The ties that bind

by Ruiniel

Summary

~ TA1400. As the Shadow of Angmar engulfs Arnor, its people turn to seek aid from alliances of old. Nienor, the sole remaining representative of a minor House, finds herself alone in a foreign land with strange customs.

Legolas/OC though NOT a slow burn, this path is a little different. Events loosely follow the timeline of the TA. Much angst and heavy (and I do mean HEAVY) on the romance.

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To seek aid

In the shady Eryn Galen morning, the ground shook with the sound of hooves drawing near. Expected, they knew the way. The convoy was in great haste, the kind that only war and need could bring. They had been traveling for nigh a fortnight resting only briefly for moments of respite. Now the riders stopped, the scene unfolding before them not one easily dismissed.

*Indeed as beautiful as sung in the bards' tales,* young Nienor thought. Then her gaze turned ahead with unease to Ereldur, her betrothed. Their eyes met briefly before she hastily looked away.

It had not been a willful union. Yet before her father high lord Rotharin of the fortress of Garolin passed, his daughter had promised that she would do the necessary to ensure the safety of their people. And now, with the creatures of the Enemy starting to infiltrate the lands of Arthedain leaving their people struggling to defend their livelihoods, she had no choice but to honor that promise. As Nienor had been advised by the elder council, the proper course of action would be to increase fighting numbers by joining her fate to Ereldur, the lord of the neighboring fortress city of Anduron. A marriage that would seal an alliance, for alone men stood no chance in the eventuality of an open conflict.

But it was not enough. Thus here they were, journeying with the rest of the few that were strong enough and willing to reach the hidden kingdom of the Silvan elves in search of aid. The orc and strange men from the East were drawing nearer, having already wreaked havoc in Arnor. It was all the more worrying since these seemed to be no mere skirmishes, but coordinated attacks to inspire fear and drive local inhabitants away from their lands.

*It was for the best, we need all the allies we can hope for in times like these,* Nienor mused, yet her heart was as dark as the times they lived in.

She had not known the lord Ereldur long, but could not forget his displays of rashness, indifference and stream of violent outbursts during their recent encounters. The maid closed her eyes and grimaced as she remembered the time he drunkenly tried to enter her chambers throwing harsh words when she had barred herself in. Her lips tightened in a thin line, her brows furrowing to dismiss the memory.

Soon after their journey came to an end as now the human host stood in front of the great gates of Thranduil, led by the elven escort that had ridden to meet them. Her worries were shed by the wonder which was all about her, trying to absorb that which looked so much different from her own lands.

'Lady Nienor, welcome. Please if you would follow me,' she heard someone speak and then noticed an elven guard standing beside her in formal greeting. She had not quite seen elves up close before, for she was young and not much traveled, save for the vicinity of her homeland. Needless to say, she was pleasantly surprised. She remembered fragments from songs her mother would sing to her about the Eldar and their kin when she had been a babe. Their alliances with the children of men, their history and their magic, all of it fascinated her.

They were led through high corridors to the throne room where the king Thranduil expected them. He was neither exceedingly glad nor a courteous host, but he ensured the travelers had all they needed for their stay before the negotiations. An indefinite, but perhaps short stay, since the Silvan elves were not known for interfering in the woes of the world beyond their borders.

That night, after settling into her allotted chamber, Nienor decided to go for a stroll outside the
great cave under the stars. The forest seemed alive. Of course it was indeed alive, but it felt to her that it was breathing as one single consciousness. Thoughts of home and her father took her, and she sank into them.

'Rather unnerving place, is it not?' she then heard a voice, recognizing it to belong to her betrothed. He approached her at arms length, and somehow the night grew even colder. He had been drinking, she could feel it in his breath.

'I would not know,' she uttered glumly, hoping she would be left to her own.

'Oh, the steel maiden again! It does not suit you to be so tight lipped, my dear,' the young man said as he took Nienor by the shoulders, turning her to face him. She saw that the handsomeness of his face could not hide his character. She studied him briefly, his brown locks descending down his shoulders, his dark green eyes lit by a strange light.

Her betrothed continued, irked at her silence. 'We have been through this. Though you insist on punishing me with your moods, your people need my grains and fortress for shelter, just as I need your men at arms and horses. You have seen the aftermath of what the beasts have done to our lands. So you and I will just have to make do with each other.' He then smiled rather unkindly when Nienor drew away from him. He reached and took her by the arm, all too tight and all too sudden.

'My lord, I wish to be alone for now, pray let us talk on the morrow,' she choked on the words, her voice breaking from disuse. This conversation was not one she was ready to have with a drunken man, moreover he was hurting her.

'On the morrow,' he said, gripping even harder 'you will be in a better mood,' he muttered as he loosened his grip of her. 'Good night, my lady,' he bowed in mock courtly manner before briskly walking away.

Nienor felt relief at his receding footsteps in the night. Not even the distress of being alone in a foreign land or the troubles of her people could hinder it. Unbidden, tears pricked her eyes but the maid hastily tried to shake them away. Tears would aid nothing. Moments passed and she eventually managed to return to her musings, startling when she heard another voice.

'I see it is not a good time, but an even worse one to be outside for much longer. It will be very cold soon,' she then heard someone utter not far away and heard a stir somewhere in the vicinity. She quickly wiped her eyes and turned to see a figure emerging from the shadow of the glade.

'Solace comes with a price I suppose,' said Nienor looking not towards the approaching intruder, but to the starry sky. Will I never have a moment of peace? Yet the very next moment the maid wondered if she truly did want to be alone.

The new presence stood silent for a moment. 'Forgive me for intruding, I will be on my way,' he said evenly, nodding his farewell and passing her by.

'Which way are you heading? Do you know these surroundings well?' Nienor asked, biting her lip at this novel boldness.

The newcomer now turned fully to face her. She figured he must of course be an elf, the only humans here being those part of her host.

'I have returned from briefly scouting the eastern borders of our kingdom,' the elf continued, 'and the breezy night air was suitable for a night walk. Yet I fear I am better equipped for it.' He smiled
at her, and Nienor knew he was referring to the thin layers of her garments.

'Then I surmise you do know your way around these parts,' she said aloud. *Might as well not be sullen.*

'I was born here. I know these places as I do the back of my palm, every nook and cranny.' As he spoke the elf neared her and Nienor could see him better. He was taller than most men, as all elves were, clad in the light armor of the guard. She could determine a silvery head of flowing hair and now his features looked familiar. She had briefly seen him at her arrival. *The son of king Thranduil.* Yet it seemed strange that his presence to her mind was more comfortable than it was royal. She bowed her head notwithstanding.

Prince Legolas realized she had determined his identity and was slightly disheartened that it would change her regard of him. For those few brief moments, he had enjoyed the honesty of a discussion between strangers. He recalled her features from before as well, and recognized her as one of the human travelers. He found mortals interesting, having seen few of them in the past centuries, for seldom did they venture within the borders of the elven kingdom. While he at times was disappointed in their rash characters and foolhardy decisions, he attributed these traits to the rush of their fleeting existence. Seeing he captured her attention, the elf went on obligingly. *An interesting youngling,* he mused.

'Join me if you wish my lady-...'

'Nienor, lord. At your service,' she curtsied customarily.

'Nienor,' he repeated her name thoughtfully, a slight accent to the sounds. 'I am Legolas,' he introduced himself either way, a hand to his chest in greeting.

'So I gathered,' the maid said bemusedly before she caught herself '- my lord!'

His features lit in mirth, but the elf pursued a different path. 'It will do good to know your way while you are our guest. Seldom do we engage human visitors in our lands.'

His words were soft but firm, and those unusual grey eyes never left her; a fact which, to her own surprise, did not deter her. There was a stillness about him which emanated peace and tranquility despite that intense gaze.

'Then far from me to refuse that which few human eyes have seen or might ever witness!' Nienor exclaimed, unsure where all this sudden excitement came from. Had she not been in tears mere moments ago? *Why not?* she thought as she fell in step with the elf, taking his proffered arm.

'Aye, though I must say some parts of our kingdom are best not to be seen nor encountered indeed,' he added evenly. 'The shadow is relentless in infiltrating our lands as well.' Looking sideways at the maid, he noticed her slightly widened eyes. His eyes shone with amusement. 'Fear not lady Nienor, they are well away from here. We are as safe as can be.'

'Aye,' Nienor lowered her head, an irksome blush making its way onto her features. 'I am not afraid.'

'That is well,' the elf grinned. 'Bravery is a rare but needful trait, especially from one so small,' he added gleefully. *An interesting youngling indeed.*

'Small? Prince Legolas, I would never-!' the maid pretended to be riled, the obvious being that even as she rose onto her tip toes she reached only as high as his shoulder.
'It was not my aim to cause offence,' the elf continued even as Nienor ceased her demonstration though in his eyes she saw no remorse, and she was taken by that mischievous smile.

_He is enjoying this. Men seem to be more or less the same everywhere_, the thought hit her. As she grew into adulthood she had spent much time among youth her own age in her early years, and grew to know their manner, their pride and teasing.

They walked farther into the forest surrounding the Elven Halls, the ice broken, their moods lighter. An idle conversation started as Nienor relayed in more detail what had driven her and her host to the elven kingdom, although she surmised that owing to his station the elf was well aware of the politics behind. She kept her personal woes to herself.

'Lady Nienor,' he repeated her name as in remembrance. 'Your journey was too long, and you seem to have no easier time of it after it has ended.' She looked at him curiously and wondered how much he had seen and heard earlier. It was a strange sensation, to look right into those eyes she had scarcely seen the likes of before.

'We each must suffer the times we live in,' was her thoughtful reply. She realized that they had stopped walking. She was staring. _Good Eru, cease your gaping_, she chastised herself, shaking her head as if to ward off a spell.

If the elf noticed, he knew better than to mention it. Instead he asked something else. 'If I may ask... how is it you were granted your elvish birth name? Are you familiar with its meaning in my language?'

She lowered her head as she continued ahead. 'Aye, and in truth it is one of very few words I know in elvish speech. I know it means 'mourning'. A curious name to bestow upon a child, but my mother...' she trailed off.

'I did not mean to pry,' said the prince.

'Oh there is no trouble at all. My mother was very taken with elven lore, and the happenings of the First Age. She named me after-'

'The sister of Túrin Turambar,' he finished for her with a slight smile.

'Aye,' she concurred. 'A tragic fate to be sure, but it marked her, and she found the name beautiful.'

'I see,' the elf nodded in understanding. 'Come,' he offered after a pause, 'There is a place I wish to show you. I dare think you might enjoy it.'

They continued their trek until they came in front of an immense tree within a glade. It was one of the tallest in the area and its wide trunk had winding stairs built against it, wide enough for one to climb comfortably through its crown and rest on the sturdy branches. Nienor gaped in wonder when she saw the view that greeted them as they reached upward through the tree, ascending higher and higher. Her lands were mostly hilly and barren, similar to the fields of the Rohirrim, with mountains looming grey or blue in the distance. Such fauna, let alone of such immensity, was seldom to be seen.

'It must be centuries old!' the words escaped her.

The elf smiled her way, nodding. 'I remember when it was but a sapling.'

He led her upward and soon they reached the top through the crown of the tree.
In the past, this was used at times as a watch post. I practiced here myself for a while.

They were high enough to see the open sky. She marveled at the stars, much brighter in their intensity than she had ever seen them in her own land. 'Enchanting!' the young woman found herself uttering and the calmness of everything swept over her. There were no other words to do it all justice.

Her raven dark tresses became entangled in the wind, her paleness all the more visible against the darkness. She found his eyes and noticed the elf had been regarding her, that smile still pulling at the corners of his lips. Quite a boyish smile, she noticed, and completely at odds with the wise look in his eyes. It might have been ironic. But it might have also been friendly. The mirthful side of her thought that if all elves were so, she would find it quite tolerable here. Eyeing the prince, she could not help but admire the slight aura of light that seemed to envelop him in the night. Though unused to such attention and slightly apprehensive, she found she did not mind him at all. So she smiled brilliantly in return. Then he started to speak, words melodious and calming in a language Nienor did not understand.

'I admit your speech sounds mesmerizing, prince,' she stammered, leaning closer to him without realizing.

'There are two forms of speech widely used in our kingdom, but the one we use at court most frequently is Sindarin. My family line is such, but most of our people speak Silvan. You might catch a few more words, should your stay here be prolonged,' he jested.

Nienor was unsure how she felt with regards to that. 'What did your words mean?' she asked instead.

'I only said-' but before the elf could finish his thought she lost her footing, and even though the prince swiftly reached for her as the maid clutched at him, a moment and one wrong step was all it took before they were both falling through the branches, to the ground below.

Nienor opened her eyes and the pain soon followed. He had fallen first, she judged, as she realized she was tangled against him. A thin stream of red crept from his lips. Oh no, no, this cannot happen! She thought how and where to run to ask for help. But to leave him here? Worriedly she regarded the first elf she had ever spoken to at length. Her hand reached to clear the blood from the corner of his lip just as he opened his eyes. She hastily drew her hand away, sighing with a mixture of relief and worry.

'I-' she tried an apology, but stopped as the elf slowly stood to his feet. They both looked each other over for a while, as if trying to see if everything was still in place.

'Well, that was certainly not part of the tour, my lady,' he said apologetically. Then his stare took on a worried hue. 'Are you injured?' The happening reminded him of childhood wanderings climbing ancient trees. But by the nature of his race his body could bear such unfortunate events, whereas humans were far more fragile, he knew. Having a guest crippled because of him was definitely not what he had wanted. His lord father would also be no less than elated surely.

'Aye,' she smiled, but when trying to take a step she nearly yelped at the pain in her leg. She was limping.

'I will take you to the healers,' the ellon stated determinedly. 'May I?' he asked for permission, motioning to her leg.

She did not gather his meaning at first, but then realized he was offering to carry her. Unexpectedly
unsettled, she tried two tentative steps on her own but found she could not.

He quirked an eyebrow at the familiar display of human pride, which would have been amusing had it been a different situation.

The maid looked at his expectant face and nodded. Next she knew the prince was steadying her, one arm wrapping around her back while the other reached behind her knees and she was gently lifted into his arms as if she weighed next to nothing. She wondered what to do with her arms, and in the end settled to having them rest limply into her lap.

'We shall reach the healing ward soon,' she heard his voice, the tone vibrating close to her ear. 'You may hold on to me, it is easier for both,' the ellon said, trying to sound serious. He had no trouble at all, but felt how awkward and stiff the mortal was in his arms, unnecessarily so. But she was clearly ill at ease and while it was slightly amusing indeed, the elf did not want her to feel so.

At his words she nodded and placed a tentative arm around his neck, keeping her gaze ahead of her. It indeed helped to keep steady but she must have resembled a red beet she thought, and glad was she for the darkness.

That night found her lacking sleep. The prince had taken her to the healing wing and stood by her until her wound was tended to, after which he escorted the young woman to her chambers. She barely knew him, yet now her head was full of details of their first encounter. And now you have a limp to remember it by she thought bemused. When morning came, it found her still staring at the ceiling.
The hunt

Nienor rarely engaged with her own host. She had no ladies in waiting, nor were there women closer to her age that had ridden with them. She came for duty as being the sole living representative of the House of Garolin. There were many among her host who had been loyal to her family but she had few true friends among them. Most of them were soldiers at heart and while she valued them and their skill, most of the time was left with no one to relate to. Her true friends had remained home in Garolin and she prayed they would stay safe until she returned to them. As for Ereldur, the man she would marry was spending most of his days delved into negotiations and battle strategy for Arnor; and drinking with his men in the evenings. He had renounced most of his taunting of her or so it seemed, and that brought the girl some form of relief.

Everything considered, Nienor thought nothing of the moments she allowed herself to be in the presence of the elven prince, as with each passing day their chance meetings continued. In the end what was the harm in it? To her the elf was a key to unlocking and learning the strange and wondrous ways of this people. These immortals who were the awe and inspiration of humans, whom she had heard of so much but in tale and song only. One such encounter would lead to something so unexpected, so life changing, that she would dismiss anyone for poisonous liars had they told her it would be so.

One afternoon the prince was heading to the practice grounds, his bow and quiver slung over his shoulder. When not tending to his formal duties the elf was wont to delve into weapons practice and sparring on the grounds suited for such. Not only did it help maintain his skill but it also eased his mind and lightened his mood. Ever since he was an elfling the prince much preferred the marchwarden lifestyle to court society. Here is where he felt most free, away from intrigue and politics. His father had always been the better elf for all of that. He never shunned his duties, but found little pleasure in them and at times this weighed on him. Having arrived and shedding away his random thoughts the ellon noticed the space was now shared by both men and elves. *Not the most usual sight.* To his surprise, as his eyes roamed across the field he saw the young noblewoman of the human host among them. *Nienor the fearless* he jested in his mind, smiling at himself as he imagined her expression upon hearing those words.

Her father had wisely known to instill in his daughter the inclination towards training with weapons, albeit this occupation was considered mostly a male endeavor. Yet the girl had been trained by their fortress master at arms until she reached the age of fifteen and had proven to be a rather skillful pupil in time. *One never knows when this skill will prove useful to you,* her father used to tell her. And wise he had been, the young woman thought. Nienor found she rather liked the challenge that weapons training posed and though not as thorough in her practice as any of the male youth her age, she would attempt to hone her skill whenever time allowed. The girl preferred it even to other activities women were more commonly partial to, such as sewing or the musical arts.

The day had been beautiful and clear when she decided to pursue the activity. Presently Nienor chose a spot which she thought allowed more privacy as this way she surmised at least most of her painful sparring mistakes would go unseen and she would have fewer interruptions. Her opponent was a younger infantry man in her host, and he was losing.

The elf stood facing her way, his smile never faltering as he observed the mortal so concentrated on her footwork. Then without much in the way of consideration he proceeded towards where she stood, a whimsical thought brimming. Somewhere in the recesses of his mind a voice questioned the pull he felt towards this mortal, and the playfulness he suddenly seemed to exude faded as leaves scattered by autumn winds. This childish curiosity, for a child no less, was definitely not
something he thought would describe his character; but then again she was like nothing the elf was used to either.

'My lady, I see you are displaying top form today,' the prince uttered merrily by way of greeting when he was close enough.

The young woman turned her attention to him and stopped her movements, a sly smile on her face. *The grin of a little vixen* he mused, but then caught himself at his rash thought.

'I have had better days. Have you come to practice, my lord, or only for a walk after your midday feast?' she asked, one eyebrow raised in challenge. Though his striking blue grey eyes might have brought her unease once, now she found the light in them rather playful.

The ellon grinned at her in turn. Their encounters have made them become more familiar with each other, and now the lady was drawing him into a dare. *The little trickster thinks she can bait me.* It made him feel alive in a curious way, as a wild predator chasing a long hunted prey, readying itself for the final attack. Similar sensations he experienced on a hunt indeed. It was uncanny. Strange even. And intriguing. He wanted to see where this would lead.

'I thought you might require a few lessons in regards to your technique, truth be told. I was about to offer but alas, you seem to be done for today,' he motioned at the young man who was now unclasping his armor.

'Far be it from me to refuse my host! Please, let us spar,' Nienor could not help but add, resuming her stance.

A shapely eyebrow rose in response. 'At least you make up for what you lack in skill, with courage,' the ellon followed as he took the practice sword from the young man.

'Is this display of overconfidence founded or simply a common elvish trait?' she jabbed.

'You shall see soon enough,' his eyes glinted roguishly. 'Come, my lady, you are stalling.'

The heavy wooden swords clashed and Nienor was soon turning and twisting around him, avoiding his slashes as she could. It was not easy.

The prince soon attacked with more fire and before they realized it their dance took them out of sight from the rest of the field. The elf forced her into a defensive stance, not leaving any opening. *No match for him* she told herself belatedly as she felt her body fluster with heat. *Well, if only I had eternity to practice* she thought, not without a hint of envy. Nienor suspected he was even keeping most of his skill in check so as to give her the semblance of a chance. His haughty smirk helped matters little. Her eyes narrowed. There was no chance of victory, but a sly thought came to mind. Could she at least make the elf lose that perfect footing? She lunged at him in a seemingly obvious move to attack but when the elf evaded as expected, she pulled at his arm with her free hand, taking him off balance and ultimately causing them both to crash to the ground.

Yet Nienor did not expect the manner in which they landed. Though taken by surprise the ellon still had lightning reflexes and tried to lessen her fall. So it was the girl landed face front on top of him, managing to throw her arms down either side of his head. Nienor blinked when she realized she stood inches from his face. She knew not why, but seeing him so close, she took to studying his features.

*What is she doing?* the elf wondered studying her in turn not without noticing the flushed heaving of her chest, the sparse freckles dancing upon the bridge of her straight elegant nose. Her small lips
parted in curiosity.

None said a word. He felt her body's weight, a slight tremor emanating from her. It felt good. Very good.

*What?*

The elf stilled the worrying thought deciding this had to end, now. 'That was a most wicked move of you,' he tried jestingly. 'I am beginning to wonder as to how far the influence of the Enemy reaches,' the prince smiled while tensing as to lift himself, hoping she would notice and do so in part.

Nienor did not move, but continued to silently regard him. Then a smile formed on her lips, and he wondered why that too, felt good. It caused a strange warmth within him, pulsing with aught yet unnamed. It was certainly a new, unnerving sensation. Before the prince could react, her small hand was touching the line of his forehead, her fingers tracing downward. Then those small elegant appendices swiftly brushed the tip of his left ear, finally feeding the curiosity of feeling its curious shape.

The ellon started, grimacing in shock before pulling her wrist away none too gently. 'Do not do that,' he said hurriedly in a tone which woke the girl from whatever rapture she had been caught in.

He was on his feet in an instant, as her surprised and worried look followed him. Then mystifying embarrassment took over. As if drawn from a daze, Nienor herself wondered why she had lingered atop him, and her face stained a reddish hue. *He is the heir to this realm, is your head all but empty?* She could have struck herself for her silly endeavor. Not knowing what else to say, she decided for an apology. 'Forgive me, my lord. I suppose I surrendered to childish curiosity. You are so different to us.' Yet inside she felt hurt, though why this was, she could not say.

Nothing about that had been childish, was his first thought as the elf eyed her flushed face. In the end she had done nothing wrong. *Perhaps I was too curt.* 'No offense taken, none at all,' the elf tried as he offered her a hand to stand. 'You have just discovered that elvish ears in particular are not to be trifled with,' he added in an attempt to lighten the mood. *If only she knew how much so* the prince thought uneasily, and hoped she would not inquire further.

She did not. Instead Nienor followed blankly, 'I did not know. Forgive me either way, prince Legolas.' She moved past him awkwardly. 'Let us return.' *What in Arda is the matter with me?* she chided herself.

'Nienor-' the prince called after her, though why, he did not know. The ellon realized the she had not heard him either way.

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Days turned into weeks, and it was becoming more certain as time flew by that her stay in the elven realm would be longer than intended. The armies of Arthedain, her home, were rallying to and fro far away. Her people she hoped would hold fast until aid came. And among the negotiations and other activities that took her time, it felt as if she found a companion. Completely unlike his father as she noticed, the prince seemed to have taken a liking to her as well. Or at least, the elf did not shun or evade her when she called on him. The girl much enjoyed his company and took every opportunity, when given the time, to learn more about his culture and people. And then there was something more; a lingering curiosity, a need she could not and did not want to acknowledge. Of course the elf was handsome, anyone with ownership of eyes could see that. But while that was partly the reason, it was not the cause of the unknown pull she felt towards him. He had shown himself kind and helpful, and Nienor did her utmost to return the same.
One certain event would remain etched in her memory, upon the eve of the upcoming starlight festivities. A hunting party was assembled in preparation for the feast. The elves were gracious enough hosts to know that the sons of men needed both the sport and the nourishment. As such, the royalty and nobility on both sides joined together in the event as customary. Nienor was awed at the deep dark shades and elements in the lush forests of this kingdom. She could feel their magic keeping this part of it alive and safe. Even the elves themselves seemed to have a stronger aura about them. *It is as if they are one*, she mused. As she was lost in the pleasant sounds of the forest she led her horse slightly astray from the host in a gentle trot, enmeshed in the allure of the ancient woods.

Just as she heard the horn blow and cries of the host that must have picked the trail of the hunt, the girl heard a stir not far away to her left. Backing away on her horse, she froze as a rough limb pulled the greenery aside to reveal a large set of fangs pertaining to a grinning head. A head which bore a good semblance to rotten meat. The orc seemed surprised for only a moment but grinned when he spotted the easy prey. Her horse pushed back, and she struggled to spurn it around in gallop; but the animal was afeared, and knew its rider not, jumping on its hind legs violently. The young woman battled for control but lost her grip on the reins and was thrown onto the ground none too gently. Scrabbling and confused from the fall, she tried to gather herself and run but the orc was soon upon her. Her screams echoed through the forest but a moment before the creature palmed her mouth.

She was then dragged away for some time, her muffled sobs barely audible in their surroundings. Then throwing the human to the ground the orc was upon her, roughly pulling at her riding tunic and leggings. Struggling like a fish caught in the nets, she rasped even more violently when coarse cold claws left trails of blood onto her skin as they moved, from her leg to her hip. She had not expected this to happen in what was supposed to be the safest part of this kingdom. But there she was, trapped, and to her desperation alone. She cursed her lack of precaution in bringing any sort of weapon to the hunt. As all those close to death, thoughts such as whether anyone would miss her, or how long until they found her broken body in the woods crossed her mind.

The orc reeked most foul and she had never been forced to be as close to one. It was heavy, suffocating the life out of her. She grew weaker in her struggles as the orc growled in the black speech and fragments of the common tongue.

'Fresh meat. Good catch,' the beast grumbled and its coarse tongue licked the side of her forehead, causing her eyes to water with loath and disgust.

Cold fear paralyzed her, so much so that she was unable to make a sound. Her riding clothes were soon in tatters and the orc growled, preparing to dishevel her when suddenly she saw its head lift as if being pulled; and then a flash of light. Warm liquid splashed in torrents over her face, arms and chest. The lifeless body of the orc fell limp against her and she pushed it sideways frantically. Through cloudy vision she distinguished another silhouette.

His expression was impassible and stern, a short flicker of disgust on his features as he regarded the corpse. Then the elf then turned to the shaking woman lying on the forest floor, covered in black orc blood. She looked very much still in a state of shock. She was trembling through her ripped clothing.

'Lady Nienor, it is over. The creature is dead.' His words were uttered in such a way that she felt herself still into calmness.

The foul smell of the blood filled her nostrils and she felt as if she would retch. Legolas, for it was him, patiently waited for her to recover.
'Are you harmed?' he asked, noting the reminiscent fear in her light brown orbs.

She shook her head. 'He-... it did not manage to hurt me,' she uttered apprehensively. Flooded by relief she managed a smile, surprising the elf. 'All in thanks to you, my lord. Again you aid a lady in distress,' she tried to jest. 'But this time you saved my life,' she met his gaze. 'I am in your debt.'

The elf was truly glad that he had heard her screams before they were vanquished. 'Let there be no debts between us. I would prefer it so,' he added, preventing any murmurs of dissent. He wanted nothing from her, but would have dreaded for her to come to such a grisly end and so far from her home and people. And that is the sole reason his mind stressed.

'Come, we must return,' he said gently.

Nienor slowly stood, only then fully comprehending the state of her attire. He noticed her bare shoulders and thighs. Her host would not like this. He unclasped his own cloak and offered the garment to the girl, which she accepted eagerly.

'Shall I help you walk? I have given word to the others to switch focus to search for you when I noticed you had gone missing.'

Ignoring the curious fact that he had noticed anything regarding her, the young woman continued '...and what of my lord Ereldur?' she found herself asking. Indeed, why had she asked? The thought surprised her. Maybe she was still trying to make amends with her future. Maybe if he showed any amount of consideration, she could, in time...

The elf of course had no idea of her notions. 'He had separated from us with a handful of his men to pick the trace of a boar, moments before I heard you scream,' he followed in a somewhat flatter tone.

'I see,' she turned away.

Legolas then realized why she asked, and felt something akin to... was it pity gnawing at the back of his rib cage, making his chest feel too tight? No, not that. Yet he could not pinpoint it. It was clear as day she harbored no feelings for the man she came with. No pleasant ones at least. Yet she still seemed to hope.

They silently advanced together, her stumbling at times through weeds and fallen branches. Her legs were rebelling strangely and she had not full control of her movements. Wonderful, she thought belatedly. The ellon turned to her, a short look which requested silent approval. She nodded before he moved his arm around her waist to help her advance. His action steadied her as she was pulled more upright and at the same time closer against him.

Driven by she knew not what, Nienor found herself looking under her lashes upon his profile as they walked. Her eyes focused on his sharp, youthful features, the feint sheen of his skin, the unusual shape of his ear; the nearly feminine quality of his skin contrasting with the extremely masculine shape of his jaw. His fair hair helped rest matters little. It was... he was... anybody with eyes would see it, she told herself as she looked ahead, irked at her blush. It was only natural to observe and be awed by beauty in all things living. And it was an undeniable truth that he was, well, beautiful. What was less natural was the calming feeling his closeness brought; she shrugged the notion into the hidden corners of her mind.

The elf had felt her eyes on him, and though intrigued he decided not to pursue his own curiosity as to why. Not when she was in such a precarious state; perhaps another time. Perhaps.
It was not long before the elf and his charge reached the rest of the hunting party. Upon seeing the pair Thranduil as well as the human host approached swiftly, relief visible on many faces. The king was unpleasantly surprised at the proximity of the prince and the human, and the care his son showed. Though as yet, he did not know for sure why this irked him. If anyone were to search for and even save someone in distress, it was his son. His son had his mother's heart, something which the king both relished and dreaded.

By that time Ereldur and his group had rejoined the hunting party and seeing the state his betrothed was in, he rushed to pull her to him as he looked for injuries. Legolas went extremely still, and the feeling in his chest increased in intensity when the girl whimpered and seemed to want to pull herself away from her betrothed. He forced himself to look away. It was not his place.

Ereldur regarded the stiff countenance of the prince, and for the sake of courtesy thanked him for his aid. The man was weary of these creatures that had much strength and lives unending. It was unnatural. Only for the sake of need and politics did he have to bear them. Now, one of them had saved his future spouse while he had been off and away, unaware and enjoying himself. Alas, it did not matter as much, now that she was safe. She was, after all, his guarantee to accessing the lands and riches of her city. She mattered not in herself. She was weak, though stubborn enough to make up for it. Her people needed a strong hand. He would be the leader to rise to the task.

Nienor awoke covered in bandages in various places. They told her she could be released within the day. Her thoughts went to her savior. *How odd to call him that.* She could not control the flow of her thoughts, most of which now, worrying, seemed to lead to him. *He had shown me the most care ever since I arrived to these foreign lands. A stranger. Not even part of my race. An elf.* She wanted to think it was all in his nature and left it at that.
Spiraling down

It was not long before the festivities commenced. The high cavernous space which served both as a place of reception and throne room was brimming with the presence of elves enjoying community and making merry. The surrounding suspended gardens and halls were full of life and the murmurs of many. It was a respite from the dark realities of life. The human host was also present, and though wary at first they eventually took to partaking in the conversation and wine. They did not mingle much with the elven folk and there seemed to be a quiet agreement between both sides to keep it so.

So much celebration, yet I feel nothing close to it, Nienor thought darkly. She felt a gaze upon her, and turning by instinct she saw him at the other side of the large reception hall, in the presence of the king. Their eyes met for a brief moment and the young woman smiled his way in the friendliest manner she could. Nienor knew that if the elf asked about her gloom she could not hide the reasons very well from him. In fact, she could hardly hide much from him lately when they did have a chance to speak. Conversation flowed naturally and not few were the times she had to stop herself from revealing too much of her own troubles. It was not becoming, nor was it wise. Though friendlier than most of his kin the prince was a high official of this realm after all. Thus Nienor had lessened their encounters so as to not spend as much time in his presence. She knew the hearts and tongues of people were loose. Gossip among her host on her behalf was not something she needed. Certain expectations came with her station, as the woman had been tutored throughout her life.

To the other side of the wide hall she heard Ereldur engaged in loud conversation with some of the men of their host as full mugs of wine at times hit the tables. He drank his turn more than he should have, as seemed to be the norm for him, she realized. Not again. She did not wish to catch him in one of his states and with a sigh decided to retreat. A few moments later found Nienor walking through the corridor with the intention of returning to her rooms. It was not long before she heard swift steps behind her.

'My lady, why so hasty?' her betrothed questioned in mock plea when he reached her, capturing both her arms in his hold. 'We have aught to discuss.'

She pulled away but not swiftly enough to escape his grasp. Ereldur brought his face close into hers, grinding his words into her ear, his countenance suddenly vicious. 'You should be back there, we are one, you and I. It does not trouble me that you are not willing, I am no fool. I do not care about your person more than you do about mine, but you must show respect to your future lord in front of our allies. That includes standing by my side on nights like these.' His nostrils flared as he stared at her, his hand gripping her chin.

'It would be hard to, with the smell of beverage so pungent!' she threw angrily. Nienor began to see the rest of her days played out within this dungeon of the soul she willingly led herself into, and all that it meant.

Her words wrought a drunken chuckle but the man released her. 'The warnings will soon be over my lady, and then you will see.'

'Need I remind you, I am no lowly thrall for you to do with as you wish!' she hissed.

'Oh I cannot wait to snuff this bothersome fire inside of you,' Ereldur said, a wide grin spread
across his face, eyeing her from head to toe. 'I shall enjoy it.' With this he turned on his heel back towards the noisy hall.

She did not wonder much at his threat. Watching him depart, she released a short breath before tears of frustration welled in her eyes. The woman hastily turned on her path, her steps hurried and swift through the corridor. She barely noticed when she stumbled into someone. Nienor lifted her gaze, a brief apology dying on her lips when she saw the prince staring back at her, seething inwardly towards the terrible timing. Please not you, not now.

'Lady Nienor, I wanted to speak to you- ' but his words trailed away when the elf noticed her face. His jaw tightened, the damned sensation in his chest making itself known. 'You cry.' He regarded her for one moment. 'Again.' He raised an eyebrow. 'Is it some new custom among men that I was not aware of?' he asked in a soft voice, wanting to lighten the mood and to hide the sincere concern and unease he felt.

But Nienor was far from able to notice such subtleties, and took his tone as ridicule. With a foreboding look, she ushered behind the elf to speedily be out of sight.

The prince found himself following her. 'My friend, I mean no ill will!' she heard him cry out behind her, and could not help but turn around.

'Then pray leave me be!' Nienor threw at him over her shoulder, a choked string of words.

Though taken aback by her tone, the elf saw what lay beyond it. And he could not bring himself to leave her in such a state. Truth be told, the prince had sensed her woes and in spite of himself was starting to be more attached to this mortal than he had thought possible. Not few were the times he found himself lingering on her features when they met. And her laughter. Hearing her joy made him feel lighter, all that he had not felt in centuries. All he had never felt. He enjoyed having her close, hearing her voice and in spite of the restrained manner instilled in him throughout his life, the elf found it difficult to keep clear of her. She was music, the music of creation deep within himself. And it seemed as if she resonated, as if she were part of the same song. He could not escape wanting to know just how much so.

'There must be another way... other than him,' he uttered in a low, careful voice, walking closer until he stood to her side on the narrow balcony the woman had retreated to.

Nienor knew what his words meant. This alliance should not mean her own doom. Hearing his words, she glanced at him and felt much surprise and shame that the elf knew what plagued her. Why, she could not say. The night was cold, the wind carrying with it the strange music from the forest without. Wisps blew through her hair, sending strands dancing.

The elf observed her stony countenance a moment longer before looking away, frightened at what he felt was creeping into him; bolder, enveloping. A force to be reckoned with, ancient and unwavering. My lord Eru, what is this? Would you allow it? Would you grant me this?

His demeanor made her words come out brokenly, and she shook away the sudden need to bury herself into him. She pressed on, shaken by her rash thought, determined to shun it. 'I did not ask for advice or your aid, prince Legolas.'

The elf reached and turned her to face him fully. When her gaze went to his hands on her arms, he relinquished his hold. She looked back into his face. Despite her pride the ellon saw the unmistakable signs of loneliness and distress in her eyes. 'Do not distance yourself from me so, young one. You are... ' he hesitated. How to answer when he felt just as confused, as unknowing of what was happening to him? But with her before him now, the elf was starting to see. To know.
Would she?

'...I am?' Nienor hedged despite herself, taking in his lost otherworldly gaze, the entrancing sheen of his skin in the faint moonlight. Features so perfectly sharp. Must be so fine to the touch. She blinked the thought away.

'A human I have grown to care deeply for. You... matter. To me,'

She blinked again as his words sunk into her mind. Nienor felt his gaze burning her, a strange look she had seen little of, and in strange moments. Those moments with him that had made her as weak in the knees as a witless child; for there had been such moments though the woman had done her best to disparage their meaning.

'And in the world of men you've been dealt an ill hand, but you are strong, and you are brave,' he continued, hands moving to her shoulders.

She stilled under his steadying grip. 'You hold me in too high esteem,' Nienor murmured, breaking away from that intense gaze. Why must he look at her so? But she found that she made no protest when in the next moment his hand reached for hers, warm fingers entwining with her own. A new unknown shiver ran through her body at the touch, new and warm, coursing through her in waves. It was high time to pull away but every fiber of her was against it.

'Nienor,' he called her name, in a way she never heard before.

It called for her from somewhere else. It called to her. She was enraptured, could not look away.

A line tightened in his jaw, lit grey eyes boring into the depth of her. 'You do not deserve this fate. And he does not deserve you,' the prince continued, his words nearly a whisper, his gaze tracing her warm doe eyes, the light freckles adorning her alabaster skin. It reminded him of a young woodland creature, wounded and afraid. You need not fear me. This. Please do not.

'Wh-what would you have me do? It is decided,' Nienor said bitterly, feeling not a little unnerved now the elf was so close. Her heart beat faster, threatening to break her ribs.

The hand on her shoulder slid, fearfully, slowly, to the side of her neck, strong fingers wrapping around her nape. 'It does not have to be,' she heard his words in a dream. They were soothing, like him.

So close yet hesitating, Nienor was lost in his eyes. She took an intake of breath-

The scent of his skin, the new and sudden feel of warm lips against her own. Hesitating still, carefully tasting. Leading tender warmth from her mouth to her very center, now infused with an unnamed need. It was grounding, the pressure. So deep. So... healing? Her surprise only came second to the sweet sensation that took hold of all her senses, needing more of this; wanting more. Wanting him, closer-

The elf had tried his best. But seeing her now, so needful and lost, had brought it all to the surface with the full force of a storm at sea; everything he strove to deny and bury, everything her presence and companionship had changed in him. And it was all he had imagined in his own guilty mind. His arm went around her waist, bringing her closer. Closer to him, to his heart. He dared to pull her lower lip between his, reveling in the new sensation. And he had wondered. Many times, before he always forced it into long forgotten recesses of thought. The taste of another he wanted by his side. He wanted-

Using her utmost willpower and bracing her hands on his chest, the young woman pushed him
away roughly. Appalled at having done so to her friend and utterly confused, she took one step back, incredulous at what had just passed.

The elf was left staring in the blank space between them but for a moment before he regained himself. Then the quick look he gave her betrayed an apology but also worry and need, the latter scaring the woman to no end.

'Do not...' she swallowed a bothersome knot in her throat as she managed to speak the words, 'I do not feel the same,' Nienor lied, breaking their gaze.

The ellon silently took another step back, his expression more composed than hers. Though his fēa said differently, perhaps blinded as he was he had assumed... wrongly?

'Forgive me,' the prince swiftly added. 'I did not mean to,-' To what? To reveal that he saw her as more, much more, and it wreaked havoc on centuries of control, and it frightened him? 'I presumed...' but his words trailed away with the way she was staring at him. Wide eyed, afraid.

Then the moon appeared from beneath the clouds and shone brightly from above, engulfing their figures. As if a veil was drawn back for the first time, Nienor saw him infused with a bright light and a warmth she had shared and needed in her life. Everything she needed and had not the right to. She blinked, and the vision was gone. Fear took its place. A primal fear of the unknown, of the strong pull she felt towards the being before her. This could not happen.

'Please at least consider what I told you,' she heard his soft words. The elf said this, still struggling with how to make amends and feeling very much a fool in his own right.

'I must go,' the young woman managed and she could barely gather herself to walk away, sparing no glance back. She was set on keeping him away from then on. It was for the best. For both of them.
The truth unhindered

Chapter Notes

The assumption in this fan fiction is that whenever elven characters converse with no outsiders present, the conversation happens in Sindarin or Silvan elvish.

Pacing his throne room back and forth, Thranduil was drenched in thought. Through all the dealings with the human host, there was but a thorn in his back, a situation which he thought would come to no good given the right amount of time. The king knew his son well, and did not look gladly upon his friendship and growing fondness of the mortal lord's betrothed. A human, no less he thought with no small amount of distaste.

Along the weeks that the human host had been in his kingdom, the king noticed his son and heir seeking and spending time with the lady Nienor, all too much as far as Thranduil was concerned. He did not want to risk complicating an already frail alliance with the humans of these kingdoms. All would need to be united before the evil that was stirring. Reaching a decision, a few more days passed before he finally summoned his son.

'Tomorrow at dawn, you are to take whatever number of guards you need and take a part of the human host, including the lord's betrothed, away to Aegas'Annan for safety. Lord Ereldur has conceded and agreed it would be safer for them there. Return swiftly, you are needed here.'

He saw the composure of his son nearly crack to reveal a strange sort of distress, and no reply came from the prince until after a few moments. So it is as I feared the king thought grimly.

The young ellon then spoke, his voice level. The king found it commendable indeed. 'Our kingdom roads are anything but safe at the moment, you know this father. Such a journey would be perilous, even more so since there have been reports of goblins coming down through the mountain paths lately, attacking and ambushing travelers at random.'

The king looked unfazed. 'As I also know that the fortress of Aegas'Annan is the safest place to be, at the moment. I trust there will be no hardship for you to pass through, and I know you will see through to the task, after all you are my best military lead.'

'She-, and her host, are safer here,' the prince answered coldly, stressing every word through gritted teeth. Why did the thought of the mortal leaving do this to him? His father had taken notice of his feelings even before he did. Legolas sighed inwardly at having been so outwardly careless with his own heart.

'She is safer away from you. Will you question me now? Does what I say lack reason, my son?'

Legolas had grown to know his father, surely. Thousands of years had made Thranduil as objective and unrelenting as the wind. His father had the right of it, he knew. Thus he said nothing, bowed and turned on his way down the vast halls to pursue his orders. His countenance as grave as a prisoner's to the gallows. The prince felt he had only himself to blame for this turn of events.

Her thoughts were clouded and she could not bring herself to sleep. The young woman had avoided
most company for the past few days. Her lips still burned in remembrance, her eyes closing as she replayed the short lived kiss for what must have been the hundredth time. The connection which had filled her with a surge of feelings she never knew she had.

Her thoughts full of him, she was about to drift into sleep when she heard a steady knock on the door of her chamber. She stilled when she opened the door and saw the object of her thoughts standing before her, a stiff countenance about him. His pale and troubled expression, his eyes staring right through her could mean nothing good. Her embarrassment at the events of earlier faded in front of the worry she now felt.

The elf stared at her strangely for a moment longer before speaking. 'Tomorrow I am to take you to our hidden fortress within Eryn Lasgalen,' he said with no preamble, 'it was decided for your safety,' he added, and with that turned to leave.

'My lord?... Legolas?' her words came in disbelief. The elf stopped at hearing his name, but did not turn to face her. He looked over his shoulder at her.

'Why?...'

Nothing.

His strange silence worrying her, Nienor tried again. 'Do you want to stay? For a while?' His presence, it eased her mind so. If only he stayed.

It felt as if the wind was the only living breath in those halls. He would not turn to face her. What had passed?

'Please rest and be ready. We leave at dawn.' And with that the elf walked away, thinking this was going to be the hardest task he would ever see through.

Now alone, Nienor threw the door closed as if smitten. She pondered. Should she pursue the elf, press the details out of him? Was Ereldur behind this? Nay, he would have no reason to... It would have made no difference to her where they turned to before. But now? Now, what? her mind mocked. Nienor, do not be a craven. Remember yourself. Your duty.

A few long hours passed this way. Finally Nienor could take no more and left her chamber. Pacing through the elven halls she searched for any sign of her friend. She found no one. Disappointed, she returned to her quarters. She let herself fall onto the canopy bed exhausted, sinking into its softness.

Soft lips, tasting hers. Nienor shook her head to dispel the stubborn memory. Would she have to be thrown to and fro all of her life? She missed the fields of her childhood, the careless whispers of the wind through her hair. But as often happened when her thoughts flew astray, the young woman chided herself. The first task once this is over will be to get yourself a spine, Nienor.

After more time spent with nothing but her grueling thoughts, she knew not when or why, but a sudden quaint feeling came over her. She... felt, a presence? Following the strange pull Nienor rose from her bed and rushed towards the door, pulling it open. She was faced with the elf, standing before her with a look of utter defeat marring his features. He was about to call on her, it seemed.

'I could not... I could not stay away,' she heard the words, and they were bitter, regretful.

Surprisingly relieved, Nienor silently pushed herself against the chamber door, allowing him entrance.
He followed into the darkened abode with hesitating steps and she closed the door behind him. Then barred it.

'Please, have a seat.' She was restless. She had wanted to find him, but now Nienor realized she knew not what she would say to him. How does one go about telling an immortal being of the enormous pull one felt towards them? 'Would you like a cup of wine?', she continued, her voice strangled. Nay, this bland pretense was beyond them. Nienor felt his presence differently now, and a tension rising between them which was palpable.

Still standing and with a furtive glance her way, the elven prince slowly paced through the room with his head bowed until he reached the window she had left open.

'I want you to know, I would never have done anything to tarnish your honor,' he began. 'I do not know what came over me. Or why.' Liar. 'But I... do value our friendship very much.' Yet I am afraid to tell you the truth of what I feel. He spoke softly, cursing his lack of courage as he regarded the night sky visible through the wide opening.

Nienor stood silent behind him.

If she would say something, anything, he hoped.

The young woman swallowed her words a few times before she finally managed to speak. 'Will I see you again?' came the swiftly asked question. The realization had just dawned on her. A few moments passed in continued silence.

'The intent is not to,' the elf said blankly as he turned to face her, still keeping some distance between them.

The finality of the words made her head swoon. His piercing stare she had gotten used to, but this stiff, uneasy bearing and the pained look on his features were an altogether new sight. A long pause followed before Nienor noticed they were mostly in the dark. She went and lit another candle and soon its light was brushing their figures in slow caresses.

'I am at fault,' the elf continued, breaking their gaze. 'I have acted...,' he sighed, '...foolish around you.' He seemed to hesitate. 'Even coming to you now was foolish.'

A few agonizingly slow moments passed, with neither of them having the courage to continue.

This is pointless. He shook his head. 'I must leave. Forgive me,' the elf said finally as he was pacing swiftly towards the door.

But he never reached it.

Nienor rushed towards him, and next he knew he felt her warm body against him, arms reaching and wrapping around his neck before even she realized what she was doing. She felt the swarm of feelings she had smothered brimming to the surface, ruling over her.

Legolas found he could not let himself move further with her so close. Those cursed pangs of longing were harder and harder to suppress, even more so when he regarded her face and saw his feelings mirrored her own.

'Please, stay,' she said barely audible in the quiet of the night. Her eyes were wide open in a plea, an honest plea if he ever saw one. He felt her chest rise and fall against him, unknowingly straining his most resolute restraint. He took hold of both her wrists in a failed attempt to remove her from himself, to stop her from gripping him tighter, from drawing herself closer into him.
'Nienor have a care, do you want this to worsen? There are higher matters to reckon with than what we think...,' he paused, swallowing to help the dryness which choked his words, '...what we think we found within each other.' At least all was revealed. It was strangely releasing. His expression was grave yet his gaze did not leave her and unbidden, his face drew closer to hers.

'I ran away from you then, as I was afraid.'

'I know, young one.'

'Afraid of what I saw you to be. Of what you came to mean to me.'

He had not noticed when his arms wrapped around her waist, trapping her as she clung to him.

'And what do I mean to you, Nienor of Garolin?' he asked, almost derisively, despite knowing her answer would spell his doom.

Her small hand reached to touch his face then, and he closed his eyes; feeling slender fingers sliding upward, ghosting along his jaw before cupping half of his face. 'Everything,' she breathed, the words escaping her. But she meant it. He had to know.

All this be damned he thought. Yet he did not expect it when he felt her lips against his, lingering, finally tasting, enjoying his warmth. She felt wonderful. A strong light he saw within her, reaching for his own. He opened his eyes, pulling away from her kiss to look upon her face briefly. Their eyes locked, as if seeing each other for the first time after what felt like an eternity of waiting. Perhaps it had been. No one had ever looked at him like so. It felt so right, as if something within, long forgotten but rediscovered, had just fallen into place. Driven by his deepest desire he leaned in and tilted his head slightly, capturing her mouth more fully, more fervently.

She felt ablaze. This time, she did not turn away.

It was late into the night, or better said in the small hours of the morning when they finally allowed rest to come.

Now, awake and staring at the dwindling flame, the ellon was musing over the beautifully exhausting moments they had shared. Everything had been completely new to them both. But slowly, tenderly, they discovered and learned much about each other, and it had been a wonderful lesson. The first of many to come, he thought. She had turned him into a youth anew, besotted, shy and careful. A thousand years fallen away into dust, useless. The warmth of her made him shiver even now in remembrance as he watched her figure; her arm protectively placed over his chest, her head resting on his shoulder. The elf looked over her disheveled beauty which had left him gasping for air. And not only for her body, which he now realized he direly needed, but the emotions only this maiden had been able to awaken within him.

By the Valar, I am completely taken with a mortal he thought to himself as his hand caressed her sleeping form. It was unnerving, distressing. But it all made sense now. Why the elf had sought her company so often, his concern over her well being, why her closeness had all the unusual effects on him.

One supposes it was only the natural way of things, for love comes irrespective of time, space or individual fates it unites. She was unaware of the customs of his people. She did not know what this would mean for him. He loved her, now an undeniable truth. He had willingly bound himself to this mortal which meant that now he would have no other. The ellon pondered how to reveal this to his beloved without frightening her. He would never presume to impose anything onto her if she
chose otherwise. Nienor was human after all, and of a different culture, thus their customs surely differed in this. But the elf knew it was meant to be this way for him.

And then, she was mortal. He grimaced. A long road, and wrought with sorrow at the end. Something for later to consider. Not now, with her in his arms. Not before long it would be time to depart following the crass orders of his father. Nothing had ever caused him to question or disobey Thranduil in the past. He was father and king, his elder and most valuable teacher. It had never occurred to him, even when trying to be objective, but for this one time. This one time he could not obey.

Yet could he be so selfish? His innate sense of justice seemed to prevail over him now. He was not the one alone, away from his home, away from his people. It might be for the best, for her. But he could not part from her either. There must be a way. He held her even tighter and she stirred, half opening her eyes, searching for his.

'You are worried,' she said softly, his concern reflecting her own in sleep filled eyes.

'Aye,' he admitted, but now his eyes were on her lips.

She lazily removed a stray strand of silvery hair from his face, smiling, before leaning close. It was a warm and lingering touch, and before they knew it everything was more feverish, more earnest.

He tilted her head gently to trail his kiss down her swan like neck, wringing a soft moan. A sound still new to him, and he found that he very much enjoyed hearing it from her.

Her fingers tangled through fair hair and she could not resist pressing herself into him, reveling in the scent of his skin.

The elf wanted to right any wrongs, to undo what was done, or take her away, all contradicting and foolish thoughts. He had never felt anything akin to this in all his long years. This sense of one's entire being suffused with another. An extension of one, a bond forming stubbornly against it all.

'Nienor,' he whispered breathlessly, his fingers wrapped protectively around her nape.

The young woman met his eyes, her own glazed with the need his closeness brought.

'I am yours. Are you mine?' came the words, grey pools melting into earthy brown.

'Aye,' came the swift and timid answer, her hands still in his hair.

His heart thundered out of his chest at her words of consent. He brought her to him again and they lay in silence for a while longer, his hands soothingly caressing her back, dreading the coming day and the separation it meant. As they grudgingly parted, they stood both unknowing of what their now entangled fates would be or what this would lead to. But small steps would do.

'I will see you down before departure,' the ellon looked down to her with a smile as she was helping with the fastenings of his tunic, her hands on his chest, a gesture she did only to touch him a little longer. When they finished donning their clothes he held her to him for one last time before heading to make the final preparations for their journey. The corridors were empty, and he slid through undetected.

Pacing down the wide halls towards the throne room, he tried to think. Was this desperation? It appeared it was not reserved only to children of men after all.
'Legolas.' The son bowed shortly to his father, now in the midst of the soldiers who would accompany the gathering on the road. When Thranduil looked over his son now, the elf could feel his gaze scouring through his entire being. He thought he saw the curling of his father's lip in controlled distaste. Could he... sense the recent change in his son? The bond? Then he heard it. The king's voice in his head.

'What you have done is a most terrible slight I would not have thought you capable of. I tried to prevent it from getting this far, now I must take bolder measures.' The king saw his son grow pale. Thranduil was indeed disappointed, albeit not surprised. Then, uttering words so that everyone could hear, he said, in what the prince perceived to be his most sardonic tone, lost on the others:

'My son, you look tired.' His words were almost hissed, and hit his son like a bludgeoning axe. Not without noticing this, the king went on.

'Captain Sonruil will take your stead in escorting the company to their destination. I need you to rest, for you will command the second division hunters through our western borders two days hence, where I have word that those wretched spiders and other foul things have come farther into our land.'

'Father...' Legolas felt lost, though it barely showed on his countenance. He saw the grinning faces of fate rushing to repay the deeds of the night before. And then he felt anger pouring through him. Bright and mystifying. It took all his restraint not to confront his father, which the prince realized would be an even more ill turn to an already hopeless situation. So he said nothing and removed himself from the king's sight, embroidered in thoughts dark and thick as the mists of Angband. He had to get to her somehow, he would not leave her. Could not.

Before the tall kingdom gates the gathering was waiting for all to arrive. Ereldur approached and smiled pleasantly at his wife to be.

'Fare thee well, my lady,' he grinned. 'We will not see each other for quite a while. I am sure it saddens you as much as it does me.' Nienor decided to ignore his sarcasm, all the while dreading the new feeling of guilt making itself known due to her recent actions.

'Fare thee well,' she answered coldly. With this, the man huffed and turned to depart. Her eyes were seeking another, one that had not come.

Soon, she told herself in reassurance, lovingly tracing the lines of his face in memory. When would she feel him close again? It was as if they had decided together to find a way through everything.

When Sonruil arrived giving the start and the horses proceeded to move in a slow trot, she wanted to yell at them to stop their advance, to put a halt to the convoy. In her confusion she rode up to the captain, who informed her of the latest changes but could not give her the answers that her eyes were pleading for.

It cannot be. Nienor felt as if all dimmed around her, eyes full and heavy as she could not help but keep looking back, trying to determine any presence, any figure that might be heading to join them. She had to grip the reins tight so as to not fall off her horse.
We meet again

Days passed as the convoy was approaching its destination. The deep dark underbrush of the tall forest was shimmering in the summer light, stray sun rays making their way through the thick crowns of the trees. Yet this time Nienor could not enjoy its beauty.

The path lay ahead, winding, as twisted as her thoughts. She could not help the feeling of betrayal gnawing at her. How could she have hoped a few brief moments of passion would amount to something lasting? In these conditions, no less. But it was not that which hurt the most. She sincerely relished their friendship and his companionship, albeit she had nurtured feelings for the elf. Perhaps if she had managed to control herself he would not have deemed to run away, to shun her. Did he? Was it all falsity? He had given no heed of any change that could have prevented him from coming with.

Then a thought pierced her like an arrow. He is the prince. Of course. She had probably been another fawn in his elvish gardens to hunt. Anyone watching the young woman at that moment would have thought twice before engaging her in conversation. Anger flared and she felt the betrayal again, followed by nausea at the thought of how willingly she had given herself to him. Surely her payment for being unfaithful to her betrothed, and Ereldur swiftly appeared on the canvas of her thoughts before she brushed the thought away. She felt nothing and could feel nothing even if he had been a man of nobler mind and deed. Despite this, she felt guilt. She had acted like a craven but above all, she felt immensely foolish. Just then the signal was given to stop and proceed to raise camp. One more day and they would reach their destination, her temporary prison, even farther away from her kin into this strange land.

