In Starlight and in Shadow

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Summary

[Tauriel/Thranduil] Sequel of "The Necklace of Lasgalen."

Nearly 80 years after the events of BoTFA, Middle Earth braces for the War of the Ring. The Woodland Realm lies between two fronts of the war and this time, the Elvenking won't sit idly by when Sauron lets slip the dogs of war.

Thranduil, Tauriel, Legolas, and Tauriel's ward Melethril, encounter old foes and new challenges in this age of brewing peril. They will all be tested in war, in love, and in loss as they defend Middle Earth.

Notes

This is a sequel to "The Necklace of Lasgalen," and will probably not make sense unless you read that first. :) 

This story brings us forward to the beginning of the War of the Ring. I ask that you kindly point out any mistakes, as this is unbeta'd and I am no Tolkien expert though I try very hard to balance book/movie/canon/characterization with the fun of writing fanfic. Thanks for all the love on "Necklace," and I hope you enjoy this sequel.
Chapter 1

“Halt! Who seeks passage into the halls of King Thranduil of the Woodland realm?” The armored guard boomed at the approaching party. His fellow guards snapped to attention, bow and arrow at the ready.

There were three figures spotted across the narrow stone bridge that led to the Western Gate of the Elvenking’s halls in Mirkwood. They were indistinguishable through the early morning mist except for the one who looked to be a child or an elderly person. It made for an unsettling sight.

Two of the strangers stopped halfway across the bridge. Pitiful wails were audible to the elf guards’ sharp ears. It seemed the hunched figure was the source of the noise. One of the strangers continued walking the rest of the way despite the soldier’s repeated warning to halt and reveal his identity. He stepped through the mist to show himself.

“I am Legolas, son of Thranduil, and I return to my father’s house to deliver a prisoner.”

The guard’s eyes widened in realization and called for the gates to be opened to admit the prince and his fellow travelers. Legolas beckoned to them to come forward and waited until they drew near. The guards soon saw that the shrieking creature stumbling with every other step was no child, man or elf. They recoiled as it passed for it wore only a loincloth and reeked of festering wounds and decay. It threw itself to the ground and gripped one of the guard’s boots with unlikely strength. Its keeper, a dark-haired man with stern grey eyes, nudged it away and hauled it up roughly.

“We will take him to my father after he has been cleaned and fed.”

“No—we must take him at once. Mithrandir was adamant.” The dark-haired ranger uttered.

At that, the hideous creature known as Gollum emitted another pain-filled cry that echoed off the high ceilings of the underground fortress. Legolas frowned down at Gollum, nodded and led them to his father’s throne, sending one of the standing guards to wake the king.

Thranduil was appalled by the unsightliness of the creature Gollum though greatly heartened by the appearance of his son. He greeted Aragorn as a welcome guest and learned how he and his son came to encounter Gollum. Aragorn, along with Mithrandir and Legolas, tracked the creature and captured it in the Dead Marshes, the mention of which set the king on edge.

On the grey wizard’s orders, the miserable thing was entrusted to the Elvenking’s watch. Thranduil was deeply irritated by the imposition even if it resulted from his son’s recommendation of his father’s power. He was aware that Legolas could see the rise of his ire. Thranduil clenched his jaw and agreed nonetheless, it was far too dangerous to have the creature running amok. If Thranduil has managed to keep his kingdom relatively safe for this long without the use of any of the rings of power, he could certainly manage the imprisonment of one treacherous former Halfling.

Gollum was monitored closely by the most elite of the palace guards. His wounds inflicted by the torture of Sauron’s orcs were treated by Elven healers and though he recovered, one would be hard pressed to see any difference. It frequently spoke to itself as well as its captors, alternating between heart-rending pleas for freedom and vicious threats. It was as if two people resided within its grotesque body. The guards pitied it when it wept for freedom but hardened their hearts when they remembered that Gollum was a physical representation of Sauron’s corrupting influence.

Legolas spent long hours with his father over the next few days. He told him of all that he’d seen and
learned among the Rangers of the North and Thranduil could see his son benefited from his time outside Mirkwood’s boundaries. His perspective was broadened by the opportunity to see how Men lived, though the king regretted the role his son would inevitably play in the war to come.

“Seventy eight years have passed since this realm last went to war, father, and we shall soon be under the same threat.” The prince said.

“No.” Thranduil said plainly. Legolas frowned at him inquisitively. “The violence and destruction to come will not be like anything you have ever seen in your lifetime, my son. I will not lie to you on this. The war will ravage this world such that even the victors will fall to their knees when they witness the cost of that victory.”

“We will help rebuild, then. It shall be painful and arduous but we will do it. The Dark one would let Middle Earth rot and glory in it.” remarked Legolas. Thranduil was gravely pleased at his son’s understanding of the situation—he did not romanticize the notion of winning wars.

They rode together accompanied by a band of guards, the king on his elk and Legolas on a spirited chestnut gelding. Father and son were perhaps a mile into the wood, not far from the keep. They would go no further for the Greenwood of old was no more—their realm was sadly known to the rest of Middle Earth as Mirkwood. The sinister gloom of the forest warded off outsiders and oppressed its Elven occupants.

The king’s stormy expression belied his fear of what the future held. He looked sidelong at Legolas and saw the same grimness in his young face.

“I have made provisions for the defense of our people. I have yet to make arrangements for any preemptive strikes, should our allies ride to war and call upon our forces.”

“Yes, they were summoned to council at dawn. I will have no secrets from those who are entrusted with this kingdom’s defense. We shall endure, in spite of Sauron’s best efforts.” The Elvenking spurred his mount onward into a rolling, elegant canter. Legolas followed, cognizant that where his father said “we” he once meant their people alone. Now, he knew his father meant it far more inclusively.

They returned to the Keep in silence save for the heavy breathing of their mounts. When Thranduil and Legolas were safely inside the palace, the guards were dismissed to their posts.

The king retreated to his quarters with a nod to his son, who immediately sought to explore the halls of this place he knew so well. Almost eight decades was a negligible amount of time to an elf. Yet as he roamed the common dining halls, the training yard, the Hall of Swords, and all of the places he once frequented as a youth, he was filled with longing for simpler times.

In the corridor that joined the main portion of the Keep and the lower gardens, Legolas was returning from a walk when he heard a familiar and haunting voice choke out his name.

Legolas whipped around to see Tauriel before him, staring at him in disbelief. He grunted when she rushed to him and threw her arms around him. He returned her embrace, closing his eyes at his reunion with his old friend.
“It is so good to see you.” He whispered into her hair.

Legolas pulled back to really look at her and saw tension in her eyes that harkened back to the cliffs at Ravenhill where he last left her so many years ago. He wondered what her life since then was like and found that he longed to know.

“Walk with me, I am going to my archers to test the youngest ones. They might benefit from your insight.” She said with a smile.

He gladly agreed and accompanied her, amazed to find her an effective commander of a considerable force. The firebrand Legolas knew was still there but it was contained by wisdom one can only gain through the trials of leadership. He saw her soldiers believed in her authority by their attention to her every instruction. He surmised their respect was hard-won.

After she dismissed her group, she told him it was her third out of five planned training rotations for the week. They roamed the caverns and talked at length as if they had not been separated by nearly a century. When they noticed the throngs of elves walking in the direction of the Great Hall, they seemed to realize the hour and that they ran the risk of being tardy to the prince’s own celebratory feast. Thranduil wanted to mark his son’s return even if it was uncertain how long he meant to remain in Mirkwood.

The banquet was laid out in the Great Hall in the center of the palace, so that all might partake of the festivities there. Though it was spring, venturing outdoors for merry-making was no longer safe or advisable. However, as Legolas glanced around, he thought this feast was just as joyous as it might have been otherwise.

Food was plentiful thanks to renewed trade with other realms and of course Elven wine flowed freely. Music played constantly throughout the evening and all danced except for his father, which was not unusual, and Aragorn. The ranger took in the Woodland elves with a smile that lightened his often impassive countenance. Legolas even joined in at one point, to the delight of many of the noblewomen and their daughters. He partnered a blushing maiden, brown of hair and lovely of face, whom he spoke with after the song concluded and all applauded the musicians.

“The tales of your deeds do not do you justice, Prince Legolas.” The maiden said when he released her hand. He imagined the words might have sounded simpering had they come from anyone else, but from her they were genuinely meant.

“Your words are generous,” He shook his head dismissively with a small smile, “I do not know your name, my lady.”

The musicians took up their instruments once more, but this tune was a lilting ballad that did not disrupt the moment. They stood among the dancers, as tall reeds amongst a flowing river.

“I am Melethril, my lord. The lady Tauriel is like a mother to me; she has told me much of your valor and skill in battle.”

He felt his eyebrows lift in surprise.

“I am honored to make your acquaintance.” Legolas could think of nothing else to say. He was sure to offend if he inquired as to how Tauriel came to raise a daughter in the years he’d been away from Mirkwood.

“Likewise.” Smiling, Melethril took a few steps back and made to weave her way through the swaying dancers. “If you’ll be so kind to excuse me, my lord, I must take up the harp for this ballad.
I’ve already tarried too long.” With a delicate cursey, she returned to the group of musicians to take her place and join in the next chorus of the song. He watched her cerulean silk skirts as they trailed behind her.

Legolas realized how foolish he looked still standing in the middle of the dancers. He made his way to the dais where his father was seated. Thranduil observed as Legolas surreptitiously glanced at the maiden he shared a dance with.

“She is Tauriel’s daughter.” Thranduil murmured quietly. Legolas was startled by his father’s words and felt his cheeks redden.

“I was unaware Tauriel married.” Indeed, Tauriel had mentioned nothing of the kind during their discussion earlier. He studied the girl for any physical resemblance to his old friend. She plucked at the harp strings with such precision and the melody that flowed from her hands must surely have resembled the song of the Ainur.

His father seemed to misinterpret his silence; perhaps thought he was distressed to hear of Tauriel’s marriage.

“She did not.” Thranduil’s response was suspiciously neutral. “Tauriel took Melethril as a ward and provided for her care and education after she was orphaned. Her music is written by her own hand and comes to life through her harp.”

Legolas sensed there was more to this tale if his father came to know so much of it but he did not push. At that very moment, he saw Tauriel enter the hall. Her auburn hair fell loosely over her shoulders and glinted in the firelight of the nearest lantern. She’d changed into a gown of deep green satin that emphasized her slender lines and left her arms bare. He watched her closely and examined his own heart for any lingering ardor, finding nothing but the thrum of friendly affection. In a way, he was relieved.

As Legolas turned in his father’s direction to serve him more wine from a gilded pitcher, he saw that he too watched Tauriel. For the most fleeting second, Legolas thought his eyes betrayed him. His friend made her way through the different groups of people that were scattered through the vast hall, her steps complemented by her rippling skirts.

Tauriel at last came forward, curtsying before the dais, and the motion was so strange to Legolas for he knew her as a soldier clad in shirt and breeches far better than this dignified Silvan beauty.

“My lord, I thank you for the invitation to this feast to celebrate the return of your son Prince Legolas.” Tauriel said formally. It was customary for all in attendance to do so when they first arrived.

“You are most welcome here, commander.” His father responded with similar formality.

Legolas gave her his own welcome, for appearance’s sake, and descended from the dais again to partner his friend in the next dance. It was a jovial tune now and Melethril abandoned the harp for a flute. The swirl of his people all around them, stepping, leaping and turning in perfect time, was not enough to distract him from the feeling of his father observing him.

He eventually realized that he was not the object of his father’s scrutiny. Instead, it was the woman who danced at his side.

“I became acquainted with lady Melethril earlier this night, she is a credit to you.” Legolas spoke without any shortness of breath while they broke apart and came together as the beating drums
commanded them.

“Thank you. She is very dear to me.” Tauriel seemed surprised at his speech.

“That I can see.”

“She admires you greatly, you know. She made sure that her pieces would be featured during this particular celebration and even put aside her harp to be sure she could join in the dance when you did.”

Again, the prince found himself grow warm in the cheeks. "I wonder who is responsible for filling her head with those tales."

She couldn't help but laugh fondly. "Who indeed?"

Legolas did not miss a beat and neither did she, they danced with the same precision with which they fought. Tauriel's long hair spun gracefully behind her, she might not be the greatest beauty in the Hall based purely on Elven ideals but Legolas still thought she was captivating.

“I cannot keep up with these changes. I return to find you a proper lady, mother, and formidable commander. Can this be the same daughter of the forest I once knew?”

Her gaze grew serious as she was drawn back to times long past and he then regretted his tone. Of course she’d known more sadness and fear than many, so he was deeply glad she seemed to have done well for herself since last he saw her. He wanted to take back his words. Then Tauriel looked at him again with something resembling contentment and he knew she’d come back from wherever her thoughts had taken her.

“Your father’s guidance has much to do with it.” She said when he took her hand to lead her into a spin.

Legolas almost did not catch her soft words above the resounding percussion that filled the hall. They continued the dance in silence, each choosing to focus on the steps and avoid colliding with others. Soon enough, the song came to its end and the dancers applauded again. He raised his hands to Melethril, who beamed at his recognition.

By the night’s end, Aragorn bid him and his father farewell. He told them not for where he headed, only that he must not delay. Legolas instinctively knew it had to do with Gollum’s captivity, and that Mithrandir had plans to set in motion. Plans within plans, Legolas thought wearily, all the while evil gathers its strength.

He retired to his former quarters, all of the observances of the evening fresh in his mind.
“Are you certain this is what you wish? There is no shame in postponing this until you are older.” Tauriel said. Her hands smoothened out the neatly folded bedclothes which sat in a pile atop the bare mattress.

Melethril carried on folding her clothes and placing them into woven baskets. She was of age to be assigned her own living quarters. The young girl she used to tote around on her back was now a young woman, that much could not be denied. Sadly, many of the chambers of those who perished at the hands of orcs were still empty. Melethril faced no shortage of choices in this.

“I’ll still be near to you, dear Tauriel, only in a room with higher ceilings so I shall have proper acoustics to practice my music in. You see? My moving benefits your ears too—no more sour notes or botched harmonies for you to endure!” Melethril said this jokingly as she went about her packing.

It was with a mother’s fondness that Tauriel enjoyed hearing those so-called botched harmonies, but she kept it to herself.

“You promise that I will still be the first to hear your new compositions?”

“Of course! Your help with lyrics for my hymns is invaluable to me. For a warrior, you have a very poetic soul.”

Tauriel snorted softly and helped fold the last frock, setting it down in its basket and placing the wicker lid above it. The two of them surveyed the entirety of what needed to be moved, which admittedly was not much, but it would take them more than one trip to and from Melethril’s new rooms.

Halfway down the second flight of carven stairs, Tauriel dutifully listened to Melethril’s plans for arranging everything in her new abode. She clutched two wide baskets against her chest, the weight of which did not hinder her steps.

They politely greeted others whom they passed in the corridors. Tauriel knew Melethril was coming of age—she was nearly seventy after all. In the grand scheme of their world, she was still very young and sheltered even though Tauriel ensured that Melethril learned the histories and lore of several realms beyond only those of their kin. Despite all of this education, the girl had only ever known life among the Wood-elves of Mirkwood and the only encounter with the outside world had shattered the peace of her earliest years.

“Tauriel? Did you hear me?”

“Yes, sweet one. I think you will make very fine quarters for yourself, and I will visit you often.”

The afternoon passed in a flurry of activity—they completed the move and focused on unpacking Melethril’s belongings. Before long, the rooms already had a personality about them. Melethril had asked for several beautiful displays of flowers to be delivered from the indoor gardens, exquisite purple orchids adorned the space. They both felt the stirrings of hunger so they decided to halt their progress momentarily in favor of a meal.

The dining hall was not yet full, it was still early for most to take their evening meal. They helped themselves to light fare and only drank water, then indulged in honey cake afterwards.

“Tauriel, are you to meet with the prince this night?” Melethril asked innocently.
The older elf turned a wary eye to her. Tauriel drew slow patterns with her spoon through the soup in front of her. “He and I plan to patrol the immediate perimeter of the forest but we shan’t be gone for long.”

Melethril kept her face too relaxed for Tauriel not to spot the obvious disappointment. She was never adept at sport, and she would have much difficulty keeping pace with two of the kingdom’s mightiest warriors. A moment later, she shrugged delicately and her face broke into a smile.

“I am writing a very interesting piece. I know not what to name it, the title that retains the correct sentiment eludes me…I envision the drum to exactly mimic the sound of your footfalls as you dash through the wood, and the flutes and lyre the notes of the forest creatures that are there to witness it. Perhaps the wind whistling through the branches.”

Tauriel grinned. “Your style is so strange for the taste of our people. You favor painting scenes of nature with your music, rather than praising our creators or lamenting tragedies past.”

“Why does it surprise you? I think it stems from your influence. Always taking me outdoors to play and see the beauty of our world. I dreamed of autumn leaves and the smell of spices in the air. That is the music I hear in my heart.”

Melethril was artless in her animation, so endearing a child she was. Tauriel was saddened that she was not truly her mother but grateful that she had made the decision to be one to her after discovering her in the Halls of Healing so long ago.

“In any case I much prefer your style; there are far too many solemn hymns written and sung by our people already.”

“I am so gratified to hear it.” Melethril replied tartly, and then finished her soup with renewed appetite. “I’m afraid that I might have offended the prince at his welcome feast. When you see him later, will you relay my apologies? I was very forward with him after all.”

“My dear, you were nothing short of charming. Do not fret, Legolas looks upon you kindly.”

Melethril looked somewhat comforted at that. She set down her linen napkin abruptly, realizing she’d been unconsciously twisting it in agitation.

“Come, let’s return you to your new rooms and then I will ready myself for the patrol.”

Tauriel took the young lady back to her quarters so she could continue unpacking the smaller of her belongings. The commander then returned to her own rooms, two levels above by ascending the carven stairs and retrieved her bow and quiver full of arrows she’d made herself some days before. She so rarely went on active patrols anymore, instead she dedicated her energy to the training of her company.

The king had doubled the amount of troops she and the other commanders were responsible for, and all of the soldiers who’d come from beyond the capital needed much by way of preparation. Woodelves who lived beneath the trees in this day and age were no stranger to combat against foul creatures but they were hot-headed and unused to the chain of command. In the last twenty years, Tauriel forged her portion of the army from disparate pieces and made them into one, a sharpened blade of Elven steel to be added to the overall blade of Thranduil’s forces.

Legolas met her at the bend of the Old Forest River where the riverside trail wandered off into a thicker part of the wood. He greeted her with a bittersweet smile. They once did this patrol regularly, before he decided Mirkwood could no longer teach him the lessons he needed to learn.
“What is it that we expect to find out here, these days?” Legolas asked evenly. They set out at a smooth jog, their steps barely audible over the moss covered ground. Tauriel kept perfect pace with him. Her sharp eyes took in all around them and she contemplated his query.

“It varies. Spiders mostly, occasionally predatory bats, from the reports I hear about. Your father prefers I act as an adviser of sorts to him rather than join the patrols. It has been a handful of years since I last patrolled in earnest.”

They passed the base of an abandoned watchtower constructed by their people. It was covered in dried web of the spiders Tauriel spoke of. The tower itself was hardly visible through the ropey, ash-grey strings. Legolas frowned in disgust.

“This is far worse than anything I could have imagined.”

“We’re not even two miles out from the palace.”

The distance was astonishingly short before the stars were no longer visible even to their far-reaching sight. She saw the prince’s outrage and anguish grow as he saw all of the wreckage of the formerly magnificent woodland. The darkness of night fell over the land now, though even if the sun were shining, she knew no green could be found in the depth of these woods anymore. The smell of decay hung heavy in the air. It was an absolute perversion of the season of spring.

They kept their jog but both had to work slightly harder to avoid getting any part of them stuck in the fresh spiderwebs.

“How could this happen?” Legolas asked roughly.

She took a leaping step over a fallen tree trunk, and he followed her example, both landing in a shallow puddle of mud before resuming their pace. Cicadas that once populated the forest could no longer be heard.

“The creatures are much more difficult to kill. We lost several of our bravest to their venom and sometimes they were just overwhelmed by the spiders’ numbers. The Captain of the guard has mandated patrols but the routes are nowhere near as ambitious as before. The creatures closed in further once they realized nothing else stopped them.”

Legolas said nothing, only clenched his jaw in a way that reminded her so much of Thranduil that made her heart twist.

“My father has shielded us from this for how long—he cannot hold them off forever.”

“I know. Let us not think on this too deeply. We need to focus on our surroundings for now, my prince.”

“Don’t call me that, Tauriel. You should know titles mean little to me now.”

She couldn’t keep from smiling a little at his tone. His time with the Dunedain had indeed humbled him more than she might have ever expected.

Just then, her breath was stolen from her when she pitched forward suddenly—something heavy slammed into her back and knocked her quiver off. She rolled with the movement, attempting to dislodge the spider from her back. When she jumped to her feet, she saw she’d succeeded. The spider was young, not its full size. She was not bitten thankfully. Legolas dispatched it with three arrows shot simultaneously with his recurve bow. For good measure, Tauriel drew her blade and drove it straight through the creature’s head.
Its hairy legs twitched in death. Black blood oozed from its wounds. Both elves stared at it with grim resignation.

He didn’t patronize her by asking if she was alright. Her cloak was rumpled and her hair was wildly mussed but she was not harmed. She sheathed her blade and went back to retrieve her fallen quiver, holding her bow securely with her other hand. Legolas kept an arrow at the ready.

That was when the madness began.

There was a thrumming sort of noise in the back of her mind. Her brow drew down, she frowned in her sleep. The noise was not unpleasant, quite the opposite in fact. She was warm, wrapped in silken sheets, as the noise surrounded her comfortably.

Several moments later, Tauriel realized it was not noise, it was a voice. Someone was speaking, doing a poor job of trying to do it quietly. There was an answering voice, higher in pitch and also pleasing to the ear. The words did not register in her mind. She just lay there. Why could she not move? Tauriel grew frustrated—she wanted to wake fully but something held her in the space between dreams and the waking world.

“How long has it been since she fell under?”

“How long, my lord.”

“The Healers have seen to her and still there has been no change?”

“That is correct, my lord, I have fed her water and honey to try reviving her but her body slumbers.”

Tauriel could now make sense of the words but her limbs did not heed the orders from her head. She wanted to growl but could not manage that either. She concentrated on moving her fingers, delighted when she succeeded with her little and then ring finger of her left hand.

No one spoke now.

The silence was deafening.

It frightened her, this odd sensation of immobility paired with consciousness. Soon she could shake her wrist, and she fought her body until her heart pounded and her eyes flew open. The thrumming, sonorous voice was back and it spurred her onward. Tauriel willed her body to come back to itself until she sat bolt upright in the bed she recognized as her own. She breathed deeply in relief, and then noticed she was not alone.

“You took a spill into the Enchanted River, dear Tauriel! We thought it something much more serious like spider venom but it was only the magicked water that sent you into such deep slumber.” Melethril was at her bedside, clutching her hand worriedly. Tauriel could feel the slight calluses from the harp strings and she smiled.

“I feel a little out of sorts but I am alright. Thank you for caring for me. How long was it since that night? How fares Legolas? He did not fall too, did he?” She suddenly grew worried at the thought.
“No.” That voice. “He bore you back to the palace after maneuvering you out of the water with the aid of fallen branches.”

Thranduil sat across her small bedroom, in the only armchair she had. He looked distressed, in that he looked terrifyingly displeased to those who did not know him well or recognize the difference between the two. Tauriel knew Melethril was likely quaking in her shoes, being in such close proximity with the Elvenking. She adored the king, as she did when she was an elfling, but the sight of the king’s infamous temper was a different thing altogether.

“Melethril, return to your chambers. I will come to you at a later hour.” Tauriel said. The girl promptly bowed to the king and hurried out, closing the door behind her.

Thranduil then stood, raising himself up to his full height. Tauriel shifted her body in the bed to feel more comfortable. She nestled her upper body into the cushions, curving her hips too. The movement caused the top sheet that covered her to fall slightly, and she knew her day gown revealed more than what she usually wore. His eyes trailed downward over her form.

“You were careless.”

She narrowed her eyes.

“There were six that descended from the overgrowth. Anyone would have been surprised.”

He returned her sharp gaze.

“You could have drowned.”

“I did not.”

Thranduil did not care to escalate this argument. She watched him as he stepped closer to her bedside, how undressed she felt next to him in his ornate chartreuse garments. The mattress dipped under his weight when he lowered himself to sit next to her.

“Always fighting, always pushing forward.” His temper subsided, she suspected he simply enjoyed her combative side. Over the years she came to understand that he actually liked how difficult she could be when antagonized. And there was no one better than he to provoke her into such a state.

“You would not prefer me otherwise.” Tauriel teased softly.

“Who is to say that I prefer you at all?” His tone was light and arrogant but his expression was wry.

“What kind of warrior is felled by a pool of tepid water?”

She laughed, sitting up further and feeling the sheet fall all the way off of her.

He noticed that too. The neckline of her gown was far from modest, and her hair that Melethril had dutifully kept tangle-free rested over one shoulder. The diaphanous gown was not meant to be seen by anyone, the light of the lantern rendered it nearly translucent. Tauriel could not feel embarrassed for it. She once fought this too, always fighting as he’d said. Now, she relished his eyes on her, the tangible heat of his molten stare. His lips were close enough to reach if she chose to.

In an instant, it was over. Thranduil cleared his throat and looked away. His next words were gentle.

“Do not embark on patrols with anything less than a full squadron. Someone of your position in my ranks should know better, especially with our…guest down in the dungeons. Its energy may invite
Tauriel shivered at the mention of the horrid Gollum. She inclined her head, taking his point. With that, he flicked his eyes to hers once more then she watched him take his leave.
Chapter 3

Legolas could think of one thousand other things he preferred to do instead of his obligatory task of supervising the guards that monitored Gollum while he wandered in the wood. The state of his homeland still pained him deeply. Seeing it defiled by sinister creatures, including the one that was harassing a catfish in the shallow pond before them, left him bitter. The shadow over the forest turned the forest creatures vicious—bats, squirrels, and even butterflies of the deepest black blotted out what light peeked through the dense treetops.

The creature was in the habit of singing when it fished and this afternoon was no exception. The guards stood by as Gollum thrust the fish into the air and jigged. They could not understand him for he sang in the common tongue. Legolas unfortunately did.

“The rock and pool is nice and cool, so juicy-sweet! Our only wish, to catch a fish, so juicy-sweet!” It was Smeagol today, then. It was no small blessing that the more harmless of its two dispositions was currently present. Legolas stood tall, tracking every move the creature made. Smeagol ate messily, tearing into the fish with gusto that visibly disturbed even the stone-faced guards.

After its meal, Smeagol was allowed to climb a small tree with hardly any foliage upon it so he could not disappear from their sight before their arrows could kill him. This was a daily routine permitted to Smeagol that Legolas thought far too generous of his father, so to compensate, he insisted on accompanying the guards himself. After the accident with Tauriel and the Enchanted River, he would take no further chances of anything going wrong. Smeagol—Gollum—was as much a danger even when he resembled a child as he flung himself from the branches and landed back in the little pond.

Aragorn had had more patience with Smeagol than he, Legolas well knew. The journey from the south took its toll on him and he grew short with the sniveling creature. Aragorn even carried it when its wounds rendered it lame. Everywhere Legolas looked, to the lands east from whence the wind carried terrible omens, through the horror of the Dead Marshes where the body of his grandfather rested, he could only think what it must have looked like when his father fought in the Battle of Dagorlad during the Last Alliance between his people and Men. The sight of dead Galadhrim warriors in the murky marshes, the fortified Morannon and the distant roar of Mount Doom filled him with trepidation.

Smeagol still sang of juicy, sweet fish as he played in the branches above when Legolas noticed an elleth ambling down the forest path nearby. In a pale rose gown and mantle, her brown hair blown softly away by the breeze, she was instantly recognizable. She appeared lost in thought, humming quietly to herself.

“Mistress Melethril, you should not be here.” He warned sternly. To his dismay, she continued toward him, undaunted, her lips parted in a pleasant smile. Of course Tauriel’s ward would not easily obey. Where else would she learn such impudence?

“I have heard rumors of these jaunts to the wood. How magnanimous of you to allow him fresh air.” She nodded her head in the direction of the water where Smeagol splashed about.

Legolas listened to her speech, noting as if for the first time the difference between the Sindarin dialect of his people and what he’d grown used to by speaking with Aragorn, who’d been fostered with the Elves of Imladris for nearly his whole life. Melethril’s accent rolled smoothly as if in song—he wondered if that was a result of her skill in music or characteristic of the accent of the Wood-elves of these parts.
Just then, Smeagol—Gollum—landed with a thud on all fours and scampered up to Melethril, causing her to jump with a brief cry of shock.

Its speech was unintelligible to her, he could tell, but after her initial alarm she miraculously was smiling once more and her beauty seemed to please the wretched waif. The guards kept their hands at the hilts of their blades, and Legolas watched Smeagol like a hawk.

Melethril began to sing, then. She knew Smeagol had been singing while climbing and thought a merry tune might ease his sorrows as he must surely be returned to his captivity soon. Legolas watched the creature but he also heard the superior quality of the elleth’s soprano, which was by turns rich and light. Though he’d rather she stay away, he was grateful for the effect of her song on Smeagol. He was calmer and in that, he was more predictable. The guards listened too and were awed by her.

At the end of the afternoon, the party trudged back to the Keep to descend to the dungeons all the while Smeagol wept pitifully. Melethril went as far as the top of the stairs that led down to the rows of caves barred with durable wooden doors.

The guards drove Smeagol back into his confinement and his wails once more echoed off the walls that enclosed him.

“What has he done to deserve such cruel imprisonment?” Melethril asked sadly. Legolas guided her away from the dungeon entrance, his hand firm on her lower back.

“He betrayed information under duress to an evil force. There is much at stake because of his actions.”

“And your return coincides with his appearance here in this kingdom.” She whispered back. It turned out that she was under no illusion as to the truth of his homecoming. They climbed the stairs together in reflective silence.

They now stood in the courtyard within his father’s palace, from whence many paths originated to other portions of the halls. Many of their kin wandered through this shared space, eying their prince and the fair maiden curiously. Melethril did not behold him with the same wonder as she did at their first meeting. She looked tense, likely on account of Tauriel’s close brush with the spiders. He felt remorseful for insisting that Tauriel show him the forest when he noticed the shadows beneath her eyes.

“While I thank you for your aid in pacifying the prisoner, I will not speak more on this, my lady. I do not wish for you to be troubled by his presence here.”

“Very well, then speak to me of other things. Tell me of more pleasant thoughts, that we may both lighten our moods.” Her face was open, her eyes shining. Her forthright manner did not take him aback like before.

They began to walk, meandering through the palace as he seemed to be fond of doing these days. She listened as he told her of his travels since he left Mirkwood, though he omitted much detail regarding the darkening of the world beyond. Instead they discussed and compared the ways of life between elves and Men, he told her of their kin in Rivendell in the west and Lothlorien to the southwest.

In turn, she told him of her childhood and described life in his father’s halls during his long absence. They shared some similarity in memory of certain places in the palace, which prompted him to recall his own childhood mischief.
They talked without a break in conversation for nigh on three hours before he realized it. He found her to be intelligent and admirably well-versed in many topics. There was still naivety there that indicated her youth. She was so young still, he thought, with many years ahead of her to mature. It was time he quit her lest she mistook this time as something more than it really was.

However, it seemed she was perceptive too. The young lady came to a halt, causing him to do the same.

“Thank you, my lord. For humoring me a little while.” She sighed. “My music is all anyone speaks to me about because it is easy and familiar. You have shown me much respect this day, I know not why I asked you for light speech. Forgive my folly.”

Melethril bent her knee in a shallow curtsey before stepping past him, without looking back. Legolas could only watch her retreating form, feeling wrong-footed for reasons unknown to him.

At the close of another long day, Tauriel brushed the thin sheen of perspiration from her brow with the back of her hand. Her ranks were much improved, the once unruly outsiders were now self-possessed soldiers who would be useful additions to any sortie. Each soldier sparred in training matches and the champion received the honor of sparring with her. She was known to be fearsome in combat, her skill only increasing with the passage of time. While this reputation may have made a lesser Elf proud, she did not let it inflate her ego. Her fighters needed to be far better than she. It was her responsibility to make it so.

At this precise moment, Captain Feren was the one fallen. Her longtime second-in-command was a good sport and an equally good fighter—most importantly he did not let her win to preserve her vanity. She had bested him on her own terms and not from any charity on his part though it was quite a close match. Tauriel extended a hand toward him and he took it, hopping to his feet as she pulled him up. He sheathed his sword and they bowed to each other as the group of foot soldiers stood at attention. Silvan elves mostly, with little experience in warfare, she mused.

They dismissed the band of soldiers and watched them file out of the training hall.

“They are unquiet,” Feren murmured simply. “They know their strength will be tested. They know some of them will not live through what is to come.”

“Do not give those thoughts voice.” She reprimanded him even if she knew it was true and could hardly deny it.

“Very well, commander.”

She fidgeted uncharacteristically as he stood beside her, unmoving until she dismissed him. Tauriel turned to him but instead of relieving him from duty, she said, “Assemble a platoon of fresh guards. We shall patrol this night.”

Her captain looked hesitant and she knew it was because of what happened the last time she’d patrolled with the prince. Her expression grew stony the longer he delayed. She knew it was not her direct obligation to lead patrols but some instinct, some bone-deep restlessness drove her to do so.

“Yes, commander. I will call them at once.”

A total of fifteen of her soldiers were assembled in less than half an hour. They wore pared down armor and mail, their recurve bows and quivers, with twin blades sheathed at both hips. She led them
on foot, intending to cover the ruins of old villages to the near south of Thranduil’s halls.

She belatedly realized she should have informed Legolas of her intent but he was undoubtedly otherwise occupied, so she was left with only the same feeling of immense restlessness. No one spoke during this expedition. Feeling vaguely guilty for making her soldiers patrol too, she reasoned that this was also an effective training exercise. Battle was more often than not fought in the darkness as well as daylight. Especially against orcs that were more comfortable fighting at night than under the sun. Her feet knew the path, her mind went blank as parchment untouched by ink. It helped to calm the rising of nerves, a mental trick she frequently taught to her subordinate fighters.

Feren was at her side, his presence reassuring in the obscurity. Then she heard someone speak and she turned to see who addressed her.

“Commander—some of these tracks are new. I noticed them appear sporadically some leagues ago but here they are concentrated. They destroyed the ruins of this settlement.” Arphenion, as he was called, whispered to her. He pointed to the considerably large statue that had been toppled and cracked. There were remnants of simple Elven houses fashioned from wood and stone but they were deserted and uninhabitable. The putrefied spiders’ webs were testament to the beasts’ involvement in the initial wreck.

But Arphenion drew her attention to a different set of tracks—heavy, wrathful, full of malicious intent that radiated from the very earth. She resisted the impulse to shudder. She knew well what caused these tracks, she and Feren were the only ones of this group that faced this horror.

“Orcs were here.” Tauriel said gravely. Her soldiers kept their weapons ready as she looked around more. The statue that lay broken was one of an unknown elf maid. She wondered, fleetingly, if it was a sculpture of a long-forgotten queen. Then she brushed the thought away and they proceeded to examine every nook and cranny of the ghost town, in the end finding nothing but dust and bones.

“We shall return and report this to his majesty immediately.” Tauriel asserted. They were on high alert the entire way back to the palace. When the enormous gates were pulled shut and all were safely returned, she could breathe easier again.

“Go to the king and tell him all we saw, omit no detail.” She ordered her captain.

“Of course, commander, though he much prefers your report on things of this nature.” Feren said.

“I have some business to attend to.”

She loathed coming down here but there could be no escaping it this particular night. The dungeons were mostly unused save for the cell that held Gollum. It stared at her with its bulbous blue eyes when she came close. She reverted to the common tongue to understand it though the words were clumsy to her ear and felt foreign to her after having neglected the language for so long.

She stood right outside the barred door to question it.

“Were you followed when the prince and his companion bore you here?” Her voice held an implicit threat if he did not answer. Her teeth bared, she made herself look as threatening as possible.

“We don’t know—the journey was long from the shadowlands…” Gollum said in a chilling tone. “I am parted from my precious, the only precious we could ever want, more than all the fresh air and sweet fish than you elflings can provide me!”
Its weathered hands batted at the bars and rattled the door insistently, its eyes glowed with avarice that frightened her. She remembered tales of Thorin Oakenshield at the height of his dragonsickness and wondered if it could compare with this.

“What did you see in Mordor?” She asked plainly. She needed to know, to confirm what she suspected—that their forest was under direct threat.

“He wants our precious—he seeks it, he seeks to possess it again as he did before. He builds a host that he will release unto the world and nothing can stand against him. You will fall before him!” Its speech was cut off by its gurgling, repulsive cough that may have been laughter of the most unsettling kind.

“Do you call your orc friends here to harm us? Answer me!”

It only growled and rattled the bars harder. She herself wanted to reach through and hit it over the head in frustration. Moments later, she reigned in the urge because she knew whatever torture had been inflicted upon it in Mordor was likely far worse than anything she could probably do to it now. Instead she chose to read through the implications of his words; that there were orcs trampling through Mirkwood and they were in hiding.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Warning: Violence further ahead

The council chamber was carved into the stone that holds Thranduil’s mighty throne above, big enough to comfortably host the entire council and its king and shuttered away that none might overhear the discussion within.

Tauriel thought to find him there alone before the council was summoned so she trod the winding stone path that led there. She smiled at her enthusiasm, she very much looked forward to speaking with him if only for a little while before the others arrived.

It had been two weeks since she last saw him, as she and four of her fellow commanders led expeditions sweeping through the woodland until the edges of Mirkwood’s borders on all sides. Orc tracks were identified most heavily in the south near the mountains. The goblin population had tripled in the time since Thranduil attacked the Goblin Gate after the Battle of Five Armies. The forest grew ever darker, ever sicker. The purpose of the council meeting was to decide the best course of action in the face of damning evidence of an ancient evil’s rising.

She paused just outside the door, which was left slightly ajar. There were voices emanating from inside. She was reluctant to disturb a private appointment so she remained just outside the threshold.

“I chose you for your discretion.” She heard Thranduil say softly. “I know my confidence is not misplaced in you.”

There was no verbal reply. Tauriel was curious as to who the king addressed but she dared not peek through the cracked door. It was too late to introduce her presence there without revealing that she was blatantly eavesdropping. She heard footsteps approaching from inside, the mysterious individual was preparing to leave. Tauriel jumped behind where the door pushed outward and was unseen.

She was stunned when the lady Vanadessë emerged. Tauriel recognized her as one of their kingdom’s most talented artisans. It could be said that she herself was a work of art; it was undeniable that the lady was the epitome of Noldorin beauty. She had hair that shined like nightfall and it trailed over her back, her face partially obscured from Tauriel’s view. The train of her mantle brushed the floor gracefully as she moved. She walked down the path and disappeared from sight when she began to ascend the stairs that led toward the throne.

Her stomach twisted unpleasantly. How long had it been since she allowed jealousy to physically affect her? Tauriel gritted her teeth, her excitement to see him abruptly petered out. There was no point in prolonging the inevitable. She stepped inside the council room. There he stood, near an ornate credenza where two half-finished glasses of spring-wine sat. Presumably they each shared a glass of wine together, Tauriel realized. Thranduil looked stricken at her unannounced appearance.

"My lord, I am here to answer your summons and receive my orders from Lord Beriadan, your general." Tauriel said, her tone somewhere between nonchalance and irritation. It was none of her concern, if he held secret meetings with a beautiful lady. He was king of Mirkwood and of his own affairs.
"You have the uncanny tendency to appear at precisely the wrong time." Thranduil stated, frowning. He came to a halt in front her, staring imperiously downward. He clearly knew she’d witnessed the tail end of that interaction. She flicked her gaze to his, her anger sharpening acutely when she realized he was being defensive.

"It matters not, there are far more important things at hand." She said while deliberately ignoring his reproachful look. Never mind that she’d spent two weeks sleeping on the hard forest floor, living off game meat, with the added stress of potential confrontation with bloodthirsty orcs and goblins. She felt tired and unsightly in her plain brown leathers and boots.

He crossed his arms, adding to the impression of his defensiveness.

"It is a private matter, Tauriel." He said quietly. Now he sought to placate her with his words and silken tones. Still, she ignored him.

The approaching footfalls outside warned both of them that they would soon be joined by the full council.

She briefly glanced up again. "I do not doubt it. Though the next time you meet her, remember to ask Galion to fully close the door."

Feeling darkly triumphant, Tauriel broke his gaze and moved to the back of the room where her rank dictated she should stand. As a captain, she wouldn't have even warranted a place in the room, she mused.

Thranduil ignored her jab but she saw it hit home. She felt the spiteful satisfaction fade almost instantly. She attributed her sudden turn of temper to the stress of the expedition. Perhaps she could apologize later, if she could swallow her pride. It truly was none of her business who he spent time with in an unofficial capacity.

The twelve lords of the Elvenking's council entered and took their seats, which were arranged in a wide circle. The king's chair was taller and the most ornate with carven vines climbing up the back of it. She continued to watch the door in expectation of Legolas arriving but he did not come. The chair meant for the prince stayed vacant at Thranduil’s right.

All of the commanders took their appropriate places, standing behind the generals. Thranduil went to his seat and convened the hearing, his eyes stormy and equally intent on ignoring her, it seemed.

“My lords, I welcome you to our Halls. I know many of you have travelled far to reach us, what we discuss here is of utmost import to you and your fiefs.” Thranduil began cordially. Tauriel observed the Elven lords, half of them Silvan and the other half of mixed Vanyarin descent. Their hair color marked the principal difference between them, but all were nobly dressed and characteristically elegant Elves.

“I will begin with the news I have from Imladris. Elrond writes that he and his people will leave Imladris with the intention of sailing to the Undying Lands.”

This drew a strong reaction from all in the room. Tauriel’s jaw dropped. Imladris made up a great portion of the elvish population in Middle Earth. With their imminent departure, a third of their kin will have left Middle Earth forever.

“Is the evil to the east so grave a threat to prompt Elrond thusly?” Hérion, a solemn-faced Silvan
general, spoke up among the group. He’d led one of the expeditions north, he well knew the signs of Sauron’s darkness from the signs of activity in the stronghold at Gundabad. Elrond’s plan was to the Woodland Elves a sign of thoughtless capitulation.

“He is free to make his own choices. His people have elected to go.” Thranduil said. He beheld all who sat before him with much seriousness. “As are you. If you so choose to depart for the Grey Havens, I shall not condemn you for your choice.”

Some of the lords appeared to consider this, others looked affronted by the concept.

Of the latter was her direct superior, Lord Beriadan. He was of Vanyarin heritage, with the pale coloring and arresting eyes like Thranduil.

“We shall not abandon our forest, my king. Not while you remain here to face what rises out of the South.”

Tauriel dismissed her earlier pettiness toward Thranduil. She wholeheartedly agreed with her general’s declaration though she held her peace for once.

“What of our kin in Lórien? What of Lord Celeborn?” asked another—Lord Arandur this time, another Silvan.

“Celeborn will remain for the time being. His wife is a ring-bearer and has foreknowledge of what may come to pass.” The king replied.

