it was rather apparent that he was debating with himself on whether or not to answer at all. Thranduil sighed and the seemingly rigid lines of his face softened, just a little.

“It was” he admitted after a pause “Let’s go. That is not a story that can be told without a glass of wine”

Chapter End Notes

So I kind of figured out that I was just bored with writing about people having relatively good time. I'm much better at writing about suffering. Therefore the next chapter will probably be about the dragon and with a heavy content warning. And we'll probably see each other in half a year because I never wrote actual action before and how is it even done.

About this chapter. Tauriel update. I felt like it was needed.

I adressed the whole issue of why she won't talk about herself much. It's the line she doesn't want to cross yet, I mean I wrote half of this story demonstrating how emotional attachment is more intimate to her than physical proximity. In the modern world that would probably be something else, but the way the elves here are I obviously can't write that in. Also I kind of wanted to write a scene where he 'gives' her something but figured out that it can't be tangible goods. Not because of any fancy reasons. Because all of his gold and jewelry is monopoly money to her. Like, yes, it's shiny, but what to do with it? Buy a dress and make herself extra pretty so that everyone pays attention to her? That's what she's trying to actively avoid. Again, in the modern world, she'd be hyper aware of his wealth. Half an hour ride in a sports car would have a stronger effect on her much more that Smaug's entire vault of gold. Therefore he really 'gives' her something that is extremly precious to him - the deer, since she made a point of liking animals a few chapters back.

Anyway, hope you've enjoyed reading, have a great day.
Has it really been a month since I uploaded the previous chapter? Well, there are actually reasons this time. I was reading the 'Silmarillion' to get some plot details. Anyway. Long term you are all benefitting from this. I was feeling extremly uninspired to continue writing this story and contemplated making this the last chapter with a very open end. I wrote it that way but then procrastinated on editing for weeks until I got an actual idea with how I wanted the next chapter to be and if I write the next one then it won't be a convinient end of an arc and abandoning something without at least somewhat legitimate 'ending' point just bothers me too much. So this will probably continue for another arc at least. See? Procrastinating does good.

This chapter doesn't really have any particular content warning. Deaths are mentioned but nothing graphic is described. To tell the truth I'm uncomfortable with reading such content or watching it on the screen so it should be no surprise that I can't write it either. I apparently have a writing 'range'.

The War of Wrath and the events at Doriath are canon. For those who didn't read Silmarillion I included a short summary of the war in the beginning. I only took liberty with how the dragon incident went. It could only happen during the War of Wrath, I think. Basically, I only wanted to work with what I was given without adding if an alternative was already there and without removing anything if I didn't like it. It is kind of obvious that in the movies they copied the events of Doriath and the silm necklace, but... Ah, yes, I might have misunderstood something but it seems that Oropher (Thranduil's father) only became a king after the War of Wrath. Anyway, I read it somewhere and went with it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
fell that day and history were still to tell a few tales of desolation caused by the reptilian fire.

Not many could truly foresee the true scale of destruction and carnage which would take place during those events, that would go down in history as one of the darkest the world had to ever face. And even though that knowledge would never deter those who marched bravely to face the Enemy and protect all which was dear to their hearts, it would perhaps prevent a few reckless tragedies.

But such were the sins of youth and inexperience, nurtured in plenty by tales about their forefathers’ feats of bravery and valour, which as it often happens only grew in epicness with each time they were retold. It happens so that the grandeur of heroism translates much better into a tale than the evidence of horror does. In part that could be attributed to the victorious triumphs being a much more pleasant and easier for the heart to recall and recite with torture and maiming not being something that anyone would ever want to resurface in their memory. In other part, however, it simply happens so that a rare lesson is learned from a tale and with no aid of personal experience.

It had been so and thus it will remain until the world stands and the young with dreams of grand accomplishments and triumph over evil continue to exist.

***

The dragon hummed in pleasure and smiled, baring a few rows of large blood-stained daggers that were the beast’s teeth.

It was quite a good day for the fire breathing reptile. Good news came from left and right. The armies of men and elves, despite temporarily forgetting about their usual useless quarrel were nowhere near winning. A day or two ago the orcs had a major triumph from the northern front, delivering quite the blow to the elven forces and, which was perhaps the most important, tarnishing their supporting wing and leaving the overgrown woodland fairies without a few of their precious healing units. The dragons, as it should be, were not at all far behind and could justifiably brag about taking out an entire echelon of mortals and sending them to wherever they believed they would go to after their worthless lives were over.

But neither of those instances were the ones that brought the smile on the dragon’s face. It was something different and much more personal. He was not the biggest one among his brethren nor did he have any special rank in the hierarchy. He had no massive amount of gold in his possession and not many songs were crafted of his deeds. Yet it was him and him alone that the fate chose to grant a very special gift upon that day. Something that not many of his kin got to witness.

An entire squad of elves, young brave and determined, all like one in their shining armour, with swords and bows in their hands, with an unquestionable belief of their victory.

Entertainment galore.

Was there ever a better present to be granted?

The dragon was a patient one and so he knew how to pace himself to prolong the enjoyment.

One swing of a tail took care of any danger the archers could have ever posed, if such a thing was even possible, of course. Their bodies flew into the air like a bunch of dead leaves in autumn, save for the landing which was far less graceful.

Another swing and the archers were no more for what little was left of their bodies after being crashed had only a rather approximate resemblance to their initial forms.

Too bad, too bad.
The dragon let out a cloud of thick smoke from his nostrils.

Too bad the elven archers were dead and thus unable to properly thank him for granting them a demise so quick and merciful, since the orcs would for sure have been far less generous with their methods of choice.

But such was the price for being kind, the dragon laughed to himself. There were still plenty of elves to satisfy his need for interaction.

With one movement of a large leathery wing another bunch of elves were knocked from their feet and prompted upwards.

One elf.

Two elves.

Three…

Like a child catches the first snowflakes in the beginning of winter with their tongue, the reptile opened his giant mouth and allowed the prey to fall right into it, finishing the job with a clang of metal armour clashing with his teeth and a crunching sound indicating that a few more elves had permanently left the world of living.

Quick death for them as well.

But it was worth it.

The fear and the terror that took the control over the remaining ones.

Three.

There were three of them left.

Another cloud of thick acrid smoke and the elves were stripped from the ability to see or even comprehend the world around them.

The dragon watched from above at their desperate attempts to find each other or, at least, any kind of reference point. That was all in vain of course. It only gave the dragon more time and opportunity to observe what he was dealing with exactly and choose the victim that would satisfy his fancy for entertainment.

One was a redhead with nothing particularly significant about him. Boring. Snap of a claw and that one was rendered unconscious and to be dealt with at a later time. Another one was a female and she as well had nothing of the sort that could catch anyone’s attention, let alone that of an ancient fire-breathing beast. Another snap and the female joined her friend in his anticipation to become a dessert. It was the third one that the dragon needed.

This one had more of a presence than the rest of them, with fancier sword and armour, if one were to judge purely based on the elven standards, of course. The elf had to be either rich or in charge. Whether one or the other or both of those together, either of the possibilities promised quite the amount of poise and arrogance that was ever so fun to be taken away before delivering a coup de grâce.

The dragon hummed in anticipation and with one paw he nailed the elf to the ground, with the other paw the beast lifted the helmet’s visor to take a closer look at his pray.
“A pretty one I see” the reptile’s voice thundered in excitement “It would be a real shame if someone took that away from you, wouldn’t it?”

The captive didn’t answer. He couldn’t. The dragon’s claw pressed heavily on the elf’s chest, rendering him completely incapable of doing anything but gasping for air.

“Not the talkative type? No matter, no matter” the dragon’s tail coiled, disturbing the motionless bodies of the fallen elven warriors “There is no need for you to say anything, I can read the answers right from your mind. It’s not that hard to do when you are so young”

The silence lasted for shorter than a moment.

“What to do, what to do” the beast mused “I don’t feel the desire to part with you right now. Not yet. One can only ravage so many armies before it gets repetitive my little elf. It’s good to bring in a little variety every now and then, don’t you agree?” the reptile paused, as if waiting for the answer which he knew quite well would never come “I know what we shall do. We shall play a game. I will ask the questions and you will give me the answers, sound good?” another pause “As I’ve said, there is need for you to do anything, I will take all I want myself”

The dragon rested his scale covered head right beside the captured elf and with one of the claws made the warrior to face him.

“This wasn’t a coordinated attack, was it?” the dragon’s eye observed the elf’s reaction “How do I know? Kind of you to ask. You and your little squad, all of you were so young, so full of hopes” the dragon especially emphasised the past tense of the wording “And look at where you are now. But back to the question. Did you lot truly think that a dozen fools with their mothers’ milk still fresh on their lips could actually ambush a dragon?” the reptile let out a cloud of acid smoke, nearly suffocating the elf.

“Oh, where are my manners?” the dragon lifted his claw, ever so slightly letting a nearly suffocated captive a gasp of air, thus postponing the impending demise for just a few minutes longer.

“You… and all your kind shall perish” the elf wheezed between gasps.

“I show you kindness and this is how you repay me? With an insult?” the lizard’s voice went dangerously low “I believe such insolence and ill manners deserves a punishment”

A single tap of the claw and the sound of cracking ribs was completely drowned out by a painful cry.

“Now, where was I?” with his other claw and a mockingly same amount of effort the dragon tapped on the side of his snout in a similar fashion as one would do when deep in thought “Ah, yes. I was commenting on how you came here without an order. Or, perhaps, was it in spite of your superior’s orders to stay put and with no knowledge on their part? Otherwise there would be reinforcements by now, don’t you think?”

Silence was the only answer.

“You are underwhelmingly predictable. I’ve seen a lot of your kind in my days. And all of them had met their end by my fire. Young heroes, barely adults, grown up with lies about courage and honour being poured down your ears. You’ve never thought of questioning any of it, didn’t you? Never mused about how much of those stories are actually true and how much of those are fairytales crafted to resupply the amount of fools ready to give up their useless lives so that the
powers that be could keep their throne and whatever it is in their vaults?” the dragon lifted the claw, demanding an answer.

“You… an atrocity” the elf could only manage a few gasps.

“My poor little elven boy, you choose to remain a fool. And an ignorant one as well. But I do understand. I do. What else is there left for you to do than cling desperately to your beliefs in face of a certain demise? Anything that would prevent you from admitting to your mistakes” the beast laughed “They were not just your fellow warriors, they were your friends, were they not?” the tail slammed once more what little was there left of the elven bodies “And you lead them to their doom. Doesn’t it feel nice?” the dragon closed his eyes and the corners of his mouth curled up in a mocking parody of a smile “Obviously it shouldn’t feel nice for you. But it definitely does for me. The misery, the pain and the despair”

Another cloud of smoke followed the tirade. Though the flame did not yet erupt.

“I can see your mind racing right now. What could you have done differently to prevent this? Should you have come from a different side? Brought different kind of weapons? Used better disguise magic?” question after question the beast’s voice reminded more and more of a hiss “I am kind, I’ve told you that already. I am going to tell what you should have done. You should have stayed back in the safety of your homes. It would not have saved you for long, our Lord will triumph and none of your little pretend kingdoms will stand afterwards. But it would allow you and them” another slam of the tail “To spend those last few days with your loved ones. And now your mothers, fathers and lovers will spend those days in grief and tears with the last of what they’ve learned being the deaths of those they cared about the most”

The dragon laughed quietly, as if enjoying a joke that only he could understand.

“You led them here. You killed them. You filled their hearts with long-winded speeches of grandeur until they followed you like cattle to their slaughter. You sacrificed them for the sake of your own ambition of heroism” the yellow eye peered closely into the elf’s face “Let us suppose that I am going to drop dead right at this instance and you get to return to your kind as a hero and the hailed slayer of dragons. Is it going to be worth it? The fame and honour that you will receive, would those be worth having your friends’ blood on your hands? Knowing that all of this could be prevented if only you were to listen to your elders?”

There was once again no answer but this was the time when it displeased the reptile.

“Answer me” the dragon roared, with his claw forcing the elf to face the yellow eye.

The warrior remained quiet, holding the gaze even with his face paler than death itself and blood visible in the corners of his mouth.

“Was. It. Worth. It?” each word boomed with emphasis, demanding to be answered.

And at that moment the elf could no longer bear looking the beast into the eye and turned his gaze away.

The beast roared in laughter, savouring his victory and all of what was around resonated to the sound, shaking the ground and spreading the tremor throughout the lands. The dragon basked in his victory, almost as if the misery and pain he caused made him stronger. A spread of the wings sent rocks, trees and even elven bodies right up in air by a hurricane of dust.

Then it all fell, creating a murky veil, preventing any sight from coming through and a deafening
ringing in the unfortunate elf’s ears. It was painful to look, to breathe, to hear. The dark suffocating cloud enveloped all the senses, barring the elf from feeling anything but sharp pain of claws piercing his body, crushing his bones and stealing all hope of survival.

“You’ve learned your lesson. I’m glad” the dragon finally released the visor, allowing it to fall into it’s place and hide the elf’s pain distorted face “I hope you do understand that it still will not save you from your punishment”

And then there was only fire and darkness.

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The void was empty. It seemed deceptively so. There was nothing that could be seen or heard. Yet the persisting sensation of a presence never ceased. There was something out there in the darkness. Laying low and awaiting, ready to strike at any moment it deems the most appropriate. And yet it didn’t do that or anything else for that matter. It preferred to prolong the cruel suspense, to play at the nerves that were already strained more than string of a bow ready to shoot an arrow.

After all, for a true hunter the art of chase was just as important as capturing the prey. It didn’t have to happen right away. That would be boring and lacked in entertainment value. First, the prey needed to be worn down and exhausted to the point when it would considered being delivered that one final blow a blessing. The strike wouldn’t come, however. Not yet. Not until after all the suffering there would be the tiniest spark of hope that maybe, just maybe, there was nothing out there and it was safe to try and escape. That’s when the time for an attack would be most perfect.

There was still some time before that happened. Plenty to play the cat and mouse game.

It was truly unbearable.

Knowing that something was out there ready to pounce at you and yet not knowing where from or when would it make it’s move. Not knowing if it could see you. Or hear you. Not knowing whether making any movements would attract it’s attention or whether it was a futile concerned because whatever was out there could, unlike it’s prey, see perfectly no matter how dark it was and how much darked it could become. Perhaps you were already standing exposed and in full view. Having to struggle for a breath and simultaneously be vary of making one since making any kind of noise could prove to be an unforgivable mistake.

The elf clenched his teeth.

If only he could see.

Something.

Anything.

A silhouette, a shadow, a hint of a movement.

He couldn’t.

His eyes would not open at all, as if being prevented from doing so by something invisible and intangible.

Was that a spell?

Or a curse?
Was there something else obstructing his vision?
An attempt to move sent a jolt of burning pain throughout his body.
It hurt.
It hurt too much to move.
He still had to do it.
He had to move.
To throw the wretched veil that took his sight away.
“You should not do that, you’ll hurt yourself”
A voice came out of nowhere. It was not ghastly or sinister nor did it bear any ill intent. Nothing like she imagined the creature hiding in the darkness to sound like. If anything, it was unfamiliar and yet compassionate still.
Then an arm, soft and warm, held his own hand.
A deceit.
Disguise.
He pulled his hand away and immediately it was released.
“It’s okay. It’s alright. You’re safe now” the voice continued with a hint of worry in it.
Ah, yes.
The memories started to slowly come back.
He was safe and alright.
If it could be even called that.
The war was over days ago, if not weeks.
It was really hard to keep any track of time in the state he was in.
The Enemy was defeated.
Presuming that it was the truth they gave him and not white lies intended to spare his feelings of which there was already very little left, just like there was very little left of him.
“Who are you?” due to the pain, most likely, the remark sounded much less polite that he intended for it to be. Not that he minded it though.
The other person, however, did seem to mind.
“I’m Idhren’s apprentice. I’m only here to call her if something beyond the norm happens” the answer was not downright hostile yet, simply miffed “You can say if you need anything like food or water”
“You don’t sound like Idhren’s apprentice”
The healer did take on an apprentice not long before the War had started. The looming threat was clear in the horizon and being an experienced healer Idhren brought a young elleth to have an extra pair of hands to delegate less important tasks to. He had only seen the girl once and it didn’t go much further than a simple introduction after which he didn’t even bother to remember the elleth’s name. Still, it was enough to create more or less an impression of what type of person the that particular elleth was.

She was a quiet and meek girl, hardly someone to give the type of answer that he had received from the one sitting beside him. Was it even an elleth? It could be a trick of mind, a spell or even an impostor.

“You have one of your ears completely covered with bandages, it is likely that it affects your hearing” the girl brushed off the suspicions.

“I did not mean your voice sounds wrong” although that too was a part of the issue “Your words are not something Idhren’s apprentice would say”

“I don’t believe we’ve been acquainted well enough for you to know my personality” there was just a hint of nervous annoyance in her voice.

Her words were true. They were not acquainted well enough, pretty much not acquainted at all. There was nothing besides his own intuition to base his suspicion on. Right now, however, an immediate defensive reaction from the elleth was added to that list.

“But we did speak here at the camp”

“Hmm, nice try. Our meeting took place before the departure. Are you sure you don’t need anything?”

Impostor or not, the elleth knew at least the basic facts. Even though she did try to change the topic. He didn’t have any more information about Idhren’s apprentice, not even her name, and thus couldn’t make any more attempts of catching a lie. Besides, he wasn’t exactly in a position to choose right now. His father was likely resting which he not only needed but deserved as well. And so did Idhren, apart from having many more injured to tend to.

Whether or not she truly was Idhren’s apprentice, the young elleth had to do.

“Water”

He decided not to waste his time on pleasantries. The elleth may have been annoyed but that wasn’t even any kind of a problem that he would consider worthy to care about right now or even ever.

The girl fulfilled the request in complete silence. To her credit, her movements were careful enough not to cause him too much pain, since causing no pain at all was by far not among the options. Her being angry at him was not something that affected her professional integrity. If she really had anything to do with healing. At least the girl wasn’t talking to him in the same sugary condescending manner that was often reserved for those who were dying. Even though the not dying part was a rather recent improvement for him.

“Anything else?”

“No”

“Then I’ll be there at the opposite side of the tent” she sighed in a somewhat tired manner.
“Stay”

The word came out before he could even register it and he had to wince at how patheticly plea-like it had sounded.

He didn’t exactly care about the elleth’s presence. Or rather, he did not care about her presence in particular. She was a stranger and not the most agreeable to deal with. It was just that the alternative of being alone and in silence right now was something he would prefer to avoid even more that he didn’t want to bother dealing with a capricious elleth. Unfortunately that desire was much stronger than he would ever want to admit considering that he asked for her company prior to even forming it as a coherent thought.

“As you wish” the girl gave a court reply and judging by the sound sat somewhere nearby.

Still, she did not try to start any conversations.

Good. That was good.

It meant he was free to choose the topic.

“Did I displease you with my insinuations?” that didn’t resemble a sincere concern but neither was it meant to sound that way.

“It’s fine, I understand” the elleth, on the other hand, was sincere in her reply even if she didn’t seem particularly happy about it.

And there she goes. The same disgustingly compassionate voice that the rest of them used. He didn’t want their compassion because he didn’t…

“Isn’t there something else for you to be angry about?”

“What would that be?” she answered in a slightly confused manner.

Confused. The girl was either extremely inane or had a rather big future in theatre.

“I’ve lead your friend to slaughter” he snapped.

“My friends…?”

“The redheaded warrior and the female archer., I saw you speaking to them here at the camp”

“But they survived. I’m sure someone told you that”

“The rest of them didn’t”

“Then why did you have to drag them into it against their will?” the girl asked in mock anger.

At this point there was little doubt that something was terribly wrong with the elleth, if it even was one and not a hallucination that followed him into the waking world.

“Drag them!? They wished the dragon gone no less than I did”

“Is that so? Why then are you trying to assume authority where you have none? Your father is the one with the actual power to lead anyone, not you. Just because people decided to join you in your quest to doom yourself does not give you any right to act like you’re the one in charge from now on and have control over anybody’s decision”
“Are you completely out of your mind!?”

“Why? Because I disagree with your narrative? Than only further proves my point. And it isn’t even my point to begin with. I’m just repeating what your father said”

“My father?”

If the girl’s previous words only brought anger then the last phrase hit much closer to home.

“I heard his conversation with Idhren. Accidentally. What Lord Oropher said precisely was that he believes one of his speeches about bravery and valour affected you a little bit too well and that caused you to develop a heightened sense of personal responsibility which will lead to you suffering from blaming yourself even when you did not have the full, or any, control. The other two survivors confirmed that it was everyone’s idea to do that, not just yours. Please don’t misunderstand my words. Your father cares about you. A lot. It will not do anyone any good if you refuse to allow him to give it to you. You need to stop snapping at people who show you concern”

After there was silence for a couple of minutes the elleth added:

“I’m sorry for how I phrased my words. It was very rude and unfair of me to say it the way I did. It’s just that you don’t seem to respond well to compassion”

The girl sounded nervous again.

“Why would I respond well to insincerity?”

The girl’s words, in a way, made him to snap back to reality. She was somewhat right to respond the way she did. There were times when a well meaning slap in the face worked much better than anything else. That, however, didn’t mean that he inherently agreed with what she said.

“I see” the elleth sighed yet it wasn’t angry or annoyed “Yes, there are those that think that what you did was beyond stupid and there are those that are in some capacity legitimately angry at you. But trust me when I say that it was unanimously agreed upon that having metal armour melted into you flesh, including the face, is quite the punishment in itself and does not require any additions made to it”

“How bad is it?”

There didn’t need to be any elaboration for the elleth to know what exactly the words referred to.

“I don’t know. I was not present when… It seems that I don’t fare all that well when there is blood involved and such” she murmured underneath her breath.

“What kind of healer are you?” if there was any amusement to be taken out of this conversation then this would have to be it. A healer who was squeamish around blood, after all, was not an everyday occurrence.

“The kind that will have to find another path in life, apparently” the elleth sighed without too much regret “Are you sure you aren’t hungry? Those peaches look delicious you know. And I want one. But I can not take it because if someone comes in and sees me eating your food it wouldn’t be that good of a look. So could we maybe at least pretend to share one?”

“It is an original ploy, I’ll give you that”

Despite the wording, the intentions behind her offer were still quite transparent.
“It’s not a ploy. Well, not completely. Idhren did task me with making sure you eat at least something, but I also really do want that peach. Those are not easy to find around here. Show some mercy, let me be useful for something at least”

“Fine”

“Really? Thank you!” the girl beamed “By the way, My name is Lirindiel”

***

Minai pinched the bridge of her nose carefully going over the story that she just heard.

Well, oh, well.

It sure took a lot of time.

When was it that she got the bright idea of playing a role of a detective and uncovering whatever conspiracy she imagined to take place in elven lands?

Winter.

It was in winter.

It was now summer.

The beginning of it still but summer nonetheless.

Therefore it took almost half a year.

Half a year of research, observation, taking in written and spoken accounts and a healthy dose of deduction.

But now she had it.

That last something that she was missing for all of this time.

The one last puzzle piece which finally revealed the entire picture.

And what a picture it was.

Let’s review.

Doriath. This one she learned about from the history lessons she took and only knew the bare facts about, without much involvement of emotions. But even without that extra sentiment flavour which she would have had if the events were recounted to her by someone who had lived through the ordeal Minai could fully understand the gravity of what happened back then. Doriath was one of the oldest elven kingdoms, with a rich history and culture. Say what you will about Thingol’s isolationist policies, Doriath survived previous attacks of the Enemy. But then the dwarves murdered the King of Doriath due to their desire to claim the elven treasure on account that they were the ones who crafted it a long time ago even if they were paid for their services. Now. Whether there was room for debating on how reliable and bias-free were those historic elven accounts was another question. The main point here was that Thranduil, who was alive back then and had to witness pretty much his entire life crumble to pieces, had lived his entire life believing that dwarves contributed to that misery. An important point for later.

Then there was the War of Wrath which in itself was among the darkest points of the entire history
of Middle Earth. Minai wouldn’t dare to try and imagine what it must have felt like to be there and live through those all of that. She had read about it in a history book, yes, but no written text could ever match a single expression on Thranduil’s face when he retold that story in, what Minai suspected was, a highly censored version. And the dragon. The elf clearly blamed himself for what happened with the dragon even if he was not officially in charge of anyone quite yet. He wasn’t even a prince back then, let alone the king. It wouldn’t take a genius to guess that after that happen and when actually given power over people he would hesitate leading them to certain death if it could be in any way avoided. Especially that pertained to dragons. Another point for later.

In more or less recent history, Thranduil did make an effort to overcome his bias against the dwarves and mend the relationships with them. What happened then was pretty much a mirror image of Doriath. According to the elven accounts, but still. Yes, it could be that the dwarven monarch did legitimately considered that his people’s work should have been compensated in higher amount that was agreed upon initially. Could have happened because, from what Minai took out of Tauriel’s retelling, either the gold or a jewel in his possession were cursing him into being much more greedy than usual even for the dwarves. It could be even some issue of presumed disrespect, for example Thranduil not bowing for long enough or refusing to that altogether. It didn’t matter. What mattered was that the situation was pretty much sealed upon the first sign of uncooperative behaviour from the dwarves. Thranduil saw the history repeating and he would never allow the same that happened to Doriath happen to Mirkwood. He chose to leave the necklace in the possession of dwarves.

Perhaps, but only perhaps, the concept of mortality which the elves lacked to a degree played it’s role as well. It was difficult for immortal elves to completely comprehend that dwarves at Erebor were separated from those in Doriath by many generations.

Relatively soon after the incident with the necklace Smaug the Great Drake of the North attacked. The elven army marched to Erebor but turned away, refusing to help. That was, perhaps, not the right thing to do. From a point of view of someone who was completely morally pure and void of any kind of personal bias for the entirety of their live. How could Thranduil, who had a constant painful reminder of what a dragon’s flame could do covering half of his body, order his people to expose themselves to that? It was a biased decision dictated by fear but the only way the Elven King would make any other kind of decision would be if all of his previous life did not happen.

The one true mistake that could not be justified by anything was the fact that the elves did not offer any aid afterwards. Not with sharing food, not with providing temporary shelter. The elves stood to the side. It was wrong. Thranduil knew it was wrong. That’s why he regularly sent supplies to Dale and agreed to loan them money interest-free and with no real expectation of return. The elf thus admitted to be in the wrong and was trying to amend for that.

And that was it.

Thranduil made mistakes in his life, but he was not beyond redemption.

Was it Minai’s place to offer him that?

Of course not.

Not even close.

But.

As far as Minai knew, there was at this point at least some form of peaceful treaty with the dwarves.
The citizens of Dale clearly welcomed the aid they were given and were happy to receive the
supplies. They held no ill will towards the elves.

As for the elves themselves…

Referring to something that Tauriel said a few days ago, the elves considered the health of their
king to be the health of their kingdom and therefore they wanted Thranduil to be well. There was
no talk about someone else taking his place, which would not be that far fetched considering that
he had a direct heir. He must have been doing something right as their king before the events of this
winter happened.

Well.

Obviously.

It would have taken a really oblivious person not to notice how deeply he cared about his people
and wanted them to be alive and safe but that unfortunately lead to paranoia.

The elves by their nature were free of physical ailments and suffered no pain unless it was inflicted
by an outside factor. Still, they were highly dependant on emotions and, as Minai learned, negative
ones could fatigue the pointy-eared to the point where their body would simply give up. Knowing
that, it was rather clear just what kind of toll pretty much everything took on Thranduil. He must
have really believed he had lost all that he had. Most members of his family were long dead. A
large number of his people died due to his own lack of foresight, even if he could not predict the
orcs attacking. Those who remained seemingly turned against their ruler. Tauriel, whom Thranduil
took into his care accused him of being incapable of love and his only son inadvertently agreed
with that by leaving.

That pretty much explained the nature of Thranduil’s ailment and why he believed it to be
temporary. The damage done to his eyes was in itself permanent and if he wasn’t an elf with a
certain amount of magic in him, assuming that he would even survive the ordeal, he wouldn’t be
able to see at all. Yet he was an elf and could either suppress the flame’s effect most of the time but
not when there was such a significant strain on the rest of his body and mind. Therefore he would
be able to see again, once he recovered enough. If such a thing was possible, which was apparently
not always the case. Some elves had to leave Middle Earth to heal properly.

Minai bit her lip.

It seemed that immortality and eternal youth which the elves were granted came with a price and a
very cruel one at that. The more one lived, the more they had to go through. The stronger was the
body, the more was the likelihood of surviving what others would not and thus having to bear more
severe scars and memories. And the longer the lifespan the more losses would have to be
encountered during it’s course. Mortal lives were short but time showed them much more mercy
with how it healed or at the very least dulled the pain of loss their mind experience until eventually
all of that would be taken away permanently.

Such was the gift of men. Somehow, it made Luthien’s choice much more understandable and, in a
way, a lot more selfish. The elven princess chose happiness for herself and her lover who, even if
she were to refuse him, would live his short mortal time and move on eventually if not in life then
in death. Luthien joined him and was then forever released of the pain of loss when she would have
to otherwise watch her love wither away and die, but in doing so she doomed her parents, King
Thingol and Queen Melian, and the rest of elven kind to mourn the loss of their brightest star.

Minai sighed and touched her own pointed ear.
If, for the briefest of moments, she were to believe that she was now an elf and fell in love with one as well, would she be able to accept their fate? To give up all of her attempts to find her way back home and live her life as a mortal human? To forever live with the guilt of abandoning her family? To never be free of the pain their loss would bring? Was the love elves experienced so strong and so absolutely… terrifying?

After all, Thranduil was ready to wage war to recover the piece of jewellery which bore the slightest fragment of memory he had of his late wife.

No wonder, then, that elves by their nature had to suffer so much from loneliness and their unions were created by magic. They would have perished otherwise. Who would ever voluntarily agree to something like that? Yet, even if she would never be heartless enough to actually ask it, Minai wondered what the answer would be if she asked Thranduil or Tauriel if falling in love was actually worth it in the end.

And there it was.

All of it.

All the facts she would have ever wanted.

Organized in quite the neat and orderly manner, completely free to be used for whatever evil scheme her imagination would be ever able to come up with.

Just the thought of doing anything even remotely similar to that made Minai shudder to the very core of her being.

That was…

That was.

That was indeed something that she had all of the intentions to do half a year ago and she was not going to deny having had those thoughts since in doing so she would also undermine a rather large part of the journey she’s made as a person so far. That she couldn’t do. Being able to say that the entire ordeal of ending up in Mirkwood was not completely in vain and had in the end something more or less positive about it was that one mental pillar which didn’t allow the rest of the construction to fall.

On the other hand though, it would be exceptionally detrimental to her entire existence if she let that pillar become too strong.

Because then she would have to admit that in half a year of living here she made a conscious effort to achieve and learn more that during the entirety of twenty-something years of her life back at home.

Archery, horseback riding, two entirely new languages, somewhat successfully integrating in a world with a different history and culture, posture, manners, the art of tea ceremony, bullfinch taming, vocals, dancing, holding a conversation regarding a meaningful topic, cognitive skills training, tree climbing, athletics, surviving a wizard inflicted existential crisis, befriending Tauriel and discovering how nice it felt having an actual, even if temporary, meaningful place in society and making her share of contribution to it’s existence.

Oh, and the evils of lying.

Don’t forget that.
With the logical part of her mind Minai kind of understood that all of this had less to do with Mirkwood itself and more to do with her receiving a sudden emotional shake-up which under another set of circumstances could have been pretty much anything else. But the part of her that listened to emotions over reason was infinitely confused by how well she managed to settle here compared to how complacent over nothing she was back at home.

She wondered what the rest of her life would end up being like if nothing happened. Not only hers though. Thranduil’s as well. What would it be like for him?

He would probably be fine.

Eventually.

Still.

Even if that was the case.

Still.

Minai leaned to rest her head on Thranduil’s shoulder. The woman twirled a half empty glass of wine in her fingers. She remembered well where the excessive alcohol consumption lead her to previously and this time around decided to be wiser with her choices and be more responsible with her drinking habits. That did not, however, mean that she completely avoided indulging in the activity but it did mean that while there was certain influence over how free she was with her words and actions, she remained in full control over the content and intent of them.

Therefore the words she spoke next came as an absolute surprise for Minai herself, in large part because she realized the there was a certain level sincerity behind them.

“I still want to go home but...” she sighed “I think I’m glad that I got a chance to be here”

“So am I” answered Thranduil as he positioned one of his arms around the woman sitting next to him.

Chapter End Notes

And that's why he didn't wear a helment ever since, too much bad associations. I mean, other elves had their helmets on in the movies. Seriously, I know why from the cinematic point of view, but in a real battle he wold be completely dead.

This ends the second arc of the story. To give you an idea, this was originally supposed to be somewhere around second to the last chapter out of five or so. And now it's more like a halfway point plot-wise (which could be any amount of chapters, it gets longer each time I opened the text editor)

The previous arc dealt with establishing the characters and putting them in a position where they would have to be around each other. In this arc I wanted to tackle some character growth and getting them to where their relationship would be at a healthy point to progress (if that happens) Since it is my firm belief that if you have plenty of problems and character flaws then getting in a romantic relationship is not a good solution to all of that.

I also wanted to establish that these characters work well together even without
romance, that they are capable of working-out the differences they have due to being from different worlds pretty much, them being capable of having a meaningful conversation (like that one about Dale and money loans) was another major point, to share something in common (love for animals so far), plus they had to actually simply enjoy each other's company (even if it's teasing).

One more thing, I wanted to be very particular with how I portrayed Thranduil being blind in this story. I wrote that in because in the movies he was portrayed as a rather arrogant person and it seemed like an interesting character study to put him in a position where he would have to trust another person. I wanted it to not be completely brushed off plot-wise but I also wanted to avoid reducing his character to just that, making it an obstacle or something he needed to be saved from. This is probably the only part of the story where I did an actual research for and I would be very grateful if someone would give me feedback on how well I managed with that.

Well, at this point I'm done with trying to make any sense of what happened in the movies. I didn't know how badly I wanted to 'fix' it until I started writing. To think that this all started with a girl being turned into an elf (visually at least) via cosplay and the overall plot of this story I came up with during those three minutes that it took for the popcorn to be ready :) And by the way, keep all of that in mind if any future plot makes you go 'I expected better' or something like that. Three minutes guys, three minutes.
Hey there my dear readers. All none of you who still hang around with such an abysmal update schedule. But this time it's been less than a month, I think, so yay, I guess.

Full disclosure. I was intending to update within a week. I wrote the chapter and it came out cute and nice and fluffy and all that stuff. Then I went to edit it and decided 'nah, that's not what I'm here for'. So yeah, that will be my excuse for whatever happens in this chapter.

Mild content warning for this one for blood and such. It's somewhere at the level of graphic the movies were, nothing too explicit but kind of there.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Darkness. There was nothing but dense silent darkness of the trees growing so close together that each step turned into a struggle. The branches scratched her face, her arms, tore her clothes and obstructed whatever little vision she had. Rotten old leaves and moss squished under her feet making it appear as if she walked through a quicksand-like bog.

She couldn’t stop.

She had to go on, no matter how hard it became. She had to find her way out, to escape the forest, the darkness.

She craved to see even a single speck of light however dim and small. A single glimpse of the sky above, a single flicker of a far away star.

Something.

Anything.

Anything that could give her hope, anything which would make the forest seem finite.

Just a little something to know that it was possible to escape.

To have that motivation to go on.

She wandered for hours and hours, not seeing or hearing anything.

Her legs ached from exhaustion and skin burned from being scratched but still she couldn’t stop.

Just one more step, just a few more trees, just a little while longer…

And there it was.

A speck.

