Lapsus Memoriae (Rávamë's Bane: Book 1)
by RealityWarp

Summary

Every Tolkien fan has a “Tenth Walker” in them — but Eleanor Dace hasn’t read a word of Tolkien since she was thirteen and was still fantasising about adventuring in other worlds.

Now she’s twenty-two, a third year English Literature student about to graduate from college; when she discovers that her teenage fantasy just got a bit too realistic for her liking. Now she’s trapped in Arda, a world she has little idea how to survive in, trying to recover a missing set of memories that might help get her home. Or they might just make things go from merely life-threateningly bad; to apocalyptically worse.

With little more than her hazy recall of the Lord of the Rings trilogy to draw on (and a sarcastic second personality giving cryptic advice in her head) Eleanor begins to realise that there is something sinister going on in Middle Earth, besides the return of the One Ring. Something more than just mere coincidence brought her here, and only remembering what it is will get her home again.

Oh, and in case things weren’t complicated enough already — her ears just got a whole lot more pointy.

[My spin on the ever popular cliche: “a girl falls into Middle Earth.” Rated for language.]
A/N: Yes, it's been done a billion times. Yes, I'm sure I'm going to be upsetting a small army of Tolkien purist just waiting to breathe fire at me for writing this — but here we are with my take on the ever popular cliche: "a girl falls into Middle Earth."
I've tried hard to make the plot and characters as believable as possible, and where possible I've held as true to the original canon (both book and film) as I can. If it's not your cup of tea, then feel free to just hit the back button. No one is stopping you. But if you're willing to come along for the ride, I hope you enjoy my writing and I'd love to hear what you think.

Long chapters. Slow to build up. Reviewer are adored, constructive critique is welcome, and flames will be used to cook my dinner.
So without further ado, lets get this ball rolling!
Prologue
Eleanor Lucy Dace, 22, was reported missing on Monday by her flatmates after she failed to return home from work to their shared apartment early Sunday morning.

Miss Dace, a third year English Literature student at Imperial University, was last seen leaving the Cat & Canary student bar (where she was employed as a bartender) at about 2:00am on Sunday. She was said by colleges and friends to have been "upset by something before she suddenly up and left."

The shoes Miss Dace was last seen wearing the night of her disappearance were later found in a rubbish bin on the high street, leading police to believe that she must have vanished somewhere on the path between the popular student hangout and the campus bus stop.
Miss Dace's family have been informed of her disappearance, though they have refused to give a statement as the investigation continues…
I hated him.

I hated him. That was all I could think. My hand clenched into a fist around my mobile, which was still pressed to my ear. I could feel my arm shaking as the muscles constricted in rage. I was biting down so hard on my lower lip, I was almost on the verge of drawing blood with my teeth.

"Ellie?" Katie asked nervously from the other side of the bar. "Are you alright?"

It took several deep calming breaths before I felt like my voice was steady enough to speak.

'Come on Eleanor. In through the nose, out through the mouth…'

"I'm fine. Just a wrong number." I lied through gritted teeth, carefully moving my hand away from my ear. Katie gave me a disbelieving look as she eyed the fist that was still on the verge of crushing my phone into powder. I forced my smile back onto my face, finally managing to pry my fingers off my mobile and shove it a little brutally into my back pocket of my jeans. "My shift is almost done. Let me get us a drink and we can go find the others."

Before Katie could object I turned to face the liquor shelves and retrieved two tall glasses. I kept my back to her and the rest of the drinking students while I worked, hoping that no one else would notice my eyes starting to fill with tears.

Katie okay-ed me half heartedly, before getting caught up in conversation with a guy waiting next to her. Red-headed, curvy and exotically pretty, my best friend had been earning herself a lot of smouldering looks all evening, especially in the tight black and green dress. She had offered to do me up for our girls-night-out too, but I'd only let her curl my normally pin straight brown hair. I had already settled comfortably on a blue halter top, tight black jeans and a pair of heels. I had to admit, I'd felt good enough to walk with a kick in my step at the beginning of my shift at the student bar.

Now I just felt like being sick.

"I'll just be a minute." I said, blinking back the unshed tears, and sliding our drinks across the bar
towards Katie and her guy friend.

I hastily bid my manager and fellow booze-dealers a goodnight, untying and slinging my apron over the back of a barstool. I must have failed to conceal the furious look on my face, because I barely had to shove my way through the crowd of semi-drunk students before I found Katie near the dance floor. She'd abandoned her admirer and had come over to find me. She looked unsure of what to say and I sighed heavily, trying to relax.

"Sorry Kit-Kat, I just heard something that upset me a bit." I said, using the nickname I'd been calling her since we were ten, although it was a slight understatement. I wasn't upset. I was murderous. I felt like I wanted to strangle someone to death, and then kick over a building for good measure.

The look on Katie's face said that she wasn't buying it.

"He's giving you problems again, isn't he?" She didn't bother to make it into a question.

I nodded reluctantly, taking a large gulp of my drink. I almost choked on the lump in my throat which I hadn't even noticed was there.

"Something like that."

"I thought you two were finally over this."

"So did I..." I mumbled, feeling something buzzing against my hip.

My phone.

My stomach plummeted for the second time that night and I quickly downed the rest of my glass in one go. The alcohol burned the back of my throat and I forced another false smile at Katie. God knows after all the crap she helped me through recently; she deserved to have at least one night without me dragging her into another of my dramas.

"I'm going to sit outside for a bit. I need to cool off. Why don't I find you and the others on the dance floor in a few minutes?"

Katie looked doubtfully at me, almost as if she could see straight through me. Five years together at school and then three of college; she'd been my best friend for so many years she was more like a sister. She knew me well enough to know when I needed to be alone.

"You sure you'll be ok, hun? Its cold out tonight." She asked with a worried look.

"Yeah, I'll be fine. I've got a coat." I answered her without hesitating. She nodded, giving me a reassuring little smile and a gentle squeeze on the shoulder. Then she turned and moved back through the thick crowds to where excessively loud 5club music was blaring from the speakers. I waited until she was out of sight before letting the false smile slide off my face.

It was snowing again when I stepped outside, just past the bouncers who where chatting leisurely by the doors. It would have been a beautiful evening, with the late winter snow still falling, but I was far too focused on the dread rising in my stomach to think about it.

I pulled my mobile out of my coat pocket and looking at the screen.

~I Missed Call
I stabbed the redial button with my thumb and held it to my ear, trying not to shiver.

It rang once. Twice. Three times. Finally he picked up.

"Hey babes, I was just thinking about you," Mark greeted me cheerfully as if nothing was wrong, "I've been trying to call you all night. I really wanted to talk about when you're coming back to—"

"I picked up the first time you rang me." I interrupted him, unable to mask my anger any longer, "About two minutes ago. While you were rolling around in bed with that 'new friend' you were telling me about."

There was a very potent silence on the other end of the line. Obviously Mark hadn't realised that just as he and his new 'friend' had been getting down to business, he'd accidentally hit the redial button on his phone and called me. I'd got to hear the entire thing from start to finish.

"Still want to talk?" I asked, and it came out in a growl.

"Ells, that was nothing." He started after a pause, but I could hear the panic in his tone, "We were tickling each other, that's all. We were just joking around, it's not what you—"

"Do you normally moan the names of people you tickle?" I asked, cutting him off again, "Or are you that enthusiastic about everyone you take to your bedroom to tickle at two in the morning?"

"Ells, you're not listening to me! I would never do that to you!" He lied again, and it felt like an icicle being pushed through my gut, "You've been drinking. You're tired. It isn't what you think."

I should have just hung up there and then. But I just couldn't stop.

"I just got off work, Mark. I'm still sober, and I heard everything. 'Annabella' is a bit of a mouth full of a name to shout at orgasm, don't you think?"

It was only when I heard the faint snorts of laughter from behind her that I realised that the bouncers were eavesdropping on the conversation. I didn't care. I could feel myself boiling over with silent anger. It wasn't until I felt something warm roll down my cheek that realised I was crying.

"Ells it didn't happen like that!"

"I don't care how it happened, Mark." I said quietly and without emotion, "I have class in the morning and I'm tired. Just tell me the truth, or I'm hanging up right now."

I could almost hear his temper snapping through the phone. "Fine!" He spat angrily, "I did it! I slept with her! Happy now?!"

It was stupid and pathetic, but I covered my mouth to hide the sob that crawled up my throat. I clubbed it down with the blunt side of my anger, refusing to let him hear me crying.

"All this crap only happened because you went away to a college on the other side of the fucking country, and you were too selfish to ever come back and visit." He continued to vent furiously at me. I forced the lump in my throat down before responding: better to sound pissed off than weepy.

"So this is my fault now?!" I forced my voice to stay steady as another wave of tears rolled silently down my cheeks, taking my make up with it, "You swore you were willing to wait when I left! We
agreed that we'd talk if things got difficult! You swore you'd never do this!"

I heard him scoff, and it made me want to hit something.

"I agreed to wait if you promised to come back! But you were too much of a coward to even call!"
I could almost hear the sneer in his tone, "I've had enough of waiting."

I felt my insides constrict at that sentence. My boiling rage turned to ice in my blood, and I could all but feel my heart turning to stone in my chest. For several painfully long seconds I could barely breathe. When I finally did answer him, it was in a voice so cold, so quiet and furious, that it startled me. "I guess that's it then. We're done."

My whole body was shaking with fury. The line crackled and I could hear a woman's voice on the other end asking if my dear old ex was ok. My blood crystallised into shards of ice as I listened to him softly reassuring her that everything was fine.

Finally he spoke to me, one last time.

"You know you'll never find anyone who will love you more than I did, Ells. Ever."

I gave a chilly little smile, and only wished he could have seen it.

"That's good. I don't particularly want to be loved the way you 'loved' me again any time soon." I said coldly, pouring as much of my frozen anger, rage and hurt as I could get into the last words I'd ever say to him.

Anger tore through me, and the next thing I knew I was hurling my flimsy mobile phone like a cricket ball at the stone wall a few meters away. It shattered like a miniature firework, sending bits of circuiting and plastic flying into the snow. Later I would remember thinking that was probably a stupid thing to do. I'd need to buy myself and cheap replacement.

The bouncers gave a loud chorus of cheers and whoops of approval behind me. I had been friendly with most of the staff on the campus since I'd started working part time at the student bar. I knew they only meant it to cheer me up, but I wasn't in any mood to go back inside and pretend I was ok anymore.

I was tired, cold, angry, and just wanted to go home.

I forced a small smile at them, asked them to tell Katie I'd decided to head home after all, and started walking back across the courtyard. I managed to keep myself from breaking down into angry tears again for most of the walk across campus towards the bus stop. It was early in the morning, cold, dark, and the high street was virtually deserted when I finally reached it, still lost in bitter thoughts.

I'd suspected for a long time that my turbulent long-distance-relationship with Mark — the beau of my final years at senior school — would end up like this. He'd been sweet and supportive at first when I'd been accepted to go to university in London, but it had quickly become obvious that he hadn't wanted me to go. I'd been putting off coming back to see him for months just to avoid him trying to talk me into dropping out early.

"What are you going to do with an English Literature degree anyway?" He'd said.

I sighed and wished that I hadn't been so stupid as to throw my phone against a wall. I desperately wanted to call home and talk to my folks.
I wanted to talk things out with my mum; get long-winded anecdotal advice from my dad; get a sarky but well meant jibe about 'scummy cheating boyfriends' from my little brother. But even if I did have my phone, chances were that my family would have all been asleep anyway. That's the way things worked when you had family who were constantly travelling around the world.

Mid thought, my foot suddenly slipped on the frozen pavement and my ankle twisted painfully in the wrong direction. I half cursed, half sobbed, and angrily yanked the once beautiful shoes from my feet. The heels had been worn down past the point of repair and they were caked in a thick layer of ice and mud.

Furious and tired, I dumped them into a nearby rubbish bin, ignoring the freezing pain of my bare feet on the icy pavement.

The bus stop finally came into view at the end of the road, but as I made my way towards it I ended up glancing at my reflection in a darkened shop window. It was only for a second, but I mentally winced at what I saw.

My make up had almost been washed off by my waterworks. What hadn't come off completely had run down my puffy red cheeks in a series of horrible long black streaks. The snow that had landed on my curled brown hair had melted, making is go lank and tangled, and my normally bright green eyes were watery, sore and bloodshot to hell. I looked like something that had died at the bottom of a well.

I sighed heavily, no energy left to cry or get angry, or anything. I just stared at myself in the glass, thinking about how things had been getting harder and harder to deal the closer I got to graduation. I'd put it all down to stress — over working myself with my studies, my work at the bar, my extra curricular activities, and trying to keep Mark happy.

I'd never looked or felt so run down in all my life.

I was just so tired. All I really wanted now was to go home, crawl into bed and not wake up for a very, very long time. Or maybe just disappear altogether.

'Disappear… really?'

The thought rang through my head as I stared at my sorry reflection in the window. It rang in my mind as if someone had actually asked me the question aloud. Melodramatic and stupid as it was, I already knew my answer.

"Yeah," I mumbled almost silently, my voice going weirdly muffled and slurred, "That would be nice."

That was the last thing I remember.

~ ❥ ~

I was dreaming. I knew that before anything else.

My hands brushed the tops of the tall yellow flowers that bloomed under a navy coloured night sky. The moon drifted through the sky like a floating lantern, and the air was warm and comforting rather than cold and harsh, and it was quiet. For once in so long, it was peaceful and safe for me to
walk through my own dreamscape.

The grass tickling the soles of my bare feet as I walked. I could smell the scent of the flowers as they swayed sleepily in the gentle breeze. The skies were so clear I could even count the thousands of stars as they danced behind the thin wisps of cloud.

I guess I'd finally reached my limit. Maybe I was so tired that I didn't even have the energy to care about what was going on outside my dream world. I could have happily kept walking on forever in the peaceful state, oblivious to the world outside.

I probably would have if something out of place hadn't caught my eye.

I stopped and stared off through the warm evening air across the yellow heads bobbing in the breeze. I couldn't see their face, but I was sure it was a person. They were knelt down among the flowers, a curtain of long brown hair shielding them from my eyes. I couldn't see what they were doing, or even who they were, but I found myself walking towards them.

A sudden hesitation in their movement and a twitch of their head said that they had apparently sensed me there. I opened my mouth to speak, not a sound came out. Then the ground vanished from under my feet.

My clothes flew up around my body as I dropped through a flurry of yellow petals into inky blackness.

I didn't even have the chance to scream before I was awake again.
The last time I'd had a dream that vivid, I'd ended up sleepwalking and been found facedown on the front lawn the next morning by my brother.

It had been years ago, not since I'd been twelve years old. But recently my sleep had become more and more restless — the substance of my dreams containing far less fluffy bunnies and a lot more Weeping Angels from Dr. Who. A metaphor for all the stresses that come with being a final year degree student a psychologist might say, if I ever cared to ask for one's opinion.

My breath hitched and my heart beat surged painfully as I pulled myself out of the dream turned nightmare. I gasped and coughed through the sudden throbbing ache in my chest. My eyelids felt like they'd been glued together. My mouth was dry and I felt strangely dizzy, a little like the time I'd been persuaded to drink too much rum at a party during my first year.

Funny, I couldn't remember drinking enough to get a hangover. Actually… I couldn't seem to remember much of anything…

I searched my head, trying to recall the memories of arriving home, but they wouldn't come. I could remember leaving the student bar, and walking towards the bus stop, staring at myself in a shop window…

Then nothing.

Did I make it home? Did I even reach the bus stop? A worryingly large chunk of my memory was just gone. The more I struggled to retrieve it, the more it seemed to slide away. Had my drink been spiked? No, I didn't think so, or it would have kicked in sooner. Maybe I slipped and hit my head? A concussion would certainly account for the splitting headache I had.

With an irritated groan, I decided it didn't matter. I rolled over and tried to feel around the nightstand for my phone.

At least, I tired to roll over. I only got about half way before a sharp pulling sensation on my left arm and leg stopped me. Baffled, I peeled open my sticky eyes and craned my neck to look down at myself. It was almost too dark to see at all, but there was just enough dim light to see that whatever I was lying on was definitely not my bed. It felt hard and uncomfortable, but not nearly as uncomfortably as the tree roots that were pinning my other arm and both my legs to the floor.

Hang on… *tree roots*?
I was supposed to be in my bed at home, not lying on a stone floor in the dark covered in tree roots. I forced myself to breathe. Dream or not, at the very least I wanted the option of moving my limbs.

"Ok. You can worry about the 'why' and 'how' later. Get your arms and legs free first, Eleanor."

I sat up a little more carefully. My eyes had adjusted enough to see the roots that were keeping me pinned. Two were coiled tightly around my left arm while three were bound even more tightly around my lower legs. At first it looked as if someone had tied them to me, but the more I struggled to free myself, the more I saw that they'd must have grown around me while I'd been asleep. Not that that was possible.

My hand were shaking as I worked to pull the stems away. By the time I managed to get the last roots off, my fingers were bruised and sore. When my legs were finally free too I had to keep from jumping to my feet as the rest of my environment finally began to sink in.

I was in a cave. A cave. And I wasn't dreaming. The continuous pain in my head, chest and hands was making that obvious.

It was so damn dark, but my eyes had adjusted just enough to see the tunnel wall. I began to follow it towards what I hoped was the exit, trying to stay calm. I couldn't help but feel a rush of relief when I finally saw sunlight streaming in from just around the next corner. I ran for it.

I ran so fast it shocked me, only slowing when my foot caught on a stray root or stone that seemed to exist only to trip me. Finally, I burst from the mouth of the cave like a mad woman, gasping for fresh air as if I'd been held too long under water.

I probably would have just kept running out of blind panic if my senses hadn't been viciously assaulted by the world outside. The light and colours were all so bright it felt like someone had made me look into the sun through a telescope. My pounding head was suddenly filled with the sounds of streams and birdsong, so loud and clear it was as if someone had turned up the volume on the entire world.

It was all too loud and too bright. And it hurt. God it hurt.

Only one thing I managed to register before the pain became too much and I screamed, falling to my knees on the rocky outcrop with my hands clamped over my ears and my eyes clenched shut.

I wasn't in London anymore.

Everything after that was a blur. A painful, colourful blur.

Whether though fear, confusion or adrenaline fuelled survival instinct, I had very little recollection of the days that followed. What little I did remember consisted of working out that I'd ended up somewhere between a small range of rocky hills, and a wood that stretched further than I could see.

I remembered discovering that I was no longer clothed in my black and blue halter and jeans, but something much older, worn out and dirtier than I could remember ever owning. It looked like the remains of a long red dress, but I couldn't be sure since it had been hacked off just below the knee. I also remembered the sunlight hurting my eyes so much that I only dared venture out into the world when my thirst and hunger pangs finally got too strong. The world seemed so much bigger and more daunting around me that I could ever remember it being, like I was seeing it all for the first time.

The next two days melted together into a mesh of scavenging what little food I trusted my shaky survival knowledge with, and following the flow of the river downstream. Fishing really wasn't
really an option, but luckily there were several abundant fruit trees and berry bushes growing along the forest's edge. It wasn't enough to keep the hunger at bay for long, but at least it kept me sustained enough to just keep walking. It was pretty soon after my second day of this that I realised that, despite my hunger, I was not tiring the way I'd expected to. My body seemed determined to not grow weary, even after walking for miles in bare feet without stopping.

'It's just the adrenaline,' I told myself a hundred times. 'You're frightened and confused, it's sharpened your senses and boosted your endurance. That's all…'

None of this however was enough to distract me from the constant fear of my unfamiliar surroundings. I was still scared out of my mind. The only distraction I found was to just keep moving, only stopping occasionally to eat, drink or wash myself as best she could in the freezing cold river. By the second morning, I was ravenous with hunger and still hopelessly lost. I'd hoped that by following the river I'd at least have come across a village or town. It was only on the night of my third day of wandering that I finally spotted the lights glinting through the trees.

The relief and excitement had been like a shot of warm brandy. I rushed through the trees as quickly as I could, almost falling over myself in my haste to get to them.

In hindsight, it was a stupid thing for me to move as silently as I did. I should have called out for help, or at least announced my presence — but by then the fear and hunger had beaten my better judgement into submission.

I crept into the clearing without so much as a whisper.

A rather haggard and old-school looking tent was set up in a small clearing, with a single flickering lantern hanging from it's supports. A small supply pack and a few cloth sacks lay in a pile next to the tent, but I completely ignored all that in favour of what they were centerer around. In the middle of the camp was as old log lying close to a dying fire, the embers still glowing faintly. Hanging over the coals was a small cooking pot, and from what I could smell coming from inside, someone had left out the remains of their dinner before turning in for the night.

I felt my stomach growl painfully at the smell. I couldn't remember the last time I'd smelled anything so wonderful.

A small nagging part of my mind repeated that this was a stupid idea, but I ignored it. It had been days since I'd eaten anything more substantial than a handful of berries, and I was close to going mad with hunger.

Slowly, quietly as I could manage, I crept into the clearing and over to the fire, being carful not to stand on any of the fallen leaves or sticks. Just as I thought, when I peered inside the pot what looked and smelled like a freshly prepared stew was still simmering in its base. I couldn't tell what kind of meat it was, but it smelled so damn good that I honestly didn't care.

I was just reaching for the ladle when my persistent inner voice kicked in again. Something about this felt wrong, but I couldn't think clearly enough to understand why…

My hand had frozen in mid air as my eyes fixed on the lantern hanging from the tent support. Something whirred and clicked into place inside my exhausted mind. If its owner was already asleep in their tent, then…

Why was the lantern still lit?

Too late I realised my mistake. Before I could jump to my feet and make a dash for the trees,
something cold and sharp pressed into the space between my shoulder blades, right behind my heart.

"Don't move." A deadly calm masculine voice growled from directly behind me.

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Every nerve ending in my body felt like it had been jabbed with a taser. I went rigid, my hand still outstretched reaching for the stew pot.

"Stand up, slowly." The voice commanded from behind me.

Under any other circumstances, I would have not hesitated to ignore the command and make a mad dash back into the safety of the trees. But whatever it was that was being pressed against my spine felt like a very good reason to swallow my panic and cooperate.

I obeyed, standing up as slowly as I could without turning, and raising both hands either side to show I was unarmed.

"Who are you?" The male voice demanded in a voice that sounded closer to a growl than speech.

"I-I'm lost." I babbled before I could think about what was coming out of my mouth.

"I asked who you are, not what condition you are in." The man retorted without sympathy, although he seemed to pause upon hearing that my voice was female, "Your name, girl."

I swallowed. Half of my mind was screaming at me to run, but the other half was too paralysed with fear of what I guessed was a blade being driven into my back. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been so petrified. So it was a slight shock to me when my brain decided it was a good idea to say; "Why would I give you my name when I cannot even see who you are?"

I mentally kicked myself. Brilliant Eleanor. Perfect opportunity to show off your rapier wit, when there is a frigging knife in your back.

To my surprise though, the stinging pressure in between my shoulder blades was suddenly relieved.

"Turn around." The growling voice instructed sharply.

It would have been a lie to say that I handled the situation bravely. I was so frightened that I had to consciously force my legs to move. Slowly, I turned on the spot, keeping both my trembling hands raised to just below my shoulders.

The man that stood before me was both terrifying and surprising all in the same glance. He was very tall, well over six feet, with a slightly overgrown mane of dark brown hair and stubble bordering on a beard to match. He was dressed in what she could only be describe as a shabby mediaeval war re-enactor's get-up; complete with dark, rough fabrics and a heavy looking leather belt loaded with small weapons. He also had a small star shaped pin that was holding his drab coloured cloak closed at the neck. He was dressed for resisting the elements, but even then I could tell by the way he held himself that he was not only strong, but fast too.

Hard core cosplay mugger or not though, if I had ever claimed to have seen a man that looked truly
hardened by the harshness of the world, it was him.

He was glaring down at me with the starkest pair of grey eyes I’d ever seen on a human being, and it was enough to make my legs shake. Also, and much to my horror, the sharp object I had felt being pointed at my back only second before turned out not to be a knife, but an actual full sized sword.

Oh, and it was pointed straight at my chest.

"I will not ask a third time, girl." His voice was ten times more intimidating with the face to go with it, "Tell me who you are."

I opened my mouth to answer, but all I could focus on was the sword being aimed directly at me. The tip was less than an inch away from cutting into the skin under my collarbone.

It all happened in less than five seconds.

Without realising what I was doing, I took a step back, completely forgetting my close proximity to the camp fire. My heel caught on the stone sitting around the embers, and I began to stumble backwards. My arms pinwheeled, frantically trying and regain my balance, but the momentum sent me tumbling backwards. My elbow smacked into the makeshift stove, sending the cooking pot flying as I crashed to the ground.

Then I screamed.

I screamed as I felt my arm and hand fall directly into the still glowing embers. The sleeve of my dress offered no protection against the hot coals, and before I could react fast enough to pull my hand away I felt and smelled my skin scolding.

Quick as lightning, the terrifying man lunged forward and grabbed my arm, yanking it none too gently from the dying fire. He swatted with his gloved hand at my sleeve, hastily putting out the flames that had caught on my dress. When he did not relinquish his grip on my burned arm, I started thrashing and kicking against him in blinding agony, shrieking even louder than before.

"Be still! You'll injure yourself more!" I remember him yelling at me, trying to hold me down without touching my burned arm.

In hindsight, I couldn't really remember why I fought against him so hard. Maybe it was the pain, or maybe I was still running on bare instincts. A small part of my rational mind realised that whoever this utterly frightening man was, he was trying to help me. But as far as the rest of my mind was concerned, he was being about as helpful as a rampaging elephant in a ceramics factory.

The pain was too much. The fear was too much. The confusion was too much. Everything was just too much. And he wouldn't stop shouting at me to stop moving. So I did the only rational thing I could think of…

I drew my fist back, and punched him as hard as I could across the face.

I watched as his head jerked to the left, and a small spattering of blood erupted from his mouth. Time slowed down as the edges of my vision began to go fuzzy and dark. He slowly turned a faintly stunned looking face back to look down at me, and I saw with a small pang on guilt that I'd split his lip. There was blood dribbling down his chin through his beard and onto his shirt.

Had I the breath in my lungs to speak I might have instinctively blurted an apology, but the tunnel vision chose that moment to take hold, and I'd sagged back on the grass into darkness.
A/N: Take a wild guess who she just socked in the face, or wait till the next chapter to find out. :)}
"Well, you certainly handled that well."

I didn't bother to open my eyes. I already knew I was dreaming again. I was far too painless to still be awake.

"Since when do figments of my subconscious know how to use sarcasm?" I groaned, not moving from where I lay flat on my back on what felt like soft grass.

"Since you do, obviously." The voice replied with a little dash of a smile, as if it was the silliest question in the world.

"I don't suppose you're here to tell me how the hell I managed to get from the college campus to the middle of a nightmare forest, are you?"

"Well being, in your words; 'a figment of your subconscious', I can't know anything that you don't. So no, I'm afraid I can't tell you that."

I groaned again and rubbed my hands over my still closed eyes, "Wonderful, then this conversation is already pretty damn pointless then."

"That's rather rude. At least you have someone to talk to now. Haven't you been wishing for days now?"

"A sarcastic and unhelpful second personality isn't exactly what I had in mind." I snapped, "Maybe I've finally started going crazy."

"Let's hope not, that would be bad for the both of us." The voice hesitated for a moment as if she was thinking, and I could almost feel her eyes on me. "Are you going to just lie there for eternity? Or are you going to get up and do something?"

"Like what?"

"Wake up?" She suggested, "Or you could keep talking to me. We could ponder your intriguing nature of your predicament together."

"No thanks."

"Why not?"
"Because so far you haven't said anything remotely helpful." I said snippily.

"Well, maybe you just haven't asked the right question."

I paused for a moment to contemplate this.

"There's no point in me talking to you. You're not real. You're just a trauma induced invention of my subconscious, at best. You can't help."

"Even so, you don't have to be so harsh about it. I was just making a polite suggestion."

"And I can't remember asking for your opinion," I replied sharply, and then added tiredly, "Whoever the hell you are."

There was a ghostly chuckle and the sound of rustling on the grass next to me, "Well, why don't you just open your eyes and find out?"

I sighed. I didn't really care about who I was talking to really. I knew I was just dreaming, and in theory I could just wake myself up in an instant, if I wanted to. But either way, that would still require opening my eyes. So, reluctantly I allowed my eyelids to slowly open…

And I found myself staring directly into my own face.

My figment — or whatever she really was — had the exact same oval face, with the exact same full mouth, narrow chin, small nose, and wide almond shaped eyes as me. Her hair was admittedly longer and better kept, tumbling all the way down to her waist, but it was exactly the same shade of chestnut brown as mine. If I had been standing, I was be willing to bet my life that the two of us were within a centimetre's difference in height.

It was like staring into a mirror, only my reflection had come to life right in front of me. The only part of her appearance that was in any way different from mine were her eyes. Where I knew mine were bright jade green, hers were an almost luminous shade of amber.

I stared at her with my jaw hanging slack, and my other self just smiled fondly from where she was knelt down next to me. We even had the same tiny dimple in our left cheek when we smiled.

"There we go, that's much better."

And then the world fell out from underneath me again.

~ ❧ ~

Pain was the first and only thing that registered in my mind as I felt myself coming back into reality. My legs, my stomach, my head, my arm. Especially my arm. My whole body just hurt. I didn't dare try and move. Just thinking about moving made me feel sick.

I realised after a moment's groaning that I was lying on my back, which was a start. There was something rough and scratchy supporting my head. I tried shifting just enough to feel all the muscles in my body complain for the small effort. Something heavy had been draped over my body, and despite the constant aches and hunger pangs, I felt shockingly healthy for someone who had their arm cooked medium-rare. My neck burned with pain as I forced myself to turn my head.
and crack my eyelids open. Early morning sunlight flooded my vision and illuminated the world around me.

I was still in the clearing where the camp had been set up. The shabby old tent had been taken down and the fire rekindled. Instead of a stew pot, there were now four small fish on sticks resting over the flames. I was lying close enough to the embers to feel the warmth on my skin, and smell the meat cooking. My stomach moaned in desperation, but the second I tried to get up off the ground a sharp and intense pain shot up my left arm. A throaty cry escaped me, and I curled into a ball on my side.

My burned hand and forearm had been placed by my side, supported on a separate piece of heavy but clean cloth. My sleeve was completely gone, ripped off at the elbow, and the skin looked clean around where several large flat leaves were covering the worst of the burns. I could feel something damp and cool covering the welts in a thick layer under the makeshift plasters. Although still tender and fresh, the burns didn't hurt half as much as I had been expecting them to. I'd been half prepared to wake up screaming in agony. Whatever had been applied to my skin under the leaves was obviously doing something to lessen the pain, and I felt a pang of gratefulness to whomever had attempted to patch me up.

But the gratitude died quickly when I remembered that the only person I'd seen in days had been the man with the scary eyes and the sword. The same man who had very nearly tried to kill me yesterday.

Left over fear from the previous night brought on another wave of nausea, and I tried to sit up again, using my unharmed arm as a clumsy lever. If it hadn't been for my bizarre new talent for hearing things that were a ridiculous distance away, I wouldn't noticed through the haze of pain as the said man trudged back into the clearing through the surrounding trees.

Our gazes met, and panic instantly flooded my senses again. Before I could think of what to do, I was scrambling backwards away from him on my one good hand and butt. The man instantly stopped his approach, obviously seeing the fear that must have been apparent on my face. He raised both of his hands in a universal gesture of peace.

"Av 'osto, hiril vuin.*" he said, and pointed to the bundles and pack that were lying where the tent had been the night before. Hesitantly, I ceased my back-pedalling and glanced over at the pile. The man's sword had been unbuckled from his belt, safely sheathed and was leaning innocently against a small tree a good few feet away. The intended message was obvious: he didn't mean me any harm.

Relief washed over me, but it was followed seconds later by confusion. I had been so dazed with panic moments ago that I had only just realised that when the man had spoken to me, it had been in a different language.

"Man i eneth lin?**" He said, and I realised that he was asking me a question. One that I couldn't answer, seeing as I didn't even have the fainted idea what language he was speaking in.

"I-I..." I cringed at the frail croak of my voice and irritably cleared my throat to strengthen it, "I'm
The man looked at me in confusion, his eyebrows pinched together. His hands dropped to his side again and for a second I was truly scared he was going to reach for his sword.

"A nin ú-cheniathol?***" He spoke in that strange tongue again, but then seemed to rethink his words. He still wore a look of confusion, but it was now mixed with suspicion at me, "How is it that a she-elf does not know the language of her own people?"

'A she-elf?'

I was genuinely torn between bursting into tears and bursting out laughing. Had he really just said that? Had I really got myself lost in the woods, and then miraculously stumbled into an outdoor convention for fantasy nuts? Well, what other explanation could there possibly be?

My half amused, half petrified inner monologue must have shown on my face because he glared down at me with impatience when I didn't respond. I half giggled, half hiccuped in alarm and spluttered out an answer.

"Because I'm not a she-elf."

The man continued to stare down at me with narrowed disbelieving eyes.

"No? Then pray tell, my lady, what are you? Because you are certainly no man, nor a halfling." He said in a disbelieving, almost mocking tone and I was humiliated to feel my eyes being to swim a little.

"I'm human, of course." I said blankly.

He raised an eye brow at me, "Human?"

That was when the last shred of my self control withered and died.

"Yes! I'm a God damned human!" I burst out in a sudden frustrated shriek, my fear and desperation turning itself into rage. I'd had more than enough of this. If this all turned out to be some kind of game or lame joke, I was going to be putting someone's head through a wall when it was over.

"I'm not a man, elf, halfling, or whatever the hell else there is to be around here!" I screamed furiously at him, throwing my hands into the air, "I'm lost! I've been lost for two sodding days! I'm exhausted! I'm starving! And I'm—ah!"

I had been so caught up in my fury and confusion at the man, my situation, everything, that I hadn't realised that some of the leaves covering my burned arm had come off. Just a brush of the back of my hand on the fabric of my clothes was enough to cut my angry rant short. I gasped in pain, my whole body shaking as I cradled my wounded arm against me. Tears welled up behind my eyes, although I wasn't sure whether they were ones of pain or frustration anymore. I could feel them as they spilled down my cheeks, cutting little channels through the dirt on my face.

It took less than a second and no more than three strides for the man to move across the camp and kneel beside me, gently taking hold of my arm above the burns and turning it over. I instinctively resisted at first, but quickly ceased my struggling when he began quickly applying a thick clear balm over my hand. The pain instantly began to subside.

"Forgive me, I did not intend to upset you." His voice had gone from harsh and intimidating to what passed as gentle in mere seconds. Despite the pain, I couldn't help but find it a bit irritating,
"Its best if you try not to move too much. You arm was badly burned yesterday."

He didn't bother to ask for my permission before treating the rest of my arm. Quick and skilful as any stone age first-aider could be, he removed the old leaves from my skin and began re-covering the burns with the strange tingling gel. Still feeling a little disarmed by his sudden kindness, and more than a little awkward that I'd yelled at him, I sat still and let him work. I could see that the skin on the back of my forearm and hand had blistered and become red and inflamed overnight, but I only winced when he pressed a new set of leaves over the burns.

"One question at a time." He said gently, taking the cloth that my arm had been lying on and tearing it into long strips, "First, what is your name?"

I looked at him wearily for a second.

Benevolent as he was being, I still didn't like the fact that he had pointed a sword at my back only the night before. I didn't generally make a habit of introducing myself to potential murderers. Still, it couldn't hurt to at least give him my first name. At least it was better than being called 'girl' or 'my lady' again.

"Eleanor," I answered, trying to hold still as he carefully wrapped the cloth around my arm over the leaves, "My name's Eleanor."

"An unusual name for a she-elf." He commented.

"Maybe because I'm not an elf." I said exasperatedly once again, but this time he ignored me and continued treating my wounds.

"You are a long way from any kind of settlement, Lady Eleanor. How did you come to be out here by yourself?"

I opened my mouth, and then closed it again, biting my lower lip. Even if I did trust him enough to tell all; how the hell was I supposed to answer? I barely had and idea myself. The last thing I could remember was walking bare foot down the frozen streets of my college campus. I didn't have any kind of logical reason for why or how I'd ended up in a cave in the middle of nowhere. I supposed I could try and lie, but something told me that this man would have no trouble seeing straight through me. Plus, I'd always been bad at lying.

So, the truth seemed like the best option. Just maybe not all of it.

"I don't know." I said slowly, watching his reaction carefully, "I was just walking home from a party, then all I can remember is waking up in a cave in the side of a hill. I don't know how I got there. I've been following the river for almost three days trying to find out where I am."

Finally he finished with my arm, tying the cloth he'd wrapped around it in a secure knot near my elbow before meeting my eye again.

"Well, that I can answer for you, my lady. You are on the western edge of the forest of Trollshaws. The river you were following was the Hoarwell ford which runs south as far as the Angle, where it then meets with the ford of Bruinen, or Brandywine River." He spoke with the knowledge and authority of someone who had obviously studied the land by experience rather than pouring over maps. I sat there and soaked in the names in silence. The names of the forest and river sounded awfully familiar, but I couldn't remember for the life of me where from.

Also, the fact that he kept calling me 'my lady' hadn't escaped my notice, and it was starting to get on my nerves. Seeing the thoughtful look on my face as I listened, my attacker/saviour continued.
"Where exactly is it that you are from? Your speech and accent are unlike any I have heard, and for a young..." he hesitated, and I was sure that he was trying his best to avoid calling me a she-elf again, "...female to find herself alone in this part of the world is a rarity, and not a lucky one."

You could say that again, I thought grimly, pretending to assess the condition of my arm before answering.

In for a penny, in for a pound, I guess.

"London," I said softly, "I'm from London. I'm a third year English Literature student at the Imperial University."

I was only half surprised to see the look of bafflement on his face. The more I spoke to this man, who I realised I still did not know the name of, the more I was beginning to believe that I was much deeper water than I'd first thought.

"I'm afraid not familiar with this 'London' you speak of, nor this 'Imperial University'." He said, and he looked both genuinely bemused and a little mistrustful of me. I felt my hopes whither and die as my gaze fell back to my wounded arm. My eyes begin to water again and internally cursed. I hated the fact that I always seemed to tear up when I was frustrated or angry.

"Though perhaps I am merely unfamiliar with the name itself. Regardless, when I said you are far from any kind of settlement, my lady, I mean by at least a fifty miles in any direction." He spoke gravely, "You are obviously not a traveller, nor do you appear to be experienced in roaming the wild alone. So I must ask again. Do you speak the truth when you say that you really have no idea how you came to be so far from your home?"

I stared at him. I had been right about him being able to see straight through me. I could practically feel his eyes scanning my face for any hint of a lie. I nodded my head and bit my lip, not wanting to risk speaking for fear of collapsing into a gibbering mess. The uneasy tension was broken though when my stomach decided that enough was enough. It let loose a groan that sounded more like a miniature roll of thunder, and I felt my face flush with embarrassment.

"Then that brings us to your second problem." He spoke a little more warmly, turning to the fire and removing the fish that were now fully cooked. He handed one skewer with two toasted river fish on it to me and took the second for himself. Simple as the meal was, the fish smelled and tasted divine, and I had to physically force myself to chew slow enough so I wouldn't choke. Within minutes I was finished with the first fish and was deliberately savouring the second at a slower pace. When I was finally finished I put down the skewer, wiped my mouth and eyed the man tentatively as he continued to eat slower than I had.

I still found him frightening and was hesitant to trust him any further than I could kick him, but the fact that he had treated my wounds and fed me at least put him in my good books, for now.

"So... I've answered your line of interrogating questions." I said tentatively as he ate, "Isn't it about time I got to ask you some of my own?"

He looked at me over his skewer. He gestured more with his eyes and chin than verbally saying 'ok', but that was good enough for me.

"Ok, first question: why did you attack me when I first came into the camp?" I asked him, and he finished chewing a mouth full of fish and swallowed before answering simply.

"Forgive my bluntness, my lady, but in your haggard and soiled state I assumed you to be either a
wandering thief or a very well dressed orc."

Had there been anything in my mouth, I would have likely spat it out. "An… orc?! Are you serious?" I all but laughed in his face. Unperturbed by me and my cackling, he took a flask casually from his belt and I instantly smelled the thick scent of brandy as he uncapped it.

"I'll admit, it's unusual to find orcs this far west of the Misty Mountains," he reasoned seriously, ignoring my near laugh as if his answer was the most reasonable thing in the world, "But you were too small and too slight to be a troll."

He took a long swig from the flask and once again I was torn between bursting into maniacal laughter or just screaming. Seeing as neither would have made for a helpful reaction, I opted for just sitting there with my jaw slack and my eyes bulging like pingpong balls.

Seeing the look I was giving him, he raised an eyebrow and gingerly extended the flask to me. I ignored it.

"You're joking right?" I spluttered, trying to keep my tone jovial but it sounded more hysterical than cheery, "There's no way you can be serious about all this! Orcs! Trolls! No offence to your fandom or anything, but wandering into the woods with a cloak and sword? Are you a hard core cosplayer, or just a fantasy nut who camps in the local forests at the weekends?"

I laughed a little insanely at my own joke, but he didn't respond. He just gave me a genuinely puzzled, almost pitying look. I could practically see the thought brewing behind his eyes: 'Poor, mad girl, she must be half way off her rocker.'

Like I was the crazy one here.

There was absolutely no way in hell or heaven that he could be serious… was there?

'No.' I told myself firmly. There was no way I was going to even let myself think along those lines. Not at least until I had every last one of my questions answered.

"Ok, second question!" I fired back, jumping quickly back into my interrogation, "What is with this 'she-elf' nonsense that you keep calling me?"

The man hesitated for a moment, as if judging the best way to answer that question. Finally, he got up and moved over to the pack lying a few feet away. He picked up a thick curved hunting knife and I jumped as he unsheathed it. He saw my reaction and gave me what might have been a comforting look, carefully turning it over in his hand and offering it to me.

"See for yourself." He answered simply, and pressed the blade hilt into my palm.

Confused, I looked from him to the hunting knife. I could see the faint reflection of my own grubby face staring back up at me from the surprisingly well polished steel.

My own reflection…

Realising what he had meant for me to do, I held the blade up in front of me like it was a hand mirror. If it hadn't been for the distinctive shape and colour of my eyes and the small dimple in my cheek, I would have hardly believed it was me. My face was barely recognisable under all the grime, dirt and dried sweat. My hair was a mess of tangles, leaves and dried mud, and I didn't even dare contemplate the state of my clothes. But I ignored all of that — reaching up and pulling back the matted brown locks so I could clearly see my ears.
"What the hell?!" I swore softly, almost letting the knife slip from my fingers.

Sure enough, the tips of my ears were no longer round, but delicately pointed. Pointed.

My first thought was that they had to be fake. Some kind of latex costume prop that had been put on me while I was asleep as a stupid joke. I ran my hands over them, even pulled hard on them, but all I could feel was the warm pulse of my own flesh and blood.

They were real. It was all real!

"Oh, bloody hell!"

In hindsight, it was strange to think that out of everything I had experienced over the past week, it was this small change to myself that really rang as the biggest shock. More than the cave, more than being attacked with a sword, more even than having my arm burned to a crisp. But even so, it was still stranger to think that in all that time, that tiny changes had been there all along. All I need have done was stop long enough to look at my reflection in the river.

My internal monologue quickly sank back into hysterical gibbering as the logical part of my mind frantically tried to search for another explanation. But it could find none.

'Bugger.'

Swallowing thickly, I found myself almost dreading the words that I could feel forming on the tip of my tongue. I was already fairly sure what answer I was going to get.

"Last question. Well, it's actually two questions." My voice came out as barely louder than a whisper, "Who are you? And… what is the name of the continent I'm on?"

It was obvious that he didn't understand the significance of my second question, but he humoured me anyway, and answered both in the same sentence.

"My name is Aragorn, Ranger of the North, though most in these parts call me Strider." He spoke sombrely, "And in the common language, this continent is known as Middle Earth."

I was utterly silent for ten very long seconds.

Then I let out a strangled, wheezing chuckle that quickly turned into a frantic, hysterical laughing fit.

I laughed, and laughed, and laughed. I laughed until my stomach rolled and I thought I was going to be sick, and all the while Aragorn just looked faintly alarmed by my reaction. It took a while, but I slowly calmed myself down again and regained my slightly shaky composure.

"On second thoughts," I croaked weakly at him, "I think I will take that drink after all."

Chapter End Notes

Translations (Sindarin):

* "Don't be afraid, my lady."
** "What is your name?"
*** "You can't understand me?"

A/N: I don't know about you guys, but that's a close to a realistic reaction to being dumped into Middle Earth as I can imagine. Also, if anyone spots any mistakes in the elvish translations, please let me know! Hope you enjoyed it so far! :)
I didn't sleep for two days after that.

Well, not really. Sleep had just refused to come to me for any sustainable length of time, no matter how much I tossed and turned. I'd stayed awake for hours every night, whenever Aragorn decided we would stop our marching and rest until dawn. Given my situation, I had had little choice but to go along with him, especially since he had made it clear that his moral code would not permit him to leave a defenceless woman on her own in the wilds.

No arguments from me.

Even a whole day after the initial shock (which had involved a lot of cursing, swigging from the friendly booze flask, and Aragorn serenely telling me to calm down), I still couldn't fully believe what was happening. The rational part go my brain kept trying to beat my other senses into submission, repeating endlessly that none of this could be real. Even when I reached up and feel the warm and sensitive tips of my pointed ears, I still couldn't quite convince myself that any of this was really happening. It was as if I'd been thrown into one of the fan-character stories I'd written as a teenager.

My memory treated me to a flashback of something with painfully bad grammar and excessive use of the term 'violet orbs', and quickly shoved the thought away with a cringe. This was ridiculous. I was not a she-elf. That I was not somehow in Middle Earth. And I was definitely not being led through a forest by one of my childhood heroes…

'Aragorn,'

I didn't really know quite what to make of him. He was very different from how I had imagined from the book I'd read as a child. He was taller, and older looking. I hadn't imagined his demeanour to be quite so severe and intimidating, nor his speech to be quite so abrupt.

Never the less, he was kind to me. Sort of. He didn't talk much, and whenever he did it was usually only to answer one of my frequent questions, and I'd had more than enough of those to make up for the one-sided conversation.

I asked about the forest, the rivers, the animals, the mountains I could see way off in the distance to pass the time, but I steered clear of anything too personal. I didn't want to risk him getting suspicious as to how much I already knew about him. That was a conversation I really didn't want to get into. But anything and everything else I could think of, he answered.
My arm and hand also seemed to be improving surprisingly quickly. The pain and tingling was almost completely gone by the second day, but Aragorn still insisted that I keep the bandages on to keep it clean. He checked the state of my burns occasionally, but it quickly became apparent that that was as far as his skills as a medic stretched. Still, he never complained when I begged to stop and remove them for a while because the itching was driving me mad. But despite my endless stream of questions, I found it strange that he never once asked me about anything more than my immediate condition.

He never asked after my home, family, or where it was that I claimed to have come from. But I didn't mind. In fact I was glad he didn't ask. Every time I so much as thought of home my eyes would swim and a painful knot would appear in my throat. I caught him looking at me out of the corner of his eye a couple of time when I'd been like that, but he'd chivalrously turned away and pretended not to have noticed. I was grateful to him for that, even if he only did it because he thought I was insane.

We had travelled south for a day and a half before finally coming to a trail that took us through the outer edge of the forest. Whenever we stopped, Aragorn would set up a small camp fire and the tent, and we would eat a simple meal in near silence before one of us would take the first watch. Aragorn had told me during our traveling together about the dangers of the forests, and of the things that only came out after the sun dipped below the horizon.

"Do you think it merely a coincidence that it has the word 'troll' in the name?" he had asked me with a raised eyebrow, and I'd felt my insides squirm. "Though it's unlikely to find any this far from the Misty Mountains, there are still things in the wilds of this wood than I don't care to risk attracting with complacency."

So we took turns staying awake while the other rested. Not that I slept well. I'd quickly found that I physically couldn't sleep for more than an hour or two at a time, no matter how hard I tried to force myself to. Part of me wondered if it had something to do with the fact that I was apparently now in a she-elf's body. But my own personal Ms. Logic still insisted that it was more likely because my real body was comatose or something. After all, you can't fall asleep inside a dream — and whatever all this was, it sure as hell wasn't Inception.

Still, the feeling of not being able to really sleep bothered me. Whenever it was my turn to rest, I would curl up in the tent, close my eyes, and pretend that I was home again. I pretended to dream of my warm bed back in my cosy college flat. Of Katie and all my friends from my college. Of my family's home in the middle of the English countryside. Of my mother, and father, and my little brother who had just left senior school. I'd shed tears during those first few nights, but although the pain of longing for my family never really diminished, I found that the tears didn't come as often by the time we reached the edge of the forest.

It wasn't until our second night on the road that I realised I hadn't bothered to ask Aragorn where he was taking me, although I was fairly sure I knew the answer before I finally worked up the nerve to ask him.

"To Rivendell, my lady." He answered me with a glint of warmth to his eyes, "To the house of Lord Elrond."

Oh boy, as if I wasn't living enough of a cliche already…

And yet, for some unfathomable reason, the idea comforted me more than it logically should have.

The night before we reached where our trail met the edge of the wood again, Aragorn gave me the sheathed knife that I had used as a mirror a few days before.
“Have you ever wielded a hunting blade before?” he asked me, and I shook my head without hesitation, eyeing the blade a little skittishly. With a grunt, he took my good hand by the wrist and placed the knife's hilt in my palm. He angled it so the tip was pointing backwards towards my elbow with the blade facing outwards. "Hold the blade like this. You're small, so this will make it easier for you to defend yourself if your opponent is stronger than you. Only use it if your life is in danger. If you can escape without drawing your blade, you run. Understand?"

I swallowed and nodded sombrely. Well, at least that's something I knew I could do well. Run away.

He nodded, satisfied with my non-verbal answer and handed me the sheath and belt. I tied it awkwardly around my middle since the buckle was far too loose for my considerably smaller frame.

"You think we're likely to be attacked then?" I spoke nervously, running my hand over the wooden hilt of the knife. Aragorn didn't answer immediately, which made me think that he was probably sugar coating the answer for me.

"I think it unlikely, but it pays to be cautious when wandering in this part of the world."

"Great, I'll take that as a resounding 'yes' then." I mumbled more to myself than to him. He gave me what I guessed was meant to be a comforting look.

"We are not far from the valley of Imladris, but not yet close enough to be out of harms way. Just keep your wits about you."

"Right, my wits. Nooo problem." I chuckled with a hesitant little smile at him, to which he returned with a simple nod.

It wasn't long after that that the trail finally began to taper out as we headed down hill. The terrain became noticeably more stony than grassy. When we finally came to the bottom of the long slope, I saw that we were walking in the base of a large river bed. The River Bruinen that ran down from Rivendell, I guessed. Thankfully it must have been the dry season, because the river was little more than a wide stream running up to our ankles.

The water was almost painfully cold, but the feeling of the it washing over my sore feet was like heaven. I hadn't stopped to think about the state of my legs and feet over the past few days. I'd been far more concerned with the state of my arm, or my new status as a she-elf to even think about the fact that I'd been running through the forests in bare feet for a week.

I stopped when we were about half way across, bending down to gently rub the grime from my filthy bruised toes. As I did, I caught my reflection in the slow moving surface of the water. It wasn't the first time I'd seen myself in my new body, but it still left me a little stunned every time I saw my pointed ears poking out from under my tangled hair. The rest of my face and body was too plastered in mud, dirt and sweat to see if it was an improvement on my human self. But the one thing that I could clearly see that hadn't changed were my eyes.

They were still that exact shade of green with a tiny ring of gold near the centre. The exact same eye colour I'd shared with my mother, grandmother, and great grandmother. They were the one part of my appearance that I had always been truly proud of.

Delirious hallucination or not, out of everything else that had changed about me, I was happy that they had remained the same.
Then the stream of water suddenly became more intense, and my reflection vanished back into the ripples again. I heard Aragorn call for me to hurry and not linger from not far ahead, but his voice seemed to be quieter than usual. It was difficult for me to hear him over… what was that sound?

Still stooped over the steam, I slowly stood and turned my face curiously upstream. I was sure I could hear something else, deep and rumbling and not far away, and it was getting louder. Something like muffled thunder.

'No. More like... water.'

"Move!" Aragorn's voice suddenly thundered through to me and my head snapped towards him. He was half way up the river bank, beckoning frantically for me to follow quickly. I would have done so if I hadn't seen what had been the cause of his alarm.

What I could only describe as a wall of water was charging down the gully straight towards me.

I froze in terror, my whole body refusing to move from where I stood.

"Eleanor, run!" Aragorn bellowed at me, and something about the sound of my name snapped me out of it.

I ran. I couldn't remember running so fast in my life. My feet barely made splashes in the flooding stream as I flew over the riverbed in a sprint. But even then I only just made it to the bank as the river crashed down around me.

Before I knew what was happening I was yanked violently back, lifted up off my feet, and swept sharply sideways as the water surged. I fought hard to keep my head above the surface, but the current forced me down again and again. I gasped for air and instead was rewarded with mouth full of river water that made my lungs burn. I lashed out frantically with my arms and legs, searching for something, anything to cling onto.

The current surged again, and my arm struck something hard as I was pulled under. My fingers automatically latched around it, and I pulled with all my strength to get my head above the water. My chest burned as I choked and coughed, trying to suck in as much air as I could. I couldn't pull myself far enough out of the water to breathe anything other than foam.

I heard Aragorn yelling my name again, but before I could so much as figure out which direction he was shouting from, another crash of water hit me square in the face. My tired and weak fingers gave up completely and I was once again swept back under the river. I remembered hearing more than feeling the crack as my head smashed into the rocks. My vision instantly went dark, and the sound of the raging waters seemed to fade from a roar to a low rumble around me.

Somewhere far off I heard a splash and someone shouting.

Or maybe it was someone shouting and then a splash.

Either way, I didn't have time to really think about it much before everything went quiet and wonderfully painless.

~ ❧ ~
"Finally back again are we?" My subconscious dream self's chuckle rang through my head.

I tried to give my intended insulting reply, but I dismally noted I was lying flat on my face, and my witty response was ruined by the fact that I had a mouth full of grass. My other self laughed merrily.

"Is this going to happen every damned time I manage to fall asleep?" I demanded.

"It would seem so."

I pushed myself up into a sitting position and glared at her. She was sitting on the remains of a small stone wall with her legs neatly crossed in front of her. She still looked like an eerily familiar and yet strangely alien reflection of my own face, but I couldn't help but notice she was in far better condition than me.

She was dressed in a plain red dress with long tight sleeves which made her strange golden eyes gleam and her hair shine. I on the other hand, still looked like something that had spent the night in a skip, and it irritated me more than it should have. I spat out a few stray blades of grass in her general direction and she gave me an amused smile.

"Though, I feel obliged to point out that you're not asleep per se. I think asphyxiated into unconsciousness would be a more accurate description."

"Yeah well, having your arm cooked medium-rare and then getting a river dumped on you will do that."

"Trauma to the head too." She added in a nonchalant tone, "That tumble against the rocks looked like it hurt."

"Yeah it did. Pity it didn't get rid of your attitude along with what's left of my sanity."

Her face fell into a deep frown and she placed a hand over her heart, "You could at least try and show a little gratitude. I'm only here because of you after all, and all you've done so far is-"

"Ok, ok, fine. I'm sorry." I interrupted, getting impatient with myself already. Honestly, even in my own head I couldn't get any peace. "I'm an ungrateful wench, you don't need to rub it in."

My inner self sniffed regally and looked down her nose at me. I had always taken no small amount of pride in the fact that despite being on the smaller end of 5'3, I'd mastered the art of being able to look down my nose at people miles taller than me. Now being on the receiving end of the metaphorical stick, I could see why the trait was so effective when I needed to deliberately piss people off. She was technically me anyway, but I still couldn't help but feel irked by how well she employed my own technique.

"Anyway, I'm not here to chat." She went on, sliding neatly down off her perch on the wall, "I'm here to help you."

"Help me?" I questioned.

She walked calmly over to me, eyeing me with the irritating expression of an elder sibling forced to babysit a difficult toddler.

"Well, help us really. Since I am you." She added offhandedly, "And yes, I'm here to help. God knows you need it. Honestly, I can't believe how clumsy and thoughtless you've become over the past few days. Are you trying to get us killed before we get any answers?"
"Clumsy? Thoughtless? Are you serious? I just spent the past two days lost in a wood, hallucinating that I'm in Middle Earth. The only person I've seen almost murdered me, then turned out to be a hard core cosplayer of a fictional character. And none of includes the fact that my real body probably unconscious freezing to death in a ditch somewhere outside this messed up dream." I spewed indignantly, "Tell me, how the hell were you expecting me to deal with it?"

"Better than this. Low expectations breed low standards." She answered with a contempouously flick of her hand, "And I should know. I know what you are capable of, what you're incapable of, your limits, your unconscious thoughts, and I know that you're headed for a nasty end if you keep this up."

I didn't realise it until I was at eye level with her that I was on my feet.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?!" I snapped angrily at her, "I don't see how standing here getting chastised by my own freaking subconscious is supposed to help me! You're not real! None of this is real! You're a trauma induced shadow of my own sarcasm at best! And I still don't know why the hell you are even here!"

I saw rage flare behind her strange amber eyes and watched in bizarre fascination as the reflection of my own lips twist into a snarl. I must have blinked because the next thing I knew she was an inch from my face, staring me down almost nose to nose.

"Why do you think I'm here?" She spat in a voice so hot and furious that it actually made me step back a pace, "I'm your coping mechanism, you idiot. I'm here because you are literally tearing your mind in half trying to convince yourself that this is not happening. Your brain is loosing it's ability to cope because you keep trying to rationalise away reality!"

I just stared at her, suddenly feeling like a very young child being shouted at by an older sister. It made no sense since the one doing the yelling was technically me, but it rattled me anyway.

"Rationalise away reality?" I repeated blankly, the words obviously not really hitting their intended meaning. My other self came close to rolling her eyes, I could see it in the face that was identical to mine.

"Yes." She said, and her tone suddenly turned from angry to pitying in under a second, "Heaven help you, I know better than anyone how you use logic and rationalisation to solve your problems. But I'm sorry to say that right now that isn't going to do you any good."

"W-what do you mean?" I asked, a little frustrated that my voice had suddenly chosen that moment to turn croaky.

"Look, I won't beat about the bush here, boss." She said gently, "The bottom line is that everything right now is actually happening to you, it's 100% real, and if you don't start taking it seriously it's going to get us very dead, very quickly."

I was still for a very long moment, just staring at her, at me. It wasn't until she reached out and took hold of my hand that I realised I was shaking. Her hands were cool and soft, and I could feel the small raised scar on her right index finger that was identical to the one on mine. She led me over to the small wall that she had been perched on and sat me down gently. I couldn't seem to stop myself from trembling.

"So, what can I do?" I croaked out at last.

"Simple." She said flatly, sitting next to me, "You have two choices. You can either go on
pretending that this is some kind of dream, and eventually get yourself killed because you can't
face reality. Or you can accept that this is actually happening, and move forward..."

She hesitated, and for a moment I could swear I saw genuine fear flicker behind her eyes.

"But I can only help you if you choose the latter."

I found myself nodding slowly. I forced myself to inhale deeply, the scent of grass and flowers
filling me. I looked up at the sky, and realised that I could see far more than just stars hanging in
the sky. I could see rolling nebula, far off comets, tiny wisps of cloud reflecting the moon's light. It
was impossibly beautiful.

"W-will..." I stumbled over my words, no longer bothering to hide my fear, "Will you help me
then?"

"I can't give you flat answers. At least not ones that you don't already know the answer to. But I am
your subconscious, your intuition. I can help steer you in the right direction. But you have to ask
the right questions."

"Right." I continued to stare up at the sky, choosing to focus on a couple of falling meteors that
glowed gold as they passed through the atmosphere. "So what about all this? Right here I mean. Is
this real too?

"Well... kind of." She answered, following my gaze.

"So this is all just a dream then?"

"Yes, and no." She said hesitantly. I sighed.

"Well that's delightfully unhelpful." I forced out in a poor attempt at humour.

"What I mean is that yes you are asleep, but no this isn't a dream." She spoke seriously, completely
ignoring me, "Something happened to us before you came here. That much should be obvious even
to you; otherwise you would remember how and why we ended up in that cave in the first place."

"Okay," I said, trying to clear my head enough to unscramble my thoughts, "So can you tell me
what happened?"

My other self looked noticeably uncomfortable, like her answer left an unpleasant taste.

"I can't say, because I don't know. And I don't know, because you don't know. I am you,
remember? You're going to need to work that one out yourself before I can help."

"It figures. No rest for the wicked, huh?"

"Indeed."

I sighed, looking down from the sky and putting my hands on my knees. I could feel a slight ache
appearing on the right side of my head, and across my right arm. When I looked down, my body
was beginning to fade.

My other self gave me a sideways glance and put a hand on my shoulder. Either she was turning to
smoke right in front of me, or my eyes were going out of focus again.

"Looks like its time to wake up again." She said with a small smile that managed to look both grim
and hopeful at the same time. She was going steadily more blurry and dark as the world faded into inky blackness.

"This might be our last chance. Let's make it count."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: It's been slow to pick up, I know, but for the patient ones who are still here, things should start to pick up from here. See you next chapter. :)}
I woke to the feeling of a troll hammering a tire-iron against the side of my head. Or at least it certainly felt like that was what I was being subjected to. Every beat of my heart was accompanied by a dull thudding pain against the inside of my skull. I didn't dare open my eyes, but a little shift of my weight told me I was lying on something much comfier than the hard ground of the forest. My pounding head was also being supported by something that felt far too soft and comforting to be the rough cloak I'd used as a pillow. I rolled onto my side, half burying my aching face in the wonderful softness and slowly opened my eyes.

I was lying on what looked like an elaborate sleeping cot, in a room flooded with so much light that I though I might still be outside. When my eyes finally did adjust, I found myself looking around at a room which might have resembled a recovery ward in a hospital. Only, this hospital looked like it had been modelled on an Alphonse Mucha painting.

Everything was polished wood, carefully wrought stone, and soothing earthy coloured fabrics. The tall arching windows didn't have glass at all, and the breeze blowing dried leave in from outside was gently rustling long gauzy white curtains that fell all the way to the floor. Simple cots covered in white silk sheets were lined up next to each other along the room, all of them empty except for mine.

"I knew it, I'm dead." I mumbled and just gazed in awe at the sight around me, barely noticing myself sitting up on the cot, "I've died and woken up in a cliche."

"Finally, your eyes open."

I almost jumped out of my skin to see a tall dark haired woman in a long navy blue dress standing in a doorway, watching me with interest.

She was stunning. And I meant that in every literal and metaphorical sense there was. She had the kind of face that didn't look real it was so perfect — utterly flawless pale skin, coal black hair that fell past her waist, and almond shaped eyes the deepest and most vibrant shade of blue I'd ever seen. She reminded me of something out of a Renaissance painting of a Greek goddess hanging in the Louvre.

'Da Vinci would have sold his soul to paint her portrait.' I thought past the haze of awe at realising where I was, and who I was likely gawking at. The beautiful elven woman smiled warmly at me.
"I trust you are feeling better?"

"Urrrh…" I responded cleverly. Always ready with a witty retort, that's me. Her smile widened, a laugh dancing behind her incredibly blue eyes.

"My name is Arwen." She introduced herself, confirming my starstruck suspicions at who she really was — not that it did anything to lessen the sudden lapse of my language faculties. I just continued to stare at her like a dumb struck moron. I tried to speak, but a sound more akin to a startled mouse came out of my mouth. I coughed and tried again.

"I'm Eleanor." I said in a tiny voice.

Arwen Undomiel, the Evenstar of Imladris, beamed at me again. It was mercifully less overwhelming the second time around.

"I know." She said.

I must have given her a less than comprehensive look, because she laughed lightly and added, "Estel gave us your name when you arrived. Although, I suppose you know him better as Aragorn."

I sat up a little straighter, ignoring the pain that shot through my head.

"Aragorn?! He brought me here? Is he here?" I paused in my rapid fire questions to let my battered brain catch up, "Wait, how long have I been asleep?"

"Two nights since you arrived. For a time it seemed like you might never wake." Arwen answered me promptly, crossing the room to set down a tray I hadn't even noticed she was carrying. It held a clay jug of water, a small ceramic flask, a tall glass, and what looked like a couple of bread rolls on a plate. She set it next to me on the nightstand, plucking up the small flask and unstoppering it before handing it to me.

"My father asked that I give this to you once you'd awakened. It tastes better than it smells, I promise."

"Your father?"

"The Lord in who's house you currently reside."

'Yes, dummy, both of which you already knew. Engage your brain before you make an even bigger tit of yourself.' My unhelpful internal voice scolded me, and I serenely ignored her.

I held the innocent little bottle experimentally up to my nose the smell was so pungent it almost enough to make me gag. Good lord, I hoped she was right. Not wanting to look childish in front of my world-be-nurse, I held my breath and gulped down the vile smelling concoction as quickly as I could. Thankfully it did taste ok, aside from being slightly too sweet. The moment the liquid touched the back of my throat, all my muscle aches and stiffness all but vanished into pleasant and relaxed warmth. Even the pounding throb in the side of my head was reduced to only a mild discomfort.

"Wow," I coughed and eyed the empty bottle, impressed, "That's some good stuff."

"A mix of miruvor and some other medicinal herbs — my father's recipe." Arwen clarified, handing me a glass of water which I gladly quenched my suddenly dry throat with, "Do you feel well enough to bathe? I imagine you would feel more comfortable in conference with the Lord of Rivendell if you were clean and appropriately dressed."
I finished gulping down my second glass of water and wiping my mouth before looking up at her, perplexed.

"Conference with who?" I wracked my brain for the memories of when I'd read the about Rivendell in the Hobbit, and the Lord of the Rings, "You mean the Lord of Rivendell as in Lord Elrond? Lord Elrond wants to see me? Why?"

"Well, he was responsible for healing your head wound. Though all he told me was that he wished to speak with you once you were well enough." She replied, gesturing to where my head had been throbbing earlier.

Well, that explained why I was still alive then. I'd been sure that I'd finally gone the way of the Dodo when the river had crashed down onto me. If it really had been Lord Elrond who'd healed me, it seemed only right that I should thank him for bothering to put me back together again.

I looked dubiously down at myself. My arm had been cleaned and bandaged neatly at least, but I was still filthy, and still wearing the mud covered dress I'd been found in over a week ago.

"Yeah, I think maybe I should get clean first."

Arwen led me to the end of a passage and into a small bathroom that was surprisingly modern compared to what I'd been expecting. Well, by modern I mean that it had running water, a mirror and a decent sized brass tub, which was good enough for me. I dazedly thanked her for her hospitality.

"You are very welcome. I will return once I have found you some suitable clothes." She chimed with a light smile, and glided off down another passageway.

The second I’d shut the door, I ran the water as hot as I could get it, dumped an entire bottle of sweet smelling liquid into the tub, and started peeling off the tatters of my old red dress. I must have stunk something awful, because the dress was all but stuck to my body with dried sweat and mud. It took a good five minutes to get out of the damn thing, and by the time I was, the tub was almost full.

Sighing blissfully, I finally sank myself into the almost scolding hot water, being careful to keep my injured arm safely on dry land. I'd only just noticed that it wasn't stinging anymore; and when I carefully started unwrapping the bandages to inspect it, I found that the skin underneath wasn't half as bad as it had been the day before. The skin was still a bit inflamed, but the blisters and gross peeling skin had all gone.