The next day they set early and by sunset they were at the gates of the Elvish fortress of Aegas'Annan, deep within Eryn Lasgalen. It was unknown to most but for the Eryn Lasgalen elves. The term fortress was somewhat fitting. A large cavern, docked on the outside with stone. It was grimmer than the Halls of Thranduil, taller and more guarded. It had stood so for ages, serving as a retreat and meeting point during times of war. She thought of her lands, her home in Garolin, of which no news had come her way.

Days passed and turned into weeks. The young woman would practice her skill with sword and dagger, having little else to occupy her time with. She helped with various tasks to keep her mind busy. Still, her nights were cold and bitter. Many a time she had fallen asleep to the sound of her own weeping, though the elves were courteous and she had made acquaintances with many of them. Many wondered at her stern face and the grim air about her, which seemed to always take her beyond the present. Yet they did not ask, for elves are a gentle folk in matters of the soul. They invited the woman to their gatherings in the evenings, and elvish singing has a way of lifting one's mood whether one wants it or not. These moments of respite helped her but did not erase her memories nor the feelings which stubbornly remained lodged within her deepest confines.

Then on one such night, a messenger was come. War had broken out in her lands and hosts of the enemy they faced were advancing. Preparations to set out for the human lands were ongoing. All that were in the fortress and able to fight would need to return to fill the ranks of elves the king would provide as aid.

'All must return, then?', she asked, her voice caught in her throat.

'By command of the king, my lady,' the messenger replied. 'These parts are nearest to the edge of the kingdom, and the enemy is drawing near. Though our lands are not in immediate danger, we must clear the path, leave only a few armed and capable scouts, and return with the rest.'
They had been in Aegas'Annan for over a month and this was ill news though she was happy for it. She grew weary in her loneliness and grief, seldom eating or drinking, though remembering Ereldur sometimes made her thankful for having left. The other set of thoughts she had learned to bar and bury, and stop them as they formed. She wanted to go home.

It was a few days before the host was ready for the journey back to the Elven Halls. The first days were uneventful and passed quickly. Then on one night, after camp was set and most had retreated to their tents she heard much commotion, and a horn blaring. This could only have one meaning. They were being attacked.

Fear gripped her in its cold talons, but she quickly gathered her daggers about her and carefully exited her tent. They were goblins, and they were many. The guards were struggling against them, and had the advantage of discipline, felling the beasts in high numbers. Staying the urge to run and hide, she ducked before one foe and threw herself at him, her daggers flashing. In her despair to not end up a wretched shell in the mud of battle, she looked fierce and wild, and it was not long before her tunic was drenched in black blood. Not now, not here. Not by goblin sword would she go. Her skill was far from adequate against her foes, but she had the advantage of being slight of foot. She managed to fell two enemies before one drew close behind her, and just as she turned the woman would not have been fast enough to block its sword and would surely have perished, if it had not been for the arrow which now pierced its skull. The goblin fell before her, and turning she saw that reinforcements had come.

And her heart sank to her feet as she looked upon the sender of the arrow, who was now too trapped fighting to return her glance.

Eventually, after much bloodshed, thankfully most of it on the goblin side, the fight was at an end. There was bustle and hurry in taking care of the wounded for the travelers could not linger long. Nienor helped as best she could, all while taking special care to avoid the prince during her tasks. He was the one who had saved her from possible doom indeed, but she dreaded to see him. Not after everything. Not after what she realized. Wherever he went, she went the opposite way.

Legolas noticed this and was at a loss. One could even describe his counter as wretched, judging by the way he looked to where she walked and seeing the great strides she made to keep her distance from him. He wanted to speak to her more than anything, yet eventually he always abandoned the resolution to approach her and saw to his own. Their eyes met a few times, each saluting the other politely yet briskly, as if to prevent their eyes from revealing the truth for others to see. That she was angry with him. That they had been lovers. That he wanted to hold her again.

One evening the company stopped for the night and quickly set out the fires as they resorted to the cover of darkness. Nienor opted for the starry night as opposed to the confines of her tent, and since sleep escaped her she set out and eventually found a quiet place not far from the camp. She perched herself onto a mossy boulder and found herself stargazing, humming a recently learned elvish tune. She was getting accustomed to this folk and their ways. She tried not to think of the one elf who had once taken over most of her thoughts.

'Why have you come?' she suddenly asked in a low tone, her thoughts interrupted.

The elf had paced towards where she stood, purposefully so she would hear his approach. He was now standing at some distance beside her. He had to speak to her, he thought, to let her know she was all that kept him going since she had left. To tell her how he forced his company to ride without respite for three whole days to get to them in time. How he worried for her, how he missed her presence.

'Nienor,' he broke the silence after a while. He felt her frosty manner and was dismayed. She surely
loathed him. He had seen the look in her eyes before, directed at Ereldur. His insides wrenched. Still, he continued. 'We marched along the west, hunting the foul giant beasts plaguing the realm. And ever since goblins have grown bolder and infiltrated the area, most of the guard has been patrolling the fringes of the kingdom. We came as soon as we received news of their advance.'

'Most noble of you, prince,' she remarked flatly.

'I would think we are past you calling me so,' he uttered darkly.

'But you are, are you not?! The prince of this woodland realm, highborn and valiant. Nobody could think anything less,' she added, a scornful smile on her lips which he caught despite the darkness.

'Except for you, since you mock me so,' he whispered sadly. Yet he could understand her anger. After so long, how could she take anything he said but for a cheap excuse? The elf was willing to take her mockery, if it would help be around her and somehow mend her trust. He realized how the eve of their departure must have looked like to her, and felt this was a harder battle than the one they have just been through. Also one must note, this was not the kind of combat he had experience in. A long pause followed, which Nienor interrupted much to his relief.

'I thank you... for your aid. It would have been the end of me.' She tried to sound as formal as possible, as she did feel a sense of gratefulness to the one who prevented her from leaving this world, in spite of her current aversion towards him.

*One step into the right direction*, he thought. 'I hoped I would find you unharmed,' he then said, turning to face her.

She did her best not to look at him. She had lost hope of seeing the prince again, let alone have him appear as suddenly as he had vanished from her life. Now the woman saw that her feelings for him were still blooming, having never withered at all in spite of her efforts and denial. All the work she placed into forgetting had been for naught. She hated her human weakness all the more.

Looking at him now, her eyes having gotten used to the darkness, Nienor had to admit he looked rather saddened. Was this a ploy to get her back into his bed? Her look lingered, unbidden, taking pleasure in his presence. Then just as quickly she admonished herself for it. Her hurt was stronger and it stung. Why could he not leave her be? There were other elven maids he could spend time with in that manner, no doubt. And she was to be wed. What had they both been thinking? *Nothing, it seems*, her conscience scorned. Besides, if there was indeed another reason for his abandoning her after their first night, would he not have told her so now, instead of this poorly acted part he was playing?

Seeing the woman drenched in thoughts but not knowing their nature, the prince decided direct honesty was the best approach.

'I have missed you direly,' he softly continued, but only silence met his words and she avoided his gaze. Making one small step to lessen the distance between them, he went on. 'Nienor, I must tell you something which I have not had the time to say before you left. The night we -'

But then she raised a foreboding hand, signalling him to say no more and come no closer. The foolishness they've indulged in that night was not something she wanted to be reminded of.

'Good night, prince Legolas,' muttered Nienor as impassively as she could, though her head swam at his words. Pacing away quickly as she felt her determination falter, she never glanced his way.

The elf remained behind, contrite. Was there no bond between them after all? Nay, it was there. He
felt it so clear and strong yet. He felt it in the dull ache in his chest when he was separated from her, in the lessening of that ache when she was close. He sighed in frustration at the overwhelming desire to stop the woman in her tracks, to make her face him and show her what he could not find the words to say. He thought better of it. *Now is not the time*, he told himself now alone in the night, his eyes on her retreating figure. By morning they would be riding again.
The journey back

The company started early the following day, leaving no sign as to their presence in the area the night before. Legolas had taken the lead from captain Sonruil upon his arrival and gave the start.

They would be riding for a number of days before they would reach the Halls of his father. My father, he thought bitterly. Maybe he had tried to protect his son, in his own way. Surely, falling in love and bonding with a mortal was the very last occurrence any elf would expect to happen. It equaled signing one's own death sentence. But there it was. The elf could not help but glance towards the direction he knew the woman rode, her face a blank, all too pale mask. He looked away to dispel the dread it evoked in him.

The elves took a longer yet safer path, or so they thought. When the time came a makeshift camp was raised akin to the previous times. The wounded from the recent battle could not fare as the able could, thus presenting the need to stop for rest more often. Nienor aided as she could, albeit the healing skills she was taught in her land could not match those of the elves. She was learning. It helped to keep her mind - and eyes - away from a certain elf she was trying her very best to avoid. Needless to say, it was not a wholly successful endeavor. The woman oft caught herself stealing glances to where the prince stood whenever she thought him busy. Her determination to forget what had been between them was still present but curiosity would not leave her be. She had never seen the commander in him before, only the prince, the friend; the lover. The young woman felt a traitorous blush upon her face and stared away from the elf, trying to focus on the act of sharpening her weapons. It was not an activity she excelled in but it did require the utmost attention. After all, who knew how soon the need to use her daggers would present itself.

Still perched on a fallen tree trunk away from the clearing the temporary encampment was in, Nienor chided herself for her lack of restraint. And yet it was a strange sensation, to observe the elf freely. She saw how different he was in manner and command, compared to how she had known him. Then she felt terribly silly and saddened for offering him so much of her thought space. Oh but you have already done much worse than that, she thought belatedly.

Her view shifted back to her task at hand, lost in fading thoughts. Nienor startled when she heard a familiar voice next to her.

'What was that?' she asked confusedly, taken out of her thoughts. Her brow furrowed when the young woman lifted her head and saw her interlocutor.

'Not again. Why must he plague me so?'

Legolas looked to her hands holding the whetstone and dagger, half a smile pulling at his lips. A bright smile she had tasted.

'He is absolutely hateful' she surmised.

'I said, you do have great potential with the dagger, from what I saw of you. I never would have guessed from your sword sparring.' He glanced at her, admiration in his expression. 'Quite commendable,' the prince continued, still smiling in a manner she knew too well. Nienor blinked at the elf now descended onto one knee beside her, clad in his light riding armor.

'Is he actually trying to jest with me?' He asked for permission with a short look. Morosely the woman let him take the dagger and stared away from the elf who was now inspecting the intricate carvings on its handle, turning it in his hand a few times.

'Thank you,' she offered, her mouth a thin line. She was not about to make pointless conversation,
and was quite vexed with herself for not hearing him approach. *Elves.* Nienor decided she found something she did not like about them indeed.

Legolas noticed how the mortal tried her best to avoid his gaze but decided to press on. ‘They will ride to war soon when we return. Your people. What will you do?’

*Get as far away from you as possible, that much is certain,* then to him she added ‘I might... join my future husband on an early pleasure trip of orc hunting. Is there a purpose to this interrogation, lord Legolas?’

She was seldom as fiery, except for a few dear moments that were still etched in his memory. At the same time her decision sat ill with him. A danger loomed over these humans and he felt powerless against it. Worst of all, he felt her resentment.

‘Your blades will aid you well, then,’ the elf said tiredly, striving to contain his discontent. ‘How fare you with long distance arms?’

Was the elf actually asking her this? To what purpose? Nienor was about to mention the lack of concern that should cause him, but bit her tongue. There was aught in the manner of the prince now which made it difficult for the young woman to unleash her bile the way she wished. ‘What kind of arms is it you speak of?’ The sooner he had his answers the faster he would let her be.

‘The bow, for instance. Do you know your way?’

‘Nay.’ *Where is this leading to, elf?*

Legolas pressed on, unabashed by her stern looks and short mouthed answers, although they tugged at his heart strings. ‘Then you ought to learn. Foes are easier to run down from a distance. At close range combat one can fell quite a few but is soon overpowered.’

Nienor hated the way he spoke - as if the elf knew all that there was to know about war. She hated his gleaming silky hair, the way the afternoon sun caressed his youthful features, hated his soft level voice and that grey stare. The young woman hated the memory of his scent. She wanted to, at least.

‘Are you well my friend?’ the elf asked softly, noticing she had buried herself in thought again. He wanted her there, with him. The prince was keen to help this stubborn child, but her unwillingness made it feel as if trying to empty an ocean using his bare hands.

‘So we are friends? I was not aware,’ she added bitingly, the sound of metal sharpening against whetstone chiding along.

The elf flinched imperceptibly. But his next words came calm and placating. ‘I seem to recall we were, once. You have done no harm to me. As far as I know and feel, you are still my friend, if nothing else, and I wish to see you well.’ He had spoken simply and honestly. The fact that he also longed for her in ways she would not hear of, that he had bonded with this mortal woman and would have no other - that was a different tale, which the ellon would keep to himself forever if so she wished.

‘Well. I am glad, *prince,*’ Nienor added, a mock and a challenge in her tone that he did not miss.

But the ellon had no wish to play this game. He closed his eyes, features changing in a slight frown. ‘I am confused. Should I be offended by your use of my title?’ he added in his usual impassive temper, which now irked Nienor to no end.
'I would not think so,' she looked away from him. He had managed to make feel petty. *Wonderfully played.*

He sighed. 'I want to offer you my support. It may aid you in battle, wherever...' , the prince paused, then followed softly '...wherever you will go.'

'I do not need your aid,' Nienor said vehemently, turning sharply to meet his gaze. *The audacity.*

His eyes boring into hers caused a shiver within but also an intense dislike, irked as she was by the power his presence still had over her. One must remember that although the lady Nienor was wise far beyond her human years in some respects, she was still a young woman in the early third decade of her life. Compared to the experience and patience of elves she would be counted a mere youngling easily driven by passion, and this to her was a battle in itself.

'You refuse yet you have not even heard what I have to say,' the ellon insisted mildly, his brow furrowing further.

'Very well,' she sighed. 'I suppose you would have me train with bow and arrow. And I suppose, you would be the one to teach me. Have you not more pressing matters to attend to, prince?'

It took considerable effort to suppress the sudden bile rising within him at her dismissive sarcasm. If anyone were to look at the elf in said moment, the only indication of feeling would be the whiteness of his tightened knuckles.

When he rose to stand rather stiffly Nienor thought she had gotten her wish. To her astonishment, it did not feel as good as she had hoped. In fact, this little revenge was rather painful to witness. But her pride hurt more.

His tone now had a cold edge, his calm unabated. 'I do have plenty to attend to, which is why I would not be your tutor. I would have captain Sonruil teach you. He is one of the most skilled archers in our kingdom, and you would make good use of his knowledge. Should you decide towards it, you may go to him.' If distance was what she wanted, then she would have it. But it pained the elf to see her so cold. He had done her no harm, at least nothing he could have prevented. He wondered if she would ever see this.

Nienor stood silent, only nodding before returning to her task. She sighed in relief when the elf turned on his heel and left her. Truth was, his words made sense. Her weapon skills needed to be more varied. She would train with Sonruil, thus owing nothing to that petulant elf prince. *You loved that petulant elf* her inner voice grinned at her. She wished it away. *Why not train* she thought. Reaching a decision, the young woman rose and paced towards the area where Sonruil stood.

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The arrow flew over the wooden aiming post. Nienor groaned in exasperation.

'Worry not, it will be a while before you can properly master the technique,' Sonruil added assuredly.

'It might be too long a while, captain', she said grimacing at the lone arrow she had managed to send into the aiming post.

Sonruil smiled. *Everything takes time, my lady. Again.*
Her fingers and back ached after her first training session, but as more practice followed the young woman had gotten used to the stance and shooting mode. As the company stopped during their journey she would go and practice even without Sonruil. *At least I am a dedicated pupil, if not a bright one,* Nienor thought bemusedly as she let the arrow fly. It did not go over the aim as the first few times, but it landed far from the other she had shot.

Nienor sighed and lifted the bow again, charging it with another arrow. Just as she was aiming she heard footfalls behind her.

Thinking it was Sonruil, she went on in a mirthful tone. 'Behold, I have managed to aim barely worse than in our last session!'

'Then perhaps we must change your trainer,' she heard a familiar voice which startled her.

The woman sighed in exasperation. Nienor had seen little of the prince lately and now her bearing fell to disarray as she spun around, finding it was indeed him who spoke. *When will it end?*

The elf was looking not towards her, but at the aiming post. 'I believe you need to modify your stance. And you pull at the string too close beneath the arrow. That is why the arrows fly over your aim.'

'You need not trouble yourself prince Legolas, I will manage. Captain Sonruil is a marvelous tutor,' she added airily.

Nienor thought she saw his jaw tightening in displeasure. *Good,* she thought, satisfied with the small victory. Maybe he would leave her be.

'Yet you still aim over your target after five sessions,' he retorted with what she noted to be amusement. 'Perhaps you are distracted during your lessons?' he followed now smiling rather sharply, she thought.

*This damned elf.* 'I am indeed. Distracted. Right in this moment. Because you interrupted me,' the woman muttered haughtily, trying to revert her attention to her posture and failing.

'Words sharper than your daggers,' the elf sighed. 'Nienor, this is no jest,' he added blankly. 'Do you not truly wish to learn that which might save your life?'

Nienor suddenly felt taken back to her childhood when her tutor would chastise her for her lack of attention. Why must he make her feel this way? He had no right. He was not her brother, not her comrade, not even part of her race for Eru's sake! Aye, they had shared a bed, and she had loved him but that had to be forgotten. Yet this elf seemed to take it in stride, speaking to her shamelessly as he did. *As if all is right in the world,* she seethed. And he had done enough already. Nienor was woefully unimpressed with his feigned interest; moreso, it was beginning to grate on her mood.

Taking her silence as a truce, Legolas came closer until they were at arm's length, facing each other. 'Get into your stance.'

'My next lesson is on the morrow,' the woman quipped. But she surprisingly found herself obeying,
although there had been no commanding edge to his tone. After all prince Legolas was not only a seasoned warrior, but also said to be among the most skilled archers in the elven realm; a fact not even Nienor could deny in as much as she had witnessed.

As he examined her stance, the elf drew closer and gently pushed her foot with his, bringing hers closer together. 'Feet should be locked far apart, but not as far.'

Then he moved to stand behind her and pressed his hand against her middle before she could protest, causing her whole body to lean back.

Her breath left her for a moment before the woman regained her footing. The gesture brought her uncomfortably close to him, rousing many different sensations; all of which were most unwelcome. She scowled his way. 'You cannot- Nienor started to say, turning her head to speak but the elf continued his instructions and paying her no mind.

'Your core should be kept hard. It helps lock your stance and makes for better aim,' he explained. She had tensed under his touch and despite himself the elf noticed, with no small amount of trepidation. She was as warm as liquid stone and it burned through the material of their garb, a heat threatening to consume. He succeeded to keep still and focus. 'Now. Aim and place your fingers lower below the arrow when you pull.' The elf still stood behind her, one hand having slipped to rest lightly on her waist, the other gently moving her elbow to a more efficient height. 'Your must pull with your back, not your arm. If done correctly, the position of your elbow should be so.'

Nienor did her best to comply, and as he went a step behind her she sent the arrow shooting. It went the way of the others.

'You need to pull harder. Your back, not your arm,' the elf insisted, closing behind her again and placing his hand lightly against her upper back, trailing the muscles which should be used. His other hand corrected her drawing elbow.

She felt his soft breath nearly grazing her ear and that certainly did not aid the exercise. Nienor stirred to make more space for herself. 'I am not used to someone being so close!' she hissed. 'I cannot shoot straight like this. I ask that you make way,' the woman said determinedly.

'Is this not the way captain Sonruil would teach you?' the elf retorted in that same placid tone that riled her. 'This should be no different. You must be able to shoot under any conditions.' He looked about the silent glade, then spoke softly into her ear, 'There is no such stillness in the midst of battle.'

An unmistakable sort of fire shot through her when she felt the soft whispers brush her ear. *Curse him!*

'Harden your core. Good. Now pull on the string and do not hold it too long after you aim. Simply release,' the elf followed, the words spoken calmly but with intent before he stepped back again.

As in a strangely stilling haze she did so, finding that the arrow at least shot into the aiming post this time.

'Better,' the ellon encouraged, his hands lightly on her shoulders. Nienor was more prone to understanding him through their connection when he tried, and he was happy to see the link was true. As much as he dared, the ellon took a moment to enjoy having her near.

But the woman was beginning to feel too much like a rag doll in his grasp. 'Release me!' she managed sharply, her bow discarded as Nienor tore away from him. She turned around, taking a
few steps back from the one she once loved. They faced each other, both more than a little affected by their meeting and closeness in so long a time.

She recognized his stare; dark and shadowy, the same as from their first night together. Nienor wanted to escape him and this feeling gnawing at her before it took a more powerful hold of her. Without a word she swiftly gathered the weaponry and turned to walk away.

'Why do you recoil from me so?' the elf found himself utter, before having a chance to think. 'I have done nothing to you to deserve it, at least not knowingly.' His voice was still level, but she felt the sad, bitter edge to it. Nienor interrupted her stride, seemingly thinking of a reply.

'Young one,' he followed, slowly walking closer to where she stood. 'I did not mean to leave you, to disappear. Would you at least try to believe me? There were circumstances. I know how you must have felt, as I felt it also. My father, he noticed I grew deeply fond of you, and I had been a careless fool in my behavior around you. He did this and disobeying him as my king would have meant treason. Yet now I wonder at the cost. If it is guilt, then I feel it also, I do. But I want us to find a way through all of this. I always meant to come after you, though I managed later than I had hoped.' Finally. He had long wanted to speak of this to her.

Before the elf could open his mouth to say anything more, the woman spun around. He was surprised at the anger twisting her face.

'Enough lies!' Nienor threw, making a swift motion with her hand. 'At least... have some semblance of respect now, if you did not before.' How much longer will I have to evade him? 'You say these words of wanting me well, caring for me, yet before now here you were, trying to seduce me again!'

'Trying to seduce you?' the elf asked incredulously, and a mirthless laughter escaped him at her misinterpretation. He took another step towards her. 'Trust me my friend, I was in no position for such a feat.'

In her turbulent state, Nienor took his laughter as a means of offense, to taunt her uneasiness. The sound she once loved rang in her ears in mockery. Surely, this elf was of a great and noble House of elf lords, and among the Firstborn, but who in Arda did he think he was, toying with her this way?

Steeling herself, her hands balling into fists, the woman let her words spill as fire speaking what had been on her mind from the day she left Lasgalen. 'Hear this, elf!' she quipped. 'Do not presume to approach or touch me again,' Nienor spoke trembling in anger, even as she saw him paling. 'You have done enough to last me a lifetime and I thoroughly regret it. Kindly take yourself back to where your...,' she emphasized scornfully, 'charms will be better received.' With this the woman turned her back on him once more and paced away hurriedly, determined to have that be the last of it.

By now the ellon had had enough. As glass shatters against stone, so did his patience and self control. He sensed her struggle, but why was she so determined to always antagonize him when he was trying to mend her trust? To lock him on the outside despite them having shared something they both knew was still there, in spite of him having done nothing more than his duty? To always cause them both pain in this manner? Thoughts whirling and all his attained elvish calm forgotten, he found his feet swiftly taking him towards his pitiless lover.

Faster than Nienor could react the ellon twisted her around, and such was the momentum that she crashed into him. Taken aback, the woman tried to remove herself from his embrace but utterly failed. He was strong, she realized. Inhumanely so. But he had never used it on her until now. The
Elon leaned in and locked her chin between his fingers, so Nienor had no choice but to look him in the eye.

'Unhand me!' she threw angrily into his face, trying to withstand the withering look he was giving her. She would not cower before him, irate immortal elf lord or no.

He smiled but it did not reach his eyes. With his other hand the prince now held her to him, locking both her arms behind her back. The elf then roughly brushed his finger along her lower lip, ignoring her weak struggle. His gaze, now dark as a tempest, made him seem a feral herald of nature's darkness. She remembered that in spite of the resemblance he was no human, but a creature, strange and unpredictable, nearly ancient compared to her. Who had her trapped.

'I do not speak lies,' she then heard the elf say through gritted teeth. He felt his Silvan side rise to control and he closed his eyes briefly in an effort to quell its cold fire. 'If you have doubts as to my words, I would show you.'

She froze. For the first time Nienor noticed a wild, fierce glimmer in his eyes. It brought forth a striking likeness to his father. She was not afraid, somehow the woman felt he would never harm her, but she felt overcome. Overcome by him and the bellowing desire riling inside of her at his closeness. Nienor had missed him more than she liked to admit to herself, and now it became clear as to how much. Sparse tears of frustration appeared in her eyes as the woman felt her body cease its struggling, softening against him.

'You have no right! Cease this at once!' Nienor tried, even with the fight leaving her.

Legolas regarded her face for a moment longer. In that dark glimmer she saw something else. A hunger, something deeper and more relentless than what Nienor had seen in the eyes of anyone before.

'Not this time,' he said as he leaned in and captured her mouth.

Her reality shifted at the taste of him. His kiss was burning, a desperation in the pressure of his lips on hers which brought her to her knees. It was akin to a sweet poison seeping into her veins, wringing the life out of her. And she wanted to die this way.

'I only want you to relent,' the elf then soothed, his fingers lightly placed under her chin. 'I would never do any harm unto you, Nienor. You know this in your heart. Cease this prideful game.' Then his lips were on hers again. He released her wrists, sensing he was losing himself and not wanting to bruise her.

All her suppressed longing for him overflowed within until soon Nienor had little use for her arms, save for wrapping them around his neck. 'You have won,' she managed before she was lost to his touch, ere clutching, caressing and pulling at him furiously all at the same time while she felt everything spin about her.

Himself rather dazed and with the shadow of a smile on his features, the ellon lifted her to him, her legs wrapping around him while he led them towards a secluded shadowed place in the clearing. Gently but firmly he lay her down onto the rich mossy ground, joining her side and soon his hand was slowly sliding over her thigh and then up over the rest of her, feeling every curve.

She only knew him, only felt him. His nimble fingers tucking away at her clothes revealed her bare skin, promptly regaled with searing kisses, and Nienor felt fiercely aware of how much he truly desired her. Then his hand was under her linen shirt caressing its way down her back, causing her to arch like a strung bow into him. He continued to unravel her clothing, her thighs and legs falling
prey to his touch. This mortal... his mortal, was so beautiful, like a forest spirit strewn in the grass, lost and inviting. Nienor wasted no time undoing his own garments in fast motions until there was nothing between them.

'Do you still think me a liar?' the elf whispered against her lips, crushing her against him.

Nienor made no reply, struggling to suppress a gasp when she felt him enveloping her. Her eyes rolled to the back of her head in delight, then closed.

He ceased at seeing her expression: eyes closed in a frown, her lip caught between her teeth. 'Am I hurting you?' the ellon asked worriedly, thinking his need for her had made his movements too hurried.

Nienor opened her eyes. 'Nay,' she breathed earnestly. 'Nay,' she repeated before sucking on his lip hungrily. 'Please, do not stop,' she pleaded, arching her hips sharply to meet him half way.

He hissed at the sudden jolt of pleasure, his forehead resting against hers. 'Never,' he said when he could form words again, a forlorn smile on him. It was overwhelmingly intense to his already heightened senses, but he thirsted for more of her. He took both her hands, fingers entwining. Never releasing her from his gaze the elf brought her arms to rest above her head and he continued, until he was so deep inside of her it broke her restraint and Nienor was moaning in pleasure against his mouth. He was ruining her in ways she never knew.

Attuned to what she needed the ellon then released her arms, his hand reaching under her to bring her even closer against him. She gasped, her body caught in a warming tremor.

'Does it please you so?' he whispered, receiving an eager nod in response. Resting on his other arm for better leverage he repeated the motion; slowly at first, only to enjoy the sounds he wrought from her; music to his ears; and soon they fell into a steady cadence, their breathing and heartbeat mingling into one. Her soft curves firmly pressed against his hard body to perfection, it was the sea and the earth, fire and air intermingled at the tips of their fingers.

It was different compared to the first time, there was more fire and more intent. And still she wanted more. The unsettling sensations in her core were at last appeased when she had felt him inside of her. Nienor was now pulling at his hair so hard he felt she might rip it off, and little did he care.

She pushed herself into him suddenly, bringing him deeper than he thought possible.

'Nienor!' he gasped against her mouth, stilling his kiss. They stood like so, unmoving, entwined with each other. His lips then formed a smile as the elf reveled in the sight of her eyes glazed with desire, darkened from the dilation of their black center. He tasted her again, feeling her writhe against him, wanting him to continue.

'Patience, my love,' the prince grinned against her mouth. 'Only a respite,' he cooed. But he barely contained the urge to take his mortal wife fast and harsh, to give her what she wanted and beyond, to hear her scream and beg until she soared. His eyes fluttered closed. He loved to make her feel this way and wished they had come to a sooner realization of how simple it was to be this close.

Everything inside of her felt about to shatter when her lover started moving away, slowly enjoying her, before drawing back into her swiftly. He did so again, and again, playing a game he would soon lose, whispering his love for her in hushed melodious words that were her undoing. He kept to his pace, slowly but surely becoming more persistent, more demanding. He wanted to give her all of himself, wanted her to surrender completely to the building pleasure they were creating
together; though his own restraint was hard to maintain with her ever loving moans, her arms around his neck, in his hair, roaming all over him, caressing and feeling. Her mouth so slick and wet against his. How magnificent she was, motioning her body and dancing along with his, willing him to never cease loving her. And he did not, not until he felt her fracturing in bliss under him, grasping him so tightly she left marks on his back and shoulder. Nothing had ever felt like this. He then seized her hips and dove into her as fast as rivers in spring until he joined her, and they both soared before crashing back down in each other's arms.

At the end of it all Nienor lay tangled with her elf, still brushing gentle kisses wherever they would land and wondering how she had lived without him close for so long.

'There is something else I must tell you,' he followed after some time.

She was intrigued and overjoyed at what he conveyed their union to mean; a bond, a vow of togetherness, essentially a union of fates akin to marriage. Yet she was not bound by anything unless it was of her choosing. Despite his words she saw it in his eyes, a lovingly destitute plea for her to accept him as hers. And there was nothing more she wanted.

'You already know. You have always known. It can be no other way now,' she took his hand in hers and pressed lovingly.

He had not told her of grief, of what would happen eventually due to such a union. The elf wanted to spare her the worry, the fear that came with the notion that once she was gone, he would not last much longer either. All in due time. The coming dawn and all it meant seemed far away from them.
The following day found them on the road once more. The convoy had a five day journey ahead of them until they reached the halls of the Elven King. Nienor was riding to the front alongside other elleth she had befriended during her time spent within the fortress of Aegas'Annan. Now it must be said, her current state of mind was what could only be described as a haze, a dream, where she performed all of the mechanical functions of movement yet her mind drifted to events linked to the subject of her affections, and especially the events of the previous night.

They had returned to the encampment separately of course. To prevent any cause for suspicion, Nienor had made a point of having strayed looking for healing herbs after her archery practice late into the evening. As such she did bring strains of athelas and marenith back, as many as she and the elf could find. Now the only indication of her thoughts was a blush which made itself apparent every so often.

Nienor looked ahead to where the prince rode with Sonruil, the two ellons seemingly engaged in idle conversation. For obvious reasons they could not be seen together at length. He would at times ride to the end of the column to assess the safety of the rearguard and the young woman never missed the brief exchange they had when the prince rode past her mount. His face was expressionless and bore the commanding posture he had in his official role, but Nienor felt aught in his gaze which was solely hers. A shimmer of knowing glee.

As evening came the convoy once again stopped for the night and most were made busy with raising another makeshift camp, while others were attending to the still wounded from the previous battle. Nienor had assisted the healers as she could and late when all tasks were done, she joined the company around the warmth of a recently raised fire. The sound of softly sung tunes and the effects of the elvish wine eased her mood. She gazed into the flames, the sounds of the two elvish dialects mingling and filling her ears with their musicality. She saw him seated cross legged across the fire among other elven rangers of his company. His features betrayed nothing as he seemed to thoughtfully listen to recounts from a dark haired ellon sitting beside him. Then another elf interjected and the three of them burst into light laughter. A laughter warming her inside.

Perfect. Perhaps it was the strength of the wine or perhaps the euphoria of their recent reunion, but she could scarcely tear her vision away from him, try as she might. She drank in the way light from the fire played across his face, illuminating his visage with an even more regal glow.

His gaze shifted and met hers for a brief moment. The prince took a sip of wine, gazing at her over the rim of his goblet before turning his attention back to the speaker he had been engaged with. Nothing had betrayed any meaning, but the flutter in her inner recesses was there, causing the dreaded blush to make itself known.

I am hopeless when it comes to you her better judgement chastised her self, she glad indeed for the darkness.

After some time warming to the fire the young woman felt she needed to be alone with herself, to think, to ease her mind. She rose and set forth towards the solace of the trees without. As she descended farther into the surrounding forest leaving the light of the fire behind her, she indeed started to feel the chill of the night. Gazing far towards the dark mountains, she finally let herself drop lazily against a tree trunk, eyes closed in respite. A deep sigh escaped her, the recent events infusing her mind. Her thoughts flew to blue eyes, and moments which made her body tense and her heartbeat quicken. More time had passed as she stood alone with her thoughts when she heard twigs breaking under steps.
'You left so soon,' came the voice she knew so well, and her eyes locked with blue fathoms. The
prince of Eryn Lasgalen, otherwise known as bittersweet torture, stood before her with a mirthful
expression on his ageless face.

She tilted her head slightly. 'It felt as if the cold forest air would do me a world of good, my lord.
And I see your tracking skills are excellent,' she added smiling at him. Different to the previous
times she had used his title, this time it sounded more as a desire than anything coming from her
lips. It also helped to keep appearances should they be overheard.

'Walk with me,' the ellon said evenly, offering her a hand to raise herself. She accepted it gladly
and was instantly pulled into him but for a moment before she regained her footing.

'Overusing your abilities, are you not?' she gasped, her eyes caught by the quiver of his lips, her
breathing forgotten as he held her. 'I do not require so much force, my lord,' she said, a wolfish grin
playing across her features while she pried herself from him, turning to walk ahead.

'Perhaps,' he followed, his tone mirroring hers. 'But that was barely what I would call much.' She
smiled, knowing it was the truth, at least by elven standards.

They walked for a while in silent companionship, Nienor always one step ahead.

'So if I may be so bold, what is your actual age, prince Legolas?' she broke the silence in a playful
tone. 'I do not believe we ever discussed this.'

'I am far older than you would give me credit for, my lady,' he uttered behind her, a brief smile on
his features.

'Oh, is that your usual answer so as not to frighten us mortals away?'

'Are you easily frightened?' his tone was unreadable.

'Not by this,' she said over her shoulder.

'Hmm.'

More silence followed the noncommittal sound.

'Perchance, you have any pertinent existential advice to share with this poor mortal before you?'

When no reply came, she turned around to face him, her eyes now long accustomed to the
darkness. He had been seemingly lost in thought, his head slightly bowed.

'Well? May I not be graced with an answer? It is safe to say it is a bit late for me to flee from you,
even if you were to tell me you broke bread with my ancestors,' she jested as she closed the space
between them. Facing him closely, she observed his silence and piercing gaze for a moment before
she noticed that glimmer. He inched closer to her and his hand reached to slowly twirl a wavy
strand of her hair around his finger. His fingers moved slowly, almost reverently, his touch so light.

'I have missed you today,' the elf said, so quietly she wondered if she had dreamt it. His gaze was
fiery but the worry marring his features was telling. 'So much,' he repeated as for himself,
encircling her waist with his other arm and bringing her in until she was flush against him. 'To see
you, regard you as if we were merely acquaintances... not the easiest feat, I must admit.'

'Yet it is a ruse we would continue even after our journey ends,' she whispered, taking from his
body heat. What would they do about this mess? She placed her hands on his chest. So tense. She
found his lips almost timidly, as if they were together alone for the first time. As ever he tasted good, the fruity aroma of the strong wine only serving to entice her. Ending the kiss, she buried her head into his chest.

'We cannot hide when we return. They must know,' the ellon added. 'I will find a way to deal with my father and will aid you with Ereldur. Let us discuss more at length before we arrive. My mind is reeling as to the best approach still.'

She saw so much determination in his gaze that it partly scared her. And partly made her throw him down there and then, and show him what he made of her.

'I cannot think of him. Please, not now.'

'By our elven customs, you and I are now bound together. There is not much, to my knowledge, to be done against that.'

Ereldur. The King. Nienor trembled at the prospect that awaited them. Her future had turned in on itself in nary a few moon turns.

'Be still, all will be well,' he soothed, his hearing having perceived her ragged heartbeat.

'Legolas I -'

'I do like hearing my birth name from your lips,' he whispered, now grinning languidly in a seeming change of tone. 'Especially since it took you a while to start using it.'

'Please focus!' she added, slapping at his chest in mock seriousness.

'I cannot help it. I am still trying to determine how your bewitching has worked to make a slave out of me. A happy slave, but a slave nonetheless.'

She grinned, as she did not feel much different when it came to him. 'Bewitched, surely. By a lowly mortal?'

'If it were impossible our lives would be infinitely less complicated, Nienor of Garolin,' he jested.

She kissed him deeply then for a long while, ending it with a gentle bite on his lower lip.

He closed his eyes to fully enjoy her ministrations, etching the moment to memory. 'We have so little time,' the ellon then added, searching her eyes. 'I must return to the encampment sooner than later.'

'It was my intent to go for a night swim in the lake we passed to the west of here,' she cooed.

'Are you truly intent on preventing my rest for tonight? As that is surely all I will think of now.'

The mortal smiled beguilingly. 'Far from me. Besides, I trust your elvish resilience,' she playfully pulled at the leather strap adorning his chest.

'I need you,' he whispered. His tone had a finality to it which pulsed through her.

'And I you,' the young woman replied in kind, the silence permeated by nothing but the faraway sound of a wolf wailing.

With this Nienor slowly pried herself from his arms and paced ahead into the direction of the aforementioned pool. When they reached the water she stopped to regard it. It seemed deep enough
for a swim. She turned her back to him with a smile and began to remove her garb. Once done she dove into the water and took a turn swimming to the other side before returning to the lake bank, where he stood.

The cold seeped through her skin, helping to calm her senses. Nienor saw him stood there regarding her with a hidden smile, and she decided he would not wait long. When she emerged from the shallows her pale skin was glistening. Water rivulets made their way down her neck and chest, following her rounded globes, peaked from the cold.

He saw it all, even in the dim moonlight. He stood still as a statue, eyes trailing over the woman he loved as she approached.

Nienor pressed herself against her elf taking in the delicious slick sheen of his skin, become brighter with the faint rays above; she began to unfasten the straps holding his daggers. They fell discarded into the grass. Smiling and never breaking his gaze she reached and unfastened his belt, letting it fall to the ground. The elf then removed his tunic and placed it over her shoulders, leaving him in a silken long shirt at which his wife pulled to lure him down with her.

'My Nienor... ' his eyes lightened. 'Nee,' he murmured with a grin, bringing her into his lap. 'I hereby dub thee lady Nee.'

She smiled at the endearment. 'If that is your wish,' the woman followed as she spared no time in leaning in to pursue the shell of his ear with her lips.

In his surprise the elf grasped her, fingers caught in her thick soft hair, and drew her head back gently so she would look at him. 'You do seem to enjoy torturing me like this,' he said, a kiss on her chin the retort for the offence.

'What would it take to bring you to bliss?' his bonded wondered, pulling her head from his light hold, saw him quirkling an eyebrow. She was a world of curiosity. Elvish ears sensitivity was a topic both unusual and endearing to her. And if Nienor had her way, another tool to show this elf she loved how much she wanted him.

He pondered, that grin ever present. She wanted to kiss it.

'Not very much. You almost managed during your first ill fated contact.' His grin widened as the ellon recalled her curiosity of him back when they sparred, and how shockingly good it felt to be touched by her then.

'May I try again?' Nienor gushed, the corners of her lips twisting upwards sheepishly.

The elf fixed her with that same darkened gaze full of an intensity that leveled her, that dared her. Taking this as consent, she leaned into him and placed a kiss on his jaw, slowly tracing down the side of his neck and then up once more, very slowly, until she reached his left ear. She felt him tensing when her lower lip made a gentle sweep over the outer shell. Pleased, she moved to kiss him on the lips. His body felt like burning stone against hers as the ellon drew her closer, and it made her even bolder. She followed her pursuit by trailing her lower lip over the tip of his ear. His fingers now dug into her thighs, and she heard her lover whisper aught she barely heard, his breathing now irregular.

'Avo garo...,' she heard him utter. 'Do not,' he whispered again, for her to understand. But Nienor never was one to turn back from a dare and wanted to see how far she could go before she saw what lay beyond his warning. She was back to circling his other ear with her lips when he gasped and suddenly turned her on her back. Surprised and delighted, she posed no resistance.
The Silvan side that took over his senses was only visible in the swiftness his moves now took, and in the wild, inlight glimmer in his eyes. Nienor was both thrilled and afraid at what she saw. He trapped her and made love to her in very swift, paced movements, not saying a word. Not uttering a sigh. Not that she minded this side of him. In fact, she found it very much to her liking. His fingers were now caught in her tresses, pinning her head down to prey on her sensitive neck. He did this knowingly, stopping at times as if to calm her senses before starting anew. After a few times of this she felt brimming bliss coil inside as he kept moving into her. Her legs tightened around him.

'Please,' the young woman breathed against his lips. Her only response was a swifter pace which left her breathless soon enough. He had found his release not much after, still holding her tight a good time following.

'Now I trust, you will be able to rest?' the woman spoke in the silence that followed, seeing him come back to his senses.

'I needs must try,' he said smiling against her neck. This was indeed the remedy which helped keep his ruminating thoughts at bay. Her. The feel of her, nothing between them but skin and warmth.

To the west side of where the travelers were located, a day as the crow flies, a band of shadows were swiftly moving into the night.
Mayhem

The first rays shone through the forest, illuminating the foliage a brighter, even more lavish green. They had been traveling for most of the day.

The prince was riding in silence, his thoughts astray. Nienor was riding close behind with the healers, not as far from where he rode this time. His sensitive hearing enabled him to discern fragments of their conversation, smiling to himself whenever he heard her voice.

Yet now something else was the main focus of his thoughts. Before them, tall and ominous stood the Mirkwood mountains which they had to pass through to reach the Elven king's halls.

*Emyn Duir. We must be on guard.* It was common knowledge that these mountains were unsafe for weary travelers, with goblins inhabiting the hidden slopes and caves. He knew how treacherous the path ahead lay and unease took hold of him.

'Belegon,' he called out to one of the scouts who was reaching him from afar. He had gone ahead to assess clearance of the path.

'My lord,' the ellon acknowledged the prince with a nod.

'Report.'

'Aye, tis quiet,' Belegon said as he spurned his horse alongside the prince's. 'I surmise we should be safe for the next portion. I could neither hear nor see anything unusual to make us wary. For now.'

'Very well. Please reconnoitre every other hour,' then turning to Sonruil he urged 'Let us have the archers ready, captain. I do not trust this quietus,' he said, his eyes on their surroundings. Sonruil nodded before setting forth to carry out the orders.

Legolas then spurned his horse and headed to the back of the column, as he had done many times before. He caught her gaze as she turned from speaking with Eredhel, the healer who had taught the woman most of what she knew of elvish medicine. It lasted but a moment, but it gave him something of her.

'How fierce and concerned the prince looks,' Eredhel suddenly said, waking Nienor from her reverie. At first a slight blush spread over her features and her pulse quickened, thinking the elleth might have seen their quick exchange.

'...Truly you think so?' she tried offhandedly.

'I see it in their eyes. The scouts. Let us hope we will pass the path through the mountains safely. We do have the best guards on hand,' the elleth followed smiling.

Nienor nodded in agreement, returning to her thoughts. She was full of doubt once more. One can say it never loosened its grip on her. She knew she could not be without him. But as it was, her people's alliance with the elves of Mirkwood hung by a thread, all in thanks to her actions. The king would surely not bless their union, especially considering his actions thus far. And guilt still plagued her mind. *Though, what we had done would traditionally seal an alliance, not destroy it. Were I not human and fleeting. And already betrothed,* another thought whispered her.

They were now well into the mountain path, surrounded by grey slopes from either side. The only sounds heard were those of hooves hitting stone, their echo being thrown off either side of the
cliffs.

They had been riding for the better part of the day, and had yet four days to travel until they would exit the mountain path, which now widened considerably. A pine forest could be discerned to their right, seemingly endless at the foot of the mountains.

'Captain,' the prince called to Sonruil. 'There is a clearing to the east of our position. We shall stop for rest and continue on the morrow.'

His second in command nodded and set about to relay the orders. Everyone took to the task and turned their horses to the direction they were led to.

As evening closed on the mountains, a chill fell on the forest which seemed to make the starry sky shine even brighter.

Having helped the others, Nienor was now admiring the celestial bodies above as she pulled her hooded cape tighter over her shoulders.

'Do not stray,' she heard his voice behind her without preamble. Turning, she saw the prince, seemingly examining an arrow fletching in his hand, his expression giving nothing away. Yet she could feel it in the softness of his voice. Concern. And something else.

'It is best to be wary in this region,' he continued, his eyes now trailing over her face as he spoke. She smiled and bowed her head in acknowledgement.

'Not a worry, my lord. I understand.' We shall not have a chance to meet this night. He bowed to her curtly in turn and set about in the direction of his company. He was about to reach them when something hissed past his ear. He turned swiftly to see a crude black arrow embedded in the nearby trunk. A near miss.

'Orc!' the prince cried to the others, not wasting a breath as he pulled his daggers from their sheaths.

'Another ambush, ready yourselves!' Sonruil then shouted. Guards took to arms, while archers hauled themselves up into the trees to strike down the foe from above. Others ran to encircle the weaponless ones.

And then the screams started.

Nienor did not realize when she was pushed roughly aside by something hard and cold. She swiftly rolled away on the ground before an axe was embedded where her torso had been. Looking up and around, shadows with gnarling teeth were surrounding them, attacking and wreaking havoc among the small camp.

My daggers are in the tent! she realized in horror, running towards that direction before something knocked the breath out of her. She fell to the ground again. Before her stood not an orc, but an enormous black goblin whose rusty sword was raised in attack. It put its foot on top of her chest, and she felt as if her rib cage would crash in on itself when the beast fell to the side. Her vision blurred as Sonruil lifted her and pushed her towards a direction different than the one she was headed to.

'My lady you must not linger!' he shoved her aside as his sword continued to block left and right.

Legolas. Wildly she looked around, trying to find him among the bedlam. Bodies were already multiplying on the forest floor. Goblin, orc, but most were elves. The screeches of the creatures
were terrible, and she felt sick as she realized their group was sorely outnumbered.

'Legolas!' she yelled for him, propriety being last on her mind. Yet she could not see him. It was all happening too fast. The small campfire previously started by the elves now illuminated the faces of the fallen in grizzly lights, their eyes still forever. Her face was caked with dust and her eyes stung. She tried to follow Sonruil but could see no sign of the prince.

She barely avoided a scimitar as it swung at her head and she jumped out of her wits when she felt a hand grasp her arm roughly. Spinning around she was met face to face with him, relief washing over but for a moment. She gasped at what she saw. His face was smeared with black blood as well as red, his eyes wild.

'Listen to me, you must run... there are too many of them,' the ellon spoke swiftly in labored breaths. 'They surely followed us for days and more foul ones must have descended from the mountains. I do not know what the enemy is planning with this move but my father must be warned in time. Find a horse if you can. Ride to our Halls. If not, travel by day on foot with caution. Relay to the king our lands have been invaded by greater numbers of beasts of the enemy and tell him I -'

'What are you saying? I will not leave you!' she interrupted frantically, gripping his tunic before realizing he was leaning into her unusually, holding his side. 'You are wounded! Legolas-'

'Nee, please!' he gritted. 'There is no time. They have killed most of our companions. I would never ask this of you but there is no one else. You must-'

Before he could finish three goblins were upon them, weapons raised. The ellon turned in time to repel them while Nienor fell to her hands and knees struggling to find any sort of weapon on the ground for herself. As she stumbled she found and pulled a blade from one of the fallen. She froze for a moment as she looked upon the body. Sonruil. Unmoving. Eyes glazed over. Tears prickled her eyes as she turned away in haste, aiming to help the prince in his efforts against the beasts. She threw herself at one of their opponents, trying to throw the goblin off balance with her body.

'Why do you not listen?!' the ellon cried to the woman as he slashed left and right, trying to reach her. A heavy red pattern now covered his left side, right below his ribs. Yet he did not feel pain. He could only see her small form, unused to the throes of battle, trying to wield a sword twice her capacity.

A snarl was heard from behind them, and then black speech mingled with the common tongue.

'This is the princeling. Take him. Kill the female.'

'Nienor run!' the ellon cried to her, his voice now hoarse as he realized their target was he. 'Go for Manwē's sake!' he insisted, felling one enemy.

'I will-,' she ground in response and tried lifting the heavy sword to parry '-not abandon you!' she screamed and turned towards him but was met face to snout with a black muzzle and yellow slitted pupils.

The goblin growled at her and she almost fainted at its reeking breath. She tried to escape but it took her by the neck and started squeezing so hard she fell to her knees, her vision blurring.

'He seems to care about this wench boys,' the goblin grinned as it pushed its slimy maw into her face. She was now clawing at his grip to no avail.

'Heed! Elf scum! Yield else you want the female to succumb,' it cried to the ellon, Nienor gasping
for air in its hold.

Legolas threw her a wild look, distracted for a moment when he noticed her thrashing and choking under the beast's hold. And one moment was all it took. Something came down heavily upon him, clouding his mind as he lost control of his limbs. He next felt the ground against his knees, and the warmth of liquid trailing along his jaw. With one last blurry look into Nienor's direction, he heard her stifled scream. And then all went black.
He opened his eyes, his surroundings still barely discernible. As his vision cleared, more sensations followed. Pain - yes, there was pain. Dull at first but growing in intensity with every moment. His head felt as if it would leave his shoulders, a sharp ache to the right side making itself known. It was also cold. He felt a hard, humid surface beneath him. Stone. He could now discern a dark rocky ceiling. A cave. I am in a cave he thought bitterly.

'Thank the Valar!' he heard her voice and felt her warmth at his side. The elf looked to where her voice came from and saw his bonded kneeling beside him, her features marred by worry. Short lived relief washed over him before he remembered the recent turn of events.

'Nee,' he whispered faintly 'Are you unharmed, did they-

'Aye I am well,' she replied reassuringly and he felt her palm on his face, small and warm. 'They must have carried us... here. Wherever here is. You were struck and fell. They took you and spared me also, for whatever reason. I thought that was to be my end there and then.'

Closing his eyes, he tried to rise and managed though not without considerable effort. His side was stiff and heinously throbbing with pain. The elf pulled himself upward to rest with his back against the nearest wall. He felt for the leather strap holding his daggers. Taken my weapons of course. He did not want her to sense how weak and powerless he actually felt. How hopeless their situation seemed. But she had been utterly rash and thoughtless in her actions.

'For whatever reason?' he snapped. 'Nienor, they spared you to torture me, should they sense our connection,' he then spoke quietly, staring ahead into the darkness. 'I can think of no other reason than to have their fill of you once they have finished.' He knew his words were heavy and regretted them as they were uttered. They felt like sand in his mouth. But that was the truth of it. No mercy was to be expected from these foul creatures.

Being female was often the worst of it. She had seen this first hand the time the orc had captured her during the hunt in Lasgalen. She should have known better. Anger. Yes, there was anger. At her or at himself, he was not sure.

Nienor regarded him closely, as much as the darkness allowed. His hair was mottled with dry blood and dirt. His face was no better. The wound in his side still bled fresh through his tunic. She bit her lip to prevent the heavy feeling in her chest threatening to break her.

'Remember yourself Nienor, he does not need to see your weakness as well. Instead she continued speaking.

'They carried us through a passage within these mountains, but I know not where, as I was blindfolded. I only felt the light dissipate and knew we went deeper into the cliffs and in the
bowels of the mountain when the air suddenly turned cold.'

The ellon felt his heart clench in a vice at seeing her kneel in this cursed place. She was trapped. She should have been far away.

'Please, do not be upset,' the woman placated. 'I feel the disappointment behind your words. I am at fault I admit, but I...' she trailed off, realizing she had no excuse in actuality.

'Why did you not do as I said?' he countered then so harshly it startled her. But his resolve weakened upon seeing the tremble to her lip and the welling in her eyes.

'I could not,' she murmured as she regarded her hands.

'You could not? Follow my lead? You thought you would do better,' he added mockingly. He tried to control his simmering anger at the futility of her actions. 'Now nobody knows what had passed or even where to start looking.'

She kept silent. The ellon sighed heavily and let his head rest against the rough wall.

'Perhaps...perhaps others still live. If so they will surely venture to Lasgalen to warn the king.'

'Surely,' Legolas added bitterly, his voice seeping with regret.

'I see your stand, but you are being unfair.' Undeterred by his smoldering gaze, she continued. 'How could I leave you to your fate, wounded and alone?' she said when it was clear he would not continue. 'It would be the death of me. Perhaps not immediately, but it would follow me for the rest of my days.' She edged closer to him, reached and tucked a strand of bloodied hair behind his ear. 'I will meet whatever end-

'You acted like a foolish child,' he insisted. Her touch was akin to a balm, a relief he sorely missed. She would have reacted in defense at his words, had it not been for his eyes which spoke of the worry he felt. So she chose to accept his chastisement.

'How is your side?' she instead tried and her eyes skimmed over his injury.

'I have had worse wounds,' the ellon muttered grimly. But Nienor was undeterred.

'I must dress it somehow. There is no light but I can try. Please,' she insisted seeing as he might refuse 'before the beasts return.'

Without waiting for an answer, she placed her hands on him and started to slowly remove the soft material of his tunic and shirt. He complied in the end, grimacing when she removed the cloth that stuck to the open gash. His eyes could discern it was dark and fairly deep.

They were mostly enveloped in darkness, the only source of light being a dull torch at the end of what seemed to be a corridor hewn in the stone. The entrance to their confinement was held by thick crude bars which blocked their escape. As she worked, the ellon scanned everything, trying to capture any detail that might aid an escape. *There is fire, thus clearly we will not be alone for long.* Yet indeed his hearing could not discern the sound of footsteps or anything living other than they. His senses felt smothered and dull in this place below the world.

Having removed his tunic and shirt, Nienor crafted a makeshift dressing by ripping narrow strands from the latter. She then bound his wound around as best she could to curb further bleeding.

'There, this is all I can do. Oh how I wish I had dried athelas weed at hand! You must fasten your
tunic back on.' Legolas complied once more, part of him proud at all she had learned of the healing methods employed by his kin.

'It will heal. Our bodies regenerate at a much faster pace, tis one of the gifts bestowed upon us.'

Nienor nodded with a trace of a smile. 'So I have been told.' She placed a hand to his forehead. Her smile left her face when she remembered Eredhel. What had become of her friend? Moments passed in silence before she ventured to speak.

'I do wonder what they will do with us. I hear no sound, nor do I know how much we traveled to reach this place. It is as if we were abandoned here.'

'I can only assume the worst. They were looking for me. Knew my identity and whereabouts. I shudder to think of it, but the enemy seems to have a strategy beyond skirmishes and terror displays. ' He lowered his head in defeat. 'I have failed them. I was supposed to lead them home, but I did not see the signs. We should never have stopped.'

Nienor shuddered in memory of Sonruil and most of their companions, their lifeless forms upon the ground adorning the forest floor. Timeless beings whose lives had been savagely cut short. Have any managed to escape? Even now her insides churned in remembrance of the screams.

'You could not have known. Is it not pointless to blame yourself for the malice of the enemy?' she hedged in weak consolation.

Icy blue eyes bore into hers.

'You of all beings I know ought to be aware of the weight of responsibility your blood carries. To lead is to surrender to sacrifice as well as both the victory and the blame of one's people. I am not my father and never will be. Nor do I wish it. However, I am bound to part of my destiny and I accepted this long ago. Only I...' he trailed off, seemingly hesitant, and looked away.

'Aye?' How unusual it was that she felt his feelings. For the life of her she did not understand how, but they were surely coming from him. A state of joy, regret and determination surged through, making her consider the actual depth of their bond. It was strong, if the overwhelming need to keep him safe was anything to go by.

'Only I never expected you,' the elf added quietly.

'Then I have also failed them,' she looked away.

He darkened at the implication of her words. 'You assume... and correctly so,' he reasoned, 'that Eredur will dissolve the alliance between your people, rendering your land alone and crippled in front of the onslaught.'

'And yet... I hold no regrets about you and I,' Nienor said, her averted gaze studying the cavern walls.