A tiny blurred speck on the very edge of her vision.
It was faint and dim yet in the darkness of the forest it shone brighter than the sun itself.

With a newly regained strength she ran towards it, ignoring the tiredness, the pain.

It didn’t matter.

Nothing did but the light she saw.

It grew brighter and brighter with each step she took, it took shape until it was almost within her reach.

She just had to...

Minai jolted herself into a sitting position breathing heavily and shivering, with cold sweat covering her body. The nightmare never changed and remained the same each and every night, ending abruptly mere moments before she could finally see what was it that she was chasing.

Frustrating as it was, it wouldn’t be nearly as insufferable if she didn’t wake up from it tired and with all of her muscles aching as if instead of getting the night’s rest like she should have been doing she spend hours running around and trying to catch a phantom.

The woman collapsed on the pillows and with spirit crushing dismay realized just how bright the morning sun already was outside the window and how loud was the annoyingly merry chirping of all the different birds, including one hungry bullfinch in particular. There really was no point in trying to get back to sleep, even if she did not at all feel any kind of rested. With an annoyed groan and unwilling to move legs Minai got out of her bed and went to get ready for the day.

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“Come here little one, you can do it” Minai waved her hand in which she was holding a slice of apple while giving an encouraging smile to the little deer who stood half across the meadow on his thin wobbly legs.

Mother doe sat there on the other side of the clearing and vigilantly supervised the training, as any animal mother would.

The fawn made a few steps forward, stumbled but managed to regain his balance and with careful unsure steps made his way to where the treat was waiting for him. It took quite some time and a few more stumbles but the destination was finally reached.

Minai gave the rightfully deserved reward to the little deer and petted one of the big fluffy ears as the animal ate the apple. When the slice was done with, the deer proceeded with poking the woman’s side with his muzzle.

“How silly of me to try and fool you and your superior sense of smell” she gave another pet to the ear and leaned against the tree with her eyes closed.

Luckily for Minai’s sleep-deprived self it just happened to be one of those warm summer days where the sky was of that bright blue colour which seemed almost unnaturally picturesque and the very few clouds in the sky looking very neat and painterly. Light breeze barely ruffled the tree leaves creating a pleasant whispering sound lulling everyone who listened into a state of comfort.
and tranquillity. As a result, nobody seemed to be particularly interested in doing anything but relaxing and enjoying themselves.

The little fawn, tired from a long walk, sat nearby and snuggled to one of Minai’s legs and resting his tiny head against one of the tree’s root. Mother deer then crossed the meadow with just a handful of steps and settled not too far away, right next to Thranduil. Buddy the Bullfinch chirped from one of the branches above where he was perching.

The scene was pretty much idyllic which made Minai to temporarily forget her worries and give into the relaxed atmosphere.

The woman opened her eyes and giggled.

“You know” she said “I thinks our hoofed friend really likes you. Must be because of that thing on your head which you insist on calling a crown. It makes her mistake you for one of their own and she probably sees you as a potential father figure for her little one”

There was no excuse to such behaviour other than that she could. Minai could get away with drawing that comparison aloud, something she was sure to be on almost everyone’s mind at some point. Besides, it was about time to turn those tables around. She took her fair share of teasing from the elf, it was only fair to finally take her turn.

“What’s that?” the aforementioned elf smiled “It seems to me that she is more in a market for a babysitter” Thranduil remained completely unfazed to whatever jabs Minai tried to take on him.

“Well, that is a very clever animal. And spoiled” the woman watched Thranduil give an entire apple to the doe.

“What sort of jealousy I hear?”

Minai had to admit, it was probably her own fault for thinking she could get the upper hand in the teasing game with such a disparity between their years of experience but she simply refused to give up so easily just yet.

“I must admit I wouldn’t mind having eyelashes as pretty as hers. Maybe if I had those I would also have plenty of elves line up to seek my company and cater to my whims”

“I’m afraid there are more reasons for why that has not yet happened”

“And what are those reasons?” Minai asked suspiciously.

“This one is quite obvious my dear, you spend far too much time around me. Most would come to a conclusion that you are simply not available for such courtship”

“Ahh, that makes sense”

Minai was so prepared to defend herself from whatever comment that would be made at her expense that she forgot to take into account any actual possibilities.

“That no longer bothers you?” Thranduil asked with genuine surprise.

“It used to, yes. But it’s probably for the better that way. If I am eventually to leave it is not such a good idea to get too close with anyone”

“I see” the elf replied with a strange expression on his face, as if the answer he was given was not
the one that he expected to hear “Do you have anyone waiting for you back at home?”

“Not in that sort of way” the woman shook her head.

“You are not interested in having that type of relationship?”

Miani bit her lip thinking how on earth could the innocent conversation take that sort of a turn. She seemed to be the one who brought the issue but it was certainly him who was interested in discussing it further. A part of her wanted to find more to it than there probably was but another part reminded that it probably had something to do with his overall interest in whatever life she had before coming to Mirkwood of which she was so reluctant to speak of. She did tell him a fairytale love story from her world and called it unrealistic, it would only be natural for him to want to know how the realistic type of relationship would look like. Therefore, after rationalizing everything in a way which wouldn’t give her any ideas, Minai deemed it a relatively safe topic to discuss.

“I...” Minai hesitated “I’m not exactly against the idea but...” she didn’t want to say a definitive ‘no’ because, well, she wasn’t exactly sure what that because was but it was definitely there “I mean, I do think it would be nice to be in love and love someone. I know I have not lived as many years as an elf, but since I lived my life as a human I matured as one as well. I am an adult and at the stage of life when many of my peers are starting families, so I am old enough for that” that seemed like another important thing to clarify for the same mysterious reason as before “But there are just too many variables”

“What those variables might be?” Thranduil asked curiously.

“My mind still works in mortal time-frames and I struggle very much with the concept of eternity. There is high chance that I am still mortal. It would be too cruel and irresponsible to be with someone who is actually immortal. What if I am immortal but without a fea I would not be capable of having feelings that are also immortal? Wouldn’t it be sad if after sharing a feeling I would suddenly not be able to anymore? What if whoever I fall in love with will eventually find the actual true love? Even if my fea magically appears one day, it is still unknown how I ended up here. What if the same force that threw me here decides that it is time for me to return? What if I am given a choice of whether to leave or not? I want to go back, would my hypothetical lover go with me? If yes, then what if I am the only one who can cross that boarder? What if...”

“I applaud your resolve to leave your room each morning” the elf chuckled a bit sarcastically but not mean spirited.

“Huh?” Minai blinked in confusion.

“What if you decide to go outside for a walk and a tree branch falls down on you breaking your neck?”

“That’s not the same. Yes, random barely probable accidents can happen but it doesn’t mean you shouldn’t be cautious because of that”

“Almost improbable? Then tell me, in your opinion, what was the probability of you coming here in the first place?”

“I...” she didn’t know how to answer.

Well, she did. But giving an answer to that question would be rather close to admitting the defeat in the debate which she did not want to do.

“No rushing into any kind of relationship, whether romantic or not, if you do not feel ready is a
responsible stance to have. The same way it is responsible to wear an armour into a battle. However, if you try wearing the same armour on a daily basis it will cause you and those around you a lot of discomfort. By overthinking it and avoiding any type of closeness with others due to fear of what might happen you’ll end up isolating yourself” it seemed like there was something else he wanted to add but did not in the end.

“I still don’t think that there is anything particularly wrong with my behaviour” Minai mumbled more out of sheer stubbornness than of anything else.

“Yes, there is nothing wrong with that if you are happy with the results of it. But have you considered that this might be the very reason your fea is so deeply hidden? Since you are this afraid of accidentally getting close with anyone”

Minai remained silent for a while. She had to admit, Thranduil was not entirely wrong. She did have a problem with having an emotional bond with people. She had no close friendship, long term relationship and she really did drift apart from her family. But did she really act in that sort of way back at home as well? Avoiding being friends with classmates, colleagues or the people she rented an apartment with? Because school will be over, the lease will end and everyone will go in their separate directions therefore there is no point in trying to get close? What about her family then? That excuse didn’t work there so well there.

“Do you really thing such thing is possible?” she asked.

“That I do not know. This is the first time I’ve encountered something like that. There is no reason for any possibility to be excluded”

Minai sighed. Whatever the reason for her missing fea was, it didn’t seem like the solution could be found within the walls of the palace. Besides, the conversation clearly drifted into a very personal territory for her and she didn’t feel like discussing any of those issues right now. The topic had to be changed.

“Do you think I could go on an actual scouting mission any time soon?” she voiced a thought that was on her mind for quite a few days by now.

“No” the answer was unexpectedly short and quick.

“Why not?” Minai was slightly taken aback by that sort of reply.

“I do not think you are ready yet” Thranduil explained.

“I know I’m not there yet for something major, but a simple evening patrol should be fine. I spoke with Tauriel, she said pretty much nothing ever happens during those” Minai argued.

“I’m not sure you completely understand what going on a mission requires. You are not ready yet” the elf repeated.

“When will I be ready then? You have to admit there is no indication that I won’t age the same way as any other human does” whether due to the lack of sleep the previous night or some other reasons, Minai started to get annoyed.

It wasn’t the ‘no’ itself that bothered her. It was how definite and final it sounded without even a single second given to actually thinking her request through. What it implied was that he had the absolute zero faith in her ability to walk a small circle within an already cleared area while being accompanied by scouts with years of experience.
That sort of thing required no kind of training whatsoever and Minai spent half a year improving her abilities.

It most definitely wasn’t pleasant to hear that all of her effort was worth nothing.

“You can easily double your chances by actually telling me where all of that sudden interest towards going on patrols came from” Thranduil clearly sensed Minai’s change of demeanour and wasn’t particularly fond of the reaction “Or do you expect me to believe that this agitation just appeared out of nowhere after months of not bringing this topic up even a single time?”

Minai twirled a small flower in her fingers. That was true. She never tried discussing it before, even in a long term perspective kind of thing. Still, there were plenty of reasons, even the ones that were pretty much obvious and would presumably require no clarification. Starting with the fact that eventually going outside was her goal from the very beginning. Then there was the terrifying but not by any means unreal possibility that the longer she remained missing the higher was the likelihood of her family would simply filing for a notion to pronounce their disappeared daughter to be legally dead in order to sort out the loans debt payment issue. Not to mention the reasons she didn’t want to discuss.

How could she with a serious expression state that it was in large part because of a weird dream she had? That wouldn’t increase her chances, that would probably decrease them on the grounds of complete irrationality. Not to mention that it would raise the subject of something being not quite right with her which could potentially result in some elven healer trying to probe her brain. A visit to a healer was something that she wanted to avoid at any cost. Ever since during her studies Minai learned about the ability of elven ability to, in some cases, read each other’s minds. Her thoughts belonged to her and her alone and that was that.

Besides all of the mentioned above, ever since she finished with the most of her studies she started to get quite a lot of free time on her hands and with Tauriel being assigned to missions, Thranduil busy with kingdom’s inner politics, more commonly known as getting drunk, and the library, after the book falling incident, becoming a place where she was far less than welcomed Minai was more and more visited by the thoughts of being a complete freeloader. Freeloading was an appealing concept in theory but without any usual means of wasting time such as movies and more time passing, the stronger was the desire to do at least something productive.

See?

Plenty of reasons for her to go and none to forbid that.

“Why does my reasoning concern you? Maybe I’m just tired of sitting here confined to one place and being useless”

Minai immediately bit her tongue after speaking. It didn’t come out the way she intended for it to, not in the tone nor in wording. Raising the voice was wrong. She didn’t get much sleep lately and was tired but it still wasn’t good enough of an excuse for such behaviour. It was just upsetting, really. To already feel like she was pretty much that one resident of the Mirkwood forest who brought the least to the table, if anything at all and then be directly told that this was indeed the case. Skills were better trained in the field and she wasn’t asking for impossible. She understood she had to start with something small.

Why wouldn’t Thranduil allow it?

“Of course. How could I have forgotten that you have such a deeply ingrained aversion for telling me anything about yourself” Thranduil’s voice was deliberately calm yet it was quite apparent that
it required a certain amount of effort to keep it like that. “To answer your question, your state of mind right now is clearly irrational since anger is your first reaction to being told ‘no’ which in itself is a major argument against assigning you to any task that requires discipline. Finding the cause of the problem usually helps with finding a solution, yet you don’t seem to be interested in that either. There is however one thing that you are right about. It is about time to assess how useful you would be outside of the training grounds.”

With that he walked away and Minai was left alone with her thoughts where she would have probably remained for quite some time if it wasn’t for the rather hard nudge on the ribs.

“Hey!” the woman yelped and turned to see the source of the nudge only to meet two very reproachful doe eyes.

Literal doe eyes.

The animal stood up from where she was sitting and now pretty much towered over Minai with that immediately recognizable look of parental disappointment.

“Well why wouldn’t you pick his side, you’re his animal companion after all” Minai sighed in a half-hearted attempt at defending her position “Isn’t it better if I don’t tell him anything? If I’m going to leave and never return, wouldn’t it be better if I remained just a faceless stranger with no backstory?” she looked at the doe in search of any kind of answer to her question.

Unfortunately an animal, no matter how smart, still remained an animal and could not provide any solution to such a complex situation. Yet, even if the doe had an actual answer, there would be no way for Minai to receive it since the ability to communicate with animals, along with other elven traits, were by far not something that she could claim to have.

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The following night Minai got even less sleep than the previous one. No weird recurring dreams were involved in it this time. The issue was purely of guilty conscience.

The longer she thought about it, the more wrong the conversation she had with Thranduil the day before appeared. He was not the one who was in the wrong. It was her. She was completely in the wrong through and through yet, hurt by being pointed out the truth, she lashed out.

But how could he be this dismissive of her request? Why didn’t he give it some consideration at least. Wasn’t an eventual venture into the world outside the entire goal of her training? Of course she wasn’t an elf, of course she would never be as good as any of them. She simply lacked their height, strength and centuries of experience. She would never have those but it didn’t mean she would remain helpless because of it. Other humans existed in the world and somehow made it out there. Why was it such a foreign concept to Thranduil that she could do that as well?

Right.

Because instead of calmly explaining her reasoning she instead chose to become angry and offended.

Stellar behaviour.

Commendable discipline.

She was too much of a coward to admit that one of the biggest reasons for her sudden agitation towards going outside the palace walls and looking for clues was because that with each day spent
around Thranduil she was getting closer and closer to that tiny little point of no return where she would just fall in love with someone who was already married and far away beyond her reach.

There was no way she would ever say that. She already knew what answer she would receive.

It would hurt to hear it.

Therefore, before it were her feelings that suffered the blow, she opted to hurt his.

Minai dug her nails into the pillow.

If she had any hope for the slightest chance of being heard she would run outside and plead whatever higher power that was listening to take her back to the times when her biggest concern in life was trying to remember which episode of the series she was binging she left on.

How blessed she thought she was that all of her lukewarm relationship were easy and free of any kind of drama. It was so simple. She was the one who was approached and if she found the person attractive, mentally or physically, she would give it a try. Nothing came out of it and the thing ended due to both parties gradually losing interest.

That seemed like a great thing.

Until now when she got herself neck deep in an extremely complex situation and found out that she had zero experience in dealing with any kind of strong emotions. She was scared confused and disoriented by the sudden influx of feelings and reacted defensively whenever someone tried to reach out and possibly help her to make sense of it.

She denied Thranduil’s attempts to get her speaking about her concerns and she threw a temper tantrum when Gandalf the wizard brought out her issues while clearly not having what it takes to deal with everything on her own.

If only there was a way to meet Gandalf again. That wizard clearly knew something. This time she would actually ask questions that mattered instead of being perpetually angry.

The morning came unnoticed, but unlike it usually happened, a maid did not came to wake her up for the morning training. That, unfortunately, was far less than surprising. It was fairly expected, that Thranduil wouldn’t want to see her this soon.

Still, while such state of things was a completely logical outcome, it didn’t make it any less upsetting. Minai wanted to speak with the elf, to explain her behaviour, to apologize even. But alas, such an opportunity refused to appear.

Unlike Thranduil, who had every means of reaching her whenever he saw it fit, she had zero chances of finding him when he himself didn’t wish for it. Minai didn’t have the least of clues about where his chambers might be and even if she did, going there just like that wasn’t something that she was welcomed to do, especially now. As for Thranduil’s study, the only place where it was even allowed to seek an audience, the elf was definitely not there. Not on that day and not on the next one.

Almost a week later, Minai spent her days sprawled on her bed with a pillow covering her face. The situation was murky and even the weather changed from bright and summery to dull grey clouds covering the entire sky. It did not rain but at this point it was hardly a good thing at all. Rain, at least, would add some variety and give some hope of sun finally showing itself afterwards. Still and unmoving remained the colourless blanket of hopelessness which covered the inside and outside of Minai’s existence.
Until one day which in all likelihood was a Monday, judging by the exceptionally nasty gushes of cold wind terrorizing the trees all across the forest.

The morning started with a knock on her door and Minai jumped up from her bed, prompted by the anticipating anxiety. There was a maid, one of the regular ones, who politely informed the blonde woman that her presence was requested on the training grounds. A wave of relief washed over Minai but it was almost immediately changed to slight worry when the maid added that she was also required to bring a bow and arrows.

Archery practice was an activity that was specific to Tauriel and as far as Minai knew the redhead still was not back from her latest venture into the forest. Still, without asking any questions which the maid most probably didn’t know the answers to Minai obliged and after fetching the bow and arrows that were given her out of the training stock she left her room in the back of her mind noticing the absence of the of the ever present bullfinch.

There was probably nothing to it, Minai told herself. Maybe Thranduil was not as angry as she imagined and really did think about her request. Maybe he just wanted to assess her overall progress. Or some other harmless possibility that she couldn’t think of right now due to nervousness and slightly shaking knees.

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Right outside the training grounds, as expected, there was Thranduil with his face expressing nothing but stone cold indifference, like that of a marble statue. There was absolutely nothing that could be discerned from his face and even less from his voice, since he didn’t even speak. With one movement of his head the elf acknowledged Minai’s presence and beckoned her to follow. That she did remaining silent as well. Everything she could say right now would just come out as awkward and most probably would be left without any kind of response.

The training grounds would usually be empty, Minai suspected this was one had to be of Thranduil’s private spaces. This time, however, this wasn’t the case. For some reason the first thing that she noticed was the bullfinch perching on one of the training dummies. Then again, a bright speck of red like that was hard to miss. Beside Buddy, there were two more elves neither of whom Minai could recognize. Judging by their attire, from far away, Minai came to a conclusion that those two were guards and what they were guarding was…

The woman stopped in her tracks reluctant to make another step further.

There, held in chains, was a creature. A large creature looking vaguely humanoid in shape. Although even a strained ‘vaguely’ seemed to almost be a compliment. It, the creature, had the same number of limbs. Massively large limbs with claw like yellowed nails and an entire body covered in cadaver pale rotting skin, crookedly healed scars and festering wounds emitting smell that would make anyone gag from a mile away. From the first glance it could be mistakenly assessed that it was wearing armour but a closer look revealed the horrifying fact that the creature was wearing barely anything. Metal plates were simply grown into it’s body like disproportioned scales would be on a dragon. Atop of the creature’s bulbous balding head there was dirty clump of unkempt thin hair hanging down in greasy strands. One of the creature’s ears together with it’s nose were completely missing, bitten off judging by the roughness of the edges around the holes where those attributes of a face would normally be located. The creature’s teeth could not even be called teeth. Those were fangs. Horrid animalistic razor sharp fangs, that’s what they were. One of the guards held a sword to the creature’s throat, preventing it from emitting any kind of coherent sound, if it was even capable of that. The creature compensated with low menacing growls. Yet neither of the already mentioned features were what made cold paralysing fear spread throughout
the entirety of Minai’s body.

It were the eyes.

If eyes were to be mirror’s to one’s heart then those two were dreadful holes revealing the depths of darkness that to this day Minai never imagined to be even possible.

The woman couldn’t fathom such hatred, such an unwavering will to destroy all that was not entirely evil could ever exist. There needed to be no words, no explanations, all she needed to know about the nature of what was before her she already got.

The creature drilled it’s beady yellow eyes into the woman and it seemed that it was looking right into her soul, filling her entire being with dread much more overpowering than any instinct she had.

“What… what is that?” she managed to ask in a voice that came out as nothing more than a hoarse whisper.

“That is an orc” answered Thranduil in a deliberately nonchalant manner “Kill it”

“What… no…. why?” Minai stumbled over her words, unable to fully comprehend the reasoning for such an order.

“Why not? You were more than eager to make yourself useful, weren’t you? Once you are outside and on a scouting mission this is what you are going to have to deal with. It won’t hesitate to take your life so it is better for you to learn not to hesitate either” his words had a very instructive manner to them as if he was talking about why the sky was blue.

“I can’t” was all that Minai could manage in response.

“You can’t?” Thranduil paused for a brief moment “Perhaps you don’t care enough about saving your own life? That is your choice but you need not forget that you are not going to be alone out there. What about those who will be with you? Would you just stand there and watch them get taken out?”

“No. No, I… I can’t” the woman repeated like a broken record. She still had not recovered from the shock of the situation and the fear she felt when meeting her eyes with the orc’s.

“Could it be that you do not deem it fair to strike while it is tied up? Should I order for the guards to release the creature to make it more fair for you?” once again his speech was unnervingly calm.

“No!” Minai exclaimed before she could control her actions “Please don’t”

“Then tell me, what is holding you? You were so eager to insist that you were ready to go out there. I’m giving you a chance to prove that” Thranduil’s voice was still void of any emotion but at the same time it was ice cold, enough to make Minai shiver.

She raised her gaze and with horror realized that the same hatred she saw on the creature’s face was mirrored on that of the elven king. He stood there with his head turned to face the orc and if Minai didn’t know otherwise she would swear she was witnessing a weirdly twisted staring contest. The woman averted her eyes, unable to watch.

“I can not kill” she repeated once more.

All of the other thoughts have fled leaving Minai to desperately cling to the last one that remained.
“Those things, the orcs, they are a creation of the Enemy. What was done to them can not be reversed, definitely not in this world. It’s existence is a curse for anyone who is alive, including the orc itself.

Killing it would be an act of mercy. If there is even a shred of light in it that is worth saving then ending it’s life would send it’s damaged being to wherever it can have a chance heal and if such a chance is not possible then by killing this thing you will be doing a favour to everyone” the way Thranduil spoke it was apparent that not even for a briefest of moments did he allow a possibility that an orc could be saved.

By all accounts he was right, there weren’t any indications that such a thing could ever happen. There was a countless number of written and spoken proof of the orcs’ crimes. Elves, humans, dwarves, all suffered from the senseless horde unleashed upon the world by the Enemy. There were no accounts, however, of orcs changing their ways. There were no accounts of anyone able to reason or strike a deal with one of them. The orcs were too far gone and if even elves, the creatures of light, could not always find healing in Middle Earth then evidently it could not happen for something as damaged as an orc’s fea, if that term could even be applied.

Minai saw the devastation those creatures brought with her own eyes back in Dale, she spoke with elves who lost their loved ones by the orcs’ hands during the war in winter.

She now had an orc right before her, glaring at the woman with nothing but a desire to kill.

And yet.

She could not.

No matter what argument she had, no matter how rational and logical those sounded, she could not end a life.

It went completely against everything she was taught during her entire existence. It went against every moral and belief she had. It went against the very core of her being.

“I will not do it, it’s sentient” Minai said quietly looking at her feet.

She was naive.

That, her way of thinking but not her actions, could be excused with the world she lived in, with how she brought up, with something like orcs simply not existing back at home. She could not have thought about this issue before-ahead because it simply wouldn’t come to her mind. She had a ghost of an idea that maybe, possibly, she would have to hunt for food if it was a colder time of year and no towns or villages would be around. She allowed the possibility she would have to kill a fair share of spiders. She had to deal with them back at home as well, the difference now was that the spiders here were simply bigger in size.

But it was different with the orcs.

The orcs were sentient.

Evil, irreparably corrupt but sentient.

“Sentient? If you truly believe so then go ahead and have a conversation with it” Thranduil made a sign to the guards and the sword was removed finally allowing the orc to speak.
And speak it did.

“She-elf as arrogant as the rest of the elven-scum. Thinks I need her pity. You are the one who needs pity. Time of the elves is nearing it’s end and the proof of that is you. I can see it clearly, how empty and light-less you are. Nothing left of you but an empty shell. A fate awaiting for the rest of the elven-scum. Light fades while darkness is on the rise. Time of the orcs is soon to come”

Entranced by the speech Minai almost took a step forward but was stopped by Thranduil’s hand.

“It… does it know something?” her eyes were wise and her heart racing.

Of course she knew better than to listen to the orc, but it’s words made sense. A horrible, horrible sense. She was empty and that went far beyond fea she did not have. She was an empty being, void of interests, hobbies, aspirations and any kind of bonds with other people. She knew better. She knew not to believe an orc. But in all of those months she was not offered any other kind of information and this one, stated with such an unfaltering confidence, it didn’t sound implausible.

“Do not listen to it. The orc doesn’t know anything. It is trying to get in your head” Thranduil still held his hand to prevent Minai from nearing the creature.

The orc laughed. A roaring guttural sound, distantly similar to a start of a broken engine.

“You care about this woman, don’t you? Stop lying to her then. I know everything. I can see it. I can see everything that will happen to her and to you and to your entire kingdom” the orc was now looking directly at Thranduil “Young she-elves make the best sound when we deal with them. It is going to be special pleasure to dig my teeth into your she-elf. To hear her scream in pain. I wonder how similar it would be to your previo...”

The creature was not given chance to finish it’s sentence for with a single swing of the sword it was beheaded.

A fountain of black reeking blood emitted from the severed neck, staining everything that it reached.

The liquid covered Minai’s clothes, her arms, her hair and several splatters even made it’s way onto her face despite any of the woman’s attempts to cover herself. She gasped in terror as the twitching body and the lifeless head with it’s eyes still opened fell right before her legs. Minai made an instinctive step back, stumbled, fell on the ground feeling her eyes fill with tears, result of pain, fear, disgust and the putrid smell of the orc’s blood.

From her position on the ground she was harshly yanked by one of Thranduil’s arms, he was still holding the sword in the other one.

“Now imagine that I did allow you to go on a patrol and an unlikely orc attack happened. What would your reaction result in? You would be killed and along with you would go the rest of your squad trying to save your life and by doing that losing time to save theirs” he leaned closer to her face and whispered so that only she could hear “I would strongly suggest you to stop throwing a temper tantrum over not immediately getting what you want and start being honest about yourself and your motives or at the very least sit there quietly like the rest of those who are useless”

All air was taken out of Minai’s body and it took all of her strength not to gasp for breath. A terrible realization down on her along with a wave of burning cold. The full gravity of the situation now weighted heavily on her shoulders when she heard Thranduil speak that last word.

‘Why does my reasoning concern you? I’m just tired of sitting here confined to one place and being
She heard her own voice ringing in her ears.

Those were the exact words she said.

Maybe Thranduil was wrong. Maybe she should have ordered the guards to release the orc. That way she would get what she deserved. What she asked for so persistently.

She didn’t think.

She really truly didn’t think.

She never thought that it would… that it could…

Minai felt a tear slide down her face.

There was no excuse she could give herself.

There was no excuse she wanted to give herself.

She wanted to apologize, to say she was sorry for her utter lack of any thought but words didn’t come. She could not produce any sound not even a whimper. Her entire body was unwilling to move, unwilling to cooperate. With all the effort and courage she could muster the woman raised her eyes and finally gazed into Thranduil’s.

Minai expected to see anger, annoyance, disappointment, resentment…

She saw none of those things.

What she saw instead when looking into those icy blue eyes was pain.

Pain and tiredness of constantly being refused any opportunity to really talk to her, to have her open up to him the way he did to her, to finally have her trust him.

‘Useless’

That was the reason she finally gave to explain her behaviour.

She was so focused on keeping her petty little secrets like those were the most important thing to ever exist that she completely disregarded how her behaviour might affect those around her.

How it could affect Thranduil.

More tears fell on the ground as Minai was biting her lip, paying no attention to the taste of blood forming a strong presence in her mouth.

She reached her hand but as soon as her fingers touched his shoulder Thranduil made a step back and turned to the guards.

“Clean this mess” he ordered in a completely composed and unemotional tone.

The rain had started and with each heavy droplet falling down on her Minai finally started to understand how it truly felt to be denied an attempt to reach someone she cared about.
Well, I sincerely hope she went to write the best apology speech to ever exist but I guess we'll never know if I keep updating like that. I'll be honest, that mobile game I mentioned I was playing has a major upcoming event and... well. That and the weather is actually nice for a change. Sometimes I'd rather just enjoy that.

This is probably the worst thing I've written so far. I mean, I like it but it's the worst. It made me feel an actual feeling. Still figuring which one that was. I really wanted to make her just go on and be more open about herself. As I've said, I wrote it that way. But it just seemed so weird that after so stubbornly sticking to one particular pattern of behaviour for so long she would just suddenly wake up one day and decide she would act differently now. It was very anticlimactic, to me at least. In literature things should be learned the hard way to make it more interesting to read. Or to write. If I don't enjoy writing this, then what's the point?

Anyway, this is what her behaviour resulted in. I kind of gave a major hint that she really doesn't get with her modern thinking brain certain aspects of living in this kind of world, so you can't tell me that this sort of incident came out of nowhere. Hope she learns from her mistakes. If she doesn't I'm disowning her. Well at least as we all know the only way from the bottom is up.

See you next chapter, take care, don't forget to comment.

P.S. Keep an eye on that bullfinch
Perspectives

Chapter Notes

Yes. It is me. I am alive. Unfortunately. It has been... almost three months. Do I have an excuse for that? I do, but this isn't my personal blog and it's not what you're here for. You're here for the next chapter of the story which I actually wrote two months ago but wasn't satisfied with how it came out so I decided to wait until I would come up with something better and then things happened and now we're here.

But you know, the longest time I waited for a story update was nearly a decade. I'm not even joking. The author came back and posted a chapter with a note 'Yes, I know how long it was. Since then I've graduated highschool, college, moved to another country, survived a nature catastrophe, married, had a kid and now that my kid went to kindergarten I finally have enough time to finish the story' The best part is that I and many others legitimately waited for that long.

So um, yeah. Here's the next chapter for you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Stance, posture, concentration, keeping eyes on target, pulling the string until fingers can no longer hold it and…

The arrow missed the target.

The second one landed on the target, the very edge of it to be precise.

The third one missed by not that much.

The forth missed it completely.

Fifth, sixth, seventh, all landed anywhere but the red circle in the middle.

Eight, no luck.

Ninth…

It was, without any exaggeration, exceptionally hard to focus on the task since the mind kept wandering around and going in all sorts of different directions, mostly those where it shouldn’t have went at all.

There was, however, no other choice.

First of all, after demonstrating a complete lack of foresight and ability to really think about what it meant to be a decent member of this society it would be a rather notable achievement to demonstrate a complete absence of any kind of discipline by ditching all of her training as well.

Sure, the idea of taking refuge in a bedroom and hiding under the covers from all the world’s problems seemed even more beautiful and appealing than ever but at this point of her relatively
Minai was painfully aware that this allure was akin to a siren’s song. The one that would lure unsuspecting sailors to their ultimate demise that is. If she were to give in to the desire of throwing a pity party of a century things would only go downhill from that. No matter how much she would convince herself that it would only be for one day, by the end of it she would inevitably come to the conclusion that extending the even to two days could do no harm. Two days would then turn into three, three days would turn into a week and, well, you get the general idea.

Thus she had to grit her teeth and climb her way up from the pit of misery she found herself in. She couldn’t sit around and wait for someone else to do it for her this time.

Yeah.

About that.

It wasn’t exactly the first time that Minai found herself in a less than optimistic mood lately. And not so lately either. She remembered her zombie-like state when she first arrived here. Going back and forth between her room and the dining hall with only an occasional detour to the training grounds to watch Tauriel hit some targets. A murky form of existence with not much going on besides doing bare minimum to keep herself alive. Could she claim to properly taking control over her state of mind back than?

Not quite.

She channelled all of the unused energy into anger and vindictiveness.

What really happened to help her to snap out of it was that she got her schedule rearranged by Thranduil to have all of those extra activities, as well as socializing, that helped her to feel more comfortable with making her way around the kingdom around on her own. She managed to accomplish that while finding her way to get from one studies venue to another, learning some of the inner arrangement of the castle in the process. This gave her access to many new areas where she could eventually spend some leisure time at and eventually enjoy herself. Similar to that, learning elvish writing gave her an opportunity to read and with time better understand the strange new world she found herself in. Finally, she was pretty much dragged out of her bed every morning until going outside instead of sitting in one room feeling sorry for herself became a need and a habit.

It definitely worked, as Minai now realized, partially due to the framing of it. Having a definitive end-goal to all of it, in this case being able to leave the walls of the palace and search for a way home, gave her the much needed resolve to put the effort into all of her studies and training. Effort that would most probably not be there if she was simply told that she just needed to ‘stop moping around and do something’.

Arguably, she did overcome the issue herself by putting the work into it. But without that initial push she was given she would never make the progress.

Still, even after all of that there was also an issue of gossip which gave Minai quite the amount of grief. Being somewhat the centre of attention made her life here at Mirkwood overwhelming and at times uncomfortable. She managed to deal with that and end up feeling more at ease, didn’t she?

No. Not really.

She managed to become snappy and annoyed.

Still, she eventually overcame that, yes, but only after Thranduil gave her an opportunity to get
away from the curious elven eyes following her around. She was taken to Dale, a place where she could see something familiar, to spend some time around humans, to relax. She was given an opportunity to take a much needed breath and enjoy the calming tranquillity of the remote scenery by the remote lake. Subsequently, this pretty much softened the blow of realizing that her life didn’t miraculously return to normal upon leaving the premises of the forest.

Ah, the wonders of reflection.

Several more arrows were fired and all of them did hit the target but once again the red circle remained untouched.

Better that than nothing.

What was next on the agenda of giving herself a mental slap for?

Several to choose from.

What about the encounter with Gandalf the Wizard and the world shattering existential crisis in the aftermath? Of course her world continued to stand, shaken but definitely not yet shattered. She managed not to derail herself into a complete misery. She distracted herself somehow from getting too hung up on that conversation, right?

Actually…

After noticing that she was in a somewhat sulky mood Thranduil distracted her from that by asking to talk about Dale and the observations she made during her morning stroll that day. She didn’t think too much about the issue right after it happened. Afterwards there were matters to attend to and after some time passed it wasn’t quite that urgent anymore to fall into despair because of some alleged wizard.

Even so, if she didn’t fully give in to the despair, she was majorly feeling uneasy after returning back to the elven domain.

Therefore back at Mirkwood when she was still slightly out of it and chose to isolate herself inside the library, sacrificing her usual days bin the sun, it was once again the same elf who helped her to chase the melancholy away. She mentioned liking animals when she asked to tame those bunnies and so he took her to watch some very cute deer.

That was nice.

She was treated nicely.

Was she nice in return though?

The arrow missed.

So did the next one.

And the one after that.

The last one didn’t hit the target either.

Minai sighed and took her losses, prepared to call it a day. She collected the arrows scattered around the range, placed them into the quiver and absent-mindedly arranged them in the same manner as someone would arrange a flower bouquet in a vase. When she turned to leave and…
“Tauriel?” Minai raised her eyebrows in a surprise which she immediately realised to be quite unwarranted “I…”

“Forgot that I was there?” the other elleth offered helpfully “If you want I could pretend that I just got here right now and didn’t see anything”

“That would be nice of you, yes” Minai smiled with one corner of her mouth. She recognized that Tauriel was just trying to lighten up the mood and appreciated the effort, even if her mood still remained in it’s dark sulky corner.