Well, that was odd. Even if I'd received fancy elf treatment for my injuries, I'd never heard of burns healing quite that fast on anyone before…

I was so lost in though that I almost fell out of the tub when a light knock came from the other side of the door. 

"Élanor?" Arwen's soft voice came from the other side of the door, "I have a dress for you. May I enter?"

"Um… ok." I replied, sinking a little deeper into the water until only my bare shoulders were exposed above the bubbles. She entered soundlessly, laying a silky looking gown out on a chair before coming over to inspect me. She plucked a cloth from beside the tub, wetted it, and gently turned my face towards her.

"Let's find out what you really look like under all that dirt, shall we?" She said with a kind smile,
and carefully began cleaning my face.

I instinctively drew my knees up to my chest, feeling deeply self conscious about my nakedness beneath the foamy bathwater, especially when the bubbles began to subside with the dirt. Arwen hardly seemed to notice though. After she’s finished with my face, she busied herself with lathering my filthy tangled hair with lemon scented soap, being carful to avoid the painful bump on the side of my head.

She spent a full hour working on getting me as clean as possible, patiently scrubbing and rinsing my hair and face until the water around me had all but turned black with the dirt. Despite still feeling embarrassed at being tended to by someone who made most supermodels look hideous, I was grateful for her help; and very, very happy to be clean again.

"There we are, that's much better." She sounded pleased with her work. Helping me out of the tub and into a soft white towel, she sat me down in front of a small vanity table and immediately started going to work on my knotted hair. That's when I found myself looking directly into the first real mirror I'd seen since I'd been stranded here.

For a moment, I didn't recognise the girl staring back at me.

She had slightly wavy chestnut brown hair that fell just past her shoulder blades, still slightly damp and tangled from the bath. She had a soft oval face, not overly lovely but still pleasant, with a small mouth, a pronounced cupid's bow, and a dimple in one cheek. Her eyes were the only thing that were immediately familiar — jade green with a tiny band of gold around the pupil.

My eyes.

It was me. I was different, but I was still me.

I wasn't nearly lovely enough to hold a candle to Arwen, but there was a new kind of smoothness to all my features that I had definitely not possessed before. My face was suddenly void of blemishes, lines or dark circles. It took me several moments before I managed to pry my star struck gaze from my own reflection, and mentally smack myself back into sense.

Good grief, what was wrong with me? Since when had I turned into a damned ageing-cream advertisement?

The next thing I knew, Arwen had finished combing and drying my hair, and had decked me out in a long mint coloured dress made of some silky fabric I'd never seen before. On a her, I'm sure it would have looked perfect. On me, the hems were about two inches too long. I had roll up the sleeves over my hands, and hold the silky fabric of the skirt up off the floor to keep from tripping over it.

Satisfied that I looked presentable, Arwen led me out of the bathroom and through the house. I followed her on bare feet, trying and failing to hide my sheer awe at the wonder of my surroundings. And that was just the hallways and atriums we passed through. I hardly noticed when we finally arrived at a large set of oak doors, and jumped a little when she knocked twice, and opened the door into a large study.

"Adar," She announced softly, giving me a gentle encouraging nudge into the room, "She is ready to see you now."
Lord Elrond was bloody tall.

Tall, regal, dressed in fine silk robes, and just as difficult to describe as his daughter had been. His face looked older somehow, and yet no less perfect or weathered by time. His hair was dark and straight like hers, but was neatly braided back in a long fishtail. His dark eyes practically oozed eons of wisdom and knowledge, and they were curiously surveying me as I hovered like a nervous chipmunk near the door.

I'd thought Aragorn had been imposing. Now I suspected if he were to stand next to the Lord of Rivendell, he would have looked like a school boy.

There was something uncanny about the man that brought both a feeling of familiarity and unquestioning respect — an odd thing to feel since I'd never set eyes on him in my life. It seemed sensible enough to be polite, though I had no idea what the custom was with the elves and greetings.

Did I bow? Curtsy?

I ended up giving an awkward little wave and felt instantly stupid. He just smiled at me, amused, and it made his face look infinitely younger and less intimidating.

"Élanor, I am please to see you well again." He said, his tone of voice kind and soothing to my frazzled nerves.

'Élanor.'

Apparently when Aragorn had relayed my name to the elves the pronunciation had got a little lost in translation. Both he and Arwen put a lot more emphasis on the "el" sound than I was used to hearing, and it made me wonder if my name actually meant something in elvish.

"Yeah, I'm feeling much better." I fumbled to find words that seemed appropriate, "Thanks for, you know… healing me." A silence rang thick in the air for a long moment as the towering elf lord surveyed me from in front of a massive bookcase he'd been perusing before I entered. For a fleeting moment I had ridiculous urge to jokingly ask if he had anything by Oscar Wilde on the shelves, but managed to kick myself back into sense at the last second. "Arwen said you wanted to see me about something." I said, shifting nervously from foot to foot.

"I wished to see how well you were recovering." He beckoned me over to a set of high backed chairs in front of a happily cracking fireplace. I skittered over and plopped down inelegantly into one, and Elrond sat facing me with an intrigued look. "But I also wished to hear the story of how you came to be in the forest for myself. Aragorn has told me much, but also said you spoke strangely when he found you, and of things he had no knowledge of."

My stomach dropped and I groaned internally. I hadn't thought of what I'd say in this situation.

I didn't have a believable backstory to draw on, made up or true. There was no way I could tell the frigging Lord of Rivendell that the reason I didn't have a backstory was because I was from an entirely different reality. Of all the things to come in useful in later life, I'd never expected the childhood obsession I'd had with one of my favourite fantasy books would be it.

If only I had the encyclopaedia-like knowledge of Tolkein's world I'd had as a teenager.

But I didn't. So I lied.
"I… was travelling." I started slowly, wracking my brains for the vaguest, most congruous story I could, "I got separated from my party somewhere in the forest, and found shelter in that cave. I must have eaten some bad mushrooms or something. I was delirious, that's why I was talking to strangely when Aragorn found me.”

Elrond just looked at me. His face gave away nothing, but his eyes bore unblinkingly into mine. Then his gaze turned suddenly hard as stone and icy cold, and he said: "You're lying."

'Shite!'

I just stared at him, my jaw working feebly, and feeling very much like I was back in school sitting in the headmaster's office. I tried to form a reply, but my throat had gone bone dry.

"I would hear the truth from you, now." He said, calmly, but firmly — his stare pinning me to my chair like a butterfly to a card. I tried to think up something sensible I could say in response to being so easily caught out. Anything. But instead my panic took the reins and I started rambling.

"What else was I supposed to do?!" I blurted without thinking, frustration and fear warring for control inside me. "There's no point in telling you! There's no way you'll believe me! Hell, I barely believe me!"

Elrond's gaze softened very slightly, and it was enough to take the pressure off and let me relax a little. He didn't look away, but he reached towards a tray on the desk and retrieve a decanter along with a small glass. Pouring a shallow amount of amber liquid into the glass, he offered it out to me and I automatically accepted it.

"Child, I have been alive for two ages, and have seen and heard more than you can imagine, let alone comprehend. There is little in this world that surprises me any more." He told me in a matter of fact tone, then leaned very slightly forward in his chair and fixed me with that unsettling stare again. Only this time, there was blunted by the finest trace of amused curiosity, "Try me."

So I told him. Just like that.

I told him everything.

I told him about my entire life. My university, my friends, my home in the English countryside, my childhood of traveling from country to country with my dad's position in the army. I talked about everything I could think of, from the towering buildings of London to the 'bizarre customs' of its people, like single women living alone, going to college, and all children being made to attend school. Every now and then, he would ask short pointed questions, and I answered every one as honestly as I could — adapting things like phones, cars and electricity into phrasing that I hoped would be easier to understand.

The one thing I didn't tell him was about Tolkien's books. That Middle Earth wasn't supposed to be real at all. It was just a story. How in hell could I have explained that I had knowledge of the future of this world, because in my world the history of Middle Earth was a series of popular fantasy stories? That was a rabbit hole I had no intention of going down if I could help it. My memories of the books were hazy at best anyway. I told him about my last day on Earth. I talked about my job, the party, and how I couldn't remember anything beyond walking home in the freezing cold.

I pretty much spilled my guts to him; and all the while he just sat there patiently, listening to it all. By the time I finished telling him about how I'd woken in the cave, the fire had started to die in the hearth, and he was watching me with an expression I couldn't read. A long silence hung in the air like a dense cloud once I'd finished.
Finally, he said, "You are either a very skilled liar, insane, or telling the truth."

Immediately I opened my mouth to declare that I wasn't lying this time, but he held a hand up to indicate he wasn't finished.

"If you are a liar, you are a painfully terrible one to present me with such a fantastical explanation." He said plainly. I bit my tongue hard to keep from pointing out the *magnificent* irony of that statement, and he continued. "I gauge that you are too sound of judgement to be a true mad woman. Which leaves us with only one explanation: you are being truthful with me."

I just stared at him. I was probably in danger of catching flies my mouth had been hanging open so much lately.

"You believe me? Just like that?" I asked, dumb founded.

Elrond gave me a dubious look and arched an eyebrow, "Is there a reason I shouldn't?"

"I don't know. It just all seems… so *insane*." I trailed off feebly.

"And yet, clearly *you* are not." He paused, "Although Aragorn seemed to think you may have been suffering from some kind of intoxicated delirium when he found you. You apparently couldn't stop laughing for quite some time." He rose gracefully from his seat to pour himself a glass from the decanter as well.

I realised that I'd been so enraptured with my rambling that I'd neglected my own glass, which was still sitting in my hand. I took a tentative sip, and the warm taste of honey and wild flowers rolled over my tongue. I hadn't even realised how tightly wound I was until I felt my shoulders begin to relax with the alcohol.

"You claim to be born and raised in a world where you are human, yet you very obviously reside in the body eloth now." He continued with a much softer and less accusing tone than before as he took his seat in front of me again, "Do you have any memories other than those from your previous life? Anything that might indicate who you might be in Arda?"

I tried to ignore the unsettlingly nauseous feeling that stirred in my gut when he said "previous life".

"Arda?" I asked, not immediately recognising the name.

"This reality. Middle Earth." He explained patiently.

"Oh," I mumbled, feeling a little silly for not already knowing that, "I don't know. I mean, I haven't really stopped to think about it until now."

"Then perhaps you should." Elrond nodded and gave me an expectant look. It took me a second to catch on, but I understood that he meant for me to do. I swallowed my mouthful of wine and closed my eyes. I thought hard, pushing back all the memories I knew where mine, and tried to focus on anything that I might have overlooked for the past few days. Anything that was unfamiliar, like it didn't belong. At first, there was nothing. Only dark shadows and shapes, just like in the dreams I'd been having recently before coming here.

Then something odd happened.

I noticed that I could hear something. Actually hear something. It was crackly and quiet, like the sound of a badly tuned radio being played in another room. But it was there. I tried to focus on it,
pushing everything else away to the back of my mind until the sound was all I could hear.

It got only a little louder and a little clearer, but it was just enough for me to catch a single word, "Rah...Rah-va-mae. Rávamë."

"Rávamë?"

I opened my eyes briefly to find Elrond was sitting forward in his chair with a mixed expression of interest and deep thought on his face. I nodded slowly at him, shutting my eyes again and rolling the name around in my mind to see if it jarred anything else loose.

"I remember that name, but... it's not mine, it's someone else's... but I can't remember who's." I gave a huff of frustration, dropping my hands from where they'd risen to either side of my head, and opened my eyes again, "That's all I can hear. There's nothing else."

"You're sure that is the name you remembered? You couldn't have misheard it?" The elf lord asked me seriously.

I thought for a moment, the memory coming back as clear as if I was replaying a recording in my head. "No." I said slowly, listening carefully to the syllables of the word following through my mind, "No, I'm certain. Does that name mean something?"

"I'm afraid not." He said quickly. Maybe a little too quickly, "None that would give any clue as to who you truly are at least."

The crushing feeling of hope slipping away must have shown on my face because he looked down at me with an almost pitying look in his old eyes.

"You're certain you can't remember anything else at all?" He asked me again gently.

I didn't dare tell him about the sardonic second personality who seemed to have taken up residence in my head. That only seemed likely to have earned my a one way trip to the nearest looney-bin, if elves even had such a thing.

"No," I mumbled softly, unable to keep the hopelessness out of my voice, "That's all. There's nothing else."

He paused, for another long moment, and the space between each of his sentences seemed to stretch on forever.

"I'll admit, your situation is one I have never encountered before." He said at last, "Physically you are an elf, there is no debating that. Yet mentally, you are adamant that the place you belong is somewhere else. Somewhere you seem desperate to return to. Logically, it stands to reason that discovering who and why you are here in this world should allow you to find a what brought you here."

The guy had a really roundabout way of saying it, but I think I understood what he meant. I was here, in Arda. There was no getting around that now. I had no idea why or how, but if I could figure who I was in this reality by digging up my current body's missing memories, then that might provide a clue as to how I got here.

And how to could get home.

A tiny spark of hope rekindled in me, growing into a little flame at the mere suggestion that I might be able to get home after all. I peered down into the last of my wine thoughtfully, my fingers
tracing anxious circles on the sides of the cut crystal.

"So, if you're right, then all I have to do to get back is figure out who I was before I woke up in that cave." I asked, refusing to let the tiny flame of hope in my chest fizzle out.

"I believe so."

"Ok then, how do we do that? There has to be something I can do remember quickly."

Elrond gave me an inscrutable look over the top of his glass, "Unlocking the mind is not as simple as unlocking a door or opening a book, Élanor. It will take time and perseverance."

My stomach did a back flip behind my ribs, "How much time?"

"Months. Perhaps years."

"Years?!" I spluttered, almost spitting out my mouthful of wine. He nodded once, and I slumped against the back of my chair, my stomach going from doing tumbles to contortionist manoeuvres at the thought, "But you're a master healer aren't you? Isn't there some way to… I don't know, magically shake the memories loose?!"

I felt stupid just saying it, but I was scrapping the bottom of the barrel for ideas. Elrond just looked at me with a mildly frustrating mix of patience and pity.

"Whatever magic or trauma there is concealing your memories from your conscious mind, it is not within my power to undo. To try may cost you your sanity, and that is a risk I would not take even if you were willing." He explained, his tone firm and unyielding. I knew before he'd even stopped speaking that I was never going to be able to argue with him. I felt close to tears.

"Then, what am I supposed to do?" I demanded, suddenly angry, "I can't get home, I can't contact anyone for help, and I can't even remember who I'm supposed to be here!"

Elrond paused for another agonisingly long moment, steeling his fingers in front of him thoughtfully. If he kept this waiting game up much longer, I was going to damn well throw myself from the nearest window just to see how he'd react.

"If there really is no place else you may go, then I would bid you remain here in the safety of Imladris." He said suddenly, catching me by surprise.

"Stay here?" I squeaked around the knot in my throat.

"You would be a ward of my house. Until your memories resurface, or as long as you choose to remain, you would be under the protection and hospitality of Rivendell." He explained, obviously catching on to my complete ignorance of what he was offering, and even then it took a long minute to really sink in.

He was offering to let me stay here, in Rivendell.

"You would do that, for a complete stranger?" I heard myself ask before I could think, "Why?"

Lord Elrond gave me a look of practically paternal reprimand, but I could see the tiny smile tugging the corner of his mouth. "I believe the more polite response would be to graciously accept."

"I am!" I caught myself, realising that I'd almost screamed the words at him, "I mean… thank you,
Lord Elrond. But that still doesn't answer my question. Why?"

Elrond just continued to smile at me slightly sadly, as if I had asked a question that only a simple child might ask, "You are in need, and as far as you know, alone in this world. It is within my power to provide you with shelter. What else would you have me do in good conscience?"

Something nagging in a dark little corner of my brain was telling me that he wasn't telling me everything, but I ignored it. I didn't have any other choice but to trust him anyway.

Then I suddenly realised I'd forgotten something, or rather, someone crucial.

"Where's Aragorn? Is he ok?"

"Calm yourself, he's fine. He left at dawn this morning." Elrond told me, and I couldn't help but feel a little disappointed. Barring Arwen, and now Elrond, Aragorn was the only other person in this weird and wonderful world that I'd had the chance to talk to. He might not have been all that easy to converse with, but he was real, and he was the nearest thing to a friend I had here — a pretty sobering thought, considering he'd almost skewered me with a sword a few days ago.

Elrond rose from his chair and walked over to a large oak desk on the other side of the study. He opened a drawer and withdrew something small and wrapped in slightly dirty cloth, "He did leave you this before departing, with a cautionary word for you to not to lose it again."

He handed it to me, and I unravelled it curiously from it's wrappings. Something slightly heavy and metallic fell into my lap.

It was a dagger. A sheathed hunting dagger. The same one I'd used as a mirror when he'd first told me I was a she-elf.

I couldn't help it.

I started laughing. And then I started crying.

Three hours later, I sat alone on my cot with a candle burning down next to me on the nightstand; my sheathed hunting dagger resting in my lap.

Arwen had shown me back to the infirmary shortly after I'd finally managed to stop sobbing into Lord Elrond's robes. The poor man. He'd been incredibly forgiving of my meltdown in his study. He didn't complain once, even when I left a damp tear-stained patch on the front of his pristine silk robes. He'd just patted me awkwardly on the back like I was a small child, all while I sobbed and hiccupped. Eventually I'd reined in my emotions and calmed down again.

I was relieved to be alone after that. Arwen had offered to sit with me after she returned me to my temporary quarters, but I'd politely declined, insisting that I needed time to think. And I did.

"Months. Perhaps years."

I couldn't get that one sentence out of my head. I could be stuck here for years, at least according to Lord Elrond.
The thought caused me equal amount of excitement and pain, now that I'd had a chance to get the panic out of my system. I was the Ward of Imladris now. I had the chance to experience Middle Earth first hand, see and experience things I'd only dreamt about at a child and teenager. I would literally be living one of my childhood fantasies...

But I wouldn't be able to see my family, or my friends, or my home.

I'd been going to college overseas for years, so I was used to living on my own far away from my family — but they'd always been there when I'd needed them. The thought of not having my parents a quick phone-call or a few hours airline flight away was...

A dull pain appeared in my chest, just under my breastbone. I clenched a hand unconsciously over it, my eyes stinging but no tears coming. I doubted I had any left. I knew that the ache was nothing to do with my physical injuries.

Then another thought struck me: what if I ended up being here for so long that... I forgot them? Could that happen? Could I ever really forget my parents? My little brother? My friends? My home?

'No,' I told myself adamantly. I wouldn't let myself do that, no matter how long I was stuck here.

I wasn't going to forget.

I hastily got up from the bed, and started rummaging around in the drawers of the nightstands looking for something reasonably pointy as an idea formed in my head. A few minutes of searching and I found a small letter opener in the third drawer down — not exactly what I'd been hoping for, but it would do.

I stayed up almost till dawn that night, carefully carving eight important words into the polished wooden hilt of my hunting knife, my only possession, before finally drifting off into exhausted sleep.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Whewf that was a long chapter and a lot of info to get through. Hope you guys enjoy, and please do drop me a review if you are pleased with what you've seen so far. Even the shortest reviews are appreciated! :)
Part I :: The Ward of Imladris

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Three months went by since I'd been made the Ward of Imladris. Barely any time at all for the elves, but for me it seemed like an eternity.

Nothing had come back. Not a single whispered memory or fragmented thought from before I'd woken in that sodding cave. Not since I'd dug up that one name that made no sense from my scrambled memories. Not even my irritating second personality had been much help even though she'd been appearing in my dreams nearly every night.

I had quickly decided to dub her "Tink" — for Tinkerbell, the angry little fairy from my all time favourite Disney movie: Peter Pan. She'd accepted the condescending nickname with about as much grace as a velociraptor, but at least it got her attention. I was getting really sick of having to mentally shout 'Oi! Obnoxious split personality!' whenever I needed her attention.

I had managed to keep Tink's existence from Lord Elrond so far, and as promised he was helping me as best he could — both in recovering my lost memories and adjusting to life among the elves. Once every week I would visit his study, and he would spend hours helping me focus, trying to dig up what memories I could salvage from the shadowiest parts of my mind.

So far the only things I'd managed to scrape up were dark flickers of figures, places and words that were too shadowy or too quiet to be anything other than frustrating.

Patience, he preached. They would come in time.

Patience, my foot. I doubted a couple of months even registered as time at all when you were older than the New Testament. Regardless of what reassurance the elf lord gave me, regardless of the fact that I was technically an amnesia suffering she-elf now; I was still a twenty-two-year-old university student in spirit. Patiences had never been one of my virtues.

But where my luck with recovering my memories was frustratingly non existent, life outside my head as the Ward of Imladris seemed like a never ending landslide of new experiences.

I was moved out of the infirmary the morning after my meltdown Lord Elrond's office, and was given my own modest but utterly beautiful room overlooking the gardens. From my small balcony I had a panoramic view of the entire valley and waterfalls running under the house. When I'd finally mustered the courage to venture down into the massive gardens, I'd seen someone I'd almost fallen over a bench in shock upon recognising.

Bilbo Baggins of the Shire.
He was difficult to miss at 3'2, brass buttons on his waistcoat, humming happily to himself and pottering around the rose bushes with his pipe. He'd introduced himself and offered to help me up when I *did* fall over at realising who I was seeing. It had been easy as breathing talking with him after that, Embarrassing falls made for a great ice breaker.

He was far more friendly and far less grumpy that my childish memories of 'The Hobbit' had lead me to believe. We'd chatted for hours that first day, and regularly repeated the routine for many days after — minus my awkward face-plant into the magnolias.

Aragorn returned to visit regularly; still as stoic and intimidating as ever, but I was still happy to have his company. I'd tell him about what I'd been up to since we last spoke, and he'd ask short and pointed questions, making sure that I wasn't causing problems for Lord Elrond or any of the staff. He even suggested that I asked one of the sword masters to teach me some basics, since I was becoming obvious that I was going a bit crazy with restlessness. Well, more crazy that usual.

It was nice to have someone who cared enough to check up on me, and I dare say he was even starting to enjoy our little chats.

He even smiled, once.

And then he'd gone and introduced me to Elladan and Elrohir — twin sons of Lord Elrond, and elder brothers to Arwen.

I'd always been under the impression that elves were all meant to be serene, subtle and mysterious creatures. That illusion had been masterfully shattered when Elladan's first words to me had been; "*Manwë's breath, you are tiny!*" That had been followed swiftly by a long series of pestering questions about myself, my life at Rivendell, my lessons, and a *lot* of playful jibes about my height. I could have sworn I'd seen Aragorn biting his tongue to keep from laughing at me. It was like being back in school again.

They'd even given me a nickname. Well, I couldn't tell if it was meant as just a nickname or something bordering on mockery, but ever since Elrohir had said it one night at dinner while merrily jesting about my small stature, it had stuck.

"*Míwen*" — roughly translating to "small lady" in Sindarin. Even in a fantasy realm I was still the butt of the 'vertically challenged' gag. Life just wasn't fair.

It was true though, at just 5'3 I *was* unusually small for a she-elf; though no less graceful than one Arwen assured me, but I was pretty sure she said out of pity than truth. I had light-footedness that could make a professional ballerina turn green, but I still stumbled and fell over during my introductory classes in sword fighting. All of my senses were sharper that what I could have imagined as a human, but I still found I got easily distracted and ended banging my head on thing's I'd walked into. There was no escaping it. Nothing I did ever seemed to be quite perfect enough to match the elves.

The more time I spent among them, the more obvious it became that I was still human in everything but body.

Despite all that, I was *always* made to feel welcome in Elrond's house. Any questions I had, were answered. Any activity I wished to partake in, I was welcomed to (no matter how catastrophically bad I was at it). I'd been trying to quell my boredom like that for weeks. So far, I'd achieved little more than mastering the art of playing 'Smooth Criminal' by Michael Jackson on the elvish harp.

The one new skill I was proud to have flourished in was — weirdly — the art of wielding elvish
knives. The weapon had been suggested to me after a particularly awful swordplay lesson with Glorfindel, in which I had almost severed three of my fingers. I had thrown down my blade in frustration, taken the apple I had brought for my lunch and had thrown it over fifty feet. It had sailed across the gardens, flew straight over the head of an unsuspecting scholar, and down a squirrel hole half way up a cedar tree.

After that, I had abandoned swordplay altogether, and had happily assumed instruction in wielding a set of small but lethal elvish throwing daggers. And damn, for the first time since I'd come to Arda, I was actually good at something.

Shortly after that, one other uplifting discovery occurred.

I found that, though my novice level Sindarin elvish was truly appalling, I was somehow able to read Tengwar script perfectly. I'd run frantically to Lord Elrond's study upon discovering it, babbled hysterically with excitement for about a minute, and then run straight off to the library. I refused to leave for three whole days, and Lord Elrond being the well humoured elf lord he was; had my meals sent up to where I'd all but buried myself in books and scrolls.

It was a gradual thing, my adjustment to life in Rivendell, but it was happening.

I found that the more I listened and watched the other elves, the faster I learned how to at least act like I belonged. Sometimes it even felt like I did belong — as if I wasn't really being taught much at all, only very slowly reminded of things I already knew, but had left untouched for so long that they'd withered away.

There was just one little problem…

"None of the memories have come back?" Bilbo asked me one afternoon over a pot of freshly brewed tea. We'd sat in our usual meeting spot in the gardens; right next to the magnolia bush I'd fallen into on my first day.

"No." I confirmed morbidly, blowing on my steaming cup to cool it down, "I know all these things, but I don't know how I know them. I know how to read Tengwar and throw knives the same way I know how to tie a bow or write my name. I don't think about it, it just happens."

Bilbo gave me a speculative look and chewed thoughtfully on his pipe, "Perhaps they just need more time to surface? Lord Elrond himself keeps saying that maladies of the mind take the longest to heal."

"I know, but if it was only a matter of time, don't you think I should have remembered something by now? Anything? I've been here for months and I still can't even remember what my name was." I reasoned, trying to keep the frustration from my voice, "Just that one other name that makes no sense."

"Rávamë." Bilbo echoed quietly, nodding in recollection and puffing out a perfect smoke ring. I'd told him pretty much everything that had happened in Elrond's study on my first day in Rivendell — sans my status as Arda's latest illegal immigrant. He hadn't ever really been able to do anything to help, but he had always been willing to dish out advice, "No luck scouring the library for clues then?"

"No, there's no record I can find of that name ever being used in the library genealogy records, and I went back four thousand years." I grumbled, "I found about two hundred Bainthaurwen's, fifty Rivaleth's, even two Rythredis's. But no Rávamë."
"Perhaps not a person's name at all, but the name of a place? A city maybe?"

"Nope, I checked that too. Three times. No dice." I just shook my head and stared dismally down into my tea.

Bilbo gave me a gentle pat on my shoulder and uplifting smile that reminded me of my dad, "Don't lose hope yet, Miss Eleanor, I'm sure they will return someday."

He was right of course, but that wasn't really what was getting to me the most at the moment. The homesickness was what was really eating at me. If I didn't occupy myself with something, anything, I started to think of home.

And thinking of home hurt.

Three months of trying and failing to distract myself from that pain had been more than enough. I was sick of hurting. I was sick of being sad. I was sick of feeling hopeless. But more than anything, I was sick of sitting around feeling sorry for myself.

"No more tears." I commanded myself right after my meltdown in Lord Elrond's study, "If I've got time to sit around and cry, I've got time to get up and do something productive."

The only problem was, there didn't seem to be anything productive for me to do.

Finding something to do in Rivendell other than playing music, read, or drink endless cups of tea with Bilbo was a bit like trying to find an ice-cream truck in the desert. Everything was pristine and perfect, and always being attended to. From the Hall of Fire, to the waters gardens, everything was immaculately kept and no help was required in keeping it that way. I'd offered to help anyway, but the appalled looks I'd been given for offering to help in the kitchens had been humiliating.

I was the Ward of Imladris, they'd told me, horrified, a lady under Lord Elrond's protection. They could never have allowed me be seen doing dishes or scrubbing floors, no matter how much I might have begged. And I did beg. Honestly, If this kept up, I was going to have to resort to something drastic…

"'My mind rebels at stagnation, give me problems, give me work!' (1) " I mumbled a quote from one of my favourite mystery novels back on Earth. "I feel your pain Holmes. At this rate I might reduced to shooting the words 'Victoria Regina' into the library wall too."

Bilbo gave me a sympathetic smile that was laced with pity, even though I knew he head no idea what I'd just said. Meh, I was used to being looked at like I was one glow-stick short of a rave by now anyway. He patted my shoulder kindly, and we both just sat for a while, sipping our tea in a pensive but companionable silence. "A wise old wizard once told me 'the world is not in your books and maps, it's out there.'" He said after a while, "Perhaps that is your problem."

I turned to look at him with my eyebrows raised, my tea forgotten, "What do you mean?"

"Maybe you need to stop worrying so much about who you were before, rummaging through all those books in the library looking for answers, and focus more on who you are now. Maybe if you just let yourself just be you, the memories will come back of their own accord."

I thought about that for a moment. Could it really be that simple? All this time had I been trying to be someone else, and that was what was keeping me from remembering? I had no idea who I was supposed to be in this world, so up until now I'd been trying to dig up my elvish past with what I'd seen the over elves doing. Music, arts, and rifling through endless scrolls and book for clues. I'd kept trying because I'd hoped that it might eventually stir up something — throwing as much as I
But nothing had, because I'd never really had any interest in any of those things. I'd never really stopped to think about what *I* wanted.

I'd been digging for answers in the wrong place.

"Miss Eleanor?" Bilbo leaned forwards to peer curiously at me. Before he knew what was happening, I'd taken his face in both my hands and planted a big kiss on the top of his curly head. His face turned an impressive shade of magenta and I grinned at him.

"Bilbo Baggins, you're a pint sized genius! You've just given me an idea!"

With that, I jumped up and raced off towards the main house, leaving Bilbo sitting there staring after me with a baffled sound of, "Shall I finish your tea then?"

~ ❖ ~

"You want to be trained as a healer?" Lord Elrond asked in both a confused and surprised voice. He was staring at me over his desk with a look I couldn't really read. Probably because I'd just come charging into his office without bothering to knock first.

"Yes! I mean… *Mae. G-goheno nin, Im—.*" I tried to remember how to say the phrases in elvish, since Lord Elrond had insisted I practice every time we had our meetings. This time he interrupted me with a quick wave of his hand and a faintly pained look. I couldn't blame him. I'd cringe too if I heard someone butchering my native tongue that brutally.

"Do not feel obliged to force your Sindarin, child. I see you are upset." He said gently, clasping his hands to rest on the desktop, "Tell me why this idea has suddenly occurred to you."

I hesitated before speaking again, trying to think of the best way of putting what I was feeling into words. Then I realised that trying to stick to a script here wasn't going to do any good, so I decided to just wing it.

"When I was human, running till I was too tired to think used to be my way of relieving stress. Now I can run an uphill marathon through the valley without stopping and barely get tired at all. I can read in the library for hours, but I'm not allowed to help do anything around the house. I've been sitting around waiting for something to happen for three months, and it's driving me insane." I explained, wringing my hands together to keep them occupied.

Elrond's thick dark eyebrows furrowed together as he observed me, his faint worry lines deepening in confusion, "You have a very restless mind, Êlánor. Under your circumstances, it is perfectly normal to that you would feel this way. Though I fail to see why you think becoming a healer might help. I've told you, there is nothing more that can be done to hasten recovery of your memory."

"It's not the memories I'm worrying about… or at least not entirely." I replied quickly, edging instinctively towards the desk while I flailed to find the right words, "I feel… useless. I've been here for months and I still have no answers, no purpose, nothing to do except pour over endless books or throw knives at a target. Don't get me wrong, you've been kind to shelter me, and it's beautiful here. But I just feel like I need something more to work towards; more than improving
my grammar at least."

I realised I was rambling, and cleared my throat, embarrassed, "I know it's asking a lot, but I… I do want to be taught to become a healer. Really. I've been studying a lot, and I want to learn more than just what I can read from old scrolls and books in the library. So I… what I suppose I'm asking is, will you agree to teach me?"

For a long time Elrond just stared into my face. I'd become used to the long pauses in our conversations by now. I supposed when you were over three thousand years old, awkward silences just didn't seem that big of a deal anymore. Still, it made me feel like a gold fish in a bowel just standing there, waiting for his response while he just watched me.

Finally he spoke, his tone slipping from gentle to severe as easily as slipping on a glove, "I do not train apprentices by halves, Élanor. If this is what you really want, you must be willing to put your full effort in. I will accept nothing less."

Bloody hell. I hadn't been expecting that.

I hadn't fully believed he'd even consider teaching me, let alone agree on the spot. I realised my jaw was hanging slack, and I mentally smacked myself out of my daze and started nodding eagerly.

He continued, "It will not be easy for you either. You might have learned much these past few months, but your Sindarin is still… poor, and pouring over books is no substitute for years of practical experience. It will take a great deal of hard work, and I trust you know I would not show you any leniency simply because you are a ward of my house."

"I understand." I answered simply, and meant it.

"Then," He said with another slight pause, "let us hope your skills as a healer will be an improvement on your talents as a musician."

I felt my face flush pink in embarrassment, but let loose a small burst of relieved laughter when I realised that Lord Elrond was smiling warmly at me, and amused twinkle in his eyes.

"You should rest. We'll begin at daybreak."

- Continued In Part II -

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
* "Yes. F-forgive me, I'm—." (Sindarin)

Quotations:
(1) Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (Sherlock Holmes - "The Sign of Four")

thoughts, especially in the form of comments (wink-wink, nudge-nudge.) Next chapter will be first of Part II — hope you have enjoyed the build up of "Lapsus Memoriae" so far!
Two Years Later:

I was lying in a flower bed when the first harbinger of change came to Rivendell.

It was one of the few places in the gardens that Glorfindel or my other tutors never thought to look when given the arduous task of fetching me. Only Bilbo ever knew I was there, and he always kept tactfully silent with an amused little smile on his mouth.

Nobody was looking for me today.

It was one of the few days I had free of lessons, and I'd been reading there behind the irises when the bell of the main tower started chiming across the grounds. It signalled the approach of someone in urgent need of assistance, and had roughly the same effect on me that an ambulance siren has on a paramedic.

I shot up out of the shrubbery so fast a flurry of leaves came with me, startling one of the nearby gardeners tending the rose bushes. The book on medicinal herbs I'd been studying fell to the grass beside me as hurriedly I scrambled to my feet. Impatiently I scooped it up, hitching up the skirt of my dress and started running full belt towards the house.

I was better at running now, or at least less clumsy than I'd been two years ago at the start of my training. No longer did I barrel headfirst into innocent bystanders while racing to get from lesson to lesson on time. I ducked and wove past the staff, only coming close to knocking one person over before making it to the courtyard outside the sanatorium. I was just in time to see the back of Glorfindel making his way up the steps.

There was a small form wrapped in a travelling cloak bundled up in his arms.

"Take him into the infirmary, quickly!" Elrond's calm but commanding voice came from the open doorway as the tall blond elf lord entered past him, "And would someone please find my apprentice!"

"I'm here, master!" I panted, following Glorfindel up the steps and towards where my mentor was moving inside.

Though competent by now, I was still not fantastic at speaking Sindarin. So I'd fallen into the habit of calling my teacher 'master' in the common tongue instead, which seemed to both please and amuse him most days. I had yet to persuade him to call me 'padawan' — a work in progress.
He peered at me as we moved inside, "Are those dried leaves in your hair?"

I felt myself flush, quickly brushing away the remains of the dead foliage and tugging my hair back into a messy knot, "I was reading in the gardens. What's happened?"

"There's no time for explanations yet, apprentice, he needs seeing to immediately. Go and prepare at bed while Glorfindel and I assess the damage."

Though a little peeved at being left out as usual, I went and quickly did as instructed. It didn't involve much more than hastily clearing some space in the surgery and throwing a fresh sheet over the nearest cot. Glorfindel pushed roughly past me a minute later and gently deposited the little body of a dark haired hobbit on the cot.

"Glorfindel, I would take it as a kindness if you were to make sure the others arrive safely." Elrond said quickly in that calm and controlled tone I'd learned only came up when a situation was serious.

"Of course." Glorfindel nodded soberly, and swept from the room in a regal golden blur without another word.

I turned to leave as well, but my mentor's voice stopped me in my tracks, "Apprentice, you will stay here."

Turning hesitantly back to the cot I saw Elrond stooped over the little form, carefully inspecting the bloodstain on the upper left side of his shirt. He was so small, even smaller than Bilbo, with dark curly hair and pale clammy skin that was fast turning the colour of sour milk. Tiny veins of black had raised around his eyes and neck, his face was contorted in pain, and when he opened his eyes I saw they were starting to cloud over with a misty film. I'd seen a lot in the time I'd been training as Lord Elrond's apprentice, but I'd never seen anything like that before.

"Are you sure?" I asked, not daring to step closer until I was absolutely certain, "You really want me here for this? It looks… worse than usual."

Elrond read my hesitation like it was a book left open on a table, and frowned hard at me. Since I'd become he apprentice, he'd adopted a very Yoda-esque 'do or do not' attitude towards my tutoring. Either I studied hard and learned how to do something correctly, or I got it wrong and reaped the consequences.

There was never any middle ground, and he did not approve of hesitation.

"Every challenge in life is a lesson, Élanor. You cannot pick and choose the severity of them." He beckoned me over without waiting to see if I'd listened, "Quickly now, tell me what you see here."

I hastily moved over to his side, peering down at the hobbit and gingerly and going through my ingrained routine of assessing a patient. I wasn't an expert like Lord Elrond or anything, not even close, but by this stage into my training I was starting to border on capable. It wasn't usual for him to hand the reins to me anymore, as a test to see what I'd learned. Also if there were any gaps in my knowledge that needed filling. I started prattling off symptoms out loud as I went down the mental list of symptoms to possible causes.

"He's feverish and in pain, but not convulsing yet so it's probably not septicaemia. Milky film over the eyes likely means some kind of poisoning." I carefully unbuttoned and pulled aside the hobbit's shirt, noting what I saw with a clinical detachment, "Darkened veins around the face, throat and chest… and the wound is… blackening, and… cold."

I jerked my hand away from where I'd pressed my fingertips to the skin around the stab wound just
under his left collarbone. I'd read about symptoms like this before in my assigned studies, but even so I couldn't quite believe I was actually seeing it in front of me. Out of everything I could have thought up from my reading, this was by far the last thing I'd been expecting.

"Black Breath?!" I spluttered, looking up at Lord Elrond and half expecting him to announce the punchline of an elaborate joke, "Are you serious? He's been stabbed with a *Morgul knife*?!

"He has." Elrond answered me simply, still using that serious but calm voice to prompt me on, "You know the theory behind them; they affect both body and soul. Which do we treat first?"

"The *hröa* — the body." I said immediately using the Quenya word — the elves equivalent of medical latin — my head buzzing with memorised information, "*Hisféa* feels weak but it's still clinging on. I think it can still be healed, but if the body is not healed first then the spirit will just whither away inside it."

"Well said, apprentice." Elrond said it in a detached tone — a simple acknowledgement of my correct answer, "Though in this case, both must be treated at the same time. The blade's tip remains embedded in the wound, and is burrowing in. It must be removed before anything more can be done."

He beckoned for me to come and stand around the opposite side of the cot while he removed a bound set of medical instruments from a side table. He unrolled the set out on the stand next to the cot and began removing and disinfecting them in a quick and well practiced manner, "Time is of the essence here. You must keep the shard from causing more damage to his *féa* while I remove it physically from the wound."

I felt the blood drain from my face at those words. My jaw started working wordlessly in panic. Elrond didn't even notice before I got a terrified squeak out.

"B-but, that would need me to do a *féa* link!" I stammered frantically, suddenly feeling very, very out of my depth. "I've never done one before! Not on an actual person!"

A *féa* link, for lack of a better analogy, was a little bit like physic surgery. It involved a lot of big words in Quenya to understand properly, but the basic idea was that you used your own *féa*, or spirit, to 'clean and bandage' a psychological wound. It was supposed to help relieve mental trauma and speed up physical recovery, and just like any kind of surgery, it's difficult and really risky. I'd learned the basics — studying under Lord Elrond, you either learned fast or you didn't learn at all — but so far I'd only had practice using it to treat wounded rabbits and battle-spooked horses. I'd never attempted one on a real, living person.

"What if I screw it up?" I breathed almost silently, more to myself than my teacher but he answered me all the same.

"You will not 'screw it up.'" He told me firmly, "He will struggle unconsciously against the pain. You must work to keep him as calm as possible."

I didn't move at first. I didn't trust my hands to keep from shaking. Lord Elrond didn't even pause in his preparation work, but looked up just long enough to give me stoney look that shot adrenaline into my blood. "You *will* do it now, or not at all, apprentice."

It wasn't the first time he'd indirectly threatened me with expulsion as his student if I chickened out of a test. There was a reason for that; it worked. Chicken or not, in two years I hadn't backed out of a single one yet. I wasn't about to start now.
Swallowing around the terrified lump in my throat, I obeyed. Carefully I reached down to rest my fingertips against the hobbit's clammy temples and closed my eyes. Quietly, I began muttering the focusing chant I'd been practicing for months, willing my fëa to reach down through my hands as if it were a limb all its own. The focusing chant wasn't so much about the words themselves, but the concentration and discipline behind them. Even if discipline wasn't exactly my strong suit yet, Lord Elrond had made damn sure I knew them well enough to recite in my sleep. The dark space behind my closed eyes began to slowly fill with dim colour, my mind painting a picture of what my fëa was sensing.

'So far so good.'

Then the image began to focus, and I almost recoiled at what I saw.

The poor hobbit's fëa had been savaged. Not as bad as it could have been given the weapon used, but enough to make me wish I hadn't looked. In the image my mind created for me, I could see the semi-corporeal form of the hobbit's soul in pale glowing blue — and the black essence of the shard wrapped around him. It sprouted from the left side of his chest, where I knew the physical wound was; and had coiled around his ghostly body like pieces of ethereal electrical wire. They were digging viciously into his translucent skin, leaving dark smoking lines where it touched him, choking the light from him with every second.

Words didn't seem adequate to describe seeing a soul being so brutalised, but spoken words didn't really translate well when you were working as an incorporeal spirit anyway. So instead, I tried to force calm and soothing thoughts down through the link between us, trying to reassure him it was ok. I was here to help.

It had roughly the same effect as tipping gasoline onto a campfire.

The semi-corporeal form of the hobbit began shrieking and thrashing like a rabbit caught in a trap, eyes wild, and teeth bared in primal panic. I had to literally cling on to keep from being thrown out of his head entirely. I gritted my teeth and tried again; this time less forcefully, but the more I attempted to send a feeling of serenity through the link, the more he seemed to struggle. Another sharp thrash and I almost lost the connection again.

'Oh to hell with this!' I thought, abandoning the air of calm entirely and instead going for the coil of dark writhing wire that was still latched around his throat, strangling him. I wrapped the incorporeal hands of my will around the barbs, and started trying to pull them loose.

Sharp, freezing cold pain hit me in a wave through my link with the hobbit. I felt it like shards of ice forming behind my eyes, frozen water seeping into my blood. The feeling was so sudden and so severe that I almost let go and collapsed where I stood.

Raw stubbornness was the only thing that kept me there. There was no way in hell I was going to let myself mess this up, my first real shot at healing another's mind, because of a sodding migraine. I schooled my focus, shoved the icy pain to the back of my awareness, and continued uncoiling the viciously sharp wires from around the hobbit's fëa. I lost all sense of time through the link, so I have no idea how long it took to remove all the pieces. When I finally pulled the last of the wires from around his neck he rasped out a strangled breath, and the pale representations of his eyes met mine for the briefest moment.

Then I felt the shard's icy presents beginning to wane, and realised that my mentor must have finally found it and begun pulling it from the wound. The blood-freezing cold started to subside to a merely arctic chill, and the pain in my head began vanishing. The chilly piece of wire clutched in my ghostly hands suddenly turned to smoke, and my extended consciousness was abruptly flung
back into me like the snap of an elastic band.

I shrieked and fell back against the nearby wall, the link severing with a shock of pain. My eyes flew open, and I could see again. I was completely back inside my own body, and Lord Elrond was dropping the blackened shard of the Morgal Blade into a specially prepared fire. It was instantly consumed by the flames, turning them a nauseating shade of green with a sickening hiss of thick black smoke.

I looked down, half expecting to see the tortured ghostly form of the hobbit that I’d seen moments before. Instead, he was mercifully whole again, real, and had finally stopped struggling. He was still pale and clammy, but his chest rose and fell in steady breaths, and the wound on his chest was no longer black.

I let myself heave a heavy sigh of relief. He was ok. I hadn't screwed up.

Stupid as it was I had the sudden urge to laugh out loud. My first fëa link, and I hadn't messed it up. I had managed to helped someone.

Then something glimmered out of the corner of my eye.

I looked down to see what it was, and saw a small and gold band had tumbled from hobbit's pocket. I hadn't noticed while preforming the fëa link, but it must have clinked to the floor by my boot when he'd begun struggling.

Without thinking I reached down to pick it up.

Before I could, an old but vice-like hand seized my wrist and jerked it back before my fingers could brush the little trinket. I looked up sharply, and found myself staring straight into the face of a wizard. And not just any wizard.

A Grey Wizard.

"Best not touch that, my dear." Gandalf said with almost paternal reprimand, lifting my hand gently but firmly away and scooping the little gold ring up safely in a handkerchief.

With a rush of shame, I knew that the old man had likely just saved me from my own idiocy. I should have noticed it, realised what it was the moment I'd seen it. That wasn't just any ring that I had just tried to pick up. That was the Ring.

Then that must have meant, this hobbit was…

"Oh, shite."

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
"fēa" = spirit (Quenya)
"hrōa" = body (Quenya)

A/N: Love? Loathe? Let me know (especially those of you who spotted the Star
Wars references.) You're feedback warms my soul. See you guys next chapter. :)

Frodo Baggins finished his recovery much faster than I think even Lord Elrond had been expecting. I'd been ordered by my mentor to tend to him during his recuperation — which mostly involved mixing up and applying topical salves and changing bandages. With the Morgul blade splinter gone, the rest of his injuries were fairly minor, and he would slip in and out of semi-consciousness whenever I was there.

Bilbo and Gandalf had been coming in to see him regularly, and on the third day of treatment Glorfindel had come up to me in the hall outside and bluntly stated: "Master Frodo is awake. Your attendance is no longer required." Then he'd glided gracefully off down a passageway.

'Probably to go and drop-kick puppies, or take candy from small children,' I'd thought sourly.

That of course meant it was back to work as usual for me. Elrond had me organising the herb stocks in the sanatorium this time. Cataloguing, checking dates of the harvest, making sure they were properly stored. It was mind numbingly dull work, but it left me with to think over what was happening.

It had been two years since I'd come to Arda, but my limited memories of Tolkien's stories hadn't faded much. I'd made sure of that. From my own fragmented recall of the books, and from talking with Bilbo about his adventures, I had a pretty good idea which part of Tolkien's 'story' I'd ended up in.

Frodo had been brought to Rivendell after being stabbed with a Morgul blade. Gandalf was here, Aragorn had returned as well, and the One Ring was here too. It hardly took a rocket scientist to put the pieces together. Especially when Lord Elrond told me the that there was to be a meeting of emissaries from all the free races of Middle Earth.

And it was to be held here in Rivendell, today.

And I was already late.

The reason for my tardiness was thanks to the towering pile of record books I'd been given the last minute task of returning to the apothecary on the other side of the house. Each book was as thick as my arm, stuffed to the bindings with loose bits of parchment, and weighed about the same as a small dog. I'd just about managed to stumble to the top of the stairs without dropping any or tripping over my dress, when something big and solid as a brick wall barrelled into me from my right.
If I hadn't been so weighed down with all the books, I would have been hurled backwards off my feet and into the air. As it was, I was saved from being bulldozed back down the stairs by a large hand seizing me by the wrist. The record books weren't so lucky. They were catapulted out of my arms, and crashed thunderously back down the stone staircase while loose pages flew in every direction like party streamers.

Hell. I was going to get hell for this.

I whirled on the spot, more than ready to give the idiot that had ploughed into me a pointy-ear-full when my tongue suddenly lost it's ability to function. The man standing before me, still holding me firmly by the wrist, was not an elf.

The only coherent thought I could form at seeing him was; 'Oh thank God, someone with a beard!'

"I'm so sorry!" He spluttered, quickly releasing my arm as if it was a hot poker fresh out of the fire. I'd barely opened my mouth to answer him when he stooped and started hastily picking up the papers that had been scattered like confetti over the landing.

I just stared down at him like an idiot.

He was a tall man, or at least he would have been if he'd been standing, with auburn hair he'd neglected to cut in a while. It fell almost to the tops of his leather shoulder guards. He was also broad across the shoulders, a trait I'd only seen in Aragorn and the elves who trained serious in swordplay. It was small wonder he'd nearly sent me flying just by walking into me. He stood up to hand me one of the books he'd knocked out of my arms, and I got a good view of a really nice pair of blue eyes to go with the russet bread. Clearly he'd won some kind of genetic lottery at birth, because he was handsome. Really, handsome.

After a few months of living in Rivendell I'd given up feeling self conscious about my own appearance, shortly after my first dress fitting with the house's seamstress. When you lived in a place where everyone was beautiful enough to make Kate Moss look like a shrivelled hag, worrying about your own physical attractiveness kind of lost its relevance. There was no way I was ever going to be able to stand next to Arwen, or Glorfindel, or even Lindir and feel like anything but a toad. I'd had over two years to get used to feeling like the ugly stepsister, and it had stopped bothering me a long time ago.

But now it did.

"Please forgive my clumsiness, my lady." He apologised again, stacking the disarrayed papers and handing them back to me.

As was my custom when life presents me with someone of greater than average attractiveness: I started babbling like an idiot.

"Oh, don't worry!" I stammered breathlessly, "Thanks for, um… not throwing me down the stairs."

'Smooth, Boss, very smooth.'

' Shut it, Tink. You're not helping.' I silently growled at my internal double. She chuckled and fell obediently silent.

The human man scooped up another of the book and the last bits of paper within easy reach, but instead of handing them over, he held onto them and extended his hand palm up to me. For two horrible seconds I had no idea what to do. I just stared stupidly at him. Then I hastily started juggling the heavy books into one arm and allowed him to take my free hand. If he was bothered
by my obvious lack of social graces, he made no show of it.

"Boromir, son of Denethor the Steward of Gondor, my lady." He introduced himself, and I felt my heart skip a couple of frantic beats as he stooped formally over my hand, "I'm here to attend the —." 

"You're here for Master Elrond's council!" I blurted before I could stop myself; suddenly remembering him, or at least his name. Boromir gave me a very startled look and I slammed the lid down on my internal jar of spoilers before I could give anything away, "I mean, of course you are! Why else would you be here, right? Ha ha!"

I started laughing, but it came out a bit too high pitched and not burdened with much dignity, so I tried to subtly turn it into a cough. Boromir just nodded and smiled politely down at me, which only made it harder to focus on speaking like an intelligent being.

"Yes, I was on my way there now. But I'm afraid I've found myself quite lost. These halls are quite the maze."

"It's alright, I used to get lost all the time when I first got here." I said, but inside my head I was banging my head against a wall. Jeez, since when had I turned into the simpering, doe-eyed heroine from a trashy romance novel? And who gave him the right to be that good looking and charming? I never had this problem with elvish men. They were all too pretty...

"You're not also here as an emissary for the Council. Are you, my lady?" Boromir asked, looking at me with polite curiosity.

"No. Well, not really, sort of..." I stumbled over my word, still trying to pull the shreds of my dignity back around me. He gave me another rather nice smile, raising a questioning eyebrow and clearing expecting an explanation. I tried to ignore it and coughed again to get my squeaking voice under control and looked down at the books in my arms. "I suppose you'll find out soon enough. I... have to return these first. Do you need me to show you to the hall?"

"I think that would be best, since I'm very likely to lose my way again if you abandon me here." He chuckled lightly, and began picking up the last of the papers littering the stairs, "Allow me."

"Oh you really don't have to—."

"I insist, my lady." He interrupted me with another small smile, "It is the least I can offer in return for my clumsiness.

I couldn't bring myself to argue. We spent the next five minutes collecting the last remaining bits of parchment off the stairs and landing, before Boromir chivalrously (and maybe a little foolishly) offered to help me deliver them to the apothecary too. She was a scary looking she-elf with the piercing grey gaze of an angry harpy, and she reminded me vividly of a librarian who'd once worked at my primary school. She gave me a thoroughly disapproving look at the shabby state the record books were in, but I'd already started herding Boromir back out the door before she could give me a grilling.

"Well, that was bracing." He muttered quietly the moment we'd retreated to safety back down the hall, "I've encountered trolls with more forgiving dispositions than your herb-master."

I snorted in a very un-lady like fashion.

"I did try to warn you. She's always been grouchier than usual around me." I gestured up at him. He all but towered over me by more than a foot, "I should probably be thanking you though. You just
saved me from a very long lecture."

"I live to serve, my lady." He chuckled amiably. His smile must have been contagious because I couldn't help but smile back.

"Eleanor." I told him, "My name's Eleanor."

"A pleasure, Lady Eleanor."

I twitched a bit at the 'lady' part, but was pleased to hear him use the proper pronunciation for a change. I couldn't bring myself to be repelled by the cheesy dialogue. It had been years since I'd had the chance to talk to someone who looked like they were within a few decades of my own age.

When we finally arrived at the entrance to the hall I let Boromir walk in ahead of me, subtly trying to use his considerably bigger frame to disguise my own. It almost worked.

The hall was already full to the brim with emissaries from the elves, men, dwarves; and everyone already seated in a semi-circle and talking quietly amongst themselves. Only three people even noticed I was there at all. Gandalf, who smiled almost invisibly at me. Aragorn, who gave me only the tiniest nod of acknowledgment. And Glorfindel, who eyed me from where he'd been talking with two other unfamiliar golden haired elves.

'Tic, tac, toe, three blond supermodels in a row.' I chuckled silently to myself, schooling my expression and deliberately avoiding their gazes. Glorfindel in particular was giving me a withering look, and I had to fight not to scowl back at him.

He'd disapproved of me on principle since I'd quit learning swordplay from him a few months ago, in favour of something less likely to end in surprise amputations. To his credit, he had a good reason to dislike me — I might have told him in a fit of pain induced anger exactly where he could shove his ''noble blade" before stumbling out of the training ground. I'd been made to apologise of course, but it turns out elf lords as old as Glorfindel tended to hold grudges for a very, very long time.

"Lord Boromir." Elrond stood and welcomed the human man at my side with a formal bow of the head, bringing his hand to his heart in the elven sign of greeting. Then his eyes fell on me.

"Apprentice." He acknowledged me more quietly and with far less approval at my tardiness, gesturing minutely with his chin for me to take my seat. Boromir gave me a mildly surprised look at the revelation of my 'title,' which I met with a sheepish rise and fall of my shoulder before quickly taking my place beside my mentor.

As Lord Elrond's ward and apprentice, I had the seat directly on his left, while Arwen (who was never late for anything) as his daughter and only present heir, had the honour of sitting at his right. We were there as a show of formality for the visiting emissaries — more so Arwen than me. The only real reason I was even there was because most of the emissaries had heard that Lord Elrond was training a new apprentice, and they were all expecting to see her there in support of her master's council.

It was for that reason that I was under very strict instructions to keep my mouth firmly shut for the entire proceedings. Two years as my teacher had been long enough for Lord Elrond to learn that my mouth tended to run whenever I was nervous.

"Strangers from distant lands, friends of old, you've been summoned here to answer the threat of Mordor. Middle Earth stands upon the brink of destruction, none can escape it. You will unite or
you will fall. Each race is bound to this fate, this one doom."

Elrond, along with everyone else in the room, turned to face the hobbit who was perched beside Gandalf and looking pretty anxious about being here.

"Bring forth the Ring, Frodo."

I gave Frodo what I hoped was an encouraging little smile as he got to his feet, gingerly moving forward to where a stone podium had been set up, and placing the innocent looking gold ring onto it.

"So it is true." I heard Boromir's voice whisper as everyone in the hall fell into hushed mutterings as well. The atmosphere in the open air hall suddenly felt thick and heavy, and I knew without drawing upon my knowledge of the books that it was the effect of the Ring. No one in the semi-circle of different races seemed to be immune to it. I could see Aragorn eyeing Boromir out of the corner of his eye as the other man rose slowly out of his chair.

"I had a dream." He started slowly, far more dazed and less controlled than I'd seen him in the hall outside minutes before, "I saw the Eastern sky grow dark. But in the West a pale light lingered. It was crying 'doom is near at hand, Isildur's bane is found'. Isildur's bane…"

As if not fully realising what he was doing, Boromir's hand began to drift out towards the Ring. I felt my hands gripping the armrests of my chair hard enough to turn my knuckles white. I didn't remember this part. I didn't remember anyone succumbing to the Ring this quickly.

I wanted so badly to shout a warning, but my mouth remained tightly shut.

'Don't touch it!' My I screamed silently, but Lord Elrond didn't.

"Boromir!" He thundered aloud.

Then without warning, actual thunder boomed through the hall. It shook the pillars, rattled the leaves from nearby trees, and the autumn sunlight abruptly drained from the room as if covered by a storm cloud. I didn't even realise that it was Gandalf's voice making the ground shake until I saw he'd stood up and his lips moving. He was speaking in a horrible twisting language that I couldn't understand, but could feel writhing all the way up through me like a serpent. It made my head spin and my eyes lose focus, and something deep in the darkest parts of my mind broke with an audible snap.

Then suddenly I was not in the council hall anymore…

I was standing in a field littered with the corpses of men, elves, horses, and horrifying beasts I didn't have names for. I was staring down at the body of a woman in dark armour lying in the bloodstained grass. A woman I didn't know by name.

A woman I'd just killed.

I recognised the blade protruding from her chest as my own, somehow. I'd thrust it through her heart seconds before. She was smiling up at me with a victorious grin on her beautiful face as the light faded from her inhuman yellow eyes, their pupils slitted like a cat's.

"Well played, mîth pazâth.* Well played." She laughed through the blood filling her mouth, pale flickers of gold fire collecting around the wound in her chest. The disturbing yellow colour was draining from her eyes as she looked at up me, "Now it's your turn."
Then the thunder suddenly stopped, and I was back in my body again. I could hear myself gasping for breath as if I was being held under water.

"Jesus Christ!" I rasped between breaths, slumping bonelessly in my seat and trying to pull my senses back together.

Whatever had just happened, I clearly hadn't been the only one who'd been affected. Prying my eyes open and looking around, I saw almost all of the elves present had gone pale and breathless too. Arwen was hunched over herself and looked like she was about to be sick.

Lord Elrond seemed to be the only one who remained in reasonable control of himself because he whirled on the old wizard with very near outrage, "Never before had any voice uttered the words of that tongue here in Imladris!"

"I do not ask your pardon, Master Elrond, for the Black Speech of Mordor may yet be heard in every corner of the West! The Ring is altogether Evil!" Gandalf countered, somehow managing to capitalise the word 'evil' without even raising his voice.

So that had been it. He'd been speaking the language created by Sauron himself — no wonder the frigging earth had started shaking. But that still didn't explain what on earth what I'd seen. It had been like a movie playing behind my eyes…

'Tink,' I called inside my head, 'what the hell just happened? What was that I just saw?'

I heard the same confusion and excitement as mine reflected in her voice when she replied. 'I'm not sure. It looked like a memory of a dream, but… more real. Whatever it was, it happened too fast for me to get much more than you did.

'A memory?' I froze in my chair as the thought formed in my mind, 'You mean that could that have been one of my memories?'

'Maybe…'

I was vaguely aware of the fact that Boromir had started grandstanding again, but I wasn't listening anymore. My brain had gone from zero to full speed in seconds. Whatever that was I'd just seen, it had been the first thing to even come remotely close to a recovered memory I'd found since I'd been here. It had made no sense, and had been only seconds long; but after two years of waiting it was something.

I looked up from where I'd been staring at my hands to find Gandalf staring at me.

Everyone else seemed to have recovered from his impression of a Skrillex concert, their attention now focused on Boromir, but Gandalf's focus was fixed entirely on me. His normally kindly blue eyes were narrowed in an expression I couldn't read. Flickers of confusions, shock, and something else I didn't recognise all whispered across his face.

He'd seen something. Whatever had just happened to me, he knew something about it. I was sure of it.

I wasn't given a chance to so much as open my mouth to question him because Aragorn's commanding voice suddenly rang across the hall like a warning bell. "You cannot wield it, none of us can!" He spoke up with a severe look at Boromir, having been suspiciously silent up until now, "The One Ring answers to Sauron alone, it has no other master."

As kind and polite as Boromir had been to me, I saw right then that he was more than capable of
looking down his nose at someone he deemed inferior.

"And what would a Ranger know of this matter?" He sneered. He'd clearly intended the question as rhetorical, because he and everyone else in the room looked stunned when one of the blond supermodel elves came to his feet.

"This is no mere Ranger," The male elf with shocking grey-blue eyes stated boldly, aiming them in a razor-sharp glare at Boromir, "This is Aragorn, son of Arathorn. You owe him your allegiance."

Boromir's eyebrows shot up, and he turned back to Aragorn with a renewed look of disbelief, thought this time it was tinged with shock. "Aragorn? This is Isildur's heir?"

"And heir to the throne of Gondor." The blond elf added, still fixing Boromir with a rather unsettling stare. I saw Aragorn put his face in his hands.

"Havo dad, Legolas." Aragorn told the elf with an almost embarrassed shake of his head.

I looked over at them all curiously. So that was Legolas? I'd been a soppy teenager back when I'd read the Fellowship of the Rings, but even then I'd never pictured him being quite so... pretty. Even among the other golden haired elf lords, he managed to look like a pissed off Disney prince. He also looked more than ready to start off at Boromir again, but Aragorn abruptly fixed him with such a hard look that he closed his mouth and remained silent.

'Know thy place, pretty boy.' I thought just a little bit smugly, pleased to finally see someone else on the receiving end of Aragorn's 'stop-talking-or-unpleasant-things-will-follow' glare.

"Gondor has no king," Boromir murmured quietly at the elf with a hard look all his own, then turned to Aragorn with his sneer back in place once again, "Gondor needs no king."

I already knew Aragorn was no push over by any stretch of the imagination, but it still irked me to see him let Boromir talk to him that way and give no reaction at all. I peered over at him, trying to read his deliberately blank expression, but he avoided my gaze along with everyone else's in the room.

"Aragorn is right, we cannot use it." Gandalf announced once Boromir was seated again.

"Then you have only once choice." Elrond continued before anyone else could argue, "The ring must be destroyed."

"Then what are we waiting for?!" One of the dwarves with a huge red beard was suddenly up out of his seat and swinging a battle axe the size of my leg down at the Ring with a bellowing shout. I'd known what was going to happen before the axe came down.

What I hadn't expected to happen was for the blade to explode upon impact, or for me to get hit in the face with a flying piece of the broken handle.

A blunt but big piece of wood clouted me right between the eyes, and I shrieked and almost fell backwards out of my chair. Both my hands flew up and clamped over my face as pain exploded behind my eyes. The blow hadn't quite been enough to break my nose, but it still felt like I'd been socked in the face with well pitched a rounders ball.

"What sorcery is this that shatters dwarven steel like glass?!" The dwarf bellowed in outrage, his shouting sending waves of pain through my temples and drilling holes in my eardrums.

"You seriously thought hitting one of the damned Rings of Power with an axe was actually going
to work?" I bit furiously at him without thinking, burning pain still pulsing through my entire face. It was only when I lowered my hands from my throbbing nose that I realised I hadn't snapped the words quietly; so much as angrily shouted them across the entire room.

Everyone was staring at me, mixed reactions of shock and outrage on every face; human, dwarf and elf.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Elrond slump in his chair and pinch the bridge of his nose. I felt a tiny pang of shame in my gut. I didn't get a chance to sink through my chair in embarrassment because the redheaded dwarf was already back on his feet, beard brisling in indignation.

"And who are you to speak out like that to any of us here, girl?" He yelled at me, and I swear to God I saw a tiny bit of spit fly. I opened my mouth to bite back an angry retort, but Elrond cut sharply across me.

"Élanor is a ward of my house, and my apprentice." He stated with calm diplomacy, but aimed a severe sideways look at me and I dearly wished for the floor to swallow me whole, "And though you'll have to forgive her forthright manner of speaking, Gimli son of Gloin, she is correct. The Ring cannot be destroyed by any craft we here possess. It was made in the fires of Mount Doom, and only there can it be unmade. It must be taken deep into Mordor and cast back into the fiery chasm from whence it came."

He let his piercing gaze sweep one over everyone in the room and finished, "One of you must do this."

A thick silence rang through the entire hall. If a comedic cricket had started chirping in the background it wouldn't have been out of place.

"One does not simply walk into Mordor." Boromir broke it with an exasperated disbelieving tone, "Its Black Gates are guarded by more than just orcs. There is evil there that does no sleep. And the Great Eye is ever watchful. It is a barren wasteland, riddled with fire, and ash, and dust. Even the air you breathe is a poisonous fume. Not with ten thousand men could you do this. It is folly!"

"Have you heard nothing Lord Elrond has said?" Disney prince Legolas was on his feet once again, and this time he wasn't bothering to be diplomatic, "The ring must be destroyed!"

"And I suppose you think you're the one to do it!" The redheaded dwarf who I now knew as Gimli fired back, also getting to his feet and aiming his pint sized wrath at the blond elf opposite him.

"And if we fail, what then? What happens when Sauron takes back what is his?!" Boromir shouted over them both.

"I will be dead before I see the Ring in the hands of an elf!"

The chaos that ensued next could have put most bar fights to shame. Men, elves, dwarves, everyone in the room was suddenly on their feet, shouting and pointing fingers. I was half expecting someone to whip out a smashed beer bottle and turn it into a real blast form my bartending days. The only people in the entire hall who weren't contributing to the mayhem were Lord Elrond, Gandalf, Frodo, Arwen and me.

"This is insane." I mumbled in disbelief, just watching at the entire room dissolving into testosterone driven chaos, "Somebody's head's going to end up being paraded around on a spike at this rate."

"Be grateful it isn't your head, apprentice." Elrond said grimly, still pinching the bridge of his nose.
I swallowed nervously. It was an empty threat, I knew, but it was more than enough to show exactly how angry he was with me for the scene I'd just caused.

A small, clear voice cut through the mayhem of the council chamber. It was a voice I hadn't heard up until then, but I knew without looking who it belonged to.

"I will take it! I will take it! I will take the Ring to Mordor!" Frodo said bravely, though his bright blue eyes held fear and his face was scared as all eyes suddenly fell on him, "Although… I do not know the way."

Gandalf was the first to rise out of his chair and come to stand by the little hobbit, resting a companionable hand on his shoulder. "I will help you bear this burden, Frodo Baggins, as long as it is yours to bear."

I turned and saw Aragorn rise too, far more solemn than Gandalf but just as determined. "By my life or death, if I can protect you, I will. You have my sword."

"And you have my bow."

"And my axe."

I watched as both Legolas and Gimli too came to stand beside Frodo and Aragorn, though neither of them looking particularly pleased about being next to each other. Legolas in particular looked close to rolling his eyes.

'Five down,' Tink whispered in my head, 'Four left to go.'

My heart started thudding in excitement as I watched Boromir slowly rising from his seat too. His eyes flickered briefly over the Ring one more time, before he smiled that warming smile of his at Frodo.