'None at all?' the ellon dared, a faint smile gracing his features.

'None,' she said determinedly. 'My conscience tells me I should, and I do feel guilt to some degree. But naught else. I only want you by my side.'

The words kindled the fire of devotion in his chest. He reached for her hand and pressed it in his own. 'Nienor of Garolin, remember this. You are not alone, I will do everything in my power to ensure this. You have the name and protection of my House. Provided we escape this ordeal with
our lives, of course.' Promises easily given. He had little hope they would, but she did not have to see any more of it. And there was something else requiring their attention. 'With regards to our current predicament I must ask that you listen to me closely. And do as I say. Can you promise me this?'

Her head had come to rest against his chest, the sound of his voice a pleasant music to her senses. But at the question she found that words remained trapped in her throat.

'Nee, do I have your word?' She noted the frustrated edge to his tone as he took her by the shoulders to face him. 'That you will listen to me and do as I say in the matter I am about to discuss. You once asked me how old I was. In over a thousand years I have learned much and while I loathe to use this in support of my argument, I know not what else to tell you to make you understand. I have seen many battles, and have had dealings with these wretches many a time. There are patterns always followed.'

Her eyes met his as the meaning of his words sank in and the elf almost smiled at her perplexed expression.

She blinked in disbelief. Nienor knew he must be far older than she owed to his race, though still young compared to others of his kin. But to number a thousand years? The enormity of it erupted in her mind. Trapped as they were in the sunless bowels of the mountain, the woman realized just then what this elf chose when he bonded with a mortal. When they chose each other. She was fleeting compared to him. How could he love her? She was imperfect, weak, prone to illness and old age will take her. A sudden surge of humility filled her.

As if reading her thoughts, his hand moved to cup her face. 'Do not,' he smiled, stilling her distressing thoughts. After a while he continued. 'They surely want information, which they must not obtain under any circumstances. This implies by threat of torture- no, do not be frightened,' he added when he sensed the woman tense in his hold. 'This is more important than my life. Whatever they threaten to do, you must not give them what they seek. You and I are nothing to each other, do you understand?'

'I understand,' she offered meekly. How would she achieve this?

The elf was about to continue when they heard the familiar sound of footsteps. Multiple and heavy. Nienor froze with fear. With one last embrace the ellon shifted away from her. 'Be strong, young one. I am here.'
Trials

*How odious they are,* the thought came unbidden to Nienor as she stared wide eyed at the figures now outside the cell of their confinement. The small enclosure was now filling with the scent of decay and acrid sweat. Their scent. The woman stood, her back pressed against the wall, tendrils of fear keeping her still. *This is evil in the flesh we are against.* Escape seemed improbable. She tried not to look at the elf, in keeping to his instructions. To show nothing that would suggest strong feelings for each other. No weakness the enemy could exploit.

Three orc had presently entered the cell, all of them armed.

'Well well, the little elflings are awake. Look Grotak, that one is fixing you with a stare - I think it fancies you!' the first orc grunted maliciously.

'Do not be daft, Rothar', the second orc growled. 'Tis only one elf. The black haired one is a human female,' it said licking its cracked black lips, its lizard eyes now fixed on Nienor. The woman paled visibly under its stare.

'Bah! They all look the same to me! Spindly skinny creatures. Only good to crush under my boot! Their bones to chew on,' it licked its lips.

'Are you sure this one's the woman?,' the third orc then added pointing to Nienor, its maw distorting in a rictus. Beastly eyes then rested upon the ellon. 'Hard task to tell the difference if you ask me!,' it leered. The elf glared in return, his stance that of a cornered beast, his muscles taut, ready to attack.

'Easy, princeling, have a care with your bravery lest we carve your human pet,' the orc Grotak then snarled, making a motion with the short whip he was holding. Nienor noticed the endings of the weapon curled into metal claws. She swallowed.

He hated how much power they had over him. If he had been the only one captured, the elf would have had little to risk and could attempt the most desperate of acts to free himself. Yet as it was, he could not.

'She is not my pet, and I know her not,' he gritted instead.

Grotak made a snorting sound of disbelief. 'Lo, it speaks! We shall see soon enough,' he said, his yellow slited eyes once again turned on the woman. 'Seize them.'

Strong gripping claws were laid upon their shoulders, dragging the prisoners to stand in submission. Nienor did little to struggle against the orc, nauseaus fear taking over when it laid its heavy claws on her. She saw Legolas throw a hateful glance at the orc who roughly pulled at him, opposing resistance as they tried to drag him outside of the cell.

'Hold him,' the one called Grotak then ordered. 'This one beckons for a little softening,' the orc hissed as he approached the ellon, whose arms were now held at his back in a vice grip. A crude dagger was presently held to his neck, a thin stream of blood already dripping down his collar from the contact.

Grotak grinned, lizard eyes trailing over the elf before his fist landed in a powerful blow. Legolas felt his vision falter and knees weaken as the pain in his abdomen flared. He stood fast.

'Not as princely now are we?'
The ellon gritted his teeth as another blow landed under his ribcage, causing him to finally lose his stance and fall to one knee, his breath cut short. He could vaguely hear them roaring in laughter.

Nienor did her utmost to suppress the whimpering sobs racking her throat. The ellon glanced her way, the look upon his face one of determination and brief encouragement.

‘Alright move imbeciles, take them! I grow tired of this philandering about,’ Grotak snarled.

‘Oh I shall enjoy tearing you apart and eating you when we are done,’ she heard the creature growl into her ear when she was roughly pushed outside the cell. ‘But not before we enjoy your pretty, pretty body-’

‘Silence!’ Grotak threw.

She wavered in her steps at the horrors she was hearing. Legolas was being dragged behind her, so she could not see his face. But she knew he had heard the words as well as she.

They were brusquely ushered farther down the poorly lit cavern corridor, which soon split into multiple paths under the mountain. The group stopped when they reached a wide cavern chamber, its high ceiling brimming with bats, some small, some abnormally large to her eyes. And they were all screeching terribly. The space itself was lowly lit and teeming with the creatures of the enemy - orc, goblins, and horrors she could not recognize.

_Eru, there are so many of them...so close to the heart of our kingdom_ the ellon thought, dread seizing him. He looked to Nienor, trying to capture her gaze. When he did, he sent her a destitute look that spoke of so many things, an apology among them. _I hope you will be able to see this to the end._ He felt her fear and it tore at him.

‘Out of the way maggots!,’ the orc carrying them yelled to the gathering, as they proceeded to the front of the cavern.

Legolas noticed they were approaching the other end of the wide enclosure, a rising similar to a stage discernible ahead. It was crudely hewn into rock, as everything else. To the left of the platform a huge beast stood, resting its weight against another structure which resembled something akin to a throne. Humanoid bones were scattered around the platform and at the creature's feet. Various pieces of rusty armor and weaponry littered the edges of the crude stage. Elvish, human, dwarvish. The face of this beast was terrible to behold, its cadaverous skin and dead milky eyes now fixed on the prisoners as they approached. The smell became fouler, causing Nienor to retch her empty stomach away.

They were ushered onto the platform upon crude stairs and forced onto their knees in front of the abomination. The creature now raised its arm and the sounds died.

‘Legolas Thranduilion. I, Grond king, welcome you to my court,’ the beast said in false courtly manner, motioning one huge misshapen arm towards the enclosure. Legolas paled realizing they all knew of him.

A few moments followed in silence as the great goblin appeared to study the prisoners.

‘This region knows only one king,’ the ellon then spoke, defiantly raising his head to meet the gaze of the now grinning beast.

‘Ah, the gall only royal blood such as you would have, in spite of being trapped and at my mercy,’ the king pointed out satisfied. ‘And who is this?’ it then growled, its gaze shifting to the form of Nienor, who could barely bring herself to meet those cadaverous eyes.
'We found her at their camp, m'lord. The elf seemed to hold her in very high regard and desperately tried to protect her. We think it is his human pet, something we figured might prove useful to us', Grotak added bowing.

'In this your henchmen are sorely mistaken,' Legolas interrupted, trying his most careless tone. 'She is but a human healer apprentice traveling with us, I barely am acquainted to her. Your intuition is lacking, beast.'

'Silence!' Grond then bellowed. 'Let us not tarry. We hunted you with a purpose. A purpose which should now be made known to you. Give me what I seek, and I shall see to it that your death is swift... as well as that of the little human.'

Legolas grinned sardonically. 'You must be bereft of your senses thinking an elf would ever trust the word of a creature of Morgoth. You shall obtain nothing.'

Grond tapped a clawed fatty finger against his stone throne, looking rather bored.

'Very well then. Strip the cloth from him. Tis time for a taste of hospitality.' At this, strong claws were on him and the elf was dragged to the center of the platform. His tunic and shirt were altogether ripped off his back as he was forced to his knees, one orc pulling each of his arms straight. The pain in his side throbbed, unbearable warmth licked his skin. The orc Grotak approached, a whip in hand. Nienor widened her eyes in horror at the crude weapon, realizing what they were about to do. She covered her eyes with her palms as she fought against retching again. She forced herself to meet his gaze. The ellon looked steadfast, despite it all.

'Let us start with thirty lashes,' the great goblin commanded.

Grinning, Grotak struck. No sound came from the ellon as the first lash hit his back. But as the lashes increased in number, his determination became harder and harder to maintain. The ellon flinched in pain each time the metal claws scraped his flesh, as did she. He bit his lip until he drew blood, not wanting to give them the satisfaction of seeing him crumple. Once the orc finished its task, they released him. The ellon remained on his knees, his arms propped against the floor, his head bent into his chest. Blood was slowly pooling to the floor around him.

'Come now, prince, can we not make this easier for you and save everyone time? We are in earnest. The path to the halls of your father. Offer this now and I shall still uphold my end of the promise.'

'Or maybe we can indulge in a little fun with his pet,' one of the other goblin added, roughly catching Nienor by her hair. Its harsh tongue shot and licked her face, causing the woman to scream in disgust and terror.

Legolas felt his heart drop to his feet. Valar, if any grace is left for me, I beg you keep her out of harm's way.

Grond seemed to think. 'Nay, let us try thirty more lashes. Even elves cannot bear it all. The master has provided us with a mission. We shall fulfil it to the utmost.'

The master? So they are being supported by another from the shadows the ellon thought as Grotak positioned himself to the task once more.

One lash. Two. Three. Legolas tried his best not to lose his bearing against the withering pain. He braced himself even as blood and pieces of flesh flew from the reddened whip. Fifteen. Valar... he felt as if he was about to lose consciousness.

'I will tell you!' he then heard her thin voice, raspy and determined.
No, no, you promised he tried lifting his gaze to hers.

'Please, stop! I will tell you of the path,' she repeated quietly, avoiding to look at the ellon.

'Nienor... you cannot!,' Legolas tried, and he would have been shocked and angry if not for the paralyzing pain.

'By Melkor's beard! It seems the young one has more sense than the ancient warrior,' Grond added slyly.

'But. I have terms,' the woman added, her voice breaking in her attempt to hold her own. 'I will lead you myself. And I want the elf to come as well, for he knows details I do not.'

'How is it that he would tell you what he did not tell us under torture?' Grond bit out, his tone a curious tint.

'He is my husband.'

'Nienor, cease this!' she heard his voice, an angry tint to it now. Yet she continued.

'I have... bewitched him, he is my lover and, given the right spell, he will disclose what I ask. I planned to have him never return to his father's halls during this journey, but you interrupted my endeavor. I can give you what you seek, but I need him returned to me. If you, however, harm me, you will obtain nothing.'

'Do you have proof of this?' the great goblin asked suspiciously.

'Are his lies in order to protect me not proof enough? His behavior on the field of battle?' she turned to Grotak. 'Tis my doing, I did not want this to be known, as I was afraid. But now I see we may come to an understanding.'

'Oh, how foolhardy! That a woman would be the undoing of a kingdom,' Grond then mused. 'Very well. You leave at once.'

'No!' she interrupted then added, 'Wh-what I mean, Grond king, is that I would like to check on his state. He is no good to me dead,' she tried.

Grond sighed thunderously. 'Take them back to the cell. If you are attempting to deceive, rest assured, I will know. And we will line the walls of my throne room with your entrails.'

Nienor swallowed but said no more as she and Legolas were roughly taken by the shoulders and dragged towards the corridor. He would not look her way, but she surmised that in his state even lifting his own head would be a feat. He was now more being dragged than walking on his own two feet, his composure more defeated than anything she had seen, and her heart trembled at the foolish plan she had tried.

But she could bear them hurting him no longer. There was nary a chance of success, but it gave them a reprieve and it was all she could muster. And it would have to do.
Against the odds

His back ached fiercely. The ellon was lying on the cold floor, his face pressed against the stone. It helped somewhat, but was no match for the engulfing fever his body was drenched in. He had never been delirious before yet now he barely heard her voice as he drifted in and out of consciousness. Among shadows and fire, one question burned the most. Why?

The woman sat beside him and the elf barely felt her hand upon his face, placed on his fevered forehead.

'Legolas,' he heard his name in a haze. The ellon opened his eyes, his vision blurred from pain. 'Try not to drift away. Focus on my voice.'

Her words came troubled and meek. Nienor felt a fool for her attempt. She was aware of having acted completely against his wishes and dreaded the coming words. But she could not stand to watch them ending him.

His back was in tatters and she had no means to clean the wide winding wounds. The woman had asked for water, having seen an underground stream on the way to the cell. It had only wrung a scornful bout of laughter from one of the guards, and she received a backhanded blow for her insolence. Thus there was nothing to do but wait, and hope his body would recuperate enough to travel. Time was scarce.

Nienor wrapped her arms around her knees as she looked upon her elf. He opened his eyes once, to no avail. He stared right through her. Some time had passed before the ellon finally stirred, raising himself unsteadily onto one knee. His face contorted in pain.

'Are you still feverish?' the woman asked, her hand gingerly reaching to his face. The ellon caught her wrist, his vision only now directed truly at her. She felt steady anger and disappointment that was not her own surge through her. Here it comes.

'Why?'

She averted her gaze and let her hand drop, abandoning its intent. 'Why?' she repeated his question to herself, her gaze downcast.

'Why did you have to ruin others through your deceit?'

She still did not look his way.

When no answer came the ellon continued as if to himself 'I presumed that you understood the main purpose of a leader in such conditions as we find ourselves, and the burden lain to bear. I thought you would be wiser when it came to the safety of my realm... my people. Your people, Nienor,' he added.

'So did I,' came the faint response. 'But I could not lose you, can you understand?'

'What does it matter since we will both perish either way? They would have gained nothing more than that. Now you have condemned them all,' he threw even as the pain in his back flared.

'Of course we will not show them the elf-path!' she retorted, a line appearing between slender eyebrows, his words stinging in her ears.
'Then what is your goal? To die in torment once the creatures discover your lies?' he added bitingly. She finally looked at him. Finally.

The woman sighed into his irate stare. 'I do not know, but we are still alive, which means there is still hope.'

She was his countenance change to that of utter disappointment. 'I always forget how naively impulsive humans are. I should have known,' the elf added, though his gaze lost of its steel.

'The amount of trust you have in me is bewildering, do continue,' his bonded retorted, unable to control the bite in her words.

The ellon tried to lift himself to a standing position, yet even supported by the wall he found that he could not. The pain was unbearable. Nienor was at his side in an instant, but with a short motion he stopped her advance.

'As you wish, if you are so determined to shun me now,' she added morosely, her shoulders drawn forward helplessly. She regained her position, her arms wrapped around herself.

The elf heard the need in her voice, saw the care behind her deeds. Indeed, he felt her love burning within himself, exuding energy he sorely needed.

But it had been all wrong. Nothing and no one should go above the needs of the realm against the Enemy. Not him, not her, no one. He sighed again and searched for her eyes.

'We must finish this, now that you have started this folly. Tell me, what are your thoughts? What is your plan?' he added evenly, ignoring her frowning look.

She conceded. 'First you must be able to travel... though I doubt we will have much more time for a reprieve.' Then seeing as his upper body was naked, his tunic having been destroyed, she motioned to a heap in a corner. 'You may take my cloak if you wish. I have nothing to treat your back with.'

The elf nodded and reached for the discarded item.

'I fear we are in no position to negotiate further. We await the decision of the great beast on when to leave. Perhaps...we might be able to escape during the expedition towards the path.'

'That is not a plan in itself,' the prince returned, shaking his head for emphasis. 'We have no weapons and one of us is wounded. I see no other option, thus it will have to do. Yet I fear we are only prolonging our demise. Have no false hope,' he then added in a slightly softer tone.

'Is there any place in the area we could lead the orc into? Something to help us in our attempt?' Nienor asked, ignoring his warning.

The elf mused for a few moments. 'There might be. Yet I repeat, all of this has little chance of success.'

'I see now that living forever makes one quite ominous in their views,' the woman smiled weakly, against everything.

'Nay, but it does help one in assessing situations clearly,' the ellon added, not amused in the least.
Grotak opened the cell and grinned at its occupants, who somehow drew closer together at the sight of him.

'Rise and shine! 'tis time to meet your fates.' He was accompanied by the one called Rothar. The orc knew full well they would meet little resistance. The wounds on the elf were grievous, Grotak had made certain of it. He licked his lips in remembrance of the fresh blood he drew and its alluring smell.

The prisoners were unceremoniously dragged in front of Grond once more. After gazing upon them imperiously for a few moments, the beast addressed Nienor, its rictus ever present.

'Fair maid, time has come to meet your promise. You are to lead us to the elf-path, after which, as per our understanding, you and your lover may go free.' Words spoken in a kind overtone, yet Legolas narrowed his eyes. He knew his words for the obvious lies that they were. They would not escape with their lives.

'I shall do as was agreed,' Nienor spoke, barely covering the waver in her voice. The beast was as terrifying as the first time she had laid eyes upon it.

'Oh, yes, one more detail I must share - tis not for disbelief, yet you must agree caution is required. You shall go accompanied by my lieutenant at first. Once he assesses the truth of your guidance, he shall escort you back farther and set you free before returning to me. Thus I tell you, farewell - lest of course, you are lying, in which case you know what will happen.'

The threat was obvious and poorly veiled. With these last words, Grond made a gesture with his enormous arm that signaled the audience was over. The prisoners were once again grasped by heavy hands and dragged into a different direction whence they came through the narrow corridors under the mountain. Nobody bothered to cover their eyesight this time. To Legolas, this only spoke of their foe's true intent. His back ached and he was barely able to keep in line with the rest, but he tried to assess the current situation as the air shifted, which meant they were nearing the passage way to the outside world.

Slowly, the darkness lifted, making way to a dim light which surrounded them and they saw that it was the light of the moon. Trees appeared in their vision. The ellon felt a sudden surge of energy within him. At last, out of the aching darkness he thought as he inhaled the now cleaner air. Nienor noticed this change and was all the happier for it.

The orc marched them ruthlessly, at times throwing jibes as their hellish laughter resounded against the cliffs. Their captors were three, including Grotak who followed from behind. Two orc guarded each of the prisoners. Scimitars adorned their backs, the ellon noticed. After what seemed like an eternity of marching, Grotak signaled for a stop. They came to a crossroads, and the orc looked to Nienor, gesturing with his arm. 'Now tis time to prove your worth, human. Which way?'

Nienor seemed to waver but gestured towards the left. 'Thence.'

'You best speak the truth' the orc growled with narrowed eyes, and it was suddenly before her, its maw into her face, a painful grip on her arm.

'It is!' she exclaimed wincing, knowing it was best to not antagonize Grotak.

Legolas pinned the orc with a murderous stare, which Grotak caught. 'What, have you not had enough?' the orc threw, suddenly inexplicably angry. Then, seemingly having a new thought, it
grinned at the elf as it pulled Nienor closer. 'Grond promised he would set your sorry hides free...but not in which condition.' With this, he threw the woman to the ground, while the others jeered in approval, for they had a show before them. Legolas paled as Nienor shifted away from Grotak onto the ground.

'If you harm me you will never reach the Elf-path!' she tried despairingly.

'Harm? A little merrymaking never harmed anyone,' Grotak countered, the lewd grin widening. Then turning to Legolas, 'Is this not how your folk call it? Merrymaking?' He then pinned the woman to the ground by her shoulders and started to pull at her clothing. 'I will give you something to remember me by, little wench.'

The woman whimpered. Grotak lost sight of his companions, taking to removing her tunic. As she struggled, despair bringing forth the memory of an all too similar situation, Nienor started yelling, yet she knew not to whom. A powerful slap ended her wailing, leaving her gasping for air. The other two orc were holding Legolas to his knees and were indeed amused.

'Leave something left for our turn, Grotak', Rothar grinned, the sight of her now bare breast enticing him.

Legolas felt unbearable anger take control. He felt the woods themselves recoil at the presence of the orc. The pain seemed to give way to an exhilarating numbness. He felt his limbs go taut, one goal making itself clear in his mind as he looked upon Nienor.

The blow seemed to come out of mid air as Rothar felt the ground slip from under him. In a movement as quick as his injuries allowed, the ellon had kicked the orc's legs from under it while throwing the other orc over his shoulder with all the strength he could muster. Faster than the two could gather themselves, Legolas was upon Grotak, pulling the orc's scimitar from its sheathe and rounding to slash at the others just as they were upon him. Grotak turned his head in bewilderment and made to lift himself. Nienor took the chance to throw a powerful blow with her knee into the orc's lower abdomen.

'You little filth, I will end you!' the orc snarled then, taking the woman by her hair. He backhanded her so hard she lost her vision though her struggle against him never ceased. Grotak pulled her to her feet into an unbearable hold and she was now pinned against the orc as a shield.

At that moment Legolas struck and Grotak saw his companion fall to the ground with a dull sound. The remaining orc threw itself at the ellon with a wild shriek. The elf jumped nimbly to the side and not sparing a moment, the scimitar fell upon the beasts's back. The orc landed on the ground, unable to raise itself with the deep black bloodied gash that covered its back. The ellon then turned to Grotak, his steely gaze unwavering, fury still glinting in his eyes in an unsettling dark iridescent hue.

'I can still sprain her neck like that of a rabbit,' the orc growled. 'Do as I say or this will be the end of her,' he said and as truth to the words, Nienor was gasping for air in his hold.

'Indeed, this will be the end,' the ellon replied quietly, and through her struggles Nienor felt a mystifying anger that was not her own. How can anyone feel this and live? she thought, not a little bewildered. The ellon stepped closer to Grotak.

'Get back!' the orc continued, and it was then that Nienor took the anger that was not her own - and made it her own. Using strength she never knew she was capable of, she bent in on herself suddenly and her elbow landed in a blow so hard she felt the cracking of ribs. The orc shrieked terribly, its grip on her loosening for a moment. Her gaze locking with the ellon's, she fell to her
knees just as he was upon the orc. The beast's head flew off his shoulders in the next instant, its body falling lifelessly to the ground.

Next she only felt the elf kneeling next to her and crushing her in his arms.

'Nee,' he murmured into her hair, and she reveled in his breathing and beating heart against her own. His anger dissipated in an instant, the pain in from his wounds returning with renewed force. Yet feeling her close to him and unharmed was all that mattered now. Nienor relished his warmth, and as she broke the embrace to look at him, she still saw weak traces of the iridescent hue in his eyes.

'What was this? I felt your anger, such as I've never felt before in my life. I feel your feelings at times, ever since we... it was as if it took over me.'

The ellon regarded her quietly before he replied. 'Truth be told, I know not. It must be owed to the bond we share. It manifests itself differently for everyone. I cannot explain it otherwise.'

'Our bond...' the woman seemed to muse.

'Aye. And strange it is, for it is thought that such a link between humans and elves is unattainable. And glad am I that it happened, as it seems to have saved us,' he added, the corners of his lips turning upward in a faint smile. He cupped her face in his palms and she saw that his eyes were now their usual light shade. He regarded her for some time before he cast his gaze down and moved to take her hands in his. 'If you had not attempted this, we would have had scarcely a chance of escape. It was wrong of me to despair. Will you forgive me?'

'I... there is nothing to forgive. I understand your reasons,' she added, surprised more than anything at him asking her forgiveness in such a way. The elf pulled her into him once more, and she returned the embrace she had missed so much. All the woman heard before she felt his body go soft against hers were his words against her ear.

'Gi melin, Nienor.'
The woods were brimming with life and color in the early morning light. Two lone figures could be discernible lying in the grass of a shadowy clearing, their forms lost to sleep. Nienor felt the light of the sun brush against her brow and she opened her eyes. Cradled next to her was her elf.

After the intense toil of their escape, his injured body had been so weak that he had fallen in her arms, and barely had she managed to aid and hedge him to come back to her so they could move farther away from the place of their escape. The creatures would undoubtedly send scouts when they realized that their comrades had not returned. The pair still had time now to place a good distance between them and the enemy, as the latter could only travel by night.

Nienor rose from the forest bed, gently prying herself from him. She proceeded to explore their nearby surroundings, hoping to find a water source. Some time had passed before she returned and saw he had awoken.

'There you are, I was about to come search for you,' he uttered softly, wincing from the pain.

'Forgive me, I did not mean to worry you,' the young woman said as she descended next to the elf. 'I found a stream nearby so that we may clean your wounds. And your face,' she smiled. His eyes shone in mirth at her attempt of a jest.

'We must place as many leagues as we can behind us today. Judging by what I could discern of the night sky, it will take us about two days' journey on foot from here to reach the halls of my father.'

The woman nodded and as they gathered themselves, relief she had not felt in ages filled her.

'Your Majesty,' the scout addressed the king as he spurned his horse to a halt. 'We have searched the eastern side of the river. Nothing.'

Thranduil bowed his head, his grip tightening on the reins of his horse. It had been nigh a fortnight since they had found the remnants of the convoy which had been making their way to the kingdom. The attack spoke clearly of the disarray that the enemy was bringing to their land. Upon burying the dead and burning the beasts, he had commanded a search which scoured the surroundings of the glade and farther down the region, even around the mountains. No trace of his son found to this day. It was as if he had disappeared from the face of Arda. The lady Nienor was also missing from among the bodies, as lord Ereldur had signaled.

Day after day his scouts returned empty handed. And with each day his mood soured all the more in the unbearable hours spent thinking what had happened to his heir. Yet he stubbornly pressed on. By the Valar, I must know at least what had become of him. He barely noticed the commotion which surged among the company.

'My liege!' a voice brought him back to reality and his gaze focused, widening instantly as he saw two figures approaching the riders. An elf, seemingly in a sorry state, his cloak and clothes dirty and ragged. And a woman.

When he reached the king, the elf bowed as much as in injuries allowed. 'My king', his voice sounded choked and relieved.
The older ellon dismounted swiftly, closing the gap between himself and his son. He grasped the younger ellon by the arm in the official warrior salute and his feelings seeped into the words that followed.

'My son, how glad I am to see you before me, alive and well.' It was then he noticed the woman standing behind Legolas, regarding them both with an unreadable expression. Her state looked no better than that of his son.

'Lady Nienor, I see you have survived this ordeal also,' Thranduil uttered, unease taking hold of him as he recalled the situation before her departure from his halls.

'Indeed your Majesty, though we barely escaped with our lives,' she said, not meeting his eyes, he noticed.

'It is very good indeed that you are unharmed. Your betrothed shall be happy when we return you to him.' At these words the woman looked at him, and the king saw a flash of fear cross her expression.

It was then that his son placed a hand on his shoulder. 'Father, let us return. Much has passed that I must share.'

Once Nienor had bathed and scrubbed herself of the filth of their ordeal, she proceeded to the king's study, where she and the prince had been summoned to recount their trials and the information they have gathered about the enemy. Entering the chamber silently, she first noticed Legolas and the king standing to the window. Yet her breath caught in her throat the next moment as she noticed Ereldur standing with them.

'My lady!' he exclaimed. 'How it pleases me to find you unharmed, against all hope! I have been mad with worry,' he reached for her.

But the woman recoiled instinctively from him, her skin pricking in disdain. 'Do not touch me!' she seethed lowly, striving to keep her voice level as she drew closer to the prince.

The king's eyebrow lifted questioningly and the man stopped in his tracks, his expression attaining a stony quality. Thranduil then looked over to his son, sensing the sudden animosity that filled the air, and knew all there was to know. What have you done.

'Father, lord Ereldur,' Legolas then started with an intake of breath. He relayed the happenings and what they had been through since the ambush upon their company. When he was done, silence fell over the room.

'There is one more vital announcement I wish to make.' He shifted slightly in front of Nienor then turned to the mortal lord, looking him squarely in the eye.

'The lady Nienor and I are bonded. We are wed by our elven custom, and she shall remain with me.'

Ereldur seemed to take in the words before mouth dropped agape, at first confusion marring his features. But it was closely followed by rage. He pinned the woman with a gaze that spoke of nothing good.

She met his eyes defiantly. You will not frighten me.

The ellon studied the mortal, assessing his possible reaction, while he felt the gaze of his father on
him as well.

'Please do not take this as a slight. Her allegiance to her people never faltered. You have the alliance to aid you in your efforts in Arnor, that which you had set forth to achieve. This will bring your people far better aid than the union between you and lady Nienor would have. I trust that you will see the reasoning of this, my lord.'

The man remained quiet, regarding the prince with a barely concealed expression of fury. He knew that if he was to benefit from the elven alliance, he had to hold his tongue at least in front of the elven king.

*His pride is the only suffering this brings him* Legolas thought grimly.

'If this would be your decision,' the man suddenly turned to Nienor. He then bowed to the king and swiftly left the chamber, his shoulders tensed in anger.

Nienor exhaled shakily.

'Lady. I wish to speak with my son,' came the quiet request. Nienor stared warily at Legolas, who nodded in assurance.

'I will see you after,' came his words. She glanced worriedly at the king, whose face betrayed nothing, and left them.

Alone with his sire, Legolas tried to remain steadfast in front of the impending storm. He quietly watched his father pace through the room. A good few moments passed before he spoke, almost startling the younger elf.

'How dare you bring this shame upon my House?'

The son suspected this would come, yet the words stung no less.

'Shame? Is it shameful to follow my heart? Since when is the House of Oropher against this?' he tried calmly.

'The woman was already betrothed to another!'

*Nienor* was, indeed. Yet no vows had taken place. She had no obligation-

'You know of what I speak!' Thranduil thundered. 'Honor! One does not overstep such bounds! Especially in times like these when the Enemy is all but at our doorstep. And a mortal no less. Have you lost your mind?'

Legolas felt increasing frustration at being scolded this way. 'It is done and I will not deny her,' he gritted.

His father stopped, towering over his son, looking every piece the king he was. Legolas would have wavered under that gaze had he still been an elfling. *Yet a youngling I am no more.*

'I feel her father, her fëa. It is beyond me as to how it is possible, but does that not mean anything in your eyes? Does it not speak of the validity of what we share?'

'Do you know war is breaking in Arnor? Do you know who lurks there? The people of that land are skirmishing among themselves while the Enemy marches on. I hear disturbing tides of one with much dark power, rising in the West. All the while you... you would continue with this gallivanting
foolishness you call a bond!

The ellon stood still, his jaw tightened painfully as the wrath of his father reached new heights. He looked away into the empty space before him, his next words trembling with anger.

'I love her.'

'You fool!' the king roared. Then, seeing his son's eyes glint with anger and hurt, he calmed himself. 'My son,' he continued sighing, his fury now slightly subdued, 'you know what this means. You would condemn yourself to death for the sake of her? You would abandon eternity, your life, your kingdom? For a few years spent next to a human?'

Legolas closed his eyes and took a steadying breath. He knew that, in fact, Thranduil was referring to his abandonment by his son, though his father would never utter the words. His heart ached yet he could not deny what he knew was his fate. Turning away from the king towards the window, his next words came low and bitter.

'You are strong and powerful. You know as well as I, that I am not needed to take the throne, not while our race would still inhabit Arda. And I am glad for it, in truth.'

'You would decline your birthright? Your legacy, your duty?' the king bellowed, desperate at the stubbornness of his heir.

'I have respected and shown you all the honor befitting you as my king!' the younger ellon whirled around, his voice now raised. Then realizing his unfitting outburst as the king stared at him dumbfounded, he lowered his head immediately. His next words came softer. 'What does eternity matter, when it is spent alone? Empty, barren days? Endless. I grow weary, father.' He thought he saw the king's shoulders release the tension they held, his bearing losing of its kingly air.

'Never have I thought I would outlive my offspring.'

'She gave me hope where there was none.' The ellon paused, sighing. 'She saved my life. We have been through much strife together. She deserves your respect, no less than any other valiant warrior under your banner.'

'She had a duty to her people!' 'To forge an alliance. Which, all in all, she has done,' the son insisted, looking his father in the eye.

Thranduil sighed in frustration. 'This mess is yours to mend with Ereldur and his court. I shall have no part in it.' With these last words the king turned his back on his high commander, signalling an end to their conversation.

'He does not care for her,' the prince added as an afterthought. 'My eyes have seen his true intent. He only wishes for her lands. I will mend the slight, but I will have nothing tainting her honor.' He waited for a few moments, and as the silence stretched to cover them both, he bowed to his father's back and left him.

Hearing the hasty footsteps of his son receding, the king sighed once more as he heavily fell upon his chair.

'So be it,' he muttered, taking a blank scroll from his desk and beginning to write. When done, he marked the scroll with his seal and set towards his throne room. There, he summoned a messenger.

'Ensure this reaches the mage Arothir. Deposit the message into his hands, and his hands alone.'
'As my king commands,' the elf bowed low and was gone.

The prince roamed through the airy halls without purpose, his blood still boiling. Then he saw her on the balcony leading from the banquet hall. Her arms wrapped around herself, she was seemingly lost in thought. His confrontation with the king having left the ellon not a little weary, seeing her helped him release of the dread his mind held. He realized in passing that the balcony was the place of their first kiss. *When she had run away from me. When all of this began. Nay, it had begun long before,* he smiled to himself.

'Nee?' he called softly as he reached her, placing a hand on her shoulder. When she faced him she instantly assessed his troubled expression.

'I take it, this was not a light encounter.'

'Nay, it was not,' the ellon sighed. 'Yet my father will relent in the end. He must. I will have it no other way,' and with those words he took her in his arms.

Yet Nienor still felt the burning shame, recollecting Ereldur's gaze upon her. *When will this guilt stop tormenting me?* She buried her face in the crane of his neck, breathing him in. When she raised her head to look into his eyes, part of her hoped the ellon would recount what had transpired between him and the king. Yet seeing his countenance she realized she might not want to know.

'Come,' she heard him then, the word almost a whisper. He led her through the halls for some time until they reached a door.

'My chambers, now yours as well,' he said from behind her, his hands lightly resting on her hips. Nienor flushed, as foolish as it was, everything considered. As if sensing her apprehension, he turned her around, and she saw mirth dancing in his eyes. 'Is this you being bashful?'

She closed her eyes and shook her head in a smile. 'It is... well, we have had so many nights together and yet this feels somewhat different. Being here, this space is a part of you I have not seen yet.'

His smile never faltered as he led her into the chambers. Once inside, Nienor appraised the space; candles were lit, and she could discern the usual furniture that would make a bed chamber. It was clean, more spacious than the one she had been given. A balcony could be seen on one side. Another door adjoined what she saw was a bath chamber. All in all, not simple enough for someone of average status, but nothing in the space particularly spoke of royalty either. She smiled.

She turned to look at the prince, who was regarding her with a smile of his own, leaning against a pillar with his arms crossed. Her heart skipped one beat.

'It is a spacious room, my prince,' she smiled lightly, his title rolling off her tongue mirthfully.

He nodded, his eyes never leaving her. 'Large enough for two.'

'Aye,' she said somewhat shyly as he soon closed the distance between them. His hand reached to cradle the back of her head, fingers lightly grazing her neck. When he leaned in to kiss her she wrapped herself around him like a drowning man to a lifeline; and soon she felt steady arms around her waist before her feet left the ground as the ellon easily lifted her, leading them towards the wide bed.

'It is all yours, hervess nín,' he told her with unusual gravity. As he uttered the words he lay his bonded on her back. Finally. They were together and safe for now. And this was a new beginning.
With her by his side he felt stronger, and everything would be different.

His kiss left her lips and started trailing down her neck, further down to her collar bone. There he ceased and rested his head against her chest, now heaving under the soft material of her dress. He smiled, pleased to know he affected her just as much as she did him. The rhythm of her heart pulsed through him, making him feel as though he had drunk ten bottles of miruvór. He buried his face there, taking in her scent.

Nienor, visibly affected by his closeness, was now beyond herself and her hands started roaming through his hair, gently making circles along his back. His wounds were not yet completely healed, she knew. 'I am terribly jealous of your hair, have I ever told you that?' she jested, banishing the unwanted memory of their captivity.

His face did not move from her chest, only vaguely shaking his head into a No.

'It is so fair, soft and silky,' she followed, still playing with his hair which flowed freely over his shoulders, bereft of the usual warrior braids. Yet it seemed like a one sided conversation as the ellon remained silent against her.

'What else are you envious of?' she then heard the question spoken against her chest, and felt his hold on her tighten.

'Hmm... that you are fairer than even most human women.' He grinned, and she heard his mirthful scoff. 'That you never seem to be out of breath after efforts leaving most men depleted...' What else? she thought to herself, acutely aware of his weight and warmth against her own. 'That... that you are immortal and I wish I could spend eternity with you' the thought came, but she brushed it aside.

She felt his hand on her left ankle, sliding upward slowly along her leg in a searing caress, lifting part of her dress in the process.

'What else?' his question was breathed into her chest again.

'I... well, but am I not rather foolish? Elves do not comprehend this feeling, as I understand. Jealousy is purely...' she swallowed as his hand reached her thigh and grasped it tightly 'a human condition.'

'Not so,' he then said, lifting his head finally to regard her. His lips were curved in a half smile as he rose against her, his hands on either side of her head. 'I am loath to admit, yet the thought of another touching you makes me writhe. Is that not jealousy?' Strands of his hair now brushed her face.

'Not as such,' she smiled before he leaned to capture her mouth once more. 'Well, it is debatable. You... you are protective, that is all,' she uttered in between kisses. No reply came, but now his mouth pressed against hers with more urgency.

'You are mine,' he finally said against her lips, his eyes shadowed.

Nienor could not help the thrill surging through her at the possessive words. She very much loved this side of him.

'Mine,' the elf repeated before he teased her lips with his tongue, causing her to see stars so light headed she was. They kissed as they lay tangled with each other, innumerable moments passing them by. 'Nee, it has been so long,' he whispered, holding her flush against him. He felt the familiar ache that would not let him be. That would only be appeased through her touch.
Indeed she felt the same, for she could barely contain herself.

'Undress,' the low command then came, rousing so many different sensations. 'Please,' were the next words she heard as the ellon propped himself on his arms to give her more space for movement.

Her eyes on him, she relished his darkened gaze as he followed her motions. She slid the shoulders of her dress downward, unlacing the bodice from behind, her back arching slightly in the process. When the material reached halfway down her chest, he pulled the rest of the dress off of her in one fluid motion. Her shift followed. Feeling earnest, Nienor reached for the fastenings of his grey tunic and began working on the studs of his collar, moving downwards and finally removing the fabric, revealing his chest, firm and lean. Her hands roamed from the base of his neck, taking their time, trailing downward. He stood still, watching her with that look in his eyes. Predatory, expectant; but also fiercely protective.

'You are perfect. Why must you be perfect?' her question came in mock despondency.

The ellon smiled as he leaned and once more caught her in a light embrace, her nakedness pale against the candlelight. 'Flattery will get you nowhere, fast,' he grinned playfully as he slowly led one of her legs to encircle him, then the other.

His warmth engulfed her and she gasped when she felt his skin against her own, her face flushing a pleasant shade. She let her eyes close, herself abandoned to his touch. His face hid in the crane of her neck and soon after she felt the familiar pleasant ache as he took her, moving with her body, pulsing through her in waves of content. She wrapped her arms around his neck tightly, letting him have her as he wanted. Everything was afire.

'What does it mean?' he heard the question in between gasps when their lovemaking slowed.

'What does-?' he asked as if waking from a haze filled dream.

'Hervess nín.'

The ellon smiled, touching his forehead to hers. 'My wife.'
The mage Arothir looked upon the king warily. He had come as summoned, and did as he was bidden.

'Is this it?' Thranduil pointed at the flask the mage had placed on his desk.

'Indeed, my king. Nepenthe, concocted with water from the river Gûlduin itself. Seregon was added to increase the potency, and lissuin to lessen the aftermath of the effects.

'Good. What are the terms?'

'The bonded of the recipient must offer it, and it must be willingly taken if the spell is to work.'

'I see. Will any physical harm come to him?'

'A few days worth of weakness and confusion. I cannot say for certain, yet it is good to keep watch over the one affected.'

'I thank you for your aid.'

'Your Majesty?' the mage seemed to hesitate.

'Speak,' Thranduil asked tiredly, wanting this to be over. It was hard as it was.

'I must warn you. While there are no physical dangers, the fëa will suffer for the potion does not cut the bond. The one who drinks will have no memory of the other, but they will forever be plagued by visions and ache for that which is not there, never realizing why. They will not be able to form another bond. This is the price.'

The king sighed. 'I understand.' But it must be done. For our people.

'Is there anything else?'

'Nay, my king. Only that I would advise against it, for what it is worth.'

'Thank you for upholding the secrecy of this.'
'Your Majesty,' the mage bowed and was dismissed.

Thranduil knew what had to be done. With a heavy heart, the king paced from his study in search of the woman.

Nienor was returning from council with her host for tidings of Arnor. Of the three kingdoms in Arnor, two were on the brink of war with one another as disunity plagued their lands. The kingdom of Arthedain was on the brink of war with the neighboring Rhudaur. The fortress of Garolin, her home, resided in the former and needed support sorely if war broke. And then there were the tidings of the Enemy. Nobody knew why the number of orc and strange men from distant lands grew as the months went by. These hordes were merciless in their raids and a plague upon the people of Arnor, burning fields, attacking villages and frightening the populace.

Garolin needs our aid, and soon. She thought to bring this to Legolas next time they spoke. But first, their union had to be made official. As soon as possible, and if Ereldur would forgo his pride and realize this was for the best. With Garolin, his fortress and the elves united, the support would be great for Arthedain. Perhaps a truce could be struck with Rhudaur, so they could focus on driving the dark ones from their lands. They had all been united once.

Lost in her thoughts, the woman startled when she heard a voice from behind her.

'Lady Nienor.'

She turned around, and blinked in disbelief. The king was before her. She bowed her head uneasily.

'Your Majesty.'

The king regarded her airily for a moment. 'Pray join me in my study. I wish to speak with you.'

She knew she could not disobey Thranduil, as much as she dreaded whatever he had to say. Thus she nodded and proceeded to follow the king.

Reaching him and struggling to keep in step with his long strides, she dared a glance at his profile as they walked in silence. His jaw was set. What ever could he want of me? It pained her that the father of the being she most cared about in the world disliked her for her race and grudged their union. But such it was.

They reached their destination and he allowed her entrance. She flinched in spite of herself when the king closed the door behind them.

'You say you love my son, do you not.'

He wastes no time the woman thought uneasily, taken aback by the direct question.

'I do love your son', she replied, not a little coldly, 'your Majesty.'

'How do you see the rest of your lives? What do you see your future to be?' Nienor suddenly felt cornered, yet the king's stare left no room for argument, expectant of an answer.

'I see myself at his side.' She paused. 'I see a family', she said determinedly.

'But do you also see old age? Do you see fragility? Do you see death?'

'What are you implying, your Majesty?'
'Do you see these?' the king insisted, irked at her questioning him.

Nienor closed her eyes to steady herself, realizing where this was leading.

'I do.'

'Whose?'

'Mine.'

'And do you think it fair, in as much as you say you love my son, for him to die with you?'

'To die with-'

'My lady, do not insult us both by feigning surprise.'

'Your Majesty, I assure you, I do not understand your words,' she uttered, her eyes widening in confusion. The king regarded her for a few interminable moments.

'Has he never told you?' he asked, astonished. 'Then allow me to shed light upon that which my son apparently neglected to mention. You will die one day, yet he is immortal. That much is obvious. You will grow old and frail and perish. As for him, he will linger for your sake, but it will not be long before heartbreak and death take him as well. Your death will bring his own.'

Nienor could do nothing but shake her head at the words, paling.

'I cannot believe he would keep this from you, the fool!' the king exclaimed, frustration in his words. 'If you are truly bonded, grief will rip him of his own life after losing you.'

'He never told me,' the woman repeated as to herself, her eyes studying the patterns on the floor.

The king crossed his arms behind his back. 'Now that you know, will you consider if this is what you want to happen? Is this what you want to lead him into?'

'Why did he not tell me?'

'Child, my son has a destiny to lead his people. He is not meant to die. I ask of you, nay, I beg that you not curb his fate and condemn him.'

'I would do no such thing!'

The king approached her then and she felt heavy hands on her shoulders. She could barely stand the blinkless eyes pinning her, a stare of ages unnumbered. The same eyes she saw when looking at his son. Yet these eyes were cruel, determined. There was no love for her in them.

'I love him,' she then uttered to the floor, feeling the familiar sting of tears welling. She blinked them away.

'This again. 'You love him enough to cut his life short? You would condemn him through your own selfishness?' he threw at her, anger lining his words.

'What would you have me say?' she choked as she raised her gaze to meet his once more.

'I want you to admit it is folly! Your tryst will cause the loss of faith in you for your people and hurt your name. It will cost me my son, and my kingdom an heir.'
She remained silent. Thranduil pressed on.

'Will you not spare his life?' he asked softer.

'He is my husband by your laws, how can I deny him? Not for anything would he ever accept such a thing!'

'This is the purpose of my seeking for you. There might be a way to remedy all of this. But I need your aid and consent, for it will not be easy. Somehow, between the two of you, I deem you the wiser.'

Nienor watched with dread as the king moved to lift a glass bottle from the nearby table. A flask, filled with what seemed to be an indiscernible dark liquid.

'This is the solution.'

The woman regarded the dark liquid distrustfully. What was this? Was it poison? Surely the king would not...he could not...

All of it was too much. Appalled, the woman took a step back. She wanted, she needed to speak to Legolas. Before the king could react, she gathered herself and bolted out the door, barely noticing the servants she almost hit on her way.

The prince had finished preparations for the next scouting expedition with his reports as well as the audience for the day with the human host. Tidings were grim. And then there was the matter of making their marriage known to both his people and hers. Time was scarce, thus he had to speak to Ereldur. He knew the man hated him fiercely, yet for Nienor he had to try.

He barely saw her before she nearly crashed into him from a side corridor.

'Nienor, what is the matter?' he uttered and worry took hold of him at seeing her disheveled state. He felt such anguish coming from her that he at once knew something was very wrong. She only looked at him, no answer forming on her lips. 'Nee, will you not tell me', he hedged, taking her by the shoulders. Yet when only a shaking of the head was his answer, he raised her in his arms as if she were a child and hastily paced towards his chambers. She posed no resistance at all as he carried her, seemingly becoming smaller in his embrace.

Closing the door and depositing her on her feet, he repeated his questions. She drew from him, wrapping her arms around herself as she went towards the bed. The elf followed her warily and sank to one knee facing her. He regarded her troubled face, and when she would not meet his eyes he reached and gently tilted her chin so she faced him.

'Why did you not tell me everything?' he heard her utter quietly.

'Concerning? Nee please, you are scaring me. What has passed? Is it Ereldur? If he has done anything I-

'Nay. Why did you not tell me the full consequences of our bonding? Why did you not tell me about what would happen to you?'

The ellon closed his eyes as realization struck.

'That is not important now.'
'Not important-' she felt as if all breath had left her. 'You would make me the cause of your untimely death?'

'A lifetime with you is no more than I need. I know this. I feel it,' the prince added, taking one of her hands and bringing it to his chest. 'Who made you worry so?'

She did not reply, for fear of causing more strife between the ellon and his king. 'You are not meant to die! I cannot do this. I will not!' She met his gaze steadily and attempted to remove her hand, but the anguish present on his features was unbearable.

'You are my wife, mortal or no,' he said in a low voice which belied the distress within and the woman felt the grip on her hand tightening, so much that it was starting to hurt. 'I do not care for eternity if it is to be spent without you. Do you understand?'

The woman shook her head. 'I cannot let this pass.'

The despair she felt suddenly from him left her breathless as the ellon sprang from his knees so fast she recoiled. He started pacing through the room.

'To leave then, is that what you suggest? Is that what you lack the courage to say? Flee to your fortress with your mortal lord and leave all this behind?' he threw as he stopped to face her. 'To live out the remainder of your days as a bird in a cage.'

'At least I would not bear the guilt of ending you. It was never my wish,' she said to the floor.

'And what about my wishes, Nienor?' he followed, descending to one knee in front of her again, his hands on her thighs. 'Let me ask you this: what would you have done, had I told you everything after our first night together?'

She buried her face in her hands. 'I do not know. Legolas please, why will you not relent to reason?'

'You are mine. I am yours. Do you remember the words?' his hands moved to rest on her own. She would not look at him. 'Do you?' he insisted.

How could she forget? Nienor could not reject him. She was failing, felt his despondency. And even though she wanted to pull her hands away she found she could not. The mysterious solution the king had suggested suddenly came unbidden to mind.

'Do not worry so about what will not happen but for years to come,' she heard the ellon say, a softer lilt to his voice.

He understood her apprehension. And never before had he wanted to be mortal, as much as he did now. When she said nothing, he continued. 'I shall seek and speak with Ereldur. Then we will make preparations to announce ourselves. Nee, this will be a good tiding for both my people and yours. Do you not see? An alliance stronger than this they could not hope for.'

She nodded, seeing the sense in his words. Yet the image of the flask would not disappear from her mind's eye.

Chapter End Notes
Gûlduin = The Enchanted River which rose in the Mountains of Mirkwood, and flowed northwards in a great loop to meet the Forest River under the canopy of the trees of Mirkwood.
The king was tired. After a full day, work in the runnings of the kingdom had left him weary. He sank into the chair of his study with a sigh. To his right, the flask stood, as if to mock him. He grimaced as he fell deep in thought. Then his elven hearing caught a stir outside the door, and the next moment he heard a knock.

'Come.' He saw her enter, her steps faltering, undecided.

'Lady Nienor.'

'Majesty. Forgive me for abandoning you so suddenly previously. It was crass of me.'

The king inclined his head towards her.

'Do not trouble yourself. I can understand how the truth might have affected you. Have you pondered upon the situation and our previous conversation?'

Nienor steadied herself. 'You are right in your judgement. Our link was a mistake.'

Thranduil was impressed at her selflessness, yet dreaded what it meant he would do. For the first time since he had looked upon the woman, he saw her in a different light.

'Your Majesty please, what is in the flask?'

The king regarded her in silence and sighed inwardly before continuing.

'Lord Ereldur.'

The man had been pacing back and forth in the empty throne chamber where the elven prince had requested to meet him, prey to his thoughts. And dark thoughts they were. When he turned at the sound of his name he felt cold anger seep into him.

'I wished to speak to you, so that we may clear what lies between us, as befitting of your status and honor,' the ellon started calmly.

'Honor,' the man snorted, in spite of himself. 'Pray tell, what does your kind know of honor?'

The prince turned steely. 'Peace, lord. I admit to the insult, and came to assure you that it was not intentional. I do care for her. Very much indeed.'

'Nay, for I doubt either of us will do it justice,' the icy reply came. Patience, the ellon told himself. The mortal's eyes glinted dangerously at the implied meaning of those words.

'Then what is it you wish to discuss with me about? The intricacies of morality?'

'Nay, for I doubt either of us will do it justice,' the icy reply came. Patience, the ellon told himself. The mortal's eyes glinted dangerously at the implied meaning of those words.

'Then I am curious as to how you would justify taking my wife-to-be away from me, in plain view, no less! As easy as it was,' he added maliciously.

'I came to justify nothing. You care for her not, as she is fairly aware. Your union would have broken her. That is no life.'
'Aye, indeed, forgive me!' Ereldur retorted scornfully. 'You are her savior and champion, keeping her interests at heart...all while ignoring the obvious slight this is to me and my own. What do you know of our plight? Of the constant fear we live with? You wood elves hiding away in your crude forest, uncaring of the ails of this world?'

'I know no more than what I have seen. And that is enough. You would drive her into a cage. You would force yourself upon her,' the elf could abstain himself no longer, the words flowing, and he took a step towards the mortal without realizing. 'Do not think I am blind to your ways.'

Ereldur scoffed. 'Did you bed her?'

The elf stared in disbelief at hearing those base words, and barely did he manage to keep from throwing himself at the man before him, to curb that uncouth tongue. Instead he remained silent in an obvious effort to steady his flaring temper.

Ereldur seemed to notice, a grin plastered on his features, his arms crossed. 'You silence speaks tomes. You ancient elves seem to not even think twice before bedding children. For are we not mere children to you?'

'Have a care. My patience at these stings grows thin,' the prince gritted, his eyes darkened.

'Hah! You insult our people, you destroy our planned alliance and trample on our customs, and now you take offence? You sullied her, made a harlot of her!'

As fast as a whirlwind, the ellon was grasping the man by the collar of his tunic, the last words ringing in his ears. 'Say it again,' he urged, a menacing smile now gracing his own features.

'Yet, as proof of my understanding and for the sake of our alliance,' Ereldur continued unabated, 'I shall forgive it all once she is returned to me,' the lord of Anduron finished even as he struggled with the iron grip.

The ellon knit his brow together in confusion at those last words. 'Speak your meaning!' he shook the man roughly.

'Legolas,' he heard a voice behind him then, and not little was his surprise as he looked over his shoulder and saw his father approach. He was accompanied by Nienor.

Releasing Ereldur with a forceful shove, the ellon bowed uncertainly to the king, yet the insurmountable dread he suddenly felt made him switch his gaze to his wife.

'Nee?'

Then his eyes turned swiftly to Ereldur. The heinous bastard was still grinning. Why?

'My son,' the king repeated to a now wary prince, 'In time, you will realize this will have proven the best course to follow.'

'The best course... to what? I fail to understand.' But the king merely stared back at him, his arms crossed behind his back. From the corner of his eye, Legolas saw two guards had appeared.

'Take him,' he heard the command, and the guards proceeded to attempt seizing the prince.

He evaded them easily, dreading to hurt his own kin. And why would Nienor not meet his gaze? In his bewilderment, he had not caught sight of another guard approaching from behind who caught him unawares, apprehending and twisting his arms behind his back powerfully. The other two
guards were upon him then, seizing him by the shoulders.

'What is the meaning of this?' he threw to his father while he struggled against their grip. Strong though he might be, unlike the orc, three times the elven strength was harder to suppress.

Nienor then started walking towards him, her steps reluctant and wavering. She held a chalice in her hands. When she stood facing him, his gaze followed hers as she looked down at the object in her hands. His eyes widened at the sight of the black liquid.

'Nienor.' The pleading tone in his voice was torment to her ears. Her eyes finally locked with his.

'Forgive me.' Why she asked his forgiveness, she did not know. He would not remember either way.

'Nee, what is it that you are doing?' the prince asked, a strangled calm to his voice.

A few moments of silence followed. 'What I must. We cannot...' but the words left her. She could not do this.

He tried to make sense of what was starting to feel more and more like a betrayal. Nay, she would never. It was impossible.

'I beg of you to drink this, so that things may once more be as they were,' she tried. His eyes flashed, and for the first time she saw her elf regard her with resentment. Her heart dropped.

'I will not,' he said in quiet determination. 'Explain yourself.' At this she lowered her eyes, her hands trembling on the chalice while the elf struggled once more against the grips of the guards.

It was then that Ereldur appeared behind her and a dagger was placed to her throat. The woman stifled a scream and closed her eyes, the chalice nearly slipping from her hands. The prince pinned the other with a hateful glance.

'Hurt her and it will be the end of you.' The way he said this would have chilled anyone else to the bone. But the dagger only seemed to dig further into the fine pale skin.

'Please, Legolas,' his wife said chokedly then, raising the chalice. 'Drink.' But he turned away from the object in disgust as she lifted it closer to his face.

'Why?' he insisted.

'Her fate is in my hands either way, prince,' Ereldur interjected. 'Drink and she will live. Though I admit, her fate is all the same to me.'

'You would allow this?' the ellon turned to the king, whose stance was that of a marble statue. Only silence met him. He lowered his head.

'All will be well,' he heard her voice again, this time broken in her throat, 'Drink.'

'Why do you lie? What is this in your hands? For the sake of all we shared, speak!' Silence. 'Nee, I do not know what you have done, or what my father said to you, but this is wrong. Please, do not be their pawn,' he tried again.