Much discussion ensued regarding the journey to Aman. Tauriel said nothing, only listened. Thranduil would not leave. This stood out most among all of the speeches. Her king would not abandon Middle Earth to a dark fate. She was filled with pride for him, how differently he now viewed the world since the last time their realm fought a war. She could not deny that she was afraid. There was so much at stake and too much uncertainty for her to fathom. Facing a dragon was no grand mystery, only a matter of mustering a force mighty enough to defeat the beast. The evil of Sauron was difficult to pinpoint strategically, like trying to trap shadows with bare hands.

After many long minutes, Arandur spoke up once more. “My King Thranduil, we shall inform our people, your subjects of the possibility of departing and we will not punish those who make that decision. However, our place is with you as it has been these many years past and so it shall be until the end of all days be upon us.”

All inclined their heads in deferential agreement. Thranduil returned the gesture, honoring all with the same respect.

“We shall discuss the next area of concern. There are many parts of our borders that require vast fortification against both Gundabad and Dol Guldur, should either of these march upon us—”

The king’s speech was cut short by the chamber door being thrown open by Galion, whose face contorted with horror. Tauriel’s blood ran cold as the butler spoke the words, her hand gripped the general’s chair back until her knuckles went white. Before she knew what she was doing, she was running out of the room with both of her knives drawn, leaving most behind though several of the commanders followed suit.

She came to a sudden halt, dust flying as her boots skidded. It was as Galion said. An ambush past the Western Gate—the orc pack she suspected in these parts! She counted three guards fighting valiantly, matching the creatures blow for blow. She saw two fallen soldiers, arrows sticking out of their bodies where their armor left them vulnerable.
Legolas still fought. He slashed the throat of his opponent—a black orc of solid musculature with a menacing face, fangs bared and eyes blazing with hatred. It advanced toward the prince, still hacking at him even as he dodged and parried. Tauriel took her knife by the sharp point and without hesitation launched it at the orc’s back, watching as it penetrated its hide and it shrieked in pain and shock. Legolas kicked it down finally and she dashed toward them, bending to rip the knife out of the orc. He registered her presence and together they engaged the remaining three orcs. More commanders arrived and between all of the Elves, the rest of the pack was soon obliterated.

“Where is Gollum?” Tauriel cried with dismay. The creature was nowhere to be found.

“The cursed thing disappeared at the first sign of the orcs. He is gone.” Legolas bit out. His voice was laced with panic even though their enemies were vanquished. He turned in a circle, frantically searching for something. She felt a wave of apprehension.

A scream pierced the air, some distance away. Legolas took off running with Tauriel at his heels toward the source of the noise.

In a bed of wildflowers lay a fallen orc, its grotesque body twitching in death. She was confused at Legolas rushing toward it until she saw the small white hand that clutched the dagger lodged in the creature’s neck.

“Melethril!” Tauriel shrieked, dropping her knives to pull the wretched corpse off of the young elf’s body as Legolas swept her protectively into his arms.

The commanders cleared the wood thereafter. Tauriel and Legolas returned to the fortress, the prince bearing Melethril’s unmoving body.

Legolas went to her after the council reconvened, including him in the latter half of it. Tauriel told him where to find her and that she would speak to no one, not even her. He doubted she would speak with him at all yet he felt obligated to see to her welfare after the earlier catastrophe. To his surprise, the wooden door was pulled back and she stood there with reddened, haunted eyes.

“I have come to ask if there is anything I may do for you.” The prince murmured. The candlelight of her small solar backlit her silhouette. She seemed to glow gently; the memory of the slaughter she was part of was almost unreal.

When Legolas thought she would simply close the door on him without a single word, she again surprised him by stepping back to make way for him. She went to the chaise that was pushed against the main wall and lay down on her side, her face pointed toward him but she shut her eyes.

Legolas made sure the door was shut behind him before he went to the armchair adjacent to the chaise and pushed it closer to her. He said nothing, just took his seat next to her. Melethril was not asleep, he could tell, but she stayed so still he might have believed it otherwise.

They stayed thus for a long while, perhaps an entire hour, maybe even two. He looked around at the room, glancing at the tapestry that adorned the humble walls and the blooming orchids that filled a few of the ceramic vases that covered many of the surfaces. There was a medium sized harp situated in a corner of the room and a short wooden stool beside it where she presumably sat to play. The ceilings were high, it was her favorite thing about the place, he remembered her say once.

“Yes creatures killed my father when I was a child.” Melethril whispered eventually. He snapped his eyes to hers at that. “I never saw my father’s body. I do not know what happened to the dead
from that battle so long ago.”

Legolas sighed deeply. “We honored their bodies with dignified burials. They were returned to the earth, and their fëar released to the bliss of Valinor.”

She was startled by his words. “I’d… I’d forgotten you were there. Tauriel mentioned it once, long ago. But I do not like to speak of it.”

The elleth’s face then contorted with long suppressed misery. No tears came. She’d spent them all before he’d arrived, it seemed. He was seized with the need to comfort her, to ease her sorrow, but he was at a loss as to how. So he just sat next to her, hoping that by simply being with her he could do just that.

Melethril soon recovered herself enough to resume her speech, though her tone was fragile.

“At that time, I used to pretend the king was my father. Looking back, I see how silly of me it was to presume to claim your father as my own. A lowly Silvan elf am I, my lord, do not think I still harbor the illusion of being part of a true family, much less a royal family like your own.” That note of dejection did not belong in her voice.

“You are not lowly.” Legolas vaguely remembered Tauriel saying something similar, long ago. “I do not begrudge you your grasp at a normal childhood after…” He trailed off. He did not wish to further grieve her.

“After my parents departed from this earth. There is no point in avoiding the words. They do not hurt me as much as they once did. It is only the memory of my mother’s despair at the passing of my father. I imagine nothing can prepare any of us for that kind of sundering.” Melethril leaned back into the plush cushions of the chaise. Her hair spilled onto the damask luxuriantly. Legolas studied her pensive face and warned his heart from the way it quickened when he looked upon her.

“No,” replied the prince, “Though my father long suffered the effects of his own sundering from my mother when she left this world.”

She turned her eyes to him, from the look of her, she was guarding some secret thought.

“Does he love her still?” Melethril asked. She looked away with nonchalance, as if his answer did not matter all that much.

“Who can claim to know the innermost workings of my father’s mind and heart,” Legolas said carefully. “He cares for all of us greatly. He has denied himself the chance to sail to the Undying Lands for thousands of years to protect us.”

She considered what he said. Her knees bent, causing her long skirt to tent over her legs.

“Time may ease the pain of a loved one’s passing.” Legolas offered gently. “You might also make the other case, that for immortals, loss is something that can never be recovered from. It weighs upon us until it drives us mad or kills us too. No matter how an Elf may boast of his immortality, none are immune to heartache.”

There was a moment of quiet as he shifted in his chair. He wondered if he spoke of matters far too personal for polite conversation, or revealed an embarrassing, overly sentimental part of himself that he allowed no one to see. Luckily, she just scoffed in reply.

“Your father the King is many things but not mad.”
Her skeptical proclamation caused Legolas to laugh unexpectedly.

“That is debatable, Melethril, and certainly depends on whom you ask.”

The young woman huffed, ignoring his quip and continued speaking her mind. She almost had to pretend to forget who he was, in order to maintain her air of honesty.

“He was always kind to me when I was a child. If ever I was belligerent and disobeyed Tauriel in some way, the king would somehow know of it and speak to me. It was never clear that I was being chastised until he departed and then I realized it after.”

“Such is his way, as a father. But as a king, there can be no mistaking his anger.” Legolas mused. He sat back in the armchair adjacent to her. It was pleasant to sit and converse with her, idle talk was not something he could do very frequently anymore much less with anyone he found as interesting.

“I…I think Tauriel sometimes looks at him as a…” Now she took care to censor herself. Perhaps she did not want to offend him. Yet he was intensely curious as to what she would say, for this hinted at a topic he’d long been pondering since he returned to Mirkwood.

“As a what?”

She swallowed, eyes trained on the ceiling.

“She looks at the king…differently.” Melethril admitted quietly. Then she shook her head dismissively, “It is very rare that she does so while anyone can plainly see, and I know she has the utmost respect for him. She takes her duty very seriously, my lord, please do not let what I say alter your perception of her as a commander.”

“Of course I won’t.” Legolas said, mildly affronted.

She bit her lip and looked away. Neither of them said anything more on this. The prince turned contemplative when he leaned back in his chair. He turned to look at his companion, studying her posture on the chaise. He realized she was now utterly at ease with him. Her shoulders languid and arms splayed as she cradled her head in her hands, leaning back. Her eyes were half lidded with drowsiness—had they really stayed awake past the midnight hour?

“I will retire to my rooms. Forgive me for disturbing you until this hour, Mistress Melethril.” Legolas said, the formality peculiar even to his own ears. He rose from the chair slowly and she tilted her head toward him, her hands coming from behind her head to rest folded on her abdomen.

“Goodnight, my prince.” Her smile was tinged with melancholy and he found himself discomfited. This elleth—how she vexed him! So why he continued to end up in her presence for considerable stretches of time discussing things bordering on nonsensical, confounded him. She nearly lost her life today. The thought of her dying was so jarring to him that he knew he must carry out the task his father set to him. He was to ride to Imladris to report to the lord Elrond of Gollum’s escape.

His walk back to his chamber was spent in long reflection of the earlier council meeting. The violence Melethril witnessed this day would never leave her. He regretted that she was there at all for it. His anger at his refusal to send her away in the first place, to be firmer even as she playfully resisted, returned. She had to stay away from him, for her own safety. Perhaps it was just as well that he was to travel to Lord Elrond’s domain, to clear his head of laughing blue eyes and that voice like Tinuviel’s.
The magnitude of Tauriel’s relief that Melethril survived the encounter rendered her numb with shock and gratitude. She tended to her charge, applying ointment and bandage to her cuts, and healing her ankle which was swollen from a sprain. Melethril returned her embrace tightly but did not speak. Tauriel knew Legolas’s presence soothed her, so she let them be.

Now the commander was left to her own devices. The events of the day were almost beyond comprehension. King and council resolved to dedicate all military force against Sauron in spite of a history of overwhelmingly isolationist opinion. The attack on their prince and the disappearance of Gollum were catalyst enough. Thranduil would not sail west. She would lead her company into battle, it was only a matter of time now.

For the second time that day, Tauriel’s feet brought her to a place she did not consciously realize she was going to.

The guards admitted her without question, they knew she was no danger to their king and that he was wide awake. Thranduil paced on the balcony of his chambers. His hands clasped behind his back, he still donned his raiment and crown of woodland flowers. He looked to be deep in troubled thoughts when she came forward. Their eyes met, recognizing the emotion in the others’ and Tauriel went to him as he opened his arms wide.

She collapsed against him, shaking uncontrollably. She was incapable of speech, she had no voice left to spare. His large hands stroked her back slowly. This unconditional kindness from him made her even more ashamed of how she treated him earlier. She buried her face in the lapel of his robe, arms wrapped around him uncaring of how tightly she gripped him.

“You will not leave us here,” Tauriel said at last, the side of her face resting against his chest. She could feel his steady heartbeat at her cheek. The moon hung over their heads, so too did the Seven Stars of the Valar. Their light seemed more distant than ever.

“No. I shall not, and never will.” The Elvenking’s words and touch comforted her. They stood together until the sun breached the clouds over the tree-lined horizon and she watched the rays illuminate his person, knowing in that moment that her devotion would never waver again.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Morning had broken. Arien guided the sun through the summer solstice which occurred as they stood on the balcony, heralding what should have been a season teeming with life in the Greenwood of old. Now all that was left of summer could be felt with the return of the sticky, humid air without any of the verdant splendor of the past. Still, Tauriel rested in Thranduil's hold. She did not want to move. The cadence of his pulse and the warmth of the pale sun lulled her into unprecedented calm.

When he spoke, she felt rather than heard him, the sound of his voice hummed low in her ear. "Will you break your fast with me?"

Tauriel graced him with a smile of assent. She summoned the discipline to remove herself from his arms. He looked no less perturbed than she felt at the separation. This was precarious ground for them indeed. Every encounter like this became myth in her memory, irrespective of how many times they were drawn together by circumstance, it still felt like each time was but a fragment of a dream.

Galion arrived promptly with a modest selection of fruit and sweet breads which were laid out on the king's oak table in his solar. If Galion was shocked to find her there, he hid it well. After the table was set, the steward bowed to them and stepped out.

Thranduil went to his dressing chamber, leaving her alone for a moment. He returned wearing a simpler morning robe. He looked lean and strong without the bulk of his usual attire, she also noted the lack of his crown or circlet atop his head which allowed his hair to fall freely over his shoulders. His hands were free of the opal, jade, and bronze filigree rings he wore. The easy intimacy of sharing a morning meal was a novelty she did not dare expect to experience.

She shed her own thin cloak and draped it over the back of the wooden chair before taking her seat next to him. She straightened her dress, tugging at the fitted bodice and smoothing her skirt over her legs. Maybe she was edging into deliriousness after everything that happened. It should have been strange; how natural this felt to her. What else would they have done after watching the sunrise but continue their morning in tandem?

She bit into a slice of cantaloupe, its mellow flavor and crispness pleased her. He chose the sweet breads with seasoned meat fillings and ate intermittently from the large bowl of mixed berries. They ate in companionable silence between them with the sound of the underground waterfalls near the king’s open-air audience chamber just past the door of his solar.

"Melethril—she is unharmed, I gather."

Tauriel appreciated the true concern behind his words. The fear that she carried of losing the girl had eased yet it lingered in the depths of her consciousness. She rather suspected that this feeling would be with her always, regarding Melethril’s wellbeing.

"Small cuts and bruises only. Her ankle is healed. She’s a strong one, no matter what one may think of her gentility." Tauriel replied, "Legolas is a good friend to her…Perhaps that in itself improved her more than any of the actual healing."

He nodded and gave her a look of understanding. There was no disapproval in his visage, unlike in decades past. Tauriel remembered when he took it upon himself to warn her away from his son’s
growing affinity for her. What a peculiar thought, that once this king wanted to sever any connection between her and Legolas. Stranger still that Melethril and Legolas did not elicit the same censure from him. In hindsight it was ever clear why he sought to keep her from his son, a different reason altogether from what she assumed at the time.

“They’ve grown close in the months that he has been here.” She said carefully, gauging his reaction.

He ate slowly with the same repose that governed everything else he did. When he spoke, he looked regretful. "Legolas will leave for Imladris by the end of the week." Thranduil murmured, dabbing the corners of his mouth with a cloth napkin. He set it down next to his plate and sat back to look at her. Tauriel finished her last slice of melon and did the same, taking her cup of warm tea into her hands. It was a fine blend imported from Dale that she greatly savored.

"Will this be a temporary trip from which he'll return after his business is done?" She asked, sipping her tea. Her eyes involuntarily shut in bliss. Between the good food and his company, there was nothing more she could have wanted. She opened her eyes again to look at him when he spoke.

He seemed amused at her appreciation of the steaming beverage, as if he’d known which blend would please her best and ensured Galion would include it among their choices.

"I am sending him as a messenger to relay what occurred here yesterday." Thranduil sounded faintly bitter, the former amusement slowly receding. "If Elrond thinks to leave Middle Earth, I would have him first know what we face on this side of the mountains. Perhaps he will delay his choice."

His darkened tone did not escape her notice, despite her exhaustion she was still attuned to him. Tauriel wanted to kiss his brow where it creased, he likely blamed himself for the ambush and for failing to hold Gollum prisoner as was asked of him. She too was disappointed in herself for not locating the pack in time. Nonetheless, self-recrimination would not change the past.

"He will represent you well. There is no better ambassador than your son to Elrond's council."

Thranduil nodded slowly. His eyes were hooded as he stared pensively into his own cup.

"If you could make the choice for yourself, barring any and all connection you have with this world, would you choose to sail west as Elrond will? He will reunite with Celebrian at the other side of the sea." He asked. He didn't look at her as he spoke. There was still that pensive expression on his face.

Tauriel took her time and composed a response with care. "No. I cannot imagine living happily in the divinity of Aman. I was born of this earth and will not willingly go. Some struggle is necessary to appreciate the good in our lives. I realize now that pain is not always something we should run from."

An unbidden image of his queen arose in her mind and wondered if he could not help remembering her at that. Tauriel took another sip of tea. Perhaps it was unwise of her to drudge that up. She had
no inflated opinion of herself though she did not particularly wish to hear of his first great love that had turned him into a misanthrope for the better part of three millennia. What kind of elven maid could inspire that depth of feeling? Certainly not she, Tauriel thought of herself, with some despondency.

When Thranduil spoke, it was not of his wife but of metaphor. "The past is merely a tale that we recite to ourselves, over and again, until the passage of time distorts our memory. Then we question our version of events and wonder if what we recall ever truly happened."

"You make it sound like we're in the habit of constantly deluding ourselves." She remarked. She rested her elbow on the table, cradling her chin in her palm as she leaned toward him.

"Perhaps we are. This is how we cope with our longevity." Now Thranduil was purposefully baiting her.

"Then we must strive to make it a joyful tale. It is no crime that we cling to the good in our lives," Tauriel offered. She smiled gently at him and knew that what solace he gave her earlier through his embrace, she could try to return to him. She was gratified by the sight of the corners of his mouth tilting up even if his eyes still hinted at his internal worries.

"Your optimism knows no bounds, Tauriel." It could have been an insult. His tone strongly implied otherwise. She marveled that she could now tell the difference.

"Alas, it is why you allow me here." She jested quietly. This humor was another facet of their connection that she deeply enjoyed. The tinge of mirth she’d glimpsed retreated somewhere inside him and his seriousness returned.

"I also should inform you that the fiefs will begin the process of evacuation of their people to our Halls beginning at Midsummer. We will take them in gradually so as not to alert our enemies that we know their intent. It would be counterproductive for our people to fall victim to more ambushes on the paths toward our Halls." Thranduil said firmly.

She focused her attention on the practicalities that would soon require actionable solutions. "It is wise to plan for their safety. We have adequate lodging for them though we'll need to see to supplies and provisions to last through the coming winter."

"The coming autumn's harvest will be the last this land will see before the destruction. We have no choice other than to make the most of it and then trade for what we lack." The images his speech inspired were the bleak reality.

"You know that we are a hardy people. We can live on less for as long as it takes to secure peace."

"I regret that some will have to suffer at all." The king sighed profoundly. There was an old saying that on the head of the king, all the sorrows should lie. She thought there was nary a more apt expression to describe the burdens of a faithful monarch.

"I know," she whispered. She covered his right hand that rested on the table top, pressing against him reassuringly. "I know."

"I intend to send messages to the king of Dale, offering his people a place in our halls if ever they have need of it."

Her eyebrows raised in surprise at his unanticipated generosity but she quickly regained her
composure because she did not wish to offend him. “Erebor will take them in surely, if they are assailed.”

“Who can say what Dain Ironfoot will commit himself and his resources to under that kind of duress. I will extend the offer to Bard’s grandson regardless of the Dwarves’ capacity to aid them.” Thranduil’s tone was not as scathing as it might have been whenever the mention of dwarves came up. Knowing what he’d seen in Doriath, the coldblooded murder of the high king by avaricious dwarves, as well as more recent events at the Lonely Mountain, she knew his perpetual mistrust of that race was not unfounded.

“The people of Laketown will be happy to hear of this, should they find themselves under attack.”

He glanced at her hand on his. Slowly, he turned it over until his palm faced upward and he could lace his fingers through hers.

"Happy indeed. Can you still envision happiness for us, Tauriel? Some place on this world where we two might live out our days in peace." Thranduil murmured, going completely still as if awaiting some inevitable interruption. His question stunned her. It was the most direct confrontation of whatever existed between them since that night so long ago. He had never been one to often pose such bold hypotheticals aloud.

"I do not know. You said once that you were blessed with images to come, that we may find ourselves on that path. I’ve entrusted my happiness to Varda,” Her mouth suddenly went dry, "and to you."

They were at the age-old impasse. She could sense the unvoiced question he yearned to ask a second time. She would not grant him the answer he sought even if her heart rejoiced in the notion. It was not a matter of feeling or lack thereof but of what was right for the realm. It would be selfish to claim him as her own.

There were much greater things of concern than their happiness, Tauriel thought, and a wedding was no small matter. Legitimacy took time and meticulous cultivation as she well knew through her experience as a rising commander. How much respect did she stand to lose if suddenly she became his wife? How selfish in the extreme it would be to place yet another burden on him in the face of the strife to come! Even now, the very concept simultaneously thrilled and frightened her.

Thranduil was about to speak when Galion re-entered the room to clear their table. She quietly removed her hand from his though not fast enough for the steward to have missed it. Tauriel refused to be embarrassed for herself, she did not want to give others cause to undermine him at such a delicate political time.

Thranduil stared impassively at the remnants of their meal as Galion worked around them. Only now did the silence turn strained with a third party in their midst.

"Does my lord require anything more?" Galion inquired. Thranduil looked in her direction and when she shook her head, he dismissed his steward. They were alone again yet the atmosphere had dissipated. The gravity of what would soon befall the woodland was impossible to forget.

"My lord, I ask that you rest now if only for a little while. You are weary." She told him, sliding out of her chair and picking up her cloak. He rose too, and took her cloak from her, holding it so she could slip easily into the sleeves. His fingers brushed against her throat when he fastened the clasp. She smiled her thanks, somehow accustomed to this closeness with him that she’d only ever seen amid couples long wed.
“What of your fatigue? I seem to recall I was not the only one who stood on that balcony from dusk to dawn.” This from the one who, if rumor had it, forewent sleep for the entire two weeks that his troops embarked on their scouting missions. The king had an impressive reserve of strength but even he couldn’t remain perpetually awake without sacrificing the rest of his faculties.

“I can manage. Rest,” Tauriel implored him with mild exasperation, then departed from the king's chambers. He knew she could be trusted with the subsequent arrangements for their kingdom. They were of the same mind when it came to the safeguarding of their people and forest. When the Elvenking laid down to rest, he slept in peace.

The summer passed quickly, days and weeks blending together in a flurry of preparations that kept the entire kingdom occupied. June and July gave way to August and by that time, the Wood-elves’ civilian population had been coaxed into taking refuge in King Thranduil’s Halls at the northeastern edge of Mirkwood. The transition was intentionally slow-going to allow the palace to adjust to the arrival of more and more occupants, and to avoid attracting unwanted scrutiny. The King’s guards constantly patrolled the forest surrounding the Halls and along the tributary of the Celduin that ran beneath it. Spiders on the western side were commonplace despite frequent clearing of their nests.

Legolas negotiated a compromise with his father that he would stay in their realm to assist with the evacuations. He led the soldiers responsible for protecting the caravans of elves travelling from the outer reaches of Mirkwood to safety in the underground fortress in addition to providing safe passage to all those who elected to go to Imladris with Elrond’s people, from whence they would journey to the Grey Havens together and embark on their voyage out of Middle Earth. These folk were few, most of the Silvan elves remained in the woods in the example of their overlords and king. The lords were true to their promise, they did not condemn the ones who chose to leave to Valinor.

The days until the prince would depart were akin to sand slipping through Melethril’s fingers. The two were ever in each other’s company when Legolas was not engaged with some task, a rare sight for all to see him choose to spend time with a common, if lovely, maiden. Her studies continued uninterrupted even with the growing populace of migrants in the Halls. Melethril, along with other musicians, lent their talent to entertaining the elflings which were surprisingly many in number; she sang, played her instruments, and recited poetry. All she did without artifice and with great care, earning the gratitude of the adults who’d just left their homes and hundreds of years of the memories contained therein to almost certain destruction. She was enthralled by all of these people, more than she’d ever seen in her life all in one place, with so many histories and experiences of the world outside the Halls.

Legolas saw all of this and the kind words she had for everyone including those who wronged her, not that it happened frequently. He did not love her, he told himself. He did not love how her eyes sought him out in crowded rooms to light up, upon their discovery. He did not love how her eyes sought him out in crowded rooms to light up, upon their discovery. He did not love the way she asked for nothing while he stole what was left of her precious downtime. He did not love the way she was at once independent and welcoming of him, even when his temper simmered at his father’s commands to go to Imladris and he knew he was not a joy to be around.

Mereth Nuin Giliath was a more somber affair than it had ever been amongst their people in recollection. The festivities were conservative in the amount of food prepared and the liveliness of the chatter and dancing ebbed and flowed through the evening. The last time Legolas was present for this feast, he was seeing to the arrest of trespassing Dwarves—he had not partaken of much. The stars cast their light onto the Wood-elves and comforted them. Several simply lay back on spreads of velvety fabrics and cushions to watch the constellations and reflect on the myths that explained how
they came to be.

The music chosen for the evening was minimal to complement the mood of the feast. Melethril sat at her tall gilded harp—the largest of her series—fingers strumming and plucking tirelessly throughout the evening. Two flautists played along too but she was the most mesmerizing to watch. Her eyes stayed shut as they were wont to do while she concentrated on playing. Her skin never looked fairer in contrast with her aubergine satin robes. The night breeze swept her russet curls past her ears, she seemed to sway tenderly with the strains that floated up from her harp. Legolas sat beside his father at their high table elevated on a dais and allowed himself to just look at her at the far end of the feast.

When he thought his father might have caught him watching her, he slowly lifted his eyes to the stars overhead. The moon was startling in its fullness—the light of Isil was always valued greatly by his people and no less so this night. They sorely needed what light was left for them. Tauriel was at one of the lower tables, listlessly picking at the food before her like she felt remorseful for consuming rations when they are not yet under siege. With regard to the commander in her, he knew she thought that a feast of any size was currently ill-advised. They gathered and saved much throughout the autumn harvest. Legolas silently willed her to stop her current line of thought and let her derive any enjoyment she could.

His father now drew his attention. The king kept his voice low and told him the news he’d had from the south. Sauron sent forth a band of Uruk-hai to take the largely abandoned remains of Osgiliath in Ithilien, stealing the ancient capital from Denethor, Steward of Gondor. Perhaps this explained Tauriel’s grim expression. It chilled his blood to imagine the creatures defiling that once great city in what was the Dark one’s first test of his renewed power. He wondered what became of Gollum and felt anger rise within him—the searches he’d conducted, scouring the wood for the wretch after his escape were fruitless. Aragorn and Mithrandir toiled to capture it and he proved to be unable to see to its incarceration. What they would think of this failure when he reported to lord Elrond, he did not care to speculate though he would report honestly. It was no one’s fault but his own, for allowing pity for the creature to take precedence over the safety of his people.

Legolas came to realize that his feelings on this matter were likely only a fraction of his father’s. He turned a sideways glance to the king, seeing his adar from the perspective of a future king rather than that of a hot-headed youth was still disconcerting. How his father could endure all he had and retain his grip on sanity as he did for all of Legolas’s earthly life was almost incomprehensible. He once thought his father apathetic to most when nothing could be further from the truth. The regret of how coldly he last departed from his father shamed him still. He was at a loss how to repent. Words of apology were stuck in his throat, they had been the entirety of his return to Mirkwood. Nevertheless, the king welcomed his son home without question and would again certainly mourn his imminent leave-taking.

The song ended with a concluding flourish of the harp strings. Melethril stilled the strings with her bare palms and rose to her feet. The only music now was the sound of leaves rippling with the wind in the far distance. The others set down their flutes and rejoined the feast but the maiden instead walked alone toward the edge of the balcony and came to a stop at the top of the stairs. It was an overlook point carved into the side of the stone fortress, not unlike the one in his father’s private chambers. There was no balustrade on this exposed part of their halls, set high above the fortress in open air, no interruption of any kind of her figure that was bathed in starlight. She stood where the white light would bear her to the heavens, out of his reach for all eternity and safe from the darkness of the earth.

He did not love her, he thought, even as his breath caught in his throat as she slowly turned, tearful eyes ever searching to find him.
This AMAZING cover by Sara Bareilles of the Coldplay song “Yellow” inspired the second half this chapter. You can watch it here if you’re interested: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z7yxJHALPug

More notes:
I was going to throw on a huge list of all of the absolutely wonderful sources that I’ve relied on to help write this massive (for me) fic at the very end, but I feel obligated to list them now. Top among them are the fabulous timeline by the LOTR project found here http://lotrproject.com/timeline/#zoom=2&lat=-1485&lon=1500&layers=B, the map of Middle Earth here http://blog.lefigaro.fr/nigtech/assets_c/2011/06/middle-earth-map-33096.html, LOTR wiki, and Tolkien gateway, as well as the realelvish.net phrasebooks. And of course, the Hobbit/LOTR films and all of the uber-talented actors, excerpts from the source texts and especially the Silmarillion lore.

Thank you to all who put the former together, and above all to J.R.R. Tolkien for his immense genius. I can’t say enough how brilliant that man was, the more research I do for this fic.

Thranduil says, “The past is merely a story we tell ourselves…” is nearly a direct quote from the fantastic movie “Her” by Spike Jonze.

“On the head of the king, all the sorrows should lie” is a direct spoken by Ruth Evershed on the TV show “Spooks.”
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Elvenking was perched on his carven throne, dressed imperiously with his autumn crown and staff of oak held in one hand. He had been occupied for most of the day, receiving suppliants and hearing their entreaties. His people were proud yet humble. They did not beg yet he saw in their eyes the grief at losing their livelihoods and homes in the preparation for the coming war.

By the time all who came to him had their answers and departed, there was only one left to see him.

“Legolas,” Thranduil said in greeting. His son inclined his head respectfully.

“Ada, I come to tell you that I am ready to fulfill my duty and go to Imladris.” There was certainty in Legolas’s voice but it was tinged with the barest hesitance. Thranduil believed he knew from whence this reluctance came but did not begrudge his son for it. Legolas would do what was asked of him, he would obey this time. There was too much danger in disobedience. The world had reached a critical point of no return. The Dark one was ready, he proved it in Osgiliath.

“I will tell him of Gollum’s escape and offer my bow and blade in service.” Legolas said. He watched as his father rose from his throne and came down the steps toward him. He’d heard whispers of his own resemblance to his father and wondered if he retained that same regal bearing, if he could ever aspire to follow in his example. He intended to begin by pledging his service to Elrond in the hopes it would beseech him to remain to fight again.

When Thranduil came to a halt before him, Legolas sensed his father would address a different point, one that he dreaded ever discussing with him. When Legolas exhibited his growing affection for Tauriel nearly a century ago, his father had done what he could to dissuade him from that course. It was unclear whether his father thought her unsuitable for her station or heritage at the time. Legolas also believed his father had ulterior motives where she was concerned.

Now, he knew his father once again meant to caution him against surrendering his heart, though to infinitely different maiden. He withheld a bitter laugh. It was far too late for any such warning to be effective. Even now, Legolas shied away from the thought of saying farewell to her and leaving her behind to an uncertain fate.

“Do not depart without seeing her first,” was all his ada uttered. There could be no doubt of whom he spoke, his father was not so stupid or blind to be unaware of what Melethril was to Legolas.

The prince beheld his father with a touch of incredulity. He did not expect his blessing, more like the contrary.

“Ada…” Legolas said helplessly. He had never felt so out of his depth. Thranduil appeared mildly amused at the quality of his son’s tone, but the amusement was tempered by sadness for no one could know what the future held for any of them.

“Give your hearts, but not into each other’s keeping, for only the Valar can contain your hearts. You would do well to remember that the oak and the cypress grow not in each other’s shadow.”

Legolas later returned to his quarters to prepare what he needed and pondered his father’s enigmatic parting words. He noticed a small velvet pouch set atop the low-lying wooden table in his solar and picked it up warily. The strings came loose with a delicate tug and he emptied the pouch into his
opposite palm, shocked when a necklace fashioned from the purest white gems and silver he had ever seen fell into his hand.

This gift could only be from one person. His father’s words resounded in his memory and he realized what the king meant to tell him in abstract expressions.

The path to the Halls of Music was one Legolas was very familiar with. He wore his travelling attire and was armed for the road, but in his hand he clutched the small pouch with a sense of purpose that could not be diverted.

Today she sang for the young ones. No instruments in sight, she stood before a group of silent children whose eyes were all fixed on her and he did not wonder at their awe. Melethril sang of the queen beyond the western sea who lived in the blessed light of Valinor, weaving such a tale of beauty that the very light in the Hall was set aglow.

He stood at the threshold through another few verses before the little ones noticed him there and rose to bow politely. Legolas looked at all of them kindly in greeting then he bent at the waist toward Melethril, who ended her song and dismissed her class. He waited patiently as she saw them safely away.

When at last they were alone together, the gladness in her eyes grew muted when she realized why he was here. The weight of the pouch and its contents in his hand was a pressing reminder of how he meant to part from her. Not with a heart full of sorrow but of faith.

“I believe this once belonged to my mother. It is my greatest wish that it resides in your keeping. It is a promise of my return to you here, no matter what the future holds for either of us.” said the prince, handing her the necklace.

She accepted it and removed the velvet wrapping. There was immense shock written in her face when she examined the necklace and its overwhelming flawlessness. Melethril began to shake her head, her hair rustling with the motion. Yet she held the necklace up with utmost care, as it was precious beyond anything material she’d ever been gifted.

“I do not care for promises that even you cannot guarantee to keep, my lord.” The growing sadness in her visage pained him. She met his eyes then looked at the necklace again. “I would rather you remain here, safe, with us, than accept this as a reminder of you. But you have a duty to your king and your people, and I will think no less of you for valuing that above all else.”

“This is not an empty promise, Melethril. The shadows over our lands will pass and the light will grace us once more. And then we will be free to live as our people once did. I will give you my pledge beneath the light of a thousand stars and humbly await your answer.”

“You are cruel,” She said tremulously. “Yet I believe you know what answer I will give you.”

The prince of the Woodland Realm left with a small guard, riding west toward nightfall on the path to Imladris.

Legolas’s absence rendered a noticeable change in Thranduil, as Tauriel anticipated it would. The king was silent and brooding, in the way he tended to be when he was deeply worried. He shuttered himself away, inaccessible to most, and even to her. She did not take meals with him because she was occupied with several other tasks and also because he did not go out of his way to ask her anymore.

She was not hurt by it. She understood his fear for his son, and she genuinely had much to take care
of as part of her official duties. Her own worry for her friend greatly weighed upon her even if she had utmost confidence in his capability as a mighty warrior.

Tauriel rose early that morning, fully intending to receive her orders from Lord Beriadan, who was the general charged with positioning the companies. She walked with purpose from the Halls of Residence toward the Keep in the center of the fortress. There was not much commotion around so when she heard hushed whispers from around the next corner and footsteps coming up the stairs, she paused. Even at a whisper, the dialogue was painfully conspicuous.

“The king has called on you often, Vanadessë, is this not the second or third time? It is a great honor he bestows upon you. Why are you not proud?” A voice of a lady, sweet as tinkling bells, drifted upward. It seemed she was ascending the stairs from the way the speech carried toward Tauriel, who was still hidden from their sight. The name of the striking artisan stopped the commander in her tracks. She listened cautiously for the answer.

“I am, do not mistake it. I know well what an honor this is. I only worry that I will fall short of his expectations…I do not wish to displease Thranduil. Tauriel abruptly cut her line of thought regarding what exactly warranted Vanadessë’s fear of the king’s dissatisfaction.

“I highly doubt that’s possible, dear lady.”

The voices sounded much closer all of a sudden.

Tauriel jerked backward and hid in an alcove behind a thick tapestry, thanking any deity that listened for its convenient hiding place as the Sinda and her handmaid rounded the corner and continued their walk to the pavilion where the nobility resided. Tauriel waited until the corridor was empty and silent before emerging from the alcove. She was angry, there was no denying it. Angry at herself for feeling betrayed and for her ignorance of the nature of that lady’s meetings with the king.

The king was apparently inaccessible to most except this lady with the pleasing features of her Noldorin ancestors. What business could she have with the king? It grated at Tauriel that she should feel thusly threatened. She did not care to confront Vanadessë and incur Thranduil’s mocking brand of anger.

Tauriel closed her eyes and pressed her palm to her forehead, the other hand on her hip. She leaned into the cool stone at her back. There was no time to waste on foolish trifles like this. She had no desire to partake in court intrigue of this sort, making plays at the king’s affection and fighting for his attention. It is not my concern, she told herself firmly. He said it himself the day of the ambush three moons past, that it was a private matter.

She crept out of the alcove without greatly displacing the tapestry and continued down the stairs. She changed her mental course and formulated a request for her general that she was determined to see him grant.

The council room was scarcely occupied this early during the day. When she pushed the heavy chamber door aside and strode in, she found Beriadan standing with Feren in front of a large map of the woodland and surrounding lands drawn in great detail on sheepskin. The map stretched out against the wall and was marked to denote the placements of the companies. Lord Beriadan and Feren were discussing the watchtower assignments on the eastern portion of the river that flowed toward Esgaroth.

Feren noticed her at once. He was dressed in practical military garb with his blade at his hip. He looked worried, and if she could discern it past his customary quietude, she thought perhaps what
they discussed was of great significance.

“Good morning, commander.”

“Good morning, captain. Forgive my interruption, I wonder if I may address Lord Beriadan privately.”

“Of course, I will report to the training yard for the morning rotations.” The captain bowed to his superiors and promptly vacated the room, giving her leave to make her request.

“My lord, I come before you to ask if I may travel with Lord Tirithon’s retinue to Dale. I ask to take some of our company as protection to our kin on the way there as well as to the people of Dale. King Thranduil offers weapons, food, and shelter in our Halls if they ever have need of it in the coming days as we have long been their allies. I am eager to be involved with the diplomatic outreach to that kingdom.” As she spoke, she could see his doubtful expression.

“It was my impression that you were to remain here to oversee the relocation and settlement of our kindred. The king gave explicit instruction—“

“The king has the authority to change his mind. I am to go with the delegation that leaves on the morrow.” Tauriel’s voice did not falter. She was lying to him about the king’s orders but at that moment she was still quite affected by what she’d heard in the corridor.

Her purpose in the king’s halls had become too narrow for her to feel she was contributing enough. She thought of Legolas, dedicating himself to destroying that which the Dark one needed to hold dominion over them all. Treating with the Men of Dale would challenge her diplomatic abilities, which certainly needed further refining.

The general contemplated her situation at length. She grew impatient but resisted the urge to fidget.

Finally, Beriadan spoke up. “I will honor the king’s word to place you among the departing retinue. I trust you will be a responsible emissary on our behalf to those Men.” The intonation of this Sindarin general’s voice and the way he tilted his head just so while he spoke reminded her of the king in a way that further irritated her.

She could not lose her focus to the idiocy spurred by lovesickness, that very word made her want to retch but she knew not what else to call this unwarranted paranoia. Beriadan granted her wish and she thanked him appropriately, hoping he would not inform the king of it until after she’d left.

The rest of the day she spent in the training yards with Feren and all of the divisions of her company, from the archers to the swordsmen and spear-fighters. She was merciless with them. Their strength was abiding throughout her numerous and varied drills, none complained. Their enemy would not pause for them to rest or readjust and neither would their commander. She’d trained them to be better than her and she would not rest until she killed every last orc or was felled by one, she saw to it that they adopted that same relentless mentality.

Feren, blessed soul that he was, did not question her for he too saw the wisdom in over-preparing versus the opposite. The sun had begun its descent when she finally came to her senses. She looked at her final division, some fifty soldiers in their simple woodland mail. They all breathed hard after hours of constant sparring under her critical watch. She never hesitated to step in with corrections anymore, none dared challenge her for they remembered what occurred so many years past when she was newly appointed. Daeron remained a lowly Dungeon guard though he kept his opinions regarding Tauriel’s worthiness largely to himself these days. Daeron’s father Tirithon just so happened to be leading the party to Dale.
As a representative of the Woodland realm, he was necessarily level-headed where Thranduil had long been unwilling to treat with other kingdoms. His son’s impertinence toward her as a new commander was shameful to him, so she found no protest from him when she asked to accompany the diplomatic corps. She took twenty of her troop to provide safe passage to the retinue on their way toward Dale.

Another commander of the king’s fifth company arrived to relieve her and her troops so he could bring his in to begin their exercises. She dismissed her soldiers, noting how their expressions ran the gamut from exhilarated to frustrated.

Tauriel composed a formal writ of absence, had it signed by Tirithon, and delivered it to Galion the hour before she mounted her horse and departed from the wood toward the kingdom of Dale. It was for the best that she put some distance between herself and the king. It would ensure they both functioned as they should with their respective duties with minimal chances for distraction. All of these words did not comfort her however, as she imagined his reaction at discovering the content of her letter.

The Kingdom of Dale was prosperous as it had been before Smaug had descended upon it. She observed with great awe how these people resurged in productivity and spirit. The houses of the common folk were made of tanned brick likely made from the sediment of the river. The markets brimmed with variety and livestock were well kept. The people looked content with their lot, the shadow did not seem to touch them here as it did the Elves in Mirkwood. Her heart ached to compare the relative carefree lives these Men led. Did they not know of the coming darkness? She was glad she came. These people could not afford complacency if they wished to preserve what they so successfully rebuilt after the ruin of dragonfire.

The king swept into the council room to find his generals there, toiling over strategic planning. Thranduil learned of Tauriel’s departure with Lord Tirithon’s diplomatic retinue from Beriadan, who was alarmed when he realized the miscommunication. The rest of the elven lords quickly sensed the king’s irascibility and bowed to take their leave.

Thranduil paid them no mind as the door to the council room closed and he was left alone. The sheepskin maps that were hung on the walls did not distract him as he hoped. He surveyed their battle plans with a critical eye, thinking with growing cynicism that he had seen this all before and the bitter outcome would be just the same.

He was no stranger to loss. Even now, those he loved were gone from him. Legolas had gone to Imladris not by choice but by extenuating circumstance and now he was without his stubborn commander, who seemingly volunteered herself for a diplomatic mission he had yet to officially sanction. Thranduil contemplated her reasons for doing so without his permission but it only turned his mood for the worst. He had not felt this crushing vulnerability in thousands of years, its reemergence now in the face of her absence staggered him. He despised it, this weakness.

Sometime later, the king retreated to his solar alone and indulged in his remaining stock of Dorwinion wine. The amount he consumed might have killed an ordinary Man. For him, it served to quiet his roiling thoughts and he welcomed the reprieve. He had done all a ruler was supposed to do at a time like this, he’d been equitable, generous, fair. He was aware of his petulance but there was no one here to criticize him so he did not bother to restrain himself with regard to drink.

He pushed the third…no, fourth, empty flagon away and watched it topple noisily on the table and roll onto the floor. By Eru, he was entitled to one night of drunken misery. And even as the wine clouded his head, he felt his heart harden of its own accord. That reflexive withdrawal was natural to him as breathing—it came to him like the way someone who is falling scrambles to right themselves.
before they hit the ground.

Anger was far safer than desolation. He was far more accustomed to its biting hold over him and he bitterly welcomed its return for the distraction. When he began to wonder what tasks she set herself to or had been assigned, if she enjoyed her journey outside the forest despite its official purpose, he reared back from the sentiment that threatened to overcome him.

He knew even in his inebriation that the way to Dale and back would not be passable in a matter of days. Winter would soon come again and the deep of it was about to blanket the earth with snow and ice. Thranduil wore a crown of barren branches for the season and held his staff of carven oak; his cold eyes pierced all who dared look upon him whether in trepidation or in pity.