"You carry the fate of us all, little one." He said softly but with finality, "If this is indeed the will of this council, then Gondor will see it done."

Time slowed down for me in that moment as I looked around at them all, warring with myself inside where I still sat glued to my seat beside Lord Elrond.

Every instinct in me was screaming that this was it! This was the opportunity I'd been waiting over two years for! If there was any chance left to help me finally remember who I'd been here and get home, it was this. My better sense was also growling at me to be quiet. What good would getting involved in this do? I'd read the books, albeit a long time ago. I already knew what was going to happen, mostly. What would getting involved accomplish? I'd just be throwing myself into danger on the off chance that I might find another clue to my past. But my instincts argues that staying obediently silent now would mean I'd be letting the only clue I'd had in years walk right out of my life, probably forever.

That's what it boiled down to in those few second. If I stayed quiet I'd get no answers; but at least I'd be safe. It would have been sensible to sit quietly and do nothing, but…

'Hell, I've never been good at being sensible…'

Slowly, I rose out of my chair too.

"So will I." I said, my voice a bit rough with nerves.
Elrond's head whipped around so fast I'm surprised he didn't give himself whiplash. "Élanor, what are you…?"

"You cannot be serious, girl." Gimli talked across the elf lord without missing a beat, eyeing me contemptuously behind thick eyebrows.

Doubt suddenly gripped me, and I almost sat back down again. But then I could suddenly hear a memory of my running coach’s voice playing in my mind. He was repeating the lecture he'd given me right before my first 5k race: "If you start telling yourself 'I can't do it', then you've already lost."

So I stood there firmly, staring the gruff looking dwarf down as best I could from my significantly higher vantage point, keeping a harsh and haughty glare plastered onto my face. He didn't need to know that my hands were shaking and my knees were trembling.

"Actually, I'm perfectly serious."

"The dwarf is right." I recognised the voice of Legolas and looked up from Gimli to find him staring straight past me at Lord Elrond as if I wasn't even there. "She is no warrior. She cannot have the experience or the capability of defending herself should we face danger along the way."

That irked me. At least the dwarf had had the decency to voice his displeasure at me, not my teacher.

"I'm still here you know!" I bristled indignantly. Legolas finally turned his sharp grey eyes on me, sending me a cold look. It was actually kind of impressive how intimidating he managed to appear, considering he was almost as pretty as Arwen. If I hadn't already taken an immediate and thorough disliking to the guy's attitude, I might have asked him to teach me how he did it.

"You'd be a liability." He said flatly, and for some reason the words both chilled me and enraged me at the same time. I scowled, my pride and hope stung, and before I knew what I was saying the words were already out of my mouth.

"Liability suggests uselessness," I said, my tone icy, "And I wouldn't be useless to you."

Every one of the men in the hall except for Gandalf, Elrond, Frodo and Aragorn looked at me with damn near tangible levels of scepticism.

"Oh? And what kind of useful purpose is it you are suggesting then, lassie?" Gimli enunciated the nickname as if it was some sort of curse word meant to insult me. I started to speak again, but Frodo's small clear voice rose up out of the silence.

"I remember you," He said, and I turned to see him looking up at me as if trying to recall a memory that was very, very fuzzy, "You were there when I was being healed, and while I was recovering. You helped treat me."

"I… yeah, I was." I confirmed, shifting a little conformably from foot to foot. Strange that it was Frodo's tone of gratitude that had unnerved me more than the hostile voices of the others present, "Though, mostly that was Master Elrond's work. He took the Morgul splinter out of you."

Frodo frowned slightly, still fixing me with a startlingly blue gaze. I pointedly ignored the harsh stares and glares of the others present, and instead I spoke only to the hobbit who was still looking up at me with an expression I couldn't read.

"It's true, I am not a warrior, Mr. Baggins," I said hesitantly, choosing my words as carefully as I
could, "But I've dealt with most injuries before. Broken bones, lacerations, concussions, burns. I can treat your wounds and stitch you back together as well as I can stitch up any clothes that need mending. If you'll let me to join you, I will do my best to keep you and everyone who follows you in one piece."

I eyed Legolas and added, "Maybe two pieces."

The blond elf narrowed his grey-blue eyes at me, his lips pressed into a thin line. Then Gandalf came out with something I really didn't expected to hear from any of them.

"I believe she should be allowed to join us."

If there's been surprised in the room when I'd stood up and offered to join them, there was damn near awed shock when Gandalf backed me up. He ignored the baffled looks (mine included) effortlessly, eyed me with a tiny conspiratorial twinkle in his eye and continued, "We can carry all the bandages and antidotes we wish, but that would be no substitute for a trained healer. And bar Lord Elrond himself, I doubt you could hope to find one present and willing with a steadier hand and a calmer head than his own apprentice."

I tried not to gulp.

Grateful as I was to Gandalf for his vote of confidence, he might have been exaggerating my abilities for the benefit of the crowd. Most elven healers had hundreds of years to master their craft. By comparison, my two years of intensive study with Lord Elrond probably equated to little more than an elvish crash course in first aid.

My mentor appeared to be thinking the exact same thing, because his frown was so deep that it looked as if a thunder cloud had rolled in on his eyebrows.

"Here!" Something, or rather someone, suddenly shot out of the bushed right behind me. A rather rotund looking hobbit with reddish gold curly hair pushed past us all and forced his way to Frodo's side, "Mr. Frodo's not going anywhere without me!"

"No, indeed not. It seems hardly possible to separate you two, even when he was invited to a secret council and you were not." Elrond commended dryly, though there was an amused smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"Oi! We're coming too!" Two more hobbits came sprinting out from where they'd been hiding behind two nearby pillars and came to a stop on Frodo's other side, grinning excitedly, "You'll have to send us home tied up in a sack to stop us!"

"Anyway, you need people of intelligence on this sort of mission, quest… thing." The shorter one said sagely.

I found myself laughing despite my nerves and the hobbit grinned cheerily up at me. My giggles died quickly though when I turned to find my mentor looking at my seriously. He didn't look angry, at least not that I could tell. He looked… worried. Almost pained.

He gave my a searching look and finally said quietly, "If this is truly your choice, apprentice, then I will not stop you."

I couldn't explain why, but I felt an unexpected shot of sadness mix in with my anxiousness and excitement at those words. Then he swept his gaze from me and over the entire group of us standing there in the middle of the council hall.
"Ten companions?" He said quietly,"So be it; you shall be the Fellowship of the Ring."

All four hobbits smiled, but it was the shorter one next to me who said with a completely straight face: "Right… where are we going?"

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
* "little princess" (Adûnaic - speculative translation)
** "Sit down, Legolas." (Sindarin)

A/N: A massive thanks to those of you who have stuck with me though the sinfully long build up to this moment — it's a tenth walker from here on out. Let me know if you're looking forward to seeing more. :)

Four hobbits, two men, two elves, a dwarf, and a wizard go on a long walk to a mountain of doom.

Now, if that didn’t sound like the start of a really bad joke, then I didn’t know what did — and yet here we all were.

The ten of us were already several days into the journey, walking east towards the Misty Mountains according to Gandalf. I’d spent most of that time sticking close to either Boromir or the hobbits, enjoying the truly incredible scenery we passed. And all the while, trying to take my mind off the lingering feeling of our departure from Rivendell.

It had taken longer than I’d expected to leave. Supplies had to be acquired, travel plans made, and what little we were able to take with us had to be packed as light as possible. When we finally were ready to set off, I came down to the courtyard in my riding greens with my pack to find a farewell procession. Bilbo was there, along with almost every elf I recognised from the house. All of them there to see us off. The ageing hobbit had given me a fond smile after saying goodbye to his nephew, wishing me luck and leaving me with a light kiss on the knuckle for good measure.

Arwen had been present too, although she kept a solemn expression of propriety in place as she bade each of the Fellowship farewell and a safe journey. Her eyes had misted over slightly when they fell on Aragorn, and the two of them shared a long moment with more being said through their silence than they ever could have through words. Finally Aragorn dropped his gaze from hers and reluctantly turned away to see to the supplies.

Then she had finally come to me.

Instead of a morose farewell and a regal blessing like I’d been expecting, I’d found myself being wrapped in a warm hug that had smelled of lilacs.

“You never seem to find trouble in halves, do you?” I could hear her smile, though her tone was sad. It made my throat clench uncomfortably to hear it.

“I guess I don’t.” I said, hugging her back.

Arwen and I hadn’t become the BFFs or anything, but she had been a constant positive presents in my time in Rivendell. She’d always been happy to sit with me while I studied, talk with me during the evening meals, sometimes even forewarn me if her father was in a particularly bad mood. She was kind and warm, and I already knew I going to miss her.
The goodbye from my mentor had been considerably less affectionate, but I’d been almost more pained to say goodbye to him than I had anyone else. He’d spoken in that serious but calm tone he’d always used during my practical training, but his eyes had softened behind the mask.

“I will not lecture you, Élanor. This choice was yours to make, not mine. All I ask is that you remember that you are in this company not because you are a warrior, nor because of your skill with a blade.” He’d rested his hand on my shoulder, giving it a gentle but firm squeeze with a tiny, almost sad smile, “Be safe, *padawan*.”

I’d felt my eyes mist over, just a bit.

And that had been that.

The farewell to the place I’d tentatively called a home for just over two years. It had stung more than I’d been expecting, seeing the ‘Last Homely House East of the Sea’ disappearing over the cliffs behind us. We’d been walking for just under a week when Gandalf decided that we should take some time to rest for a while, before finally turning south. He chose a rocky outcrop on the slopes of Misty Mountains to stop and make camp, and everyone was taking the time to rest their feet.

Well, almost everyone.

“Merry, your turn!” Boromir called at the hobbit, before going straight into another short series of attacks with his sword. Merry parried them all with his shorter blade, just as he’d been instructed minutes before — all while holding a half-eaten apple in his free hand and grinning cheerfully.

“Good, very good!” Boromir praised. Then it was Pippin’s turn to defend, which he did with just as much enthusiasm as Merry.

“Move your feet!” Aragorn chipped in from where he watched the hobbits practicing, leisurely smoking his pipe.

I’d perched on a flat rock next to Frodo, and we were both watching in amusement as Pippin and Merry threw around compliments and batter in between Boromir’s drills.

“Miss Eleanor, would you care for some breakfast?” Sam came up beside us, tentatively offering out a couple of plates filled with sausages, well cooked bacon and a small hunk of bread.

I’m not even a little bit ashamed to admit; I instantly started salivating.

“God, Sam Gamgee, you’re an angel. Do you have any idea how long it’s been since I’ve had real *bacon*?” I took the plate from him, taking a long moment to savour the smell of the cooked meat as he handed the second one to Frodo. The kitchen staff of Rivendell had been fantastic at their jobs, but the wonders of a proper English breakfast were something they had just never been able to grasp.

Sam on the other hand did, and damn could the little man cook food over a campfire like Jamie Oliver himself.

I dug hungrily into the sausages and rashers as Frodo filled Sam in on Merry and Pippin’s progress. I felt a pair of eyes on the back of my neck, and only noticed Gandalf’s pensive expression directed at me when I peered over my shoulder to see what the others were up to. He was perched a little way away with his pipe, looking thoughtful, and his eyes very occasionally flickering between me and the view of the mountain’s foothills.
“Gandalf not joining us in the pork-festivities?” I asked quietly, noticing that he was the only one who hadn’t been gifted with bacony goodness yet. Sam glanced over his shoulder and looked a little uncomfortable.

“I offered him some, but he said wanted some time to plan our next route ‘free from culinary distractions.’”

I looked curiously back at Gandalf again. It was the first opportunity I’d had since we’d left Rivendell to try and talk with the old wizard while the others were out of earshot. He wasn’t looking at me now, but I had the nagging instinct that he was waiting for me to come over…

“I’ll go see if he wants a cup of tea instead.” I mumbled off-handedly and got up. I moved away before either Frodo or Sam could tell me it was a bad idea, taking the last of my angelic breakfast with me. I was curious, not insane.

The only other two members of the Fellowship who hadn’t joined in the combat drills or the ritualistic bacon scoffing were our resident dwarven axe-swinger and elvish snob. Gimli was standing off a little way away, smoking his pipe and muttering to himself in what I guessed was dwarvish; and Legolas was ‘scouting’.

I say scouting.

To me it just looked like he was staring vacantly off into the distance, trying to appear alert and mysterious. I narrowed my eyes at the back of his perfect blond head as I passed. Unlike the rest of the Fellowship, Legolas hadn’t bothered to say a single word to me since we’d left Rivendell. He’d barely even looked at me, as if I didn’t exist. It was probably for the best though. Judging by the look he’d given me after that scene in the Council chamber we’d probably get on about as well as sea water and an oil spill.

I already had one goldilocks elf lord who hated my guts in Glorfindel. One was more than enough.

I walked past the both of them and tentatively up to where Gandalf was smoking and surveying the view. I opened my mouth, not exactly sure of what I was going to say. I needn’t have bothered because Gandalf knocked my composure flat on its arse with three simple words:

“Eleanor Lucy Dace.”

The bottom fell out of my stomach. If I’d been a cartoon character, my eyes would have popped out of my head and gone rolling across the ground, “Y-you know my real name?”

“Of course.” The wise old wizard spoke as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “Lord Elrond decided that it would be best if at least one member of this Fellowship was privy to your…” He turned from his pipe and eyed me with a faintly intrigued twinkle in his eyes, “Unusual circumstances.”

“Oh, right…” I swallowed, not really sure of how I was supposed to respond to that. After a moment of just hovering there like an indecisive raincloud, I determined to just throw myself in at the deep end. “About what happened in the Council chamber…”

“You saw a fragment of your past, did you not?” Gandalf got there first again. This time it didn’t take me quite as much by surprise. If the man knew everything I’d told Lord Elrond, and he was a wise as Tolkien made him out to be, there was a good chance he knew more about my situation than I did. He noticed my unease and gestured for me to come and sit beside him.

“I… I don’t know what I saw.” I said carefully, perching on the sun-warmed stone a few feet from
him, the remains of my breakfast all but forgotten, “But it was something. More than I got from
two years of…”

I stopped, realising I was in danger of waffling again. I bit my lip as Gandalf just watched me
patiently. I knew what I wanted to say. I just had no idea how to ask it without sounding insane…

“Gandalf, the memory…” I began slowly, considering my words carefully this time before I let
them out go my mouth, “It started when you used the Black Speech, and it ended the second you
stopped talking. I haven’t been able to get anything else since. So, I…I mean… is there a way to
__?”

His expression shifted from amused to sever in less time that I took to draw breath.

“No, Eleanor.” He interrupted gently but very firmly, “That is something you cannot ask of me.”

“Why not?”

“The Black Speech is not a tongue to be thrown around casually. Were it not for Vilya’s protection
over the Imladris Valley I would not have dared voice it at the Council either.”

“But it’s the only thing that’s knocked loose any of my memories in two years! Two years,
Gandalf!” I said back, my voice raising a bit before I could suppress it. I was suddenly deeply and
irrationally furious with him, “Getting them back is the only chance I have of figuring out how I
got here in the first place!”

“And that alone is not a good enough reason to endanger us all by speaking the tongue of Mordor
aloud here.” He responded sternly, completely unaffected by my outburst. My shoulders fell and I
looked away, my anger vanishing as quickly as it had come, along with my hopefulness. Gandalf’s
expression softened as he saw me deflate in defeat, “I’m truly sorry, my dear. Whatever other help
I can offer in this quest of yours, I will gladly give it.”

“Heh, I thought we were up to our knees in a quest already.” I forced out a laugh, though it was
hollow and left a bitter aftertaste in my mouth. I looked down at my hands, a little dirty and the
nails chipped. I glanced sideways at him, “But you still can’t really expect me to just sit back and
do nothing about this.”

“Oh, I’m not.” He replied, glancing back at the others who were still enjoying their breakfast and
mock-brawling, “There is a reason I supported your enthusiasm to join our company. I certainly
don’t expect you to sit idly while we walk headlong into Mordor. You are Lord Elrond’s
apprentice after all; your skills will be needed.”

“A fat lot of help my measly two years of skulking around Rivendell will be against odds like that.”
I scoffed sullenly.

“I would not refer to training under Lord Elrond as ‘skulking’ if I were you, my dear.” Gandalf told
me in an amused but still reprimanding tone, “He doesn’t take apprentices often, and those he does
generally have a great deal more experience and skill to offer than you.”

My eyebrows tried to retreat up into my hairline. I mean, I’d known I’d been asking a lot when I’d
petitioned Lord Elrond to teach me. But I hadn’t realised him agreeing had been quite that big a
deal.

“Seriously?” Then… why did he say yes to training me? I mean, I barely knew how to tie a
bandage before two years ago.”
“Perhaps he saw some raw potential in you?” The wizard shrugged, blowing out a smoke ring that turned itself into the wispy shape of a butterfly. “I supposed we shall find out. Though let us hope we don’t find ourselves in need of healer quite this early into our journey.”

He took another long drag on his pipe. “But I digress. You must have faith, my dear. You have recovered one of our memories already, and by sheer chance. The rest will return in time.”

“You sound just like Bilbo.” I smiled a little ruefully, my thoughts drifting back to the old hobbit.

“He spoke highly of you, you know.”

I looked up curiously at Gandalf from the view of the mountains. “Bilbo? What did he say?”

The old wizard’s blue eyes twinkled with silent laughter. “He said you tell very amusing stories, and make an excellent cup of tea.”

I snorted through a laugh at the that. For the past two years Bilbo had been regaling me with stories of his own adventures (namely one involving thirteen dwarves, and dragon, and a very lonely mountain). So in return, I’d taken to telling Bilbo fairy tales from my world. I’d told him the story of Cinderella, Beauty & The Beast, Thumbelina, even Hansel & Gretel. I’d spruced up the language at bit, aiming to get them to fall somewhere between the original Brothers Grimm versions and the sugar-covered Disney renditions — and he’d enjoyed each of them thoroughly.

I’d been happy enough telling and hearing fantastic tales of adventures in the third person. Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine that I’d end up smack bang in the middle of one all my own.

I put my elbows on my knees and my face in my hands. “God, what have I gotten myself into…?”

“I don’t believe your role in this company will be quite as insignificant as you believe, my dear.” Gandalf chuckled.

“How do you figure?” I asked.

“My instincts.”

“Your instincts?”

He nodded, “They tell me that all things happen for a reason, and that you are here for a purpose. Although what purpose I cannot say, yet. But a purpose non the less. And I think your instincts tell you the same.”

“Maybe,” I mused, staring off at some darkening clouds forming over the hills in the distance, “But I already made the mistake of asking my ‘instinct’ for advice. Now I can’t get her to shut up.”

I’d meant it as a joke. A bad joke maybe. But the stoney look I got from Gandalf killed my laughter in its crib. It was the exact same look he’d given me in the council hall, right after I’d woken from my cryptic flashback.

I thought for a moment he was about to interrogate me further, or maybe critique my poor taste in humour, when Gimli’s voice suddenly spoke up from behind us.

“If anyone was to ask for my opinion, which I know they’re not; I’d say we were taking the long way round.” He said, coming over to us but pointedly ignoring me and speaking only to the wizard at my side, “Gandalf, we could pass through the mines of Moria. My cousin Balin would give us a royal welcome!”
Gandalf gave the dwarf an even more unsettling look that he’d given me. Not because he looked disapproving, but because he looked suddenly, very deeply worried.

“No, Gimli. I would not take the road through Moria unless I had no other choice.”

A clang of metal hitting metal caught all our attention. I looked round only to see Merry and Pippin had abandoned their weapon training in favour of simply dog-piling Boromir, both of them shouting, “For the Shire!” I burst out laughing along with Frodo and Sam, despite still feeling disheartened. It only got harder to stop when Aragorn went to break them up, only to wind up flipped onto his backside by the two hobbits pulling his boots out from under him.

None of us even noticed the darkened shadow on the horizon until Sam suddenly stopped chortling and frowned at something over Frodo’s shoulder.

“What is that?”

“Nothing, it’s just a wisp of cloud!” Gimli dismissed with a nonchalant wave of his pipe. All of us were looking now. Instinctively I swivelled to see Legolas watching it closely, his whole body gone ridged with concentration.

“It’s moving fast… and against the wind.” Boromir said quietly from behind us.

I stood up and squinted at the shadow on the horizon, trying to get my long distance vision to focus, “It looks like… birds?”

“Crebain from Dunland!” Legolas’s voice suddenly barked without warning. I didn’t have time to jump out of my skin before Aragon was shouting at us all to hide, fast. More spooked by the other’s sudden panic than by the apparent flock of evil birds, I did as I was told.

Snatching up my medical satchel and pack I dived under a rock ledge out of sight. Boromir’s shield appeared next to me a second later, followed quickly by its owner. I looked out past him to see the others disappearing into similar hiding places. I suddenly froze where I crouched. My eyes had landed on something they’d missed…

’Sam’s pack!’

He must have been too busy putting out the campfire and hiding the remains of the cooking utensils to remember it. The sounds of beating of wings were getting louder. Aragorn and Legolas’s reactions to the ‘Crebain’ were enough for anyone with half a brain to tell if they saw any sign of us here, it would be bad.

Without giving myself time to think sensibly, I belly crawled out from mine and Boromir’s hiding place and shot as fast as I could across the clearing.

“Eleanor, get down!” Aragorn shouted from somewhere behind me.

I grabbed up Sam’s pack and had just managed to fling it under an outcrop of rocks, when a hand stronger than some industrial clamps latched around my ankle and pulled hard. I fell flat onto my face and was tugged out of sight under a thorny clump of bushes.

“Be still!” An angry voice hissed right behind my left ear, and with a jolt of irrational anger I realised it was Legolas. Then the sounds of beating wings was everywhere, coming from every direction as the cloud fell on our hiding places like a swarm of bees. Even if I dared move to cover my ears, Legolas’s grip on my upper arm had me pinned flat against the stone under the bushes.
Legolas is a lot stronger than he looks. I stayed still.

The sound of the squawking and flapping wings was almost deafening, but just as it was becoming almost unbearable to remain motionless, it started to fade. Only when the distant sounds of cawing had completely disappeared did Legolas’s grip on my arm finally relent. I jerked away from him and crawled out from under the bush. My fingers went to rub the tender spot just below my shoulder where he’d grabbed me.

I could already feel a band of finger-shaped bruises forming under the sleeve of my tunic.

Back on Earth I’d bruised more easily than most. If someone poked me hard enough in the wrong place it would leave a mark. I was used to the familiar dull throb of the black-and-blue marks. It didn’t hurt much, but I could tell it would if I hit or banged it on anything for the next few days. And knowing my luck, I’d do just that.

I made a half disgusted half irritated noise.

“Great. Nice to know that’s another useless trait I’ve kept from Earth.” I muttered. I looked over my shoulder to see Legolas already nimbly back on his feet. He glanced over at me with an annoyed expression, but it vanished the moment his gaze fell on where I was still inspecting my bruised upper arm. I quickly looked away and forced my hand to drop to my side. The last thing I wanted was for the uppity blond (and surprisingly strong) elf to think I was so pathetic as to get worked up over a little contusion.

“Spies of Saruman. The passage south is being watched.” Gandalf struggled out from his own hiding place as Aragorn and Boromir helped the hobbits. He turned from where the Crebain had vanished into the distance to the mountains and pointed to the peak of one covered in snow, “We must take the pass of Caradhas.”

I was about to clamber to my feet again, when an upturned hand made it’s way into my peripherals. For a moment I thought (or maybe hoped) it was Boromir being chivalrous again.

Alas — I found myself staring up at my personal Prince-Not-So-Charming. Legolas had a look on his annoyingly perfect face like he’d been made to swallow something unpleasant. And he was offering a hand out to help me up. I bit back a sour retort, but couldn’t quite conceal my scowl. No one’s perfect.

“Thanks.” I mumbled begrudgingly, and allowed him to pull me to my feet. His unsettlingly blue-grey gaze skimmed over my face for a second, and his eyebrows pinched in a faintly confused frown. He looked as if I’d just spoken to him in a language he didn’t understand.

“You are welcome.” He replied stiffly after a moment. Then he turned and strode off without another word. But not before I saw him clenching and unclenching his fingers out of the corner of my eye — as if his hand had just been dipped in something fowl and he was resisting the urge to wipe it off.

The same hand he’s just used to help me up.

‘Well, that was charming.’ Tink muttered sarcastically in my head.

’Swoon-worthy.’ I agreed sulkily, and went to gather my things for our long trek up the mountain.

~ ❖ ~
So four hobbits, two men, two elves, a dwarf and a wizard spend three hours climbing halfway up the side of a snow covered mountain with an unpronounceable name…

Another tasteless start to the equally tasteless joke that had somehow become my life. But at least the sun was shining.

It had taken almost all morning but we’d made it to the foothills of Caradhras. At that point in our merry uphill hike, I’d still been stewing over my odd encounter with Legolas and my not-so-helpful conversation with Gandalf. There was no changing his mind about the Black Speech trick, I knew that the second I’d asked. But there was also nothing I could currently do to speed up the process of ‘knocking something loose’ in my head.

That left me only two real options given my current situation: I could either mope and wallow in self pity. Or, I could be proactive and cheer myself up.

I chose the latter.

The quickest way to do that, I’d learned, was simple: chat with Merry and Pippin.

If telling funny stories or singing rowdy pub songs had been an Olympic sport back home on Earth, those two hobbits could have easily taken gold every time. By the time we reached the first snow on Caradhras I was so lost in their songs and stories of the Shire that I’d all but forgotten my conversation with Gandalf, and the dull throb of my bruised upper arm.

“You must have some tales of your own to tell about Rivendell, Eleanor.” Merry said to me cheerfully as we plodded through the snow just a little behind Aragorn, Frodo and Sam. He’d mercifully agreed to drop the ‘Miss’ from my name.

“You mean apart from spending all my time surrounded by excessively hospitable elves with annoyingly perfect hair?” I smiled, and it turned into a small smirk when I saw Legolas’s head twitch very slightly in our direction just a little way ahead.

“I’m sure it wasn’t as bad as that.” Pippin chipped in.

“It was beautiful, yes, but I like it out here. There’s sun, beautiful scenery, and no one calls me ‘my lady’.” I threw Boromir a playful grin over my shoulder where he was taking his turn leading Bill the pony, “Well, most people don’t anyway.”

I’d been trying to get him to stop calling me by my ‘respectable title’ for two days, to no avail. He just smiled amiably and made a show of pretending to not have noticed my comment. I chuckled and turned back to the trail Gandalf and Aragorn had cut through the ankle-deep snow for us to follow.

“You seem a little carefree for an elf.” Pippin told me seriously — an unusual thing coming from the hobbit who had not two hours ago been trying to teach me a song called ‘The Drunken Green Dragon.’ “Shouldn’t you be, I don’t know, more serene? Maybe a little less cheerful?”

“Would you really prefer it if I was less cheerful? I could start reciting macabre poetry if it would make you feel more comfortable.” I replied equally serious, putting on the air that my old Drama teacher had adopted when quoting Hamlet, “Here, how about this: ‘With thy sharp teeth this knot intrinsicate, Of life at once untie, poor venomous fool! Be angry, and dispatch—.’”

“No, no! That’s alright!” Pippin interrupted me, looking slightly panicked.
“You sure?” I grinned.

“Very.”

A gruff grunt caught came from just ahead of us in the line and I looked up from the two hobbits walking beside me. Gimli had turned over his shoulder in his marching and was looking at me dubiously, though it was difficult to tell since his dark red beard and eyebrows together covered about 60% of his face.

“What?” I asked, eyeing him uncertainly. He seemed to consider his words for a moment before answering.

“You make no sense, lass. You look like an elf, eat like a hobbit, curse like a dwarf, and talk like a man.” He said after a minute, shaking his head slightly.

“Should I take that as a compliment coming from someone who curses every other sentence?” I replied, raising one eyebrow. He huffed and turned back to keeping up with Aragorn.

“You understand the language of the dwarves?” Pippin hissed quietly at me in surprise. I quickly shook my head and waved a hand.

“Nope. I’m just old enough to know a cuss word when I hear one.”

“How old are you exactly?” Boromir asked me without warning.

I opened my mouth to reply but then snapped it shut, my stomach doing a weird little spooked-chipmunk manoeuvre. I was twenty-four in human years now, but I was also supposed to be an elf. In their years that would have made me not much older than a toddler. How in hell was I supposed to explain that?

My metaphorical bacon was saved by the merriment of hobbits.

“My lord!” Merry exclaimed in a jovial tone of mock horror, “I thought a gentleman never asks a lady her age!”

Pippin chortled and Boromir turned a bit pink. “I meant no offence, my lady.”

I heaved an internal sigh of relief and thanked my lucky stars for the awkward bullet I’d just dodged.

“It’s no problem.” I said, making my relief with a polite smile, “And for God sake, stop calling me ‘my lady.’ It’s just Eleanor; no ‘lady’ or ‘miss’ required. Makes me feel like an old school mistress.”

“I shall try to remember that.” Boromir replied with a small smile of his own. I let a still chuckling Merry and Pippin move on ahead, dropping back to pace beside him. We just walked in companionable silence for a while, trudging side by side through the ever deepening snow. Eventually the past few days worth of curiosity finally got the better of me and I turned to him.

“Boromir, you talked a lot about your city at the Council meeting. What’s it like there?” I asked. He looked at me sideways, not displeased, but maybe a little surprised.

“Why the sudden curiosity?”

“Because it was one of my favourite locations described in a series of fantasy books from a world
I coolly resisted the urge to violently clobber Tink and her barbed tongue into silence, and instead said; “I’ve… read a lot about Minas Tirith, but never seen it. It sounds very beautiful.”

“It is.” He said and I saw a light kindle to life behind his eyes when he said it, “It is not called the White City for nothing. It towers over the fields of Pallenor in seven levels, each one carved from the side of the mountain itself. And the view from the Tower of Ecthelion is…” He trailed off with a faintly sad look making it’s way into his expression.

“You sound like you miss it.”

“That I do.” His gaze fell on Aragorn who was still walking just out of earshot ahead of us, “It has been without a king for many decades, and my father Denethor II has ruled as Steward for many years… I had little idea I would find Isildur’s heir when I answered Lord Elrond’s summons.”

I followed his gaze to stop on the back of Aragorn’s head. He’d taken the lead from Gandalf for a while and was walking just out of earshot from us at the front of the line.

“He’s not what you expected?” I asked quietly.

“I’m… not sure what I expected.” Boromir replied softly, watching the ranger with a look that mixed curiosity and distrust.

I found it a little odd that Boromir hadn’t known anything about Aragorn before coming to Rivendell. I remembered vaguely in the books that he’d come because both him and his brother had been given dreams about the return of a king to Gondor. But that hadn’t been the case here. If he truly hadn’t known, could I really blame Boromir for being surprised? The lost Heir of Isildur, hiding out in Rivendell among the elves all this time? And not a single human soul had known? Aragorn was many things: intimidating, quiet, weather-beaten, and downright terrifying with a blade in his hand. But he did not look like what you’d expect a king to look like. At least not to me.

To Boromir though? Maybe he did. It was hard to tell since they two had spoken about as much as Legolas and I had since that scene in the Council chamber. The unaddressed tension was starting to grate on my nerves.

I for one, did not handle tension or awkward silences well. So I decided to break this one wide open.

A wicked little smile spread over my mouth as an idea formed in my head. Boromir gave me a questioning look and I lifted a finger to my lips in the universal sign for quiet. Then I hunched down and began gathering snow into my hands. Merry and Pippin abruptly broke in their conversation upon noticing what I was doing. They immediately saw what I was planning, and Merry’s face broke into a grin. Pippin clapped a hand over his mouth to hide the snicker.

“Are you sure you don’t know any good pub songs, Eleanor?” Merry asked, trying to cover his snickering. “I’m sure we could all use a laugh.”

“A mature and proper young lady like me? Perish the thought!” I started moving up the line towards Aragorn.

“Mature?” He scoffed quietly without turning around. I walked calmly past Legolas, Frodo and Sam with my armful of snow. They all gave me looks, but none of them tried to stop me.
“I’ll have you know I’m exceptionally mature. And I’m shite at singing.” I said primly, and dumped my double handful of snow down the back of Aragorn’s cloak. He yelped in surprise and jerked away, trying to shake the snow out from where it had slide down the back of his shirt. Boromir and hobbits all cheered and guffawed their approval. Hell, even Legolas and Gandalf cracked minute smiles.

The laughter was interrupted by a short yelp and a thumping noise, and I spun to see that Frodo had slipped and tumbled backwards over the snow. Not missing a beat, Aragorn literally blurred past me, managing to stop the hobbit from rolling completely back down the hill. He pulled Frodo up out of the snow and to his feet. Frodo spluttered out a thanks, but froze as he abruptly felt frantically around his neck. My stomach twisted.

The Ring.

It took barely a second for me to spot it, without even really looking. It was lying in the snow, gleaming in the sunlight just a few feet away where Frodo had slipped. Boromir was closest. He immediately crouched down and picked it up by the chain. He’d not even finished rising to his feet when his expression changed, going from casually amused to something else I couldn’t read. He just stared at it.

“Boromir?” I said carefully.

He didn’t move.

And just like that, the fleeting moment of joy had completely gone. Every eye was fixed on Boromir from across the gap in the line. I saw Legolas’s fingers twitch towards his bow, and my whole body tensed.

“It is strange that we should suffer so much fear and doubt, over such a small thing. Such a little thing.” Boromir breathed quietly, more to himself than any of us. The change in his voice unsettled me. Consciously I knew it was the Ring’s doing, but it still made my skin crawl.

Gone was the kind and courteous man who I’d been laughing with us minutes before. Now it felt as if there was a completely stranger standing there…

“Boromir!” Aragorn’s sharp voice broke the silence, and suddenly Boromir was himself again, “Give the Ring to Frodo.”

Boromir hesitated just a second too long before walking back towards the hobbit.

“As you wish, I care not.” He said, extending the ring out to Frodo who quickly snatched it back. For a second I saw something unpleasant flicker in Boromir’s eyes, but then he shook his head, smiled, and ruffled Frodo’s hair before move back towards the rest of us.

It was bad enough that I’d noticed Aragorn very deliberately relinquish his grip on his sword as Boromir turned away. But what made me more uncomfortable was that my own hand — independent of my will — had moved from resting at my side, to hovering over the dagger pouch at my hip.

Chapter End Notes
Quotations:
(1) William Shakespeare (“Antony & Cleopatra” - Act V Scene II)

A/N: Updates will be coming a little slower from here on as I get into writing/editing the longer and heavier chapters. With any luck, I hope to get at least one update posted every week or so — so don’t fret if you’re impatient for more (which I hope you are.)

Thanks again to all of you who have taken the time to comment thus far. Your feedback has been thoughtful and really helpful in keeping me motivated. See you next chapter! :)
Walking on top of snow felt like walking on top of polystyrene packing peas, which might have been ok if the wind wasn’t howling around us at about a hundred miles a minute.

Two hours after the uncomfortably tense moment with Boromir and the Ring, we’d reached the higher part of the pass. Just our luck; right after we’d begun to pick our way along a very narrow plateau, a blizzard had decided it might be fun to come along for the ride. Ten minutes later, everyone was literally up to their chests in the snow. The poor shivering hobbits could barely see where they were going as Gandalf carved us a path from the front of the line.

Legolas and I — being the only two elves in the company — had the benefit of being light-footed enough to walk on top of the snow rather than through it. Legolas moved effortlessly ahead of us all, barely leaving a footprint where ever he stepped. I on the other hand, had to cling inelegantly to the side of the mountain as I struggled to stay vertical, let alone keep up. The wind was so strong I was sure if I let go I’d be blown off my feet and over the edge.

“There is a fell voice on the air.” Legolas called back at us from where he’d suddenly stopped at the front of the line. How any of us heard him over the howl of the wind, I have no idea — but from Gandalf’s sudden reaction of horror you’d have thought he’d shouted “bomb!”

“It’s Saruman!” He yelled, just as a deafening cracking sound rumbled down through the cliff and through the stone beneath our feet. Fragments of ice, snow and rock the size of both my fists started tumbling and crashing down all around us, the pieces getting bigger with every roll of thunder.

One piece smacked straight down onto my bruised arm, knocking me into the snow and sending waves of pain up my shoulder.

“Argh! Bastard!” I cursed, equal parts pained and terrified.

“He’s trying to bring down the mountain!” Aragorn shouted, pulling the hobbits as far back from the edge as he could, “Gandalf, we must turn back!”

“No!” The wizard clamoured back, pulling himself out of the snow and right up to the edge of the plateau. For a moment, when that old man opened his mouth and began to shout, I honestly thought an earthquake had come to join the party along with the storm.

“Losto Caradhras, sedho, hodo, nuitho I ruith! *”
The wind only seemed to get more violent as the two wizard’s voices thundered across the mountain tops, louder and more hellish that anything the storm itself could have conjured.

Then it happened again.

A familiar feeling swam in my head. The same kind I’d felt just before my first blackout/flashback in the Council hall. My vision swam, my stomach rolled, and my whole body went almost wonderfully numb. It wasn’t a blackout this time. I could see shapes forming in the falling snow though my foggy vision, distant sounds appearing in the howling wind.

Two armies. One entirely of humans and elves all around me, and the other of nightmarish beasts and battle-crazed men charging headlong towards us over the field. A man in warrior’s armour sat astride a horse at my side, his face turned to watch the first volley of arrows shred through the oncoming hoard. I knew that he was familiar, but I couldn’t quite make out his face. I opened my mouth to say his name, but the sound was lost in the distant howl of the wind and screams of dying monsters. He turned slowly to look at me. I was sure that if I could just get him to meet my eyes I’d be able to recognise him…

Just a little more. I could almost see him!

I didn’t even realised I’d moved perilously close to the edge of the plateau until someone short and very strong grabbed me by the scruff of my riding greens and jerked me back. The vision vanished in a flurry of snow. My head smacked hard against the cliffside just as an avalanche of shale, ice and snow hammered down onto the plateau, burying us all.

For seven horrible seconds, I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t move. I tried to scream but icy snow filled my mouth and nose. If I’d been able to move my arms to claw my way out, I would have. Then a light suddenly hit my face as someone shovelled the snow off of me. I gasped and opened my eyes to see it was Gimli. He gripped my forearm and heaved me up out of the snow with a grunt of effort.

“You alright, lass?”

I wanted to scream at him no. I wasn’t alright. I was freezing, terrified, and had been inches away from getting another clue to my past back, only to have it snatched away at the last second. But I simply didn’t have enough air in my lungs to say all that. I hunched over and choked.

“Yeah,” I rasped out between gulps of cold air, “I’m wonderful.”

“We must get off the mountain, make for the Gap of Rohan, and take the West Road to my city!” I heard Boromir call at Gandalf over the gale, who was looking only a little better than I felt. Shielding us from Saruman’s assault had obviously taken a good deal out of him.

“The Gap of Rohan takes us too close to Isengard!” Aragorn rebuked Boromir, and even I could hear the stubborn frustration in his voice. I lost it.

“Whatever you’re going to decide, do it fast! Before we freeze to death!” I suddenly yelled at both of them, my lungs still burning from the lack of oxygen.

“How are you freezing to death? You are an elleth!” Legolas shouted back at me over the wind. The bastard didn’t even have a hair out of place. Furiously, I flung up both my bare numbed hands for him to see.

“An elleth who’s fingers and pointy ears are turning blue, Prince Charming!” I hollered back lividly, my temper snapping. Even though the blizzard, I saw the anger flare behind his eyes.
directed at me. But before we could start screaming up another storm at each other, Gimli cut us off.

“If we cannot go over the mountain, then let us go under it!” He said loudly, through a beard turned almost white with the snow caught in it, “Let us go through the Mines of Moria!”

“We cannot stay here! This mountain will be the death of the hobbits!” Boromir agreed through the silence, still sheltering a near hypothermic Merry and Pippin from the wind as best he could.

I could see the frustrated indecision in Gandalf’s exhausted face as he turned back to us. He obviously did not relish the idea of heading to Moria, though I had only the foggiest recollection as to why. Something bad was in Moria, I knew that. But at this point, anything was preferable to enduring another hour of the icy wrath of Caradhras.

“Let the Ring bearer decide.” Gandalf said firmly after a moment, and I could clearly see the lines in his face deepen with worry as he turned his eyes on the hobbit, “Frodo?”

The dark haired hobbit looked around at us all, his face showing the weight of the decision being placed on him. He remained silent for what seemed like an eternity before finally answering.

“We will go through the Mines.” He said clearly. Gandalf’s expression looked like the lid being covered over a coffin.

“So be it.”

~ ❖ ~

Somehow, we all managed to stagger down off the mountain and find a usable cave to shelter from Caradhras’s fury that night.

I helped Boromir get a fire going the second we’d found enough dried roots and twigs to burn. Then we managed to boil just enough water to make everyone a small mug of tea each. I took out the little flask of miruvor Lord Elrond had given me before leaving — the same stuff I’d been given for my head trauma when I’d first woken in Rivendell. It wasn’t much, but I let a drop fall into each cup, hoping it would take the edge off the cold. All four of the hobbits looked ready to go into hibernation, huddled together against the chill like penguins.

“We should rest here for the night.” Aragorn stated, divesting himself of his sword and smaller weapons. Gandalf nodded tiredly in agreement, and all but immediately went to go collapse down by the fire. “Eleanor and I will take the first watch.”

I looked up from handing Gimli his mug of tea, “We will?”

“Yes.” Aragorn said simply, but there was stone in his voice.

Normally that tone would have unnerved me, but in my current waterlogged and shivering condition, it just irritated me. I’d been looking forward to curling up in my damp cloak as close to the soldering fire as I could get — trying to imagine I was somewhere a little more warm and dry. Like maybe the volcanic surface of Venus.

The others all began setting themselves up for the long night as best they could, the hobbit’s being
given the spots closest to the crackling campfire. Pippin, Merry and Gimli were all already out cold, and the others didn’t look far behind. Boromir was looking glassy eyed as he absently stoked the fire, and I saw Legolas had already started to slip into the strange waking trance that was his equivalent of sleep. His grey-blue eyes were unfocused, but I couldn’t shake the feelings that he was watching me as I walked past him to follow Aragorn to the mouth of the cave.

The ranger had sat just shy of the lip of the cavern, just far back enough to shelter from the wind, but close enough to get the best look out. It was also far enough away from the others that they would be almost completely out of earshot.

He said nothing, but I could see that he did not look pleased.

I sat down hesitantly beside him on some rocks, the cold outside air already chilling me through my damp tunic and cloak. I pulled my knees up to my chest and tucked my arms in against them, trying to preserve what little warmth I had. The silence that stretched between us was only making it harder to focus on staying awake and alert. Only when the light snuffles of the hobbits, and Gimli’s less quiet snores started coming from back inside the cave did I finally dare to voice what was going through my head. I already had an idea of what was coming next…

“Is this the part where I get a lecture?” I asked, my voice coming out a bit more sardonically that I’d intended. The ‘manners’ cortex of my brain had long since succumbed to frostbite, because I didn’t really care at all about sound rude anymore.

“It would be no less than you’ve earned. Especially after that stunt you pulled on the mountain.” Aragorn said dryly.

“It wasn’t a stunt. I—” I broke off at getting a better look at Aragorn’s face. I swallowed and shivered a little harder at the expression he wore, “If this is because I dumped snow down your back, then I’m…”

"It's not." He interrupted me sharply, "I'm talking about your attitude, Eleanor. Your conduct at the Council meeting. Your reckless behaviour during the Crebain sighting. And your continued disregard for certain members of this company."

I frowned.

"You mean Legolas."

"And Gimli also."

I snorted through my nose and pushed my damp and tangled hair out of my face.

"Gimli doesn't care how I talk. Except that I apparently talk like a man. And Legolas is just pissed because I gave him a taste of his own attitude at the Council meeting."

Aragorn turned to me and fixed me with a very deliberate gaze from which I couldn't make myself look away.

"'Possibly two pieces'," He said very clearly, and it took me a second to realise he was quoting me directly. "'Prince Charming'?"

Damn. The man had a wicked sharp memory. I just continued to scowl at him through my shivering.

"He was being an ass. It was ironic."
"It was insulting," Aragorn retorted coolly, "And a deliberately disrespectful choice of words."

"Do I look like a bastion of respect to you?" I asked, getting annoyed.

"You look like a half drowned rat." He said flatly, "And your behaviour has not been much of an improvement. You've been alienating people who you share a common goal with for the past two weeks."

"And they didn't?" I asked waspishly.

"Whether or not they did shouldn't matter. You are only responsible for your own behaviour, not theirs."

Sweet Lord, it was like I was ten years old again and getting a talking to from my dad.

“Why am I the only bad guy in this situation?” I demanded. It probably wasn’t a good idea to raise my voice, but I couldn’t help it. I was so cold, and tired, and getting angrier by the second. I wanted to do was sleep. “It’s not as if the prissy elvish git did anything to—!”

“Enough, Eleanor!” Aragorn’s voice was still quiet but snapped like a whip-crack. The authoritative tone with which he spoke shut me up instantly. He stared down at me, bearing a sudden and unsettling resemblance to my old mentor when I’d made a clumsy mistake.

“You are being childish.” He emphasised the word. And it stung. “You are a Ward of Imladris. You are not only representing yourself, but Lord Elrond as well. I will not see you drag his name through the dirt.”

He met all my fiery frustrated anger with cold steel in his eyes. Eyes that had seen a hell of a lot more of this insane world that I had.

And had been left scarred by it…

I shivered and looked away first, my pride stinging. We just sat there in silence for ages, staring out at the blizzard howling across the mountain. I wished I could have found something to say in response. Anything. But nothing I could have said at that point would have changed the fact that deep down I knew Aragorn was right. I’d knowingly got myself into the Fellowship, into this whole situation, and yet I was still insisting on blaming others for my own issues.

It was only now I was finally realising the reason why:

I was scared.

I was really frigging scared of what we were facing. Of what might happen if I didn’t manage survive long enough to scrape back my memories and remember who I was. I didn’t have a reasonable coping mechanism in place for dealing with the kind of danger we were facing. I never had. So what had I done instead?

I’d taken out my fears on the people around me. I’d verbally pushed away people who might be able to help me, all because I was frightened and didn’t know how to deal with it.

I felt like an idiot. But more than anything, I just felt exhausted.

Finally, Aragorn rose from where he too had been staring out into the storm in complete tired stillness. He didn’t speak for a long moment, but when he did, the unexpected gentleness of it cut through the silence like a knife.
“Do not allow your pride to make enemies where there should be allies.” He said quietly, and then turned to go and wake Gimli for the next watch.

I went to sleep feeling cold that night. Cold and exhausted, and unsure of whether I felt more homesick for London or Rivendell anymore.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
* “Sleep Caradhras, be still, lie still, hold your wrath!” (Sindarin)

A/N: Like? No like? I know this one was a bit short; but it's in preparation for the next one, which will be much longer. Let me know you're thoughts y'all. Or if you liked it but can't think of anything to say, just stick a 3 in comment box. :) See you next chapter!
In my dream, we were sitting on swings, surrounded by bright white haze and tall pale trees.

Tink and I sat in what looked like a familiar children's playground. Although it was strikingly realistic, I knew it wasn't real without having to think about it. No children were in sight, and everything from the climbing frames to the seesaws were all purest white. In fact, the only things I could see that weren't white where Tink and me. I didn't bother to look surprised either. I was getting almost used to the strange Salvador Dali-like scenes I found myself in whenever I fell asleep.

"Well, this is new." I said conversationally, kicking myself back on the swing. "It looks different here that usual."

'I thought we could use a change of scenery.' Tink said from the swing right next to mine, gently swaying back and forth. She was wearing white this time, her long hair in a loose braid, and she all but blended seamlessly into the ghostly white scenery all around us. She was technically a part of my mind itself, so I guess just willing her surrounding to change shape whenever she felt like it came with the territory.

I spun myself around on my swing, the chains twisting together before spinning me back the way I'd come.

"And you chose..." I looked around as I spun to a stop, realising suddenly why everything looked so familiar, "My old primary school?"

"It seemed appropriate, given your current state of mind."

"And what is my current state of mind? Childish?"

"No. But I would say you're exhausted almost to the point of senselessness."

I snorted with repressed laughter.

"Well, I am having a literal conversation with myself, sitting in a hallucination of a playground I used to hang out in when I was eight. Fair point."

I went back to my spinning, leaning back and looking up as the white treetops cartwheeled around us.

"I suppose you heard everything Aragorn said." I didn't bother to make it into a question.
"I did." Tink confirmed. "What of it?"

I put my feet flat on the ground to stop my momentum, waiting for the world to stop twirling, and thinking about what had been said.

"Apparently I've been antagonistic with the others."

"Antagonistic? You? Surely not!"

"Wise-ass much?" I tried to sound irritated, but I couldn't make myself hold it for long. I felt the worry slip back into my expression. "I'm seriously though. We're going on a journey literally into the heart of hell, and Legolas and I can't even speak to each other with contemplating homicide. What if these issues we have do start becoming a problem?"

She pursed her lips in thought.

"I guess the logical thing to do would be to do something to get them to start warming to you."

"Warm to me? After everything that's happened so far? How in hypothetical hell would I even start getting someone like Legolas or Gimli to warm to me?"

"Set them on fire? That could be fun."

Tink suggested, and I could hear her grin. I cringed and rolled my head back, almost ashamed that my own subconscious could come up with such a terrible one-liner.

"You've been waiting to use that one, haven't you?"

"For months." She confirmed, and grinned proudly at me. "Wanna hear another one?"

I gave her a flat look, and she threw up her hands in amused defeat.

"Fine, fine! I yield to your disapproval, oh humourless one."

I ignored her previous remark, and went back to staring out over the playground, swaying gently on the swing.

"Seriously though, what if he is right?" I asked quietly, genuine worry filling my voice. "Aragorn I mean. I don't think much of his teaching methods, but what he said wasn't wrong. What if I have just been digging myself a hole with them up till now?"

She shrugged her shoulders at me.

"So what if you have? You could ask the 'what if' question until you stop breathing, boss. Everyone gets scared. Everyone deals with it differently. It's what you do with that fear that matters, now that you know it's there."

I eyed her.

"Are you sure you're not just channelling Aragorn now, Tink?"

"Well, you said it yourself; he isn't wrong." She replied loftily, pushing herself back into the swing until her long dress swept the grass. "Though I agree, his teaching method leaves a lot to be desired."

"Agreed." I kicked off the ground and leaned back into the swing, giving myself enough momentum to match hers. "Ok then, Ms. Id, you're the expert on the base part of my brain. What
should I do now?"

She pursed her lips thoughtfully as we both continued to swing back and forth in time with each other.

"I'd put that fear you're feeling to good use. Use it as a tool, instead of letting it use you."

"And how am I supposed to do that exactly?"

"No idea." She said cheerily, "But it sounded deep didn't it?"

I groaned.

"You suck."

She grinned cheekily at me, that dimple we both shared in our left cheek appearing.

"I guess you're just going to have to figure out the semantics as we go. I can't give you all the answers."

I smiled back at her, though I didn't really feel it reach my eyes and said, "So far you haven't given me any straight answers, Tink."

"Touche."

We both shared an identical chuckle, which might have been eerie if I wasn't so used to it by now. Tink slowed her swinging to a gentle sway and stared off at the misty playground. I followed her gaze to find her looking at the white version of the jungle-gym I'd learned to climb on as a kid.

"You remember the last time we were here?" She asked quietly. "The time Katie learned to hang upside down on the monkey bars, and she tried to teach you, but—"

"But I was too scared of falling on my head to try." I finished her sentence for her, the memory coming back clear as if it had happened last week, not sixteen years ago. "Katie called me a wimp for days. I remember."

"Do you remember what you felt after?" She asked.

I thought for a minute, reluctantly dragging the memory back up from all that time ago.

"Angry." I nodded slowly, recalling one of the few real fights I'd ever had with my best friend. "I was angry at myself, but I took it out on Katie. If I'd fallen, I could have really hurt myself… but I missed out on something special because I was too scared to even try…"

I trailed off as I thought about it even more. I thought I understood what Tink was getting at; showing me this manifestation of another point in my life where I'd let fear get the better of me. But I felt like there was more to it that she wasn't sharing. I looked sideways at her past the chain of my swing.

"…Why did you really show me this, Tink?"

She didn't answer. She just smiled at me, and got off the swing.

She'd just begun to walk away when she stopped suddenly and turned to me, her white dress shifting even though the air was completely still.
"You going to be ok here on your own for a bit?" She asked, ambers eyes watching me intently from the mirror image of my own face.

I looked around at the deserted memory of the old playground. I closed my eyes, inhaled the scent of the fallen leaves, silently pretending for just a moment that I was home again where it was safe. Where there were no wizards, elves, dwarves or perilous journeys through icy mountains to intrude.

"Yeah." I murmured quietly. "Just… let me have this. Just for a little while."

"As you wish."

~ ❧ ~

I woke from the dream far more reluctantly than I had any other in a long time. Inside my head had been peaceful, and quite, and warm. The current land of the living was quiet, but not nearly as cosy. The fire had died some time in the night, and it was cold, though mercifully I wasn't damp anymore. It must have been very early morning because the sunlight hadn't grown past a watery glow when I opened my eyes.

I'd fallen asleep on the cold stone floor just a few feet from the hobbits and quietly snoring Boromir. My hip was digging painfully into the uneven rocks beneath me. I shifted my weight slightly to roll onto my back when I stopped, realising suddenly that I wasn't the only one awake. I could hear two men talking quietly not far off at the mouth of the cave.

Correction: one man, and one elf.

"… you are the only other I have heard of that was ever named Ward of Imladris. How did she come to be under Lord Elrond's protection?" I heard Legolas's voice. It was by far the most I'd heard him say in a single sentence since we'd left Rivendell. But what really caught my attention was the 'she' in that phrase. There was only one female Ward of Imladris that I knew of…

They were talking about me.

Unhealthy curiosity; thy name is Eleanor Lucy Dace. I lay still as I could, keeping my breathing even and pretending to still be sound asleep — and I listened.

"It's a… complicated story." Aragorn answered him with a small pause in between. I guessed he'd taken to his pipe again. "You could always ask her to tell you."

"I doubt she would answer me." Legolas said dully.

"She might, if you asked her nicely." The ranger chuckled. He said something else in elvish that was just a bit too quick and quiet for me to understand. I heard Legolas give an exasperated sigh, sitting back against the wall of the cave.

"She…" He made a half frustrated, half irritated noise. "She is not at all what I expected."

"What were you expecting?" Aragorn asked.

"From the apprentice of Lord Elrond? Composure, humility, certainly more social grace."
I ground my teeth, the exhausted defeat left over from the night before giving way to bubbling anger. I was temped to roll over and demand what other traits his lordship thought I needed to keep him happy — but I forced myself to keep still, and keep listening.

It was Aragorn who surprised me with what he said next.

"You did not exactly present her with an iron-clad reason to respect you, mellon nin. And she is not the only one who would benefit from a little more humility." He paused again, and I could all but hear his smirk. "I find you are remarkably similar."

"I'm insolent?" Legolas all but spluttered.

"Proud, and stubborn," Aragorn clarified plainly, and I heard a dash of amusement slip into his tone, "And not suffering from an overabundance of manners."

I heard Legolas chuckle, and I realised it was the first time I'd ever heard him laugh. Another first.

"I suppose I have no right to argue with you on that, my friend." He agreed, though it was a tinged with a something that sounded like regret, "Though you too are in no position to cast stones."

Aragorn chortled quietly at that, but he didn't deny it either.

What felt like an amiable quiet fell on the cave between them, and I tried to resist the urge to move a little to the left. There was a pointy piece of root poking right into my ribs, making it very difficult to pull off my Sleeping Beauty impression. Finally Legolas broke the silence.

"Why do you defend and her so? Has she earned some kind of special treatment I was not made aware of?"

"Lord Elrond asked me to make certain she did not endanger herself during our journey." Aragorn replied, and then followed it up pointedly with; "You do not look convinced."

The elf was quiet for a moment before finally admitting, "I heard how you spoke to her last night."

My stomach squirmed in embarrassment. I'd already guessed he'd been listening the whole time — super-elf-hearing and all that — but I still didn't relish the idea of him hearing me getting schooled by Aragorn. That had been humiliating enough on its own.

Aragorn was silent for a long moment too, and I almost forgot to breathe waiting for his reaction.

"You object?" He asked.

"Not exactly." Legolas responded, taking the time to choose his words carefully. "I just wonder at your motive for speaking to her that way. I have never heard you so severe with anyone before. Even one as infuriating as she."

Again, I had to fight the urge to roll over and let him know exactly how infuriating I could be, and that he hadn't seen anything yet.

"She has seen little of the world outside Rivendell. I believe if she continued with this careless attitude towards the danger we face, she is likely to get herself killed. She needed to be shown that, before an enemy arrow or blade did the teaching instead."

"You truly believe that?"

Aragorn just grunted in reply and I heard him take a puff on his pipe. Another long silence
stretched between them, and I was almost tempted to give up listening to them indirectly chastising me, and try to go back to sleep. Then Legolas said something that made me stop.

"If I didn't know better," He said quietly, and I had to strain my hearing to catch it, "I'd say that the reason you insist on being that severe with her, is because that 'carless attitude towards danger' of hers is not dissimilar to that of a young ranger's I once knew."

I stillled at that, my breathing slowing almost to a stop. Aragorn's quiet laugh was hollow, and I was certain that there had been more meaning behind it that I knew.

"Perhaps," He replied at last, and though I could hear his smile he sounded a bit sad saying it, "And look and see how he turned out because of it?"

Another silence, but I could hear the smile in Legolas's words when he finally answered.

"I do." He answered firmly. "I see a good man, and a friend."

The hike down from the mountains was uncomfortably quiet. Although they'd all slept like rocks, the hobbits were still feeling the effects of the long cold night before. No jaunty pub songs or crass toilet humour for us today. No one else had had the energy to start up anything more than polite niceties as we walked, Gandalf leading again while Aragorn lead Bill from the back.

For once, I didn't mind the silence. I didn't especially want to talk to anyone after the night I'd had, least of all Aragorn. Having had time to calm down, sleep on it, then eavesdrop on his conversation with Legolas; I'd found myself feeling conflicted about our one-sided talk during the first watch. I knew now what he was trying to get across by what he'd said to me; but that didn't change the fact that the way he'd gone about it had left me feeling demoralised, and a little hurt. I was in no mood for another 'lesson' any time soon.

As our path down the rocky foothills levelled out to flat, I found myself walking up beside Gimli. He had that big old war axe slung casually over one shoulder (the "back up" for the one shattered at the council meeting), and I tried not to feel intimidated. Short and comically hairy as the stout little man might be; I had little doubt he'd have no trouble cleaving a person in half with it, if he cared to.

I supposed the polite thing to have done would be open the conversation by thanking him for digging me out of the snow on Cradahras. I already knew he wasn't particularly fond of me, but instead I found myself saying something else that was playing on my mind…

"Gimli," I started, not really sure of the best way to talk to the dwarf in question. I decided to go with 'diplomatically blunt.' "You said your cousin is in Moria. Balin, right?"

Gimli looked momentarily surprised. Probably at the fact that I'd spoken to him at all, let alone asked a question so politely. He peered at me curiously through thick eyebrows.

"Aye, lass. What of it?"

"When was the last time you saw him?"
The grizzly redheaded dwarf looked momentarily wistful, and it instantly changed his appearance from intimidating to something warm, almost endearing. No mean feat, considering he had a sod-off huge war axe slung over his back.

"Not since he and a good number of my kin set out to reclaim Moria, over three decades ago. Last I heard they had reclaimed the Axe of Durin. A fine prize."

"So... you haven't actually heard from him recently then?"

Gimli eyed me dubiously through narrowed eyes.

"Are you getting to a point, lass?" He asked bluntly.

I bit my bottom lip nervously. I'd got an uneasy squirming feeling in my gut when he mentioned his cousin, but I had no idea why. I vaguely remembered that there was something about Moria that was bad news from the books, but for the life of me I couldn't remember what. Could it have been something to do with Balin? Or the other dwarves?

"I—."

I'm still not sure what I was planning on follow that with, but I didn't have to worry about it long. The next outcrop of rock we turned opened up onto a sight that left my jaw hanging slack.

Where the rough and rocky mountain side should have continued, it gave way to a gigantic and almost perfectly flat wall of stormy grey stone. It stretched off down the edge of the mountain side as far as I could see, and towered over the surrounding river over two hundred feet straight up. If we'd been on Earth, I'd have half expected to find myself staring up at a couple of popular American president's faces carved into it — Mount Rushmore style.

"The walls of Moria!" Gimli exclaimed in awe. If I hadn't been so impressed at the sight myself, I might have found it funny that a dwarf could be so enraptured at the sight of his own people's architecture.

We picked our way over the river until we came right up to a narrow path, sandwiched between the towering stone walls and the dark lake the river ran into.

"Dwarf doors are almost invisible when closed." Gimli explained to me with a dash of pride in his voice, wrapping the blade of his axe against the stone to emphasis the point.

"Yes, so much so that even their own masters cannot find them, if their secrets are forgotten." Gandalf added knowledgeably.

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" I heard Legolas say quietly, just loud enough for both Gimli and I to hear him.

I tried not to roll my eyes. Really I did. Gimli saw the look on my face, and I could swear I spotted a tiny smile crease the corners of his eyes.

Gandalf led us down the lakeside path, running his hand along the cliffside until finally he came to a stop between two gnarled looking trees. He felt around some more, muttering to himself; his fingers finding grooves in the stone that I wouldn't have been able to spot even with my funky elvish eye-sight. He continued to mumble incoherently, then suddenly looked up at the sky. I didn't understand what he was waiting for, until a cloud parted and allowed the half moon to shine directly onto the cliffside.
An archway, beautifully wrought and almost twice as tall as me, appeared the second the moonlight hit the stone. Its edges, instead of appearing as carved stone, glowed with pale light as if they’d been carved out of the cliffside with a star. As the lines and edges grew clearer, I could see writing appearing across the top of the arch, interlaced with the spiralling patterns.

With a surge of excitement that they were written in Tengwar script! I could read them!

'Ennyn Durin, Aran Moria. Pedo mellon a Minno. Im Narvi hain enchant. Celebrimbor o Eregion tetant I thiw hin.'

I found myself silently mouthing the ancient elvish words as Gandalf read them aloud in the common tongue to the others, indicating with his staff as he went.

"It reads, 'The door of Durin, Lord of Moria. Speak, friend, and enter. I Narvi made them. Celebrimbor of Hollin drew these signs.'"

I stifled a chuckle at the last part of the translation. Beautiful as the famous elven smith's work was; that last part of that inscription sounded very much like a flowery elvish version of: "Narvi and Celebrimbor were here."

"What do you suppose that means?" Merry asked interestedly.

"Oh, it's quite simple. If you are a friend, speak the password and the doors will open," Gandalf said confidently, raising his staff and aiming the end at the centre of the door. "Annon edhellen, edro hi ammen!*"

Nothing happened.

Gandalf paused in surprise for a second, staring at the door. He tried again, raising both arms dramatically up in the air.

"Fennis nogothrim, lasto beth lammen!* " He called loudly.

Again, nothing. This was starting to seem a little silly.

Gandalf gave an annoyed sound, walked up to the archway and pushed against it with his shoulder. He might as well have been trying to push the mountain itself.

"I once knew all the spells in all the tongues of elves and orcs." He muttered irritably, more to himself than any of us.

"What are you going to do then?" Pippin piped up, and the old wizard whirled on him.

"Knock your head against these doors, Perrigrin Took!" He barked, and Pippin and I both flinched. "And if that does not work, and I am permitted a little peace from foolish questions, I will try opening words."

Something about wizards being "subtle" and "quick to anger" stirred in my memory, and I was glad I'd chosen to keep my mouth shut this time. Poor Pippin looked thoroughly taken aback, and mumbled something about getting campfire going. I decided to help him out — no reason we had to sit around getting cold while we waited for Gandalf to crack the lock on the door. I just hoped he figured it out soon, before he decided to just blast it open in a fit of frustration.

Pippin gave me an appreciative smile as I helped him and Merry scrounge up enough dry wood to get a small fire going, and get Sam's small kettle boiling over it. Tea — in my humble opinion —
solves most of life problems, if served at the right time and in the right quantities. Grouchy wizards, surly rangers and homesick hobbits were no exception.

"The Mines are no place for a pony, even one so brave as Bill." I heard Aragorn telling Sam quietly as I brewed the tea. I turned to see the larger hobbit sadly stroking the old horse's mane while Aragorn unbridles and unsaddled him. Finally he steered Bill in the opposite direction and gave him a light pat of encouragement to get him moving. Sam bade the faithful pony a quiet farewell and reluctantly let him go. "Don't worry, Sam. He knows the way home."

I felt a bit sad myself watching them — I knew Sam had grown very fond of the pony in the few weeks we'd been traveling. I'd opened my mouth to try and say something reassuring, but the words died on my lips. I could feel a pair of eyes burning into the back of my neck, and I turned to find Legolas leaning against the wall of the cliff just a stone's throw away. He was very deliberately looking anywhere but at me.

I frowned and turned back to the kettle which had started whistling.

"Is there mud on my face? Something stuck in my hair?" I asked quietly. Merry gave me a quizzical look from over the campfire.

"No. Why do you ask?"

"Every time I look away, I can feel Prince Charming over there eyeballing the back of my head."

"Maybe he just likes the shape of your ears." Pippin suggested unhelpfully, his lip stretching into his usual playful smile. "They're very pretty ears."

I raised an eyebrow at him. "Thanks… I think."

I was about to start pouring the tea when something else out of the corner of my eye moved. Out over the lake.

I whipped my head around to look, but saw nothing. I was sure I'd just seen the water move. Except that wasn't possible. There was no wind to make even the smallest ripples, and the small lake should have been far too cold for fish…

The memory hit me like a slap in the face.

'The Watcher in the Water!'

I mentally smacked myself on the forehead. I couldn't believe I'd only just remembered now. Oh it wasn't like it was important or anything. Only that there was a sod-off giant river monster hiding in the lake waiting to attack us when we weren't looking.

Nope, nothing serious at all.

Bloody hell, I needed to warn the other before it spotted us and we all ended up getting dragged into a premature and very damp grave.

I opened my mouth to speak, but the second I did it was as if all the air had been pulled from my lungs. My throat closed over the warning I'd been about to shout, and I choked on a wheezing breath. My eye widened and my hand went to my throat. Merry and Pippin looked up in alarm, but I couldn't speak. I tried again, and this time my tongue fused itself like quick-dry superglue to the roof of my mouth. I hunched over on my knees and started coughing violently trying to dislodge it. Boromir came over and gave me a few gentle slaps on the back as I hunched over.
Finally after about a minute of coughing, I managed to choke out a wheezy 'thank you'.

"You alright, lass?" Gimli called over at me gruffly.

"Yeah," I rasped. "Just… forgot to breathe."

Gimli, Boromir and Aragorn all gave me identical thoroughly unconvinced looks, but I ignored them all. What answer could I give them? I had no sodding idea what just happened. Every time I'd so much as drawn breath to try say something about the river monster, I'd started choking on my own tongue.

"I'm going to go… check the supplies…" I said, my voice still a little rough and croaky.

"Perhaps I should help you." Boromir offered, setting his shield down by where I'd abandoned the tea for Merry and Pippin to deal with. I shook my head hurriedly.

"No, no, that's ok. I've got it."

It was only half a lie.