“Where’s your little bird friend?”

Minai bit the inside of her lip. She had not seen Buddy ever since, you know. For all she knew he could have went on to find himself a less detestable caretaker. Still, she didn’t want to give any legitimacy to that suspicion by voicing it aloud.

“Hiding from the weather, I think. It has been raining a lot lately, that’s can’t be good for his feathers”

“Is that so? I thought he fled from the catastrophe” the redhead mused aloud.

“Catastrophe?” Minai frowned, slightly confused.

“Yes, the one that apparently happened while I was on a mission” Tauriel gave her companion an intent look.

“I’m not sure what you mean” the blonde smiled sheepishly.

“I mean your impeccable demonstration of skills today. I’ve had a fair share of bad target days in my life and know that those don’t exactly come just because. Something’s clearly ruining your concentration”

“I’m just feeling a little under the weather. With the rain and all I think I might have gotten a co...” Minai had to cease her well crafted excuse when she noticed Tauriel tapping one of her ears with a finger.

“Did that excuse work a lot when you lived among humans?”

Right. Elves and their immunity. So much for having a cold as a get out of jail card.

“You’d be surprised” Minai answered in hopes that it would somehow change the topic “A true blessing on a day when you are especially unwilling to get out of bed”

She remembered all of those times when she lied about feeling unwell to get out of going to school after having a fight with one of the classmates or having a test she was rather unprepared for. That excused worked well sometimes and she remained in a bliss of thinking that her acting skills were simply impeccable and unparalleled. With time, however, she came to a realization that it wasn’t so much that she was some kind of thespian genius but an act of good will from her parents. They were quite attentive to her needs and recognized when she needed to have a ‘breather’ day every now and then.

Her family.

They were very kind people and good parents.
It wasn’t really their fault that, well…

They would have to be sad about her disappearance. Minai knew that they loved her and cared for her, since they were her parents and she was their daughter. Set that aside and the only difference of her absence in her parents’ lives would be the lack of a lukewarm phone-call every two weeks or so.

Not that Minai was negligent or didn’t want to talk to her parents, but there is only so much a person who has nothing going on in their life could potentially say.

Not having any particular passion for a hobby or having only a handful of friends was not that much of an uncommon thing. There were people who were naturally introverted as well as those who dedicated themselves to their work and preferred to spend their free time in mindless entertainment allowing their mind and body to rest. There were those to whom the job itself was a hobby and those who preferred to earn money first and give in to leisure activities later in life. Those for whom their family were their closest friends and those who were comfortable alone with their spouse, or no one at all, and an occasional casual chat with colleagues to fulfil their social needs.

Those were all legitimate choices and whatever fit a particular person was right for them.

But it wasn’t quite like that for her, was it?

She never thought about her life in depth. She refused to do it, plain and simple. Whatever issues she may have had were shoved so far back into her mind that she managed to convince herself they didn’t exist.

That was a convenient form of existence. An easy one.

No circle of friends?

Not a problem. There were after all those twelve people subscribed to her blog, right? Twelve nameless icons occasionally pressing that ‘like’ button every now and then. At least they were consistent which allowed to count them as a regular social interaction, did it not? The modern world had her covered.

Inexistent love life?

Oh well. That wasn’t unique. It was never too much of a hassle to find someone to spend some quality fun time with for an unspecified amount of months. And if she needed some romance in her life then, well, then she could always drop by a nearest book store and pick up a newly published novel. Modern world for the win.

No call from parents in a week?

A common occurrence. She barely noticed when that happened anymore. She was busy. A series finale was airing in a month and it was about time to binge watch the entirety of the nine or so previous seasons. Each with twenty-something hour long episodes. Technologies score another one.

She still remembered that moment when she asked her parents about the possibility of having horseback lessons. Mother and Father said that such a thing would take away from their working hours but if that was what she wanted and if she agreed to have less new toys then that could certainly be arranged. She remembered the moment when she said ‘no’. If it would be a hassle then she didn’t need it that much. It wasn’t even about having less toys. It was about being a rational
person making rational decisions. What if she changed her mind? What if she didn’t like it as much as she thought she would? Having her parents make such drastic changes to their family’s life and then for all of that to turn out to be in vain seemed like a horrible idea.

Well, as it turns out, in doing so she also refused to potentially find herself a lifelong passion. Since now she knew for sure that she did indeed enjoy riding horses. She refused a chance to find herself some friends who shared her interest as well as the chance to spend more time with her parents and perhaps form a stronger bond because...

Because what if it didn’t work out, then what?

That was the way she continued to act throughout her further life.

She didn’t want to make mistakes.

She didn’t want to deal with the consequences.

She didn’t want to commit to an expensive and time consuming hobby in case she would fall out of love with it later. She didn’t want to pick too difficult of an education major in case she wouldn’t be able to keep along the way. She didn’t want to commit to a serious relationship because it could fall apart and she didn’t want to be stuck with someone she hated on a lease. There was nothing in particular ever going in her life and thus there was nothing to talk about. Therefore when her parents did call her she only answered in simple sentences, creating an impression that she wasn’t in any way interested in that conversation. And she herself only called herself every two weeks or so. When something just had to happen by default. Like a chestnut falling on her head when walking to university or a pigeon stealing her sandwich. That kind of stuff. She drifted away from her parents’ lives and all in all it was simply a natural thing to happen.

In the end, she brought that on herself.

“Are you sure you don’t walk to talk about it?” the redhead asked again, with a certain amount of concern in her voice.

“I...uh...” Minai realized that she was spacing out and struggled to find a plausible excuse for her behaviour.

Of course she was sure of not wanting to talk. That was what she wanted to say. It wasn’t even a lie. It was the truth. There wasn’t anything about the incident and the subsequent encounter with the orc that would paint her in good or even a neutral light. There weren’t really that many people in general who would want to brag about their missteps and failures in general. Especially if it wasn’t just a simple mistake but a long string of downright refusals to admit glaring behavioural issues.

However.

That was just it.

The whole situation.

She ended up where she was now exactly because of her stubbornness and unwillingness to share anything about herself.

Wouldn’t she, by avoiding to talk about it right now, be continuing to move on the same darn path that lead her here in the first place?
If she ever wanted to amend her behaviour, wouldn’t that be the perfect opportunity to do so? To make that first step?

“You know, I think I do want to talk about it” Minai finally said after a long pause.

***

“...and that’s that” Minai finished her tale drowning her empty gaze in a half empty cup of tea.

She, of course, omitted quite a few details not to reveal anything that she shouldn’t but the general idea was still there. She was acting selfish and bratty, the things she said she wasn’t proud of while keeping her mouth shut when she should have spoken. As for her excuse, she had none.

The end.

Tauriel nodded.

For a while she didn’t say anything, remaining deep in thought.

“Well” the redhead eventually said “You are far from being the first elf who was unhappy with not being allowed into action before being fully ready for it. Most of the younger elves go through that and even some of the older ones fall into the same type of behaviour. In cases such as having an injury that hasn’t properly healed yet or something similar. Often-times it works best to simply shock someone into truth rather than risk them not listening to logic and sneaking out. Such cases aren’t exactly uncommon and more than a few tragedies ended up happening as a result” Tauriel gave Minai a somewhat reassuring look “I would advise you not to think too much about the orc. It was a slap on the wrist but not more than that”

“You’re right” Minai admitted “That was probably the best way for me to learn that lesson”

Even though she routinely read a lot of elven literature and historical documents involving orcs, it had very little effect on her until she saw one with her own two eyes. After all, there were plenty of people throughout history who had claimed to have supernatural experiences and such, and even though some of those people she met personally at one point or another in her life, Minai still remained very sceptical about the idea. The same thing happened with the orcs. She read the books, she heard the accounts but her mind still didn’t register those beasts as being real until confronted with the irrefutable proof.

“As for the other part” Tauriel continued “Having been in a situation not too dissimilar to yours fairly recently I might suggest that it is not as hopeless for you as it appears right now. However, there is no advice I can give, since in my case the issue just got resolved with time”

“Hmm” Minai took a sip of her tea “Somehow I feel that for me not doing anything will only make things worse. But there is also not much I can do. I would ask for forgiveness, but at this point I’m not even sure I deserve any” she felt her exasperation built up but was at a complete loss on how to deal with it.

“Forgiveness doesn’t have to be for you” the redheaded elleth suggested.

“What do you mean?”

“It happens so that I can easily see your situation from both ends since I have been the one to say more than I should have and to listen to words that hurt me as well. It was unpleasant to hear and I was angry enough for all of my other senses to be overpowered by it. That is not a place I would like to find myself again” Tauriel sighed “Learning to forgive and let go was what helped me to
eventually find peace move on”

“Would you want the other… person to apologize” Minai didn’t say it aloud but decided not to be any more specific than the other woman, or in this case elleth, was.

There was a pause but then Tauriel smiled shook her head.

“I thought about that. A lot. But each time I do so I come to a different conclusion. Would I want to hear an apology? Perhaps. I wouldn’t mind it. But at the same time I recognize that words are simply words and do not mean anything unless there are actions to support them. Right now I’ve been simply reinstated to the life almost the same as I had before and just that. I accept this outcome since I gave no apology of my own for my words either. My actions, no matter what emotional reason I had behind them, were out of line for a soldier and a scout. Despite everything, I love this kingdom and being given back trust to protect it on my missions is what I consider both an apology and forgiveness”

“That is very admirable position to have” admitted Minai. Imagining herself in a situation identical to Tauriel’s she had her doubts about being able to act with similar grace about it.

“It sounds like that now, but is only the result of all the less than admirable mistakes that I’ve made” the redhead replied with a genuine smile that had the faintest hint of sadness behind it.

“Would be nice though if we could have the becoming smart and wise part without, you know, other types of consequences” Minai let out a wistful sigh. She wasn’t really being serious with that statement, it was simply a fleeting thought that came and went.

“Hmm, yes, I do wish I knew more about crow behaviour before climbing the tree to look at the baby birds that one time”

“Are they aggressive?”

“Ah, see that scar behind my ear? Now let me tell you...”

Tauriel continued to tell the story about the crows and the tree and how she and prince Legolas, while still being small elflings, had to flee from what seemed back then as an entire murder of angry crows. In return Minai told a tale of her own about how she and her classmates fed seeds to a bunch of pigeons, adopting one bird of their own and making bets whose champion would end up eating more seeds. Everyone, save for the pigeons, ended up losing when a local groundskeeper chased them away since, well, pigeons were never exactly known for leaving the ground clean behind them.

They talked about this and that, paying no attention to the heavy downpour of rain outside the cosiness of the room. It felt nice to chat about everything and nothing as it felt nice to simply talk about what was bothering her. Even if there was no actual solution found, hearing that her missteps were far from being unique made Minai feel, in a way, less alone. Even though she was well aware of the fact prior to the conversation.

The evening came and after wishing Tauriel a well night’s rest Minai headed to her own bedroom. The halls were unusually dark, despite it being summer and sunset not being scheduled by another hour or two. The mystery, however, did not stay for too long and the woman discovered the reason for the darkness when passing a large window of sorts.

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It was a rather impressive sight out there to be quite honest. There was no way it wouldn’t be. It
wasn’t exactly an everyday occurrence for her to witness millennia old trees being tossed around left and right back and forth as if they were a bunch lonely strands of grass on a boardwalk. In retrospect, there was probably not a single person Minai could claim to know who got to see a similar sight. Before coming to Mirkwood, of course. For the elves, and maybe some other inhabitants of Middle Earth, it wasn’t that much of an out of ordinary happening. On the other hand though, there was still an issue of whether or not something like that would even be on anyone’s ‘must see’ list at all. Of course there were plenty nature enthusiasts and overall adrenaline chasers who wouldn’t let such an opportunity to slide. But those were the people who took a specific interest in it. As for the general audience, the answer to that question would most likely be a firm ‘no’. Most people went through their lives without ever wondering what a thunderstorm in a very echo-y mountain surrounded wilderness area would look and, most importantly, sound like.

Well, to anyone who was still curious, Minai would readily attest that the sound of it was nothing short of completely dreadful.

Impressive, yes, but still very much dreadful.

Not that Minai had not seen a thunderstorm before. She got to experience her fair share of those during her relatively short lifetime. It was nothing like that though. All it ever amounted to previously was one or two, five at most, unenthusiastic lightning strikes somewhere in the distance, far-far away. In the hindsight, not at all surprising. Considering the myriads of lightning rods scattered all around the populated city area. Naturally the lightning was usually accompanied by the sound of thunder, but even that was properly hushed by the buzzing of the car engines stuck in a jam. Still, there was the rain pattering on the windowsill. But even that was not much of a problem. Close the windows, put on some movie and thunderstorm went successfully unnoticed. Plain and simple.

Somehow, Minai got the feeling that this storm would be much harder to ignore.

She hurried to her room, even though there wasn’t really that much of a need since she wasn’t exactly outside anyway. Still, empty hallways felt like being in an open air and she found herself desiring that feeling of safety and comfort which could only be provided by a place she could, even temporary, call a home.

Reaching the destination didn’t take too much time since this path, at least, Minai had memorized quite well by now. Minai reached her hand and opened the door, greeted by nothing but darkness. It was already late in the evening and heavy enough clouds only worsened the situation. Since she left the room early in the morning when the sun could still pierce the not yet raining veil it left the lantern lights required some awakening before they would start shining.

Minai was about to get on with the task when a lightning struck and she realized she was not alone in the room. The cold white light illuminated a figure of an unknown elf. When both the thunder and the girlish scream ceased the elf said:

“I brought your bird”

***

Working as a Royal Guard in the Mirkwood forest was, despite what many would like to assume, mind-numbingly uneventful. Royal Guards barely ever left the premises of the palace in order to, forgive the redundancy, guard the boarders of the kingdom or rid the woods from the pesky eight legged plague that were the spiders. Those were the tasks reserved for the march-wardens and the
scouts. Similarly, Royal Guards, for the most part, did not participated in any combat unless it was
a situation that would require anyone who could and couldn’t bear arms to intervene. Fighting
wars, defeating enemies and winning battles was something that soldiers did.

To put it in simple terms, the only task of a guard for the majority of their employment was to
stand there quietly and put on an intimidating facade. Not that heavy of a burden by any stretch of
imagination. Shining golden armour, long pointy spears and sharp swords alone created the needed
image of intimidation and were rarely ever used for their intended purpose. For the most part the
weapons and the armour were meant to adhere to the overall aesthetic of the palace and upkeep the
overall atmosphere of regality.

Yes, of course, in case there was an actual attack within the palace walls it would be the Guards’
duty to protect their liege. However, the possibility of such a situation ever occurring was
somewhere on the same level as waking up one day to witness the sky suddenly fall onto the
ground. Not very likely. No one and no thing that had a smidgen of potential to pose any kind of
actual harm was ever allowed inside the premises unsupervised, unattended and unsubdued. Not to
say that Mirkwood was openly hostile to the any uninvited visitors, that were not the dwarves of
course, but to call it hospitable would be a tad of an exaggeration as well.

Sure, the position of a Royal Guard had a certain aura of prestige wrapped neatly around it but the
bulk part of it could be explained with one simple word that had nothing to do with courage,
bravery and valour.

Payment.

It paid well to be a Royal Guard. Once again, despite the wide consensus, the reason behind it was
not in any way connected to the potential risks behind the job. As it was mentioned those were
hardly probable.

The payment was meant to ensure that whoever occupied the position of a Royal Guard would
simply be quiet and keep to themselves.

Low risks meant very little when the top-brass was, without any means to put it mildly, paranoid.
Now, whether paranoia was a prevailing trait of the sindarian rulers, starting back from Elu
Thingol, or something of an entirely different nature was of little consequence. Whatever was that
reason, as a result of it the ruling authority was often suspicious of anything and everything. It was
well established during the rule of King Oropher and continued even after his son Thranduil
ascended the throne. Fortunately it wasn’t as severe as the isolationist policy of Doriath but it still
meant that the Guards just had to be present every time something of any significance happened.
They had to be present during the official visits from the representatives of other elven domains,
they had to stand there when guests came from any part of the world and even when a random
passer-by were lost and brought in, a Guard’s watchful eye was needed.

The guards could not take a leave throughout an official audience with the king no matter who the
other person was in terms of any aspect of their background.

During those audiences conversations happened and things were said, some of which were strictly
forbidden from reaching the ears of anyone who wasn’t the one for whom they were intended.
More often than not, the Guards were exactly those for whom the information was not intended.
Yet they still had to hear it by the simple virtue of being present.

Hence the generous amount of gold received for fulfilling their roles. The Guards received quite
the amount of compensation for their services, which included the requirement to never speak of
anything they could potentially hear. As well not bringing the issues further.
That was the main rule of being a Royal Guard and one that was abided to no matter what. No questions asked. It was hard to ever imagine a set of circumstances when a Guard would go out of their way and in any way shape or form acknowledge something or even anything they happened to witness during their silent vigil.

However, every rule is known for having an exception.

***

Observing that girl follow Tauriel all those months ago was quite the experience. Pale, scared, with a scratched ear yet with that unmistakeable spark of curiosity and wonder ever present in the eyes of someone who happened to enter an elven domain for the first time. The one thing strange, perhaps, was that the girl was an elf as well, which did rise some questions. But not as many as occurred when the girl spoke.

She spoke and denied being an elf and didn’t have the slightest degree of familiarity with anything around her, as it seemed.

Evidently reluctant and uncomfortable she appeared to be almost disoriented. Her expression and attitude changed from an honest fear to a nervous laughter in a blink of an eye. It was beyond clear that the girl came either from far-far away and barely understood anything of that which was happening to her or was under an influence of a malicious spell. She needed to be given some time to calm down and comprehend the situation.

Unfortunately for the girl, the one to decide her fate was not particularly known for being lenient and understanding towards strangers. The only thing which saved her from the imprisonment was perhaps the undeniable pointedness of her ears. She was spared a trip to the dungeons but that was only after she was further scared to the point of almost crying.

The Guard was not void of compassion and at some point even wanted to place a hand on her shoulder and reassure the poor thing that she pretty much got lucky to get out of the situation the way she did. He wanted to, but he couldn’t.

He had to keep still and quiet.

Such was the Guard’s duty.

***

“H-Hey, Feren, have y-you seen the newcomer yet?” tipsy as usual on a day-off one of the ranger elves leaned heavily on a table he was sitting at.

“You mean the blonde elleth following Tauriel everywhere?” Feren, who perhaps held a slightly higher rank on the overall hierarchy showed a little more discipline and refrained from drinking the amount which would make his speech slurred.

“You know we’re now making enemies out of our own kind” the drunken elf continued.

The Guard, who was observing the conversation silently, had his interest peaked. He hadn’t seen much of the girl ever since that day when she stood before the King. The Guard knew she was around and still following Tauriel in a lost kind of manner, almost akin to a baby duck following it’s mother for no other reason than not knowing any other viable way to get by. Yet, knowing what he did about the strange elleth and her insistence on being a human, he couldn’t help but feel a decent amount of interest towards the way she would to settle in the elven society.
“What are you talking about?” Feren raised an eyebrow answering with just the right amount of indifference to barely reach that socially acceptable line of not being accused of being interested in gossip. But only barely.

“You should’ve seen the way this g-girl grimaces every time the name of our king is brought up. Especially during today’s dinner” the ranger dawned another mug of wine “I thought… what’s the name’s going to death glare her to… death for that”

“Are you sure all of those death glares weren’t addressed to you and your drunken behaviour?” replied Feren, this time with a sincere lack of interest in his voice.

As for the Guard, he held his tongue. For the most part rumours were just that, rumours, no matter how believable it would be for the girl not to be too fond of the local authority after the way she was treated.

***

The next morning all of the kingdom was buzzing with gossip.

The unheard of and the unimaginable has happened.

The elleth, the new one, the one that was completely quiet and disoriented, the one that only knew how to follow others, the one that was widely known for being shy and self conscious in the bath house, the one that barely ever left her room for any other reason than to bath or to eat, the one that was completely oblivious to the elven way of life, the one that walked around with eyes wide and mouth agape, the one that was completely bewildered by a display of an arrow hitting the target, the one that needed help with the simplest task of braiding her hair, the one that could barely reach the dining hall without getting lost and thus never strayed from her route, that pliant girl…

She was not only seen but also escorted from the King’s study in the earliest hours of morning, with an unmistakeably dishevelled look about her yet in no particular state of distress.

Of course most of the Mirkwood residents, almost each and every one, knew for sure that the gossip had no round behind it. It still didn’t mean that the topic wouldn’t be widely discussed for days, if not weeks. There were not many who left Mirkwood and even fewer who arrived on a regular basis therefore any new issue was a hot issue for the sole reason of being the only issue at hand.

Still, there were a few with their hearts young who refused to give up the possibility of truth behind the rumours quite so easily.

One of them was the Guard’s sister, a young and spriteful elleth in love with music and dancing.

“I’ve been asked to teach the new girl how to dance” she sang in a very much excited manner one day “This is amazing. I’m finally going to get my chance to get to the bottom of this!”

The Guard did not reply. Perhaps it would indeed be wiser to deter that curious sibling of his from being nosy but by that moment he knew better. It would be a useless task, completely futile, for everybody knew that nothing stood between an elleth and a particularly promising hearsay. Not even common sense.

On the other hand, especially not common sense.

Still, a little bit of nudging in the right direction couldn’t hurt.
“I wouldn’t keep my hopes up if I were you”

“Oh, don’t be such a spoil sport” the young elleth giggled “I’m not that naive. I know when to keep my feet grounded. But you have to admit, something like that would be actually nice. Our King could use something or someone to occupy his interest instead of… you know, other things”

The Guard once again said nothing. Many lives were lost in the recent war, many of which the Guard personally cherished. It could be that his sister was right. There were some cases when one would hope for gossip to be true.

***

It was the Guard’s turn to hold the silent vigil before the King’s study that day. The task was fairly simple. To make sure no one entered unless it was the emergency of all emergencies. It was still an unforgivably early hour for any kind of disturbance. Of course many would say that a noon was a rather acceptable hour to hold an audience with one’s people, but such a person most probably wouldn’t be the one who had spend the last several days staying as far away from being sober as evenly possible.

Ah, yes, the King was drunk but at this point it was hardly anything new. This time in particular it was almost justifiable. It could be almost justifiable, that is. There had been a meeting about the current state of the army earlier in the week and the result were more than worthy of turning to wine as a coping companion. It would, however, help tremendously if the King wasn’t the direct cause for the current pitiful situation the kingdom had found itself in.

As a consequence, there wasn’t too much effort put into preventing an angry elleth, one on the older aristocratic side of the population, from entering the King’s study. If anything, it was closer to killing two birds with one stone. That elleth wasn’t exactly known for her amicable personality and may or may not have been noticed chastising guards for not holding their spears perpendicular enough or some other nonsense. Both parties would acquire a massive yelling induced headache from the encounter and the guards, well, the guards always had the excuse of not wanting to use force when handling a poor widow.

The reason she was there wasn’t even that big of a mystery. For the Guard at least. His sister recounted in detail about what transpired during the tea party. The new girl didn’t react well to others prying into her personal affairs and due to the lack of experience and a very short time spent at Mirkwood she couldn’t know who would be petty enough to complain and who had enough of a status to complain to the highest instances. Yet none of it mattered in the long-run since it was rather doubtful that there would be any continuation of the conflict. The widow elleth would complain and then perhaps there would be some yelling about the evils of bothering the reigning monarch with such trivial matters. You know, since there were more pressing issues in need of attendance, such as wine bottles numbered from five to eight. Anyway, the important part was that nothing would be remembered next morning.

Five minutes passed in silence.

Then ten, during which there was no yelling heard.

Somewhere after the fifteen minute mark the elleth exited the venue with a much calmer expression. There was of course that unmistakeable hint of aristocratic annoyance that never left the faces of many upper class elves but besides that she looked a lot more relaxed that before.

The guards exchanged looks, somewhat surprised by the outcome. The lukewarm surprise, however, was promptly changed to a complete confusion when some half an hour later the
newcomer girl was summoned but instead of getting a full-blown lecture concerning her recent behaviour she left the King’s study in quite a cheerful mood, chirping something about pets, bunnies and the newfound love for climbing trees.

The young elleth wasn’t just talking to herself, she was in fact engaged in a conversation with none other than Lord Thranduil himself.

Jaws were dropped.

The rumours, or rather the ones who usually spread them, were confused as well.

The girl was the one in the lead and deciding the direction, making it apparent that it was probably her who initiated such an appearance. Considering the faces she made upon the mere mention of his name, seeing her now walking in such a relaxed manner and hand in hand with the king was a change no one had expected happening. Despite being unexpected the change wasn’t exactly unwelcome. The girl’s attitude could not have changed without a change in attitude towards her as well.

Perhaps changes could happen after all.

***

There was some speculation about the girl’s motivation. No self respecting gossiper would ever let an opportunity to speculate about spies and conspiracies pass by like that. However everything was gradually started to be put in it’s rightful place when people noticed the looks and the blushing.

To the gossipers, everything they were talking about was immediately validated then and there.

Gifts such as the brooch, then riding one horse, walking hand in hand and having dinners together. It became more than obvious what thought came into the girl’s mind after all of that, even more so considering her affinity for reading romance. Something she was often seen doing. It was a tale with a known end.

The public’s opinion was divided.

No matter how few there were still those who didn’t appreciate a newcomer, young, raised in human culture and lacking a respectable lineage to have this type of connection to the king. It never grew into anything surpassing casual annoyance for there was not much reason to raise the arms about it. It was a common knowledge that elves rarely took a second spouse so nothing would come of it in the long run.

On the other hand there were also those who acknowledged that last fact and were therefore displeased with the elleth being led on. It wasn’t that hard to imagine that alone in a new culture she would want to reach to the one who took it upon himself to be her guide. It was hard to imagine the King not to understand the implications of his actions.

To that the third and probably the largest group had an answer ready. The girl was clearly aware of what was going on since it was easily read on her face that she immediately caught herself whenever her thought went in an inappropriate direction. She knew the king to be married and held no illusions. Even if she was setting up her own demise further down the line she did so in full awareness of the possible consequences.

This time, no one said anything.

It was a silent agreement of sorts.
Considering the girl’s profound disdain towards anyone prying into her life it was decided to leave her alone to decide her own fate. Not to mention that the girl’s arrival gradually improved their king’s demeanour and that was something no one would ever oppose to.

It was simply beneficial for everyone to keep quiet.

Summer came and with warm weather warmed to mood of the entire forest and the hearts of those who lived in it.

Including some rather starchy guards.

***

It didn’t take an expert to see by the expression of her face that the girl saw an orc for the first time in her life. The look of pure terror not only confirmed that it had to be the case but also revealed that she was not in any way prepared or warned about the sight that would greet her that morning. Worse yet, it wasn’t even quite clear what was she afraid more of, the beast or the tyrant who made that meeting happen. If not for the duty the Guard, who was at that moment restraining the orc, would feel very much compelled to reassure the girl somehow. To say that the orc couldn’t harm her due to being well guarded. To advice her not to look or interact with the foul creature. But that he couldn’t do.

The duty forbade it.

The girl’s full attention was captured and her eyes were glued to the beast. She only raised them once. One brief glance towards the towering figure of the King near her and her already pale face could rival in it’s lack of colour even that of a corpse.

From then on she could only look at the orc and not dare to avert her eyes.

Thus, when she made that one small movement towards the creature, she could not at all see the immediate change on the King’s face. She didn’t see the expression of pure hatred for the orc change into that of concern.

Concern for her well-being.

And at that moment the Guard knew that for once he’d have to disregard the protocol.

***

“Buddy?”

The small bullfinch perching on the Guard’s shoulder perked up and readily made his way to the one who called his name, landing on one of her fingers.

“Buddy! Where have you been? I was so worried!” Minai smiled, ruffling a few of the red feathers with her pinky.

“It seems he couldn’t get into the room because the windows are all closed. I think since there isn’t really anywhere to perch outside the door he made his way to where the food was” came the response.

“Oh” in her happiness over finally seeing her feathery friend Minai completely forgot she was not alone “Thank you for bringing him to me”
Of course the windows were closed because of the wind, rain and overall nastiness which happened to take place outside the palace recently. But it wasn’t completely true that Buddy couldn’t find any other way to get in. He managed just fine quite a few times before. Still, Minai really appreciated the unknown elf’s attempts of cheering her up with any kind of an explanation.

Her best bet would be that Buddy wasn’t really at her side in any sense of the word these past days. That was fair, even if unpleasant. All in all, the bullfinch returned and that sent a wave of warmth throughout Minai’s body. She never even realized how much she got used to having the bird around and how much she actually needed that little companion of hers. She took for granted all those times she could vent her frustration and get a chirp, which she often pretended to be supportive, as a response. She took for granted being amused by Buddy’s antics. She took for granted the feeling of not being alone.

Even if the bullfinch was just a small forest bird and even if she still couldn’t at all communicate with animals, it seems that in those months they’ve spent roaming Mirkwood side by side they did form a bond between them.

A bond that, as it was now clear, withstood a trial of sorts.

At that moment Minai made a promise to cherish that bond by finding out where the elves grew strawberries, the ones that were fresh and delicious even during the harshest winter months. She would find that out and ask for an enchanted all-year-gifting bush to plant in a pot on the windowsill.

Because her friend deserved the biggest reddest and juiciest strawberries this or any other world offered.

“I apologize for intruding on your privacy. Unfortunately my position forbids me to be noticed lingering outside your room for too long or being seen returning here several times. May I request to speak with you?” the elf, still nameless, bowed slightly.

“Yes, of course, give me a minute”

Minai carefully moved Buddy to his favourite perching place, the headboard, and tapped a few lanterns to bring some light into the living area. That was a regrettable decision. Kind of. She didn’t get too many visitors in her room lately and… well…

The place could use some tidying up. One chair, at least, could be bared from a clothes pile. The empty plates on the table could be brought to… wherever empty plates went around here. Those stale bread crumbs, they were Buddy’s, but considering that the bullfinch wasn’t really here for quite some time, yeah. Those crumbled parchments were probably the least on the list of offenders.

Oh, and Archibald.

Archibald the Arachnid was quite a laid back individual, small, no bigger than a coin. Quietly he occupied the right top corner, underneath the ceiling. Normally Minai wouldn’t be particularly appreciative of a spider’s presence and would serve Archibald with an eviction notice within the first hours of noticing his unlawful residence but he paid rent in stray wasps being caught in his web. Wasps, mind you, could sting and bite, therefore choosing between a spider whose only crime was being unsightly and a wasp that could easily cause some physical pain Minai chose the lesser of two evils.

The woman finished with lanterns and freed one of the chairs from the eldritch abomination of textile horror that grew upon it over the course of several weeks. Having done that she offered the
seat to her guest and climbed on the bed herself, as she often did in similar situations.

Now that the room was much brighter Minai no longer thought the elf to be completely unfamiliar yet could not quite ascribe a name to the face.

“What is it that you would like to discuss with me?” the woman started the conversation after noticing the elf’s polite gaze.

“I understand this might not be my place to ask about your private affairs and by no means I suggest you are under any obligation to answer” his voice, while polite, was still firm and clearly indicated that such wording was more of a safety measure kind of thing “There is something that I’ve seen which conflicts greatly with my other observations. I do not believe that what I saw was what really took place”

“I’m not sure I...” Minai narrowed her eyes looking at the elf, trying to remember where she could have seen him and the next moment her eyes widened “Wait, you mean that day with the orc?”

She finally recognized one of the guards who were restraining the creature back then.

“Yes” the Guard nodded but did not elaborate any further.

Minai frowned. Clearly the Guard was being extremely cautious from the very beginning. He either didn’t want to or simply couldn’t speak more freely. If that was the case then the issue must be truly important for him to even show up here at all. Still, it placed quite a lot on her deduction skills.

What did he say earlier?

Something wasn’t as it appeared to be?

Okay.

So.

That incident with the orc.

What would it look like from a perspective of an average guard who likely wasn’t given any other details or instructions other than to restrain an orc one random afternoon?

First there were the guards, an almost uninvolved party. Second, there was the orc, infinitely more terrifying than a spider. Third, there was Thranduil, appearing cold and indifferent. Then there was her. Trembling in fear, pretty much begging for whatever was happening to stop and even crying.

What would she think if she saw a, presumably innocent, person being forcibly exposed to terror inducing creature by someone clearly in power?

Minai suppressed an urge to slap herself.

That’s what it was to a bystander. She knew the context behind it. Thranduil knew.

The guards didn’t.

For them she was a poor soul unjustly tortured for a tyrant’s amusement.

Except.
That’s why the Guard came to her.

He didn’t want to believe it.

He didn’t want to believe his king to be a tyrant.

Perhaps some months ago he would.

But things changed.

‘...conflicts too much with my other observations’

Those were the Guard’s words.

It was a strange feeling. Bizarre even.

Minai knew she was in the wrong yet somehow the situation was perceived in her favour. Right now she was going to ruin that, to probably make herself look awful, to admit to all of her faults and flaws and…

And she was happy about it.

She was happy about being given an opportunity to make a fool out of herself.

Somehow, it almost felt like the best thing that happened to her lately.

Because that guard came to her instead of just assuming.

Because the guard refused to believe the worst.

Because that was the proof.

The proof of how much things have really went for the better since the winter.

Thus Minai relied her version of events, perhaps even a little more abridged than what she told Tauriel earlier in the day. She kept it short and straight to the point, as she suspected the Guard wasn’t there for any details or gossip material, He only needed her to deny or confirm his suspicions.

She confirmed.

She confirmed that indeed, she acted like a complete... untranslatable word from her language.

“...I never even realized how sheltered I was. I’m trying, but I just can’t really understand how other’s can do it” Minai blurted out at the end of her short tale. She wasn’t going to say it, it just came by on itself, likely from being on her mind a lot lately.

“It would be unwise to expect a mentality one held for their entire life to change overnight. You can not force to understand such things with your mind alone” the Guard replied courteously.

“Thank you” the woman blinked, slightly surprised that the elf sitting in front of her offered any words of support. For a second time already. He seemed like such a formal and reserved individual.

She wasn’t exactly sure what the Guard meant with his words but somehow hearing them gave her a little bit of reassurance.
The elf stood up, indicating that the conversation was over and he got everything he wanted from it, and made his way to the door.

“I am very grateful you gave me a moment of your time. Let me give you a token of appreciation” the Guard lingered in the door-frame for just a moment “Today’s storm appears to be rather strong and frightening, it might seem right now as if there is no end to it. But in summertime storms do not last for too long. It should be gone soon, perhaps even before the morning comes. I do believe a sunrise is especially beautiful to witness after the downpour passes”

With that the Guard was gone.

Minai smiled.

This time she understood.

Chapter End Notes

I don't think I have much to say about this one. It's one of those boring intermediate ones. I'm not sure I entirely remember what's in it. I think I know what I was going for, but I lost my way not even halfway through. Whatever. The next one is supposed to be more interesting. Whenever that get's written.

I swear there were reasons for a hiatus other than that mobile game which, so that you know, betrayed me. I grinded and grinded for months, I collected every single one of available free-to-play crystals, I pulled an all-nighter until the last hours of the event and I didn't get the character I wanted. This ruined my life. Not because of that character. Because of what it represents. You can spend the entirety of your life getting education/job experience/crystals but the truth is that there is only a limited amount of scholarships/job offers in your preferred field/crystals. In the end whether you succeed or not will be decided by luck. If you were at the right place at the right time/your application being seen first/HR being in a good mood/that 1% drop rate smiling just for you. The only true way to get what you want is to, before you even start trying, have a large amount of disposable money either as a passive income or provided by someone else to get into uni/get the right connections/to buy crystals. Therefore if you don't have that there is no point in even trying to do anything. Save yourself some time and emotional turmoil. Give up :(

Anyway, don't take that too seriously. I'm joking. Please don't give up.