No answer came, her eyes on him unbearably guilty. The dagger against her throat dug deeper while he continued to struggle in vain against the iron grips of the guards. He saw bright red spill from the start of a gash. The woman cried in pain against the man grasping her.
'Cease this!' the prince said hastily, lowering his head in frustration. 'I will do as you ask,' he gritted darkly. Then turning to his father 'I hope the Valar will forgive you, for I know this is your doing. But remember this - I will not.' He then regarded Nienor, still in disbelief at her part in this. Why did she agree to... to what ever it was they were doing to him? The dagger disappeared from her throat then and she straightened. It took a few moments to steady her breathing before moving even closer to her husband.

'This will not harm you. It is only so you can forget.'

'Forget? What would I want to- ' then the black realization hit him in full force. 'No, you cannot mean...' he shook his head in disbelief. His father had gotten to her. When he lashed at her she had to take a step back. 'You think you are doing me a kindness?' his words came viciously. 'Could you be so cruel? So cowardly?'

Hardly able to bear more of this, against herself the woman lifted the chalice to his lips and even though most of the contents spilled as the elf struggled, he had taken enough. When it was done, the chalice dropped from her hands and its clattering on the floor was the last clear sound he heard. A strange feeling came over his senses then, his legs starting to feel strangely heavy and leaden. The grip on him slackened as he eventually sank to his knees, his vision a haze of indistinct shapes and colors. Her form was still visible standing frozen above him.

'I will not forget. Rest assured I will... not,' he managed before even speech became a difficult task. He barely propped himself on his arms, trying to rise from his knees, all in vain. His eyes rolled to the back of his head as reality shifted and unbidden, visions of her started to dance on the canvas of his mind. Images that seemed to disappear from memory as pieces of a broken vessel shattering to the floor. She was at his side in the cell under the mountain, tending to his wounds. They lay tangled onto the grass in the forest. She was angry with him. They were climbing the ancient tree. The lone figure he approached in the gardens at night. Briefly regaining his senses, the ellon raised one hand as if to reach her but could manage no more as his entire body now felt leaden. He was trying his utmost to commit the image of her face to memory, but the sudden pain which coursed through him interrupted the effort. Then an anguished scream escaped him, his hands on his head as he felt his mind shattering. And then he knew no more.

Nienor fell to her knees beside him. 'Forgive me,' she repeated numbly, uselessly.

'Take him to the healing quarters,' she heard the king's voice dimly against the pounding of her heart in her ears.

It is done. So intense was the pain that now she longed for Ereldur's dagger. As the others departed, the woman found herself alone, still sunken onto the floor. Powerless against the agony inside, she bent in on herself and wept.
The stars were glinting abovehead, their cold light streaking the night sky akin to speckles of precious dust. The woman sighed as she stood with her shoulders brought forward, her arms crossed against the chill night air. She was awaiting Ereldur as the king had summoned them to discuss the matters of alliance. Her guilt ridden thoughts strayed to the prince. *I wonder if he is well, if he is at peace in his slumber.* From the healers she had learned the elf was still unconscious, having been in the healing ward for the past two days. Yet the healers could not determine what could be the cause of his sudden ailment. She still stood pray to her ruminations when she felt a hand on her arm.

'Come, the king awaits us,' Ereldur spoke evenly.

After all that had happened, she did not have the strength to oppose him. What she felt was akin to a mourning of sorts, a loss she had to bear for the rest of her days. So she nodded and let his hand linger as he walked with her to the throne room.

The king stood grimly on his throne and when the pair were announced, he stood and descended towards them.

'Leave us,' he motioned to the guards present.

When they were alone, Thranduil turned his gaze towards the pair. The woman, pale with sunken eyes, riddled with grief. The man, his expression unreadable.

'I trust you agree that what was done had to be done. I know you are now in haste to depart as your lands need the support of fighting men. I will grant you the aid promised and discussed during your time in my halls. But, I would also have a request.' He stopped, waiting to see if any of them would interject. He then continued, his gaze on Nienor. 'I would ask that you marry, as previously decided before your coming here. It would keep with your plans and finalize what everyone else knew to be true.'

The woman paled. *But what does it matter now anyway?*

'I would gladly honor this request, as was my original intent to do so, your Majesty,' Ereldur replied. 'If the lady would acquiesce, of course…'

'Indeed this is a condition for the aid I will provide. It must be done,' the king added curtly.

'It will be done,' she spoke then, her words bereft of any feeling.

The king sighed in relief. 'Thank you, my lady. For your help and collaboration in the matter.' Nienor was barely able to meet his gaze, and bowed imperceptibly. 'I will send your fortress aid regularly. If anything should pass that would require a larger force I request you send messengers ahead of time. I hear tidings of fell actions descending upon your lands from the North. There is one there that appears to hold great power, yet his motives are absconded from us.'
'We will do as requested, and we shall be forever grateful for your aid,' she heard Ereldur say.

Once the audience was over, the pair descended the steps towards the corridors. Nienor was about to leave the man for her own chambers without a word when he blocked her way and was suddenly in front of her.

'You and I have more to discuss.' And not caring for her struggles, he half dragged half led her to his chambers.

'Release me!' she cried even as he threw her into the room and barred the door.

'Now now, my lady, dispense with the false sense of propriety. We both know there is nothing left of it.'

'Your words are poison! Waste them not, for I am long immune.'

The man sighed, then regarded her, a grin now lighting his dark features, a soft lilt to his voice.

'I must admit, I am impressed with your steadfastness,' the man addressed her now. 'Abandoning your beloved creature so easily and agreeing to marry me under the span of a week. Quite the feat. When the king had summoned me to relay the plan I thought you would never agree to, imagine my surprise when he confirmed you had already consented to carry out the task.'

'Do not be cruel Ereldur,' she muttered. She tried to make her way towards the door, but the man reached for her and brought his face closer to hers, his hands gripping her shoulders.

'My lord Ereldur, if you please. Have we not spoken about respect?' Her eyes flashed, bringing a smile to his lips. 'Finally, I have broken that impossible pride. What am I saying, you have done that yourself. And make no mistake, you are the only one to blame for whatever befalls your lover after drinking that foul poison.'

'Unhand me,' she threw now trembling with anger.

But he was undeterred. 'It must be hard for you, I imagine. From being his whore, to simply a whore.'

Her eyes widened in shock at the base insult, though she had little expectation from the man to begin with. 'I was never his whore,' she seethed. 'I still am his wife. And whatever vows you and I will exchange will be false, and void,' she said with satisfaction.

She never saw the slap coming, and only felt it once it had made contact with her face, the stinging sensation grazing her cheek.

'I see we shall have to mend your impudence as well.' Then, to her astonishment Ereldur began to laugh. 'It would be interesting to see what the prince will have to say of this, when he wakes and has no notion of you! No matter how many times you bedded him. I still cannot believe it. Indeed, fate is a curious thing,' the lord of Anduron shook his head.

'I loathe you,' Nienor added quietly, tears welling at the bare truth of his words.

'Be that as it may, I think more gratefulness from you is due. You forget how generous a man I am. I will take you as you are, tainted by another, to uphold our alliance. For I have at least some sense of duty, you wretch.'
He then released her and Nienor all but stumbled towards the door, the shame burning more so than the mark on her face.

'Take to preparations and be ready, we depart for Garolin in two days time.'

'My prince, wait, you must not rise without assistance!'

Legolas stood unsteadily, his eyes roaming over the room. Frowning, he had to blink a few times before his vision became accustomed to the daylight. He realized he was in the healing ward.

'Where... what happened, Amiriel?' he asked the chief healer who had spoken.

The healer lowered her eyes, seemingly apprehensive. 'Truth be told, my lord, we have checked yet...your symptoms escape us. You had fallen suddenly, we were told. And then remained in an unconscious state. We were deeply troubled. Though you frequently stirred and spoke during your time spent here, none could discern what it was you were saying. How do you feel?' she asked, her eyes assessing his state. He looked unusually pale, but other than that there was no sign of physical ailment.

'I... I do not know. I feel, unlike myself. In truth, my mind is a mess and I have no memory of what had passed before coming here. Where was I when I fell?' Indeed he felt as if his head would leave his shoulders. When he tried thinking about any recent events, he could only discern fragments, hastily pieced together by vague threads. And an emptiness engulfing him, his chest raw with longing. Valar, what is the matter with me?

'The king had said you were in his company when it happened, my lord.' Amiriel was at his side in an instant. 'My lord, please take heed!'

The elf shook his head, cursing this unusual weakness. He rummaged through his thoughts, trying to find any semblance of sense. *I was scouting...we were trying to reach our kin, to escort them to the Halls. He remembered a battle, his daggers clashing against scimitars. There was an ambush...* But the more he tried to pry memories out of his mind, the more unbearable the headache became. A stone cell. *Captured? I was captured by the enemy?*

'Amiriel, please...humor my question. Did I recently return from somewhere?'

The healer looked confused, now gazing at her prince warily. 'Why, yes my lord...you had been missing for nigh three weeks before a search of your father proved successful, and you returned to us. You had been ambushed by the enemy. Most have been killed.' Her face contorted in grief. 'But you escaped! And so did the lady Nienor. I do not know the details of your ordeal, for you were quiet about it all, if you remember. But I did tend to your back myself. It must have been dreadful...'

'The lady Nienor?' the name sounded vaguely familiar, yet he could not place it.

'Yes, my lord...the lord Ereldur's betrothed? The human host that had come to us for aid? She was part of the returning convoy, for she had been sent to Aegas' Annan. I...I do not know if you have
been together all of the time, or if you had met on your way, but you had returned together.'

'Amiriel, the whereabouts of this lady?' Perhaps she will be able to tell him more. Yet he remembered nothing of her. The ellon had decided to start with his father and then seek for the woman.

Amiriel bowed, even more concerned now at the state of her prince. She could have sworn the prince knew the lady Nienor well, having seen her in his company plenty a time. They actually seemed to have befriended each other. Could this be some sort of shock release owed to what he had suffered at the hands of the enemy?

'My lord, the human host have departed our realm yesterday. She is no longer here.'

A sharp pain made itself known in his chest and the elf had to steady himself against the wooden bed frame.

'Are you unwell?' the healer worried.

'Nay. I must go see my father now. Thank you for your aid,' the ellon said breathlessly. Despite the unwillingness of the healer to let him leave the ward the prince rushed by her with a deepening frown, his steps hurried through the halls.

Chapter End Notes

Can you guess whom the king is referring to in the first part of this chapter? Tip: he's the tall, dark and faceless type.
The journey to Arthedain had been long and tiring, but they met no peril to disrupt their travels. The cold weather season was starting to make itself known. The convoy, men and elves alike, made its way through the old forest road and turned north along the mountains. They had to reach the pass that would take them through to the other side of the mountain chain, and then they would continue down by Mount Gram. They took the longer road as to avoid passing through Rhudaur. Then they would travel the wide plains to their destination.

Garolin stood past North Downs, sharing the road that led to lake Evendim. Nienor could already imagine the structure before her. The fortress and its surrounding community was not by any means comparable to Fornost Erain, the capital city of Arthedain. But it was her home, and a place where part of the descendants of the long lost Númenor could live out their lives in honest toil. And she was one of them. Her father had been a good and respected leader, sentiments which extended to his blood. She had missed the familiar faces of the fortress inhabitants and friends during her travels to Eryn Lasgalen. Thinking of the elven kingdom now caused her nothing but anguish and her eyes traveled unbidden to Ereldur, who was riding in her vicinity. She was not looking forward to her fate. Her thoughts went astray towards the events in Lasgalen. A betrayal. I betrayed him, but it had to be done. It had to.

Then her eyes caught the towers of Garolin looming ahead, grey-blue against the bright autumn day, and a fleeting ghost of a smile lit her face. After gruelingly long days of travel, she had returned. She was home. The riders urged their horses into a canter on the main road leading to the entrance.

'Open the gates!' a voice boomed as they drew nigh, and immense wood and metal gates were slowly pulled open.

The travelers rode in to the greetings of many as people had gathered to see the newly returned. Women with missing husbands, children expecting their fathers. And most marveled at the company of elves sent forth to aid in their defense; to those assembled they clearly were a curious sight, out of this known world. Yet the elves kept to their own, polite and calm though they were, and seemed to disregard the attention bestowed by the community. Children were especially drawn to these unusual beings, most seeing members of the elven race for the first time in their lives. And possibly the last.

'My lady!' Nienor heard a known voice as she scanned the crowd, and smiling turned to see Igleta coming towards her; her grey and brown skirts lifted to aid her speed. Nienor dismounted and merrily embraced the one who was her head house mistress and nursemaid. For Igleta had brought the younger woman into the world and had been at her side most of her life. 'Oh, child! But you are so gaunt!' the older woman uttered worriedly. 'Had they fed you nothing among the elven folk?'

She could not help a smile. 'Igleta, heed. They are right here among us!'

'The truth hurts indeed! Come,' Igleta continued, paying no mind. 'There is much that has happened in your absence.' The woman stopped then, realizing something. 'And where is the lord Ereldur?'

Her face darkened, as if reminded of her own situation. 'He has gone to show our elven companions the stables, so they can rest their wearied mounts. Is all else prepared for their
accommodation?'

'Aye, of course! The barracks were raised to supplement the spaces in the main House. And our stables, Valar be good, possess enough room for twice as many horses. Once you have recuperated from your travels, we will prepare for the feast together!'

Igleta was of course referring to the wedding feast for herself and Ereldur. Her heart tightened at the thought.

The two women moved towards the main manor house, the way lightened by the continuous chatter of the older woman.

Once the woman had bathed and rested, she and Ereldur, along with the elven commander attended the briefing of the local council on states of war. The council room was the largest chamber in the house. Rectangular in space, lit by long sturdy, stained glass windows that stretched to the high roof. It served both as a throne room and a place for celebrations.

An immense candle filled chandelier hung from the middle of the ceiling, and two empty thrones stood to the back of the room. The woman sighed. One had been for her father, high lord Rotharin and the other for Nyras, the lady of Garolin and her mother. But the young woman had not seen the latter sit on the throne too often in her short life. Her mother had died when Nienor was ten. She remembered of her, and a passing memory darkened her gaze as she used to sleep cradled in her mother's throne a good many nights following her passing. Igleta or a servant would often times come to wake her or simply carry her sleeping form back to her chambers.

Nienor reached the council table where the military leads of the fortress were gathered, all bent over a long map depicting Arnor.

Hamor stood amongst the gathering, taller than any man except for the elves. The Garolin fortress military commander had been in the lord's service for nigh twenty years, his sharp mind a keepsake remnant of the high minds of Númenor. He was also the fortress master at arms and had trained Nienor in her early years, when her father expressed his desire for her to be learned in basic weaponry and defense. He had a stern approach but he was a good man. It was he that now spoke, relaying the situation.

'Rhudaur have threatened to take the portion beyond our Eastern border here by force, as they claim it had been theirs in the olden days and say this would make the split more even. It is the Arkentine treaty issue again. Our scouts have seen the Rhudanic fighting forces in high numbers marching and raising camp along the border close to the Last Bridge. But then we are plagued by attacks upon our smaller encampments. Easternlings, orc, seemingly in collaboration, attack villages at nights and set fire to our crops. Kill our people. You all know this, so far Rhone and Aroneh have fallen to their numbers. We have not the forces to aid two fronts, and Fornost have their own struggles with Cardolan. Of course, now that lord Ereldur has so fortuitously secured our friendship with the elves of Eryn Lasgalen, we may try a different approach. '

Nienor cringed at the statement, reminded of the words Legolas had spoken to her. Of the strong alliance their union would have brought.

'We are most grateful for the aid of our elven friends and Thranduil your king,' Hamor now addressed Dalaron, the elven commander in attendance. The latter bowed shortly, his auburn hair afire in the sunset light. 'Time is scarce, and now that you have reached us safely, we must ride to the border. Try and make peace with Rhudaur before going the way of war. They too are plagued by attacks. We must unite against this darkness that threatens all men. That is my suggestion.'
'I think this the best approach.' Ereldur had been the one to speak. 'We must try. Perhaps seeing us aided by our allies will sour part of their thirst for battle. We must try for a truce.' He paused, a smile making its way to his lips. 'And when we return, we shall have a wedding.' With this he gazed at Nienor, who politely returned his smile, shuddering inside.

So it was that the events unfolded and the armed forces of Garolin rallied for their journey to Rhudaur. Nienor, as the only remaining representative of the royal family and hence a figure of authority, would rule in absence of her future spouse. This aside from the care she had of the main House and the fortress activities related to supplies, stock, food preparations, and even decisions from official pleas, should these fall under her knowledge. It helped to keep her busy by day, but the nights were an altogether different story.

There was no one she could speak to, no one to hear the burden of what she had been through. Her nights were bitter with memories, regret and longing. The longing was the hardest to live with. She wondered if he had truly forgotten her, as his father said would happen. But then of course he had. The last image of him on his knees, his head in his hands, crying in pain. It haunted her for many a night after her return, and Nienor cursed the wickedness that drove her to such an act. But now he will live, she would tell herself, a meager consolation though it was to her mind.

One windy day in the remaining month of autumn she was in the supply room with one of the many housemaids laboring there, settling inventory. They would need to determine how much they had to obtain for the upcoming wedding feast.

'At last! I have been searching all over for you.' It was Igleta. 'Gasta says the dress is ready. We must get you to try it immediately! She will need the time should any adjustments be required.' But the woman in front of her seemed none too glad of her news. If Igleta were to guess, her face more bordered towards woe. The woman now stared ahead, her eyes unfocused.

'Child, is something the matter?' she asked approaching her lady, her hands reaching to cup her face.

'Nay. But it is all happening very fast,' she smiled, 'I sometimes still cannot believe I am to be wed,' she tried the lie, hoping Igleta would leave the matter be.

But the elder was no fool. She knew this child, she knew her like the back of her palm. 'I know, he is not an easy man to love. Please know, we all see the effort you make in the name of your father and for us. As much as I can, I will try and aid you. Perhaps one day you will reach the happiness you deserve, even at his side.'

Nienor paled ever so slightly, the woman's words hard to hear. She holds me in such high regard. If only she knew. If only she knew how improbably careless her lady could be. How naive.

'We all obtain what is reserved for us, in the end,' she said offhandedly, hoping the elder would relent on the topic.

'You do know I am here, if you ever need someone to listen,' the woman hedged, the state of her ward worrying her. Igleta thought the young woman was changed; as if she was concealing a new, hidden sorrow. Igleta had noticed this ever since her return. It was in her gait.

'Yes, Igga, I do. And I thank you,' she embraced the older woman who seemed content to let it lie for the time being. Yet there were things she knew she could never reveal. The very happenings which left her mind strained and spirit weak.
'Will you stay?' she whispered against his lips, her body coiling around his. She felt good against him, warm and brimming with life. Yet then she was not.

He was on his knees, and she was standing above him. Long black tresses, reaching to her waist. Her face was hidden behind the chalice. Blackness seeped through, casting him into oblivion.

She placed a hand on his forehead. 'Legolas, try not to drift away. Focus on my voice.' He opened his eyes and tried to follow. He reached the figure and placed his hand on her shoulder. Yet when he turned her around, the endless void stared back at him.

The prince opened his eyes. He dazedly stood from the cot, his senses raw. It was more or less the same dream. Unnervingly vivid. Sometimes there were others, but it always ended the same way.

He bowed his head into his chest, stepping outside the military flet he had been resting in. Rain poured outside, the sound soothing in its rhythm. He was bare waist up and the cold soon seeped through him, a calming numbness.

*Who are you?* he asked the void for the umpteenth time. The visions would take form when he was most tired. He had tried most every remedy and yet they would not relent. Aside from this, why could he not remember? It was unnatural. All was fine until a certain point in time, he had begun to notice. The king had not known much more than he when his son inquired about this though Thranduil had relayed to him the recount of his capture. He knew less about the trials of the lady his son had apparently returned with. *There must be a key to this. There must be.* He thought he ought to one day ask this woman in person if she knew aught more; so the elf could retrieve his peace of mind, if nothing else.

Then slender hands holding a chalice appeared in his mind, the skin pale, so known to him. A familiar longing made itself known. *Valar, why do I feel such loss when I have none?* The ellon sighed, all hope of rest now escaping him. On the morrow the hard hunt of the fell weaving beasts would continue. Musing, the prince nearly smiled. How interesting it was that here was where he found most of his peace lately.
Chapter Summary

Content below might prove disturbing to some, and it is not my intention to undermine the seriousness of the subject of rape. I only use it to reflect as much of a reality of such times as I am able to. Relevant detail to the story is found at the end.

The day had been one of hard labor. Nienor was busied with her daily tasks when the war horn blared twice, loud enough to be heard throughout the fortress. Travelers. Our own.

Folk gathered at the gates to welcome the men and elves returning from their expedition. She saw Ereldur riding alongside Hamor, and went towards them in welcome as customary. Dalaron also caught her eye and smiled her way, a light bow of his head. He remembered her from Eryn Lasgalen as their paths would at times cross due to her residence in the elven halls and her friendship with the prince. He was a relatively young elf by comparison to others of his kin but he had proven himself wise and capable, traits always appreciated and sought for. He was appointed the new commander of the guard, replacing Sonruil who had met his end at the hands of the enemy. A tinge of regret coursed through her at the memory of the elf, his lifeless body on the ground.

'Mae govannen, hiril nîn,' the ellon said as he dismounted and approached her.

'Mae govannen, hir nîn,' she answered in her meager Sindarin. Her skills were sorely lacking but for the few words she had caught from her time among the elves. The musicality of the elven speech soothed her, and reminded her of better times.

'How are you faring, my lady?' the elf now asked switching to common, a curious expression on his timeless face.

She was about to reply when she heard and saw Ereldur addressing the crowd.

'Good people, take heed! We have been successful. No war with Rhudaur will threaten our borders for now. They too have seen the need for unity in front of the barbaric cruelty of the enemy. Today we are stronger.'

Then he dismounted and made his way to Nienor, a wide grin spread across his handsome face. A grin that would fool easily, if it were directed at anyone else.

'My lady, finally I have returned to you.' The woman swallowed, her throat hollow. Ereldur then turned to those assembled.

'Let there be a feast tonight, in honor of our endeavors. And by the week's end, the lady Nienor and I shall wed, uniting our Houses and lands as we march into a new dawn.' Nienor stood beside him, unable to move yet wishing she was anywhere else.

And so it was that by the end of that week the wedding celebrations commenced. All were scurrying to and fro in preparation. The ceremony itself was to be held in the throne room, where
nobility from both Garolin and Anduron would be in attendance. Then celebrations would continue into the gardens, where guests could partake in drink and dance. Though they were in late autumn, the weather was forgiving enough to allow table arrangements outside.

When the time came, Nienor had been garbed in a flowing white and blue dress, the colors of her crest. Her face stony as she allowed the young servants to arrange her dress and hair, to place the veil over her head. She could not help the feeling that she was preparing for her own funeral. The dark side of her mind found the humor in this, as in many ways, she was. The death of any dreams of happiness or contentment, the casting of her first and true bond into oblivion. Hands caught in blond flowing hair, the sweet taste of the forest. She brushed her wanton thoughts aside. *I will scarcely, if ever, see him again. And these are dead memories.*

The wedding itself was a tedious affair. She did not know what proved to be more torturous: the moment she accepted the signet from her new lord as they spoke their vows, or all the honest good wishes she received after and bore with a frozen rictus across her face. Or all the dancing she had to endure for the remainder of the night. When she had said the words she considered the falsity of it all, and her misery grew tenfold.

After an unbearably full night of hiding her true feelings, she fell onto a chair within the dining hall. Then the thought came and cold fear trapped her as she remembered the obligation which came with this. Usually in happier cases, the wedding consummation would happen in the midst of celebration, as the couple went their own way to enjoy the privacy of their first time together. But of course this was not one of the happier cases. It was in the early hours of the morning, when most of the guests had retired, that Ereldur came to her.

'Now that you are my wife by right,' he continued, pleased as he saw her eyes widen fearfully 'it would be time to honor your husband.' She felt the ale in his breath, and almost lurched forward at the revulsion twisting her insides.

A pale Nienor said nothing as he almost dragged her into the passage leading to the upper level of the building, where both their chambers were. For they lived in separate chambers, and would continue to do so. When they reached his own chamber, he said not a word as he opened the door motioning for her to enter. When she hesitated, a strong grip was on her arm, ushering her inside. She paced through the room close to the window, her arms wrapped around herself.

Ereldur approached quietly, and when he was in front of her forcefully wrenched her arms from herself and raised them around his neck. He embraced her, smiling at the shudder wracking her body.

His hands grasped her waist, reaching sinuously down to her back, grasping her body roughly. A retching sensation filled her core as she struggled against him.

'Oh no, no my lady, I am no elf, I know' he said, grasping her head and burying his face next to her ear, causing her to cringe. His hand roamed unbidden through her dress, between her legs, and she shivered so violently in disgust she would have fallen to the floor but for his hold of her.

'Did he do this? Or was he perhaps too soft on you? Perhaps you need something more.'

His words only made her revulsion rise to unparalleled heights, as in her mind she still belonged to the other, and anyone else touching her this way was a betrayal to their bond. The bond which was no more, but which she grudgingly held true in her heart.

'My lord, my lord,' she pleaded almost wailing, shivering, feeling trapped and miserable in his hold. She had been determined to not let him break her, but now, as she was faced with his power
and demeaning touch she realized it would be a losing battle. Furthermore, he was in his right, in
the eyes of everyone except for herself.

Deaf to her begging, the man lifted her easily, her whimpering turning into sobs as he dragged and
threw her onto his bed.

'You are not exceedingly glad to have me. Rest assured, this at least is something we both agree on.
But you will have to do.'

It was then that she truly started to struggle, prying his hands away from her, her arms and legs
flailing in her despair.

'Stop your sniveling, you already whored with the elf, so you know what to expect. You will find
this is no different. You may even close your eyes and think it is him, I care not' he whispered as
he roughly held her chin to look at her.

'I would rather die of the plague than willingly give myself to you,' she threw, anger now
suffocating her.

'You are my wife now, my bonded, a slut though you may be, and I will teach you more of respect
now than you learned in all your miserable life.'

True to his intent, she felt his fist in her hair, and the pain made her eyes water as he pulled
roughly. He kept her head pinned in his grasp, twisting her limbs forcefully as he shifted above
her.

'If you stopped fidgeting, you might actually enjoy this,' he ground out while he pulled her dress
upward.

Her knees shot up to her chest and she turned to her side, shielding herself from him. But the man
was much stronger and however much Nienor tried, she could do little against his strength. Sobs
wracked her body when the young woman felt his weight suffocating her. Her gasping cries
increased, her mind traveling to the one she had left behind, begging for forgiveness in her mind
and wishing she would fall dead before this came to be.

Ereldur palmed her mouth, her muffled sobs ever present as he positioned himself between her
legs. She nearly retched and her body convulsed then froze, tears drowning her vision.

Just then the battle horn sounded, long and winded. Once. This had only one meaning, tidings of
war.

They froze gaping at each other. Then Ereldur rose hurriedly and dressed as Nienor scrambled
away from him, hardly believing her stroke of luck. With one last threatening look her way, he
exited the chamber.

The woman rushed outside as well and when she came into the market she saw much agitation,
soldiers running to and fro.

She caught sight of Dalaron who was himself swiftly pacing to the stables along with the elves in
his company.

'Dalaron, please! What has passed?' she asked, striving to keep with his fast strides.

'My lady Nienor,' the elf responded hurriedly, never stopping his advance, 'Fornost Erain and Bree
call for aid. They are under attack.'
Legolas looked upon the dark cavernous walls, his hand pressed against the humid surface. The scouts in his company were returning from inspecting the remainder of passageways hewn under the mountain.

'Nothing, my lord,' one of the scouts reported as she approached. 'Aye, it is as you said, but we found no trace of life within this mountain, fell or fair. They must have fled upon realizing you had escaped and would no doubt return. But it is only a presumption.'

'One that I am inclined to believe also,' the ellon answered sighing, having himself seen the now empty enclosure where he had been tortured. He remembered the place and the pain. But not much else.

As part of the Silvan elves efforts to cleanse their lands of the invading beasts of Bauglir, the prince had driven an expedition back into the place of his captivity. He took what he could from his patched memories and what his father had relayed to him. Put together this enabled him to find his way back to the lair. The intent was simple: to seek and destroy the fell population within. But now the ellon could not deny the sheer disappointment of this outcome. The remains and debris were there, but the former occupants have disappeared. Except for the scars on his back the whole happening could have been a dream. But he thirsted for justice and had been looking forward to a good fight. For all those lost, their lives severed. For the families they left behind, grieving and prone to fading. And lastly, it would leave him exhausted enough to quiet his mind. He would welcome even death if it brought him peace. Yet again, he had nothing to pursue.

It was days later when he was returned to the Elven Halls that the king summoned him.

'Father,' the son greeted when he entered the study.

Thranduil was busy skimming a scroll he held in his hand.

'Legolas,' the king lifted his eyes, a strange light in them. He approached and placed a hand on his son's shoulder. 'I am sorry to hear you did not find them.'

'As am I,' the son sighed. 'But such it is,' he followed evenly. Not wanting to dwell on this failure, he continued 'What is this matter you wanted to speak of?'

'Yes, indeed. Arthedain is in a dire situation, its lands under attack. Unmarked forces have descended upon the towns Fornost Erain and Bree and now Garolin is asking for aid on their behalf. In truth, I believe it to be the work of this power rising in the North. Hidden from us, we know not the extent of its reach. The scroll I hold in my hand is an official request from the lord Ereldur.'

'Is there no more detail of this enemy? Nothing of their numbers?' Legolas asked, remembering in a haze words in reference to a master from the great goblin. A master whose bidding the beasts had been doing. He had hoped to capture the goblin and obtain further details, by any means necessary, but now that plan had fallen to ruin.

'None other, I am afraid. Both orc and men make part of this army. Sorcerers making use of the dark arts. I know these lands are not our own, but I must stay true to the promise made.'

'What is your ask of me, then?' In truth, the ellon did not care much, as long as he had something to occupy his mind; to fill his days and nights with something other than meandering thoughts and
restless longing.

The king assessed his son briefly. Dark shades under his eyes that had not been there before were now a constant feature on the younger ellon's face. Thranduil ignored the pang of guilt gnawing at him, hoping but not daring to ask whether his son's nights have improved, whether he could find peace in sleep once more.

'Dalaron has taken our forces already in Arthedain to the aid of Fornost Erain. But the area of Bree sorely lacks in numbers and fighting skill. You would take as many of our armed force as can be spared considering our own efforts, and head for Bree. I believe lord Ereldur is making his way there as we speak.'

Legolas nodded, musing on the words. 'This would at least help us see the nature of this enemy for ourselves.'

The king nodded. 'How soon can you be ready?' He was most disinclined at sending his son on this endeavor. But even he had to admit the need was dire for a capable commander. And though loath to involve his own people in this war, there was no denying that the evil these men tried to withstand was the same evil the Silvan elves battled against. Then there was the sensitive topic of the none too recent happenings related to the woman, which he had a hand in curbing. Even if the prince were to see her again, he thought, there would be no danger to his son and his mind. The mage had assured him the effects of the Nepenthe could not be reverted. And she is officially bound to another.

'Within a day,' his son broke into his thoughts. 'We shall take the short path through the mountains into Rhudaur;' the ellon then decided. 'Since we now know recently a truce was struck with Arthedain, we will use our status as allies of the latter to hasten our travels. If we ride fast we would arrive in time to come to their aid, provided our enemy does not possess any major unforeseen advantage.' With these words he bowed and made to turn away, a new thought brimming in his mind.

'Legolas,' he heard his father's voice and turned briefly. 'Be on your guard,' the king said.

The ellon nodded with half a smile and left the study. As he made his way to the military barracks, he pondered on the thought that buried itself in his mind ever since his father had mentioned lord Ereldur. The lord and his wife. They might prove a good opportunity to aid me in my own efforts.

'Out of the way!' a voice boomed before the boulder tumbled out of mid air, destroying all in its wake. One soldier was not fast enough and met his grueling end crushed underneath.

The enemy that had bewildered the men of Arthedain was making use of various contraptions and war machines, some of which were never seen before. One was a giant wooden frame with a lever, which when pulled would heave heavy rocks into the opposing faction with such strength that they crushed everything in their path. All feared and were disheartened at this use of armament coupled with the malicious energy of the beasts and men wielding it.

'My lord, they have broken through the west flank!' one infantryman cried to Ereldur. 'The sorcerers have done something to the mounts, for they went astray, throwing our men off.'

_Curse this day_ the man thought bitterly. He spurned his horse and headed towards the advancing orc. They had attacked by night again. He fell as many as he could, but his arms were now tired and his eyes strove see through the darkness. His helm thrown away, splintered.
When Ereldur and his men had hastily arrived in support of Bree, the forces gathered were a meager representation of defense. Men from Bree as well as surrounding smaller settlements had taken the call upon learning of the attack, but their numbers were no match for the enemy. They had been battling with little respite for nearly a full week, barely managing to not be overrun.

The screaming and deafening sounds of metal against metal were the music of this night as the human forces tried to fend off the dark army so merciless upon them. Though no leader could be determined, the dark ones seemed to have their purpose clear: to take no prisoners, and give no quarter. They had not breached the town itself yet, but with the way everything was going it did not seem to be long before that too came to pass.

His horse now killed from under him, Ereldur was slashing left and right, his exhausted body bringing him into a frenzy. Out of his many faults, cowardice was not among them. Just then he heard a horn, a drawn sound of strong winding musicality. He only turned to see tall legged horses sprinting through the battlefield, their riders with bows and swords raised in attack. They passed by him, their flowing hair catching the wind, not wasting any time felling the numbers of the enemy.

*The elves. The elves have come* he realized and with his strength now renewed, he continued to cut into as many beasts as he could.

The Silvan elves indeed proved a valuable aid, their bows strung as a coordinated rain of arrows fell upon the opposing faction. Then another. After this, most dismounted, their horses seemingly fleeing in coordination, and took to direct combat.

Legolas threw himself at the orc, a darkened glint in his eye. The energy of battle surged through him, tensing and refreshing his senses. All that he had gained from his Silvan mother was ruling him now. He was in his element. He fell his opponents with swift efficiency, his twin daggers merely flashes of reflected moonlight.

The newly arrived help proved vital in overthrowing the attack. By dawn, most of the battle had come to an end, with both men and elves counting their losses. The wounded were being gathered and tended to. The enemy bodies as well raised into large piles to be burnt.

'Prince Legolas,' the ellon heard as he was depositing a wounded ellon on a pallet in the makeshift healing tent. When he turned, his gaze fell upon a man. A man he knew, yet did not. His face seemed familiar, but as with many things in his recent past, he could not place it. His garb was lordly, but his countenance gave the elf a strange feeling in his chest which he could not yet describe.

'Tis I, lord Ereldur. We have not seen each other in a while,' the man approached cautiously, bowing slightly. 'Firstly, I wanted to thank you. You saved us all from defeat.'

'No need for thanks between allies, lord Ereldur,' the ellon replied, his assumption on the identity of the man confirmed. He fully turned to face his interlocutor. The man met his assessing stare evenly. After a few moments the man broke the gaze and made his way outside, the ellon following as they fell in step together.

'How many fallen?' the elf asked.

'The count is not complete yet. But more than we can spare,' the man answered grimly. 'Then there are the wounded. I am afraid we are sorely equipped for the viciousness of these beasts, or the spells of their casters.'

'What of Fornost Erain?' Legolas asked, wondering and hoping Dalaron had succeeded on that
'Aye, those are better tidings. They have turned away the attackers, their losses fewer than our own. A scroll reached me just before I came searching for you.' He sighed. 'I know not what awaits us now. They will return, surely. Their taunting has ended, now they seem intent to graze these lands off the face of Middle Earth.'

The ellon stood quiet for a while, listening and assessing the man's features at the same time. If Ereldur noticed, he said nothing.

'Be that as it may, today we have won,' Ereldur followed, though nothing in his face sustained his words.

They walked for a time in silence, each musing on their own thoughts.

'My father had dispatched me to assist your people,' the prince followed after a while. 'We would stay to observe and be ready if the enemy decides anything against you in the near future.'

The man stopped then, a hand on the ellon's shoulder. Legolas tried his best to cover the dread the touch evoked in him, thinking it another ploy of his poorly knit mind.

'That would be invaluable to us, my lord,' Ereldur followed. Then seemingly having a new thought, 'Further, you and your host are most welcome to come with us and reside in Garolin for a respite. It does not compare to the Elven Halls but there is plenty of space. It would be but a meager return to the hospitality your father has shown us.'

The ellon bowed his head slightly, his internal turmoil and unease at the man still brimming. Why he felt this way escaped him and he cursed his broken mind. This was not the place nor the time, but he would at one point have to ask the lord of his time in Lasgalen. And more importantly, he had to ask his wife.

'It would be an honor, lord Ereldur.'
Shadow of the past

The day was making way to dusk, brushing the towers of Garolin with its fading light. Nienor observed the dying day from the window of her chamber, the heat from the slow burning fire warm on her face as she stood lost in thought. She had toiled all day, helping the servants with the usual chores. She had ordained the daily goings of the city fortress that was her ancestral home, as much as was in her power to do so.

Now, not a little weary, the woman pondered on her present situation. She had bathed, at least twice within the day. Though nothing could cleanse his wandering hands or the memory of his weight against her, she tried to tell herself she was not at fault, that she should not feel as tainted and used as she did. As she could have been. Turning fully to the dying embers of the fire, she wondered if next time she would be as fortunate to escape his grasp. But the woman was sure she never could bear to feel what she had felt that day ever again. That complete helplessness and terror, being stripped of all dignity, the unwanted touch of unwanted hands.

Part of her hoped he would not return. She had tried to live with his presence but it was increasingly difficult by the day. Then, she was faced with the wifely duty which was expected of all married women - to bear her lord a child. The thought of carrying on his blood made her ill, and she saw little escape. If only he would cease taunting her. A bird in a cage, just as... just as he had said. But she dared not think of him further. It would only make everything harder to bear.

So trapped she was in her thoughts that she did not hear the first sound of the Garolin horn. It was the second sound that took her out of her reverie, and just then she heard a knock, and a voice on the other side.

'My lady, friendly travelers are here, and the herald says it is our host. I have come to gather you.'

It was Igleta.

The woman hastily turned her face into something more composed and went to the door as it was being opened. Igleta regarded her lady strangely for a moment.

'Are you well, child?'

'Aye, please let us go.' Please do not let it be him. Please not yet. But her hope was ruined when she saw the banners as she descended the stairs to the main square. The day had turned into night, and torches lit on the sides of the building and upon the walls made the main source of light.

She came to stand expectantly in the front, waiting at the bottom of the stairs of the main house. She was soon accompanied by other ladies, women of this small court whose husbands had gone to battle. They would always greet the men as they returned, whether successful or not in their endeavors.

She felt icy floes trap her in place when she saw Ereldur riding at the front, his face unmistakable among the riders. But the men were not alone? She then noticed other riders, their garb seemingly in shades of green in as much as she could determine by torchlight. Long, auburn hair adorned the heads of some, and their tall mounts made quite the impression. Elves? He has brought more elves with him?
Just then, upon seeing her the man motioned his horse towards her, a small smile pulling at his lips. She froze when she met his gaze, and he was coming nearer. His hands between her legs. She shook her head, wishing away her fretful thoughts.

'My wife, we have returned. The battle on the fields of Bree was hard and wearisome,' he addressed her so that all could hear. 'And we would have lost, if not for the help that had arrived in time.' As he said this he dismounted and approached her.

Nienor tried not to waver at his closeness, standing still, trapped in her own body.

Ereldur only smiled broader when he was in front of her and leaned in, his words now a whisper only she could hear, 'And I bring you a gift, wife. In remembrance,' he said close to her ear. She drew from him, confusion knitting her brow. The man then turned to address another rider who had just dismounted.

'Prince Legolas-

She choked on the air in her lungs, her eyes on Ereldur, thinking she misunderstood his words at first. Has he gone mad? But then she switched her gaze to the approaching rider, whose face had been partly covered in shadows and felt a darkness cloud her vision when she discerned his features. Her fingers curled into the flesh of her palms.

The elf now reached the pair, a vague official smile on his features. Her eyes widened in disbelief and horror as if she was seeing a specter before her.

'You remember my wife, I assume?' Ereldur asked cordially, his eyes on the woman.

The ellon looked at her then. So this is she. In truth, he did not remember the woman which stood before him at all. It was most disconcerting, but he would never say this, not in the midst of an official greeting at least. Not wanting to lengthen the silence and remembering his manners, he bowed to her in greeting. 'My lady,' he said. When she did not offer him her hand he straightened, eyeing her but for one moment before turning to Ereldur in askance.

'Forgive me, lady wife, I had not the time to send messengers ahead. I have requested further help from Lasgalen. The prince led a company to our aid, and I have asked him here as our guest for the time being. I hope, it is something you can undertake to accommodate our friends?'

Nienor barely heard the words. Her heartbeat in her ears, feeling the elf's eyes on her, she tried to steady herself.

'Nienor?' Ereldur hedged, unusually gently.

Her eyes shot to meet his, still trying to ignore the presence of the other.

'Aye,' was all she managed.

What a strange woman, the ellon thought. Her eyes then turned to him and he saw something akin to fear in them. This only served to increase his wonder.

'Then let us prepare for this night with what rooms and space we have available, and tomorrow my wife will arrange for better conditions,' the man followed, turning to the elf.

'Aye, that is fair. Though I hope we are no great impediment,' the ellon said politely, looking between the two of them.
'On the contrary,' the man continued, his eyes now on Nienor. 'And we shall have a welcome feast as well. This victory must be marked.' If gazes could kill, he would have probably already been in his grave with the way his wife looked at him.

'Thank you, lord Ereldur. If you will excuse me, I must take my mount to the stables, for she has had quite the day,' the ellon broke in gently.

'Aye, of course.' Ereldur motioned to a stable hand who approached and took to the task. 'Nienor, would you mind showing the prince to a room available and then aiding the rest of our elven companions?' The glint in his eye flared her anger. She watched the man but for a moment longer.

'Aye,' she gritted. Then she turned towards the manor house without a word to the ellon, who only turned to follow her, still taken aback by her behavior.

*Oh Valar, this cannot be happening, this cannot be happening.* What if he knew? What if the potion had not worked? Though nothing in his eyes had shown it. And she could not meet his gaze to assess further.

'My lady?' she heard and cringed at his voice. *This cannot be happening, he cannot be here.*

Not deigning to reply, she only led him into the establishment towards a room on the ground floor.

'This is the place,' she uttered as steadily as she could, opening the door.

The ellon met her gaze, and the overflow of her feelings almost leveled her.

'Thank you, my lady. I did want to ask-'

'Forgive me, it is late and I must go see to the others. I will have my house mistress in charge come see if you desire anything else.' The woman knew she was being excessively curt, and her behavior towards the ellon would be considered horrifying by nearly anyone where manners and etiquette were concerned, considering his status. But she could not stand to be in his presence a moment longer. With the last words she turned and left him, not waiting to hear anything else he had to say.

The ellon blinked, standing in front of the door staring after her, his thoughts of earlier registering again. *What a strange woman indeed.* It seemed his task of drawing tidings out of her would not prove as straightforward as he had thought. He had also tried to place her somewhere within his memories, all to no avail.

Nienor walked away hastily, wanting to place as much distance between herself and the elf as fast as possible. She could scarcely believe he was here in the flesh, let alone be able to speak to him.

It was late into the night when aided by the servants she finished preparations for the others. Nienor had regained some of her composure, but her mind was still full. He was alive and well. The single good tiding that Ereldur's *gift* had brought. The young woman decided to confront her new husband for his cruel games, afraid though she was of him. Stilling her thoughts brought by his recent attempts to abuse her, Nienor went to her chambers and drew one of her daggers from its sheath. She stared at the abandoned weapon she had not used since her time with the elves. Before her courage could falter, her steps took her towards his chambers. When she reached his door she hesitated at first before knocking weakly.

'Enter,' she heard. With a deep intake of breath, Nienor followed inside and remained with her back pressed against the closed door.
'Do my eyes deceive me?' Ereldur asked, a brief flash of surprise on his face. He was still in his riding clothes, himself having probably retired recently. He approached his wife tentatively, unfastening his coat. 'Have you come to tell me how much you enjoyed my gift?'

'Why are you doing all of this? Can you truly be so vengeful? I wish to forget what is in the past! Why will you not let me?'

'Oh please. You grant too much importance to yourself. Not everything that goes on in Middle Earth revolves around you, Nienor. I have called the elves here so they may rest and meet with the rest of their kin. They have aided us overmuch, and might still do so. Your personal woes were of little concern when I made my offer, though I must admit, seeing your countenance was indeed a welcome sight. Fear not, for your elf remembers nothing. I doubt he would be here if he did.' He grinned at her tortured expression, drawing even closer. 'Now, why are you here? Have you come to finish what we started before my departure?'

Nienor shuddered, the dagger suddenly making itself known in her hand, the blade pointed towards her husband.

'You will not touch me again,' she hissed.

Ereldur seemed taken aback but for a moment, but in the end his grin returned. 'But neither will he,' and with this he started chortling lowly.

She whirled around and exited the chamber, the mocking sound hounding her steps.
'Dalaron!' the prince exclaimed gladly as his second in command dismounted.

'My lord,' the former greeted his prince with a friendly smile, their arms gripping in the customary warrior salute. Dalaron and the remainder of the elven company had finally arrived from Fornost.

'I cannot express my joy at seeing you well,' Legolas added. 'Tell me of the battle and our losses,' he urged as Dalaron gave his reins to the stable hand and took to walking together with his royal companion.

As the elves strolled across the courtyard leading from the stables, deep in discussion, they did not notice a figure observing them from the second floor of the main manor house.

Nienor stood deep in thought, unable to tear her eyes away from the pair. It was so strange to see him here, in the place she had been born and raised. She had been determinedly ill prepared for such a meeting, and Ereldur only served to make matters worse by not advising her of this beforehand. Her mind was planning and searching for ways to ensure their paths would cross as little as possible. After their first encounter she was barely inclined to leave her chamber, though she knew there was plenty of work to be done; especially now with the addition of the elven company, the tasks in managing the household doubled. She only gathered the courage, most unwillingly, when Igleta had come to gather her to oversee the kitchen preparations for the upcoming feast. Once she was finished there, she went straight back to her chamber while painstakingly avoiding meeting any elves on the way. She knew she was acting foolish and childish about it all, but another side of her did not want to risk anything that could lead to him possibly asking questions. Questions about the past and events all too painful to remember. When she saw the ellon before her everything had rushed back to the forefront of her thoughts with painful clarity. The guilt of what she had done to him. His crystal gaze upon her, bereft of any remembrance only served to increase her self loathing. Now she waited until the elves disappeared from sight before proceeding to exit her chamber, her face a blank mask, to pursue the remainder of the day's tasks.

The days wore on with little excitement, apart from the news of the advancing armies of the enemy. Scouts were sent in all corners of Arnor to ascertain the situation as best they could, and would report back to the lords of the different cities within the three kingdoms.

In the meantime Garolin was preparing and ready for the feast its lord had called upon, a welcome respite from the harsh reality which plagued its people. When the week's end came all was set in the main hall for the festivities. Since the weather had turned into the harsh winter that Arnor was famous for, the days were shorter and nights longer. Thus is was not long before the evening came and people were starting to gather in the main hall. The lord and his lady were presiding over the feast, seated in the middle of a long table set before the two thrones.

People from Garolin and different surrounding cities as well as elves of Lasgalen were present. Other tables were placed to the sides of the wide hall, leaving the large space free for dance. The dances of Garolin were said to be remnants of ones from the court of ancient Númenor, and no official visit or celebration came without this closely observed tradition. Dinner passed with little commotion, the sounds of music drowning the chatter of the people gathered. Nienor stood besides Ereldur, her expression a carefully crafted mask of blank pleasantness. She spoke little, ate less, while her eyes tried to avoid meeting others'. But it was not long before the dances commenced and Nienor had no choice but to partake due to her status as the consort of lord Ereldur, and
representative of the ruling house of Garolin. So she joined in the opening dance, changing partners mid swing as was the custom. Ereldur was her first turn as her husband.

'Are you faring well, wife?' he asked, the charring tone completely opposite to his words.

'I did not think you cared,' came the irked reply.

'You know murky waters run deep, my dear,' he smirked. 'Though, I did notice something. I see you blatantly ignoring our royal visitor. Do try to curb your rudeness and not make a disgrace of us all.'

'You truly are despicable if you wish to lengthen my punishment with this. You know why I avoid his presence!' she hissed.

The grip on her hand tightened. 'Nevertheless. I would expect you to be more courteous to the prince. He is our guest and ally after all, and his kin a valuable aid. Besides, his leery presence seems to help morale,' the man said disdainfully, and she saw the dormant hatred in his stare. But in spite of everything, even his pride, Ereldur knew when to be tactical. He grinned down at her. 'Come, Nienor. Nothing could stop you before,' he said silkily.

She would have stricken him across the face but for his hold of her. Though accustomed to his stings, the way he used the past against her was always hard to hear.

'Cease your whining,' he said gripping her tighter. 'Do as you are told and I will consider having you attend less of him.'

The woman then felt determined to leave the festivities, custom and status be damned. She wanted to end this miserable night in some sort of solace. But in the end she stayed, partly due to her sense of duty, partly to not draw attention to herself for what would be considered highly unusual behavior.

By the third dance she had gone through Hamor and then another youth, son of an Anduron noble family she did not know very well. It was at the end of this dance that she was twirled around to her new partner, and it took all her good sense not to recoil from him in front of everyone.

The elf facing her courteously bowed to signal the beginning of their turn, his hand outstretched, awaiting hers. She hesitated briefly before finally placing her hand in his, her unease palpable.

I wonder what it is in my countenance that she finds so terrifying the ellon thought morosely as he brought a small tensed hand to rest on his shoulder, his own hand then loosely resting on the side of her waist. He raised her other hand to his chest and placed his own over it, taking it upon himself to bring them into the correct posture.

The tune started playing, a fact dimly noticed by Nienor. This seemed to be a poorly written mummery, but here they were. They had never danced together before in Lasgalen, she realized.

The prince saw the woman did her best to avoid his gaze, and belatedly thought this was the first time he was dancing with someone so wary of him. It was quite the opposite usually, if he were to compare this to the eagerness of the women he had entertained until then. And he had seen the lady of Garolin had not been so with the others. Thus the only logical reason for her sudden fearful mood had to be him.

'Allow me to say, tonight becomes you, my lady,' he tried. And it was true, it did. Long inky hair flowed freely past her shoulders, the muted dark blue dress a compliment to her pale skin. Her face, though slightly drawn, was fair and pleasant in its stark contrast with her hair. As he said the words
she seemed to become more agitated, imperceptibly but still enough for his senses to notice. Her body drawing from him, as if ready to sprint. It should not have bothered him. Why it did, he did not know.

'You need not feel obliged to offer compliments, my lord,' she finally managed, breaking into his thoughts. *In fact, if you could not speak at all* she pleaded in her mind.

'I assure you, I do not speak lies my lady,' he followed smiling.

Her eyes shot to meet his, nearly faltering in her step at the distinct memory his words evoked. The cold earth beneath her, his warm embrace. She desperately hoped the color in her face was not as intense as it felt, though his expression gave nothing away.

The ellon saw the woman in his arms was terribly uncomfortable, the reason completely escaping him. Their paths almost never crossed, but when they did she would hastily make herself scarce, a fact not lost upon him. *Perhaps she shuns elves, as most humans unaccustomed to us. But then she had seen Lasgalen, spent much time among my kind. Unless, something had happened that left her distrustful of me.*

Regardless, he thought the time had to be now. He had to ask her. It was either this or forever chasing after her for a moment of her time until he had to depart this place, either for Lasgalen or war; possibly never to see her again. And she had proven elusive to say the least.

'Lady Nienor,' he began, treading carefully, 'might I have a word?'

Her eyes then lifted to meet his, and he thought that she would flee there and then, such was her expression.

'I hoped that you could aid me,' he followed cautiously, 'as I find myself having trouble remembering certain events. Events, that I was told, you were a part of as well. I know how it must sound,' he tried lightly, wanting to unwind her. If possible, the body he held close became even more rigid. Had it not been for his lead, she surely would have stopped moving altogether. He was half afraid she would bolt away from him.

'Which events, and what would you like to know, my lord?' he finally heard. Her lowered eyes seemed now intent on studying the collar of his tunic.

Though relieved, the ellon regarded her stony face before continuing. 'My lady, your help would be invaluable, and I thank you for consenting to offer it.' She merely nodded, still not meeting his eyes.

'To my knowledge, you were part of the convoy returning to Lasgalen from Aegas'Annan. This is true?'

'Aye.' *Remember yourself, he does not know* her mind told her repeatedly.

'I have only pieces of memories to aid me in this, so please bear with me. I do remember I rode to meet this convoy on their path, but at one point we were ambushed by the beasts of Bauglir. Yet I have no clear memories of what had befallen me after. My mind recalls the coldness of the cave I was imprisoned in, and I remembered the pathway to the beasts' lair under the mountains of my kingdom. I was tortured there, but in truth, the scars I have tell the tale better than I can.'

The image of the whip invaded her mind and Nienor wanted to flee then, propriety and status be damned. But she stayed, his hand warm upon hers, still trapping her in dance.
'Further to this, I have no known memory of you, either before or after these events. None at all. Though I was told we returned together. Which is entirely possible, but inexplicable, and I think anyone would agree it is strange.' He stopped, his senses trying to reach her, for anything of help. He found nothing but fear.

'Please tell me you at least remember of me?' he asked, a veiled earnestness in his jesting tone.

'That I do,' came the faint reply. _Eru help me, I cannot keep this ruse much longer._

The ellon failed to see what caused his dancing partner to be so tight lipped, but he succeeded to contain his pique, focusing on what was important.

'How did we come to return together? The question had to be answered at last, the words escaping him on their own accord.

It was then that the tune of their dance came to an end, and Nienor had never been so thankful in all her life. But when she tried to turn for another partner she could not, due to the now iron hold keeping her in place. Gentle though it was, this insistence made her lift her gaze, ready to deny him. But when she saw his face she was lost.

'Would you mind another turn, lady Nienor?' the ellon smiled down at her gallantly, mostly to hide his unease at the prospect of leaving his questions unanswered. Questions which had maimed his mind for the past months. He applied pressure as much as he dared, only to hedge her, to show her how much she would bring him if she helped.

The woman knew that struggling would bring only unwanted attention upon herself as the music signaled the beginning of the next dance, so she forced a smile and stiffly complied.

'What is your last memory of these events?' she quietly asked, before being twirled around him once.

'In truth, I do not know,' the prince said as they faced each other again, and she could hear the truest confusion in his voice. 'When I try to make sense of them, I come to no viable conclusion. The harder I try, the more everything escapes me.'

His bitter tone made her pause. But she could offer no comfort. She did not want to think about what he had suffered. She did not want to think about him at all. So she resorted to what she thought would help keep him away. She lied.

'I ran away when the orc descended upon us.' At his now raised eyebrow, she added quickly, 'Not very heroic my lord, I know. But what was I to do? I had been lucky, for I escaped into the darkness and did not look back for fear I would be caught. I was lost, for days on my own, trying to make my way to Lasgalen based on vague memories of my journey thence and the positioning of the stars above. Then one day, I came upon you in the forest. You had been grievously wounded.'

She stopped then to assess the effect of her words, only to find he was rapt with attention. No disbelief in his eyes. He looked disarmingly youthful in his eagerness, the ages gone from his gaze, and in that moment she felt her heart skip its beat. And she wished she was back in that forest with him.

'And then?' the ellon urged, watching her intently. He found himself trying to ignore the warmth coiling in his chest.

'I joined you, though you were... not entirely rooted in reality,' she chose. 'At times you would speak deliriously. When your state improved, we traveled together until your father came upon us.
in his search.' She was in disbelief at herself for the flagrant lie she had concocted. And at the ease with which she uttered it. I must tell Ereldur.

The ellon mused on her words for a few moments as they danced in silence. He would have liked to ask her for more, but decided against it. 'I thank you for this help, and your care. Truly, I am in your debt.'

She looked away, the irony of it bearing down. 'You owe me nothing.'

'Though, it is beyond me how I cannot remember anything of you,' he continued, his eyes roaming over her face as if it held the answers.