I did have every intention of checking the supplies. What I wanted more was a chance to sit, get my breath back, and think about what the hell had just happened to me — preferably without any ruggedly handsome men distracting me with their chivalry. Plus, something about what Gimli had said earlier still bothering me, but I'd been practically wringing out my brain trying to remember why.

I scuttled off towards where Aragorn had set down the packs and satchels that Bill had been carrying. I studiously ignored the curious eyes I could feel on the back of my head and began going through each bag, taking inventory of what we had left. It was very similar to the work I'd used to do for the apothecary back in Rivendell, and much less complicated. It only took me five minutes. After going through our food provisions, I decided to check my own medicinal supplies while I was at it; just to keep my hands busy while I thought.

Seven small throwing daggers; five rolls of bandages; two medical satchels with assorted tools; one hunting knife (slightly used with a crudely engraved hilt); and a partridge in a pear tree…

I found myself staring vacantly down at my equipment after a minute. I'd sorted through them three times, checked everything was clean and sharp, and I was still drawing a mental blank. I couldn't think of any explanation as to what had just happened. All I'd done was try and warn them of what was in the lake. Of potential danger.

Could it be some kind of weird unspoken law of bring dropped into a parallel universe?

'\textit{Thou shalt not give away plot twists to the original canon characters}?'

Then it dawned on me.

It wasn't that I'd been about to warn them of impending danger. I'd been about to warn them of something that I shouldn't have even known was there. The only reason I did know was because I'd already read this part of the story back on Earth. It was hazy and vague, but I remembered it well enough to know the attack was going to happen. I knew what was lurking beneath the water. But the others didn't.

Whatever invisible force it that was keeping me from speaking, it seemed intent on not letting me give away to the Fellowship what was going to happen. And there was only one invisible force
resident in my head that knew what I knew…

"Can't let you do that, boss." Tink's voice rang through my mind, as if she'd been waiting for me to think it.

"Tink?! That was you? You did that choking thing to me? Why?!"

"Because of what you were about to say." She replied calmly, impervious to my outrage, however silent. "You were about to tell the others about the Watcher in the Water. You can not do that."

'And why the hell not? I can't just sit here in silence knowing what's going to happen!' I fired back inside my head.

'We can, and we will.'

I just sat there for a moment, stunned. Whatever Tink was — my subconscious; my id; the personification of my basic primal brain — I had no idea she was capable of doing anything like that. In the two years I'd had her living inside my head, she'd never done anything like this before. The idea that she could spontaneously cut off my airway, or make me choke on my own tongue, was unsettling to say the least.

Then again, I was reasonably sure she wouldn't be in a hurry to try it again. If she did, she'd essentially be choking herself too.

'There'd better be a damn good reason why you did that.' I snapped, still angry and very freaked out. 'You're my subconscious for God sake!'

'I'm also your survival instinct.' Tink answered, still frustratingly calm, but I could hear the irritation creeping into her voice. 'It's my job to stop doing something that's potentially going to get us dead.'

I felt myself frown at that, and my stomach did a nervous little roll.

'Dead?'

'Possibly mauled. At this point it could go either way.' She said conversationally, paused, and then added. 'Besides, you'd totally be ruining the plot if you gave it away now.'

'So you're not only my internal babysitter, but also a spoiler nazi now? Wonderful.' I grumbled. I turned to look very slightly over my shoulder to look at the others. Gandalf was still muttering incantations at the door, while Boromir, Aragorn, Gimli and the hobbits sat patiently near the fire. I noticed the tea I'd made hadn't gone unappreciated.

'Why?' I silently asked. 'Why interfere now?'

Tink chose her words with obvious care before she answered me.

'Let's just say that some things you're supposed to learn the hard way. Just, not so hard that you end up killing yourself doing it."

I was about to tell her that I'd had more than enough unhelpful riddles for one day, when a shadow fell over my hand in the moonlight. I came one muscle spasm away from drawing my hunting knife, but I controlled myself just in time.

"Jesus, don't do that!" I let out a shaky breath of relief at seeing it was only Legolas. He looked
different in the dark. The moonlight had turned his long hair from gold to silver, and his handsome face looked less imposing now than it did in direct sunlight. Or maybe that was just because for once he wasn't scowling at me. His blue-grey eyes were still just as sharp and unsettling as ever, but his frown was one of confusion instead of irritation.

"Do what?" He asked me.

"Sneak up on me like that!" I told him shortly, very deliberately putting my sheathed hunting knife back on the ground next to me.

"I wasn't attempting to sneak up on you." He insisted, the faintly irritated tone I was used to hearing from him creeping in. I ignored it, busying myself with the fiddly process of putting my knife pouch back onto my belt.

"Well, you managed it anyway. Congratulations."

I fastened the last buckle and turned to look over at where he'd sat himself down crosslegged on a nearby stone, his bow resting across his lap.

"So why are you here?" I asked.

"You shouldn't wander too far on your own, especially here." He stated plainly, then paused, tilting his head to the side in thought. "I was also curious to know why you've been less… talkative than usual."

'Smooth save there, Prince Charming. You were going to say "obnoxious" weren't you?' Tink commented smugly. I slammed the metaphorical door on her. For my own good or not, I was still really pissed about what she'd done to me earlier.

"Well, I've got a bit on my mind than usual." I told Legolas irritably, turning away again. Then I stopped, and just for a moment thought back to my conversation with Aragorn. I looked over my shoulder at him; paused, then added more amiably; "More than Pippin's raunchy pub ballads anyway."

A minuscule, tiny twitch tugged at the corner of the other elf's mouth. If I'd blinked I might have missed it — but it was there.

"Clearly." He said, his hardened tone softening just a little bit. I saw his gaze flicker down my right shoulder. He was silent for a moment with an uncomfortable expression creeping into his eyes.

"How is your arm?"

"What?"

"Your arm." He repeated stiffly, as if he were embarrassed for even mentioning it.

That caught me off guard. Why did he suddenly care about my arm? He hadn't seemed remotely interested in my continued existence the day before. Now he was asking after my well-being, like some family friend over for Sunday lunch?

I looked down at the limb in question and then back up at him suspiciously.

"Its fine. Just a bit bruised."

He nodded and looked away for a moment. The silence stretching between us was just becoming uncomfortable when he broke it with another question.
"May I ask you something?"

"I suppose so…" I said slowly, both curious and slightly nervous.

"Elves only sleep as Men do when we are deeply wounded or ailing from some unseen sickness."
He told me seriously, giving me a pensive look that made me feel a little uncomfortable about what was coming next.

"I'm pretty sure that was a statement. What's your question?" I pressed, and he watched my expression closely.

"You are neither wounded nor poisoned, and yet you sleep. Why?"

Urgh. As far as questions went, that one was a doozie. Sometimes I completely forgot that I was an elf now. A lot of the things I said and did as a human Londoner just didn't match what I was supposed to be here in Arda. Among many things, my sleeping pattern had been the biggest noticeable difference between me and the other elves of Rivendell. I'd learned from Lord Elrond that most elves rested their minds and bodies separately — one going about its usual business while the other took a break. Very rarely did they ever fall into a sleep deep enough to dream. Not like I did.

I'd experimented with it a bit during my two years training, but the most I'd managed to go without slipping into sleep deprived psychosis was about six days. Of course, there was no way I was going to try and explain all that to Legolas — no matter how creepy-unexpected-polite he was suddenly being to me.

"I… ur…" I thought for a second. I'd always been terrible at lying, but hell, it was worth a shot. "I was dropped on my head as a child?"

Legolas gave me the most masterful deadpan look I'd ever seen in my life. He arched one eyebrow at me, and I made disgusted noise, throwing up my hands in defeat.

"Alright, fine. I have no idea why. I get tried, I sleep. Is that so terrible?"

He shrugged, and turned away to look out over the lake.

"I suppose not. I was merely curious."

Another uncomfortably potent silence stretched between us. Occasionally it was broken by the sounds of hobbits talking quietly around the fire, or Gandalf's frustrated grumbling at the riddle on the door.

I peered at Legolas in thought after a little while. He looked content to leave me to my sorting, and it probably would have been the sensible thing to just leave the conversation at that. After all, for once we'd ended on a good note, sort of. Really it was the first time we'd ever managed to speak to each other civilly for more than five minutes. That was an achievement all on its own.

But I just couldn't leave it alone.

If there was anything Aragorn had shown me via his reprimanding speech last night; it was that the one thing I hated more than being talked down to, was a double standard. If I was going to be made to eat my badly chosen words from the past few weeks, then so was he.

I swallowed the last of my pride and turned back to face the other elf in the dark.
"Look, Legolas. How I spoke to you at the Council meeting was disrespectful, and said out of frustration. I apologise for that. It won't happen again."

I said it fast, like ripping off a bandaid. The blond elf turned to look at me, his expression more than little bit shocked. He opened his mouth to speak, but I cut over him before he could get a word out.

"What I won't apologise for, is everything that's happened between us since. I'm not the only one here who's behaved badly. Whatever it is I said or did to offend you enough to treat me like you have, the least you could do is tell me, so we can both get over it."

That really caught him off guard.

Rebuff? Scorn? That I was expecting. I hadn't expected to surprise him so much that he just stared blankly at me, his grey eyes fixed on mine. From the look on his face, I was pretty sure I'd struck something I hadn't intended to with those words.

"There, big dramatic speech over. Feel free to chip in any time now." I muttered uncomfortably, eyeing him for a reaction other than an unsettling grey-blue stare.

He looked at me uncertainly and opened his mouth to speak. Then he hesitated, as if uncertain of how he was supposed to respond.

"I… must admit, I find your behaviour and speech baffling." He finally said slowly after a very long moment of almost painful silence. I heaved a silent sigh of relief. At least he wasn't scowling at me anymore.

"You wouldn't be the first to say so." I agreed, but didn't miss that he was deliberately evading my point. "But that's not an answer. Merry and Pippin are baffling too, and you've treat them just fine."

He sighed through a tiny frustrated noise, but where I expected to see annoyance in his face I just saw discomfort.

"You do not conduct yourself as most ellith I've known. After what happened at Lord Elrond's council, I found myself unsure of how to handle you. Also, it has been a long time since I've witnessed anyone give such an… unconventionally first impression." He explained, and I noticed that the tense line of his shoulders had relaxed. Also, the hand he's been gripping his bow with had relaxed. Had he really been that angry? Or, nervous…?

Nah.

"I think the word you were searching for there was 'memorable'. I gave a memorable first impression." I corrected him, unable to hold back a smug little grin.

Shockingly, he actually smiled at that. I decided right there that I preferred his smile a lot more than his glare.

"True." He agreed, and then paused to look thoughtfully at me. "I will concede that I too have not conducted myself as I should have. It was not my place to treat Lord Elrond's apprentice with such disrespect simply because you're…"

He trailed off, and I tilted my head to the side expectantly.

"I'm a girl?" I offered. He looked uncomfortable again.

"Partly, yes."
"Its fine. You were half right at least. I *am* pretty terrible at fighting." I gave him what I hoped was a pointed look. "But just because I'm female doesn't automatically make me a liability."

"So I've seen." He said more amiably, but not quite losing the uncomfortable expression on his face. "There is little I can offer for my behaviour, other than my apologies."

"Well, since I can't offer much more, I guess that makes us even." I replied, a small pleased smile appearing my face which he returned.

"Then I hope you can forgive my treatment of you."

I chuckled, "Now you look *and* talk like a Disney prince. How can I say no?"

He gave me a confused but not displeased look.

"I don't understand. Is this a good thing?"

I decided not to answer him. I just chuckled at the baffled look on his face, smiling to myself like the loon that he probably still thought I was. I put the last of my things away, and started getting to my feet again.

"So how about it, Prince Charming? Think we can tolerate each other and our 'baffling ways' until we reach Mordor?" I grinned. Just because we'd agreed to be civil didn't mean I was going to let him off the hook completely.

Legolas gave me a gimlet look at the sound of his designated nickname, but I saw the corner of his mouth twitch, just a little.

"I think we can certainly *try*." He said graciously, climbing gracefully to his feet and offering me his hand, just like before. I let him pull me completely to my feet, and this time it didn't feel forced to accept his help. I knew we hadn't come close to patching up all our issues, but it was certainly a start. And a hell of a lot more than I'd dared hope for.

A splash from the lake set my heart to racing in sudden panic.

I whipped around, only to see Merry and Pippin throwing pebbles into the water, trying to get them to skip. My stomach dropped and I went to shout at them to stop, catching myself when I remembered what had happened when I tried that earlier.

If I did that, I'd likely just end up unable to breath again.

I made a frustrated noise, and Legolas looked at me in confusion. Aragorn heard it too, looking up just in time to see the panic on my face directed at the hobbits. Thank God he had no weird choke-on-your-own-tongue curse to stop him doing something about it. Merry had just picked up another stone and was about to throw it when Aragorn came up behind him and caught his wrist.

"Do not disturb the water." He said quietly but sternly.

A clatter drew everyone's attention as Gandalf let his staff drop to the ground in frustration, taking a seat on a nearby stone in defeat at the still sealed door. Frodo rose in his place, looking up at the writing on the archway with a pensive look. His eyes widened in realisation.

"It's a riddle!" He cried suddenly, looking hard up at the ancient inscription. I held my breath, crossing my fingers and hoping he'd finally got it. I knew we likely didn't have much time left.
'Speak, friend, and enter.' What's the Elvish word for friend?

Everyone's attention was on Frodo and the door. Which meant no one but me was looking at the lake. Larger ripples had started to move surface of the water…

'Come on, come on, come on!'

"Mellon." Gandalf said clearly, the elvish rolling off his tongue.

The walls of Moria answered with the penetrating sound of stone cracking open, and the carved doors began to swing slowly outwards of their own accord. Gandalf gave a triumphant rumbling laugh, as everyone started getting to their feet to follow. He patted Frodo on the back as he passed, leading the way into the fully open doorways to the dwarven halls. I followed in quickly after them, just a step behind Legolas and Aragorn.

It was very nearly pitch black inside. I could barely see a thing. But it was the smell that hit me like the crest of a wave.

Dust, damp, must, and something else. Sickly sweet and sour, like spoiled milk and burned meat.

I wrinkled my nose in the gloom, but none of the others seemed to have noticed as they followed Gandalf further inside. All except for Legolas. He had the same repulsed expression as me, only it was accompanied by weary alertness, one hand clutching his bow at the ready. He looked over at me, and for a weird second we shared a look of mutual worry.

Something about this really wasn't right, and it was unsettling us both.

"Soon, master elf, you will enjoy the fabled hospitality of the dwarves; roaring fires, malt beer, red meat off the bone!" Gimli's voice entered merrily through the gloom, just a little ahead of us. "This, lass, is the home of my cousin, Balin. And they call it a Mine. A Mine."

He snorted in amusement, just as Gandalf breathed light into the crystal on his staff.

The hallway was instantly illuminated, and with a jolt of horror, I saw what had caused the fowl smell.

"This is no mine." Boromir breathed, coming up behind me. "It's a tomb."

Bodies were everywhere. Desiccated, butchered and rotting away; they were everywhere. They littered the crumbling stair case, the cracked floor, some were even pinned to the walls and pillars with arrows and broken blades. Some were still just recognisable as dwarves, while others were so mangled or burned that it was impossible to tell.

I took an instinctive step backwards in fear, stumbling back into Boromir. He caught me by my bruised arm and steadied me, but I hardly noticed the pain. Something crackled under my foot.

"Eleanor, don't…" Boromir warned me just a little too late.

I looked down to see the crunching sound under my boot had come from a dead dwarf's finger bones, still clutching a blade in a shrivelled hand. I almost threw up.

"No, no…!" Gimli groaned in dread, looking around at the bodies. He rushed over to one and clearly recognised the armour and weapons on the dead dwarves bodies. "No!"

Legolas of the cast-iron stomach, reached down and pulled an arrow out of one corpse's skulls,
took one look at it and blanched.

"Goblins!" He said, and it was the first time I'd ever heard him truly panicked. He threw the arrow aside and reached for his own arrows, just as Boromir and Aragorn also armed themselves too.

"We'll make for the Gap of Rohan. We should never have come here!" Boromir insisted firmly and fearfully, taking my shoulder and pulling me back firmly towards the door. My mind and body froze, unable to decide which I should be more afraid of — the monster I knew was lurking in the lake outside, or whatever was hiding in the mountain that had killed all these dwarves?

 Turns out, I didn't need to decide.

It all happened much faster than I'd imagined it would. One minute Boromir was shouting at us all to get out. The next, Frodo was screaming, and all the hobbits were yelling.

All of us whirled to see the long grey-green tentacle-like arm, like that of an obscenely oversized octopus, had reached out of the lake behind us and had grabbed Frodo by the ankle. It was trying to drag him into the dark water. Merry and Pippin had grabbed Frodo by his arms and were trying to pull him back, while Sam hacked viciously at the slimy tentacle with his short sword.

With a muffled shriek of pain, the monster beneath the lake released Frodo. But not even a second later, the one arm Sam had managed to fend off with his blade was replaced with an explosion of a dozen more, all of them shooting out of the water straight towards us.

The hobbits were swatted backwards off their feet with one swipe from an arm as thick as a tree trunk, while another seized Frodo by the leg and pulled him down. I shouted his name in panic, lunging back through the door and falling onto my front, trying to grab his hand before he was dragged under. I caught him, but our fingers slipped, and he was pulled up and into the air above the lake, shrieking in terror. I scrambled back to my feet as Boromir and Aragorn rushed past me into the water, swords drawn and going straight for the base of the monster's arms.

Legolas's bow appeared to my left, an arrow already fired and spinning through the air to land with an audible thunk in the arm still holding Frodo upside down. It loosened its grip just enough to let its hold on him slide from Frodo's leg to his ankle. But it didn't drop him. Aragorn and Boromir had managed to hack and slash their way through a forest of gross flailing limbs to just under where Frodo was still dangling.

I cursed aloud. I couldn't just stand there, but there was nothing I could think of to help. I didn't have anything other than my hunting dagger and throwing knives, none of which would have even made a dent in the thing's hide.

Frodo screamed again, and the black waters of the lake parted to reveal the Watcher's head. It was huge. Huge and hideously ugly, like that bastard child of an octopus and an ocean going sci-fi alien. Two massive black eyes and a gaping maw of a mouth, opened up; and for a moment, I thought Frodo was going to end up as fish food.

But Aragorn saved him just in time, cleaving straight through the limb clutching Frodo with his sword. Frodo dropped with a cry of panic, but Boromir was already there and ready to catch him.

"In to the Mines!" Gandalf shouted at us all, pulling Pippin back onto his feet by the scruff of his cloak. Aragorn and Boromir were sprinting towards us through the water, but the Watcher had recovered and was right behind them.

I dashed forward and pulled a still dazed Merry and Sam up off the bank, tugging them backwards
towards the stone doors. Something whistled past my left ear, and thunking straight into one of the creatures arms. I looked up to see it had been just a foot away from latching itself around my neck, before an arrow had staple it into another larger arm right behind it. The creature howled in fury.

Gandalf was still shouting at us to get into the caves. I ground my teeth and all but shoved Merry and Sam in ahead of me. Another huge arm slammed into the arch above our heads, cracking and breaking the stone until it couldn't support its own weight. Aragorn, Boromir and Frodo all dived through the entrance at the last second, just as the beautifully carved gates of Moria collapsed with a thundering crash behind us, sealing us in.

Pitch blackness engulfed us.

For a moment I totally lost myself.

Since becoming an elf and becoming used to the sharpened senses that came with it, I'd never found myself unable to see. I'd never found myself in such complete and absolute darkness. I didn't make a sound, but internally I was gibbering. Frantically, I felt around on the stone floor in front of me, afraid that if I didn't find something, any kind of proof that I wasn't the only one still alive in there, I'd start screaming.

My fingers closed over warm hand in the dark, and I gripped it tight.

Dim light suddenly illuminated the half collapsed entranceway from the tip of Gandalf's staff. It was weak, but more than enough for us all to see. I squinted around in the gloom and did a silent head count.

One wizard, four hobbits, two men, two elves, one dwarf.

I gasped out the breath of relief I didn't realised I'd been holding in. Everyone was ok. Bruised and shell shocked, but ok.

Finally I allowed myself to look down and see who's hand I'd found in the dark.

Boromir.

He was covered in dust and soaked from traipsing through the lake, but he instead of shock and fear in his blue eyes, there was grim determination. He'd obviously seen the fear in my face though, because he quickly gave me a reassuring smile, and my hand a gentle squeeze, before helping me gently to my feet again. My legs were still a little wobbly, so he graciously kept a hand near my elbow just in case I toppled over.

I don't know why or even how I noticed, but for a split second I saw Legolas's gaze flicker between my hand and Boromir's, before swiftly turning his face away.

"We now have but one choice. We must face the long dark of Moria." Gandalf's voice rang through stone hall, throwing back the gloom as he breathed a little more light into the crystal on his staff. "Be on your guard. There are older and fouler things than Orcs in the deep places of the world. It's a four day journey to the other side. Let us hope that our presence will go unnoticed."

He began walking in the direction of the ruined stone steps, and the hobbits all scrambled to follow closely behind him, followed by Aragorn, Gimli, and Legolas. Boromir gestured for me to walk ahead of him, and I gratefully obliged.

We might have survived the Watcher in the Water, but I didn't want to even contemplate the idea of becoming lost in this place, whatever was waiting inside.
Translations:

* "Gate of the Elves, open now for us!" (Sindarin)

** "Doorway of the Dwarf-folk, listen to the word of my tongue!" (Sindarin)

Chapter End Notes

I want to say a big thanks to everyone who's read and left comments so far — your feedback has really kept my motivation high. Apologies this chapter took so long to post, but as you've probably seen; it was a long one, and it took me an awfully long time to get right.

I'm sure you know the drill by now. ;) I love your feedback, but not as much as I love the fact that you read this far. Hope you enjoyed! See you next chapter!
Part II :: Stories In The Dark

Chapter Summary

A/N: We’ve hit the 50 review benchmark over on FF.net ladies and gents! Thank you so much!

So to show my appreciation to all of you who’ve been lovely enough to contribute to the feedback: I’ll be posting two new chapters rapid-fire this time round! Chapter 13 was posted today early this morning (UK time) and Chapter 14 will be up later tonight, so keep your eyes peeled. :)

Hope you enjoy reading, and once again, thank you! You are all very much adored, dear readers.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The biggest problem with wading through hallways full of decomposing corpses is the smell.

Not the general horror-movie-grossness. Nor the occasional horrible crackle of the bones underfoot. Nor even the fact that in some places, we were having to literally clamber and climb over where they’d blocked the staircases. The smell was dense as smoke, and just refused to fade no matter how far or how long we walked.

‘I told you two days ago, boss. A little culumalda oil rubbed under the nose, and bam! Corpse smell gone!’

I didn’t respond. Not even to point out that culumalda oil — though it did have a lovely woody scent — when applied directly to the nose or mouth, had the nasty side effect of making you hallucinate about giant purple mushrooms.

Do not ask me how I know that.

It might have been juvenile, and a bit futile, since Tink was privy to all but the deepest of my inner thoughts anyway. But I was still angry at what she’d done to me on the side of the lake. I’d refused to speak to her, or even acknowledge her, since we’d been sealed into Moria two and a half days ago.

‘You know, you’re not going to be able to ignore me forever, boss.’
For sheer contrary effect, I pretended not to have heard her, and mimed waving away a pesky fly
that just wouldn’t go away.


It wasn’t a good time to get into another argument with her though. We’d reached the lower levels
of the actual mines of the Mines, and were having to pick our way across a lot of precarious
bridges and narrow walkways. I wasn’t fully convinced that the creaking wooden structures were
strong enough to support us all at once, and Gandalf seemed to think likewise.

He’d ordered us to walk single file as he lead us through the dark — wizard, then Legolas, me,
Gimli, Frodo, Sam, Boromir, Merry, Pippin, and finally Aragorn bringing up the rear.

I kept close behind the tall elf as we walked, almost close enough to feel the warmth radiating off
him in the cold dank air of the abandoned caves. I didn’t like the idea of anyone in the Fellowship
thinking that I was scared, least of all Legolas (who I’d stumbled into a couple of times when
Gandalf had abruptly stopped without warning). But I just couldn’t convincingly hide the fact was.
I felt a deep-seated, weirdly desperate longing to see the sky and stars again, and an inescapable
dread at the thought of having to try and sleep down here for another night.

Legolas didn’t comment, nor did he complain. Not even once. Not even when my nose collided
with his shoulder for the fifth time in an hour. He was clearly just as uncomfortable under the
mountain as me, though he was much better at hiding. I was just close enough to see that his
shoulders had tensed up, the muscles of his back wound tight as violin strings under his hunting
greens.

At one point, Gandalf lead us along a very rickety platform skirting the side of a stone wall, the
other wise giving way to darkness. He slowed in his walking and ran his hand curiously along the
stone. He turned back to us with a small smile made wry by the long hours of walking in the dark.

“The wealth of Moria is not in gold, or jewels,” He told us, as if we were on some kind of bizarre
tour and he was our guide, “But mithril.”

He held out his staff over the edge of the platform, and poured more light into the crystal set on the
tip. All the others curiously peered over the edge, and reluctantly, I looked too.

My breath came out in a rush.

“Oh, wow…”

Veins of beautiful bright metal ran like silver streams down through the stone walls of the mine,
reflecting the light of the wizard’s staff like mirrors illuminating the huge chasm far below us.

It was stunningly beautiful. And it was a very, very long way down.

I leaned forward and peered over to get a better look, and trying not to think about how long you’d
have to fall before finally reaching the bottom. A firm but gentle hand appeared unexpectedly on
my arm. I looked to find Legolas gently but firmly holding me back, as if he was expecting me to
suddenly pitch myself forwards over the edge. His hold on my arm was a lot more gentle than last
time — so carful in fact, you’d hardly guess his grip was strong enough to leave deep finger shaped
bruises.

But the moment I’d met his eye, he let go and turned away.

“Bilbo had a set of mithril rings that Thorin gave him.” Gandalf told us, continuing to lead us along
the rickety platform, and cutting off my confused look at the other elf.

“That was a kingly gift!” Gimli sounded impressed from right behind me. He had good reason to. From what I gathered, mithril was pretty much the platinum of Middle Earth — only x10 in terms of rarity and value.

“I never told him, but it’s worth was greater than that of the Shire.” Gandalf chuckled, as if it were a secret joke.

We continued on for several more hours, coming to a worryingly steep set of stairs — most of which had been reduced to nothing but rubble and smashed rock. We had to climb slowly to avoid slipping and falling on the loose stones. They were also covered in — yep, you guessed it — even more corpses. It probably wasn’t a good sign that by that point, I was almost getting used to the sight of the desiccated bodies, if not the smell.

When we finally reached the top, the once smooth stone platform opened up onto three identical doorways, each leading off in opposing directions. One lead up another long staircase, while the other two lead down into murky darkness.

Gandalf halted before the three arching entrances, saying nothing, and looking from one to the other very slowly.

“I have no memory of this place.” He finally murmured after a long silence, and he sounded troubled by the fact.

That was the only thing he’d said in the past two hours. Two hours which he’d spent sitting away from the rest of us, perched on some craggy rocks facing the three doors. His frown was so deep his thick grey eyebrows had almost joined in the middle. No one had dared ask him what he was doing this time, especially not Pippin.

The others of the company were busying themselves sitting around, and trying to wait as patiently as possible for Gandalf to have his inevitable epiphany. Smoking seemed to be the favoured pastime of the day. Merry, Pippin, Aragorn, and even Boromir all had their pipes out, smoking like chimneys. I’d sat far enough away that the smell wasn’t too overpowering, but there was still a faint cloud forming above them after the first hour.

Gimli was swigging what smelled like whiskey, from a hip flask he’d drawn from I knew not where.

I couldn’t blame him though. I think all of us could have done with a stiff drink at this point. And none of the rest of us were having to deal with the unspoken question of what had become of Balin in this horrible place. There were a hell of a lot of dwarf corpses down there in the tunnels. But so far they had all looked like foot-soldiers. Gimli had said his cousin was one of the dwarf lords who led the recolonisation of Moria decades ago. Surely if he was still here, he wouldn’t have been lost among the hundreds of bodies we’d passed to get this far.

By the second hour, the silence was getting uncomfortably heavy, and Gandalf still hadn’t said a word.

I decided to at least make an attempt to tame my filthy tangled hair, since I’d been neglecting it for days now. It had grown since we’d left Rivendell, hanging down to the middle of my back when I let it out of its usual ponytail. Of course, without anything close to a decent hairbrush handy, that only meant the Medusa-esque tangles were only slightly more nightmarish than usual. I could have murdered a hot bath, some shampoo and a comb. But I made do with using my fingers to tease the
worst of the knots out, and mulling over my limited progress in the cryptic flashback department.

In my waking dream on Caradhras… the man I’d seen in the vision… I’d known him. I knew him.

Every time I thought back to it, I felt a sting of familiarity in my gut, and a small tugging pain in my chest. It was a very similar pain to the one I got when I thought of my parents, or my brother, or Katie.

I had no idea who he was, or even his name. But clearly some part of me remembered, and missed him.

It had been by far the clearest and most vivid of both my flashbacks, but it had still left me with frustratingly more questions than answers, again.

But it had revealed one thing. The first time I’d had one of the creepy flashbacks, it had been Gandalf using the Black Speech that had set it off in the council chamber. The second time, it had been two wizards having what equated to a magical long distance shouting match over a mountain range.

As far as I could see, the lowest common denominator in that equations was: Wizards.

A wizard had been involved both times.

Gandalf wasn’t stupid, and he wasn’t blind. I’d seen the way he reacted in the Council chamber. He knew something more about what was blocking my mind, and he was deliberately not telling me. I just couldn’t work out why…

With the silence still hanging like an unwelcome guest over our heads, I was tempted to get up and go over, intent on demanding he give me some straight answers for a change…

“Are we lost?” Pippin asked quietly, his small accented voice cutting through my musings.

“No. I don’t think so.” Merry whispered back even more quietly, “Shhh though, Gandalf’s thinking.”

“Merry.”

“What?”

“I’m hungry.”

“You’re always hungry, Pip.” Merry replied, trying and failing to add a light chuckle into the words.

“I can’t help it. It’s been hours since first breakfast.”

Pippin’s stomach let out a loud growl of agreement, and Merry’s chuckle sounded a little more real this time.

“You probably should eat something, Pippin. Your stomach groaning like that will wake the whole of Moria at this rate.” I said from when I was perched behind them, also trying and failing to sound more chipper than I felt. I must have looked or sounded worse off than I thought because Pippin’s face fell a little when he turned and saw mine.

“Are you alright, Eleanor? You’re looking a bit pale.”
“Yeah, I’m fine.” I said, not even convincing myself with that answer. “Turns out, I just *really* hate being trapped underground with a mountain full of corpses.”

Pippin obviously couldn’t think of anything reassuring to say in return, so he just offered me out a piece of the stale bread he’d dug out of his pack with an apologetic smile. I took it, smiling weakly back at him.

“Thanks.”

He and Merry both started wolfing down the remains of the small breakfast we’d had earlier. There wasn’t loads, but still enough for me to wonder how they managed to put it away and still remain the size they were. My hips couldn’t help but feeling a little envious.

“Do all hobbits eat as much as you two?” I asked them curiously, and Merry managed to smile through a mouthful of dried apricots and nuts. He swallowed before answering.

“Not all, but most, I’d say.”

“We’re a folk of simple pleasures and hearty appetites, m’lady.” Pippin added, his grin loud even though he was keeping his voice quiet.

“I suppose I should be grateful one of us thought to pack so much extra food.” I was still trying to work out where exactly they’d hidden all of it.

“Well, we could hardly plan to go half way across Arda and not bring along some extras for second-breakfast.” He whispered to me conspiratorially. “Speaking of, what do elves normally eat anyway? You’re the only elf I’ve met who likes bacon.”

I chuckled dryly.

“Why are you asking me? I think it’s already pretty obvious I’m not a ‘normal’ elf.”

“Well, no, but…” He peered tentatively over at Legolas. The blond elf was standing off to one side leaning against the stone wall. Serious faced, staring into the dark, and wound tighter than his own bowstring.

I got what Pippin was getting at.

Air, tension, knife. It was obviously starting to eat at us all, and he didn’t want to risk setting anyone else off like he had Gandalf again. Then it was gone again, just like that — the small moment of cheer had gone. Silence fell over us all again as minutes passed. The fleeting moment of laughter dissipated, replaced by the dark and dank quiet of the Mines once again. I was teetering on the edge of telling myself really terrible knock-knock jokes just to keep my mind off the dark, when Sam unexpectedly came to my rescue.

“Miss Eleanor,” His quiet Somerset accent sounded weirdly alien in the murky gloom of that horrible place. “Mr Bilbo said that you tell wonderful stories. Could you… maybe tell us one?”

Nine pairs of eyes all turned to fix on me in the dark. I could suddenly feel the weight of their tension, and I swallowed nervously.

“Urm… alright.” I said hesitantly, suddenly regretting ever introducing Bilbo to the wonders of Earth-style fairytales. “What kind of story do you want to hear?”

“Something happy, to lift our spirits.” Merry suggested.
“But nothing too boring either, mind.” Pippin added.

I couldn’t help but feel anything I could tell could be as exciting as being trapped in underground dwarven city full of corpses. But hell, I’d take a stab at it.

“Oh, um…” I thought for a moment, mentally rifling through every Brothers Grimm story and Disney film I could think of for ideas. Finally, my thoughts settled on one story I’d missed from back home in particular. I smiled to myself in the dark.

“Alright, I’ve got one. This is the story of Peter Pan, the boy who never grew up …” (1)

So, I spent the next hour and a half telling a nursery story to four warriors, four hobbits, and one wizard in the dark under a mountain.

I told them about Wendy Darling and her two younger brothers — John and Michael — wishing that they never had to grow up, staying up long into the night telling stories while their parents slept. I told them about Peter Pan and Tinkerbell, and how Peter was fascinated by their stories and would listen, floating silently over their heads in the dark of their nursery. Then I told them how one night the children spotted him, and how he lost his shadow and fairy sidekick when the window to their bedroom was slammed shut before they could escape. I told them of how he returned the next night to get Tinkerbell back, and Wendy offered to help sew his shadow back on in return for a kiss.

Merry and Pippin snickered like school kids when I explained how poor Peter didn’t know what a kiss was, so instead Wendy gave him a thimble so he wouldn’t be embarrassed. They only smirked harder when I told how in return, he took one of the acorns from his shirt and gave it to her as a “kiss” of his own.

I told them every part of the tale I could remember. Fairy dust allowing the children to fly to Neverland. Tinkerbell getting jealous. The Lost Boys asking Wendy to become their new mother. Tiger Lily and the Indians. Captain Hook, the pirates. And of course, the ticking crocodile.

I suppose I should have felt embarrassed, or awkward, sitting there in the dark telling nine adult men a story about magic, and fairies, and pirates. But it quickly became obvious that I wasn’t the only one who’d felt the darkness of the mountain pressing down on them. Regaling them with the adventures of Peter, Wendy and her brothers in Neverland was a welcome distraction for the murky gloom and endless waiting around.

When I finally got to the end — opting for the version were the Darling family adopt the Lost Boys, and Wendy’s daughter ends up going on adventures with Peter years later — the air felt lighter than before.

“Well, Master Bilbo spoke true.” Gimli commented through his continued chuckling, snorting out little puffs of smoke. He’d barely stopped chortling since I got to the part involving Hook’s missing hand getting snapped off by the crocodile. “You have an interesting talent for storytelling, lassie.”

“It is one of the more unusual tales I’ve heard.” Boromir agreed with an amused look in my direction. I gave a pleased smile.

“I’ll be sure to tell J. M. Barrie you said so.”

“Jay-Em… who?” Merry asked, but I avoided opening that particular can of worms by pretending not to have heard him. I got up from my perch on the stairs with the intent to stretch my legs,
crossing the small craggy platform towards where Frodo had gone to sit nearer to Gandalf.

Legolas was standing just a little off to one side, leaning against a half destroyed pillar with his arms folded over his bow. He was looking out into the dark, occasionally flickering his gaze back to Gandalf — who as far as I could tell, had slipped into a meditative coma of concentration on the three doorways.

“Still nothing?” I asked quietly, coming up beside him. Tentative as our truce outside the Mines had been, the past two days in the dark had made the conflicting tension between us ease somewhat. It was hard to hold petty grudges in a place like Moria, especially when we were both already struggling to keep from going mad with elf-related claustrophobia.

“Not so far.” He answered me softly, not moving his head.

I heaved a heavy sigh and leaned back against the pillar too, wiggling my toes in my boots to get the blood circulating in them again. Legolas turned to look at me in the dark as we just stood there in silence.

“Your story was one I have never heard before.” He commented after a moments hesitation. “Is it your own?”

I shook my head, rubbing my hands together and trying to get them to warm up along with my toes.

“I wish. But no, I… heard it from someone else a long time ago.” I responded, deliberately vague.

“Someone from your time in Imladris?”

“Not exactly…”

“This ‘J.M. Barrie you mentioned? A friend of yours?”

“Why the sudden curiosity in my fairy-tale sources?” I asked, eyeing him warily and pointedly ignoring his previous question. He didn’t answer for a moment, and it was too dark to read the expression on his face clearly. He turned away from me slightly to look out over the cavern below us.

“I was curious to know how long you were living there under Lord Elrond’s tutelage.”

I chewed my lip in uneasy thought. I knew this particular question had been coming.

I’d decided a few days prior that, until further notice, I was going to keep all information on my background as limited as possible from the others. Until I had more blank spaces in my own Middle-Earth memory filled in, the less prying questions from others I had to answer the better. Not the most trusting policy, I know — but it seemed much smarter idea than trying to explain to the Fellowship that I’d come from another world entirely. Especially when I still had no idea how or why it had happened to me.

I wouldn’t be able to keep the secret forever, I knew that. But for now, I needed to…

“I was there long enough to learn the pointy end of a scalpel, and where best to aim it. Lets just leave it at that for now, ok?” I answered, dodging the question as gracefully as I could. I poked my index finger at his bow. “What about you, Prince Charming? How long have you been shooting that thing for?”

He didn’t glare at the nickname this time, but I saw the tiny twitch in his expression.
“Long enough to know the pointy end of an arrow, and where best to aim it.” He replied with a small smile, not missing a beat. I rolled my eyes.

“Haha. Very clever, your highness.”

A rumbling growl came from just behind us and I jumped a bit. The pair of us turned to see Pippin’s face had gone pink, and Merry was trying to hide his snickering.

“I don’t believe it. Pippin, your stomach is growling again?”

“Perhaps you might have something to help remedy that, being our capable resident healer?” Legolas smiled minutely at me in what might have passed for sincerity, but I heard the playfully jibing tone hidden underneath.

Keeping my face perfectly straight, I flipped open the medical satchel on my hip, dug inside, and retrieved a long thin needle that was a few inches short of becoming a hat pin. Merry and Pippin watched in confusion and mild alarm as I offered it out to Legolas with a polite smile. Legolas just looked at it, and looked at me.

“What is that for?”

My sweet smile widened.

“Please use it to deflate your head. You’ll find it easier to get through the doorway.”

Whiskey suddenly came out of Gimli’s nose. I heard a choking snort come from Boromir, and the hobbits didn’t even try to hide their chortles. I also heard a gentle thunk of the back of Aragorn’s head hitting stone wall. I didn’t care. I’d decided that he — all of them — could disapprove of me and my baffling behaviour as much as they liked. I wasn’t useless. I wasn’t an idiot. And I was just about done letting myself get walked over by these “big strong men,” however politely they might be doing it.

Legolas took the needle from me after a moment, stashing it in a pocket in his hunting leathers without breaking eye contact with me. He smiled narrowly, but underneath I saw the challenging look that said clear as a flashing neon sign:

You do realise, this means war?

I gave him my sugariest smile in return, sending him one right back:

Do your worst, Prince Charming.

“Oh!” Gandalf had been silent so long his voice made me literally jump as he exclaimed, “It’s that way!”

“He’s remembered!” Merry cried, excitedly scrambling to his feet.

“No, but he air doesn’t smell quite so fowl down here.” Gandalf said with cheer that I didn’t normally associate with him. He walked over to the door on the far left, put his pointy hat back on his head, and patted Merry on the back. “When in doubt Meriadoc, always follow your nose.”

Gandalf led us down into the dark, the dim glow of his staff leading the way. It was another climb down some steep stairs, though luckily these ones weren’t quite so battered so it didn’t take long. When the ground finally levelled out to flat stone again, we came through another tall archway, and out into a room so big I couldn’t see where the floor met the walls.
“Let me risk a little more light.”

The white light of Gandalf’s staff suddenly burned bright enough to make my sensitive eyes sting a little — the light filling the room around us.

Only it wasn’t a room.

It was a palace hall, or something that came close. The ceiling was taller than anything I’d ever seen before, towering up hundreds of feet, with huge wrought stone arches holding up the weight of the mountain over our heads. They stretched off in rows and columns for miles over the stone floor, so far away I couldn’t see where they ended.

It was beautiful, and kind of frightening all at the same time. I’d seen lavish European cathedrals that would have turned green with envy for the ruins of the dwarven city.

“Behold, the great realm of the dwarf city of Dwarrowdelf!”

“Well, there’s an eye opener and no mistake…” Sam breathed out in a rush of awe.

Gandalf led us out into the halls of the city, through the forest of towering stone pillars. He had to occasionally warn us of cracks in the floor, since most of us were so dumbstruck by the overhead view we almost didn’t look down to see them in time. It was a long way through the dark, but after a while we reached another wall between a series of great pillars, and a dim light flickering in a doorway not far off.

Gimli gave an elated cry of excitement, and shot off ahead of us without waiting.

“Gimli!” Gandalf called, but the dwarf didn’t stop. He dashed through the doorway ahead while the rest of us rushed to catch up. I came through the doorway behind Gandalf to see a ruined room full of more bodies, all of these recognisably dwarves this time. The light had come from a small inlet in the stone ceiling overhead. It was shining a tiny beam of purest daylight down onto a white stone tomb in the centre of the room.

Gimli had fallen onto his knees in front of it, leaning heavily on his axe and sobbing. Real, honest sobbing.

It was a gut wrenching sound to hear coming from the usually gruff old dwarf.

“No…” He was saying over and over, “No…oh, no.”

I followed Gandalf as he moved over to stand beside him, looking down at the inscription on the top of the stone.

“Here lies Balin, son of Fudin, Lord of Moria.” The wizard read aloud in a solemn voice, quite finality tinging the edges of it. “He is dead then. It is as I feared.”

I felt my face fall as I recognised the name. His cousin.

“I’m so sorry, Gimli.” I murmured quietly, knowing that nothing I could say would seem like enough. He just shook his head silently, leaning his helm on the polished white stone of his cousin’s tomb.

The others had followed in behind us, the hobbits peering between the tomb and the grizzly bodies littering the room with nearly identical frightened expressions. Gandalf had circled around the other side of the stone coffin. One of the half rotten, half mummified bodies was slumped against
the side, a thick tome still clutched in brittle fingers. Gandalf beckoned to Pippin, who was the closest, and handed him both his staff and hat. Carefully, the old wizard removed the dead dwarf’s hands from the book, picked it up, and opened it with a creak of old parchment and protesting leather. I was surprised the thing didn’t just fall to pieces in his hands. It looked ancient…

“We must move on, we cannot linger here.” I heard Legolas whisper almost silently to Aragorn behind me. No one else except the Ranger reacted, so I guessed I was the only other one who’s heard him. The words made the cold unease that had been lingering in my gut for the past three days turn into icy dread.

Gandalf blew a cloud of dust from the pages of the book, and began to read.

“They have taken the Bridge,” He read, only just loud enough for all of us to hear. “And the second hall. We have barred the gates, but cannot hold them for long. The ground shakes… drums in the deep… we cannot get out… a shadow moves in the dark…”

He turned to the last page. I saw that the once neat hand of the scribe had begun to turn frantic and jagged with fear the more he wrote — ending in a single jagged line that cut like a wound across the page.

“We cannot get out… will no one save us… they are coming.”

“Pippin—!” Merry’s voice hissed suddenly, cutting through the silence left by Gandalf’s words.

*Crash!*

A terrified shriek flew up my throat as a thunderous echoing clamour came from right behind me. I clapped both my hands over my mouth, smothering it before it could become a full on horror-movie scream.

Everyone whipped their heads around to find Pippin standing there, his eyes wide and his mouth working soundlessly in shock. He’d backed up to the edge of a well at the side of the room, and had accidentally nudged one of the bodies collapsed over it until the thing’s head had just fallen off. It was still making a God awful racket as it plummeted down through the mines and tunnels Pippin winced.

But just when it seemed like it couldn’t get any worse, the rest of the body followed the head down the well. Pippin cringed with every single bang and crash that echoed up through the hole in the floor. After what seemed like forever, the echoing crashes finally feel quiet.

We all just stared at him, utterly silent.

Seconds felt like minutes in the quiet that followed, and it took me a moment to realise I’d been holding my breath the entire time. We all had, I think. I reluctantly uncovered my hands form my mouth, and Gandalf slammed the book shut with a loud *crack*, not bothering to be quiet any longer.

“Fool of a Took!” He barked, furiously snatching his staff and hat back from the smallest hobbit. “Throw yourself in next time, and rid us of your stupidity!”

Poor Pippin looked utterly defeated and miserable, closing his mouth over the apology he’d been about to voice. I was tempted to say something reassuring, but my voice failed when something more bone-chilling than the crashes of the falling body met my ears.

A dull, echoing thump. Coming again and again, like the heartbeat of a monster. I knew it wasn’t
loud enough for the others to heard it, because Legolas was the only one who reacted when I did. I saw his face instantly set into an impassive stoney frown, but I saw the colour drain a bit from his face.

*Boom... Boom... Boom...*

It was coming from the well. And it was getting louder...

“That doesn’t sound like a good noise.” I whispered, my voice gone high with nerves. It was loud enough for the others to hear, and they all reacted in exactly the same way Legolas and I had. The hobbits blanched, while Gandalf and the others turned alert, their hands twitching towards their weapons.

“Mr. Frodo!” Sam suddenly cried out, pointing down at the other hobbit’s hip. Frodo pulled aside his travelling cloak. The blade of his elvish made short sword was glowing a a bight pale blue.

“Orcs!” Legolas said, his voice coming out half a growl and half a warning.

As if the emphasise the point, the sound of inhuman howling and shrieking echoed up through the well and from the hall outside, cackling like hyenas. The sound set tremors of purely primary terror rushing through me.

Boromir, who’d been standing closest to the entrance, dashed back towards it to look out. If he’d been a second faster, an arrow would have nailed his head to the door. Three black shafts sank into the wood inches from his nose with muffled *whiz-thunk*. All the colour drained from his face, but he controlled himself and heaved the heavy wooden doors shut with Aragorn’s help.

“They have a cave troll.” He informed us, somehow managing to sound more annoyed than worried at the prospect.

“Get back! Stay close to Gandalf!” Aragorn shouted at the hobbits as Legolas blurred towards them, helping gather what little there was available to barricade the ancient entranceway. There wasn’t much available, and the wood of the door was already damaged just shy of falling off it’s frame. Whatever was coming from the other side, it wouldn’t be enough to keep it out very long.

I felt sweat beating on the back of my neck and my hands started shaking a bit.

Gandalf drew the sword he had tried to his belt, and the hobbits all did the same with their shorter versions — Frodo’s elvish one glowing like a tiny blue star. Boromir, Aragorn and Legolas backed away from the door the second it started rattling on it’s hinges. Legolas knocked back an arrow against his bowstring like it was as instinctive for him as breathing. Aragorn did the same beside him with one he’d snatched from a fallen dwarf, and Boromir readied his sword and shield with a grim expression etched into his face.

“Eleanor, your knife!” Aragorn snapped back at me over his shoulder.

Almost numb with fear, I obediently unsheathed the blade. Instinctively I turned it over in my hand, so the blade faced back towards my elbow, the razor edge facing outwards — just like he’d shown me two years ago. My hands were trembling, my knees were shaking; but the grip of the knife familiar, and the blade was a comforting weight in my hand.

“I knew how to use it, but I was terrified beyond logical thought by then. I bit my lip almost hard enough to draw blood, trying to make myself stop trembling and *think* past the fear.

“‘*Use it like a tool, rather than let it use you.*’”
I’m still not sure if it was actually Tink speaking in my head that time, or just my recall of her cryptic advice. But it didn’t matter. I stuffed my fear down as best I could, sat on it, and locked it away for later. I could melt into a gibbering mess later…

“Stay behind us.” Aragorn told me quietly without looking, and I had no intention of disobeying this time. I could tell him to quit playing the dictator when we were all out of this hell hole alive. Hopefully in mostly one piece.

“Let them come!” Gimli bellowed furiously from where he’d climbed onto Balin’s tomb, his grizzled dwarven voice turning savage with rage for his fallen kin. “There is yet one dwarf in Moria who still draws breath!”

Cracks had begun to appear in the door. One of Legolas’s arrows blurred through one when it was large enough, and a high pitched squeal of pain came from the other side. It didn’t stop them though.

One loud bang shook dust from the ceiling. A second. A third.

And the door shattered inwards, spilling monsters into the room.

~ ❖ ~

I really wish I could say that I fought bravely. That I was a badass warrior princess; all spinning blades, cool nerve, and whatnot.

The truth is, I was so terrified I almost forgot how to breathe.

Orcs are fucking scary, ok. Not just because they’re ugly as sin, or that they were wielding weapons that looked like they belonged on the set of a Saw movie — but the sounds they made as they rushed us. Howls, screeches, dull crashes, and the sound of metal hitting metal. It was sodding petrifying.

What I did manage to do in spades was dodge, dive and/or scream away when anything pointy or sharp got within a foot of my face. Occasionally I remembered that I was armed with my hunting knife, using it to block incoming blows I couldn’t dodge, or stab and slash limbs that were in the way of my escape. I wasn’t going to kid myself into believing I was any good at fighting, but I could dodge things intent on killing me like it was going out of style.

I just hadn’t got the hang of doing it gracefully, yet.

Something to work on in future — provided we ever got out of here alive of course.

‘Come get me, you ugly bastards!’ Tink sang mockingly at them all, her voice ringing through my head like a war cry. For all the life threatening peril we were in, she seemed to be enjoying herself immensely — shouting taunts and vulgarities at the bloodthirsty orcs from inside the safety of my mind.

‘This isn’t a bloody Indiana Jones movie, you nutcase!’ I screamed back at her, the words almost coming out through my mouth they were so loud.
She just laughed, the sound completely unhinged, bordering on insane.

The others for their part, seemed to be handling things only marginally better. Boromir and Aragorn were brutal in their swinging attacks, not bothering with finesse with their blades in such close quarters. I’d lost track of Legolas and Gandalf somewhere after the first wave, but I could hear the occasional *thwunk* as one of Legolas’s arrows made contact. Gimli was running on so much pent up fury that he’d gone very nearly berserk with rage, tearing and shredding through anything that got in the way of his two massive war axes.

Even the hobbits, despite their size, were fierce little buggers too, when they wanted to be. I got a lovely mental snap shot of Sam knocking a particularly hideous orc out cold with one powerful swing from his frying pan — Rapunzel style.

I might have laughed, if I could only remember how my lungs worked.

Still terrified almost to the point of numbness, I kept up with the chaos as best I could. I’d just started to find something close to a strategy for avoiding swings of the orcs — ducking their swings at the last second, then raking my knife diagonally across the inner elbow of their weapon arm. Then a huge, roaring, battleship of a creature came crashing through what remained of the broken door. Splintered wood sprayed over the floor, and I looked up to find myself gaping at a monster from a Harry Potter movie — only twice as big, and three times uglier.

The cave troll.

It was almost as tall as the ceiling, hunched over with heavy slabs of muscle, and thick grey hide that I instinctively knew would be harder to pierce than kevlar. It had a huge linked chain dangling around it’s thick neck, like some kind of leash, and a spiked mace the size of a car door clutched in a meaty hand.

It looked really pissed off. And it was looking straight down at me.

I couldn’t help myself. I started cackling hysterically and shouting, “Troll! Troll in the dungeon!”

That’s when the fun *really* started.

The cave troll roared. It was so loud I actually felt it shake the ground under my feet. Dust and loose stones fell from the ceiling. If it hadn’t been for Frodo suddenly stumbling into my side, I might have remained there, petrified to the floor. I stumbled sideways and caught him before we could both fall over.

The troll lunged towards us, swinging that monster of a mace over its head until it brushed the ceiling. I didn’t give myself a chance to scream. Frodo and I both dove — well, fell really — forward onto the ground, rolling clumsily between its leg and onto the other side as the giant weapon shattered the ground where we’d been standing into dust.

It whirled on us again, slow and clumsy, but more than making up for it in sheer bulk. It wouldn’t need the mace to kill us. It could have crushed us both to pulp under one giant foot, if it had the brains to try…

Turns out, it *did* have the brains to try. But only just.

It raised one huge leg into the air, preparing to bring it down on me and the Ring barer sprawled on the floor next to me. But instead of squashing us flat, it began to fall backwards with a howl of frustration. I scrambled back, seeing that Aragorn and Boromir had both seized the huge chain encircling the troll’s neck, pulling back hard enough to heave the thing off balance.
The troll, enraged beyond sense at the two men, whirled on them, disregarding us completely. It swung a huge fist at the two men.

Aragorn ducked and rolled, but Boromir wasn’t quite fast enough. The blow caught his cheek, sending him into a dazed spin, though he somehow managed to keep hold of the chain. The troll, in a moment of badly timed lucidity, grasped hold of the other end of the chain. Before Boromir had a chance to regain his bearings, it swung the massive leash like a whip.

The human warrior went flying straight into a wall and fell straight onto a pile of corpses, his sword clattering to the ground.

“Boromir!” I heard myself shriek. I scrambled to my feet and making a dash towards him, praying his neck hadn’t just been broken by the fall.

I was a reasonably good healer by now. But no one was that good.

Relief flooded my entire body in a wave when I saw him lift his head, trying to shake the stars from his eyes. He obviously wasn’t firing on all cylinders after that blow, because he didn’t see the orc coming at him with a machete the size of a butcher’s knife until it was almost on him. It snarled through black teeth, peeled back with glee, and raised the weapon over it’s head for a downward swing.

In case anyone tries telling you this in future: practice does not in fact make perfect.

Practice makes permanent. And Glorfindel — no matter how much he may have disliked me — had made damn sure I’d practiced with my chosen weapon until I could wield it without thinking. And it clearly worked, because I did react without thinking.

Jerking one of my eight throwing knives out of its pouch, I flipped it over in my palm so I was gripping it lightly by the blade. My aim fixed, I bent my arm back so the handle was almost touching my ear, and flung the knife with the sharp flick of my wrist I’d been made to practice a zillion times to get right.

My knife hit the orc at the base of the spine with a wet thunk.

The orc convulsed in sudden pain and shock. The blow wasn’t fatal, but it was more than enough to give Boromir time to snatch up his sword, and take the monster’s head clean off it’s shoulders. He saw me, saw the knife in the dead orc’s back, and just stared for a second, stunned. If I wasn’t so high with adrenaline, I might have been grossed out at what I’d just done. As it was, I could only feel a little dash of nausea, plus a little twinge of satisfaction at how I’d likely just saved his life.

My mini moment of heroism was cut short when another orc suddenly grabbed me from behind, in what I could only describe as a rib crunching bear hug, my arms locked to my sides. The air left my lungs in a grunting rush, my feet came off the ground, and I started thrashing and shrieking furiously, trying to get free. It snarled in my ear, and the stench of rotting meat and unwashed skin almost made me wretch.

One of the hobbits shouted my name, but I couldn’t tell who it was.

One of my thrashing kicks caught the orc in the shins, and it hunched forward with a grunt of pain — just enough for my feet to reach the floor. I planted my weight, and slammed the back of my head into the orc’s face. It howled as its nose crunched, a disgusting spray of dark blood spattering the back of my neck. I elbowed it in the stomach and shoved my weight forward, scrambling away before it could try and grab me again.
The troll was still going after Aragorn, and now Gimli, taking wide, heavy swings at them.

They were doing a good job of dodging, sometimes even managing to get the troll’s mace to crash into an unsuspecting orc instead. I’d just dodged behind Balin’s (surprisingly still in tact) tomb when something flew straight over my head and thumped straight into the troll’s chest. I only realised it was one of Gimli’s war axes when I heard him let out a clamouring battle cry from right behind me.

The troll bellowed back in fury. My ears rang. It swung the mace down at us again.

I screamed and scrambled back fast on my butt and elbows, just as the mace came down on the front half of the tomb, throwing Gimli off backwards and crushing the polished white stone to powder. I rolled onto my front as the world spun and started to crawl away, choking on the dust filling my lungs.

Then something huge and strong as a bulldozer seized me by the ankle.

I had just enough time to think; ‘Oh God, not again!’

Then I was being dragged back across the floor and up into the air, dangling upside down by one leg. I blinked the dust from my eyes, and found myself face to face with the ugliest mug I’d ever seen. It probably didn’t help that I was viewing the troll upside down, or that its breath reeked of what smelled disturbingly like over cooked pork. It growled right into my terrified face, and I almost passed out for the stench.

“Lass!” I heard Gimli bellow from somewhere in the chaos.

I couldn’t do anything. My hunting knife had fallen from my hand somewhere by Balin’s tomb where I’d dropped into the dust. I tried to reach for a knife in my dagger pouch, but it had twisted and stuck closed. I tried to struggle free, but I might as well have tried to defy gravity for all the good it did. I didn’t even have enough air left in my lungs to scream.

I saw what it was going to do seconds before it happened.

The troll drew back it’s arm, the spiked mace ready to swing directly at my head. If that thing so much as clipped me, they’d be sending my remains back to Rivendell in a shoebox.

Unable to contain myself, I covered my head and closed my eyes, bracing myself for the bone shattering impact.

But it never came.

Instead the troll howled in pain, jerking furiously and swinging me like a hyperactive child with a yo-yo. My eyes flew open, and still viewing the world from upside down, I saw why all my skull hadn’t been smashed in.

Legolas had used my needle. The one I’d given him earlier. He’d climbed onto one of the higher platforms over the room, and had managed to jab it through a gap in the troll’s thick hide. It had gone right into the wrist joint, just as it had drawn it’s huge arm back to take a swing at me. He must have hit a tendon or nerve, because all the muscles in the troll’s massive hand went suddenly limp and useless as a dishrag. The massive spiked mace fell to the floor with a dull boom, crushing a wounded orc flat where it fell.

Relief mixed with ridiculous petty resentment filled me.
I was *never* going to live this down.

I’d given Legolas that needle to sting his pride. And what had he done? He’d gone and saved my life with. The bastard.

Next thing I knew, the troll had thrown me. In a perfect world, I would have fallen daintily into the waiting arms of our resident elven Disney prince. But since this was neither a perfect world nor a Disney film, I was hurled like a screaming sack of onions straight into a dazed looking Sam. He made a valiant attempt to catch me, bless him. He might as well have been trying to catch a cannonball in flight for all the good it did.

I slammed into him, and we both crashed hard to the stone floor. My head smacked hard against something solid, and my eyes went very blurry, along with my hearing. I just lay there for ages, waiting for the world to stop pinwheeling and come back into focus.

It felt strangely like being underwater.

I was still at least half conscious, but the entire world was muffled. I heard a lot of crashing, banging, and shouting. A terrified cry came from one of the hobbits, and furious shouts of horror and rage from the rest of them. I couldn’t tell who. Another bellowing roar from the troll shook the walls and the stone beneath me. Another whizz-thunk for one of Legolas’s arrows, then a bone shatteringly heavy body sent a shockwave through the ground under me as it hit the floor.

The troll I guessed. Just for a moment, it was mercifully quiet for a few wonderful seconds…

Then I was being shaken by someone kneeling over me and calling my name over and over. I blinked fuzzy eyes frantically, trying to get them to focus past my dizzyingly spinning head. When they finally did, I found Boromir looking down at me in relief. Presumably that I was still alive and well. Not a red and squishy mess on the stone floor.

I choked out a wheezing breath of thanks, and he helped me sit up.

Then I saw what had made the other hobbits scream.

Frodo was lying face down in the rubble, as still as any of the corpses surrounding us all. My stomach clenched.

‘*No. Oh God, no.*’

Aragorn and a frantic Sam were already next to him, the latter not daring to try and even touch him. I saw the anguish on Aragorn’s face from across the room. He moved to roll the little body of the hobbit onto his back.

“Don’t touch him!” I tried to scream, but it came out a bit garbled and slurred as if I was drunk. Aragorn froze and I scrabbled to my feet, stumbling over on shaky legs, not waiting for Boromir to help me up. If Frodo was by some miracle still alive after that blow, he couldn’t afford to have anyone accidentally injuring him more.

“Don’t try and move him.” I ordered, my stronger voice finally coming back to me again. I dropped onto the ground next to the hobbit on my bruised knees. The spear had come out and was laying in the rubble next to him. He was lying on his front, and I was responsibly sure looking at him that his neck or spine hadn’t been broken. But he still wasn’t moving, not even to draw shallow breaths. Dread pooling in my belly, I very carefully rolled him over onto his back.

The dark haired hobbit rasped out a winded gasp and clutched at his chest, and I almost had a heart
“Jesus, Frodo!”

“He’s alive!” Sam sounded almost tearful with relief.

Frodo leaned forward and rasped in several deep and painful sounding breaths. Sam and I helped him to sit up when he finally got his breath back again.

“I’m alright. I’m not hurt.” He wheezed out, his voice scratchy. Aragorn for the first time since I’d met him, looked truly dumb founded.

“You should be dead!” He said in astonishment. “That spear could have skewered a wild boar.”

“I think there is more to this than meets the eye.” Gandalf, said in a knowing tone as he came up behind us, looking down at the hobbit still on the floor. The old man was sporting an impressive bruise on his jaw, and still had his sword in one hand and staff in the other.

Frodo, looked up at the wizard, then down at his shirt. The top two buttons had come open in the attack, and there was something silvery and metallic peeking out over the top. I suddenly remembered what it was, and where he’d got it, just as he pulled his shirt aside for us to see clearly what was hiding underneath.

“Mithril!” Gimli voiced, both surprised and impressed upon seeing the light chainmail shirt protecting the hobbit’s small torso. “You’re full of surprises, Master Baggins.”

Full of surprises or not, I was clearly the only one who was very conscious of the fact that he’d just been stabbed in the chest with a spear, by a troll!

A bit exasperated at their collective gawking, I pushed Aragorn’s hand aside and rolled up the mithril shirt over Frodo’s side — going instinctively into what I’d patented Lord Elrond’s ‘healer mode.’ Some of the links in the chainmail had cut into his skin a bit where the spear had punched him. I was careful to avoid them as I pressed my fingers gently into his side, counting down as I checked each rib. When I came to the second from the bottom he winced and flinched away.

“Two cracked ribs.” I mumbled more to myself than the others, and immediately turned to fish through the medical satchel still strapped securely to my left hip. “You’re going to have one hell of a bruise, but everything else looks alright.”

I pulled out the flask of pain relief draught I’d mixed before leaving Rivendell and pushed it into his hand.

“Take a swig, it’ll dull the pain.” I told him firmly. He did so without question, and with a grateful nod at me. Then Sam and Gandalf were helping him back to slightly shaky feet again, taking a while and some help to find his balance again.

“Eleanor, here.”

I looked up abruptly to see Aragorn looking at me seriously, and holding something out to me. My hunting knife. The one I’d dropped — again — when the troll grabbed me. The same one he’d told me not to lose, and the look on his face told me he’d remembered.

I took it sheepishly, but didn’t yield under his gaze this time. He nodded at me in acceptance and started to get up.
I was about to get up too when I stopped in my track, watching Aragorn rise awkwardly. His right arm was perfectly fine, still gripping his sword at the ready. But where his left arm met his torso looked wrong, even through the shirt and cloak. Where the curve of his shoulder should have been smooth, there was a jagged angle spiking sharply downwards. It was only when he stood up straight and gave a small but noticeable wince of pain that I realised why…

“Um… Aragorn?” I said tentatively, weirdly unsure of how to speak to him since the last time we had, had been on the mountainside of Caradhras. He turned to look at me expectantly.

“Yes?”

“You realise your shoulder is dislocated, right?”

His eyebrows pinched in a frown, and he looked down at where his left arm hung limp at his side — perfectly normal, except for the shoulder joint making a large bump poke out in the line of his tunic. He looked genuinely surprised at the sight. Either he (like me) was still flying high as a kite on adrenaline, or he had an insanely high pain threshold, because he barely seemed to have noticed. Aragorn can be a really scary bastard sometimes, even when he isn’t trying.

Not saying a word more, he marched straight over to me, holding his dislocated arm against his side to keep it from flopping, and gestured to it minutely with his chin. I knew instantly what he meant for me to do. Silly as if was, I couldn’t help but feel a little twinge of relief. He might disapprove of my conduct and behaviour, but he still trusted me and my training with Lord Elrond enough to do this.

Not wasting a breath, I took his wrist firmly in my hand just like I’d been taught to, and braced my arm under his elbow to hold the arm straight.

“Ready?” I asked.

He just grunted.

“One, two…”

I rotated the arm, pushing up with my legs and pressing into it. The joint snapped back into the socket with a loud pop. Aragorn gave a muffled groan of pain and hunched over on his knees, but otherwise didn’t complain. I thrust the bottle of pain relief draught at him, and he took a long swig before handing it back to me.

“Thank you.”

“For future reference,” I said through a strained chuckle, the post-battle wobbles finally starting to set in, “if any of you ever get injured doing something involving a troll again, you can bloody well stitch yourself back together.”

A light, exhausted round of weary chuckles came from the hobbits, wizard and dwarf. I even caught Legolas smiling with a peculiarly relieved look on his face. He’d come out of the fight almost untouched, save for a purpling bruise on his cheek and a shallow cut on his forehead.

But the moment was short lived. It had been barely a minute or two since the end of our first real fight, but it had been enough to wake what had obviously been sleeping deep within Moria’s depths. Howls, and shrieks, more high pitched and cackling than the orcs suddenly started coming up from the doorways and through the cracks in the floor.
Gandalf turned to us, face grim and sword still drawn as he headed straight for the door at the opposite end of the room without waiting.

"We must not wait here. Quickly, to the bridge of Khazad-dûm!"

Chapter End Notes

Credits:
(1) The story of “Peter & Wendy” was written by J.M. Barrie in 1911, and I do not claim any credit over the story. But it is one of my favourites. :)

A/N: Lets keep the ball rolling! Onwards to Chapter 13 in just a few hours!
When I was human, my running coach once jokingly boasted that I could have outrun a Mongol horde if I was motivated enough. I’d laughingly replied that he only said that because he was the one who’d trained me.

But it ain’t boasting if it’s true.

I’d been fast as a human.

But as an elf, I reckon I could have given an Olympic sprinter a run for their money, literally. Especially with an army of howling blood-thirsty goblins snapping at our heels.

Like there were right now. There were hundreds of them. Maybe thousands. It was impossible to tell in the near pitch darkness. Where there was enough light to see, they were coming up through holes in the fool, and crawling out of cracks high in the ceiling like spiders. Spiders with swords, knives, spears, and other various implements of nastiness.

We ran fast. We just weren’t fast enough.

Gandalf’s staff light shone on the path through the Dwarrodelf halls ahead of us. They were already there, waiting for us.