No promises on the update schedule but I'll try.
Sunrise

Chapter Notes

There's the new chapter. I wanted to update sooner but due to some computer related stuff I've lost my notes and struggled to remember what I was going to do with the issue established a few chapters ago. I tried different options but it just didn't work that well. At least I finally remembered it.

We've finally reached a 10k long chapter. That's twice as much as when we've started. I think some part of it I might have forgotten to properly edit. If that's the case, sorry.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

That benevolent guard certainly told the truth.

The storm, though daunting it appeared, did not last for more than a several hours into the night. Somewhere around the middle of it the sounds of thunder started to become considerably more quiet and the flashes of lightning much more subdued. The intervals between the sound and the flash grew longer with each turn, a sure evidence of the storm moving away. Most hoped it would leave far enough for it not to return, for quite a while at least. As the storm made it’s way to the land far off, it took the darkness with it. The clouds dispersed, but the stars hidden behind them did not get a proper chance to grace the sleeping world with their merry twinkle.

The sun had risen bringing with itself a sight which was truly one to behold.

It happened precisely at that mystical morning hour when the pitch black sky started to acquire it’s first pinkish tint which it proceeded to share in plenty with the thick layer of fog still covering the forest. The fog blushed the same sky-pink colour and hurried to retreat, no doubt startled by being caught still lingering past it’s welcome. While it scattered around the area it left behind a slight pastel hue, dimming the greenery just enough for the grand reveal to be that much more impactful.

Today it happened so that the trees from top to bottom were still covered in raindrops, courtesy of the night before. As the sun’s first rays spread further and further the droplets flared in perfect harmony with the shining light. One by one the rays went through the tiny prisms and illuminated the green of the leaves. Soon atop the forest there stood a rainbow. Bright and colourful it promised the very best of mornings to anyone lucky enough to happen upon it.

The day was indeed promising to be beautiful. Warm, sunny, with the sky clear blue and the ever so rare clouds nothing short of picturesque. The forest’s inhabitants seemed to share the nature’s excitement as well. Full of energy they welcomed the dawn of a new day with all sorts of cheerful sounds. The smaller birds sang their little songs, the woodpeckers pecked, the squirrels squeaked notifying each other of the newly discovered berry bushes and the elves…

Quite unfortunately not all was well in the elven kingdom.

For one reason or another, some members of the pointy-eared kind were not capable of enjoying this exceptionally wonderful morning.

One of those few was none other than Minai who had spent the entire night prior trying to come up
with the most perfect apology speech that was ever spoken not only by mortals but immortals as well. The things she should and could say, the correct phrases to use. Each and every word had to be well thought through. Alas. Predictably enough, as it was deeply ingrained into the very fabric of the universe from the moment the time began it’s course, when the moment finally came to use the speech which she had oh so carefully prepared her mind went completely blank. Akin to a virgin-white sheet of paper, awaiting it’s turn at the printer. That hypothetical paper had an advantage though. Someone else would prepare the text and then press the button to print it. All the paper had to do was to ready its surface to get the sentences appear. Not too much work, especially for an inanimate object. Minai, however, would not be so lucky. Now, to be fair, Minai didn’t have any particular success in the department of luck in general as of late, but today of all days she could have used some. Even the mighty Valar must have known she needed it.

Yet the Valar, for better or for worse, didn’t mingle much with lives of those in Middle Earth these days and the poor woman was left completely on her own.

There wasn’t a helpful prompter who would readily supply her with all of the answers. Not even some of the answers. Not even one measly little answer. What she had to rely on were here wits alone. But as expected on this of all mornings those were nowhere to be seen. The words dispersed, the thoughts scattered and even the most casual of phrases would not leave Minai’s lips.

“I don’t have an entire day to wait around for you to say something” Thranduil’s voice broke the silence.

Minai turned to look at the elf who was standing beside her for quite awhile now. Thranduil, of course, was the same as he usually was, tall, handsome and so hopelessly far away despite being no further than a hand’s reach. He wasn’t facing her and for that reason Minai couldn’t see the expression he had but it was an easy guess that it wouldn’t be a particularly happy one. Still, Minai wasn’t all that surprised to learn that Thranduil was aware of her presence despite her never announcing it. Of course he would know she was there. Even though she didn’t have all that much to say, Minai had plenty and then some to sigh about. Likely she had done so once or twice by now, even if she didn’t actually notice any of it.

The situation seemed familiar. Then again, Minai had been in a similar one before. She had already met the sunrise once at this exact balcony. It was here that she had wandered towards all the way back in winter. That time she had ended up here by a complete accident. This time however it was on purpose, even if it did require a hint for her to get there.

How different it was back then.

“I...”

Well, that sounded gloriously pathetic. Hardly a surprise, considering that this sort of thing had a remarkable tendency of happening when someone started a sentence without knowing how to finish it. Although, perhaps simply not finishing the sentence would be a blessing in itself. That potential sentence lacked not only the ending, the middle part was missing and, for the sake of transparency, the beginning was nowhere to be seen as well.

Still, Minai knew she had to say something.

Awkwardly she shifted her wight from one leg to another.

Thranduil wouldn’t acknowledge her presence if he didn’t want to talk to her, right? This was by all means a flimsy straw to grasp at but it had to do since there wasn’t another one in sight. He did start the conversation. Technically. Maybe. In doing so he was already offering her a favour. A
much greater favour than she probably deserved right now.

“Can we please talk?” Minai finally managed a coherent sentence.

Well.

Could have been worse.

Or not.

Most likely not.

“I can’t recall ever preventing you from talking”

Minai’s gaze fell onto her arms which were gripping the railing. What could she reply to that? It was an acutely truthful statement. She was always welcomed to talk. Encouraged even. It was her conscious choice to refuse every single opportunity to do so. Why should she be given another one?

If only there was something in his voice, face or even posture that she could take for an expression of emotion. Thranduil sounded calm and indifferent. There was no way of telling whether he was angry, annoyed or perhaps something entirely different.

He was still standing there however, patiently waiting for her to collect her thoughts.

“I understand...” Minai started “...that my behaviour was...” the words still refused to come “...I do acknowledge that the way I acted that day was unacceptable and selfish. I apologize” the woman didn’t raise her head and opted to continue staring at her arms.

So much for the long winded apology speech she worked on the entire night. By a power unknown her oratory eloquence was reduced to that of a chair. An old, rotting and with one leg missing chair. Although even the chair had more range in it’s squeaking.

“No need for that” this time there was a tone to Thranduil’s voice, he was being dismissive “You should have figured it out by now. Your behaviour was hardly uncommon”

Minai finally raised her eyes, studying the elf’s face. The very little of it that she could see. As expected, he wasn’t in the best of moods. There wasn’t anger, none which would be apparent, but annoyance, perhaps, was something that Minai could pick up on judging by the furrow of his eyebrows. That at least gave some indication of where to go from that point forwards.

Thranduil didn’t want her apology. Or rather, that wasn’t what he wanted her to apologize for.

This much Minai already knew.

Her acting bratty on one particular day wasn’t the issue. It might have a catalyst of sorts, but never the issue.

The woman knew exactly what the main point of contempt was.

If only she could articulate it properly.

“That is not what I...” Minai made a deep breath “I shouldn’t have been so unwilling to share...” another pause “...I should have been more open about... everything”

“Clearly that was no fault of yours” it wouldn’t take a genius to notice the sarcasm in that reply
“You were quite overt from the very beginning that I was never entitled to your companionship or knowing anything about you for that matter. There is no blame to be given to you for acting completely in accordance with the stance you’ve always held. Evidently I’m the one in the wrong for assuming you’d be willing more than simply putting up with my presence”

“That’s not true!” Minai blurted out, momentarily losing control over the composure of her own voice.

“Am I to believe your words now when your actions clearly tell me the opposite?” Thranduil’s voice, on the other hand, was quiet, though how deliberate it was could be a matter for a debate.

“Thranduil...” Minai immediately cut herself off.

It wasn’t wise to use his name like that, without any titles. She was never given a permission and now of all times would definitely not be allowed to do so.

And yet...

Her saying his name like that did have some sort of effect on the stoic elven lord. For a brief moment he turned his head to face her but turned away before Minai could read the emotion behind it.

“If you are in such a talkative mood today would you perhaps be kind enough to enlighten me about the motives behind your actions? I fail to grasp on why would you feel the need for such an elaborate pretence game. You clearly detest the attention that comes with being around me. I’ve offered you dresses yet you weren’t eager to wear any. Neither did the jewellery seem to catch your fancy. I’ve listened to your pleas to be among the mankind and gave you the opportunity to do so yet you chose to return. Were you that much afraid to lose your free housing services?”

Minai bit her lip.

It wouldn’t be too far fetched to assume that at some point Thranduil, considering his position and status, would want to know about the underlying intention of those whom he allowed in his inner circle. Somehow she would have been more surprised to find out that he would just take everything she said at face value. Knowing now that he did try to find any materialistic desires she might have had did not change much. Still, it did shed some light about why her ‘free food’ comment might have hit a bit too close to home.

It was kind of amusing, really.

Not that she was ever too hung up on chasing luxury but neither was she a paragon of unselfishness. Minai believed herself to be easily moderate in her spendings but not exactly frugal. To put it simply, if the theory of multiple universes held any truth to it, none of these hypothetical timelines would have her refusing living rent-free and have meals prepared for her without ever paying for groceries. Neither was there a version of her which would’ve said no to pleasant gifts such as expensive dresses and shiny golden hairpins.

It was more of a coincidence of sorts.

Indeed, when they had their first dinner together with Thranduil the maids offered her plenty of dresses. She chose the one she’d be most comfortable moving in, it just happened to be on the simpler side. Not that the others weren’t pretty. She wouldn’t be too upset to have those other dresses in her wardrobe. Especially now that she was more skilled in wearing such gowns. That particular time however, she just didn’t want to gracelessly face-plant the floor in front of the
spectators. The hairpiece she didn’t wear because, plain and simple, she wasn’t skilled enough to manage her hair yet. Not that she didn’t want to have at her possession an expensive and elaborately crafted piece of jewellery made with real gold and precious stones.

Then again, she wouldn’t mind to have these things if they were given to her but actively pursuing all of that was never her goal either. She never went out of her way to ask for these yet wouldn’t refuse if they were given.

Therefore it was indeed amusing for Minai to take any actual credit for being an average amount of greedy. Not more but neither less than most.

However if there was something which wasn’t a coincidence then it had to be her decision to stay with the elves instead of humans.

Minai didn’t run away to be among the human kind and it had absolutely nothing to do with the free stuff she was getting.

She didn’t think about it back then but if asked now she would attest that she wanted to stay here at Mirkwood.

She stayed because she genuinely enjoyed this new lifestyle she now had and activities that came with it. Riding horses, climbing on trees, practising archery, discovering an entirely new culture. She was proud of her physical achievements and enticed by the idea of broadening her horizons.

She stayed because she wanted to spend more time with those she met here.

“Please, it’s not...” Minai started.

Thranduil finally turned to fully face her with some sort of a crooked half smile on his face.

“Tell me. Were you perhaps trying to stroke your ego with how kind and virtuous you must be for giving some pity to a...”

“No!” the woman tried to control her voice this time yet miserably failed to do so, her speech was quick and almost frantic yet this time she didn’t struggle to find words “Listen, I understand that now of all times I have no right to interrupt you and my words have the least amount of power but...” Minai made a very brief pause to observe Thranduil’s reaction and after not seeing anything that would indicate her to stop she continued “If me just saying that this is not true will not mean much then maybe I can argue with simple logic” after one more pause to collect her thoughts Minai continued “You are in full control of pretty much everything that happens here. You have more gold and influence than all of my ancestors ten times combined. You have an entire kingdom and an army who are loyal to you without a fault. Whatever you say goes. And then there’s me. With no possessions. No useful skills. Not a single person I can claim to really know beyond Mirkwood’s walls. Lacking knowledge about anything in this entire world. Incapable of lasting more than a day outside on my own. And even a day is putting it generously. I simply don’t have enough arrogance to give you any pity when I wouldn’t survive without yours”

Minai noticed that her knees were slowly but gradually started to tremble and her cold, despite the warm weather, hands gripped the railing until the knuckles turned white. She had no idea if what she said was the right thing. Whether there even was one correct thing to say in such a situation. It wasn’t exactly something which happened commonly and she didn’t have the time to think her response through. Neither did she think of that at any point. Why would she? That entire line of thought wasn’t had not ever come to her mind for the reasons prior stated. But to think that any of her actions might have appeared that way...
“You don’t really think that, do you?” Minai knew that it was almost childish to ask this question but could not help herself nonetheless.

She needed to at least make an attempt.

For the longest time there was silence but then, despite expectation, Thranduil answered.

“No, I do not think that. It would be far too convoluted of an explanation when there already is a much simpler one” his voice now sounded tired and even somewhat defeated “Let’s get this over with” with that he turned away and left the balcony.

Minai followed with her mind completely blank. She didn’t even try to guess what he meant with those words. This whole situation didn’t go the way she hoped it would. Although perhaps she was reaching far too high with her expectations. Somehow the entire thing was turning out to be much more severe than she imagined it to be. Clearly her behaviour was not read the way she intended for it to and whether it was the issue of miscommunication or her own lack of social skills didn’t even matter at this point. Minai had no idea what her actions appeared like to Thranduil and gave up on even trying to figure that out.

Well.

Maybe…

Maybe there was something Minai did understand after all.

What she was feeling right now, could it be that Thranduil felt the same way this entire time? When she acted upset and wouldn’t tell anything about her encounter with the wizard or after those weird dreams she had and was still having? Right from the beginning he asked her to be honest about how his words and actions made her feel. That part she understood and did her best to follow. But the wizard and the dreams were not something Thranduil had any control over. There was nothing that he did which caused her turmoil and thus she didn’t deem it needed to be shared. Except.

How was he to know all of that?

Back in winter she demonstrated with her behaviour that she would go against her will in fear of repercussion. She was drunk, tired, projecting her anger and said all this stuff about entitlement. Minai regretted those words. That was never how she felt but she still pretty much said it out loud that she felt pressured by his status. Why wouldn’t Thranduil end up thinking that she was unhappy and was simply putting up with him for whatever reason? She was loud and clear about it being something she would do. It would be no stretch at all to assume that he would easily recall this pattern of behaviour when, clearly upset, she brushed off all of his attempts to talk.

Once again Minai was wrong, but this time it concerned her perception of the situation. There was a bliss in ignorance and remaining unaware of her own wrongdoing this time would truly be a more merciful option. For herself. Just like it was merciful for a child to not fully comprehend the true implication behind tearing wings off a butterfly. Still, eventually the child would have to grow up and finally learn a thing or two about the world around them.

Just like Minai had to admit that she did understand the full extent of what she did.

She understood it well.

Her behaviour lacked equality, as well as fairness.
There was quite a lot which Thranduil allowed her to be a part of. It took time but Thranduil opened up about his past and parts of it which were not found in any records. He made sure she wouldn’t miss out on anything in the present by giving her plenty of opportunities to learn necessary skills and acquire knowledge to experience life at Mirkwood. She got invited and accepted a chance to make her contribution to the future of the kingdom on that trip to Dale.

Minai never felt left out or not wanted.

At the same time she lied until she got a chance to completely refuse talking about her past, overzealously avoided discussing any concerns or feeling she had in the present and as for the future, well, not once had she missed a chance to remind how much she couldn’t wait to leave forever and without an option to return or communicate in any way shape or form.

At what point did she show Thranduil that she wanted or needed him there? Him as a person, not just someone she chose to be around because being alone all of the time would be too sad and depressing. She said, well, she said a lot of things, but words would always remain empty and hollow if they weren’t backed up by actions.

As for the actions, it was rather obvious in retrospect.

Despite him letting her be a part of his life Minai never did the same for Thranduil. There wasn’t any part of her life which she would willingly share.

There wasn’t really anything to share, Minai often said to herself. Her past was empty and future uncertain. She only truly had her petty little problem. That much was true, however such a truth came with a caveat. No matter how small her concerns were, sharing them would always come with something else.

Trust.

Thranduil gave her his trust yet she unknowingly denied giving him any of hers.

Not that she was completely ignorant of the situation. Minai was always aware that Thranduil was upset by her not opening up, it was the extent of it that she remained completely oblivious to. Her worldview just wouldn’t allow it to happen. The way she always saw it, people, for the most part, strived upwards, not downwards. That was a completely logical notion. Being less than an ambitious person, Minai had always been aware of her place in life and was fairly comfortable with where it was. From the moment of her birth she was deeply rooted into the middle class society and knew that this was where she were to remain. It wasn’t a bad place to be, a comfortable one for sure. But it had it’s limits.

In very simple terms, if she were to be put in the same room with her celebrity crush Minai would die of excitement and then lose no time asking for an autograph and a photo together. That hypothetical celebrity though? They’d charge for the autograph and begrudgingly accept doing the photo in order not to ruin their public image by mistreating a fan. Then they would forget her face immediately because while that celebrity was one and only for Minai, she was one of the literal millions for them.

There was nothing wrong. That’s how things worked.

That’s why, despite many signs pointing otherwise, the woman never truly believed that rich, powerful and beyond words attractive king of the forest would ever actually want trust from an ordinary person like her. That he would care for her on anything but a surface level.
What an incredibly kind way to treat someone who was already accused to be incapable of feeling.

Suddenly, or maybe not, Thranduil stopped. Minai managed as well, but only barely did so in time. She recognized the place. They arrived to the door of the royal study and, still unaware of why it was this of all places, the woman followed inside. She hesitated, unsure of whether she should proceed further than the door but after receiving no instructions carefully approached the table which now presented itself as a tangible obstacle between her and the elf.

Minai watched him open one of the table’s drawers and…

“There, take it. I am returning this to you and thus no longer have anything of yours held hostage. You are therefore completely free to take your leave as there shouldn’t be anything to prevent you from doing so”

Minai stared at the objects she took from Thranduil’s hands, performing the motion completely on autopilot. The thing was cool to the touch, rectangular, with a dark glass surface on one side and a much lighter one on the other.

She knew what it was.

It was her phone.

The one thing which she could truly claim to belong to her in this entire strange world. The only proof of her own world, her entire previous life, existing. Her most precious and valuable possession here in Middle Earth and on the plain old modern earth as well. She spent many weeks surviving on nothing but instant-noodles and photosynthesis in order to afford it. Her pride and joy. How worthless now it seemed.

“You think I’ve spent time with you to get on your good side and get this back?” Minai spoke in a quiet voice which somehow was strangely calm, although perhaps numb would be a better suited term.

To say that she never had this thought before would be a lie. Such a plan came to her mind. More than once even. But it was quite some time ago and if Minai was to be honest with herself, she would have to admit that at this point she had almost completely forgotten about the device even being there. The thought of it existing lingered somewhere out there in the background of her mind and maybe came to the surface once or twice a month. Not much more than that.

Her question was left without an answer but none was needed.

Minai already knew that it was the case before even before she asked and the silence only served as a confirmation.

So that’s what it appeared to him.

That the nice things she did or said were nothing but a ruse to get her hands on what she claimed to be a ‘travelling mirror’ and in hindsight, it was quite the logical conclusion for him to make.

The woman sighed, only now realizing that she was holding her breath.

What was she to do?

What else was even there to do but to leave?

Thranduil said there was nothing holding her.
He didn’t say he wanted her to be gone, did he?

Only that she was free to do so.

No. It was one and the same, wasn’t it? Minai knew her mind was desperately trying to see what she wanted to see, not what was actually there. She needed something, anything to cling on to but there simply wasn’t anything. But if she now took the phone and exited the door…

If she were to do so then it would do nothing but confirm that this was indeed her goal all along. At least that’s what it would be from Thranduil’s perspective.

Of course it wasn’t true. Minai didn’t want to leave. She wanted to stay, she wanted to explain everything.

She knew she wasn’t owed that. Thranduil was not obliged to listen to her explanations. It was her who wasn’t entitled to his time, never the other way around. Minai was painfully aware that her presence wasn’t the most welcomed right now and there was no solid argument she could make to plead her case.

If Thranduil wanted her to leave then she would.

However...

“Do you really want this?” it was one of those times when words left her lips before Minai managed to realize she was saying anything. Still, hearing herself asking that question made her feel relieved that she did so.

There wasn’t much hope the woman had. She didn’t expect to be suddenly pardoned or to have Thranduil change his mind out of the blue. That wasn’t the case. All Minai wanted was to, however naive this might have been, show that she wasn’t just eager to grab her phone and run. Maybe there really was no way to convince him that the last six months wasn’t an elaborate ploy to get her treasure back. But one thing Minai was certain of, if she didn’t even try she would never stop resenting herself for the rest of her days, even if she was actually given an elvish eternity.

She remembered the guard’s words. That elf served Mirkwood for many years, quite likely even centuries. He had to know how the things worked around here and be well-versed in understanding the king’s temper. Probably, or maybe definitely, much better than Minai could. He gave her the advice to come here. Whether the royal escort knew about the reason or not, it was their duty to know the places their king would be likely to visit. The guard that came to her hinted at the location and, even if indirectly, told that there was still a chance.

Perhaps it was that tiny spark of hope which gave her courage not to give up.

Not yet.

Agonizing seconds, which seemed to last no less than forever, passed before Thranduil answered.

“What I want is to no longer be your source of entertainment. Despite what some may say I am not without a heart. I am capable of sympathizing with your situation. I know what it feels like to lose your home and would not deny you shelter if you have asked for it directly. I gave you more than enough opportunities to find companionship elsewhere yet you still chose to act as if it was me you wanted. You were given freedom to act in my kingdom as you pleased and I only ever asked you to not lie to me about your intentions in return. You still did. Just give me an answer, why?”

Minai stared at the reflective surface of her phone and silently counted droplets which fell on it.
She never considered herself to be that much of a complicated person. Her needs were always rather current and very rarely went beyond the basic necessities of an average human. Food, shelter, a bit of entertainment and a little something extra, like a new phone, every now and then. She never wished to be renowned by masses. In terms of grand fantasies of world wide impact or any other preposterously unachievable feat there barely ever was anything to talk about. Minai knew she wasn’t complicated.

She was simple.

Therefore when Thranduil revealed his scars to her Minai viewed the situation in similarly simple terms. Just like she was used to.

It seemed rather obvious back then.

She made a joke at some point about appreciating the elven society for being easy on the eyes. Afterwards she told a fairytale which revolved around physical appearances.

What else was there to it?

Yet that wasn’t even what the fairytale was about, if one were to look past the metaphor.

It wasn’t the part about the Beast’s appearance which resonated with Thranduil back then. It was the part when Beauty failed to return on time after promising to do so. Young maiden being repelled by an unsightly appearance or disagreeable temper was something to be expected. Being lied to about being accepted was the devastating part.

That’s why Thranduil asked her to be upfront about her intentions. He didn’t want to be given false hope.

It was painfully apparent and Minai almost laughed at how oblivious she had been. Thranduil didn’t care all that much about her only sticking around for the purpose of looking at attractive beings nor was he ever concerned about her running away if she were to learn of what was hidden behind his personal illusion.

There was something else that he wanted her to know.

Minai remembered how apprehensive she was when asking the question about the origins of the burns. She did not want to intrude or go beyond where she was allowed her.

Only now she finally understood that it was the point.

Thranduil wanted her to ask that question, or rather, he wanted to know whether or not she was willing to listen. What happened with the dragon was the first and, perhaps, the biggest mistake of his life and he still regretted it to this day. It wasn’t something he would ever share lightly.

All in all, it definitely was an issue of acceptance. Thranduil really wanted her to see him for who he truly was yet foolishly Minai assumed that it meant his appearance when it was so much more than that.
If she were to know, would her decision remain the same if she was aware of that from the beginning? Would she still have said that she was glad to get a chance to meet him?

Of course she would.

She would have still said those words.

However.

She would have been more aware of the true weight behind them.

She would have been a lot more mindful of her words and actions afterwards.

Minai bit her lip not to allow any pathetic crying sounds to escape.

After assuring him that she indeed wanted to have him in her life she, in a rather cold manner, rejected his every attempt at trying to get to know her. Rather clearly she demonstrated that she wasn’t willing to share with him not only her past but her present as well. She didn’t trust him the same way as he trusted her, she didn’t want to talk to him about her concerns. No matter what her words were, her actions spoke louder. On that day in particular her actions said the following: if Thranduil didn’t give her exactly exactly what she wanted, allowing her to go on patrols, she would more appreciate being not bothered at all.

Breathing became harder as now it took an effort to do it quietly. The air seemed to have evaporated and Minai struggled not to gasp for the remainders of it. The phone in her hands was blurry, her hands were blurry, the world around her was blurry. Yet she couldn’t give in. Minai couldn’t allow herself to openly cry, to be a weak pathetic girl asking for compassion or at least some charitable pity.

The amount of compassion she receive was already much more than she ever deserved and the pain of knowing that she failed to be kind in return was almost physical.

More than anything the woman wanted to just step forward, to wrap her arms around Thranduil and to apologize for each and every single one of her words or actions which might have hurt him.

She wasn’t allowed to.

She wasn’t allowed to come near him.

She wasn’t allowed to touch.

That right forfeited herself.

Worse yet, that wasn’t even the extent of it.

The metaphorical crutch she leaned on to avoid telling Thranduil about her world was her sincere belief that some concepts were just too difficult, or sometimes even impossible, to explain to someone who was completely unfamiliar with any blessings of the modern world. To lay down enough information about her current phone Minai would have to go through way more than a century of human inventions starting somewhere at the discovery of electricity and reaching the advent of satellites. It was of course debatable whether that process was all that challenging to explain in general or if it only appeared so to Minai personally. After all, her own understanding of that particular progression of things was not exactly plentiful and it was only her phone, something she used daily.
It seemed like such a solid excuse.

However upon a closer look Minai knew it was only paper thin.

Modern technology and nuclear physics were most certainly important but far, far from only things of which her world comprised.

What was it exactly prevented her from speaking about, let’s say, sports? Or holidays? Or music genres? Fashion maybe? Peculiarities of social etiquette such as how many times one would be allowed to reply ‘what’ before laughing and hoping that what the other person said was not a question? The little things of which there were plenty and then some. What was there that didn’t allow her to elaborate on those?

It didn’t come to her mind. Really, it didn’t. Satellites and nuclear energy were hard to explain and her personal little problems were too small to even be worth discussing. There. Those two conclusions were enough to leave Minai convinced that there was simply nothing at tall she could talk about. Comfortable in that conviction she never bothered to give it a second thought. Why would she feel the need?

Because of course she was the only one whose needs mattered, right?

Minai tried to get any sort of grip on her thoughts which grew more and more incoherent by the minute.

However little, she had a success.

Something still wasn’t quite right.

Judging by what she learned about his past, Thranduil wasn’t the kind of person who would show any kindness and understanding to those who wronged him, especially on such a serious level. He wouldn’t generously give her a chance to explain herself if he truly believed that her motivation aligned with what her actions appeared to be. Hell, he wouldn’t even care if she understood there actually was discrepancy between the two. Yet there he was, not only giving her the benefit of the doubt but also listening to what she had to say.

If only there was anything.

Suddenly Minai felt something akin to a jolt of a lightning pierce through her mind.

Of course!

If words were so adamant to fail her then maybe she could avoid using any at all. There was something else she left to try.

“I did not lie to you about my intentions” Minai finally said trying to keep her voice steady and even, or at least to keep the amount of despair in it to a dignified minimum “I know you might no longer believe what I say but...” the woman made a deep breath to not let her voice tremble when she spoke “...if you don’t believe my words you can read my mind, you’ll see that I’m being honest”

That was indeed a thought which occurred out of sheer desperation but there didn’t seem to be any other option, let alone a better one.

“Read your mind?” Thranduil repeated slowly as if the words were spoken in another language.

“Yes. If you’re the one to do it I’m okay with it” Minai closed her eyes.
Of course the idea of her mind being exposed and all of her little secrets being discovered was beyond words scary. But the alternative was even scarier. If her other option was to let Thranduil believe that she only wanted to be around him to get the phone back then Minai knew what she would chose.

“No. I’m not going to do that” Thranduil’s voice wasn’t harsh yet there was a certain finality to that statement.

“But I...”

“It is clear you do not fully understand what such a proposal means. First of, it is a rare ability to read just about anyone’s mind on demand. What it usually requires is to have a certain type of bond and a level of trust between those who voluntarily choose to share this type of connection. Going through someone’s mind without permission requires force and is not used for interrogation purposes. Believe me when I say it, invading someone’s privacy like that is not exactly encouraged”

“But I will...”

“No. You should only ever offer this to someone you trust and only when you are mentally ready for it. Feeling pressure to prove something is not the right motivation”

Minai, of course, understood what Thranduil was trying to say. In a sense, it brought her quite the amount of relief to know that her mind wasn’t at any point shuffled through by a random passer by without her even noticing. On the other hand, at no point she would ever offer an access to her most private thoughts to someone she didn’t already trust.

Minai was left wondering about the right way to look at the refusal she got. Mind link, or whatever was the proper elvish way to call it, turned out to be a sort of a two way street and a rather intimate one at that. It required both parties giving each other an equal amount of consent to access to their inner world. Thranduil could have simply said that he wasn’t willing to share that kind of connection with her. But that he didn’t even mention. Patiently he explained the importance of reasoning behind such act.

Minai felt gratitude mixed with guilt.

A lot of guilt.

Her options were exhausted and she was still no closer to the solution.

“What else can I do?” that wasn’t exactly what she was intending to say originally. Not that Minai remembered what it was that she was planning to say in the first place, she just knew that those were not the words that left her lips.

Then again, there wasn’t anything she was particularly sure of anymore.

Perhaps that was the only option she had left. To simply ask about it directly even if it would make her appear to be completely clueless. After all, each and every sign so far pointed that this was probably her exact state of being.

“Why do you even need to do anything?” Thrandul’s voice was more casual than ironic yet both were inarguably present.

“I...” Minai took a moment to process the question “What do you mean?”
“What is it that you are trying to achieve? Is it forgiveness that you seek? What for? I’m not going to give you any punishment for your actions if that is what you are afraid of. If it is validation that you’re after then nothing of what happened makes you an inherently bad person. You haven’t done anything terrible enough in the grand scheme of things nor do I believe you to have any potential to. If it wasn’t the trinket or, the way you put it, free accommodation, that you wanted then I simply do not see what benefit there is for you to come to me when you have so explicitly demonstrated that my presence isn’t something you care about”

Minai closed her eyes and slowly opened them.

It was one of these weird moments when the time itself starts to go slower, when she became painfully aware of how loud her own heart is beating inside of her chest, when every single breath she had make was a trial of perseverance.

She stood there in some kind of a stupor.

As much as she hated to admit it, there was a part of her which saw perfectly well where Thranduil was coming from with those words. Worse yet, there was a part of her which completely agreed with what he said.

Did she come here to get forgiveness? No, not really. That would, of course be nice and make her beyond happy, yet she knew it wasn’t her place to expect it. Did she want to be called a good person who did nothing wrong? No, far from it. There could be a feast thrown to celebrate her virtue yet it would mean nothing when deep insight she knew what the truth was. Did she want back whatever type of relationship she had with Thranduil? That…

What for would she want that?

After being so hell-bent on not having any type of relationship with anyone here, what would be her motivation? By her own logic, wasn’t what happened a good thing in the long run? She wanted oh so badly to stay away from getting close to those around her and there, she had her wish granted.

Why was there then nothing else she could think of now but how to amend the situation, how to make up for her behaviour, how to make things right?

For the first time this morning, Minai knew exactly what she was going to say.

“I’m not smart, nor clever, nor talented. I’m not much of anything really. I know I am a coward. I never got involved in things which seemed complicated. I never took a strong stance. I never really had any lifelong friends and I’ve disappeared from the lives of my own family long before I vanished from my homeland. I only ever bothered with my own comfort and didn’t ever have any desire to step outside of my comfort zone. My life had always been dull, empty and meaningless. But I’ve never noticed any of it. I was perfectly content with the life I had and would never want for it to change. Then I came here and everything became different. Everything that I was and what I believed in was suddenly challenged. My whole world-view was shattered. I was stripped of all that I had and was left with only who I am. I didn’t like it. I didn’t like who I was. I wanted to change and you… you helped me. You allowed me to live among your people and at times feel like I belong. You gave me an opportunity to train my body and challenged my mind with conversation. You helped me to become a better version of myself. The longer I remained here the longer I started to care. I started to enjoy my new lifestyle. I began to look forward to learning new things, to see Mirkwood come back to life. I saw elves slowly become happier, their conversations were more lively day by day. And then I realized… that it made me happy. I grew to care about my life here, to care about what happens to this kingdom, to care about you. That was perhaps the scariest thought I’ve ever had in my life. What if, I thought, one day I start to care so much that I
wouldn’t want to leave? This is not my world, I don’t belong here and so I couldn’t let that happen. I knew I needed to find my way home sooner, needed to keep distance from everyone and you in the first place. Yet what I wanted was the opposite. It was all so... confusing. I know this is not an excuse but that is the truth behind my actions. To answer your question, I don’t think I deserve forgiveness and I don’t need to be told that I am a good person. I came to apologize. If this is the last time I’m allowed to speak to you directly then all I have to say is that I’m sorry. It wasn’t my intention but my actions hurt you and I take full responsibility for my ignorance. I... I’m sorry. I really am”

What a long winded speech that turned out to be. None of it was a part of what Minai had spent the entire night preparing and imagining herself to say. But then again, nothing went the way she imagined it would. In the end, it didn't go that bad, did it? Thranduil gave her an opportunity to speak and she said what she had to.

It was strangely liberating to do so. Those were some of her deepest and most private thoughts. It always seemed like the end of the world would surely come, the sky would fall and universe itself cease to exist if she were to voice any of them aloud. Yet now she did and nothing of sorts happened. The world stood and even she herself survived. It felt as if the sword of Damocles which was hanging above her neck had suddenly disappeared.

She was free.

Unfortunately, there was a price tag attached to that liberty. The need to be constantly tense and on guard not to say a thing too many was what essentially helped Minai to hold herself together all of those months. That pillar fell and with it one by one crumbled the walls of her fortress.

Tension which held her body hostage for the last hours disappeared and left Minai trembling in it’s wake. The woman knew that if she were to speak another word her voice would stutter and if she were to move her knees would give up. Whatever energy she still had left was barely enough to keep herself standing. The only thing unrestrained were the tears which now fell freely down her cheeks.

The life she lost twice and the one she could never had, the opportunities missed and the chances ignored, the insignificance of her problems and the impact they made regardless, the relationship that never happened and those faded away, the people with whom she drifted apart and the one she would never be able to reach.

She tried to not let those things break her.

Think about it later, there’ll always be another day, it’s never too late to learn, life can be rebuilt, don’t be jealous, never mind that everyone around are pretty much perfect beings who will forever be infinitely better stronger and prettier… Those mantras worked once. Then twice. But there’s only so many times one could say to themselves that everything will be all right before noticing that things simply don’t improve.

She tried to be strong but in the end everything she had was simply not enough.

It felt like the time itself left the premises, irritated at being unobserved. The sounds ceased save for her own less than pleasant to ear sobbing. Minai felt so hopelessly alone and yet...

She wasn’t.

She wasn’t alone.
There was someone else beside her. Someone who was holding her and stroking her hair. Someone who made her feel warm and safe.

Minai remained perfectly still. She didn’t dare to move nor did she want to. She just wanted to stay like that just a little longer, simply listening to Thranduil’s voice whispering all sorts of calming words to her. The woman closed her eyes and rested her head on the elf’s chest. That probably was not a right thing to do. How could it be? Thranduil was far less than pleased with her just a few minutes ago. Why would he now want to try and comfort her? That wasn’t right. It must have been that the elves were known for being compassionate to the pain of their kin. She was probably playing on some sort of natural instinct that was simply hardwired into the immortal race.