Chapter End Notes

“Give your hearts, but not into each other’s keeping, for only the Valar can contain your hearts. You would do well to remember that the oak and the cypress grow not in each other’s shadow.” –This is almost a direct quote from “The Prophet” by Kahlil Gibran and is a beautiful collection of poetry that strikes me as very in tune with Elvish philosophy. Obviously I modified it to fit in with the context of this fic.

The song Melethril sings is called “O Queen Beyond the Western Seas” and can be found here http://www.arwen-undomiel.com/elvish/lyrics.html
Chapter 7

The rebuilt Kingdom of Dale was a spectacle to behold. Tauriel was unsettled at first, at the strange languages spoken, the rambunctiousness of the people, and at the feel of existing in a settlement directly under open sky with no cover at all. The elves did not mean to be conspicuous. They were simply too different to avoid being fawned over, which is precisely what occurred when the children raced after their procession toward the castle. The impressive structure was built at the highest point of elevation in the city. A wise vantage point if ever there was one.

King Brand was sat upon his throne at the head of a Great Hall lined with the prominent figures of his realm. There were marble pillars on both sides between which the banners of the noble houses hung. Their coats-of-arms were bright in color, displaying crests that were entirely unknown to Tauriel. It could not be denied that this king was pleasing to the eye. He had the bearing of royalty offset by just enough charming ruggedness to appeal to the everyman.

The heir apparent, a young man named Bard II, looked so much like his forebears that Tauriel had to remind herself that two generations of Men have passed since she last was embroiled in events in Esgaroth. The seat of this realm's power was re-established in Dale, though Esgaroth was ruled under the sigil of the Black Arrow of the Great Bowman.

She saw the flash of cognizance in the king’s steely eyes. Tauriel wondered what tales had been passed down through his father, who was the young boy she’d whisked into a boat with his two sisters to save them from the hellfire. It summoned memories of the burning lake and the charred wood houses on the water, of Kili and his gruesome wound from a Morgul-arrow. His roguish face passed fleetingly over her mind’s eye. So too did the look of wonder that crossed it when she healed him. The grief at her old friend’s demise still pained her somewhat, but she could not afford to give only half her attention to her current undertaking.

"My lady Tauriel, it is an honor to welcome you to Dale. We remember very well your part in saving my father’s and aunts’ lives when Smaug set fire to Lake-town.” The king said from his seat. His councillors stood around him, all in their vibrantly colored fur-trimmed robes. They stood tall with proud comportment, perhaps a bit arrogant for they had known peace for too long to remember the fear of war. They were barely past adolescence in terms of elven years but they had lived heartily. She could see it in all of their lined faces.

Tauriel knew her role was to be interpreter here as she was the only member of their party that had a solid enough grasp of Westron.

“Thank you my lord, I am likewise honored by your generous welcome. It is my pleasure to introduce Lord Tirithon of the Woodland Realm, who is King Thranduil’s appointed emissary.” She motioned toward Tirithon, who stood nearly two heads taller than all Men present and radiated serenity. She supposed it was the effect of juxtaposing immortal and mortal that her people’s noble carriage should be so readily visible.

The others in their party were then introduced, each by name. They were Silvan nobles whose lands supplied Dale with lumber for building and for fire and whose domain included the river villages that ensured the safe shipment of barrels out of Mirkwood to Laketown. These lords had dealt with the fishermen of Lake-town and hunters of Dale the longest of any of the Woodland elves. They had long feasted together after their work was done. There was no lack of friendship between their peoples, at least.
“The purpose for our journey here is to extend an offer of aid.” Tauriel stated on behalf of Tirithon. The nobility appeared warily fascinated by them.

“We are well aware of the activity in the east, my lady.” The king spoke as if he could comprehend the degree of destruction awaiting them. She tried not to bristle at the title he’d mistakenly used for her—she was no royal lady but a military commander. To these Men, she was just another woman, it seemed. A pretty trinket with no other discernible skills. Tauriel knew she should not fault them for their misconception, among their kind, women were never trained as warriors.

It had also been many long years since the dragon tore its way out of the Lonely Mountain to wreak havoc upon these lands, much less could any of them remember the terror of Bolg’s orcs as they hunted for Thorin Oakenshield and his company in Lake-town.

She briefly remembered the way she and Legolas drove them away from Bard’s humble abode. She wondered if they realized exactly how she achieved the feat of getting Bain and his sisters toward safety that night. It certainly did not involve pretty dresses or the spoken courtesies of a lady.

Pushing aside her misgivings, Tauriel translated for Tirithon what the king said and she saw her superior prepare to launch into persuasive speech. His words rolled off his tongue, the fluid Sindarin dialect of the northern forests filling the entire Hall and drawing the rapt attention of the Dalish lords.

“My lord insists that you allow us to support the fortifications of your mighty city, that you may preserve what you and your people have created. It is wiser to have them and not need them than to find yourself lacking when you need them most.” She said. She surveyed the hall, amazed that they would hesitate to accept an offer of gratuitous help.

“I will consult with my advisers, my lady. In the meantime, I ask that you and your kin make yourselves at home here. My steward will see to arranging your lodgings.” King Brand raised his arm to call for his head of household.

The king spared no expense for their sakes, they were accommodated in luxury as befitted visiting dignitaries of Dale. Once she was shown her room, she shed her travelling clothes and mail. Donning a dress and cloak made from the same thick wool, she pulled the hood over her head to protect herself from the small snowdrops that fell.

Memories flooded her mind during her exploratory walk through the city. The faded tan of the bricks beneath her feet were clean, not sullied by blood as it was during the Battle of Five Armies. The buildings were aesthetically pleasant to look at and structurally sound.

Tauriel walked in silent observation of the city folk. The market was bustling with life, a hub of commerce where merchants of all sorts set up their wares. These people bartered in goods but she also noted that there was rudimentary currency of minted gold circulating too. She passed a stall of a wine merchant with shelves of countless glass bottles in addition to wooden barrels full of drink that were supported by four-legged stands. Thranduil would have likely perused it with his discerning eye and selected only the choicest vintage. Tauriel bit her lip at the thought. She did not need reminding that she’d left Mirkwood so she did not have to think of him so constantly.

Even while she chastised herself, Tauriel let her curiosity get the better of her. She wandered into the stall and saw the merchant, an old man with a stoop and kindly smile, coming to ask what she was searching for.

“Something complex…with many underlying notes that are subtle to the palate.” She trailed her fingers along the different bottles and flagons. “Not as heavy as Dorwinion, please.”
The merchant appeared surprised at her knowledge. She allowed herself a faint smile. Her knowledge of wine did not want for correction, thanks to the influence of a certain hedonistic king.

After sampling small amounts of different varieties, she settled on one that tasted of currants, black cherries and oak. Tauriel offered him the intricate leather cord bracelet that she wore on her wrist, for it had turquoise stones woven into it. It held no great sentimental value. She lowered her hood in respect, intending to trade her bracelet for the wine when she saw the man’s eyes widen. She realized he recognized her features that marked her as an elf.

Tauriel returned to her room in the castle with both her bracelet and the wine, feeling a bit guilty that it was not a fair exchange regardless of how much she’d insisted he accept her payment. She placed the bottle in her small rucksack and ensured it was wrapped well inside the few other clothes she’d brought. She pulled on a tunic and pair of old breeches to sleep in.

She lay down on the narrow bed, atop the coverlet. The night was cold but she was impervious to the chill. Somewhere in the castle, King Brand debated with his son and lords whether they should accept elvish assistance. Perhaps they did not want to be indebted to the Woodland Realm. As if Thranduil could have need of anything more from this kingdom than its wine, she thought severely. Tirithon was patient, at times to a fault. The party would remain here until some sort of agreement was struck. Perhaps they had already treated with the Dwarves and Thranduil’s offer was generous but redundant.

Tauriel stared at the stucco ceiling. This winter summoned more and more remembrances of sad things long past. Perhaps it was not the best idea for her to have volunteered herself for this as rashly as she had. This city was deserted when her kin had last set foot in it. The buildings were uninhabitable, half-burned ruins. Elven corpses littered the ground and Thranduil gazed at them with both cold ire and anguish as she nocked an arrow that she wanted to let fly rather than see him walk away—She replayed that memory, bringing her hands to her eyes and pressing them against her closed lids.

Why must all thought lead back to him? In any case, she was here and she would make herself useful for a good cause. Tauriel lowered her hands, letting her arms rest immobile at her sides. She tried to clear her mind. It had been an arduous journey from Mirkwood to Dale, she knew she needed to get however much rest she could.

Midwinter in the wood was once a beauteous experience. The dusting of snow on the barren tree boughs and forest floor gave the forest such an unspoiled appearance. Now, there was naught but an air of loneliness. The birds ceased to sing for they’d departed for warmer climes.

Melethril strolled along a familiar path near the lower gardens. She was by herself, on a rare day she was not immersed in teaching. There were remnants of old autumn leaves every so often, she crunched them underfoot as she walked. They were iced over, their color seeped away into the bluish white of the snow. The trail was still apparent despite the slow build of the snow and ice, but it would not be long before it disappeared altogether.

The impetuous elf maiden was replaced by one who wore a serious expression most days. Her songs were much changed too—they did not inspire the same lightness of mood they once did. Tauriel was away, and the prince too. She did not know for how long they would be gone, and she could not bring herself to imagine what danger their duties may lead them into.

Her steps were light and her mind greatly distracted when she realized she was no longer alone on
this particular footpath. The king stood before her, seeming intent to cross paths without any exchange of greeting. His cool eyes appraised her. There was no hostility but she did not detect the fondness she recalled from him in her youth and its loss was substantial. He continued on his walk, his back to her when she was seized with the need to call out to him.

“Hîr nin Thranduil!” Melethril could not bear for him to pass her without recognizing her.

The king maintained his pace down the path in the opposite direction. She hurried after him, lifting her skirts so they would not drag in the fresh snow.

“You will not turn away, sire!” She cried.

He halted his progress, indicating he’d heard her. She waited until he turned around to face her. Not many had seen him since his brief appearance at the Midwinter Feast. There was terrible emptiness in his pale face, barren like his crown of thorns and the trees around them. He looked disproportionately affected by her outcry.

Melethril watched as snow flurried around him. The delicate drops landed on his long hair and eyelashes, causing them to glisten like tears. Her king stepped up suddenly to loom over her like some beautifully threatening force. She shivered as the icy wind wound itself through her hair and garments.

“You should not dally in the woods alone. Tell me, how many Orcs must threaten your life before you learn your lesson?” Now the king spoke and his words were lightly scathing. She recoiled from him. This was not the benevolent figure she was acquainted with. There was a primordial kind of anger in him that reminded her of a wounded animal, lashing out at anything that happened to come near.

“That is unkind,” Melethril dared to tell him. She did not suffer from lack of backbone, no matter how subdued she had become.

“What you think of me in the solitude of your own thoughts matters not a whit to me.”

His blithe words struck some nerve in her, one that had been scraped raw with anxiety nigh on two moons. Too many sleepless nights had emptied Melethril’s reserve of patience.

“You have behaved badly in court. Your subjects do not know what to make of you.”

The king drew himself up formidably at the assault of her speech. Melethril braced herself for an onslaught. She watched his breath depart his lips, visible against the cold.

“What do you know of ruling a kingdom? Nothing. I advise you tend to your own affairs.” Thranduil made to turn back around and continue on but she lunged to grasp his forearm. Her small, cold fingers held him back. He turned to glare down harshly at her. She’d not been this near to him in a very long time. Melethril forgot the compelling duality of his nature. She had only ever known his reserved brand of kindness. Never had she been so directly exposed to his wrath.

She pressed on regardless.

“I may not know much of governing a realm but I can see how your suffering at her absence has clouded your judgment!”

Something stirred in his eyes.

“You are closed off to us. We need your empathy but you give us apathy. The elflings are
frightened, as are their parents… They know you only by your reputation. They do not know you well enough to know the grace of your leadership or compassion, when all they can see is your withdrawal.”

“Who are you to lecture me on the subject of duty, of responsibility? I have done all of this and more for far longer than your simple mind can comprehend.” He was deliberately cruel but Melethril knew now that it came from a sense of imagined betrayal. She might have cursed Tauriel for leaving in secret, had she lacked her inherent goodwill. She was moved by the king’s obvious injury and subsequent inability to appropriately handle it so she did not allow his words to fend her off.

“Legolas would point out your foolishness, if not Tauriel. As neither are currently present, it falls upon me to do so.” Melethril asserted.

“You impudent child!” Thranduil’s words rang clear through the forest, anyone else on the trail would have undoubtedly heard. She stood her ground.

“Yes, I am a child. Yes, I am impudent, stubborn, and low born. Rail against me all you like if it will snap you out of your moping. Your subjects cannot read your mind and the sooner you come back to us, the faster they can implement your orders that will see to our kingdom’s protection.”

Thranduil looked so affronted by her that it would have been laughable, if Melethril’s heart were not racing with fear in spite of her bravado. Then she saw him frown, his eyes slipping from hers and down to her neck. She gasped. She remembered she was wearing the necklace that Legolas gave to her. Self-consciously, she adjusted her winter cloak and pulled it more tightly against her form.

Suddenly his bluster was gone and his broad shoulders fell ever so slightly. The king looked pained at the sight of the necklace. She thought he would nonetheless continue to harangue her.

“I will consider what you’ve imparted.” He told her slowly, quietly.

They stood there for a long moment. Melethril watched as the little droplets of precipitation gathered on his silver crown of thorns.

“If you insist on traversing these paths as you do now, I would have you escorted by armed guards from now on.” Thranduil said at last, his volume quite muted compared to before. “Return with me to the Keep, it is not safe. The storm is now truly arriving.”

Meekly, she followed his direction. They walked together, each mindful of the silence between them as the wind picked up and howled through the trees. The snowfall intensified as the king predicted, burying what little remained of autumn.

Tauriel stared out into the valley between Dale and Erebor, studying the great face of the Dwarven stronghold that she had long associated with the pangs of loss and grief. She stood at the top of the stone rampart of the kingdom of Men. The ground between the great cities was covered by a hardy species of tall grass that swayed gracefully in the wind.

It was surreal to be here once again. The enormous statue of Durin stood tall at the face of the Lonely Mountain, the fortress’s gate was perfectly symmetrical in its design. How very utilitarian was Dwarven architecture, she thought. A gust of wind blew past her, causing her long hair to obscure her view. She batted the strands away from her face.

“Naneth!” A small voice cried out. Tauriel whipped around, somehow convinced that the voice was
crying out for her. It could not be Melethril. It had been years since her voice sounded so childlike.

An unknown elleth bounded toward her, little arms outstretched. She had hair of rose gold, strands of finely blended red and blond. It was an exceedingly rare color for Elven folk. Tauriel found herself smiling despite her confusion. She took a few steps in the girl’s direction. It was not her wish to upset her by informing her that she could not possibly be her naneth.

“Naneth!” The elleth shouted delightedly.

Tauriel found herself crouching down to lift the girl into her arms, fitting the child against her torso to get a proper look at her face. The child was fair with beautifully formed elven features and it shocked her to recognize some of herself there—in the girl’s heart-shaped face, sculpted cheeks and delicate brow-bone. There was a visible widow’s peak on her forehead, just like Tauriel’s own. Her eyes, however, were the pale blue of the sky on a winter’s day. Their color was entrancing: darker on the outer edge of the iris, fading toward her pupil with subtle flecks of gold.

“What is your name, little one?” She asked, tucking a lock of wavy hair that was blown by the wind behind the girl’s pointed ear.

“Amdíriel, of course. How did you forget?” She wound her arms around Tauriel and hugged her tightly. The child buried her face in her neck, as if seeking refuge from something frightening. “Adar is very sad, Nana. I do not know how to console him. I showed him the butterfly I found in the forest—it is so lovely and it followed me to our home! But Adar could not smile. I think he has forgotten how to smile, like you forgot my name.”

The words were muffled against Tauriel’s collar and she had to listen closely. She heard the plaintive note in the child’s tone.

“Amdíriel, I am sorry that your adar is sad. Mayhap, if you tell me how to get there, I can take you home and speak with your parents? They might be afraid that you are lost. These are dangerous times to wander alone, they will be even sadder if they find you gone.” Tauriel said softly.

The girl straightened up. She stared at her with those familiar eyes, all precious innocence.

“You are my nana.” The girl looked close to tears. Her bottom lip quivered tellingly and Tauriel’s protest died on her lips. She placed a kiss on the girl’s cheek to quieten her.

“Then tell me where to find your adar, and we will ask him why he is sad.”

“He is home, nana. I think he is sad for you are not there with him. I fear he does not love me anymore because he says you left us. But you said you’d always love us, in starlight and in shadow. I want you to come back!”

Those words were ones Tauriel thought she remembered her own mother say to her. It was so long ago that she herself could not ever truly be sure, but the expression was one she’d kept close in her heart after her parents’ deaths.

The child was openly weeping, the sound of it effortlessly drew out Tauriel’s empathy and she kissed the girl’s other tear-stained cheek.

“Come back to us, naneth,” said Amdíriel, “Please! Please come back.”

“I do not understand…” Tauriel trailed off.

The sound of the elleth’s voice became oddly disjointed. In the blink of an eye, Tauriel’s arms were
suddenly empty. Her knees buckled in shock with the abrupt disappearance of the elleth. Amdíriel was nowhere to be found yet she could hear her forlorn weeping and the entreaty, “Please, return to us! Come home!”

She faced Erebor again, saw how the Lonely Mountain stretched high into the clouds and some invisible force turned her toward the distant eaves of the forest, her homeland. Though her sight was far-reaching, it was still difficult to see Mirkwood. She spun round, searching for Amdíriel. The elleth was gone. Her overly sensitive ears still rang with the girl’s poignant cries. They grew in pitch and volume until Tauriel dropped to her hands and knees on the cold stone floor.

“Amdíriel!” The name was wrenched from her lips, tearing her out of the fog of sleep and into the waking world.

Tauriel wrestled her bleary eyes open as she exclaimed the child’s name to the night air. She sat upright in bed, her head pounded furiously as she struggled to regain her bearings. Her sense of reality was distorted, the weight of the girl in her arms and the sound of her crying had been so vivid. She could not make sense of it. Mildly afraid to close her eyes, Tauriel breathed deeply and felt her pulse begin to slow after a considerable amount of time passed. Her loose tunic was damp with sweat, her breeches hiked uncomfortably past her knee. She yanked them down to cover her calves, shivering as she lifted herself up to wriggle underneath the coverlet.

Naneth, come back to us. Do you not love Ada and me? Please, Nana.

Tauriel lay on her side, eyes wide open; where she remained until the freezing dawn broke over the city. The essence of the dream remained with her throughout the duration of their stay in Dale. She worked hard at serving as translator, simultaneously conveying what each side meant as accurately as she was capable of. By the end of nearly three full moons, King Brand had agreed that the Elves take their sick and elderly into their Halls. Children were to accompany them back as well. Their success meant that they could return home to the woods with these people in their care and half of the soldiers that arrived with them would remain as protection alongside the formidable archers of Dale. Elvish architects and builders helped construct more ramparts around the city.

Tirithon led them to Lake-town next, with King Brand’s permission and Tauriel’s guidance. They convinced the people there too that their women and small children as well as the elderly and sick should take refuge with them. The Dwarves had indeed extended their assistance as well, but when all was said and done, they were warriors. A mighty race that was more suited for battle and less so to caring for the aforementioned kinds of humans. Erebor stood to offer support to Dale through the strength of their army. Mirkwood offered refuge, shelter and food to those who were not capable of fighting.

Still, the dream recurred every so often. Tauriel did not sleep during the nights when Amdíriel came to her. She ran with the cold night wind out toward the shores of the Long Lake. The storm had passed and the snow thinned at the water’s edge. Tauriel was enraptured by the image of the stars reflecting off the water’s undisturbed surface. She stood where water met the earth and sky, cloaked in velvet starlight.

In starlight and in shadow, naneth.
After an intemperate, bitter winter, the Elves had returned from their official sojourn to Dale. They brought with them some of the elderly and women with their young children. The Men of Dale and their sons stayed to protect their city. The Elves’ presence in their capital was genuinely reassuring to them. They distributed lembas among them and the people were awed by its sustaining properties, the Healers cured the sick and injured along the way.

Tauriel arrived with the cavalcade from Dale on the last day of winter when hints of spring came to Mirkwood. The stark and creeping darkness among her beloved trees and the ominous shade above their halls were so oppressive that she found it hard to prevent the escalating sense of foreboding in her breast.

Melethril greeted her at the Western Gate and extended a jubilant hand from her heart to Tauriel’s. In her navy day-dress with a leather woven belt draped over her slender waist, Melethril looked so grown that Tauriel had difficulty believing this woman was once an elfling just like the ones she now mentored.

There was some sadness in her face—a hint of nostalgia or some distraction that she hid well behind affectionate eyes. Tauriel instinctively thought it had to do with Legolas but she let it lie. She too worried for her friend: the reports from the south grew graver every passing day. When the news of Rohan’s fall became widely known, Tauriel knew that the span of the war would grow outward from that tragic land.

Not long after the group returned from Dale, Thranduil made it known that the Woodland host had ten days to complete the final preparations for war. Battle plans were carefully and indelibly etched in crimson onto the sheepskin maps of the War Council room. News of a battle at the fortress of the Hornburg in Helm’s Deep arrived in their Halls by messengers from their southern kindred in Lothlórien. Elven warriors of that realm had been sent to the aid of the Rohirrim at the Hornburg and despite heavy losses they were able to overwhelm the legions of Isengard’s orcs, Uruk-hai, and the contingent of Dunlendings beguiled by the treacherous Saruman.

The force of Dol Guldur was unleashed against Lothlórien and Caras Galadhon withstood thus far two assaults by those orc contingents. Celeborn and Galadriel drove them back, but a third push was imminent and it was uncertain whether the Lord and Lady of the Wood had strength enough to defeat it.

The messengers also spoke of how Sauron sent forth his armies from Mordor to overwhelm the West. Minas Tirith would soon be laid siege to. There, the opposing host comprised of Rohan, Gondor and Dol Amroth against the entire force of the East. It stood to reason that it was only a matter of time before the north came under attack too.

Tauriel was privy to these details but she had never travelled that far south or seen any of the kingdoms mentioned. The scale of those battles was beyond her ability to fathom. She knew not which of these conflicts Legolas was involved in, but she quailed when the messengers related the number of casualties for both sides and the description of the Pelennor Fields during the bloodbath.
There was brief mention of a ring-bearer, a Halfling entrusted with the task of taking the one ring back to Mordor to destroy it by casting it into the fiery abyss of that terrible mountain. Tauriel was astounded that this ring-bearer should be a relation of the Halfling who’d been a companion of Thorin Oakenshield. There was mention too of a Fellowship formed by Elrond—and then she realized Legolas’s purpose of going to Imladris so many moons ago.

Thranduil was distant, grave, calculating. He did not acknowledge her nor seek her out. Tauriel did not lay blame on him. There was much to think on, many decisions only he could make with very little chance of delay. She was not even sure he was aware of her return to Mirkwood.

The Silvan elves of the woodland were not loremasters like their kindred who were more inclined toward scholarship. With that said, there were still great efforts to preserve their heritage and culture. Each day, Melethril spent hours poring over all of the scrolls and tomes that described their way of life in detail. There was a dimension of hushed tragedy in the act, Tauriel thought. It was as if Melethril sought to commit to memory every last word, as one who thirsts savors every last drop of water before they are denied any more.

“How long has it been since you began this ritual?” She asked in a sympathetic manner. The light of the library came from a series of oculi in the vaulted ceiling. There were shelves built into the stone walls in the form of tree branches that supported the numerous tomes that were housed there. There were many tables and chairs spread throughout the archives, but Melethril was often the sole occupant.

“I started coming here after you left. I turned to old volumes of poetry written in Quenya, for I’ve learned to sing in that language. My interest in the rest took flight from there.” She kept her tone light. She avoided looking at Tauriel and instead focused on the material before her.

“I admire your dedication, my dear, but you oughtn’t to bury yourself down here all of the time.”

“If this is lost and we perish, who will remain to impart it? It cannot be that no one should ever know we existed. Here in this forest, in these living Halls of stone.” Her young charge said. Tauriel could not deny the truth in her statement.

Tauriel stood at Melethril’s shoulder, looking at the numerous volumes lying open on the expansive table. There were an assortment of subjects there—astronomy, history, texts written in Quenya and Sindarin alike, healing and medicine, and customs of the Eldar. The latter particularly caught Tauriel’s attention.

“These describe Elvish wedding rites and ceremonies.” She noted with benign amusement, lightly tracing her finger along the worn edge of a page.

The answering blush that rose on the younger elf’s cheeks made Tauriel laugh softly.

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of, sweet one. Perhaps it is for the best you are educating yourself on these topics now rather than discovering by accident the gravity behind the sacrament of marriage.”

“I…quite agree.” Was all Melethril could manage. She glanced up at Tauriel with sudden mystery in her demeanor. Tauriel then saw where Melethril’s high collar divided at her neck, there was a visible sparkle beneath the cloth.

When she realized what it was, Tauriel could only stare in dumb surprise. That necklace was not one easily mistaken or forgotten, no matter the length of time it had been since she last laid eyes on it.
“Legolas,” Tauriel breathed incredulously.

Melethril nodded apprehensively. She did not appear offended by her disbelief. “I…I did not tell you because I feared you would disapprove.”

“Why ever would I disapprove? What says the king of this attachment?” Tauriel cannot help asking despite the indelicacy of doing so. She expected tolerance though not full endorsement of a union between the prince and her ward.

“Legolas has been your friend for many years. I did not wish to upset you in any way or think I had purposely set out to ensnare him. The king has not voiced disapproval but I do not dare to speak on his behalf. Legolas left me with this and a promise of a pledge. Nothing more, nothing less.”

There was heartbreak in her eyes as she choked out those last few words. Tauriel felt sadness so sharp that she leaned forward to take Melethril into her arms without hesitation. She knew this pain, she knew the grief inspired by the unknown. Legolas had not been directly heard from in nearly six or seven moons.

“You have been so strong, my dear. Have faith in him, he will return.” She whispered, stroking the young woman’s upper back as Melethril shook slightly but did not weep.

“I…I must attend to my afternoon pupils. They will be arriving in the Hall of Music soon for today’s lesson.” The younger of the two disentangled herself from the embrace and rose from her seat, leaving the scrolls and books in disarray.

Tauriel heard the need for constant occupation as a means of diverting troublesome thoughts. She nodded with understanding. Melethril left Tauriel alone in the library, a solitary figure among the vast hall filled with the wisdom of their people.

The front room in her quarters was warmly lit and cleanly kept but the stillness had never been starker to her. Tauriel sat alone on her settee. She was accustomed to the air being filled with strains of Melethril’s instruments, the ever-changing notes of a budding composer’s imagination.

She drained the contents of her cup with one extensive gulp. Her face crumpled, the wine burned down her throat and settled in her belly. Battle plans, projected losses, tactics…all of these things burdened her mind and she would set it aside if only for an hour while she still had the chance. The prospect of dying was one she was becoming accustomed to. Somehow her life and all that she’d ever seen or done had far more meaning now that there was a strong chance she might lose it.

The mortal races lived their lives knowing with certainty that they one day would perish. Tauriel pondered if they led more fulfilling existences than she and her kin because of that knowledge. Given a finite end, one made sure to achieve all they desired before it was too late. Perhaps a mortal life was not the terrible thing the Elves made it out to be, though she knew not what became of mortal beings’ souls in the afterlife. The uncertainty must be both frightening and liberating.

She thought over her time in Dale. The way those people lived and worked each day, doing what pleased them so long as it harmed no one. She remembered their particular sort of amity among them. They welcomed her and her fellow soldiers for the protection they helped provide and the weapons they brought for Dale’s forces. There was inherent trust in their preconception that the Elves could do no wrong and were infallible. She was astounded by that. Her kin were capable of much good but there were more than enough examples in history of their failings. Mortals had selective memory that
way, it seemed.

For an elf, she knew she was being maudlin. Tauriel poured more of the Dalish wine she’d procured. She cradled the cup to her and stared blankly at the dark liquid. The candles in the lanterns were half melted and she only swirled her wine around, unwilling to partake of any more lest she over-imbibe. Tauriel set it down on the low bronze iron table in front of her. She leaned forward and rested her forehead in her hands, wishing desperately for clarity of the strictly non-liquid variety.

Two brief knocks on her door disturbed the silence. She rose to her feet and went to answer, the skirt of her night dress brushing the floor over her bare feet.

Tauriel gasped wordlessly. She stepped back to admit him and swiftly shut the door. She saw he wore none of his usual trappings, only a hooded cloak and doublet over a long-sleeved tunic, with breeches and tall leather boots. When Thranduil stood in the center of her humble living quarters, she leaned against her door with her hands behind her back and faced him. His every movement spoke of naked agitation.

“Leaving this realm without permission is one of your most exasperating tendencies.” The words were clumsy out of his mouth like he’d planned some eloquent and scathing speech that he could not quite manage at the sight of her.

“Well, I’m back now.” She deadpanned.

He glared at her obvious pronouncement. “Why did you leave?”

In another age, Tauriel would have glared back and said that she could go wherever she pleased without giving him notice if it was in the name of her duty as a commander of the realm. She took his anger in stride because she knew her departure was a slash aimed at the sensitive underbelly of his hidden sentiments. They passed an entire season apart—the longest they’d been separated in recent memory.

“Because I thought I could be useful elsewhere.” She swallowed past the lump forming in her throat. “Because I thought you were finished with me.”

He clenched his jaw and cast his gaze toward something on the hardwood floor near his feet.

“I do not understand.”

“It sounds completely ridiculous stated aloud. I was selfish, I admit to it. I saw Vanadessë as she was returning from some meeting with you. She spoke in riddles to her handmaid and I drew the worst conclusions from her speech.” As Tauriel told him what she’d wanted to say, he kept his eyes down. “I owe you my apology for acting hastily but I do not regret assisting with the mission to Dale. We did them much good, the weak and old among them will have a better quality of life here with us than out there.”

The king nodded slowly. He looked careworn. She realized that with her and Legolas gone, he’d been completely alone.

“That lady was fulfilling an official request on my behalf. My meetings with her were not as illicit as your imagination portrays.” Now, Thranduil did meet her gaze and she felt trapped by the intensity of it.

“You told me it was none of my business.” She reminded him firmly.

“Yes, I did, and it was not.”
The soft concurrence was not what she expected. Tauriel expected him to scream and rage and
denounce his connection to her, but here he was dressed practically in rags to disguise himself while
visiting her in her humble living quarters.

“You must have more to tell me, to have gone through the trouble of coming here undetected.” She
prompted him expectantly.

“I’ve had word from the scouts; orcs from the south will reach Lothlórien before dawn’s first light.
Celeborn and Galadriel stand to defend it. We have perhaps three, four days more before the orcs lay
siege to our kingdom.” Thranduil said. She felt a thrill of fear run down her spine, she was barely
returned from a long excursion and now the time of reckoning was finally here. Blood would be
shed before the sun could fully rise.

“This is the anticipated third assault?”

He nodded wordlessly in answer.

“The companies stand ready to be dispatched at your word. I saw to it myself, earlier. Ve thorthol,”
Her voice was firm. She could not waver in front of him. He could not afford to doubt any of his
generals or commanders. She fleetingly thought of his council--did anyone know he was here? How
was it that he could slip into this part of the palace without being noticed? The whereabouts of the
king are not to be missed by those who are observant.

Thranduil said nothing more of their forces. She suspected he wished to put that aside momentarily
as she’d been trying to before he showed up in her rooms. Tauriel straightened from her place at the
door and moved to stand close. Years of the ambiguous closeness they shared rid her of any fear of
rebuke. As expected, none came.

She took his hands in hers, as he’d done to her once. “How fleeting each second is now, how much
more precious—when once we faced the endless stretch of time without end…that must sound trite
to you.”

There was self-deprecation in her tone. He lived through so much more than she had that it was
unfathomable; he knew too much of rage and grief, sorrow and isolation. But he remembered what
their lands were like before the shadows and sickness pervaded the forest. He knew love once with a
noble elven lady and still did, through his love for their son Legolas. She remembered every word
that left his lips from that evening and his proposal that would forever burn bright in her memory. In
comparison, her life was but a drop of water in the vast, bottomless lake that was his.

Thranduil made a sound that wasn’t quite laughter. Some of the tension in his stance eased with his
exhalation. “It is a burden we who fight must bear so that our people do not have to.”

She recalled a time when he lived in denial of any need to muster an army and when she stubbornly
believed he thought of other races as lesser beings. Yes, by any account he’d turned indifferent to the
plight of others after the fall of Erebor to the dragon Smaug but she knew better now—she
understood him far better.

The wars that stole lives of those he loved and destroyed prosperous, ancient kingdoms…He’d seen
Doriath, Lindon, and Greenwood the Great succumb to the ravages of time. He saw Elu Thingol,
Gil-galad, and his father Oropher slaughtered, his wife slain in Angmar, each successive loss more
demoralizing and heart-rending than the last. Caring for a young son and coming into a throne in the
face of that debilitating grief—all of that shaped him into who he was now.

“You have borne so much alone for so long.” Tauriel whispered sadly. She let go of his hands and
raised her right to touch his cheek. His skin was warm beneath her palm just as she remembered. The way he looked at her told her that he saw she understood. It was a sweet reunion, the feel of him against her. He grasped the back of her hand and leaned into her touch, surprising her by closing his eyes. His scent of wood sage and sandalwood was soothing to her as she inhaled leisurely.

A long moment later, Thranduil opened his eyes slowly and met her gaze. There was something more he had to tell her and by the look of him, she predicted it would not be to her liking.

“Tirithon brought me a message written by Brand of Dale and delivered them to me as soon as the retinue arrived. They too will soon fight legions of Sauron’s Easterling supporters. It appears that if Erebor and Dale are overrun, the Easterlings could march through our northern border and join the Orcs to surround us. We cannot let this happen.”

A gnawing sense of dread began to rise within her, rendering her momentarily speechless.

“I will send more of our force north to aid them in addition to those of my host that remain there, while the majority remains here to defend the forest. I wish for you to take your company to the King of Dale whether or not we can hold back the orcs. You know the paths well, having just returned from that realm.”

Tauriel reacted violently, wrenching away from him. Her eyes were wide with anger.

“I deserve to fight for our kingdom here when the Dark one seeks to butcher and maim! How dare you think to take that from me?”

He was taken aback by her vehemence, then he drew himself up and she saw the precise moment when his determination to get his way superseded his desire to be in her good graces. His eyes flashed dangerously, he was ready to counter her.

“You will do as I say, Tauriel. I will brook no opposition from you.”

She plunged ahead wildly, heedless of his warning or irascibility. She was clearly ignorant of the true state he worked himself into during her absence.

“Do you seek to spare me from facing the Orc filth? Do you think I am safer fighting bloodthirsty Men who are fortified by the enemy’s enchantments? Or is it that I am not deemed competent enough by Lord Beriadan to warrant a place in our ranks? Well, which of these is it?”

She threw her hands sharply in the air and steadied herself for the anticipated onslaught.

“None of that, and you well know it! I would have you aid our allies for I trust no one more than you in this! Bard of Laketown, do you recall him? –his grandson and great grandson will face the savage Men of the east. Shall we leave him to fend for himself and his people? We must help them keep the armies separate for their sake as much as for ours!” He roared back. She did not flinch, she squared her shoulders to him and faced him completely.

“And if you should fall?” Tauriel watched his reaction shrewdly. “How can you truly think that I will fret less if I cannot see you?” Her voice was full of unmitigated sarcasm, her posture radiated defiance.

The troubled look in Thranduil’s eyes told her what she feared was true.

“I have lived long in this world, Tauriel. If Vairë decides my presence in her tapestry shall be no more, then to her husband’s Halls I must away. As long as I still draw breath, as long as I stand here with you, I will not shirk my duty to protect you.” His words were harsh and unyielding.
“How can you say that yet be resigned to die yourself?” She hissed accusingly. Her hands balled into fists, tense but immobile at her sides. She could not raise a hand against him, not ever again, yet the force of her anger was crippling.

The entirety of what he just conveyed overwhelmed her. She turned her back to him and wrapped her arms around her middle, then felt him come close and embrace her. He pressed himself to her and whispered soothing words until she realized that tears were coursing down her cheeks in spite of her attempts to force them back.

When her tears subsided, Tauriel leaned into him. Her voice shook. “I will do as you ask. But I will be present for the first engagement and a little while thereafter. I will then take my company north.”

She felt him sigh in relief. Taking advantage of the slackening of his grip, she turned to look upon him. Her fingertips brushed over his mouth then down to caress his jaw. Their lips met in a searing kiss that both could not feel any shame for and caused her knees to weaken beneath her.

Thranduil ravished her unreservedly, she responded by gripping his shoulders and melding her body to him. She knew he could feel her through her night dress—his breathing quickened and the restraint she remembered from him was nowhere to be found. It astounded her anew that at his most raw, he was but flesh and blood.

Elves were not whimsical in matters of the heart, very least of all this king whose touch set her aflame. She knew the words—she made sure to consult the tomes in the library of her people’s rituals with regard to this, the day she found Melethril there. In her wildest moments, she did not dare hope to ever say them to him. However now she knew with perfect clarity that which needed to be given voice.

She knew him for the better part of seven hundred years, she knew the best of him and the absolute worst of him and she loved every part. Not the idea of loving a king, not any temptation of riches or splendor, she loved him for who he was to her. She was old enough now to fully comprehend what she felt and the words she memorized came to her effortlessly.

Their foreheads rested gently together when they came apart for air and she felt the ancient words tumble unencumbered from her mouth, “I give you my heart… I give you my love. If you accept these gifts, by Varda’s grace, I would thee wed.”

There were no betrothal words or rings, no parents to bless the union. There may never be a ceremony, no one might ever know that it happened. She didn’t even know if they could, if he would refuse her as she refused him once or if his bond with his first wife was not sundered but intact and a second union impossible.

All of these things mattered not, all she wanted more than anything was for him to survive, for his son and people, and then for her. She could not see anyone else standing to rule over the Greenwood, as it would be once more after the darkness was driven out. Tauriel knew she could not stand to bear witness to the sight. She would die from brokenness if he was slain and another claimed his kingship.

Tauriel waited with bated breath for his answer. With eyes full of meaning, he drew breath to speak.

Chapter End Notes
Sindarin translations: (From Southern Sindarin dialect phrasebook at realelvish.net)
1) Ve thorthol - We are yours to command
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Thanks everyone for your support thus far. I hope you enjoy this chapter, and as always please let me know what you think.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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Tauriel waited with bated breath for his answer. With eyes full of meaning, he drew breath to speak. She wagered she could have sprinted the entire length of the Forest River and back in the time Thranduil took to compose his reply. At last, he answered.

“I receive these gifts gladly. Anthon ’úr nîn angin, Anthon veleth nîn angin. With these gifts and by Manwë’s grace, I would thee wed.” Thranduil’s sonorous voice filled her ears and she had no time to wonder if he was reminded of the last time he spoke these words before he was kissing her again.

They moved together to her bedchamber, where she divested him of his cloak and bade him sit on the mattress so she could pull his tunic over his head. He complied as she pushed him back against the cushions and leaned over him in hopes of capturing his insouciant smile for her own. His finely-formed hands trailed up from her sides to unlace the bodice of her nightgown before he tugged it open at the chest—she gasped at the sensation of his lips on her exposed skin, fingers tangled in his fine hair. He grunted when she pulled at his hair, changing the angle of their kiss so she could fit her lips better to his.

The moments they’d shared of this nature were scant over the past six decades. Tauriel did what she felt was right and what seemed to make him press nearer to her. She was not ashamed of her inexperience but eager to find what lay beyond this, this frantic mingling of lips and tongue as hands roved the other’s body.

Thranduil allowed her to lead thus far. She sensed that he held back to let her discover his body in her own time, but now he burned for her. Her nightgown fell all the way off her, down past her waist and legs, after he helped her pull her arms free from the translucent sleeves. She stepped out of the gown boldly, pushed her hair off her shoulders and lay back before him. With his breeches and boots gone, Thranduil stood at the edge of her bed, silent, admiring, eyes full of sentiment that eluded words. She was at his mercy, laid out before him to do with her as he pleased. It could no longer be cast into doubt that he loved her as she loved him.

He braced himself with his left arm and his right caressed her cheek, further down to the pale slope of her neck. His lips followed the path of his hands. Her body responded to him seemingly of its own
accord, she arched into the kisses he placed on the tender skin of her breasts. His strangled groan was proof that he was victim to desire just as she was. She touched him tenderly to return that pleasure to him, gratified by the strength of his reactions. They compelled her to try and elicit more from him. She had no basis of comparison but she was determined to learn his body as she knew his mind and heart. When they were both senseless with need, Thranduil murmured, “With my body, I thee wed.” The words shot straight through her, the answering pulse deep in her core briefly distracting her.

She knew she had to repeat the words, the final of the wedding rites that would bind them. They were remarkable in their simplicity. The consummation of the union was the marriage itself. Tauriel felt tears well in her eyes—the terror, uncertainty and peril they would face shortly had no place here in this room. This was certain. This was forever, however long that might be. She sucked in a breath and said, “With my body, I thee wed.”

He sat up again, back on his heels. Thranduil touched her gingerly; he traced identical paths from her ankles, to her knees, and then paused at her inner thighs. When her legs parted for him, she could tell he was enraptured by her and she knew nothing more rewarding than the way he seemed to be memorizing each detail of her person.

Many long moments passed while he learned how to please her with his touch and his lips at her neck, until she reached some hitherto unknown peak in her desire and cried out loudly. She found herself entreating him for something she’d never experienced yet now craved, she was beyond any and all rational thought. She writhed beneath him, hopelessly lost with every kiss and stroke of his fingers.

“Oh, please…please,” Tauriel beckoned him to her now, her skin flushed enticingly from her face to her sternum. Thranduil moved forward, extending himself to cover her body with his. He gently pressed his face to her neck to kiss her there once more as she ran her palms along the muscles of his upper back and shoulders. She trusted in his patience with her, seeing how he took care to see to her own satisfaction before his own.

The sensation of their joining was unlike anything she ever hoped to experience. She’d loved him for so long that she knew with certainty why this would be the only union she could ever bear to be part of in her lifetime. He raised his upper body by bracing himself on both forearms so that he might watch her face and see every flicker of emotion that crossed it. She hid nothing, surrendered everything, just like him as they moved together.

Tauriel welcomed him wholly, raising her hips to meet his and then her release built up to a shattering crescendo that left her limp and gasping beneath him. She wanted more than anything to see him reach that same blissful height of pleasure and stroked his chest, shoulders, back, urging him on with her unrelenting rhythm until he growled low in his throat and gasped her name. His movements became more aggressive, his raw craving for her and her alone brought her a second release, and he could no longer resist the temptation of following her into that headlong, blinding pleasure.

When Tauriel regained the ability to think clearly, she realized that they were now wed in the eyes of the Valar.