I’d been flying ahead of the others in a sprint just behind Gandalf when Aragorn suddenly seized me by the wrist, jerking me back behind him and Boromir. One of the goblins made a snarling grab for my hair, but Gimli clobbered it in the face with the pommel of his axe, snarling back just as viciously. They were everywhere now, forming a hissing, snarling circle around us like wolves boxing in wounded cattle. The hobbits had been pushed back behind us into the centre of our little cluster. They were trembling almost more than me as they held their short swords, ready to fight their way free if they had to. Not that that looked like a viable option. With how many there were now, and with how hungry they looked, I estimated we might make it fifty feet before something hideous and screeching cut us into sashimi.

Something deep and booming, so low pitched it was almost inaudible, rumbled through the cracked stone floor. The cavern went abruptly, eerily silent. All the shrieking and howling of the goblins stopped, and I saw a couple of them look suddenly and very nervously at each other over Boromir’s shoulder.

The sound came again. Louder this time.
Thunder. Underground.

‘Ok, I take it back.’ I murmured quietly inside my head. ‘That was definitely not a good sound.’

Another low rumble rattled stones on the floor near our feet. A huge shadow moved somewhere in the darkness, followed by a dim glowing orange light appearing not far off through the forest of pillars.

‘We need to run, boss!’ Tink’s voice suddenly rang frantically through my mind. ‘We can’t handle this! Not yet!’

I’d almost started adjusting to the feeling of the fear pulsing through me. But the panicked sound in Tink’s voice redoubled the feeling until I had to fight the urge to literally run for my life.

‘… What is that thing?’

‘Pray we don’t get to find out.’ Her voice was very near panic, whispering at me as if she was afraid it might hear her if she spoke too loud within vaults of my mind. ‘For sod sake, Eleanor, we need to run! Now!’

The goblins clearly thought that was a splendid idea, because they all gave collective shrieks of terror and began falling back, scurrying back down the cracks and holes in the stone from whence they’d come. Gimli gave a deep rumbling growl of satisfaction next to me, but icy dread had started pooling in my belly again. Whatever it was that had scared the goblins away, I didn’t think it was anything we should be pleased about.

I tried to think back to what I’d read at this part of the book, to what could possibly have frightened Tink so much.

Tink — my personified primal instinct — who’d told me to use my fear as a tool. Tink, who hadn’t been impressed with a bunch of orcs that nearly butchering us five minutes ago. Tink who I was beginning to realise knew a hell of a lot more about what was going on here than she was telling me…

But my brain had short circuited, too tired and too scared to think anything other than: Run! Run fast!

“What is this new devilry?” Boromir’s voice came almost soundlessly from inches behind me. Before us, Gandalf had his eyes shut in concentration, listening to the rumbling sounds of whatever was coming for us through the Mines. The fiery orange glow far off in the darkened hall was getting brighter, closer, casting eerie shadows onto the floor as it passed the pillars of the ruined city.

“A balrog.” Gandalf answered darkly, and the name hit home something buried deep in my memory of Tolkien’s stories.

My mind conjured up memories of illustrated monsters, towering tall and formed entirely of inky blackness and flames, horns curling out of their heads like a caricature of a stereotypical demon. The mental image seemed ridiculous. Somehow I doubted the real thing would be anything as tame as that, and I didn’t want to stick around long enough to find out.

“It is a demon of the ancient world. This foe is beyond any of you! Run!”

Now that was an idea I could get on board with.
We ran.

We ran like your tails were on fire. And for all I knew, given the amount of roaring and rumbling coming from behind us, burned backsides could have become a legitimate concern.

It was like running through a nightmare, that long stretch of the mines we followed Gandalf though, dodging rubble and cracks in the floor until the glow of light appeared through a stone doorway just ahead. Gandalf herded us all in ahead of him, practically throwing Merry through when he stumbled and almost fell down.

I shot through and down the stairs behind Boromir. I almost slammed straight into the back of him as he screeched to a sudden halt. He stumbled and very nearly went straight over the edge into the fire-lit gorge that had appeared right ahead of us. Legolas appeared out of nowhere and seized him by the back of his cloak, yanking him back onto the stairs before he could do a swan-dive off the edge.

“Lead them on, Aragorn! The bridge is near!” Gandalf ordered behind us, pushing the ranger ahead of him. When Aragorn didn’t react fast enough, Gandalf almost threw him bodily off his feet.

“Do as I say! Swords are no more use here!” He thundered.

Another boom rumbled through the stone stairs, followed by another menacingly echoing growl from a thundering throat. Like any of us needed a bigger incentive to keep running.

Down the stairs we went, fast as possible without tripping and falling into the bottomless pit yawning beneath the narrow walkways. Every so often the staircases would suddenly change direction, leading us further and further down until I wasn’t sure if I was dizzy from vertigo, or literally running in endless circles. Halfway down, we hit yet another problem. A huge jagged gap in the walkway. It was a frustratingly ambiguous size — not far enough to keep you from thinking about jumping, but just far enough to make one little miss-step absolutely fatal.

Of course, that meant Legolas jumped it in one graceful leap like it was nothing at all. Even in a fiery pit of doom, I couldn’t stop myself from hating him just a little bit for it.

Seriously, could he not be irritatingly perfect for just five minutes?

Another ground shaking boom rattled the walls of the cavern and stairs under us. Dust, stone and large pieces of shale started to break loose, tumbling down from the ceiling high above us. The balrog monster thing, was obviously getting closer, because it felt as if the air in the cave had started rising.

Gandalf went next. For a wizened old man, he was pretty light on his feet. He leaped the gap in one go, landing heavily but safely on the other side, with Legolas there to steady him when he stumbled on the crumbling stairs. I was about to take the leap too, when something shot past my cheek, flicking up a loose stand of hair as it passed. I flinched, feeling where it left a shallow cut across my cheek. Another almost caught Merry in the leg, and I saw it was an arrow as it bounced off the stone by his foot.

A look up showed us all that the bloody goblins who’d surrounded us earlier and then run away had grown their balls back. Only now they weren’t coming after us with crude machetes and spears. They’d opted for just shooting at us from the platforms above with crossbows. Lovely.

Legolas drew and aimed his bow in a blur, and started returning fire while Boromir followed the
jump next. Scooping both Merry and Pippin under each arm, he hurled himself over the gap from a
running start.

“Sam! You next!” Aragorn yelled, barely giving any warning before picking the terrified hobbit up
by the scruff of his coat and flinging him straight into Gandalf’s arms. He turned to face me and
Gimli. The dwarf gave him a severe look with a shake of his fist.

“No one tosses a dwarf!”

And with that wonderful mental image, he hurled himself over the edge. For someone so short and
weighed down with so much muscle, he was shockingly good at jumping long distances. Not quite
good enough to reach the other side unaided though. His boots landed firmly, but his body decided
to stay behind, teetering backwards with his arms pinwheeling.

Legolas, in a moment of quick but unwise thinking, grabbed Gimli by the end of his huge red
beard. Gimli howled in furious protest, but the blond elf ignored him, pulling him to safety.

The only left Frodo, Aragorn and me on the other side.

Another thundering boom shook loose even more debris from overhead. Frodo yelled a warning
just in time for the three of us to jump back away from the edge as a stone the size of my head
slammed down onto the spot Aragorn had been seconds before. It shattered the fragile edge of the
crack in the stairs, making the gap even wider as we stumbled back to keep from falling.

If it had been a difficult jump before, it was verging on suicidal now.

As if it wasn’t perilous enough already, another stone dropped and smashed through our retreat
back up the stairs behind us. We were essentially left standing on a broken pillar, balanced
precariously only by our own evenly distributed weight. And the goblins were still shooting at us.

“Shite, shite, shite!” Was my eloquent response to this development, trying to stay upright as the
ground under our feet began to sway drunkenly. Aragorn’s hand seized my wrist, steadying me,
and I grasped his forearm in a white-knuckled flood grip. He grasped Frodo by the shoulder and
leaned us against the roll of the stairs, trying to keep us balanced.

“Hang on! Keep your feet planted!” He shouted at us both, and again, I didn’t feel any burning
desire to disobey. The stairs tipped at a heart-stopping angle to the left before Aragorn manoeuvred
us to counterbalance the weight, tipping us back to the right. I thought my heart was going to crawl
up into my throat.

“Lean forward!” He commanded over the howls and shrieks of the goblins overhead. “When
you’re close enough, jump!”

He pushed both of us forward until we were all but leaning out over the edge. The platform began
to tilt, falling forwards towards the over side of the broken stair case, where the others were there
waiting to catch us.

I hoped.

Stone smashed against stone, and I jumped.

For once, I was grateful that Legolas was as inhumanly strong as he was. If he hadn’t been, I’d
have died right there.

The edge of the stairs crumbled and gave out from under my feet, and I felt myself dropping
backwards. I screamed, and Legolas seized my wrist, pulling me hard towards him. My arm all but came out of its socket with the force. Something went whiz-thunk right behind me, and a dull pain suddenly appeared in my side. Then my face smacked hard against Legolas’s chest as he pulled me back away from the edge. My head spun, my cheekbone throbbed where it had slammed into his collarbone, and I suddenly had the scent of cut grass and pine needles filling my nose…

How the hell did he smell so good? We’d been stuck underground for three days, yet he smelled like a bloody alpine forest after a summer storm. How?

“—you alright?”

It took a chaos filled second to realise he’d yelled a question at me over the noise, and I spluttered out a response before I could run it past my brain.

“I’ll be fine… once I’ve thrown up.”

One last deafening boom shook the entire cavern like the shock of an earthquake, and a crack the size of a city bus appeared in the wall where the door we’d come through was.

“We need to get out of here.” Legolas for once sounded truly afraid, and he started pulling me none too gently down the walkway after the others.

“Best idea you’ve had yet.” I wheezed out, all but falling down the stairs after him. He kept a firm hold of my hand as we ran down into the tunnels, the heat becoming almost unbearable. Finally we reached one final hallway, with a long narrow causeway at the end. Beyond that there was yet another stone archway.

But this one had daylight streaming through it. The way out.

Legolas turned and thrust me out ahead of him, forcing me to run with him and Gimli in step right behind me.

“Don’t slow down.” He somehow managed to keep his voice calm even though I knew he was running on just as much adrenaline as me. I probably had enough to power a small country by this point. I was very near pain with breathlessness and smoke inhalation, the heat in the tunnel building to something like the inside of a kiln. Just ahead through the heat haze, Gandalf was ushering the hobbits hurriedly across the narrow walkway after Aragorn and Boromir.

I flew after them across the bridge, forcing myself not to look down.

“Sodding dwarves! Who builds bridges this narrow and thinks its a good idea?!” I panted out through my scorched throat, trying to keep my balance while sprinting along the narrow causeway. Clearly the fear had at last fried what was left of my brain by then, because I started cackling hysterically at my own joke.

“Less laughing, more running, lass!” Gimli shouted from right behind me. I ran faster, but couldn’t make myself stop shrieking with maniacal terrified laughs. The others had already started scrambling up the stairs towards the exit on the other side. But just as Gimli, Legolas and I reached the other side, I saw Frodo whirl to look back. The horrified look that appeared on his face made me look too. Gandalf had stopped right in the middle of the bridge. He’s turned his back to us, facing straight towards the…

I’d been right.

The illustrations I’d seen of the balrog didn’t even come close.
It was huge, well over 15 feet tall, but bizarrely that was the least imposing thing about it. It had taken on the shape of a minotaur, heavy and broad across human-like shoulders, but snarling furiously through the face of a savage bull. Thick curling horns protruded from either side of it’s head, and where it’s body wasn’t entirely formed of thick smoke or wreaths of flame, there was nothing but utter blackness. It was like looking at the unholy offspring of a blackhole and a nuclear disaster.

And it had all it’s wrath aimed squarely down at the comparatively tiny grey wizard.

Gandalf stared up at it with a look of grim but exhausted determination, staff in one hand and sword in the other.

“You will not pass.” He told the huge fiery monster adamantly, as if he was shouting a fact of the universe, and not an obvious challenge. The balrog drew itself up to it’s full height, it’s shadowy wings spreading and the fire forming it’s body surging in fury.

I heard Frodo call Gandalf’s name in fear for him, but the sounds was almost completely drowned out.

Gandalf murmured something too quite for me to hear over the roar of the flames, and held up his staff as the tip began to glow, brighter and sharper than any star, forming a sphere of light around him. The light seemed to enrage the balrog beyond all sense, because it formed a flaming sword as big as a small bridge in it’s hand and swung it down at the wizard. Somehow, Gandalf managed to deflect the blow with a combination of his sword and the light I know realised was acting like a shield.

He was keeping it from following us across the bridge — though it wasn’t without it’s cost. I could see the exhaustion on his face from where I stood frozen to the spot.

‘He’ll be ok...’ I told myself, but I couldn’t quite make myself believe my own words.

The balrog roared, and the heat of it’s breath was something straight from the inside of a volcano. I lifted my hand to shield my face, seeing Frodo and Boromir do the same just behind me.

“Go back to the shadows!” Gandalf growled, his voice taking on the same furious thunder it had when he’d shielded us from Saruman on Caradhras. As if just to prove it could, the balrog took one thumping step onto the narrow bridge, another fiery weapon forming in it’s hand. A whip this time.

A bull whip. Oh irony.

The balrog swung the whip in a horizontal swipe, just over Gandalf’s head, the tip making a exploding crack and a shower of sparks against the cavern wall.

“You shall not pass!” Gandalf thundered — no metaphor intended — and slammed the end of his staff down on the bridge. A flash of light, and the protective sphere around him winked out, sinking into the stone bridge beneath their feet. A tag dramatic maybe, but one way or another I believed those words.

The balrog wasn’t going to cross that bridge. Of that I was certain.

‘He’ll be ok. He was there later on, I’m sure...’

Tink didn’t say anything. I couldn’t even focus enough to feel if she was there.
The balrog gave another blast-furnace roar, and I felt the scorching heat hit my face from all the way across the chasm. My hands flew to protect my face, my eyes clenched shut, and the world spun like I’d stuck my head inside a washing machine on spin-cycle. The feeling was all too familiar…

“No, no, not now!” I heard my own voice cry as my stomach lurched. I already knew what was happening before there was another snap from inside my head, and the world came into focus behind my still closed eyes.

I could feel my cheeks were wet. My chest ached with the remnants of agonised sobs.

A cut crystal vial was clutched in my trembling hands. I was shaking so badly I could barely unstopper it. More tears spilled down my cheeks. The sharp scent of magic touched my senses.

I hesitated, the glass a hair’s breadth from my lips.

I didn’t want to. Eru save me, I wanted so badly not to. But what I wanted didn’t matter anymore.

“They’ll be safe.” I heard myself whisper almost silently. I couldn’t tell if I was speaking to someone else, or only to myself. Another pained sob wracked my body, but I felt grim determination bubble up inside me as my hand clenched on the vial.

“You can have me, rabê.* But you’ll never have them.”

I touched the vial to my lips, and drank.

A crash and a howl brought me back with a start.

I was slumped against the stone wall behind me, sweaty, trembling, and gasping for breath. I looked up just in time to see the balrog lunge over the causeway, straight towards Gandalf. Then half of the bridge cracked and crumbled under the balrog feet, and it fell straight down into the gloom of the chasm below with a screeching howl of fury. Gandalf dropped his sword arm to his side, his chest heaving with a heavy exhale of relief…

Then the flaming whip of the balrog flew up in one last slash, and caught around the wizard’s ankle.

His foot was pulled out from under him, and he slipped over the edge, catching the broken side of the bridge with his weakened fingers. My breath caught in a tiny choked gasp.

“Gandalf!” Frodo yelled, trying to race back down the stairs to help him. Boromir caught him just in time and held him back, shouting something I couldn’t hear clearly.

Gandalf pulled himself up just enough to see us all there.

His kind blue eyes met mine for a fraction of a second, and I was sure when he looked at me, he was really looking at us all.

“Fly you fools.”

Then he was gone, following the balrog down into the dark.

Somewhere outside my own haze of shock, I heard Frodo scream.
I felt numb as we fled Moria.

I knew consciously that I hurt all over as we run and stumbled out and back into daylight, but I couldn’t feel anything. It felt like years I’d been longing to see the sky again. But when the morning sunlight finally fell on all our faces, it did nothing but illuminate exactly what had just happened.

We’d lost Gandalf.

It didn’t seem real. Like we were in some over dramatised scene in a play, and any second the short tempered but kindly old wizard was going to appear from the wings for an encore.

I collapsed onto boulder once we were outside and onto the foothills of the mountains, torn between gasping for fresh air and just throwing up everything I’d eaten in the past day. Sensation had finally start to come back through the shock. My throat was bone dry, my chest and side hurt like hell with a runner’s stitch, but I couldn’t make a sound. I didn’t even realised I was already crying until the cool breeze turned the tears cold against the warm skin on my cheeks.

The others were no better. I could hear the heart wrenching sounds of the hobbit’s sobbing, mostly Merry and Pippin. Sam, who was closest to me, had his face buried quietly in his hands, but his shoulders were trembling. Gimli was roaring with fury, trying to force his way back towards the tunnels, with only Boromir there to keep him from charging back to avenge our fallen guide. I couldn’t see or hear Aragorn, Legolas or Frodo. I didn’t even try and look for them — doing a headcount like I’d done whenever I was scared in the dark under the mountain…

I didn’t want to count the heads of our company, only to count nine, when there should have been ten.

I just sat there, hunched over myself, crying silently for what felt like ages. I couldn’t claim to mourn Gandalf like the hobbits did. In all respects, I barely knew the man. But he’d gone. The kindly old wizard, our guide, the only man who’s supported my joining the Fellowship in the first place… the only one of our company who knew the truth about me. And he was suddenly just gone.

I didn’t understand how that was possible. Every foggy memory I had of the trilogy told me that Gandalf had a larger role to play, beyond saving the Fellowship from Moria. He couldn’t really be dead. He appeared later on in the story! I was sure of it! Or had I remembered it wrong all this time? Was he truly gone, and if I’d only remembered sooner I could have done something to stop it?

I was so tired and confused, I couldn’t make myself think straight. My side was still burning with a stitch from running so hard, and probably inhaling so much smoke. Cursing through my silent tears, I touched a hand to my ribs, and froze at what I felt there…

It wasn’t a runner’s stitch in my side.

I pulled aside the outer layer of my tunic, and looked down to see the end of a black crossbow bolt about the size and length of pencil jutting out of the right side of my torso. It hadn’t gone deep enough to hit anything major — thank God — or come out the other side, but it was still lodge in deep just under my floating rib. The wound was oozing a steady trickle of dark red blood down my
I just stared at it in shock, the realisation slowly sinking in.

I’d been shot.

“H-how...?” I breathed, looking vacantly down at it, “I barely even felt it...”

Then the actual shock finally hit me. My entire body went almost painfully cold, like I’d been suddenly dunked in ice water. My vision started going fuzzy around the edges and I had to fight to keep breathing steadily. It didn’t hurt as much as you’d expect, I was still too jumped up on adrenaline for that. But the clammy feel of my skin and twisting feeling in my stomach was enough to reason that the wound was bad. Goblin arrows were often poisoned, I remembered reading that somewhere...

‘Pull it out.’ Tink ordered me — don’t miss the innuendo there, all yee faithful perverts.

‘No,’ I answered silently feeling myself going pale, ‘The head is probably barbed. If I try and take it out myself, I’ll just bleed out.’

‘And if you don’t, the poison will spread to your heart.’

‘Or it might not be poisoned at all!’ I insisted, though I knew I wasn’t fooling anyone, least of all myself. ‘I can’t slow them down now. Gandalf said that Lothlorien is less than a day from Moria’s east gate. If I can hang on that long we can get help there.’

I looked over at the others, keeping my body turned away to hide my injury.

Gimli had given up his outraged struggling in favour or slumping over in exhausted defeat. Aragorn had told Legolas to help get the others moving again, and he was reluctantly trying to help a still weeping Merry back onto his feet.

Keeping my wounded side facing away from them all, I took the arrow shaft in my left hand, and placed my other against my side to hold it steady. It hurt. I took a few deep breaths, held the last, and snapped the shaft an inch from my side. Pain fired up through the entire left half of my torso, and I had to bite hard on my cheek to keep from crying out. I hunched over myself, breathing deeply until the pain receded, pretending that I was doubled over with shock rather than side-splitting agony.

“Give them a moment, for pity’s sake!” Boromir’s loud voice suddenly came out sorrowful and angry at the same time, but I heard Aragorn meet his outrage with cold reason. He hid it well, but I could hear the sadness in his own voice too. He was just a lot better at masking his grief over Gandalf’s loss than the other man of Gondor.

“By dark these hills will be swarming with orcs!” He replied quietly, sheathing his sword which was now clean of orc blood. “We must reach the woods of Lothlorien by nightfall.”

Footsteps came towards me. I uncurled myself and looked up to find Legolas standing before me. A confused and pained look was etched on his face. The expression looked alien on his normally calm and self-assured face. He looked like a lost puppy. I guess death wasn’t something he’d ever had to deal with this close up before...

Silently, he offered out his hand to me, and I took it.

I stood up, my legs a little wobbly, and my side still throbbing dully under my tunic. While
Boromir and Aragorn had argued, I’d pulled the sash from around my waist, and subtly used it to bind around the broken arrow shaft, keeping it still, but also keeping it hidden.

‘Don’t be an idiot, boss!’ Tink’s voice came quiet and faintly pleading in my head again. ‘This is insane, even for you!’

Legolas led me to follow the others, his fingers only slipping from around mine only when we’d fallen into step behind the still distraught hobbits. When no one was looking, I dug in my medical satchel and pulled out three small bottles from the bag. I gulped down the gritty substance that would help fight any poison already in my system, along with the last of my miruvor and the pain relief draught, hoping that it would be enough.

I said nothing, not in my head and not aloud.

Tink was right. This was insane, even for me. But all I could think about was the look on Gandalf’s face.

Right before he’d fallen into dark after the monster he’d saved us from.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
* “bitch” (Adûnaic)

A/N: So there we go! I hope you enjoyed the double whammy chapter update. It took a lot to get done, but oh it so was worth it — especially to end on a cliffhanger! XD

Just a little heads-up: I start work again after the 1st of April. I’ll still be writing, but updates may be a little slower than I’d like (every 10 - 14 days?) We’ll see though. I managed to get both these chapters finished in just under two weeks. Anything’s possible!

Let me know your thoughts if you can spare a comment, and thanks to those of you who already left me with some lovely feedback! Thanks for reading! See you next chapter!
Part II :: A Thorn In My Side

Chapter Notes

So, we've finally reached the fair eaves of Lothlórien, and the last chapter of Part II! It's taken a long old time to get this far, but it was worth it. Especially with all the fantastic people who've taken the time to read this far from the beginning — You lot are crazy amazing!

Hope you enjoy. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They were at it again.

For the past three hours, Aragorn and Boromir had been having repeated variations of the same conversation over and over again. The words changed, but the unspoken grating tension was exactly the same. The latest version sounded something like this:

"There must have been a simpler path to Lothlórien than this."

"Perhaps once there was. Pray, what kind of path were expecting?"

"A plain road. Even a dirt track. Not... this." As if to emphasise the point, Boromir's boot caught on a stray root. He stumbled and I almost ran straight into the back of him. I guess he was internally ruing the fact that he hadn't insisted we take his advice and go via the Gap of Rohan.

Aragorn barely slowed in his jog from the front of the line, leading us all over the rough terrain of the Misty Mountain foothills as nimbly as a gazelle. He did manage to shoot an annoyed glance at Boromir over one shoulder, his voice taking on a surly tone.

"Any safe path we could follow would likely be watched. Through the wilds is our safest option. Unless of course you would rather return through the road within Moria? Or the scale the mountains back to the West?"

Boromir gave him a look that could have scoured rust off sheet metal.

"Just lead on, ranger. Our path still remains treacherous."
Good God. I wondered if all men of Gondor were this crabby when they were tired…

Despite the endless alpha male bickering going on between the two Men of our company, I was grateful there was something to draw the attention of the others — however annoying a distraction it was. Gandalf's absence was still weighing on us all, especially the hobbits, although most had seemed to be postponing their grief for a safer time. They ran ahead of me, just behind Gimli who was keeping up well without complaint, despite all huffing and puffing.

We'd been going like that for half the day by then, and even though my wound was still hidden, it's effects were becoming noticeably worse the further we went. Weirdly, it really didn't hurt as much as you'd expect — not even after hours of running. I was much slower than I'd been through Moria, keeping a steady but strained pace a little behind Boromir. I guess the lack of pain was mostly due to the pain relief draught and miruvor I'd downed earlier. But I knew if I hadn't taken it, I'd have been doubled over with agony by now.

It was the other symptoms that were my bigger problem.

I was getting progressively thirstier the further we ran, and where the pain in my side should have been, there was a lazy numbness that was very slowly making it's way up my side. I knew that wasn't a good sign, but still I kept quiet, determined to just take longer, more frequent gulps from my water skin and keep running.

Yeah, I know. Off the scale of madness.

But I wasn't so mad — yet — that I didn't make sure to keep a close eye on my heartbeat and breathing. Aragorn had been right; we needed to get out of the open by night fall, and I couldn't slow the others down now. Not at the risk of stopping and leaving us vulnerable to the orc packs roaming the area. But I also knew Tink had been right on one point — if the numbness spread any higher up my side, or started across my chest to my heart, I'd have no choice but to stop.

Goblins were ugly, violent, collectively dull witted creatures. But from my studies of them back in Rivendell's library, I knew they were hell on wheels when it came to poison making.

"Are you sure you're alright?" Legolas asked me quietly when I stumbled over my own feet for the seventh time in an hour.

"I'm fine. Just getting tired…" I answered breathlessly, though this time I didn't try to force a faux smile past the wave of nausea. They were coming more frequently, along with the dizzy spells.

Legolas eyed me suspiciously, but didn't argue as we kept going.

As if sensing our collective weariness, Aragorn slowed his long striding gait to something more sane — and less indicative of where he'd got the nickname 'Strider'.

"We need not continue running from here." He said as if he'd heard me complain, though he was too far ahead of us to have been able to. He came to a stop at the top of a rocky hill and pointed down towards the bottom. "We've reached the edge of the Golden Wood."

The rest of us caught up to him at the crest of the rocky hill, and we all looked out over the sprawling view ahead.

Tired as we were, the first glimpse of Lothlórien really was a sight for sore eyes.

The last of the fairly steep climb down from the mountain foothills went on for little more than half a mile, before it gave way to a short stretch of grassland. I imagined it would be covered in
wildflowers in spring, but since it was late winter, the green was shot through with small white
patched of unmelted snow. Just beyond that, the outskirts of the forest covered the landscape like a
vast green velvet blanket, splashed with yellows and dark golds. A narrow river wound it's way
down from the hills and around the edge of the trees, and I made a note to refill my water skin as
we passed it.

I just hoped no one would have the presents of mind ask how I'd gone through an entire flask worth
of water in less than two hours.

It took us less than twenty minutes to clamber down the foothills, cross the grasslands and river,
and enter the eyes of the wood. It had looked like a green cloak flung over the hills from far off,
but once we were under the trees it seemed much larger. The vast array of different trees towered
up way over our heads, ending in a viridian ceiling that shifted in the breeze. And although it was
January and should have been chilly, the air seemed to warm the further moved further inside.

It was beautiful, and felt strangely welcoming. Like the feeling you get when you come home from
a long day and there's already the smell of dinner cooking. It was almost enough to distract me
from my steadily increasing nausea. With each pang it was getting a little worse, and a little harder
to hide...

We followed Aragorn tentatively through the trees, and I surreptitiously took another long swig
from my water skin. It didn't help.

"Why do they call is the Golden Wood?" Merry wondered aloud, peering around at the
surrounding trees. For the calming effect the forest seemed to have on me, the little hobbit in
question looked jumpy — like he was expecting something to leap out of a bush and shout 'boo'.

"That is mostly thanks to the mallorn trees that grow here." Legolas replied quietly. He'd been
nearly as quiet as the hobbits during the journey from Moria, but he suddenly sounded relieved,
almost happy now that we were finally under the shelter of the trees. "Lothlórien is said to be
among the fairest of all my people's dwellings because of them. They grow tall with silver grey
bark, and in autumn their leaves do not fall, but turn gold, refusing to fall until spring brings the
new green to the branches."

He ran a hand thoughtful over the silvery bark of one as we passed it, adding thoughtfully,
"Though these ones are small by comparison, the older ones nearer the centre of the wood are said
to be tall enough to match the ceilings of Moria's halls."

Gimli gave a not so subtle snort of disbelief from up ahead, but Legolas ignored him.

"You've seen them before?" I asked him quietly, genuinely curious to know, but also trying to
distract myself from the twisting feeling growing in my stomach.

"Not before now." Legolas answered softly, still looking up at the light filtering down through the
trees. "I've only heard of them in tales and songs of my own people in the North."

A wistful little smile had appeared on his mouth, his eyes sharp grey-blue softening just a little. It
made him look much younger than I knew he really was — almost my own age.

"Stay close young hobbits." Gimli cut in quietly to Merry and Pippin (or at least as quietly as he
could manage with his deep dwarven voice). "They also say a Sorceress lives in these woods. An
elf witch of terrible power. All who look upon her fall under her spell, and are never seen again."

I saw the frown that creased Legolas's eyebrows before he could hide it, but he said nothing more
to the dwarf.

As we kept walking, more of the mallorn trees started appearing, each one growing a little bigger and taller the further we ventured. Sunlight continued to pour through the gradually yellowing canopy overhead, drenching the path before us in warm honey coloured light. It was strange that the others clearly felt unease at being here, when all I could feel was calm and safe…

I tilted my head back to look up and see the beautiful gold leaves for myself.

Bad idea.

My head spun and I swayed dangerously, almost stumbling sideways into Sam. I quickly shut my eyes, placing a hand against a nearby trunk to steady myself. My other hand came up to cover my mouth.

"Miss Eleanor, are you really sure you're alright?" Sam asked me quietly, in that tone you hear from people asking a drunk how many fingers they're holding up. "You really don't look well."

"Yeah, r-really… I'll be ok once we…” I insisted, forcing a grimace onto my face while I bit my tongue to keep for wincing. My side had started throbbing. The last of my pain relief draught must have finally started to wear off.

I almost fell over Frodo when he suddenly came to a sudden halt in front of us.

"Mr. Frodo?"

Frodo didn't respond.

Since we'd escaped Moria, since Gandalf had gone, he'd barely spoken at all. Not even Sam.

I knew he'd been closest to the old wizard, and that his loss had hit him the hardest of all. I'd thought back to my own first experience with loosing a loved one from my life on Earth. My grandfather had died when I was twenty, in my first year of college. The loss of the kind man who'd been there through all of my childhood and most of my young adult life had been more than difficult. Likewise — bar loosing Bilbo — I imagined Frodo couldn't have been dealt a more painful blow than seeing Gandalf slip away right in front of him…

He didn't look grieved now though.

He had a puzzled look on his face, and was looking around the small clearing, as if someone had just called his name through the trees. Sam asked him quietly if he was ok, and gave him a gentle shake of the shoulder. Frodo jumped a bit, and Sam and I both saw the alarm in his eyes.

He had heard something.

"Well, here's one dwarf she won't ensnare so easily!" Gimli was still grandstanding to Merry and Pippin. "I have the eyes of a hawk and the ears of a fox!"

The words had barely left his mouth, when an arrow appeared right in front of him, pointed straight at the end of his prominent nose.

We all froze. Gimli's eyes widened.

The blond elf aiming the arrow had literally appeared out of nowhere. Next thing any of us knew, we each had between two and four arrows pointed at us, all by unfamiliar, hard-faced looking
blond elves. All of them were dressed in a varying shades of dark grey and shadowy purple hunting leathers. They would have blended perfectly into the growing shadows of the forest if it had been just a bit darker.

None of us had a chance to so much as sneeze, let alone draw weapons. Except for — wait for it — Legolas, of course. He'd somehow managed to draw an arrow and pull it back to aim squarely back at the one pointed at him. Quite the medieval stand-off.

I just stood there like a lemon, eyes slightly crossed at the bolt pointed right at the centre of my face, too shocked and too queasy to react at all. Not even to spit out a witty one-liner about pointy objects and phallic metaphors.

I must have been in worse shape than I thought…

"The dwarf breathes so loud we could have shot him in the dark." Another elf had addressed us all, somehow managing to sound both matter of fact and a bit smug at the same time. He calmly stepped out from the others that had surrounded us into plain view.

He was also blond like the others, but his pin straight hair was a noticeably darker and braided back smoothly out of his face. He also wore slightly different hunting leathers from the others, marking him very clearly as their leader.

Oh, and he was also the only one not aiming anything pointy at us… other than his stare, I guess.

His hard gaze drifted over us and stopped on Legolas, who was still in the midst of a staring contest with the elf opposite him, arm still drawn back in an unfired shot. The head honcho elf snapped an order at them in Sindarin elvish, and they each lowered their bows in near unison. Legolas also lowered his own bow, though he didn't immediately look away from the elf who'd very nearly shot him in the face.

"Mae govannen, Legolas Thranduilion." The leader said, bringing his hand across his chest to his heart in the elvish sign of greeting, though he didn't smile. It took me a second to get my brain into gear and make the mental switch from common speech to Sindarin, but I understood what he'd just said as: "Welcome Legolas, son of Thranduil."

I looked confusedly from the leader of the hostile elves to Legolas, who's expression hadn't changed even a little. Obviously the other elf knew him from somewhere else, or by reputation at least. That made me feel at least a little better. But if the title 'son of Thranduil' held some bigger significance than sounding a bit pretentious, it was totally lost on me.

Legolas returned the greeting gesture politely, but didn't lose the wary expression.

"Our Fellowship gratefully accepts your welcome, Haldir of Lórien." He said neutrally, and the fact that he didn't refer to himself individually didn't escape me either. He sounded almost annoyed by the fact that he'd been deliberately singled out. At least, more annoyed than he had at almost being shot in the face. Obviously he didn't take kindly to that kind of treatment any better than I did.

Except, I actually had been shot…

My side throbbed again as a reminder, and another wave of nausea crept up through my stomach. I pushed it away and focused on watching the darker blond elf, who I now knew as Haldir — the famed Marchwarden of Lórien. I'd heard of him, and remembered him vaguely from the books. And like many of the other 'characters' I'd met, he looked different to how I'd expected. Harder
faced but still handsome, but a *lot* less welcoming.

Not that I was ogling yet another stupidly handsome elf or anything. I was far too focused on not throwing up on him to do that.

"Aragorn of the Dúnedain, you are also known to us." Haldir said with increasing surprise, still speaking Sindarin as his gaze fell on Aragorn. Aragorn graced him with a polite bow and the same elvish greeting Haldir had offered Legolas, and it looked really odd coming from him. I'd never seen him bow to anyone except Lord Elrond.

"So much for the legendary courtesy of the Elves! Speak words we can also understand!" Gimli cut in brazenly in common speech, in the gruffly blunt fashion that only he seemed to be able to pull off.

Haldir turned slowly on him, and gave him a haughty look that was harder than stone. Again, something I'd only ever seen elves manage to pull off.

"We have not had dealings with the dwarves, since the dark days." He said coolly, looking down his nose at Gimli.

"And do you know what this Dwarf says to that?" Gimli replied, his voice very nearly a growl. "Ishkhaqwi ai durugnul!*"

I had no idea what the hell Gimli had just said, but it was obviously nothing pleasant, or even remotely polite, because Haldir's eyebrows pinched in a sharp glower and his jaw muscles tightened.

Aragorn closed his eyes in exasperation and clapped a hand on Gimli's broad shoulder — a gesture that could have been companionably restraining, but wasn't.

"That was not so courteous!" He muttered sharply. Gimli snorted, looking thoroughly unimpressed, hands twitching towards his axe.

"These woods are treacherous, Aragorn. We should go back." He intoned as if Haldir wasn't standing right there within perfect earshot. The Marchwarden eyed the dwarf with narrowed blue eyes and a birdlike tilt of the head.

"You have trespassed on the realm of the Lady of the Wood. You cannot simply go back." He said coldly.

The look he gave us all sent a chill through me that had nothing to do with my wound. We'd entered the forest peacefully, seeking aid, not a fight. Whatever the penalty for hostile strangers intruding upon the Golden Wood, the look in Haldir's eyes told me that it was anything but pleasant.

My stomach twisted again, and I bit my lip to stop myself doubling over. A salty, coppery taste had suddenly appeared in my mouth…

Aragorn gently but firmly pushed Gimli a little way back behind him, approaching Haldir and speaking deliberately very quietly in Sindarin again.

"Haldir, we came here for your help. Please, we need your protection." Aragorn said, a distinct note of pleading in his voice that anyone else might have missed. Haldir noticed it though, and narrowed his eyes.
"From?"

Another wave of nausea — stronger this time — rolled over me, and the last of the pain relief draught went spiralling down the drain along with my control…

I turned, braced a hand against a tree, and was noisily sick right over the feet of the nearest archer. He gave a startled cry of surprised disgust and stumbled back away from me. The wimp. I'd barely eaten anything since Moria, so there wasn't much to come back up other than water. Still, it wasn't pretty, and it hurt like hell.

One wretch, two, three…

By the time the others realised something was very wrong I'd slid down the tree onto my knees and hands, my legs turned to water beneath me. My stomach gave up after it there was obvious nothing was left to throw up, and just settled for twisting and clenching horribly. A little moan of pain escaped me before I could stop it.

"Eleanor?!"

Boromir had been closest to me. Confused and alarmed by my reaction, he reached down and gently tried to help me get myself vertical again. The worried look on his face deepened when his arm coiled around my waist, brushing right over the end of the broken arrow shaft in my side. I went nearly blind with the pain. As my vision came back, I saw Boromir had drawn his hand back from me, and frozen in shock.

His hand had come away slick with my blood, the red speckled with tiny patches of dark grey.

Ah… balls. That really wasn't good…

Aragorn was at my side in seconds, ignoring surrounding elves as if they weren't even there. Boromir made a sound of protest, but Aragorn calmly pushed his hands away from me. He quickly untied the sash holding my outer tunic closed and all but tore it off my middle. My lights almost went out with the wave of pain that brought.

"By Mahal, lass, what have you done to yourself?!" Gimli's voice sounded like it was coming from a long way away.

I thought of a snappy comeback to shoot at the dwarf, but my brain didn't manage to get it out of my mouth. I was too busy hunched over myself as flashes of pain fired through my insides.

"You were wounded this whole time?! And you said nothing?!

Legolas's stunned voice came from just a few feet away.

Aragorn was knelt down next to me now, half supporting me, half trying to get me to stand up. But I just didn't have the strength left in my legs to lift my own weight. I fell sideways into him and saw the look on his face. I knew that look. I knew exactly what was going through his head, and it made my blood boil despite myself.

Or maybe even because of it.

He opened his mouth to chastise me, but I cut him off, pointing a shaking finger right in his face.

"Don't y-you dare… call me a l-liability… y-you ass." I stammered, my whole body starting to shiver violently even though I didn't feel cold. Actually, I couldn't really feel much of anything from my waist down…
A frustrated and angry look crossed his face, but it was quickly replaced with cool focus as I groaned and curled in on myself again, needles of pain poking at the inside of my belly. My body wanted so badly to be sick again, but there was just nothing left in my stomach to throw up.

"She has been hit with a goblin bolt?" I heard someone else say, and realised after a second it was Haldir. He'd kneeled down next to me on the grass, and was examining my injured side without trying to touch me. "A poisoned one. It has had more than enough time to set in."

"Can you help her?" Pippin's voice, high with worry and shock suddenly came from somewhere to my left. I couldn't see where anymore.

One of the other elves said something to Haldir in elvish, too fuzzy and too fast for me to catch. He responded with a short, sharp reply.

"We can treat the wound temporarily, but not here." He told Aragorn seriously, who was still holding me reasonably upright while I shivered and trembled uncontrollably — my vision going in and out of focus. "You were followed by something from the North-East. We cannot risk remaining on the ground. Come, this way."

I heard him stand, but he was little more than a dark blond, purplish grey robed blur now. So was Aragorn, and I had no idea who the other various blurs clustered around me were.

The world had started spinning again. I swallowed a moan of pain, forcing my exhausted brain to think of something to keep alert. Of all the things I could have gone for; I started prattling off every and all the Shakespeare plays I could possibly remember. I was terrified that if I blacked out now, I wouldn't be able to wake up again. But I was just so damned tired...

“Macbeth… Hamlet… Midsummer Night’s Dream… Romeo & Juliet…” I mumbled, my words coming out weak and breathy.

I could only just about remember being picked up gently by someone strong, then being carried in their arms. Even with my eyes close I recognised the familiar scent of Aragorn: wood smoke, leather and damp earth. My cheek rolled against his shoulder, and I let it stay there, keeping my dizzy mind focused as hard on the names.

“…M-Much Ado About Nothing… Twelfth Night… O-Othello… Antony & Cleo…”

One of the elves asked another what I was saying, but no one answered. I could practically hear their baffled shrugs at me and my rambling. Big surprise. I guess magic was the order of how things worked in Middle Earth, rather than bog standard chemistry.

We stopped suddenly, and my world spun as my head was jarred to the left. Another embarrassingly pathetic moan escaped me.

"Let me…” Someone's very muffled voice said close to me, but my ears had started ringing with too much white noise to tell who. I was gently passed to them, laid carefully over their shoulder in a fireman's hold. Then we were slowly rising up into one of the trees.

My carrier was an elf. I knew that without a doubt, because he was somehow nimble enough to climb the rope ladder up to the platform one handed. Plus one semi-conscious damsel slung casually over his shoulder.

Meh. Elves.

Even when I was half dead they still managed to irritate the hell out of me.
The second we reached the top, I was laid down carefully on a smooth wooden platform high in the tree, my head resting on someone's knees for support. The second I was horizontal all the blood run straight to my head in a dizzying rush. It made the world cartwheel. And made me very sleepy.

I'd just shut my eyes for a minute. God knew I'd bloody well earned a nap by now. Just for a minute…

"Eleanor? Eleanor! Wake up!" Aragorn ordered me, all but yelling right into my face and gently smacking a hand against my cheek, just hard enough to keep me from getting comfortable. "Do not fall asleep!"

"Stop… s-sodding… telling me what to do… y-you scary bastard." I heard myself croak.

"She's going into shock." Another familiar voice said, calm but tinged with deep-set worry. I knew who that was…

I snorted loudly, but it came out as more of a groan as another wave of numbness crawled up my side. Silly blond Disney prince elf probably didn't even know what shock was.

"N-no I'm not…" I slurred almost drunkenly at Legolas, "—Mm just really… sleepy…"

"The shaft is broken. She must have snapped it to keep it from moving." I heard Haldir say calmly but seriously. I could feel what I assumed were his fingers gently but efficiently pulling my tunic up over my belly to inspect the wound.

I knew full well I was delirious, and probably near hallucinating. But dammit, I couldn't help but feel embarrassed that some stranger had just gone and pulled up my shirt in front of a bunch of men.

"The arrowhead must be removed or the poison will continue to spread."

"She won't be able to stay conscious through that kind of pain." Legolas's voice filled my ears again, edged with something a step above concern.

"Eleanor, where is your Numbing Draught?" Aragorn asked me suddenly, still gently tapping the side of my face to keep me firmly in reality. "The one you gave to me. For my arm. Where is it?"

"Gone." I coughed out dryly. "U-used the… last o-of it outside M-Moria."

Aragorn growled a word that a gentleman really shouldn't say in front of a lady. I choked on the coppery taste in my mouth and glared up at him as best I could.

"Q-quit complaining. Or y-you can… s-sodding well f-fix your own a-arm next time!"

"The tip is too deep to be safely cut out. It has not hit any major organs, but the barbs would only cause her internal damage if pulled out." Haldir stated, sensibly ignoring the pair of us. But my stomach dropped and twisted all at once at what he said next.

"It must be pushed through entirely."

I was suddenly and vividly reminded of when I'd helped Lord Elrond remove the Morgul splinter from Frodo. How the frightened little hobbit had thrashed and screamed in panic and pain while Lord Elrond and I had worked to heal him — knowing that there was nothing we could do to ease
the pain other than to keep working.

I almost started laughing, like I had done in Moria when the panic had become too much to handle. But it hurt too much to breathe, so I just grimaced and nodded silently without a word.

"I am more skilled at putting these into others, rather than removing them. But I can do this much." Haldir said directly to me, rather than to any of the others. He took a small strip of leather from a pouch on his belt, folded it, and held it in front of my face with a faintly apologetic look. "Forgive me, this will hurt."

I knew what was coming next. But that didn't mean I was going to like it.

I swallowed thickly, taking the little strip of leather and saying just before I bit it between my teeth; "J-jus—... just do it."

Haldir nodded grimly.

"Hold her."

Someone took hold of both my ankles — Aragorn I think — pressing down on them with just enough weight to keep them pinned to the floor. Someone else lifted the upper half of my body against them, a gentle hand slipping into my hair, carefully holding me still against their lap so I wouldn't hurt myself if I started convulsing.

The familiar scent of pine needles, grass and rain filled my head — the only sense I had left that hadn't been dulled by the poison...

"Keep her still."

I swallowed again, trying to focus on anything other than what I knew had to happen next. Another wave of dizziness hit me, and I clenched my eyes shut, turning my head closer against the person holding me, their scent intensifying until it was all I could sense.

"...you smell... really nice..." I slurred before I could think, my head flopping sideways to rest against them. I felt their fingers stiffen very slightly against the base of my neck.

Then Haldir began to push the arrow through.

I know some people out there had the ability to compartmentalise their pain. Shoving it away to the back of their consciousness, sending themselves into a meditative state where they feel only minor discomfort.

But I couldn't do that. I felt absolutely everything as the arrow head went through me.

I screamed.

I screamed, and screamed, and screamed.

A hand found mine through the waves of agony, and I gripped it so hard my knuckles popped. My head swam, my vision went red, and my hearing turned to nothing but white noise. The gag fell out of my mouth at some point. I knew I was still screaming though, because my throat and side burned like they were both on fire. The stronger, slightly calloused hand held mine tightly while the fingers in my hair held carefully but firm against the back of my neck — half comforting, half keeping me from cracking my head against the floor. They were saying something to me. I could feel their breath on my face, but I couldn't hear them.
It felt like an eternity and a half lying there, pinned down, unable to move as the worst pain I'd ever experienced in both my lives seared through my entire body from my side…

At last, the pain stopped.

My screaming was replaced with ragged gasps for breath, my throat raw, and my ears slightly damp from where my tears and sweat had slid down my face and into my hair.

The sharp, mind numbing pain in my side had gone. But it was quickly replaced with something less intense, but no less crippling — creeping through my limbs like warm treacle. All the strength had been drained out of me. I felt like a limp dishrag, barely enough energy left to even lift my head. My ankles had been released, but I couldn't move them. Whoever had restrained my upper half though, hadn't let me go yet. I opened my eyes and tried to look up, though the light made them sting.

Gold blonde hair, grey-blue eyes in a stupidly handsome face. He was really blurry now. If it hadn't been for the familiar scent of him, I wouldn't have been able to tell the difference between him and the other elves of Lothlórien…

He was the only one close enough for me to hear properly, stroking a hand very gently over my sweat-soaked hair.

"…—finished. The arrowhead is… —you're alright…" I could just about see his mouth still moving in speech, but his words began to slur and fade out, like someone turning down the volume on a radio. "…—gone… you're alrigh—… mîr nin——mustn't fall asleep!…—to stay awake!"

'Mîr nin? Huh, that's a new one… wonder what it means…' I thought sleepily, and made a mental note to ask him or Aragorn about it sometime. Later though. Right now I was way too tired…

My eyes fell shut, my body went numb, and the last sounds of the world outside quieted to blissful silence.

I should have felt panicked, convinced that I was dying and needed to do something about it. But I was so relieved to be finally free of the pain that I didn't care.

Then I heard something. Another, irritatingly quiet noise intruding on my long awaited nap time.

'For God sake, can't they just let me sleep? '

Then I realised that the sounds weren't coming from anyone outside my head. They were coming from inside my head…

Just like the first time I'd first searched my mind for my lost memories in Lord Elrond's study, two and a half years ago…

Frantically I scrambled to reach for them, trying to pull them close enough to hear. And this time, they did. I reached out and touched the ghostly fragments of the sounds I could feel just within my grasp, and the memories came painfully to life behind my eyes and in my ears. Flashes of images I recognised appeared all around me, but they blurred together, one after the other, almost too fast to see clearly…

I was a child again, sitting in a room with an incredible view of the sea. A beautiful woman with my own green eyes knelt on the carpet next to me. I was weaving a posey of yellow star shaped
flowers into her long dark hair with my small, babyish hands. The woman smiled with bliss and hummed a quiet tune. The sound was like wildflowers, and honey, and home.

Then I was somewhere else, outside, but still familiar. I was sitting high up in a white tree in a courtyard of stone. There were guards below us, shouting, demanding that we get down this instant. A boy my age with curly brown hair laughed. So did I. He reached for a small flower growing high on a branch, plucked it, and stuck it behind my delicately pointed ear.

Then I was a little older. I walked across a stone floor, my bare feet cold, my eyes welling with tears, carrying an injured rabbit in my arms. I brought it tearfully up to a tall man who looked like me, but different. His ears were pointed like mine, but there were streaks of silver grey in his long dark brown hair. He smiled tenderly at me, running a hand over my hair. Then he laid it gently on top of the little wounded rabbit, his smile turning a little sad.

Then I was a teenager, walking across a lawn towards a row of training dummies. The same boy I'd played with in the white tree was older now too. He was practicing swings with a sword just a little too heavy for his slender arms. A knife suddenly flew over his shoulder, hitting the dummy in the forehead, thrown by me. He spun, and smiled widely at me, a silent laugh in his bright green eyes.

Then I was older again, almost an adult. I was back in that terrible blood stained field I'd seen in my first vision, with the body of the dead woman at my feet. My knife still in her heart. I was hunched over, on my knees, my hand clenched to my own heart, gasping in shock. My chest hurt so much.

A familiar male voice somewhere not far off called out to me. He was calling my name, I knew, but I couldn't quite hear it clearly…

Then finally, I stood somewhere else again. Somewhere unfamiliar and dark. Somewhere I didn't want to be. The boy, now a man, stood opposite me. He was taller than I was, his brown hair a bit curlier than mine, but we still looked the same. Our eyes and smiles were the same. Or, had been once…

On the outside he looked calm. But I saw inside. He was almost too grieved and in too much agony to speak. But he did anyway.

For the first time, I heard his gentle but strong voice. It was low, cracked and pained, as if his heart were breaking beneath the calm, comforting facade.

"… wish it didn't have to be this way."

"I know." My own voice came from my mouth, accented by a language I didn't know anymore. "I'll go east, inland. Perhaps one of greater lord or ladies can… help me."

I wouldn't tell him exactly where I was going. It was better if he didn't know. That way, he wouldn't be able to follow me, even though he'd promised not to. He was like that…

I dipped my head so I wouldn't have to see the pain in his face.

"Please, don't tell father. Tell him something else. Anything. That I'm dead, or missing, or…" I heard my own voice breaking. "Please don't tell him that I-I'm…"

"I'm so sorry, mîth nésil.**"

'Mîth nésil…'

The nickname jabbed a white hot needle into my heart, and I felt unwilling tears force their way into my eyes. I couldn't understand the spoken words, nor recognise the language. But somehow I
knew what they meant…

'Little sister.'

My throat closed over another sob, but my voice somehow remained steady.

"I love you, Var."

'Var… my brother.'

He held me tightly against him, stroking a hand gently over the top of my head, just like he'd used to do when we were children and scared of the dark.

"I love you too. Always."

He pressed a final kiss to the crown of my head, and my entire world — both dream and waking — turned to bottomless void that I couldn't pull myself out of.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
* "I spit upon your grave!" (Khûzdul)
** "small sister" (Adûnaic - speculative translation)

A/N: April fool! Another clifffy! XD

I'm so, so sorry! Just when you were all so lovely in your reviews, I went and gave you another (sort-of?) cliffhanger! Feel feel to throw inanimate furniture in my direction… :)

Oh a more sensible note: Thank you so much for your feedback guys! It's really helping to keep me motivated and focused. There are a boat load of important details planned in this fic and it's tricky to keep track of them all. Your comments on what you're curious about and interested in seeing next are a great help in keeping the flow of the story going.

Keep the feedback coming if you can spare a review. Next chapter will be the first of Part III! I'm so giddy with happiness at you all for sticking with me this far I can barely type!

See you next chapter!
I suppose it was inevitable. I was still unconscious.

My eyes were shut, my side didn’t hurt, and my stomach wasn’t trying to crawl out through my mouth. One mini marathon, a seriously traumatic bodily event, and an unexpected memory recall later, the blackness of deep unconsciousness finally decided it was time to collect its dues… sort of. I was still obviously out like a light, but at least part of my brain had finished rebooting enough to let me think semi-coherently. And my first semi-coherent thought was:

“I think I need to re-evaluate my policy on self-preservation.”

It came out loud, which was how I knew I was back in Dreamland again. The ground I was lying on felt grainy and soft under me, and I could hear the soothing sound of waves hitting the shore not far off. And there was no pain.

Yep. Definitely dreaming.

Which meant the only thing missing now was…

“You’re a fucking lunatic. You know that, boss?” The blunt, familiar voice of my inner self was like a club against my temples, coming from about a foot away from my ears.

“Tink,” I groaned, not moving from where I was lying on my back in the sand. “You’re not seriously going clobber me with a lecture now, are you?”

“Honestly? I still can’t decide whether to slap you or kiss you.” She replied coolly, her voice still very close by. “You just ran for half a day with a poisoned crossbow bolt stuck in your side. That’s a special kind of badass.”

A soft laugh escaped me, and it felt obscenely good to breathe without any pain.

“Does it count as vanity if I accept compliments from my own alter ego?”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself. It was also epically stupid.”

I grunted in acknowledgement of her point, still not opening my eyes.

“You don’t need to be such a wingebag about it, Tink. We’re still alive, aren’t we?” I paused for a moment. “I assume we’re alive? Because if we’re not, that would make this conversation pretty redundant.”
“We’re alive. No thanks to you.”

“Well, that’s something at least.” I mumbled, and Tink clucked her tongue in wordless but obviously disapproving reply. I suppose I should have expected this too.

No way something as insignificant as a massive physical trauma could get rid of her so easily. Or the inevitable chasing lecture about survival. But I was still in no mood to get beaten over the head by her. I could try and ignore her. I could pretend she wasn’t there. But, as much as I wanted to, there wasn’t much I could actually do to stop her. So I just sighed and accepted it, like accepting an unpleasant but inevitable fact of life — like disease, taxes, and terribly written teen romance novels making the Times Best Seller list.

Reluctantly, I opened my eyes and sat up.

We were on a beach.

I’d been on a few beaches in my short but colourful life, but none like this. Most people think of white sand, palm trees, turquoise sea and lots of sunshine when they think of beautiful coastlines. This one had none of that, but still managed to look spectacularly beautiful, in an untamed primal sort of way. Tall grey stone cliffs surrounded the mile long stretch of dark gold sand. The sea was rough and crashing against the shore in the way that said a storm was approaching, the sky dark and clouds rolling on the horizon even though the sun still shone on us. Tall, white topped waves would have battered the beachfront where we stood if it hadn’t been for the jagged barrier of rocks and reefs breaking their charge towards the cliffs.

“Another metaphor for trouble coming my way?” I asked aloud, looking out at the thunderclouds rolling over the white-tipped waves.

“Not exactly. But ‘trouble’ would be a good place to start.”

I turned in the direction Tink’s voice had come. She was stood only a few feet away facing away from me, dressed in a pale grey lace dress that stopped just below her knees. Her long hair was loose again, and the wind was billowing it in uncontrolled little wisps all around her head — the same way mine always did in even the gentlest breeze. She had picked up a dried stick from somewhere, and was busy tracing thin lines and swirling patterns in the damp sand.

She stopped when she saw me looking at her, amber eyes curiously cat-like. She stopped in her doodling, and leaned casually on the stick like it was a gentleman’s walking cane and placing a hand on her hip.

“So… ‘Var?’ Kind of a drab name isn’t it?”

My near-perfect elf recall of the memories came back in a rush. The clear image of the boy turned man appeared suddenly behind my eyes, his curly hair the same colour as mine, the same green eyes, and his smile almost identical to mine — sans the dimple I had in my left cheek.

I leaned back on the sand, letting the vision play again and again in my head.

“It’s probably short for something. It felt like a nickname. Unless of course our parents had exceptionally bad taste…” I trailed off, realising what I’d just said without even realising. I felt an honest little smile creep it’s way onto my face. “Heh, our parents… I have a family. I have a brother. Here.”

Tink poked my forehead gently with the end of her gnarled stick.
“Had a brother.” She enunciated plainly, going back to making swirls and flourishes in the sand. “From the sounds of that conversation, you aren’t exactly in close contact anymore.”

“Can’t you go five minutes without stepping on my optimism?” I scowled irritably, letting the image in my mind fall away. Tink gave my a self-righteous look over her shoulder as she turned in a circle, tracing another line by her bare foot.

“Nope, not while I’m acting as your common sense I can’t. You have one more name, boss. And only a nickname. Sorry, but that’s not going to help us much. Not yet. Exciting or not, we don’t have time for optimism right now. We need answers.” She turned and pointed the stick at the end of my nose. “And speaking of time, we need to have a chat about your particular brand of bad timing.”

I pushed the end of the stick out of my face, and fixed her with a glare.

“Timing of what?” I asked, irritated by her attitude but also curious. She rolled her eyes and clucked her tongue impatiently at me.

“Oh don’t play dumb.” She gave her stick-less hand a flick. “’Prince Charming’, boss.”

I stared at her blankly.

“What about him?”

She just looked back at me flatly for a long moment, one hand on her hip and one eyebrow raised; as if expecting me to say something poignant. I shrugged my shoulders, and shook my head in a ‘do I get three guesses?’ gesture. She frowned at me in confusions, then her expression changed to one of genuine surprise, her eyes widening and eyebrows disappearing up into her windswept hair.

“You mean, you haven’t even guessed yet...?”

I threw my sand covered hands out the sides in baffled exasperation.

“Guessed what?!”

Then she did something that pissed me off even more than non-specific clue dropping. She started laughing at me.

“For sod sake, Tink!” I yelled over her shrieking, “Would you knock it off!”

She tried to speak, but she was almost doubled over with giggles, tears leaking out the corners of her eyes. I was up off the sand by now, embarrassed by her howling as well as confused by it.

“Ok, now you’re taking the piss.” I growled, kicking sand at her. “I am not sitting here listening to this. Not after everything that’s just happened. Not after...”

A pang of purely emotional pain and guilt hit me just bellow my sternum, the name on my tongue not making it out of my mouth.

Gandalf.

The warm but wise face of the old wizard appeared in my thoughts even though his name didn’t make it past my voice. I could have asked him about all this. He might not have had many answers, if any. But either way he knew what I was searching for, and he had wanted to help. And now he couldn’t. I couldn’t ask him for help. I couldn’t talk out my confusing visions with him over
breakfast. I couldn’t even ask if he was willing to listen to me vent in return for a properly made cup of tea…

I realised after a long moment that I was just standing there, frozen, staring out at the waves crashing against the reefs. The look on my face must have given my thoughts away entirely, because Tink finally stopped laughing when she saw me, her face shifting from amused to concerned in the space of a breath.

She didn’t say anything. She just dropped her stick, came over, and took hold of my hands. Her fingers were warm while mine felt cold, and she gave them a gentle squeeze, reaching up and rubbing my shoulder comfortingly with her other hand.

I swallowed down the lump that had started to form in the throat.

“Is he really gone?” I asked almost silently. Tink knew who I meant without hearing his name. She looked down, her gold eyes turning a little bit sad.

“I can’t say, boss. I can’t tell the future any more than you can.”

I’d known she was going to answer in that way before I’d even asked the question. But it still sent a little pang of dashed hope through me. And another little bit go guilt. Now that it had happened, I clearly remembered reading about Gandalf’s fall in the books. I remembered almost every detail, right down to the description of the balrog. I just hadn’t remembered when it had counted. When I might have been able to do something about it. Then again, even if I had remembered in time, was there anything I could have done?

Then something else that had been nagging at me came to mind, and I turned to my double, tearing my gaze away from the rough sea before us.

“I’ve been meaning to ask, Tink. Why did you stop me from warning the others? Before Moria I mean, outside the gates.” I asked quietly.

She’d looked saddened when she’d come over to comfort me, but by the time I’d finished speaking that question, her expression was different. She dropped her hand from mine and looked away uncomfortably.

“A lot of reasons.”

“Pick one and go with it.” I replied a bit more forcefully, “Stop trying to dodge the question.”

She still refused to meet my eye, which in my experience was really unusual. Tink was many things; abrasive, blunt, crude, and short tempered. But she was never hesitant.

When she finally answered me, she did it in a very soft voice.

“I did it to protect us, boss.”

“Protect us from what exactly?” I pushed, too intent on finding out what had made her act this way to be subtle. She looked up and fixed me with a blank stare, raising her eyebrows very slightly, as if prompting me to think.

I very nearly smacked myself in the forehead, realising why.

“Right. No simple answers. I should have guessed…”
Tink nodded in affirmation, crossing her arms over her lace dress and watching me intently through past gold cat-like eyes.

“Just think it through.” She prompted slowly, carefully. “You’ll know it when you see it, figuratively speaking.”

So I thought about it. I stared out at the water, and thought back to the time we spent at the side of the lake outside Moria, drawing back the images and sounds until it was playing like a recording in my mind.

“…When you first stopped me from talking,” I began, focusing hard on as many details as I could recall. “I’d been about to warn the others of something… The Watcher in the Water.”

She nodded.

“Keep going…”

I furrowed my eyebrows at her, still not sure entirely what she was trying to get at. So I thought harder, changing my tactic and focusing instead of on what could have happened if I had been able to warn them…

“If I’d warned them about it before it happened…” I said slowly, following the chain of logic, “Then… Merry wouldn’t have disturbed the water, which wouldn’t have called the River Guardian…”

“And if the River Guardian never attacked?” Tink prompted me again, her tone of voice gaining an edge to it.

“…Then the gate into Moria wouldn’t have collapsed behind us, sealing us in…”

I trailed off as the reality of it all hit me like a punch to the gut. My voice failed, and I suddenly felt like I’d been hit in the face with a sledge hammer. I turned to look at my double, who’s face had turned abruptly impassive.

“You wanted us to get trapped in there!” I said, almost inaudible with shock.

Tink’s amber eyes flickered with something hard to distinguish — something hard, stubborn, and maybe a little bit anxious. Her arms were still crossed defensively across her chest.

“Better Moria than the alternative.” She replied softly, but firmly.

I wasn’t prepared for the rush anger that surged through me. I exploded.

“What the hell, Tink?! I shouted at her. “What could possibly have been worse than a four day’s trek through a mountain filled with goblins and a fiery god-monster?!”

She didn’t even blink at my outburst. She just said one word.

“Wargs.”

I stared hard at her, fury and confusion warring for control of my face.

“Wargs?” I managed, my teeth grinding with the effort to stay calm. Tink’s voice remained cool and calm.

“There was a pack of wargs following us, sent from Isengard.” She told me plainly, as if
explaining something to a dense child. “They’d been tracking us for about three days. If we hadn’t been sealed into Moria by the River Guardian, then the warg pack would have followed us in. Likely slaughtered us in our sleep.’

“There’s no way you could know that for sure.” I heard myself fire back past the guilt, confusion and rage still swirling inside me. “If I’d been able to warn the others, we could have found a way to…”

“To what?” Tink’s voice suddenly turned to cold steel and icy stone again the heat of mine. “Let’s say we did it your way, we found another way over the mountain, and Gandalf survived. What would that accomplish? He might be alive, and we’d definitely be dead.

I glared daggers at her, so furious I could barely speak anymore.

“That still wasn’t your choice to make.” I growled, matching her stony voice with my own. She shrugged, the gesture far too delicate to hold as much weight as it did.

“Maybe, but that’s your problem.” She answered, her voice absolutely voice of any remorse as her gold eyes burned with stubbornness. “Mine is keeping us alive.”

She turned her back on me and began walking away, as if to end the conversation. But I wasn’t done yet. Not by a long shot.

“So if it was between me and one of the others, what then?” I asked harshly, not trying to hide the accusation in my tone.

She didn’t turn around.

“What if it was Boromir? Aragorn? One of the hobbits?” I asked harshly, not trying to hide the accusation in my tone.

She didn’t turn around.

“You know, for a figment of my subconscious you seem to know a hell of a lot about all this that I don’t.” I spat lividly, not even really thinking about what I was saying until the words were out of my mouth.

Tink didn’t say a word.

She just turned her head very slightly and stared at me over her shoulder, her amber eyes burning like molten gold. I stared back. I could feel there was more in that stare than a mere locked glance. It was a matching of wills. Hers against mine.

I held her gaze, refusing to look away even though I suddenly desperately wanted to. Her expression darkened to something nasty, and it felt like I was suddenly staring down the barrel of a gun…

It frightened me, but I didn’t care.

“You will never do anything like that again. Ever.” I told her simply, calmly, and without any of the hurricane of emotions I was still feeling.

She didn’t react. She didn’t even blink. But I saw the challenge stir in her eyes as she looked back at me.
“As you say, boss.”

Then she just vanished, like smoke dispersing into the dark.

I stood there on the beach alone, staring at the spot where she’d disappeared for what felt like a long time. I knew she wasn’t really gone. Not really. She’d just retreated into a different part of my mind, probably to sulk. Or to plot my gruesome murder.

I shook my head and closed my eyes tiredly, the sounds of the waves echoing all around me off the cliffs. I was suddenly exhausted, my head aching. The mental exertion of feeling so many strong emotions at once obviously taking its toll. But even so, I hadn’t expected to feel quite what I did when I’d held Tink’s stare just then.

It didn’t feel like a mere sharing of gazes.

It felt like the weight of that stare had been a tangible force pushing down against me, trying to force me back.

Tiredness and aches abruptly began to blossom all over me, tearing the thoughts away, and I instinctively knew I was waking up. Properly this time. Just before I did though, I opened my eyes and look down curiously at the sand where Tink had been drawing just before our fight…

Only, she hadn’t just been drawing. She’d been writing.

Elvish, English, Dwarfish runes, Chinese kanji, Hobbiton script. Hundreds of languages from both Earth and Arda covered the sand all around me. Some of the scripts were so scrawling and unfamiliar that I couldn’t even recognise what they were, let alone read them. But I only needed to read one to know that they all said they exact same thing. One word repeated over and over again, stretching off in every direction over the sand.

She’d covered the entire beach with one name.

Rávamë.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Ok, firstly apologies for the super delayed update! This chapter took ages to write for so many reasons. Work, illness, unexpected family plans, a school reunion, but the biggest being deciding what to reveal next without giving too much of the mystery away! God, why oh why did I decide to make such a complicated story? XD

Originally this chapter was much longer (14,000+ words), but it got so huge and complicated that I decided to split it into three — the next of which I’ll be posting as soon as I’m done editing them. A lot of the inspiration for this scene (and help getting over the writers block) came from Lindsey Stirling’s awesome original song “Beyond the Veil” and the accompanying music vid. So, if you want to go and check out where my muse-bunnies came from this time, I’d recommend going and finding it on youtube! :)

Anyway, hope you enjoyed! See you next chapter!
When I woke — properly this time — I felt better than I had in weeks.

Don’t get me wrong. I still ached like hell, and there was a thorn in my side you could have pitched a tent with. But even so, it was still a massive improvement on how I’d felt before I’d gone under.