She had to stop it, this much Minai knew. But it was a nearly impossible decision to make. His embrace made her feel protected, it made her want for the time to stop and let this moment last longer.

Time didn’t care about her or anyone’s wishes and the only thing Minai could do was to close her eyes and try her best to trace it into her memory so it would stay there forever.

“I’m sorry...” Minai would have continued with apologizing for her pitiful behaviour but the words were drowned with another sob.

“Whoever dared to do this to you?” there was a strange kind of anger in Thranduil’s voice which Minai knew wasn’t directed at her but still couldn’t understand it.

“Oh, I wish there was someone to blame” the woman sighed “But I did this to myself”

“Someone must have told you all those lies”

“Lies? No, there are no lies” she sniffed quietly.

Right.

Of course.

If Minai herself was to hear about a person with such an empty life she too would doubt of their existence but it happened to her and to put a doubt on that was much more difficult.

“Minai, do you know how I knew you were on the balcony today?” Thranduil’s voice was unusually gentle.

“No” the woman replied with a sudden clarity in her mind.

She suddenly realized that was the first time he actually called her by name apart from that one time he gave it to her.

“You smell of strawberries. That’s the scent you always choose and that’s how I always know if you are near”

“I… didn’t notice” Minai was left dumbfounded by the direction which their conversation took.

“You didn’t. There are many things you might not notice about yourself which are apparent to those around you”

“I don’t think I understand” she blinked away the remaining tears.

“Those things you’ve said are clearly not true because while you believe to be so I’ve seen the
evidence of the opposite. If life has not put you in a situation where you would have to defend your stance it does not mean that there is nothing you stand for. Similarly, standing up for something does not always require direct opposition and can be a part of your every day act. Regardless, you have stood up for yourself plenty of times since coming here even if circumstances were stacked against you. Similarly, you have stood up for Tauriel even though you were risking to ruin your relationship with gossipers despite your aversion to having rumours spread about you. This shows me that you have a strong concept of fairness which I’m sure didn’t just occurred out of nowhere”

“I didn’t really think about it like that”

Defending oneself and their friends had always been something Minai assumed to be a part of human nature. Besides, she never really considered at that moment that she was risking getting at the bad side of the main gossip source of the elven kingdom.

“That is the point. You didn’t think about the need to stand up for something, you simply did. You might not think about it directly, but there are things which are dear to you. There is no way you can claim to have nothing you’ve cared about before when it is clear how dear to your heart are your homeland and the culture that brought you. It is plainly seen in the way you act and speak. The significance and meaning you see in food you grew up with, the enthusiasm with which you spoke about the city of Dale and the everyday life of it’s inhabitants, the pride you felt in knowing that a man and not an elf was capable of defeating a dragon, all of it was you showing your love and appreciation to your heritage. That is an admirable quality to have and so is your kindness towards animals. You might not think you understand them as well as other elves, but it never stopped you from caring for you childhood pet or bonding with that little bird of yours. Neither would the mother doe allow you near her fawn if she didn’t regard you trustworthy”

“You really think so?” Minai asked, completely stunned by this new perspective.

“Yes, I do. Just like I think that something must have happened to put you in such state of mind. I remember it clearly, how eagerly and proudly you’ve listed your skills”

“I was just being creative with the truth” the woman mumbled remembering the visit to the dungeons.

“I admit, I’ve suspected as well. That’s why I’ve tested you. You’ve demonstrated the understanding you have about the inner workings of the world around you and the ability to hold a conversation about politics, consequences of war as well as kingdom’s inner and outer relationship. At the very least that shows your intelligence, ability to think and make conclusions. As well as natural cleverness with which you find your way out of situations caused by your cheekiness”

Minai chuckled. She once again felt like crying but for an entirely different reason.

“Lastly, tell me this, have you ever before had any doubts about your family loving you?”

“Never”

“Then as a parent this much I can tell you. More often than not children make mistakes, disobey, ignore advice, rebel and sometimes leave and not write back for months save for the basic courtesy of telling you they are alive. Neither single one of these things or all of them put together will not make a parent’s love any less nor will it make the child not to be a part of their lives”

Minai fell quiet. Hearing such words about herself from Thranduil of all people, her emotions were hit hard by that. It almost made her wish he never said any of it. Knowing that he cared about her enough to notice all of those things, that he enjoyed the time they’ve spent together, that he still
had genuine desire to comfort her even after how she behaved. After all of that, how could she not just…

“Thank you. I probably don’t deserve that”

“That isn’t for you to decide” his voice did not become colder when he replied but there was certain firmness to it.

“I’m not...” Minai decided not to finish that sentence.

“You are acting as if you are the only one with any agency” Thranduil explained “Others are given just as much choice as you have. Therefore it is for me to decide whether I want to do this for you or not. Similarly, it is not up to you to dictate to anyone whether they want to get to know you or not. Even if you intend to leave in the future”

Ah, right.

Was it from their conversation about her stance on romance? She did mention wanting to avoid hurting someone with her possible departure. Even if Thranduil didn’t mean it in quite the same way, hearing those words left little denial towards her own feelings.

“I still don’t understand why” perhaps it wasn’t the best of ideas to pursue the answer but Minai still couldn’t fully believe that what happened actually happened and wasn’t some kind of an illusion caused by her mental breakdown.

Thranduil sighed heavily and remained silent for a while, as if considering what answer he wanted to give.

“Why don’t we make a deal?” the elf started slowly “You will accept that it is my desire to help you simply because I chose to do so. In return I will agree that your behaviour for the last half a year was also genuine and did not stem from a need to have free accommodation or anything of a similar nature. Would you consider that to be fair?”

Minai nodded knowing that Thranduil would feel the motion with how closely her head was pressed to his shoulder. She, of course, recognized that fairness or any other type of trade-off were far from being involved in that situation. For one reason or another, Thranduil offered her to put the entire thing aside. If her part of the agreement was to believe that he wanted this as much as she did, well, then it would be a rather poor judgement to question whether or not he was sure of that decision.

Even if it would take her quite some time to come to truly terms with everything that happened today.

“You haven’t eaten anything today yet, have you?” Thranduil asked in a more casual tone.

“No, not really” Minai answered. She wasn’t particularly hungry but then again, she recognized that it wasn’t about the food this time.

“In that case I propose we move somewhere else. I’ll ask maids to bring breakfast and then you and I can have a talk about what happened in Dale”

So that’s what it was. Thranduil was willing to give her another chance and was now asking if she would take it.

“In Dale?” the woman repeated, slightly surprised at the suggested topic.
“Yes, in Dale. Something must have happened on the morning you chose to go out on your own. You were quite content exploring Mirkwood and engaging with others before the trip and then you’ve locked yourself in the library after the return. Would I be wrong for assuming that this is when all of your thoughts of your own inadequacy occurred?”

“Ah… that… you’ve noticed it? Then yes, if you want to know…” somehow Minai didn’t see the idea of sharing to be so frightening anymore. Thranduil had already seen her at pretty much her lowest point. There really wasn’t much left to be afraid of.

The start of a new day was in full bloom outside the palace walls. Greenery of the leaves, the colourful splendour of flowers, the merry dancing of butterflies and the intoxicating smell of summer compelled anyone to forget their worries and simply enjoy the gifts that nature had to offer. Yesterday, however, there was a storm and nothing could fully guarantee that it wouldn’t come back tomorrow or the day after that. The blue of the sky and the warmth of the sun could easily be taken away by dark clouds and harsh winds. Nothing really lasted forever in this world and even the mightiest of kingdoms fell.

But tomorrow’s storm didn’t mean that today couldn’t be enjoyed.

Quite the contrary.

Just because countless what ifs existed and nothing was certain it was necessary to find happiness whenever possible.

Minai smiled, took Thranduil’s hand and carefully placed in it the phone which she was still holding. There wasn’t much she could do with the gadget in terms of it’s original purpose but perhaps there was still a way it could serve her.

“Can you keep it safe for me, please?”

She didn’t know what the future held for her but she now knew she wouldn’t be alone when facing it.

Chapter End Notes

The end... possibly. There’s still more of this story I want to tell and I will try to do so, but if I won’t be able to then at least I wanted to leave it at a positive note.

Yeah. Things in my life lately, blah blah blah.

In case I will update, I was thinking to write a more humor (maybe with a hint of romance) focused and less plot heavy chapter about Minai just explaining modern world concepts and that kind of stuff. That could be a good idea after all the drama lately or do you want just straightforward plot?

In case I do come to a point where I'm like 100% sure there will be no more updates, do you want me to just write a summary of the remaining plot or would you like to still have some hope for a proper continuation? I'm asking because I'd probably choose the second option, but that's me.

Have a happy life, enjoy your holidays, write what you think about this chapter.
Bye
Selfishness

Chapter Notes

I've decided to continue uploading until my arm falls off (metaphorically).

If dates on files to be believed then this is exactly a years since I wrote the first chapter. Tjat's not true, I remember some stuff with deleting/copying documents due to formatting issues and the incident where I had to recover files from the flash drive. Still, this is the earliest date I can trace as to when I started working on the best thing that happened to fanfiction since 'My Immortal'. To those unfamiliar with 'My Immortal', you young and innocent souls, that was sarcasm.

Anyway, to commemorate this anniversary, here's a chapter. This is shorter than usual but I've decided to quit while still being ahead. There's no drama here and as some of you've requested, it's more of a straightforward dialogue. It was supposed to be a long chapter with second half regarding 'having fun with discussing modern world' but (a) I wasn't particularly inspired to write that and (b) Didn't want to have you wait something like half a year for an upload.

One more point. I already mentioned that I get creative with the canon material. First, I know the published version of Silmarillion is not the final version as it was published after Tolkien's death but for all intents and purposes this is going to be the version that I stick with for this story. From what I've understood 'Silm' is supposed to be a book written by an in-universe character, an elf I think. Like a historical chronicle or something similar to that. Well, in this chapter I'm taking a HUGE advantage out of that. Just a warning to those who don't like canon to be messed with, although I warned about it in the disclaimer to chapter one. TL;DR This story is 'fun-over-canon' so if you prefer canon not to be messed with, I respect your stance, but this story is already far more canon accurate than I've intended for it to be.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“I must say that I’m impressed. It’s been quite the number of years that I walk this earth and yet it is by far the first time that I meet a person with such an outstanding ability to find themselves this much trouble each time they leave their house”

“Surely you’re exaggerating” Minai scrunched her nose at the description she was given.

“By no means” Thranduil replied “Believe it or not, stumbling upon the wizard during your casual morning stroll is not something that many can claim to have happened to them”

“The wizard? Not a wizard? So you know him?”

“Quite well actually. What was it that he wanted from you?”

“I don’t think there was anything in particular that he wanted from me other than giving me a massive headache. Although even that wasn’t on purpose” Minai felt a little bit uneasy about potentially causing the travelling mage problems with the elven kingdom “There was no way for Gandalf to know that I would come to the conclusions that I did, so I can’t really blame him for
what happened with me after our meeting”

Well, maybe she wouldn’t mind a little tiny bit of trouble for Gandalf. A teensy little smidge. Not for what essentially later became an existential crisis, that, Minai had to admit, wasn’t exactly his fault. But for being vague, cryptic and overall confusing? For sure.

Unfortunately she also didn’t want to feel responsible for any kind of conflict that might occur and therefore had to protest, even if unenthusiastically.

“There is something about wizards you must know. No matter how aimless their actions might appear to you, there is nothing accidental about them. Whatever he might have said to you, he did so with a purpose and likely knowing the outcome” while his voice remained calm, the expression on Thranduil’s face spoke everything there was to know about his opinion on wizards at that particular moment “Does anything come to your mind about what it might have been?”

“No, I don’t...” the woman started the sentence but then abruptly stopped.

A thought occurred in her mind.

While some details might have been a little lost due to the passage of time, Minai remembered clearly that Gandalf questioned her stance on not being an elf and consequentially not belonging in their society.

One cherry.

He was purposely confusing with his wording and speech patterns, asking multiple questions to the point she became disoriented and started to think with her emotions rather than logic.

Two cherries.

Gandalf asked about her purpose and her goal. In her already somewhat dazed state she focused on that question instead of doing a rational thing and getting out of the conversation which was extremely weird and uncanny, just like Gandalf himself.

Three cherries.

Considering the prior conversation about being an elf and belonging, the question about her perceived purpose made her think about who she was and where was her place in life. She started to question and rethink everything she knew about herself.

Ding!

Minai jumped from the sofa, unable to remain in a sitting position due to the firestorm raging at the very core of her being. Empty plates, standing on the table nearby, clinked in alarm at the sudden disturbance.

“Geezer! Dusty old coot! If I ever meet him again I’ll stuff his raggedy hat right into his...” Minai proceeded with a nice long list of untranslatables, each new word increasing the temperature of her blood to the boiling point.

How come she didn’t realize it sooner?

It was so obviously on the surface.

Such a simple conclusion – Wizards sucked!
“Was that your native language right now? It does sound very interesting” even if he didn’t understand any of them Thranduil clearly knew the exact nature of the words he just heard and evidently found it amusing.

“Forget everything I’ve said just now!” Minai blushed profusely, for a brief moment she completely forgot that she wasn’t alone.

“As you wish” the elf smiled, it was beyond obvious that he wouldn’t forget a single thing “I am curious though about the cause of such reaction”

“Oh, um...” Minai calmed down and returned to the sofa “I think I know what the wizard wanted”

“Which is...?” Thranduil raised an eyebrow.

Minai now realized that after the conversation with Gandalf she put to careful scrutiny her life as a human and things she enjoyed doing in her own world, as well as the relationship she managed to form. She then proceeded to conclude that the activities she learned in Mirkwood and the connections she made were in some parts much more fulfilling than what she had before. Which was not untrue but would have remained unnoticed for quite some time if it wasn’t highlighted so profusely at that moment.

Which comes back to the wizard’s original point.

“I think he wanted me to start thinking of myself as an elf” the woman said with a sigh.

“Is there something wrong with being one?” unexpectedly, the question was asked in a rather serious manner.

Although, maybe not that unexpected after all.

“I’m more upset with being played like a fiddle” Minai avoided answering directly “I wasn’t trying to imply there was something wrong with being an elf”

Being born an elf, that is.

“Yet you still wouldn’t want to be one”

Minai studied Thranduil’s face. It wasn’t really surprising that he took Gandalf’s side in the imaginary debate. If anything, she should have expected this outcome. This topic was brought up before and Thranduil argued the same point. Well. Maybe this had to be addressed.

“It used to be the ears. I hated them. They symbolized everything wrong that was happening to me. Each time I saw an elf I was reminded of how weird my life was, how I was far away from home, how not human everyone around me were. How not human I was. My humanity was taken away from me against my will and the ears were that never allowed me, even for the shortest moment, to pretend that everything could be easily fixed. But then one day I was looking at you and there was nothing wrong with your ears. Or any other elf’s. Your ears were just that, ears. A detail of appearance that simply didn’t have any of the connotation that I saw before. I guess I just accepted, with time, having my ears differently shaped”

“You no longer mind your ear shape being similar to ours?”

“I don’t think I do. I just don’t feel as strongly about the ears or being an elf in general. A few months ago I would be completely against it but not anymore. If it turned out that I was actually an elf then I think I’d learn to live with it eventually. I would come to terms with being immortal
because I would have all the time in the world for it to make my peace with it. I would grieve my human friends and relatives whom I’d never get to see again, but I would also gain connection among the elves whom I wouldn’t want to leave. That sounds like a logical progression of things yet right now it’s terrifying. The thought of existing forever…” Minai paused to take a breath “I was always aware that my life would end eventually. I didn’t think of it much but neither did I dream to surpass the human lifespan. I accepted the world as it was because there was no other option. Now that I know that there are other paths I can’t help but think that it could become a point of misery in the future when I get old and frail. I’ll be thinking that another way existed and… resent refusing it” the woman sighed helplessly “If I’m actually given a choice in the matter then it seems that no matter what I decide I will one way or another regret it”

“It is impossible to live life without regret” Thranduil noted in a soft voice.

“I understand that, yes. But it is such an enormous decision to make. I feel like it would be far too much responsibility to take on, even if it is actually about my own life. I never had something so huge on my hands and neither have I wanted to” Minai bit her lip “I really don’t understand how you can cope with having something like that. To willingly take on responsibility for an entire kingdom, to have all those lives depend on you… I could never even imagine myself in that position”

“Neither could I. I never really thought that my father… Despite being the sole heir, I never truly expected to ascend the throne. Yet it happened anyway. I did not want it to happen, I wasn’t ready. The situation was dreadful. There was barely a third left of our army, my father was gone and I had to bear the news to my mother. It felt as if the weight of the world was suddenly thrown on my shoulders and I wasn’t sure if I’d be able to go on. But then I looked into their eyes, what little was left of now my soldiers, for the first time as their acting commander. I saw fear, no less than my own, but at the same time I saw the light of hope. They’ve entrusted me the responsibility to lead them and despite it being incredibly daunting, it helped me to find my strength. At that moment I knew that if there was ever something I wanted to do with my life it was to never let the light in their eyes to fade” Thranduil fell quiet, lost in a memory of his.

Minai drew her knees closer and wrapped her arms around them. It felt nice but at the same time somewhat bizarre to be having a conversation like that with someone like Thranduil. The entire set of circumstances that led to it and the situation itself were beyond the meagre capabilities of her imagination. Yet by no means did any of it appear unnatural. Quite the contrary. It did feel natural despite them both sharing their very personal and intimate thoughts.

Then again, wasn’t that how a regular conversation should be between two…

Huh.

There wasn’t really a word which Minai could put at the end of that sentence. Neither was she going to search for it, lest her thoughts venture in a direction she didn’t want them to go. The logical way to go would be to finish that sentence with the word ‘friends’ but somehow Minai was hesitant to do it. Her and Thranduil were close but being just friends wasn’t the type of close that she…

Exactly.

That was exactly why she decided not to think about it.

“This is an admirable stance to take. Sometimes I wonder if I will ever find something that I’ll feel as strongly about” Minai voiced her thoughts.
“It is fine if you don’t but if it does happen, it should happen naturally. It is rarely a good idea to go searching for it”

“Believe it or not but randomly ending up where I shouldn’t be and meeting wizards is not a part of my usual routine”

“That would have been much easier to be believed if I myself didn’t experience meeting you at a place where you’d be least expected to be at”

“I never knew elvish culture didn’t have a concept of coincidences”

“Coincidences happen once. After that it’s a pattern”

“It’s a balance issue. For the longest time my life was pretty uneventful. Now it’s just evening itself out” Minai paused remembering a question that was bothering her for quite some time “Do you think there is any meaning to my meeting with the wizard?”

“If it will bring you any peace, you are far from the first to be driven out of your mind by him. Although lacking malice in the motivation that wizard does have a tendency to put the end goal above the immediate comfort of those involved in achieving it. Quite possibly he believed his action to benefit you in the end” there was genuine compassion in Thranduil’s voice.

“I know he wasn’t trying to harm me, he even said something about helping if I recall correctly. Would it kill him though to be clear and direct about it?”

“I suppose we’ll know if he ever tries that”

Minai laughed, enjoying the fact that she could once again have a nice and friendly conversation with Thranduil. She really missed that.

“Still, I can’t think of a reason why me being an elf would matter to a wizard”

“Despite being eccentric, the wizard rarely if ever does something for his personal gain alone. But there is something to learn from it. First, no meeting with the wizard is by an accident therefore it is evident that he knew you would be at that particular place on that particular morning. Second whoever or whatever brought you here did not do that in order to harm you and neither does your presence bring any bad omens” Thranduil said remaining deep in thought.

“How would you know that last one?”

“Quite simple. If there was any danger about you the wizard would come to speak to me first”

“Did you think I could be dangerous before?” the woman asked in a somewhat teasing manner.

Thranduil smiled and Minai had a nagging suspicion he was trying not to laugh.

“I’m sure you’d be a formidable threat to the notion of bunnies remaining not petted around here”

Well then.

At least he was nice about it.

Still, it was reassuring to have an actual argument towards her ordeal not being an elaborate punishment for… who knows how many mosquitoes she had slapped in her lifetime.

Minai decided not to ask whether it was possible to find Gandalf and interrogate him about the
information which he refused to surrender during their meeting. If such a thing was possible Thranduil would have likely offered it by now. Therefore it was either impossible to get anything out of the old coot unless he wanted to give it or there was downright no possible way of contacting him.

If he was this well known then it meant he wouldn’t stay in one place for a long period of time and you can’t exactly send a letter to someone without a home address.

Minai crossed her legs still sitting on the sofa.

The conversation had to happen and if she continued to put it away nothing good would come of it.

“You know, I didn’t lie about not knowing how I ended up here. One moment I was in the forest with plenty of people and then I am here. My homeland is different enough from Middle Earth and there is enough known about its layout to be completely sure that it wasn’t just geographical distance that I somehow managed to cross” in a nervous motion Minai scratched the sofa with one of her fingers “I don’t have amnesia. I remember my life in its entirety starting from when I was about four”

“Were there any other unusual happenings in your life?”

“No, not really, just a regular human life” even if a little boring at times.

“What indicates that the life you had was that of a mortal?”

“Apart from ageing like one?” Minai made a face, this was another conversation she didn’t want to have “I have engaged in physical relationship with men just for the sake of it. More than once. It didn’t result in a marriage”

“That still doesn’t completely exclude the possibility of you being an elf”

“It doesn’t?” the woman replied in confusion.

Of all the proof of her being a human that was perhaps the most solid one Minai could provide.

“The reason why elves only marry once is because it creates a bond between their fea. Once that exists there is simply no desire to be with someone else. If your fea already can not be sensed then it would be a rather probable assumption to make that you can not bond with anyone in that way right now. That’s why you were able to enjoy the physical aspect of being in a relationship without any ties”

The next phrase Minai blurted without thinking.

“But I thought elves don’t get such desires and you only do it for the sake of having children”

“Just like your parents, correct?” Thranduil smiled in a way that was understanding and teasing at the same time.

“My parent’s are an exce...” a gear slowly turned inside of Minai’s head “I hate you”

That surely wasn’t the mental image she ever wanted to have.

Ever.

“Might I advise you to be less trusting of fairytales? A story of looking into each other’s eyes and holding hands for seven years straight might be a romantic one but I assure you, even an elf can not
“Is the story about Thingol and Melian a lie then?”

“It is not exactly a lie, but it is unlikely that what you’ve read is the entire story. You mustn’t forget that every tale is written by someone. Most likely that someone was not present during the events. It is widely known that Thingol and Melian did spend seven years in that forest together, completely forgetting about the rest of the world. But holding hands was far from the only activity they had engaged in. I don’t think there are many who find it compelling to share every single detail of their honeymoon with historians”

Having by now multiple reasons to blush Minai lost no time in doing exactly that.

Who could’ve guessed that elven stories got the actual fairytale-to-animated-movie kind of treatment.

Questions.

Minai had questions.

“What about Beren and Luthien? How much of that one is true? Was there no love at first sight?”

“This is not what I’m saying. However, tell me, if you were to be a daughter of a vindictive and powerful monarch, would you disclose having multiple meetings with your secret mortal lover? Knowing that by doing so you would be bringing your father’s wrath on him? Since it was an already well-known fact that your father would disapprove of the relationship because of his prejudice against mortals?”

“Point taken” Minai nodded in agreement. After all, none of the elves, or maya, involved in those stories wrote any memoirs and stories, even if told as closely to actual events as possible, tended to change details every time they were retold. Not to mention personal bias of the scribe who eventually ended up writing them down. “So elves do feel physical attraction?”

Minai knew she shouldn’t. She knew it. Just like she knew insta-noodles weren’t a good nutrient but that never stopped her from eating nothing but that when she blew several months of future food budget on a new phone. Although in that particular situation her only other option was to hope she had any plant life in her ancestry that would allow her to get by on photosynthesis.

“Do you think Luthien’s so-called suitors wanted to kidnap and coerce her into marriage because her personality was so irresistible?”

That was also true. Luthien, being known as the fairest to ever grace Middle Earth, had her share of unwanted attention because of it. Somehow Minai assumed it wasn’t for the sake of physical appeal and more for an aesthetic nature, akin to wanting to own a rare heirloom. Which was no less disgusting. No matter what the reasoning behind it was, there couldn’t ever be a valid enough excuse for those elves to treat Luthien as nothing more than a means to justify their desires, physical or not.

“Then it’s not all about love at first sight?” Minai remained in deep denial about the reason she had for asking that question.

She already knew from Tauriel that love at first sight wasn’t the only type of romantic feeling that elves were capable of. There was also Aredhel, that poor elleth, who was worn down and pretty much spellbinded into giving consent.
Yeah, pointy ears didn’t guarantee being incapable of atrocities of such kind.

“I’m not saying it does not happen. It does. However if world worked exactly as it does in fairytales we would have ended up extinct a long time ago since there wouldn’t be enough silmarills to steal in order to prove one’s feelings worthy”

“That’s true. If that was the case I would have to come to terms with dying alone if I were to stay here. Because I don’t think I’d be capable of slaying a dragon or anything like that”

“Shouldn’t it be the other way around? Young maidens usually have a dragon slain for them, not by them” Thranduil asked with curiosity to hear the response rather than having any opposition to the statement.

“It can be seen that way indeed. But I prefer another interpretation. For me it’s the status issue, or a state of being if you will. It’s usually commoners and mortals who should commit to accomplishing some heroic feat in order to win affection from either a member of royalty or a fairytale creature. To me, a mortal commoner, every elf is a fairytale nobility so it would be my duty to go on a quest”

After all, when it came to fairytales, even Cinderella had to be a hero in her own terms by disobeying, going behind her evil stepmother’s back and risking getting punished. That might not have been a dragon, but for a person abused since their childhood it was no less heroic to find their strength like that.

“I’m afraid if you go into the world and claim to have grown up among mortals you’d be hard pressed to find anyone who would consider you to be a commoner”

“How come?” Minai frowned at the confusing statement.

“You don’t exactly feet the criteria, not by mortal standards at least”

“I’m not sure I understand” it still refused to click.

“You didn’t need to be taught to write or read, you simply needed to know the conventions of the language. You were always capable of holding a conversation even if it concerned difficult topics such as politics, meaning you were not only literate but educated as well. Your speech patterns and social behaviour were proper, you were only unaware of cultural aspects such as dancing. Your body was completely untrained for any kind of physical labour and your hands were without a single callus. I don’t know about the place you hale from, but around here no commoner would survive without having any practical skills”


The very foundation of Minai’s world was obliterated and turned into space dust which promptly scattered to the farthest corners of the universe.

Then, in a quick and professional manner, it collected itself back together.

Middle ages didn’t have a middle class.

She had read somewhere at some point that ordinary people of her time had better living standards than medieval royalty. Mostly due to medical advancements and the supply of hot water. Which wasn’t actually a problem for the elves, they had those things figured out. Healing songs and enchantments, forgive the pun, worked magic on living standards.
You know, I’m not sure how I feel about that. I mean, sure, I wanted to be a princess and have a puffy pink dress like most other five year old fairytale aficionados” especially the fairytales of the animated variety, althoug that was still a concept to be explained “But now that you told me people will see me a certain way I don’t know if I’ll be comfortable will that”

“Are you telling me you were unaware of how people at Dale saw you?”

“Well, I wasn’t oblivious to how people see elves and I was ready to be seen as an elf. But a noble elf? That might be… oh” the following realization didn’t exactly come out of nowhere “The citizens of Dale didn’t saw me as just an elf, right?”

Thranduil nodded, confirming her suspicions.

Well, obviously.

If she was dressed in fancy clothes, had expensive elaborate jewellery in her hair and was appearing everywhere hand in hand with Thranduil then it wasn’t hard to guess what conclusion average person, completely unaware of the elvish culture, could come to.

Still, there was something that was slightly off about all of this and, most probably despite her better judgement, Minai had to ask about what bothered her.

“Didn’t you tell me that after elves marry there can be no desire to be with another? I understand that humans don’t know that and would assume all sorts of things” and in all likelihood they had no way of knowing that she wasn’t actually his one and only wife “But you’ve also said that the elves in Mirkwood might think there is something between us. How can that be? And on the same topic, how could Finwe fall in love with Indis when his first wife wasn’t technically even dead?”

Miriel just decided to take a temporary hiatus from living.

Which, in terms of relatability, put her put her on a rather high pedestal.

“It’s not the act of marriage itself that holds two elves together. If the bond between them is strong then there is indeed no desire to be with another” Thranduil paused, carefully choosing his next words, it was not the topic he was particularly happy to discuss yet he continued nonetheless “The bond, however, can be severed or damaged. Since you’ve read that story, tell me, why was it that Miriel did what she did?”

“Well...” Minai tried to recall the sequence of events, it didn’t help that elvish text were written in this fancy and vaguely cryptic language “I really don’t know how it works, but from what I’ve understood, giving birth to her son took too much out of her. Spiritually and mentally, I think”

“That is correct. Having just one child took a toll on Miriel. Her husband, on the other hand, wanted to have more than only one offspring. Those are two fundamentally different viewpoints regarding marriage which resulted in their bond becoming weaker. This allowed Finwe to fall in love with his second wife. Still, he and Miriel didn’t completely lose their feelings for each other and the bond didn’t fully disappear because of that, which is why Finwe gave up his right to be re-embodied to give such opportunity to Miriel”

“I see, not sure I understand how or why this whole system is in place but I guess I understand how it works now” more or less. Was the only reason Finwe, Miriel and Indis couldn’t coexist together because an elf could only legally have one wife and neither one in the relationship wanted to let go of the other? Or maybe it was a veiled punishment from the Valar for the mess they’ve created out of raising Feanor and neglecting his well defined emotional issues present since his early
childhood to the point that it resulted in several kinslayings? “So a marital bond between elves is only as strong as are their feelings for each other?”

“Once again you are correct” Thranduil answered.

Minai observed his face for a brief moment. Surely if something like that happened between him and his wife he wouldn’t be speaking of it so easily.

Damn it.

Damn it. Damn it. Damn it.

It was wrong to even think of something like that. Yes, it would make things much more convenient for Minai herself if the Queen at some point lost feelings for her husband, but clearly Thranduil still loved his wife considering the lengths he was ready to go to return just her necklace. It would be devastating for him to know that she no longer cared.

Minai made a mental note to slap herself across the face as hard as she could for that initial spark of excitement she felt when she heard that an elven marriage could, after all, be broken.

Still, several questions remained.

“If a marital bond can be broken for elves then I must know, did it happen between Aredhel and Eol?”

Because if being tricked into a marriage, held captive for years and years and years, not being allowed to see the light of the sun, having a spouse who casually didn’t care about naming their child, being pursued and chased down by him while attempting to escape clearly loveless and abusive relationship and then being killed by her husband while shielding her son from being murdered by his own father just for daring to disobey wasn’t enough to warrant a divorce then…

“Yes, that bond was clearly broken if it ever existed to begin with. But Aredhel would be free from Eol either way. From what I’ve heard his spirit never entered the Halls of Mandos and faded away from existence”

“Faded away from existence? You mean… permanently?”

Weren’t elves supposed to be immortal?

“Yes, permanently” it was immediately evident from the expression on Thranduil’s face that the topic wasn’t exactly a light discussion “You already know that for an elf, their spirit needs healing as much as their body. Sometimes it can happen that an elf can not or chooses not to seek healing. That it how their existence ends”

“That’s… awful” there really wasn’t much to say beyond that.

Although this much had to be expected. For immortality to come without any strings attached would have to be beyond wistful thinking.

“Awful you say? This sort of thing doesn’t happen overnight, it would have to take more than an average human lifespan. How can you view it any differently from growing old?” there was a clear irony in the way Thranduil spoke.

“Growing old is inevitable. Dying slowly while refusing or unable to get help is similar to a terminal illness, not ageing”
“Can all illnesses be cured?”

“Well, no...” not by a long shot. Even with all the modern technologies, there was still a lot of progress to be made.

“Then tell me, what is the difference between dying of an incurable disease and dying of old age besides the time-frame?”

“Wait...” Minai frowned slightly coming to a realization “Is this how you view mortality?”

“How else would you suggest me to view it?”

It did make sense. Quite a lot of it, actually. If the thought of existing forever was scary to her then why wouldn’t Thranduil be wary of the opposite. His argument wasn’t wrong. From an elf’s perspective at least. There was very little difference between withering away from an illness in a year or having the same thing happen in a span of several decades. Either one was nothing more than a blink of an eye for someone who had eternity on their hands.

With that in mind it became easier to understand why Thranduil would insist on her choosing to be an elf. If one of her friends was going to die of something that could be cured and refused treatment Minai herself would also try to convince them of rethinking that decision.

Logic aside, it still wasn’t easy to come to terms with something like that on a purely subjective level.

“I do like living and I certainly don’t wish for it to end any time soon. I never did” Minai reached for Thranduil’s hand “I never realized how this situation might appear to you. It really is difficult sometimes to see things from an elf’s perspective. But I...” somehow saying the next words was much easier than expected “I don’t think it’s impossible for me to learn”

Thranduil responded by taking her hand into both of his.

“You can start by not thinking of yourself as not belonging. I welcome you to stay for as long as you want. You do not have to forget your origins, but nowhere does it say that you can’t have more than one home”

“Thank you. It means a lot to me to hear this from you” despite there being very little need to do so Minai turned away to hide her flustered face “But my words about not belonging earlier today... it wasn’t because I was trying to be modest. Nor was it because of anyone making me feel that way. On the contrary, everyone’s being nice to me. I’m just not sure what place can I have here. Elves who are born in Mirkwood eventually find their calling and seamlessly blend into society. It was on accident that I ended up here and my presence is completely arbitrary. Can I even fit in? As it turned I obviously can’t be a warrior or a scout. Nor can I become a healer. As for the rest, you’ve mentioned it yourself, I have no practical skills and even if I were to start learning any of them now, I’ll never catch up in craftsmanship to those who held those positions for centuries. I mean, I’ll be the first to admit that I don’t exactly dream of being overloaded with work, but I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to not feel like a guest if that is the only thing that I am here”

At least back at home Minai had that blog of hers. Sure, there were only a dozen or so subscribers but those were still real people waiting for her to produce some content. There would be more if she actually tried to promote it or update more regularly. Then there were things like ‘I want to watch that movie that comes next year’ and ‘I wonder how the book series will end in a decade, considering the author’s schedule’ or even ‘I want to save money to buy a car’. Those little self-made purposes for those who are either waiting to find or simply do not care about their life long
calling.
“You want to have an official position?”
“I guess. Is that silly?”

“Not at all. It is commendable that you want to do your part yet you are going the wrong way about thinking of how you might do it. Life is not a theatre play with a set amount of roles where a new actor needs to wait for an opening to be a part of the performance. If there isn’t a role that suits you then it doesn’t mean something is wrong with you. It simply means that there needs to be a new role created for you. You might not have practical skills pertaining to the lifestyle here in Mirkwood but I’m willing to bet it is not due to you not having any useful skills at all. Even from what little you’ve described of it, the place you hail from sound different enough for you to not need the same skills as we need here in your everyday life. This is something unique only to you. When you live for a long time opportunities to learn something new become scarce and for that reason all the more valuable. Therefore if the world you lived in does indeed differ from the one you are in now then you can contribute by sharing the knowledge. You can be a cultural ambassador. How does that sound to you?”

“I really like that idea” with a soft sigh Minai rested her head on Thranduil’s shoulder “Thank you”

Doing that, on Minai’s part, was one of those rare ideas that just happened to be simultaneously the best and the worst. The best part, of course, was obvious. The position she was in was nice and warm, there wasn’t another place she’d rather be at. The worst part was, on the other hand, a little trickier. It was indeed warm and it was indeed nice. An ideal set of circumstances for falling asleep. Add to that a sleepless night and a stressful morning and her feelings were made clear with a yawn.