Gathering her nerve, she looked at him again. There was no trace of recognition. She took in the dark shades under his eyes, a strange sight on his ageless face. 'I cannot confess to know why that may be, prince Legolas,' she said evenly, holding his gaze but a moment longer before tearing her eyes away. Lying to him through her teeth left her impossibly weary and her mind begged for a swift escape. His arm now encircling her waist was too warm.

He searched her face once more; pale, framed by impossibly dark strands of hair. His brows furrowed together, an image from his dreams suddenly coming to mind.

Flowing hair brushing his face.

He blinked, now strangely aware of her hands on him and the warmth seeping through them. It still seemed that aught was missing. But there it was, the mystery only partially solved, yet still more than what he had before speaking to her.

The woman withstood his assessment with a frozen countenance, her eyes averted. Thanking the Valar when the notes died and their dance came to an end, Nienor pried herself from the elf's now loose hold. She curtsied as customary and before he could say anything else, swiftly made to leave the dance floor. She danced no more that night.

Legolas was met with a new enigma. Are my senses amiss? he mused as he watched her form disappearing among the many dancing couples. How had she felt so familiar? Why did the riddles seem to fade from his mind when this woman had looked at him? He felt the need for air, the colder the better. Unable to focus on the celebrations any longer, he excused himself and made his way outside.
'He is too perceptive, he seeks me for information. It is torture to speak with him - and I refuse to continue to do so,' she hissed at the man who was seemingly lost in thought, his hand stroking his dark beard in lazy motions.

'He asked me about our return after the ambush,' she continued, her tone whispered though they were alone. 'I had to lie, I cannot think about what it would mean if he discovered.'

'What would it mean, though? Hm?' Ereldur interrupted, his dark eyes illuminated by the flickering candle flames, studying her. 'The elf would hate me, indeed, but my alliance - our alliance -, is with his father. And his father commands the armies. And his father has had a hand in the unfortunate event befalling the prince. I would never deny my role, but...' His eyes trailed over her changing expression.

'...if I placed you as having the central role in this deceit, would you deny it, only to change his regard of you? Would you cause your elf pain and destroy his ties to his father? You remember his last words to the king. He would also hate you, of course. And that is what you dread the most, is it not?' he finished, drawing closer to her.

Nienor looked away from him, hating the truth in his words, and how predictable she was to him. She could never stand his unsettling gaze on her. Her hand itched, wavering imperceptibly over the fold in her sleeve where she had hidden a small dagger. A precaution, as she never again wanted to feel anything akin to what he had done to her on their wedding night. The demeaning events gnawed at her and she shook her head, wishing away the memory of his roaming hands. They had met in the empty library after the night's feast started to unfetter and most of the guests were heading to their homes. A number of invitees remained to pursue the festivity to the end, until dawn hit the sky.

She did not have the courage to go seek him in his chambers, her fear of him the winner, and the present space in its neutrality proved safe enough for her. Though the fact that she had to hide and taste fear in her own home only added to the myriad of thoughts fouling her spirit.

'Is it not?' she heard the question again. 'For you are a fool. Though you insist on avoiding him, I have seen you come to pieces in his presence. You disgust me, wife, for you are weak. And you fully deserve his scorn if not more. So why then, should I not spare you the worry and tell him myself? My own version of course.'

'Please, Ereldur do not,' she tried, afeared of his words.

'What will you do for it, you slut? Will you, for instance, concede to do your duty and offer me an heir?'

'I am no more a slut than you are valiant!' she threw, her brow creasing in ire.

He seized upon her, his hand heavy on her arm. 'You are what I say you are. For I am your lord. I, not that creature you leer at when nobody is looking. For I have seen it-

'Let go of me!' she struggled, her grip on the dagger tightening.
'Aye, I will, and straight to him do I go, let us see how you manage when he is the one that seeks you out.'

'Alright! I w-will, I will do as you ask. After this war ends. After, if we live,' she tried desperately. She could not bear to look the elf in the eye while he knew the truth of her actions. She had imagined it countless times since he arrived to Garolin, and her nightmares always ended for the worse.

Ereldur smiled thinly, his hand reaching to caress her face. 'The lady of Garolin, always so lenient in the end.' She pulled away in visible disdain and he left her there, his shadow receding against the flames. The library door rang shut. Alone among the dust and knowledge of ages, Nienor of Garolin started to weep.

The war council was called at first light, for urgent tidings had arrived. Present were Hamor, Ereldur, Dalaron and Legolas among their generals and captains. All stood grim, expectant. The messenger marched into the room, his clothes dusty, his brow wearied. Everyone had been summoned as soon as the watchman saw him approach from afar, his horse foaming in his haste.

'Grave news, my lords,' he started, his bow the only introduction. 'An army is heading this way, north from here. Their numbers are vaster than what befell Bree. It is the same enemy, for they seem to have the same structure. Men of darkness, sorcerers among them, orc, goblins in high numbers. Our only advantage is they depend on the cover of darkness to unleash their full numbers upon us, a meager help though it is.'

'How soon do you think will they reach the fortress?' the prince asked.

'Nigh three days as the crow flies, my lord.'

A low murmur was heard among the men.

'We have little time, thus we must make the best of it,' Ereldur spoke. 'Hamor, see to gathering the fighting men we have at disposal here and in the surrounding villages. Send word to Fornost that we require aid, for the enemy strikes anew.'

'We are at the ready,' Legolas added, speaking for his elven host. 'Dalaron, please see that our troops have their horses watered and weapons sharpened and prepared. Lord Ereldur will provide for this.'

Ereldur inclined his head towards the prince. 'We have no choice but to meet them and try to overcome them. I am loath to see these dark days when we perish in front of this unnamed enemy, but we shall make our stand. The blood of Númenor lives.'

'The blood of Númenor lives,' the men chanted as one the words which made the grim war cry of their people.

'My lords,' the messenger continued 'I have also heard of one who leads them, one who has made his stronghold in the north. Tis the source of all of this rallying, our network of scouts surmise, though none dare to go closer.

'Something to consider indeed, thank you Magon,' Ereldur addressed the messenger. 'I believe we have the initial steps to prepare, we shall meet anew in the afternoon to assess progress. I shall speak to my lady Nienor so she is aware to gather the womenfolk and prepare to offer medical aid. Those unable to fight will take shelter in the barrows beneath the fortress.'
With this the war council was dismissed, and all set their separate ways to prepare for the fate set before them.

'Another battle, so soon upon us?' she gasped in disbelief.

'Aye woman, those were my words,' Ereldur gritted 'see to it that healing tents are raised and supplies are gathered. The army leaves on the morrow.'

Nienor could scarcely believe it. Soon more lives to be lost, crippled. And with no guarantee of success, for their enemy seemed to have a different strategy each time. But she would do her best, as she had always done. And she dared not ask about the elves, for she knew they would fight. He would fight. The Valar keep him. May they keep us all.

Droplets of rain hit metal armor in a grim cadence, causing an eerie song to rise among the disquiet. The fighting force was at the ready. The cavalry made the front line of defense, both men and elves aligned to their leaders. Ereldur stood to the right, while the woodland prince with his company covered the left flank. Elven archers made the rearguard. Inhumanely still, expectant. The army had ridden to meet the enemy half way, stopping their march about one day's ride from Garolin. It was the farthest they could go to allow them the time to prepare.

Moments unnumbered had passed in wait before the elves' keen sight saw a grizzly green aura on the horizon, the fell light leaving no doubt as to who it was. As the seconds passed and turned into minutes, the horizon filled with dark shadows which came closer and closer until discernible by all. The leaders gave the signal and the defending army started marching towards their foe. Possibly marching towards their fates. Their numbers were adequate, but no man could ignore the fear in their bowels at the sight of the men of darkness and orc drawing nigh, some atop horses and some riding fell, wolf-like beasts.

The clashing of the two armies was vicious, the sound thundering, deafening. The cries of men and elves mingled with the clattering of armor. Blade against blade clashed as they pushed through their foe.

Legolas had dismounted and took to close combat, his twin blades shining red and black with blood. It seemed to last forever, and among the chaos he could barely discern friend from foe even with his gifted vision.

'Thranduilion,' a voice beckoned in his mind, raking against its walls, and barely could he focus on his defenses anymore, so intense was the sudden crushing sensation in his head.

'Who are you? Release my mind!' he yelled amidst the throes of battle, his cries drowned by the mayhem. He evaded one foe and kicked another off his feet before he heard it again. A laughter so sinister even he recoiled.

'Your mind is broken, prince. But not to the point of no return. I could aid you,' the voice continued anew, causing him to sway from the sensation of his nerves shattering. The somber timbre thumped through him, weakening his reflexes.

'Stay out of my thoughts sorcerer!' he cried again as he slashed at another enemy with his dagger before evading the strike of a scimitar. Just then he felt a chill deep in his bones and an immense dread took hold of him. He heard the stir and beating of what sounded like enormous wings. As he turned towards the sound, his eyes widened when he beheld the winged beast landing not far from him, its screeching causing all to flee from its path in terror. The beating of its wing threw all aside.
His head now hurt so much it was unbearable, blurring his vision. He stood frozen, gaping at the creature before he managed to recover his bearing. He then saw the rider atop this beast. The being seemed to be of material form, but dark as the night it swallowed the light, a black aura enveloping it. Yet somehow he glowed, wraith-like in the moonlight. The creature’s face was hidden. Stifling the surprising fear he felt at its proximity, the elf reached a decision. He fell another foe in his path before running towards the nameless rider and his beastly mount.

Another bout of laughter burst in his mind followed by an invisible blow which threw him to the ground so powerfully it left him gasping for air.

‘Your time will soon end, child of Ilúvatar. But consider the power you would have when all others are destroyed, once you join the cause of our Master.’

The elf rose to his feet, but no sooner did he attempt an offense with his blades than the winged beast attacked, its powerful neck sustaining the ferocious slashing of its maw. The ellon rolled over from its path, circling behind it and tried to advance towards the rider-

But then his mind went blank, and all sound around him subsided and became no more than a distant humming. He stood still, his body unresponsive as images rapidly buried themselves in his mind. Brief images of him and... The elf shuddered. Her?... He was seeing her for the first time in Eryn Lasgalen. From that point, fast as lightning, what Legolas saw to be his own memories flashed before his eyes. His father, standing still and watching as she offered him to drink a dark liquid. He even felt its bitter taste, and nausea clenched his insides. The pain in his head was excruciating and the elf wavered while blindly slashing with his blades.

The fell laughter grew louder. 'Do you see what men and elves are capable of doing when it suits them, son of Thranduil? But if you join our cause, you can be part of the unveiling of the true fate of Arda. A new world order-'

'Silence!' the ellon gritted, now nearly mad with pain.

The dark rider was already hovering above ground on the beast, and the sweep of its heavy wings threw him to the ground. He managed to lift himself-

'My lord!' someone cried to him in warning, all too late.

In his confused state the ellon turned but not fast enough to evade the fell rider swiftly upon him, nor the blade raised in attack. Though he barely avoided the full swing of the sword a flash of pain blinded him and then the elf was falling on his back, his balance lost. The left part of his face felt hot and slippery with viscous flowing liquid. He rolled over just in time to avoid the heavy swing of an axe. The pain in his face was unbearable but it was soon smothered by the renewed blood lust pounding in his veins. It numbed everything. He resumed fighting, forgetting all else.

'Where are you?' he yelled to the nameless rider who had infiltrated his mind though no sign of him, or it, remained. The violation had affected him deeply. The dark tendrils that invaded his mind left him nauseous and his fëa weakened. But it was the images which truly broke him, the lies which swirled in his mind like poisonous weeds taking root. For they were lies. They had to be. No, he could not dwell on this now.

'Show yourself, you coward!' he ground out into the surrounding chaos as he fought tooth and nail.

He did not realize when it was all over. After what seemed like an eternity the enemy was retreating, but nothing spoke of a victory. Their losses had been great and now both elves and men lay lifeless on the vast field of Arthedain, their blood seeping through the earth as an unwilling
sacrifice.

Legolas walked among them, darkened with grief. He had found his horse and gathered his company around him as he could. His wounded face throbbed violently, and only now was he beginning to feel its sting again. A winding gash covered half of his face, from brow to jaw, and it was bleeding profusely.

'My friend,' he heard a familiar voice and turned to see Dalaron approaching him, relief chief on his features. 'You look... you look-'

'Terrible, aye. More competition for you,' the ellon replied, himself glad and relieved his friend was alive, though the throes of battle clearly had left their mark on him as well. His right arm was wet with blood from what looked like a sizable wound, his face bruised from blunt hits.

'We have lost fewer of our own than expected, but the men have perished in far greater numbers. Our enemy grows more vicious with each attack. We must rally more numbers-'

Legolas raised a hand. 'Peace, we can discuss this when we hold council. What of the lord Ereldur? Is he in a position to lead them?'

'He lives, though with broken ribs I was informed.'

The prince nodded, his gaze thoughtful.

'You must at once tend to that wound,' Dalaron motioned. 'If nothing else, it is ghastly to behold, truly a sight to scare small children.'

Legolas smiled at the light-hearted jab, but his expression darkened when he realized this meant he would have to face her. And with that thought everything returned. All the... memories, painfully thrown at him. The sorcerer must have lied, had tried to ensnare him with his spells. None of what he learned was true. But then, why did it feel so?

'Are you well?' he heard the voice of the elven commander from afar.

'Aye' he shook his head. 'Let us depart for Garolin once we have gathered our wounded and buried the dead. They deserve at least to rest with the honor by which they lived.'
Of snares eluded, broken traps

In the aftermath of the battle what remained of the fighting force returned to the safety of the fortress. Makeshift healing wards were constructed in the southern part of the fortress grounds, with women of the city running to and fro as they tended to the wounded.

Legolas rode ahead, eliciting none too few stares as more folk beheld his state. The nameless rider was on his mind, as well as the worrying immensity of the dark power this enemy exuded during their confrontation. This was valuable information to share, as this sorcerer seemed to be the one leading the numbers of the enemy. With such power it would not be far from the mark to assume so. The prince thought he would have to call for an expedition to the north, to the base of the mountains, where human scouts dared not venture as of yet. They needed to gather better intelligence if they were to stand a chance against this fell power. He also had to write to his father immediately of these tidings. The purpose of this evil was terrible, judging by the words the sorcerer threw at him. *The true fate of Arda? Valar, what awaits us?*

After a short trip to the infirmary he would have to call a council gathering and speak with the leaders. Lost in his thoughts, his eyes darted aimlessly through the crowd. It was then that he saw her.

Nienor was carrying a basket of freshly boiled bandages, her steps taking her to one of the healing wards. She had received word in advance that the fighting company would soon return, their enemy foiled though with great losses. Now she was returning from overseeing the care of Ereldur, who had arrived with part of his company in a separate line hours before the elves. He was worse for wear, but he would live. Her mouth was set in a grim line, her eyes shadowed. The women were expecting double the work now with the latest arrivals and she had done her best to prepare. Presently the womenfolk enlisted to care for the wounded scurried through the crowds like bees, fretfully awaiting the return of their sons, husbands, brothers, fathers.

She saw the first of the second wave of men and elves arrive, some on horseback, some walking along wooden carts carrying the more grievously wounded. These would be the first tended to. As her eyes roamed over the scene she gasped, and nearly lost her grip on the basket. There he was, riding among his kin. Part of his face was an utter mess. Blood drenched the collar of his tunic, seeping down onto his leather armor and over his chest. The elf dismounted on his own, though not as nimbly as usual, she noticed. He was hurt. She had to go to him.

'Stop it you mad woman, he is not your concern, you will only make a spectacle of yourself,' her inner voice told her in time, and with this she smothered the urge, hesitating in her tracks. But soon the debate was solved for her when his stride took the ellon straight to the tent which served as the main healing ward. She hastened her steps into the same direction, entering just behind him.

'My lord?' the woman asked, and she thought she saw his shoulders stiffen before the elf turned to face her. She almost swayed at seeing the state of his face, and it was all she could do to not reach out and touch him.

'I would need some, ah, assistance lady Nienor,' he said, his voice eerily blank 'for this,' he gestured to the gash. 'If you have someone to spare the time, that is-'

'Of course, please come this way, there is a spare bed-',

'I am not staying, cleaning and sutures will do,' the ellon hastily added, his eyes on the commotion within the ward.
She bit her lip but said nothing more, instead turning on her heel for him to follow. Moving fast and striving to avoid collision with the hurried healers and people inside, they reached an empty narrow pallet where she motioned him to sit. She went to retrieve the needed supplies and returned with a number of bottles.

'I will give you essence of harts-tongue, this will dull the pain when I will work to sew the wound.'

'Nay,' he interrupted, 'no potions.'

She looked him in the eye determinedly. 'But prince-

'Do what you must without it,' he said tiredly, averting his gaze. The finality of the words left no room for argument.

Nienor would have pleaded more but under the circumstances, she could do nothing but comply. She nodded, though he was no longer looking at her, his gaze lost somewhere far. Wasting no time the woman took to the task dipping the cloth in warm water and her hand reached, unsteadily, to gently turn his chin to one side so she had access to the injury.

'Close your eyes my lord,' she added, her voice coming softer than she would have liked, and when he complied she started to clean the blood off his brow. She then proceeded to clean the remainder of his face where the gash deepened. He did not so much as flinch while she worked. His brow furrowed slightly when she gently dabbed essence of kingsfoil over the gash, its cleansing properties causing an intense sting on open wounds.

'Now you must lie down so I can start applying sutures, my lord.'

My lord he grimaced. Such falsity. How could she manage it? He opened his eyes at her trembling voice, but her expression said little. The ellon did as told but started despite himself when he again felt light fingers on his face, warm and steadying. She proceeded to sew the wound as neatly as she could. There was pain but he was distracted by her breathing next to him. She was bent in so close-

A fool I am, if I ever knew one, he closed his eyes, attempting to still the sensations gnawing at him.

Nienor for her part was surprised her fingers were so steady, and though the endeavor was not the easiest she would rather it be her than someone else. This had to be done properly. In a way, she was close to him at least and a small part of her was relieved it was so, though the chaos and wailing of the wounded around them made the strange music of this day. Ereldur's words ring true, I am a wretched craven.

'My lord, I am done,' she nearly whispered when she finished her task. When no answer came, she studied him and- her heart melted. He has fallen asleep, finally gave way to the toll of everything. Knowing what she did about elves, she could only imagine the immensity of the trials he had been through if he succumbed to sleep in such a manner. Quietly she gathered herself and her supplies. She would have asked for him to replace his bloodied attire but was loath to stir him, and with one last lingering look she left him.

Tendrils of mystifying longing spanned from his core to his fingertips, leaving him breathless. She was pressed against him, her body writhing in pleasure as he dove into her.

'Nienor, will you not tell me?' his words came in a different time as he faced her in the dimly lit chamber.
A chalice clatters to the floor.

His eyes fluttered open and he sharply raised himself against the pallet. His surroundings registering, the elf saw himself alone among the sleeping wounded of the ward. At once he felt the burning pain in his face, but he did not dwell on it. His breathing hitched, the prince realized this was the first time he had heard her name in his visions. It felt to be unmistakably the truth. Pieces of memory fell into place as his mind strained to remember. He started to dwell on all the woman had told him. How easily she had lied about everything. To what end?

Just then his keen hearing discerned the shuffle of approaching footsteps. His gaze shifted into their direction and his composure nearly slipped upon seeing the woman from his visions, his senses still raw from the images of her in his dream. But the ellon managed to stay his thoughts, his gaze following the woman until she came to stand before him. She knelt next to his pallet.

'You are awake,' she said quietly, sounding as though she would have preferred him not to be. The way he was looking at her had almost made her retrieve her steps, abandoning her intent. *He is still your patient* she emboldened herself.

Everything struck him at once. Her face, her eyes. Her hair... he had tangled his fingers in that hair, he...

It all fell in place with wrenching clarity. She avoided him like the plague ever since he had come into her home, she barely looked him in the eye. A cold resentment passed through him in rising waves. Fingers curling imperceptibly, the elf tried to determine a worthy reason behind her actions and found none. As he did so his discontent only grew, coming dangerously close to tearing the bonds of his calm facade. But he could not let her see it. Not yet.

The woman seemed to wither beneath his stare but as uneasy as she was to be close to him, she reminded herself that she had a duty to perform. She also selfishly desired to see that his state had improved. In the end she met his stare evenly, trying a vague smile.

His eyes narrowed on her.

'I have brought you a fresh tunic.' It was then he noticed the garment she carried, and she placed it aside.

She had treated him herself, but why for? Some misplaced sense of repentance?

'Does your wound trouble you much?' she broke into his thoughts, more uncertainly and wary of him.

At this the ellon broke their gaze and scoffed, a derisive smile on his lips. 'More than you know,' he said. Let her think on that what she will.

Somewhat contrite, the woman could not understand this frosty countenance, so different than before he left to fight. Perhaps he was in a state of shock? It did not evade even the most seasoned warriors. But she thought it was best not to wonder too much about anything related to the elf. The less time she spent in his presence the better. 'Then I could have athelas concoction brought to you,' she said finally.

His eyes were back on her. 'Do not trouble yourself, I have no need for it,' he finished, his voice lower, much steadier than he felt. Had she touched his wrist, she would have been surprised at the erratic lifebeat thrumming under his skin.

Silence stretched between them.
Though his features were schooled into blankness, she felt pinned in place by those eyes, smoldering in their scrutiny.

Someone moaned in pain across from them, which brought her back. There was presently something in his manner and the rigid set of his jaw that made her want to end their exchange. She realized she had seen this look from him before, but could not place it.

'You ought to rest more, my lord. You can ask the helpers for anything you need.'

Her words went unacknowledged. He only continued to stare at her. Unable to stand it any longer, she nodded towards him a hasty greeting which barely adhered to civility and set on her way; still feeling his eyes burning into her back.

The ellon listened until the sound of her footsteps died completely. On the inside, he was charred. Part of him wanted to confront her but he did not have the full details of what had happened. Where would he start? He felt she had completed him once. Even now, upon their second encounter, even with his thoughts of her erased, he had been drawn to her from the very beginning. He only did not know why it was so. Ereldur surely also played a role in her actions, he reasoned. It was highly doubtful the man had not known of their bond since here she was, having become his wife; as void as that link may be.

So much for elven wisdom, he thought darkly. Lies upon lies, all of which he had failed to detect. His thoughts then turned to his father. Thranduil had not been able to tell him much about the events his son had survived after his memory inexplicably deserted him, but was that all there was to it? He knew how ruthless Thranduil could be when matters of importance to him were in danger of going awry. And his enduring attachment to Nienor, who was human, could only be one such case. He, an elf and further heir to the throne of Eryn Lasgalen, hopelessly in love with a mortal. He could only imagine the effects such news would have on his father though he found no memory of a confrontation on the matter.

But. By a simple logical fact, the type of poison his wife had given him was not attainable by human hands alone. Such an outcome was possible by knowledge gained through countless ages of study and research. This partial knowledge was more torturing than all the blankness of the previous months.

His legs hit the floor and he renounced his bloodied garment. He then threw the new tunic over his shoulders, hastily fastening the garb before rising and leaving the healing ward in a whirlwind. When he traversed the courtyard towards the stables, Igleta saw the elf and was not a little surprised at his pale figure and steely expression.

His wife, his first in many ways. No, he shook his head, what does it even matter now? What does she matter? he thought. Nothing could be regained of what they used to share. No one knew of their union to support such a claim. Would she even want it? Would he? He could never forget what she had done. Did she not already make her choice through her actions? Yet his thoughts betrayed him as it now dawned on him what the warmth in his chest had been whenever she was close. Though his physical mind knew it not, his fêa had felt her. In a strange way he was relieved. At last he knew the reason behind his troubled mind, his sleepless nights. But he could not deny the betrayal he felt when she discarded their bond as if it was aught of scarcely little importance. And to make the wound deeper, not long after leaving his home she linked her fate to another. His mind afire, the ellon paced towards the stables. He stopped when he reached Aerth, his mount, and took a deep steadying breath. His hand reached to caress the soft mane. 'My friend, you seem to be the only one I can rely on for honesty these days,' he lulled lowly to the horse, his hand continuing its gentle motions. Aerth snorted and turned her head to the prince in askance.
He nearly bolted from the stables upon Aerth, to the surprise of those who all but fled from his way and it was not long before the horse was galloping through the wide gates and over the surrounding fields, its rider urging her to go ever faster.

His bandaged face hurt and stung, but still it could not compare to the flames burning him from the inside. How could she have lied to him so easily? His mind then conjured in remembrance the deep love with which she held him close once, the pain in her eyes when he had been wounded. The realization made him even more despondent. She had loved him, but in the end she chose differently. The ellon could not understand it, any of it. He had thought remembering was all he wanted. This was a part of his life, of both their lives. It had been unfair for her to deprive him of it. She had been so thoughtless, ruthless in her actions.

It was late afternoon when he returned within the fortress walls, his countenance somewhat more subdued, the long ride having tamed his mood. But there still was the flaring pain and disappointment at the newfound truth about the woman who had been - and by virtue of precedence still was - his wife. A sigh escaped him and he shook his head, as if to will away all thoughts of her. He fed and groomed Aerth himself, allowing the repeated motions to further soothe his troubled mind. He was in the midst of it when his hearing picked the sounds of steps approaching. Someone small and swift, he surmised.

'My lord!' a young maid gasped when she saw him. He remembered her working as a helper in the healing ward. 'My lord, we were so worried, you had disappeared from the ward - and look, your face is bleeding! Please, if nothing else, come with me so we can change your bandage. Commander Dalaron inquired for you, and mistress Nienor has been most worried.'

His gaze darkened at the thought of her. *Worry, did she ever.* 'Peace,' he lifted a placating hand. 'I am quite well and do not require further care,' he told the young woman.

The maid hesitated, obviously uncomfortable at posing insistence towards a prince of the Eldar. 'But my lord, your bandage, it is soaked with blood. Infection might still set for the wound is fresh. Please.'

He turned from her and sighed, wanting nothing but solitude. She had no blame, she was only someone doing what she was told. He held his stinging words and decided to comply. 'Very well, let us go.'

Once they had reached the ward, the girl took to the task of replacing his dressing. 'Oh but this is healing nicely, my lord! I have heard of the swift healing powers of the elves, but seeing this upfront is nothing short of a miracle! I suspect we may remove the bandage and sutures within two days.'

The ellon took the young woman's banter stoically. His thoughts were full of the knowledge he had gained, and how to best approach Nienor. He needed her to know that he remembered, to hear the full truth from her. Even if it were to break him.
He proceeded to the council meeting of the day, trying to focus on the latest tidings, all the while wondering at the role Ereldur had played in the deception. He tried to focus on the matters at hand, but it had never been more difficult. The man standing in front of him seemed of noble enough bearing, but the dread his presence evoked broke no room for doubt. Something had passed between them and it had everything to do with her.

For his part, he shared what he had learned and his confrontation with the wraith rider, carefully leaving out the details of what the sorcerer had revealed about his personal woes. He also suggested the need for better scouting and a closer inspection of the North.

'But who will go? We are barely recovering from the attack, and could spare but a few-' 

'I will go,' the prince answered. 'We need not many numbers, I shall take one of mine.' He felt Dalaron's stare on him, and guessed at the words to follow.

'My lord, if I may, I do not think you going directly into what is possibly the enemy's lair-'

'No you may not, Dalaron. This is what shall be done. I leave in four days' time. You will take command in my stead.' He knew he would hear an earful after the council, but he was undeterred. He knew Thranduil had charged his friend with the safety of his son, and understood his commander's reasons to challenge him. But this had to pass. This was no longer a threat affecting mortals only.

After the council meeting concluded the ellon ventured to the healing ward where his bandage and sutures were removed. A deep red scar now adorned the left side of his face. Within weeks, no trace of it would remain. For now however it marred his otherwise fine features, but disfigurement was only part of life as a fighter and he always expected injuries. They had come in so many different shapes and sizes along the years.

Two more days passed with no sign of the woman which held his thoughts. It was as if she had disappeared from the face of Arda, so valiant were her efforts of avoidance. *Coward* he thought darkly.

The third day came passed in the same vein. He was loath to ask her husband. If his previous sentiment upon seeing the mortal for the first time had been true, then the history they had was not a pleasant one. Even so, Ereldur had been nothing less than courteous this time around, especially since he needed the aid of his kin. Legolas strode across the fortress courtyard, his head full. *It took a spell of the enemy to revert what those I thought dear have inflicted.* He mused on the irony of it
all. Just then it was a familiar tune he heard which interrupted his thoughts and made him lessen his stride. A child's voice. Curious at hearing such a tune in this place, he started to follow.

’He sought her ever, wandering far,’

Intrigued, he went towards the sound and turned a corner.

’Where leaves of years were thickly strewn,’

His steps soon led him to the sight of a dark haired girl, perched on top of a bale of hay in front of the main barn. Men were working around her, stacking the bales and fodder to be used for the many mounts serving in battle. As he approached, the child noticed the elf and stopped her singing, a blush creeping on her small face. Her legs swung atop the bale.

He smiled as the girl gaped at him, her eyes darting to his ears, then to him again.

’Well met, little one,’ he tried, surprising even himself.

The child was still regarding him warily.

’What is your name?’

’Alynde,’ the child said apprehensively. She had no notion of titles yet, and she probably did not know who he was. Her innocence melted him.

’I am Legolas,’ he followed politely with a slight incline of his head, his hand to his chest.

’You are an elf,’ the girl stated shyly.

’That I am,’ his smile grew.

’Mama says the elves are here to help us, but you are different and dangerous.’

’Do I look so dangerous to you?’ the ellon said in mock hurt.

The girl hesitated, assessing him from head to toe before answering. ’Not so much. You are too pretty,’ she surmised in a definite tone.

His smile widened despite himself. Children at times provided the best relief from woe.

’That was a very pretty lay you were singing.’

The girl's face beamed, obviously pleased her efforts were appreciated by such a character. ’It is about Luthien Tinuviel, an elf. She was the most beautiful elf, and she fell in love with a mortal man.’

’I know this tale.’

’Mama taught it to me. But mama says it is not true. She says an elf cannot love a human, because we are so different.’

’Well,’

’Alynde.’

His head swiveled into the direction of the new voice and his smile dropped.
'Child, your mother is looking for you everywhere! Come, tis time for your midday meal,' Nienor urged, standing a few feet from the unusual pair, her hand outstretched and her eyes set on the child.

The girl seemed to hesitate, eager to continue her conversation with the first elf she had ever met, who was actually speaking to her. But he was no longer looking at the girl. The woman was pointedly avoiding his eyes, her vision set upon the child.

'Would you love a human, master elf?' the girl asked undeterred then, eager to continue their debate.

His eyes swiftly turned to the child and he lowered himself to the ground onto one knee so that he was facing her at eye level. 'Love knows no bounds of race, remember this little one.'

The child's eyes widened. 'So did you ever? A-and did she feel the same?'

The ellon looked at the child kindly, seemingly unable to concoct an appropriate reply without making his feelings known.

'Once, I was the happiest elf at her side,' he finally managed.

Alynde raised her eyebrows so high it nearly made him regain his smile.

'Where is she now?'

The ellon lowered his head at the question, and as foolish as it was, no answer came. Nothing that would not reveal all he felt. He tried not to look her way. He truly did. But he could not resist in the end, his bitterness the winner, and his eyes briefly darted to the waiting woman. He kept nothing from his gaze, and he hoped she would see it.

'Alynde come, do not bother the prince anymore,' the woman cut in, a shade paler than before.

The child stared at him in wonder. 'You are a prince?' He offered a vague smile, completely opposite to what he felt.

'Alynde, this instant!'

The child unwillingly shuffled off the bale towards the woman, disappointed at the interruption. 'Farewell master elf prince,' then the girl paused before adding over her shoulder 'I hope to see you again!' and with that she was off.

'Farewell,' the elf said as he straightened, his eyes following the pair. His heart pounded against his chest with newfound force. I must speak with her. Before this consumes me.

Nienor deposited the girl in the care of her mother and departed. Her thoughts flew to the uneasy encounter with the ellon. His words and thinly veiled expression of resent made her fret. What in the name of Ilúvatar was that? Does he know? How can he know? Impossible. It was her imagination. She had not the strength to confront him, all her nightmares coming back to her at once. Needing solace to place order in her thoughts, after the afternoon chores were done the young woman went to change into her riding garb. Carefully checking that no one suspicious was in sight she made her way to the stables, intent on caring for the foals in solitude. She was well into the matter, having just washed her hands when she heard the doors creak open.

'Nienor.'
She whirled around at the voice.

'Prince Legolas-.' She had thought herself well hidden from his sight but apparently that was not the case. After their unsettling earlier encounter she wanted to be as far away from him as possible.

'Please, forgo the title,' he grimaced with a vague motion of his hand.

Nienor took a few steps back as he approached, hoping the elf would heed and stop his advance. She did not realize it when her back hit the wall in her retreat.

He seemed not to notice her distress, or chose not to. 'At last I found you. But for my tracking abilities, it seemed I never would have seen you again, let alone have a chance to speak with you,' he added when they were facing each other within arm's reach. He tried a cutting smile, his face devoid of all mirth. 'A most elusive creature you are.'

The woman swallowed a shaky breath, regarding the elf cautiously.

'You seem troubled,' he followed.

'I apologize, but I must go to my husband, my lord. He is wounded and I-'

'-you were hiding away in the stables?' Though calmly spoken, the words were sharp.

'What is it to you either way?' she returned nervously.

His eyes flashed at her challenging tone, but then he observed the fear in her countenance. *Does she think so little of me?* 'You have nothing to fret from me,' his voice softened.

As soon as he said the words she knew they were true. The elf had never and would never hurt her in any way. *As opposed to what you have done* a charring voice told her. She felt shame at her fearful impulse, owed in equal part to guilt and what Ereldur had done.

'I have been searching for you. I believe you know there are matters to be settled between us,' the elf brought her back.

'I fail to take your meaning,' the woman met his eyes squarely.

He raised an eyebrow. 'Do you?' Was she truly going to keep to the ruse?

'Aye,' came the more uncertain reply.

'Then allow me to aid you. Could you care to explain,' he started, 'what led you to accept your task? Was my father so convincing? Or were you simply burdened with it all?'

Close as they now were the elf leaned towards her smaller frame, his hand coming to rest against the wall.

'I do not think it wise to dwell on the past now,' she said emptily, forcing herself to meet that icy stare.

'Not wise?' he asked in feigned surprise. 'This is not a matter of wisdom. If I could venture to think so, I would say it is, or was, a matter of trust. Or lack thereof.'

The woman tried her best to withstand the look he was giving her, realizing in that very moment that he really did know. He remembered. She felt anger and disappointment from him, so much disappointment, contained yet struggling to reach the surface. She found it odd that she could feel
'Well? Can you enlighten me, since no one else appears to be able to, how it is that I often dream of you in ways I cannot even mention? How your presence is so familiar to me? How it is, that I have the distinct memory... of a dark haired woman feeding me something foul. A mixture which addled my mind into such a mess that I barely recovered? How that woman, I have learned, was you?'

'Perhaps your sources are mistaken-' she stammered, losing more of her bearing with every moment.

'You deny it, then?' he hissed. 'And when I remind you word for word what you said to me that night I came to your chamber, will you still deny it?' he added viciously.

Nienor winced, becoming smaller against the wall. They were mere words, but she felt their sting as if he had slapped her.

'It was you,' the ellon followed and she felt her chest tighten painfully. 'All this time, never knowing the cause of this empty longing,' he lowered his head.

The woman could take no more, she had to escape him. She tensed, ready for an attempt to move around the elf but startled as his other hand shot against the wall, effectively caging her between himself and the stone.

'Stay,' he said curtly, unwilling to let her run from him again. 'Can you fathom what life has been like due to your actions?'

'Prince-

'You know I never quite liked you calling me such,' the elf interrupted, his patience wearing thin at her denial.

'Please make way,' the woman said, her tone now cold in an attempt to withstand him. Nienor felt his fire trapping her, overwhelming her.

'Not yet. Now you will listen to me, for once. And then I will have answers,' he added coldly.

Her eyes shot to meet his, the dam of her thoughts breaking. 'Aye, I have done it! I am to blame!' she threw. 'Because we had been mad. You most of all in your carelessness, linking your fate to a human. And in an attempt to right the wrong, I have taken to a course of action which seemed to be the best. Kill me for caring!'

Legolas studied her in silence, his jaw set. The fire in her eyes was there, a trait he had always respected. But her actions had caused a never ending torture of the mind. He had to make her see this. She sounded so much like his father a dreadful foreboding filled him on the involvement of the latter in this.

'Is it madness to wish for a life with someone?' he asked searching her face.

Nienor smiled sadly despite it all. 'A life... at the side of a mortal? A few years worth?'

'Worth more than living countless ages alone,' he retorted.

'A speck of dust in your otherwise endless existence?' she insisted, a desperate edge to her voice.
'Endless and empty. What do you know of immortality?' he asked angrily. 'Did you think I had not considered it all?' he paused then, willing his soaring fury and biting words to still. When he regained himself he went on. 'I waited for you, for so long. And then you came. Mortal or no, our fates were tied. I felt you long before I realized what you were.'

His words had lost of their bitterness, but she found herself staring into pain. He looked so shattered, the heartbreak laid bare on his features. For the briefest of moments, he let her see it all.

'Legolas,' the woman barely noticed how she used his name so pleadingly, so taken was she by his bright gaze. 'Even the least wise know there can be no such thing between a mortal woman and an elf.' It had to be said, though she did not believe the words any more than he. How could she, when everything they went through proved he was the only one for her.

'You did not seem to think so once,' came the words. 'Not when I held you close, nor when I made you mine.'

She wished more than anything to cure his hurt, to place her hands on him and soothe his woe with her touch. But such things could no longer happen between them. Instead, she followed, 'Do you think my life has been a careless ride through the fields ever since? I have had my share of grief, even more so since I remember! Everything!'

'And I seem to recall begging you to consider my wishes. But as always, you have done the opposite,' the elf said disdainfully, his features shuttered once more.

Nienor paused, unable to argue the truth. 'I have done it for your own well being. To spare your life,' she added meekly.

'Was it my father who told you so?'

The woman was taken aback. All his memories have returned? 'I wanted you to live, not become a shadow of your former self and linger aimlessly only to fade!'

'How generous of you.' The prince knew his words were small, but seeing her writhe in discomfort brought him a twisted form of contentment. It was but a meager aid to the growing resentment within. 'If the king was your ally in this, he made use of you, Nienor. I trust you see this. My father surely had his own plan, based on his own subjectively righteous principles. 'Nay, I think there is more,' he followed softly. 'If my memories... have passed, then we are, 'were bonded.'

At her silence he dared to reach and tilt her chin upward. The touch was searing to her senses and she recoiled. He dropped his hand.

'Yet you fed me poison and fled. Like a coward. And married another,' he said evenly, and again Nienor saw his facade failing before her, the raw pain she had dreaded to face twisting his features.

And she felt it. She felt every bitter drop of it, and it was so unbearable the woman wanted to drop to her knees and beg his forgiveness. But she did not. Instead she stood still, trapped, those last words finally breaking her. Nienor shut her eyes against the pressure welling inside. Let him say his part. I deserve this.

'I made a grievous mistake,' she uttered in the gloomy silence. The admittance brought her a
strange relief. She could at least give him this. All the guilt and regret that had plagued her days since seemed to now have diminished, seeing him alive and well before her. 'But it was foolhardy to ever think we could be.'

'Did I not hold your heart?' he followed, more brokenly than she had ever heard him.

'Aye', she murmured, her gaze cast downward. Anywhere but at him. 'But it does not matter now.'

The elf and the human stood facing each other for a good while in silence. Her quickening heartbeat drumming in her ears, knowing full well he heard it also. Her chest was full and demanded the relief tears brought, but she could not release them.

'Indeed, it does not,' the ellon finally said, his composure somewhat returned, the mask firmly back in place. She forced herself to look into his eyes again. The deep, unblinking gaze she knew so well, that had drawn her to him so much in the past. That drew her to him still.

Without another word the prince lowered his arms to allow her passage and Nienor all but fled, brushing his side as she went around him in her hurried steps.

Left alone, he stood there a good time after, his eyes unfocused, his mind reeling. The truth had helped, but there was more. She was utterly miserable, no less than he. He had seen it. He had felt her through their bond, albeit weakly. When the ellon reached his chamber that night, it was the first in many a month that no visions plagued his sleep.
She fled straight to her chamber, barely avoiding running through folk in the way of her hasty retreat. Leaning against the door she threw shut Nienor closed her eyes, and no sooner did she settle on the floor than the tears came. Her chest felt as if it were about to burst open and barely did the woman manage to contain the wailing wracking her body. It had happened. What she dreaded the most had happened. The being she cared about most in this world despised her, and rightfully so. What else would anyone have done? Someone lesser than him might have done worse. Now it all made sense, starting with his behavior in the healing ward. Nienor felt immensely foolish, remembering how she pretended to smile his way, and how the elf probably hated her all the more then.

But how? What could have happened between the recent battle and now that had made him regain his memories of her, of them? At least Ereldur has nothing to hold against me now. But that mattered little now. Should she even tell her husband of this? Nay, she decided it was not her place. If Legolas wanted to confront the man on his role in the deception, it would be his prerogative to do so. Besides, the ellon did not seem as if he knew the whole truth of what has passed. Further, more grave matters were in development now. They were at war. Personal woes had no place in this.

Nienor would simply have to face the elf from now on knowing he detested her. Now that the truth of what she had done was revealed, she would have to bear his scorn, or whatever he decided to throw her way. Then, eventually he would depart her home and she would be at peace again. She grimaced through her tears. Is this the best I can look forward to now?

But he deserved more. He deserved the full truth. Though Nienor wondered if it was her place to reveal the role the elven king had played in all of it. Should she let it lie, supposing Legolas would eventually discover it on his own, the same way he had done with all else? Perhaps it was his own father who had revealed it all? But nay, that made absolutely no sense, for it was exactly opposite to what Thranduil had wanted. Still a part of her, the part that melted in his grey stare, longed to speak with the elf at length. What was there to lose now? The woman did not expect his forgiveness. But perhaps they could both, somehow, obtain a form of closure.

No more tears she willed onto herself. Her thoughts astray, Nienor washed her face in a small basin next to her chamber mirror, changed back into a working gown and with one last look at her countenance the lady of Garolin left the main house. More tasks in the healing wards awaited her that afternoon.

The auburn haired ellon frowned, his eyes catching the bright sunrise brimming in the crisp dawn. Legolas stood next to him on the wide open balcony adjoined to the main house, observing the east, a hooded cloak drawn over his shoulders. His gaze lost somewhere.

'I still believe it is folly to go alone.'

'And had I not been in military observation countless times before, I might have agreed. Further, I have seen this evil firsthand. There may be little that I can see or feel that could be worse than facing it.'
'Do you intend to follow their retreating scouts?' Dalaron abandoned trying to convince his prince otherwise, knowing his mind was already made.

The fair haired ellon nodded. 'Aye, I am sure they will lead me in the correct direction. As brawny as they are, I could follow them with my eyes closed wearing bells around my boots and they still would fail to detect me.' Then he frowned, recalling something. 'I will need a map though. Ours do not cover the North in much detail.'

'You may as well try and search their library. I am sure they have a drawn map, within its confines, ancient though it may be.'

The prince agreed to that same course of action. He was mostly prepared for the scouting expedition he would start early that day. All he had left to do was complete the last arrangements with Dalaron. In truth, he longed for the solitude of the road, the peaceful nights under sky and forest. Away from this place. He had even written his father of his intent, though he kept any mention of his personal revelations and his questions of his father related to these out of the missive. Those were meant to be covered in person.

'Farewell my friend, until next time we meet,' he said, turning to Dalaron, his hand on the younger ellon's shoulder.

'In good health. May I say, that you seem somewhat different?'

'Different?' Legolas frowned.

'Aye. You now bear yourself as if you came upon a great discovery, and are immensely relieved for it. A shadow lifted from your eyes, though there are others lingering.'

The prince stared at his friend, his expression schooled, though inside he was indeed intrigued. He had shared nothing with the younger ellon of his past and connection with the mortal. Though Dalaron knew of her, and had seen them together in his home. Legolas wondered if the perceptiveness of the other gathered anything more, or if the change in him was so visible upon the retrieval of his mind. A shadow lifted indeed.

The auburn haired ellon shook his head, seeing as no words came forward. 'It matters not. I only wanted to... ah, I am here if ever you need to share something of yourself.'

'I thank you my friend,' the prince could not help but smile kindly either way and leaving his commander he turned away, heading into the direction of the library.

Dust rose from the ancient scrolls, caught within the rays of early sunlight now streaming through the wide glass stained windows.

Nienor had arisen early as per usual, today even more so. Presently she was busying herself arranging the different manuscripts in an effort to restore somewhat of an order to the high number of books spread across the reading tables. As many other things in Garolin, the library was in her care. She could scarcely sleep the previous night, her unwilling confrontation with the ellon having left her mind scattered and ruminating. And with red rimmed eyes the woman now sifted through titles and dust, going back and forth between the tables and the different wooden shelves that stacked high to the roof of the library. At least it was quiet. She needed the silence. At times she had to use a wooden stair, so high above was the destination of some works.

Nienor was just descending from said stair, having returned a bulk of geography scrolls to their rightful place. She turned around and-
saw the elf right as he was shutting the main door behind him, having entered the room. Their eyes met. With his gaze on her the temperature in the room dropped to an eerie cold. The prince looked her way but for a moment before turning on his heel-

'Wait!' Nienor did no know why she uttered the word, but it did something.

The elf ceased his movements, seemingly hesitant, his hand on the door handle.

'What-', the woman tried, 'What is it that you seek?' Nienor followed as evenly as she could. She could at least offer him aid, should he accept it. With each agonizing second the silence stretched, so did her composure.

'A map,' the elf finally said, facing her now, 'of the North.' He looked as if every word he spoke to her was painful in his mouth.

'O-of the North?' What does he need such a document for- strategy, of course, it dawned on her.

Legolas stood expectantly, hands clasped behind his back, seemingly at a loss for what to do or simply unwilling to offer her any more of his words. His gaze shifted to somewhere beyond her. Nienor recovered just as she realized no further detail would come.

'Aye, I believe there is a number of them,' she turned from him, studying the high shelves, pondering. Now that she was released from his gaze the woman felt steadier on her feet.

After a few moments which seemed like an eternity to him, her dress swirled around her as Nienor headed into a known direction. The ellon did not know if he were expected to follow, but seeing her again now before departure was the very last he had wanted. Seeing her long, dark hair caressing her slim waist was the last he wanted. But the elf was soon taken out of his reverie by her approach. He slowly lifted his gaze to find Nienor holding two long rolled scrolls in her arms.

'This is what we presently have,' she followed, nearing the closest reading table.

The elf approached warily, his eyes on the maps, on her small hands splaying each one open. He leaned forward to the opposite side of where she stood, studying each document. As he did so Nienor stole one quick glance at him, and her traitorous heart beat just a little faster. Her sight beheld his scarred brow, his shadowed eyes. His long fair hair flowing freely over his shoulders, catching a beam of morning light. She had always liked it that way. He was beautiful. She loved him. She loved him more than anything, certainly more than she did her own life. This elf was the kindest, bravest being she had ever known. She had ruined it all. Even the friendship they once had was lost. Then and there the woman once more felt she had to at least offer a better, a kinder explanation. She direly needed to know what he knew, and how he came to know it. Even if this elf would despise her all the more for her prodding. But his willingness to listen to her... that was another matter.

'This one,' the ellon said motioning to the map which seemed of a later make. Despite himself he took note of how weary she looked, weary and in pain.

'No longer my concern' his mind quipped. Yet it hurt no less. They were still bound to one another, he knew. He felt her, all of her, her mind, her heart, the grief, her scent. Her... longing. Calling to him from across the divide. But he could not answer. 'It shall be returned,' he spoke, unnerved at how rough his own voice came.

She inclined her head, her eyes lowered. It was all still too much. The guilt, his gaze. He was too
much.

With one last blank look her way the ellon turned to depart. But near the door he stopped in his tracks, looking over his shoulder at the one he once loved. *Once.*

'Thank you,' he said honestly, and her confusion must have been visible for he added, 'For tending to me after the battle. Late though it is.' Her previous words stubbornly reached the forefront of his mind. *It does not matter now.* What else was there to say?

He needed the distance. He needed *her* as well, but the elf would bury that need deep, deep beneath the recess of the disdain her actions brought, until it smothered the very bond which stubbornly lingered between them. 'Farewell,' the prince murmured as he turned away once more.

*Farewell? Why farewell?* the words finally gained meaning in her mind. *He is surely not leaving? He cannot leave!*

'Legolas!' the woman called after him, wanting to stop him; wanting aught more of him, anything more.

But if he heard her the elf did not let it show, for he never looked back. The door to the library rang shut.
The elf watched them from his hidden position between the crags of a ragged cliff, overseeing the valley before him. His disquiet increased tenfold at the sight. He had journeyed for nigh over a week through the cold wilderness of the North, following the trails of the enemy he intercepted once every few days. All those he had followed were heading into the same direction, and his trek soon led him to the north west until he reached a red soiled valley at the foot of the Misty Mountains. He had expected to come upon a stronghold of some sort, but this was definitely not what he had thought to discover.

A tall fortress-like structure, wide, strongly built and powerful. Its walls blackened, windowless, layered with iron and thick ice, rose high, ominous in the shadow of the looming mountains. The valley the fortress presided over was brimming with strangely clad men of distant shores, orc, goblin and other beasts used for hard labor. He had been observing them for the past four days. Though the scouts he followed throughout his observation growled in the black speech, little of which he knew, one term kept recurring in their conversation: the witch king. Was it the same powerful sorcerer he had encountered on the battlefield of Arthedain?

They were building, training, killing. An army in preparation. There were thousands of them, and more seemed to arrive with each day. He did not doubt a forge stood within the confines of the dark fortress, its fires burning strong. His nerves brimming with trepidation, the ellon started to descend from his high perched position. He needed to be closer if he wanted to gather more intelligence. Though his insides churned at the thought of being so close to the gagging scent of these beasts, his purpose was clear. He had to return with something to help Arnor. For this was no longer solely about Arthedain, he surmised.

Slowly, lightly as only an elf could, he descended until he reached a small road cutting through the mountain, a narrow path towards the valley. He had taken but a few steps when suddenly he felt a familiar nausea, and a sharp pain made itself known inside his head. No... next his hands were on his ears, the source of the disturbance unknown. But he felt it. The powerful screeching sound echoed through the valley. He sprinted out of the way, fortuitously hiding himself in a narrow crag between the stone walls of the mountain path. A long shadow flew overhead, circling above the valley. He knew what it was. He knew who it was. The sorcerer. The one slaving for an unknown evil, the one who had struck him with fell power and made him regain part of his mind in the process. Who had tried to win his alliance for his master.

He stood hidden until the shadow passed and the screeching ceased. He then darted from his hiding space, stealthily descending closer into the valley. Hiding behind various structures the beasts had erected, he tried to listen.

'Grish grim!' one of them growled somewhere not far from where the ellon stood. Suddenly he heard clashing of weapons, and gnarled screams. They were fighting amongst themselves. He hoped his scent would evade the orc long enough until he finished his task.

This was the enemy's lair in the north. This was the base of their army, their iron fortress. Angmar the elf thought grimly, speaking the word in his own tongue. Daylight here was forever a gloomy twilight, thus his keen eyesight came especially useful.

After another two days of silent observation and gathering whatever information might prove
useful, he decided he had seen enough; and started his retreat. He needed to reach Garolin as soon as possible.

'Thousands?'

'Aye, and their numbers increase with each passing day,' the ellon responded gravely.

The lords and military leaders gathered in the council room muttered among themselves.

The elven prince turned to Ereldur. 'I will write to my father. I suggest you send messengers to Fornost Erain. And to Rhudaur, Cardolan. Tell the kings there is need to gather our strength for this foe will strike anew. It is only a matter of time. Arnor must unite. I will write to lord Elrond of Rinvendell as well, for he must be informed of these developments.'

He had relayed all that he had seen and discovered. He had told them about this witch king, who seemed to be the sorcerer leading this army for his master. He dreaded to assume who that master was. He needed someone wiser to weigh in on all of this.

'Your council is wise, prince Legolas,' the man added. 'Thank you for your aid once more. Tis good to have you returned safely to Garolin.'

The ellon nodded, though the way the man was eyeing him spoke of his true regard.

'My lords,' Ereldur continued, 'It seems Arnor is at war.'

Their swords clashed briefly before the woman drew away, sprinting nimbly backwards. She was panting now, the chilly morning air filling her senses. She had missed this. With everything that had happened and all the added responsibilities she took, there had been little to no time for weapons practice. But true to her decision to amend this, she had taken herself to the practice field west of the fortress walls. It was a bright winter morning. More men and elves were appearing as the day drew forward, their increasing numbers a continuous moving pattern. Designated captains were leading different practice or sparring groups and nominated pairs as appropriate. The cries of those engaging in combat filled the area.

She chose swordsmanship. Dalaron, who was presently her opponent, had just thrown her off balance. He smirked her way, though not unkindly.

'You do better than expected, for a lady of your stature,' he grinned, his golden green eyes on her. He had agreed to be her sparring partner to help with her form. She had some experience with long daggers, but a one handed sword was a different matter entirely. Further, other men had been indecisive when she had asked, possibly dreading the reaction of their lord.

'I suppose there can be worse comments,' she smiled back as they circled each other. Of course, he looked as fresh as the moment he had arrived on the training grounds. Elves she snorted to herself, as so many times before in the past.

She lunged at him then, the blunted sword heavy in her hand. Where could he be now? Dalaron avoided her strike easily and went for the offensive, but she turned just in time to parry. Is he in good health, returning to us? It was these thoughts she tried to smother, though it was not wholly effective. Soon her brow was heated from the effort. She felt flustered in her dark leather training outfit despite the cold, but its advantage was that it allowed fluid movement. Her dark hair was woven into a practical braid.
'Dalaron. Man cerig? Daro.'

She whirled around, her eyes falling on fair hair and a grey stare. Unexpected relief took hold of her, and barely could she subdue it. But the prince kept his eyes on his commander, his gaze darkened. A bow was slung across his shoulder along with a quiver full of arrows. A sword hung in its scabbard at his belt. He exuded nothing but strength, and the air caught in her chest despite her labored breathing.

Then the fair haired ellon approached and said something brief to his second in command in their own language. The lilting words she could not understand, but shortly after the exchange Dalaron turned to her and bowed.

'Apologies my lady but duty calls. Perhaps we will be able to continue our practice soon.'

'I trust we will, thank you,' Nienor smiled his way then stood looking after him as Dalaron departed, sword in hand. She then dared to meet the eyes she felt on her. The elf faced her with a cold expression, and her mood dampened considerably.

'You have returned,' she said matter-of-factly. When Dalaron had told her of his expedition and its purpose, alone, her knees had weakened with worry. Of course, this elf had not seen it necessary to tell her of it. Why would he?

'What are you doing here?' the words came sternly in the common speech.

'My business in my home is my own, I would think,' Nienor said, surprised at how harsh her words came. Were you not glad to see him? her inner voice started. Her gaze moved to the horizon. 'I am trying to improve my sword skill, for it leaves much to be desired.'

'I see,' he said, his tone matching his face. 'And does your... husband approve of it?' he added, motioning to her weapon.

There it was. He, too, could be cruel when he wished. It hurt, but the woman managed to regard him with a coolness of her own. 'I do not see how he should have a say in this. You know I-' ... she stopped, loath to rekindle the past in front of him, 'I am versed in some close combat.'

His mind conjured a brief image of a bloody clash and a whirling form. 'So I recall. But this is more than a mere skirmish we are against, Nienor. I do not think it wise for you to attempt involvement on the battlefield. Your skill as a healer is far more useful. You know this.'

She frowned. There was that elvish condescension again. 'Be that as it may,' she muttered, trying her hand at a sweeping offensive move in the air. 'And what if the battle comes to us? What if Garolin should fall?'

The elf watched her silently for a moment. 'It will not come to be so.'

'How can you be so certain?' she insisted, intrigued by his confidence. After all they have lost so far.

His eyes seemed to catch the light strangely, his brow knit in a grim line. 'Because we will fight. We are stronger together now than men in the North ever were in the past. We have allies in Cardolan as well as Rhudaur. We will muster all that we can, and many will die, we might die. We will lose much. But the enemy will not win. I feel it so.' Somehow they stood closer now.

'I hope it rings true,' Nienor uttered, disarmed by the fervor in his eyes and confused with how alluring it made him. She caught herself quickly and looked away. Why would she not believe him,
an elf who had seen battles for hundreds of years? Then seemingly unable to control the words coming out on their own accord, 'Why is it you care about anything I do well or ill anymore?' she asked. The woman had not meant her words to sound accusatory or ungrateful. But she could have struck herself for the way they did.