After, they rested together. Thranduil kept Tauriel close to him, one hand resting on her lower back and the other holding her hand to his chest. Tauriel felt a distinct sort of drowsiness and wondered if he experienced the same lethargy. She turned slightly to look at his noble profile, admiring his features.

“I…We—we went about this in rather a different order than I imagined.” He said quietly, with the barest of smiles. He met her eyes and saw she raised a questioning eyebrow.
“You cannot have imagined how well we…” Tauriel was tempted to be more blunt but it was still new and delicate between them, “…suit each other, this way.”

Thranduil surprised her by laughing, like he could possibly be offended by her bluntness when he’d faced her at the height of her temper countless times. She felt the rumble of it beneath her hand on his chest. The sound of it sent a tremor of arousal through her in spite of its innocuousness. She felt her cheeks flush, how could she want him again so soon?

“Don’t tell me you wanted to be the one to ask first. We might have had another century go by if I did not speak my mind.” She teased with greater confidence.

“Perhaps it’s best that you took the initiative.” He conceded but not without a gentle pinch on her thigh. This time Tauriel laughed at his retaliation.

They were still melded close, skin to skin, and his scent was primal on her. She was endlessly addicted to the feeling of his smooth skin beneath her hands. Her left leg was intertwined between his, causing her hip to fit snugly against him.

“In any case, I did not imagine that we should be so blessed in that regard,” He said wryly, “I have to tell you before I lose the opportunity—I brought something that I wish for you to have.”

Thranduil began to sit up, to her dismay. For all the treasures in the world, she would not be parted from him so quickly after the ecstasy of their marriage. He felt her grip tighten unconsciously and raised her hand to gently kiss her fingers, loosening her hold so he could lean toward where his outer cloak hung on the chair beside the bed. He retrieved something from the inner pocket and nestled back against her.

In his palm, he held an exquisite ring that was made of thinly forged silver. Upon a closer look, she saw that it was not comprised of a single band but of several intricate vines that were woven together among which were several of the embedded gems of Lasgalen. They shone brightly in his outstretched hand even though the lone candle that burned in her room was nearly at its end.

“I had this created for you but a proper time to present it never made itself known until now.”

“You had this made?…For me?” She asked, inanely.

That would mean that he’d stormed into her quarters with a plan to ask for her hand in marriage. With the traditional offering of a ring. She wanted to laugh at the coincidence of their respective best laid plans—she looked up the vows and he’d fashioned a ring. It was astounding that the two events should occur independently of each other.

“I commissioned Vanadessë to design and fashion it from her finest silver. I gave her the gems for this very purpose. She consulted me several times regarding its appearance, she wanted to ensure it would please you.” Thranduil continued as realization left her thunderstruck with guilt. Tauriel was embarrassed by the memory of her own harshness regarding Vanadessë. He was staring at her with poorly concealed amusement, as if he could hear her berating herself.

“I regret that I was so angry with you and what I said to you because of it. I had no inkling that… You went to great lengths to keep this a secret!” Tauriel didn’t trust her voice any further so she fell silent. At his encouragement, she picked it up carefully and admired the quality of the craftsmanship.

“All of the times I saw her exiting your chambers, she was receiving your orders for the creation of this ring.” Tauriel said more to herself than to him. She spent the winter fuming over that lady, who as it turned out, had been greatly occupied with the task of creating her wedding ring.
These were the same gems she retrieved from King Dain of the Lonely Mountain, when all she wanted more than anything was to atone for her sins and make things right between them. It was surreal that he was surrendering these into her keeping for a wedding present. She felt no offense that the raw material had been meant for a different lady long ago. If anything, she was deeply touched that he was willing to create new memories with them. He did not bring up Legolas’s mother and she doubted that he ever would. She did not begrudge him any love he still felt for his first wife—she was only glad for the way he seemed content with her now. If he chose to tell her more of his first marriage, she would lend a willing ear. Her thoughts turned to Legolas and what he would think of this when he found out. She reminded herself firmly that Legolas did not have Fëanor’s hatred, that hostility recounted in the ancient stories.

“Are you certain you wish to bind yourself to the greatest fool to have set foot in this forest?” Tauriel asked with a touch of discomfiture. The ring felt solid in her palm.

Thranduil smirked and said, “I agree with your assessment of your own intelligence if you think I mean to abandon you now.”

“Then I am yours.” Tauriel concurred softly, hearing his indirect forgiveness for her mistaken anger and his unspoken apology for the secrecy that unintentionally wounded her.

“If it please you, I will also give you the epessë Silivren.”

Thranduil showed her that the epessë was engraved in flowing script on the inside of the ring. As if to inadvertently reinforce the meaning of that name, Tauriel turned a radiant smile to him. “Then Tauriel Silivren I shall be from this day forth.”

He returned her smile with one of his own that softened the angular planes of his face and she was amazed anew by the depth of his affection.

She would find a chain for it later, for now, she slipped the ring onto the index finger of her right hand and wrapped her arms around him to kiss him deeply. She had so much to tell him but the words lingered stubbornly in her throat. It would feel like acknowledging defeat before the fighting even began. Before long, neither could deny that war would soon greet them and they could no longer afford the luxury of basking in their afterglow. It was time to prepare.

Fully dressed, even in plain clothes, she almost did not believe he could be the same lord she held so ardently not a few hours past. Thranduil looked as composed as ever, unruffled even after so much passion, and she envied him a little for that. In her re-laced nightgown, she still felt exposed to him—she longed for more time with him, her husband, and he must have seen it in her face. The burgeoning grief for the immediate loss of him.

There were plans to be finalized. The woodland host was rapidly mobilizing and its head could not remain missing for too much longer. Time was a scarce enough resource now that their enemy marched from the Nazgûl fortress at Dol Guldur.

“Promise me, you will ride north when the time comes.” Thranduil said gruffly, “Please.”

Tauriel leaned up on her knees, aided by the height of the mattress to reach him easily as he stood in front of her. She placed a light kiss at the corner of his mouth, cheek, and neck. His arms snatched her around the waist and pulled her into a deeper kiss, one that in other circumstances may have resulted in the undoing of all the garments they had just went through the trouble of putting on. It tasted of a hunger that neither could ever fully satisfy. With much difficulty, she gave him her word though inwardly she resolved to stay as close to him as possible during the first engagement of the enemy.
“Go, Thranduil. They are no doubt in a panicked search for you now. Go! I shall follow.”

The Elvenking leaned down for a last, fervent kiss, then stole from her room as quietly as if he’d never been there. Tauriel went back to her bedside table, still reeling from the heat of his lips and hands and body on her, and stared at the ring on her right hand. She had wanted to remark on its beauty, but she knew better than to be overly admiring of it. Beauty alone did not constitute goodness. She thought of the tale of Annatar and Celebrimbor, the origins of the rings of power. The brilliant stones glinted up at her and she remembered her epessē. The name he gave her was far more precious than the jewels as far as she was concerned but the ring was the only solid proof of their marriage she could hold onto.

She went to her dresser and found a silver-linked chain for the ring. After Tauriel bathed herself and dried off, she slipped the chain around her neck. The ring fell just past her collarbone and rested against her heart. This ring was absolutely pure, no tainted magic existed in it. It embodied their sacred union.

Tauriel appeared in the war council room, immaculate and stoic, as the generals and the king reviewed the strategy for the long days ahead. All were absorbed in the task at hand, as she soon was, even if the thought occurred to her every so often that she was married now and her husband was shoring up the largest war effort that this realm had faced in centuries. The Battle of Five Armies paled in comparison to the scale of the War of the Ring, and she recalled how none who fought in the former came from it unscathed.

Lothlórien rallied and now marched against Dol Guldur, the tide of that battle clearly turning in their kin’s favor. However, the orcs driven out by Celeborn would join the force that approached Mirkwood. The Wood-elves of Thranduil’s kingdom thus would have no help from their southern kindred.

On the eve before battle, he surprised her again by stealing into her quarters. There was the same yearning in his visage, nearly undetectable save for the intent in his eyes. Tauriel drew him into her arms, her bed, and her body. She stood before him naked except for the ring on the chain around her neck.

He did not temper his passion then. She welcomed his ferocity, knowing that he would not hurt her for her own longing matched his. His thrusts were forceful but she gripped him tightly and cried out for more, more until both of them were gasping in the throes of their mutual release. They made love into the late hours of the night, neither daring to talk about what they would soon confront. When the hour arrived for Thranduil to leave her, he kissed her forehead with great care and whispered, “Posto vē, I dhû hen meren.”

She could detect the farewell wrapped in his meaning. Tauriel clung to him as long as he would allow. Guren niniatha n’i lû n’i a-govenitham, she thought to herself. The king left her where she slept, and when she woke to a cold bed mere hours later, she knew it was time to ready herself. As she dressed for battle, she felt the weight of his ring on her skin— it steadied her and Tauriel would not be afraid.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I am going with the Tolkien legendarium notion that to the Elves, sex equals marriage. Yes, there are formal ceremonies of betrothal and for the wedding but these
are mostly for the rest of the community to be made aware of the union. In this case between Tauriel and Thranduil, they do not presently have that opportunity.

The Elvish wedding vows are very loosely based on traditional Catholic wedding vows to go along with Tolkien’s style, though I imagine they would be spoken in Sindarin.

Sindarin translations: (from the Southern Sindarin phrase book at realelvish.net)

1) Anthon 'ûr nîn angin, Anthon veleth nîn angin: Basically the Sindarin equivalent of Tauriel’s vows from the end of the previous chapter. These phrases are directly from the source.

2) Silivren – An epessê, or a name given to a bride, meaning “white-glittering, as a jewel.”

3) Posto vê, I dhû hen meren: Rest well, this night was joyous.

4) Guren nîniatha n’i lû n’i a-govenitham: My heart will weep until the time we meet again
Chapter 10

Scores of the king’s soldiers and guards alike went to the royal armories—clad in golden armor and forest brown leathers, they went to arm themselves for war. Tauriel had become self sufficient in donning her armor over the years so she needed no squire to assist her. She did not hear her door open and shut as Melethril let herself in.

“Let me,” The girl said, even if she had no business helping Tauriel into her plackart and faulds. Her armor was wrought-silver to denote her rank as a higher commander. When it was all properly fastened, Melethril straightened and clasped her hands together tensely. Tauriel must have looked taken aback at her unexpected skill. It caused the girl to bristle.

“I have grown up watching you fight, did you think I had not memorized the way the different parts fit together?” The younger elf said with a touch of acerbity.

“Forgive me for underestimating your attention.” Tauriel replied with a smile despite the disquiet between them.

“When must you report?”

“As soon as I am ready. The scouts have reported sightings of the orc legions and estimate an attack by nightfall at the earliest.”

A heavy sigh escaped Melethril at that. She ran a hand through Tauriel's hair, likely noticed it was freshly clean as if air dried after a bath. The lingering scent of jasmine water hinted at the bath, Tauriel realized what an indulgence it seemed at a time like this. She fought away the blush that threatened to appear at the remembrance of exactly why she drew a bath to begin with, at such an odd hour.

“Your hair is undone—it’s unsuitable for combat.” Melethril frowned. “Let me plait it for you.”

So Tauriel sat at her dresser, watching her charge in the mirror as she diligently worked her long auburn hair into warrior’s braids that began at her temples and joined at the crown. Melethril worked dexterously and seemed wholly engrossed. Tauriel could see past the calm façade, past her guarded stare.

“You know what lies ahead, dear heart.” Tauriel said honestly. She could not help the mother’s gentleness that colored her tone. “I will fight for our kingdom here but after the first engagement, I am to lead a sortie to the north. I am uncertain how long we will fight in the northern theater or how long the siege of Mirkwood will last.”

“So we shall wait here until the war is won.” Her voice was her most expressive feature and it quavered now. She wrung her hands fretfully after she finished braiding.

Tauriel stood and turned to look at Melethril in the eye.

“You will keep the dagger I gave you on your person at all times. Defend yourself and any others that you can, should these Halls be breached. There are two hundred guards stationed to defend all of the gates and entrances to the Keep. In the meantime, occupy yourselves as you normally would. Tell the children old tales, sing to them and comfort all who are frightened. And know that out there,
The deployment of their entire host did not take long since they had adequate time to prepare—a full year almost to the day to gather their strength. Their armory was emptied of all the elven weapons made and forged for their respective purposes. Their soldiers were indistinguishable from one another—the infantry donned their proud golden armor and were united under the last great Elvenking Thranduil Oropherion.

It turned out they were wrong regarding the lack of help from their other woodland kin. The Galadhrim archers sent from Lothlórien had already seen victory in the Battle of the Hornburg and Helm’s Deep, they had come north to aid their kindred against more of Sauron’s forces in spite of the losses they incurred in those conflicts.

It took a certain perceptiveness to note the difference between pure silence and lack of noise. It was entirely the latter among the elven host of some eight thousand strong, troops from all of the woodland fiefs that ran the length of Mirkwood. The bulk of their power was concentrated along the southwestern border.

The scouts reported the enemies’ bypassing of the densely packed forest on their northbound march and then eastward turn to their fortress. Tauriel thought the enemy would be cunning enough to try to
draw them out of the woodland but she supposed it was an ironic blessing that orcs were not renowned for their intelligence but their cruelty.

They waited under cover of the cool spring night. The archers were camouflaged high up in the trees with arrows nocked at the ready, the infantry soldiers spread out over the forest floor in position to ambush. The Elvenking was mounted on his elk, which was still and silent except for its steady breathing. King and elk appeared to be fixed to the earth just as the oak trees that surrounded them, a forbidding image, yet Tauriel was apprehensive about him being so exposed. He was backed by the elven lords who served as his generals. Beriadan, Arandur and Hérion stood out among them. Tauriel stood some paces behind in position with half her company, blended with the rest of the king’s host. The other half of her company were stationed on higher ground on the northern border. They were placed there for the dual purpose of standing guard against any potential enemy forces from Gundabad as well as being ready to ride toward Dale once she met them there.

She kept her eyes trained ahead. Every one of her senses were on alert; she could hear the merest flutter of a bird’s wing high overhead and see the slight movements of the impatient archers above. She imagined all of the king’s troops were similarly riled. Her hand flexed and loosened on her sword’s hilt. Thranduil’s figure remained utterly still. He was the north of her compass, anchoring her entire existence.

Feren stood to her left. In his possession was an enchanted horn created from a Kine of Araw. It was one of perhaps a few that still existed and played a pitch audible to elvish ears alone. It was to be the signal for the first wave of arrows to be loosed before the charge of the foot soldiers. There were no structured lines as on a traditional battlefield—there were far too many obstructions. The forest floor was uneven and treacherous in the pitch black of night to those who were unfamiliar with it. An army of Men might have cursed the terrain but Wood-elves would have the element of surprise against their adversaries. It was their intent to disrupt their enemies’ lines and drive them toward the river, where the current would swell and drown as many as possible.

Tauriel fixed her sight on Thranduil’s armored back, studying the gleaming ridges on his silver cuirass and pauldrons. He wore no cloak for the weight would hinder him. This was no time for pageantry—everything on him was there for a purpose. The Elvenking was a force to be reckoned with not just in physical prowess but also in tactical wisdom. He’d seen the disaster caused by his father’s pre-emptive charge against Sauron in another age. He would not make the same mistake with the lives of his own soldiers that Oropher made with his, nor would his generals disregard his order to wait. Legolas, wherever he may be, would not be fatherless after this night and Tauriel would not be both wife and widow.

She resolutely barred all thought of their short time together but for the knowledge that his ring was tucked underneath her mail and tunic. Those memories could be reviewed later. At present, there was a battle to be won and she intended for their memory of this night to be of victory and the tales invented to be of triumph. They would feast in glory and laugh and dance one day when the memory of war was not so pervasive, but again, she drove these thoughts away and recalibrated her focus on the present moment.

Thranduil abruptly turned his head to the side. She saw the tension of his posture, read the warning in the way he held himself. He was telling them to listen without using words. Tauriel listened closely and she heard what the king did: the terrible war cries of the orc legions. The cess pits of Dol Guldur were rushing toward them, filthy, corrupted beings that served Sauron. This was no spontaneous ambush…they were organized to wage war. It was no small mercy that the Elves were prepared for this.
She gritted her teeth and stealthily drew her blade. Her fingernails dug sharply into the skin of her palm as it enclosed the hilt. Tauriel’s company followed her example. The other commanders, spread throughout the great forest, drew their own blades when Feren raised the horn to his lips and gave the signal according to Thranduil’s order.

The ground shook, the very earth trembled and their enemies drew ever closer, shrieking orcs, Uruk-hai and goblins. Many were mounted on the largest wargs she’d ever seen—the foul beasts growled viciously, biting, snapping even at each other. There were sounds of explosive charges that destroyed the tree trunks, it appeared that one of the enemy’s battalions was dedicated to felling the majestic oak and beech trees that gave the elves protective cover. The blasts slowly but surely cleared a path toward the Halls, their massive siege equipment worked with fatal precision as the enemy advanced. It could no longer be denied that it was time.

The first wave of elvish arrows sliced through the air and cut down a line of those beasts, sending the ones immediately behind them clattering to the ground as they stumbled over their fallen comrades. The rest of them, infuriated by the loss of their first line, charged forward at greater speed. Their armor and weapons clanged loudly and mingled with their horrifying screams. The archers snapped into action, releasing arrow after arrow, some two or three at a time and their aim never faltered.

The Elvenking and his infantry took advantage of the generous buffer the archers provided them and began their charge. Tauriel broke into a sprint, blade raised, and joined her comrades—for her homeland, for Melethril and Legolas, for her friends, for her husband and king.

Both sides met in a resounding collision. There was so much screaming—such a drastic change from the silence from only moments past. How the orcs had managed to take down so many of the younger saplings at such an alarming rate, she did not know. Their explosives were unending, the barrage continued felling the trees in the direction of the king’s halls. The severed trunks toppled over, nearly killing members of both sides and she would have laughed at orc stupidity if she weren’t occupied fighting a war.

She eyed Thranduil from a great distance atop his armored elk, his longsword slashing and beheading multiple Uruk-hai at a time. She didn’t have a second more to spare before she was directly engaged by a ferocious Uruk that snarled and swung at her, the sharp edge of its sword whizzing past her face. She parried a few times, enough to destroy the Uruk’s equilibrium and when she lunged to deal the killing blow, the hideous thing fell from multiple arrows to the vulnerable uncovered flesh on the back of its neck.

Tauriel saw that the archers continued to shoot but they were equally targeted by orc arrows since the surprise of their location had worn off. The constant whirring of arrows from above and below filled her ears. Several wounded archers fell from the height of the trees’ boughs and landed hard on the forest floor, on charging Orcs, and on their countrymen in a grisly parody of rain.

Tauriel drove her sword easily through the smaller orcs’ hides, cutting their throats where armor and helm did not cover them, the soldiers behind her doing the same. They fought hard and wisely in close-quarters combat, expending just enough effort to slay their foes and then moving on.

There was carnage all around and no time to stop to breathe, Tauriel fought with everything she had in her. She cut down orc after orc until she lost her blade to the jaws of a frenzied warg that ripped it from her hands, bloodying some of her fingers with its teeth. She immediately drew her knives and blinded the beast, avoiding being crushed as it flailed and she killed its rider by propelling herself off the side of a sturdy tree trunk to drive her knife through the orc’s horrid face.

She wasted no time in surveying the scene after she landed on her feet next to the slain warg and its
rider. Embers danced through the air and set the brush alight. There hadn’t been enough rain this spring to dampen the foliage. Whether the orcs dropped their torches purposefully or not, the forest would burn. The blaze grew steadily, forcing the remaining archers to race down from the boughs to avoid burning to death.

The infantry carried on, pushing forward as best they could to keep the battle out in the forests instead of being driven back in the direction of the palace and fortress where the rest of their people hid. It was a rolling, murderous sea that lay siege to Mirkwood. There were so many orcs despite all they’d eliminated, their seemingly endless numbers stretched out past her line of sight. She knew there was a concerted push toward the river as the original battle plan dictated but she could not see how successful it was.

She searched desperately for the antlers of Thranduil’s stag. She ran toward the direction she thought she saw him take, dodging arrows and swords as she vacillated between detachment and wide-eyed panic. The heat of the blaze warmed the metal of her armor but she dared not shed any of it to cool down. Sweat and blood dripped down the sides of her face—she did not even realize she’d been cut—she kept running, boots slick with blood, searching for him, where was he—

“TAURIEL!” She heard one of her troops yell from some distance but it was too late and she was blindsided by a cloud of enormous black bats, knocking her off balance and laying her flat on her back. Her skull smacked against the inside of her loosened helmet, causing her vision to blur with the pain. Four of them descended upon her as the rest whizzed past overhead. They pinned her arms so she couldn’t slash at them with her knives. She resisted their weight and kicked as high as she could, distracting them before they could tear into the flesh of her arms and legs. Her vambraces protected her but against the bats’ sizeable fangs she did not know how long they would last.

Just as suddenly, the bats were flung off of her—their bodies hit the ground with sickening cracks and she jerked upright to see what saved her. It was a massive wild bear she recognized as one of the Beornings! They’d come to aid them against the orcs for they too were under threat by this invasion. The skin-changers joined the fight and she was filled with shaky gratitude that made her joints feel far heavier than she could afford. The bear threw her a final glance and she quickly inclined her head in thanks before it lumbered off to continue mauling orcs that dared cross it. Several of its companions followed, showing no mercy to any goblins and orcs in their path.

She grabbed her fallen knives and resumed her hasty flight, looking for Thranduil until she spotted him about thirty paces away. The muscles of her legs stung badly but it was nothing she could not withstand, she had to reach him. Thranduil’s assault on his enemies was mystifying to behold; she saw his flashing blades leaving a trail of swirling leaves and blood as he cleaved his way through battle atop his elk. The pile of carcasses at its feet were testament to his unmatched agility.

When he saw her, his face conveyed equal amounts of relief and fury.

“You should have gone long ago!” Thranduil bellowed, instantaneously dismounting from the elk and striding toward her. He left her no time to respond before he grabbed her about the waist and hoisted her up into the saddle to take his place. She adjusted her seat as the elk shifted its weight from side to side.

The chaos around them was stifling—the forest was burning, the elk’s nostrils flared with restrained panic and she reminded herself to breathe even through the suffocating scent of ash and burning flesh. Her husband’s eyes were wild with memories of dragonfire and bloodshed of devastation long past. His rage rivalled his fear and that potent combination made him lethal. Tauriel knew she couldn’t break her word to him now no matter how badly she wanted to stay and fight alongside him.
There was no time—Tauriel held both her knives with one hand, her knuckles crusted over with her own blood from the warg bite, and leaning down, she took his free hand with her other undamaged hand.

“Thranduil,” She said. There was no time for a true goodbye, so she held her peace. She thought he might not have heard her over the sounds of battle and death but he let his torment show, scars visible, and it nearly destroyed her to see him like this with stains of black orc blood all over his face and fine armor, his pale hair matted with it too. His grip was crushing but somehow she didn’t feel the pain it should have caused. He understood what she could not say to him amid the anarchy.

“Tauriel Silivren--an ngell nîn boe i ’wêg! Noro lim!”

She committed the words and the way he said her name—her full name—to memory, hiding it away in the recesses of her mind where nothing could ever steal it from her. She remembered the parchment back in her room, the name would not die between them—a huge explosion lit the nearby copse on fire and cast a crimson glow on everything around it.

“NORO LIM!” The king roared, all traces of vulnerability gone. He backed away from her to dispatch an orc that charged up to him with malicious intent. The elk reared back at the sheer volume of its master’s command and obeyed. Before she could fully comprehend it, she was riding away from him to her awaiting company on the northern side of the Halls.

She clung to the elk by the strength of her legs and sheathed her knives, groping frantically for the reins though the animal needed no further urging. It gored all the orcs in its path, shaking them off with ease but consequently spattering her with their blood. A thrown axe from an Uruk in pursuit of them clanged against the side of the elk but since the animal was armored, it was largely unaffected by the impact.

Tauriel closed her eyes tightly against the whipping wind as the elk stormed through the fighting—when she opened them again, she saw troops as some fought, some fell, and the fire continued to grow into an unearthly storm, burning the dead and forcing the living on both sides closer to avoid it.

The elk’s sides heaved as it expertly navigated the gnarled tree roots and vines that covered the ground before it, its superb footing ensuring its continuous gait. It took her around the side of the palace parallel to the river and soon put considerable space between them and the battle. The colors of everything they passed blended into one long stretch of dilapidated, fading grey.

The thunderous noise of the bloodshed behind her dulled her sharp hearing, her ears throbbed in time with her racing pulse. She squeezed her eyes shut, tapping into her hatred of the enemy: she was a royal commander and she yet had a role to play. Others’ lives were in her hands now. She would do right by them or give her own life in fair exchange. She required no reminder that she was far from the only one with something to lose.

The elk burst through the last of the trees of Mirkwood and raced into the wide plains, across which one could see the Celduin and then the Lonely Mountain over the vast distance. The lines of the other half of her mounted contingent came into view soon enough, all of them tensed to ride. They were perhaps two hundred total, an impressive sight in their still pristine golden armor. The early rays of dawn reflected brightly off of them, nearly blinding her. Among them were still more archers, who rapidly nocked arrows and were ready to unleash them at the abrupt noise the mighty elk made as it barreled down toward them.

She was vaguely aware of what she must look like, spattered liberally with orc-blood and maybe that of other Elves too—also that she was diminutive compared with the animal she rode. Her mount was easily recognizable as the king’s but there was no time to explain that he was not dead, that he still
fought fiercely to the south with the rest of their force. The archers lowered their arrows and returned
them to their quivers when they realized who she was as she and the elk drew near.

“Gwêm hi! We ride to Dale! To Erebor! Berio i nand-a garas!” Tauriel shouted repeatedly until her
voice broke with strain of it. The elk thundered through the horses to lead the charge and she prayed
to each of the Valar that they were strong enough to help repel the enemy forces in the north.

She told herself she would see him again, even if their beloved forest went up in flames, the
mountains came crashing down around them and the bountiful rivers ran red with their sacrifices of
their people. The expanse of time stretched out before her and then contracted as she returned to the
present moment. For now, Tauriel did not look back. She did not see the rising smoke that drained
the skies of all color and cast a far-reaching shadow over all that she loved.

Chapter End Notes

Sindarin translations – (Southern Sindarin phrasebook from realelvish.net and
http://www.elendilion.pl/2015/01/13/g-i-p-report-elvish-dialogs-from-the-hobbit-battle-of-the-five-armies/):

1) “Galo anor erin râd gîn, na lû e-govaned ‘wîn.” –May the sun shine upon your path,
   until we meet again.
2) “Cuio vae, Melethril “ -- Goodbye, Melethril
3) Tauriel Silivren an ngell nîn boe i ’wêg!Noro lim! - Tauriel Silivren, please you must
go, run fast! Run fast!
4) Gwêm hi! – We must go
5) Berio i nand-a garas – Protect the valley and the city!

Description of Thranduil in battle was inspired by this quote:
“Peter wanted the sight of Thranduil in action to be like a maelstrom. He would be a
swirling vortex of death. A way to show this was through the movement of the snow in
the air around him, with his flashing blades leaving a trail of swirling snow and blood as
he cleaved his way through the battle”
— Greg Tozer, Weta Workshop Designer
Chapter Notes

Lots of notes in this chapter! This is a long weekend for me and with all this extra time, I was excited to finally polish off this update for all of you.

First off, I realize it might be more helpful if I put the translations at the top rather than at the end where I’ve been putting them in past chapters. Please let me know if this helps you understand better, I just hate putting the English translation within the text as I think it disrupts the flow of the story.

I also want to thank everyone for all of the comments, especially the most recent reviews. This fic is posted on both AO3 and ff.net, and I post update notifications on Tumblr (my username is le petit creationist). I’ve received feedback from all three sites and you’re all so wonderful, really. I hope you enjoy this next installment, please let me know what you think.

***I’ve received a question regarding Thranduil’s use of Tauriel’s full name when he sends her away from battle in the previous chapter. This is significant because the epesse "Silivren" is a bride-name, which Thranduil gives Tauriel during their ‘wedding’ before battle. It is precious to both of them and sort of implies the love between them without explicitly saying “I love you” as Tauriel rides off to Dale. The exchanging of names during major life changes is a custom among the Eldar and explains why elves often go by multiple names. (ie Galadriel is also known as Artanis, Nerwen, etc)

Sindarin translations: (Southern Sindarin phrasebook at realelvish.net)
1) Gurth ani chyth 'wîn! – Death to our enemies!
2) Maetho i vagol gîn – Draw your swords!
3) Northo – Charge!
4) Orodruin - Mount Doom

Bardings = The Men of Dale and Esgaroth called themselves this after Bard I, their king

Unwavering was the daughter of the forest as she beheld the siege at the Lonely Mountain. Tauriel and her company arrived and came to a halt some distance away from the fighting that they might assess the scene. There would be no rest for them; Tauriel saw the Easterlings maintained two fronts—they attacked Erebor with intricate siege equipment and bombarded the Dwarven-made stronghold with cannon fire while Dain’s force retaliated with arrows and massive pieces of rock tossed by catapults from their great height. The Celduin ran far stronger in these parts, the current swept away the corpses of those who fought too near it. Dale lay across the battle plain to east and fared much worse—the city was sacked and plundered. Its Men were hopelessly outnumbered, this was arguably the result of more than a day of fighting. Tauriel knew what had to be done.

She kept the mighty Rhovanion elk at a vigorous trot as they paced to and fro along the line that her warriors formed. She did not need her hands for balance on the elk for her legs were strong enough to keep her centered. Tauriel and the beast were synched perfectly—if there were any doubts in the minds of her troops whether she could successfully lead them to war, there absolutely none now.
“Thranduil our king has sent us here this day to aid our allies—our mission here is clear! We have no time for lengthy discourse, I would have us draw the enemy from Dale toward the Lonely Mountain. We must push them toward Erebor and entrap them, between us and the Dwarves we will have victory if we carry this out.” Tauriel halted the elk with her seat and raised her knife high in the air.

“Gurth ani chyth ‘wîn!” She cried. Her troops screamed it back to her and she felt the power flow between them. There was no fatigue in the strength of their unified voices. “Maetho i vagol gîn! Northo!”

She turned the elk forward with the power of her seat and it knew from her command and the clamor at their backs what they were meant to do. The wind whipped across the plain as if it urged them onward. The elven horses’ hooves thundered over the ground and Tauriel saw the vicious Easterlings mutilating the Barding soldiers as if slicing through the tall grasses that grew in this locale. She commanded the archers among her cavalry to let fly their arrows—there was a great sheet of them that struck down their enemies whose backs were turned to their approach.

They met the Easterling host fiercely—they charged forward with the momentum granted by the sloping descent of the bluff. She watched in morbid fascination as her mount gored several of the enemy, lifting them from the ground. There were perhaps six caught in its mighty antlers and she beheaded them all with one slash of her long knife as she’d seen Thranduil do many times before. Their helms covered the entire face but not the neck, an area of vulnerability that she intended to exploit. She sliced cleanly through muscle and bone, her stomach turning despite herself. To kill a Man was different than slaying an orc, but the evil that lived in these Men’s hearts left them no choice.

The Bardings saw that the Elves came to their defense and were heartened, they pushed ahead and overcame their flagging morale. The elven fortifications installed previously by Lord Tirithon’s group saved the city from complete annihilation but there was still immense structural damage from the Easterlings’ attack. It seemed there was some uniformity among the style of weapons the dark lord had fashioned for his minions be they Man or Orc. The presence of her warriors diverted the enemy’s attention and soon enough the Bardings were able to regroup as the elves quickly engaged the invaders.

Every fiber of her being was filled with motivation to overcome this. She reminded herself that fear would spell her ruin if she let it distract her. She and the elk cut down perhaps fifty alone, the rest of her troops fought just as effectively if not more. They eliminated as many as they could and before long Tauriel screamed, “To Erebor!” in frantic reminder. She remained behind to find whoever had command of the Bardings as her warriors drove the remaining Easterlings toward the mountain. Her eyes roved over the masses of the straggling and the injured until she inhaled sharply in recognition. She swung her leg off the elk and slid down, leaving the reins dropped around the animal’s neck.

“My lord!” She shouted, finding Prince Bard kneeling at his dead father’s side. King Brand had fallen, his legs were broken and his armor stained bright red by his blood. A deep gash was visible behind the torn jerkin at his midsection, and there she beheld the wound from a blade that pierced his gut. There was sweat and tears and rage on Bard’s face but when he saw her come near, he got to his feet and she saw that he’d drawn his sword.

“My father is slain,” The prince told her and she thought he may not recognize her in the blindness of his grief. The fighting ahead of them was momentarily forgotten as she reached to him. He gave her his free hand and the gauntlet covering his forearm was solid against her leather vambrace, and from the way he met her eyes through his tears, she could see that he knew who she was and that she meant to help him.
“My heart truly weeps for your losses. But as your lord father’s heir, you are now king of your people. You have duty yet to fulfill. Come with me and we will destroy every last one of these faithless servants of Sauron.” Tauriel did not mince words and spoke quickly despite the rapid switch to Westron.

There was a long moment when Bard stifled his sobs and she watched his transformation from inconsolable son to wrathful king. Bard took a deep breath and on the exhale, released her hand. He went to his mount, a handsome bay gelding that was unharmed and patiently waiting near where his father’s body lay and she leapt nimbly up onto Thranduil’s elk. He cast one last broken glance at his father before following her lead and spurring his mount into a gallop.

The prince turned king rode hard at her side, they charged across the plain and led a consolidated force of Men and Elves to attack the remaining Easterlings that plagued Erebor. The Dwarves at the base of the mountain and at the high ramparts of the fortress roared in welcome as the Easterlings had to again half their numbers to contend with both sides simultaneously.

Tauriel commanded her troops to destroy the siege equipment first—they were successful in clearing the moving siege towers of the enemy so that the Dwarves could clobber them unimpeded. She shouted at her troops to form a broad half circle and force the Easterlings toward the impenetrable gates of Erebor that the Dwarves may easily dispatch them by arrow.

Bard caught onto the plan despite having little knowledge of Sindarin—she shouted instruction in her native tongue and in her haste, forgot that the Men did not understand. Even with the upper hand, their losses continued to climb. Tauriel was horrified by the sight of her warriors dying by Easterling brutality. They were ruthless fighters—she knew not if they were better or worse-off facing the Men of the East rather than Orcs and Uruk-hai. The sons of Rhûn fought with long-swords and arrows laced with poison—the Elves were just as susceptible to it as Men. There was a division that fought with spear and shield, these were not strong enough to pierce Elven armor or Dwarvish armor but they were cunning enough to find unprotected areas just large enough to deal fatal blows.

The arrows could not penetrate the elk’s armor, she was fortunate that her mount had thus far survived and showed no signs of tiring. She fought hard despite the burn in her limbs but more importantly, her vantage point allowed her to see vast distances and she could better direct her troops.

Bard and his soldiers collapsed the right flank of the Easterlings from the ground with the Dwarves’ support from the air. Tauriel saw King Dain fighting at ground level—he and his infantry defended their home fearlessly and were greatly cheered by the progress they made all together.

This cooperation between the three races enraged the Easterlings to a degree that none could have expected. They rallied unexpectedly despite their shrinking numbers and turned their backs to Erebor, instead choosing to engage with the Elves and Men on the ground and damning the consequences of ignoring the might of the Dwarves.

It lasted for three long, rancorous days. Each sunrise was bloodier than the last. Tauriel’s faction suffered losses but nowhere near as many as Bard’s did. Fortunately, Erebor’s defenses did not fail, the formidable gate was no match for the Easterling’s cannons and by the third day, most those implements had been destroyed. On that third day, the enemy retreated and began to flee from whence they came. There was a terrible rumble from somewhere far in the south—Tauriel and the Elves were aware of the earth’s quaking as something momentous occurred. Like a vile splinter withdrawn from tender flesh, the Elves could sense the dispelling of Sauron’s slaves.

Sauron was defeated—it must be! She knew not if this was in fact true but she somehow knew that evil had departed the earth. None of them could see it but what they felt was the collapse of Barad-dûr and all its walls and battlements as the molten fire within Orodruin erupted to raze the filth
around it. There was relief so all-encompassing and palpable that it was akin to a great iron band being lifted from their hearts that none realized was there before.

Great storm clouds unfurled above them and a steady downpour was unleashed. She removed her helmet and raised her eyes skyward then shut them against the water that cleansed her skin of the blood and grime. Her hair was tangled and stuck to her neck by her sweat. The raindrops fell until she was entirely sodden and light-headed with triumph.

She opened her eyes again to gaze back to the forest, hundreds of leagues away in the distance. The opaque cloud of smoke from the battle in Mirkwood was soon dispersed by the rain. Tauriel’s heart was glad—for Ulmo sent the healing waters and Yavanna would to tend to the woods in the aftermath. The Ainur were here with them this day, there was no mistaking it.

She and Bard rode together to meet Dain and his heir Thorin Stonehelm at the Gate of Erebor. They were all drenched from the rain but none looked displeased by it. The grief was heavy in Bard’s face, Dain and Thorin knew what transpired without asking and offered wordless condolence. Dain recognized Tauriel as the elf who’d befriended his kin when it was unconventional to do so. He remembered when she humbly asked for the heirlooms of her people to bring to her king. She and Bard dismounted from elk and horse, both of which rested a few paces behind their riders.

“We will feast this night and rest, my friends, for we have all had enough of sorrow.” Dain said. There was none of the characteristic irreverence in the voice of the King under the Mountain. He was exhausted from the war effort, aghast at the state of the fields beyond his kingdom.

“We thank you for your offer of shelter since my people are again displaced.” Bard replied, following the Dwarf king’s gaze out toward the plundered lands of Dale.

Tauriel looked at each of them, was reminded of their predecessors and namesakes. They could take pride in this victory, she thought. She looked back to see the troops—both Men and Elves—begin to come forward from where they were dispersed. Still, the rain poured and it was comforting even as the lightning flashed and thunder roared.

Now the Dwarf king turned to address her. She sheathed her knives in their scabbards belted at her waist in respect.

“I once had nothing but insults for your kind, my lady. It is not so now, we thank you for what you have done. If Erebor were overrun when Azog attempted to claim it, we would not have had the advantage this day. Our people worked together in that time, however unwilling, but now we are united without reservation.” Dain was more eloquent than she expected. Thorin inclined his head to her and she was humbled by this deference.

“This will be a new Age for all of us and our people.” Tauriel said. She could not know what transpired in Mirkwood yet, but her eyes still softened when she thought of Thranduil and her forthcoming return to him. After the carnage and terror, the thought of resting in his arms was tantalizing as it was far-off. Covered in grime as she was, Tauriel could not imagine going to him like this—

She nearly missed the look of horror that crossed Bard’s face just then, at something over her shoulder. The young king shoved her down before she could comprehend why.

The sky was even more beautiful now that she gazed up toward it. The roiling storm above could have been the sea of which she’d heard, the ocean that inspired longing in the hearts of Elves for Valinor. She’d never lain eyes on it…she never would. Suddenly, she heard Dain’s furious roar and the Dwarf king landed in an ungainly heap next to her on the muddy earth.
An immense pain bloomed in her chest, Tauriel glanced down her body and saw the shafts of two Easterling arrows protruding from her shoulder and side. Her assailant had hit his marks. She realized her throat tightened increasingly with every breath and that it was the telltale sign of poison-laced arrows. Dain was shot too—he lay dying beside her.

Thorin and Bard, the heirs of their fathers, were able to kill the lone Easterling archer that had survived by hiding himself in the ruins of a fallen siege tower on the other side of the Celduin. The rushing of the river did not hinder the archer’s concentration though he did not live long enough to see his deeds come to fruition. She looked to the sky again. The rain was a counterpoint to her heated skin from the white-hot agony of her wounds. She thought she saw her husband’s face but it was only the silver of the lightning overhead. It was the last thing she saw before she lapsed into oblivion.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Readers, there be angst ahead. I firmly believe that the after-effects of war are in many ways worse than the actual fighting of it. You have been warned. Please don't be put off by this chapter, remember, it's always darkest before the dawn.

As always, thank you for your support and critique or commentary is most welcome.

Some clarifications: Bard and Thorin whom I refer to in the previous chapter are Bard II and Thorin III Stonehelm. Bard II is Bard I's great-grandson (Bard I, Bain, Brand, Bard II). Thorin is Dain Ironfoot's son and heir.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

There was blistering heat and darkness. Pain in the farther reaches of her consciousness. Lucidity flared and receded but the scorching tide was constant. Breathe, someone told her, like there weren’t hundreds of little pricking needles stabbing at her with every rise and fall of her chest. Breathe, someone said again and she tried to comply but all she wanted more than anything was to drift back to that unholy obscurity.

Her eyes flew open when the obscurity suddenly gave way to arresting sensation—unrelenting waves of pain that had been so far-off now battered her. She screamed incoherently, limbs flailing such that the healers needed to hold her down but against her strength they were no match. The way she screamed and tore the muscles of her throat dispelled any notions of elven omnipotence. On a pallet in a makeshift infirmary, she was just another patient on the brink of that dark abyss. A diluted reverberation of the force that led troops to victory not a day earlier.

Two days passed before she was able to rest. The wounds were on the mend in fits and starts. The physicians were initially at a loss to stop the poison from circulating as the location of her wounds did not allow them to place tourniquets. No amount of kingsfoil would slow this blend of poison. In the back of her mind, she knew she had to quiet her heart to slow the circulation. It worked for a time until it gradually began to dissolve in her blood by means unknown to Men, they understood little of elven resilience.

However, the severity of her injuries was still worrisome for an elf and her resilience was finite. Something was dreadfully wrong if her body could not heal itself with the expeditious ability characteristic of her people. This was hardly a training yard injury from an overly exuberant novice, it was far worse than the venom of the giant spiders. She heard the urgent commands given by her human healers and their attendants. Her body was subject to their treatments, however rudimentary, she was still grateful.

Then on the fourth day of her convalescence, she came down with a searing fever. The shock of battle, they said. The fever burned until her skin had taken on a sickly pallor, muscles locked in seizure, and her teeth were coated in blood as she coughed and the healers looked on in bafflement and horror.

There was no space for thought beyond this. With every breath, her lungs compressed painfully—in
her stupor she thought what good was immortality when she couldn’t breathe, couldn’t breathe, couldn’t breathe? She cried out in her language that the physicians did not understand as she sweated through the bed sheets and thrashed and thrashed.

On the fifth day, the daughter of the forest and the commander of the woodland contingent lived no more.

She stared down at herself. It took a moment to realize that she was looking upon herself from outside of her body. The sensation was chilling, how could this be? She was on the other side of some gossamer division between worlds.

The human healers dared not move her. None of them had ever witnessed the death of an immortal. They were unsettled by her, there were grey bruises beneath her shuttered eyes and the flesh around her wounds was gruesome. In the end, she’d succumbed to the quintessential weapon of the sons of Rhûn. Their blend of toxin was potent, fortified as it was by Sauron’s malice—it reached her vital organs too quickly for even an elf to withstand. Perhaps if she’d been of higher Elvish descent she might have survived. It was a bitter thought that crossed her mind. She stopped thinking of her heritage as a detraction long ago, she should not begin now of all times.