Thranduil most certainly wasn’t any help either. He could’ve said something but instead he moved one of his arms for Minai to be more comfortable and ran his other hand through her hair.

Another yawn.

“You know what you’re doing, right?” the woman mumbled in a less than a half-hearted attempt to shift the responsibility.

“Would you like me to stop?” Thranduil answered, clearly pleased with himself.

As expected, the responsibility was given back to her.

Okay then.

She was going to do the right thing and...

“No, I don’t want that”

This wasn’t exactly the wrong thing either, right? She was just, uuum…

Fine.

So maybe Minai didn’t have some kind of selfless and logical explanation to her words. Other than that she sincerely enjoyed the situation she was in. This was neither selfless nor logical. It was purely self indulgent. But hey, the world would be a truly miserable place if she had enough willpower and modesty to decline an offer from Thranduil to be her personal pillow for the day. Wasn’t refusing to bring any more sadness into the world a good thing after all?
Minai knew that she was, at times, a selfish woman and, for once in her life, she was happy to be that way.

With that thought she closed her eyes and fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so elves and divorce. There is not much said by Tolkien himself about the topic and I just interpreted the best I could from the little that was there. I don't think Tolkien's canon is entirely set in stone as he himself changed it a few times and there are some contradictory and downright 'hmmm' moments. What I'm saying there is some wiggle room there which I take full advantage of.

For example it (the canon) states that elves marry by having you-know-what. Also a marriage can not be forced on an elf so if someone tries to go against an elf’s consent then the elf dies. Literally. But we have Aredhel and Eol. Eol didn't let Aredhel to leave his forest (with magic or something) until she was scared lonely and said yes to anything that would get her out of the situation. I don't consider that to be actual consent at all (I took the biggest liberty and 'divorced' them for good). Then several elves tried to kidnap Luthien and basically hold her as a prisoner until she consented. That, in my book, wouldn't count for it either. This is very... you know... a few extremely side-eye worthy moments.

Then there is the whole Finwe-Miriel-Indis mess which is... messy. If an elf can only have one spouse forever and ever then how on earth Finwe fell in love with another? Like... Can elves have feelings for others while in a marriage in general? If someone fell in love with someone else while being married they are destined to suffer forever? If that feeling is mutual then the other elf should forever be alone because the object of their affection is already taken? As I've said, a mess. Therefore here I also get creative with my interpretation.

Also, what do you think about Minai being an elf? Is she? Do you want her to be? Or not? Your answer will likely not affect the outcome, but still.
Cultural Exchange

Chapter Notes

Oh look. A chapter. And you didn't have to wait an eternity for it. What's the catch? Yeah, there's a catch.
This one and the previous chapter were written last summer. I've mentioned that I was going to have our heroine just decide one day that she's done being silly and start being open about her background. So there. I wrote it that way but then decided to go another route. Now I just repurposed that content, there wasn't even too much work to be done.
Make your own conclusions.

This is the 'fluff' chapter. Just fluff and everyone having a good time. Yeah, I can do that sometimes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bullfinches were never considered to be among the most noteworthy birds. Neither their appearance nor their habits had warranted them, in the long run, any special attention from the general public. In the minds of many, bullfinch was that one bird with a red splotch that exists specifically on winter holiday merchandise. Comparatively few would even see a bullfinch in their lifetime and even fewer would name them as their favourite bird. Some tried to keep them as pets but to most they were nothing more than bud-eating pests.

Even in the domain of elves who were generally much more in touch with nature, where the earth still breathed magic and the trees were as old as the dirt they stood on, there wasn’t any practical use to a bullfinch. They were too small to carry on letters and far too unremarkable to become a target for domestication.

To the bullfinches themselves, however, all of those facts were largely irrelevant since, due to their not so complicated nature, desire for fame was not something most of those avians tried to actively pursue. Bullfinches simply existed in their own little societies, uncerned with the rest of the world. Those birds remained as they were and stood impartial even during the events capable of disturbing the general mood of the forest. Something akin to what happened last winter.

Back then one nameless bullfinch was no different than the rest of his flock. He was small and puffy, with a short beak, a red chest and a dark hat of feathers. There was absolutely nothing that would distinguish him from every other bullfinch that ever hatched under the blue sky. A berry pecked, a chirp made, a branch hopped. There was nothing in his life more but an ordinary routine that went undisturbed day after day until…

The bullfinch heard a call.

***

“Nope. I refuse to accept that” Minai grumbled in a voice even more bitter than a piece of black licorice gifted to a child by that one relative who knew very little about kids due to only ever seeing them on one of those milk cartons, you know the type.
“What is the matter?” Thranduil asked, amused by the reaction.

“When writing in my language it is forbidden by law for you to have better handwriting than me”

Maybe not a legal law, but at the very least the law of universal fairness.

Thranduil’s writing was, as much as it stung to admit it, near perfect.

There might have been a little skew to the lines and the spacing between some of them was occasionally slightly uneven. If Minai wished to see it desperately enough. Otherwise the letters looked on par with something that could be seen in one of those calligraphy-lesson videos. There was a brief period in Minai’s life, about three hours, when she made a valiant, by her standards, effort to learn from such a tutorial. Alas, she was ultimately stopped in her beginnings by a simple realization that in the age of technology and typing there wasn’t much usefulness to perfecting her handwriting.

Look how well that one worked out.

Oh well. At least he didn’t get it perfect on the first time so there was that to hold on to. That was exactly what Minai did. The parchment with Thranduil’s very first attempt at writing in her language was now stored among the woman’s most prized possessions, taking priority over the jewellery which, as it turned out, was actually gifted to her after the trip to Dale.

“I do apologize. Would you like me to lower my penmanship skills?” Thranduil was clearly not the least bit apologetic.

“What’s the point? I highly doubt it will get my self-esteem back if I know you’ll be doing it on purpose” the woman sighed in a purposely dramatic manner “Seriously though, you’re doing great with this”

At first Minai was slightly surprised when upon being asked which aspect of her world he’d like to get acquainted with Thranduil picked language and writing. Although when she thought about it a little longer it became far more obvious and even logical. Writing was a skill that could be learned and, most importantly, practised. It was simply better to start with something that had a tangible proof behind it’s existence.

Minai was still unsure about how to approach teaching the language and it’s rules, especially the spelling, the grammar, the sentence structure... All of those nice things which were neatly erased from her memory by the mere existence of messenger apps and auto-correct. Moreover, there wasn’t really any previous experience she could refer to when it cam to teaching. Writing, on the other hand, wasn’t too complicated. All it took was to start with tracing the alphabet letters on Thranduil’s palm and then proceed to guiding his hand on the parchment. It didn’t take too long for him to pick up the skill.

As she now leaned over Thranduil’s shoulder observing the movements of his hand Minai felt a certain hint of pride at the success of her student.

Yeah, about that.

The part about leaning.

With her mind preoccupied with other matters the woman completely missed the moment when she leaned this closely to Thranduil. Not that she had never been in such a close proximity to the elf. It happened numerous times in the past. However…
There wasn’t exactly an instance when her face was this close to his. A little bit too close for it to not entice a certain type of thoughts. If she turned her head juuust a little then she could…

As soon as the thought pierced her brain akin to a fiery lance Minai made a quick step to the side. Too quick for it to be perceived as natural by any stretch of imagination.

No.

Nope.

Never.

Never ever.

She would never.

Not in a million years.

Unless, of course, if she knew that Thranduil would be okay with that.

That brain of hers, which Minai suspected had complete rotted to it’s core a long long time ago, didn’t help the situation. Not at all. Instead of thinking of something distracting, like, um, sad kittens and cupcakes dropped on the floor, her mind happily proceeded to render a full sized HD quality image of her and Thranduil…

NO!

“Is something wrong?” Thranduil, who luckily either couldn’t or graciously decided not to read her thoughts, was somewhat startled by Minai’s actions.

“Hot” the woman coughed “I-it’s hot in here. It’s summer. It’s not a good idea to be this close to others”

Uh-huh. Rapid talking, stuttering, repeating words. All of the ingredients to make a perfectly believable justification.

Maybe she would get lucky. Maybe the word ‘hot’ didn’t have any double meanings in the elvish language.

“If you say so” Thranduil answered with enough courtesy to not sound overly complacent.

But still complacent enough to make it clear that he wasn’t exactly fooled by the excuse Minai came up with and wanted her to be fully aware of that.

Great.

“Buddy!” the woman called for her little feathery companion “Stab him with your beak please”

What else she was supposed to say when she didn’t want to risk the word ‘peck’ to have a double meaning in elvish as well?

Upon hearing his name being called, the bullfinch, who was quietly sitting atop of an inkwell, peeped cheerfully and migrated to Minai’s shoulder, giving her tunic a nice bird-paw print.

Double the great.
The only thing left for Minai was to fume in annoyance.

“Bullfinches can be rather wayward birds, more often than not preferring mischief over direct subordination” Thranduil remarked.

“Ever heard of the expression don’t bite the hand that feeds you? You really think I haven’t seen you sneaking him berries during our morning practice?” the woman grumbled “That’s why he won’t do anything to you. You basically feed him candy and then he won’t eat his fly for dinner. Or is it some hierarchical thing?”

Not that Minai fed Buddy flies. There was just one dead on the windowsill that had to be dealt with. Minai was too squimish to touch it, Buddy was too disobedient to do what was required and Archibald the Arachnid was simply too scary to even be asked for a favour. The fly died somewhere around the time when the bullfinch went missing and remained there to this day, a silent and very reproachful reminder of the low tier that tidiness had on the overall list of priorities of each and every single tenant.

“Bullfinches more often form pairs rather than flocks. Hierarchy has little meaning to them”

“But he still has to recognize your authority in some way”

If for no other reason than because Thranduil, unlike Minai, could communicate with the bird.

“He knows I have authority yet, as he is your companion and is more perceptive to your moods, he doesn’t see me as an authority over you”

“Wait, so what you’re saying is Buddy has little regard for your authority because he thinks that I don’t either? That can’t be true, I do acknowledge your position”

“I do not doubt that you are aware of my status but nothing in your behaviour would indicate to the bird that you view it to be above yours. Neither does he see me trying to exercise power over you”

“He sees us as equals?” Minai asked the question not sure if she was really asking about Buddy this time.

“Why wouldn’t he?”

This might have been a self conscious thing to ask. It wasn’t the first time she brought up the status thing and Thranduil disagreed with it being an issue. But getting a direct verbal confirmation for that which remained implied until that moment was something Minai needed to hear before fully believing. Besides, when else would she get an opportunity to ask it without being too direct and insecure about it.

“I guess you’re right, Buddy sees exactly how it is” Minai agreed “So he didn’t spend those days he was mad at me with you?”

Buddy, still sitting on her shoulder, chirped in a chaotic manner, flapping his wings to make a better point. If that was what he was trying to do, that is.

“No, he wasn’t with me” Thranduil paused listening to the bird “Your friend wants me to tell you that he wasn’t angry but he also wants you to know that it was difficult to get into your room with all the windows closed because of the storm. He had to take shelter in the kitchen area”

Right. That was the exact explanation that the Guard came up with. Somehow, getting the same excuse from Buddy himself made it even more suspicious than before. Because back then the
Guard guessed that this might have happened. Why did he have to guess then if the birds could have told him that from the beginning? Unless communicating with animals was not the ability that all of the elves had.

Still.

How much of a coincidence would it be if a random guess would perfectly coincide with reality?

“I really wish I could understand him myself” Minai sighed.

“If you want to understand him then you need to learn to listen”

“You think I don’t? Believe me I’d be lucky if I could just not listen to all the infernal chirping in the morning”

Seriously, just because the sun had risen it didn’t mean that the whole world had to be notified by Buddy personally.

“Come with me, I’ll show you”

***

The clearing was quiet and cozy. It was at a distance from the main routes most of the elven kind took throughout the day which gave the place a certain air of privacy yet it was still located within the territory of the palace for it to feel completely safe. The trees were tall and their branches formed something akin to a dome which only allowed a few chosen sun rays to enter. Despite it being the middle of the day, the light of the sun was slightly dimmed, adding to the overall mood of seclusion from the rest of the world. There was nothing but the sound of wind playing with leaves to remind of it still existing.

Minai sat on one of the rather large tree roots with Thranduil standing behind her.

“Tell me, how many living creatures can you spot?” the elf asked.

The woman looked around a few times and then once more but closely.

“Well, I’m seeing an elf with antlers and the spirit of gluttony disguised as a bird” she finally gave her answer.

“Do you see any audacious elleths?”

“Oh, you mean the gorgeous looking one? Yes, she is there” Minai just couldn’t help herself this time “But besides us two and Buddy I don’t think there’s anyone or anything else”

“What about the squirrel?”

Minai narrowed her eyes, studying the tree branch by branch. Nothing, nothing, nothing… nope that’s just the sun playing trees, nothing…

“I’m not sure I can see any squirrels” she answered in a hushed tone, not to scare the small animal in case it was really there.

“And the goldcrests?”

“Where?”
“It’s no fun if I point them out for you”

The search continued. Goldcrests, goldcrests. What were goldcrests anyway? The name was exceptionally unhelpful. She was told to search for living beings and neither ‘gold’ nor the ‘crest’ gave out particularly lively vibes. If anything around was made of gold it could easily be spotted because gold was a shiny and reflective metal, it would surely be given away by it’s glistening.

Yet there was nothing shiny lying around.

“I don’t see any goldcrests”

“Are you sure?”

“That’s unfair. I’m not even entirely sure I know what a goldcrest is” there was no annoyance in her voice, only a genuine desire to see a person who came up with those weird names.

“Fair enough, a bunny burrow should be more familiar to you” Thranduil smiled.

“That it is, but even if there are bunnies they’re deep inside their home. I wouldn’t be able to see them”

“I wouldn’t be able to see them even if they were hopping right before my eyes and yet I still know that they are inside their burrow”

“Of course you would. It’s technically your forest, you know it’s wildlife and you can communicate with animals, you’d know those things” to Minai it seemed pretty obvious.

Thranduil took a step closer and gently placed his hands on her shoulder’s.

“Close your eyes and try to listen”

Minai followed the instruction and closed her eyes listening to the whispering leaves and her own breathing. The woman listened attentively, trying to pick out any abnormality yet there still wasn’t anything she could notice. Except maybe one tree branch clicking with another. Although, would tree branches really click when touching each other? It was a sharp sound and the only way it would be produced by a branch was if it was already old, dried and snapped in half, perhaps by being stepped on. But there was no one who could do that and therefore…

Minai opened one of her eyes and there it was, the squirrel. Sitting on an old looking oak tree right in front of her. Yet, it wasn’t surprising that the squirrel remained unnoticed at first. The animal was well hidden by the branches and unbothered by anything except for cracking an acorn with it’s small but still sharp teeth. She closed her eyes again.

Buddy chirped. An unusually thin chirp for such a loud and pompous, at times, bird. Could it be that the sound wasn’t made by the bullfinch? Minai turned to where the chirping came from, a pine tree to the left.

Although, wait. There was something there indeed. A nest. Only the nest was located above the eye level and the only thing that could be noticed was it’s bottom which could be perfectly mistaken for a simple clump of branches. Let’s assume goldcrests were birds. Hopefully birds with a shiny golden crests on them, otherwise it would be a blatant case of false advertisement and under certain legislations highly illegal. If it weren’t for the briefest movement of a feathery tail at the edge of the nest, an unremarkable greyish-green tail mind you, Minai would still have missed it.
As for the bunnies…

“The squirrel is atop the oak tree right in front us, goldcrest nest is to the left and the bunny burrow is right underneath the tree root I’m sitting at” Minai paused for a moment “Although that one I know because the bunny came out to say hi” as well as to wiggle it’s adorable fluffy ears.

“It is not always required to speak the same language to understand someone. A newly hatched bird peeps for food and a wolf’s growl signifies danger while as little as seeing a large spider web will make you think twice before approaching. There is a lot nature can tell you only by observing it’s behaviour. This does include your little bullfinch” Thranduil explained “But there is still someone you’ve missed”

“Whom?” Minai asked surprised.

“The bee”

Right on cue the insect buzzed in an uncomfortable proximity to Minai’s ear.

“Eek!” the woman twitched, losing her balance.

Falling, however, wasn’t something that was destined to happen to her today.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got you”

The next moment she found herself with her back pressed to Thranduil’s chest with his arms around her.

Okay.

Maybe bees weren’t that bad.

Definitely not that bad.

“Thank you” Minai managed to say when she got back to her senses “I really appreciate having you there”

She managed to return to her original position yet Thranduil was in no hurry to let go of her. Not that she was in any hurry to remind him to do that. Why fix that which is not broken you know. Meanwhile the bee approval ratings continued to skyrocket.

For the sake of full disclosure, the next half an hour Minai spent simply enjoying herself right where she was, asking different questions about the wildlife inhabiting the forest, it’s habits and attitudes towards hu… elves.

“My question is, I guess, if animals in the forest are not exactly magical by themselves would such close proximity to elves affect their behaviour in any way? Buddy does seem to be a lot more, how do I say it, alert than most birds I had dealt with before I’ve met him”

At the very least none of the birds before had randomly proclaimed to be Minai’s pet.

“The short answer is no, but the long answer is yes. The animals remain the same be it here or anywhere else yet the proximity to elves does make them appear more alert to you since our ability to understand animals gives us additional understanding between each other”

“Uh-huh. So if I train a dog it will take many tries before it starts to associate word ‘sit’ with the act of sitting but you can ask the dog to sit in it’s own language, so to speak. Thus the dog will
technically learn faster from you and therefore it will also appear smarter when it’s with you than when it’s with me?”

“Yes, you are correct”

“Then that’s what I don’t understand, if I can’t yet communicate with Buddy then why did he start following me around in the first place?”

“When did you meet him?”

“Weeell…. Minai searched through her memory “A bullfinch brushed against my cheek making me fall but I can’t be sure if it was him that time or not. Buddy flew into my room one day and stayed since.

He used to go somewhere for a days but recently he just stays by my side” excluding the mysterious absence.

“If it was him who startled you then perhaps he could have sensed your distress and made appearance to check if everything was okay” Thranduil paused thinking of something “What did you do when he entered your room?”

“I spoke to him. Maybe not exactly to him but I was trying to figure out the differences between my language and elvish so it might have looked that I was addressing Buddy. He also ate breadcrumbs from my windowsill, so there’s that” Minai mused “Or maybe it was the whole bun that time, I don’t remember…”

“In case it has been a whole bun then he could have kept returning for it until there was a proper bond between you” Thranduil politely refrained from commenting on the cleanliness state of Minai’s windowsill.

“It would explain his ventures into the unknown back then. But where was he now and why is he lying about it?” Minai threw a glance at her bird but saw nothing suspicious in Buddy’s round fluffy frame.

“He cannot deceive you on his own accord. Birds might play simple tricks on one another but they do not possess cognitive skills similar to mine or yours. Your bullfinch can communicate ideas, thoughts and images but nothing as complex as a deliberate lie”

“He can’t? But…” then maybe Buddy really was just parroting the Guards explanation, but why would he have to if he could just communicate the truth “Say… if elves have it easier to giving commands to animals then can an animal be commanded to lie?”

“I can imagine something similar to that happening but I can not imagine a reason for it” Thranduil confessed.

“Me neither to be honest. Maybe I’m just overthinking it” Minai sighed. After all, she wasn’t exactly at her best in terms of mental state when the whole bullfinch debacle happened, it could have influence her train of thoughts and give some ideas that were not exactly stellar. It happened before.

“If you truly have concerns about motive behind your bird’s actions then I could use my authority to interrogate him”

Minai looked at Buddy once more. She was curious and she did really want to know, however…
“It’s okay. You’ve said it yourself, no matter what were his original motives Buddy made a choice to become my companion. I will respect our friendship and wait until he chooses to tell me”

She reached her hand and had the bullfinch land on it. If she were to learn to listen then it would also mean learning to be patient.

***

“If it is a communication device, then why don’t you use it now to make contact with your people?” the elf asked with a healthy amount of scepticism.

Prior to that conversation Minai had went through the entire history of phone invention. The little of it that she knew. It seemed bizarre to just start the explanation with the cellphone itself. Thus, to make the whole tale more believable, the woman decided to first explain how the technology occurred and developed during the century and a half since it’s conception.

“I can’t. It died” she replied not giving much thought to her words.

“Died? I didn’t get the impression that it was a living thing” there was now a vague alarm in Thranduil’s voice.

“Sorry” Minai smiled “I didn’t mean it that way. It is not a living thing, you are correct. It is simply out of charge. It is supposed to be regularly supplied with energy, in an artificial kind of way”

“Why don’t you recharge it then?”

“I’m not sure there is a way to do that here. The energy in question is called electricity, it can be harvested but there don’t seem to be any means to do it in Middle Earth and I regrettably don’t know enough about the process to create those means. I’ll explain more about it next time”

“How hard it is to acquire that phone of yours?” Thranduil lightly tapped his finger against the phone’s glass surface.

“Used to be quite hard and expensive. It’s still considered a relatively new technology. I didn’t get one until I was a teenager and even then it was a bulky old thing. Nothing like the one you’re holding. Right now, well, at the moment when I left, they were pretty accessible. Where I lived they were available for purchase pretty much at any marketplace. Some were more expensive than the others, depending on functionality and the establishment they are produced by”

“There are multiple ones?”

“Yes. It’s similar to...” it took a moment to find an analogy “Well, take swords or jewellery for example. There are some masters who are more skilful with their craft and owning an item created by them holds more prestige, wouldn’t that be right?”

“I suppose there is truth to that, but it does correlate to quality. Materials from which the item is made and the technology of it’s craft play a major role as well. Certain elements are more accessible geographically and some masters only reveal the secrets of their craft to their next of kin. Is it similar with phones?”

Yes. Smartphone quality. The most relevant factor to think about when pawning your kidney.

“There are also company values. Would you commission an item from someone who has insulted you or something that you hold dear? What if that someone harmed others during the item’s
creation, not because there was no other way but because that would simply bring them more money?"

"Which of those you took into consideration the most when choosing your phone?" there was something suspicious about the elf’s voice when he asked the question.

"A bit of each I suppose" Minai also considered how much she didn’t want to be evicted or to starve to death "I decided to get the best thing I could without it having a lasting negative effect on my life quality"

"That is very wise of you" Thranduil smiled with the same suspicious air to it "Do forgive my curiosity but there is one more question I must ask"

"Go ahead" Minai replied, knowing that there was a catch but unable to pinpoint it.

"It’s pink, isn’t it?"

Of all the…

With the fire of righteous indignation burning bright in her heart Minai held her head high and answered:

"It’s called rose gold and it’s a very noble colour!"

***

It might’ve taken a while but the ancient art of flower crown was finally mastered. Even if Minai had no idea what the majority of the flowers in the basket were called. There were the big puffy magenta ones, those had the strongest smell. The same ones came in a paler shade of pink and even white but of course the brighter ones immediately took all of the attentions.

"Those are peonies" Thranduil noted when one of the flowers was given to him for identification purposes.

"Thanks!" Minai beamed, carefully incorporating the peony into her future masterpiece.

A few roses was a given. Those she didn’t need any help with when placing a name on them. They were white and small, likely came from a rose bush rather than a lonely stem. Whoever put the roses in the basket had already made sure that the flowers were included without their thorns.

Bless the anonymous kind-hearted elf and let their prickled fingers heal as fast as possible.

Some leaves, the green ones, had to be weaved in here and there. Otherwise the whole piece would be nothing but a cacophony of bright colours. That wouldn’t do at all.

Finally were the little purple flowers which smelled like…

"Candy flower?" Minai gave the delicious smelling plant for an inspection.

"They are called heliotropes" Thranduil returned the flower after a brief examination.

"Is it okay to eat them?"

"I’m afraid they are poisonous if ingested"

"Well isn’t that lovely" Minai lightly shook the flower in hopes of seeing any remorse from the
Of course the flower remained criminally unapologetic to the fact of being a deceitful fiend. Oh well. As if Minai didn’t already know that everything in nature would try to kill her once she stepped outside on her own.

At least the flower had enough decency to be rather harmless when not being consumed.

The woman carefully placed the heliotrope accents into the final product.

“All done, there you go” with a feeling of a job well done Minai returned the crown to it’s rightful place “It’s suits you well” she giggled.

Well, yeah, she cheated. Instead of making an entire flower crown from scratch she took the ‘crown’ part a little bit more literally and opted to giving some flower ornaments to Thranduil’s actual one.

Honestly though, that thing was a perfect canvas for decoration. It had an intricate design with enough crevices to weave the flower buds into.

“Yes, indeed. Your knowledge of colour theory is outstanding and attention to detail is impeccable” Thranduil said in an absolutely deadpan voice.

“Buddy, oh Buddy” Minai called dramatically for her bullfinch “What have I ever done to earn such mockery? All I ever did was put my heart and soul into this ornament and what an ungrateful response do I get”

To add to the effect Minai theatrically pressed the back of her hand to her forehead. Buddy landed on one of her fingers with an equally melodramatic chirp.

“Have either of you considered enlisting into a Thespian Society?” the elf asked, amused by the performance.

Whelp. That was the fanciest way Minai was suggested to join the drama club.

“I, um...” it was a touchy subject indeed “Acting hasn’t worked out for me that well”

“You’ve tried your hand at it?”

“Yeeeah... Kind of. Not really” the woman mumbled “It is sort of a messy story which involves alcohol, lost bets and...” she paused to look at Thranduil’s face “...and now I realize that all of what I’ve just said probably only made you more curious, right?”

“That I won’t argue”

“Okay. Here goes” Minai made a deep breath “I was celebrating a milestone in my education and got drunk. Then I made a bet that I could actually sing but I couldn’t. To honour the bet and be punished for my lacklustre singing abilities I was supposed to perform a role of a noble elf maid in a play. That was when I got lost in the forest and that’s why my clothes were similar to what your people wear”

“If I were to hear such a tale from someone else I would be inclined to put it through scrutiny. Yet after getting to know you that does no longer sound as impossible” Thranduil replied after a long pause.
“Do you believe me? I mean, not just about that but about everything I’ve been telling you so far?” Minai bit her lip.

She told Thranduil about a few modern inventions. The phone, some of the kitchen appliances, transportation. He asked questions but never accused her of lying which Minai, while being grateful for the sentiment, couldn’t fully accept it as being entirely sincere. If roles were reversed she would definitely not be as trusting.

“I do not think that you are deliberately making any of it up” Thranduil gave an honest answer “It is hard for me to imagine a society in which you travel through sky in a construction made of metal but it is equally as incredible for someone to meticulously think such an elaborate deceit through. Whether it was you who did it or someone else who made you think it’s true”

So the real answer was neither. He didn’t truly believe what she was saying without substantial proof but neither did he think that she was lying. That Minai could accept.

“Thank you for being there for me and trying to keep an open mind” the woman said with a grateful smile on her face.

After experiencing the importance of being told that her presence mattered Minai decided to not withhold those words herself.

Thranduil didn’t reply. Instead he reached for the flower basket and picked up one one the peony flowers which he then carefully tucked behind one of Minai’s ears.

For the very first time Minai felt happy about having her ears elongated. The absolute perfect shape to hold the flower in place.

***

Next on the agenda were cameras and photography. Minai continued with her approach of explaining one topic at a time and as a point of reference she took her phone. The gadget represented a rather large amount of a modern human’s everyday life and included in itself numerous different functions. It only made sense to go through these functions one by one starting from their inception as large and bulky pieces of technology to the moment they ended up in a small metal device. She went through calls and texts to which Thranduil reacted rather amicably, stating that while he saw the general use of it there weren’t many with whom he’d be willing to share his phone number with compared to those whom he’d have no choice but to give access to it due to his status as a king.

There wasn’t much Minai could say to oppose that argument since working once at a call-centre and being yelled at by angry customers all day had left a rather large scar on her mental well-being at that time. Why would she want to expose Thranduil to some noble elves’ constant complaining about someone not smiling the right way for them.

Well, okay, maybe that one time wasn’t about the smiling itself. But it wasn’t exactly her fault that the other lady was wearing a floor length dress and she, in her leggings, was faster to claim the only bench that stood in a shadow of a tree. Still, first come first serve. Perhaps a smug smile afterwards was a little excessive, however, trying to complain to higher instances that the newcomer didn’t offer the seat to someone older and of better social standing was an unbelievably petty retaliation.

Of course it’s possible, probably, maybe, that hopping off the bench with the word’s ‘Here you go grandma’ the next day was equally as petty but it ended up with them both laughing about the
sitting while sharing the bench and chatting about advantages and disadvantages of certain wardrobe elements as well as the ever-elusive pockets on dresses.

Anyway, taking photos.

While Thranduil was only mildly curious about the primary function of a phone, which Minai suspected was partially because it was rather difficult to fully believe something like that as truth without it being proven with evidence, he appeared to be much more enthusiastic towards the world of photography. That much was obvious from the amount of questions the elf had about the topic.

How many photos could be taken? How often? How accurate was the likeness? What was the usual size of canvas? How lasting it was? Were there any special conditions required? How specific the location had to be? The weather conditions? How much prior training was required? Were there any restrictions?

Minai wasn’t surprised by such extensive interest. The elves had long lives and there were many moments they’d like to look back at.

“Yes, if it was possible to charge my phone I could definitely take photos with it. Even so, there still would be no way to make them appear on canvas. That would require a lot of additional equipment which I never personally owned” Minai explained, reminiscing about the photo albums her parents and even grandparents had.

She herself didn’t have a single tangible photograph printed. There were some photos she took to be found online, inside her phone’s memory and on the hard-drive of her laptop, but that was about it.

Thranduil remained quiet, thinking about the information he just heard.

“If I understand correctly, you are comfortable with your likeness being taken?” he asked breaking the silence.

“Yes, pretty much” Minai shrugged.

Perhaps ‘comfortable’ wasn’t the right term for someone who had on multiple occasions participated in her generation’s sacred ritual – taking one’s own likeness in front of a mirror. In her defence, she only did that on days when she felt particularly confident in her appearance. Then again, those were not such rare days before she ended up surrounded by a society where no one ever had a bad hair day.

“I want to have your portrait painted” the suggestion was sudden but by the tone of his voice it was clear that Thranduil had thought about it for some time already.

“Really?” all Minai could do was to raise her eyebrows in surprise. She was not against the idea by any means but didn’t really expect something like that to be ever brought up.

“If you decide to return to you home before I’m able to see you with my own eyes I’d still want to know what you looked like and to have something to remember you by”

Minai tilted her head. It was hard to say what caught her attention more. The fact that Thranduil wanted to preserve a memory of her or the exact way he worded the request. He said ‘if’ she ‘decided’ to go back, not ‘when’ that happened. Such a simple choice of words yet she would be lying if she said that it didn’t matter to her.
“Sure, I don’t see why not, it would be interesting to see myself depicted by an artist” she replied. “But while we are on the topic of portraits, say, are there any paintings of Luthien that are still out there in the world?”

“Why would you need them?” Thranduil smiled, likely knowing the answer.

“Well, you know” Minai didn’t want to sound too obvious “She was described as the most beautiful being who had ever existed and, just out of curiosity, I wanted to know how much of that was true. So are there any? Maybe you’ve at least seen them? Or even Luthien herself? Have you seen her? Was she as beautiful as described? Or was it elvish propaganda because her father was one of the most influential rulers in Middle Earth and her mother was pretty much a goddess?”

Way to not be obvious.

Thranduil laughed in an amused but a very light-hearted manner.

“The years I’ve lived in this world would have been completely in vain if I haven’t learned by now that in a presence of a young maiden hers is the only beauty one is allowed to praise”

“This rule only pertains if there are romantic feelings between you and the said maiden” she argued in a similarly playful manner.

“Let’s do it this way, if ever an opportunity presents to be in a proximity of Luthien’s portrait I’ll let you know so you could make your own judgement of her beauty”

“Fair enough” Minai agreed.

There was no rational way to describe it. Minai would never ask a question she wasn’t prepared to hear an answer for. She wouldn’t be upset if Thranduil confirmed that Luthien was exactly as or even more beautiful than the tales claimed. She would never want anything negative to be said about anyone else for no other reason than to appease her.

Still, she couldn’t help but feel a tinge of relief when Thranduil gave a non answer to the question.

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Have you ever got that nagging feeling that something was wrong? Something that could potentially land you in a significant amount of trouble? Homework you forgot to do, an exam you never studied for, job interview that completely slipped your mind and thus there was no alarm clock set? It continues to pester you, taking away your peace of mind but never revealing it to you on time to prevent the catastrophe.

That was the exact feeling Minai had when tossing in bed after a nice and eventful day packed with entertainment of all sorts.

Although not without a backup from Tauriel Minai had set up a new personal record in climbing a tree. While being there on the top, she saw a perfectly nice lake. Not the one with the rotting dragon corpse, that one was not as nice for various different and colourful reasons. No, the lake she spotted was much smaller, similar in size to an outdoor backyard pool. That gave Minai a perfect idea of enriching the elven culture with water polo. A harmless and relatively simple sport which didn’t require too many rules to be explained. At least not for a casual game on a hot summer day. Then, after a few hours of keeping score and watching the others she requested the frozen treats to be brought. One more of her contributions. Elves didn’t have fridges but some caves went deep enough to reach a place where it was cold and certain products could be stored or frozen. For the sake of experimenting Minai asked some juice to be left there there in separate cups and with small
wooden planks inside them.

The experiment wasn’t unsuccessful and she, along with Tauriel and few others got to enjoy the some cooling refreshments.

Everything went fine. Perfectly fine. Nothing went even remotely wrong.

What on earth was bothering her then!?

After staring at the ceiling for what felt like hours but in reality was likely about ten or so minutes Minai threw off the covers and decided there would be no harm in going for a midnight stroll. Mirkwood was a completely safe place at any time of the day and nothing would ever happen to her as long as she stayed within the patrolled boarders.

The woman fished a knee length dress out of her closed, a design she requested for occasions just like this one, when she couldn’t find it in herself to be bothered to put on any pants.

The Elven Kingdom never truly slept. Elves in general needed far less sleep than humans, Minai supposed. Even she herself spent as much time in the land of sleep as she did because of the recent nightmares which weren’t exactly as recent anymore. The last few weeks were exceptionally nice by each and every single account. Minai couldn’t recall having any bad dreams during that time. As a result both her mind and body were widely awake despite the late hours. So was apparently Buddy’s little feathery judging by how readily he followed Minai.

There was distant music and youthful laughter heard from one of the galleries indicating of a friendly get-together lasting past the bedtime hours. A few guards engaged in drinking wine and playing something that seemed eerily similar to regular old cards. Minai smiled and nodded to the guards, a gesture which they eagerly returned. She used to think that such a behaviour on the guards’ part was an indication of poor discipline but honestly, there weren’t any dangers lurking in the palace and the only thing enforcing stricter rules would accomplish would be souring the overall mood of the woodland realm. Mirkwood simply wouldn’t stand as long as it deed if the elves living here were anywhere near to being careless and disorderly.

Back to the topic.

Minai went through the events of the prior day.

First, tree climbing. Could there be something else that she saw up there? Something that would set off the alarm? No. Not really. Just the lake, the trees and the mountains. Nothing out of ordinary and nothing that shouldn’t have been there. All seemed well.

She exited the palace itself and found herself in one of the inner gardens, still deep in thought. The garden was peaceful but not silent. Crickets sang in tune with the dance of countless fireflies illuminating the garden. It was a beautiful sight. Minai took off her shoes and walked around the garden, feeling the soft grass with her bare feet and enjoying the scent of various different flowers. She brushed her fingers along a rose-bush, careful not to touch the thorns. The action startled a couple of month that took off into the air after being disturbed.