I was in a bed for starters; I knew that before I’d even moved. There was a soft, feather pillow propping my head and back up to what was almost a sitting position, and warm, satiny covers drawn up to my shoulders. A little shift of my limbs also revealed that I wasn’t in my close-fitting riding greens anymore, but something silky and wonderfully comfy…

Someone had redressed me.

My eyes popped open, and I instantly regretted it. Unfiltered, early morning sunlight assaulted me square in the face. I groaned as my retinas were pan-fried in my head, lifting my heavy arms up to shield my face and rolling over out of path of the beam. My limbs creaked and ached from lack of use, and I felt my muscles shake with the strain of trying to support my weight. Just how long had I been out for?

And… where exactly was I now?

I uncovered my face and slowly took in the world around me, sans the painful beam of light to the eyeballs. I was lying in a white, silk covered bed the size of a small yacht, sitting in a large room the shape of a half moon — a room which I could only describe as something you might see on a Midsummer Night’s Dream set design.

Absolutely everything was white. The floors, the ceiling, the canopy over my bed, even the flowers sitting in a vase on my bedside table. The furniture was all made of a silvery, pale grey wood that had been carved and polished into simple elegance. Everything in that room looked too perfect to be real. Even the woman sitting beside my bed in a white chair was decked out in a splendid white lace gown…

Finally my brain caught up with what I was seeing.

I did an honest to goodness double take, my neck muscles protesting furiously.

Nope, I hadn’t been imagining it. There, sitting serenely in a high-backed chair beside my bed, was a woman. An elven woman. She was dressed in an elegant, floor length gown, with sleeves so long they almost covered her fingers. A book was open in her lap, and she was humming a quiet tune under her breath as she read, the sound effortlessly lovely. Something silver and bright as a tiny
star glinted on her left index finger as she turned a page.

If that wasn’t enough of a screaming hint as to who she was, the luminous, silver-gold shimmer of her waist length hair definitely was.

My voice stuck in my throat as I tried to force words past my awed shock.

“Um… hi?” I said wittily, my voice coming hoarse, and I could almost hear the sound of Tink repeatedly slamming her head against a wall somewhere in the depths of my mind.

Galadriel, the Lady of the Golden Wood — the keeper of Nenya, one of the three uncorrupted rings of power, and among one of the oldest beings in Middle Earth — raised her head from the book in her lap, and her crystal blue gaze met mine. The smile she presented me with could have lit up a football stadium, and dazzled the blindest of the blind.

“Hello, Élanor.”

In that same way that Aragorn was ten times more intimidating with a voice to match his face, Lady Galadriel went from being breathtakingly beautiful to simply overwhelming when she spoke. Her voice was soft and gentle, yet edged with near tangible strength all at the same time. It did absolutely nothing to lessen the near mind-boggling effect of her presence.

Looking back, there wasn’t a specific thing I could pick out as being individually lovely about her. She was beautiful as all elves were, with absolutely luminous blonde hair reaching down to her hips, pale skin, and very, very tall — even when she was seated. But somehow it was as if none of that was really relevant. It was as if her external appearance had nothing to do with what really made her presence so overpowering. There was something about her quietly certain expression, the way she held herself, and the weight of ages behind her eyes. It was as if nature itself had deliberately taken every anti-female stereotype in existence and — while flipping the bird at misogynists everywhere — had created something spectacularly beautiful, powerful, and unashamedly feminine out of them all.

She was powerful, with a capital “P.” Just sitting near her was enough for me to know that. I could all but feel it coming from her, like the heat off a bonfire.

I also realised after a moment that I was just lying there with my jaw hanging wide open. Galadriel was still smiling at me, though it had turned from merely warm to laughing at my expression. She gently closed the book she’d been perusing (one on herbs and their medicinal properties, I noted) and placed it on the side table next to her.

“How do you feel, child?”

“Urm…” My own voice sounded painfully dim to my own ears, but I managed to get it to steady a bit after clearing my throat. “I feel… pretty good. I mean, I feel like a troll used my ribcage as a xylophone… but otherwise, I’m good.”

Galadriel presented me with another blindingly bright smile that, to my surprise, didn’t leave me with brain damage. She rose out of the chair to her fully spectacular height and moved to a small side table, where I now noticed a genuine tea pot sat amidst an assortment of dainty looking china on a tray. The regal elven queen plucked up two cups and saucers, and somehow managed to even make pouring hot water over dried leaves look angelic.

“Perhaps this will help you begin to feel as yourself again,” she said in a quietly amused tone when she was finished, returning to her chair with both steaming cups. The smell got to me first.
Tea. Honest to goodness tea.

Not one of the flowery herbal kinds I was used to the elves of Rivendell serving. This stuff was the closest thing I’d smelled to home — my real home — in a very, very long time.

Galadriel obviously noticed because her bright smile widened even further.

“I hear you are quite fond of it.”

“Y-yes… I, ur… yes, I am.”

I wanted so badly to ask how she’d know that; if one of the others had told her, or if she knew some other mysterious way of discovering a person’s favourite beverage. But I was too boggled and brain-numbed to think straight, let alone talk straight.

This was hands down the most surreal situation I’d ever been in.

I was sitting there, in an enormous white bed, dressed in (what I now realised was) a pristine silk nightgown, with probably one of the most powerful women in Arda literally serving me breakfast in bed. If it wasn’t for the dull ache in my side as I sat up, where I knew my wound was still healing, I’d have assumed I was hallucinating. Galadriel handed me my perfectly brewed cup of tea with a serene smile, before gracefully seating herself on the edge of my bed, and bringing her own cup to her lips.

I just sat there gawking, my own cup resting untouched in my hands. So many questions tried to shove their way to the front of my brain at once, it actually took me a moment to focus my eyes properly. But the only thing that managed to find it’s way out of my mouth:

“You’re… a lot taller than I expected.”

That brought a bubbling laugh from her, and the sound reminded me of wind chimes.

“You would not be the first to say so, child.”

I found myself smiling shyly and chuckling too, and it felt really good, even if I was aching all over. She still hadn’t properly introduced herself, I noticed. Not that she’d needed an introduction, I’d known who she was the second I’d seen her — and she seemed to be well aware of the fact, too. She’d just greeted me as warmly as if I was an old friend…

I took a tentative sip of my tea. It even tasted of home.

“How long have I been here?” I asked in a small voice.

Galadriel didn’t miss a beat, though she did pause just long enough to finish her sip.

“This is your third morning.” She answered in that voice that somehow mixed earth shaking power with maternal warmth. “The captain of my Guard — or I suppose you now know him as Haldir — brought you here ahead of your companions, due to your critical state.”

Another internal barrage of questions.

How bad were my wounds? Who had healed me? Had Haldir really carried me all that way on his own? Was I going to be stuck in this bed until I’d fully recovered? Was there a bathroom anywhere nearby?

Honestly, you’d think such a simple question would reap a fairly simple answer, but it seemed that
each time I asked something and received a reply, another three questions sprang up to take its place. I put down my cup and pushed myself further up on the feathery pillows.

“What about the others? Are they alright?” I forced myself to ask first, pushing everything else to the back of my mind for later. I might be ok now, but the last time I’d seen any of the others, they’d all been at arrow-point. “Haldir didn’t hurt them, did he?”

Galadriel placed her free hand gently on my shoulder. It was a comforting gesture more than a restraining one. But that simple touch left me with exactly no doubts that she could have held me down effortlessly if I tried to do anything to re-open my wounds.

“Do not worry yourself, child. They arrived last night. They are weary, and burdened with much sorrow for Gandalf, but unharmed.” She paused, tilting her head to the side and watching me closely, as if trying to read something in the shadows on my face. “They are also heavy with concern for you. The four halfings in particular have scarcely stopped asking after your condition.”

“Really?” I asked, trying to imagine what that looked like and failing. Galadriel gave me a tiny amused look that clearly said: ‘of course, what a silly question’. I chewed on my bottom lip a little nervously, looking down into my tea. “Where are they now?”

“They have been given a small clearing and camp to rest in the glades below. The halflings were more comfortable remaining on the ground than in the trees.”

A soft laugh escaped me at that, and it felt good even if it did hurt my side.

“Yeah, I thought they might be,” I chuckled to myself off handedly. “I can’t imagine Pippin would last ten minutes up a tree.”

Galadriel continued to smile at me through the silence that followed, and I took another heavenly sip of my tea, avoiding looking directly at her. She tilted her head to the side as she observed me through the gold-silver hair curtaining either side of her face.

“It is interesting that you ask after your companion’s well-being before your own. Especially after coming so close to death yourself.”

“I… I guess so,” I replied slowly, feeling oddly like I was being subtly reprimanded. “But I didn’t. Die, I mean.”

“Indeed not,” Galadriel said softly, her smile faltering a little. Her crystal blue eyes fixed on me pensively, and I could almost feel the weight of her gaze as a tangible pressure against my thoughts.

“Though even with the treatment you received, it is no small feat that you still live. Your companions had good reason to worry as they did,” she said finally.

I thought about that for a moment, for the first time since I’d woken, really stopping to consider how the others must have felt at realising what I’d done. By not saying anything about my injury until I was almost at the point of no return. An uneasy, squirming sensation appeared in my tummy at the prospect of facing them all again…

“You do not wish to see them yet.” Galadriel said gently but firmly, as if it was a fact instead of just an opinion. I looked up at her, a denial already on my lips.

“No, I do…” I countered, but I wasn’t entirely convinced by my own words. I stumbled to follow them up with a good reason, but I couldn’t really think of one. Nothing specific anyway. So I just
told her honestly; “But I have a few questions first. Well, a lot of them actually.”

She nodded and smiled at me again. I was almost getting used to the intense luminosity of it by now.

“I know, child. And you shall have answers,” she told me gently, and I believed that she honestly meant it when she said that. “But not right now. For now, you need to regain the strength you lost while journeying here. You will need it.”

She placed a gentle hand softly on mine and gave my fingers a little squeeze, then paused as she looked at me, as if considering a thought that had just occurred to her. Then she let go and rose off the bed in a single, graceful movement.

“Merileth,” she called over one shoulder, the sound ringing even though she hardly raised her voice.

Two seconds later a beautiful, young, elven woman entered the room from the balcony door. She looked to be about the same age as me (relatively speaking) and was tall — though not nearly as tall as Lady Galadriel. She had the fair, utterly unblemished skin all the Lothlórien elves seemed to share, and long pale blond hair that fell in a pin straight sheet to her waist. She also had a very unusual but beautiful set of almond shaped, hazel eyes. It was a colour I’d never seen on any elf before, let alone any of the elves of Lothlórien — who as far as I’d gathered, all seemed to lean more towards shades of pale blue and cool grey.

She smiled directly at me with such warmth and enthusiasm it was almost unsettling, as if she was literally bursting with excitement to speak to me.

“Élanor, this is one of my most trusted handmaidens, Merileth,” Galadriel informed me. “She shall be at your disposal for the time your wounds are healing.”

I found myself shaking my head frantically, throwing both my hands up in front of me in the bed. “Oh, no! You really don’t need to do tha—!”

“It would be an honour to assist you, my lady,” she interrupted me in perfect Common speech before I could finish, dipping into an elegantly low curtsy. I just stared at her with my mouth open, making an uncertain noise that was something between a groan and a mumble. Galadriel faced me with another amused smile, carefully tucking a strand of my messy hair behind my ear.

“We shall speak later, child. For now, I pray you rest and make yourself welcome here.” And with that, she swept out in a swish of white skirts and glowing, golden hair.

I was left there, sitting up in a white, silken sick-bed, dressed in something entirely inappropriate for a sick person, with one eager looking blonde elf maiden standing by, awaiting my any request.

I sighed, and threw back the covers.

“Alrighty then,” I said, swinging my feet onto the wooden floor. My legs were stiff beneath the nightgown, and I rubbed them to get the feeling back into them. “Since you’re now officially my babysitter, would you mind showing me where the nearest bathroom is?”
Merileth did as I requested with damn near dizzying enthusiasm. She’d beamed, taking me quickly by the hand and leading me out of my recovery room, and onto a small balcony that skirted around a huge mallorn tree.

Legolas hadn’t been kidding when he said they grew tall. The city of Caras Galadhon was built entirely around them, spiralling up hundreds of feet around the silver trunks, and vanishing up into the yellow-leafed canopy overhead, the early morning sunlight making them burn gold and amber. I almost went dizzy again looking down at the maze of whitewood flets, walkways, and platforms running like spiderwebs all through the thick branches below…

Or maybe that was just because I’d suddenly realised exactly how hungry I was.

Merileth led me down a series of long spiralling stair cases and narrow walkways that curved and twisted down through the trees like ribbons until we were finally reached the forest floor. The first thing I noticed looking at the ground was that it wasn’t bare like you’d expect from a forest in late winter. It was a rich green, warm, and dotted with tiny yellow and white flowers that were just starting to peek out. The path we followed was lined neatly with white stones separating us from the greenery — but if anyone was expecting me to keep off the grass they should have put up a sign.

I deliberately stepped over the line as I walked bare foot behind my guide.

I knew it was silly, but come on. Bare feet on grass after a week of almost non-stop running in leather boots? Utter heaven.

I slowed to a gradual stop, closing my eyes and just standing there for a second, wiggling my toes and enjoying the blissful feel of the grass tickling the soles of my feet. Somewhere far off there was the sound of someone singing, though I couldn’t quite make out the words from there. It all felt ludicrously good, and I was half tempted to just stay there and let Merileth walk on without me.

The sound of giggles and soft laughter met my ears. My eyes popped open and I looked around. A couple of children were playing in the gardens at the foot of a tree just a little way away. Elf children, I realised — though to me they looked like any other, exceptionally cute eight to fourteen-year-olds you could imagine. I watched in fascination as they chased each other around one of the huge mallorn trees, shrieking with glee as the elder chased the younger. Then the youngest suddenly tripped over a root and went sprawling over the grass. He didn’t cry, or even look upset, just surprised that he’d lost his balance so easily. His brother was immediately there helping him back up again, dusting off his dirtied tunic and breeches.

The youngest one spotted me looking, and his brother glanced over too. They both caught my eye from across the grass, and I noticed that they were almost exactly the same shade of hazel as Merileth’s.

Both boys gave me near identical curious smiles, and I automatically smiled back, raising a hand in an awkward little wave. The eldest finished helping his little brother to his feet, and youngest one gave me a big smile and a wave back before running after his brother again. I stood there on the grass watching them play for a moment, realising suddenly that it was the first time I’d ever really seen elf children before. The few elves living and working in the house of Rivendell hadn’t had any of their own — at least not as young as this — and certainly none who were young enough to enjoy playing tag. I didn’t know what I was expecting elvish kids to be like when I did finally see one, but I hadn’t expected them to be quite so… normal.
Merileth cleared her throat, and I abruptly turned to find she’d stopped too, looking back at me in confusion.

“Is something wrong, lady Élanor?” she asked, looking a little worried and probably questioning whether I was truly well enough to walk about yet.

“No, not at all,” I answered, ignoring her concerned-nurse look, the relaxed smile remaining on my face. “And it’s just Eleanor.”

She smiled blandly and nodded.

“As you say, my lady.”

I sighed again, but smiled and continued following her down the twisting path through the beautiful wood.

“We shouldn’t linger too long, Lord Haldir will be along shortly to show you back to your companions,” she told me as we walked. I pointedly ignored the subtle squirming sensation in my belly at the mention of seeing the others, and just continued walking beside her.

“Where exactly are we going?” I asked as we passed yet another little patch of early blooming flowers. My stiff legs had begun to ache despite only walking for a few minutes.

“The Looking Pools, my lady,” Merileth told me cheerfully.

“Um, the what now?”

She repeated herself with a bemused look at me. “You said you wished to bathe, yes?”

“I actually asked if there was a bathroom nearby.” I clarified plainly, then looked down at my creased nightdress and tangled hair sheepishly, adding; “But yes, now that you mention it, a bath does sound nice.”

She smiled again and led me towards a slightly thicker glade of smaller trees, past which I could hear the sound of voices and running water. As we got closer, I realised that all the voices were female, though the significance of that didn’t really click until we’d rounded the final bend of dense trees. The view opened up on to a scene from a fantasy landscape painting.

When Merileth had said ‘bathe’ I hadn’t realised she’d meant literally in the middle of a forest river, in full view of a bunch of very pretty, very curious looking elven handmaidens. They were clustered around a small embankment lined with smooth moss-covered stones. Most were luxuriating in the crystal clear waters of the river, while a couple were perched on the rocks in full view of the world as they cleaned their hair and chatted. Every one of them was lightyears beyond Earth standards of beautiful — and none of them had so much as a stitch of clothing hiding any of it.

I felt like I’d just stumbled into some odd version of a renaissance painting that had been photoshopped past the point of perfection or believability.

The second I’d stepped into view with Merileth leading me, they all paused in their conversations, turning to look and whisper to each other, glancing curiously over at me and my ethereal nursemaid. My face turned a bit hot, and I tried to convince myself that they were looking at Merileth, not me. I couldn’t think of a good reason why they’d be staring so intently at me…

“Is there something wrong, Lady Élanor?” Merileth asked as I hurried to keep up with her across
the riverbank. She was leading me around to the opposite side of the pool to the bathing elf women, thank God.

“It’s a little… exposed out here, isn’t it?” I said nervously, looking around the at the surrounding trees. They were denser than the ones around my sick room, but not so much that they’d keep someone close enough from peeking through.

Merileth gave me a perfectly blank look.

“Is that a problem?” She asked innocently. I shrugged, feeling almost painfully awkward as I fiddled with the thin strap of my flimsy nightdress.

“What if someone… ur, someone not female comes through here?”

Comprehension dawned on Merileth’s lovely face, and she looked as if she way trying to stop herself from laughing. She took my arm gently with a playful smile and continued leading me around the embankment.

“The pools are only used for women’s bathing during the morning hours. The men know never to come here during the first half of the day,” she told me reassuringly. It did make me feel a little better. Then there was a splash and one of the bathing elf girls let out a bell like laugh that was so pretty and perfect I actually winced.

“Right, only women. Only flawless, spotless, perfectly proportioned, slightly creepy women…” I mumbled more to myself than my nurse. I glanced over my shoulder again, trying to appear nonchalant. They were still watching and whispering to each other, one or two even pointing directly at my back as they spoke.

“Why are they all staring at me like that?” I asked quietly, deeply unnerved.

Merileth glanced over at them. A few had the sense to look away and pretend they weren’t interested, but most of them didn’t bother.

“Many of them are my fellow handmaidens, and they’ve heard that you are the only female member of the fellowship now under my Lady’s protection. They are simply curious to see you,” she explained, turning back to me.

“To see how I measure up, you mean,” I joked dully, though the humour was painfully forced. Merileth wasn’t fooled either, and she gave me a pointed look over her shoulder.

“There is no reason you should feel embarrassed before them. I saw nothing worth noting when I was dressing you. Save for your wound of course, though that is healing well, according to my Lady.”

I was pretty sure she hadn’t meant that to be quite such a backhanded reassurance, but I didn’t say anything. Then another thought struck me.

“Wait. You where the one who… ur, redressed me? While I was unconscious?”

“Of course,” she replied simply with a blank look. “Why?”

I was so tempted to just put my face in my hands, or maybe bang it against a nearby tree, but I resisted.

“Oh, nothing. Ignore me and my dented pride,” I mumbled, pausing and looking down at myself,
then sideways up at her. “I’m guessing you picked out the nightdress too?”

She nodded.

“Thought so.”

She led me into a fairly large tent, which presumably acted as a makeshift dressing room for the bathers. There were a few benches half covered with discarded clothes, some screens also with garments draped over them, even a couple of full length mirrors. She brought me over to stand in front of one leaned against one of the tent posts. She turned me around so she could help me pull the silky gown I’d been sleeping in over my head.

A familiar, chilling sensation of dread crept through me before I could stop it, and I flinched away automatically. Merileth looked a bit confused and tried again, but I pulled back, firmer this time.

“No, please,” I said, forcing my voice to sounds calm even though I suddenly felt anything but. My stomach had lurched and my heartbeat went from zero to ninety miles per hour in a second. I tried to sound polite and reassuring through my fake smile, but inside I was suddenly wound tight as a bowstring. “I’m ok, really. I can manage.”

She must have seen through the expression because she didn’t smile. She just gave me an understanding look and nodded, though she continued to watch me carefully. I turned sheepishly back to the mirror, a little embarrassed for my suddenly harsh reaction.

I could understand Merileth’s confusion. She didn’t know the reason why I hated anyone helping me undress. Nor did she need to — even if I had just accidentally insulted her.

At that moment I was more focused on the puzzle of getting the nightgown over my head. The thing had multiple thin straps that were more flimsy and more complicated than I was used to. Somehow I managed to get the damned thing over my head, wincing as I did. The movement wasn’t enough to aggravate the wound enough to reopen it, but I could still feel it like little needles in my side if I stretched too far. Finally once the dratted gown was off, I curiously looked to inspect my side properly in the mirror for the first time, but I stopped when I saw an unfamiliar person looking back at me.

Ok, that’s half a lie; she wasn’t completely unfamiliar.

She was just… not what I’d been the last time I’d seen myself in a looking glass.

I was leaner now, the sinewy muscles in my arms and legs more noticeable. I’d never been podgy or anything, but several weeks of almost endless walking/running, and living of nothing but dried meat and stale bread would shave excess weight off even the sveltest of figures. My face was a bit thinner too, my cheekbones and narrow jawline more prominent. I still wasn’t pretty exactly, not in the way the other elves were, and I was still practically doll-like compared to Merileth and Galadriel. But now that I was clean and recovered from days of running, I was fascinated by how my reflection had changed since Rivendell. I looked vaguely like what you’d expect from a fairly serious cross-country runner — a bit stronger, faster, and I held myself with more self-awareness than I had while living in the Imladris Valley.

I allowed my eyes to travel down myself, taking note of things that were different, and things that were mercifully the same. Then my gaze fell on where the goblin arrow had hit me…

I saw Merileth’s face fall in the reflection of the mirror, her voice taking on a worried note.

“Lady Galadriel is sure that it will heal fully with time. Once the stitches are removed you will not
be left with a permanent scar,” she told me gently, coming over and carefully taking the night gown from me. “It really doesn’t look that bad. It was much worse a few days ago.”

I knew she was saying it to try and comfort me, to reassure me that my physical appearance wouldn’t be marred by it. But in that moment, I honestly couldn’t have cared less if the scar was on my stomach, on my back, or on my face. I hadn’t realised exactly how close I’d come to actually dying until I’d seen that mark emblazoned on my side. Seeing the pale pink scar tissues pucker just above my hip bone. The neat stitches that held the two-inch wound closed as it healed. The tiny dark red lines spidering out from where the poison had spread into me…

I touched my fingers gently to it, feeling the delicate skin which was still only half healed, and still tender.

I just stood there, staring at myself in the mirror. I stared and stared at that scar on my body for what felt like an age — drinking in the result of my choice to stay silent when I’d known I shouldn’t have. That one little decision, that one tiny choice I’d made… had almost cost me my life.

That was what had shaken me.

I realised after a moment that I was standing there half naked in front of the mirror, gawking at my own reflection like a gobsmacked prima ballerina fixing her makeup. Suppressing the urge to blush, I pulled off the remainder of my undergarments (which mercifully I’d been left with), trying to avoid looking at Merileth while I did it. I could feel her watching me, resisting the compulsive urge to come over and help me — but she kindly respected my request and let me undress myself.

Once I was done, she handed me a towel and led me out to the edge of the water. Setting the towel down on a smooth-topped rock I quickly waded into the calm river pool, more because I wanted to get out of sight more than to get clean. I could feel their eyes on me, even if I was refusing to meet them. The water was cool, though not nearly as cold as it should have been, given that it was late January. I didn’t do much to ease my taught nerves, but it was heaven on my aching muscles and healing bruises. I went damn near boneless with relief as I sank into the water of that river basin, the last of my pains washing away.

I heard Merileth say something vague about finding me a suitable dress from the tents, and I gave a halfhearted grunt of reply, not really listening anymore. I’d sunk shoulder deep into the clear waters of the river, leaning my back against a nearby stone covered with soft moss. I felt ridiculously good, I didn’t want to move for a long, long time.

Even the sounds of the elf women chatting seemed to fade away…

Until one of them quietly said a word that stuck out so much I couldn’t have noticed it more if she’d shouted it.

“… Thranduilion.”

My eyes popped open again for the second time that day, and I sat up a little in the water, peering over at them. They finally seemed to have lost interest in me in favour of a different and more interesting topic. Now they were talking about ‘Thanduilion’ — the son of Thranduil. The same name Haldir had addressed to the only other elf in the Fellowship.

They were talking about Legolas.

‘Just how well known is this guy?’ I wondered silently, though I got no answer. I suspected Tink
was too busy scheming my untimely death to give a witty reply. I pretended not to care.

Closing my eyes and pretending to relax into the water again, I concentrated all my focus onto my hearing — and I listened. The handmaidens were talking about him in the hushed excited tones I usually only associated with teenage girls, not ageless elf maidens probably more than five times my humble twenty-four years. It was difficult to hear them clearly from across the entire pool, but I couldn’t help but catch the odd word that drifted over the water. Words like “tall,” “handsome,” and “unmarried.”

Ye Gods. Nice to see mortals weren’t the only ones with a monopoly on gossips. Or man-eaters.

I smiled, surpassing the urge to giggle. It was a bit immature, I knew, but still the thought of Legolas having his own group of rabid elvish fangirls was completely hilarious to me.

But it also made me wonder about something else. When Haldir had addressed him as ‘Thranduilion,’ and when the elf maids had said it too, the name had sounded like it held more weight than I knew — more than a mere statement of parentage at least. It sounded like some kind of title…

“You have lovely hair, Lady Élanor.”

I jumped, the movement making a splash as I fell inelegantly sideways into the water. I pulled myself up with an embarrassed splutter to find Merileth standing there on the bank with a long pale blue dress in her arms, and a laughing little smile on her perfect mouth. She’d been so quiet I hadn’t even heard her footsteps on the stones lining the bank.

“Urm, really?” I said slowly, embarrassed and curious. I looked at my damp dark brown hair, stuck to my neck and shoulders, picking at it dubiously. “I always thought it was a bit of a boring colour.”

“Not at all. It is rare to see anything such a dark shade among the elves of Lothlórien.” Merileth seated herself on a nearby rock, setting down the dress beside her. She tilted her head to the side and pinched her lip between her teeth in thought. “I wonder, may I braid it for you? When you are finished bathing of course.”

I shrugged.

“Sure, knock yourself out,” I said without thinking.

Merileth looked like I’d just slapped her.

“Knock myself out?” She spluttered, eyes gone wide with shock.

“Oh God, no! I didn’t mean literally!” I floundered, realising exactly what I had just said to the poor girl. “It’s, um… it’s just a saying we, um, sometimes used in Rivendell. It means ‘help yourself.’”

“Oh, I see,” she smiled, though it seemed a little wooden. I returned it, and we both chuckled at the awkwardness at the same time, the tension easing a little.

We chatted for a while after that, mostly me asking about Lothlórien and Caras Galadhon and Merileth answering my numerous questions while I washed my hair and face. A few of minutes later she helped me out of the water and into a towel, helping me dry of with only minimal assistance (bless her angelic heart). Then she led me back into the tent where I’d undressed and led me to a bench in front of one of the mirrors.
“Your speech is so unusual, and strangely charming. Do all the elves of Imladris speak as you do?” Merileth asked as she sat me down and went about finding something to tame my hair with.

“No, I’m something of a black sheep,” I replied, pleasantly surprised to find how relaxed I was talking to her by then. I guess after everything she’d seen me go through up until now there was no real point in being embarrassed anymore. I kept my head still and facing towards the mirror as she expertly took a wide toothed comb to my tangled hair. “Have you ever been to Rivendell?”

“No, I have spent my whole life in Lothlórien. Though lord Haldir has. He speaks very fondly of it,” she told me, working through the knots so carefully I hardly felt a thing.

“And you speak fondly of him,” I noted, unable to keep the little smile off my face. Merileth looked surprised, but the blush that coloured her pale cheeks left no doubt that she knew exactly what I meant.

“Oh? Do I?”

It was the second time she’d mentioned him in half an hour, and every time she had I’d seen that quiet, wistful little smile appear on her face. I might have been hopeless in the romance department, but even I wasn’t that clueless.

Merileth, for her part, seemed content to leave me to my pondering while she dried and brushed my hair. When she finally got to the braiding stage she started to hum a light tune quietly under her breath. It was pretty, but also a little sad somehow — the soft notes reminding me of birdsongs just before the sky turned dark at night. I closed my eyes and tilted my head back, lazily enjoying the feeling of being pampered and the sound of Merileth’s humming.

“That’s a pretty song.” I heard myself say, and I could all but hear the small smile in her tone.

“A song my mother used to sing,” she explained fondly, then her voice dimmed slightly, “She used to sing it for me almost every night when I was a child.”

I opened my eyes and found that Merileth’s pretty smile had vanished, replaced with a neutral expression — but there a sorrowful look hidden behind her eyes.

“Used to?”

Merileth nodded and continued working on my hair.

“She was taken from this world two years ago, along with my father. There was a sneak attack on their travelling party as they passed through the mountains.”

I saw my own face fall, and it was a genuine reflection of what I felt at those words. In a way, when I’d come to Arda, I’d lost my family too. But at least I knew that somewhere, they were still out there. I could scarcely imagine loosing my parents in the way she had. Especially when, as an elf, death wasn’t something you normally had face.

“I’m sorry, Merileth,” I said quietly, and meant it.

“As am I,” she replied, a soft, flickering smile appearing in the place of the sorrow like a tiny flame. “The pain still lingers for me. I might have departed for the West by now, if not for my brothers.”

“You have brothers?”
“Yes, my lady. Two. Both of them much younger than I. Gweredir is nearing his thirty-fifth year, and Colion is but eighteen.”

It took me a moment to get over the mental speed bump. If my mental maths was anything to go by, that would have meant that Gweredir appeared about nine, and Colion about four in human terms — the same age as the two elf children I’d seen playing in the gardens.

“I think I saw them both earlier. Curly blond hair and hazel eyes?” I asked. She nodded with a small smile. I nodded too, returning it. “They’re both cute boys.”

Her smile brightened at that, completely eclipsing the sadness that had marred her features moments before.

“They are why I remain,” she told me, her voice welling with the kind of tangible affection that only a much older sibling could invoke, “I could not abandon them for my grief.”

I returned that smile in the mirror, feeling a level of empathy at that statement that I couldn’t have possibly put into words. So I didn’t even try. I just sat there, thinking about my own brother for a moment as Merileth continued to weave my hair into a complicated plait.

“What of you, my lady?” she asked tentatively after a long but amiable silence. “What of your family?”

Although I had no logical reason for wanting to, I suddenly wanted desperately to tell her the truth. The truth about my real family back on Earth. How much I really missed them… and how painful it was to think of them for too long. How I tried to avoid thinking about them because of that pain, but how I was also scared of forgetting them completely.

But as always, the truth was out of the question.

I swallowed.

“They’re…” I faltered, my voice hitching a little bit before I could get it together. “They’re a long way from here. I haven’t seen them in a long time.”

“I see,” she said, sensing my unease and not pushing the subject. “What about a suitor?”

“Suitor?” I repeated, puzzled, and taking a moment to realise exactly what she meant by that word. I looked back over my shoulder at her and she nodded, tilting her head to the side curiously.

“You are of age, fair and kindhearted,” she stated plainly, without so much as a trace of sarcasm, tucking a stray stand of hair behind my ear. “Is there not one who holds your affections?”

“No,” I said a little too quickly, the sharp sting of unwanted memories surfacing again. It had been two and a half years, almost to the month since I’d last heard Mark’s voice. But his final words still chilled me every time I remembered them:

“You’ll never find anyone who will love you as much as I did, Ells. Ever.”

I cleared my throat and looked away, shaking my head.

“No, there’s no one.”

Merileth eyed me in the mirror and clucked her tongue.

“I’m not so sure I believe that,” she said wryly. She paused for a second, tending to a more
complicated part of the braid, and chewing her lip slightly in thought before adding; “Your companions seem to care a great deal for you.”

That piqued my curiosity. I peered at her over my shoulder with a sceptically raised eyebrow.

“How do you figure?”

A knowing little grin played across the elf woman’s lips. She opened her mouth to answer, but was interrupted when one of the other fair-haired handmaidens swept inside. She was garbed only in a loose white robe that somehow managed to accentuate rather than conceal her supermodel’s figure and perfect skin. I hated her already.

“Merileth, Haldir is here to return Lady Élanor to her companions,” she glanced over me with interest, then gave Merileth a knowing, almost sly look. “He also wished to see you, if you were available to speak.”

Merileth’s cheeks coloured again, darker this time. I felt her fingers tremble very slightly against the back of my shoulder where she’d been tying off the end of my braid. Well, I say braid. To me it looked like she’d spun my hair into something resembling a long and extremely complicated basket weave.

“Of course. We’ll be but a moment.”

Maybe it was just me, but Merileth seemed a lot more intent on getting me prepared quickly after the other handmaiden swept from the tent.

She all but pulled the towel off me, throwing the silky blue dress over my head, and turning me around as she tugged it down into place — a flustered but excited little smile stuck on her face the entire time. I tired to keep up as best I could, obediently turning and twisting in whichever direction she ordered before finally she was satisfied I looked presentable again.

The dress was beautiful once it was on. Silky, pale blue, with long sleeves and a flattering neckline; and it fit surprisingly well. But it was way, way longer that I was comfortable with. I had no idea if the skirt was supposed to drag along an entire foot behind me, or I was just epically shorter than the person supposed to be wearing it. Probably a bit of both. The Rivendell elves, despite their fabulous architecture, seemed to value function over form. Lothlórien, on the other hand, seemed to be an entirely different ballgame — all etherial floaty fabrics and flamboyant safety hazards.

Ah well. Just as long as I didn’t have to run away from anything intent on eating my face.

I picked up the long skirt over my feet and followed Merileth as she led me outside, being extra careful not to trip over the hem and go tumbling face-first into a tree.

It was harder than you’d think. By the time I’d skirted the bathing pools and followed around the copse of screening trees after Merileth, she was already strides ahead of me. I slowed as I watched her walking quickly in the direction of the steps we’d come up to get to the pools, and stopped entirely as I saw who she was so intent on reaching.

Haldir stood about fifty meters away, waiting patiently with his back to us. He was still wearing the hunting leathers of the Galadrim I’d seen him in when his patrol had found us. And he still had that stoney, unyielding expression on his serious face.

I watched curiously as Merileth slowed in her strides towards him, her posture suddenly turning from excited to nervous, her hands wringing together. He obviously heard her approach, because
he suddenly looked up and smiled warmly at her — far warmer and kinder expression than I’d ever seen him wear before.

Merileth returned the smile with so much brightness it turned her already beautiful face into something that could have broken a human man’s heart in seconds. Thankfully, Haldir wasn’t human, and it seemed to only make his own smile that little bit warmer. He didn’t drop the formal stature though. He gave her a polite bow and said something I couldn’t hear. Merileth replied quietly and equally politely, but it was easy to see even from the other side of the clearing that the formality was forced. Though she hid it well, I could tell she was disappointed by Haldir’s pointed reservedness.

You would have had to be blind or going for a Darwin Award to not see what was going on between those two.

I suddenly felt deeply uncomfortable standing there watching them as they gazed doe-eyed at each other. Don’t get me wrong, they were just talking — but there was something about it that made me feel like I was intruding upon something very intimate right then.

I decided after another second of hovering there like an awkward pale blue cloud that Merileth could probably survive without me. I managed to silently slip away down some white stone steps while the two of them were making gooey eyes at each other, disappearing before either of them could notice I’d vanished. It was obvious Merileth had all but forgotten about me anyway, and that was fine with me. I’d felt the itching need to be alone since she’d shoe-horned me into that dress anyway.

But even as I vanished down the stairs in the other direction, I couldn’t keep the knowingly gleeful smile of my face at the thought of her and the Marchwarden though.

‘*God help me if I ever end up looking that mushy about someone ever again.*’ I chuckled silently to myself, not expecting, nor wanting, an answer.

I made my way to the bottom of the stone steps until my bare feet hit soft grass, and I found myself walking through yet another small garden, this one filled with the same yellow flowers I’d seen earlier. They grew almost everywhere. Up through the grass, in the flower beds, around the trees — and I imagined them in the light of the currently unlit silver lamps, looking like tiny gold stars against the dark green grass.

I slowed in my walk and picked one, using it as an excuse to slow to a stop and try to remember whether I’d ever read about this type in my herbal studies. But really, I knew I was just putting off the inevitable.

Merileth had mentioned briefly during our chat where the others were camped out on the forest floor, and I knew I was heading roughly in the right direction. I was sure that even with my appalling sense of direction, I would find them eventually, but I wasn’t really sure that I wanted to face them just yet...

It was Gandalf that convinced me I should. Well, figuratively speaking.

The soft elvish singing I’d heard earlier that morning while walking to the pools was clearer now that I was properly awake and alone enough to focus on it. I listened and realised with a little pang of sadness and guilt that it wasn’t a song at all. It was a lament.

> *Olórin, who once was*
The Sindarin and Quenya words cut deeper than any knife or arrow I could imagine as I translated them in my head. My eyes stung a little, and I realised it was the first time I’d truly had the opportunity to stop and really let the loss of the old Wizard sink in. Gandalf was dead, and I had no idea if he was truly gone forever or not. Somehow, that lack of closure was worse than anything else.

I felt myself sink down onto a moss covered stone, the little gold flower still cradled limply in my hand, my eyes suddenly a bit damp.

I’d promised myself years back during my first few months in Arda that I wouldn’t cry anymore. That if I had time to cry, I had time to get up and do something about it. But I knew this was different. This wasn’t anything to do with me, or my problems, or my homesickness. It was simply the sinking realisation that a kind, wise old man who had guided and protected us all was gone.

So I let myself have that moment. Just a moment to let the reality of it sink in, and let whatever emotions I had suppressed until now out. It felt good to let it out, weird as that sounds. Even if it was just for a moment, it was good to let the fear, frustration, grief and confusion go without the fear of appearing weak.

Finally when I was calm again, I knew what I needed to do. I knew that there was no way Gandalf, or my mentor, would have approved of me shirking the others for fear of being reprimanded. And in all fairness, I probably deserved the roasting I’d be getting when I saw them.

I’d still do it. But I also knew it wasn’t going to be easy.

‘What in this ever world is?’ Tink’s voice echoed up from the depths of my mind for the first time since our fight. I sighed, and smiled through my half-dried tears.

‘Touché.’

Taking a deep breath to quell the last of my hiccupping breaths, and wiping away the last of my water-works, I got up off my rock and started moving barefoot in the direction Merileth had told me about. Following the paths paved with white stoned, I reached another set of winding stairs leading down through some more huge mallorn trees. I followed the silver lanterns on either side...
of the walkway, being careful not to trip over my ludicrously long skirt.

About halfway down the heavenly smell of bacon hit my nose, and I almost grinned. The scent was so unbelievably familiar and welcoming it was almost enough to calm my suddenly jumpy nerves.

Almost.

I followed the smell of cooking food down the stairs on shaky legs, and around the base of a tree until I could hear the sounds of the hobbits talking quietly. Presumably over their freshly made breakfast. I could hear Gimli’s gruff voice complaining about something, and the occasional tenor of Boromir chipping in too.

I tried hard to distract myself from my nervousness by wondering if they had any leftovers for me. But as soon as I rounded the last tree and saw them all there, my courage abandoned me.

They were all there. Every one of them.

All four hobbits had divested themselves of their travelling gear, and were clustered around a small cooking fire in their looser clothing and talking quietly. Girli was nearby too, and for once was not wearing his heavy metal helmet. He was reclined against a tree root with his axe propped against it next to him, his head tilted back resting on the bark with his eyes unfocused and muttering something about ‘the rabbit food the elves call a meal.’

Boromir was there too, sitting just far enough to one side to keep the sound of him sharpening his sword with a whet-stone to a minimum — a sound which, oddly, didn’t sound menacing even though it logically should have. And just a little way behind him stood Aragorn and Legolas. The two of them were talking quietly to each other in Sindarin with their backs to me near some trees, both wearing looser clothes and relaxed stances, and Aragorn calmly smoking his pipe. Seriously, did the man ever stop smoking?

Sure enough too, they all looked like they’d just finished the remains of a good, old-fashioned fried breakfast. Merry was helping Sam clear away while the others continued to sit and talk, or simply enjoy the feeling of calm and safety that seemed inherent to the wood we were now sheltered in.

I just stood there for the longest moment, simply looking around at them all in their various states of relief and quiet. It was a strangely peaceful moment to come in upon. I’d never seen any of them quite like this before — calm and relaxed, but with a lingering hint of sadness; no doubt left over from their own grief over Gandalf.

Then, I suddenly had the oddest feeling like I was intruding. Like I shouldn’t be there.

Maybe it was the nerves, or the lack of food, but I couldn’t shake the sudden feeling of suddenly wanting to turn around and go back up the stairs again...

Then Frodo looked up suddenly, and for a split second our eyes met. We just stared at one another, the Ringbearer’s blue eyes widening. Then he opened his mouth and said in a stunned but unmistakably relieved voice loud enough for every one of them to hear:

“Eleanor?!”

Chapter End Notes
Quotes:
(1) “Lament for Gandalf” from The Fellowship of the Ring by J.R.R. Tolkien
(original translation in Sindarin and Quenya)

A/N: I don’t know what it is with me and ending on really tense moment, but it feeds my soul. XD Plus it really frustrates my gorgeous new Beta reader (Kitzie), which is always fun. :3 Kudos to you babes for taking on the arduous job of nitpicking my grammar and spelling. Love you and your wonderful brain. :3

Next time we’ll see exactly how the others react to seeing dear old Ellie up and walking around again. Hope you enjoyed the ride so far. See you next chapter! :)
The silence came so fast and so suddenly once Frodo voice’s rang through the clearing, it was like someone had hit mute on the entire forest.

I hadn’t realised how surprised he’d been to see me standing there until I’d heard it in his voice as he said my name. Eight pairs of eyes instantly fixed on me, entirely different expressions on every face; shock, surprise, worry, unease, reprimand, and confusion, but the one thing every face had in common was an unmistakable look of relief.

I just stood there vacantly, shifting from foot to foot, without the faintest idea what to do or say.

“Um… morning?”

The next thing I knew, two curly-haired cannon balls had shot across the clearing and ploughed straight into me, small but strong arms latching around my middle. I had to brace a hand against a tree to keep from being knocked over.

“Merry! Pip! Ow!” I managed to wheeze out, trying to angle myself so their waist height hugs didn’t tear my stitches. They instantly let go, flinching back away from me as if my dress had caught fire.

“Sorry!” they both spluttered in unison, clearly terrified that they might have injured me more. They then started frantically talking over one another at me in increasingly louder voices.

“—didn’t think—!”

“—forgot you’re hurt—!”

“—shouldn’t have kept quiet—!”

“—gave us a right scare—!”

I was saved from the two hobbits disorienting jabber by Boromir. He gently nudged the two frantic hobbits aside and pulled me sideways into an unexpectedly informal one-armed hug, being carful to avoid my wounded side. I’d been expecting that even less than I had Merry and Pippin’s spirited reactions, but I returned the hug a little awkwardly anyway, my face going red.

“It’s good to see you back on your feet again, Miss Eleanor,” Frodo sounded genuinely relieved as he came up to greet me kindly while Boromir let me go with a warm smile.
“Aye, lass. Looks like you’re not quite so dainty after all,” Gimli sounded like he was almost on the verge of laughing which, oddly, was what started settling my nerves a bit. I returned the light laugh somewhat stiffly, feeling quite bowled over by their jovial welcome, and still kind of unsure of what to say.

Meh. When in doubt, stick with the basics.

“Thanks,” I said awkwardly, before turning to Merry and Pippin who had only just managed to stop talking, “I don’t suppose there’s any breakfast left?”

I should have known better than to doubt the hobbits’ resourcefulness, especially when it came to food. Of course they had extras to spare for me. I barely had time to notice the looks on Aragorn’s and Legolas’ faces as I was ushered towards the circle of cushions that had been set up around a tiny cooking fire.

Aragorn was, as per usual, difficult to read. He looked relieved to see me there and all — at least I think he did — but behind the tense smile I could see the disapproval I’d been expecting, along with something else that had given a faintly concerned tinge to his expression. It was a strange look on him, one I’d never seen before.

Legolas, on the other hand, had an even stranger look on his face. Well, stranger than I was used to. He was looking at me as if he wasn’t sure if I was really there at all — eyes slightly wider than usual, and his mouth ajar as if he’d just been about to say something. He had stopped in mid-stride, frozen to the spot facing us the second he and I had meet gazes.

Then Merry all but shoved me down onto a cushion near the fire, ordering me to stay put while he and Sam busily went about fixing me a hobbit-style breakfast that was (and I quote): “guaranteed to put anyone half-dead back on their feet.” Gimli also gave me a good-natured clap on the shoulder which very nearly dislocated my arm, but I smiled at him anyway when he slumped down against a tree root again.

“How are you feeling now?” Boromir asked gently, passing me and seating himself opposite me, his sword and whetstone all but forgotten.

“Better, I think. Less dizzy, and I’m not being sick on people’s feet anymore, which is a plus,” I tried to joke lightly. It didn’t have the desired effect as Boromir’s face fell back into worry, the lines in his face deepening a bit. I cleared my throat nervously. “How long have you all been here?”

“Since late yesterday evening,” Legolas told me quietly. He’d managed to unfreeze himself and had taken a seat next to me on some of the cushions. Now that he was closer I could see that, for the first time since I’d met him, he looked honestly tired. There was a weary slant to his tiny smile, and almost invisible dark circles under his greyish-blue eyes.

That struck me as odd. Could elves even get sleep-deprived when they didn’t need to sleep?

“No one would tell us of your condition, only that your wound was severe and you were still being tended to,” he added in an even quieter voice.

I shifted a little uncomfortably on my cloud-like cushion, drawing my legs up under my skirt and resting my arms on my knees. I could feel the pull of my stitches as a reminder that I still wasn’t off the hook yet.

“I’m alright now, just a bit achey and creaky,” I replied, forcing confidence into my voice that I desperately wanted to sound genuine. He didn’t look fooled though; I saw the disbelief appearing
in his expression before I even finished talking. I tried to smile reassuringly at him, but I could feel it didn’t really reach my eyes.

“Seriously, Prince Charming, wipe that look off your face. I’m fine, really,” I chuckled, giving his shoulder a playful little shove.

If the look on his face had been strange before, it only got stranger at those words. He still smiled, but it was as if the smile was masking something else hiding just below the surface. He turned from me and reached into one of the nearby packs as the others all settled themselves around the dying fire as well. A moment later, he withdrew what I recognised as my traveling cloak, wrapped into a bundle around something metallic. I could hear it clinking as he gingerly handed it to me.

“You best take these back.”

I already had an inkling as to what it was. Sure enough, as I unfurled it, my hunting knife and throwing daggers — still neatly stashed in their pouch — tumbled into my lap. My face broke into the first genuine smile I’d felt since I’d entered the camp.

“I wondered where those had got to.”

Legolas gave me a warm smile in return, but it still looked a bit strained, as if he was biting his tongue down on saying something more. It was starting to unsettle me a bit, but I was saved from pondering it more as Sam handed me a plate decked out with the full works — everything from bacon to jam covered toast. I thanked him heartily, and tried to distract myself from the feeling of dread in my gut by hastily tucking in.

We talked only for a little while, mostly me asking them to fill me in on everything that had happened since I’d gone under. Frodo, Sam and Pippin explained that I’d been taken ahead of them to Caras Galadhon because of my injury, and it had taken them much longer to reach the heart of the wood without Haldir there to lead them via the quickest rough. Gimli and Boromir occasionally chimed in too, commenting on everything from the hospitality they’d been shown by the elves, to their meeting with Galadriel and Celeborn, the Lady and Lord of the wood. Gimli in particular all but sang the praises of the Lady and her graciousness for letting them stay — though he pointedly didn’t comment on the food provided by the elves.

Despite my hunger, I was still recovering from not eating for three days, and didn’t quite manage to polish off all of my plate before I was full. Legolas, for all his tact beforehand, needn’t have bothered holding his tongue. Our resident axe-swinging dwarf — hurling subtly to the wind as usual — went ahead and said what I knew everyone had to be thinking.

“Far be it for me to hammer down the high spirits, but I think you’ve got some explaining to do, lass,” Gimli said with no small amount foreboding. He’d lit his pipe at some point, and was looking at me pointedly through the tendrils of smoke curling up around his face. “What in Mahal’s name were you thinking, staying quiet about a wound like that?”

I didn’t miss the edgy sideways glance he shot at Aragorn. The ranger had sat down too, directly opposite me across the circle, but I was avoiding looking at him. I chewed on a crust nervously, trying to pretend I wasn’t carefully choosing my answer.

“You would have wanted to stop if I’d said something.”

Urgh. I’d known it was a stupid idea even before I’d gone and done it, but it sounded so much worse when I said it aloud. It didn’t take a genius to see the others were in agreement on that.
“Too right we would have!” Merry exclaimed loudly, gesturing non-too subtly to my wounded side with his fork, “You were shot!”

There was a collective murmur of agreement, and I continued to use my slice of toast as a crux to buy time to think. I tried to shrug nonchalantly.

“I was kind of under the impression stopping to rest in the middle of orc territory would have been bad for all of our healths,” I replied with a slightly defensive tone. “And besides, I’m alright now, aren’t I?”

“You still should have said something,” Boromir chipped in, the look of his face still tinged with concern. “And you…”

He trailed off, the worry in his face being replaced with obvious discomfort. He’d picked up his whetstone again and was turning it over and over in his hands, his gaze flickering around at the others. I looked round at them too. They all shared variations of the same expression. Discomfort mixed with worry. And none of them would meet my eye. All except Aragorn. He still hadn’t said a word so far, and that was somehow worse. If his expression was anything to go by, he didn’t have anything good to say about what I’d gone and done.

I slowly put down my plate, my appetite for the hobbit-style breakfast abruptly gone.

“There’s more to this you’re not telling me, isn’t there?”

They all somehow managed to look suddenly even more uncomfortable, the shadows of guilt flickering over each of their faces. I eyed them all, trying to quell the dread stirring inside me and failing entirely. No one answered me. Not all of them looked fully on board with the statement, but no one denied it either. I heaved a heavy sigh, hoping it masked exactly how jittery my nerves suddenly were.

“Alright. Just get it out of your systems. I think we’ll all feel better.”

‘Here it comes…’

“That was incredibly foolish thing you did, Eleanor,” Aragorn told me, though his tone wasn’t anywhere near the level of pissed off I’d expected it to be. He sounded more tired than angry.

I swallowed a bit thickly.

“I know.”

“As a healer you should have known saying nothing of an injury that serious, even for a short while, could easily have killed you. You should have known better,” he continued, and his words stung a bit more than the last had. My jaw clenched imperceptibly.

“I know that, too,” I said again, my teeth grinding a little, but keeping my tone respectful. “I think we can all agree that what I did was fabulously stupid. I’m not in a hurry to repeat the experience.”

Aragorn watched my face closely, but I made sure to keep it as blank as possible — void of so much as a twitched eyebrow. I didn’t trust myself to keep from showing exactly how unsettled I was by the way they were all behaving.

“It is good that you are recovering. We could all do with a chance to rest. Although we are safe for now, it will not stay that way for very long. We will remain here just long enough to regain our strength and plan our next path, since we no longer have our guide,” Aragorn explained in that
same precise, unaffected tone he’d used when trying to explaining complicated combat footwork to me. He kept the straight face, but I saw the hobbits’ faces fall at the indirect mention of Gandalf. Legolas tensed slightly, and Boromir and Gimli looked crestfallen too — but none of them said a word.

I glanced round at them again, sympathetic but also impatient. I’d had more than enough suspense dangled in front of my nose for one morning.

“What are you getting at, Aragorn?” I demanded flatly when no one else pitched the question.

You could have heard a penny drop through the eerie silence, before Aragorn finally answered me in a diplomatic but firm tone.

“Eleanor, I think when the time comes for us to leave, you should give some serious thought to remaining here in Lothlórien.”

My jaw fell open.

Out of every kind of reaction I’d been anticipating from him — reprimand, anger, a lecture as long as the Battle of the Somme — that was honestly the one thing I hadn’t imagined he would say.

I’d known my joining the Fellowship hadn’t been a unanimously adored idea, but Aragorn had been one of the few who hadn’t openly argued against it. Looking back on it, he hadn’t even seemed all that surprised when I’d stood up and offered to help. Yes, he’d made damn sure I knew what I’d got myself into during our chat on Caradhras, but beyond that, he’d never once displayed any wish for me to not be there with them.

So why was he saying it now? Here?

Something niggling at the back of my mind behind the shock and silent outrage whispered that this was only partly to do with my getting injured. I didn’t know what, but I could feel there was something beneath that wasn’t being said.

No one would look at me. Not one of the Fellowship would meet my eye.

All except Aragorn. He was clearly still waiting for my reaction, his expression carefully blank, but the tense line of his shoulders gave away his edginess. He’d obviously come into this prepared for a bad reaction. I stared at him, carefully closing my mouth, not trusting my own voice to remain calm or collected with the hurricane of questions and feelings battling for control inside me.

When the silence finally became too much to bear, Boromir spoke up for the first time since Aragorn’s big revelation had dropped.

“Perhaps it would be easier to have this conversation at another time,” he suggested quietly, as if speaking to himself more than anyone else.

Aragorn released a soft but tired sigh, looking away and rubbing the bridge of his nose.

“Yes, I think that would be—,”

“No,” I cut them both off, my voice utterly flat with icy calm.

That surprised them. Hell, it kind of surprised me too.

I swallowed hard, fighting to keep my voice and expression toneless and carefully neutral. It was
hard, but I managed.

“You don’t have a ‘get out of jail free’ card on this one. If you’ve got something to say to me, you can say it now,” I said quietly, still calm, but letting a little dash of my anger leak in.

‘Really, boss? Here, in front of everyone?’ Tink’s concerned voice rang quietly in my head.

I didn’t answer her.

Tink might not have been around when I was still human, but she knew me and my human memories enough to understand. I’ve been told all about my shortcomings for most of my life. From when I started school, to my final year of college, to my breakup with Mark; I’d been told why I shouldn’t do something. Why something I suggested was a bad idea. Why the way I was just wasn’t quite good enough.

And as it turns out, that was ok with me. I was ok with not being perfect. I was ok with occasionally screwing up, and things going pear shaped — as long as I was the one to reap the consequences. What I was not ok with was people trying to ‘help me’ by passive-aggressively belittling me. Not anymore.

I let the silence that hung in the air act as my answer, and Tink shifted nervously in our shared understanding of what it meant.

‘Oh boy,’ she groaned in dread, then faded back into silence.

Aragorn’s neutral expression had slid into a darkened frown, grey eyes still diplomatic but hardened behind the mask.

“Very well.”

I wasn’t anything close to hungry anymore, but I picked up a crispy, leftover piece of bacon off my plate and took my time chewing on it. The motion wasn’t really intended to draw out the tense silence hanging in the air, but it did allow me some much needed seconds to get a rein on my fast deteriorating temper.

“So, that’s it, then? The verdict is that I should stay here when you go?” I said finally, looking from face to face and watching their reactions carefully. “And you all think this?”

No one answered my question. All of them were looking absolutely anywhere but at me, including Gimli and Legolas who were all but two feet away. I even looked straight at Boromir, but he was very deliberately looking at a spot over my left shoulder instead of my face.

I felt my blood starting to boil.

“We think that—,” Aragorn started quietly, but I interrupted him in an equally calm but much colder tone.

“You think,” I enunciated the word a little more aggressively than I’d expected myself to sound, “that if I come along I’ll slow you down. Exactly like I would have done if I’d owned up to my wound outside Moria.”

Aragorn’s sharp frown got even sharper, but I didn’t let up.

“This is no joke, Eleanor.”
“I’m not laughing,” I replied tonelessly.

The ranger had long since abandoned his pipe, but only then did his actually bother to extinguish it. The embers went out with a little hiss and a little plum of curling smoke. He set it down without looking away from me, or I from him.

“Your decision to remain silent over your injury was foolish, yes, but this goes beyond that. The fact remains, we are now without a wizard to protect and guide us. And despite your improvement since our departure from Rivendell, you are still not a warrior.”

He let that hang in the air for a few painfully long seconds, but when I went to open my mouth to reply he interrupted me without any warning or any kind of sugar coating.

“The fact also remains, that you are the only female member of this Fellowship, and are simply not possessed of the skills or strengths needed to stay alive on the path we will face to reach Mordor.”

He couldn’t have taken me more by surprise if he’d pulled out a gun and shot me with it.

I stared at him in stunned silence, my mouth working silently and my stomach trying to twist itself into a pretzel. For a few seconds I completely forgot how to breathe. Ok, I’d been prepared for reprimand, disapproval, all that tripe, but not this. Whatever theme I’d expected Aragorn to play on in his inevitable lecture, I had never expected him to sink so low as to drag my gender into it. The fact that I was female. I’d half hoped that we’d moved beyond the flippant misogyny I’d encountered during the Council, but it was obvious now; the fact that I was a woman was still being held against me, even if I hadn’t been fully aware of it up till now.

For a long moment I couldn’t speak. I was just too shocked — and lividly, blood-boiling furious.

If I hadn’t taken those few seconds to stop and really look at the weather-beaten man sitting opposite me across the campfire, I would have probably started spitting fire at him. Aragorn had a good pokerface, better than most, but it wasn’t perfect. There was the briefest flicker of reluctance in his expression before he could banish it, but I saw it.

He was lying.

Oh I was sure my XX chromosomes were certainly part of the problem, but I saw in that moment as I glared at him that he wasn’t being entirely honest. He was trying to use the fact that I was the only girl in this boys-only-club as an excuse. An excuse to cover up what was really going through his head.

But as dear old Shakespeare liked to say: ‘truth will out.’ (1)

“That’s a heap of troll shite, Aragorn.”

I thought for a moment that he was too surprised to respond. I should have known better.

“What?” he asked in a dangerously quiet voice. I ignored it.

“If my being a girl was really a problem to you, you would have said so back in Rivendell, along with everyone else who was there,” I answered in the same cold flat tone I’d used seconds before, trying to pretend I wasn’t boiling over with too many emotions. I visibly saw Gimli and Boromir wince, and although he hid it well, Legolas was close enough for me to see his shoulders stiffen and hands clench from the corner of my eye. I shouldn’t have enjoyed the little twinge of satisfaction I got from that, but I did.
I met Aragorn’s hard gaze with my own and refused to break eye contact no matter how much he stared me down. It was hard. His eyes were like chips of stone boring into mine, but I managed it. I wanted him to know that regardless of what he might think of me, no matter how scary or regal he might be, I would never just roll over and allow myself to get walked on again.

Not even by the one who saved me when I first came here, those two and a half years ago.

“Tell me why you really think I should stay here,” I demanded flatly.

Aragorn narrowed his eyes at me.

“You know why.”

“I really don’t.”

“Perhaps we shouldn’t…” Boromir’s voice cut in, but whatever he was going to suggest died a premature death as both Aragorn and I turned on him in unison and complete silence. The looks on our faces must have been something to behold, because the seasoned warrior of Gondor paled and shut his mouth immediately.

“What possessed you to join this company in the first place I cannot say, Eleanor, but it was not through a selfless want to help. It was an unwise choice, and you know it,” Aragorn said smoothly, turning back to me as if we hadn’t been interrupted.

“No one here has entirely selfless or wise reasons for anything, Aragorn, let alone marching headfirst into the fire-pits of Middle Earth. And regardless of my motives, I joined this Fellowship of my own free choice just as much as you did. I have just as much right to remain as you do,” I countered, then lowered my voice so that only he (and probably Legolas) could hear me clearly: “Last I looked, you weren’t my mentor or my guardian.”

He jerked his chin minutely in a shake of his head.

“No, I am not, but I am at least partially responsible for you, now that Gandalf is no longer here to protect us.”

“And that suddenly gives you the right to imply that I’m useless to you all? That I should sit here like a good little girl twiddling my thumbs while the rest of you march off into the sunset?” I folded my arms over my middle and very deliberately gestured to his left side with my chin. “How’s your arm doing, by the way? Still stiff?”

That did it. I knew immediately I’d kicked a hornet’s nest when I saw the blood drain from Aragorn’s face, his jaw muscles working furiously.

“You are being frivolous.”

“And you’ve lost your mind if you think I’d ever agree to stay here because you tried to passively-aggressively order me to.”

“Remaining here is what would be best for you now. You can argue all you wish, but it is what it is, and arguing about it won’t change that,” Aragorn countered me sharply, his tone getting less and less neutral by the second. Less and less like our conversation on the mountainside — but the weird part was that, this time, I didn’t care at all.

I didn’t feel scared anymore. I just felt angry.
“Maybe, or maybe not,” I said in a calm, toneless voice. “Either way, that isn’t and will never be your decision to make for me.”

“Manwë’s breath, Eleanor, this task is not a game, or a debate you can win with clever words! Any mistake could cost more than just one of our lives! Least of all foolish mistakes like the one you made! The ones you still make!”

I hadn’t realised I was on my feet until Aragorn stood up too, all but towering a head over me.

“You think I don’t know that? You really think I’m so stupid that I walked into this quest with my eyes shut?! You really think that this,” I jabbed a finger at my side, where we all knew the wound was even though it was covered by my dress, “Wasn’t lesson enough for me to know that?!”

That was the first time I ever saw Aragorn truly lose his temper.

“You know nothing!”

He didn’t shout, or even raise his voice much. It was a look brewing in his eyes that was miles scarier.

“You are a healer’s apprentice, not a warrior! You know nothing of the consequences of your mistakes! You have no experience, can barely defend yourself, and no memory of any kind of life you might have had before two years ago! How could you possibly know what you were getting yourself into when you…”

My stomach plummeted the second he’d said it, as if I’d just gone into a free fall from stepping off a cliff.

I felt all the blood leave my face. I suddenly felt cold. My rage was still there, but it had turned from fire to ice inside me. Aragorn took one look at the expression that forced its way onto my face and trailed off. His own face showed the second he realised what he’d done — what he’d just said out loud, in front of all of them.

He snapped his jaw shut, but it was too late.

“What?” Gimli spluttered out.

“You have no memory?” Frodo breathed almost inaudibly quiet with shock.

“Two years?”

Now it was my turn to avoid looking at all of them. I couldn’t bear to see the looks on all their faces. I didn’t want to imagine what they were all thinking — putting the pieces together until they all realised the truth about this. The truth Aragorn had been trying to imply to me without actually saying it out loud. That I wasn’t fit to continue with them, not because I was a girl, not even because I was just a healer with no fighting experience.

It was because, for all intents and purposes, I had literally nothing but two meagre years of life in this world to draw upon. I was literally the youngest, most vulnerable, and least experienced one here by decades.

But this wasn’t how I wanted them to find out. Not like this.

“You know what?” I ground out, my jaw clenching so hard over my turbulent voice that I could barely get the words out. A knot had appeared in my throat that I couldn’t get rid of no matter how
much I tried. I fixed Aragorn with the hardest glare I could muster, so furious I could scarcely
focus my eyes. “Since you brought it up, you can explain that one. You’d obviously do a better job
than me anyway. Having so much more life experience.”

I picked up the skirt of my stupidly long dress and went to move past Boromir and Sam, trying not
to look at them as I went. I didn’t want to see the look on their faces. I didn’t even realise that
Aragorn had seized my wrist at some point until it prevented me from striding away.

“Eleanor, thats not—,”

I jerked my arm sharply out of his grip, which had gone slack with shock. I couldn’t stand the
feeling of all their eyes on me. All of them stunned, confused, outraged…

And worst of all, pitying.

My insides writhed and I felt faintly sick. Aragorn, for once, looked completely lost for words as I
met his eye again, before I quickly turned my back and started walking away.

“Miss Eleanor? Where are you going?” Sam’s shellshocked voice came suddenly as I moved
quickly back towards the stairs.

“Somewhere I can think in peace. I need to clear my head,” I replied calmly and without any malice
or emotion, even though I felt anything but calm. I’d be damned if I was going to let any one of
them see the tears forcing their way into my eyes.

“Thanks for breakfast.”

~ ♦ ~

I took Merileth up on her prior offer of hospitality for the rest of that day.

It took me a while, but several wrong turns later I found her and about five other handmaidens
working busily in the gardens on some pretty extravagant sewing, and they’d welcomed me to join
them without so much as a surprised bat of an eyelash.

None of them had asked about the Fellowship (thank God), or even much about me personally, but
they definitely made sure to make me feel extremely welcome. I guess Merileth had tipped them
off that bombarding me with too many questions at once would be unwise in my “fragile” and
“only half recovered” state, but they did talk about pretty much everything else under the sun while
they worked.

For my part, I didn’t really join in. I just sat there on a stone bench, listening to them chatter about
everything, from the latest news the forest patrols brought to what shade of green would be best for
a summer gown. It must have been nice, I thought, having only simple things like work, clothes,
and eye-candy related gossip to worry about. I had to admit, it was times like this that I’d found
myself a little jealous — almost missing the time when I’d been that care free.

I tried hard not to dwell on it, but I found myself going back to what Aragorn had said before he’d
dropped my secret amnesia bomb on the others of the Fellowship.

I thought about how even though I wasn’t exactly helpless anymore, I was still at a severe
disadvantage because of my lost past. About the reason I’d decided — however foolishly — to join the Fellowship in the first place. And about what it would be like if I did stay here in Lothlórien when the others inevitably pressed on towards Mordor.

I looked around at the other handmaidens seated on the grass and a few stone benches around me, chatting, smiling, and laughing happily as they worked on their embroidery and hemming.

Would it really be so bad if I did stay? Here, where it was quiet and safe?

It was a question I couldn’t answer, and had resolved not to try to answer until I’d had time to properly cool off and clear all the homicidal thoughts from my head. If there was one thing I’d learned from arguing with Aragorn, it was that the aftermath brooding could do more damage than the argument itself.

I spent the entire morning and afternoon there in the gardens with Merileth and the handmaidens, and it did take my mind off things for a time. Eventually, the later winter light began to wane through the trees as evening approached. Finally, Merileth and the last few handmaidens collected their needlework and left to attend to their other duties — Merileth leaving me with simple directions to find their quarters when I wished to sleep. She also promised to bring along another pot of tea a little later when she came to check up on me.

Say what you like about the rest of Galadriel’s supermodel handmaidens, but Merileth was quickly turning out to be golden in my eyes.

I thanked her, but decided to stay there in the gardens on my own for a little longer. I’d hoped the cooler evening air would help relax me some more, and help me think — but it ended up just making me feel even more tired.

I lay on my back on the stone bench, looking up at the darkening sky and watching as stars began to appear one by one though the gaps in the golden trees. I don’t know how long I just lay there stargazing vacantly, but it was long enough to realise I wasn’t going to get any more productive thought done tonight. I rolled over on the bench and pillowed my head on my arm, letting my eyes fall shut, just for a moment. I remember thinking to myself as I slowly drifted off, that I’d been right — the little yellow flowers dotted all over the grass and around the trees did look like tiny stars, reflecting the light of the silver, glowing elf lamps.

After what seemed like two minutes after I’d finally nodded off, I felt myself being gently shaken awake again. I grumbled in protest, but the insistent hand on my shoulder didn’t relent in its pestering.

“Lady Élanor,” Only the elves ever called me by that pronunciation of my name.