Her lung had been punctured too; one of the arrows had entered her body with enough force to collapse it. Her convulsions only exacerbated it and the acceleration of her heart beat was the final doom. Tauriel forced herself to look, to study her body in death as she rarely had in her seven centuries of life. There was a curious lack of sentiment, she noticed, in death. Tauriel observed life continue, the only thing that made her fëa stir with panic was the thought that the human healers might remove the ring from the chain around her neck, which miraculously stayed on throughout the violent ordeal she’d experienced. It was a disservice to the character of the Bardings, she knew, but she also knew how the spoils of war were often claimed by the survivors.

They left her alone for seven days. There were countless others who still lived and suffered from ghastly wounds that needed tending to. Tauriel wandered the beleaguered city and saw the recovery efforts. The gathering of the dead was the worst of it. It always was. There were so many to bury even if they had the victory. These funerals were crudely set up but the sentiment ran deep in all of those who attended to them. Without her, the Elves were leaderless here but they helped their human comrades as much as they could—healing minor injuries and distributing what limited foodstuffs there were available.

Tauriel pieced together the events in the south from fragments of stories she heard in passing—from gossip of surviving common folk and the grim recounting between Barding soldiers. She could not bring herself to remain in the presence of her own soldiers for too long—they were taciturn as they did their duty. The killing of Men, even if they were cruel, Wild Men of the east, had taken a grave toll on them and no words could heal those hurts. The children of Ilúvatar were not meant to die by the others’ blade. It was, to a lesser degree, a kinslaying. The Elves needed no words among themselves, what they felt was written plainly on their faces.

The One ring was destroyed and Mordor fell. Orodruin erupted and sent rivers of molten rock flowing out onto the cursed plains surrounding it. The foul creatures were annihilated with their master’s fall—any that survived were quickly put to death by the united armies of Men.
She tried to gather information about the battle in Mirkwood but it was much more difficult as her people were not gossip-prone and were much focused on the immediate task of rebuilding Dale to where the people would have basic shelter for the long nights ahead.

At the nadir of her aimlessness, Tauriel heard a voice call out to her. She thought she was the lone spirit in the sick-room but she felt a displacement of the air. A shift in the composition, like a gentle rending of fabric hardly noticed. Tauriel turned in a full circle, startled, but found nothing and no one beside her. The healers in the room paid her no mind, they could not see her.

“Who…who are you?” She asked simply. There was no fear in her voice. There was nothing left to fear now.

Before long, she had her answer.

“One who seeks to aid you, and one who has long admired your spirit. Your fëa is steadfast, your heart true, and your hröa still harbors life if you would return to it.”

The concept of reincarnation was less abstract to her, these Quenya words that before held little meaning, but she was still impatient at how disjointed everything was.

“Speak not in riddles; they serve neither of us now.” Tauriel said hotly. Perhaps it was irrational to be short-tempered with a bodiless voice yet she was. There was soft laughter, so delicate they might have been the sound of precious bells.

“There is purpose left for you in this world. I would see that you remain to fulfill it—but it is your choice, even if you entrusted your happiness to me. You must choose for yourself.”

She was taken back to that morning in Thranduil’s chambers. A lifetime ago. Can you still envision happiness for us? He’d asked. I’ve entrusted my happiness to Varda, and to you. She’d replied back. Was it truly Elbereth who spoke to her now, that noble lady of the Valar who created the stars so beloved by the Eldar? Disbelief colored her thoughts. Rose-gold hair, swinging like a pendulum as that little girl ran among a field of marigolds and daisies. In starlight and in shadow, naneth. A sky full of stars, she could see Alcarinque from the highest point of the tree whose climbing holds she knew by heart. Melethril and her new rooms, Legolas and his forgiveness, Thranduil—Always fighting, always pushing forward – a thousand other voices joined the chorus in her mind and she heard every single one in memory after memory.

This was not the way it was described in the tales nor how it was recounted in the ancient tomes. She wasn’t whisked away to face Námo in his Halls for judgment, her spirit remained in a shoddy tent that housed the dying and the wounded. Tauriel knew nonetheless what choices were laid before her. Her contemplation was long and careful as she gazed at herself, lying still and lifeless on the straw pallet. Her fëa thrummed vigorously, her certainty grew until her reply was near to bursting from her lips as the voices crowded out all other thought.

“I do not wish to die! I choose to stay! Please--!” She shouted into the ether. She shouted over those hundred voices, terrified that her plea would go unheard. She regretted her earlier insolence and feared that Varda would abandon her to this half-life. “Please, I do not wish to die!”

The voice did not reply though Tauriel could sense its presence nearby. It lingered, but not too long and by nightfall, she was alone. The barrage of voices ceased their incessant buzz and the abrupt silence made her ears ring. It left her feeling heavy despite her weightlessness like the sensation of those first few torpid steps after shedding mail and armor. Or maybe the attempt to resist some invisible force that still retained its hold on her.
She knew not what to expect. She kept watch over herself as she’d done the long nights after her death. She watched as the healers at last summoned the will to undress and clean her, then re-dress her in robes of unsoiled white cotton.

The next day, she saw Lord Beriadan enter the makeshift camp they constructed in the center of the sacked city, accompanied by a stone-faced King Bard. The elven general had come to search for those who were of his people. He wore travelling clothes, having ridden straight from their kingdom. He froze in his tracks when he saw her body, unmoving and silent on the pallet. This Sindarin lord always treated her fairly even in the days when her appointment by Thranduil was unpopular among the upper echelon of Mirkwood’s army.

“How came she by this fate?” Beriadan asked the king. The elven lord’s face betrayed distress. Bard sighed deeply in remorse.

“On the day of our victory, we were not as vigilant as we should have been. It was after the fighting ended that we gathered at the Gate of the Lonely Mountain. An archer unseen among the ruins of a fallen siege tower claimed her life and that of the Dwarf-king.”

After a drawn-out pause, Beriadan faced the King of Dale.

“I thank you for your candor in this recounting. I will relay what you have told me to King Thranduil. I intend to bring her and all my kin back to our realm so they may know eternal rest in the land of their birth.”

She imagined her breath may have hitched in life, upon hearing that Thranduil was alive. As it was, she listened raptly for any more detail she might glean from the exchange. It proved futile, Bard did not add more. What could he say to an elf of Beriadan’s great age that would not be taken as trite at best, condescending at worst? The young king walked with his shoulders bowed, his own troubles only visible in those moments when he could not quite manage the façade of authority.

Was this truly what victory looked like?

There was no victory in the rancid stench of illness and the moaning of the wounded. In regret so piercing that one almost wished for the ability to turn back time; if only they had moved more quickly, the soldier they called friend might have lived. If only Bard had been faster, his father would be guiding them through this and overseeing the recovery efforts. If only Thorin spotted the archer that killed his lord father, the Dwarf-king might have made good on the promise of a feast and instead they would be gathered at table, food and drink before them, perhaps still short on cheer but in a Hall amongst the multitude it would have been so much easier to pretend. They were the victors but they had not the joy of it.

She turned her attention to the healers, three human women in plain working garments who stood fretfully in the vicinity. They had brow-beaten, sad faces and their clothes were stained with dry blood and who knew what else. Tauriel did not doubt that they lost husbands, sons, brothers to the war. The elven lord did not castigate them as they feared.

The next day, Tauriel saw herself lifted up into a small horse-drawn carriage and placed onto a cushion that was the length of her body. The Wood-elves, both living and slain, were to return home. Beriadan led them from the valley between Erebor and Dale, the cost of victory weighing heavy upon him. Tauriel went with them, unseen by all, but she could plainly see many returned with hearts of grief at the bloodshed they were part of. The king’s elk had come through unscathed but for some damage to its legs. It walked beside Beriadan at the head of the solemn procession, divested of all trappings of combat. Divested of armor, bit and bridle, it appeared as it would have in nature. Its gentle eyes were mournful, as if it too felt the repercussions of its deeds.
There were hardly any places left untouched by the War of the Ring. Scorched earth and smoldering piles of corpses, villages of Men left destitute, the Elves witnessed but a fraction of these wastelands on the way back to their realm. Somewhere in the procession, a lone voice rose in haunting lament. She listened as several more joined in until they blended into a single entity, swooping in and out of glorious harmony and dissonance.

When the vestiges of Mirkwood’s eaves appeared in the distance, she felt hollow, the echoes of a remote sense of sorrow. So much was burned past recognition and there were piles of orc carcasses that burned still. These piles were kept toward the edges of the forest but the sight was no less grim. Where once there were peaceful glens surrounded by dense forest, so many of her peoples’ dwellings were turned to ash. What was not turned to cinder was left lying on the forest floor, mostly charred and broken tree trunks sacrificed to the orcs’ explosives during the battle. As she walked on, she saw a dead white stag along their path. Its crown of antlers that were majestic in life was jagged and uneven.

She thought of Thranduil, then. Her sorrow was amplified a thousand fold when she realized she would have to play witness to his reaction. She wished fervently that she could delay his discovery of her until after the most pressing work had to be done. He could suffer no distraction at this crucial point in time. His people needed their king to see them through this time of transition.

Was this truly what the voice had meant? Tauriel chose to stay but she did not think it entailed existing as a spirit that forever roamed the earth—separate from her corporeal self. This was not what she envisioned when Elbereth, if indeed it was that fair queen of the Valar, said she had purpose yet to fulfil here. How was she to accomplish anything as a being unseen and unheard? Her fëa turned from sorrow to frustration. Upon arrival in the Halls of the King, her body was one of several that were taken to the Halls of Healing in the palace until a decision should be made about their interment.

Tauriel thought of Melethril and Legolas—she did not want them to see her either. She longed to know where they were, if they were safe after it all but as it was with Thranduil, Tauriel equally dreaded what seeing them would do to her. So she remained rooted at her own bedside, staring pensively at herself as she’d done in Dale. The Elven healers were dutiful but their hearts too were grieved at the sight of so many of the fallen warriors. She did not remember their names. The details of her life grew vague as time crawled onward.

The tangles in her long hair were combed out and it was gracefully plaited at the crown of her head. The rest of it was arranged to flow over her shoulders, ending at her hips. Her robes were again changed into ones of elven make. They were made from fine green silk with slender white vines covering the bodice and long sleeves. The skirts were long, they might have formed a train had she been standing, and instead they draped over her legs and hung off the bed.

To her deep relief, the chain that held her ring was not taken away. The healer who arranged her hair had noticed the glittering gems there.

“Ai, hiril vuin...amarth fêg,” The older elf said dolefully, “She was a newlywed by the look of her.”

The healer respectfully positioned the ring upon Tauriel’s chest where it rested just at the neckline of her robes. Tauriel reached out to touch the ring but her hand went straight through it. She could not feel anything in this form.

It was with a weary gladness that Tauriel now beheld herself. She did not look as terrible as before thanks to the attention of the healers. It was a small comfort that now those who viewed her might not realize the magnitude of the wounds that killed her.
Tauriel heard it whispered that Thranduil traveled throughout the realm with his guards, killing all straggling orcs and foul creatures. The darkness was no more but the light that came to replace it revealed devastating truth of the battle’s aftermath. The day finally came that the Elvenking made his rounds to the Halls of Healing.

“My lord!” Tauriel heard the alarmed voices of the healers interrupted in their tasks. A commotion at the entrance, footsteps falling in inimitable cadence. She knew those footsteps anywhere.

Tauriel was unprepared to see him stride into the Hall, furtively looking at every infirm elf that lay abed. His eyes were impenetrable. They searched until they found her among the dead. If Tauriel wanted for emotion in the time between her death and this moment, what she felt now more than made up for it.

Thranduil staggered forward, all pretense at impartiality gone. He dropped his blade in its scabbard; it hit the stone floor with a resounding clang. His expression was a rictus of agony that he did not hide, all who watched their king in the infirmary knew that this was an intensely private moment and vacated the premises. The members of his council who had followed him here departed, the king was alone.

Thranduil fell to his knees at her bedside, his armor clattering noisily but he cared not. She was without any means to comfort him—all she could do was watch with mirrored agony as her husband grasped her hands and lowered his forehead to rest against them. Lips pulled back to bare his teeth in a silent, wordless scream, she watched him collapse into himself.

The fury that arose in her toward the Valar for what she’d become was irrepressible—her spirit served no purpose thusly unless it was some cruel method of atonement for her sins in life. There was nothing here but grief, anger and pain. She hoped desperately that somewhere in the southern kingdoms, Legolas still lived. The words she shouted in the infirmary in Dale were stuck in the back of her throat.

Please do not let me die,
I do not wish to die.

But she watched her husband on his knees, broken, and no amount of praying seemed to make a difference.

Long were the hours that the king remained at her side. He touched her cheek and neck with a trembling hand, stopping to trace the outline of her wedding ring. Tauriel stayed with him. She would not leave him to suffer even if he was ignorant of her presence.

The night faded into the light of dawn soon enough. The oculi in the ceiling caused the room to glow softly. Thranduil did not stir. He remained on his knees, clutching her hand, and watching her face. Tirithon and Beriadan entered with matching expressions of grimness. If they were at all taken aback by the depth of their king’s grief, neither looked surprised. Tauriel thought perhaps their relationship was not such a great secret at all. There was a ring identical to her own, save for the gleaming moonstone, on the index finger of his right hand.

The intrusion of the emissary and general accentuated Thranduil’s vulnerability. It had been millennia since they had witnessed their king so undone.

“My king, we bid you return to the Keep to address our people… including the Woodmen of the vale and Bardings who have taken refuge in our Halls.” Tirithon began, hesitance coloring his speech. Both Elves stood at a respectful distance some paces back. Thranduil ignored him though he heard perfectly clearly.

“My king, please. It is imperative that they hear from you alone that all will be well in the days to come. I’ve had word that Lord Celeborn and Lady Galadriel will soon pay us homage. With your blessing, they will aid us in healing our lands.” This time Beriadan spoke. He was the one who brought Tauriel’s body back. He saw the ring of starlight around her neck, and how it was the king’s
elk with which Tauriel departed Mirkwood on the first eve of battle. He knew what it signified that
the king should mourn her so deeply. Tirithon rapidly came to know it too. Neither lord could
condemn or harshly judge this display in good conscience. She saw that they feared this would be
the loss to finally break him.

After a protracted silence, Thranduil lifted his head.

“Tell them I shall come.”

They could hear every one of the king’s years reflected in the coarseness of his voice.

Tauriel watched Thranduil begin to rise, stepping up on one foot and then the other. His armor
clinked into place while the cloak of midnight blue fell loosely at his back. There was a visible effort
to regain his composure. He fought to bury the anguish, keeping his eyes shut tight since he had the
good fortune to be turned away from his subordinates. When he opened his eyes again, she noticed
he deliberately kept them off of her. He took the first step away from the bed where she lay and the
next one was no easier but he was duty bound. He bent slowly to pick up his blade where he’d
dropped it and fastened the belt around his waist.

Tauriel watched Thranduil leave with his lords. Stunned by the depth of his display, she could not
bring herself to follow.

Chapter End Notes

*hides*

Sindarin translations:

1) “Ai, hiril vuin…amarth fēg.” –Oh dear lady, what an evil fate!

2) Fea and hroa – “Soul/Spirit” and “Earthly body”. These are words from Quenya and
are used to describe elven reincarnation. One cannot exist without the other in Middle
Earth. I’m taking creative license perhaps when I describe the way the fea must choose
whether to return to its hroa or depart to Aman.

From “AskMiddleEarth” on tumblr:
3) Alcarinque – This name means “the Glorious”, and was one of the brightest stars that
Varda made before the elves awoke, using the dewdrops of Telperion (one of the Two
Trees of Valinor.) Today, we know this “star” as the planet Jupiter.

4) Orodruin – Mount Doom

This portion is a reference to the breakfast scene with Tauriel and Thranduil in Ch. 5:
“She was taken back to that morning in Thranduil’s chambers. A lifetime ago. Can you
imagine happiness for us? He’d asked idly. I entrust my happiness to Varda, and to you.
She’d replied back. “

Thranduil’s moonstone ring: https://s-media-cache-
ak0.pinimg.com/236x/f4/27/7d/f4277d0ee024e1dea47c9d2513b44e5a.jpg

And last but not least, a few of the songs I listened to on repeat for inspiration while
writing this chapter:
- "Silent Night" by Damien Rice & Lisa Hannigan
- "Hallelujah" covered by Imogen Heap
- "The Garden Meeting" by John Williams (Memoirs of a Geisha soundtrack)
- "Watermark" by Enya
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Hello dear readers, I hope you’ve all come back! I was floored by the intensity of the responses to the last chapter—thanks for all of the feedback, the good, the bad and the ugly. In the interest of avoiding spoilers, I’ll only ask that you wait til the very end before you make sweeping judgments. There are better days ahead! Stay strong, friends.

On tumblr, I answer some questions about the previous chapter that I got via reviews, mainly:

1) “Why didn’t Thranduil know Tauriel was in trouble?”
2) “Why did it take so long for him to find out?”

You can find the post at the following link if you’re interested:

I go by "le petit creationist" if any of you would like to keep up w/ me. My blog is a stream of consciousness regarding the writing process for this story, so if you follow me you’ll probably be able to see where I draw my inspiration from. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Melethril heard the king deliver an address from his throne earlier in the day. Throngs of people gathered all around the core of the Elvenking’s halls to hear him. At every level of the caverns where there was room to stand, Elves, Men, and a few lingering skinchangers ceased their activity to listen to King Thranduil’s speech resound throughout the Keep.

Even the Barding civilians and Woodmen stood with them while they listened to Thranduil speak of the Dark one’s demise and how they were at last safe from further harm of his doing. The orcs were diminished almost to extinction but all were still counseled to maintain vigilance when it was necessary to leave the safety of the carved fortress. There were patrols led by the reinstated palace guard in case of ambush by surviving foul creatures. Despite all this, already the air around them felt less diseased, less oppressive.

Later during the day, she also heard that the troops from the north were returned to them. She was astonished that news of their arrival was so delayed. Her heart leapt—Tauriel led that group, could that mean that she too was returned? Melethril left the necklace of Lasgalen safely tucked away in her dresser, threw on a presentable frock and tidied her hair but did not spend a second longer at the mirror than necessary. She took off at a pace too quick to be considered polite, her slippered feet knew exactly how to get to the Halls of Healing where she knew the warriors reported upon arrival.

Many bystanders jumped out of her way. Melethril knew how absurd she looked flying down the corridors at a run, but all she could think about was seeing Tauriel and embracing her after the Battle Under the Trees that had frightened all who hid in the king’s halls—no one paid any heed to the slender elf maid who pushed open the heavy door to the infirmary.

She found only mournful silence there and the smell of noxious remedies to treat the wounded. The
Healers looked at her with alarm, her noise might have woken their other patients. She struggled to catch her breath and calm herself.

“I search for Commander Tauriel, I heard it said that she might be here.”

The Healer nearest to her came to her and took her hand.

“She is here, child.” The older elf, Nestadeth was her name, murmured. Her movements were unhurried and hesitant, the hem of her tan rawhide garments rustled about her ankles. At her waist was a series of pouches sewn together that held a variety of poultices and what Melethril assumed were other medicines that could easily be taken from patient to patient.

The smell of the infirmary was perhaps what invoked her memory of it. When she was first brought here as a grief-stricken child, the smell of acrid ointments frightened her. So too did the alien environment, so different than her parents’ simple cottage. Melethril was perceptive enough to understand but not to accept the solemn truth she read in Nestadeth’s body language. She grasped the Healer’s hand with her other one. “Please, please let me see her.”

Nestadeth could not refuse such heartbroken eyes. She’d also been the one who cared for Melethril as an elfling after the deaths of her parents. It seemed that this child was cursed to endure once more the loss of a mother figure.

So she was led by the hand to the furthest end of the stone hall and then into a secluded room where Tauriel lay. She had been moved to this room for the sake of the king’s privacy, as he had come to sit at her side whenever his duties allowed. Nestadeth did not leave, Melethril’s mind went completely blank but felt the healer’s presence nearby. She saw the paleness of Tauriel’s skin and wondered at her last moments but could not bear to ask. Her knees buckled so she moved closer, her ears were filled with the sound of her racing pulse.

Melethril fell heavily onto the edge of the feather mattress and bent down to rest against Tauriel’s body, sobbing harder than she ever had in her life. Her voice that could produce such beautiful sound did completely the opposite and the Healer mourned doubly at this unadulterated outpouring of anguish.

The four stone walls of the room seemed to shrink around her and the healer knew that there could be no worldly boundaries to rein in her keening. The girl was too familiar with suffering, they were the defining milestones of her short life. She did not weep after her parents died some fifty years past, only lapsed into a prolonged period of silence. Now it seemed she may never stop.

“Nestadeth,” A deep baritone addressed the healer from the threshold.

The king was there, in full raiment he occupied almost the entire entryway. Melethril was conscious of nothing but the body of the only mother she had ever known, motionless beneath her hands.

The healer bowed to him and stepped out of the room to leave him with the grieving maiden.

“My lord, King Thranduil,” Melethril rasped when the door was pulled shut. No further speech was forthcoming, her chest hitched and she continued to sob, hot tears coursing down her cheeks. Melethril, unthinking, went to him and fell against his solid frame. He placed his arms carefully around her, he was steady as a mast on a wind-tossed ship at sea.

“Be at peace, child.” He murmured down at her, her height did not reach his shoulder and she felt frail in comparison to his stature. The brocade of his burgundy over-robe scratched her cheek as she wept. “She would be saddened to see you weep so, be at peace.”
The king's most powerful device was not the loudness of his voice but rather the softness of it. The way he enunciated every word, each sinuous vowel encased by the crispness of his diction. She'd heard criminal punishments meted out in those silken tones, more efficient than overt shouting from the most belligerent and rambunctious. She was all the more mindful now of his intent to soothe and the affection she had for him in her childhood welled up once more.

“I think I will never sing again,” She said eventually. She stepped away from him with a great shuddering breath. Her voice cracked under the strain as she asked, “Why does this hurt so much, my lord?”

Thranduil gave her a look, a flash of stunned recognition. It vanished as quickly as it passed over his face and then he led her to the armchair adjacent to the bed where she settled herself. The king took the wooden seat on the other side. He slipped out of the heavy brocaded over robe and let it fall against the chair back.

She did not expect an answer he was not ready to give. Instead he saw her eyes flit to Tauriel’s face and then her brow bent in consternation at the sight of the precious ring that lay flat against her sternum.

Melethril leaned closer to look at the jewels. “My lord, what is the meaning of this?” She was amazed despite her tears, at the purity of the ring’s craftsmanship.

He dropped his gaze to his lap. He could not answer past the sudden welling of tears that blurred his vision. His cheeks burned with indignity that this young elleth should see him so wretched. It was not long before she took the meaning of his silence.

“Oh, my lord…” Her tears resumed their course over her cheeks and her face contorted by humiliation. “Oh please forgive me, I do not mean to…upset you further.” She bit her lip and cut off her rambling but he did not know if he’d prefer the stream of meaningless chatter or this tense silence that he was determined not to break with any signs of outward lamentation. He had not the will to drive her out, so silent he must be. He was proud, even in his grief. He had ample practice with stifling it after all.

“Let us just be. Let us be with her now.” Melethril whispered as she leaned back into the chair. The fatigue was carved into her features. She wiped her face unabashedly with the sleeve of her ruby-colored gown, her hair stuck to her cheeks and temples but she brushed those stubborn strands away.

His crown felt heavy atop his head. It had begun to flower once more, heralding the coming of a late spring. With Sauron’s malice diminished, everything in the wood edged slowly toward good health and that included the Elvenking’s crown. Yet there was still much to be done, as the wreck must be cleared after the storm before anything new can flourish.

The two of them sat together in this evening vigil for Tauriel. He studied Melethril’s face as she closed her eyes and let her head tip back against the chair. This was the maiden so beloved by his son; he thought he was not mistaken to offer his approval to Legolas. Not that his validation was necessary at this point in Legolas’s life. He could not begrudge his son’s regard for Melethril—he could decipher Legolas’s innermost thoughts when his son believed none watched him. He was much like his mother that way.

“Glawardis,” Thranduil uttered without realizing, that name that he’d kept buried in the annals of his memory for longer than any other elf in his realm could recall. In the dimness of the room it was easier to let these burdens slip past his lips.

“I beg your pardon?” Melethril straightened slightly, facing him.
“Legolas’s mother…I—that was what I called her when we married.” He said, the barest hint of tremor in his tone. “I have not told another of her name in longer than I care to remember. It shall not be so with…with Tauriel.”

“What did you call her?” Melethril whispered. During the onerous quiet that fell between them, she thought she shouldn’t have asked. The implications of what he said were more than obvious. There was a crease that formed between the king’s brows. His eyes fell shut as if in great pain, then he exhaled and met her gaze.

“Tauriel Silivren.” It stumbled out of him. A maiden of the forest, gleaming brightly through the dark. Could three syllables within two words accurately convey all that she was to him? The symmetry of her name crystallized excruciatingly somewhere inside him. He repeated the name in his head and he remembered what Tauriel said about deluding themselves about the past in order to be happy.

“A lovely epessë, sire.” She said softly.

They both looked upon Tauriel at that. It was almost as if she were feigning sleep, in the half-light of the lanterns, he could almost delude himself into believing it before something wrenched in his chest and he reminded himself of the truth.

It was a lie to say he could not picture the future for he knew what would transpire. It was a new year for the Elves and life would continue in its cycle of seasons but all he could think was that once again he would preside over this prosperity alone. It was not to be another Watchful Peace—Mordor would not rise again. The irony stung him. What was true peace if not this? No peace would there be for Thranduil perhaps until his son returned and even then his heart would not be whole.

His immediate future was too bleak to contemplate for very long and the past haunted him for the choices he made. For war was always choices, the weighing of necessary evils, the countless chain of decisions that he could work and rework until he was legitimately sick with it. In all chaos amidst the entropy, there is calculation, there is the probability that one action can tip the balance in their favor. In spite of their best judgment, not all calamity could be prevented no matter how much he might have wished. He made his choices, he gambled, and he both won and lost. Thranduil then despised himself for this line of thought. She and thousands of others had paid for his choices with their lives.

He continued this routine every night after the evening meal in the Great Hall. Melethril accompanied him too but departed eventually to leave him to his thoughts. Although she wept each time, he saw too the determination in her to carry on. She took on whatever duties there were that needed to be taken care of, in the preparation of food, the tidying of rooms and living arrangements for the refugees, and in tending to the wounded in the Halls of Healing. She neither sang nor played any music—none of the minstrels did—and the Halls were graver for it.

The healing of her spirit would come in time, Thranduil predicted. He was uncertain of his own. The euphoria of victory had long worn off among his people. He never allowed himself to yield to its sweet deception for a king is never afforded the luxury of the present. A king’s worry was always for what came next: he lived each day with no expectation except for the work that he took upon himself.

The able-bodied of his people were tasked with repaving the roads destroyed by the orc armies and the structures along the Forest River that were ruined in the fighting. The river would swell and flood the surrounding area if the irrigation system and outlying canals were left in disrepair. Commerce with Dale and Erebor was essential to their livelihoods, especially those Elves who resided along the water and sustained themselves through agriculture and the sale of their goods.
Then there were the dead to contend with. Lord Tirithon worked tirelessly to derive the total number of their army’s losses—the final estimation reached three thousand. His zeal was unmatched among Thranduil’s council. Objectively, a tactician might have been glad that the loss was relatively small, their entire host comprised eight thousand. Yet upon hearing this report, Thranduil could not help remembering his return to the Greenwood after the War of the Last Alliance, returning with less than half of the force his father led south.

They never had a final number back then. The loss was too enormous to fathom especially because Oropher was among the dead. This time, the knowledge was unavoidable. Three thousand of Mirkwood’s best fighters perished whether by the fire or against Sauron’s minions. Three thousand, the king lamented, and in the thick of night he did not sleep—to close his eyes was to see each and every face of the slain. It was small comfort to think that they were housed in the tranquility of Mandos when their kin remained on the eastern side of the great Sea.

The ruined forest was littered with the remains of those who fell in battle, from both sides. Their hröar were unrecognizable—scattered limbs, charred faces, broken bows and tarnished swords and shields were all that was left of them. The population of giant spiders certainly dwindled since the fall of the Dark lord but the ones that lingered in the woods made feasts of the elven remains as well as those of deceased orcs, goblins and wargs. The spiders did not discriminate on what they gorged. It appalled him to witness this and he led the sorties against those foul things while they were preoccupied with feeding. It was still uncertain whether or not they were completely eradicated. What remains that he and his soldiers could gather, they laid to rest by properly burying them.

Thranduil became engrossed in all of this and it was enough to stifle the grief that simmered beneath the surface of his waking thoughts. The human refugees from the Anduin vale were slowly being resettled and moving out of his Halls for they were a strong and proud race who did not wish to live on charity no matter how freely it was given by the Wood-elves. The Bardings too began to depart from the wood back to their lands now that the fighting was done. They left by river-rafts borne by the current toward the Long Lake.

The second month of ethuil had arrived and with it a missive from Gondor—Legolas wrote that he would return home after the coronation and wedding of the new king. Aragorn, son of Arathorn, was now King Elessar. Through his marriage to Arwen, daughter of Elrond, long-sundered bloodlines would be joined once more and they would preside over the realms of Gondor and Arnor. He felt a stab of envy at what his imagination rendered—a royal wedding amid the splendor of a rebuilt Minas Tirith. If comparison was the thief of joy, Thranduil felt himself utterly robbed despite the high regard with which he held Isildur’s heir.

Thranduil read the rest of the message in the privacy of his solar and only then did he allow himself to bask in the relief that his son was alive. There was a second, separate missive addressed to Melethril and Thranduil could only surmise its contents. From the way her step had lightened, he knew that his son intended to make good on his promise to her. He thought it strange that he found himself tied to this headstrong elleth, their acquaintance sealed by grief and care for the same two people.

Yet another night passed and Thranduil settled into the armchair at Tauriel’s bedside. The infirmary had been largely cleared of its patients, Elves who were injured in either of the two battles and were now able to resume their daily lives. The river system restorations were nearly complete for they worked diligently. The roads were passable once more for goods to make their way out of Mirkwood to and from other lands.

Her appearance was deceptive still—he maintained the thought that she was only sleeping. It was the posture that gave it away: she’d been positioned to lie on her back, her hands gracefully crossed over
her chest. He knew she preferred to sleep on her side, head buried in the crook of her arm. His heart clenched at the memory. Melethril was not with him, Thranduil was profoundly grateful that he was alone. He slumped back into the softness of the chair back, shedding his façade of utmost control as easily as his outer cloak. He felt much slighter in only his cloque jacquard coat and breeches. The black of his coat seemed to ripple with his movements—its sheen came from woven silver threads that formed a raised pattern. He slid his crown carefully from his head, he wore the one modelled after a stag’s proud antlers this day. He set it on the bed beside her thigh, staring at it rather than her face because he thought it hurt to gaze upon her too long. Soon his eyes shut altogether. With a deep breath in that reached his aching bones, the Elvenking allowed himself respite.

Tumnë talmar rahtainë nixenen umir
Yúlallo nárë nauva coivaina,
Cálë lómillon tuiuva.

This is the only clue I will give for what lies in store. ;)

Chapter End Notes

Shoutout and huge thanks to lunarrosedesigns on Tumblr for helping me correctly describe Thranduil’s clothing! Check out her blog, her work is amazing!

You may want to re-read the previous chapters, as well as my first fic in the series “The Necklace of Lasgalen.” I will be referencing events/characters and certain details that you may need a refresher for. Pay attention to Lord Tirithon and his son Daeron, who rebelled against Tauriel in the early days of her promotion to the rank of Commander. (I’ll say no more for the sake of avoiding spoilers)


Sindarin translations: (from Southern Sindarin dialect phrasebook at realelvish.net)

1) Nestadeth literally translates to “Healer” in Sindarin
2) Glawardis - Epesse of Legolas's mother, meaning "Crowned by sunlit radiance"
3) Ethuil – season of spring (2nd season of ethuil = April)
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Dear readers, here is the next chapter--extra long because I didn't have the heart to split it in half and leave you with a cliffhanger. An answer post will be up on my tumblr (le petit creationist // blog name Eryn Lasgalen). I hope you enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"The world is indeed full of peril and in it there are many dark places. But still there is much that is fair. And though in all lands, love is now mingled with grief, it still grows, perhaps, the greater."

-JRR Tolkien

She was there, sitting beneath the lonely limbs of barren trees. He walked toward her and thought she'd soon notice him. The snow was thick beneath his boots. He was mildly alarmed by the depth of the snow as he trod through it before he grew accustomed to the feeling. She, on the other hand, did not look at all bothered, perched on a massive tree root.

"You'll catch your death if you stay out here." He said, voice ringing through the clearing. It was something he had heard Men say to one another, wives to their husbands and children. Oropher once encouraged him to learn the ways of other races while they journeyed over the Ered Hithui through the wilderness toward the old Greenwood. It was folly to say that to her--elves did not succumb to human illness and she was a hardy specimen. Regardless, it felt right by some strange instinct.

She craned her neck to look up at him. Her eyes were vibrant green in the winter light. He did not know how he'd never noticed their true color before. Forest green with tawny flecks.

"No I won't, my lord."

There was no tinge of mockery there even though he deserved it. It was only in the absence of her scalding wit that he realized how much he relished it. Her sharp mind and sometimes unforgiving remarks often piqued him in the beginning of their acquaintance.

Through time and closer understanding, his opinion changed. She was the catalyst of so many changes in him. He perished the thought; he clearly recalled the day he first laid eyes on her as an orphaned young maiden barely past maturity. He remembered her trepidation. The way she strived to earn her place in his Halls, in his ranks, in his regard. They were entirely different people in those days.

He remembered also the way she gave her affection too easily to Dwarven princes with roguish smiles whose lives were just as easily extinguished by sword as sickness. He remembered when she outgrew that naïveté, becoming older, wiser and more dangerous. And he remembered, most painfully, how her antipathy toward him evolved into something else and the welcome in her eyes, her touch, was summer to the endlessness of his deep winter. How fitting that she should rest here,
where the fire of her hair blazed amid the bluish white.

He lowered himself to sit next to her, leaning against the base of a tree where its roots parted and burrowed into the soil. They did not touch. He could feel her warmth at this proximity. It was unmistakable amid the ice and wind. She was striking, so very young, and he felt every bit as ancient as the twisted trees around them.

Now another memory. It floated to the surface of his thoughts; the funeral of Thorin Oakenshield and his sister-sons. The Noegyl had a saying oft repeated during royal burials: all are from the dust, and to dust all return. He turned the phrase around and around in his head, beautiful as it was macabre.

“If you could make the choice for yourself, barring any and all connection you have with this world, would you choose to sail west?” Before the words left his lips, Thranduil realized he had already asked her this question and therefore knew her answer. She rested her elbows on her knees and pursed her lip in that way of hers, whenever she was weighing her thoughts before responding.

“I was born of this earth and will not willingly go. Some struggle is necessary to appreciate the good in our lives. I realize now that pain is not always something we should run from.”

“How can this be a better alternative?” His voice cracked as a bough splinters under a burden heavier than it can bear. “Tell me, wife—when will I be allowed to stop running?”

Looking at her was beyond his present ability. She kneeled before him but he avoided her searching gaze.

“You will have rest, herven nin. Do you remember what you told me? The fortunes of the world will rise and fall but here in this kingdom, we will endure.”

His cheeks were wet and the wind was stinging when it blew past. Tauriel ran her thumbs over his cheeks to wipe his tears away—he did not realize that he’d been crying. Only that the merciless force of his grief robbed him of breath and speech. The fires of Angmar claimed Glawardis, Legolas’s mother—and on the cold northern plains of Rhovanion at the base of that forsaken mountain, Tauriel Silivren lost her life.

Thranduil opened his eyes to find he’d fallen asleep in the chair beside her. His cheeks were damp as they were in his dream. He lifted his arm and roughly brushed his sleeve over his eyes to dispel the haze of sleep. He wondered if Melethril was similarly plagued by dreams of these sorts, if the pain that had become his defining feature likewise began to take root within her. He strongly hoped not but he knew how futile that hope was in the days of fresh and early grief.

The hanging lamp above was on its last candle. The light flickered, shadows danced over them. He was so very, very tired. Until sunrise he would stay, and then there was ever more work to be done. Minutes turned into hours and Thranduil knew that he was here on borrowed time. As expected, the peace of Tauriel’s room was disturbed by a soft rapping of knuckles at the door.

“Enter,” Thranduil stated aloud, cringing as his own voice cut through the silence. The door opened to reveal his adviser Lord Tirithon. He wore ceremonial robes of rich damask that befitted the reception of dignitaries. That could only mean one thing.

“My lord,” Tirithon began, and Thranduil felt particularly mean-spirited at the interruption of his counsellor who never stopped laboring. He felt foolish in his pared down clothing that he’d arrived in the previous night compared to Tirithon’s stately mien. Trivial as it was, the exhaustion combined with a plethora of other emotions kindled Thranduil’s temper over the relatively small matter of his vanity.
My lord, the Woodmen require more supplies than expected. My lord, the granaries will soon be depleted and we must implement stricter rationing. My lord, Celeborn and his infernal wife are due to arrive. He imagined Tirithon informing him of all these things and would that he could simply respond with all the acerbity he wished to infuse in his reply. Instead, he shoved away his irritation and faced his busybody counsellor.

“Lord Celeborn and Lady Galadriel await you in the Keep. They arrived at dawn’s first light and come bearing gifts. The wizard Radagast the Brown has also arrived from Rhosgobel.”

Thranduil withheld an unbecoming snort at that—it sounded like the opening of a bad jest: a Sinda, a Noldo and a Maia walk into his throneroom…A punchline eluded him so he banished his caustic humor and composed an answer before Tirithon truly thought him mad.

“I shall meet them at my leisure—“

Perhaps Tirithon had finally overworked himself and his nerves were frayed beyond all pretense at patience for he cut Thranduil off, clearly annoyed. “My lord, I urge you to make haste.”

That was all the justification the king sought to make his displeasure known.

“You forget yourself,” Thranduil snapped. “I do not heed their beck and call like one of their own subjects. They have come to meet me and until I am ready, they shall have to wait.”

Tirithon’s eyes widened at being addressed so rudely by the king. He glanced at the commander’s body upon her deathbed and then back at Thranduil. The elven lord inhaled a calming breath and let it go; he could not afford to truly invoke the king’s anger before so important an audience.

“Very well, sire. I shall inform them that you will appear shortly.”

With that, Tirithon began to withdraw from the room. His mind was already rifling through the numerous platitudes he could offer to the rulers of the Golden Wood that did not seem too blatantly false regarding what delayed the king. He took but a few steps before Thranduil’s voice rang out once more.

“Tirithon—your son…He was called Daeron.” Thranduil said slowly. His face was nearly stoic again, his eyes bright and inquisitive. The king regretted his curtness as quickly as his temper flared. Tirithon was the ideal courtier and had ever faithfully served him. His father had known Oropher and marched with him out of the West in the early days. Tirithon looked pained at the mention of the name. His fingers curled into his palms to make loose fists before they relaxed again.

“He…he perished, sire.” There was pride still in Tirithon’s voice, for what Daeron had been. “At his post, guarding the Western Gate. His blood was not spilt in vain for they were able to secure the palace from all breaches.” The counsellor’s words were so quiet that even Thranduil had to strain to hear.

Thranduil raised his hand over his heart and extended it in sympathy and apology to Tirithon. He remembered Daeron as the upstart who challenged Tauriel for her position as commander in his army. He also remembered how he demoted him after he lost in combat to her. Last he heard, Daeron had been a lowly dungeon guard. It was an embarrassing assignment for a son of nobility but such was the punishment for mutiny.

Tirithon seemed to lose himself in his thoughts. His eyes were fixed on the stone floor.

"My son was a skilled boatwright, sire. Despite what you might think of him. He had talent. There is a small ship he labored upon down by the river, nearly finished. My wife...my wife," his voice
suddenly caught, "--she wants to sail West and meet him there. I will stay until my work is done and then we will leave, my king."

Thranduil knew not what to say. It suddenly made sense why Tirithon spent all of his waking hours at some task or other. It was his way of coping, not unlike Thranduil in his habit of keeping constantly occupied. There was guilt in him at the thought that Legolas lived and was coming home while Daeron had fallen in defense of the realm. There was honor in his death and redemption for his defiance though he knew that those words did more harm than good to a grieving father.

"Then it shall be so." Thranduil said. He had no grounds to demand Tirithon remain in Middle Earth if it be his and his wife’s ultimate choice to go to the Undying Lands. He would honor all of his subject’s wishes.

With a final look of impassivity, Tirithon left the room and closed the door behind him. Thranduil rose and moved close to the bed. He trailed his eyes over Tauriel, letting his gaze linger on her shuttered eyes, the delicate nose and cheekbones, and her lips. Even thusly, she was still beautiful. Her hrôa would remain forever so and he would ensure it was protected and cared for.

With difficulty he tore his eyes away and steeled himself to see to his guests.

The arrival of their foreign kindred stirred rumblings of anticipation among the Elves of Mirkwood. The Lord and Lady of the Golden Wood were closer to legend than living beings even among the reclusive Silvan elves of the north. The whereabouts of Caras Galadhon were unknown to many save for Thranduil, whose father so resented the lady’s Noldorin influence that he and his people began their northward trek to escape it.

They were also a distraction for his people, who had thus far only dealt with the reconstruction of their realm and the sorrows that accompanied it. So while Thranduil was still not overly fond of them, he was glad of the spectacle they could provide. He and Celeborn were acquainted from their time in Doriath, where the latter was a fair prince. Celeborn’s father Galadhon was friend to his own father Oropher. Celeborn praised the design of Thranduil’s Halls, as it was reminiscent of the halls of Menegroth. They both admired Elu Thingol and thus shared common cause against the Dwarves but that was an animosity of the past.

Galadriel, on the other hand, was as irritating as Thranduil remembered upon her arrival in Doriath from Aman. Thranduil held his tongue at all that triggered his dislike of her in an effort to be diplomatic—when he felt her gaze boring into him, he took care to shield his mind from her. Whether or not she could sense his recoiling, he did not know precisely. It was disconcerting as it was rare, he admitted, to be in the presence of an elf older than him with a real claim to omniscience.

The four of them, the three Elves with the addition of the wizard Radagast, discussed the terms of agreement with regard to the cleansing of the wood. It began amicably enough, which is to say Thranduil refrained from snide remarks every time Galadriel spoke or gave voice to her opinions. She intended to use Nenya, the Ring of Adamant, to cast out the remaining shadows that were invisible to their eyes and Celeborn would assist in leading more sorties alongside Thranduil to eliminate the Giant Spiders.

After the clearing of the shadows, Galadriel and Radagast would see to the nurturing of the wildlife. The lady’s gifts to the kingdom included the seeds of birch trees of Lothlórien. The significance of the birch was not lost on Thranduil. It was a symbol of new life and renewal, and he knew this species of tree would grow far faster than trees untouched by elven magic. They would stand tall by
the autumn and be full grown by the next spring. In the elder days, the strains of Yavanna’s music
may have graced their ears. This day, the signs of the Ainur were too subtle even for Elven senses.
Yet the mosses and ferns sprang to life, the Enchanted River no longer bewitched those who fell in it
and the shaded paths were free of all illusions that distorted them.