Silence met her question, his gaze now set on the groups engaged in practice far to their left.

Nienor hated herself well enough for having hurt him, and his past words came to her mind. He had told her that when elves bind their fates together, the other remains their only mate, forever. What would happen when this elf left her home, now that their fates were different? Would he still fade from this world, as she had learned happens to elves in most cases of grief? Would he survive it? Dispense with this, that is not your concern her mind urged.

'I will train,' Nienor said finally, barring her distressing thoughts, her face turned from him. 'You may either try to hinder me with words, or aid and fight me.' She went into her stance, the tip of her sword raised towards him.

The elf drew closer until the blade's end nigh touched his chest. A familiar feeling crept into him, the same from a time when their friendship was new. Legolas tried to smother it under a mask of indifference, but it poured through him, a life of its own. 'You must be jesting. You know I will defeat you.'

'That matters little to me. I must learn,' the woman eyed him, surprised at her own gall.

Holding her gaze, the elf discarded his bow and quiver to the side. Stubborn children of men. A lesson was what she needed. 'Make no mistake, I will not be as easy on you as Dalaron,' the elf followed as he circled her lazily, his sword now drawn, pointing to the ground. His blade was not blunted.

Nienor nodded in understanding, her weapon at the ready. Despite himself the ellon smiled at her display of courage.

She threw herself at him.

The elf parried easily, at the same time throwing the human off balance so powerfully she had to struggle to regain her footing.

They were circling each other again. His mind tried to think of ways to defeat her without causing too much damage. But a little damage she could do with. Only a little.

The prince lunged at her and the woman met his blade evenly, though the force of the blow threw her back and to the side, where Nienor stumbled and finally fell most ungraciously to the ground.

He was so much stronger than her it was amusing she was even trying. Men gathered at times, taking in the curious sight before them. Possibly the sturdiest elven warrior on the field, sparring with the lord's wife. Actually, humiliating her in combat.

'Are you certain you wish to continue this?' the elf inquired, his brow raised, half a smile on his lips as he offered the woman a helping hand. When she accepted Nienor was brought up so forcefully she nearly stumbled into him. A swift shiver ran through her, but the woman steadied herself before returning to her position opposite him. Judging by his haughty smile, he was well aware of it.

'It would help much if you actually told me what to do... Teach me,' she said, her last words strangely pleading to his ears.
Legolas sighed, but his eyes trailed over her form for a few uncomfortable moments before he continued. 'Refrain from holding your sword with one hand when attacking. It is a one handed weapon but the blow is more powerful if you hurl the blade with the strength of both arms. Further, this sword is too long for your frame. You must choose a shorter length.'

'You could have said so from the start!' she hissed.

'Because it would have helped overmuch?' he threw and Nienor thought she heard the echo of a lighthearted jab.

He is impossible she seethed. But the flush in her face, spreading down her neck was no longer due to physical exertion alone. His words were a whisper of another time, but it still gave her hope.

'You could use your small frame as an advantage. But you need to be swifter, and employ your own weight to aid you.'

'How?' she asked, more despondent than ever. Nienor could not impose herself on him to teach her anything, she knew. Not after everything.

But to her unending surprise the ellon seemed to take pity on her, for he abandoned his stance and approached, stopping just before her. His voice came slightly lowered when he spoke, and to her it seemed softer than before.

'Do you truly want me to show you?'

'Aye,' the woman breathed, somehow no longer sure what she was acquiescing to.

'Then be here every morning, at dawn.'

Her face lightened at his words, but the woman had no time to say anything else for the elf already turned from her and retrieved his bow and quiver, his steps leading him to the archery range.

Feeling somewhat discomfited, Nienor turned to search for another sparring partner.

Neither of them had noticed Ereldur standing to the far end of the field, observing them with interest.
The following morning Nienor was there, in the same place, at the ready. The time she spent practicing now meant working later into the evening, but it mattered little. It kept her mind adrift. She went, curious and wondering if the elf would truly come. Perhaps he changed his mind and considered distance was still the best approach. Having nothing else to do while waiting the woman decided to begin a warming sequence with her blade.

'Good, you have started,' she heard his voice behind her after some time.

'Legolas,' she turned, somewhat surprised, nodding by way of greeting.

'Aye?' he asked, her expression not lost on him.

'...I was not sure you would come.'

'I am one true to my word, Nienor of Garolin. I presumed you knew this well,' he said evenly.

She averted her gaze, suddenly very interested in the sweeping motions of her sword.

'Very well, let us begin,' the ellon followed.

They practiced late through the morning, and not few were her mistakes and failures. The elf had left her no room for rest, nor had the patience for complaints. This was what his subordinates must feel like daily, she thought belatedly. Then again, this was precisely what Nienor needed, and was grateful for his time. By noon the woman was appropriately battered and bruised from his relentless practice methods, and not a little disgruntled. Nienor took her leave of him and went to the armory to discard her weapons and practice armor. Her daggers also had to be sharpened, for long had they fallen into disuse.

When the lady of Garolin reached the armory men were striding to and fro taking to various tasks, but soon their numbers dwindled. Some acknowledged her while others gave her strange looks. For most, this was not the place for a woman. Keeping to her own devices, she went behind an empty barracked space to discard her armored pieces. They were small, possibly made to fit a slim youth. Nienor kept the gloves about her, intending to wear them when sharpening her daggers. She then wiped herself with a cloth dipped repeatedly into a nearby barrel filled with fresh water, thinking she would wash properly once all her tasks were done. She lastly donned her working clothes, a white shift and simple black kirtle before exiting the enclosure somewhat more refreshed. Having placed her sword back in its place Nienor turned from the weapons rack- only to nearly collide with the elf she had left not long ago.

'L-... my lord!' she startled, forgetting even how to address him. How daft she berated herself. Of course he would come here. After all this time Nienor still could not get accustomed to his silent steps.

Cold eyes fell on her, an eyebrow raised skeptically. 'Need I remind you we are alone,' the elf muttered as he moved around her. Her insistence with the pretense of titles when it was just the two of them was infuriating, considering everything. The prince wondered if she was aware that it ever reminded him of the forced distance between them.
She lowered her eyes while the elf deposited his own practice sword onto the designated rack. 'You did startle me though,' Nienor could not help but add. She knew not why. Perhaps a childish, rebellious part of her, which came alive in his presence. They were after all polar opposites in that respect, he her elder by many centuries. The woman had not said the words to be difficult. Maybe she only wanted to see him treat her with any sort of feeling.

But she heard nothing more on the topic as the elf only turned towards another wall, lined with bows and quivers.

'How fared your travels? Your trip into the North?' she tried.

Now she is eager to speak he thought blithely.

Just when Nienor thought no answer would come, he deigned to reply. 'Tiring, but fruitful. You would have heard all about it had you attended the council gathering.' He had reached for and was now examining a bow he could use to continue his own practice. He was yet to be done for the day.

To her it felt as if this was as good a moment as any to attempt to speak to the elf about what had passed between them. Now, when they were alone and away from prying eyes, and he seemed more inclined to listen to her.

Legolas gleaned aught else was to come, and his exasperation increased with each passing moment. He sighed. 'What do you want, Nienor?' he asked tiredly as he continued to study the weapon in his hands, his back still turned to her. Her hesitation was becoming irksome, as was being trapped in her presence longer than necessary.

'May I ask something else of you?' she dared, pulse quickening at his possible reaction. How to even begin?

He looked over his shoulder at her then and with thinly veiled suspicion. Moments passed. An eternity passed. 'What is your question?' he conceded in the end, a wary look in his eyes. He had sensed her uneasiness, and though keeping her on her toes was somewhat amusing, the elf wanted to be done with it.

'Do you hate me much?' she breathed. They had never had a respite to speak at length, not since the prince had cornered her in the stables, forcing the truth out of her. They had not truly spoken about her motives, about them, about everything. She wanted to. They had to.

When the elf spoke next there was a barely noticeable waver in his voice. 'I dare not say.' Why did she insist on prodding him with this? Hate... how laughable. How... human. What could he tell her? That he loved her the same and it would never change? That he was fighting against himself every day? 'Do you need aid sharpening those?' the elf looked to her daggers. It was a pitiful attempt to sway the conversation, and she surely caught it. I could simply leave. But he still stood there, wondering what else she would throw his way.

'Nay,' the woman said to her hands dejectedly. 'But I thank you,' she followed, and then made the mistake to look at him. She barely managed not to gape.

The scar on his face was barely visible anymore, but with or without it he was still devastatingly stunning. The leather spaulders he wore over his green leather tunic only added to the warrior
countenance that seemed to suit him best. The woman had not noticed during their sparring caught as she was in her own movements, but now it was painfully obvious. A familiar ache thrummed inside as she drank him in. *He will never be one of you, fool, remember this* Nienor shook herself. He was immortal perfection, never exposed to disease or age. He would stay so, while she withered into nothingness with the years. It was best this way.

The ellon noticed her appraising eyes, one had to be blind not to. And though he was glad to see he affected her so, the part of him that was still raw and hurting brought a wicked thought to mind. *You wanted this to be. Now bear it.*

'You are staring,' he observed smiling coldly, now in the process of removing the armor from his shoulders.

That woke her. 'And you are being presumptuous!' the woman threw and turned her back on him, annoyance masking her discomfort at his jesting tone. He was mocking her. Embarrassed, she made herself busy adjusting the straps that held her daggers then reached for the sharpening tools. The sooner she finished the better.

His hearing could discern nothing around them. They were still alone. The elf grinned, observing the stubborn human before him. He knew his comment would bring a rise out of her. True to his earlier intent, he closed the distance between them in measured steps.

'Am I?' came the question, closer to her than she expected. Without notice Nienor was spun around and froze when she found herself so close to him.

'What are you doing?' she started breathlessly, feeling his hand, warm and steady on her arm.

The elf seemed to also notice, releasing her immediately. He locked her in his gaze, a derisive smile on his features. 'Indeed, it pleases me to see you hold your own like this, despite that look in your eyes,' he followed. After all this time, his grey stare still made her knees go weak. 'It would be a shame to destroy all that you and my father have worked for to keep me out of your life. And we would not want to render my trials useless either,' he added, his voice lowered to nearly a whisper.

Nienor saw his face as he spoke, so distant and marred by discontent. Seemingly the only expression the prince had for her ever since his memories had returned. It caused a dull ache, ever present in her chest, to reach the surface. *Legolas, your father-'*

'I do not wish to speak of him now,' the elf interrupted.

'Please, how do you... that is, how did you know about all of it? Did your father tell you? Did-, did someone else?' she wanted to see where to start.

He frowned. She wanted to do this now? Truly? 'Let us say, it was a twist of fate,' he said tiredly. The elf realized he was not ready for what she intended to do, and decided he would take his leave, abandoning his original intent.

Nienor was puzzled. 'I think you do not know everything. Please Legolas, for all that was between us, I want to speak with you.'

'Unfortunately, I do not,' and the elf turned away from her, heedless of her plea.

'Wait just one moment-' slightly desperate now for an unknown reason, Nienor reached for him.

At her insistence something snapped within him. Legolas turned sharply to face her, startling the young woman. Without preamble his arm reached around her waist, locking her in a vice grasp; his
other hand he placed around her nape and Nienor gasped when the elf roughly brought her to him. 'I know enough,' he hissed, before capturing her mouth with his. In her surprise the woman made no attempt to push him away.

It was an unforgiving, bruising kiss. It seared her lips and when he demanded more Nienor submitted despite her better judgement. The sudden feel of him on her tongue made her lose her footing, her body leaning into him of its own accord. Her eyes closed with abandon at his taste. All tension gradually left her limbs as desire rose a tall, unexpected and vicious wave inside. Her gloves thrown to the ground, her arm flung around his neck, her fingers curling into soft hair. She missed him. She wanted him. His warmth that she had longed for in all her empty nights, now a brief reality. Something was brimming in her chest, a strong light she saw behind closed lashes, reaching for him.

_Nay, this cannot happen you fool_ her better sense tried. _Anyone could come upon us here_ another thought charred. Reality striking like icy floes, the woman started to struggle then but he only deepened the kiss. His hold firm on her, all his frustration and need poured into the endeavor. He had never been so rough. She found bitter enjoyment in his ministrations, tasting him back as she could.

Legolas had lost sight of whether this was her punishment or his. He wanted to feel her, wanted her to crumble into him, as so long ago. Unchecked the pressure on her lips lessened, his need for her taking precedence over the impulse for petty revenge. 'Nee... ', he breathed in remembrance of what they used to be, and the elf nearly lost track of his plan she felt so good. He crushed the mortal to him and held her ever closer, the roughness in his movements all but disappearing until nothing but longing remained. Her feet barely touched the ground anymore in his embrace.

'How could I ever hate you?' he whispered without thought, searching her eyes.

Nienor looked completely smitten, regarding him through half open lashes, her mouth imbued and reddened with his kisses. She was beautiful, lost as she was. A trembling hand reached and touched the line of his jaw, sliding upward. Warm fingers trailed over the light scar adorning the face she loved before she brushed her lips against his again.

_A strong sliver of desire surged through him. He slowly reached downward, remembering the lines of her body. One he had known so well. His fingers dug into the sides of her hips, crushing her against him. It wrung a low moan from her, swiftly smothered by his mouth. How he wanted her splayed on the floor, ready for him. He would kiss her everywhere, worship her through his touch as he had done so many times before. It was all so vivid in his mind now. He cursed this stubborn bond and the way it weakened him. She should be his._

_She was still his. Why have you done it, Nienor? the thought pierced through his self-abandonment, and with that so did his resolution and hurt pride. Abruptly he severed the kiss, leaving her breathless, her lips blue and red._

Nienor met his gaze and immediately regretted doing so. He looked so different than before. A darkened gaze, so much resentment contained it would have made her fear this elf, had she not known him so well. 'Legolas?' she tried softly, staring deeply into now cold eyes for another moment.

He roughly pried her arms from around his neck and released her with such momentum it nearly threw the woman off her balance, and she stumbled backwards. His eyes averted from hers, the elf took one deep breath before turning on his heel to retrieve his discarded bow. He swiftly paced out of the armory without a word or glance her way.
Dumbfounded by the sudden surge of need and stricken in his wake, Nienor remembered herself after a few moments. Her trembling hands returned to their task. She then tasted the metallic tinge of blood. Her blood, that he had drawn. The elf was toying with her, showing her how weak she was. How she still needed him. Nienor supposed she deserved this, and much worse. But he did not utterly hate her. That was one step into a better direction, and more than she had hoped.
As the arrow flies

She scrubbed over the hard wooden surface again. No matter how much she had lathered and soaked, the impervious stains remained. Nienor was cleaning the tables which had been used to operate on the men in need to have limbs amputated. There had been so many in such dire need they had resorted to bringing wide tables from the eating hall, and now the women were cleaning these to have them returned. Nienor muttered as she continued her efforts, assisted by the other designated aid in the healing ward. She tried to focus on the task, willing the sweeping motions to still her thoughts from running back to what had passed the other day. To how the elf had held her, as if nothing had changed between them. How he then acted as if it had been merely a stroke of fancy. Or revenge.

The inside of her lower lip stung and hurt, of a bluish shade from his merciless kiss. The young woman thought at first he would yell at her, remind her how despicable she was, judging by the suppressed fury Nienor saw when the elf had turned to face her. But not this, and certainly not him losing himself with her. It had been so unlike what she knew of the elf, this act. This desperate, angry display. In any other circumstance, and if he had been anyone else, the woman would have demanded an explanation. But she was in no position to demand anything of him. The elf seemed to have lost all respect and consideration for her, save for that short lived moment when he looked into her eyes, and told her he did not hate her. But Nienor suspected that had been a momentary loss of reason on his part as well. It was unbearable, and most of it her doing.

'Good day,' she heard then, and turning her head Nienor saw the new addition to be her husband. 'Kindly leave us, I wish to speak with my lady wife,' Ereldur motioned.

A sense of foreboding and wariness filled her as the women all bowed and successively left the tent. The man turned to his wife then, hands clasped behind his back. He seemed to assess her, taking in her figure, her bloodied apron, her hair, having become unruly in her braid due to the physical effort.

'This war is far from over, as you can see,' he broke the silence, and she wondered why he chose this topic in particular to open a conversation. 'If it comes to it, you would need to gather the people and flee Garolin. I have no men to spare. Make no mistake, the grievously wounded would need to be left behind. It will not be easy. You would be the one to lead them, if no aid comes. Are you capable of such?' he asked, not actually expecting a reply.

The woman lowered her head. She suspected as much. Legolas said it would not come to that. She hoped.

'What about the-,' she only realized it had been unwise to mention it after the words came out 'the elves? Would a number of them not come to our aid if we were in danger of falling?'

'That depends on what we achieve against the enemy in open field. They themselves might be overwhelmed. But the outcome I put to you is indeed the worst I can imagine. Only then would the need to resort to you as a leader present itself.'

'Why do you choose to tell me this now?' she wondered aloud.

'Because we will soon need to head out again.' He smiled bleakly at her surprised expression. Then Ereldur fell quiet, instead looking about him, as if seeking something within the enclosure of the tent. As if something was amiss.
'I saw you with the elf.'

Her breath left her, try though she did to hide it.

'He seemed to be granting you quite a sparring lesson. None too gently.'

Ereldur had seen them on the field. She came to herself. Half turned from her husband, she said, 'I was attempting to hone my skill. I needed a sparring partner.'

'How feeble. And of course it had to be him?'

'There were others as well.'

Ereldur drew closer, and she barely hid her shudder when his hand reached for her. His finger twirled around a strand of her hair, smoothing it away from her face. The motion would have been tender in the eyes of any onlooker.

'Not the kind of swordplay you are used to, no doubt,' he sneered even as he saw her eyes cloud with resentment. 'I thought you refused to speak with him or be near him,' he added gently.

*How low he is in his blows.* 'That is different,' she answered curtly, more ill at ease now than before. She knew better than to think such gentleness was in any way sincerely bestowed upon her.

'I am curious how this came to be from not bearing to be near him.' He was facing her fully now, having come so close his face was mere inches from hers. 'Those were your words if I recall, yes?'

'I thought you wanted me to be more courteous to him.'

'Do you take me for a fool, Nienor?' the man added darkly, and his true mood shone through. 'Or perhaps you think me blind, neither of which I have given you cause for.'

She averted her eyes to the entrance. 'I do not understand what you are implying.'

A low hum left his lips, something akin to a wild animal sneering. 'It is painfully obvious to me you want to be close to him, try though you might to hide it even from yourself. Pray do not let yourself descend into foolery. We have a war to fight. People are dying. He is here for a purpose. He tilted her chin towards him. 'Or perhaps... I should go to him and reveal the truth he so clearly craves to find?'

She pressed her lips together as she stared into cold green eyes, only able to imagine how that would end. Legolas only knew of some of the past events now, and that fact should be kept away from Ereldur. Either way she doubted the ellon would take the man for his word fully. Perhaps Ereldur could still poison his mind against her since she had not even provided the elf a decent explanation. She would keep trying, despite his current aversion and ill treatment of her.

'As you said, my lord, we are at war. I think, it would be impractical from your part to do so. We need allies to be allies. The past should not be stirred.' She hoped she sounded honest enough.

The man regarded her silently for a moment. 'When will I finally see you in my chambers, Nienor?'

She shuddered, but offered no answer.

'Or is the prince so distracting to you?'

'You very well know we are nothing to each other now-,'
'Hah! Be quiet,' her lord scoffed. 'Do not offer insult atop injury any further than you already have. I dread to think how your own father might be rolling in his grave at the dishonor you brought him through your actions. Did he ever imagine his only child would come to be an elf’s plaything?'

'You have no right to speak of my father!'

But the words did not cease. 'Do you truly think that elf would have pledged himself to you for eternity? Or rather, would he have started resenting you when your body withered and you stopped being able to offer him the earthly pleasures he craved? When you grew old and frail, and he would come to be nothing more than your caretaker?'

The words hurt as intended. More so as the same thoughts had sinuously made their way into her own head countless times. But no, Legolas would never have done that. He was more than that. Or had been. Her eyes flashed and she met his own coolly. She might have learned to respect him once, had he been kinder. 'For all your righteousness, you have no honor. Your petty pride will one day lead you astray and then you will see the wrong of it, my lord,' she seethed.

Ereldur stood silent. 'Perhaps. But I warn you again. Take heed of your own actions, lest you yourself find to be on the wrong side of me. And I have little mercy for those who do me wrong, Nienor.' Then he threw her a condescending smile as he turned away, leaving her alone, taking measured breaths, the blood soaked cloth hanging miserably in her hand. She let herself fall against one of the tables. There was no escape.

The arrow hit the target with a dull sound. It had broken through the previous one, landing in the very center.

*You have wronged her.*

Legolas sighed before nocking the next arrow, shaking his head to disperse the thought.

*The arrow flew and went the way of the others.*

*Your disgraceful actions lacked honor.*

He growled, nocking yet another arrow. Then another. His mind was unyielding, no matter how much he tried.

*You overstepped your bounds. Not her, you.* The ellon stopped, turning his gaze to the horizon, his bow lowered. She had tried to speak to him, possibly offer him the pieces of truth he lacked. But the elf could not hear her, could not bear her excuses, her apologies. Could not look into her pale face, her pleading eyes. He had wanted to leave her there, but something pulled him back. Something from deep within him, perhaps the Silvan side of him, relentless and merciless. But the regret flaring inside him now could not be denied when he recalled how his forceful kiss drew blood. Nor the longing when he felt her taste. He had been truthful when he said he did not hate her, but her actions he did hate. And since their last encounter went the way it did, an apology for his actions seemed like an unlikely possibility either way. She would probably be too hurt and, to his increased distress he realized, frightened to approach him again.

As he was lost in thought, his hearing then discerned movement behind him. Turning, he saw it was Dalaron approaching him in his even stride.

'You have been here for half a day almost. Was there not to be a council gathering?' his friend started by way of greeting.
'Tonight,' the prince replied as he pulled another arrow from his quiver.

'Lord Elrond has sent a response.'

The fair haired ellon turned to his commander. He had produced the missive indeed, holding it between slender fingers.

'We shall read it at the council. Anything from my father?'

'Not as of yet. But I believe messengers have arrived from Cardolan. Nothing from Rhudaur.'

'That is somewhat disconcerting. Tell the company they are to further aid the new human recruits in their training, aside from their own practice. The lord Ereldur has agreed to the same. He cannot spare too many of his own experienced men.'

'Aye, my lord,' Dalaron replied before he smiled vaguely. He wondered what fouled the mood of his friend so.

'How went your lesson with the lady Nienor?' he tried.

The arrow hit the target above center, nigh to the right of the others.

'Her form leaves much to be desired,' he nocked another arrow.

'Aye, I must admit I could not fully unleash myself upon her, for fear of causing her harm. But her slight frame could prove an advantage. It does so when she wields those daggers she owns. I trust that would be your thinking for the sword as well.'

The prince sighed, his bow lowered. He turned to Dalaron, who was now watching him. Intently.

'What is it?'

'My skill was not good enough to aid an inexperienced human woman?' It was not an accusation, but more akin to a curiosity. 'You stopped me from sparring with her, yet somehow in the end you agreed to help her yourself.'

'Her place is not on the battlefield. But she is stubborn.'

'And you obliged, despite your many responsibilities.'

'Twas truly not much of an effort on my part,' the prince sighed tiredly.

Golden flecked green eyes burned into his. 'I suppose you know her better. You have been friends for so long.' Dalaron had seen them together in Eryn Lasgalen, owed to his post when he was reporting to Sonruil. He found the woman fetching and witty, a better sample of her race. Dalaron was not terribly inclined towards mortals, but she he could approve of. Her lord and husband, however, was a different matter. Yet something was awry.

Legolas held his commander's gaze evenly. 'Is there something you wish to ask of me, Dalaron? Speak plainly.' He turned once more to his craft.

The younger ellon wondered if he should continue. Or if he had already gone too far. Of course he had seen it. The forlorn expression on his prince when the mortal was in the vicinity, painstakingly hidden though it was. He feared and worried what it meant. Or how long it had taken root. When he spoke next, his tone came softened and cautious.
'You care for her.'

It was a statement, not a question. Grey eyes locked with his, though in those eyes Dalaron saw nothing. They were shuttered, indifferent. Forced.

'We have been friends for a while, as you stated. Further, her lord is our ally, and our host,' he added as evenly as he could, now reaching for an arrow anew. It had been an effort to speak about the man without disdain.

The other elf sighed audibly. 'You know that was not what I meant,' the prince heard as he aimed and released. The arrow landed below center.

Dalaron was relentless. Legolas wondered briefly whether it was at all an option to share the truth, or at least part of it with his friend. He knew Dalaron would never betray his confidence. But he shook the thought away. What good would it do?

'Indeed I do not,' he decided. He glanced at the younger ellon, taking in his unconvinced expression. They faced each other in silence for a few moments before the prince continued. 'Humans are fickle and run driven by their passions, bringing woe to others as well as themselves. Whatever you are thinking, it is not worth dwelling on.'

'Legolas... ' Dalaron tried softly, but the prince's gaze on him now left no room for a continuation. Thus he yielded. 'As you wish.'

Another arrow was nocked, hitting the center of the target, sending splinters into the air from the one before it.
'Lord Elrond of Rivendell is thankful for our news and states he will provide as much counsel and aid as he is able. Tidings have reached him indeed of the fell power rising in the North, working its evil behind its mountain fortress.' Dalaron stopped then, looking at the men and elves gathered at the council meeting.

'The same mountain fortress I have witnessed during my travels there,' Legolas supplied.

'Carn Dûm,' Dalaron added thoughtfully.

The fair haired ellon nodded in confirmation. 'A fitting name.'

'Our scouts have seen no movement as of yet, but we do not have eyes around all borders,' lord Ereldur joined. 'No messengers from Rhudaur for one full month now. However, Cardolan have agreed to join forces with us and place themselves under the suzerainty of Arthedain.' A murmur was heard among those gathered. At least a piece of good news. For now, they would ready themselves and wait.

Ereldur was tired. The injury to his ribs still bothered him and it was with no little amount of annoyance that he walked when nearly each step the man took jolted him. He retired to his chambers after the council late into the night. He threw his cloak unceremoniously onto an armchair and picked a chalice from a nearby table, filling it to the brim with wine. Drinking deeply he stood and pondered. He refilled his glass. Then another. He looked towards his bed. Empty. That wretched woman was forever stalling, forever avoiding him. His touch she hated. He was not the man driven by carnal pleasures, but her stubbornness somehow always riled him in the worst of ways.

After some time he ventured to the window and his eyes fell on the pair of elves crossing the courtyard. The princeling and the other red headed fool. He then noticed his lady wife, coming towards them from a different direction. Their paths crossed, and he could see her tense form even from the distance as the woman lowered her eyes, nodding in brief greeting. Her steps became swifter. The chalice hit the table with a sharp sound as Ereldur hastened from his chamber, reaching the stone stairs just as she was climbing them.

'My lord?' she asked, and Ereldur could do nothing but admire her voice, so even and serene in contrast to her eyes. The fear in them was poorly veiled.

'I wish to see you in my chambers,' he muttered.

'M-my lord? I do not-'

'Aye you do, and you will,' he demanded as in the next instant his hand was gripping her arm, dragging her after him.

'Cease!' Nienor struggled. 'Please, it was a tiring day, and still so much to do on the morrow-,'

He now gripped both her shoulders, brought his face into hers. 'I care not,' was all she heard before Ereldur led his wife inside. He was not as rough as on their wedding night, but she was both still
and shaking all the same.

'Please,' the woman tried as she followed him with her eyes, her arms crossed around her middle.

He had filled two chalices, beckoning her to come take one.

'I do not need to drink.'

He propped himself against the table, arms crossed. 'You will find that it helps. Why do you think I do it?' he asked, the shadow of a smile on his lips. He stared at her for some time. 'I never did understand what an elf would see in a human. You are comely but not breathtaking. You have a mind that spans beyond average, but you are no sage. He could have had anyone. Why you? Why my wife?'

Taken aback by this sudden change of topic, Nienor mutely stared at her husband. She had had a grueling day, and little strength left for this.

He placed the chalice on the table and came close to the woman, causing her to begin a retreat towards the wall. Her eyes darted to the door and in the next instant Nienor sprang towards it but an arm came roughly around her waist, cutting her momentum. Ereldur crushed her against the wall and she felt the stone dig mercilessly into her back.

'A coward twice around! First you leave the elf, now you shun me. What is your aim, woman? Is there aught you are good for, save for torturing minds of men unlucky enough to fall victims to your charms?' his voice had an angry tint now.

Nienor stood silent, shaking in his hold. His hand he had brought to the back of her neck and she gasped when his grip tightened. His other hand reached for her throat, clutching tighter and tighter. It hurt and soon after her head felt as if it would burst. Nienor barely heard him against the pressure in her ears. Ereldur was looking down at her, a dark fire in his eyes that she had seen before.

'If I end you now, who would care?' she heard, and unparalleled fear took her at the notion that he might do just that. His grip was unyielding, her breathing more shallow. 'No one! You belong to me, do you hear? Anger me again, keep leering at the elf and one day I will finish what I started here.'

Only when she found herself collapsed against the wall did Nienor realize he had released her.

'Get out,' Ereldur growled now standing with his back to her, his hand shaking as he poured himself yet more wine.

Nienor wasted no time as she stumbled outside her husband's chamber, her hand to her neck, her shallow gasps the only sounds filling the quiet corridors.

The following day was the second to last day of a hard working week, and the customary week's end feast had been prepared. Nourishment, drink and dancing usually made the main activities of the event. Recent losses of war made it all the more needful in the eyes of the folk who had seen too much.

The elves were seated next to the long table reserved for royalty. Though originally meant to be seated there as well Legolas had elected to be near his kin at another table to the right side. He morosely scanned the crowd - searching for what, he did not know. Among others, he saw them. The ruling couple of Garolin, heading towards their seats. The woman, paler than usual, at the side of her husband. Her arm draped around his. She looked ill in all her finery he thought, a terrible
contrast, not unlike a dying man dressed in his best clothes.

The ellon looked away, then back out of the corner of his eye. As she seated herself Nienor lifted her heavy hair to move it over her shoulder. For that brief moment which would have been lost on human eyes he saw something. Something which froze him. A strange black fog appeared on the edge of his vision and he barely tore his eyes away from the object of his observation, only to land on Dalaron. His friend had seated himself opposite from the prince and exuded a cautious air about him. Legolas took one long sip of his wine. Then another.

'In a festive mood?' he heard the inquiry, worry laced carefully with mirth.

'As ever,' the prince replied offhandedly, glancing briefly at his commander. Though he could tell Dalaron was puzzled, he cared not elaborate further.

It was after the fifth glass and bouts of strenuous conversation that he rose and joined the dancing, the thoughtful gaze of his friend on him. This wine was nothing compared to the strong Dorwinion or indeed any other wine his people enjoyed. Its effects were mild and only slightly did he feel it, somewhat helping him release some of the tension in his limbs. He had needed it to help maintain the mask of empty and reassuring pleasantries.

The elf never lacked for dancing partners, most of the young women in attendance being nothing less than delighted to dance with one of the Eldar, and the elven prince of Eryn Lasgalen at that. But the one he truly wanted to approach was farther and farther away. He kept dancing, entertaining his partners as politely as he could. It was not at all difficult as most maids and women seemed dazed and dumbstruck in his arms. He could be ever the gallant prince when he so wished. Finally he turned and was met face to face with the one he sought. He swept her nonchalantly away and while she would not meet his eyes, her tense form spoke volumes.

A pleasant, formal smile graced his lips as the elf leaned in, aware of the folk around them. 'Nienor, what happened?' Whatever the animosity, whatever barriers were between them owing to his recent actions, they were shattered in the face of what he saw earlier.

She looked at him then, astonished. At the fake smile, at his eyes, a tell tale of something else. The question was completely at odds with the situation they were in. His hands on her a reminder of how he held her only days ago.

'Why do you ask?'... she followed blankly. She seemed lost, afeared, and it only increased his worry.

As the elf held her he turned her around him and imperceptibly his hand brushed her hair away from the back of her neck. His movement was so swift no other eyes could see it, but they were there, sure as day. Deep, purple and red marks at the base of her neck. The high collar of her black dress prevented the marks from being visible at the front. She felt his grip on her waist tighten.

'Who did this? Was it him?' the elf asked brusquely even as he could feel the black fog returning to the corners of his vision. Nienor said nothing, and her silence galled. Legolas twirled her around him once more as was required by the style of dance; when Nienor faced him again she saw his eyes were darker.

'It is nothing,' she managed, wishing this would end so she could return to her misery.

'That was not nothing. Nienor, please,' the ellon tried again.

'It is not your duty to concern yourself with my well being,' the woman spoke then, even as she
held on to his shoulders, gripping for dear life. ‘...my lord.’

Dark shadows under reddened eyes quickened his heartbeat, and the elf felt such grief from her it nearly made him react foolishly. Foolish enough to raise her in his arms and take her away, far away from this place, war and fate be damned. But the prince managed to stay the urge, instead searching her eyes.

‘Not my duty, my wish,’ he said softly, his wooden smile barely concealing the concern and anger flaring behind his eyes. ‘Would you have me beg?’

‘I would... have you...’ but her words trailed off, and the elf never heard what she might have said for the tune changed, and she removed herself from him to take another partner.

Legolas barely noticed the woman he took next in his arms, and after two more turns his feet returned him to the table. Dalaron eyed him but thankfully said nothing. He refilled his glass. The marks were deep and many, as if she had been strangled. Would Ereldur truly go so low as to harm her in such a way? Now, when she was his own by law? What more did he wish for. She was barely half his size and had even less his strength. Why torment anyone in such a manner? Such vile creatures the Second Kindred could be. He searched for Ereldur in the crowd of attendees. There he was, partaking in dinner conversation, as pleasant and beguiling as ever before those unsuspecting of his true nature. The ellon saw Nienor join him and her husband placed a hand on her arm, gripping it slightly before releasing her. She then stood and left the hall. What animal would do such a thing to the one he had sworn to protect?

‘Legolas!’ someone hissed.

He slowly, dazedly turned to Dalaron, following the direction of his worried gaze. Looking towards his own right hand the elf saw his fist clenched around the remnants of his wine glass. Trickles of blood poured through the small shards, between his fingers, seeping into the white tablecloth. His eyes focused on the rest of their table companions, their faces mirroring the same astonishment.

‘I..., excuse me,’ the prince whispered hastily as he rose and strode swiftly out of the hall.

Outside the night was cold, the stars brighter than they had been in a while. Debilitating fury still veiled his vision bleak, the dead sound ringing in his ears, drowning all else, and all he saw was that moment. That one moment in which he espied the barbaric marks on her neck. It had happened, with him here. It had happened and he could do nothing. The elf took a deep breath, then another. Slowly his vision came back to him, the darkness retreating.

Against his own previous counsel the elf decided to follow what his soul yearned to do. Search for her. Find her. A sudden sting reminded him he still held his fist clenched. The prince looked downward, frowning at the blood dripping to the floor. But this will not do, he thought. He could not very well roam around the fortress bleeding from one hand and risk distracting her if he did find her. At first he was at a loss, since there was nobody on duty at the healing wards at this time of night, and his own supplies had not been stocked. An unlikely option came to mind. Taking a decision, the ellon turned on his way while keeping clear of the feast and its participants as best he could.
'Forgive me, I did not know where else to go.'

'No trouble at all, my lord!' Igleta said in her crackling merry voice.

The elf and the old woman were seated in the empty kitchen, a few healing supplies spread across one of the tables. 'I only hope the feast was not so awful as to provoke such a reaction from an elf! They call you the fair and kind folk, you know,' she jested.

'Nay indeed, all was perfectly well assembled, gratitude,' the ellon smiled. He sighed. 'I simply, must have forgotten my own strength for a moment... ' *Lies easier to come by.*

'Aye, well, all compliments should go to my lady, she was the one who had arranged everything, overseeing even the tiniest detail.'

The ellon nodded, his gaze clouded as the blackened bruises came to mind.

'And she could do with some kindness, the poor child,' Igleta continued. 'I worry for her, in truth. Ever since she has returned to us, she seems aloof, and ever distant. She speaks to no one of herself, and any attempts, at least from my part, are foiled. I know not what happened to her in your home but she is not the same child that left here.'

The ellon looked at the elder. She held his gaze, something in her eyes.

'My lord, not to be too bold, and forgive me if indeed I am, but it seems to me you know each other well, though she barely speaks of you. But then she barely speaks of anyone,' the woman scoffed. 'Would you... try, to speak with her?'

'I will.' As soon as he found her.

The elder seemed to lose some of her stiff bearing. 'Thank you, my lord. Well let us wrap this over now,' she said as she took to the task of bandaging his hand. When she was done, he rose from the table.

'I thank you for your aid.' He was heading towards the kitchen door.

'In the west wing.'

'Pardon?' he turned around to face the old woman.

'There is a wide open space supported by pillars, where the moon is most visible on certain nights. My child,... my lady oft used to spend her time there in her own counsel.'

The elf nodded his thanks, and with one last look at the overly perceptive house mistress, went on his way.
He paced through the halls and corridors, went into the courtyard. No sign of her. Lastly he decided to search the place Igleta spoke of. If she was not there, she surely retired but he hoped it was not so.

When the elf reached the wide open space, he saw the woman was indeed there. Resting on the white marble floor, her knees bent under her, shoulders brought forward in a tell tale sign of her state. Relieved, his cautious steps led him to stand beside her. Was she not cold, seated like so?

'Your mistress Igleta said I might find you here,' he began, his gaze afar. The elf did not want to completely rob her of the solitude she so clearly needed. When silence met his words he glanced down at her briefly. He stood quietly, loath to disturb her from her musings. But he had to reach her somehow.

'What you started in the armory... do you still wish to speak of it?' he asked finally, his head tilted towards the star trails above, his arms crossed.

Nienor turned her head away from him, indeed to hide the streaked state of her face, though she suspected he had already seen it. She had heard him approach, or more likely the ellon had wanted her to hear him.

'Aye,' he heard the answer.

More silence followed the word, engulfing them both, and for a while it seemed as if they were each trapped in their own thoughts. The elf then stepped around Nienor towards the nearest pillar and descended against the structure facing her, his back pressed to the stone. He took in her profile, her hair rolling down in heavy waves, dark as the night around her shoulders. Her head was bowed. He waited.

'How did you discover about the potion?' her voice broke the silence then.

He pondered a while before starting to speak. 'During the battle of Arthedain, I came upon the one they call the witch king, the sorcerer you might have heard leads the enemy we face. Or he came upon me. He breached my thoughts as I tried to fight him. He wields the most powerful of the fell arts I have ever witnessed, and to my shame I must admit, in those moments I tasted fear. It was then that he immobilized me, and a number of memories seemed to have been thrust back into my mind. He also tried to sway me to his side though for reasons unbeknownst to me.'

Her gaze shot to meet his. But his head now rested against the column, his eyes closed. It was bewildering, to hear his words. Of all the ways he could have remembered, of all the ways the potion effects might have been reverted, it was the enemy's doing? 'But you do not know all,' she followed, wanting to hear it from him.

'Nay, I do not know all.'

She swallowed away the dryness choking her words before speaking, slowly adjusting her own position until she was facing him. 'I cannot begin to know what you have... suffered since I... since I left.' Since I left you, was what she knew she ought to say, but she could not. Saying those words, and to him no less, was indeed the hardest part of her confession. 'And I truly do regret that it was my doing.'

He grimaced. 'It was not only your doing.'

Her head dipped slightly. It was much more difficult to draw the words than she had thought. Laying herself bare before him was as nerve wracking as it was releasing. She could claim neither
less nor more responsibility for the happenings than she had. He already knew his father had his own role in it all. 'Indeed, it is true,' she followed softly. Then, mustering more courage, her eyes on her hands, she started to speak. She told him everything. What the king had told her about the consequences of their connection, how it rang true, how she agreed to a solution in desperation. How she agreed to wed Ereldur. She never cowered from her actions, and with every word the darkness in her chest eased somewhat.

No interruption came from his part. When she was done she fell silent for many moments before continuing. 'You deserved to hear the whole truth but my courage to offer it failed me until now. And I deeply regret my choice, though that counts for nothing now.' She lifted her gaze to the silent elf, as still as the pillar he leaned against. She wrung her hands unconsciously.

'Your neck?' she heard finally. Eyes still closed.

She looked to her hands again. 'When he is angry he does these things. When he drinks, it is worse. He... he blames me for you and I. But he hates you more,' she added.

'I suspected as much.' He did not remember his past confrontation with the mortal, but he knew something had happened. His senses were always on alert in the lord's presence. Maybe he could do something to ensure the filth never touched her again. Her voice brought him out of the grim thought.

'Your hand?' she pointed to his bandaged palm.

He had nigh forgotten about it. 'A mishap.'

'Legolas, if he finds out... that you remember ...he must not,' she pleaded.

He understood. It would make her own life even worse. The misery and fear lacing her words distressed him so much it took all his restraint to keep himself still, to keep himself from reaching for her, to offer her the comfort she so sorely needed but never received. Was he not, by virtue of their connection which was still very much alive despite their best efforts, supposed to protect her? What kind of mate had he been to her? Not her mate at all. Not anymore.

'Did he hurt you in other ways?' Of course he had thought about it. He had thought about it from the moment the elf remembered what she was to him, but dreaded to even consider what had happened between her and Ereldur since the two had wed. Did the wretch force himself on her? Has he done worse things? The elf was not sure he could hear it, but for her, he had to ask it all the same.

The woman stood silent. Wandering hands, around her neck, his weight suffocating her. Nienor had not told the ellon of the ways her human husband tortured her mind, not wanting to seem craven in his eyes. But he was asking nonetheless, and she was loath to tell him. There was nothing he could do. 'He tried,' she spoke, her gaze once more on her hands. 'And I am still expected to produce his heir,' she spat.

As he listened to her account, the prince kept his eyes closed so he could better rein in his emotions, guilt now chief among them. Lost in his own pain, he had utterly missed hers. She had been forced to bind herself to the man she dreaded, whom she feared and grew to loathe. In order to help her people. A wave of anger surged through him at the thought of Thranduil, who he learned had placed this condition on her.

'I am deeply saddened to see you suffering so,' was all the ellon could say.
'It was, more or less, my own doing. I agreed to it all.' Even with the passage of time the words were hard to speak.

They were also hard to hear. 'I cannot help to think-,' he started, no discernible emotion in his voice, ‘about the fact that had I not discovered what I had, you would not have told me of this on your own. Do I speak true?'

She could not lie. She would never lie to him again. 'Aye. I was a coward.' Just as you said.

The ellon opened his eyes, focusing on hers.

'I suppose you ought to know. Even if... your ill advised, though well intended, role in this ploy to save me from my fate might have been successful originally, it will probably no longer be so. The grief over your death which you meant to shield me from cannot be abated. As now I fully know what I lost.'

Her heart plummeted. It should not be so, it could not. But this denial sounded weak and cowardly when she looked at him.

'But perhaps, events in the near future will prevent that from coming to be,' he added darkly, his gaze beyond her now.

He means the war. If he should die?

'How can you say this?' she started, her eyes wide at the blackness of his thoughts. But then, his first words registering even more forcefully, 'You would still... be gone? Fade? Just as before?' Her hands shook in the folds of her sleeves.

'Young one. Our mate is our forever. My fate is set. I say this not to bring you grief, but I do not think I could bear your loss and continue.'

Her breathing hitched. 'Legolas, could you not fight it? If we survive this war we would never see each other again-'

'Fight my bond with you?' she heard the question hovering in the air. 'As if it were a disease?'

She sensed such pain from him she knew she had spoken foolishly. She could have struck herself. The next words she heard were laced with bitterness.

'I suppose I would have to try.' His eyes were closed once more.

They stood in silence. After innumerable moments she heard an intake of breath from him.

'Though your decisions hurt me deeply and irreparably, who you are to me will never change.'

Nienor listened, trying to stay the pressure building behind her eyes.

'Yet in my disappointment, in my... pain, I acted rashly and dishonorably towards you. It was disrespectful, and you did not deserve it.'

Then unable to bear the distance any longer, he shifted from his position against the pillar to stand closer before her. His hands he placed on her shoulders. He searched her eyes and the guilt she heard through his next words made her pause. 'I regret it, Nee.'

Her chest felt too tight and she dropped her gaze, her next words coming shy and subdued. 'You regret having done it in anger, or that it happened?' She still had his taste in her mouth, recalled his
hard body against hers. His hands on her.

'Does it matter?' he said, though it broke his heart. 'You have a different life now. In both our peoples' eyes, you are rightfully wed.' He was watching her keenly, following the change in her expression at his words. He wanted her, yes; just as much as he loved her and he would ever miss her touch, but that was the way of things now. And that was how it should stay. 'Please, will you forgive me my behavior,' he pleaded.

She only nodded, too choked to speak. She had tried. But the end would be the same, and she also lost him along the way. She was an utter, unforgivable fool.

His hand moved to cup her cheek, causing her eyes to flutter closed at the contact. She leaned into the touch and felt him shift closer, and soon their foreheads were touching, his soft breath ghosting her lips. She once more felt the familiar scent of his skin, of the forest after summer rain. It was painful how much she needed him.

She felt his grip on her shoulder tighten, his other hand moving from her face to comb through her disheveled hair.

'Though not together, I am yours, Nienor of Garolin. And ever will my soul seek yours and never will I escape the pain of being sundered from you, and even in the Halls of Mandos will I dwell with you in memory.'

Her chest went from tight to suffocating. She looked at him then, and what she saw made the fringe of her composure crack and crumble away like a weather worn castle. Tears warmed her face, and she let them.

His hand left her shoulder and reached to wipe the wetness away from her eyes, slowly, repeatedly when the stream poured anew. 'I find myself wishing I could help you, though I know not how,' the ellon confessed. 'Save for maiming the bastard, which at this point I would happily do if you asked it of me.'

'Take me away from here? Elope with me into the sunset, be my valiant prince once more?' she smiled, trying a jest through her tears, wiping her face with her sleeve.

'Is that your wish?' the elf asked gently, his tone bereft of the mirth she tried to instill. Such was his determination that if she truly asked it of him, duty and all be damned, he would do just that.

The woman smiled kindly and dared to drape her hand over the bandaged hand now resting on her cheek. She knew that could not happen, however much she desired it. The invisible knots around both their wrists ensured that. Knots of duty, war and custom.

'As long as I am here, I will try to ease your hardships to the best of my abilities,' he followed. And after? his mind hedged, but he could not think of that presently.

They stood there a while longer in silence, his fingers still soothingly caught in her long tresses. Nienor then felt her body being pulled forward as the elf rose and supported her to stand as well. She fell directly into his embrace, into the ever soothing warmth she would miss forever. Her mouth found his briefly before she lowered her head into his chest, aware of his previous words.

His heartbeat under her palms, the elf held her to him whispering in his native tongue. Something which sounded both exhilarating and downcast, something her soul understood despite her mind not being able to. A wave of calm washed over her.

His eyes closed as his chin came to rest on the top of her head. He did not tell her the meaning, and
she did not ask. She was afraid it would kill the last semblance of control and composure if she did. Maybe it was the same for him.

On the side of the building which overlooked the wide veranda, Dalaron turned away, his gaze darkened but bereft of any surprise.
He stood propped against the window of his chamber, contemplating the whole night away after he left her. Against himself he left her there, alone, her head bowed into her chest. It had all been both releasing and tormenting, knit together in a tangled mess. He promised her she would have his aid, but now the elf wondered whether he should have made such a thoughtless oath. What could be done in the end? Though the thought did cross his mind, making an end of the lord of this settlement was not an endeavor he could consider, nor would it help matters now. The ellon grudgingly admitted to himself that the man was a good leader, all faults aside. Good leaders were needed now. Then he recalled the bruises. These invisible knots and the powerlessness against it all, it was maddening. Looking without the open window, he saw the pale light of dawn engulfing the east. Today he was to proceed to the training grounds to oversee the preparations for the cavalry units together with Ereldur. He gritted his teeth. War made strange bedfellows indeed. He was about to leave his chamber when a knock pounded furiously against the door.

A youth was revealed, flustered and panting. 'My lord,' the young man tried. 'A messenger, just arrived. Lord Ereldur has called upon the war council.' The ellon nodded his thanks and swiftly he was gone.

When he reached his destination Legolas saw everyone had gathered. His eyes fell upon Nienor, standing nigh to the left of her lord. So she was here. Just as well. He acknowledged Dalaron with a short nod, though the other elf simply stared back coldly before averting his gaze. Curious, but he did not dwell on it. He would find the commander later.

'My lords,' Ereldur began, a weary look upon his features. 'I shall impart upon you a most unfortunate and grave development. The short of it is this: Rhudaur has fallen. For reasons absconded from us, our supposed ally seems to have sided with the witch king. Now I am able to make sense of the lack of correspondence from the area. Loren, if you please.'

The messenger, a young man of no more than twenty years of age looked a sorry state. His face was bloodied and gashed, his left leg sporting a winded wound, yet to be tended to. He proceeded to recount how, seemingly out of nowhere, Rhudanic forces started attacking the Arthedain men positioned together on the borders. Taken by surprise, most were felled. He barely escaped with his life.

'I have also seen men and orc striding about in tow with them all. So it is that betrayal is rife among us. We are one ally short. How or why this witch king swayed them to their side, I know not,' the messenger continued. 'But I have heard their king Honrus had been speared through. Perchance another took his place.'

'There is something else,' Ereldur spoke. 'They march towards us.'

The murmurs increased.

'All of them? Then we must ride and meet them head on!' Hamor stated.

It was too soon. Ill news indeed, for the ellon saw the exhaustion, fear and constant worry weakened the men of this land after the last battles they faced, too many in too short a time. Plenty dead, too many wounded, and resources were fewer by the week. Though Thranduil would send provisions as well, it was not enough. It never was.

'Your people are wearied with battle and loss, my lord,' the elf addressed Ereldur.
'Pardon me, prince Legolas but are we to wait until they reach our doorstep?' Hamor interceded, though not unkindly.

The elf searched the room and his gaze fell on Nienor. He felt rather than saw her fear and worry. Despite it all, they had to fight.

'The elves of Rivendell will provide their aid as well. Enforcements from my father should also arrive shortly, within two days,' the prince added.

'How soon do we reckon we ought to set out?' Ereldur asked the ones in attendance.

'The full distance takes around three days' riding. On foot, respite included, it would be a week perhaps before they reach Garolin,' the messenger added.

_Reach Garolin._ Nienor paled.

'Then we will start preparations immediately,' Ereldur conceded. 'We would need to leave Garolin in two to three days.' Following were matters of administrative nature and strategy to be discussed, and it was late in the afternoon that the council was dismissed.

'My lord,' the ellon heard. His body going taut despite himself, he turned to the owner of the voice.

'Please walk with me,' Ereldur added. Unable to refuse for any worthy reason, the prince nodded, making no small effort to keep his hands from balling into fists.

'My lady wife, if you would join us.'

A wary Nienor approached the pair. The elf cursed the man in his mind, but his expression was fairly void of emotion as they walked side by side, crossing the courtyard. She was reasonably composed, he noticed. That was well.

'The reason I wanted to speak to you both concerns a matter my wife is most privy to. Nienor does her best in leading the healing wards with what aid she has available, but I fear the ordeal to follow will mean we will be sorely lacking. Would you be able to spare a few of your elven healers and leave them behind in Garolin?'

'Of course,' the prince answered. 'Need not be asked,' he followed smoothly. Her hands were curled into her skirts. A slight blush was visible, creeping along her neck, a tell tale sign of uneasiness. _Be still_ he urged. He hoped the other would not notice.

'Excellent,' Ereldur looked from his wife, the epitome of concealed discomfort, to the elven prince and his unabated calm. The lord of Garolin smiled, a thin affair. 'As ever, I am indebted to your kin for your invaluable aid. I would dare to hope we did not need the numbers but...' he sighed and trailed off. They all understood.

'If you will excuse me, I have unfinished tasks and preparations to oversee for my company,' the ellon said as he nodded shortly to both.

'Of course,' Ereldur uttered, still smiling when the elf turned away.

He left them, with no small hope to one day crush that smile against an extremely hard surface. Repeatedly. The thought followed him the rest of the day.

When evening came, with most if not all his duties completed, the elf proceeded to the armory. It was late and so the large wooden hall stood grim and empty.
He spread the contents of his quiver across a table. Arrow upon arrow, he set to work fletching each of them, ensuring all was in order. He had been immersed in the task for some time before he heard someone approach. The door opened to reveal Dalaron who was carrying a quiver of his own. Wordlessly, the elf deposited the item onto a nearby table but instead of doing anything else, he seemed content to stare mutely at the object.

'My friend, I wanted a word with you,' the prince started, seeing as the other elf said nothing. 'What is the state of our supplies?'

'Dwindling,' the commander all but muttered. 'What is available will be prepared for our forces within two days, given the time available.'

The other ellon acknowledged this with a short nod, his gaze still on his task.

'You left quite abruptly last night,' the words then came.

_Strange change of topic_ the prince thought, even as a sense of unease took hold.

A pause followed before Dalaron heard an answer. 'Other matters called my attention.'

'Indeed.'

At the spat word Legolas looked upon the face of his friend. The frown marring the features of his commander was telling, yet he was not keen on delving further.

But apparently Dalaron was. 'You seemed to have quite a lot on your hands,' he continued, his tone unchanged as he crossed his arms, regarding the fair haired ellon with a strange expression.

His eyes became steely. 'You followed me.' Was it disgust or worry that he saw?

'Nay, I did not follow you,' Dalaron laughed mirthlessly. 'I was merely returning to my chambers. Just as anyone could have done. And just the same they could have seen the heir to Eryn Lasgalen, on his knees with the lord's wife!' he threw, the last word stressed painfully. 'Where is your restraint?'

'Careful Dalaron, you know naught of what you speak,' the prince said darkly, his work forgotten.

'Then pray tell me, prince!' the other followed, a streak of anger to his words. 'Help me understand why you so carelessly seem to overstep your bounds.'

Legolas did not like the challenge in his tone. 'Tis not your place, nor of any help would it be,' he quipped, perhaps harsher than intended. 'I request you keep what you saw to yourself.'

'A mortal?' Dalaron scoffed. 'And she is wedded, you fool! How long has it been so? Did you even consider what it means?' the auburn haired ellon insisted. His frown deepened, his next words poisonous even as he gazed upon the dark expression of the prince. 'I thought you had more sense, and I your trust, but I see now that we are friends but in name, and I your subject above all else.'

It was not so. But as tired as he was, the prince was not wont to offer any explanation on the matter, as helpful as it may be against the frenzied reaction of his friend. He was not wont to put to Dalaron that yes, she was wedded, but not to the lord of this fortress. It was enough that it plagued him all the time. 'Has it escaped you that we are riding into battle, commander? Is this the most urgent matter you would broach now?' Legolas asked coldly.

'Few things escape me, my lord, though believe you me, I wish they did. I came to you before I
went to the king, owed to our friendship alone. But I will place my duty first if need be.'

Ire took hold of the prince at this relentless chastisement. The following words left his mouth in a cold torrent. 'Then go to him, o faithful servant! Be sure to leave out nothing of what you saw. It would save me the trouble, if nothing else.'

Dalaron paused, his eyes wide, in consternation or hurt, Legolas was not sure.

'We are done here,' the prince threw as he slung his refilled quiver over his shoulder and turned away before he said something else he would regret. As he did so, he could not help but think that it all could have been handled better.
The waves between us

The next few days were filled with preparation and passed all too quickly. Entering his chamber on
the night preceding their departure, the elf felt wearier than he had in a very long time. He barely
closed the door before he felt aught amiss. His senses peaked and movements schooled, Legolas
placed the candle he had been holding onto the nearby table just as a figure emerged from the
shadows. He froze. 'Why are you here?' the ellon wasted no time asking even as he turned to bar
the door. He remained so standing with his back to her, his palm lingering against the heavy wood.
Nienor stood silently, seemingly weighing an answer.

Legolas did not understand this. They had spoken and agreed to the way of distance, and she had
been of like mind. But now here she was, needlessly endangering herself. The longing in her eyes
was distressing, if only because he felt his own resistance falter the moment he had locked the
door. Still the elf summoned all remnants of determination to his aid.

'You ought to leave,' he said stiffly. His words were steady. But he would indeed be the greatest
deceiver to say that he wanted her gone. Yet the elf would still try to sway her to reason, despite the
knowledge that he had little power to do so. There were times when the prince wondered if the
Valar thought this amusing, to let it be so.