I opened my eyes groggily to find it was Haldir who had dragged me from my slumber.

“The Lady Galadriel wishes to see you,” he told me with a distinct disapproving undertone to it when I didn’t immediately react. “Now.”

Aragorn was one thing, but I had the feeling that after they day I’d had, my Scottish grandmother would have risen from her grave and clouted me for letting a man with no facial hair at all try and boss me around. I sat up on the bench with a groan and rubbed my tired eyes, muttering incoherently as my sleepy brain took an extra few seconds to boot up.

Haldir’s disapproving look deepened. I eyed him. Even before I’d been dropped into Arda, I simply couldn’t stand people who took themselves too seriously. Unfortunately for me, most of the people
I’d been living with up until now were well over several hundred, if not thousands of years old. I guess when you were older than most European countries, you tended to get a little set in your ways.

Even so, I decided to be polite… -ish.

“A pleasant morning and fair tidings to you too, good sir,” I grumbled with very slightly less sarcasm than usual.

See? Progress.

“It is evening,” he corrected me shortly without a trace of irony. “About nine o’clock.”

I sighed, watching as my joke sailed straight over the Marchwarden’s head. I’d been asleep for only about four hours, and I was still tired.

“Then that explains why I’m so hungry.”

Haldir didn’t look impressed, but didn’t comment either. He did, however, help me to my feet rather chivalrously. My stitches tugged a bit and I winced.

“How does your wound fare?” he asked me seriously, and despite his cool tone, he honestly looked like he was concerned to know. I pressed a hand to my side and gave a crooked smile.

“Better now. Much better. No more pain, but I’ll be glad to be rid of these stitches.”

Haldir didn’t quite return the smile, but he nodded to show he was pleased to hear it, then turned and started leading me off in a direction across the gardens I hadn’t been yet.

I’d managed to ditch the lovely but ridiculously long, pale-blue dress earlier that afternoon, swapping it for something a little more sensible — well, by Lothlórien standards anyway. One of the slightly shorter handmaidens had agreed to lend me a dress that wasn’t in danger of putting me in an early grave. A white lace number with short sleeves and a comfortably loose fit, and I managed to keep up with Haldir’s long strides without tripping over the hem.

“Thanks for talking the arrow head out of me,” I said quietly after a few minutes of walking in silence. Haldir paused in his stride to glance sideways at me before responding.

“You are welcome, though I would not recommend repeating the experience.”

“Oh I don’t plan to, don’t worry,” I assured him, meaning every syllable of it.

I followed him quite a way through the forest, beneath the city in the trees and through the seemingly endless gardens. Finally, we came to a secluded looking clearing with an archway framing the top of a long stairway leading down. A couple of vaguely familiar looking, dark blond elves who bore a faint resemblance to Haldir stood guard on either side, bows relaxed at their sides but ready for use if need be. One of them was sending a very pointedly displeased look in my direction as we passed them and moved down the wide, polished stone steps.

“Is there something wrong with that guy?” I asked once I was sure we were out of earshot, glancing over my shoulder back at them. Haldir didn’t even break in his stride.

“That was Rúmil and Orophin, my brothers,” he informed me, as if it was an explanation on its own. When I didn’t respond he added with an utterly straight face, “Rúmil was the one who’s boots you vomited upon.”
“Oh, right,” I felt my face heat a little. “Um, sorry.”

“An apology best saved for him, I believe.”

I sensed the edge in Haldir’s tone rather than actually heard it, and looked sideways up at him, trying to pinpoint what it was. I decided to take a wild stab in the dark and guess.

“You think what I did was crazy, don’t you,” I said bluntly, my lack of sleep taking away some of my usually charming tact. Haldir didn’t seem to mind though.

“It does not matter what I think,” he answered simply without missing a beat, turning for the first time in our walk to look at me directly. “But I am curious. Why did you say nothing? Did you not trust your companions to care for you adequately?”

“No, I…” I stopped, thinking about it.

I knew the reason, or rather many reasons I’d decided to keep quiet. Shock from Gandalf. Not wanting to slow us all down. Not wanting to get eaten by orcs. Not wanting to be seen as weak… When put into words, however, none of them really felt like enough to justify it. It’s a lot easier to deal with moral dilemmas when it’s all happening exclusively in your head, and no one else is involved or getting hurt.

“I didn’t want to slow them down,” I said finally, knowing that it didn’t come close to a satisfactory answer, but too tired of thinking about it to care anymore.

Haldir was quiet for a long time as we descended before speaking again. “You have quite a low opinion of your own company.”

“Excuse me?”

“You did not trust that they could help you as well as protect themselves from danger,” he clarified blandly, nodding in the direction of my side. “That is not to say that your motives weren’t admirable, but, in my experience, trust is usually something that has to move in both directions to work.”

That caught me off guard. Don’t get me wrong, I’d been expecting a disdainful comment along those lines when I’d opened the whole conversation. What I hadn’t expected was for Haldir’s point to make so much sense to me, or hit quite such a sensitive nerve.

I was the healer of the Fellowship, responsible for keeping them all “stitched together,” no matter what craziness we ended up facing, and within their limitation, they’d all trusted me to do that. Aragorn with his arm. Frodo with his ribs. Yet, when I’d said nothing about my own injuries, I’d made it clear that I hadn’t returned that trust; not with any of them. It might not have been intended that way, but that didn’t matter. The message I’d given was clear enough.

A rush of a sigh came from me, and I suddenly became fascinated by the texture of the stone steps in front of me. Haldir was still eyeing none too subtly me through his peripherals. Then again, I’d seen that subtlety wasn’t really his forte.

‘Subtlety, or spotting when a certain ash blonde elf maid is practically falling over herself to get him to smile in her direction,’ Tink added quietly, and I knew she was trying to take my mind off my brooding. I smiled a bit, appreciative of her effort even if it didn’t really work.

“They seem to care for you a great deal more than you think,” Haldir broke the silence after a
minute, turning away from me with a nonchalant shrug. “Merely an observation.”

“And you notice a lot for someone who doesn’t seem to realise what’s right under his nose,” I found myself saying before I could run it past my common sense. Haldir’s head whipped back towards me, a baffled expression on his face, but also a noticeable touch more colour on his cheekbones.

“Pardon?”

“Nothing,” I said offhandedly, looking away. “Merely an observation.”

The Marchwarden only flushed more, his confusion turning into wary suspicion. He opened his mouth to say something else, but clearly decided against it before a word could come out. He shook his head, as if shaking away a stray thought and didn’t press any further. I didn’t push it either, but I couldn’t help the tiny knowing smile that crept onto my lips.

“We’re almost there. Come, this way.”

Stone steps finally gave way to grass again, though there were not as many flowers in sight in this part of the gardens; only tall, old looking trees that twisted and leaned into one another in a leafy canopy over the forest floor. I followed Haldir through the hall of ancient looking branches until finally it opened up onto a much smaller garden. Two statues of elf maids stood either side, holding those pretty silver lamps, illuminating the modest sized glade and casting soft light onto the other statues that were dotted around the garden. Only a few flowers grew here and there, and most of them were those pretty little yellow flowers I’d seen earlier — the ones that looked like tiny gold stars. A small stone podium sat in the centre of the glade, on which a wide silver bowl sat along with a tall silver water jug right next to it.

I recognised it instantly as Galadriel’s mirror, and sure as the sky is blue, there could be no mirror without the Lady Galadriel herself.

She was dressed once again all in white; a long white satin gown that was so long, it trailed along the ground, yet somehow had managed to stay spotless. She’d seated herself regally on one of the nearby stone benches and was admiring one of the masterfully carved marble statues — one of a kneeling young elf maid, holding what looked like a wreath of wildflowers in her lap, her long hair swept over one shoulder.

“My Lady, she is here,” Haldir announced without raising his voice, before bowing once and vanishing back the way we’d come. I turned my head in confusion to watch him swiftly disappearing up the stairs, and when I turned back, Galadriel was looking at me with those ancient, crystal blue eyes.

Her smile was like warm sunlight breaking through rainclouds after a storm, but where before it held maternal affection and gentleness, now there was a cautious tinge to it. She stood and held out an upturned hand to me, Nenya catching the light and shining like a tiny star, and beckoned me over to her side.

“Come here, child,” she said, her voice gentle and reassuring, but also laced with the tiniest trace of sadness that I couldn’t miss. “We have a great deal to discuss.”

Chapter End Notes
A/N: Ok, first can I just say that I have the loveliest readers! The last bunch of reviews were especially thoughtful, and jam packed with wonderful questions and feedback. I found myself reading back over them again and again until my face hurt from smiling so much. Thank you so much guys! Love you and your wonderful brains.

This chapter was a literal headache to write, but I’m so happy I finished it. Getting the Fellowship’s reactions and dialogue to sound write on paper was so hard I actually ended up re-writing this scene about two and a half times before sending to my Beta. Also, I apologise for once again ending on such a tense note! I honestly just can’t seem to end a chapter at a sensible, non-cliff-hangery moment — it’s like a knee jerk reflex I can’t get rid of. XD

As always, hope you enjoyed. Next time we’ll find out what Eleanor sees in Galadriel’s mirror, who she sees, and maybe even get one or two straight answers about her past life. ;) See you next chapter.

~Rella
There really should be a tax imposed on needlessly flashy entrances in Middle Earth — that along with mysteriously uninformative greetings. They could have solved world poverty and hunger overnight.

I stood there in the entrance to the glade, frozen solid as any of the statues dotting the garden, looking vacantly between the mirror podium, the silver jug, and the Lady of the Wood. She still had her hand extended to me in a beckoning gesture. She was smiling that warm but frustrating smile, as if she was amused by some unspoken joke that I wasn’t in on.

“How do you fare now, child?” she asked, letting her hand drop to her side.

I blinked, shaking myself out of my daze and managing to unstick myself from the grass. I was really starting to get tired of people asking me that.

“Better,” I replied instantly, moving towards where she sat. “Fit as a fiddle, even.”

Galadriel watched me closely and the weight of her gaze was something heavy and almost tangible, like standing in the path of a strong but warm breeze. Her expression shifted from curious to faintly concerned as she looked at me.

“Something has caused you worry since we spoke this morning.”

It wasn’t a question, just a statement of what she was obviously seeing. I should have known she’d immediately notice the conflict in my face; perceptive, all-knowing elf lady and all that. I bit my lip, thoughts of the conversation I’d had with the Fellowship earlier returning. I looked sideways down at the grass.

“It’s… it’s nothing. Nothing I can deal with right now anyway,” I answered quietly, wishing that I could hide the hurt still lingering in my voice. I swallowed hard, forcing down the knot out of my throat and returning my gaze firmly back to her again. “You said you were going to answer my questions.”

“I did,” she confirmed, taking a seat and gesturing for me to come and sit beside her on the bench. “I shall answer as many as you have, to the best of my abilities.”

“Well, I’ve got plenty of those,” I smiled back politely, though it felt forced. “So I guess I’ll try and boil them down to the really good ones.”

“I’m sure you will,” she nodded with an amused look. I perched on the cool polished stone next to
her, my hands resting in my lap as she continued to watch me with those kind but unnervingly sharp eyes. “What would you ask of me first, child?”

I just sat there for a minute, chewing my lip, and my fingers nervously fiddling with the intricate lace of my dress while I thought. For all the torrents of questions I’d had leading up to this point, now that I was faced with the possibility of real answers, my mind had gone totally blank. So much had happened since I’d been here. Where exactly was I supposed to start?

“First I suppose I should ask,” I began hesitantly, “How much do you really know about me?”

Galadriel paused for a moment to consider the question, her eyes skimming over my features in what I assumed was consideration of how best to answer.

“Enough to know that until two years past, you knew yourself only as Eleanor Lucy Dace, and a human of a merely twenty-two years.”

I supposed I should have been surprised by that, but honestly by this point in the day, I wasn’t sure if much could shock me anymore. The novelty of having a native Middle-Earthling casually drop my human name mid-conversation had kind of worn off when Gandalf did it.

I nodded slowly, still chewing anxiously on my lower lip.

“Then you really know about me? Before I ended up here in Arda, I mean?”

“For the most part.”

“And you know about that how exactly?” I asked, my voice gaining a little more strength as the steady stream of questions I’d been carrying around for months slowly started coming back to me. “The only two people in the world who knew my human name were Gandalf and Lord Elrond, and that was only because I told him.”

I left out the part where Lord Elrond had assumed me unhinged to begin with, and Gandalf just found my paradoxical predicament rather amusing. Galadriel’s small smile twitched at the edges, and I had the oddest feeling like she’d sensed what I’d just been thinking.

“I glimpsed it in your life’s memories and dreams when first you arrived here. While you were being treated,” she explained as if she was talking about a simple maths problem, not the next best thing to a mutant X-Man power.

“You read my mind?” I stuttered out, thoroughly creeped out by the idea of anyone, let alone an elf queen, casually rummaging through my head. Then again, I’d spent the past two years with an internalised split personality sharing my mental space. I guess weirder things had happened.

Speaking of Tink, I found it a little odd that, despite everything that had been going on since we’d entered Lothlórien, she’d remained uncharacteristically quiet up until this point — and something was telling me it didn’t have anything to do with our argument when I’d been unconscious.

Galadriel let out a chuckle at the vacant expression that had crept on my face, cutting my silent musing short.

“No, child. The mind is nothing so simple as to be read like a book. The memories, dreams, and nature of a person, however, are not so difficult to glimpse when looked for in the correct place,” she turned her bright blue eyes to my face, very deliberately aiming them directly into my own. I suddenly had the deeply unsettling feeling that she was looking straight through me and right down into my soul. A nervous, twisting sensation crept up my spine and slithered up the back of my
neck. Then, just as the shared gaze was in danger of becoming something creepy, her expression softened, and she said: “Your thoughts of late have been of home.”

I edged back on the bench a little. I couldn’t help it. You can’t come out of a staring contest with Lady of Lothlórien without feeling at least a little unnerved by the experience. Trust me.

“Well, yeah,” I shrugged, rubbing my neck to try and mask the shiver that had run up it. I didn’t think I’d fully understood the significance of what she meant when she’d said that. “We’ve all been travelling a long time since we left Rivendell, and…”

“I do not speak of Imladris,” she interrupted me smoothly. “Your home before then.”

My chest tightened and my stomach clenched. I knew immediately what she was talking about, where she was talking about, but I desperately didn’t want to think about it. Not right now. Not when I’d already had my emotions kicked in the teeth once today, but I couldn’t help it. The thoughts of home, my real home, came flooding back even though I tried to stop them — along with the homesickness that always, always, accompanied it.

I sighed, my shoulder slumping a bit as the air left me in a soft rush, my throat tightening.

“London.”

The name felt weirdly unfamiliar in my mouth, it had been such a long time since I’d said it out loud.

“The strange, towering city of steel and glass where you dwelt before waking here, and the family you left behind, yes,” Galadriel said equally softly. I felt her hand close gently over mine in my lap, her fingers warm and strangely maternal in their touch. They were also pristine and totally unblemished, especially when compared side-by-side to mine. She turned my hand over thoughtfully in hers, examining the array of tiny cuts and half-healed scars I had dotting my fingers and knuckles. “But you also dwell on the memories of your home before that. Of the life you had here on this plane, but have only glimpsed recollections of.”

“You know about those, too?”

“Of course,” she answered gently, reaching up and absently tucking a stray lock of my wispy, dark hair behind my ear. She regarded me with a touch of sadness, as someone might look at a sick child in hospital, and spoke quietly under her breath, more to herself rather than to me. “It was inevitable that some would return eventually, given enough time.”

My stomach sank at the word she used.

“Some of them?”

She didn’t answer me immediately. Instead, her hand trailed from my hair to hover a few inches over my chest, right over where my heart was, the faint, sorrowful expression not leaving her eyes.

“The mind can be made to forget, but the heart always remembers. Joy and pain. Some scars run too deep to ever truly be covered.”

Well, that was delightfully vague, and more than a little perplexing.

Despite the fact that Lady Galadriel had been kind enough to offer me her assistance, and answers, all these mystic, talking-in-riddles shenanigans were really starting to grate on my nerves. I’d begun to feel as if I was talking to a particularly uncooperative psychic rather than a noble elf lady.
All we were really missing now were a crystal ball, a tarot deck, and some strong smelling candles.

I glanced down at where she still had a loose grip on my hand, though she’d gone back to watching my face again. I had the distinct feeling she was carefully gauging every one of my reactions with every question I asked. I swallowed, reining in my growing impatience, and met her gaze again.

“If you know about that, then you must know who I really was, how I got here, and why I can’t remember anything?”

She answered me simply, her expression never changing, though her voice did dip into something more serious, taking on an almost warning tone.

“I do.”

I felt a jolt of excitement surge through me, my heartbeat racing. Finally, I finally had a tangible answer within my grasp…

“Can you tell me?” I asked almost inaudibly. Galadriel tilted her head minutely, unblinking in her penetrating stare.

“No.”

I blinked, stunned. Perhaps I’d misheard her?

I shook my head a bit, and repeated the word in my head half a dozen times to make sure I’d heard her correctly. I had. Shock stole my voice for a long moment, and when I finally managed to speak again, the sound came out strangled and hoarse.

“What?!”

“I may not give you that answer,” she told me plainly, her voice and face suddenly completely neutral.

Confused and angry, a desperate frustration threatened to choke all the air from my lungs as I tried to speak. My jaw and fists clenched so tight they ached, my head shook slowly, and my mouth hung ajar, trying fruitlessly to form something resembling words. Only one made it past my frazzled brain.

“Why?!” I demanded, my voice going up a several octaves with the typhoon of emotions all clamouring for first place within me. I was starting to loose it.

Galadriel didn’t so much as bat an eyelid at my appalled reaction. It seemed as though she’d been expecting me to respond just this way, and her pokerface was lightyears better than Aragorn’s. She just sat there, regal, neutral, and totally unaffected, her expression giving away absolutely nothing.

“I promised to answer as many of your questions as is within my power to answer. This one, I cannot.”

I just stared at her, speechless. Well, almost.

“Let me get this straight. You offered to help me by answering my questions, but only the ones you feel like answering?”

“No,” she replied flatly, as unaffected by my rudeness as a lioness is by a termite crawling over its
paw. “I wish to help you in any way that I can, Élanor, but the question of how you came to be in Arda is one I cannot answer for you.”

I resisted the urge to start tearing my hair out. I was teetering on the edge of going mad with frustration. I wanted to say something scathing, but stopped myself, forcing myself to breathe, to calm down and think about what she was saying to me.

Galadriel said she wanted to help me, but she wouldn’t answer this one crucial question. Why? Something about the way she’d said it struck me…

“You won’t tell me,” I started, forcing myself to consider each word before it left my mouth. “Or you can’t tell me?”

“I cannot,” she answered me very clearly, with an emphasis on the word that I felt more than heard. I stared at her, not fully understanding what the answer meant. If she wanted to help, but couldn’t, what exactly was stopping her?

Galadriel levelled her steady gaze at me, sharp crystal blue eyes boring right into mine.

“For this, child, you must ask the correct questions to gain the answers you seek,” she told me simply, and with so little emotion it was almost creepy.

Sweet merciful God, it was like having the most unhelpful fairy godmother in the world. If she started resorting to mysterious limericks or cryptic knock-knock jokes I was going to damn well run to the top of a spiralling tree staircase and throw myself off, but even so, I’d waited two years to get so much as a sneezed clue to my past. Two years of pain every time I thought of my family, my friends, my home.

If I had to play this stupid guessing game to get my answers, fine. I’d play.

‘Come on, Eleanor, think!’ I barked at myself silently like a drill sergeant, ‘Aragorn may have been right, you’re not good at fighting, but you’ve got a damn decent brain. You’re the apprentice to Lord Elrond for sod’s sake! Think!’

I concentrated on my breathing as my mind worked furiously, trying to keep my raging emotions from hijacking logical thought again. It was an exercise Lord Elrond had taught me during my very first month of being his apprentice. It was a routine designed to help me quell frustration and help concentration, although it had rarely worked well enough for me to put to good use. It was worth a shot now, though.

‘One breath in, hold for three seconds, breathe out… One breath in, hold for three seconds, breathe out…’

I repeated this over and over again as my mind frantically chipped away at the problem before me, taking all the bits of information I’d acquired so far and trying to piece them all together.

Galadriel knew about my human life, at least vaguely, from the glimpse she’d taken from my head. She knew about my past here in Arda, but for some reason she couldn’t tell me. She wanted to help me, I believed that, yet something was obviously stopping her…

I realised in a chilling moment that the fact that — for some inexplicable reason — she literally couldn’t give me straight answers about my past was, in itself, a clue. Not a big one, or even a good one, but a clue nonetheless, and I wasn’t exactly swimming in options here.

Hell, it was worth a shot.
“Alright,” I croaked out, then cleared my throat when I realised how dry my breathing exercise had left it. “Let me make sure I understand this right. You can’t give me a straight answer about who I really am. You also can’t give me a straight answer about how or why I left Arda in the first place, or how I ended up back here, but you still want to? Is that right?”

She nodded, long gold hair swaying in the faint breeze of the garden as she watched me.

“Yes,” she told me, the tiniest shadow of an encouraging smile crossing her lips. The message was clear; I was on the right track. The excitement I’d felt earlier returned, stirring in my gut and sending butterflies into my stomach.

“Then, can you tell me why you can’t speak of it to me?”

She nodded again.

“I am bound by a vilissë vérë* on my life, and the lives of all my descendants,” she explained in a low, deadly serious tone that sent a chill up my spine. My eyebrows raised in surprise without my permission.

“A vilissë vérë?” I breathed, well and truly flabbergasted now, “Bound to what?”

The flicker of incomprehensibly deep sadness marred her otherwise seamless featured for a split second, before it was gone again.

“To never speak of, share knowledge of, or directly reveal the nature of your past. Or to disclose in any way the reason why your memories were taken from you,” Galadriel answered me in that deadly serious tone of voice that, I was certain, was going to start boring holes into my psyche before long.

I just sat there in silence for what felt like years, smartly staring at her in shock and awe.

A vilissë vérë, or to its nearest Common speech translation, “a blood oath,” was a tricky and extremely dangerous thing to mess around with. I’d heard of them only in vague reference during my time in Rivendell, before I’d become Lord Elrond’s apprentice, back when I’d been pouring through books in the library to pass the time.

Blood oaths were something that, technically, every race had in one form or another, but for the elves it was an especially serious issue. It was a solemn vow, a promise that supposedly ran deeper than your own blood once you made it, using a tiny piece of your own soul to “seal the deal.” I wasn’t down on all the complicated magic or physical elements that made it all work, but I did know that it was pretty much the most serious kind of oath any elf could possibly make.

This was the kind of oath that joined bond-brothers together in their promise to defend each other in battle. The kind of oath that joined a husband and wife when they swore to remain faithful to each other for the rest of their immortal lives. There weren’t any direct words in any human languages I knew suitable enough to truly translate it — because humans just didn’t have the frame of reference needed to understand how deep a promise like that sank.

It wasn’t the kind of oath you broke. It wasn’t even the kind you considered breaking. Not without inviting some truly horrific consequences on all those involved.

Seriously, just ask Fëanor and his sons.

No wonder she had flat out refused to answer me.
What I did know for certain was that whomever had made Lady Galadriel — the keeper of Nenya, the frigging Lady of the Golden Wood — swear a blood oath on the lives of her children and grandchildren must have been absolutely sodding nuts. No one sane would have done that. No one with half a brain would have even considered it...

Not unless they were truly desperate to keep any and all of that information a dead secret, literally. People only got that desperate and that stupid when they were scared. Really, really scared. Someone out there had been frightened enough of me getting hold of my past to strong-arm the damned queen of Lothlórien into a vilissë vérë.

“Why would anyone…?” I murmured, my head spinning with the overload of sudden information. I shook myself out of the daze firmly, refusing to allow myself to veer off on a tangent this time. Not now that I was so close to figuring this out. I faced Galadriel again, still sitting there as regal and as solemn as any of the statues in her hauntingly quiet garden.

“You can tell me who, right? You can tell me who did this?” I asked in a tiny voice.

She gave me the smallest of nods.

“I can.”

“Well, that’s something,” I exhaled in relief, still a bit frazzled but finally satisfied I was on the right track again. I straightened and pointedly looked the Lady of the Golden Wood dead in the face and spoke quietly: “Then tell me then. Who made you swear to never speak about my past?”

She held my gaze steadily for what seemed like forever, a dozen different emotions slipping over her face like water over stones. Then finally, she answered with three simple words.

“You did, child.”

There are times in life when spluttering the word “what?!?” at full volume just doesn’t seem adequate.

This was one of them.

I gaped at Lady Galadriel like a baffled goldfish. I seemed to be doing that a lot today anyway, so it wasn’t like I hadn’t had time to practice. Galadriel just regarded me impassively, waiting patiently for me to gather enough of myself together again to form understandable words, but I could barely get my own thoughts to make sense, let alone get them past my language faculties.

“I… I-I did…” I stammered, the air coming from my throat in jagged little hiccuping breaths, like a child who’s been winded by a sudden shock.

I didn’t even realise my hands were shaking until Galadriel took them both in hers and fed what I could only describe as a feeling of calm to me. It felt like a cool breeze on a hot day, flowing up through my arms and into my chest. I took a shuddered breath, forcing myself back into the breathing exercise I’d used moments before.

It didn’t help, but at least I could breathe again.
“You came to me long ago, and asked of me for one favour,” Galadriel told me very gently, as if her words might shatter me if she spoke too loudly. “Your one request, Élanor, was that all the memories of your past life be locked away forever, even from yourself.”

The memory I’d had when the Balrog roared, just before Gandalf had fallen in the dark of Khazad-dûm came rushing back like the surge of a tidal wave. The dark place, the pain in my chest, the sobs, and the tiny vial in my hand that I’d wanted so badly to smash against the wall.

But instead, I drank it. I drank every last drop.

My mind continued to reel at that information. Wave after wave of theories, questions, and a distinct lack of answers flooded my head, but I couldn’t get any of them to make any kind of sense. I gripped Galadriel’s hands tightly, the feelings swirling through me not relenting no matter how hard I tried to calm myself.

“You’re saying… I did this. To myself?” I croaked, still winded by my own bafflement and shock. “Why?!”

Galadriel gave my hands another tiny squeeze, reassuring me that she was still there, trying to help.

“I cannot give you that answer either, child.”

I wanted to scream.

“God dammit! Why not?!” I exploded, my voice coming back without warning if more high pitched than normal. Galadriel, of course, didn’t so much as blink. She just watched me, perfect and unyielding like a marble statue, with an infuriatingly piteous look on her face.

“Because that was a part of your price. I cannot break the oath I made to keep your secret safe, not even to ease your own confusion.”

I ripped my hands from hers without warning, the feelings overwhelming my system turning into near physical pain. I felt my body curl in on itself, my eyes clenching, and my arms wrapping around my middle as I hunched over on the bench. I felt sick, and I was so close to tears I was sure if I opened my eyes, I wouldn’t be able to stop.

“Why? Why would I do choose to do this? Any of this?” I asked no one in particular, my voice choked by dry sobs I was refusing to let have rule of me. Galadriel didn’t answer me immediately. She clearly understood that right then, the last thing I needed were more riddles and mystical clues. I was in no state to think straight, let alone give a reasonable response.

I think maybe I did end up crying, I can’t really remember. All I do recall is shivering and hiccuping in shallow little breaths, all while Galadriel kept a steady and comforting hand on the centre of my back, rubbing in gentle circles as a mother would for a crying child. She waited for me to have my moment, allowing me to fully calm down from my moment of collapse without pressure or impatience. When I finally managed to talk again, properly this time, I could only focus on one thing.

“I don’t understand any of this,” I said, and I sounded utterly defeated even to myself. “Why would I willingly do this, any of this, to myself? What possible reason could there be?”

Galadriel looked down at me sadly. She was so tall, and yet she had somehow managed to make what could have been an intimidating frame look shielding and protective rather than imposing. She continued to gently rub her hand against the centre of my back, letting her own serene aura seep into me.
“Memories lost or not, you are still yourself, child,” she explained, meeting my eyes and allowing a tender look of concerned curiosity to slip into them. “Tell me, what reason would you have to take away all the memories of a life you loved?”

“I would never…” I stopped mid reaction and thought about it for a second. Really thought about it.

I’d been so drained of hope and jumped up on sheer outrage at being cheated out of my promised answers that I hadn’t stopped to consider the problem from that angle; that I might have the tools to figure it out without Galadriel just handing them to me. Also, the fact that I now had at least one logical, vaguely sensible train of thought to follow was helping to pull my out-of-control emotion out of the driver’s seat. I was still baffled, angry, confused, and maybe a bit hysterical with frustration, but it was sinking back to a manageable level again.

I clobbered my hysteria politely on the head, shoved her back into the passenger’s seat, and wrenched the steering wheel of my brain back on track.

Assuming Galadriel was right — that I was still the same person I’d been back then underneath all the memory loss and trauma — my decisions now should, logically, reflect the ones I’d made back then. Of course, that was assuming that my memory loss hadn’t affected my personality, altering the axis on which all my decisions hinged, but that was a rabbit hole I couldn’t go down right now, not while I still had my hysteria frantically gibbering just under the surface of my consciousness.

So, assuming I was still the same person I’d been; what reason would I have? What could make me scared enough to deliberately enlist Galadriel’s help with erasing my past?

There was only one thing I possibly could think of…

“I’d only do something like this if… remembering was somehow putting my family, the people I loved, in danger somehow,” I all but whispered in near silence.

Galadriel didn’t nod or so much as blink, but something changed in the lines of her expression that made me think she was agreeing.

“The most deadly of dangers often come to us from those who are closest to us,” she agreed, again not quite giving me a simple yes or no.

“But all that tells me is what might have happened,” I countered, calmer than I’d been, but voice still noticeably frustrated. “Something I knew or remembered from back then was bad enough to merit me giving myself amnesia?”

“A logical conclusion,” Galadriel said in that blank tone she’d adopted earlier, and I realised she was deliberately slipping back into vague answers again. We were drifting back into dangerous waters for her, and no matter how much she might like me or wanted to help, she wouldn’t risk the lives of her children and grandchildren just to give me a straight answer.

I sighed and hung my head, staring down at my hands again. I suddenly felt very, very tired.

“You can’t give me any more answers about this, can you? Not without breaking your oath?”

I knew the answer before I’d even opened my mouth. Galadriel’s ancient eyes fell, the sadness behind them deepening even if her expression didn’t change.

“No,” she confirmed, then paused, her gold eyebrows shifting into something that wasn’t quite a frown. “But perhaps I may steer you towards something else you seek.”
I eyed her curiously.

“And what is it that I seek?”

“Knowledge, but of another kind,” she answered, letting her hand slip from my back as she rose from the bench beside me.

I watched as she glided across the glade to the stone podium, retrieving the silver pitcher and moving over to a small fountain that I hadn’t noticed when I’d arrived. Patiently, she filled the jug to the brim, then carefully carried it back to the podium. Slowly, she tipped it, and a stream of diamond clear water poured from the pitcher and into the basin, the water turning a to a smooth silvery sheen as it hit the surface of the bowl. It was a peculiar sight; a perfectly simple action made unsettling by the significance it implied. The weirder part was that even though the bowl was only about the size of my two arms looped together, the water inside didn’t stop moving or shifting — even after Galadriel had finished pouring every last drop. When she was done, she turned back to me.

“Will you look into the mirror?” she asked simply.

I almost laughed. I remembered the mirror, and what it could show those who looked into it. Past events, present events, and things that could happen. It could show you what you wanted to see, or things that could leave a person scarred for the rest of their lives.

My answer came out a little squeaky, two parts painfully confused to one part excited.

“Was that a serious question?”

Galadriel gave me a blank stare, and I shook my head, folding my arms tightly over my chest again with the sudden feeling of cold pressing in around me. I was completely silent for a moment, barely breathing, staring at the ground in fragmented thought before I looked up again slowly.

“What will I see if I do look?” I asked softly.

“I cannot know,” she answered just as softly. “But whatever you see will change you.”

“So why are you even giving me the option to look?”

“Because it is our choices that are what shape our future, Élanor,” she explained in the patient tone of a parent explaining the concept of gravity to a toddler. She started to walk slowly around the small stone platform until she stood directly opposite me across it, still holding the empty pitcher. “If you choose to look, your future will be shaped by it, for better or worse, but that decision to shape your own path has always been, and will always be, yours. Not mine, nor anyone else’s.”

I chewed that over for a moment.

My automatic instinct was to refuse and demand some proper clarification. I’d come here for answers, not games, and so far I’d had got nothing for my trouble except the revelation that I was the one responsible for my current plight. Still, I forced myself to I think about it some more. Looking into the mirror could show me nearly anything, good or bad, beautiful or horrifying — I remembered that much from the stories — and whatever I saw in there, I trusted Galadriel entirely when she said it would change my future — that it would change me.

I half expected Tink to chip in with some wiseass comment about “taking the plunge,” but she remained utterly and completely silent. Somehow that creeped me out even more than the idea of what I might potentially see in the mirror.
Either way, and sensible or not; I’d got too few answers and more than enough puzzling riddles dropped on me for one day. If looking into the mirror would give me some kind of tangible answer, was I willing to risk letting that chance slip away?

No. I’d walked into this of my own choosing. I was in way too deep to chicken out now, even if I’d wanted to.

I rose onto my feet off the bench and moved tentatively over to where Galadriel still watched me, still as one of the garden statues, still holding the empty silver pitcher. I crossed over the grass and right up to the edge of the podium. I had to stand on one of the small edging steps to be able to see down into the basin. My reflection stared back at me — clear and crisp despite the shifting surface of the water.

I looked once more up at Galadriel, my expression questioning. Her blue eyes flicked down to the surface of the mirror, and she gave me the tiniest of nods.

When I looked down into the water again, my reflection was gone.

The surface had started to swirl and shift like the top of a lake in a storm, but not a drop spilled over the side. Colours began to appear like drops of ink falling into a whirlpool, mixing together until they began to form misty silhouettes and vague shapes. I leaned forward instinctively, being careful not to touch the surface of the water. Then suddenly, the water smoothed to a glassy surface, and the torrent of colours swirling beneath congealed into something I recognised.

I found myself looking down into a perfectly clear view of Lord Elrond’s study. He was sat at his desk, having just been interrupted from his writing by a talk, dark haired elf woman. It was easy to see they were speaking in quiet, but tense voices, despite the fact that I could hear no sound through the mirror. I didn’t immediately recognise the elf woman as Arwen until she glided around the desk to her father’s side, taking his hands. She looked exhausted, and worried, but determined. Elrond’s expression instantly changed from righteously displeased to saddened as she took his hands. Arwen said something to him in what I could tell by the look on his face only made him even more anguished, despite the fact it was obviously meant to comfort. She touched a hand to his face and smiled softly. I watched as my mentor pulled his daughter into a tight hug, his eyes heavy with bone-deep sorrow just as the surface of the mirror began to shift again, the vision vanishing.

The inky colours in the water swirled and rippled together again until finally they collected into a completely different scene. It wasn’t Rivendell anymore, but here in Lothlórien, and in present time too. I recognised the white tent shelters of the Fellowship’s forest floor camp, and the silver glow of the elf lamps hanging nearby. The four hobbits were settling down onto their respective sleeping mats for the night, smoking and talking. Sam said something to the group and gestured vaguely off in a direction I couldn’t see. Pippin and Frodo looked uncomfortable and turned away, but Merry answered promptly, with an irate look and a sharp point of his pipe towards the stairs; the one’s I’d retreated up when I’d left them earlier that day. I didn’t have time to wonder what they were all talking about that had gotten them so anxious when the mirror’s surface changed again.

This time it swirled and writhed like waves on a stormy sea before the surface settled again. It still showed Lothlórien, but a different area this time. Gimli sat alone in a part of the camp I didn’t recognise, perched on a tree root. He had that battered looking hip flask of his in one hand and a small pocket knife in the other. He was painstakingly and patiently carving a small, Dwarven rune into the dented metal on the side of the flask. The new marks were fresh and clean beside three much older looking ones that appeared to have been carved into it many years before. I couldn’t see the expression on his face, but something about the dwarf’s usually confident posture gave me the impression that he was weighed down by a heavy sadness, one he didn’t want anyone else to
The water rippled again, and this time I found myself looking at yet another part of the camp, somewhere far enough away that I couldn’t see the tents but still recognised the terrain. Boromir sat on a carved wooden bench by a stream, hunched over with his arms resting on his knees. He was speaking quietly to someone who stood nearby, and it was only as the vision cleared that I realised it was Aragorn. The two men seemed enthralled in a deep conversation about something that was making them both very somber. Boromir in particular had something of a growing weariness and grief in his eyes as he spoke. Aragorn said something quietly to him, taking a seat on the bench opposite. Boromir looked up at the ranger after a moment, and I saw a glimmer of hope kindle to life behind the sorrow. He smiled tiredly, and clapped a hand on Aragorn’s shoulder — the gesture holding more meaning than I was sure I understood. Then, once again, the vision disappeared into a torrent of swirling colours before collecting itself a fifth time.

Legolas’ form came into view this time. He was sitting high in one of the gold-leaved mallorn trees, reclined against the trunk with one leg dangling over the edge. He looked perfectly relaxed, as if he wasn’t seated hundreds of feet off the forest floor. He was still dressed in the loose fitting attire I’d seen him in earlier that day, and though he looked less sleep-deprived now, he still had a faintly troubled look in his eyes. He had an arm resting on his bent knee, and was holding something small up to the light to see clearly. I squinted and saw it was an acorn, a tiny one he must have picked up somewhere on the forest floor. A sound must have come from just below, because he suddenly looked down at one of the platforms just a few feet below. I followed his gaze to see Haldir and the unmistakable form of Merileth walking across one of the bridges side by side, and talking quietly. Both of them had the same awkwardly formal postures I’d seen when they’d first spoken by the Looking Pools. They also had identical expressions of masked fondness, making sideways looks at each other when the other wasn’t watching as they walked. Legolas’s face broke into a grin, and I realised after a second that I was grinning too. He turned away from the pair of them, and went back to curiously examining the little acorn still in his hand. The tiny amused smile didn’t leave his face even as the vision disappeared.

The water shimmered and swirled again one last time, its surface flattening into glass and the image beneath it focusing slowly until finally it was as clear as if I was looking through a window.

My breath left me, all of it in one go.

“That’s…” the words caught in my throat as I realised what I was seeing. “That’s me!”

I was looking down through the surface of the mirror at myself. My human self.

My eyes were closed, as if I was asleep. My ash brown hair was lank and thin, though it had been carefully brushed though. I was pale as milk, and I was a lot thinner than I could remember ever being. You could have sliced bread with my cheekbones.

God, was I dead?

No. My chest rose and fell in long, painfully slow breaths. As if I was barely breathing at all. The image fell back slightly away from my human reflection, and I could see I was lying in a bed. An Earth hospital bed. There was an IV in my left arm, and patches on my chest connected to a heart monitor. I couldn’t hear anything through the mirror, but I could see the blip of the line on the screen that tracked my heartbeat. It was steady, but faint. Barely there at all.

Then the vision in the mirror showed me something that all but cut my heart from my chest.

My mum. She was there, sitting by my bedside, one of my pale skinny hands clasped in hers, and
an open book in the other. She looked exhausted, dark circles under her green eyes, her normally neat clothes rumpled, and her hair mussed as if she’d been awake far too long. She was reading aloud from the book in her hand as she stroked a thumb over the back of my hand.

Something like a shard of ice twisted into my chest as I realised what she was reading to me.

_Peter Pan._

A sob crawled its way up my throat, and I had to cover my mouth to keep it down, forcing myself to keep my eyes open and keep looking. The vision cleared a little more and showed me the rest of the room. There were several bunches of flower sitting on a nightstand nearby, along with a stationary shop’s worth of cards. Above that, I saw a calendar hanging on the wall.

It was April 12th, but the year hadn’t changed.

I felt the blood rush from my head, and I was suddenly barely able to keep standing. Two months? But, I’d been here in Arda for over two years! How had it only been two months since I’d…

“W-what… what is going on?” I choked out.

Then suddenly the vision of my mum looked up as someone else came in. I saw Katie there, dressed in a creased old Star Wars t-shirt and jeans, her messy red hair tied up to hide the fact that it was a few days past needing a wash. She looked just as haggard and tired as my mother did, though she’d managed to force an optimistic little smile into place. She said something softly to mum, who answered with an exhausted response, hanging and shaking her head wearily. Katie came over and patted her gently on the shoulder, taking the book from her hand and pointing towards the door. Mum got to her feet and let my hand go reluctantly, allowing Katie take her place reading at my side while she clearly went to get some much needed sleep.

Something warm slid down my face and fell onto the surface of the mirror, the image of my distraught mother and best friend distorted momentarily by the ripples, but not vanishing. I stared down at it in confused, shocked silence. It wasn’t until I really heard the choking sound of my own voice that I realised I had failed to hold back the tears.

“What happened to me?” my breath came out in jagged little mini sobs, unable to make my lungs work. My chest hurt, the dull pain that had appeared there earlier spreading until it was almost unbearable. Without considering the action at all, I reached a hand down to the surface of the mirror, at the image of Katie sitting there at my side trying and failing to keep her smile.

“Do not touch the water, child!” Galadriel's warning came quiet but firm.

The warning came too late — my fingers had already brushed the surface.

The image beneath the water abruptly vanished in a spiral of dark colour, the silver of the mirror turning black as if ink had spread into it from my fingertips. The water went from lukewarm to icy in the space of a second, the surface hardening and cracking like the top of a frozen lake that couldn’t support its own weight. Then the mirror shattered, splintering into thousands of tiny pieces of black ice that flew outwards in every direction. I shrieked and fell backwards off the stone step and onto the grass, stunned.

I just lay there for a moment, sprawled on my back, my cheeks still wet and my head spinning. One of the piece of ice had caught me just under my left eye, and the shallow cut stung, but I barely noticed.

“I’m alive! I still alive!” I half babbled, half rasped. “On Earth! I’m in a coma, but I’m still alive!
How is that even possible?"

I pushed myself up to see Galadriel had calmly set the silver pitcher back beside the basin, not a
hair out of place as she walked around the podium towards me. She still had that calm expression
on her face, but something in her demeanour told me she was not pleased that I’d disobeyed her
instruction to keep my hands off the mirror.

“Of course you still live,” she answered my rambling shortly, with all the patience of a school
teacher speaking to a stubbornly trying student. “Your soul is what has shifted between places,
child. You are not dead, but without your mind and soul there to guide it, what did you expect your
human body to do but sleep?"

“I don’t know what I expected!” I snapped, irritated fury rearing its ugly head through my
confusion and the remains of my tears. “But it wasn’t this! None of this is making any kind of
sense!”

“Then perhaps it is time you considered what it is you do expect,” she replied with a cool but
unmistakably crisp tone, as if that boundless patience was slowly but surely wearing thin. “And
perhaps what you expect to happen in the course of your future here.”

My hysteria made an insane little giggling sound, and I decided that I really needed to stop
personifying my less helpful emotions.

I bonked her on the head again and forced myself to get a grip, to stop crying, stop gibbering, and
think. Nothing Galadriel had said to me so far had been insignificant. Every suggestion had been
nudging (and in some cases all but shoving) me towards questions and answers that were right
under my nose, if I were only to look. If she’d pointed out my expectations as something important
enough to merit consideration, then maybe I should.

I considered it. My expectations of what was going to happen came from my limited memories of
the books, but since Moria my recollection of the books had been growing more and more fuzzy
and vague — like a song that I hadn’t heard in so long, I could only recall the odd line. I could
blame some of that on human error. I’d loved the story of the Fellowship when I’d been a teenager,
but I hadn’t read it in years before I’d been dropped into Arda. Most of what I could remember
now was cobbled together through hazy memories of key moments, and talking with Bilbo about
his adventures. Still, that didn’t account for my forgetting the really major things. Parts of the story
that I knew I should have remembered at the time — like the Crebain, the Watcher in the Water,
and the Balrog in Khazad-dûm.

Was that what she’d been getting at? Well, there was only one way to find out…

“You know about the books, from my world right? The ones that tell the history of this world as
fiction? If you got a look at my human memories, you must know about that,” I asked, getting up
off the grass and swiping away the last of the tears from my face. Galadriel regarded me and
nodded once.

“Indeed.”

“Then why have I been forgetting such big parts of it?” I asked bluntly, no energy left to dance
around the question. “I can understand forgetting the parts that didn’t really mean much, but I
didn’t even realise what the Ring was until I almost picked it up.”

Galadriel paused for a moment before answering, considering her words with a curious, bird-like
tilt to her golden head.
“I do not have an objective answer. I can only share my own theory on the matter.”

I shrugged, throwing my hands out to the either side of me.

“It’s better than nothing, which is all I’ve got right now.”

Galadriel nodded curtly with a wry smile, a gesture of concession to my point.

“In my experience, time and events are not set in stone, Élanor. What might have once been deemed to occur can been influenced and changed by the smallest of things. A different word here, a different choice there, or by the mere presence of something,” she fixed me with by far the most unsettling stare I’d received in my life. “Or someone who was not originally intended to be there.”

Well, that would certainly explain why I was having a hard time remembering certain points of the story. When I looked back on them, a lot of things that had happened so far had changed very subtly from my memory of the books. Not dramatically, or even that noticeably — but just enough to slip past when I wasn’t paying close enough attention.

“So, you’re saying I’ve affected the course of this world’s future, just by existing in it? That’s why I’m having trouble remembering when things are going to happen?” I resisted the urge to raise a skeptically questioning eyebrow. Galadriel shook her head, her hair swaying like the branches of a weeping willow.

“Not in the way you imagine, child,” she clarified simply, her gaze drifting from to around the small garden we stood in. “Yes, the future of this ‘story,’ is uncertain and fluid now thanks to your presence in it, but from what I have learned of the future and its path through time, certain event are unavoidable. They sit as islands in a river that runs eternally downhill. You may change the path by which the river flows around them, cutting channels, put up barrier to change its direction. Yet, in the end, the path will always pass around them. You may prepare for them, anticipate their arrival, but they will come, whether you are ready or not.”

I swallowed.

“Things like the Ring being found you mean?” I asked in a small, weakened voice. “Like what happened to Gandalf?”

Galadriel didn’t answer, but she didn’t disagree either. She just gave me a sad, weirdly tired smile and placed a hand on my shoulder. She was so tall she hardly had to lift her arm much to reach it. I sighed heavily, knowing that I wasn’t going to be able to get a better explanation out of her. Still, bizarre as it was, I was grateful for the help she had offered. I tried to return her smile, but I think it came as more of a grimace.

I was almost out of energy and brain power, and all I wanted to do was sleep, but my curiosity is a strange, sleepless, masochistic creature, and it wouldn’t be silent. Not until I had the most serious of all by question answered, one way or another.

“One last question,” I said quietly.

Galadriel took her hand from my shoulder and smiled down at me.

“Of course.”

“Will I ever remember enough to get me home again?”

She pursed her lips in contemplation, and it was a strangely human expression to see on the face of
an elf queen.

“Perhaps,” she said gently after a moment, though this time I got the impression she was choosing her words carefully for my benefit, rather than to dance around the bindings of the vilissë véré. “With no small amount of luck, and if you choose to look for the answers in the right places.”

Vague and non-specific as the reply might have been, it somehow did more to quell my fears than if she had flat out told me everything would be alright. She thought there was a chance, a small chance. It might not be much, but at least I had a hope. Real, honest hope.

It had been a long time since I’d had any of that…

I nodded and looked down, the shadow of a determined smile making its way back onto my lips again.

“In return, may I now ask you one last question?” Galadriel said suddenly, catching me off guard. I looked up and hesitated for a moment, more curious than confused.

“Sure.”

“Beyond what you have asked me of, do you recall anything more? Of your life here before?” she asked, eyeing me with an interested twinkle in her gaze. I’d been expecting that question, though admittedly I had been expecting her to ask it much earlier.

“I remembered one thing. A name, well, two actually,” I said back, and a real smile crept onto my face as the memory of the smiling brother whom I couldn’t quite remember came back to me, warming me from the inside out. “Var.”

Galadriel’s face brightened.

“Ah, of course.”

“You knew him?” I asked.

“Not personally, but I knew of him,” she replied thoughtfully, eyeing me meaningfully, “And that he cared for you, his only sister, very dearly.”

I felt my smile brighten, then it turned a little sad as I reached for more memories of him where I knew there were none. I looked down again.

“Yeah, I remember that much at least.”

“And the other?”

My smile faded as the mental image of my brother did too, the recall of that one other name replacing it, repeated over and over again from where it had been written by my subconscious in the sand.

“Rávamë,” I answered softly, with a helpless little rise and fall of my shoulder. “But I have no idea who or what it means.”

Galadriel’s expression didn’t change as she looked down at me, but I could feel the stoney cautious creeping back into her gaze.

“That is the question.”
Yeah, that and about a dozen others that I still didn’t have answers to, but hell, it wasn’t like I had anything to loose by adding one more to the list.

“Can you tell me what it mean?”

“No.”

I sighed tiredly.

“Didn’t think so.”

Galadriel’s face broke into a wide, amused smile, but it was one that didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“It is a name long forgotten, and long unspoken but in old tales and myths,” she told me quietly, almost reverently, as if she was speaking of something that would be dangerous if overheard. “I may not provide you with that answer, child. Not without inviting ruin and strife upon myself and my descendants, but there is one among your company who may, if you choose to ask them.”

That piqued my interest greater than anything else she’d said up till now.

“Really? Who?” I paused, then added with a suspicious frown: “And… why wouldn’t I ask?”

Galadriel glanced over at the basin in which I’d seen myself reflected in my body back on Earth. A little pang of pain shot through my chest, but I ignored it.

“Some tales are best left forgotten,” she replied in a small voice, her face and eyes momentarily seeming much older than before. I gave her a puzzled look, but decided not to push the issue.

“More riddles,” I mumbled, more to myself than to her. I turned away and folded my arms across my chest as I swept my gaze from the mirror around the garden. It seemed colder in the glade than when I’d entered, and I felt a little shivery.

“It’s always better to know the truth,” I heard myself whisper, though I can’t remember giving my voice permission to speak my thoughts aloud. Galadriel’s voice met my ears in a sad little chuckle, and I turned to look up at her again. She was smiling sadly down at me again, though this time it wasn’t pitying.

It was almost proud.

“Not always.”

I thought about countering with something witty, but changed my mind. I was starting to feel the extent of my tiredness pressing down on me like someone had attached lead weights to my arms and legs. Galadriel, for her part, seemed to sense my weariness, because when she spoke again it was with a tone of finality.

“If you wish to pursue this, I would consider asking the one of your company who has had the chance to amass the greatest number of tales of old. He may have one that could assist you, if you ask the correct question.”

Yet another riddle. I was beginning to believe the Lady of Lothlórien thrived off them.

I already knew she wouldn’t give me a straight answer, so I didn’t bother to ask. I just nodded, noncommittal — stashing that information away to mull over later.

“Thank you,” I said quietly, suddenly exhausted. Galadriel acknowledged my thanks with a very
slight incline of her head.

“That is as much help as I may provide, though I know it is far from what you hoped for,” she said to me. “The choice to pursue your past remains yours, Élanor. I, nor any of my kin, would ever to presume to take that right from you.”

Then she surprised me one last time.

“But I will say this, child. You chose to forget your past for a reason when you came to me for help. You chose to leave that life behind for a reason. Remembering may grant you the answers you seek, but truth is a double edged sword. It cuts both ways, and can leave us vulnerable as well as enlightened,” she spoke almost silently. Her eyes met mine again, and instead of feeling like she was staring into my soul, I got the inescapable feeling that she was giving me a warning behind the words.

“Choose carefully.”

~ ♕ ~

I drifted back towards the handmaiden’s quarters later that morning in a zombie-like daze. Rúmil and Orophin were still there at the top of the stairs, the both of them standing watch with their bows at the ready. They looked like they’d barely moved a muscle since Haldir and I had seen them the night before.

Without thinking I slurred out a dazed: "Sorry about your boots," at Rúmil in Sindarin as I passed. He looked genuinely stunned that I’d said anything to him at all, like a puppy that had just encountered a noise it had never heard before. I didn’t wait around to see if he’d accepted my apology, but I could sense the two brothers exchanging puzzled looks as I stumbled away from them into the gardens. Whether through lack of sleep, or the boat load of information that had been dumped on me in the past few hours, I simply didn’t have enough brainpower left to think straight, let alone walk straight.

I’d gotten halfway across the grounds of that part of the forest before I realised I had absolutely no idea where I was going.

I stopped and peered around, turning in a wonky circle in the middle of a white stone courtyard I didn’t recognise. I’d just looked up to try and see if any of the platforms above looked familiar when something small, blond, and moving at the speed of a low powered Italian moped slammed into my side. I would have fallen straight onto my butt if there hadn’t been a tree in the way. I managed to catch myself on it before I could go tail-over-teakettle.

"I am sorry, my lady!" the miniature, blonde battering ram spluttered in fluent Sindarin before I could react.

I looked down to find the older of Merileth’s two younger brothers sprawled at my feet. He didn’t look much older than ten or eleven, despite the fact that I knew he was much older. He was dressed in a loose tunic, breeches, and soft leather boots, and he had somehow already managed to get mud on them all. He was looking up at me with an expression of childish panic, horrified that he had almost knocked me over, and was clearly expecting to get roasted for it.

I kicked my frazzled brain in the backside until it got its act together.
“It is alright, no harm done,” I replied with a casual shrug, stumbling slightly over my neglected Sindarin. I was honestly more relieved for the fact that he’d chosen to run into my uninjured side. I pulled him up and back onto his feet again, the top of his blond head coming to only just above my shoulder height. He squinted up at me a little and then his big, hazel eyes widened. He’d obviously picked up on my being more comfortable with the Common Tongue because he made the language switch so fast it took me a second to catch up.

“You are the elleth from the other night! The one the Marchwarden brought back from the patrol!” he exclaimed, half excited and half awed. I blinked.

Wow. I felt famous.

“I am. My name’s Eleanor,” I confirmed, feeling the first genuine smile I’d had all night and morning appear on my face. “And you must be Gweredir.”

The young elf boy looked abruptly surprised, curious suspicion creasing the space between his eyebrows.

“You know me?”

“I met your sister yesterday,” I explained, then leaned down and added with a conspiratorial whisper, “She helped me chisel the dried mud out of my hair.”

That made him giggle-snort in a most un-elf like fashion, which set me off giggling, too. He looked embarrassed by his break in character and tried to straighten himself up to his full height. It might have worked, if the top of his curly blond head had made it past my shoulders.

I tried not to smile too hard. Even among the elves, children were still children — still determined to prove they were more grown up than they really were.

Heh, like I could talk.

“May I escort you back to your companions, my lady?” he asked formally, the picture of a perfect, miniature gentleman. My smile widened and I dipped my head in a grateful nod.

“Thank you,” I said, then pointed in the direction I’d been walking before he crashed into me. “But I was actually looking for the handmaiden’s quarters and got a bit lost. Do you think you could show me there, first?”

He beamed up at me, immediately took my hand and started pulling me excitedly off across the grounds.

“Of course! This way!”

~ ♕ ~

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
* “vilissë vérë” = spirit promise (Quenya — literal translation)

A/N: Urgh, complicated story is so, so damn complicated. I think I made my Beta
reader’s head implode with this chapter (sorry Kitzie.) XD Having said that, this one was a breeze to get through compared to the last one! Weird since it’s probably one of the most complex ones I’ve done to date. Lots of info, reveals, answers, hints, and clues to there get through!

More to come (obviously) but I hope in the mean time, the few things that have been revealed so far are enough to keep you going. At least until the inevitable big reveals start to drop! All things in good time, I promise!

Next chapter will be up in the next few days! See you then! :)

~Rella
Gweredir did as he promised and lead me to the handmaidens' quarters, eventually.

We got a little sidetracked by him insisting on showing me all his favourite hang-outs along the way, as well as all the best spots to hide from his tutors. We were even more delayed when we finally did reach the handmaidens' quarters only to find Merileth was busy elsewhere. Instead, her youngest brother Colion was there, waiting dutifully to give me the message from his big sister.

I'd all but been a captive of the two boys after that. Only three hours later did I manage to tear myself away from the adorable clutches of Merileth's siblings, but not before I'd been "forced" into several different games with them. I-spy, tag, hide and seek, even a tree-climbing race; when I finally insisted that I needed to head back, Colion had made me promise that I'd be back tomorrow to play with them again.

"All the other maids are so serious, or too busy to play, but you're fun. You laugh and smile a lot, like Merileth when she's not busy working," he stated in the matter of fact way only kids could pull off. "Promise you'll be back?"

I promised.

I mean, come on. Who could have said no to that?

Plus, I'd really needed something to cheer me up after the night I'd had, and those two kids had pulled it off better than anything I could have asked for.

It was just past midday by the time I finally started heading back, and the sunlight filtering through the golden leaves of the mallorn trees bathed the forest in warm, honey coloured light. Gweredir had given me directions back to the Fellowship's camp from the handmaidens' quarters, though this time it was through the maze of bridges and walkways up in the trees. He'd assured me it was much faster, but I would have taken the route for the view all on its own.

I smiled and hummed quietly under my breath as I picked my way across one of the bridges and along a walkway, the loose braid I'd let Colion pull my hair into swinging against my back. Now that I'd had a chance to properly calm down, get my hysteria under control, and actually think about what had happened with a clear head, I was starting to feel a bit better about it.

Well, better in the sense that I could consider my options clearly now. Hanging out with Colion and Gweredir hadn't only done wonders for my mood, it had given me much needed time to consider everything that I'd learned during my meeting with Lady Galadriel. In between climbing trees and
chasing the two kids around the gardens, I'd also been thinking hard over everything Aragorn had said, especially the bomb he'd dropped on the others about my memory loss.

Most importantly of all, I'd made my decision on how I was going to respond to Aragorn's "polite suggestion" at remaining in Lothlórien. Which was why I was currently forcing myself to walk back towards the Fellowship's camp, when really all I wanted to do was turn tail and run. Oh, I was feeling much better than before, and a lot calmer now that I had at least a vague idea of what I wanted to do next. Still, that didn't change the fact that the last time I'd seen any of the Fellowship, they'd all been about thirty seconds into the aftershock of realising that their resident elvish healer was only a two-year trained amnesiac.

'Just keep smiling, Eleanor. Keep humming, and smiling, and walking with a spring in your step, and maybe one day you'll actually convince someone you're not petrified of seeing the looks on their faces again…'

Urgh, who was I kidding? I slowed to a stop on a low hanging bridge, letting the forced smile slide from my face.

I didn't want to admit it, but happy as I'd been minutes ago with the kids, I was really scared of going back now. I'd been gone half of yesterday, all night, and most of the current day. As far as the rest of the Fellowship were concerned, I was likely still hanging out with the other handmaidens, and they were probably expecting me to just stay there. After the way I'd left them after Aragorn's speech, I doubted they were looking to see me back all that quickly.

Yet, if I was going to make my decision known, I was going to have to tell them sooner rather than later. Might as well face the music now while I was feeling brave.

I steeled myself, my fists clenching slightly at my side, and let the forced facade of cheer vanish entirely as I kept walking, my stance turning from chipper to determined. The forest floor below was starting to look familiar, and I could smell the scent of food cooking. Fried, debatably unhealthy food — a good indicator that I was almost there.

I'd just stepped off another bridge onto a low level flet when I heard something that made me stop in my tracks. Two familiar voices, talking quietly from just below the platform I stood on.

Curiously, I moved as silently as I could to peer over the edge, and froze instantly.

Aragorn and Gimli stood not ten feet below. Gimli had divested himself of his battle-axe and helm, and had settled himself onto a moss covered tree root. Aragorn leaned back against the tree beside him, and for once, neither of them were smoking.

Of all the people, it had to be the top two of the entire Fellowship I wanted to face least of all right now. I scrambled away from the edge and pressed my back flat against the tree the flet was built around, so that I was as far back from the edge of the platform at possible. It wasn't a good hiding spot by any stretch of the imagination. If either Aragorn or Gimli so much as glanced upward they'd see me immediately, but I couldn't move now. Not without them hearing my steps on the wooden bridges linking the platforms.

So I stayed there, standing as still as possible with my back against the tree, my fingers crossed, and praying they didn't decide to spontaneously look up to admire the golden treetops.

'Argh, how do I keep getting myself into these situations?'

'If only I knew the answer to that, boss,' Tink answered quietly, whispering even though she knew
"... she really has no memory before two years past?" Gimli was asking, and I could hear him surprisingly clearly despite the awkwardness of my eavesdropping position.

"It is why Lord Elrond took her in," Aragorn replied, and I couldn't help but listen closely, especially at the realisation they were talking about me and my 'situation.' "Or at least that is what I am led to believe."

Gimli gave a low, gravelly grunt of acceptance that at the same time held a note of arrogant dismissal — it was a sound that I'd learned that only he could pull off. Must be a dwarf thing.

"Well, that explains a lot of her strange behaviour, I suppose," Gimli responded gruffly, with a musing note to his rough voice. A silence stretched between the man and dwarf for a moment before Gimli broke it with something I wasn't expecting him to say. "You didn't have to be so hard on the her before, Aragorn."

Clearly Aragorn was equally as shocked by Gimli's words as I was, because it took him a minute to respond in his usual unaffectedly calm, matter-of-fact voice.

"It would be safer if she stayed, she needed to see that. She won't survive long out there if she keeps tripping up like this," he said back tonelessly. "You think she'll live long enough to see Mordor by being coddled for making such dangerous mistakes?"

"No, but mistake though she may have made, she survived it. And what more, she learned from it. No permanent harm done. Except perhaps my ears, the lass can really scream," Gimli replied, unaffected by Aragorn's noticeably defensive tone. I imagined the dwarf giving him a pointed look past his beard and thick eyebrows, and Aragorn staring down at him with those storm-cloud-grey eyes narrowed in warning.

"You fight as family do," he said simply. Aragorn's response came instantly and sharply.

"We're not."

Gimli chuckled lightly, though the sound didn't hold much amusement.

"You sure about that, laddie?" he asked pointedly. I could all but see the hard look on Aragorn's face, and hear Gimli's dismissive shrug. "Could have fooled me, the way you treat her."

"Treat her?"

"Like she's made of glass. Like she'll go to pieces out there without you there to shield her," he clarified in a gruff and faintly impatient voice. "I'm no expert, but for just two years training she seems to be a pretty decent healer. No amount of balms or pain relief salves are going to replace that, especially if one of us gets stuck with an arrow or breaks a bone."

"And what if she's the one who gets hit with the arrow, or the blade, or any weapon? What then?"

"Then she will have already made the decision to risk that for herself. You made damned sure she knows that," there was a pause as Gimli took a sigh, as if longing to take a drag from his pipe. The silence that hung in the air was so thick I was sure if I reached out a hand I'd be able to physically feel it. Then finally, Gimli broke it one last time.

"She's a good lass, Aragorn. Smarter and tougher than you give her credit for, and she's learning fast that the world outside Imladris is an unforgiving place to live in. Don't let her start hating you
for that."

~ ♛ ~

I felt strangely numb by the time I finally reached the edge of the Fellowship's camp, and it was a stark contrast to how I'd felt entering it the previous day.

For ages I'd just sat there on the flet where I'd slid down the tree, half shocked and half baffled until Gimli and Aragorn had walked away. I hadn't expected to feel what I did when Gimil, of all people, had come to my defence. Out of all of them, I'd been expecting him to care the least about my choices — and yet, he had. It made a strange, squirming feeling of warmth appear in my gut, accompanied by the sharp twinge of guilt at having not come clean with them all sooner.

The entire glade was near empty when I came down the stairs and rounded the corner. I wasn't expecting the entire company to be there or anything, but I'd certainly expected to find more than just the four hobbits. They were reclined on the cushions that had been circled around the fire the other night, now set up under one of the white, silk awnings, and seemed to be enraptured in a deep conversation in hushed but relaxed tones. That all combined with the steady streams of smoke rising from their pipes made the whole scene look like an Arabian shisha den.

They'd also just finished eating a round of what smelled unmistakably like pancakes.

Pancakes, at lunchtime.

I suddenly had the oddest feeling of nostalgia for being student again, back when I'd been in the halls of residence during my first year. Sam must have decided they were all in need of a late lunch — probably the second one of the day.

Merry was the first one to notice me this time, his face falling into wary surprise as he looked up to see me wandering towards them. The others looked around too. I tried to smile, but it felt a little wooden and tired on my face.

"Mind if I join you?" I asked softly. None of them protested, and Frodo pulled a cushion over for me to perch on. Sam and Pippin gave me equally uncomfortable smiles as I'd given them, but I noted that Merry hadn't lost the slight frown he'd had when he'd first seen me. I sat down beside Frodo, tucking my legs under me, and tried to ignore the awkward silence crushing us all.

"Where are the others?" I asked when no one else said anything. Sam cleared his throat, little puffs of pipe smoke coming out of his nose, and I saw him give Pippin a surreptitious nudge with his foot. Pippin fumbled with his own pipe, coughing awkwardly too.

"They were around a few minutes ago but..." he began to answer slowly with a strange, puppy-like look at me, but it clearly wasn't the response Sam had wanted because he interrupted brusquely.

"Boromir left to find the training grounds. Aragorn and Gimli went to wander around the gardens just a few minutes ago, and Legolas..." Sam trailed off, suddenly squinting at me in puzzlement before asking, "Are those flowers in your hair?"

I blinked and looked down to see the flimsy braid Colion had put my hair into had swung into view over my shoulder. It wasn't anywhere near as intricate as the one his sister had given me the previous day, but he'd made up for it by working dozens of the pretty, yellow, star-like flowers into the plait.

"Oh, yeah," I answered with a fond little smile, twirling the end of the braid around my finger. "One of the elf children heard my name was Eleanor and wouldn't take no for an answer. Next
thing I know, I'm rocking a flower-power braid."

"That makes sense," Frodo chipped in conversationally, his interested tone making me feel a little less awkward.

"Oh?"

"Élanor'. You share the same name as that flower," he clarified, gesturing with his pipe to my hair. "Legolas was telling us their names earlier."

I raised an eyebrow and looked down at the end of my flower adorned plait, thumbing it absently and mildly surprised that I hadn't realised that sooner. Herbs and plants had kind of been my specialty as Lord Elrond's apprentice; it was partly why I'd done so much work for the house apothecary. Though when I thought about it, all the flowers and herbs I'd studied during my apprenticeship had been exclusively for medicinal purposes, and I'd never seen these ones growing in Rivendell.

"Huh, I guess I know why the elves have such a funny way of pronouncing my name now," I said lightly, feigning casualness I didn't feel. I couldn't tell if Sam, Frodo or Pippin were fooled, but Merry sure as hell wasn't. He'd sat up, fixed me with a hard stare and cut straight through the lingering tension like knife through half-melted butter.

"Why didn't you say anything?"

We all stared at him, even Pippin. Then, all four hobbits turned to stare at me. I swallowed nervously, somehow feeling more off balance now than when I'd had my tiff with Aragorn the previous day.

"I… I just…" I trailed off, feeling the pressure of all of their gazes on me.

"You didn't trust us," Merry stated calmly, calmer than I'd ever heard him before. It was an eerie sound to hear coming from him, someone I would probably be laughing and joking with under normal circumstances.

"No, it wasn't that. It just…" I stopped and considered it for a moment, a brief flashback to what Haldir had said to me earlier about trust. I closed my mouth, took a breath to settle my nerves, and started again. "It didn't seem relevant at the time, when I joined the Fellowship I mean. Everyone at the council meeting already thought I was incompetent and shouldn't be allowed to come. Adding that information to the mix would have just added fuel to the fire, made things worse."