Thranduil grudgingly came to respect Celeborn when he saw his ability in a fight. They and their
soldiers made quick work of the weakened spider population, a considerable feat when taking into
account the sheer amount of land they had to cover from end to end of Mirkwood. How he hated the
name his realm had been dubbed by the rest of the world!

When Galadriel cast her arms upward and spent the remainder of Nenya’s waning power, he
watched the blinding light erupt from the ring and he trembled when every last hint of Sauron’s
lingering influence was driven out and doused at last. When they came to inspect Dol Guldur, he
imagined the glory of Amon Lanc as it should have been but it left a bitter taste in his mouth. He had
no need for opulence in his solitude. He wanted no ownership of his father’s former stronghold, so to
Celeborn’s realm it would pass.

When the cleansing and nourishment of the forest took effect, Radagast called back the animals— a
slew of woodland creatures including the insects and birds, frogs that sang near the creeks and rivers,
herds of deer and elk, predators ranging from wild lynxes to grey wolves. The purity of the forest
resounded throughout as a beacon for all that once inhabited it. Thranduil knew that with more time
and direction, all would be as it should. His people need not live in fear any longer. For this, even he
could swallow his disdain for the Lady of Lórinand.

The day arrived when the cleansing was done and between themselves, they granted Mirkwood a
new name: Eryn Lasgalen, the Wood of Greenleaves. Thranduil took all the northern region as far as
the mountains that rose in the forest for his realm; and Celeborn took the southern wood below the
Narrows, and named it East Lórien; all the wide forest between was given to the Beornings and the
Woodmen. Radagast the Brown was to return to Rhosgobel where he would continue tending to the
forest, undisturbed by Man and Elf.

It happened during their return trip toward his Halls when Galadriel halted suddenly and her fair
hand flew to her chest. She looked deeply affected by some unseen force and Celeborn went to her,
supporting her when she sagged against him. Her gown of white and gold rippled delicately as the
wind blew past and perhaps Manwë whispered to her truths that evaded all else who were not
attuned as she was.

“She must rest,” The silver-haired lord said gravely, “For Nenya’s strength has taken much from her
and she has expended more than she ought to have.”

“No, it is not that,” said the lady. Her voice was soft, her bright eyes lifted to rest upon Thranduil. He
immediately sensed that she’d come into knowledge that somehow pertained to him but he could
only speculate as to what it was. He was in no mood to invite her into his head so his defenses stayed
firmly in place. Galadriel knew this. It was in the way she smiled in that all-knowing manner she had
long perfected.

“Long have you waited, Thranduil-king, for these shadows to depart your lands at last. Your
patience shall be rewarded a thousand times over.” Galadriel said directly to Thranduil. Grey-blue
eyes clearer than his own bore through him.

“I do not know of what you speak,” He responded. It unsettled him the way her eyes shone with the
light of awareness that eluded him. “Come, in our Halls you may avail yourselves of sustenance and
rest ere the next leg of your journey.”
The couple would soon be bound for Gondor to see their granddaughter wed and crowned queen. Celeborn nodded sensibly and moved forward with his wife tucked securely against his side. That smile remained on Galadriel’s face though she turned her eyes forward and away from Thranduil, and the Elvenking was relieved for it. The three Elves continued their walk through the wood until they reached once more the caverns of Thranduil’s palace.

At the nadir of her aimlessness, Tauriel heard a voice call out to her. She thought she was the lone spirit in the sick-room but she felt a displacement of the air. A shift in the composition, like a gentle rending of fabric hardly noticed. Tauriel turned in a full circle, startled, but found nothing and no one beside her. The healers in the room paid her no mind, they could not see her.

“Who…who are you?” She asked simply. There was no fear in her voice. There was nothing left to fear now.

Before long, she had her answer.

“One who seeks to aid you, and one who has long admired your spirit. Your fëa is steadfast, your heart true, and your hröa still harbors life if you would return to it.”

The concept of reincarnation was less abstract to her, these Quenya words that before held little meaning, but she was still impatient at how disjointed everything was.

“Speak not in riddles; they serve neither of us now.” Tauriel said hotly. Perhaps it was irrational to be short-tempered with a bodiless voice yet she was. There was soft laughter, so delicate they might have been the sound of precious bells.

“There is purpose left for you in this world. I would see that you remain to fulfill it—but it is your choice, even if you entrusted your happiness to me. You must choose for yourself.”

The longer the forest daughter wandered, the farther removed she felt from all around her. She roamed the woods beyond the Halls where she once dwelt—for there was joy in the budding green that held a world of promise. Tauriel watched the progress and lamented that she was not part of it. She knew her husband stayed at her side in the darkest hours of the night. Despite knowing of his constancy, she could not bring herself to witness it. Even at great distance, she heard every anguished breath he took and her inability to console him was to plunge a knife into her heart again and again.

This night, she had the distinct feeling that she was no longer alone.

“Why do you hide yourself? I know you are there.” Tauriel called out boldly. The feathery reed grasses at her feet whistled softly as the breeze picked up and the presence grew stronger.

“The music is resilient within you and you will know it when it manifests. There is hope suffusing these lands. It shall be thy pride and glory.”

"Who are you?” Tauriel asked urgently. She had taken a path that led out of the dense forest where the trees eventually thinned and revealed a meadow. The purple and blue of the evening sky was illuminated by the infinite light of the stars and moon, unrestrained in their brilliance.

In this clearing, Tauriel envisioned her people in celebration—dancing and singing in laud of the unearthly magnificence. They would ride and hunt and live by starlight ever more. Beneath the Valacirca, Telumendil, and Soronúmë in the silence of the meadow, she knew not where the
boundaries lay between earth and heaven, the temporal and extemporal.

"There is life in you yet, and it reaches toward you for your fëa to return." That same delicate voice answered, Tauriel could confirm it was the same one she heard in Dale.

"Then tell me, why am I here? Why do I wander listlessly on these paths?"

Among the rustling grasses, there appeared an elven lady of such sublime beauty that Tauriel instantly thought it was Fanuilos descended. She walked in Tauriel’s direction with her shining raiment undisturbed by the brush underfoot. When she at last stood but a few paces from Tauriel, she could see her porcelain features framed by golden hair. She was somehow familiar though they had never met before.

"I am sent as a messenger by the Valië whom I serve. My mistress has long known of your plight, forest daughter." Her voice was lilting and kind, she used the same dialect of Sindarin spoken in these parts. Tauriel knew that it was no great mystery on whose behalf this lady had come.

"It must be Elbereth Gilthoniel that you serve, and her husband Manwë. I would ask an audience with them that I may be heard directly. I ask for a chance to fairly represent myself before them." She was both afraid and determined to ask for a trial before the Valar. There was nothing for her to lose by simply asking though this was a different kind of battle that seven hundred years of training in arms and combat did not come close to preparing her for.

The lady’s head dipped in a regal nod. On her lips played a smile that spoke of neither condescension nor delight. It was serene, the essence of the evening personified.

"Yes, child. You elected to stay in Arda, and my mistress has heard your entreaty. You have been delayed here in this state while your case was argued among the Valar. I have served them for nigh on two thousand years when I first came to their realm." There was a subtle inflection in the voice. There was more to this tale and Tauriel was compelled to know it.

"How did you come into her service?" She inquired bluntly.

"I was known by the name of Glawardis when once I walked in Arda as you did, and I called the same place home. In those days it was known as the Eryn Galen and I ruled over it with my husband. I bore a son to him and we lived happily until the time came when I had to choose, as you do now."

Tauriel contemplated the words. She now truly knew to whom she spoke and the knowledge caused an avalanche of realization. She feared retribution for stealing what was perhaps not hers to claim. Was that why her fëa was homeless, neither welcome in Aman nor Arda?

"I'm so...so sorry, if ever I have caused you grief in my weakness." For ultimately it was her weakness that led her to initiate the wedding vows that bound her to Thranduil without regard to his previous union. They had not known in the moment whether or not the Valar would bless their union. Tauriel did not expect to ever discover exactly if their marriage was acceptable by those faraway deities but evidently it had been recorded among them.

"Hush and be at peace, I have long been parted from him and our marriage is dissolved by my refusal to become incarnate once more." Said the elven queen in reply. How strange it was to have one’s questions answered and panic alleviated without speaking, Tauriel thought to herself.
"Then have I committed a crime against Mandos’s statute? Is Thranduil condemned too?" She asked with sudden anxiety.

"No, for I chose to go to Valinor and remain because I saw the tapestry of Vairë. The threads of Thranduil’s fate and mine ran parallel until mine changed its course. Yours and his have since come together and cannot be undone. Her maidens have woven them intricately together but it will be a great many years before your parts in the tapestry are finished."

"If you bore great love for Thranduil and…and Legolas, I do not understand why you would elect to stay in the Undying Lands rather than be with them." Tauriel’s questions arose like rapidly loosed arrows and she was incapable of stopping them from leaving her lips.

"There was great love between Thranduil and I but the threads of our lives took us on paths we could not take together. For mine was the choice of Míriel, and it is consolation enough to know I will soon be reunited with my son. Legolas will hear the gulls at Pelargir and the sea-longing will kindle in his heart."

Tauriel could not process what she was hearing. Legolas was destined to sail but his father was not. Now the reason for Thranduil’s silence regarding his first marriage became eminently clear. He did not grieve for her death—he had grieved that she refused to return to him. There was no obstacle or hindrance to a second union and the statute of Mandos remained unviolated.

“As I’ve said before, my lady petitioned on your behalf for she has heard your plea and in her compassion asked Manwë to dissuade Namo from taking you into his Halls. It has been decided between the three that you shall return, for a sundering of a union so new is far too cruel for a child of Ilúvatar.”

She fell to the ground prostrate but did not feel the solid earth under her as she was filled with boundless gratitude. She almost could not trust it—the moment was surreal in how Glawardis of all possible beings was the chosen messenger from Elbereth.

“My lady, I thank you and your mistress from the very depths of my fëa for this compassion.”

The gentle breeze sped into a stronger gust, and the elven queen’s voice rose in volume far mightier than expected from a being so slender and fair. Her voice resounded through the meadow and the power of it was like a great wave that built and crashed over Tauriel.

“Arise, Silivren! Thou shalt return for thy final task is yet unfulfilled. You will bring hope to the Eldar, for all but the Silvan of the North shall soon come to Aman. But of those who stay, you will raise among them hope the likes of which none have seen for millennia.”

And it showed in her face that she still did not comprehend what it all meant, so Glawardis smiled and said, "Tumnë talmar rahtainë nixenen umir. Yúlallo nárë nauva coivaina, cállë lómillon tuiuva."

This speech was in an archaic dialect she did not understand. It was too beautiful for her not to be moved despite her lack of comprehension. Through Glawardis spoke Varda Elentári, Elbereth Gilthoniel, and she knew she’d been graced by a power beyond anything she could hope to experience.

The air suddenly warmed in the meadow, it became a fount of invisible energy that diffused throughout and even Tauriel’s fëa was not immune. The cleansing of the wood by Nenya eliminated the final barrier; the rip in the gossamer between worlds reformed its ethereal seam. It parted now and Tauriel’s will was not her own anymore. Her spirit was drawn back toward her body, she viewed the
world from a multitude of perspectives, over rock and glade she flew toward the depths of the Halls—it was frightening and she did not understand until she inhaled sharply and she realized she was looking up at a hanging lamp indoors rather than the evening sky.

Tauriel looked down and saw her body clad in green silk robes with the ring at her neck though it fell to the side as she struggled to sit up. Emotion and sensation were returned to her in their excruciating fullness, the flesh where her wounds had been was healed but there was a jolting pain in her middle that elicited a small moan of discomfort. She looked up and saw Thranduil, seated at her bedside with a wine-skin in his hand which he quickly set down when he saw her move. His eyes were wide and incredulous, and she was so disoriented that she almost couldn’t believe it either.

“Ni veren an dhe ngovaned,” He whispered. His voice had been unused for the length of his vigil in her room. He had no other words for her—his shock rendered him utterly silent. There was reluctance in the way he came closer to her, like he’d become accustomed to tricks of the light and his own imagination combined with his visceral longing for her taunting him with false visions.

Gingerly sitting up, Tauriel opened her arms and he fell against her. She held him securely as he went slack with wordless gratitude and took a shuddering breath that became a sob against her collarbone. He was wine and tears and heartache—the ever familiar sandalwood and sage—and she cradled him in her arms and stroked his back through the storm of his relief, her own tears streaming down her face.

“There was something I had to rectify, lest your accusation prove true.” She said slowly as if testing her voice. She smiled at him in a way he never expected to see again. The dimples formed in her gaunt cheeks and all he wanted to do was to kiss those imperfections for their presence meant she was alive and so very real.

“To what are you referring?” He ran a gentle hand over her forehead and then down to cup her cheek in his warm palm, his thumb ran over the slight indentation that he’d been previously thinking of.

“I..left without permission.” She saw his confusion and clarified further, “My most exasperating tendency.”

And when he remembered his own words quoted back to him, he barked a short, harsh laugh. The sound turned into something grievous and raw, he was dazed beyond measure at seeing her eyes vivid green once more. When the force of his shock eased, she kissed his cheek and whispered to him, “All of my life has been war and running and running. But you…you feel like peace. You will have rest, my husband, and I have been sent back for reasons yet unknown to me.”

Chapter End Notes

NOTES:
Deep roots are not reached by the frost.
From the ashes a fire shall be woken,
A light from the shadows shall spring;

Tumnë talmar rahtainë nixenen umir
Yúlallo nárë nauva coivaina,
Cálë lómillon tuiuva
The above clue is taken from the Riddle of Strider, translated into Quenya, courtesy of http://fenxshiral.tumblr.com/

“All are from the dust, and to dust all return.” Ecclesiastes 3:20 (I’m Catholic and I wrote part of this on Ash Wednesday in February, this quote seemed very fitting for this fic)

I relied on the following excerpt from “Death in Tolkien's Legendarium” by Amaranth as the basis for this chapter http://valarguild.org/varda/Tolkien/encyc/papers/Amaranth/DeathinTolkien.htm

After a time of waiting in Mandos's halls, the Elvish fëa may, if it chooses, be reincarnated in a hröa identical to the one in which the fëa was formerly housed. The Valar were given permission and power by Eru to see to the construction of a new hröa for the 'houseless' fëa, and they can judge that a fëa may not be reimbodied, or at least not yet, in certain situations.
Normally, the reincarnated Elf remains in Aman. Only in special cases is the Elf sent back to Middle-earth, generally because they have some task yet to complete there.

This section is a direct quote from LOTR wiki:
Thranduil took all the northern region as far as the mountains that rose in the forest for his realm; and Celeborn took the southern wood below the Narrows, and named it East Lórien; all the wide forest between was given to the Beornings and the Woodmen.

Sindarin translations: (from Southern Sindarin dialect phrasebook at realelvish.net)
1) Noegyl – Dwarves
2) Ered Hithui – early Sindarin name of the Misty Mountains
3) Herven nin – my husband
4) “Ni veren an dhe ngovaned.” - I am joyous to see you
5) Valacirca, Telumendil, and Soronúmë – Quenya names for important stars/constellations
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Real life has not allowed me to dedicate as much of myself to writing recently but I nonetheless hope you enjoy this next chapter. As always, please let me know what you think and drop me a comment if you wish. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The integration of Tauriel into life in the woodland realm was not seamless as one might have imagined. News of her rising spread quickly. She walked among hushed whispers. Thranduil was often with her and her hand over his did not go unnoticed. The king stood alone for so long that seeing the former commander at his side was a stark departure from the paradigm. The image of the icy Elvenking melted away, for his unofficial consort was the blazing sun. The Wood-elves came to expect the sight of them together. Where one was alone, the other was sure to follow. Rumors spanning the past several decades took form as truth. Neither of them hid their attachment but neither did they make a formal announcement.

There was tenderness in the king's actions too. His face was perfect stoicism but his hand lingered at the small of her back when they walked and she slowed her step as if relishing the subtle contact.

Thranduil felt it time to address the political aspect of their union. He let it be during the weeks of her recovery, willing to let the hearsay run its course while Tauriel rested. Now that she endeavored to involve herself with the reforestation of the wood, it became more obvious that now was the opportunity to make some kind of acknowledgement before their people.

"You are my wife as much as I am your husband. I ask you now if you will also be queen of this realm. You will rule with me and independently of me, we will answer to our people through the council. Only say the word and I shall convene a session to present you for the people's consideration."

Tauriel heard how Thranduil sought to keep his tone neutral. So neutral, in fact, that she knew with certainty that he was desirous of her agreement. She did not have to think twice.

"Yes," She said, "With the council's approval of our case, nothing would please me more."

"Then I will call the council to chamber in five days’ time."

She nodded with a small smile but a wave of apprehension washed over her. Just then, a hint of something that was not quite pain radiated from within her. It was not exactly the pain of the poison that had run through her veins and that she was exceedingly accustomed to. It was a sensation she could not quite put a name to. It stole her breath and caused Thranduil to frown.

"Tauriel?"

She hid behind false cheer. "It is only residual discomfort. I am well, beloved."
The endearment rolled easily off her tongue and he did not bristle at it. Thranduil eyed her for a moment longer before his attention shifted to the particulars of approaching the council. Though she listened, she felt dismay at all that she had not realized about governance. The internal political workings and matters concerning the defense of the realm were not mutually exclusive but she had a lot to learn regarding the former. The ache in her body remained constant despite her insistence that it was nothing.

Truth be told, she concealed the little things from everyone including her husband, Melethril and the cohort of healers. Tauriel did not want to give anyone cause to worry further as there were many other pressing matters to be resolved. Melethril attempted to be a devout caregiver in the days immediately following Tauriel’s return but as always, the older elleth maintained that beyond the Valars’ healing she wanted for no further remedy.

The younger directed her attention to the planting of alfalfa and clover throughout the forest using the materials left by Radagast the Brown. With the return of the fauna, the Elves worked to encourage the growth of natural food sources. Tauriel joked that the deer whose food Melethril tended to would benefit far more from her ministrations than Tauriel would from constant hovering.

In truth, Tauriel was conscious of fatigue slowing her movements. She tired more easily than she ought to have and her stomach roiled at the most inconvenient of times. A serving maid brought a platter of fried trout during one particular midday meal and Tauriel was immediately repulsed. The scars that formed where the arrows penetrated her skin throbbed occasionally and her hand that had been bitten by a warg during the Battle Under the Trees lost its former dexterity.

She supposed that her hröa retained some signs of her ordeal because she’d been reimbodied in Middle Earth rather than made anew in Valinor. It did not matter so very much. It was enough for her to appreciate the gift that had been granted to her. Fleeting nausea and a few scars from battle were but a small price to pay so she shooed Melethril away with a reassuring smile and presented Thranduil with the best version of herself. She needed to show him that she could be relied on as a partner not only in marriage but in governing a realm as mighty as the rebuilt Eryn Lasgalen.

Tauriel was also aware that she was regarded with keen interest by the Lady of the Golden Wood. Galadriel was an intimidating figure in the periphery of Tauriel’s acquaintance. The longer the Lady of Lothlórien spent in Thranduil’s halls, the more Tauriel had the impression that Galadriel was biding her time before approaching her.

The day that Thranduil convened the council to present Tauriel’s ascension to queen consort, Galadriel and Celeborn were among the multitude of Elves that gathered to listen to her discourse. It was the lady, however, that Tauriel was most wary of. Thankfully, Melethril stood near to the front of the crowds in moral support. Thranduil spoke minimally—Tauriel herself held the attention of the full council and the throngs of Wood-elves throughout the Keep. The king acknowledged their marriage and so too did Tauriel, it was the first formal pronouncement of their union.

Her nerves were alight with tension once the words left her lips. Tauriel felt the churning in the pit of her stomach as she tried to ignore the range of expressions of everyone around her. Their judgment of her in her entirety would ultimately decide if they would accept her as their lady. She remained objective and humble about her military service and accomplishments in battle, only stating that if ever her love for her homeland was cast into doubt, that they recall those deeds. She also reminded them of her past mutiny and banishment, long before her appointment as royal commander or marriage to Thranduil. By admitting all of these things, Tauriel offered a full and honest self-portrait to be judged by the populace.

Only when she finished her speech did she dare look at the councilmembers’ faces. A significant
amount of them were newly seated. Many of Thranduil’s counselors were also generals and warriors who’d perished in the battle and most of their heirs were elected to replace them. Tauriel saw many of these heirs were Silvan daughters with wise and noble bearing much like their fathers before them. Despite this, she knew better than to expect biased treatment solely on the basis of gender or race. Legitimacy must be built on honesty. Tauriel did not want to be automatically made queen because she was Thranduil’s wife, she genuinely wanted to lead the way into a new age. Was that not her calling according to Varda? To raise hope among Silvan and Sindarin alike in the northern woods? Lord Beriadan, her former superior, and Lord Tirithon both knew her character well. She hoped they would take her side in this, though their countenances were equally indecipherable.

At the close of Tauriel’s address, there was a rustling of chatter from the crowds and the councilmembers resolved to make a decision once they had heard from their respective constituents. Thranduil ended the council meeting and only then did Tauriel turn to meet his eyes. What she saw there was unmistakable pride, it filled her with such immense gladness that she could inspire that in him. Thranduil rose from his throne and walked toward her.

“Well spoken, hiril vuin. Shall we retire?”

The session had lasted the entire morning and there was nothing that appealed to her more than the idea of going back to their shared bedchamber. She flushed slightly in realization of what he was really asking her. Tauriel lowered her voice appropriately.

“It’s barely past midday, Thranduil.” Though it was a rebuke on the surface, he could detect the barely hidden anticipation in her tone.

“I shall depart first, and if it should assuage your sudden play at coyness, you can wait however long you deem necessary for propriety’s sake.” He murmured nonchalantly. She wanted to laugh—he was a master at this kind of insouciance. When she watched him leave through the dispersing crowds, she realized they had not been together since that last evening before the battle. Perhaps it was barely past midday, perhaps it was a bit unseemly considering she had just pled her case to be elected queen of Eryn Lasgalen. Tauriel Silivren had spent nearly a century denying herself what she wanted and she decided not one day more would she waste by doing so.

It was not the most graceful of their encounters. Stumbling together into their bedchamber, hands tugging thoughtlessly at garments— rending and pulling and exposing until nothing was left except flushed skin pressed tightly together. Their lips never parted during this fraught voyage from front door to bed. The backs of his knees collided with the mattress and down they fell, snickering at their own ungainliness before they were lost once more in their frantic kisses.

“Ouch—woman what are you—”

“Hold still, by Eru, or I—”

Then more hushed laughter as Tauriel finally untangled her husband’s hair from the wooden crown she so hastily tried to remove from his head. It pricked her fingers as she let it fall atop their haphazard pile of clothes.

“Usurped by a wily seductress,” Thranduil grumbled against her smirking lips.

“How the mighty have fallen.” She deadpanned and pinned him to the bed. When neither of them could stand to taunt the other any further, Tauriel straddled him experimentally and this reunion of
their heated bodies was enough to drive any attempts at coherent thought from them both. She could tell Thranduil’s movement was marked by hesitance at first. He did not want to aggravate any injury but this was a rare instance where her fatigue or discomfort was completely vanished. She drove him to the brink of his release and saw him give into it, then followed him into the nerveless, undulating bliss.

It was barely past midday yet the Elvenking and his soon-to-be queen quickly dozed off amidst their tangled bed sheets and intertwined, sweaty limbs. Tauriel settled into Thranduil’s arms and closed her eyes. Politics, the rebuilding, and the secret of her residual pain were distant worries that couldn’t detract from the hazy bliss that enveloped her as she drifted into sleep.

The filtered sunlight danced across the bed late that afternoon. It was still a novelty to laze about like this. Thranduil lay in elegant repose beside her, tracing invisible patterns along her ribcage with his fingertips. Tauriel pretended to ignore the fluttering it caused within her, how it roused her.

He now caressed the faint scar where an arrow had pierced cleanly through her shoulder. The wound healed well, there was only the slightest puckering of skin. Tauriel made a leisurely humming sound and opened her eyes to peer at him.

“The healers maintain their advice against strenuous activity for at least another few weeks. You aren’t exactly helping me comply with their counsel.” Even as she admonished him with a lightly mocking tone, she was tilting her body his way.

“And you are not exactly doing your utmost to dissuade me. Besides, we have spent most of this day abed so that might placate them.” Thranduil drawled softly. He fitted his palm over her cheek and caressed the bow of her upper lip with his thumb. He leaned in to kiss where his thumb had just brushed and spoke against her smiling lips, “I want to taste the sunlight on your skin.” He placed a small kiss on her collarbone, then trailed down to her breast and caused her to moan when he took her into his mouth and shortly after moved to kiss her other breast. Tauriel’s fingers weaved through his hair and pressed against his scalp. Her eyes fell shut again as she surrendered to her husband’s attentions. He kissed his way downward to her stomach then to the top of her pelvic bone. He raised his eyes to hers to see find her watching him with ostensible anticipation.

That look of half-lidded desire on her face seemed to encourage him. He brushed his palms over her breasts, drawing a small groan from her, and then over the rest of her body until he reached her knees and gently parted her legs. Tauriel realized his intention and felt the fluttering evolve to an intense, throbbing heat. This would be a new dimension to their lovemaking. Although he never touched her quite like this before she found herself far more impatient than skittish. She looked at him greedily, admiring his features—his strong brow that was bent in a frown of concentration as he pleasured her. He lifted her legs to rest on his broad shoulders, her feet on his lower back. She felt his muscles shift beneath her feet while he repositioned himself ever so slightly.

“Thran—“ She said, as if she could manage anything else while he was between her legs. The rest of his name trailed off into a soft moan. He suddenly paused, smirking, as his eyes settled on her face.

“Yes, I am rather, aren’t I?”

Her lust addled her wits—it took her a moment to realize she’d shortened his name to just half its meaning. Vigorous, indeed, she thought deliriously. She didn’t know if she should laugh or press her hips up toward him in an effort to regain his attentions. Thankfully he did not tease her further and returned to his task in earnest. Her hands gripped the sheets beneath her until the sensation built and built, she let go of the sheets to again grasp his hair. He anchored her in all things, so it was with their intimacy.
When the shuddering of her completion had more or less subsided, Thranduil raised his head and kissed both of her inner thighs. He moved to lay next to her as he had been doing before, this time he wore an expression of endearing but insufferable smugness.

“What of your pleasure?” Tauriel asked breathlessly as she smoothed down his hair where moments ago she’d mussed it.

“It is pleasure enough for me to witness you in the throes of it. I wanted to feel your release without considering my own.” The timbre of his voice was another of his features that she loved. She felt drowsy then, quite intoxicated by the afterglow of her release. A pair of large, warm hands gathered her to his side. Tauriel let herself drift off to sleep in the warmth of his arms and their bed.

When she next woke, it must have been just past sunset. The light of the room was fading little by little. She stretched, like an indolent feline, and Thranduil too stirred. He saw her movement and tracked the tantalizing curve formed by her lower back and buttocks as she arched.

"You will spoil me if you keep this up. My standards have risen too high for me to be satisfied with anything less."

"Just as well.” His eyes traveled conspicuously from her eyes down the rest of her, “I would have you hunger for no one else's touch but my own."

Tauriel inhaled deeply and let her breath go in a deep sigh. She wondered if anyone was looking for either of them yet—it truly had been a day spent in bed. Her muscles were deliciously sore but she did not regret any of it. She lay on her side facing him, her head resting over her bent arm.

“May I wear your ring upon my hand or would you prefer it remain hidden?” Where their words were formerly lighthearted banter, Tauriel turned wistful and hesitant.

“I believe we have waited long enough to make our union known amongst our people. After your address earlier today, there can no longer be any doubt that we are married,” As Thranduil spoke, he grasped the ring upon its chain and then caressed her skin beneath it. “I only tarry until you are fully recovered from the ordeal of your return. I do not care to see you spend your energy on planning or preparations just yet. Presently, we await the council’s decision.”

“Such consideration.” Tauriel stroked his cheek tenderly. “I am not averse to a feast and I feel well enough to at least put it to writing.” Her voice grew quiet.

“Then I shall aid you in this task.” Thranduil replied. “For now, let us rest.”

A wicked smile bloomed on Tauriel’s face and he knew she had none of the latter in mind. “There is one more endeavor I must see to ere we rest.”

The remnants of the afternoon were spent in languorous pleasure beneath the dappled gold of the fading sunlight.

Chapter End Notes

The major action is behind us, now I want to explore the emotional implications of all that has happened. I'm also fiddling around with a weird blend of Elven democracy within a largely feudal society which is something I'm totally developing as I go.
Thank you all for your support of my little creative exercise, for your kind words and kudos and comments. What began as a shipper's quest to write the fic I wanted to read became something quite personal and creatively fulfilling. Stay tuned for what's next! :)
Arien is the guardian of the sun in Elven-lore, a Maia that serves Varda.

Hiril vuin = my lady
Mae govannen = Hello
Elleth/ellyn = woman/women
Belegaer = what the Elves called the Western Sea
Valarin = the language spoken by the Valar, a level up from Quenya (which is like Latin)

Aragorn and Arwen were wed on Midsummer's Day (circa June 20) in T.A. 3019.

Galadriel is the niece of the infamous Fëanor and was part of the Noldorin exiles that followed him out of Aman in the Years of the Trees BEFORE the First Age. She’s not particularly proud of this part of her past.

“How do you pick up the threads of an old life? How do you go on, when in your heart you begin to understand there is no going back. There are some things that time cannot mend.

Some hurts that go too deep... that have taken hold.”

– The Return of the King

The crisp air and dew drops on the burgeoning eaves drew Tauriel from the confines of the caverns before the sun rose. She made her way from the underground Keep alone. The sky was cloudless and the morning stars thrown into stark relief by the light blue around them; she strode out into the forest with the intention of witnessing the breaking dawn. Tauriel breathed easily while she loped fleetly through the woodland. Her husband was still wrapped warmly in bed as she quietly slipped out for this solitary ritual.

Her new living arrangements were no secret from the general public so Tauriel departed from their chambers with an even step. Even Galion was nowhere to be found when she exited and she knew he woke early to tend to Thranduil each morning. She’d donned a thinner pair of leggings with a maroon tunic over them and a brown leather vest that laced up the front—an outfit of practicality rather than style. She supposed she would soon find herself afforded very few opportunities to dress as such and would cherish these moments when she could just be the forest maiden she’d always been.

The wind picked up as her momentum built—she knew she was smiling like an idiot as her stride widened and she ran with her whole heart. No fatigue troubled her in these moments, no guilty thoughts. The destruction from four moons’ past was extraordinarily unnoticeable. Those times of war she put far from her mind in the waking hours for they still distressed her to dwell upon. Tauriel instead preferred to admire the state of the woods and running before the dawn was most conducive to clearing her head.

The reforestation efforts of the Wood-elves had been thus far successful. There was vibrant green
budding throughout the forest though the trees were not yet tall enough to form the dense canopy as they did before. Clad only in light shoes, she enjoyed running unhindered by weightier boots. Tauriel was mindful of her footing and leapt over the moss, tangled vines and tree roots along the path. Flocks of yellow-bellied larks sang gaily as she found the rushing river and continued her pace beside it, due east as was the current.

She took that path to where the forest ended, slowing to a leisurely jog when she found her destination.

The sun began its steady ascent from above the horizon, Arien ushered it higher and higher until it hung in the sky and cast its light on the lands below. In the distance the Forest River poured into the wide mouth of the Long Lake and the light reflected brightly off the immense body of water. She could not bring herself to look north at the Lonely Mountain for the memory of what transpired there.

Tauriel shut her eyes and breathed deeply of the fresh air, basking in the warmth of morning. The sound of the moving current was faint and the lark-song followed.

She was at peace.

Then, she detected the faintest rustling, closer than Tauriel might have expected.

“Tauriel,” a regal, feminine voice disturbed Tauriel’s reverie.

The source of the voice quickly made itself known. Tauriel turned to find the Lady Galadriel a few paces away; strolling along a different path that joined with the one she took to arrive here. She shifted nervously at the sight of the noble lady. Galadriel’s very image befitted her name, especially when the light of the morning sun and stars shone upon the waves of her golden hair and white gown girt with silver.

The Lady of Lórien still observed her with veiled curiosity. An unspoken question seemed to lie oppressively between them. Tauriel wished the lady would simply ask and be done with it. She suspected the question had to do with the details of her reboimbursement. Tauriel knew there were countless others who were similarly curious but dared not risk offending the king by speculating. She also suspected the lady held her peace for that very reason—it certainly was no mystery that Thranduil was not overly fond of her.

“Mae govannen, hiril vuin.” She replied courteously.

There was a long pause as Galadriel took two deliberate steps nearer. Beyond the kindness in her smile, her eyes shone with history that Tauriel knew stretched farther back in time than she could grasp. The notion that Thranduil was not too far from her in age was slightly unsettling too—but he did not have quite the same kind of grace as she. Galadriel lived in the light of the Two Trees and that alone would forever distinguish her from elves of these parts.

“Mae govannen, hiril vuin.” She replied courteously.

The lady moved to walk past her. Glancing sidelong at Tauriel, she said, “Walk with me, Tauriel Silivren. This day is fair and we may as well enjoy it in each other’s company. This is the last sunrise I shall see in the north.”

It was indeed turning into a glorious morning. The lark-song began again, closer this time, as if the birds themselves sought to be nearer to Galadriel.

“I shall be happy to, my lady.” Tauriel fell into step with Galadriel. As they walked along the border of the woods, Tauriel faltered in what to say. Galadriel maintained her silence. It was not that she
was purposefully aloof rather Tauriel sensed the lady was listening to the song of the morning and delighting in its purity. Maybe she was laughing inside at its primitiveness compared with the fabled Mallorn trees of Caras Galadhon. That idea did not particularly assuage the tension, Tauriel decided. She did not care for a foreigner's mockery of her homeland regardless of how highborn they were.

“I admit I have long wanted to know more of you. I believe you and I may be of distant relation.” The lady finally spoke, she turned to look at Tauriel as they walked.

“Oh? How so?” Tauriel asked, intrigued despite herself.

“My uncle had your shade of hair—the hue is the most vivid thing in my recollection of him. It matched the heat of his temper.” The last part sounded like an afterthought. A reflection of someone long gone from Arda, yet whose legacy rested with those old enough to have been part of it.

“I have often been told how rare a color it is among us, my lady. I confess you are the only member of the House of Finwë I am acquainted with.”

The shade from the young trees did not dim Galadriel’s aura. Tauriel clasped her hands behind her back to restrain her impulse to fidget.

“My uncle was many things both great and terrible…his deeds shaped the world long after his passing.” The lady turned her gaze away and Tauriel exhaled swiftly. “Does that trouble you?”

“It is very much a surprise.” Tauriel replied carefully. She had a vague inkling of whom Galadriel spoke. There was an entire body of legend that surrounded this particular relation of hers. “Neither of my parents named Fëanor or Nerdanel as an ancestor as far as I remember.”

Galadriel looked pleased that Tauriel correctly guessed his identity. Tauriel belatedly remembered that the Valars’ statute that allowed for her marriage to Thranduil was the one created expressly for Fëanor’s father and his second wife. There were evidently more connections between her and the lady than met the eye. Even so, Tauriel was somewhat skeptical. A claim of kinship based on something as tenuous as hair color was a bit far-fetched yet she would not dispute Galadriel’s musings.

“Regardless of your lineage, I see why Thranduil-king has presented you as his consort.”

Now Tauriel couldn’t withhold her huff of disbelief. “How can you know this of me when this is the first time you and I have spoken?”

The two ellyn kept walking; the lark-song became distant now.

“The reemergence of your fëa is testament to your strength. Not every elf who returns from the trial of death can run as freely as you do now.”

Even as Galadriel’s words registered, Tauriel’s heart sank for she could not lie to herself about the faint shadows lingering in her. In dreams, faceless, formless creatures woke her in the middle of the night as Thranduil slumbered next to her. These dreams recurred more often now; the touch of the Valar three moons past was perhaps wearing thin.

“This…this is something that no one in this realm has ever faced.” Who could possibly relate to Tauriel’s circumstances? Even her husband would be hard-pressed to understand how she returned to the world of the living. She stayed silent about the details. He did not know it was Glawardis who orchestrated her return. She did not tell him or Melethril that Legolas was destined to sail over the Belegaer and be reunited with his mother.
The lady began to speak again. Tauriel quietened her morose thoughts to better listen.

“Indeed. In recent times, I only know of another besides yourself who was sent back. It was Mithrandir who rose again as Glorfindel did, after defeating the Balrog in Moria.”

Tauriel knew of the grey wizard but not that he too fell and rose again, and of course she’d heard the tale of the mighty elf-lord Glorfindel.

“They cannot be plagued by the same terrors as I am.” Tauriel murmured. “There are a set of spoken lines I cannot rid myself of. I do not understand the language yet the words are ever in my ear. Perhaps you might?”

The inherent plea in the upward intonation of her voice bade Galadriel to halt.

“If I have your consent, I will hear with my own ears that which perturbs you.”

Tauriel understood what Galadriel was asking consent for. Thranduil warned her of the lady’s ability to peer into others’ minds before she and her lord husband arrived. Tauriel nodded in agreement as she met Galadriel’s eyes.

The memory of that mystical evening came forth; Glawardis was summoning her fëa with those beautiful words too ancient to be understood.

*Tumnë talmar rahtainë nixenen umir. Yülallo nárë nauva coivaina, Câlê lómillon tuiuva.*

Galadriel did not force her way into other parts of her consciousness or memories as Tauriel feared she might. Once she heard the words, she withdrew from Tauriel and gazed contemplatively at something in the far distance. The sunlight glinted off her profile and the image struck Tauriel anew with her radiance.

“It is a form of Quenya very close to Valarin—speech far higher than anything we use in Middle Earth. You have heard it from the Valar themselves, a potent blessing if ever there was one.”

Galadriel looked at her as if her unspoken question was now answered. Tauriel simultaneously feared and longed for further elaboration.

“Its meaning eludes me still, in all its forms.” Tauriel continued walking, prompting Galadriel to follow. They came to a turn in the path and headed into the forest once more, away from the river.

“Elven women are most often blessed by dreams of this ilk. The Valar send messages to us in dreams, Tauriel, and this message is a blessing for you alone. As with all things divinely granted, they will become known in their own time.”

“Time is a commodity that we are in abundance of as of late. I have no wish to spend all of it pondering this and why it tears me from my sleep in the darkest hours of the night. I am weary of mystery. What would you have me do, my lady? How can I be strong in leadership if I struggle to overcome this? So many others have lost more than me, no right have I to complain yet here I stand.” She realized her speech was delivered nearly all in one breath.

Tauriel hoped she did not come off as uncouth. Her frustration got the better of her—she was mortified that Galadriel might find her ungrateful for the blessing of Varda. The lady was pensive, perhaps weighing her thoughts carefully as Tauriel should have done before speaking.

“I will not give you counsel, saying do this, or do that. For not in doing or contriving, nor in choosing between this course and another, can I avail; but only in knowing what was and is, and in
part also what shall be.”

“Then translate the words, my lady, and I shall not trouble you further.” Tauriel insisted. Tauriel was then faced with the realization that the rank of Elven-queen of Eryn Lasgalen was a title far grander than the Lady of Lórien’s. If elected by the council, she would effectively outrank Galadriel. It unnerved her that she may one day be entitled to make demands of high-elves like she’d just done.

Galadriel did not take offense, as a mother easily forgives a wayward child.

“Very well: Alas, deep roots are not reached by the frost, from the ashes a fire shall be woken and a light from the shadows shall spring.” Galadriel paused, granting her words much emphasis. “I will not alter your perception of this message with my own interpretation. That is for you alone.”

Tauriel ceased to walk forward. Her hands flew to her midsection in reflexive alarm. The revelation of the words in Sindarin incited that jolting sensation, her abdomen seemed to clench before she overcame the feeling.

“Hannon le, hiril vuin.” She bit out, truly grateful for an answer even if it was only partial and inspired more questions.

Galadriel looked grave but beautiful in her concern.

“Let us return to your halls to break our fast.” The lady suggested, and the two ellyn made their way through the woods back toward the palace. The uncomfortable sensation persisted until they arrived. She largely kept to herself through the morning meal at Thranduil’s right hand, listening courteously to the discussion of Lord Celeborn’s and Lady Galadriel’s planned departure from Eryn Lasgalen south toward Minas Tirith.

There were too many secrets, Tauriel thought to herself, but she could not share one with Thranduil and hide all the rest. It would be all or nothing if she were to unburden herself. She risked a glance at her husband as he finished what was on his plate and engaged Celeborn in further conversation. Galadriel caught her eyes, then. The same concern remained in her expression. Perhaps she caught onto the fact that Tauriel had little appetite and left most of her food untouched.

Tauriel truly could not eat so she took her cup of tea between her hands and lifted it to her lips. After a long sip, she was relieved that the nausea remained at bay.

It would all come to light. That she’d seen Glawardis, that he would be sundered from Legolas, that she was likely not fully healed…It was only a matter of finding the best time to tell him.

The Lord and Lady of the Golden Wood were to depart the following day. A modest retinue chosen by Thranduil would join them. These Wood-elves were to accompany Celeborn and Galadriel south and present wedding gifts to Gondor’s newly crowned monarchs.

The weather was as fair as each day had been since the cleansing of the forest. By boat would they travel from the bank of the Forest River until it joined the Anduin flowing toward Gondor, for it was swifter to travel over water than over land on horseback. Celeborn gave his thanks to the last great Elvenking for his hospitality and the amicable division of lands.

The silver-haired lord stepped onto the first boat alone while his wife lingered behind. Galadriel turned to Thranduil and he sensed she was about to tell him something of great importance. The lady’s eyes settled briefly on Tauriel, who was far enough away for Galadriel to speak honestly. As Thranduil was now accustomed to it, he was left unsurprised by the lady’s lack of preamble. She stood close and kept her voice hushed.
“She is strong, that I do not doubt. Though she is healed of body, the greatest caution is necessary with the healing of her mind. Your wife is strong but you must be ready to stand by her in the coming days.” With that, Galadriel took her leave of him and he knew it would be the last time he would see either of them.

Thranduil wondered if Galadriel thought of Celebrían...If her daughter’s fate was her motivation in cautioning him. Tauriel was stronger than Celebrían. Than even perhaps Glawardis. Yet he spoke none of this aloud for the pain was too great still for him and perhaps her too despite the long years since their passing.

Just then, Tauriel came to stand beside him. She placed her hand on his arm and he raised his right hand to envelope hers. They watched the three boats progress down the Forest River until they disappeared from sight past the river-bend.

The days leading to midsummer were filled with joyful labors—groups of Wood-elves dedicated to their respective tasks ensured that the forest continued to grow. Later that afternoon, Tauriel walked among the expansive gardens outside the caverns where Melethril and her assigned group were tending to the fledgling herbs with delicately wrought pails full of water. Tauriel listened to the buzzing chatter and laughter, feeling lighter at the happy sounds. Among those voices was her young ward’s—she was humming a wordless, buoyant tune.