'I ought to,' Nienor drew closer, placing a hand to his back.

Still he could not turn to face her. The elf tried to appeal further to his better sense, to the
repercussions of the peril they were currently in. But the words did not come. 'Then why are you
still here?' he finally asked through gritted teeth, stressing each word. The fatigue from earlier
surged through him, senses scattering aimlessly. Nienor was so close he could hear her breathing
and ragged heartbeat, skipping every now and then. There was only honesty there. Not that he had
doubted it. His throat felt unbearably dry.

'Will you not face me?' the dreaded words came.

Righting himself from the door the elf turned to her, his blue grey gaze saddened, set on her drawn
features.

'Do you truly want me to go?' her palms came to rest against his chest.

For the first time in a thousand years, the ellon felt cornered. He foolishly hoped for a distraction.
Anything to keep her from looking at him like that. He closed his eyes and prayed for restraint.
'Why do you ask such things of me?' He stood still as death, making no move to encourage her. He
bravely ignored the pang of anticipation when she touched him. Then he remembered. 'Dalaron
knows.'

That seemed to wake her, eyes focusing in a sharper beam. 'How?'

'The veranda.'

It had always been a risk. It could have been a worse turn, if someone else had seen them. At least
Dalaron was more unwavering in his friendship with the prince than in his fealty to the king. Or so
it seemed. Nienor found herself unable to concoct an appropriate reply. 'He knows...'

'Nothing aside from what he saw. He believes you and I are-'

'I see,' she added, fast enough for the elf to notice. *Adulterers. Deceivers.* She did not want to hear
it all, however untruthful it might be. And it was not something to dwell on now.

'Another piece to consider. Do you truly see?' the elf tried to support his stand.

She did not. The young woman looked away, her gaze catching the darkness outside the window. 'We might never meet again.'

He knew it was true. Prowess and all aside, there was no promise of escaping with their lives, were such a promise even possible to give by the powers that be. Each time they went to battle, death and loss lingered in his wake. His own as well as others'. She would suffer the same, should they fail. 'That alone has me fighting to ensure that we will. I vow it. But now you must... you must go.'

Her hands fell to her sides.

Perhaps harder than saying these words to her was striving to contain the feelings and need of her pounding furiously against his chest, demanding him surrender. Nay, what he had to do was take her by the shoulders and usher her outside. That was what should be done. The ellon reached for her just as she fell into him. But instead of dragging her away and towards the door the elf enveloped her like a much needed cure, even as she softened in his grasp. 'A mighty risk you are taking. What if he looks for you?' Surely Ereldur was as inconstant as bad weather, but chances still were that tonight of all nights he could call upon his wife. And she would not be there. What would happen then, to her most of all, Legolas could not fathom. But at the same time he could not bear the thought of that man touching her. Nay, she was better served here.

'I left only after he had retired,' the woman said, craning her head upward to meet his eyes. A meager precaution, and definitely not enough to place him at ease. 'That will not always be so. And this is not what we agreed.'

For a moment she feared he would relinquish his grip on her, but he did not. 'I miss you, Legolas-'

He hissed a sigh of frustration, looking away. 'At times it seems it is all I do,' she continued undeterred. 'Nee,' he tried, despite the growing surety that he was losing this fight, 'you know I cannot deny you, yet now you do this. It is folly.' Humans and their rash decisions. Not that he was much better when it came to the one before him.

'I know.'

He closed his eyes. She would be the end of him. Frustration surged viciously and again came the urge to forcefully remove her from the room. The elf was about to do just that-

When she reached and kissed him. A slight, slivering touch of warm silk over his own lower lip, but it was enough. Enough to provide a respite from the storm thrashing within, enough to soothe his frayed nerves. He was yielding. He had to...

'No,' the elf whispered, drawing away reluctantly. If he could not have all of her, he would not have her at all.

'You deny me, then,' but she kissed him again, more desperately than any time he remembered and his will, already chipped, withered away against the crushing warmth of her mouth.

He could not... if he felt her again, there would be no escape. But was there ever? Was he not
already trapped, his soul captured by this maelstrom of emotions which were ruining him? Before the prince knew it his hold on her tightened, and he was meeting her with equal fire.

Nienor was well aware she was doing him no favor with this. Needling, selfishly and so freely offering something they could not have. She understood his attempt to turn her away. But his hands were so steady on her hips, his lips burning hers with such abandon. It was wrong, but it was him. Nay, it was right. They were fated and she would have this, as foolish as it was, just this once. Perhaps the last, who could say. The thought tore at her.

The elf kissed her longingly, his conscience now only vaguely unnerved by the fact that it was against all they had decided. But Valar, how she felt against him. When her tongue grazed his a soft moan escaped his throat, the sound vibrating through her entire being; signalling his complete surrender. He had so missed molding her against him, and if ever there was a doubt in her mind he would dispel them all.

'My love,' Nienor lulled to him dazedly between kisses, his taste reminding her so strongly of times past.

His insides burned, ached. 'I will have you say it again,' the elf cooed, finding that he was smiling, the fool he was.

The young woman then felt herself being lifted in his arms as the prince moved them towards softer ground. 'My friend, my beautiful elf,' she smiled lost in him, closing her eyes. 'I love you so much,' she whispered again obligingly and it nearly broke his tempered pace, the words burying themselves mercilessly into his heart. He had heard it so long ago from her, it seemed a different lifetime. And it was.

A few hours they had, only barely enough for what he wanted to show her. He lay with her onto the bed, never breaking their kiss. It was not long before she was begging him for more. Her hand clasped the front of his soft suede garment. He nipped at her lips gently a while longer in sweet, tantalizing sounds until he broke away, wringing a slight aching sound from her.

'What is it that you need?' he asked, his eyes closed in respite, his lips pressing lightly to her forehead. Anything, he would do anything she asked. The elf then looked into her eyes, and soon hands were touching his face, fingers tucking strands of fair hair behind his ear, barely ghosting its outline. His entire body tensed. Then her small hand moved its way down his back, pressing him against her.

'You,' she whispered, 'I need you, my prince,' she gushed, and what he witnessed in her eyes threw him over the edge with nary a chance of redemption. She was so young, his mortal, and it showed especially when she abandoned all restraint.

'Then I shall see it done,' he promised, eyes darkened. He pulled on her lower lip with his own before rising and taking her with, his arm snaked around her waist.

His tunic came discarded easily enough. Kindled, the elf turned his lady around, holding her against him. His hand then slid to her neck, gently placed so he could feel the life beat under her skin. Her heartbeat burst in a furious rhythm, and he leaned in to place a soft kiss onto the very spot. His other hand was unlacing her clothes and the endeavor soon left her bare waist up.

There was aught about her nakedness against his clothed form which enticed her to no end. She then felt the searing pressure of his hand gliding across her chest, deliberately stopping against one of her globes, pressing even more, tenderly feeling its hardened center; she bit her lip to prevent the aching sounds of desire his movement wrought; slowly his hand then came to rest against her
middle, the touch burning into her lower being. His other hand was grasping her thigh, fingers
digging possessively into the soft curve. She stood powerless to his touch. Everything he did
tipped her cup over little by little.

His soft lips followed along the side of her neck. 'Is this your wish?' she barely heard his forlorn
whisper.

A sigh was his only response as he continued with his lovely task. The elf slowly turned her to face
him and Nienor set to remove the white silk shirt he wore. When her arms then locked around his
neck and she embraced him his world shifted dangerously. She was the center, keeping it all
together. Legolas leaned into her, leading her tenderly to where he wanted and she relented, both
falling together onto the soft bed. It was a downward spiral, and as ever was the case with her, it
took all his better sense with it.

A primal sort of hunger took over when the elf felt her writhing under him, the wild recesses of his
being starting to emerge to the surface; leading his hands to feel her body more insistently, his kiss
deepering a desperate hue until they both ceased to draw a much needed breath. He ground his
hips against hers, wringing low, hopeless moans. He was lost, and all the happier for it.

Her hands eagerly reached to slide the material down his strong thighs. Nienor felt him, so hard and
unrelenting, and wasted no time wrapping herself around him with a sigh of contentment. His body
pressed into her warmth and when he looked into her eyes all else dimmed. Both felt nothing but
each other. She pursued his skin, hands sliding down his shoulders and back, feeling his every
move. She was whole again. Then her fingers found solace in his hair and soon she was blessing
the moments she held him so tightly, his fëa vibrating so close with hers. He was pure bliss. If she
never saw this elf again, Nienor hoped the memory of him would see her through the end.

The small hours still came, much too soon. Legolas watched the sky through the window facing
the bed, a barely lit canopy. A dark twilight resembling his own inner state. She was sleeping, still
in his arms, head resting on his chest, her dark hair silk against his skin.

'Nee,' he called softly, knowing it had to be done. His hand smoothed her hair gently and soon she
was looking upward at him, the remnants of slumber pulled over her eyes.

'Is it time?'

'Aye.'

When done readying themselves, Nienor turned to her elf. His unreadable expression spoke of so
many things, and told her all she needed to know.

'Must you go?' she tried uselessly, her arms wrapping around his neck, her head bent downward. A
childish plea. She knew better. But she could not help herself.

'As you well know,' the elf lulled before crushing her in another searing embrace. 'Nee...,' he called
her name, unable to continue, unable to release her. 'Trust I will return,' he tried though his
conviction faltered. But, for her, he had to. And he would, against all that fate threw his way.

Wordlessly she kissed him again. It was pained, and sorrowful, and it broke his heart. He returned
it all tenfold before he would have to part with her.

'Valar keep you,' she broke the kiss and abruptly pried herself from him to turn away. It was easier
like so. The elf made no motion to stop her and soon enough the door closed. Not once did she look
back.
And all fled before his face

They rode ahead, horses foaming at the mouth. Elves as well as men were already striving to ward off the onslaught of the first wave of enemy numbers. Deafening sounds, mingled limbs and bloodied weapons glinted in the sunless twilight. And all was becoming darker. They had ridden the way past Fornost Erain and clashed with the enemy right after passing between North Downs and Weather Hills, onto the wide fields of Arthedain. Rivendell elves and forces from Lindon were to come as reinforcements, provided they met little resistance as they crossed Rhudaur to reach them. Twas the swiftest way, but now wrought with danger.

Legolas slashed through enemies with blinding speed, unleashing his full anger upon the orc viciously, a testament to his Silvan legacy. Aggrieved by the memory of those lost to their hordes, he showed no mercy; knowing they would give none in return. His daggers flashed red and black, a sight he had grown accustomed to. None stood a chance. He looked to his far left where Dalaron was felling enemies with swift and deathly accuracy.

One slash. Then another. He skittered through the mud to reach a man being overwhelmed; his dagger flew from his hand, piercing a deformed skull. He sprinted and retrieved the weapon before the body of the beast hit the mire.

There were so many. Too many. The hosts of Arthedain were not faring terribly, but the men were tiring. Many had already fallen from their numbers and the darkness engulfing them helped little against the beasts who fared well in the shadows. The aid from Rivendell would even the numbers only somewhat.

The ellon had just avoided an Easterling blade and next his vision caught something not far to his left. Ereldur was battling two orc, and visibly tiring. A third joined them and the man was soon mostly on the defensive, falling back. He tripped and fell. Then he was on his knees, blood sputtering over his chin as he struggled to evade and parry their attacks.

Legolas knew he ought to go to his aid. This man was on their side, against the evil. He was an ally, and a skilled fighter who bled for his people. He was also cruel, vindictive and repeatedly tormented the one he loved. But he was on their side. The thought of what he had done to her came to the forefront of his mind even as the elf cut through an armored chest. How the man tried to demean her, how he delighted in her torture back when his mind was still broken and bereft of memory.

He would never hurt her again if he fell.

Still, he was on their side.

Caught between the two opposing forces of his mind and heart, the elf wavered. Nay, this is not how it should be. It was never like him to end a life for selfishly personal reasons. And the sight would not let him be. Reaching a decision, he whistled for Aerth; as a vision the mare galloped through the mist of battle, easily avoiding the most dangerous of slashes; he nimbly mounted and proceeded to run down foes in his path, bolting into the direction where the lord of Garolin still stood. As he neared them he sprinted from the back of his mount, his full force brought forward as he buried his daggers to the hilt into the back of the orc ready to strike the struggling man; retrieving the weapons as he kicked the carcass aside, he whirled around with inhuman swiftness.
and another orc fell, its head flying off its shoulders. He turned, and saw Erelurd trying to lift himself. His leg sported a gash.

'On your feet,' he growled to the man as he pulled him upward roughly.

Erelurd looked at him with no little amount of surprise before his gaze darkened. He nodded shortly towards the ellon, whose eyes cut to his in an unsettling hue. But he had little time to ponder on what had happened as the endless stream of enemies engulfed them.

The elf had saved his life. The fool, Erelurd thought grimly, his hatred of the prince somehow all the more kindled.

Now with the addition of Rhudaur forces to their numbers, the enemy army had the advantage.

He felt it before he saw it. A dark green light engulfed the horizon, and suddenly his mind was afire. The screeching sound was overheard by all as the wyrm flew above them, the sorcerer atop its back wringing lightning from the dark sky upon the field of battle.

Legolas froze, his pulse quickening, his head thrumming with pain.

'Once more, before me you stand, Thranduilion,' the fell voice whispered in his mind. The sorcerer of Carn Dûm had dismounted, standing taller than all, the darkness enveloping him as a shroud of malice. 'I see you have regained your wits.'

'Cease your taunting and come face me, you craven!' the elf cried.

He heard the laughter bursting in his mind before he was thrown off his feet, crashing into a group of orc, who wasted no time in trying to immobilize him. But the elf was swifter, and all soon fell by his hand. The sorcerer still in sight, he ran towards him unwilling to lose this chance. A heavy blade was drawn and met the elf's daggers as metal collided against metal. The witch king parried, and Legolas started to feel his hands at first warm, then hot, until his daggers were afire and he barely could hold on to them for his palms started burning. He jumped back, the laughter still resonating derisively in his head.

Just then one of the men of darkness was upon him and he cut through his torso before rushing towards the witch king again. None dared attack the dark rider, and all flew from his path until there was no one between him and the sorcerer.

Panting, the prince lunged towards his enemy.

'Such impudence towards the one who helped you regain your sight, elf,' he heard. 'I take it you decline the offer made the last time we met.'

'I would rather die,' the elf seethed as he went on the offensive. He was blocked effortlessly by the darkened blade before being thrown back with unyielding force.

The laughter grew louder. 'Then so it shall be.' As the words were spoken the dark one raised his metal clad arm before him, and brought his hand into a fist.

He could not breathe. He tried to inhale but the air would not reach, and he faltered before another foe, who wasted no time in swinging a scimitar heavily upon him. He would have died a sure death then, but for the sword suddenly swung across his attacker's weapon, blocking the blow and ultimately preventing what would have been his demise. Looking up he saw Dalaron, a disgusted look on his face as he buried his short dagger into the attacker's neck before facing the prince. Just as he wanted to aid the ellon to rise, he was thrown to the side with the powerful thrust of unseen
force, landing far away.

Having regained his breath, Legolas charged towards the sorcerer once more. He tried to find an opening, anything to wound the creature. But it only seemed to grow in height before him, and so caught was he in his efforts that the elf failed to notice a foreign blow which threw him off balance, causing him to lose his stance. Then a swing of the dark blade came upon him. His innate agility helped him evade the full might of the attack but a sharp pain erupted in his shoulder. Falling back, he became dimly aware the sorcerer had struck him, drawing first blood. Then a sickening pain and a mystifying heat engulfed his entire body. He found himself struggling to maintain control, all his senses going awry at once.

'As was told,' the fell voice resonated in his mind as the dark rider approached, intent no doubt on ending him. But as the sorcerer towered over the elf he fell forward unexpectedly, and Legolas saw the tip of a blade protruding from his chest.

'Run!' Dalaron shouted his way. He had struck the dark one in the back and was now attempting to wrench his weapon free. But the blade became hotter and hotter, the metal turning red until the commander had no choice but to release it with a pained growl, before being thrown aside so powerfully by an invisible force he landed under the hooves of the frantic horses amidst the mayhem.

The prince jumped to his feet, seeing a sight of auburn hair and with relief knew his friend lived. Turning to where the sorcerer had been, he caught no sight of him. He cursed in his mind as more enemies were upon him then and he continued to slash left and right, felling as many as he could.

Where is Imladris? he wondered grimly. They needed their aid sorely. Looking about him, the ellon saw the horses skittering, men dying and even elves struggling. A strange sort of weariness took hold of him; nothing he had felt before. His arms felt heavy, though his armor mainly consisted of thick leather spaulders to allow for easy movement. Then there was the unbearable heat. Why did he feel so-

The pain in his shoulder flared as the screeches of the fell mount rose in volume. He dimly registered his own labored breathing. The battle continue to rage, yet he felt weaker and weaker.

'To me!' he heard Ereldur shout not far from him. Were they retreating? What was happening-

A milky film fell over his vision, and he barely noticed a flash of red.

'Are you injured?' Dalaron gritted in his ear, though he sounded so far away. 'Legolas!' the other repeated when no answer came. He tried to lift his friend but a goblin was upon them. Releasing Legolas, who fell to his hands and knees, he strove to defend the fallen ellon best he could. Having dispatched the foe, he whirled to face the prince.

'You best not fall or by the Valar-,' he tried jestingly, but desperation lined his words. He looked about him, but there was no sign of either of their horses.

'Dalaron-' the other managed, his hand on the commander's shoulder. 'Ride back to Garolin, watch over her.'

'You will not be left behind, I would rather fall before I allow it. We need you, fool! Now rise and fight!' Dalaron cried, a deep worry etched onto his features. He briefly assessed his friend for grave injuries but found none to warrant his current state.

'Then as your lord I command you, go now,' Legolas said hoarsely. 'As your friend I beg you, go
and keep her safe.'

The elven commander grimaced. 'Keeping them all safe is why we do this-

'H smell torments her,' Legolas interrupted. 'The orc are but one threat. Please,' he pleaded with the other elf, gripping a fistful of his tunic. Everything felt so heavy. 'Dalaron, you are my closest friend. Not lightly do I ask this of you. Keep her safe.'

This would not bode well. Dalaron seemed caught between opposing feelings, at war with himself, but in the end he nodded his consent. 'But you still owe me an explanation for it all,' he added.

'Go now, I will manage here,' the prince rose to stand even as Dalaron struck another foe, smashing its shoulder blade before burying his dagger in its eye.

He called for Aerth, to no avail. As chance would have it, a riderless horse kicked through the battle, frightened and trampling all in its path. It passed the prince who somehow managed to get a hold of its mane and pull himself in the saddle. Unable to wield his daggers in his present state, with nary a fraction of his deftness he reached for a discarded sword from the ground, and managed to cut down an enemy. Dalaron was nowhere to be seen.

He floundered like so for a good while, noticing the many bodies now littering the battlefield. The witch king had disappeared, now hovering above the raging battle atop his fell mount, the green mist of malice surrounding the fighting armies the only sign of his presence.

_Cursed Bauglir and his wretched plight_, was his last thought before his fingers fell through the thick mane, and he lost his bearing on the horse; he felt the ground rushing to meet him before he fell, landing on his arm and a sickening sound of cracking bones was heard. His long daggers scattered onto the ground as he fell, dislodged from the sheath on his back. He reached for one, rising on his arms and knees, the pain doubled. He could hardly move. The elf managed to lift his head only to see a figure enmeshed in a skirmish not far from him, discarding one of the enemy sorcerers before the mortal retrieved his battle horn. The winding sound blared through the field, above the deafening noise of battle. Above the screams of rage and pain and the clang of metal gliding over metal. Ereldur then mounted swiftly.

He surely had seen him. By now the ellon could barely register his surroundings, the veil over his eyes thicker, the pain in his shoulder engulfing every part of him, until nothing was clean. He lowered his head, trying to lift himself and failing. All felt... tainted.

He did not see Ereldur approach him and dismount. A booted foot then pushed against his ribs lazily, causing the elf to fall sideways onto his back with little to no awareness of what was happening. He saw the lord of Garolin hovering over his form splayed in the mire, an inscrutable look upon his bloodied features. Then the mortal grinned, and said words the elf did not hear.

'I thank you for saving my life. I wish you the best of fortune with yours.'

Then Ereldur disappeared from his vision. He did not see the man hastily mount his horse and ride away, dust in his wake.

His eyes were heavy, and all he wanted was to sleep. All he wanted was to be engulfed in darkness, and forever be at peace.

When the ellon opened his eyes after what seemed like an eternity, crystal blue ones were looking upon him worriedly. Golden hair filled his vision before his eyes drew shut once more.

'The wound is not deep but tis not a mortal blade, and darkness grips him. We must ride swiftly if
he is to be spared. Erestor, he will ride with you.'

'Aye, my lord.'
There shadows lay be night or day

The soldier screamed deafeningly, his cries reverberating through the ward. They were one of many. He had arrived with the first wave of the returning army and more followed. Nienor dabbed his sweaty brow with a moistened cloth while another woman sawed through the young man's leg.

'Hush now, Roeg, I know it hurts, but we must do this,' she tried to soothe him, though her words were lost on the youth. Her own voice was trembling. Soon he would lose consciousness. They had run out of pain relief potions and herbs and this was soon to be a common situation. They had requested more supplies from Fornost Erain and Bree, but they were tarried. As she cleansed the cloth in cold water, someone drew her attention.

'My lady, more have returned, lord Ereldur among them this time!' she heard a child's voice, and looking up saw Alynde speaking to her.

'Alynde, you should not be here,' the woman said hurriedly as she blocked the girl's view of the soldier. She asked another woman to take her place by the young man's side and rushed out of the healing ward with Alynde in tow. She was donning her weapons practice garb; fitted leggings and a knee length tunic, belted at the waist where her daggers hung as a means of precaution.

'Return to your mother, she needs you now,' she urged the girl before she ran to the gates.

Were they losing? Have they warded the enemy off? Was he alive and well?

Elves and men passed through the gates, commotion and bustle all around. She looked about, struggling to get ahead, but saw no sign of the one she sought. She saw Ereldur dismount and hurry into the direction of the main manor. He seemed largely uninjured, save for a gash to his leg. Commander Dalaron arrived as well, his expression more darkened than anything she had seen before. He was joined by another elf. This one was fair and tall, built similarly to Legolas. But he was somewhat even more striking, his hair a deep golden hue, his garb of grey and silver. But it was only them. Where was he? Without a second thought she rushed after Ereldur, intent on gathering the latest tidings.

'My lord! She called as she followed him into the long corridor.

Ereldur never stopped his hurried steps, swiftly looking over his shoulder at her. 'How thoughtful of you to come see to me. I am well as you can see, but have no time to spare for you now.'

'Did we lose? Where are the others?' the young woman continued, her unease growing with every moment. The night before she had barely slept, and a dreadful nightmare kept her heart in hinges. She dreamt of Legolas, but there was no color to her dream. All was gray, and she stood in an empty, barren land. She saw him from afar, his back turned to her. She ran to him but when she tried to embrace him, her arms went right through. He was naught but a vision, and his eyes were cold, unfocused. She tried speaking to him, but there was no sound to anything; and he would say nothing to her. His eyes were black and not their usual light grey as he stared through her. This was not him, she thought frightened. Then before her his appearance changed, and a black web of tendrils spread across his skin. She cried out his name but he withered before her, dispersing into the emptiness surrounding them.

'I said I have no time!' Ereldur brought her back, having pushed her into a chamber and rounded on her. She stepped back from the cruel look in his eyes, keeping a good distance between them. 'What do you wish to know? That we lost many more than before? That the elves arrived too late?
That— but he stopped, as if recalling something. Then he smiled as he took in her tired, widened eyes wrought with worry. He turned away from her, taking a few steps towards the door, where he stopped and drew an object from his belt.

The blade slid across the stone floor with a deafening sound. She went still, her breath caught in her throat as she beheld the long dagger he had thrown at her feet. She knew that blade. But there should be two of them. She could not look away from its reddish sheen, the metal coated with dry blood. Her widened eyes somehow found Ereldur's.

He smiled at her distraught face before he turned on his heel and left her without another word.

He opened his eyes and bright light blinded him. It hurt, and he had to close them once more. He tried again, this time assessing his surroundings as his vision cleared. A spacious and airy room. The light scent of roses wafted in the air together with the potent scent of healing herbs. He rose slowly and felt the softness of the bed he lay in. He propped himself against the headboard and looked about him, noticing his bow and quiver were placed near his bed. The sheath which held his long daggers was there as well, dirtied with blood and grime. There was but one dagger inside. The chamber looked extremely familiar. The arched windows and columns within the airy space had the unmistakable decorative furnishings of the Eldar, winding and graceful.

*Imladris?* He wondered. He had spent time here during his younger years, in a time when there was still some friendship between Thranduil and Rivendell. Before it all soured, for differences between Imladris and Lasgalen elves became harder and harder to overcome, as well as the disparaging notions on the involvement against the evil powers of the world. Thranduil had always been more reticent in his involvement, while Imladris held the opposite view. Then, with a painful throb his last memories returned to him. *The battle, we were struggling. The sorcerer.* The foe had spilled his blood but the wound had not been grievous. Then he fell. *Ereldur.* He remembered green eyes, and a scornful smile. Was he truly there or had it been a vision? And what had happened after?

'Young prince, it is good to have you among us once more.' This voice was familiar as well. His head whipped to the side, and no little was his surprise when he saw the lord of Imladris, his deep gaze set upon him. He had not noticed the elf lord until now.

'Master Elrond. How?' his voice was harsh with disuse. He then saw his own state - he was naked at the waist, his shoulder tightly wrapped, a green-yellow hue seeping through. His right arm was wrapped with splinters. There was but a dull ache, probably owed to pain relief he had been administered.

'Yesterday the company I sent you was met with danger on their way. They dispatched the foes, mostly men of Rhudaur, but it hindered them for time. The elves of Lindon reached the field first. My company was led by Erestor as I was bound by other developments you will hear of soon. And by the grace of the Valar Imladris joined the battle at its turning point. For a strange reason the unfolding of the events was hidden from my foresight, as if a fell fog permeated it all, thus I do not know more than what Erestor told me of this.'

The young ellon grimaced. 'There was great evil there indeed, my lord.'

'I gathered *he* must have been there, when I saw your wound.'

The prince raised an eyebrow, curiosity afire.

Lord Elrond continued with his recount, with an understanding that he would return to that subject.
in due time. 'Our host felled enemies still skirmishing with elves of your company, but some had already ridden in the direction of Garolin. While scouring the field of battle to assess current losses, lord Glorfindel fell upon you. He had rightly guessed your state, and sent Erestor and a minor part of our host back here in utmost haste. By that time, it seemed part of the men within the Garolin company as well as yours had set back towards its gates, and lord Glorfindel took his own forces in pursuit.'

He ceased speaking, hands clasped behind his back, allowing the prince to muse on all that he relayed. The ancient elf lord had always looked mightily imposing and grave in his dark robes and with his unwavering countenance, the prince thought. But now it seemed even more so.

'The blade which struck you was of no mortal make, prince Legolas, nor was its wielder, as you already knew. It is wrought with soul harnessing magic, and made of darkness. A wraith blade as I have seldom before seen, and only in the hands of one I dread to mention. A human would have perished soon after its strike. Your body being more resistant, you survived the journey here. The wound had darkened, and the blackness was spreading to the rest of your body. I succeeded in tending to you but it was the most difficult task to draw you back from the shadow lands. You fought bravely, though you might not remember most of it. One of the effects of the healing spell I tried.'

'A wraith blade,' the ellon repeated thoughtfully, even as the pain in his bandaged shoulder flared. He recalled the weakness taking over him during the fighting, and how it became stronger and stronger, calling to him, until all he wanted was to surrender and pass over into a forever sleep. Into the shadow.

'Aye, child. You must avoid it at all cost. This foe is beyond you. This... witch king of the North, which I fear serves one more powerful than he. I have yet to determine who or where this other one dwells. But my suspicions lie awaken and they will not relent. I am looking at this closely, and will confer with lady Galadriel and Gandalf as well. Something stirs that I fear will shake Arda to its foundations, and we will have no choice but to be part of it.'

The words sounded as ominous as their meaning and Legolas had no doubt they would come to be, as all else master Elrond had predicted across the ages.

'Are there tidings of Garolin?' he then asked, Nienor on his mind and in his heart.

'Unfortunately not, but I surmise lord Glorfindel will send word as soon as he can.'

'I had sent Dalaron off in my stead. I must follow,' he said, his eyes boring into the other.

Elrond regarded the prince quietly for a time. 'Your wounds are yet to heal completely. I leave you now. We shall reconvene once you have spoken to your visitor.'

'My visitor?' the prince was confused. He had to return to Garolin as soon as possible, to know Dalaron and the others lived, that she was well.

Just then a draft blew from the windows as the doors opened, and king Thranduil paced into the room.

The king and lord Elrond greeted each other, and with one last meaningful look towards the prince the latter left them, his robes shifting soundlessly about him as he closed the door.

The younger ellon met an inscrutable gaze as father and son regarded each other.
Why was he here. The worry in those eyes made bile rise within the prince, and he shifted as his feet unsteadily hit the floor. He rose and turned towards the wide windows. He had not yet come to terms with what his father had done to alter his fate and that of Nienor, and he had no desire to do so now. His main thought was set on Garolin. The lack of knowledge about how the battle unfolded was maddening on its own. Dalaron he hoped had reached the fortress safely. He hoped the city still stood, and she was unhurt. Then there was Ereldur. Had he left him for dead? Not killed him at least, but still the elf remembered those fierce eyes vividly upon him. Eyes lit by a deep hatred, one the wretch could unleash upon her in any moment. If it had been real. A different sort of pain took him at the thought of her, much stronger than his aching shoulder.

The king knew not how to begin. He sensed the restlessness of his son and it affected him in turn, thus none said a word for many a moment.

'Why have you come? Do your Halls not need their king?' Thranduil heard his heir speak finally.

'Our Halls, prince of Lasgalen. And would you I listened from afar, stood and done nothing as my son fought for his life in the nether realm?'

Legolas turned to face the king. 'I am not easily dispatched as you can see. You have sent your armies forth. That was enough, and more than you have ever done before, and for that I am indeed grateful.'

Thranduil pinned his son with his gaze, and though his face grew terrible he somehow contained his composure. 'It does not show.' His son's eyes hardened, only slightly but enough for his father to notice.

Taking another moment of silence for the other to absorb his words, the king continued. 'There have been developments. While you fought in Arthedain, I sensed and was informed of fell activity and an increasing darkness, spread farther into our lands. With more speed than ever before has it engulfed the southernmost parts of the forest. The land around Dol Guldur is the most affected, and no coincidence is this. Those blackened woods we cannot feel any longer. They have grown hostile to us, we who are interwoven with all living things, and share the same life force. There is no more life in the South, and this... sorcerer and his like which you battle against surely is of the same ilk. I have taken a host and came to take council with lord Elrond as to how to proceed, and received news in the meanwhile that you were brought here. The one you fought and nearly ended you is naught but a vasal of a greater Shadow.'

His father stopped, and moments passed in silence as Legolas mused over the words.

'Do what you must, but I cannot stay here any longer,' the prince followed. 'I ride to Garolin, our people need me there.'

'As you are? Have you lost your wits?' the irritation was palpable.

'I've actually regained some, would you believe it.' The young ellon said, an unmistakable edge to his voice.

The king sensed the heavy feelings of his son wash over him. There was more, much more. He watched the young ellon expectantly, but the other turned from him towards the window.

'You must allow your body to heal,' the king said, and Legolas pressed his eyes tightly closed at the voice wrought with care of his father. He could not hear that care from him any longer.

The prince scoffed. 'I do not need arms to ride, my lord. And I am still dispatched to Arthedain to
lead your host.'

'But even you cannot fell too many with the aid of but one hand. You never were one for rash acts, Legolas.'

'I never knew you to be so feeling.'

'This dripping mockery is beneath you. What is the true matter lying behind your words?'

His son faced him once more and regarded the king with cold eyes. He seemed about to say more, but then thought better of it. Silence descended as father and son measured each other.

'This has already cost our people a good deal of lives,' the king continued, seeing as the other would not answer. 'You would continue to lead them into the western war, when our own lands need our full focus?' Thranduil saw his son's composure change, an anger in his gaze to rival his own when in his dour est times.

'I wish you had shown the same care with respect to my own life.'

Thranduil looked upon his son, his countenance unreadable. So this was the true matter. 'What is your meaning.'

'Father cease this, I have been lied to enough to last me that eternity you desired so much for me. You have the wisdom to know of what I speak. Owing to you, our lives are torn asunder. Though my sire, I do not think I can ever look at you the same way ever again.' The words were bitter but spoken without malice.

The king felt his son's hurt and though taken aback by what he now knew to be the matter with the mortal woman, he felt aught he had seldom felt before. Guilt. And shame.

'How?'

'How, or why? Why did you so blatantly interfere? Twisted her doubts and made her your pawn? Now it will end the same way you feared; I am sundered from her and will probably not survive it.'

'You know you can fight, Legolas.'

'The way you fought, after my mother?' the prince said angrily.

They never spoke of it. It was too painful for them both, to rekindle memories of his mother. The one who linked the prince to the legacy of the Silvan elves. Who had been so crudely taken away from them that neither father nor son ever completely recovered. His father especially forbid and avoided any mention of those painful times.

'Aye, as I have done after your mother,' Thranduil added very slowly, a softer tint to his voice.

'I fear I cannot boast such strength, my lord,' the young ellon followed, slightly ashamed with how he recalled the painful event in his anger. 'Even now I feel her loss, the ties to her so strong they smother my will when we are apart.'

'You have more strength than you know. But, perhaps,-' the king hesitated, the words caught in his throat, 'I have been rash in my judgement. I never meant for you to suffer, Legolas.'

'And yet, I do.'

'I only wanted what was best for our people and you know it.'
'You mean what was best for you?'

The king was silent.

Legolas lowered his head, his good hand clenched into a fist. 'I ride tomorrow,' he said, his gaze set on the floor. 'Your host or part of it could join me if you would allow it. The men need more aid, my lord.'

'You speak so passionately for them.'

'For them, and for us. For all of Arda, in the end. You have not seen them die like light moths; you do not know how it felt to hear those fell words inside your mind. To be strangled by unseen, unbeatable malice. We are a great aid to the secondborn, and together we are stronger. Our time on these shores is not yet ended. Why not continue to help them?'

'Something has changed within you, I feel it. Though partly responsible, I cannot help to think this is not the right path for you to take. And she is beyond your reach now.'

The prince closed his eyes. 'Do you not think I know that,' he said through clenched teeth. He missed her, and the words of his father mercilessly slashed through the memory of her.

'You will have what you ask for. And I will not withdraw my support from Arnor. All I ask-'

'I can fulfill nothing you would ask of me,' his heir interrupted.

It seemed his son would truly not forgive him any time soon. The king sighed heavily, and brought himself to his full height. 'Go then, son of the woodland realm. Claim back lands in the name of the men you so protect, but remember your roots. Remember to return. If not for me, then for your people.'

'If the Powers will it so, it shall come to be,' was all the other said.

So the king turned away and left his son, his eyes as heavy as his heart.
Life to the dying

The enemy followed the retreating army of men, but the elves led by the one called Glorfindel had pursued and dispersed the foes which threatened to reach Garolin. But the alliance of men and elves was left impossibly weakened and military leaders met in the aftermath to assess the damage.

'We have depleted supplies, and what we do have cannot support the soldiers amassed at our gates,' Hamor said. With the added host of Glorfindel and the soon to be addition of the Imladris elves, an encampment had to be raised outside the fortress walls to accommodate the numbers.

'We can sustain ourselves for the time being, master Hamor,' the ancient elf stated, his striking light blue eyes reflecting the candlelight.

'Immense gratitude for your aid, my lord. Our losses?' Ereldur then asked, turning to his captains.

'The healing tents are full, and we await more healing supplies but Bree and Fornost Erain are also preparing for possible attacks, thus they cannot spare enough. We lost more than half of our host, my lord,' Hamor added, his countenance weighed down with grief. How many friends would he never see again? How many wives lost their husbands, mothers their children?

'We lost fewer of ours, though still more than we expected-,' Dalaron trailed off. They had to return to retrieve their fallen comrades. With the haste of pursuit they had left the bodies where they lay. And their leader...

Glorfindel placed a hand on his shoulder. 'Fortuitously, my company came upon prince Legolas, though he seemed in no condition to fight. We sent him to Imladris so that master Elrond could treat him. I fear what the arch sorcerer has done to him. I have sent a messenger to Imladris to impart the latest tidings and return. We know not if Erestor has reached the haven safely, or in a timely manner. All we can do is hope.'

Dalaron nodded, though hope was something he had none of.

'Indeed,' the lord of Garolin added, his expression unreadable.

'What about the bastards? Did we at least curb the scourges' excitement to attack?' Hamor asked.

'That I cannot say. They seem to return with full numbers ever and anon. We have no choice but to resist. Or take our people into the south,' Ereldur supplied.

'You as well as I know that most will not stand to leave their ancestral homes, my lord,' the old warrior added.

'Let us hope it will not come to that,' Ereldur uttered thoughtfully.

____________

Nienor with her fellow healers were drowning in work but it suited her. It helped her mind stay knit together, despite the wailing and the terror in their eyes; it helped keep her mind off the bloodied weapon. She till heard its clang against the floor. Had Ereldur done something to him? In all the chaos, it will have proved a good opportunity. Her husband had refused to give her any detail of how it all unfolded. How else would he come by a weapon Legolas would never have relinquished of his own free will? She had to speak to Dalaron as soon as her duties allowed. She had washed the long dagger and now it was tucked away in her chamber for the time being. Something of his, and she hoped she would have the chance to return it. Somehow. Though her mind told her
otherwise, she dared not lose the last glimmer of hope stubbornly coiling in her chest.

Late into the night, while there was still work being done feeding the wearied animals and caring for the wounded, Nienor took a moment of respite for herself. She had not slept in three days and only once or twice her lids fell closed for the briefest of hours. True to her intent, she went seeking for Dalaron.

She looked for him in his chambers but they were empty. Though wearied she pressed on in her search. Where else could he be? The armory. Without second thoughts she hurried into the direction of the structure and was relieved when she indeed saw his auburn head.

'Dalaron!' she called though she knew he heard her approach.

'Lady Nienor,' the other responded, though his eyes did not stray to her. He had been pouring over a map, on his own.

'Please, what do yo know of L-', she paused, '-of the prince?' She felt uneasy referring to him so intimately to others, despite knowing Dalaron was aware of their connection. She tread carefully, not knowing where the elf stood with this.

The other raised his head from the maps then and locked her in his gaze. She met the stare evenly. Dalaron had seen them together, thus hiding about would do no good. Nor did she want to. She would go insane not knowing what became of him.

His grave expression deflated her mood further. 'He was injured, though I know not how. He could barely stand when I left him,' the other added, leaving all embellishment aside, and she saw the guilt marring his features. 'I had to leave him. The prince led us well, but then I lost sight of him.' His words were remorseful, sorrow lining his sharp features.

This elf cared deeply about his liege. Her shoulders fell and she placed her head in her hands. This could not be. Her heart went erratic.

'The lord Glorfindel came upon him and sent him to Imladris, but we know not whether they reached the haven in time or what his state is.'

'Valar...' she whispered, leaning back to rest against one of the wooden tables.

The ellon felt her distress, and his own unease grew tenfold as he wondered at the depth of the connection between this human and his prince.

Her dream, an omen. But somehow she felt, she knew he was not yet gone. He was not in that grey land of her nightmares. Even if she was being foolish, she needed that shard of hope to carry on.

'My lady?'

Her attention went to Dalaron once more and she guessed what was to follow.

'He asked me to take care of you. Why would he ask such a thing?'

Of course he would. 'What did he say?' she asked, staring through the ellon.

'That he tortures you. Who did the prince speak of?'

She sighed, turning away. 'He should not have asked it of you. He is my husband.'

The ellon suspected somehow, having always sensed the animosity between her and Ereldur;
completely unlike what a married couple should be. But then elves bonded for love not duty. It look a long time for them to find their mate but when they did it was always meant to be, forever until time came for them to sail. 'And that is why you sought comfort in the arms of another?' the young ellon tried before he could stay his tongue though his words held no bite. The woman before him looked all but defeated and he feared the truth, for despite his darker thoughts the elf had sensed the powerful feelings between this human and the prince. He only lacked confirmation and if he were to aid her he needed to know what had passed.

Nienor paused. She knew Dalaron was not being difficult but could only imagine what his thoughts on the subject were. 'It was not so,' she said as she approached the elf.

'Then?' the other hedged. Her bearing was honest enough.

Her hands balled into fists, her focus facing inward into memory. 'I was indeed meant for the lord of Anduron, as you know. But then...' she stopped, willing herself to dive into the past. Somehow the notion of sharing these memories with another was not so daunting. Perhaps she needed this.

Dalaron waited expectantly until she drew a breath and started to impart their tale. When she was done the elf stood silent, his eyes downcast. Legolas had not told him any of this, choosing sullen, infuriating silence. He had bonded with this human and then lost her. For an elf this was life altering. The implications nearly made his own head spin. The grief. *Fading.* He should hate her for this, he wanted to. But it was not her doing. It was the way of things. And not even the Valar had full sway over fate. Still the damned elf had chosen to bear it alone. Why? 'Then the king knows of this?' he asked.

'Quite well he does.' She could not help a tinge of resentment at the injustice of it, but still he was the kin of Legolas.

'Yet he allowed his son to come here.'

'He thought the potion would hold. So did I. And it might have. But then the dark rider...' she stopped, a surge of weariness coursing through her.

'Whatever his fate now,' Dalaron brought her back, 'we will know. We must press on and not lose hope,' he added softly. He would not prod her further. She was very pale, as if she had spilled too much of herself to him.

And the woman had not noticed when her composure deserted her at his words; leaving her raw, her head bent against an unfamiliar shoulder. Dalaron did not turn her away, but made no motion either. Then, hesitatingly he placed an arm around her. A type of comfort he was not used to, but the elf felt her anguish and in that moment knew that this human’s pain was just as deep, if not deeper, than his own. And he would do his best to keep his promise.

Legolas rode in front of his company with no respite. The additional numbers Thranduil had given them were not many, but they would aid better than naught. He hoped that men would fare better seeing the addition of aid from Imladris and Lindon to the remaining wood elves already dispatched to Garolin. Now they reached the top mounds of North Downs and it would not be long before the towers of Garolin came into view. The dull ache in his chest persisted, and compared to it the pain in his shoulder and healing arm were but a nuisance. He could use his arm better now though it still troubled his movements.

Hours later when evening came and Garolin loomed ahead of them he saw with unbridled relief that it stood fast, same as he had left it. He bolted ahead urging Aerth into a gallop while others
followed. The horse sensed the urgency of its rider and took a similar mood. The faithful mount had found her master even on the battlefield, and was retrieved by Erestor when they took him to Imladris.

The elf noticed the battlements and encampment surrounding the fortress. *Good, with the addition of our forces that will suit.*

When indeed he heard the blaring of the horn and passed through the gates, it was all a whirlwind as he dismounted and looked around. Hamor approached him first.

'Lord Legolas! Aye, what a sight!' the elder wasted no time and grasped his shoulder tightly in salute, and though he winced in pain the ellon was glad to see the man unhurt. 'I see you have brought us more forces, Valar keep you, for we need all we can spare.'

The prince bowed. 'All I that I can do. They will station next to our kin on the outside.' Then his eyes flitted to his left and he barely saw the flash of auburn hair before he was met with angry golden green eyes, widened in disbelief and trepidation.

'I thought we lost you,' Dalaron added accusingly.

'I live to disappoint,' Legolas spoke lightly, though his state belied his words.

'Mandos will have a hard time with you, I will tell you that,' Dalaron jested as he embraced his friend. Then they locked eyes, the joy of finding each other well never stronger.

'One never knows, my friend,' the prince smiled.

Nienor was pacing purposefully from the healing ward, her eyes lowered. Another full day had passed and exhaustion was visible in her gait; her hair disheveled, falling out of her braid. She looked ahead aimlessly and in the next instant everything disappeared from her vision. All except the image of him, standing not too far ahead speaking with Dalaron. His horse was by his side and it seemed as if he had recently dismounted. He was facing her way but his eyes were on his companion, deep in conversation. He looked to be ill at ease, somehow not quite well yet stood straight and tensed. Even in her stupor she still looked him over, searching for injuries. He was alive. Alive!

The elf felt the strange sensation he always did when being watched, and his vision strayed from the face of Dalaron beyond his shoulder. His eyes took on a different light. He saw her briefly standing there and their eyes locked before she turned on her heel and walked away hurriedly.

Dalaron turned his head, and understanding dawned when he saw what had caught the prince's attention. Knowing what he did now, he could not help but feel a pang of sympathy for them both. What they had was doomed, but it still ever drew them closer to one another.

'Go, we will see you in the council room. I will gather the others.'

'What?' Legolas tore his gaze from her retreating figure.

Dalaron clasped his shoulder. 'I would have kept my word to you, but now there is no need.'

The fair haired ellon understood his meaning, and the unspoken support his friend's words conveyed. He nodded, 'I will join you soon, there are tidings I must share,' and with this he went past his friend and took Aerth's reins as his measured strides picked speed into the intended direction.
She needed a short respite. Her feet unknowingly took Nienor deep behind the stable doors, where she paced along the long line of stalls toward the end. The scent of hay and horses was somewhat calming. The woman stopped there and propped her arms against one of the stalls, her gaze unfocused. She took deep breaths. He was alive. Nienor stood there for she knew not how long, measuring her breathing, willing away tears of relief. Ereldur had been wrong, or foiled. She vaguely heard the stable doors creaking.

As in a dream the woman felt rather than saw the arm gently closing around her shoulders from behind, drawing her into a familiar warmth. Looking down Nienor saw a bracer adorned the forearm, she saw the intricate designs on it. She felt strong slender fingers wrap around her shoulder and the gentle rise and fall of his chest against her back.

'You should rest, young one, all of this is taking its toll,' his voice then vibrated against her akin to a caress. His first words to her. This elf worried for her after he had been close to death Valar knew how many times. After she had nearly lost him. Nienor reached and placed her own hand on his forearm, gripping tightly.

'I thought you fell,' she whispered, closing her eyes against the soothing closeness.

'Not even that could keep me away,' the elf smiled behind her, drawing her more into him. A brief thought of Ereldur crossed his mind but was soon smothered by her presence.

Nienor had so many other questions, but words were hard to come by. All she felt for him overwhelmed her and slowly the little strength left started failing her. 'Legolas...' she called his name pleadingly.

His other arm wrapped tightly around her waist. 'I am here.' For as long as he could.

And they stood so in silence, willing their feelings to still. Despite the surrounding mayhem they allowed the few moments of peace they found within each other. Her eyes still closed, Nienor felt herself softening against the elf until he was all but supporting her. Sleep she thought. Rest now seemed to become a dire most need as her head lolled to the side, all her worries having spent her. And now those worries took their leave and she was depleted. Yet Nienor never wanted to leave his arms.

'I have missed you,' the prince cooed in her ear. How he wanted to take her in his arms and lay her to sleep himself.

The young woman smiled, wanting nothing more than to be enveloped by the one she loved.

'Someone approaches,' the elf then whispered. 'I must go see the others. Promise me now you will go rest?' he asked, his face pressed against hers.

'I promise,' Nienor conceded hazily. Then his warmth disappeared, leaving her feeling bare and cold but relieved.
Short lived

Ereldur eyed the elven prince who was now addressing those gathered to the war council. His bearing was stiff and troubled, but he stood straight as a rod and carried himself as princely as all blasted elves could.

Yet again, like an incessant, recurring plague upon him, the elf had evaded death. When Ereldur first caught sight of him he had managed to suppress his surprise, and nothing in the elf’s manner had hinted at what had happened on the battlefield. The mortal had left him there indeed, to die or perhaps worse, if luck would have had it. Yet it seems luck was not on his side. Like a rusty nail in his back, the elf persisted. No matter. He still had the upper hand, and he had Nienor. His precious mortal was lost to the elf, just like his memory, a fitting end for the way they both had made a fool of him. His noble name, cuckolded, nearly for all to see had it not been for the machinations of the elvenking. But it was not enough. It was time to up the punishment.

All around there was bustle and chaos. A different sort of chaos than that of open battle, but to Nienor just as difficult to manage: counting stock, coordinating meals for the large number of occupants within the city walls; running the healing wards, tending to the injured. At least the wards raised near the fortress where the elves were stationed were run by their own elven healers. These fared better. Nienor went there presently to gather a handful of supplies, aided by little Alynde. Though in the midst of war the child never seemed to waver. Not from the sight of blood, nor death, and though her elders tried to keep her away from it all the reality was they needed all the aid they could make use of. She was barely eleven years of age but still good company, whether she spoke, asked questions or sang in her thin, lilting voice. And song was a rare commodity in these times.

'Alynde not that one, take the grey variance,' she urged presently as the young girl was filling her wooden basket with rolls of bandages.

'Aye, mistress Nienor,' the girl chimed, one eye always on the elves around them, so graceful in their movements and manner. Her admiration seemed to know no bounds, and it was endearing. 'Look, some have auburn hair, some very fair. Why is that?' she whispered her question.

The young woman shook her head. 'Even elves have different kin. It all depends on what their line is.'

The girl seemed only somewhat pleased with the answer. 'Do they have different forms of speech as well?'

'Aye, we do,' came a new voice, causing them both to turn.

'My lord,' Nienor uttered by way of greeting, her head tilted towards the prince.

His gaze never left her as the prince continued his explanation. 'Though not as varied in number as the languages of men.' He looked down at Alynde.

Alynde was ecstatic. 'Master elf prince! You have returned!' And without much consideration she threw her arms around him.

'Alynde!' Nienor chastised, though her eyes lit with mirth when they locked with his.

'Let her,' the ellon said, smiling, wrapping one arm around the girl.
'You smell good, do you use any incense or herbs?' the girl asked, her face half muffled in his tunic.

Nienor gasped while the prince straight out laughed. 'Not that I remember lately, little one. Focus has been elsewhere.' Then he turned his attention to Nienor, his tone lost on anyone but her. 'You look well. I see you kept your promise.'

'I have,' was all she said, drinking him in like water in the desert. And she wished she could forever keep his smile as a token.

Alynde pried herself from the elf. 'Do you want some bilberry cakes? Mistress Igleta makes the best ones. We have them at the fortress.'

Nienor placed her hands on her hips. 'I do not believe the prince has the time for such -'

'Actually,' the ellon added, 'I was about to head that way. We could walk together, if you would have me,' he smiled down to the girl.

'Can we go now?' Alynde chimed gleefully.

'Go on ahead, we will follow,' Nienor urged.

The child did not need be told twice as she hastily took her burden of bandages and exited through the tent flap.

'I saw you coming here and could not pass on the chance,' the ellon smiled, bitter though it was.

'I figured,' she replied, her eyes lowered. Neither of them dared approach the other, though they were presently alone. There were many eyes outside, and anyone could enter the enclosure at any time.

'How are you faring?' the elf then asked, concern lining fair features; he closed the space between them and reached to tilt her chin toward him; his eyes boring into hers, searching for truth.

'As well as can be,' she replied, turning from him to the shelves lined with healing supplies. She took a few vials and placed them in the basket she had brought.

'He has not troubled you recently?' His voice sounded closer. She turned to face the elf, her back pressing against the high shelf.

He came closer still and she saw his hand twitch at his side, staying an urge. She raised her own arm and placed her palm to his chest.

'Thankfully not. No new troubles, except the ones you know,' she said, focusing on the touch, recalling the feel of his skin beneath the garb.

His hand came over hers, the look in his eyes able to melt the highest peaks of the Misty Mountains.

'What happened to you? I noticed you have difficulty using your arm, and you are still so pale.' Unwittingly her other hand reached and cupped the side of his face.

He flinched but did not pull away. His eyes fluttered closed. 'You should not touch me like this, not here,' he murmured, though the way he nuzzled against her hand said otherwise. He missed her, she knew.
'Will you tell me?' she tried to keep her voice clear, though it came raspy and hoarse with all the different feelings alight from his closeness.

'Are you able to spare a few moments tonight, after the evening meal?' he eyed her.

'I will do all I can. Where?'

'In plain sight is best,' the elf added, though he would have wished to see her somewhere alone. But he should not think on these things anymore. Once was risk enough.

'Are we going?' Alynde barreled back inside the tent, causing them both to break apart like youths caught in forbidden territory.

'Aye, let us,' Nienor motioned and turned to follow the girl who left just as quickly as she entered. Then she felt his hand on her arm, and with little effort she was spun around and brought into the swiftest yet sweetest embrace she ever received. The elf pressed her to him with such care and need she flamed with longing, short lived and sudden, before he released her.

She walked ahead with her heart rebelling against her ribs; she hoped there was nothing giving her away. 'Tormentor,' she whispered lovingly as they came to walk side by side, her gaze ahead of them.

'But also the tormented,' he replied, meaning all things.

The three crossed the inner courtyard together, Alynde asking incessant questions while the prince patiently answered and quenched her curiosity. Nienor interjected from time to time, shuttering her gaze now that they were in the midst of the crowd. Though, as harried and busy as everyone was with caring for the wounded, rebuilding and rearranging, she doubted they would spare enough glances to notice the lovelorn look in her eyes. Or the way his eyes flickered when he caught hers.

They crossed the stairs leading to the kitchens where staff were busy with the preparation of meals. On one long wooden table rested sweet meats, not a wide variety, but one or two typical of the regional cooking arts.

'Here they are!' Alynde stated happily, her little hand reaching to take one.

'Now stop right there!' Igleta was quick to add, appearing as out of thin air. 'Those are meant for tonight.'

'But Igleta, the prince wants one!' The old woman seemed to notice the pair only then. 'Aye, my lord, my lady,' she tilted her head in greeting. Then she eyed the child. 'Is this the truth or am I being taken for a fool?'

'Far from us to plot on dwindling your sweets, Igleta,' Nienor added.

'Oh I can spare some, for prince Legolas,' she winked towards the ellon, who looked quite amused by the level of security within the kitchens.

Alynde wasted no time placing a few bilberry cakes into her lap, then turning to Legolas offered him one.

'Le vilui,' he thanked her, knowing she liked hearing his language. 'You are kind.'

'You are most welcome, prince Legolas!' the youngling replied merrily before digging into the
sugary sweet as they made their way back outside.

The elf looked at the cake curiously before taking a bite. His eyes widened in surprise. 'Sweeter than death!'

Nienor laughed then, a trilling, rare sound which sent his heart aflutter. A sound lost in memory. He looked at her and she at him, their gaze unguarded. He longed to hear more of her laughter, her sighs in his ear, her words spoken against his chest. But it was not to be.

'I must take my leave of you now to speak with Hamor. Until later?'

'Until later,' she replied, already missing his presence.

'Mistress Nienor, can I have the last cake?'

She smiled and nodded, her eyes on his retreating form until she lost him in the crowd.

'Enjoying yourself?'

She startled, having just entered the storage room. It was dark, and cold. The salted meats resided here, as well as most produce placed for the winter.

Ereldur was propped against the entrance.

'Pardon?'

'You never smiled that way, as you did earlier, not for anyone. Especially not for me.'

'I tire of this, Ereldur,' she backed away, even as the skin on the back of her neck prickled.

'Ah, so do I, my dear, so do I,' Ereldur said as he entered and barred the door behind him.
To your ruin and mine

Chapter Notes

Better hold on tight.

'What do you want of me?' the woman asked, trying to maintain her calm.

'So uncouth,' Ereldur smirked. 'Is it your lack of manners that attracts the elf so much?'

Present tense. Nienor cursed in her mind and took a deep breath. 'I am busy as you can see, running your house.' She refused to let him scare her again. She had too much work to waste her time on humoring his jabs. Nienor turned from him and started rummaging through the shelves, gathering what she sought for.

Arms were around her then, and before she realized her husband was speaking into her ear.

'Do not think, I have forgotten; you have yet a duty to me, long overdue,' he gripped her chin with a strong hand.

Nienor jerked in his hold. 'Not in this Age, or the next,' she hissed heatedly.

'Perhaps some time spent in solitude will cool your temper,' and Ereldur threw her away from him, swiftly moving to the door, unbarring it. 'I have the keys,' he smiled at her, 'I will come for you tonight. Until then.'

With a growl she flung herself at him but he was swifter, exiting and slamming the door closed. Then he bolted it. 'Do not think to scream, there is no one coming this way.'