The woman let out a wistful sigh, wishing she could enjoy such nights more often.

She could.

Suddenly Minai realized that she could simply go into the garden whenever she wanted and walk around as long as her heart desired. It was a strange conclusion to come to. Nobody forbade her from walking around Mirkwood. She was never restricted in her movements. She just never
noticed it.

This was her ordinary day now.

Going for walks, greeting the guards, having silly banter with noble ladies, chatting with Tauriel. Those little everyday joys became the usual parts of her everyday life and brought a sense of normalcy to it.

Normalcy which she couldn’t quite enjoy right now because of the pesky feeling of something not being right.

What else happened today?

Right.

Then the game of water polo. Could something have gone awry when she offered to play it? If so, it wasn’t brought to her attention. Were there any elves unhappy with her bringing her outsiders traditions into their society? Not that either. On the contrary, everyone seemed excited. The ones she played with were elves from one of the younger generations, most of them Tauriel went on patrols and was on very much friendly terms with. They joined on their own free will and with a lot of excitement.

The woman reached the edge of the garden and refrained from proceeding any further. Beyond that point started the forest and she didn’t want to risk getting in danger. Minai leaned against one of the trees, absent-mindedly staring into the wilderness ahead.

The game itself went smoothly. There was a lot of laughter and friendly banter, even though Minai couldn’t be completely sure she remembered all the rules correctly. It didn’t particularly matter and when she was in doubt about something she filled the blanks with her own imagination. Since it didn’t seem like an opportunity to get her hand on the modern sports rule book would present itself any time soon. Yes, everything went well, the water was warm, the ball was bouncy, the elves were having fun in their swimwear.

...

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..........!

The very core of Minai’s being was crushed by a heavy stone monolith that spelled ‘DOOM’ in humongous bold letters. She closed her eyes and slid down the tree, ending up on the grass in a sitting position. A word, which most of the cultured society pretended didn’t exist, left her lips even quicker than was her descent to the ground.

There it was.

Right there.

On the surface.

Summer heat. The lake. Swimwear.

She had spent an entire day around elves, each of them with exceptional physique and what was her mind preoccupied at that time?
Ice-cream.

Yup.

She didn’t notice. She simply didn’t notice all of those attractive elves who pretty much made her stop in her tracks during the first months she spent in Mirkwood. They invited her to go have fun with them and engage in splashing water on each other. Something Minai would have been far beyond happy to join in on back then. But no. Not today. Not anymore. She just brushed off the invitation, stating that she’d rather keep the score.

There wasn’t any point in wondering why.

She knew why.

Because while those other elves were indeed attractive, they weren’t…

Luckily, she was saved from finishing that thought. Although the term ‘luck’ became much less applicable once Minai fully registered the distraction.

The doe.

The doe which she followed in the forest, the one who led her here, the one she chased in her dreams night after night, the one with it’s fur glowing silver.

It was there. Standing at an arms length and right near the invisible boarder between the palace territory and the forest.

Minai stared at the animal as the animal stared at her. She reached her hand and the doe sniffed it, sending a strange, almost tingling, sensation through Minai’s entire body. Caught in the surreal nature of the moment Minai tried not to breath too loudly. She didn’t want to disturb the doe yet she had to know. She had to know if the animal was real and not a figment of her imagination. She had to confirm her own sanity.

The woman tried being careful, she tried her movement to be slow and non-threatening, she tried not to show any agitation yet non of it worked. Once she moved her hand, ever so slightly, the doe took of and in a matter of mere seconds was gone back into the forest.

Minai looked at her empty hand and shook her head. She raised her eyes to see her feathery friend who remained still on one of the branches.

“You saw that too, right Buddy?” Minai asked without much hope for an answer.

‘Right, right’ chirped the bullfinch.

Chapter End Notes

Oh look, just one time she doesn't argue when being called an elf and the next thing she knows is bullfinches started talking. The horror.

Going forward, if there will be some kind of 'what the...' moment, just remember, the whole story was supposed to be close to parody and i'm afraid it'll start to show sooner or later.
Happy spring by the way.
Where Bullfinches Come From

Chapter Summary

We finally find out the long and complicated backstory of Buddy the Bullfinch. Because let's face it, I won't get to writing the actual 'romance' part of this story in anyone's lifetime.

Chapter Notes


I think that my two remaining brain-cells finally fried when writing this and at some point I might have been drunk. Just like a true writer should.

Blah-blah current situation blah-blah stay indoors.

My laptop's not feeling well. Some days it takes 5 hours to turn on. It didn't turn on at all on April 1st and you didn't get an entire chapter because of that. I don't have a storage hard drive anymore, just the system one. For safety reasons I don't download anything or install any new software on that one and so there's little I can do with it when it's turned on. I had a backup flash with some of my files on it, but there's no much use to them now. I don't even have DVD or music player so no songs and no movies for me. PDF opener to read books? Forget it! You'd think that would be a great opportunity to go outside, breath some fresh air, enjoy outdoors activities? HA HA HA. Quarantine bitch. Oh, and that mobile game I was playing? On an emulator. Which was wiped out. Along with the game. And the file with codes-passwords, I didn't have a backup to that one. It's gone now. All gone. Along with a few of my more productive personal projects. Nothing left but burned ashes where my hopes and dreams once stood. Basically at this point while locked inside I only can check the news website and write this fanfiction which, believe me, in my current mental state I don't particularly want to.

I have no idea what wrong with the device. It's not even old. I've done literally everything I could without taking it apart because my hands are meant for destruction, not fixing things. I have to call a professional but I can't do that because what do you know, everything's closed and you're not supposed to contact with strangers anyway. I'm stuck with that situation and honestly pretty pissed at everything right now. As if I didn't hate my life enough already.

Enough about me though. Let's get on with what you're (presumably) here for - the story. Enjoy reading while I go and cry in the corner.

(Don't take it seriously, just needed to vent somewhere)

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Buddy didn’t say anything else. Although much likelier it was her who didn’t hear him. Or maybe even she imagined him speaking in the first place. It could have been the creaking of a tree, or a crow who was particularly good at imitating voices, it could be even a mischievous elf playing tricks.

Or a wizard.

If she was told that a regular hobby for an average wizard would be stalking young maidens and making sure that their minds remain in disarray Minai would find it rather hard to find in herself any shred of surprise upon hearing this revelation.

There were plenty of possibilities to explain the experience without having to admit that she heard the bird speaking.

The woman sighed and pulled her knees to her chest.

Did she really not want to admit it this badly? Probably not. Was she thrilled about it happening? Not really. She had no idea what her true feelings were. It was somewhat exciting to realize how many paths could open themselves for her. Could she master animal communication? What other elvish talents would she get? But at the same time Minai felt… no, not disappointment. She felt a familiar kind of sadness. The same one she felt back in her adolescence when she’d wake up in the morning, see a bright and sunny day and think of what a perfect opportunity it would be to play with her pet bunny in the backyard. Only to remember that there was no longer a bunny to play with.

It was an older animal adopted from elderly owners when they could no longer care for him. The rabbit died of old age and it was hardly sudden. When the bunny passed away Minai was already old enough to understand what was happening and was prepared for it.

Until it happened.

Perhaps right now it was similar. She came to terms with the permanency of the changes in her life.

Until she got a confirmation.

Minai wanted to talk to someone. Only that there wasn’t anyone she could really talk with. Thranduil was of course understanding and even though he would sincerely want to help her there was no denying that he was biased in this situation. He would undeniably view this possible confirmation of her elvishness in a positive light and, even if purely subconsciously, would always lean towards that opinion. Tauriel was also a good friend but despite the years she had lived she was still a relatively young elleth. Minai suspected that if their ages were scaled up, she’d probably end up being the older one.

She just wanted… her parents.

She missed them. Minai wanted to come home, hug her mom and dad, tell them how much she loved them and to hear that they loved her too. She’d tell them about her new life, demonstrate her new skills, share her journey and, most importantly, she’d say that even if she had fun and enjoyed herself she never for a single day stopped thinking about her family.

She never would.

Minai sniffed and wiped her tears away. What was that all of a sudden
She was still sincerely not sure if whether or not she truly heard Buddy say anything.

It was possible that she didn’t. There was no need to think about it too much. Or even say anything quite yet.

“You too don’t say anything, okay?” Minai asked the bullfinch.

Buddy chirped a regular old chirp that couldn’t even remotely be mistaken for anything coherent.

“Yes, let’s keep it that way for now” she managed a smile and got up.

The sky started to slowly gain a warmer and lighter colour. Only slightly for now but sun the night would end and elves would start coming into the garden. Even though she was already known as being somewhat eccentric Minai would like to void to be known as casually spending nights curled up between the tree roots and talking to herself.

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Minai woke up at noon. This was her usual time for waking up if her sleep wasn’t disturbed by someone who was supposed to wake her up on schedule, which was another way of using alarm clock in a world where alarm clocks didn’t exist. It would be neat though if there was some kind of spell to wake you up without having to involve maids who deserved no less sleep. Quite unfortunately, as it was explained to her, Minai now knew that elves couldn’t exactly use magic the same way that wizards did.

One more point deducted from wizards. For hoarding all the magic for themselves.

Still, this seemingly annoying chore but it did guarantee an employment to a certain number of people.

Then again, an alarm-clock production factory would create much more jobs with a higher salary. Until automatization would kick in and then the job market would shrink to only need machine operators instead of people at an assembly line. Furthermore, with another leap in technology alarm clocks would mostly become obsolete as the function would be built in into cell-phones. Smaller amount of factories and safer jobs would be good for the environment and the average life expectancy. With all of that increasing the already small amount of available jobs would be occupied nearly for life by an older generation thus leaving the younger people to have less wealth, assets and opportunities in life. Truly a miserable situation.

So maybe just paying people to wake you up in the morning was the one true path to a better world and not a sign of having zero discipline to get out of bed on time by yourself.

No longer worried about being deemed lazy by an imaginary conclave of judges Minai put her arms under her head and threw one of her legs over another. The afternoon breeze lightly moved the curtains, Buddy was pecking on some leftover breadcrumbs, some other birds chirped outside the window.

Not a bad set of circumstances to wake up to, not bad at all.

Well, not being woken up could only mean one thing. It was a Sunday. Of course the elven society still didn’t have the usual ‘days of the week’ concept that Minai was used to. Such a triviality was generally rather useless to beings who for the most part didn’t measure their existence in days. Maybe not even in years either. Sundays nowadays were what Minai called those occasional days when Thranduil was busy with whatever was on the royal agenda, there were no events to attend and she had otherwise a completely blank schedule.
Yesterday was a Sunday too but that wasn’t too much out of the ordinary. An entire week of Sundays would probably something to be at least slightly wary of, but two in a row was completely fine.

There was a knock on the door.

Not even begrudgingly, she was genuinely interested who could have wanted to see her in the middle of the day on a weekend, Minai threw on a robe and went to open the door.

It was a mail-man. A mail-elf? Regardless of the term, the elf gave Minai a note and wished her a nice day. She smiled and returned the sentiment. Such casual everyday politeness seemed like a very small and barely significant thing yet overtime, as it turned into a habit, Minai started to appreciate it more.

She unfolded the note and read:

‘Follow the bullfinch – Artist’

How very laconic.

Was that the artist that was supposed to paint her portrait? Probably. Did she expect a meeting to be appointed in advance? Yes. A little more detail in the note wouldn’t hurt either. Then again, artists, at least the ones Minai happened to meet at her university, tended to stray away from the societal conventions. Sometimes even on purpose. On the opposing side though were those artists who liked the rules a little bit too much and absolutely detested those who didn’t follow them.

At least, if she encountered that second type Minai now knew better than to bring up the white watercolour paint.

She decided to not bother with clothes too much. Even if she didn’t knew much about the painting process itself she knew that the first meeting had to be preliminary. You know, discussing the details, composition, that kind of stuff. Therefore the woman chose a simple dress and called for Buddy.

The bullfinch sat on the windowsill, barricaded behind the stack of books which Minai was intending to return to the library for quite a few weeks now.

“Buddy, let’s go” she called.

There was a peep and some rustling noises but no bullfinch.

Carefully Minai reached her hand and picked up the small bird. Buddy obliged and perched on her finger as usual, save for noticeable effort not to look at his companion.

“Come on, don’t be grumpy” she cooed “Are you angry I couldn’t hear you anymore? Don’t like that I’ve asked you to keep a secret? Will a promise of a blueberry muffin bribe you?”

The promise of a blueberry muffin would certainly bribe anyone, as it seemed, since Buddy migrated from Minai’s finger to her shoulder with an amicable chirp.

“That’s my bird! Now, can you show me where to find this person?” Minai asked while showing the note to the bullfinch.

Buddy hesitated for quite a few minutes presumably thinking the request through. Meanwhile Minai exited her room, waiting for further directions. She had to wait for a few more minutes and
promise a strawberry dessert atop of the blueberry muffin before the bullfinch finally took of from her shoulder and hopefully flew to the destination.

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“What is it with you today!?” Minai stood in the middle of a hallway, her arms crossed, and stared at the bullfinch who took a hiding place on a tapestry.

The tapestry depicted a nice scenery with trees, animals and a couple of birds. Buddy clung to a ‘tree branch’ and would have evaded the gaze of a relatively inattentive passer-by. Unfortunately his chance of blending into the picture were brought down to zero by the sheer fact that Minai saw him landing there. She tried to pick the bird up but he climbed up the tapestry, away from her hand, going all out on chirping and flapping his wings while he did so.

Embarrassing. This was absolutely embarrassing.

Minai felt stuck between a rock and a hard place. Either she stayed where she was and missed the meeting or forced her will on an innocent bird. The latter was probably a worse thing to do, in the grand scheme of things, but it wouldn’t hurt to know the reason behind such misbehaviour on Buddy’s part.

Of course she would happily go without Buddy, if he was so unwilling, but she had no idea where she was supposed to go in the first place. Neither did she know how to get back to where she started, her room in this case. The castle was a true labyrinth and some measly half a year was nowhere near enough time to get properly adjusted to all of it’s twists and turns.

Just great.

Right when she started to think that her life might not be so bad after all.

There were therefore two options.

To stay right where she was and wait for a random elf to pass by so that she could ask for directions or go in a random direction in hope of finding a way out or at the very least bumping into someone. Risking getting even more lost along the way.

Although, wait, there was a third option present.

Well oh well.

As if there was ever a chance of establishing herself a reputation of a proper elven lady.

Minai took a deep breath and yelled.

“Heeey! Is someone out here!?”

For a few moments there was nothing but an echo but then a voice answered.

“Is that a cultural thing or is hurting others’ eardrums a hobby of yours?”

Startled, Minai made an instinctive jump back and crushed right into a wall. This, beside a thumping pain in her shoulder blades and a headache scheduled for the evening, gave her an idea of potentially making a living by writing a best-selling book titled ‘Making First Impressions: What not to do’.

Right there, somewhere at a bridge between the hallway and a gallery, stood an unfamiliar elleth
with a gaze which had a strange air of discipline in it, enough to make Minai regret each and every
decision which led her to this moment. Immediately she stood straight and, for some reason, also
straightened her hands by her sides, just like she did when a principle entered the class back in
middle school.

That gaze was familiar. Very familiar.

Something stirred at the back of Minai’s mind and suddenly there was a realization. She knew who
this elleth was. She was the same healer whom she met at the very first day here in Mirkwood.
That had to be why the feeling was something she recognized.

Ten thousand years wouldn’t be enough to live down the regret of not wearing a business suit
which was buttoned and unbuttoned enough times for it to be the most pristinely buttoned suit in
the history of clothing.

“T’m sorry” blurted Minai before managing to think about what exactly was it that she was
apologizing for.

There was now a strange ticklish sensation at the back of her neck which she recognized as Buddy
hiding, for who knows what reason, by clinging to the collar of her dress.

At least she wasn’t alone in her predicament.

“Follow me” the other elleth said in a neutrally dry tone.

“I… um sorry, I was supposed to meet with an artist” Minai remembered the reason for here being
in the hallway.

“That would be me” came a short reply.

“But I thought you were a healer” the woman exclaimed.

There was silence.

A long enough pause for Minai to realize that elves with their freakishly long lifespans and
impenetrable immunity wouldn’t regularly need healers on a day-to-day basis and most of those
who have chose the medical field would also have to have a hobby to kill a particularly peaceful
century or two.

Geez, that ‘first impressions’ book seemed like a more and more lucrative deal with each passing
moment. Although would it count as a first impression if they’ve met once already? Better
question, why was that her main concern now?

While Minai was musing about her potential literary career the other elleth had lead her through
the hall and into a venue which by all signs had to be an artist’s workshop. Inside there were the,
um, how do you call it? You know, that thing which rhymes with weasel? Easel, was it? Several of
them could be seen in plain sight although most were covered with drapes. Underneath there was
probably some work in progress which wasn’t ready to be shown to the world yet. On one of the
walls there was a large wooden board an on it there were tools, hooked by small nails. There were
brushes and, well, brushed. That was about the extent of Minai’s knowledge of all things painting
related. She vaguely recognized a metallic instrument because held familiarity to the thing that
which concrete was evened with between the bricks. Neither of those things Minai knew the name
of. There was also a large cupboard with paints on it as well as inside of it, most likely. A couple of
chairs, a bench, more drapes. The largest window in existence, draped. A bird-feeder or two,
decorated with a flowery motif.
Yup, looked exactly like a workshop.

Except it didn’t feel like one.

It was too, for the lack of a better term, clean.

The paints were neatly organized by colour. Not a single splotch on the cupboard. The drapes were clear white, not even a hint of a washed out paint, let alone fresh one. The tools – bright and shiny. Even the wooden handles. The floor looked like it was swiped recently. Even the elleth herself didn’t make an impression of an artist. She had simple but very well-kept dress, a practical hairstyle, the leather belt, not much was different from the time that Minai first encountered her. Now, however, Minai was very suspicious of the ellth’s hands. Those were not hands of a noble lady as they held the signs of hard work but while the nails were shortly clipped there was no paint underneath them.

An artist without a single splotch of paint on her.

It was impossible. More impossible than traveling through space time and the very fabric of reality. So preposterous that it overtook the logic and common sense making Minai ask the question before she managed to evaluate the worth of the idea.

“Are you really an artist?”

The still nameless elleth stopped and raised an eyebrow. Somehow Minai felt that all the dignity that was in the room, including the little she had still left herself, went into that gesture. Thus she was left with none. Thank the almighty guardian of blonde bullfinch-owning girls, the room was dim due to the curtains and her embarrassed blush was hardly noticeable.

“It will do good for you to not think in stereotypes” the elleth said “And don’t make that face, I did not read your mind. It just happens that you are hardly original in your assumptions”

Such a nice rug was there on the floor. Maybe it was only a wistful thinking but perhaps the rug was hiding underneath it a hole deep enough for Minai could hide in.

How? Just How? Thranduil was a figure of authority but never did she feel like a third-grader late on an assignment around him.

Well.

The important thing was not to act like a third grader.

“So you’re not going to rummage through my brain?”

Well done.

Minai tapped the rug with the tip of her shoe. Tragically solid.

Damn it.

“That depends on how frequent your paranoid delusions tend to be”

An olive branch. Minai needed an olive branch to make peace. Hurriedly she went through her stash of ideas and found one.

“I’m sorry. This didn’t start right. My name is Minai, although you probably know that already. I apologize for being late, my pet bullfinch was in a mood to play rather than show me the path to
It wasn’t Buddy’s fault. He was just a small bird who shouldn’t ever be ordered around to do someone else’s bidding. Not by anyone who wasn’t Minai herself at least. Then again, how much worse tasks a bullfinch to serve as a navigator was compared to immediately accepting that idea and not even bothering to ask directions from multiple elves she met on her way before she got lost?

Hindsight 20/20.

“Idhren” the elleth finally introduced herself “Please sit by the window”

Idhren, huh. Judging by her tone she wasn’t a very big fan of olives. Oh well. Why did her name sound familiar though?

Silently Minai obeyed the request. In an absence of peace neutrality was the best option.

“You don’t like me too much, do you?” it was more of a statement than a question and not at all accusatory one.

“Much less than I used to” the other elleth gave an honest answer.

Although Minai had to wonder what exactly was it during their first meeting that she did to make herself seem so unlikeable. Didn’t matter. Sometimes people just hated you and there was nothing to be done about it. If anything, pestering for the reason would only make it worse.

Idhren approached her, took Minai’s face into her hands, tilted it right, left, up, down. Then she did the same thing with curtains opened. Half closed. Closed three quarters. Closed but with firefly lanterns. Minai started to come down with a case of vertigo by the end of second manipulation but kept her quiet until the third or so.

“What are you doing?” she asked, closing her eyes not to completely lose her ability to distinguish between the floor and the ceiling.

“Trying to find lighting most flattering for you” Idhren gave a court reply.

“Oh… I see” Minai said while averting her gaze from the other elleth. Lighting or not, it was a little bit unsettling to have her face looked at and studied in such detailed.

At times it did seem like Idhren was trying very hard to see something but Minai wasn’t sure what could that be. Just in case she decided to occupy her thoughts with some non-personal stuff like… Yeah, the bird-feeders.


Bullfinches.

There was one still clinging to her collar, not leaving even with all of the commotion. Why was he acting so strange? He knew the right way to Idhren’s workshop, so he had to know who the elleth was. Idhren, even if she didn’t seem to be particularly fond of Minai, didn’t give out vibes of a bad person. Not at all. She probably even liked birds. Why else the bird-feeders would be there then? If Idhren liked birds, maybe she was good at communicating with them and would be able to ask Buddy about the reasons behind his behaviour?
There was no harm in asking.

“You wouldn’t happen to know why my pet bullfinch is acting out?” the woman approached the subject politely.

“I would” the answer was as short as it was unexpected “It would be better if he told you yourself though”

“I don’t understand his language”

“Yet he listens to you just fine”

Minai reached her hand to the back of her neck and picked Buddy up. The bullfinch didn’t protest and burrowed himself into the woman’s palm. She lifted the bird to her eye level and for a few moments observed the little ball of feathers, small, round and with his head hidden under his wing.

“Buddy” Minai called “It’s all right Buddy, I promise. You are my friend and I want to help you. I’m sorry I can’t understand you myself yet” she gently petted the bullfinch with her finger “Please tell me what’s bothering you”

Buddy showed his head from underneath his wing but made no sound yet. He quickly glanced at Idhren and then back at Minai. Suddenly he took off and landed on one of the bird-feeders, making the pecking motions even if there was no food there at the moment. Then he made a sound, a melodic one, nothing like Minai heard before and flew towards Idhren, making a few circles around her.

Afterwards he flew to Minai and circled around her as well. Then Back to Idhren. Finally he landed on Minai’s shoulder with a very definite and final sounding chirp.

Confusing wasn’t a strong enough word to even begin to describe the situation.

“He wants me to figure out myself, right?” Minai tried a guess.

“He does” came the answer. Idhren sat in front of Minai, throwing one of her legs over another.

“He’s not hungry is he? Is there something he needs? Is he hurt?” one after another the woman tried every idea which came to her mind and only received ‘no’ as an answer “He used to come visit your bird-feeders when they were up?”

“Yes, it is so” Idhren nodded.

“But then he stopped?” Minai waited for another nod before continuing “The reason why he stopped visiting you and the reason why he is acting strange today are somehow connected, right?”

“They are, although I do think it is an overreacting on his part” there was no malice in the elleth’s voice, just a simple statement of the fact.

“Well…” the woman put a finer to her lips in a thinking kind of gesture “I don’t think he would steal anything from you and he is not big enough to cause any damage. Neither do I think you, just like any elf, would ever do anything to hurt or scare him, so…”

“There wasn’t a single thing that happened which made him act as he does right now”

A thought slowly crawled at the back of Minai’s mind.

“Are… are you the reason why he started to follow me all of a sudden in the first place?”
“That is the case, yes”

Where were all the glasses of water when you needed them? Minai felt like choking on something.

“Was he also the same bullfinch who startled me at the balcony?” a trivial question yet it would create the much needed time to process the information she just received.

“He was. But that was none of my bidding” Idhren averted her gaze to Buddy with a strange look of remorse in her eyes “It was a very regrettable accident, or so I thought”

If Minai wasn’t so stunned she would have made a comment about her dislike for those who spoke in cryptic.

There was a long pause before she spoke.

“You sent him to spy on me?” Minai looked at the floor “I’m not going to pretend that I’m okay with that, I’m not, but I understand why you would do that, especially as a healer. Please tell Buddy I’m not mad at him”

All in all, if, back at home, someone appeared without any knowledge of the modern world and unwilling to share any details of who they were and where they came from, well, Minai herself would also think that they were in need of constant medical supervision. For some time at least.

That being said, of course she was very much uncomfortable with being spied on. No matter how well she understood the logic behind Idhren’s actions Minai still felt a rush of anger and a strong desire to yell or break some of the art equipment. Preferably something expensive and hard to replicate, even if she had no idea what that something would be. So maybe she just wanted to break each and every object in sight and then set it all on fire. Twice.

Perhaps, some months ago, Minai would do exactly that, well, as far as she would get before being dragged outside by a guard or two. She knew better now. It wouldn’t be a good look and, most importantly, Minai since learned that there were instances when personal feeling mattered less than the grand picture. The brushstrokes were clear on this one. Going off on a healer who could then later write up a far from favourable assessment of her mental state was not the course of action Minai wanted to take.

“If it makes you feel any better, the bullfinch changed alliance rather quickly and didn’t tell me much of your activities here”

Miani wanted to comment something about not needing to have the truth sugar-coated but stopped before saying anything.

Was that really the case? She could recall a few times when Buddy would conveniently disappear but there were plenty of times when he went somewhere just because and therefore Minai never considered a possibility when Buddy sometimes wouldn’t follow her on purpose. To give her some privacy.

Minai could recall her bullfinch remaining in the library when Thranduil invited her to watch the deer family and that time by the lake when Buddy decided to burrow himself in the horses mane rather than perch on her shoulder. Were those deliberate? Could be.

Could be not.

There was a possibility that claiming that Buddy refused to serve his task was Idhren’s way of
easing Minai’s suspicion so that she would allow the bird to remain by her side and continue the surveillance.

No.

That was something Minai simply didn’t believe in. She knew Buddy, he was her pet bird. Therefore she wanted believe Idhren’s words. There was just something else she had to know.

“A week or so ago, was he hiding on purpose?” Minai asked.

“I was the one to originally call him in winter and by that definition he would be considered my familiar. Yet less and less was he willing to cooperate. The incident which you are referring to was indeed purposeful but it wasn’t you from whom he was hiding from. He was avoiding my call, thinking I would order him to surrender the information” Idhren sighed “I wanted to release him from having any ties to me so that he could become fully yours because that was what he desired the most. I did just that when I found him and asked the guard to return him to you”

“Why would Buddy do that, I mean, why did he choose to be my pet?” a strange feeling stirred in Minai’s chest. It was happiness, mixed with gratitude and genuine confusion.

“You named him” Idhren answered simply.

“Just because of that?”

“Tell me, what does Buddy mean in your language”

“It means friend”

“Exactly. He was simply meant to keep an eye on you from a distance yet you took him in, you played along with his mischief and called him your friend. The very moment he flew to me, flapping his wings and proud of his new name I knew he chose you”

Buddy, oh Buddy. He didn’t stay for free food or cosy shelter. He didn’t stay because he was obliged to. He stayed because he truly, genuinely, wanted to be Minai’s friend.

He chose her.

Despite being called by another, despite having food provided elsewhere, despite possible repercussions.

He chose her.

“Thank you for sending him to me” Minai smiled and playfully ruffled Buddy’s feathers.

Idhren’s facial features softened a little.

“It appears to be for the best. Him bonding with you gave more of what I needed than anything he could have told me if he simply continued relying the information as it happened”

“What do you mean?”

“You have to understand, I have been with his kingdom, with these people, since before a settlement was established in this forest. I can’t help but feel protective”

Right. Of course. That’s why Idhren’s name seemed so familiar before. Minai definitely heard it mentioned. Idhren used to be a war healer under the command of King Oropher, Thranduil’s father.
Such an old and respectable elleth, she was the one to be friends with. Definitely. After all, she most probably had the access to one of the most valuable information in the whole Middle Earth.

Why wouldn’t she?

Idhren was an artist, a painter, an old and trusted friend of the royal family.

She had to have at least one...

All in good time though.

There were more pressing matters.

“Did anyone else know about Buddy?” Minai hoped Idhren would understand what ‘anyone’ meant.

“No, Thranduil was not aware, it was entirely a whim of mine” Idhren understood as well as she understood why Minai’s expression changed “Come on, I tended to his mother when he was born, you’re not the only one who gets to skip the formalities” she said in a much lighter tone.

“I understand I might be pushing the boundaries, but why would you go behind Thranduil’s back on this? You do not trust his judgement about me?” Minai decided to ask this directly.

If Idhren was open to admit sending Buddy on a spying mission and confessing that she, at the very least, used to dislike Minai then there was little point in beating around the bush. Judging by her background as a war medic and very much direct speech patterns Idhren was clearly a person who cared little for social pleasantries.

“I never once have doubted his resolve and ability to look after the kingdom” Idhren smiled in an almost motherly way “But there has to be someone who looks after him as well”

“You thought I had malevolent intent?”

“It was more than apparent that in your case there was no point in attributing to malice that which cloud be explained by stupidity. You are naive and perhaps ignorant but hardly evil” Idhren sighed “Then again, I know very little of your actual character or your interactions with Thranduil since your pet refused to betray your trust”

That was at least an honest assessment. Not that this, or any of the conversation for that matter, was particularly pleasant but medicine was always bitter to swallow.

“I understand your concerns and can sympathise. It is fair if you don’t like me but I’m not going to try and prove anything to you. What happens between me and Thranduil should stay between us” Minai tried to speak calmly and hide her nervousness.

She didn’t want to appear aggressive or deliberately disobedient. She simply wanted to answer in the same manner as she was spoken to.

“I respect that” Idhren nodded.

“Really?” Minai blinked in bewilderment. She spent the most of her composure on that previous statement and was now lacking, just a little.

“I can’t claim to be able to judge one’s character from a single conversation but I have lived long enough to know what signs to be wary of. Your unwillingness to immediately back down before
the person you've just met without a strong reason to do so speaks more in your favour rather than otherwise. As I’ve said, I do not really know you and you don’t know me. Yet if we are to work together then it is better for everyone if we do it amicably”

Suddenly Minai realized that the metaphorical olive branch was handed back to her. If so, then there was something else she simply needed to know.

“May I ask one more question?”

“If you must”

“Do you have Thranduil’s baby pictures?”

What?

No, really.

Who else would have those if not a family friend who also happened to be a painter?

“That young lady will depend entirely on how well our cooperation goes on painting your portrait”

Minai nodded with a serious expression.

No things in life were free and if her price for the holy grail was sitting patiently for hours in the following weeks then so be it.

So be it.

***

Many Many Years Ago

From the very moment of it’s creation and to the day present Middle Earth has always been a home for various different beings. Big and small, good and evil, sentient and not much so. All of them roamed the plains and the forests, built their houses and established societies. Life brimmed and multiplied in all of it’s different shapes and forms. Yet of all of those who had the gift of life in them none were quite as curious and as persistent as a small elfling on a quest to explore the world around them.

Common as it might have been, such a simple truth was nothing but unfortunate for just about everyone else. The worried parents, the healers who’d have to deal with scrapped knees and bruised elbows as well as the furred and fluffy inhabitants of the forest, all would agree – the best state that a child could be found in was the state of sleep.

Alas.

No young explorer was ever stopped by that sentiment.

This time was no different.

“Are you sure this is the tallest tree in the forest?” the first boy asked with even more skepticism than he gave his parents upon hearing that elflings were brought by eagles.

“Have you ever seen a tree taller than this one?” the second boy retorted with his hands crossed on his chest.
“I’ve heard that if you climb the tallest tree in the forest you’ll be able to see Valinor from all the way up there” the girl smiled that all-knowing ‘I’ve once eavesdropped on older kids’ talking and now know all the secrets in the world’ type of smile.

“No way!” the boys exclaimed in unison.

“Oh?” the girl tilted her head “Have you any proof that this is not the truth?”

“We don’t… But we will!… Yeah!… We’ll climb that tree and show you!” the elflings spoke one over another.

“No you won’t!” the girl frowned. She didn’t want her friends to hurt themselves but she did kind of want to know what Valinor looked like.

Neither of the children have ever seen the land beyond the sea. They’ve heard tales, that’s for sure, but tales were only tales when you were young and adventurous. Far from being adults, they weren’t even of an age group that much later, and not among the elves, would be called ‘teenagers’. Allowed to play with friends just outside the window but still obliged to not stray any further than an average backyard territory. Even if elves did not generally have backyards.

“Listen, you know that this is not how it works” the first boy shook his head “Once taunted, one must go through with… um… whatever the thing is”

“You’re thinking about dares” the girl protested “I’ve never dared you”

“Well then. I dare him to climb that tree” the second boy smirked triumphantly.

“And I dare him to do the same” the first one copied the expression.

“Mom said if I get in any more trouble because of you she’ll ground me for a week!”

“We’ll tell your mom that you didn’t do anything and we came up with the idea by ourselves”

“But you DID come up with the idea by yourselves!”

“Even better then, your consci… cons… consciu…”

“You have nothing to worry about”

“Besides, who told you that anything bad will happen?”

“Yeah, we’ll climb up and come back down before anyone even notices”

“And we’ll tell you all about Valinor once we’re back on the ground”

“I’m worried it will be your next life that you’ll see Valinor in”

“Then stop trying to jinx it!”

“I’m not jinxing it!”

“Yes you are!”

“No I’m not!”

The bickering continued for quite a while even if the outcome was long before known. With a look
of battle lost the girl sat on a tree stump to watch her friends go through with their ridiculous idea.

The tree was indeed tall and the lowest branch was still outside of elfling’s reach. Fortunately, even though it was debatable for whom, there was not just a single elfling set up on conquering the height. There were two of them and two could form a tower which was, to the little elleth’s biggest dismay, just the right height to grab that ill-fated tree-limb. Once on top one of the boys hanged down offering his hands to his friend who readily followed. The branch was conquered but that’s where the true problems started.

You see, the next branch was farther away from the first one than the first one was from the ground. Even more disastrous, the branch that the boys were sitting at was simply too thin in order for one elfling to have enough balance for the other to stand on his shoulders. And even that was not the end of it. The ground was now too far away to jump down.

The boys were stuck.

“I told you so!” the little elleth sobbed.

“I will never be let outside ever again!” one of the boys joined her.

The second boy said nothing yet his eyes were getting suspiciously watery.

*CRACK*

“AAAH!”

The branch snapped, unable to hold the weight of two kids. One of the boys started falling yet his friend who sat much closer to the branch’s collar managed to grab his friend’s arm before he fell on the ground.

The situation grew more dire.

“I’ll go get adults!” the girl cried.

“There’s something wrong with my arm, I won’t hold him for long!”

“I don’t wanna fall!”

“What do I dooooo…!”

“You’re slipping…!”

“You can’t let go!”

“Pleasedontdiepleasedontdiepleasedontdie!”

Suddenly, the boy who still remained on the tree branch felt the wight being lifted from his arms and after turning his head back and forth in confusion he came face to face with…

“Dad!?” the elfling asked in equal parts surprised by his father being there and the fact that the dreaded tree branch which seemed to be taller than the royal palace just a moment ago turned out to barely reach his parent’s chest.

There was a silence during which the dying breath of children’s hope of not being punished echoed throughout the forest.
“Thranduil, what did I tell you about wandering off and climbing trees without supervision?” the adult elf returned his son back on the ground in a rather undignified, for the elfling, manner.