“Is there anything I may do?” Tauriel asked earnestly as she approached the leader of the group. She was older than Tauriel with generous eyes and careworn hands that spoke volumes of her expertise in working the land. Tauriel had not changed from the garb she wore during her morning run, thus she was immediately ready to assist.

“Yes, my lady. We can harvest some of the taller plants—do you see the plot on that side? From each of them, cut one third of their branches and take them into the kitchens and apothecary.” There was a bit of reluctance in the supervisor’s voice and astonishment in her face. Tauriel realized it was deference—she herself once took that tone with her betters.

“Of course. May I ask what your name is?”

Again, the look of surprise. “I am called Halloth, my lady.”

The change in title—from commander to lady—startled Tauriel more than it should have.

“I shall set to work at once, Halloth. If you see me err in any way, please do not hesitate to correct me.” Tauriel said humbly. She did not wish to be set upon a pedestal before any decision was made regarding her status.

“Very well, my lady.” Halloth looked pleased that Tauriel wanted to contribute. She accepted a woven reed basket with a long leather strap she could sling over her shoulder and a small cutting knife for the herbs. Melethril spotted Tauriel from the other side of the garden and gave a happy wave. Tauriel grinned and waved back, then went to work at the plot of rosemary.

The garden itself was a work of rustic beauty. It was situated in a clearing that received morning sunlight and afternoon shade, perfectly conducive to optimal growth. The edges of the garden touched the beginnings of the forest, the lines between the elven settlement and the wilderness quite indistinct. Before the war, farming was a far smaller operation for reasons of safety. Tauriel imagined that this was only the beginning of what could be a much more ambitious plan. Perhaps in time they could create orchards with rows of fruit-bearing trees.
She sliced the correct length off each plant, filling her basket slowly but surely. When she finished the rosemary, she moved on to the sage and the breeze carried its fragrance toward her. It was one of the scents she associated with Thranduil, and as she gathered the branches of the sage plant, she could not help the smile that formed on her face. As Tauriel worked outside the halls, she knew Thranduil himself was negotiating contracts regarding the river tolls with a visiting human representative from Esgaroth. He was likely not having as grand a time as she currently was—which meant she would have to find some way of coaxing him out of the mood he was likely to be in at day’s end. She so liked discovering new ways of diverting the energy of his temper.

Tauriel would have benefited from participating in the negotiation process. She had mastery of the Westron tongue and a passable understanding of diplomatic and trade relations with the kingdom of Dale. When all was said and done, she decided to remove herself from the throne room. It would have been presumptuous to stay in any kind of official capacity before the council came to a decision about her. Thranduil seemed to understand and respect her wish to wait.

As Tauriel continued her work, she grew somber again when she reminded herself that she needed to talk to her husband seriously regarding all she discussed with Galadriel. It was better that he know what happened now before the council convened again and they were confronted with difficult questions that they needed to answer honestly. She knew her expression looked stormy but she was alone. She need not guard her thoughts from the plants at her feet.

A few hours passed uneventfully. Tauriel took the herbs into the caverns and distributed them to the appropriate places as she was bid and then returned to the gardens to help with the vegetables. There were crops ready to be taken to the kitchens from the side of the garden nearer to the edge of the woods. Tauriel tended to the growing squash and corn before setting to work at harvesting the multitude of green and red peppers. She filled her baskets efficiently, noting that many of the group had been relieved of duty and she was one of only a few remaining elves. A short glance over the field confirmed that Melethril was still working too.

The day was nearer to its close than she realized. The sun was past the line of trees and the garden grew subtly darker. She ran the back of her roughened hand over her forehead to wipe off the beads of sweat there and sat back on her knees and heels. The baskets were heavy against her shoulders so she set them down for a moment to stretch. The muscles of her back ached—she probably should not have spent so long out at her tasks considering how ill she felt earlier. The scar from the warg bite caused her hand to cramp slightly when she gripped the handle of the cutting knife. She slid the knife into the small leather holder to avoid being cut by its serrated edge.

A noise from the underbrush caught her attention.

Tauriel froze. A thrill of fear coursed through her and rendered her utterly immobile. There was a brief, low-pitched snarl followed by the jostling of foliage. A flash of golden eyes and then a bursting of leaves as a young cougar bounded toward her.

She was prey.

The cougar must have stalked her while she toiled and identified her as vulnerable prey since food was still scarce for the woodland’s wildcats.

Sitting on her heels with her baskets at her side and sheathed cutting knife in hand, Tauriel had not felt so stupid in hundreds of years. Without warning, she was assailed by memories of battle, the screams in her head louder than the cougar’s roar as it closed the distance between them. Tauriel struggled to her feet and shakily pulled the knife from its casing but she could not run and give chase. Neither could she throw the blade, she could not kill, she could not take another life even if hers was again endangered—
It happened so fast that Tauriel almost did not see that the cougar was struck down by a thrown dagger. It was expertly thrown and likely far more effective than her gardening tool would have been. The blade passed so close to her face that she felt it glance off her cheek. The wildcat fell, wheezing pitifully and hissing as she took an unconscious step nearer to the poor animal.

“Tauriel! Leave it be!”

By now the other elves had seen the commotion and come running but the one who’d saved her spoke. She knew who it was even before her sight confirmed it. Strong arms caught her as she faltered, the nausea welled up and caused her to cough forcefully.

“Quickly, Melethril—escort her back to the Halls. Halloth, you must end your work for this day but first send for Orthorion and Thedril. I will calm the beast before we heal it—”

“Yes, my lord Legolas!” cried Halloth in reply.

Legolas had come fortuitously to her aid. She watched him give commands and approach the snapping cougar with calming words of apology, running his hands over its fur to soothe it while he awaited the others. He must have journeyed a great distance from Minas Tirith to reach the northern wood.

Melethril wrapped one arm around Tauriel’s waist to support her and the other took her hand. Neither spoke on the way into the palace. Those whom they passed saw their future queen, pale and shaken in muddy gardening clothes as Melethril brought her to the royal chambers. The latter was undaunted by the scrutiny.

_I cannot take a life._ The words repeated themselves again and again in Tauriel’s mind. _I will never wield a weapon again for I cannot take a life._
Chapter Notes

Hi friends! Apologies for the delay in updating: my friends are getting married (to each other) and I'm on the wedding planning committee so my free time has been scarce these past weeks. Here is the longest chapter yet—I hope you enjoy and if you'd like, please let me know what you think. :) Thank you all so very much for your feedback thus far!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

So the Darkness shall be the light, and the stillness be the dancing.

–T.S. Eliot

The hour of the evening meal drew nigh. Thranduil had not yet secured the desired concessions for tolls on the Forest River, though Tirithon remained with him throughout the talks. The conflict originated with Dalish merchants and boatmen who sought to use the river. Now that the raft-elves completed the rebuilding, they began to ask the requisite sums once more for the tolls at the water-gates.

Therein lay the impasse: the human merchants tried to haggle and the Elves would have none of it. The disputes came to the point where arbitration at the highest levels was necessary; there was much exasperation on both sides. After the devastation of the War of the Ring, one would think these types of squabbles would be easily resolved. As it was, they threatened to again choke up commerce not only between Dale and Eryn Lasgalen but from Erebor too.

King Bard II sent his emissary in his place for there was still much to be done within his kingdom. Thranduil took no offense that the king did not come himself and had no personal quarrel with him. Regardless, neither were king and elven-lord quick to grant the ambassador’s requests. The ambassador brought with him a scribe to record each opinion and points of disagreement between them. Their meeting lasted most of the day.

There was a knock on the door before it was pushed open to reveal Galion. Thranduil beckoned to him to enter fully, his wide sleeve unfurling like an eagle’s wing as he lifted his hand. Tirithon and the Barding ambassador fell silent and watched Galion step forward.

The ambassador did not catch the full meaning of the spoken exchange between king and steward. He inferred that it had to do with the king’s lady. This puzzled him—no royal wedding had been announced and he had only ever known the Elvenking as the sole monarch of the Woodland Realm. Perhaps he heard mistakenly. The ambassador noticed a black expression cross over the other elven lord’s face—like the name of the lady was something distasteful. Then the king’s steward mentioned the prince and the king’s eyes widened, the look on his face changed utterly at the news. The ambassador was dumbfounded by this outward display of emotion.

It seemed the prince had returned home this day after his sojourn with the Fellowship. The particulars were lost on the ambassador. Elvish was a challenging language to learn for any human and it was especially difficult to understand when the Elves wished to obfuscate in front of foreign company. Observing their interactions through a man’s eyes was to peel back layers of petals on a mysterious
blossom, beautiful and ominous at once.

Thranduil concluded the meeting abruptly. With a polite but distant air, the king left the council chamber. Galion was entrusted with escorting the Bardings to the Great Hall where dinner was served. Only Tirithon stayed behind, his critical gaze fixed on the scrolls of his notes upon the wooden table.

Upon entering his apartments, Thranduil was greeted by the sound of the cavern’s high waterfalls. He went straight through his empty solar to his—their—bedchamber and upon finding it similarly empty, headed to the private bath. It was located in a smaller room than the bath in open air and had space enough for only a small chaise and console. These were set in a small alcove, framed by pillars with carven vines connecting them to both ceiling and floor respectively. At last, he found his wife ensconced in the steaming water of the inlaid basin.

Tauriel had been staring blankly at the bathwater’s surface. The second before she realized he’d come in, her face was devoid of anything at all. Where her old fear pricked her heart there was now a gaping emptiness. Never in her time as a fighter had a weapon felt so misplaced in her grip. She was floundering, perhaps she was not built for peace.

It was not what she’d been taught to expect.

It was not what she’d spent the long years of her life training for.

When Tauriel registered his presence, she drew herself up from her slouched position. Her unbraided hair surrounded her in a floating auburn cloud and obscured the outline of her body.

“What happened?” Thranduil asked. His tone was gentle. He could see how dazed she remained.

“A wildcat chose me for its prey. I was lost in thought as I worked and it caught me by surprise, is all. I am not harmed.” Tauriel answered carefully.

He must have known she’d downplay what occurred. Thranduil look upon her for a long moment, during which Tauriel wondered if he was relieved she was alright or upset that she had again come close to tasting mortality. He looked weary. Ready to cast off the duties of his position.

“Won’t you join me, Thranduil?” Her right hand skimmed the water’s surface in welcome.

“I would not dare to presume without invitation.” How peculiar...that a king should wait on her permission. Her smile turned slightly impish.

“Presume all you like, from now on.”

She watched him as he shrugged out of his long over-robe. It fell to the stone floor in a heap of emerald satin, to be followed by his coat, sleeves, and tunic. He stepped out of his boots and undid his breeches with practiced ease.

Tauriel imagined herself as the wildcat now as she traced his progress from the edge of the room to the chaise with his pile of garments and boots in hand. Draped over the armrest of the chaise was one of his own dressing gowns of deep garnet silk. She saw him pause as if surprised when he deduced that it was the only thing she’d worn into the bath. He set the pile onto the seat and removed his silver leaf circlet, placing it atop the rest of his clothes. Finally, Thranduil turned toward her.

His unclothed beauty was impetus enough to beat back the numbness that loomed over her.

Although by now his body was familiar to her, she still marveled at the strength of his lines. Thranduil lowered himself into the water and Tauriel settled against his side, leaning close to nuzzle
his shoulder and stroke his arm from wrist upward. The water came up to her collarbone while he was so tall that most of his chest remained above surface. He rested his arm over her shoulders, saying nothing.

The heat within the room eventually loosened the tension of his muscles. She hoped he appreciated the scent of jasmine from the blooms that she added into the bath. They were one of the many treasures brought from the gardens. Thranduil sank down a little further into the basin with a stifled groan of contentment.

“Something tells me you did not enjoy treating with King Bard’s emissary as well as I thought you might.” Her left hand rested on his bare thigh as she brushed her fingertips over his chest.

“Why should I, when there are much more pleasant things to partake of...?”

The quip was punctuated by his pulling her closer. Thranduil turned to look at her. Tauriel’s leaned her head against his shoulder, her downcast eyes were framed by the sweep of her dark lashes. Her hair around her temples curled slightly from the steam, her pinkened cheeks emphasized the smattering of freckles there.

“You are aware that Legolas is back?” There was hasty urgency in her speech. “I should have mentioned it right away, forgive me.”

“Yes, Galion told me he is tending to the beast’s wound. I will see my son once I have seen to your welfare.”

The crease that lined his forehead softened. Subtle as it was, she knew it was joy at Legolas’s safe return. From this subtle shift in his visage, she could infer that Legolas’s absence had been the final obstacle to his peace of mind. Tauriel felt both pleased and guilty that he came to her first. She wondered if the revelations of her secrets could dim the light behind his eyes whenever he looked at her.

She feared it, more than the memory of dying.

“Where are you now?” Thranduil asked, calling her attention back to the present. “Somewhere far-off...”

She swallowed reflexively, lifted her head from his shoulder and stared ahead at the other edge of the basin.

All or nothing, she told herself.

“I couldn’t defend myself. The wildcat would have mauled me without a second thought had Legolas not intervened. I had a knife in my hands, a crude one but still a potential weapon. I was... paralyzed. I couldn’t.” The words left her in a rush until she bit her lip.

There was a beat of silence. The rest of her secrets lingered on the tip of her tongue, behind her teeth, ready to be blurted out with her next breath. She was sure her thoughts were so loud he must be able to hear them too. The certainty she felt seconds before evaporated like the rising steam of the bath.

“You are not at fault. It is to be expected, after all you have faced these past days. The wildcat will heal and in time, none of their kind will need to hunt so close to our halls.”

Tauriel took the conversational detour her husband unwittingly provided. She chastised at herself for taking the path of least resistance.
“Yes…the forest grows at a rate even the most optimistic among us did not expect. It is said the age of the Elves is over and the time of Man has come, yet the magic in our lands does not wane as predicted.” She spoke with quiet conviction, a credit to her authenticity.

“Celeborn informed me ‘ere his departure that most of Lothlórien will sail for the Undying Lands. I imagine so too will Elrond once his daughter is wed along with the rest of Imladris. It is true that our race will yield to Men.”

Her brow lifted in surprise. “I did not expect to hear you admit that so readily.”

“It does not mean we will lose all influence. As the only ones of our kind left in Arda, the kingdoms of Men will look to us first for guidance in difficult matters.”

She noted the implication. The Elvenking and Queen of Eryn Lasgalen would become invaluable allies and sources of wisdom, the leaders of the remaining kin of the Eldar in Middle Earth.

Tauriel rested her cheek once more on his shoulder. She did not know how much longer she could carry on hiding her secrets from him. The effort of restraint taxed her. Her judgment and verdict were imminent; the councilmembers were to return from the fiefs in little more than three days.

She threaded her hands through his hair. His eyes drifted shut as her touch further relaxed him, a sign of his complete trust. He shed his public persona without reservation in front of her. She loved him so deeply and painfully in that moment that the emptiness of her earlier solitude became that much more distinct.

Tauriel’s wedding ring briefly caught the light as she withdrew her hands from his person. The unrelenting intensity of her feelings frightened her. It reminded her of how much she had to lose.

“I have wallowed here too long, I think. I will ready myself for dinner—please stay and make use of the bath. I told Galion that we would dine simply tonight in the solar.” Making to rise out of the water, she gathered the tresses of her damp hair together. She twisted her hair to squeeze out the excess water over her left shoulder. He kept ahold of her waist, guiding her as she hovered over him as if to catch her should she slip and fall.

“Until then.” He said simply, reaching up to gently stroke her cheek where the thrown knife had grazed her skin. There was barely a mark, in truth. Thranduil saw her eyes darken though the smile on her face remained resolute.

Tauriel leaned down to kiss him. When he returned the soft touch of her lips, it tasted not of lust but of comfort freely given. She stepped out of the basin and shivered in the cool air before drying her skin with the towel left beneath the hanging dressing gown. She felt his eyes on her, watching her like she watched him earlier. Tauriel slipped into his dressing gown and tied the sash around her waist. With a final smile over her shoulder; she left him to enjoy the meditative quiet of the chamber.

Once Melethril ensured that Tauriel was safely inside the king’s chambers, she went back to the gardens to kneel beside the prince as he labored over the wounded cougar. The aim of his knife was true but it was by no means fatal. The creature quietened at Legolas’s song—she could not help smiling for it was the first time she heard him sing. His tune of choice caught her attention, *Sui Guil* was a popular one among their people in the summertime. The last line of the song went, “Mi 'aladh melethrid erthast, Nu Ithil ‘ael aderthast.” It was then that she knew he chose the song on purpose, in the context of the song “melethrid” was a variation of her own name.

When the creature’s wound was stitched closed and bandaged carefully, the other Elves took over its
care and Legolas got to his feet. Despite the pain the wildcat still experienced, he seemed glad that the beast did not shy away from him or his kin. The Wood-elves had always been attuned to the nature of their homeland. The wildcat’s trust was evidence that the Greenwood would be as it was long ago, as splendid as it was in his youth.

He held out his hand to help Melethril up and only then in the fading light of early evening did the world fall away to reveal the maiden he’d kept constantly in his thoughts.

“Mae govannen,” Melethril’s smile did not dim. Legolas saw she was kissed by the summer sun. Her hair had lightened slightly from its russet brown and her complexion was smoothly tanned—he gathered her radiance was proof her participation in the rebuilding. Legolas did not release her. He lowered their clasped hands together and from the way she exhaled in surprise, it seemed that she was in no hurry to be released.

“It seems that my arrival in these parts always precedes a near-catastrophe.” He jested.

“Maybe it is a blessing in disguise.” Her happiness was dizzying. The impulse to fling herself into his embrace grew with each passing moment but her will was stronger. She would not humiliate either of them by lavishing an unseemly amount of attention on him.

“Oh?” He tucked her hand into the crook of his arm and they strolled along the footpath leading from the gardens to the entrance at the Eastern Gate. Part of Melethril was incapable of believing he was truly there, walking next to her and talking to her as if they had not been parted these past ten moons. She then felt the sting of sudden awareness. Did Legolas realize now that she was young and unsophisticated—even compared to the mortals of the South with whom he surely must have interacted?

Melethril admonished herself to focus on the meaning of his words above all else. Legolas maintained his gaze on her as he awaited her response. She kept her own eyes lowered in case he could see her conflicting feelings.

“Well…such a dramatic entrance leaves absolutely no one in doubt of who it is that graces us. You’ve not spoken with many as of yet but I imagine most within the palace already know you are here.” She prided herself in managing an eloquent answer. Still, her heart kept its frantic rhythm.

Legolas laughed. Melethril was absurdly pleased. They were friends before…At the very least; this was a sign that there was still friendship between them.

“Shall we make do as before?” He asked as the guards allowed them entry into the Hall. The heavy doors of the gate stayed open and the warm breeze followed them inside. Legolas stood before Melethril, taking a few steps in a half circle to face her fully. He took her other hand and only then did she give herself leave to hope. When she next talked, her voice got slightly louder as if trying to drown out the sound of her heartbeat.

“Let us get you settled in your quarters, rested and changed from your travelling clothes. You cannot meet your lord father in this state.”

He nodded, conscious of his dingy cloak and jerkin, though these immediate practicalities were not what he had in mind. They were the only two in the Hall other than the guards at the door whose backs were turned.

“I meant that after dinner, we will walk these halls and you will tell me anything you wish to about your life these past months. I will in turn tell you anything you wish to know of what I’ve encountered. When the stars were veiled and melancholy reigned over our fellowship, it was the
memory of you and the promise of better days that kept my spirits high. I did not forget what I said to you 'ere we parted in the autumn."

There were the words Melethril was uncertain she’d hear. Letting go of his hands, she gave into the impulse and kissed his cheek, rising on the tips of her toes to reach him. When he lifted her by the waist to turn them about in an exuberant circle, she laughed in surprise—the sound echoed off the high ceilings of the chamber. Neither of them cared if anyone saw or overheard. They had no further cause to fear that their affections were unreturned by the other.

Legolas set Melethril back on her feet and she took his hand once more to lead him to his chambers. At his door, she did not ask entry.

“Your father will be overjoyed to see you. There is much ground that you and he must cover.” Melethril said, thinking of all that came to pass with Tauriel and the king in the time Legolas had been gone. “Pay me no heed until you have spoken with him. We will have our own proper exchange later, I am to play the harp in the Great Hall tonight.”

The prince found himself lost for words. Of course she would put herself second, despite the yearning he saw in her and that he himself too felt for this kindred soul. Yet she was much changed too, she had been weighed down by the threat of war and witness to the destruction of their kingdom. Never again would she be the light-hearted elleth that existed in his memory. He found he wanted nothing more than to make her happy, and to help her move past all that stole the ease of her smiles.

“Go, Legolas. Everything you need is in there.”

“Not everything.” Legolas murmured.

The blush his words provoked made her lovelier. He watched her turn and walk away before finally pushing open the door of his quarters. As much as his heart rejoiced in seeing her again, there was pain too, for Legolas knew he would be soon bound to leave the circles of the earth.

The evening meal was not vastly different than usual. Their repast had slightly more variety due to the resumption of trade with other regions for the food they did not produce themselves. Most notably, the palace’s supply of Dorwinion wine was bolstered by exchange with Dale and there were many Elves who joked that it was the main incentive for the king to ensure successful negotiations with the kingdom.

Legolas went to his father’s chambers first before going to the Great Hall. He did not wish to blindside him in public. Legolas greatly looked forward to confirming his adar was well after successfully concluding what he knew had been a monumental war effort. The ride into the woodland was telling enough—the remnants of old charred trees and scorched earth did not go unnoticed as he neared the palace. He thought of the ruins of Isengard. In comparison, his homeland fared much better given the amount of time that had passed since the end of the War of the Ring.

“Adar.”

He saw his father struggle. It compelled him to cross the room and as he entered into his father’s sudden embrace, he thought he must have been a very young child when his father last hugged him. He felt his father’s hand gently rest on the back of his head, adding to the illusion that Legolas was far younger than he currently was. He shut his eyes and tried to breathe through the rising tide of his sentiments. After several long moments, Legolas took a few steps back and Thranduil lowered his arms to his sides.
“It gives me joy to see you well, Legolas.”

“As it is for me, to find you in good health. I have felt the forest’s hurts and subsequent healing. I know that it can only be attributed to your doing.”

“Not only my own, my son. All who dwell here have done what they can.”

Legolas knew not what else to say—for how could he sum up all that he came upon in the past year? His first sojourn to join the Dúnedain could not compare. The trials the fellowship faced were things he had no desire to relive yet there was some good too in the recent past, the friendships forged in battle and hardship. The splendor of King Elessar’s wedding to Queen Arwen Undómiel and the reunion of the Fellowship in Minas Tirith were still golden in his remembrance.

Perhaps the most difficult realization was that this was not the first time his father had endured this. His tendency toward relative isolation spoke more of a desire to protect their people rather than of pure apathy to the rest of the world. Legolas believed he’d understood his father’s motives after the Battle of Five Armies but it was only now that he truly comprehended what it had cost his father.

The door adjoining the solar to the inner chambers was pulled open. Both father and son turned their heads to find Tauriel there. She looked just as affected as they, her eyes fixed on Legolas.

“Gi suilanthon, Legolas,” Tauriel murmured as she too came to embrace him. Legolas accepted her into his arms and like with his father, he was comforted to see her so well despite the earlier incident in the gardens. The small cut his knife made on her cheek was hardly visible now.

The three sat at table and ate of the spread prepared by Galion. The hanging lantern above them cast a warm glow on the room and conversation flowed far easier after the second course. Legolas told them of the battles fought by the free peoples of Middle Earth, how the Halflings bore the ring to Orodruin and decisively ended the conflict. He spared them the graver details, for while they were triumphant there was also much loss incurred. Tauriel mostly spoke of the two conflicts and from her Legolas learned of the fighting in Mirkwood, Erebor and Dale. Thranduil remained silent, preferring to let Tauriel speak as if he too did not know the full extent of what she faced.

To his deep astonishment, Tauriel revealed that she had passed into darkness after the Battle of Dale was won. It rang true that there was something markedly different about her but at first glance Legolas did not know what to make of it. She exuded something that he could not name and now he knew it was the light of Valinor that dwelled in her. He chanced a look at his father and saw how the hand upon his cloth napkin tightened, the only indication that Tauriel’s recounting of her death distressed him.

The longer Legolas spent in his father’s and Tauriel’s company, the more he noticed how they were with each other. He instinctively came to know what it meant. After the meal was over and Galion cleared the table, Legolas was compelled to ask.

“Forgive my forthrightness, adar, Tauriel.” He looked at each in turn. Only now was there a hint of apprehension in Tauriel’s expression. His father sat a little straighter yet his face betrayed no sign of unease. “I know what my eyes tell me but I must hear it confirmed before I draw false conclusions. Is it true that you are wedded?”

The question hung in the air between the three.

Thranduil broke the silence. “It is true.” He was cautious, Legolas knew how closely his father guarded his sentiments. Admitting to such an intimate connection was perhaps one of the most difficult things for him to do. Tauriel waited anxiously for Legolas’s response, though he knew that
she would not apologize for where her heart lay. That was something of her nature that was indelible. Death could not do away with her sense of commitment. He took in the sight of them together and he smiled upon this news, never could he begrudge these people whom he loved dearly.

“I humbly wish you both all the joy to be had in this fourth age of the Sun.” said Legolas. He did not wish to question too deeply how it was possible for his father to marry again. He supposed the union was considered divinely sanctioned for as Thranduil himself once said, only the Valar can contain the hearts of those who loved. There was no need for confrontation or dramatic denial of what clearly was and always would be.

“Hannon le, mellon nin.” Tauriel replied softly.

He inclined his head toward her. “...I have one other thing to ask of you both.”

“Then ask, my son.” Thranduil said. His father’s posture spoke no longer of trepidation, his eyes were soft in the dim lighting of the solar.

“I intend to ask for Melethril’s hand in marriage. If she accepts me, and with your permission, adar, I plan to return south to Ithilien for the lands there are much in need of healing that only our people know how to provide.”

Now Thranduil and Tauriel wore twin expressions of shock. Legolas knew it was much to ask especially given how newly returned he was, yet he felt it only right that he pose this to them now.

“I can only assume that this undertaking has the blessing of King Elessar, else you would not ask so urgently.” Tauriel said. “I know with certainty that Melethril will accept you, I only urge you to think before you plight your troth for she may not be so eager to leave Eryn Lasgalen now that the kingdom is whole again.”

“I shall heed your words, mellon. What say you, adar?”

“You are at liberty to choose whom you take as wife. The young lady in question is more than a match for you, she is possessed of the utmost intellect, kindness, and patience.” Thranduil’s brow bent slightly as he considered his next words. “Perhaps for a time, you might dwell here beneath the trees before you embark on another journey south.”

“Thank you, adar. Your blessing means more to me than you may ever know.”

At the close of the evening, there was a sense of new beginnings both bitter and sweet. Legolas indeed knew the ramifications of his father’s remarriage—he learned of the impending council session that would decide Tauriel’s accession to queen. He knew that if his plan to relocate to the western region of Gondor came to fruition, he would effectively surrender his claim as heir to the throne of the Woodland Realm. Yet he was also filled with a lightness that he never thought to feel again, when at last he found Melethril at her harp in the Great Hall, and they passed the night in conversation as they agreed to.

He would ask for her hand, but not just yet. He’d wait until after the approaching council meeting in deference to Tauriel and his father. In the meantime, he visited old friends and assisted where he could with the rebuilding. Legolas saw the grandeur of his homeland reborn and knew what was done here could be replicated in the forests of Ithilien and the other fiefs of Gondor. Once more the elven songs could be heard throughout the caverns and under the growing trees.

They carried on this vein until at last the tidings came that the members of Thranduil’s council were due to return. The palace was alight with preparations by order of the king. A feast was planned
regardless of the verdict to show the king bore no ill will toward the checks and balances of his people. Tauriel carried herself well despite the pressure she must have felt.

On the day of the reconvening, she stood before them all with Thranduil at her left as the councilmembers approached the elevated throne, stopping just at the base of the carven stairs. Legolas and Melethril were among the ordinary folk who gathered to hear the judgment, both tense for Tauriel’s sake as they watched the line of elven lords and ladies—Sindar and Silvan alike.

The first of them ascended to the top of the stairs and bowed to Thranduil and Tauriel before turning to face the multitude. His words needed no amplification beyond that afforded by the vast ceilings of the Halls.

“The people of the Woodland Realm have made their will known to us in the matter of the crowning of Tauriel Silivren as their queen. Through the mouth of the council, they shall speak.” Lord Hérion, a Silvan elf, was entrusted with the announcement.

“As there is ample evidence that the lady in question has served this realm with great honor, my conscience and the advice of those whom I have consulted allows me to vote yea on her accession.” said Hérion. Tauriel’s hand grasped a fist full of her skirt at the first sign of acceptance. Legolas saw her the muscle of her jaw tighten and then release.

She had never been more fiercely beautiful. Already she looked queenly, her cap was made of fine silver threaded with white gems of starlight. Her deep emerald raiment formed a train and the hem of her gown was lined with blossoms of fragrant niphredil. The king in his own raiment complemented hers, together they stood tall and proud.

The second council member ascended as Hérion came down. Lord Beriadan bowed as Hérion did before him and with a long look at his prospective queen, he turned to face the Wood-elves below.

“I too have heeded the will of those whom I serve. I vote with clear conscience for the accession of Tauriel Silivren.”

The susurrations and murmurings of all present began to fill the halls. Tauriel did not buckle or betray any kind of emotion, she was both serene and solemn as she watched the progression of the members of her husband’s council. Twelve in all, each took their successive turns to proclaim their answers from on high. Only two voted nay, drawing gasps of shock from the crowds. Legolas watched with wide eyes as Lord Arandur cast his vote, earnestly citing the late Elvenqueen as the reason why the people of his fief could not accept a new one.

Lastly, came Lord Tirithon.

Stone-faced and stern, the courtier looked nothing like himself. Thranduil read in Tirithon’s demeanor what he intended to say before he actually did. The king felt the savage stab of betrayal from his closest advisor and Tauriel drew a quaking breath.

“People of Eryn Lasgalen, I have listened to what those of my constituency have said. Long have I served Thranduil-king as my father served Oropher before him. I cannot in good conscience cast a vote in favor of Commander Tauriel to assume the rank of queen. For all the good she has done and though the blessing of the Valar may be upon her, she has time and again exhibited a stubbornness and disregard that have endangered many. The means to an end matter greatly—Tauriel Silivren has always pursued the latter without regard for the former.”

Legolas sensed Melethril raise her hands to cover her mouth as she cried out in protest. He continued to listen while Tirithon elaborated on his reasoning. There was an edge of barely contained fury in
the elven lord’s tone, as if he was cognizant that his words were futile.

“Therefore I vote nay, although in the end it matters not. The majority has spoken. Ten before me have voted yea and so queen she shall become!”

There was an uproar amongst the Wood-elves, Legolas and Melethril felt adrift in the middle of it all until his adar’s voice cut through the noise with characteristic authority.

“The council has spoken. My wife will be queen and we shall feast beneath the stars this night!” The king looked at Tauriel. Her eyes gleamed bright as the gems above her brow, austere she seemed yet all who looked at her approved of the proceedings. Those who did not would learn to reconcile with it, and she resolved in her heart to be worthy of the honor bestowed.

“I thank you all for your candor. It will be my life’s work to serve you at King Thranduil’s side!” She said, letting her voice carry so that all could hear. A great cheer erupted, superseding the previous chatter, and Thranduil turned to her with the palm of his hand extended. She placed her hand in his, and the image they made was of two monarchs united.

Handmaidens came forth with a crown newly made by the kingdom’s jewelers. They removed the cap on her head and presented the crown to Thranduil. As he set it on her head, Tauriel was conscious of both everything and nothing save the weight of the silver ornament that symbolized her newfound authority.

And above the effusive cheers and applause rose a song for Queen Tauriel Silivren—one that carried verse after joyous verse until the palace migrated outdoors to feast and celebrate. There was food and wine enough for all, the Elves made merry as they had not done for many years. In a grove of new wisteria trees, they painted a scene that would be forever remembered by the Dalish ambassador and his scribe, who were also invited after the conclusion of successful trade negotiations.

Despite the rejoicing, Tauriel found she could not give in completely to the atmosphere. After many hours, she sought out the elven lord whose words struck a nerve that would not be quietened. She left Thranduil to his conversation with King Bard’s emissary and saw Legolas partnering Melethril in the dance by the bonfire. Elves of all dress and station still swirled and leapt in dance, unhindered by the darkness of the evening in the forest. It was summer and though the nights were longer, there were no signs that the feast was due to end anytime soon.

She found him leaning against the bark of an oak tree, a considerable distance from the rest of the party. His gaze was fixed on something remote, he seemed not to hear her come close.

“My lord, are you quite well?” Tauriel inquired. She did not intend to confront him at once. Not when he looked disoriented and for some reason, distraught. Did her coronation truly upset him thus?

“It is no concern of yours.” Tirithon answered, still unwilling to look at her.

“Why this sudden hatred? Tell me what has happened to you?” She asked gently.

The sound of the party was drowned out by the sound of his weeping. She realized as he turned to face her that there were tears streaming down his face.

“My wife is gone, Tauriel.” Each word seemed to drain the life from him. This grief was something she recognized and she felt her jaw drop—she knew his son Daeron was slain in battle and so passed into Valinor, but not that his wife did too.

“My deepest condolences, my lord. I knew not that she passed away.”
“She did not die. She left me.”

“I do not understand...?”

A bitter laugh issued forth from him. “She was so consumed with heartsickness at the death of our son. Please, husband, let us begone from this place. Let us away to the Havens and depart from the circles of the earth. She begged me, do you understand?”

He seemed to sag against the tree, his chest rose and fell in shuddering breaths.

“I tarried. I told her, when my work here is done, then we shall away. I had promised his majesty, I would stay ‘til my work is done. She grew distant from me. As one does not realize the progress of the sun and moon, I too did not realize she had stolen away among the retinue that departed with the lord and lady of the Golden Wood. She left a note. My husband, though I love you, my love for our son compels me to go to him. When you read this, I will be with the Elves of Lórien bound for Gondor, from whence I will sail alone into the West. May it be that you will join us when your labors and duty to the Woodland Realm are fulfilled.”

Tauriel did not interrupt his soliloquy. The sense that something was deeply wrong permeated the air between them, she knew then that his vote against her was perhaps more swayed by the grief of one left behind by those he loved.

“I thought it would be easy to leave. Now my work is done, the alliance with Dale shored up and Eryn Lasgalen thrives. Yet I find I do not wish to leave Arda for it is the home I have made my own. What is left for me now? Where is my reward?” He growled. He stood straight, pushing off of the tree trunk to meet her eyes head on.

“For thousands of years, I have run this kingdom on behalf of he who raised thee up! From soldier and guard to captain, captain to commander and now to exalted queen! And where is my son? He lies in the cold earth while you saunter through these halls! Where is my wife? She left without me to join him!”

“My lord,” She choked on the taste of rising bile. Tirithon’s greatest asset was his silver tongue—he would flay her alive with his words.

“Silence! I ask not for your pity. Only that you think long and hard about the burdens of your station. It will consume you—today, tomorrow, one hundred years from now. Sovereign you will be though you’ll have naught to show for it but a cold heart and empty life.”

“What could you possibly gain by spouting such cruel words?” Tauriel snapped.

Tirithon scoffed. It was a sound she never would have thought to hear from him. Quiet, well-mannered and reasonable—that was the counselor she’d known. He was the consummate statesman. He was now bent by grief and the shock of abandonment.

“You may think you are unique because you were sent back by the Valar. That this was perhaps the role you were meant to assume. You ask me why it pleases me to speak thusly, and my answer is that I have only ever faithfully served this realm’s monarchs.”

Tauriel was not one to tremble. She stood utterly still, feet planted solidly. Perhaps she was a warrior no longer but she did not lose the stance of one. The cloak around her shoulders felt heavy, the skin of her arms was covered in gooseflesh. She would rather that the ground beneath her opened into a chasm to swallow her whole rather than have to stand there and listen.

“Since you are a queen, you must now heed my counsel. The king seeks to remake you in her image
—it is but a shadow and a thought that he has loved, and you will reap only that which her death had sown.”

She was not prepared to hear this. Tauriel’s eyes burned bright with unshed tears and she backed away unsteadily. Tirithon saw that he had her where he wanted. He lunged for the kill as she knew he would.

“You will watch the wreck of your fortune unfold before you. You will have the title but not the joy of it.”

“My lord, you are no fool but in this you are utterly mistaken.” She whispered.

Tauriel walked away stiffly, unseeing of all that she passed, and no matter how she tried to bar the words from taking root in her, she still wondered if there was truth among the vitriol. It was then that she realized how heavy the crown sat upon her head but she did not remove it. None would gain the satisfaction of seeing the queen so rattled—she indeed had the title and she would be damned before she admitted to self-doubt.

Chapter End Notes

Sindarin translations (from southern Sindarin phrasebook at realelvish dot net):

Legolas sings “Such is Life” while he tends to the wounded cougar. The line that catches Melethril’s attention translates to “In a tree, lovers meet, under the glimmering Moon they reunite.” http://www.realelvish.net/suiguil.php

“Gi suilanthon, Legolas” –Welcome back Legolas
Hey everyone! Thanks for your patience while I worked on this update. I forgot how challenging it is to write 4 people's interactions! I hope you enjoy, let me know what you think. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Thranduil stalked into his quarters, dark thoughts gathered like storm clouds on his brow. He went straight to the credenza where he knew Galion stocked the wine and pulled the stopper out of the glass decanter. He poured himself a generous amount despite the relatively early hour on this late August day.

The impatience he felt during the council session set a vein in his forehead to throbbing. There were still a few remaining disagreements between his people and the Men of Esgaroth regarding river tolls. Men were never easily parted from their money and elves were ever proud to sell their wares for less than what they valued them as.

It was only after the first mouthful of Dorwinion summer wine did he notice that he was not alone.

Tauriel sat facing him on the damask chaise. It was the look in her eyes that caught him off guard. She did not speak. Her posture did all the talking, those deliberate steps. He moved to set his glass down as she approached. Thranduil took a calming breath in and exhaled away his temper. Tauriel held her first official audience that afternoon, hearing the requests of all who’d come and deciding which of them to grant. Thranduil was not present as it was her right to hold audiences without his interference. He considered that perhaps she might have had more of a difficult day than he.

“Are you well?” He asked when she halted before him.

“As well as can be. The proceedings went smoothly, I have many notes to review from my scribe before I reach any decisions. Am I to understand that I may avail of the Council’s advice too? Or must I choose my own advisers?”

Thranduil observed his wife carefully. Her ascension to her sovereign position had been smooth thus far, yet there was something bothering her and she was taking great care to mask it. He knew it would be counterproductive to force a discussion of what lay behind her neutral expression, so he would answer her questions to his best ability.

“Either course of action is open to you. You need not be constrained by any pre-conceived notions of queenship.”

He was foolishly relieved to see Tauriel relax into a small smile.

“That does not precisely aid me past my indecision, but comforts me all the same. How was the session? I thought we already moved past quarreling with Dale by the time of my coronation.”

He huffed imperiously and reached for the glass on the table.
Tauriel laughed at his response. “In that case, let us think of other things, aran nin.”

One turn of the moon into their official union, Thranduil found he still greatly anticipated being alone with her. He sensed that in the privacy of their rooms, Tauriel wished to leave all talk of business and royal duty at the door. An unspoken agreement to simply exist with each other where no prying eyes could see was quite appealing to him.

She surprised him, then. Tauriel dipped two graceful fingers into his wine glass, swirling them once through the Dorwinion. She rose to the tips of her toes and traced a path with those same wine-stained fingers from his lips down the column of his throat exposed by his coat's split collar. Her lips and tongue followed that path and she was further encouraged by his guttural moan.

Thranduil maintained the thought that something was amiss. Her provocations, however, soon turned his mind away from it. He drew her daring lips from his skin toward his own in a hard kiss. She put a hand at the nape of his neck to better steady herself and yelped in surprise when he lifted her by the hips for her legs to wrap around him despite the cumbersome fabric of her raiment. The taste of wine and their arousal was heady between them.

He gave up her lips to tease her elsewhere. His breath was hot on the delicate curve of her ear and she relished the way his teeth brushed along her skin, poised to bite even though his restraint would not let him. She longed to lay him bare and strip the obdurate will that was his hallmark, only because she was sure that she could put him back together after.

So it ever was with them in all things even in this facet of their relationship. She ran her hands down his sides and then up the broad expanse of his back, settling at last on his shoulders. He hummed in pleasure at the sweep of her palms over him and gave in to the need to claim her. Never before had she desired to belong with another in this most primal respect. It was both exhilarating and frightening, perhaps for him too as proud and isolated as he had been for so many years.

“Take me to our bed, Thranduil.” Her eyes were dark and lustful, the sight more satisfying than the sweet wine that lay forgotten on the table in the solar.

“That is the only demand I will heed without question, today.”

If there were any subjects curious as to the whereabouts of the King and Queen during dinner in the Great Hall, they were wise enough to keep their inquiries to themselves.

Legolas found himself quite occupied as he reintegrated into their society, he led the hunters who brought back game to feed the occupants of his father’s Halls and spent his spare time with Melethril. He was not arrogant enough to presume to know every corner of her mind and heart, so he would gladly dedicate all the time in the world to try.

Melethril, for her part, still assisted with the late summer harvest. She even found it in herself to return to her musical compositions. She’d given up working on them before the war in favor of more practical pursuits. Now that it was safe to roam outdoors, Melethril occasionally ventured out with her fellow minstrels to sing in the meadows beneath the firmament.

Those nights were the closest to perfection she had perhaps ever experienced. The Elves who joined to listen and gaze at the evening sky were a respectful audience—especially Legolas, whose eyes she felt more often on her than the twinkling constellations above. They made camp in those meadows since the Elvenking’s Halls were quite a distance from the western border, sometimes they were even joined by woodmen of the Anduin vale who came to admire their songs.
It was one of these summer evenings that Melethril noticed a strange look on Legolas’s face. It was not a trick of the firelight, he seemed to stare as if memorizing her every movement. When she turned to him in question, he glanced away as if embarrassed he was caught. No attempt to coax him into light humor seemed to ease whatever worry elicited his frown. At last, Melethril saw fit to speak her mind.

“You look at me as though you are preparing to leave again.” She whispered. The rest of the party were asleep in their tents. Legolas and Melethril rested together on his outstretched cloak. She avoided his alarmed gaze and simply observed the progress of a distant shooting star. She felt him shift to lie on his side.

“What if I told you that I am indeed soon to away?” His words came hesitantly.

“I do not think you…you mean to hurt me.” She answered. “But the hour is late and I find the idea does just that. Why do you say this?”

“I can no longer keep this to myself while I have the fortune to be in your good graces. Melethril, gi melin.” The prince said. She got the sense of the world changing yet again, another grand shift in the cosmos that would send her grasping for the familiar only to find it did not exist anymore. Her breathing grew shallow as she turned to glimpse a look of fleeting sadness on his face.

“Why do you tell me you love me, when you speak of leaving?” She took his hand as if seeking reassurance. He squeezed back but did not lift her hand to his lips to kiss like she might have expected.