'Ereldur! Don't you dare!' she yelled after him through the door, fists pounding against the hard wood. 'I have much to do! Ereldur!' No reply. This went beyond all his other games. She had to find a way to escape.

Legolas had dined with Dalaron and other members of his host and was now lingering in the hall with his companions. Dinner had long passed and still there was no sign of her. People carried themselves to and fro. Despite the fact that the day ended, work did not cease.

Where was she?

'Is aught amiss?' Dalaron inquired, seeing the other's brooding expression.

'Nienor. She was supposed to meet me here.'

'Perhaps she was caught with other tasks?'
'Perhaps, though I cannot help but feel unease.' And with this he left his friend, thinking to ask Igleta if she knew aught of the whereabouts of her mistress. When the elder declined any knowledge, saying she had not seen Nienor since after lunch, he grew restless. He had to at least know she was safe.

Though knowing he should not, the elf decided he would inquire within the main house, even seek her in her chambers if the staff there still knew nothing of her. Soon after he was climbing the stairs to the second floor where he knew her rooms were. He knocked at first mildly, calling her name. No answer. Unsure how to proceed and now worried in the truest sense, his steps led him back down the stairs to the first floor. When the elf reached the flight of stairs leading to the ground floor he stopped short.

Before him was Ereldur, Nienor struggling against him as he forced her up the stairs. She looked pale, and cold. He saw the man first.

'It would be in your best interest not to struggle, this time no horn will blow,' he was telling her, one hand around her waist while the other held her struggling arms at bay.

Legolas went still. His hands contracted nervously at his sides, and he could do little but surrender to that familiar darkness slowly taking over him.

'Lord Ereldur,' the elf hissed to draw their attention, and though the words came sharp as a knife, he looked calm and composed.

It was then that Ereldur tore his gaze from his wife. Both seemed taken aback by his sudden appearance. She shook her head left and right imperceptibly, silently asking him to not interfere. But there was so much fear and distress in her eyes.

'Ah, prince Legolas, if you will excuse us, we were just retiring.' The man eyed the elf with a dark glimmer, managing a smile.

He could not intervene, should not. There was so much at stake to keep this blasted pretense going. But her eyes. The elf could not ignore the stiff way she held herself in the other's grasp, his hands on her arms; eating away at his resolve.

'I think not,' the ellon found himself saying instead.

'Pardon?' Ereldur cut his eyes to his, and the air grew thick with animosity.

'You will release her,' the prince took a step towards the pair.

'Legolas do not-

'Hold your tongue woman!' Ereldur threw. He turned to the elf. 'Oh... so I see.' The realization made his own anger flare. 'Come now, prince, we have been doing so well with each other. Must you ruin our fragile arrangement?'

'It will be your ruin, if you do not take your hands off her. Now,' the other said darkly.

Nienor looked frantically between them. What was he doing? He could not confront Ereldur, not like this. But then she thought of the other possibility. Ereldur upon her, doing with her what he would. Her breath came in shallow gasps. His hold was crushing her wrists.

'Have you lost your mind, elf? You forget whose house you are in. Out of my way, lest you start something you cannot return from.'
Legolas took another step towards them, intent on showing the mortal just what madness could do-

Then a terrible roar was heard, and a dreadful crushing sound that took all their attention; it woke the elf from his angry stupor.

'What in the name of Eru?' Ereldur growled, throwing the woman aside, who tripped and fell on her knees with the momentum. 'You stay there, we are not finished,' and with one hateful glance at the elf he ran outside.

Legolas was at her side in an instant-

'You foolish elf! What have you done?' she threw angrily.

He took her by the shoulders, locking her in his gaze. 'Would you have preferred to spend your night crying under him?' Did she not see? How could he knowingly let him force her, hurt her? 'I will not... let him touch you, ever again.'

'Madness,' Nienor whispered, drowning in his eyes.

Another blast sounded. 'Come,' the elf urged.

'Wait,' she tugged at his hand. 'There is something I wish to give you, swiftly,' and she pulled the prince with her towards her rooms. 'One moment,' she urged before disappearing within. She returned bearing an object covered in cloth, revealing it to him.

'My long dagger. Nee, how did you come by this? I had lost it-'

'Ereldur had it.'

Nothing more needed to be said. So his vision on the battlefield had not been a vision at all. His anger at the mortal soared, but he had to focus. 'Gratitude,' he said softly, bringing her forehead to his. 'Now come, and do not leave my side.'

Little prepared the pair for the sight before them when they reached the courtyard.

Green flames roared overhead, blasting walls, people, animals. Chaos ensued as the frightened inhabitants ran to and fro, trying to shield themselves from the mayhem. Parts of the fortress wall were starting to crumble. Then screeches resounded throughout, so terrible and known to him, freezing all hearts.

His head started hurting with unknown force, his shoulder flaring with agony. The fell beast flew above the fortress, green fire spewing from its maw. At times it descended, laying waste upon the crowd. With Nienor on his arm they ran and sheltered themselves as they could.

'Legolas!' Dalaron cried to him. 'The witch king. A sudden attack, and our spears cannot pierce the damned beast. It will lay ruin upon this place! Lord Glorfindel is leading our host to help gather the folk.'

'Look to surround and lead the people away, in as much order as possible. We know not whether his minions wait under cover of darkness somewhere in the area,' he said, his voice raised to cover the deafening screams. Dalaron nodded and was away.

Horses, frightened out of their stables ran amok, trampling anything in their path.

The prince turned to Nienor. 'We must gather your folk and run.'
'But will he not only follow, and destroy us from above?!!'

'I know not what else to do, I... nobody can defeat him, Nee. He cannot be killed,' the elf said to her widened eyes.

'I must gather the servants within the keep,' she disentangled herself from him.

But his grip on her stood fast. 'Please do not leave my side, if I lose you again-' a desperate tint to his voice.

'You once told me of the duty our blood carries. This is mine. Go, lead your people, I will find you. I promise,' she placed her palm to his cheek before rushing away.

She went within the keep and gathered the frightened women and children with the intent of making it to the stables and barn, to gather horses and carriages to escape. She directed them there and instructed them on what to do; to take nothing and run, stay together.

Within the main corridor she eventually found herself alone with the floor shaking under her feet from the blasts the beast was laying upon her home.

*Valar, why now? Why this?* As caught as she was in her agitation, she missed the presence of another.

Something sharp flared to the side of her head, causing her to sway from the sudden eruption of pain.

Ereldur then dragged her, kicking and struggling as she was through the corridors, amidst the falling walls.

The bellowing of the fell mount was incessant, sowing further distress among the desperate inhabitants. In their haste people nearly trampled each other, if not for the elves guiding them, trying to bring some sort of order to their escape.

'You wretch, we must be away, cease this, release me!' she gasped, but the man did not listen.

He stopped and hissed in her ear. 'I made you a promise once.'

Nienor tried to hurt him with thrusts of her elbows but it helped little. She produced the small dagger hidden in her kirtle but Ereldur was swifter, grasping the hilt from her hand and twisting it until she screamed in pain.

'Careful I said, lest you find yourself on the wrong side of me.' He threw the woman to the ground and next she knew her back flared with pain. Nienor fell to her side, curling in on herself, the agony still paralyzing; its tendrils spanning all over her body from where he had struck her.

'And now here you are. Tell me, how long since he has remembered?' He kicked her again. The woman cried out and grit her teeth against the flaming ache. 'Were you bedding the elf? Here? Of course, why do I even ask.' He spat her way as he stood above her.

Ereldur then grasped the dazed woman by her braid and with one swift swing of his short sword sheared through her hair. She fell back down to the ground.

'What follows? Hm? Perhaps this lovely face he likes so much. I could carve his name over it. That way everyone will know.' He now stood atop her, one knee pinned to her throat, the tip of his short sword pressed against her cheek.
It was hard to breathe and Nienor clutched at his legs, trying and failing to push him away.

'Or perhaps I could leave out your own traitorous eyes! Wife!' he spat. He took a fistful of her hair, now shorn so it came barely down to her shoulders, and struck her hard in the face. Her mouth soon stained red and the woman lost consciousness.

He then lifted Nienor by the shoulders and noticed her bare neck, the skin softly pulsing with life. She was warm, and aye, what better repayment could there be. Ereldur started cutting through her clothing in fast motions. There was no time, but this would be swift. Then he would leave her for the elf or to whatever other beast found her.

The elf.

That bastard, in his own house, under his own roof... they had both made a fool of him. 'Let us try this again, shall we?' he whispered in her ear.

Nienor stirred, moaning in pain.

Then he felt something sharp against the back of his neck, stilling his movements.
A long overdue task

Chapter Notes

A/N: Alright dears two things: 1. We are nearing the end of this story 2. I really enjoyed writing up this chapter. Bam!

The prince ran amongst the turmoil and managed to retrieve his bow and quiver. He also had his twin blades, now complete again but little use were they. He knew it was pointless to aim at the beast, who was now flying overhead in circles above the human settlement. Its rider laughing, a laughter drowned by sounds of chaos. But Legolas heard it. He heard it in his mind, derisively taunting him. No, he had to concentrate. They had to escape. Before he knew it he was swooping towards a child, lifting her in his arms before the barn she was near to crumbled in ash and flame.

'Alynde, where are your parents?' he asked her, for it was she.

'I... I have not seen them, I do not know,' she whimpered, frightened.

The elf cursed, running with her in his arms towards one of the lines of people and wagons already set on the road.

'Stay with them, do not stray from the caravan. We will meet after,' he said soothingly, seeing as her fists were gripping his tunic. 'You will not stray? Do I have your word?' he lightly disentangled her hands from him.

'I give you my word,' the girl said reluctantly. 'Please be safe!' she yelled after him as the elf already bolted away.

Nienor. He had to find her and the others. The courtyard was filling with rubble and fallen bodies. Thankfully she was not among them. He ran towards the keep and through the corridors, avoiding falling debris from the walls best he could.

The elf searched until he heard a voice from afar, one he knew very well. Cautiously he approached and turned a corner. What he saw instantly made his body tense, his heartbeat quicken and his anger flare. She was lying on the floor, hurt and bloodied. Quiet as death, with trembling fingers he nocked an arrow and approached the oblivious man hovering over his wife.

'Step away from her,' the lord of Garolin heard the words hissed from above. He turned his head as much as the sharp object allowed, seeing the end of an arrow, its owner with his bow raised and taut. 'Are you deaf?' the elf growled lowly. 'First drop your weapon, then step away.' The arrow tip dug deeper into his neck.

Ereldur did so, lifting himself slowly even as the ellon followed his every move, his bow still strung with the arrow ready to release. How he wanted to release.

'You inconceivable bastard,' Ereldur muttered as he moved into the direction led by the arrow tip now pressed against his back.

'Turn and face me,' the other commanded.
Ereldur did so, a rictus spread across his features. He spat towards the fallen woman.

'You can have the harlot, she is worth even less now than before-,'

But he failed to finish voicing that thought. In one blinding movement the elf had the wincing man by the collar of his tunic, pinned to the wall. And he was watching him with a strange glimmer in his blasted eyes, something rivaling the hatred he felt. Before he could react he was drawn in an iron grasp and spun with his face roughly pressed against the wall, his arm twisted painfully behind him. The pressure on his limb increased so much he had to grit his teeth not to cry in pain.

'Prince of Lasgalen,' Ereldur still mocked, 'You would have my blood for a mortal whore?'

The ellon twisted the man around to face him. He realized he had done it only when his fist struck something hard. Ereldur fell back against the wall and slid to the ground, his features alight in brief astonishment; warm liquid trailed from his nose over his mouth. He felt the metallic taste of blood. As he was, fallen on his side, Ereldur twisted and reached for his weapon but a booted foot was atop his hand, pressing painfully onto his fingers. He screeched in pain and anger.

The elf stared down at him, fury twisting his features into something feral. As fast as lighting he was upon Ereldur and struck him again. Then again, and again. He then brought the dazed man up to his face.

'I have made so many mistakes with regards to you,' the elf stated calmly, though his breathing was fast and his eyes darkened with dilation. 'No more.' His anger shone through his steel grip and the tautness of his body, radiating in almost tangible waves. Ereldur tried in vain to wrench himself free.

'Aye,' the human still added maliciously, even as blood sputtered from his nose and split lip, dripping onto his clothes. 'So have I. I should have set her free. To let you go through the ordeal of seeing her grow old and feeble, while you remain as you are. But that is revenge I would not be there to witness. Thus you can see my predicament.'

But even before he finished speaking the mortal was roughly spun around and a sickening sound of something cracking was heard. His face contorted, his howl of pain drowned by the clamor surrounding them.

'I suppose you think yourself to be very clever,' Legolas smiled sharply, pulling the wincing man closer. It was useless to struggle. 'Here I am, no doubt the fool you think me to be, having offered you a chance of redemption. Having saved your miserable life. But no worthy words ever leave your mouth, which makes my decision now far easier.'

'Hah, redemption,' the mortal goaded. 'There is none for the likes of whores and thieves as you lot.'

'Silence yourself before I break your other arm,' the elf hissed, a dark promise in his words.

Ereldur struggled, hating the prince with the power of a thousand suns. 'And tell me princeling, how will you explain killing your ally to your king? To my people?'

'And who will know?' the elf's low tone mirrored his own. He smiled, a frightening thing. 'You have no people. They are her people,' the ellon pointed towards Nienor who had arisen slowly, wincing from the pain. 'You are naught but a black leech, come from a lesser city, having sucked too much blood for your own good.'

'Legolas,' Nienor then called weakly. He heard her well enough, even over the wrath drowning his senses. In any other moment he would have been at her side in a heartbeat. But now he could not
focus, only on his building anger. All he saw, all he needed was retribution. And the sight of her battered and bruised only increased that need.

The young woman was watching them with wide eyes, unsure how to proceed. The one she saw now, so furious and terrible, was completely at odds with the wisened elf she knew, so level headed and composed.

'Where is the wisdom of your kind?' Ereldur ground out, the pain in his arm unbearable. 'I fear you not, you freakish spawn of nature,' he spewed. 'But if you do kill me, you are cursed.'

The elf struck the man square in the face, so hard blood spilled anew in a torrent, trickling onto his fine garb, and he would have crashed to the ground if not for Legolas grasping him. Still the words added to his frenzy. He would show the wretch the true meaning of cursed. His eyes were narrowed and glinted savagely akin to a predator about to maul its prey. It made Nienor gasp for right then, he was indeed terrifying.

'You are frightening the whore,' Ereldur grinned, bloodied sputter pooling from his bruised face. He knew the human was provoking him needlessly, but he cared not. The prince struck again so that the man crumpled to the ground. He leaned over the mortal, catching a fistful of his tunic before landing blow after blow until his fist was dark with blood and his own garb stained red. The black fog covering his vision heightened his senses and strength, and most of it he placed in the endeavor. He had waited for this for so long. Too long. With each blow his vitality increased, the wilderness of his forest kin pulsing within. He then lifted the struggling man high above the ground and threw him several feet away in a tangle of limbs and leather.

'Legolas stop!' he heard her voice in a daze from behind him just as he was pacing towards the fallen man. But her plea went unanswered.

Then she was in front of him, blocking his way, her arm raised towards him in a warding gesture; her eyes wrought with worry. Seeing her before him made the ellon pause just enough for the woman to speak, though her voice barely registered against the violent thrumming in his ears.

'Come back to me,' the woman urged as she cautiously moved forward.

'Out of my path Nienor,' the elf panted.

Still she approached him slowly, as one would an angry beast until she was so close to him his hitched breathing washed over her face. 'But you will kill him if you continue in this manner.'

'And that is less than he deserves,' the elf threw. 'If I do not, you will never be free of him. He is so vengeful in his pettiness that he will not stop until he ruins you.'

'You are not a killer of men. Not even one as heinous as he.'

'You are wrong,' he growled, and he meant it. His eyes strayed to his opponent. The elf was a killer of many things, his own rage a deadly weapon, and now he was determined to wring this one's neck. It was a long overdue task.

But she would not move from his way. Instead Nienor stubbornly held his gaze. She reached and placed a palm to his chest. 'Look at me,' the woman spoke calmly, confusing the elf.

'Why do you defend him?' he asked breathlessly, his voice harsher than Nienor had ever heard it.

'Not for him do I ask this of you. Do you truly want his blood as your burden? We have had so
much death already. But there is also life,' she added quietly.

Her last words barely registered. His grip was heavy on her shoulders, bent on removing her from his way.

'My prince,' she whispered, her other hand unsteadily reaching to touch his cheek, her face lit by a brief smile. 'I am with child.'

Then it all ceased. The pressure in his chest lessened, the thrumming in his ears dimmed, the blackness from his vision started to recede. His anger, which he desperately clung to, dwindled away while his entire being strove to focus on the meaning of what she had said. The elf opened his mouth to speak but no words came forth. Still unsure whether he had heard her well enough, he tried again. 'With child,' he breathed, as if seeing her for the first time.

Nienor nodded eagerly, reaching upward on her toes, resting both her palms on his heaving chest.

Legolas blinked, his eyes having lost their steel, and all he felt for one brief moment was numbness. Then a sudden, surging happiness. And his bloodied hands were cupping her face, tenderly ghosting her bruises, his expression trapped between disbelief and utter joy. He released a short breath and an unsteady smile slowly lit his own face. The contrast between his youthful appearance now and the fierceness from moments ago was startling, sharper than anything he had ever seen of him. Once more Nienor saw that despite their fair appearance and ethereal manner, the Eldar were truly a frightful force to be reckoned with.

'Ours,' his voice came, in a tone as dazed and hopeful as his expression.

'Aye,' the woman continued, her smile widening, gradually replacing the worry on her own features.

He kissed her forehead, her cheek, her lips, both oblivious of the blood he was smearing over her face. Then brought her into his embrace, ever thankful to the powers that be for leading her into his life. They stood entrapped in one another a good time longer before the elf spoke.

'Let us leave this place,' he whispered, his hands caught in her shorn hair. He gritted his teeth, his fist itching anew to pummel Ereldur into dust. 'I am taking you away.' He should have done it long ago. He should have done it from the moment he saw the marks on her neck. Nay, from the moment he had remembered who she was. This mortal was his, and he was hers. It was late now, but she was still by his side and the prince vowed silently that he would right all past wrongs. She - they - were his new purpose.

There was nothing more Nienor wanted. She had been unsure at first but when very recently certain signs made themselves known the woman had convened with one of the midwives in secrecy. There was little doubt about it and Nienor had been afeared at first with regards to what it meant and what she would have had to do to hide it, or worse. But somehow it all fell into place now. He could, and would, be there.

The elf was back to himself, but as if remembering something of import he turned around, lightly disentangling himself from Nienor before purposefully walking towards the huddled form of Ereldur. He had risen to one knee, his hateful expression set upon the elf. He looked indeed a sorry state.

Nienor watched them both warily, retrieving the elf’s discarded bow in the meantime.

The prince stood before the lord of Garolin, his brow knit, the remnants of his fury about him akin
to a darkened aura. 'Hear this. If I ever catch sight of you again, I vow that I will finish what I began here.'

No reply came as the elf turned his back on this man who had been their bane, took Nienor in his arms and carried her swiftly away.
Legolas nimbly evaded the flames and called to Aeth. The air was hot, barely breathable, the fires still decimating all in their path. An impending storm loomed overhead, bringing with it strong winds which further kindled the soaring flames.

The ellon helped Nienor astride Aeth before springing upon the mare behind her. He whispered a command and they were gone in a whirlwind. They followed on horseback for some time and soon reached the caravan fleeing the attack. The sorcerer did not follow, seemingly having reached his intended goal. Nienor looked above them and over her shoulder at times, towards her childhood home. A place of both joy and sorrow. Now a smoldering ruin.

'And they will not stop here, will they?' she said aloud. 'They will never stop, not until these lands are razed to the ground, its peoples trampled or enslaved under their yoke.' Her own people, descendants of the once great Númenóreans were now bereft of theirlivelihoods.

The elf sighed. 'You speak the truth. I underestimated their power, their determination, their tainted numbers ever growing. We thought we could make our stand against them. But we must carry on. You must not give to despair.'

For once, his words of encouragement did little to aid all the grueling thoughts. Where could they turn to? And now with Ereldur gone, who would lead them? You, her inner voice beckoned. But was she strong enough? She had always supported Ereldur in his leadership by taking on household duties but never tried her hand at leading alone for long. In a world dominated and led by men and male prowess, would she, a woman, a soon to be mother no less, be able to make her stand? Particularly now in this hopeless time. Could she be what they needed? You must. Legolas was supporting, aye. But he was of elven kind. Would her people accept him? And would Thranduil ever see things his son's way? Shuddering, she leaned back against him.

'Peace, young one,' he hummed, sensing her inner strife.

The elf was now guiding Aeth to a trot towards the group of assembled elven host.

People were still in a state of fright. Most kept looking upon the skies, expecting the green fire to pour anew, to wreak havoc and destroy what remained of their plight. Families mourned loved ones crushed by the fallen fortress walls or lost to the flames. Plenty sported burns and healers were trying to offer aid with the little they had on hand. Thus few noticed the elf and the woman riding together on horseback, she propped against him, he holding an arm protectively around her waist. The elves however, ever perceptive, did notice and not few were the wary stares they received.

Let them know. She had not the power for pretense any longer.

Legolas seemed unfazed by it all, his expression stern and cold. 'You will be tended by my healers,' he said then.

'I am well, Legolas, really there is no need.'&

'Please, Nee. For my peace of mind.' Just as he spoke his eyes fell on Dalaron approaching them.

'You seem to make a habit out of this,' he scolded before acknowledging Nienor with a nod, eyes
widening at her state.

'We must keep on, there is no hope of shelter until we reach lake Nenuial,' the prince said to Dalaron as he dismounted and then aided Nienor down.

'Aye, I have spoken to master Hamor. Lord Glorfindel has taken his Lindon troops scouting to ensure we are not led into a trap of sorts. I asked our own to set out for a hunt. The day dwindles and there are no provisions to rely on.'

'Have we lost any of our own?' the prince inquired as they started walking towards the healers who were now busy preparing pastes for the treatment of burn wounds.

'Nay, we have been fortunate,' the auburn haired ellon replied, his eyes straying to Nienor. He then looked the prince in the eye. 'But we cannot account for the mortals.'

She knew many must have perished. Looking about her, she saw few known faces, she saw Igleta and Alynde with her parents. There were some she did not see, and her throat caught with dread.

'I will find you after,' the prince interceded.

Dalaron nodded in understanding and left them. The pair reached the elven healers where Legolas called on the lead to aid the woman. He then went to seek Dalaron. The young ellon wasted no time when they fell in step together.

'Ereldur-

'Did that to her,' Legolas growled.

Green eyes turned steely. 'He what-?... I assume you interfered?...'

'Nearly too late. I would have ended him Dalaron. I still would. I could not hold back. Did not want to. Had she not stopped me...'

The elven commander sighed, only able to imagine the kind of fury that would drive an Elda to willingly fell a human. 'Either way, their people worry. They believe him lost during the fall. They fear what will become of their community now they have no one to lead them.'

'They have one to lead them,' Legolas said determinedly. He looked to where Nienor was now being treated by his healers. The old house mistress Igleta also joined her side. 'It is only a matter of her knowing it herself. And wishing it.' A heavy burden of responsibility indeed, but one he knew she would succeed in. She had the will for it.

'And, what now?' Dalaron inquired with a wary smile.

The prince stopped his stride, arms crossing. 'Now?'

'Are you, ah, that is...'

'I will not leave her side again if I can help it.'

'Our people will wonder. So will hers.'

'Until they will not. They have seen the lie long enough. Let them witness the truth.' Then a hopeful expression lit his face, taking the other by surprise. 'My friend, we will be a family.' His words had the expected effect. He grinned despite himself, marking the first time in all his days that he saw the other elf gape, his mouth agog.
'Are you certain?'

'As we live and breathe.'

Without preamble Dalaron clamped his friend's shoulder in a strong grip. 'Well then my liege, I believe congratulations are in order?'

The night was young when Nienor awoke bleary eyed. The herb infusion the healer had given her apparently caused drowsiness, for she had drifted into a dreamless sleep. She was wrapped in a heavy cloak and placed near a crackling fire. Looking to her attire, she observed her body had probably been washed and tended to while she had been unconscious. Her garment was different to the one she wore during their escape. She gingerly touched her nose. It did not appear to be broken nor swollen, which was good. Her lip was split, but that too hurt less than before, owing to the elven made salves she had been treated with. Lifting her gaze Nienor saw those otherworldly blue eyes on her, and strong relief washed over her. The elf was seated across the fire busying himself with carving a wooden shape of sorts, a small dagger in hand. Wordlessly he ceased his task and stood to come by her side.

'How do you feel?'

'Better, gratitude,' she offered with a vague smile. 'Though I cannot say my wits are all about me,' she placed a palm over her forehead. 'Whatever the healer gave me was potent indeed. I feel as though I could drift for days.'

He smiled her way in turn. 'A sleeping draught. Your body needed the rest.'

It all came back with frightful force. Her ancestral home, gone. Most of them had not the chance to gather more than a few needful items when they fled. Yet the people tried to make do and look to each other with hopeful eyes. The young woman felt his arms enveloping her and stiffened in surprise, looking hastily behind them.

'Nee.'

She turned to meet his gaze, still apprehensive though they sat somewhat sheltered away from most of the others.

'No more worries over this. You and I. Please?'

She nodded lowering her eyes, remembering his earlier words amidst crashing walls and their unspoken oath.

'I must speak to Hamor,' she thought aloud, suddenly remembering all that needed to be done. All she had to do. And then there was the matter of Ereldur. Would he leave them be, or come to claim what he thought was rightfully his? Was he even alive?

'All in due time. For now you must regain your strength.'

Still, slowly the hard reality came to the forefront of her mind. 'We have lost everything,' she murmured against his neck.

'I know it does not compare, but I am still here,' she heard his words vibrating soothingly against her temple. 'I always will be. And,' his hand he placed lightly over her middle, 'when I take you to the Greenwood as my wife, all will be right again. It will not replace your home, I know nothing ever will. And we need not stay there. We will help your people rebuild. And we can dwell
wherever you wish. Anything, Nienor. You need but name it.'

A ghost of a smile appeared on her lips just to disappear, and she buried herself into him. It felt safe there.

'Our child should know their elven legacy,' she whispered.

'So they shall. We will ensure it.' She was now leaned fully against him, his chin resting on the crown of her head, both of them staring into the fire. 'And I will care for you until the end of your days, and never willingly cause you pain. I know you have lost your world and your life today. I wish, as I always have, to offer you mine. Now tell me, hervess nín, what shall we name the little one?'

She knew what he was doing. She knew but she welcomed it. 'I believe we ought to continue this tradition of elvish begetting names.'

'Very well then. If it is to be a girl, what do you say to Míriel?'

She quirked her head to look up at him. 'It sounds lovely. I assume there is a particular meaning or history behind it?'

He traced the freckled area of her nose with his finger. 'My mother's name.'

How she loved this elf. 'It would be an honor, as one ever grateful to her for bringing you into the world, Legolas of the woodland realm. To me.'

'Dear one.' He breathed her in, his face nuzzling in her hair.

'... Aye?'

'I do not know if you realize how much this chance means to me. After ages alone, to have an extension of one, I... never thought I would be granted this.' His fingers tangled into her tresses, making soothing motions.

'And granted an early death at my side,' she whispered meekly, recalling where their road would lead them with slow, agonizing, but sure steps. She had never come to terms with it, not fully.

The ellon still cradled her against him, his eyes on the glowing embers of the fire which engulfed both their figures in warmth and shades of red. 'And a living death my life would be without you by my side. If you still harbor doubts, hear this now. My immortality I would cast aside for you, as my days would be as cold and dark as the Halls of Mandos without your presence. In death, I know we shall not meet again. The Second Children have a different path. Thus it is in life that, should you wish it, I would bind myself to you, all of you. Your youth, your old age, your death. Your humanity.'

Her hand reached to touch his face. Such a noble soul, her prince, her dearest friend. The other half of herself.

The elf closed his eyes at the feel of her feather light kiss, come as a seal to his oath. It felt good to do this, uncaring, without having to hide. They descended onto the forest floor embraced as they were, completely wrapped in each other.

The ellon watched as sleep finally took his love, her body softening against his own. He then allowed himself to drift away. The embers of the fire glowed bright into the starlit darkness.
Night still reigned when she stirred. The elf was awake, having taken only a brief healing respite. His attention shifted to her. He had been gazing at the stars, thinking of all that had happened, all it would mean to the beings of this world. Peace was far from them. But then here they were, among war and ruin, happier than perhaps they had ever been.

'Nienor?' he called worriedly when he felt the woman disentangle herself from him. She stood, looking about their surroundings before heading into an unknown direction, her cloak still wrapped around herself. 'Where are you going?' She did not answer, did not stop her advance. He saw little choice but to follow.

They walked for some time through the sparse surrounding forest, descending farther into the trees. It was the middle of the night judging by the way the stars gleamed overhead.

'We should not wander far, it is too dangerous. Nee, let us return.' His hearing discerned nothing, but it was best to be wary and guarded.

She stopped her stride at his words and turned to face him. She reached for him and the elf felt her kiss, soft and timid at first. Her mouth somehow became warmer against his and soon both her arms were wrapped around his neck, her lower body pressing even more into him.

The elf smiled into her kiss. She smiled back. Despite everything, despite her grief, despite the events which left her House ruined and her legacy thrown to the wind. Nay, her legacy lived on, within her.

'Young one?' the elf broke away briefly, sensing she would not relent.

Still Nienor did not answer, instead she deepened the kiss, seeking him.

He relented, his heart hers to do what she would. His own body welcomed the closeness. He found the tip of her tongue between his lips.

'Be one with me,' she gushed after a few moments, and he dutifully obeyed. Hands moved from her face, straying to her shoulders. He took the lead, and soon Nienor was propped gently against an obliging tree.

'Now? Here?' the prince asked, even as his chosen hedged him down to her onto the leaf and grass strewn forest floor. It was not that he was unwilling, but he wanted to be mindful of her.

His answer lay in her movements, which soon found him lying on his back, her face a breadth from his own. Her hands rested on either side of his head.

'But you are...,' his gaze strayed to her middle.

His words wrought a breathy laugh. 'Tis quite early,' she cooed. 'And besides, I know-' she captured his lower lip with her own, '-that you can be so gentle-,' she whispered, a knowing look in her eyes, '-and yet just as pleasing,' she moved to taste his upper lip, flushing deeply when she felt him burning beneath her. She smiled with abandon when strong hands pressed her hips to his. He was so fair, her elf, his eyes dark blue promises of bliss.

'Aye I can be gentle, though it is proving quite difficult presently,' he grinned. He reached up and around the back of her neck, wanting to lead her down to him.

Nienor gently pried herself free from his hold. For now she was set on admiring her life mate from her current position. The cloak he wore came unclasped under her fingers. Her hands nimbly unfastened his belt and then the clasps of his tunic, finding purchase under his shirt. She explored
what was so known to her, enjoying the warmth of his sculpted body under her fingertips.
'Husband,' she hummed.

'Wife,' he sighed contentedly, eyes closing, pressing her hands over his heart. His wife. Safe in his arms, both her and their... their child. Another impossible feat, or so he thought. Yet somehow, by whatever fate, it had passed. His fingers caressed her forearms, hands gliding to her arms. Rising propped on his elbows for better reach, he found her lovely shapes, his hand trailing over the rest of her. Strong gentle fingers felt each of those delightful globes. Her soft sigh and the tender hardness of her told him how much she enjoyed this, and he gently reached behind her back to pull his lady down into his embrace. Nienor relented at last, melding her mouth to his with a smile. She desired him so. One hand grasped her thigh while the other held her securely against him as the elf easily rose with his lover in his arms. As she clung to him in their sitting position she began to longingly nip the side of his neck, earning a sigh. He spread his cloak onto the ground with one hand and then turned to lay her down upon it, still holding her tight.

His golden-silver hair caressed her face, its lovely fragrance lulling her into a daze. An expectant, familiar ache was building inside. Nienor reveled in the scent she loved, of alluring freshly hewn grass and green summer fields. 'I need you, so much,' she gushed. And she did. He had kept her straight and steady throughout the whirlwind that have been her days, and still did. When she was with him she felt at peace. She relinquished her soul to his strong presence of mind and the depth of his heart. One she could never be without for too long even if she tried, and Valar knew she had.

Darkened eyes roamed over her face, fingers gently touching her lips, parting them. The tip of her tongue flicked over his finger. They shared a smile, as lost in each other as their first night together. He then reached and, with painstakingly slow movements and an ever present grin, deprived her of her garments. It felt good to have her trapped so. Black mingled with gold when he leaned to kiss her again.

Nienor visibly relaxed under his touch, shivering at the feel of his lips, only to tense again when his ministrations became more insistent, delving deep into her, driving her slowly but surely mad. Her hitched and shallow breathing soon became the loudest sound in the dark ether.

He tasted her, all of her, so sweet and tender and good, pleased immeasurably by her shy moans. Lush green gardens and musk, his own dreams. He felt her pleasure against his tongue, and all he
wanted was to give her more. He wanted her to forget, if only for a short while. The elf rose back
to drape himself over her when he felt she was ready and needed more. He drank her in as Nienor
wrapped herself around him, her hands leading him to her. He resisted.

'Take me,' she pleaded breathlessly against his smile.

That he would. He tasted her lips again before joining with her slowly, as slowly as his own need
allowed, fusing into one. He loved her, oh how he loved her. The mortal who owned his soul, his
heart, he belonged to her. It still frightened him at times.

When they later lay spent in each other's arms the world and its woes were forgotten for a few
blinking moments. Yet there were none more grateful for it.

Chapter End Notes

A/N:

Finally some peace and joy, no?
The leaders of both elves and mortals were gathered around a fire, faces grim and frowning in thought. Now that the initial fright following the sacking of their home had passed the elders of Garolin put their heads together in an attempt to find the best way to salvage what remained of their community. They could not risk starting efforts to rebuild their home, not with the looming threat of Carn Dûm over the lands. Fornost, the capital of Arthedain was being discussed as the closest option to request succour, but the idea sat poorly with some.

'We cannot go to the gates of the capital as beggars, when they have so many to look after within their own walls. We have no armor, no provisions, no horses, not even enough fighting men,' Hamor was saying, irritation peaking. 'We would be a burden and they will not open their city to us, heed my words.'

'Then would you we lingered as beggars here, among the barren hills and sparse forests, prey to the legions of the enemy?' another countered.

'And now with our ruler gone what hope is there for unity? Who will lead, keep us together? I suppose you would humbly take the responsibility, Hamor?' one of the younger captains quipped. The elven leaders only listened, choosing not to interfere but now were sharing worried glances. Legolas sighed at this display of pettiness. Could they be so blind?

'How dare you accuse me of usurping thoughts, boy?' the old captain snarled, his patience worn thin. 'I have served Garolin for longer than you have walked on your own two feet! Curb your tongue lest you find yourself without it!'

'My lords.' All eyes turned to the prince, silence falling.

Now that is respect not easily won, Nienor mused, seeing how those gathered waited for his words.

'Prince Legolas?'

The prince looked to Nienor, who seemed caught between two opposing forces of will. Courage, he urged with his gaze.

'Why not ask your rightful ruler, and the last of the House of Garolin to walk amongst you?' In the continued silence he turned to the young woman. 'Lady Nienor, what is your stand in this?' To her benefit, she did not waver. He knew he was forcing her hand, and felt but a little regret. Yet as she was, standing at ease, clothed in the garb of his people, she exuded nothing but determination. None but he would guess at the myriad of emotions swirling inside of her. Courtesy of his female healers she now faced them clad in a simple belted tunic and leggings, the soft greens of the forest. A short sword of elvish make hung to her side, a gift from him. His heart swelled, recalling their morning together after their night under the stars. But anyone witnessing his sombre outward appearance would be none the wiser.

'Forgive me, my lord Legolas, and not to be ungrateful for your aid and usual sound advice,-' one of the elders started.

The prince's eyes narrowed.
'But our young lady Nienor is a woman, who while capable, has little experience with these matters-,' 

'Is that so?' the woman found herself speaking, her tone more challenging than she had wanted. But why was her womanhood alone a factor for her dismissal? These were the same people who had forced her into the marriage with Ereldur, maintaining that a strong hand was needed to rule. Aye, she had not Ereldur's strong hand, but there was little that could not be taught with time. She did not welcome this, but she wanted what was best for them all. She wanted their people to thrive to the despair and ruin of those wretched beasts. *Now, now or never.*

The gathering was silent, more surprised than anything else. Expectant eyes turned her way. It was a good a start as any.

She planted both her feet firmly into the ground and crossed her arms. 'I do not think it fair to be judged by my nature alone. Am I not of the blood of your ancestral ruler? Have I not run the dealings of our city in all but matters of war, in the few months at the side of the lord my husband you bemoan? I have experienced orc ambushes. I have been their prisoner and survived. I have fought against them, and lived. I have seen what we face firsthand, and suffered their cruelty just as you have. I have seen what war does to our own, buried many and treated more of you than I can count. Was Haleth not barely in her adult years when she took the lead of her tribe?'

She turned to Hamor. 'Aye, I lack your mind for strategy, and Morten's skill with the sword,' she looked to another captain, 'but I have you both to support and lead in these matters. United we stand a chance, I know this. Together, with the aid of our allies,' she motioned to the elves, 'we can rebuild our hope and our home. All we must do is start somewhere. And not bicker among ourselves in this dire time.'

Her words must have sunk in somewhat, for the next question took her by surprise.

'Very well then, what does Nienor of Garolin suggest we do now, for instance?'

*A trial of sorts.* She took an intake of breath. 'We could create smaller groups, go scour the ruins. Retrieve what survived within the stone cellars and underground tunnels. I know them all by heart, I can draw maps with directions of what lies where. Then we can see what might be reused for trade or otherwise. We can travel to Fornost, I will request an audience with the king. I am certain they can offer aid and housing to at least part of our people. We may not have arms, but they do, and they need the strength of numbers against the Northern scourge. Part of our community can ride to Cardolan, who are allies to Arthedain, are they not?' She turned to the elves. 'You have aided us so mercifully thus far, would you still be able to offer your military aid and support with basic provisions, enough to keep us adrift while we find our bearings?' Her gaze strayed to the prince, who nodded shortly in consent. They would also have to bring forth the matter of their union, but both knew this was not the night for it.

'All of this needs more thought, but we have to begin somewhere.' When she finished her passionate speech, silence reigned for long moments.

Then Hamor spoke. 'I have served your father for his entire rule, the most prosperous our city has known in this age. I have taught you the ways of combat myself since you were but a child, despite general misgivings of others. You have his blood, but I have always known you to also have his resilience and strength of character. I, for one, see no issue with following you, just as I did him.'

Though greatly affected by his words the young woman reined her emotions, only bowing gratefully in acknowledgement.
'I second master Hamor,' another added.

'Aye,' another voice chimed, soon joined by others.

'Hail Nienor of the House of Garolin, may she lead us well. The blood of Númenor lives!' came the words from the old master at arms, washing over her, and looking about as swords were drawn to the pledge she locked eyes with the prince. He was leaning against a tree, arms crossed, a knowing smile on his features as he drank her in. *Well done, young one.*

'Wait just one moment,' the young woman heard as she was heading into the woods, two more daggers planted firmly into her belt. They were well into the start of the day and there was much to do. She smiled at the voice, turning to face the elf.

'Aye, my prince?'

'Where does the lady think she is going?'

'Off to pull her own weight? I said I would aid in checking the hare traps for game.'

The prince sighed. 'If usefulness is what you seek, then there is plenty of work to be done replacing bandages,' he said as he fell in step with her.

'I am aware, I come from there. I asked Alynde to take my place in treating the milder burn wounds. Part of her apprenticeship, you see,' she added as they came to walk so close side by side they were brushing against each other.

When they were amidst the privacy of the trees the elf slipped an arm around her waist, bringing her to him gently. 'I worry,' he stared into the depths of those doe like eyes, lips barely brushing hers.

'I know,' she gushed, reveling in the scent of him. 'But we each must do our part,' she smiled lazily before breaking away.

'Such a level headed queen you shall make,' the ellon grinned. 'Very well, then we shall do this part together,' he decided. 'Soon you will need to delegate either way,' he smirked as she jestingly struck his shoulder. He looked so happy when referring to her carrying it made her heart soar and sing, and her step light and perhaps more carefree than their situation allowed.

They took the known path, having checked the second snare to find it empty.

'Alas,' the ellon sighed as he crouched down to reposition the metal trapping mechanism.

Nienor stood not too far within the glade. Her back turned to him, she was searching the underbush for what she reckoned to be kingsfoil.

The prince had just finished positioning the snare when he felt the skin at the back of his neck prickle. Ears sharpening and sensing immediate danger, he sprung to his feet.

'Nee, down!' he yelled, causing her to startle and whirl around.

Sharp pain flared in his chest, inches from his heart.

She ran to him as he fell to the ground. The arrow protruding from his chest was blackened. Her wits scattered, fumbling hands tried to help him rise to no avail.
Overcome with the sudden drowsiness, the ellon barely managed to speak before his jaw clamped shut. 'Poisoned... run.'

No sooner did she gather his meaning than a second arrow flew past her head, causing her to fall back scrambling. She had forgotten about the snare, stepping right into the mechanism. A cracking sound was heard and she screamed in pain as the sharp metal claws lodged into her ankle. She lost her stance and fell back to the ground. Legolas lay fallen on his back, eyes open and desperate but unmoving, his body unusually stiff.

Nienor tried to run, to crawl away, but the rusty metal claws were lodged into her flesh to the bone and the pain trapped her, causing agony with every movement.

'Amazing what one can retrieve from fallen orcs, don't you think?'

Horror stricken, she turned around onto the ground to the source of the voice.

Ereldur stood towering above the elf, his bow discarded. 'A foul thing it is too, this fast paralyzing poison. It immobilizes the victim so they are awake but trapped in their own body. They can hear,-'

He moved closer.

'See-'

He knelt beside her, causing her to crawl back, a dagger drawn in each hand. Ereldur looked ragged, eyes wild and dark with hate. His face was swollen and bruised from the recent beating administered by the ellon.

'-And feel everything. Unfortunately I only came by two of them. So tell me then, what shall we have the prince see?'

Nienor cried for aid. Then he was upon her, but the woman made it difficult for him, her daggers wounding his arms and slashing across his leather clad chest. Her breath left her as she struggled against his strength, focusing on one sole goal: to live. She had to survive this, him.

Ereldur backhanded her, she slashed his face. A beastly sound escaped him and the enraged man pulled back, his face bloodied. It gave her a brief respite to crawl away. His weight was upon her suddenly and Nienor cried into the ether until her throat was hoarse, calling for aid.

He caught hold of her wrist and twisted powerfully. Nienor cried in pain as he took one of her daggers from her broken hand and turned her over.

'Ereldur... I beg you, I am carrying-'

He lodged the blade deep into her womb once. Then a second time. And a third. Blood spurted from her mouth, unimaginable agony flaring from her core. With her last remaining strength and anger Nienor thrust her other dagger into his back.

Ereldur cursed in pain, his reflexes weakening enough to allow her one last feat of strength and the woman pulled the blade from his back; with one final blow it came embedded deep into his eye. The man fell limp against her. Nienor managed to barely push him to the side-

She could not breathe.

The trees above were swaying under a gentle breeze. She heard the chirping of forest birds in their freedom. Turning her head, Nienor saw her elf still fallen, frozen, his face turned towards her, eyes
unblinking. Nienor was thankful that she could at least look upon him.

* I should have listened. I never heed. I never... *

Her good hand rested against her bloodied womb. Nienor wanted to tell him she loved him so, and ask his forgiveness ere the end. The woman tried to speak but only gurgling blood trickled from between her lips. Leaves fell softly upon the forest floor. Her eyes went still.

He crawled towards her when he came to, the poison still rendering his lower body unusable. The elf looked upon her, trembling fingers closing her eyes, ghosting her lips, wiping the blood away. With one hand he cradled her head while the other he placed over her own which was now resting lifeless on her red stained middle. Mere hours ago they were laughing together. He rested his forehead against her womb, panting heavily. It was in this way that Dalaron found them.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I'm sorry?
'By the Valar...' Dalaron cried, the faces of other elves mirroring his words. They ran to where the pair lay. 'I heard screaming, forgive me, I came as soon as I could-' he said hurriedly as the prince slowly stood to his knees, the effects of the poison finally weakening, allowing him to regain control of his limbs. 'Wait, do not remove it!' With one swift motion the ellon had pulled the arrow out, blood soon staining his garb in a widening pattern.

'Listen to me,' Dalaron tried, sorrow lining his own features as he realized what he was seeing. He placed a hand on the prince. 'We must take you to the healers lest you bleed out-' With an angry shove he pushed the younger ellon away forcefully. He felt no physical pain. All he could focus on was the living nightmare before him. He took her lifeless form in his arms, rising slowly.

Others had joined the gathering, gasping as they beheld the still form of Ereldur, then their own ruler lying bloodied in the arms of the elf. Hamor tried to run after the prince but an arm blocked his way. 'Leave him,' Dalaron said, eyes glinting. 'Do not follow.'

'What happened, where are you taking her? Explain yourself, elf!' the old captain called nonetheless.

He heard nothing, pacing on through the sparse forest, eyes glassy. None dared follow. He saw naught but the shifting shapes of ages past, turned to dust with the years.

Years. The meager allowance of time they once had, a blink of an eye become his eternity. She was so heavy in his arms. He whispered to her words of reassurance, of the places they would have traveled and seen together. His pace was measured, treading carefully as to not disturb her. She was still warm as he cradled her to him but that warmth felt like deadly blows. He knew it would soon fade.

His steps took him to the highest mound of the hills of Evendim overlooking the forest and the Blue Mountains to one side, the lake and ruins of Garolin to the other. Atop this mound the elf set his burden down reverently to rest, sheltered under one of the many trees dispersed across the lonely hilltop. Then he took a wide short dagger from his belt and circled an area into the ground. He looked around him, but not to where she lay. He soon found what he sought for. A thick fallen branch was soon hacked and carved into a crude utensil. Using the makeshift tool he began to scrape against the humid earth, removing grass, soil and stone. His fingers soon became bloodied as he discarded the tool and dug into the earth with both hands. When he was done the day had dwindled well into the afternoon. The weakness from blood loss made him waver somewhat but the elf cared little as long as he could finish his task. The mortal had not ended him, wanting him to witness it all. And witness he did. The scene repeated itself over and over before his eyes. Legolas covered his face with his hand and took an intake of breath. Then he dared look to where his wife lay motionless. She appeared to be in a deep slumber, the pale lips and stillness a sole indication of
her true state.

Very slowly he approached, hesitating briefly before kneeling at her side and taking her hand in his. His fingers trembled against the now cold skin. It was time. Her body he covered with his cloak in lieu of a shroud, yet her face he dared not cover.

_Ilúvatar, you deem this a gift?_ The gift of death, it was called. Her gift, his curse. She would go where none of his kind would ever follow. The elf propped her against him and stood, bringing his charge to the edge of the hollow ground. He stared into the emptiness, smelt the scent of fresh soil and cold depths of the earth, ready to swallow her.

He could not do it. He could not surrender her to this black, gaping nothingness. He kissed her brow. Cold as ice. His entire body shuddered with threatening sobs. 'Forgive me,' he said to the wind, now beating harshly against his face. Clouds were gathering and the faint echoes of thunder reached him from afar. The elf knelt beside the gaping hollow, closed his eyes tightly against the black numbness rapidly taking over; against falling to myriads of pieces. He still had his task to complete.

He lay her gingerly into the earth before looking upon her face for one last time. Lifting his gaze to the east, he started to whisper a lament of his people, one dedicated to those fallen before their time. With each hand of soil that covered her body his voice failed, only to try again.

When the elf was done covering her grave with a layer of rock he whispered the needed prayers in his own tongue. Stubborn tears blinded his vision as he worked but he did not cease nor give to despair. Only after he placed the last stone atop her grave did he surrender, his head in his hands. She would be here forever, with only tears laid in earth to keep her company. They would never know how their lives might have unfolded together. As the sun began to set, depleted of strength and weakened he draped himself over the cold stones and wept.

_Was this her fate or a punishment? If we displeased you so, great maker, why unleash it on her? You wrought it, you allowed it, as you do all the goings of this world._

He was in a silent space, bereft of trees or skies. It was dark but for the luminescence of sprites of light flying all about him dispersed into the air by an unseen wind. It was also cold, and he was somewhat surprised to feel it. He had never felt the cold before, not as humans did. As his eyes cleared of tears the ellon discerned wide, dark pillars on either side of him and a straight path ahead. He walked on cautiously, his hearing strained.

'What is this place?'

A fathomless ceiling could be discerned above, the darkness of an inverted abyss. Yet stars lined it and shimmered as if encased within. A faint light shone at the far end of his path and he continued towards it. There was no sound at all, not from his surroundings nor even from his beating heart. His heart though, hewn so recently, hurt with the intensity of a thousand open wounds. He wavered in his steps, clutching at his chest suddenly. It throbbed not with pain from his wound, but with loss. He knew it was her.

She looked over her shoulder at him before running ahead, her dress a memory.

He called to her, though his voice came a soundless gasp, no reverberations to be carried through this strange place. If he could see her again, only once to look upon her eyes.

'I have walked into another nightmare.' It had to be a figment of his mind, of his desperation. But still he quickened his strides, her dark hair and white garb his beacon. Then she turned a corner but
when he followed she was gone. Harried, the ellon looked about him frantically before dropping heavily to the ground, leaning forward on his forearms; his forehead he pressed against the floor. Everything was freezing cold.

‘What form of cruelty is this?’ he asked no one in particular. ‘Is there anyone here? I must return. I must...’ But then he realized there was naught to return to anymore.

The endless hall was silent. He stood so, he knew not how long, his hitched breathing his only company. ‘Please...’ he begged, though what for he did not know.

Then there was a shift and a sundering, both in the air and within himself. He felt the chill no longer. He felt a hand on his head, a gentle and soothing touch of ages past. He looked up confusedly. Before him knelt a figure of white light, draped in endless robes of grey. Her hair was spun midnight, her face contained the goodness of Aman, and sorrow everlasting lined her striking eyes. She spoke not, but smiled kindly through shimmering tears; tears falling upon him, numbing the hurt.

‘You are on the edge of pain,’ the presence uttered in his mind.

The elf was speechless, looking upon the being whose resplendence could belong to none other than a Vala of Ilúvatar. He felt it so. ‘Where am I, kind one?’

‘You know where you are, child. Look forth.’

He did so, and before him he now saw a tall, darkened throne, surrounded by wide hanging tapestries of spun starlight which were ever changing. A being was seated on the throne, regarding him in silence. Scouring through his very essence. The elf shuddered; with pain, terror and awe all at once as the figure rose to stand tall. A similar light to the other filled this one from within but his robes were black as night, his hair falling in straight silver over his shoulders. Eyes were of a deep dark light, all knowing and all scouring.

‘Námo...’ The prince whispered in awe and lowered his head in respect. ‘But how...I still live. At least I believe so. ’ Not that he regretted the time left to him in Arda, but why had he been summoned here? What more did They desire of him?

The other stood silent, raising a great arm.

‘Her presence he felt once more, causing him to jump to his feet.

‘Please, where is she?’ the elf pleaded, looking around him, his gaze turned to the kindly face of the tear stained one.

‘She is already beyond the circles of this world, young prince.’

An eternity passed with the silence. ‘Then why this torment?’ he choked, his rage soaring.

The tall silver haired one approached, but as before he did not speak. Still the elf was cowed by this presence, unwavering, terrible and steadfast, keeping his soul open and raw against himself. Digging into his pain, his loss. ‘This was to be both your fates in the end, you knew this,’ an abysmal voice sounded in his mind, deeper than the widest chasm.

‘But so soon. Why?’ He dared ask.

There was no answer. He lowered himself to the floor again, his forehead against the now soothing cold. ‘Great Námo, I humbly plead you grant me now passing into your halls,’ he looked up to the
tall dark one. 'I cannot live without her, I do not wish it. I will not survive. I crave only the peace you would bring.' And indeed this place called to him, urging him to leave everything behind.

Nienna gently spoke then. 'That is not your doom. She was the other part of your soul, but not your destiny. Your fate is another, and you must tread the shores of Arda yet ere the end.'

'You would curse me to live, like this?'

'You will. For indeed Ilúvatar wills it so.'

'There is nothing left for me there,' the elf said dejectedly. 'Have you no measure of justice? Why deny me that which is in your power to give, when you denied all else?' he accused, unable to keep his words at bay.

'And yet, your fates we do not hold sway over, Firstborn. You must press on. Hearken, for this I tell you now. You are one to be part of the making or undoing of Arda. So it is doomed.'

The elf looked to Mandos, the great Judge, boring into him with ageless orbs. And then the truth struck him like a blade and the prince knew in his very being that this was to be so. And he knew there was nothing he could do but obey, though her death had been his own.

'If that is your command,' the elf surrendered, raising his pained gaze to look upon the fair face of Nienna, then towards the stern pale countenance of Mandos.

The Judge then brought his hand to his heart, his head bowed.

And in that very moment Legolas felt her. Her soul brushed his, soothing his hurt; for the briefest span of time turned into eternity, they were one again. She was overwhelming. And there was another, one that was a part of him. As fast as lightning the feeling disappeared. A farewell. And then he knew she loved him ever after, and blessed his journey from wherever she had gone. It was the only aid Mandos could offer, and still more than he was allowed.

'Return,' the Judge then spoke, the command soaring in the fabric of timeless ether.

The elf propped himself on his palms, his head lowered. 'I beg of you, allow me but a moment longer with them-

A hand was on his shoulder.

Lifting his head, the ellon found himself draped over her grave once more, Dalaron standing before him. He could tell it had rained, for his garb and hair were dripping wet.

'I came to see how you were faring. The men are asking how to proceed, and whence to go. They demand an explanation.' He loathed to bring this upon his friend now, so lost in his mourning.

The prince bleakly looked at Dalaron. Never did he think he would gaze upon the Halls of Mandos ere the end, nor that he was bound by a doom greater than himself.

Dalaron waited. 'Will you come down, my friend?'

The prince stared into nothingness, his head tilted towards the mountains, features even more drawn and pale in the fading light.

'In truth? Nay. All I wish is to lay myself upon her grave and die. I feel no longer bound to Arda. I long for the peace I will never again know on these shores. Yet I might still have had a chance
were I to reach Mandos or sail into the West. But the Powers deny me this,' he turned to his friend, and Dalaron was afraid of the emptiness he saw within once bright orbs. 'A vision. I would deem it a dream, but I cannot. I was told my fate is tied to the doom of this world and that I have yet to fulfill my destiny before I depart its shores. What that is though, remains shrouded in mystery.'

Dalaron remained silent, the grief of his friend washing over him in tides. 'If that is the path shown to you by Them, follow it you must; for it is surely true.'

'I know it to be true. But my heart does not. My heart only knows her. Them.' He closed his eyes, the pain unbearable, too new. He would never be free of it. He sighed heavily. 'I know not what to make of this. I will travel into the wilds, in search of I know not what, and hope I find my way. Tell my father, if you wish. I will not return to the Greenwood, at least not for many a year.'

'Then let me join you,' the other asked. 'It might prove easier than walking this path on your own.'

The prince shook his head. 'You have ever been a loyal friend, but this I must do alone. Dalaron, son of Vercion, I lay upon you the responsibility of high commander. I know you will serve our people well.'

'My lord-...' Dalaron grasped for words, taken aback by the honor but also by this decision, which hurt more than he ever thought it would. At least, he thought, if his friend did this he would not succumb to fading even if the order of the Valar was all that prevented it. 'All will miss you.' With this he bowed his head in respect, his hand over his heart.

Legolas returned the gesture, his face pale and drawn but lined with forced determination.

The two friends looked about them to the clearing skies, over the wide forest, diffused with the golden light of dusk in shades of green and yellow. They looked to the tall mountains of memory, where the stars join the earth. Over the wide plains of spent wishes and desires and unfulfilled dreams. Over rivers of hope. The road went ever on.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I want to express my deepest thanks to those of you who read and followed this story, and also to apologize to those who were put off by the way it evolved and ended. Writing this down was good practice but also a therapy of sorts for me. We all know waking life is not always kind. We all suffer loss and pain, go through difficult times. This was my way to make do. Perhaps the next one will have a happy, wholesome ending. At least that is the plan.

Update: 'The plan' materialized into my new fic: Paths Afire - check it out if a Glorfindel/OC AU is something you'd fancy. Funnier, no tragic endings, I promise.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!