“You said I can misbehave all I want if there’s no chance of mother finding out. So could you maybe not tell her?” the blonde elfling, who was indeed named Thranduil, tried to smile through tears.

His arm still hurt.

Oropher sighed and gently pushed his son to keep moving towards the direction where the living area was. Thranduil pouted, completely oblivious to the fact that he was only saved from being dragged home by his ear because he was still too short for his father to do that without bending in an uncomfortable way.

The fallout was as expected. Three sets of parent and none of them happy. Add to that a dislocated shoulder and one extremely unimpressed healer. Oh, don’t forget the bickering about whose turn it was to watch kids and some rather pitiful sobbing on the elflings’ part. You get the picture.

“Now look what you’ve done! Your friend is hurt” one of the mothers was fuming.

“I didn’t mean tooo…” an elfling cried despite being unsure whether it was their mother who was scolding them.

“That’s no sweets for…”

“Please don’t punish them! It was all my idea, he only followed me for safety and she tried tried to talk us out of it” Thranduil looked at adult elves pleading eyes.

“That’s not fair! We were all involved!” his friends protested.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be fine” the blonde boy grinned ear to ear and proudly demonstrated his arm in a sling “Father said that no one will ever have a heart to punish an elfling who’s hurt!”

Thranduil still got lectured by his mother. But he wasn’t the only one in his household to get a scolding that day.

***

“…and they all promised to never climb any trees without supervision ever again. I assume you can guess what happened the very day Thranduil’s arm was out of the sling?” Idhren finished her tale.

Minai giggled imagining the events in vivid details.

“That’s so cute!” the woman said with a wide smile on her face “I kind of did the same thing with climbing a… a barn” she caught herself before saying the word ‘garage’ and having to explain what it meant.

“I think that will be it for today. I’ve managed to sketch enough of a facial expression range” the elleth put away the parchment and the graphite.

Minai sighed quietly. That was a nice trick to get her to emote. Although, could something like that really be considered a trick? More like a method. Or an exchange. She gets to hear a story and Idhren gets the needed references. Everyone wins.
The story was cute but it still made Minai wonder about the entire concept of raising children. Thranduil, at least in the early childhood, seemed to have a father who enabled reckless behaviour which, possibly, years later resulted in Thranduil deciding he could take on a dragon by himself. Having seen what effect loose ruled had on his own life Thranduil parented Legolas in a much more protective manner. Legolas, in a turn of events that probably had to be expected, ended up rebelling. Her own parents always maintained a healthy balance of discipline during Minai’s youth and there she was as an adult, lamenting that there wasn’t more excitement of any kind in her life when growing up.

There had to be some kind of moral in there but ‘don’t have children ever and you won’t end up feeling responsible for someone else’s mistakes’ could lead to a potential extinction of sentient life. Well. Perhaps it was ‘no matter how hard your parents tried and how good of a job they did raising you there will always be that one story that you’d want to tell your therapist in later years’. Then again, not everyone could afford a therapist. Maybe ‘you have to start blaming yourself at some point’?

No. Scratch that one.

‘Sometimes bad things will happen to you and playing the blame game won’t solve anything’

Getting closer.

Okay. How about ‘overthinking is the path to misery’ then?

The last one sounded like the best one.

Thus Minai decided to think about something else.

“Can I see the sketches?” she asked hopeful.

“No” the answer as quick and short.

Minai decided not to argue. First, it wouldn’t lead to anything other than ruining whatever peace treaty she had with Idhren. Second, yeah, artists weren’t generally fond of showing their work in progress. At least the ones Minai knew personally.

She therefore bid a temporary farewell to Idhren and left to fetch those pastries she owed to her feathery friend. She’d also grab something for herself and maybe turn the rest of the day into a picnic. Somewhere nice but not too sunny, just like Buddy liked. He was, after all, an exceptionally good bird and deserved to have his very own special ‘bullfinch appreciation day’.

Idhren, left alone in her workshop, picked up the sketches she just made and for the longest time stared at them. She then sighed and stored the parchment in one of the drawers.

Chapter End Notes

Come on Minai, use your brain. This person is a painter of the royal family and now she's painting your portrait. Take I hint for once! Ha-ha. Nah, that would be looking far too deeply into it. But imagine if she did come to that conclusion.

The 'interlude' thing is just me doing a writing exercise. I sort of had idea of writing a children's book at some point so I tried to write children's POV. As it turned out I'd be
happier to go the rest of my life without writing any more of it. Didn't enjoy. I don't even have friends/relatives with small kids so I have zero idea how they should act and whatnot. Back to writing adults being miserable then. And in case you're wondering why am I suddenly sticking random writing exercises in here then it's because some of you said you don't mind 'filler' content. Pretty sure that's not what you meant but I'm sticking to that excuse :)  

Okay, I have a completely unrelated question though. Feel free not to answer. Do any of you have any petty reasons why you absolutely wouldn't read/watch something? And I do mean -really- petty. Not like 'I don't like the genre' or 'I disagree with the message'. Those are valid. I mean 'the romantic interest in this love story has my relative's name and it makes the whole experience too awkward' kind of stuff. For me it's a certain fashion element (not gonna mention what it is on purpose because I support everyone's self expression and don't want my stupid opinions ruining anyone's day). Basically there is that one 'trend' that I find the absolutely ugliest thing ever and if I see that on the cover/poster it's an instant turn off. Like, it doesn't bother me in real life that much, because as I've said, I support people doing whatever makes them happy with their appearance. But in fiction - nope. I see 'that' and I won't even touch the story even if every single review from people I trust is nothing but a praise. I mainly want to know if that's a normal thing people do or if I'm the weird one. Ready to accept the latter.

Anyway, when I've started writing this I've never imagined the 'animal companion' would have a character arc. Which isn't even fully finished yet. But here we are today. Btw, Idhren was supposed to 'appear' in chapter five or so. It really become a much bigger story. Tell me what you think, wash your hands, be kind to each other.
This is me again.

The hard-drive died completely so I took it out. The laptop works now but I still don't have a proper storage. Those things cost money and I'd rather save everything I can right now. Even the thought of spending money these days give me nightmares. Ten years ago I survived the economic crisis because there was free food for poor people in my country. Now there's not because there is 'no money' for that. So if the upcoming thing hits as hard as last time and the updates stop then assume I've starved to death :)

All of this to say that the only entertainment I have is pretty much writing this story. Therefore you have somewhat frequent updates for now. Not sure how long it lasts but for as long as I can. Plus I was really inspired to write this chapter. You'll know what I mean.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The morning came and went. As it did so it left in it’s wake a full set of the consequences caused by a sleepless night. This would have to be the place to mention that the night was initially planned to be sleepless. Expected to be that way at the very least. Still, when it became less of a choice and much more of a necessity Minai had started to feel the full weight of tiredness on her shoulders.

The woman yawned while observing her feathered companion take of into the air to stretch his little wings.

Let him go.

This wouldn’t be the conversation for him to be present at.

A sound made Minai avert her gaze from the opened window and look at the Thranduil’s still sleeping form on her bed. The elf seemed to be waking up but it was clear that it wouldn’t happen just yet.

There would be still a few minutes.

Today was nothing like yesterday.

Today everything was different.

Minai closed her eyes as she went through her memories of the day prior.

***

“So Thank you all for coming here on this beautiful morning” Minai looked over her audience “Let us now discuss today’s agenda”

The woman placed a basket full of fruit on her lap.
There was indeed a reaction but not a single reply.

The mother doe remained where she was looking calm and regal. As usual. Her little fawn sniffs the air and reached his head towards the basket. Completely expected. The bunnies went on their own business and chewed on the grass. Why wouldn’t they. Buddy chirped and hopped from right to left.

Nothing out of the ordinary.

She still had to make sure though.

It was now a habit for Minai to check on whether or not her ability to communicate with the animal kind received any feasible upgrades. Of course she didn’t collect a group of animals each morning, that would be kind of weird. Today was simply a coincidence. She took the deer family for a walk from time to time which, while could be technically considered a chore, she simply enjoyed doing. The bunnies just happened to be there. Possibly lured by the fruit. And Buddy was a given.

This was her morning.

Or noon.

Yeah.

It was actually noon by now.

Minai had her sleeping routine completely skewed these days. Her need for sleep seemed to have diminished and she could easily skip a night or two if she was determined enough. Which still resulted in her sleeping in later. It was fine though. Thranduil, whatever he was busy with lately, apparently had disappeared from the face of earth. Not the first time and likely not the last. Minai decided she’d think about worrying if she ever noticed any signs of concern from other elves, all of them lived here much longer than Minai and better knew when to be alarmed.

If there was anything she had to be worried about it was the abundance of free time.

Although…

Wasn’t today the day Tauriel came back from one of her missions?

***

“Tough but manageable” Minai tapped her finger on her cheek in a thinking kind of motion.

“I’m counting on you then” replied Tauriel.

The sight wasn’t the worst but oh Valar could it use some improvement. Some twigs, leaves, a huge chunk or sticky tree sap and worst of all – spider web. The web was perhaps even more egregious than the sap. Definitely more sticky.

Minai almost felt the physical pain just by looking at it.

She had always kept her hair somewhere around shoulder length but since it now reached all the way down to her waist the woman gained more appreciation for all the daily routines that were needed to keep the hair healthy and beautiful.

Therefore seeing what Tauriel’s hair looked like after the scouting mission was close to soul crushing.
Such was the price for keeping Mirkwood safe and Minai had nothing but respect for it. To show her appreciation she asked Tauriel whether her friend needed any help with her hair when she came to greet the redhead back from the mission. Tauriel accepted the offer and after her cuts and bruises were treated and she ate a nice warm meal it was finally time for brushes and conditioners.

Damn were there plenty.

It took Minai months before she learned what all the little bottles and phials were for.

“How was your mission?” the blonde asked.

“It was on the easier side this time” Tauriel smiled “The spider nest itself wasn’t as big and the eggs didn’t hatch yet so the amount of spiders and their size were quite low”

“The only amount of spiders which isn’t considered unacceptably high is zero” Minai noted politely and also with a smile.

Okay.

Maybe not zero zero.

Archibald was okay.

But any spiders that were bigger than Archibald and had even an ounce of aggression in them could just crawl into a volcano. The rest of the world would be thankful.

“Maybe you have a point. Each time I come back from spider hunting a can’t stand to be near dining areas or use any eating utensils. The sound of fork scratching the plate remind me of the pincer clicking”

Minai flinched.

She only saw a spider the size of the ones Tauriel hunted once and the image still to this day appeared in her nightmares.

“Do they have the main nest somewhere that could be burned?”

Or exploded.

Definitely exploded.

“If only” there was a tired sigh “Not all of them are that big but pretty much any of them can grow to that size. There are small harmless spiders that live all around the forest and do nothing but good. But then there are those that are set on destroying all that is good. Unfortunately in their infancy the latter ones are indistinguishable from the former. It’s impossible to go around and kill every spider out there and if there was a way to do so then next year we’d drown in flies”

“That’s just awful” Minai shook her head and threw a sticky thread on the floor after successfully removing it from her friend’s hair “Is there a way to repel them? Like a plant they can’t stand or a smell?”

“Fire can generally keep them at bay for a while but it is a short term solution and you’d be risking setting on fire everything around you. The best solution when encountering an enemy of any kind, be it spiders, orcs, or anything else, is aiming for the head. Specifically between the eyes if just axing the thing off is impossible”
Minai stared at the floor for a few moments to get away from the imagery. Those details were unpleasant but it was better to know them than find yourself defenceless due to your own squeamishness.

“How likely is it to actually encounter a spider or an orc in the forest?”

“Not as likely as you might’ve been lead to believe. The orcs are not common in this area, we’d know about them entering the forest as soon as it happened and if the attacks were frequent there wouldn’t be a human settlement relatively nearby. I’m not saying you shouldn’t be prepared but there is no need to be afraid to step your foot outside of the palace” Tauriel explained.

“I see” Minai brushed a strand of hair now free of tree sap.

“It is a bit trickier with the spiders. They do tend to nest in certain areas. if you are able to navigate yourself around well enough and ask scouts about the current situation then you wouldn’t encounter one either. However rogue spiders, while not common, are not impossible. Vigilance is the key”

The task took hours but it was all worth it in the end as Minai managed to avoid using scissors. Tauriel’s hair was now free of each and every foreign object that shouldn’t have ever been there.

“All done. Honestly, your hair is beautiful. I wish I wasn’t as lazy to style it like you do” the woman sighed.

“Tell you what. Come back in an hour or two. I’ll take a bath and then teach you a few tricks to make the hair styling faster and easier” Tauriel stood up from the chair and stretched her arms.

“That’ll be great. I’ll manage to have a session with the painter then”

With the agreement being made the girls went on their own arrangements.

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“No” Idrhen didn’t even bother turning her head.

“Why not?” Minai feigned surprise. She stood near the window with curtains draped around her in a cape-like manner with one of her legs mounting a small wooden crate and holding a broom in her arm as a substitute for a sword “I agree, the background and props would probably have to be changed, but otherwise it would be a very nice composition”

“I was under the impression the portrait was supposed to be yours”

“It is supposed to depict my appearance, why not make it a little bit more interesting?”

Since there were no photo cameras, how else was she supposed to see herself wearing armour and looking epic? Adding a small mountain of slain dragons in the background wouldn’t hurt either.

“It is not supposed to depict your appearance. It is supposed to depict you. Which includes your personality” Idrhen explained as patiently as she could.

“I thought paintings were supposed to portray an idealized version of someone” Minai shrugged and migrated to a chair.

She could never tell a personality of anyone depicted in historical paintings. Modern ones either. Even the school or passport photos. Everyone dressed their best and combed their hair. Ironed
shirts, trousers, make-up. Yes, there were people who continued to dress as they were in their everyday life but then one could argue that their everyday appearance was what they considered to be their best version.

“There is still difference between dressing yourself up and dressing up as someone you are not”

“You’ve said it yourself, you do not really know much about me. How can you say that I wouldn't be myself in that setting?”

“Because just from looking at you I can easily tell that you lack the upper body strength to even lift a proper sword” Idhren smiled in an almost friendly manner “And I would be beyond surprised if you’d be able to prevent yourself from falling down, let alone take s single step, dressed in armour. To put it bluntly, you weren’t born with a physique of a warrior. So if you ever had any power fantasies about battlefield I’d strongly suggest to keep it just fantasies”

That didn’t sound mean in the slightest but somehow Minai still found herself disappointed. She had learned by now that she most definitely wasn’t cut out for war. Or anything even remotely close to that. Nor did she ever desired that kind of action.

But still.

Ouch.

“Are you saying I won’t be able to be useful in a… crisis situation?” Minai carefully chose the wording.

Idhren knew war first hand and the last thing Minai wanted was to make an impression of someone who was eagerly waiting for a disaster to happen just to get some thrills.

“All I’m saying is there are plenty of things you could be doing to help in a crisis situation and none of them include needlessly dying for the sake of nothing else but feeling useful” there was some underlying exasperation in those words.

Minai wanted to ask but at the same time understood that it would be beyond insensitive. Of course the old elleth would have seen plenty of young elves rush into battle head first and lose their lives when doing so. Asking whether any of them Idhren was close to personally was a bad idea.

So no heroism for the sake of heroism. Minai accepted that explanation even though she doubted that she would ever be the kind of person to engage in such behaviour. If she was honest with herself she’d say that in a fight or flight she’d chose the latter. Even though it wasn’t the kind of thing one could make a fair assessment of without experiencing it first-hand.

“In a crisis, actual needs of others are more important than personal feelings” Minai voiced her conclusion aloud.

“Indeed” Idhren agreed and handed Minai a plate with cookies.

Minai took one and happily ate it.

Until she was hit with a sudden thought.

“Hey! Is it like a positive reinforcement kind of thing?”

Instead of an answer Idhren offered her another cookie.
“Soooo…?” Tauriel asked in a sing-song kind of voice.

“Hm?” Minai replied with a hair tie between her lips, not fully getting the hint.

“What are the courting rituals in your homeland?” the redhead grinned.

Right.

No, actually, of all the people who could have asked this question Tauriel was the one whom Minai would be the most comfortable with giving the answer to. As in, there wasn’t anything embarrassing about discussing such matters with your female friend as opposed to someone whom you might be…

Ahem.

Minai took the hair tie out of her mouth.

“At the initial stages I wouldn’t say it’s vastly different from what you have here. At least between the young people. You know, spending time together, sharing secrets, hand holding, stuff like dining, going on trips and entertainment…”

Huh.

Come to think of it. Holding hands, having dinners together, vacation to another country with another culture, walks in the garden, knowing each other’s secrets and seeing each other pretty much daily.

That sounded awfully like her relationship with Thranduil. Only what they had wasn’t romantic unfort… Let’s not go there. Could it be, however, that her own experience with dating and assumptions on what dating should be had clouded her mind all this time and she had subconsciously projected those preconceived notions on her current situation?

In simpler terms, was she having those kind of thoughts about Thranduil simply because what they did together would be considered regular dating in her own world?

“Are there any major differences though?” Tauriel’s question took Minai out of her thoughts.

“I guess so. I’d say the biggest difference is in what proves one’s feelings. From what I’ve gathered here in Mirkwood the biggest proof of love would be the confession of it. Unless you count the extreme cases involving dragons or silmarills” Minai mused “Where I come from the one sure way of proving one’s commitment to a relationship would be entering a long term financial agreement with the other person”

It really depended on the age group and income. Teenagers got a pass in general. For students that would be sharing a streaming service account. For recent graduates renting an apartment. The final stage would be taking a mortgage together.

Oh.

Mortgages.

Somehow Minai wasn’t too eager to ruin the elven innocence with explaining what a mortgage was. Mortgages were horrible for many reasons many of which weren’t even connected to her not
“Are all the marriages you have arranged then?” Tauriel was somewhat surprised by what she heard.

“No, not like that. It’s about being equally satisfied with the financial arrangement. It is fine if one partner provides while the other keeps the household. It is fine if both provide equally and share equal chores. In the end, as long as laws are not overstepped the relationship should be whatever both sides have agreed upon”

“Does love not matter at all?”

“I’m not saying it doesn’t. It should. Having wealth as your main outcome of a relationship is mostly frowned upon. It’s not that easy however. While wealth shouldn’t matter the most it is impossible for it to not matter at all. What I’m saying is, in simple terms, if you can not afford food or shelter you are cold and hungry. If you are cold and hungry you are unhappy. If you are unhappy for a very long time you lose your love of life. And if you have no more love left in you then you won’t have any to give to your partner either”

Minai stumbled over her words a little. She didn’t want to say money mattered more than love did, not to an elf, but no elf really knew what a life long poverty was. Leaving your partner at the first sign of hardship was definitely terrible but if hardship was all there was in a relationship then it simply wouldn’t remain at healthy level. While everyone heard stories about that one couple who would happily chose living in a leaking shed as opposed to being apart there was no way of denying that one of the biggest reasons for divorce were the financial issues.

Oh.

Divorces.

One more word to keep away from elven ears.

“Is it something your people always think about before entering a relationship” Tauriel sounded a little disheartened.

“No, no. Far from it. I’d still say the majority enters a relationship out of love. But often physical attraction or a simple crush are also mistaken for love”

“It happens here as well. True love is hard to find, even among elves”

Geez.

How easier life would be if you could just know whether your really truly love someone or it’s just that they are hot and you haven’t been with anyone in that way for a while. An amazing way to live if you ignore the impending demographic doom.

“I’ve decided that if I won’t end up finding love I’ll just get myself a few dozen bullfinches, live at the edge of the forest in a creepy shack and become known as That Bullfinch Lady” Minai felt like the mood needed to be lightened a little.

“Like that wizard? Radagast the Brown, was it? He is known for similar things. And for many other that are not mentioned in high society” Tauriel laughed.

“Why am I not surprised that a wizard would be known for something that is better remain unmentioned” Minai made a face “I sincerely hope that this something isn’t stalking innocent
”
“Girls”
“No. It’s connected to living alongside multiple animals. And also mushrooms”

“Figures” the blonde nodded.

Honestly that Radagast person didn’t seem half bad. If all he did was sit in his house, talk to animals and, uh, appreciate the fungi, then he probably had a few amusing stories to tell.

Minai twirled a hair clip in her fingers.

Strange how her opinions changed over time. Not that long ago she would sincerely believe that talking to animals and a certain kind of mushrooms had the most direct of connections and anyone who had any association with one or the other wasn’t someone she’d be ready to make an acquaintance of. Nowadays she sort of wondered if a hermit wizard could give her a couple of lessons in animal communication.

Truly, the longer you live.

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It was just one of those thoughts Minai couldn’t get rid of. Completely insignificant and useless in everyday life it kept coming back to her no matter what. It wasn’t a constant nagging or something which had potential to impair her daily activities. Nothing like that. The thought would appear when she was eating, or taking a bath or walking from one destination to another. There in the background of her Minad the thought constantly waited for a moment when there would be a break from regular musings.

Therefore, in the evening, when Minai was returning to her room after a long and productive day of doing nothing at all the thought came back to her.

What was the card game those guards were actually playing?

Try as she might the woman could never truly figure it out. Pester ing people who were doing their job didn’t seem like a stellar idea. Then again, what kind of job were these elves doing if all they did was drink wine and play card games? Maybe a compromise then. What if she didn’t distract the guards from their game, in their drunken state that would be a pointless ordeal, but simply observed what was happening.

Even if she wouldn’t figure out the game’s rules by the end, at least she’d learn a few elvish words which didn’t translate in any other languages. Elves might be elves but being a sore loser was something which didn’t depend on the shape of one’s ears.

The plan was made then. Finding a small group of guards engaged in the activity wasn’t particularly hard as well. For the sake of politeness Minai asked whether it was okay for her to watch and the answer she was given was positive.

“Aaaand there you go” one of the elves slapped a card with an acorn symbol over the one with a leaf.

Okay. So.

Acorns beat leaves.

“Not so fast!” the other guard pulled a card with deer hoof print.
Hooves over acorns.

“You wish!” the third guard placed a card of his.

Wait.

Wait wait wait wait wait.

So now acorns beat hooves?

Or were these different hooves?

What were the rules here even!?

Half an hour came by and Minai was even more confused than she was previously. One moments the guards took cards from the stack sitting in the middle, then each grabbed a portion of that stack, then they were trying to beat each other cards and then… uuuh… collecting a certain number of symbols? What?

Which of the elves handed her the cards?

An hour more gone by and a suspicion which had previously been rather faint finally materialized itself in all of it’s doubtful glory.

There were no rules to this game because there was no game.

The guards were drunk, remember?

They pretty much did whatever with their cards, it wasn’t the point. The point was, in fact, chatting, sharing stories and, believe it or not, gossiping.

“And that one time, this Lady, she was in the garden flirting with that other elf she fancied and the back of her dress caught on one of the rose bushes. She didn’t notice. So she decides to drop her handkerchief and do this cute thing when they both reach it and their hands meet. So she bends and the dress remains caught on the branch and… Anyway, my parents are happily married for nine centuries now”

Minai laughed. She really loved these kind of stories. Silly and somewhat crude they didn’t go along with the reputation elves, in general, tried to uphold. At the very least those stories painted a picture opposite from what the story books told. But it was similar with people in Dale. Other’s had a very particular opinion of elves and elves, as Minai saw from their trip to humans’ town, did their best to appease those beliefs.

Therefore when they told her about something that happened which was embarrassing or nonsensical she felt included. She felt accepted as one of their own. Someone trusted enough to be in on the joke and shared secrets with.

“Okay, okay, I’ve got one too” Minai confessed when it was her turn to speak “It was a time for me to present what I’ve learned during the year. It concerned calculations so visual aid was allowed to illustrate. Me and my friend once mixed up our charts and graphs with…” she sighed at the embarrassing memory “…with a depiction of us less than sober and not fully clothed”

The real story was a little different. Back during the bachelor years at the university Minai and her project partner were at a party during the weekend. Right before they had to present their work someone sent the photos from the party which, while not being particularly explicit or
incriminating, were still something neither of the girls would ever want to share with any of the professors. They went through the photos on the friend's laptop before the class started, had a laugh and that was it. Unfortunately the professor’s computer didn’t want to start that day and the girl Minai worked on the project with volunteered her laptop as a temporary replacement. All was peachy until one of the students accidentally clicked on ‘My Computer’ instead of their presentation file and the window opened displaying the recently accessed files. Which were the aforementioned photos. It wouldn’t be a tragedy if they were in a regular classroom, but the venue was a large auditorium so the projected image was big enough for the thumbnails to be very recognizable.

Moral of the story – stay in your line and don’t try to get ahead of others by earning extra credit via offering your electronics.

“How did you get out of that one?” the elf sitting closer to Minai asked.

“Well” she sighed “As you can see I had to flee from home and establish a new life here”

There was laughter and wine even though Minai only drank a little bit. Her tolerance for alcohol was getting better by the day but she was nowhere close to an average elf in her drinking stamina. She might have forgotten what was her original reason for sitting there with the guards but it turned out to be quite a fun evening.

It was getting a bit late and Minai thought about getting back to her room but there still was one thing she had to know before she did so.

“So who won the game?” she asked looking at the guards.

Unlike her they didn’t exactly measure their drinking and all had this happy expression of a person who wasn’t entirely there at the moment.

“Oh yeah… here”

Minai blinked in confusion as a pouch of coins was plopped into her hands.

“I don’t think I can take it” she started to protest.

“Nah, you won it”

The woman shrugged her shoulders. She knew they weren’t playing just because and there were usually some stakes involved. You know, like dares and favours. A few times on her evening stroll she saw the ‘loser takes one article of their clothing’ kind of situations. Today it was actual money. Evidently none of the elves knew exactly what was happening anymore.

Okay.

Maybe she’d find them when they were more sober and clear up the situation. If they even remembered what happened by then.

***

Minai yawned although it was more of a yawn caused by boredom rather than anything else. It was roughly the middle of the night and she wasn’t the least sleepy. She was bored. It was honestly weird. Thranduil was nowhere to be seen for the last week or so. This lead to the disruption of normal schedule during which Minai experienced a brief excitement over being to do all the nothing she wanted with her mornings. No time was lost in slacking of and now she was bored.
By choice.

Personally, Minai blamed the years spent in education system for the mentality. She paid decent cash for her university programme yet each time a class was cancelled it was like a mini birthday. A full birthday if it was one of those 8am classes. Therefore each time something on her schedule was cancelled she couldn’t help but be happy about it. Until she remembered that she actually wanted for the event to happen.

Go figure.

Plus there was all this energy that she apparently now had which wasn’t there during the movies-allnighters-and-pizza days. Her body craved exercise or any other type of action. Yeah. Some action would have been nice. Maybe something involving riding. Horse riding. Get your minds out of the gutter.

Would she be able to take a horse for a ride at night? Elves were generally more active during the day but it wasn’t because they were dead asleep at night. Night-time was when more quiet activities took place. Darkness was of little matter when you had night vision. Minai didn’t have the night vision yet. Possibly yet. Then maybe it wasn’t the best of ideas to engage in anything which would require being on high alert.

Reading was an option but there was only so much of it Minai could take. In a month here in Mirkwood she probably read more books than in all of her previous lifetime. Yes including the university required material and the romance novels of questionable quality. She didn’t mind studying in general but it wasn’t one of her direct life goals so to say.

Tidying her room then? Okay. Come on. The general rule goes – if you are the sole occupant of your house, flat or room then as long as there’s no stench, nothing attracts insects or other pests and there’s no danger of breaking your neck upon stumbling on some stuff then the cleaning can still wait. Besides, Minai already went out of her way to get rid of the dead fly on the windowsill.

Just one of those days when a movie or a mobile-time-waster game wouldn’t hurt.

Back at home she wouldn’t even contemplate about doing anything besides staying in bed, not if she was alone.

She wasn’t at home though. It was safe to go outside at night. She was in Mirkwood – the kingdom of elves. There were no thieves among the elves. Nor were there criminals of any other kind because none of the elves here seemed to have any noldor ancestry. Although, was that even fair?

History is written by the winners, that’s the widely known truth. Granted, some of the noldor did commit atrocities but history seemed to place the entire branch in the unfavourable light forgetting that plenty of noldor didn’t even bother sailing to Middle Earth in the first place. And those who did didn’t do so because of their heritage but because of their loyalty specifically to Feanor. Although, to play the devil’s advocate, how much blame could be ascribed to Feanor? Yes, he did do what he did but how much control he had over his action?

The silmarills, while not having any inherent magical properties, seemed to be really hard to resist. Why else would the almighty Valar wanted to pretty much force evidently unstable and obsessed Feanor to surrender the shiny rocks to them? Why would Melkor want them so much if the only thing they did was burning his hands? Why did Thingol keep those things to himself despite knowing what kind of fate followed the previous owners? Why didn’t Elwing just give away those damn silms knowing that they were hunted by Feanor’s sons who wouldn’t hesitate to slaughter their own kind in order to get them? Plus neither Thingol nor Elwing were burned so clearly they
weren’t evil elves who would harm other’s for their own selfish reasons.

Minai sighed. She wouldn’t skip a chance to see a silmarill in person. Just to check just how shiny and pretty they were. They also seemed to be able to distinguish between a good and a bad person. Wouldn’t that be an awesome thing to know? How decent and virtuous you were? To have that official confirmation of you are a nice person. Minai wouldn’t mind that. But the stones were pretty much gone now although...

You see? See!?

She just read about the jewels and couldn’t get them out of her mind.

Just how cursed those things actually were!?

Then her train of thoughts was stopped by an all too familiar sound of a door knock. A completely ordinary thing at day but much less expected by night. Usually Minai wouldn’t bother with getting out of the bed to open the door. She’d garb a phone and listen to any sign of the door knob being messed with. If it was one of her room-mates the they’d text and ask to be let in. Otherwise, no one welcomed into her abode after eleven pm.

But once again, there wouldn’t be any danger in Mirwood so why not.

“Thranduil?” Minai couldn’t help but exclaim once she saw her visitor.

“I’ve missed you” the elf said.

The next moment Minai found herself in a hug.

“I’ve missed you too” she replied feeling her body temperature rise to record heights “Did something happen?”

As much as she had absolutely no desire of stopping it there was still a small part of her which had to question what was happening due to how unexpected it was.

“I just wanted to see you”

Hey, has the water in the nearby river started to boil yet?

“We better come in, what if someone sees us like that?”

“Then let them see”

Aaand he was drunk, wasn't he?

To be fair though, Thranduil was standing firm on his legs and his speech wasn’t even slurred. He couldn’t be that drunk. Right? Please?

Minai still lead the elf inside of the room and when they were both sitting on her bed she, even though it pained her, she asked the question.

“Have you been drinking?”

Stupid question. If it wasn’t apparent from his behaviour the smell of alcohol made it all too clear. It’s just the conversation had to be initiated.

“Would you rather I left?” Thranduil took her hands into his.
Minai bit her lip. It wasn’t just that she didn’t want to answer ‘yes’ to that question. She was physically incapable of it.

“N-no. I don’t mind your presence at all. I simply didn’t expect you to come here… at night”

It was the best Minai could do. No way was she going voice the implications that went through her brain. He was an elf. An. Elf. He’d never just have those intentions. And even if he did, well, he was still drunk. Being drunk meant not being in the right state of mind to make those decisions.

Still… still.

“I don’t want to be alone”

“It’s okay. I’m with you”

Minai closed her eyes, enjoying Thranduil’s fingers playing with her hair. Was she doing something wrong? He was drunk. But nothing was inappropriate yet. She wouldn’t allow it to get that way. Because he was drunk. She’d never take advantage of that. That was a wrong thing to do. Was she doing something wrong now? Nothing had happened yet that never happened before. If you ignore the entire premise. Thranduil seemed in control of his actions. He was lucid. He was aware. Or was she seeing what she wanted to see? Was she a bad person for not saying anything? She would say something. As soon as she got the slightest hint about being mistaken over the situation. She would. It was fine now. It was still fine.

Meanwhile Tranduil moved his hand from her hair to her cheek. His fingers were warm and moved gently. Minai felt her thoughts becoming less clear and even breathing seemed like a task she could forget at any moment. And she did. She did forget to breath, how to breath and even what for to breath once Thranduil brushed one on his fingers across her lips.

In what had to be one of the most prominent displays of willpower in the history of Middle Earth Minai had found the strength to turn away. If only he wasn’t an elf.

But he was.

Thranduil was an elf and for the elves such thing as a simple kiss had implications strong enough for the act to be denied if there was even a shadow of a doubt that either of the parties did not have the complete clarity of mind.

“This isn’t right” she murmured quietly.

And then…

Even with the lack of any lighting in the room Minai noticed Thranduil’s demeanour change. Confusion, which Minai thought was solely hers up to this point, appeared on his face as well. There it was. As much as she was hoping against all odds that it wouldn’t be the case the evidence of just how heavily Thranduil was really drunk has finally started to show.

“I’m sorry” he whispered as his head fell onto Minai’s shoulder “Lirindiel I’m sorry”

Thranduil was long asleep when Minai opened her window and sat on the windowsill thinking about, well, she was thinking about many things. As the tears fell down her cheeks Minai thought about Middle Earth and it’s rich history, the good and the evil, peace, war, freedom, she thought about the forest, the trees, she contemplated about how many different being walked these plains, how many generations grown up and withered before the oaks had reached even half of their current height and, most importantly, she thought that despite everything that happened and was
still going to happen on those lands never was there nor would ever be there a bigger idiot than her own damn self.

Chapter End Notes

Did I get you? Did I?
Please tell me there's at least one person who wants to go all pitchforks and torches on me.

Yes Minai, they've all lied to you. Doing the right thing doesn't feel great. It actually sucks oh so very much. But right thing is right thing and you must do it even if it makes you miserable and you'll live in regret for the rest of your life. On the other hand, if you take advantage of the situation you'll have the same consequences, just a little bit later. Sometimes life just hates you :( 

It might be just me but I find the unintentional 'role reversal' here to be really funny. In the stories I've read it's usually the guy struggles with physical desire and feels guilty over having _those_ kind of thoughts towards the girl. Here it's the girl who's all like 'He is an elf, too far above me and my filthy human thoughts'. Not quite as dramatic but you get the gist.

Way back when this was legitimately going to be the second to last chapter simply because I couldn't figure out how to get out of the situation. I just don't see Minai ever letting go of being called by someone else's name. Since you don't see the 'completed' status then it means I've managed to come up with something. Not gonna lie, the driving force was me realizing just what kind of adjectives I'd ascribe to the person who'd end a story I've enjoyed that way. It's because of your likes and comments that this story continues so your engagement actually helps.

The 'filler' part of the chapter is supposed to become relevant in the future. Just to document that I had an actual plan in case I forget what I was going to write and you'll come after me for leaving loose threads.

Anyway, write your thoughts about the chapter or literally anything else that comes to your mind. At this point of isolation I'm ready to talk about pretty much anything.

End Notes

I try to proof-read myself, but still. Now that I re-read this it seems more like an essay with a required word count. I kind of want to work on that. Here, I came up with a writing goal. To learn to write a story, not an essay.

Okay. So. If there is any feedback I'm listening (comment/like/kudos/whatever the thing is on this website). Tell me if it's good, tell me if it's mediocre, tell me if it's the worst thing you've ever read (that's also an achievement of sorts, I guess). Like I've said, not treating this as a work of my life, or anything like that. It was infinitely more difficult to find the
need to upload it than to write it.

No details about 'the heroine's' name and whatnot so far is on purpose.

I'll explain why Tauriel was there doing there (if I ever get to uploading the next chapters) and overall planning on using her as a character. I had a choice whether to create a few OCs or just take Tauriel, and I took Tauriel because I'm too lazy to research more than one eleven name.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!