“I have promises to keep…to Gimli, Dwarven lord of the Glittering Caves of Aglarond, and King Aragorn Elessar of Gondor. The lands near Ithilien require the healing that only our people can provide. It is my intention to lead those who wish to go, to accomplish this end.”

Melethril listened raptly, holding her breath, for she knew this was not the entirety of what he had to say. Legolas saw how tense she’d become.

“In the time I spent in Gondor, I confess I…heard the call to the sea.” He admitted, at last.

“I know what this means,” Melethril said. Her eyes were wide in the darkness. “You will leave Arda, perhaps not tomorrow or any day near, but you will, won’t you? You will leave us for the blessed realm beyond this earth.”

He found his own tears welling up, for the sea-longing was a secret he’d kept ever since his return. It was not meant to be a sad thing for the Eldar returning to Aman, but it was for those who would be sundered by it.

“Gi melin, Melethril, if you would come with me, we need not be apart until the end of time.”

It was amazing how quickly she could turn to righteous anger. She tore her hand from his hold and sat up. So too did Legolas as her voice rose in volume, heedless of disturbing the others’ slumber.

“I respect your need to honor your word to Lord Gimli and the king of Gondor. But what choice do you leave me? Why should I have to forsake my home and all I know? You ask too much, Legolas Thranduilion.”

He watched as Melethril took her silver mare and rode back to the Halls in the still of night, his heart pounding. He had let it lie too long and his selfishness was to blame. By dawn, the elves awoke to find themselves short of their prince and most talented singer.
“Tauriel!” A voice fraught with despair rang out through the antechamber. Thranduil was at his desk working on answering correspondence when he heard it. He stood and went to his solar to find Melethril clad in riding clothes, her hair tossed by the wind and cheeks pink with exertion. She must have returned hastily from the previous night’s festivities.

“Where is Tauriel?” She asked frantically. Thranduil noticed how upset she appeared, he had not seen her in such a state since after the Battle under the Trees.

“She is in the training yard, I will have Galion send word that you seek her. What troubles you so early this morning?”

The young elf looked embattled as if she fought with herself whether to confide in him or not. The king stood patiently as she took several deep breaths until she closed her eyes tightly and her tears spilled from her lashes.

“It is your son, aran nin. He told me that he has heard the call of the sea during his time in the south. He will leave us when he decides his time is come.”

Thranduil froze. He did not know if this was true or if she might have misinterpreted Legolas’s words. He had asked his permission to build a colony in Ithilien but made no mention thus far of sea-longing. Thranduil did not need further explanation of what the latter entailed. He himself had no intention of leaving Middle Earth, meaning he would never again see his son if indeed this was the case.

“You have heard this from his own lips?” The king asked solemnly.

The sound of a door opening interrupted their discourse. Tauriel entered, wearing old forest leathers with her bow in hand. She immediately felt the scrutiny of both her husband and ward.

“What catastrophe has befallen the both of you, even before the breaking of our fasts?” She tried to joke as she lay her bow down on the long table in the center of the room. The humor fell flat in light of Melethril’s confession which Tauriel was still oblivious to.

Thranduil ignored her. “Where is my son?” His tone was stern but he well knew it no longer had the same effect on the elf maiden.

“I don’t doubt that he followed me back here, he should arrive any moment now. I will not see him until he has spoken with you, and even then I am not sure I ever wish to, again.” With that, Melethril brushed past Tauriel—even though she’d originally come to see her, she found herself quite past the ability to repeat what Legolas said.

When the door to their chambers slammed shut, Tauriel went to Thranduil, genuinely taken aback.

“What…?”

“Melethril claims Legolas has fallen victim to the sea-longing.”

He noticed that same flicker of something she was hiding. A growing certainty within him suggested it had everything to do with Melethril’s news. He saw how her shoulders rose slightly as if preparing for confrontation. A soldier’s stance, even if she could not take a life, she went to the training hall to practice with wooden wasters and her bow. Now, she was simply Tauriel, and he sensed she had something to tell him.
“I know there is something you’ve been keeping from me. Has it to do with this?” He was more forceful than he meant to sound. The prospect of losing his son, even to the glory of Valinor, was more than he was expecting to be faced with.

Her lip quivered. All seemed to go completely still around them, no noise could be heard and it was as if the Halls themselves held their breath to await her answer.

“Yes.” She whispered.

“Pray, do explain.” Thranduil growled. He was angry, this side of him was unfamiliar to her for so long that to be on the receiving end once more was doubly painful. Tirithon’s words resounded in her head as she looked upon her husband and his ire.

“Before I…came back, I parleyed with a representative of Varda. She told me…” It was difficult to find the words.

“Go on,” Thranduil prompted her.

“She told me that Legolas would hear the gulls of Pelargir and be reunited with her when he decides to cross the sea. Her name was Glawardis. Glawardis sent me back for this reason.”

Her secret was finally out. It hung in the air between them. Tauriel did not need to look at him to know that she had hurt him. He reared back, stepping away, and like an invisible thread tethered between them she followed him. She reached for him with both hands but he avoided her altogether.

“Glawardis was my first wife and Legolas’s mother. She serves the Valar?” He asked slowly. Tauriel could not tear her eyes from his for she felt compelled to answer any question he posed.

“It is why she did not return to Arda and why our union is allowed.” How surreal it was to finally tell him when she least expected. She could not be angry at Melethril for starting this cascade of events, though she greatly feared the conclusions her husband would jump to.

"You kept this from me. You traded his life for yours." Thranduil rasped. His accusation hit her hard.

"It was not a trade I sought to make! All of this was out of my hands. Speak with Legolas before you think to judge me.” Tauriel withdrew her outstretched hands and clasped them into fists at her sides.

He did not know she'd been there when he collapsed at her bedside, the day he found her among the wounded and the dead from the Battle of Dale. Tauriel did not doubt Thranduil loved her still but this pain went beyond her, it came from the final disclosure denied to him for longer than was healthy. The pain of loss and knowledge of Glawardis's choice affected him more than did Tauriel withholding the truth.

In that pivotal moment, she realized that she may never fully know him. He had lived through far more history than she perhaps would ever be able to know and understand. She thought she'd reconciled herself with that aspect of their relationship but never before had they such a frank confrontation over it.

“The evening after my coronation, do you know what Tirithon told me?”

He at least looked at her though his expression was far colder than she was used to.
“He said you did not truly love me, though I know that to be false. He also said that you married me to make me into Glawardis’s image and recreate what you lost. You are hurt, you are angry, and you have a right to be. I only ask that you keep in mind that I am not her, nor will I ever be.”

The following days were tense and silent among the royal family. King Thranduil appeared to be in a black mood when he deigned to walk through the Halls amid his people. Prince Legolas was often away on the hunt and scarcely seen in the palace after he went to his father for a long discussion, the subject of which remained private between them. Queen Tauriel held audiences independently and seemed to be growing used to the routine, though if one looked closely, she did not carry herself as confidently as before. She walked slowly in her raiment and it spoke more of sad contemplation rather than queenly dignity.

Melethril could be found by herself in the Hall of Music. For one whose smiles and laughter were frequently to be seen and heard, she was quite solemn as she sat at her harp and played for hours on end. The elflings who wandered toward the music were all brought to tears and had to be escorted away by their parents.

Her fingers rested on the golden strings, the weight of them bringing an end to the song. Her chest rose and fell as she breathed and she looked removed from herself. As if the very notes had taken her somewhere beyond anyone else’s reckoning.

Tauriel had come in and found her there, sitting so still she might have made a beautiful statue. Melethril turned to see her queen and instantly stood to go to her.

“I’m sorry that I have caused trouble between you and the king. Please, it was selfish of me to reveal Legolas’s secret before he was ready. I do not know what has transpired but it is obvious to all that the king is angry.”

Tauriel smiled. It did not reach her eyes. Nonetheless, she placed her hands on Melethril’s shoulders and held her gently.

“There is nothing to forgive, my dear heart. It is for the best that the king knows. We can only move on from here and in time, I believe everything will right itself. I do not wish to see you in such melancholy. The days of darkness and dust have ended. Perhaps consider Legolas’s offer.”

“I… I do love him, but how can I leave you behind?”

“We do not know that it will be a finite separation. If anything, you will be the Lady of Ithilien when Legolas establishes the settlement and after your time there, you might know your mind with absolute certainty.”

There was new hope that rose in the younger elf’s eyes. Melethril moved to embrace Tauriel, and the queen smiled as she stroked her hair. Tauriel would give counsel to those who would benefit from it. She only wished there was one to do the same for her.

The Eryn Lasgalen awaited the coming of early autumn. Relations between both sovereigns of the realm seemed to have mellowed as far as their subjects could discern. Thranduil and Tauriel presided together over council meetings and joint audiences alike. Unlike in recent times, the queen was not often seen at the king’s side. She spent many an hour in the Hall of Swords or at archery practice in frenetic activity. As if trying to prove that she retained her skill despite her perceived inability to defend herself.

She attended the nightly feast as appearances demanded but more often than not, Tauriel could be
found shooting arrows at straw targets and swinging her blades through the air in an imaginary and solitary melee.

There was always restlessness in the way she moved—perhaps due to her inability to stay asleep for longer than a few hours now. She was cagey and anxious. Her right arm ached as she drew her bowstring back to nock an arrow, the line formed from her wrist to elbow was clean and elegant. In a heartbeat, the point found its way to the eye of the target.

This was how Thranduil found her.

Galadriel’s parting words to him remained somewhere in the back of his mind. He regretted his harshness toward Tauriel but he was at a loss as to how to broach the subject. Legolas still had many years in Arda left, and he admitted it was no one’s fault.

Thranduil saw the thinness of her face, how her cheekbones were gaunt and the skin sunken beneath them. It made her look fiercer, harder, almost whittled away. It made him ache with regret.

“Shall we go?” Thranduil asked. He stood just to her left and watched as she lowered her bow and set the arrow back in her quiver. Tauriel’s eyes were hooded as she went to the straw target to pluck the arrows out of it so she might reuse them. Her response was delayed a fraction of a second.

“I have no appetite.” She said simply.

“You haven’t had an appetite for several weeks, and you’ve spent much of your energy this afternoon. Tolo, mado, a sogo e-mereth.” He remarked, and he thought of how she has not slept for weeks either, not truly, and she thought he didn’t know how she wept silently into her pillow each night. She thought he did not know how her dreams haunted her, horrors half-remembered in perpetual twilight. Demons unseen that plagued her as she trembled and fought to hide it from him.

He expected her to resist and demur as she tended to do when confronted but was surprised when she put down her weapons. He belatedly thought how dangerous she still could be, and counted himself fortunate that she relinquished her bow and arrows.

“I will accompany you to dinner.” Tauriel said woodenly, like she was only fulfilling a task expected of her as his queen. He endeavored to conceal his dismay. He wanted her to come with him because in public, she would have no choice but to partake of the meal whereas in private, she would push her food around and rearrange it all the while guarding her thoughts behind the sheen of her vacant stare. In public, the queen cannot afford to be seen wasting food. He felt guilty for exploiting this facet of her newfound station even if it was for the sake of her welfare.

“Good.” He said simply, then offered his arm to her. He cringed inwardly at the perfunctory nature of his reply. They went to the Great Hall and passed the meal in near total silence. He watched surreptitiously as she took small bites of venison and helped herself to soup and a roll of bread.

When a platter of honey cakes made by the Beornings was served to them, he immediately picked one up and set it on his plate—this caught her attention for he was not usually partial to sweets. He reached for another but this time offered it to her, and she accepted it with something resembling a smile which caused her cheeks to dimple. He did his best to hide the wave of triumph that washed over him and wondered if he could be considered pathetic to be so deeply affected by that small sign of affection. That he longed to break through her aloofness by any means at his disposal.

It was later in the night when that triumph vanished at the sound of her anguished scream. Tauriel struck out at forces he could not see and he listened closely to her murmuring. Her motions jostled the duvet that covered both of them and soon enough it was entirely flung off.
“Tauriel, you are safe—you are only dreaming, echuio, echuio,” He spoke calmly even as her frown deepened and her eyes stayed tightly shut. Her muttering was unintelligible. She began to weep and he felt something in his chest crack at the sight. The war inside an elf’s mind was always worse than one fought on a battlefield. It was isolating, how things that others could not perceive the same way. He lamented that it took this long for him to be of any actual help to her.

Then suddenly she tossed herself across the mattress, blindly fleeing from Aulë -knew-what. He caught her to him before she could injure either of them with the erratic movement.

“Please don’t let me die…Please! I do not wish to die,” She cried into his chest, hands curled into fists that grabbed his night shirt. He held her tightly to him as he sat them both upright and rocked her soothingly until her weeping subsided and she came back to herself. He could feel her tension, her shame.

“I’m so sorry, I’m so, so…” She whispered brokenly. It was unclear if she was apologizing to him, to Tirithon, or something beyond his sight. He did not release her, his hand stroked the skin of her arm as he hushed her. He forgave though there was nothing to forgive, the hurt she dealt him was minimal compared to the wrong he’d done to her. He reacted with the instinct of his temper and his resulting coldness was what tipped her further into this purgatory.

The next night when she cried out those words, he did the same—patiently, he stayed with her, saying, “Tauriel, I will not let you. I am here, and I will not let you.”

Chapter End Notes

Sindarin translations (From realelvish.net)

3. “Echuio!” – Awaken!
Updated Timeline of Events

FOR FULL DISCLOSURE: I have altered the timeline from “canon” from this point forward!
Feel free to ignore this, this timeline is just helpful for my purposes.

June T.A. 3018 - Gollum's escape from Mirkwood, Dol Guldur Orcs ambush Thranduil's Halls

July-August T.A. 3018 - Evacuation of the Woodland fiefs to Thranduil's Halls

September-November T.A. 3018 - Preparations for war begin, by the end of autumn Legolas goes to Imladris to report to Elrond’s Council.

December T.A. 3018 - Fellowship of the Ring is formed and sets out from Imladris. Tauriel leaves for Dale to treat with King Brand.

January-early March T.A. 3019 - Woodland contingent helps Dale shore up its protection and at the first hints of spring, escorts those who cannot fight back to Thranduil's Halls. Tauriel returns to Mirkwood in early March. Lothlorien is under a first attack by Dol Guldur.

March 15th T.A. 3019 - Battle Under the Trees in Mirkwood

March 17th-27th T.A. 3019 - Battle of Dale (Tauriel arrives w/ soldiers near the tail end of the fighting)

April T.A. 3019 - Elves return to Mirkwood from the north (Beriadan leads the procession of Wood-elves home)

Mid-April T.A. 3019 onward - Rebuilding of Mirkwood led by Thranduil

Late May T.A. 3019 - Arrival of Galadriel, Celeborn, and Radagast to Mirkwood. Renaming of Mirkwood to Eryn Lasgalen.

Early June T.A. 3019 - Tauriel returns to Arda

Mid-June T.A. 3019 - Legolas returns to the Eryn Lasgalen after Aragorn and Arwen's wedding in Minas Tirith.

July T.A. 3019 - Tauriel is elected Queen of the Wood of Greenleaves by the King’s Council.

August T.A. 3019 - Legolas reveals his secret to Melethril, incites confrontation between Thranduil and Tauriel
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Thank you everyone who’s patiently waited for this. (To those who left me very impatient comments--I'm sorry for the delay but I didn't want to post sub-par work). Here is the result, four drafts later. *phew*

Good news (hopefully) is that there will be an epilogue. It was better arranged that way rather than trying to cram a whole bunch of stuff into a final chapter. If you're one of the guests who hasn't really piped in that much thus far, I'd love to hear what you think! Long-time readers are much appreciated as well.

Sindarin translation (from real elvish.net):

May the leaves of your life never die
May the sun shine upon your path
May the winds be fair,
your paths green and the breeze behind you golden

The queen woke with the sun. Unhindered by her increasingly characteristic tiredness, Tauriel surprised the few maidens who came to find her up and about. The king was nowhere to be found, having developed a habit of rising even earlier than his wife. The maids knew not to mention this delicate observation upon finding their mistress quite alone.

She refused the dainty portions of breakfast that were laid out for her, instead asking her companions to help her choose her attire for the occasion. In the end, Tauriel wore pale grey and white silk that whispered along the floor as she walked. The split skirt was concession made by the seamstresses so the queen could dress in the practical way to which she was accustomed. Her mantle of light damask covered her shoulders and was gathered at her throat by a silver birch leaf clasp. Her hair had been brushed out and left loose so that it fell past her lower back.

Melethril was with her too, thankfully. Her presence somehow eased the persistent racing of her thoughts. When she laid eyes upon the crown that Melethril fashioned for her, she was reminded all the times they made flower crowns together in the woods during Melethril’s childhood.

This crown was nothing like the ones Melethril made in her youth. This one was adeptly fashioned with the most perfect specimens of jasmine and magnolia blossoms the greenhouses had to offer. The smaller jasmine blooms were placed in front so they would rest at her hairline, the thicker magnolias would adorn the back of her head.

“For grace and dignity,” Melethril had told her regarding her choice of flowers. Gentle fingers arranged the crown over her hair.

“It is my deepest wish that one day you will have a friend to do the same for you.”

It was an implicit goodbye, full of wistfulness. Melethril’s skin seemed lit from within by some
mysterious light and her glowing face was framed by wavy russet locks. A newfound maturity
guided her actions now. The hardships of her past instilled a sense of reserved tranquility in her.
Tauriel recognized facets of herself there.

Lands beyond the Eryn Lasgalen beckoned now to Melethril. She would preside over the elvish
colony Legolas intended to establish in the south. This choice came of her free will. War, despair,
and obligation to cling to bygone days had no sway in her decision. Tauriel thought the image of her
young ward as the elven lady of Ithilien was not as elusive as it might have once been. She would be
Legolas’s equal, as Tauriel was Thranduil’s.

At least, that was the way of it before their most recent altercation. Thranduil had yet to speak on
what transpired between them, but his actions since then spoke of yearning for reconciliation. They
let it lie for longer than they ought to have. Immersed as Tauriel was in the endless stream of royal
duties, it was only in the thick of night when they retired that she contemplated how best to proceed.
There was no lack of intimacy between them then, when the cool night breeze filtered in alongside
the moonlight and she nestled into his arms. It was only in the light of day that their behavior towards
each other grew strained.

“Tauriel? My queen?” Melethril’s voice drew her from her reverie. “Are you ready?”

Tauriel Silivren took a deep breath. With its release, her shoulders straightened and she stood tall.
The scent of jasmine permeated the air. Tauriel smiled and fitted her palm over Melethril’s fair cheek,
brushing her thumb across it. She gently withdrew her hand and it came to rest at her side.

“Tolo,” She said, taking a step forward. They departed the royal quarters and were joined by the rest
of the queens’ Silvan maids, all of them comprised a palette of fluttering white and dove grey.
Melethril slowed her pace so as to let the queen precede them.

The procession awaited them outside the caverns. Wood-elves congregated at the other side of the
bridge. Not all had elected to leave, but a considerable number did. Tauriel carried on, aware of the
eyes of all her kin that were fixed on her but none more-so than those of Thranduil and Legolas at his
side. It was neither ceremony nor ritual, as this had never occurred before in the realm’s history.
Two divisions of elves were to journey forth, one bound for the South, the other for the West. Many
horses, destriers and palfreys alike, were readied with provisions for the road ahead, and as all
animals that were trained by the Elves, they were quiet and patient during the wait.

Most notable of the beasts was the king’s elk. The animal stood tall and unharnessed, it bore no
sundries. It was as it would appear in nature, though it too maintained a calm air as it awaited the
arrival of the warriors it had most recently borne into war. The Elven-king and Queen were to lead
them until the time came for the groups to part ways forevermore.

Tauriel stood in the space left between her husband and Legolas, turning to face the people. Melethril
stood by the prince, who smiled when she came close. Many among them were happy, but many
more affected an air of wistfulness for the past. Perhaps memories of the sweetness of this earth, and
all that had grieved them in their long lives. How a finite end here and a new beginning on distant
shores was something they did not think to face.

When her handmaids took their places, Thranduil looked out into the masses with appraising eyes.
Tauriel wondered what he felt in that moment, as a king bidding many of his subjects farewell rather
than leading them to the next life. She herself felt like a washcloth overly wrung, emotion of any
kind thoroughly expunged.

He, on the other hand, appeared formidable as ever. Unyielding as the steely crown of antlers set
firmly on his head, he seemed rooted to the forest floor as much as the trees’ branches that framed
him and Legolas.

The growing birch trees were in fact quite a sight to behold by now. Those among them who tended to the forest had begun an ambitious project not long after the war’s end; that of braiding the boughs where they would one day form a canopy. The branches, given enough time and care, would eventually fuse together to create a foundation for a beautiful bridge. Done enough times, the bridge could span the whole length of the new Greenwood. Legolas was actually responsible for the idea, as he had seen it done manifold in Lórien.

The bridges would delineate the kingdom’s new borders, a sort of girdle as Melian’s had once been for Doriath.

Tauriel dreamed sometimes of the bridge’s completion. She imagined being able to run with the birds that flew above the treetops. Perhaps also of the unobstructed sunshine and the view of the Long Lake as could be seen from such a great height.

Once her praise might have only extended to the bridge’s strategic value against attack, perfect as it was for their scouts to observe far-off events and warn of an ambush. Watching the king stand there without the traditional armed guard surrounding him was no small thing. She was aware of his deliberate stillness, as one can sense the movement of the sun without having to look at it.

Instead she met Legolas’s eyes and smiled. He wore garments of moss-green, his hair of pale gold pulled back into braids so that his features were shown to their best advantage. Melethril’s radiance complemented him perfectly. Tauriel’s opinion wasn’t based solely on their physical appearances but rather the way their spirits seemed to be at peace with each other.

Before long, the Elvenking said,

“Ú-firo i laiss e-guil dhîn
Galo Anor erin râd dhîn
No gelin idh raideg, a no adel gin i chwest
No vain i gwêw dhîn, no gelin a velthin idh raid dhîn.”

Thranduil’s voice never wavered but for his last words. He glanced at her briefly, then at Legolas. Despite herself, Tauriel grasped his hand and gently squeezed. She cared not if all could see and judge, neither did she allow her pride or vanity to flare. Their quarrel would not stop her from supporting him where he floundered. This did not go unnoticed. Tauriel saw his eyes soften as his gaze was drawn back to hers.

With her hand in his, Thranduil raised his other up over his chest then extended it to all who were present. Each of the Elves returned the gesture in final reverence to their king. Legolas followed suit, but said nothing more to Thranduil as he had said farewell to his father in private.

The royal family turned in tandem, stepping forward on the Elfpath to leave the great forest. The elk followed them closely with wide and leisurely steps. For such an enormous creature, it was indeed capable of distinct gracefulness. They kept a steady pace, and the solemnity of earlier moments soon yielded to merry songs that the Wood-elves relished best. A fiddler took up her instrument somewhere in the large procession and the notes seemed to flit through the air. The birds chattered and sang their song too, a song of late summer that elevated Tauriel’s spirit.

She made no move to release her husband’s hand and he made no move to pull away. She knew Legolas and Melethril walked some paces behind them, the knowledge made her hesitant to bring up
any subject as sensitive as the one she had in mind.

Many leagues passed before they realized. The forest grew less dense the nearer they came toward the fork in the road. The Elves did not encounter many along the way, only some Woodmen at occasional intervals who wished them well as they continued on.

At last, Tauriel saw the division in the roads. Her heartbeat quickened. Here was the place her people’s lives would thenceforth change forever.

The Elves took to their respective paths. The music did not cease as they went and no bitter tears were shed as far as she could tell. Familiar faces passed by. Elflings, healers, artists, musicians, metalworkers, farmers, and fighters departed. Her own soldiers walked onward—some of the king’s council too, Beriadan, Arandur, Hérion, Lady Vanadessë, Halloth, young Arphenion, even Feren… many of them she had known her entire life.

This was the second leave-taking, the first being the exodus preceding the Battle under the Trees. Imladris would be nearly empty now, Lórien too one day when Celeborn would finally elect to follow Galadriel across the Great Sea.

When they left the caverns it was still morning. With the sun about to set, Tauriel was amazed at the passing of time in a way she perhaps had never been before. Suddenly, she caught sight of Tirithon as he followed the footsteps of those going to the Undying Lands. He was dressed in regal silver travelling garments and his face was free of any animosity at all. He noticed her too, and she watched as he slowed his step.

Thranduil must have felt her posture seize up. Tauriel did not dare do anything but breathe. To her shock, the former diplomat placed his hand on his heart and held it out in her direction. She almost could not believe her sight. The elven lord inclined his head, punctuating the show of respect with his trademark grace. Without further action, Tirithon went with the group bound for the Grey Havens and then Valinor.

Legolas and Melethril waited until the lines completely separated and then made their way ahead. It was just the four of them that remained, with but one horse and the king’s elk standing patiently aside.

The prince went to his father and embraced him, neither one willing to wholly give into any sense of melancholy when they knew they would likely still see each other again. Melethril kissed Tauriel’s cheek and hugged her, the younger elf less inhibited in her emotion than the men. This was the first time she would leave the realm of her birth, maybe the last time she’d ever set foot in it again.

“If ever you find yourself in need of guidance, we are but a written word away.” said Thranduil. Legolas smiled in thanks and as he helped Melethril onto their horse, then replied, “I daresay we will take you up on that fairly quickly. Cuio vae, ada.”

“Cuio vae, aran nin—bereth nin.” Melethril bestowed a kind glance to both king and queen as Legolas asked their mount for a brisk walk. As the horse’s gait quickened into a trot, a strong wind blew past as if to shepherd them onward. Melethril turned away to strengthen her hold on Legolas, and Tauriel released a shaky breath.

“Cuio vae.” The king murmured simply. They watched the pair until they lost sight of them down the forest trail. The elk nickered softly as if to console them. Thranduil moved away from Tauriel to stand facing the beast, running his palms smoothly over its face and velvety nose.

“And you, mellon, must choose which path you will take. If any at all.” The elk pressed its nose into
its master’s hand. Its limpid eyes bore into Thranduil, and Tauriel knew the beast understood every word from him. “You served us both well in times of peril, for that I cannot thank you enough.”

She thought it curious how deeply this moment touched her. The elk was perhaps three or four years old when Thranduil commenced its training. She recalled very well those encounters in the woodland, when she took Melethril to frolic and occasionally caught glimpses of the king and his elk.

Thranduil stroked its neck one final time and took two large steps backward. The elk raised its head high, its antlers a proud sight to see. Then it left them, and it seemed the beast chose neither path, instead venturing into the forest. As they did before, Thranduil and Tauriel stood and watched until they could not see the elk any longer.

Tauriel stared at the ground below, at a loss as to what to say. What, if anything, could be said after experiencing and witnessing something of that magnitude? The burden of answering rendered her mute. Thranduil seemed equally incapable of breaking the silence. She started to walk back in the direction of the caverns without waiting for him. She did not get very far before his voice rang out in the quiet of the forest.

"I would close this chasm between us if I could. Yet I know not how to." Thranduil kept his eyes away from hers when she turned back to look at him. His shoulders bowed inward, he was unconsciously protecting himself whether he knew it or not. Shock reverberated through her as lightning strikes a pile of dry brush. Tears coursed down Thranduil’s face. Twice now she’d seen him weep openly, in the present moment and first at her deathbed vigil.

Filled by a compelling need to be with him, she crossed the distance to stand in front of him. The two of them had dealt hurt after hurt, each to the other. It happened despite their best efforts not to.

"The way forward is before us, we simply did not see it until now." The words came to her easily. Tauriel’s knees almost buckled when she saw him lose all semblance of composure. He was trembling ever so slightly. Again, his iron-clad control she once loved to break was barely enough to keep him standing.

“How can you forgive me for all I’ve said and done?” He whispered viciously. It was self-loathing that colored his speech. She did not cower before him, she knew this was the crucial moment. If they did not take this chance, they might not ever have such frankness between them ever again.

“Thranduil, there is space yet in my heart for the darkest parts of you where pain still dwells.” Her hands came up to rest on his damp cheeks. She brushed the tears away as he shut his eyes, almost against his will. He melted into her touch as he had not done for so long, and his own hands stroked her sides and rested just below her ribs. His hands were warm through the silk of her gown’s bodice. Something struck her as odd, the longer her thumbs gently stroked his face.

“Where are your scars?” She asked, calmly. There was no doubt that what she saw now was his rawest self. The last time she’d seen his true face was on the night of terrible battle before she left for Dale.

“It seems you are not the only one to have been blessed by the Valar. My flesh is made whole again… I hadn’t noticed the change until I realized there was naught left to conceal. It...It might have occurred when the Shadows were at last cast out.”

If Tauriel needed any indication of his most profound contrition or sincerity, that was exactly it. He may have been speaking of old wounds but she could discern his deeper meaning. He continued to
speak, adding to the growing conviction in her heart that they would be alright.

“With the numbers of our people so drastically reduced, those who remain might not have so great a need for a king. If you should wish to relinquish the burdens of ruling, none would begrudge you for it. My only concern is for your sustained happiness. If sharing the mantle of leadership with me should so greatly detract from it, you need not feel obliged to bear it.”

Still, Thranduil trembled against her hands and Tauriel could hear the desperate uncertainty in his voice.

“Are you asking me if I still wish to be your wife?” She asked quietly.

His eyes widened. There was a slackening of his face, a fleeting look of surprise. His hands fell to his sides and he looked directly at her. A lone nightingale sang and its beating wings could be heard from on high. The leaves rustled in the breeze. The Elf-king looked upon her with his whole heart yet was ready to give her up if she so wished to leave him. A slow smile curved her lips, there was indeed hope here. Dressed in his fine clothes, she thought he never looked more naked. From that singular gaze, Tauriel had her answer.

“As long as the green earth thrives, and the sun rises in the east, I will not abandon you to face the remaining ages of this world alone. Do you think I’ll have some other chance at happiness beyond all that we have experienced together? I did not fight so many obstacles and death itself only to bid you goodbye now.” She said firmly.

“I can hardly think of repentance adequate enough for the accusations I made against you, Silivren.” It was a nickname, of sorts, one he used only in the most intimate of moments.

“I am sorry for harboring secrets...Let us have no more deceit between us. This is not the first storm we’ve weathered, it certainly will not be the last.”

Together they traced the path back toward the caverns, hands intertwined.
Time does not tarry ever, but change and growth is not in all things and places alike. For the Elves the world moves, and it moves both very swift and very slow. Swift, because they themselves change little, and all else fleets by: it is a grief to them. Slow, because they do not count the running years, not for themselves. The passing seasons are but ripples ever repeated in the long, long stream. Yet beneath the Sun all things must wear to an end at last.

– J.R.R Tolkien

Life in the Eryn Lasgalen was noticeably different after so many Elves had left it. Thranduil kept their capital within the Halls for the time being. Tauriel did not think it prudent to strain their resources so quickly. They still traded with the nearby realms of Men—lumber for food and such, though it was no longer necessary to procure it in the same quantities.

Thranduil entered the solar, closing the door without too great a care. It clicked shut and the sound echoed loudly in the room.

“Tauriel, the Dalish ambassador has returned our message. He writes that Bard intends to host a feast to mark the autumn harvest in the north. Tauriel? Where—” He strode forward and soon halted when he noticed Tauriel sleeping on her side, atop the elongated sofa in the center of the room. News of King Bard’s invitation slipped from his mind as he took in the sight of his wife.

Her hair was spread out over the cushion beneath her but he still couldn’t see her eyes for her right arm covered her face. Thranduil frowned, kneeling beside her to observe her breathing. He leaned forward to place a small kiss at the corner of her mouth. Surely enough, Tauriel’s lips curled into a sleepy smile. She lowered her arm from her face and slowly opened her eyes. The tawny flecks in her irises caught the light just so.

“Asleep so early in the day?” Thranduil queried. His tone was almost overly formal. Tauriel had to refrain from laughing at his endearing, stifled formality. Doing so would certainly not do anything to assuage his concern. She tried to sit up but was astonished to feel her abdomen cramp. The sensation very nearly prevented her from doing so. Tauriel was sure that none of this went unnoticed.

“I was speaking with the washerwomen at their tasks. Trying to see if they possessed all the necessary supplies. It turns out that they have more than enough for a while seeing as our numbers have recently fallen. I felt…weary after a time. I think their bawdiness wore me out.” Tauriel joked, taken aback at the raspy quality of her own voice. Perhaps she was more tired than she realized.

“What may I do for you?”

Her eyes gleamed in contemplation.

“Berries. Bring me all the berries you can find.”

“Just a few weeks ago, you ordered all raspberries banished from the immediate vicinity.” Thranduil raised a skeptical eyebrow at the request.
“You asked, and that is my answer, lord husband.” The title was infused with a tartness that rivalled the flavor of said berries. He huffed in response, a laugh that was not quite a laugh.

“I bid you agree to a compromise. In exchange for the…fruits of my labor,” This time Tauriel did allow herself to laugh at his dry pun, “I ask you to report to Nestadeth. Seek her counsel with regard to your lethargy and see what remedies she may have. I will have to return to the council chambers to hear the rest of the discussion.”

She sank back into the cushion with a long-suffering sigh, bringing the back of her hand up to cover her eyes again. Internally, she still marveled at the state of affairs between them. That she could employ humor to try to distract him was amazing in and of itself, much more so how he volleyed it right back at her.

Tauriel removed her hand and shifted to lay on her side. Thranduil was still there, kneeling. The way his robes formed a puddle of silk around him did not help her restrain her mirth. He followed her line of sight and realized what she was laughing at. In retaliation, Thranduil tugged her up until she was standing with him.

“Do we have a deal, my lady?” His voice could turn from humor to something else entirely more sensual in the blink of an eye. He held her hands chastely, making no move to place his own elsewhere upon her body. The contrast of his voice and touch caused her pulse to quicken.

“Indeed we do,” Tauriel backed out of her husband’s reach, “I expect a bowl full of berries on that table when I return.”

The Halls of Healing were a much quieter place now. Its corridors were not so bustling, its rooms no longer full of despairing patients and their families. Tauriel walked leisurely through, though dread seemed to build in her mind and unknowingly slowed her steps.

What if something was indeed wrong with her, as she had long suspected? Tauriel found that she understood her body less and less. Nestadeth caught sight of her approach and set down her task of replacing old bed linens to respectfully greet her.

“I come to you for your knowledge, Nestadeth. In truth, I have not been myself since…” The healer wore no look of surprise at that. “Well, it would be stupid of me to think you couldn’t guess what I am referring to.”

“My lady, I will spare no effort to aid you. How may I be of service?” Nestadeth set aside the basket of white linens to make space for her queen to sit on the bed. The room was otherwise bare of any ornamentation, as an infirmary should be. Tauriel perched herself on the edge of the thin mattress and folded her hands in her lap.

“When I returned,” The queen began haltingly. She met Nestadeth’s kind eyes and knew she understood. “When I returned, I had slight pains—no, discomfort, in my middle. And I grew so despondent after a time that I ignored those pains. I neglected my wellbeing, I cared not for sustenance to nourish my body. The king has expressed his concern and I…I know now that I desire to live a full life, not only for my own sake but for his. I feel exhausted, as though I’ve undertaken some incredible physical feat, when in reality I’ve rested more luxuriantly than I ever have in my whole life.”

The healer sighed. Tauriel watched fretfully as a pensive look came over Nestadeth’s face.

“Are you still afflicted by any of those symptoms beside your fatigue, my lady?”
Tauriel shook her head. “The fatigue is most prominent. There is no pain anymore, or if there is, it is so faint as to be barely noticeable. I hunger for food and drink again. I do not deny myself my share.”

“I gather that you also realize your case is far from anything remotely typical that I’ve seen, my lady. From what I can tell, there may be a far simpler answer. Now that your fëa and hröa have had adequate time to settle each into the other, the pain of dissonance has receded. Your renewed appetite has compelled you to properly nourish yourself once more, judging from the health of your physical appearance alone.”

“I don’t understand why I feel this way, if you say I seem to be making progress in my recovery.”

“It is far easier to discern now.” The healer met her gaze and paused her speech as if preparing her for a momentous revelation. “It seems you are five, maybe six moons gone. You are with child, my queen.”

Momentous, indeed. Tauriel froze where she sat. Her mind went blank for several moments as she struggled to accept what she’d just been told.

“What? How can this be?” The first night they spent together matched Nestadeth’s approximation. There was no other explanation. “It was my understanding that…that this could not happen unknowingly.” Tauriel said softly.

She waited for Nestadeth to affirm what she’d said. The healer simply stared back at her with the same kind smile.

“My queen, this is perhaps another facet of the Valars’ blessing upon you. Will you not rejoice in it? You will forgive me for being blunt, my lady, but you and I are capable of simple arithmetic. Your spirits have fused together to create this life from the onset of your marriage. Not even death could cleave it from you.”

“Why does my stomach not swell as it should?” She croaked, bringing her hands to rest against her belly. She would not have assumed she could be carrying a child from how subtly curved it was. Yet…the curve of her stomach was convex, as if the proof had been there all along. It was just a matter of noticing. She supposed she had only a few more months of ignorant bliss before the evidence would have been incontrovertible.

“I estimate that your child will be borne by the following ethuil, as twelve moons is standard for an elven pregnancy.” The healer added.

A litany of doubts and fears shot through Tauriel. She knew not what to think at all. Then as quickly as those fears gripped her heart, she was seized with the force of sudden realization.

“There is purpose left for you in this world. I would see that you remain to fulfill it—but it is your choice, even if you entrusted your happiness to me. You must choose for yourself.”

“The music is resilient within you and you will know it when it manifests. There is hope suffusing these lands. It shall be thy pride and glory.”

“There is life in you yet, and it reaches toward you for your fëa to return.”

*Tumnë talmar rahtainë nixenen umir. Yúlallo nárë nauva coivaina, Cálë lómillon tuiuva.*

*Rose-gold hair, swinging like a pendulum as that little girl ran among a field of marigolds and daisies.*
In starlight and in shadow, naneth.

“Elven women are most often blessed by dreams of this ilk. The Valar send messages to us in dreams, Tauriel, and this message is a blessing for you alone. As with all things divinely granted, they will become known in their own time.”

“She knew!” Tauriel gasped. Even without her omniscience, the signs were so obvious in retrospect that Galadriel could have probably deduced Tauriel’s pregnancy without it. “She must have, how could I have been so stupid? This is why I failed to stop the wildcat’s attack. Why the thought of taking a life sickened me at my own expense.”

Nestadeth sensed the queen was enmeshed in thoughts and memories that clashed with her new understanding of her situation. She remained silent as she watched Tauriel raise her shaking hands to cover her pale cheeks. There was a noise somewhere farther down the Hall. It startled the queen out of her reverie and she nearly leapt to her feet.

“Hannon le, Nestadeth. I am grateful to you, but I require solitude. I shall walk, in case the king should ask you of my whereabouts.”

“Yes, my lady.”

And so the elven queen strode out of the infirmary, in the general direction of the Western Gate. She wanted to cross the river and go out into the forest. Nothing could soothe her more than the scent of the crisp air of early autumn. The afternoon passed fleetly while she walked and walked, her stroll had taken her to the center of the meadow beyond the forest. The last of the late summer wildflowers fluttered in the breeze as she stood among them.

In this place, Tauriel had chosen life. She stood alone and laughed at the simplicity. All of the changes to which she paid no mind converged into joyous truth. No pain or sorrow lingered in her; no darkness obscured her precious secret. How she had gone for months without knowing astounded her. She supposed extenuating circumstances were to blame.

“Tumnë talmar rahtainë nixenen umir. Yúlallo nárë nauva coivaina, cállë lómillon tuiuva.” Tauriel recited the lines from memory to herself and recalled Lady Galadriel’s translation. The Valarin speech never sounded as beautiful as it did then, now that its true meaning was known to her.

She closed her eyes against the setting sun. This knowledge would not be hers alone for much longer. For as long as she stood amid the sun’s gentle brilliance, Tauriel Silivren had no more secrets from herself. She cast off her burdens and felt the weight of the world melt away. With the wind at her back, she returned to the caverns. The corridors and paths were mostly deserted. All the while, Tauriel thought of Thranduil. There was to be a council meeting, but then he would be free of obligations and she would be able to share her news with him. She longed to dispel his worry for her, now that she finally believed she could. Tauriel went to Galion and told him where the king should find her after the conclusion of the session.

When he found her sitting in the courtyard garden amid the falling leaves of the renewed Greenwood’s lustrous autumn, she was smiling so broadly that perhaps she did look a bit mad—the thought sent her into laughter that made her cheeks burn with the giddiness of it.

“What is the meaning of this…? Are you well?” The king asked, steadying her by grasping her elbows as she ambled toward him.

Thranduil peered down at her, taken by her radiance but confused by her behavior. Tauriel’s love for him burned ever bright within her—in his gleaming silver vestments, he seemed to absorb the colors
of the autumn garden surrounding them. His crown of crimson birch leaves adorned his brow. She loved that he chose to wear it. The birch trees had been a gift from the Lady Galadriel to them after the cleansing of the wood. Their forest would continue to prosper, new birch saplings would arise from the loamy ground in the coming spring. The season incarnate stood before her, asking if she was merely alright when in fact she never felt such sheer perfection before in her entire life.

“"I am very well, my lord. I have long waited to tell you…I wanted to be certain beyond doubt.” Tauriel was still smiling while she awaited Thranduil’s reaction. He had his suspicions but she knew he could not suspend his disbelief. Not until she grasped his hands and brought them to rest on her belly, where there was a very slight, curved firmness. Thranduil stared at their joined hands and then he knew and it was a beautiful thing to see comprehension dawn in his face.

She laughed again, happy beyond all measure. His hands gently stroked her abdomen, up to her ribs and then around her lower back. He pulled her to him and her arms wound around his shoulders so her fingers could lace together behind his neck.

Tauriel expected him to make some sort of dry jest at their timing. Instead he said, “How better to begin this Fourth Age?” There was sincerity there. How she thought he would be able to make light of the ruin and despair was inconsiderate of her.

His gaze was deep and endless, it was like staring into a world of possibility. He had never looked this way in all of the years she’d known him. The Elvenking’s joy was something elemental like rainfall after a long-lasting drought. Her hopes that he could find true rest and happiness in Eryn Lasgalen, with her, seemed to be within their reach after all of the strife that defined his existence and hers too. Eryn Lasgalen prospered, the light reached every part of their forest now, and his son was settled in Ithilien with Melethril and those of their kin who chose to live in Gondor under King Elessar Telcontar.

Their daughter was born that blessed spring as the woods teemed with life. She was a child born of hope—the first elven child to be born in the new realm of Eryn Lasgalen. Queen Tauriel Silivren knew precisely what they would name her.

Amdiriel.

Chapter End Notes

I can't believe I've finally finished this. Thank you everyone who has left such inspiring and kind words throughout these twenty chapters, your encouragement made this endeavor possible. While I wish I had done some things differently, this was a wonderful writing experience and I hope I was able to give life to this seemingly far-fetched pairing. If you feel so inclined, I would love to hear from you one last time whether it's general or specific feedback. If you'd like to read more of my Thrandiel fics, I'll point you in the direction of my completed story "Till Human voices wake us and we drown" as well as my WIP "On Golden Winds." Until next time, dear readers.

***The name 'Amdiriel' is Sindarin for 'daughter of hope.'
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