None of them moved or spoke for a moment. They just looked at me with vaguely befuddled expressions, like I'd just said the whole thing backwards.

"You were truly that determined to come?"

I nodded without hesitation. "Yeah, I did."

"Why?"

And there it was, the question I'd been dreading most of all. The question that, even though I'd been asking myself it over and over again since we'd first left Rivendell, I still didn't have a sane-sounding answer to — let alone one sensible enough to present as a reason to anyone in the Fellowship.

Yet, for them, I'd give it a try.
"You know how Aragorn said I couldn't remember any of my life from before about two years ago?"

They all nodded.

"Well, the only time in those two years I remembered anything from my past was in the Council meeting, when Gandalf used the Black Speech," I explained tentatively, unsure of how to deal with how they were all looking at me now, curiosity mixed with confusion.

"I remember that," Merry said, still not losing his frown but sounding a little more amiable. "You and the other elves looked like you were going to be sick."

I nodded, my fingers wringing together anxiously.

"It was the first time it had ever happened. It was only for a few seconds, and it didn't really make sense. I guess at the time, I thought that if I could just get out of Rivendell and come with you all, help somehow, I might be able to make it happen again. Get something else to happen to get more of my memories back, so I could…"

The looks of surprise that appeared on all four of their faces almost made me cringe — their eyebrows all but vanishing up into their curly hair.

Ugh, this had all sounded so much better in my head. I had honestly tried my best to rehearse my explanation; why I'd kept all this from them, that I hadn't meant to hurt or betray any of them, and that I was sorry for not trusting them. Now, however, all I was doing was mangling it to pieces. I wanted so badly to just sink into the earth and maybe stay down there for a few hundred years.

"So everything Aragorn said before that, about your two years training, living in Rivendell, and not remembering anything at all before then, that was all true?" Frodo asked in a voice that suggested genuine interest, rather than accusation. I looked at him and couldn't keep the relieved sigh out of my reply.

"Pretty much," I said with a little shrug, then hesitated and asked curiously, "How much did Aragorn tell you all after I left?"

"Only a bit," Pippin spoke up for the first time, his uncertainty vanishing. "He told us about how he found you two years ago, said you'd woken in a cave somewhere in a forest not far from the valley."

I nodded with a cautious little smile at the memory.

"That's right."

"He also told us all how you were brought to Lord Elrond, made his ward, then eventually asked to be his apprentice, and got accepted."

"That too," I said again with another tense little shrug. "I suppose he did tell you pretty much everything after all."

Another heavy silence fell over us all, and I glanced around at them quizzically. All four of them had gone unnervingly silent, the expressions on each of their faces unsettlingly tense, and all of them aimed at me. I shivered.

"What is it?"
There was a short pause before Merry took the lead for all of them.

"There's more to it than just that, isn't there?" he spoke carefully after a few seconds of thought. I eyed him questioningly.

"How do you figure?"

"Whenever any one of us asked you about your or your life, you'd try and avoid the question. I understand that now, I suppose. You don't have much you can remember," he explained, looking to the others for confirmation. They all made their agreement obvious even if they didn't voice it as Merry continued, far more carefully and gently than I was used to hearing from him. He was looking at me in the way one might at a frightened, stray dog. "But when any of us ever asked you about family, or friends, or anyone really, you always looked sad and quickly changed the subject. It's like you were remembering something, something that made you really unhappy, not just sad over lost memories."

My stomach writhed at those words. A small chip of ice in my chest grew as the thoughts I'd been suppressing for so long came rising to the surface. I tried to hide it, not wanting them to see how close to home Merry's words had hit, but I couldn't quite do it. I just didn't have the will left to keep pushing it back down. I saw the expression on his face change as he looked at me, his voice faltering a bit in uncertainty.

Pippin suddenly edged over and placed a hand on his friend's shoulder, giving it a reassuring squeeze and picked up where he'd trailed off.

"Aragorn said he shouldn't have said anything to us, that it wasn't his place to tell any of us your secrets. However, he also said that, if we really wished to know more about you, we should ask you ourselves," he explained tentatively.

"We know you lost your memories and all that, but..." Merry found his voice again, and though he seemed to have found the words he'd been searching for, they sounded hesitant and jumpy coming from him. "Well, sometimes you talk as if you come from another place entirely. Other than Rivendell, I mean. Somewhere you still remember, and you don't want to forget, but don't want anyone else to know about, either."

Say what you like about hobbits, but never ever say they aren't wiser and more perceptive than they get credit for.

Not that this did anything to quell the sudden torrent of icy panic swimming through my guts. If I hadn't wanted to get up, run and hide before, now I certainly did. I'd been prepared for questions and comments about my lost memories and what I could and couldn't remember, but I'd not even considered that anyone would pick up that there was more to my story than just amnesia and two years in Rivendell. I'd decided long before that one way or another I'd eventually have to tell the Fellowship about my lost memories of my life in Arda.

The one thing I hadn't given any thought to was coming clean about everything about my situation. Namely, my life before my human body had fallen into a coma and my mind been sent to Middle Earth. Another pang went through my chest at the mere thought of my home, of the memory of the last time I'd spoken to my mother, seen my father, called my brother, or just walked down the streets of my city.

My eyes stung a bit and I blinked furiously.

I'd wanted so many times to talk to someone, anyone about the home I missed so much, but I'd
always told myself I couldn't. Even the benevolent and trusting Lord Elrond's reaction to the truth had been to declare me either a liar, a mad woman, or part of one the strangest paradoxical situations he'd ever come across in his life. The idea of willingly telling anyone besides my mentor about my life as a human, my family, my home, and my desperation to find a way to return frightened me to my core.

Then again, that was what trust was about, right?

Out of the entire Fellowship, the four hobbits had always been unquestioningly kind and respectful to me, even when I hadn't always deserved it. If I couldn't bring myself to start trusting them now — really trusting them — when was I going to?

My heart was suddenly pounding like a kettle-drum in my ear, and I hadn't even realised how scared I was of what I'd decided I was about to say until I opened my mouth to do it.

"That's because, I…" I fumbled my words, shoving back the tiny part of my brain that had started screaming "no!" as I did. "I kind of… did come from another place before Rivendell."

Silence dropped on the five of us like a stone through water. Ok, maybe that had been a tad melodramatic, but hell, there wasn't much about my situation that didn't sound ridiculously insane anyway — nd if I went through with this, it was about to get a whole lot worse. I just let it sink in for a moment, resisting the urge to nervously start picking at the skirt of my dress.

"How do you mean?" Frodo put forward finally, confused and not bothering to hide it.

I took a breath to steady myself, looking around at the four hobbit, moving from face to face, each of their gazes fixed on me. I hated the fact that I felt so scared again. So many doubts were whispering through me in that moment.

Was this a stupid idea? How would they react? Would they think I was insane? Would they even agree to listen once I started? Would they even believe me if I did? And if they didn't, would they call me a fraud? A liar?

'Only one way to find out, boss.'

I looked away from the four of their expectant faces, and down at my hands. They were shaking slightly, and I clenched them hard to stop the tremors.

"Before I woke here in Arda, in that cave Aragorn told you about, before any of that I… I had another life, somewhere else," I spoke very slowly, treading as carefully over my words as I knew how. "You where right, Merry. There's one more part to this 'story' of mine I haven't told you yet. Not anyone, except Lord Elrond and Gandalf, but I don't know..." I tired to clear the nervous lump in my throat. "I have no idea how to tell it, not without sounding completely mad."

This time, Sam — honest and wonderfully straight forward Sam — broke the silence with possibly the best reassurance I could have ever hoped for.

"That's easy, Ms. Eleanor," he replied to me gently in that kindly accent that reminded me of home. "Just talk, and we'll listen."

"We all will," Pippin added softly, a tiny smile appearing in his voice.

So I did.

I swallowed my fear, my doubt, and my hesitation, and I told them. I told them every single thing in
that crazed, messed up tale of mine, right from start to the finish.

After all, if there was anything I'd always been good at, it was telling stories.

~ ♛ ~

I don't know how much time went by as I talked, but once I'd started I could no longer stop.

I'd already done all this once before — trying to explain my home world of Earth to someone who'd only ever been exposed to the medieval world of Arda. You'd think that it would have been easier to explain second time around. Practice makes perfect and all that.

It wasn't.

Trying to explain the idea of towering cities of steel and glass and electricity to an elf lord was one thing. Trying to explain it to four hobbits who's idea of a city was anything one house bigger than Bree; now that was a completely different ball game. I did my best, though, starting with simply describing my family home in the English countryside (likening it to the Shire), how my family did a lot of travelling because of my dad's job in the army, and my time living away from home at university.

There were many questions, and a lot of deviations as I tried my best to give them the clearest image of what my home world was really like. It was only when they started asking about my life there, my parents, my brother, my friends that things got really difficult. I even told them a little bit about Mark, though I left out the part where he and his new girlfriend had accidentally butt-dialed me on my last night — that was just a subject with way too many pitfalls in it. I tried to keep a brave face as I told them about my family, biting down hard on my lower lip every time I felt my throat clench, but I couldn't keep it all in. I guess after almost three years of holding everything bottled up inside, not being able to really talk about it to anyone, I just couldn't hold back the river anymore.

Even so, I refused to let myself cry, but it was a near thing. Sam offered me one of his spare handkerchiefs just in case, and I took it without question.

There was only two things I deliberately left out of my explanation — Tolkien's books, and Tink.

It was only a theory, but the reaction I'd got from Tink at almost given away the Watcher in the Water had left me thinking that keeping the 'original' plot of the Lord of the Rings story was probably a sensible idea after all. Telling the others the things I could still remember from the story would affect their decisions, and would only help to speed up the rate at which the 'plot' of this timeline was changing. At least if I just let things play out as they should for now, it would be easier for me to remember what was going to happen next — in theory anyway.

Plus I had the sneaking suspicion if I did try and give the game away again, Tink would be flexing her incorporeal fingers to try and cut off my airway again, just like she'd done outside Moria.

It got easier once I got past the part about Earth and my family, instead getting into talking about my experience of waking up in Arda for the first time. I knew Aragorn had already filled them in, but they prompted me on and listened, enraptured as I told them everything from meeting Aragorn, Elrond, Arwen, and Bilbo, and everything in between, right up to the day I was called in to help heal Frodo's morgul stab wound.

By the time I finally finished talking, Merry and Sam's eyes were as round as dinner plates, and Frodo and Pippin were doing some masterful impressions of a pair of baffled goldfish.
"That's…" Sam began in a croaky voice.

"Wow," Pippin finished in a breathy rush. I shifted uncomfortably on my cushion, fiddling with the small white handkerchief Sam had given me earlier, when I'd been talking about my parents. It was still dry, but it had been creased and twisted from where I'd been using it to keep my nervous hands busy.

"I did warn you it would sound insane."

"I don't…" Frodo started, but stopped to reconsider his words, still staring at me with mixed shock and awe. "You said Gandalf knew about this? All this?"

I nodded slowly.

"That's at least what I thought. He made out like he knew it all. My human name, where I really came from, everything. Aside from Lord Elrond, I think he was the only one who knew everything, but now…" I let the sentence trail off as I saw all of their expressions sink a little at the mention of the wizard's fall. I wrung the handkerchief awkwardly between my fingers again, unsure of what else was left to say. "I didn't intend to keep it a secret from you all, not forever. I just… didn't know how to say any of this without sounding utterly crazy. I'm sorry."

Silence stretched on as Frodo, Sam, Merry and Pippin all just continued to stare at me with too many different expressions on each of their faces to read. I sighed heavily, abruptly too tired to feel anything other than resigned to whatever would come next — be it anger, outrage, or just more silence.

"I don't expect you all to believe me. Honestly I wouldn't blame you if you think I'm a liar now, but you asked for the truth, so…"

That got the first recognisable reaction out of them. All of them looked even more surprised than they had before — where that even possible.

"Why would we think you're a liar?" Pippin asked innocently, genuinely confused. I stared at him, then at each one of them in turn. None of them had the looks of accusation or scepticism that I'd been expecting, not a single one of them.

"You mean, you believe me?" I floundered, staring aghast at the four of them. "You don't think I'm making it up? Or I'm completely off my rocker?"

The hobbits looked at each other, as if silently asking each other the same question. The serious look had melted from Merry's face and he gave an off-handed little shrug and a tiny smile at Frodo and Pippin. In the end, it was Sam who decided to answer me.

"I'm no expert on tall tales, or knowing what's true or not, Ms. Eleanor," he told me quietly, glancing at the others as he did, "But I do know what homesickness feels like, and that you can't fake feelings like that."

Frodo nodded and added: "That's why you never wanted to talk about any of this before, right? You missed it."

I let my gaze fall to my hands for a moment, still clutching Sam's handkerchief, and nodded at them with a sad little smile.

"I still do."
Frodo smiled back at me, the edges of it tinged with the same sadness I recognised in my own expression. He looked around at the others, and I suddenly got the impression that all four of them were thinking back to the Shire. Imagining just for a moment what it would be like if they were back there again, safe and sound at home — just like I'd done so many times before now.

Surprisingly Pippin was the first to shake himself out of the reverie, turning back to me with an inquiring look.

"So, before you lived in this world where you're human, you had a life here, in Middle Earth?"

I nodded at him.

"Apparently."

"But you've been able to remember only bits and pieces of it since the Council meeting?"

"Yep."

"And you think that figuring out your past here in Middle Earth will help somehow?"

Relieved as I was for the relatively positive reactions, I was starting to feel like I was being interrogated in a really bizarre police investigation. I shrugged and nodded again a bit sheepishly.

"Pretty much. Lord Elrond and Lady Galadriel both seem to think finding out who I was here in Arda is pretty much the only chance I've got of finding out how I got here in the first place, and finding a way to get back home again."

"That's why you were so insistent on coming with us?" Merry asked abruptly, and for a moment I felt a bit off balance, realising what my explanation for helping them must sound like to them. That I only wanted to come along to fulfil my own goals, rather than help them with theirs. Selfish reasons, I realised, with a little stab of guilt.

It might have been true once upon a time, but now?

"Well, yes..." I answered him timidly, thinking about it hard as I tried to figure out what I wanted to say. "But I also don't really like the idea of this world being swallowed by darkness any more than you do. Arda might not be my home, not really, but there are people here I care about now. I don't want to see that happen to anyone's home, least of all yours."

And I realised as I was saying the words aloud, that I meant them. Really meant them.

Oh, I hadn't been trying to come up with some self righteous explanation for my strange decisions, but I hadn't realised how much my own motives for coming had changed over the past month until I'd spoken them aloud. I only noticed the reaction my word had had on the others when I pulled myself out of my mental tangent.

They were smiling at me. Honestly smiling.

"For what it's worth Ms. Eleanor," Frodo said simply, "I think what you did was very brave."

I gave him an utterly baffled look, my composure falling completely off balance by what he'd just said.

"Getting myself into an all male party to a mountain of doom, trapped under in a orc infested cave, KO-ed by a troll, and then shot with a poisoned goblin arrow — that was brave?"
His face hell and he frowned a bit, shaking his head.

"No..." he thought for a moment, then said in a matter-of-fact way, "I meant what you did at the council, and with Aragorn yesterday, what you did just now, telling us this."

Well, that had to be just about the last thing I'd been expecting to hear. I'd thought of myself as many things up until now, and been called many things too — most common among them being 'baffling' or 'touched in the head' — but not once had I ever felt or thought of myself as brave.

I almost laughed, and the feeling was a welcome surprise.

"I think most would have called it stupid," I chuckled breathlessly, and Frodo beamed at me.

"Well, perhaps," he replied, his own voice light with repressed laughter too. "But I also know it must have been hard for you to decide to come with us. It must be still hard for you. Either way, I'm glad you did decide to come. I'm glad you're here now."

The clenching feeling that had appeared in my throat and chest earlier intensified, relief and an unexpected burst of happiness bringing down the last of my restraint. I knew I'd promised myself I wouldn't cry anymore, but hell, some rules are made to be broken.

"Dammit guys," I laughed thickly, hiccuping slightly, and catching the tears with Sam's handkerchief before they could fall down my face. "You've been secretly conspiring to make me cry all this time, haven't you?"

Pippin and Merry grinned widely at me while Sam and Frodo just smiled fondly. I tried to apologise to Sam for the state I'd left his handkerchief in once I'd stopped, but he shook his head and insisted that was what it was for. He also insisted that I hang onto it, just in case I needed it again some time.

"What about the others? Aragorn, Bormir, Gimli, and Legolas? Are you going to tell them, too?" he asked seriously when I'd finally pulled my composure completely back together again. Frodo and Merry gave me curious looks too, though Pippin looked a bit worried at the idea. I chewed my bottom lip in thought.

"I want to, really," I told them honestly, the memory of Aragorn's cold tone and his temper snapping still fresh in my mind. "But I'm not sure now is a good time. Not after what happened yesterday."

The hobbits seemed to be thinking along the same lines, because they exchanged worried looks with each other, all but wincing at the idea.

"That's true," Sam said.

"Though when will be a good time, I wonder?" Merry added, and I gave him a sheepish nod of acknowledgment.

"Fair point, but this isn't really the kind of thing I can just casually drop in conversation."

'Oh, sure it is,' Tink's sardonic voice echoed suddenly inside my head. That would go down a treat. "By the way, lads, I'm not only suffering from memory loss and extremely limited medical training, I'm also from an entirely different universe, one where I'm human. Also, my human body is currently in a near-death like coma, and only regaining the memories of my past life here will allow me to figure out how the hell this all happened and allow me to find a way to wake up." Pure genius.'
I kept my face straight, but gave a mental snort of reply.

'Yeah, and maybe Smaug will invite us round to the Abyss for tea and fairy-cakes,' I replied silently. She snickered, and I could feel the tension ease out of her tone as she did. I knew she'd been worried I was going to tell them about the books, or possibly about her — I'd felt her anxiety when I'd been talking. I did also notice, however, that she hadn't done anything to forcefully try and stop me this time. Whether that was though courtesy, or for some other reason, I didn't know.

'You asked me not to, boss,' she explained quietly, sensing my train of thought. 'I won't apologise for doing it back then, but I won't do it again, unless you let me.'

Glad as I was to have Tink back to her usual wittily sarcastic self, I couldn't help but wonder what she meant by "let her." I decided that for now it didn't matter. I felt miles better that I had at the start of the day when all this started, but my head was throbbing and I felt suddenly very tired. It could wait.

"Regardless," Sam was saying when I came back to reality, "I believe you should tell them at some point soon. Once you're ready, of course."

"Until that time, we shall keep quite about it," Frodo promised in a serious but warm voice directed at me.

"Well, we three will," Merry said jovially, the accusing seriousness he'd had earlier completely vanishing. "We might have to gag Pip. He couldn't keep a secret on a deserted island."

"Oi!"

I laughed, really laughed, which only set them to laughing too, and it was the best I'd felt all day.

"Thanks guys, really," I said softly when we'd finally managed to stop. "And I will tell them soon, I promise."

"So, I guess the only question left now is; what about Aragorn?" Merry put forward, his tone reluctant. I furrowed my eyebrow.

"What about him?"

"He still thinks you staying here would be best," Frodo explained, his expression falling slightly. Sam nodded, also wearing a look of mild worry.

"He'd probably just feel even more validated in his opinion if you told him all this now."

I sighed heavily, deflating a tiny bit at the thought.

"You're probably right," I agreed, thinking back to what he'd said to me yesterday about not having enough experience. Now that I'd come clean with the hobbits, I wanted to do the same with the others, but I also knew that if Aragorn was still of the same mind he'd been yesterday, there was no way having my human life spontaneously revealed would end well.

'It's your choice, boss,' Tink spoke up suddenly at the back of my thoughts. 'He can disprove of it all he wants, but when it comes down to it, he can't make you do something you don't want to any more than I can.'

I didn't respond for a long moment, not to Tink or the hobbits. I just sat there chewing over the predicament before me. Suddenly, a thought occurred to me, and I turned to look at Frodo, though I
addressed them, all when I asked: "What do you think? With everything you know about me now, do you think I should stay here when you all go?"

Merry and Pippin looked at me, then at each other, then at Frodo. Sam did the same, and it was obvious that no matter their own opinions on the matter, Frodo was the Ringbearer, the linchpin of the entire Fellowship. Whatever the others, Aragorn included, might think, it was his opinions and decisions that were going to be the ones to matter most. This one included.

Frodo glanced at us all a bit anxiously, his brows coming together in thought as his blue eyes rested on me again.

"I think…" he began slowly, carefully. "I think it was your choice to join us back in Rivendell, and it should be your choice now too. It wouldn't be fair to take that decision from you now, just because we know this about you. However…” he hesitated, his thoughtful frown relaxing into a hesitant micro-smile. "However, if I were to be selfish, I would say that you're no less brave and no less a friend now than anyone else here, and I would be grateful for one more friend with us on a journey such as this."

I had to fight hard to keep the beaming smile off my face as I looked at him. I hadn't seen Frodo smile much since Gandalf had fallen in Moria, so when he returned it with just as much brightness, I couldn't help but feel my hope and excitement soar.

"In that case," I said finally, "I guess I'm just going to have to find a way to prove Aragorn and the others wrong then."

"What are you going to do?" Pippin asked me curiously.

I chewed my lip in consideration. I'd had an idea earlier of what I was going to do, but only now that I'd had my morale boosted by the hobbits was it actually gaining momentum.

Lady Galadriel had hinted there was only a slim chance of me regaining my past, and only if I made the right choices, and asked the right questions. Something in that warning had frightened me on a level I didn't really understand — but it had also made me absolutely sure that staying in Lothlórien would be the wrong decision. I'd be safe and sound here, well looked after, and potentially very happy, but I would find no answers. Which in turn meant that I would likely never see my family again.

Mad as it was, I think I'd already known which path I was going to take before I'd even entered Galadriel's garden. I already knew which option could lead me to what I was seeking. I also realised, now, that it didn't matter how dangerous or scary it was going to get — I simply couldn't let that sliver of hope go, no matter how small it was.

Not without a fight.

Still, I also knew that if I wanted anything better than a snowball's chance in hell of surviving long enough to make a difference, I was going to need to learn how to fight, literally. Whether improving what feeble combat skills I already possessed, or taking up something entirely new, I needed to improve my chances of survival, and I needed to do it quickly.

So, I'd gone over my options, counting them off mentally as I went down the list.

Learning to wield a sword was out of the question, though I expected Boromir would have been happy to try and tutor me. Two years of learning from one of the best sword masters in Rivendell had left me with little more than a very efficient way of severing my own fingers. I wasn't even
going to attempt to wield an axe either. Gimli would have laughed himself sick watching me trying
to lift one off the ground. Knives were ok, but they weren't going to do me much good if —
sorry, when — we ended up fighting things that were twice my size and three times my strength. I
might manage to cut their face up decoratively before they snapped me in half.

That left one option. The bow.

I'd seen in Moria that Aragorn was competent with a bow, but nowhere near what I'd need to teach
me effectively. Also, he had the habit of pulling the weirdest faces when he shot. If he taught me,
I'd spend half the time trying not to break out into fits of giggles.

Again, that only left me with one option.

"Where's Legolas?" I asked, starting to get suddenly to my feet. Merry, Pippin, Sam and Frodo just
blinked at me, confused.

"He said he needed to see to something around the Looking Pools earlier," Sam informed me
reluctantly. "But I don't think you should—."

"I'm sure his royal sassiness can spare a moment for little old me," I interrupted tartly, standing up
with renewed determination and started to move off. I thought I heard Sam and the others call
something after me, but I was already gone, hurrying down back up the forest steps towards the
Looking Pools.

~ ♛ ~

Five minutes later, I'd found my way back to the familiar part of the wood that led to the pools. I'd
taken a few wrong turns in my haste to get there, and by the time I did, I'd only just noticed it was
starting to get dark. I came jogging up a familiar forest staircase to find the clearing I'd first seen
Haldir and Merileth in together. The silver lamps lining the paths had been lit, and the glade was
almost completely deserted. Only two blond she-elves I recognised as the youngest of Galadriel's
handmaidens were walking past the trees skirting the pools, carrying baskets of what looked like
towels in theirs arms. They were talking in conspiratorial whispers, their cheeks a bit pink and the
occasional bell-like giggle escaping them both.

I marched straight up to them both and asked bluntly: "Have you seen Legolas?"

The two maids stopped dead in their tracks, their eyes wide and faces colouring, as if they'd just
been caught doing something they shouldn't have.

"W-who, my lady?" one of them stammered.

Good grief, she was even worse at lying than I was.

"Legolas," I repeated, lifting a hand to about a foot over my head. "He's about this tall, blond,
pointy ears, and an ego the size of a small country."

They both just blinked at me. I sighed impatiently.

"Thranduilion?" I tried, enunciating the name irritably.

That got their attention. Both handmaidens blushed scarlet and looked at each other. Then one of
them pointed vaguely in the direction of the other side of the trees, at the opposite side of the pool
from where Merileth had first taken me.
"Thanks," I smiled brightly, and breezed past them in the direction she'd indicated. One of them spluttered something in elvish after me, but I didn't stop to translate it, or wonder what they were both so flustered about. I was too focused on figuring out what I was going to say when I did find him, how on earth I was going to convince him to help me. I was so lost in thought, I actually started muttering quietly to myself as I moved through the meandering corridor of trees to the other side.

"You'd think finding someone with a head as big as his would be…" I broke off, my voice stuck in the back of my throat as my lungs forgot how to do their job.

Well, I'd found him. I'd come around the corner and instantly ground to a halt, because I'd come face to face with a very nice view of someone's back. Legolas's back to be precise. Only there was one important thing missing…

A shirt.

The only other elf of the Fellowship was standing there by the side of the river pools with his back to me, utterly bare from the waist up. He'd obviously just got done bathing because he was using a small towel to dry off his dark gold hair. It was still damp from the bath, and was hanging loose from its usual braids in casual disarray over his neck and shoulders. The motion he'd taken to dry it off was giving me what would have been a really nice view of a very well proportioned back, as well as the lithe but strong muscles in his shoulders and arms.

That is, it might have been a nice view, if it had been on anyone else on the face of the earth. As it was, I had been utterly paralysed with horror at what, and who, I had just gone and walked in on. Merileth had told me the pools were used only by the women during the morning hours. I hadn't stopped to consider that, logically, this meant the evening hours would be used by the men. I should have counted my lucky stars it was only Legolas there half naked and bare foot, and not half the Galadrim. I also thanked sweet merciful God he still had his breeches on, or I might have just collapsed and let the ground swallow me whole.

Something like a hiccup, a choking sound, and a startled squeak found its way out of my throat, and I all but died where I stood, clapping a hand over my mouth. How he didn't manage to hear me coming until right then I'll never know.

Stopping in his routine and lowering the towel, he turned around curiously, and immediately locked eyes with me.

He froze.

I froze too.

For about twenty seconds, we just stood there, staring at each other. We must have looked like a pair of deer caught in oncoming headlights, standing there in paralysed shock, just looking at each other. Him entirely naked from the belt-line up, and me just standing there hypnotised by the sight with sodding flowers in my hair.

'Not. A. Word. Tink.'

She didn't say a word, but that didn't stop her hysterical cackling from echoing around the inside of my head.

Very slowly, Legolas lowered the towel to his side, his shocked expression shifting into carful neutrality as he turned to face me properly.
"Can I help you?" he asked, his voice completely toneless and void of emotion.

Now instead of a front row seat view of one of the nicest backs I'd ever seen, I found myself faced with possibly the most distracting chest on the face of Arda. I had to bite my cheek hard enough to draw blood to keep from melting into a humiliated puddle on the river stones.

I recovered my composure a second later, dropping my hand from my mouth, straightening my frame regally, and contemptuously flicking my flowery braid over one shoulder, trying to look unimpressed. I might have managed it too — if my bloody voice and steadily reddening face hadn't betrayed me.

"I need you to teach me to use a bow," I forced out, my voice reaching several octaves higher than normal.

Stupid sodding voice.

Legolas frowned deeply at me and tilted his head to the side, a look of honest confusion rather than annoyance crossing his features.

"Excuse me?"

I felt my face go even more red. I wanted so badly to just curl into a ball and shrink into oblivion, but I refused to let it show on the rest of me. I took a deep breath, forced my panicking brain to count to three, then tried again.

"I'm asking you to teach me to shoot with a bow," I spoke slowly and calmly this time, adding as an afterthought: "Please."

A silence as thick and as awkward as a concussed donkey rang through the air between us. Legolas didn't move or look away from me for a long moment. I don't even think he was breathing, he was so still. Eventually, he took a few steps to my left and dropped the towel he'd been using onto a small bench —which, I also noticed belatedly, had the rest of his clothes casually draped over it.

"May I ask, why the sudden interest in learning to wield a bow?" he inquired, straightening to face me again from just four feet away. I crossed my arms a little tighter, shifting my weight from foot to foot.

"I have my reasons."

"And those reasons are?"

"What do you think?"

He gave me a pointed look, and I responded with a defeated sigh and glanced away.

"Fine," I exhaled heavily. "Aragorn was right with what he said yesterday. I am inexperienced, I am lacking the skills I need to stay alive. If I don't figure out some way of making myself less vulnerable, I'm going to end up slowing you all down, or just dying horribly somewhere along the way."

I thought I saw a tiny look of astonishment cross Legolas's face for a second, but I blinked, and it was gone again.

"You decided you wish to continue with us, after we leave?" he sounded surprised, though not as displeased as I'd been expecting.
"Yep."

"Even though Aragorn thinks you should not?"

"He doesn't get to make that decision. I do," I replied sharply, looking back at him as my anger and determination from the previous night came back in a tidal wave. "I refuse to be left behind just because one man thinks I'd be safer here. If that means I have to learn to use a proper weapon by the time we leave just to prove a point, fine. I'll do it."

Legolas just stared at me with that irritatingly unreal expression of his. I took a few deliberate breaths, counting to three between each before speaking again.

"So, how about it?"

Legolas continued to regard me silently for what felt like an eternity. While he thought, I was left standing there, hopelessly trying to avoid glancing at the fair-skinned expanse of his toned chest, or arms, or shoulders…

'Give it up, boss, you're gone,' Tink was still cackling manically at me.

Hell. I had died, and now I was in hell. The situation couldn't have gotten any worse if it was written by Oscar Wilde during a fit of opium-induced mania.

Finally, Legolas put me out of my misery and answered my original question.

"I can teach you, in theory," he told me, folding his arms across his bare torso, and I pretended not to notice. "But learning to use a bow effectively isn't something that happens quickly, let alone in just a few weeks."

I squared my shoulders and fixed him with my best unyielding stare.

"I learn fast."

"You must do, to have trained to the level you have in only two years," he nodded with a casual shrug of one shoulder, though I could see in his eyes he was taking a poke at what Aragorn had revealed yesterday.

I looked away from him, my cheeks and ears heating slightly.

"I didn't come here to play guilt games, Legolas," I stated plainly, refusing to look directly at him for fear my face would turn into a strawberry. "If you can't do it, I'll ask someone else. Are you willing to teach me or not?"

He paused for a moment, and I saw him tilt his head curiously at me in my peripherals.

"I might consider it, my lady," he said in a polite but unmistakably playful tone. "If you were to apologise for intruding upon my bathing."

My face flooded with heat and I snapped my gaze up to see him watching me lazily with his arms still folded…

And he was smirking. The smug elvish bastard was smirking at me.

I felt my nerves abruptly vanish, replaced by vindictive anger at the self-satisfied grin plastered on his mouth — a look I wanted very badly to smack right off his face. I narrowed my eyes into what I hoped looked like razorblades at him.
"Don't take this the wrong way, but hell will sprout daffodils first," I told him flatly, standing up a little straighter and trying hard to hide the fact that my pulse had just spiked again. "And you weren't bathing. You had your trousers on."

'Thank God, or you might have gone into apoplexy at that—.'

'Not. Another. Sodding. Word.'

"True, though if you'd arrived only moments sooner, that would have not been the case," he shrugged casually, as if he's just commented on the weather. My face turned roughly the same temperature as a furnace, my jaw working soundlessly and unable to quite believe what he'd just said to me.

His self satisfied smile turned into a laughing, boyish grin.

"Am I making you uncomfortable, my lady?" he tried to say casually, but he couldn't quite hide the laugh bubbling up behind it.

My pointed ears burned.

"I… oh for God sake!" I spat, unable to stop the blood rising in my face. I could feel my ears going more red than hot pokers fresh out of a fire. "Would you please just put your shirt back on!"

He grinned at me like the devil himself. The arrogant ass.

He did as he was told though, grabbing his pale blue tunic off the bench and slipping it over his head. I forced myself to look anywhere else until he was done, and even then I couldn't quite meet his eyes. I focused on a spot just over his left shoulder.

"So?" I demanded, uncoiling my arms and placing my hands firmly on my hips, making myself as tall as I could. Legolas's expression turned serious again as he stood opposite me. He folded his arms loosely over his chest again and looked away from me out over the empty Looking Pools.

"You really wish to do this?" he asked, and I didn't hesitate.

"Yes, I do."

He nodded slowly just once, the looked me in the eyes again.

"Then meet me at the training grounds tomorrow morning at first light. We'll see how fast you can pick it up," he turned away from me to the bench where the rest of his clothes had been left and began to gather them together. Pleased, yet surprised by the sudden agreement, I turned to leave him to finish dressing in private, when he added quieter than he had before: "Also, I would advise wearing something less likely to catch."

I glanced back at him with my eyebrows pinched in puzzlement.

"Likely to catch?"

He turned his head marginally back towards me, just enough to catch a look at half his face, though this time his expression wasn't serious, or playfully mocking. I couldn't read it, but the tips of his ears seemed just a touch more pink than before. Though maybe that was just the light. He shrugged and rubbed absently at his neck just below his left ear, and said: "That dress suits you, it would be a shame to ruin it while training."
I just stood there speechless as he turned back to folding his clothes.

Had that been a compliment? Had that been a real, honest to goodness compliment?

I suddenly wanted very badly to look up and check the sky for flying pigs…

Then, I noticed the tiny, teasing smile quirk the corner of his lip, and just like that, the moment was gone. I narrowed my eyes at him.

"I am going to go now," I stated decisively, turning quickly away and walking back the way I'd come minutes before. "Try not to get crushed under that planet-sized ego of yours."

I could hear his chuckling coming from behind me as I left, following me like a phantom echo in my head along with Tink's as I strode off back down the path. So it was settled; I was going to learn how to use a bow. My pride and dignity had taken a blow to accomplish it, but somehow, I'd managed to pull it off.

'I win?'

For the briefest second, my brain treated me to the mental image of Legolas from moment ago.

No shirt. Bare chest. Strong but lithe shoulders. Gold hair loose from its braid, still slightly damp from bathing… And grey-blue eyes, shocked, but somehow not displeased, staring back at mine. The image had been perfectly etched into my memory, as if the sight of him had left a permanent mark on my retinas.

He really was a handsome bastard…

I stopped suddenly in mid-stride, my eyes widening. Then I groaned, and banged my head against a nearby tree.

Stupid elf memory! Stupid perverted brain! Stupid Tink! Stupid Legolas!

I knew was going to have a very hard time thinking of him as 'pretty' again after that.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: What a place to end! But at least it technically isn't a cliffhanger this time. :3 Having said that, I am quite terrified some of you dear readers are going to start hunting me down with pitchforks and torches if I keep ending chapters like this.

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed the (sort of) double bill, the first view of Ellie opening up to some of the Fellowship, and the first little taste of what's to come between her and L. My Beta also sends her apologies for the delay in the second chapter, but she had some pretty important exams this week to get through, so it took longer than expected to finish.

Let me know if you loved it or loathed it. I thrive off your opinions and feedback, but not as much as your continued support by simple continuing to read my story. :) Much love, and as always, see you next chapter.
~Rella
The following morning I woke groggy and stiff with an almighty crick in my neck. Morning sunlight and the sound of disgustingly happy bird chatter filtered down through the leaves, and straight into my sleepy eyes.

"Urgh, nufuh..." I grumbled in a very elegant and ladylike fashion, sitting stiffly upright on my sleeping mat. I'd returned to the Fellowship camp instead of the handmaiden's quarters the previous evening, feeling more in the mood for cheerful hobbit banter rather than gossiping she-elf company. A wave of exhaustion had hit me about an hour later, and I'd fallen asleep before the others had returned. Someone had draped a satiny blanket over me at some point while I slept, and I wondered briefly who had put it there as I rubbed my eyes and looked around.

The sun was only just coming up, and though there was enough gold light in the camp to see, it was still gloomy enough to have not disturbed the others. All four hobbits were still fast asleep, snuffling softly where they'd all curled up on the cushions under the awning. Gimli had come back sometime the previous evening, and he was snoozing with his mouth wide open, slumped against a nearby tree. Boromir had returned too, though he seemed to have adopted a more dignified sleeping position, lying on his back on a sleeping mat with one arm slung over his middle. They had all kept a respectable distance from me, though Boromir was the easiest to see, lying almost right in the middle of the camp beside the unlit fire. He was near enough for me to see the relaxed look on his slumbering face, the effect knocking about five years off his usual appearance. He let out a quiet little snorting snore, and I smiled.

The only two who I noticed were missing were Aragorn and Legolas, and there didn't seem to be any sign that they'd returned here last night, let alone slept (or tranced, whatever is was that Legolas did). Both their sleeping mats were still rolled up and packed away.

I didn't give myself the chance to wonder why they'd been absent. I just yawned, stretched, and started getting to my feet as quietly as I could. I was still garbed in the white lace dress I'd been wearing the day before, and as per Legolas's advice, I wanted to change into something a little less flimsy before heading to the training grounds.

As soundlessly as I could manage, I picked my way across the camp, around the slumbering hobbits, and past a still snoring Gimli. I had to step carefully over Boromir since he was sprawled directly in the way of my exit, though it was difficult in my long skirts.

"Morning, my lady."

"Jesus!" I squeaked, stumbling over my own feet and almost crashing headfirst into one of the tent-posts. I caught myself against a tree just in time and looked down to see Boromir peering up at me with a sleepy smile.

"I've never heard that expression before. What does it mean?" he asked innocently, keeping his voice at a whisper as he noticed the hobbits and dwarf still sound asleep. I righted myself and flushed a little, embarrassed at having been spooked so easily.

Heart of a lion, that's me.
"It's, um…n-never mind," I spluttered out just as quietly. "I thought you were sleeping."

"I was," he grinned without getting up, "until you stepped on me."

"That's your own fault for lying face up in the middle of the camp," I shot back primly. "Why are you down there anyway? Something wrong with your sleeping mat?"

He sat up with a soft groan, resting an arm on one knee and glancing straight up at the lightening sky peeking through the canopy.

"I prefer the view from here. It's easier to see the sky," he told me, a peaceful, almost wistful look crossing his face. "After Moria, I found I sleep better with the stars in sight."

I looked up too, following his gaze up to where the dimming light of the stars was still peeking through the gaps in the leaves.

"You and me both," I drew my own gaze reluctantly from the gradually lightening sky to see the look on Boromir's face had fallen slightly. I regarded him curiously as he continued to watch the sky with unfocused eyes. "You haven't been sleeping well?"

I was used to seeing the face of the warrior drawn in concentration or battle-related anger, but this was different. He wasn't an elderly guy by any stretch of the imagination, at most a decade older than me, but something about the lines that had appeared in his face since he woke made him seem older, more tired than I knew he was. He shook his head finally and drew his gaze from the treetops to look at me.

"Since we arrived… dreams. Something the Lady Galadriel said troubles me somewhat…" he said noncommittally, not quite meeting my eye. He gave me an apologetic little sigh, and gave up trying to politely look me in the face. Instead, he turned away, the faintly saddened look returning to his features. "Forgive me, it is nothing you need concern yourself with, my lady."

I pursed my lips, my curiosity and concern creeping back. Seeing Boromir this disheartened and sad was unnerving to say the least.

"Oh no you don't, sir. You already got to hear one of my darkest secrets in HD surround-sound," I responded, keeping my voice quiet but pressing the seriousness of it, fixing him with a look and placing a fist on my hip. I hurried to continue when I saw his brow furrow in renewed confusion, cutting him short before he could open his mouth and ask what new, nonsensical thing I had just come out with yet again. "Spit it out. What could she have said to turn that chivalrous smile upside down?"

Boromir looked for a moment liked he wanted to answer, looking up at me in contemplation. Then he closed his mouth and rubbed a hand over his tired face, as if trying to smooth the worry lines from between his eyebrows.

"I may tell you someday, but for the moment that is a tale I would prefer to keep to myself," he replied reluctantly, getting up from his sleeping spot and gesturing for us to move further away from the others so we wouldn't wake them. I went with him, eyeing him sideways with suspicion. For a moment, I toyed with the idea of pressing him for an answer, but decided against it. He hadn't pushed me for answers I knew he was itching to ask, so it only seemed fair to return the favour.

I sighed and shrugged heavily, glancing away from him as we came to a stop just shy of the stairs.

"I suppose we're all entitled to our secrets, or what's left of them, anyway," I relented, folding my arms. He looked back to me with a faintly pained expression, not quite managing to hide the wince.
I didn't comment on it. I already knew what he was thinking, but I'd had enough talking about it yesterday. So, I just smiled tiredly, and gave his arm an amiable little push. "Just don't let it start eating at you, alright? If you ever do want to talk, I can always spare a pointy ear."

Boromir's handsome face broke into a warm, laughing smile through the weariness, and he allowed a mild chuckle to escape with a nod of acceptance.

"I shall keep that in mind," he replied, then added with a little note of apology lacing his quiet tone: "And for what it's worth, I am also sorry for what was said by Aragorn the other day. About—."

"Aragorn can be an insensitive ass sometimes, but he had a fair point," I interrupted with a wave of my hand, feeling a shadow of the sinking dread I'd felt yesterday creeping back, but refusing to let it rule my expression. "I'll admit, it wasn't the way I wanted you all to find out about me, but it's done now."

Boromir opened his mouth as if to say something more, but closed it again. I don't know if he'd picked up on my discomfort, or had read something in my expression, but I was glad he understood that I didn't really want to talk about it — not yet anyway. He just nodded, and then gave me a curious smile laced with amusement.

"I hear from Legolas that you wish to train as an archer," he said eventually, and I mirrored his smile.

"That's the plan," I confirmed. "I think it's obvious that, if I want to stand any chance surviving on this journey, I'm going to need more than medical scalpels and my rapier wit."

"True, though I would not have expected you to choose archery as your focus." I shrugged a shoulder and wrung my fingers together uneasily.

"I haven't had much luck with swords, and I'm pretty sure you have to be able to lift an axe to be able to swing it."

He actually laughed at that.

"Also true," he chuckled, and it made me feel better about the whole thing. We chuckled quietly together, and only struggled to keep our laughter down when Gimli let out a loud snore from around the corner that shook a few dead leaves from a tree. Boromir recovered first and, though he still sounded amused, addressed me with an undertone of solemnity. "I am not skilled in the art, but if you ever need assistance training in any skill involving a blade or shield, you need only ask."

I didn't try to hide the wide, honest smile that found its way onto my face, the feeling eclipsing any doubts or unease I might have had about the choice I'd made.

"I'll keep that in mind."

We both left the camp in opposite directions after that, agreeing to meet back there later for lunch. No doubt Sam would be itching to treat us all to one of his growingly popular second breakfasts. I headed quickly for the handmaiden's quarters, still needing to change out of my dress before going to find the training grounds. Merileth was there this time, and though she pursed her lips at my apology for wandering off on my own the other day, she was pleased to hear I'd met and got along well with her brothers. She promptly provided me with my neatly folded riding greens, cleaned boots, and newly polished knives in their sheath, and we talked briefly about the past few days while I changed. I left out the part where I'd accidentally pulled a 'Peeping Tom' on Legolas though.
When I was done, we both left the handmaiden's quarters and descended the walkways through the trees, still chatting amiably, only to find someone waiting for us when we came to the bottom of the last spiralling staircase. At first, I thought it was Haldir; his rigid posture and stance were similar, but as we got closer I realised the man's hair was too dark and his ears not pointy enough to be the Marchwarden. He turned upon hearing us coming, and Merileth and I found ourselves looking at none other than Aragorn waiting patiently with his hands clasped behind his back.

Really, I should have realised it was him sooner. Everyone here in Lothlórien looked pretty similar, with pale blond hair, fair unblemished skin, and an air of nobility — so much so that I'd found myself referring to most of the other male elves of the forest as 'not Haldir or Legolas.' Aragorn had the same air of nobility, sort of, but physically he stuck out like a rusty bent nail among the pristine gold haired elf men of the wood.

The second she saw him, Merileth stiffened and then dipped into an identical curtsy to the one she'd offered me when we first met upon reaching him, though she looked nervous instead of excited this time.

"Lord Aragorn," she greeted formally.

I didn't say anything, forcing my face to remain as blank as a piece of paper, but I'd felt my hands and shoulders tense slightly the second I recognised him. The same non-expression adorned his face as he took a few seconds to just stare back at me, searching my face for a reaction I wasn't willing to give. Finally, he turned to Merileth and offered her a polite bow, and a short, "My lady."

Merileth glanced between us, and got the gist of the atmosphere immediately. With a vague mention of needing to see to her duties, she excused herself, aiming a concerned sideways look at me, then glided away through the gardens.

A potent silence hung in the air between us for several long seconds, neither of us moving or looking away, the both of us either too uncertain or too stubborn to break the tension first. Aragorn caved first.

"May I walk with you?" he asked finally. I shrugged minutely, as if I didn't mind either way.

"Sure."

We walked. Neither of us spoke as we paced side by side, nor did one of us move faster or fall behind the other, despite our significant difference in stride length. We walked like that for several minutes through the grounds, and I could feel the ranger's gaze on my face occasionally, though I refused to meet it with my own. I was half expecting a note of impatience to accompany his voice when he finally did speak, but instead, he just sounded cautious.

"We should speak about what was... what I said last we spoke," he began quietly, despite the fact that we'd gone far enough through the gardens that there was no one around to hear us.

"There isn't a whole lot to talk about, as far as I can see. My secret's out. It's done," I answered, not breaking stride or shifting my gaze from the path ahead. We were walking through a part of the garden's I didn't recognise, and was somewhat focused on trying to remember which way Merileth had said the training grounds were.

"That may be, but that does not mean we should not discuss it," Aragorn said back, his tone unchanged, though I could tell my supposed indifference was making him uncomfortable. "I also wished to apologise."
That made me slow in my strides, turning to look at him properly with mixed surprise and scrutiny. His face was its usual blank slate, though I was more than used to reading the wary expression hidden behind his eyes by now.

"To apologise," I asked directly, unable to mask my curiosity as we continued to walk. "Or to tell me that I'm being reckless?"

"The recklessness is nothing new," he said, then paused before adding: "The bow is a bit unexpected, though."

"Legolas told you?"

"Partly," Aragorn shrugged. "He is worse at lying than you are."

I almost laughed.

"Wow, that certainly is an achievement," I didn't quite manage to keep the amusement out of my voice, or the small smile off my face. It vanished as quickly as it had come with my next question, eyeing him out of my peripherals as I spoke. "So, are you going to try and tell me that it's a foolish idea and to abandon it?"

I'd expected him to give a sharp reprimanding reply, but instead he hesitated, something I wasn't really used to from him. It forced me to look at him properly, only to see his eyebrows drawn together in thought, grey eyes softened but still serious.

"No," he said carefully after a second, still regarding me cautiously. "Though I still believe you would do better to remain when we depart. You would be safe here."

I stopped entirely in my pacing this time, turning to fix him with a respectful but firmly unyielding gaze from my significantly shorter vantage point.

"I know you do, but I already made my decision, Aragorn. It might not be a great decision, or even a good one," I told him simply without malice or anger, raw stubbornness taking their place instead. "But it's mine, and I'm willing to deal with the consequences, whatever they might be."

"So I see," Aragorn agreed rather quickly, not losing the thoughtful crinkle to his brow as he looked down at me, but there was also the teeniest little smile tugging at the edge of his lips. "Despite that, you know I cannot give your decision my approval."

I sighed and rolled my head to the side in a sort of defeated nod of acceptance, my own face reflecting his tentative smile as the tension eased.

"I guessed as much. Shall we just agree that I am, and always will be, a disagreeable lunatic and leave it at that?"

"Why do we not agree instead that it will be better for us all if we trusted one another; really trusted one another in the future?" he suggested, still looking down at me somewhat seriously, though his voice had turned less authoritave and more worrying. "I am not your parent, nor your guardian, and it is your right to have secrets of your own. However, by not saying anything sooner you could have easily…"

"I could have died," I finished for him solemnly. "I know. I'm not sorry for that part…" I stopped, thought about it for a moment, then waved a hand with a defeated noise. "Ok, fine, I am. Dying like that sounds pretty nasty, but what I'm trying to say is that I am sorry for the other part. Not trusting you to help me."
That actually garnered a full smile out of him as he looked down at me, the tension almost completely gone from us both. He rolled his shoulders in a shrug (the one he'd dislocated in Moria, I noted) and gave a little nod of gracious acceptance.

"I suppose it was a trust unearned."

"How about this? The next time I'm mortally wounded and on the brink of death, you'll be the first to know. I promise," I suggested with a tentative smile. Aragorn gave a little groan of mock dread.

"You are going to be utterly unreasonable on this, are you not?"

"Completely."

He didn't quite chuckle, but sighed in defeat through his smile, neither agreeing with me but not reprimanding me either. It was more than I'd dared hoped for, and despite the fact that he still obviously didn't like the idea, I was glad we were able to talk again without it turning into a verbal duel of wills. With one last half hesitant, half relieved smile at me, Aragorn gave me a short pat on the shoulder and turned to move away.

"Do as you think best, Eleanor," he said over his shoulder as he walked across the gardens, jerking a thumb in opposite direction that we'd been walking this whole time. "Though, you should know, the training grounds are that way."

Despite Aragorn's helpful — if belated — pointer, I had to ask for direction to the training grounds three times. First from a young handmaiden, then from one of the passing guards, and finally from a very irritated and sullen looking Haldir, who had given me the most monosyllabic set of directions I'd ever received, before stalking off. By the time I finally did find my way to the training grounds, my irritation at my own useless sense of direction had just about worn off. Trust Aragorn to spice up his apology with a bit of casual embarrassment on my part. In its place, an uncomfortable squirming sensation had take up residence — one which I stubbornly refused to accept as nervousness at seeing Legolas, no matter how much the butterflies in my stomach insisted I was in denial.

I was a little surprised to find the grounds almost entirely empty as I came to a stop at the edge. It was a big space, kitted out with everything from training dummies to ranged targets at different distances. There was even a medium sized sparring ring in the centre of the clearing where a group of three male elves were taking turns running drills with blunted short blades. They paused to glance at me as I moved past, towards the archery targets. One of them, I recognised as Rúmil. He gave me a polite smile and a small nod before resuming his practice match against another elf.

There was, however no sign of Legolas at all, despite the fact that it was already well after dawn. I heaved a soft sigh of mild relief and went to go and wait by the archery targets. For over ten minutes, I just stood there like a lemon, watching from a distance as Rúmil and his two sparring partners continued practicing, the occasional clang of metal against metal resonating around the clearing. By the fifteen minute mark I was beginning to feel stupid just standing there doing nothing. Tentatively I glanced down at the dagger pouch I'd strapped to my hip. I'd lost one of the seven knives in Moria during the fight with the troll, but I only just noticed that it had been
replaced with an identical one at some point.

A tiny smile crept onto my lips.

What the hell, it beat just waiting there for his tardy majesty to show up.

Flipping open the cover on my dagger pouch, I wandered over to the line of stuffed dummies. Pulling out one of the seven throwing knives, I went through the ingrained routine of palming it so I gripped it by the blade, taking aim, and bending my arm back until the hilt almost touched my ear. It felt for a moment as if I was back in Rivendell again, running drills while I waited for one of my tutors to show up. I flicked my wrist, and the knife flew, hitting the target dummy in the lower belly with a thud. I frowned at the dummy, then down at my hand. I’d been aiming for its upper chest. My arms must still be weak from the three day recovery sleep I’d been in. I tried again, and again, and every time the knives hit a little closer to where I’d aimed them, but still not quite right. As I did, my thoughts slowly began to zone out with the memorised routine. On the sixth throw, a stinging sensation shot up my hand and I flinched, almost dropping the blade.

I looked down and saw that I’d cut my finger without noticing. Not very deeply, but just enough to draw a bead of dark red blood from the tip of my ring finger. It had surprised me only because it wasn’t something that happened much anymore; not nearly as often as it had when I first started using the intricate little throwing knife set, anyway. For the first month of learning to use them properly from Glorfindel and Elrohir, I’d had to bandage all my fingers, they’d ended up so raw.

Maybe I was more nervous about seeing his highness against after last night than I thought…

I buried that thought quickly, wiping the tiny speck of blood off nonchalantly on my sleeve, retrieved my knives from the target, and went back to practicing.

An over arm throw, then a back handed throw. One more back handed throw, then another over arm throw. Every one of my knives hit the target, but my back handed throws were still skewing quite far off-centre every time. Each time I twisted and crossed my arm over my chest, ready to throw, the stitches in my side would tug and sting. I clucked my tongue irritably and tried again with my second to last knife. Another near-miss. I made a disgusted sound, giving up and throwing the last one over-armed. It hit the practice dummy squarely in the face with a satisfying ‘thunk.’

"You have good aim," a voice came from almost directly over my left shoulder. I jumped and spun to find Legolas standing there with his arms folded and a half smug half amused smile on his face. I glared at him.

"How long have you been standing there?" I demanded, trying to sound collected and failing epically. He just kept on smiling serenely at me.

"Long enough to notice that your throws sometimes veer slightly up and to the right," he noted, gesturing at the practice dummy I’d been brutalising.

"Everyone's a critic," I snorted sullenly, but felt his smile catching on my own face as I turned to face him properly. "Also, you're a bit late. You said to meet here at first light."

He moved forward towards me at that, and it was only then I noticed that he was carrying two quivers and an extra bow along with his own. He held up the slightly smaller one to me.

"I was fetching you a weapon," he answered, extending it out to me. "The quartermaster agreed to lend you this to practice with."

I was about to take it from him, but then hesitated. I couldn't quite resist the urge to poke at him a
bit for being late. What can I say? I'm a creature of habit.

I gave him an impish look and jerked my chin at the one in his other hand.

"Too precious to share your own, your highness?"

Legolas smiled slyly at me, taking back the smaller bow and offering his own out to me. I hadn't expected him to do that. His bow seemed too important, at least as important to him as my hunting knife was to me. Yet he'd just hand it over to me? The gesture held more weight than I was entirely comfortable with…

I took it. It was heavier than I was expecting, the polished wood smooth and well cared for. He gave me an encouraging nod, still smiling.

"Try," he said.

I tried.

"Damn!" I wheezed, trying and failing to pull the thing back even half way. The string twanged back with a loud snap. I didn't think I could have guessed at the draw weight on that thing — but whatever it was, it was more than enough to drop any monster. "Just how strong are you?"

Legolas' confused smile turned into a self satisfied smirk, and I could see a laugh dancing behind his eyes. He took his bow back, and handed me mine. Then he helped me retrieve my knives from the poor abused practice dummy.

"We have not had the opportunity to speak of what happened the other day," he said as he pulled the last knife from the dummy's chest and handed it back to me. I fumbled the knife and almost dropped it on my foot as he said that, my face heating as I tried to hold the resurgence of mental images at bay.

"Oh God," I groaned, embarrassment making my cheeks warm. I was suddenly looking anywhere but directly at him in the hope that it would keep me from babbling like an idiot. "Look, I swear I really didn't mean to walk in on you like that. It was an accident, I honestly wasn't trying to spy on you or anything. Though now that I think of it, those other two maids I saw might have been—.."

"Actually," he interrupted my rambling quickly, his own face colouring, "I was referring to what Aragorn spoke of. That you have no memory beyond two years past." We both just stood there for a moment, staring awkwardly at each other with no real idea what to say in the wake of that. Legolas cleared his throat after minute and looked away from me.

"I only meant to offer my help to you," he explained, a hand coming up to rub uncomfortably at his neck just under his left ear. "I doubt I can do much more than Lord Elrond already has, but whatever support I might offer in helping you solve the mystery of your past, I will give it, if you wish it."

I blinked at that, unsure of what to say.

"Oh, well I…" I didn't really have a reaction planned for this kind of treatment. I'd been more than prepared for our usual verbal duels, snarky banter and occasional witty jibe, but not for him to offer
me help, or for him to seem so sincere about it. Though, it wasn't exactly an unpleasant surprise. I couldn't help but smile, despite the uncomfortable warmth creeping up my neck. "Thank you." I answered honestly.

We both smiled shyly at each other, but the second we realised what was happening the moment broke, and we looked away again awkwardly.

"Perhaps we should start training," Legolas suggested and I nodded, still not quite letting myself look directly at him.

"Yes, I think we should."

The both of us quickly leapt on the distraction of what we were both really there for. Legolas provided me with a leather arm guard similar to the ones he wore, and then started talking me through the basics. He demonstrated each step of the process for me as he went, and I made sure to pay attention carefully — proper shooting stance and posture, how to nock an arrow against the string, how to draw back a shot properly, and how best to aim. Finally when he was done showing me, it was my turn to try. He made it all look and sound so much easier than it actually was, even though my loaned bow had a much lighter draw weight than his. He had me practice without an arrow several times — drawing the bowstring back to my cheek and holding it for a second before releasing it, which I'd got the hang of had surprisingly quickly. It was only when we finally introduced an arrow into the equation that things got a little trickier.

I was suddenly very aware of the fact that I was wielding something that had the potential to easily kill someone if I used it flippantly or carelessly. I swallowed, drawing back the shot while Legolas carefully corrected my posture. He'd adopted a short and simple tone with each of his instructions, and I was grateful for that. It made focusing on what I was doing a whole lot easier than if he'd been speaking in the borderline playful way he had earlier.

"Use the corner of your mouth as an anchor. Hold your breath before you release the shot. Keep both your eyes open," he told me, circling around the back of me and correcting as he went. When he came back into view I gave him an inscrutable sideways look without dropping my arms. His eyebrows furrowed. "What?"

I had to force myself not to laugh at the puppy-like expression on his face, and mumbled, "You are a damned Disney prince."

He smiled hesitantly too, though it was a little confused. He corrected my arm position again, pressing a hand gently under my elbow to raise it a bit and backed off.

"Someday you will have to tell me if that is a good thing or not," he mumbled too, and I couldn't tell if he'd intended me to hear it. Instead he gave an 'after you' gesture and said: "Take your shot, my lady."

I did, holding my breath to keep the shot steady before releasing the bowstring. The arrow blurred across the gap between us and the targets, and sank with a thud into the wood an inch and a half from the centre.

Legolas looked genuinely surprised. Hell, I was shocked too, more at the fact that I'd managed to hit the target at all. He glanced sideways at me with his eyebrows pinched and I shrugged.

"Beginner's luck?"

Neither of us were prepared for the duo of high pitched cheers that came from above and to our
left. The pair of us looked up in unison to see Gweredir and Colion sitting high on a flet. They were pulling faces and waving at us both, sitting just close enough to see over the edge, laughing and giggling as only children could at their own jokes.

"Friends of yours?" Legolas asked conversationally, but I could hear his smile.

"They're my new bodyguards," I stated proudly, throwing him a mischievous look over my shoulder as I nocked another arrow. "They've decided you're a potential hazard to my unshakable cheerfulness, and need to be dealt with accordingly."

"I'm flattered," he chuckled.

As it turned out, it had been beginner's luck after all. My next shot still hit the target, but sank into the wood just outside the outermost circle. The second hit just inside the circle. The third somehow managed to miss entirely and sank into the tree a foot above the target. From the platform above, Gweredir and Colion cheered again, and Legolas tried to cover a snort.

"Was that a laugh I heard just now?" I asked dangerously.

"Don't be ridiculous, my lady. I was just clearing my throat," he replied through a contagious smile. "Of course you were."

It went on like that for I don't know how long. I would shoot as best I could, and Legolas would instruct me on how best to improve, occasionally demonstrating with his own bow. I had been right though, I did learn fast, and the longer we trained and the more I shot, the less often Legolas had to correct me or give me pointers. Pretty soon he was only instructing me every few minutes, the rest of the time filled with us simply talking to fill the silences. Eventually Gweredir and Colion grew bored of watching us and wandered off to play elsewhere. With the two kids gone we continued to talk while I practiced — mostly about what the others had been up to since we arrived, and speculating about what Aragorn was planning for when we eventually left.

It was, dare I admit it, really nice. Nothing near as embarrassing or nerve wracking as I'd expected the previous day. Our initial and catastrophic introduction back in Rivendell aside, I was starting to realise I was growing to enjoy Legolas's company much more than I'd initially thought I ever would. And if the lingering little smile of his was anything to go by, I dared say he thought the same.

"Did something happen with Haldir the other day?" I asked much later, my thoughts drifting back to the grouchy Marchwarden I'd bumped into earlier as I retrieved my arrows from the last round. It was nearing lunchtime, and my aim was gradually improving, though I still had a very long way to go.

"He took a poisoned arrowhead out of your midsection. I would have thought you had noticed."

Legolas replied without missing a beat. I mock-glared at him, and gave him a playful punch in the shoulder as I passed.

"I meant since yesterday, smart-ass. He seemed, well, more surly than usual when I saw him this morning."

Legolas gave a long-suffering sigh and leaned against one of the sparring ring's posts as he watched me. Rúmil and his training partners had long since departed and the training grounds were now empty except for us two.

"He is worrying needlessly," Legolas told me. "He believes that the lady he wishes to court may be
enamoured with another man."

"Merileth, I know," I answered, reading my next shot, taking aim, and shooting. The arrow hit the target about three inches from the centre this time. "Is she?"

"Is she what?"

"Enamoured with another man?" I turned to peer at my tutor/gossip partner over one shoulder, only to see him scratching his neck and watching my progress in thought.

"I do not think so, she seems very taken with him to me," he said, eyeing me sideways as I adjusted my arm guard.

"Then what's the problem?"

"I believe he has been hesitant to pursue her affections all this time due to her lineage. She, as far as I can tell, is of full Sindar decent, whereas the Marchwarden is of only half Sindar and half Silvan. From what I have heard, he has recently got it into his head that she now has her sights set another ellon of full Sindar decent, and supposedly a better match."

I just looked that Legolas in bemusement.

"And that's important?" I asked. Legolas gave me a faintly disbelieving look and I frowned sharply, tapping the side of my head with my bow. "Hey, no memories over here. Remember?"

'Oh, such beautiful irony,' Tink's voice nearly made me physically jump. I hadn't heard her in a while and I had almost forgotten she was still there, lurking in my head.

Legolas distracted me with a soft noise of comprehension, and nodded in concession of my point. "Do you know anything of the Sindar and Silvan elf clans?" he asked.

"Only by name, not much of what makes them different."

He nodded, and gestured for me to keep practicing while he went on to explain.

"In short, the original Sindarin elves were among those who accepted the summons to come and reside in Valinor by the Valar during the Years of the Trees. Granted, unlike the Noldor, they never actually made it across the sea and into Valinor in the end, settling instead on the western coast of Middle Earth. They supposedly grew wiser and more skilful for their journey and the great kingdom they built there."

I released another half-decent shot and looked back at him, half curious and half fascinated. "And the Silvan clan?"

"The Silvan elves instead decided mid-journey not to accept the Valar's summons after all, and settled into a simpler life in the forests mostly this side of the Misty Mountains. They became reclusive, defensive, and supposedly less wise than many of the other clans. There has been much mixing of blood between the two over the ages, especially since both the two greater woodland realms are now ruled by the Sindar, but apparently some prejudices die hard," Legolas spoke that last part with a note of quiet, long-held anger in his voice. I was suddenly very tempted to question him about it further, but then decided not to — not a good idea if the darkened look on his face was anything to go by. I went back to shooting, focusing on getting my arrows to cluster together as much as I could, even if they were still hitting way off-centre. Legolas prompted me to keep the elbow of my drawing arm up, coming over and pressing a warm hand under said arm. It was much more tiring than it looked, and my wrists were starting to ache.
"So Haldir is, what? Afraid he will tarnish her purebred reputation by overtly displaying his half-blooded affection for her?" I asked, releasing my shot a bit too early and almost missing the target. Legolas cringed slightly at the blunt description (or possibly at my shooting technique) but didn't deny it, either.

"Something along those lines, though I fail to see why is should be such an issue for him. The maid in question doesn't seem to care. Better to simply tell her of his feelings and have done."

I was about to fire another shot, but stopped and lowered the bow, turning to face him increduously.

"Wait, you mean he hasn't said anything? He's tail-over-tea-kettle for her and he hasn't even told her?"

Legolas gave me a look that was half pained and half amused, another little smile tugging at the edge of his lips.

"I have never heard it said quite like that before, but yes. He is 'tail-over-tea-kettle' for her, but he insists on saying nothing."

"That explains a lot," I sighed, thinking back to every time I'd seen them speaking or walking together, always so formal yet so obviously wanting not to be. "No wonder they're both so painfully awkward around each other all the time."

"In what way am I a beast of burden, exactly?" Legolas asked suddenly, still eyeing me with a curious frown. I eyed him back, my brain taking a moment to catch up with the sudden change in subject.

"What?"

"Earlier you referred to me as an intelligent beast of burden. Why?"

"Oh, you mean when I called you a 'smart-ass,'" I asked remembering the phrase had slipped out before I'd realised it. He nodded, and I shrugged, waving a hand, vaguely. "It's a mild insult, Legolas. Like calling someone too smart for their own good."

"That makes no sense. Donkeys are neither sentient nor intelligent."

"No, you don't under—," I trailed off, faced with his perfectly serious expression, and threw up both my hands, bow and all. "I could literally spend the rest of my life in this conversation, couldn't I? No. No way, that is a rabbit hole I am not going down with you, Legolas Thranduilion."

Legolas didn't quite pull a disgusted look at the sound of his title, but it was a near miss.

"You heard the name through the handmaidens I take it?" he asked as I went back to practicing again. I gave a quiet sound of affirmation, trying to concentrate on my posture and aim.

"You have quite the fan club in that lot. They couldn't seem to stop nattering about you the other day while I was with them," I explained and took another shot (which actually hit near the centre this time). I heard Legolas groan and wipe a hand over his face behind me. A little smirk appeared on my mouth, then I chewed my lip and added speculatively: "The way they said it though, it sounds like it means a bit more than just who your father is."

"It does."
"Oh? How do you mean?"

I drew back and lined up my next shot, and heard him hesitate for a moment. I waited patiently for a reply, but when it came it was in a very reluctant and somewhat afflicted tone of voice.

"They use it because it is technically my official title. It mean that my father is Thrandruil, the Sindar Elvenking of the Woodland Realm in the North. Which, by extension, makes me—."

My shot veered wildly up into the trees. It whistled past the ear of a startled guard high on a flet, but I hardly noticed his shouts of outrage — I was too busy gawking slack jawed at Legolas.

"Wait, you mean you're an actual prince?" I spluttered.

He looked deeply uncomfortable, almost embarrassed, but nodded.

I still have no idea why I reacted the way I did, but it all happened before I could stop it. I thought back over the past month since that day we'd first met, back over every time I'd called him "Prince Charming," and took one look at the sheepish expression on his face.

Then I burst out laughing. His expression turned from embarrassed to flummoxed, and it just made me laugh harder.

"Oh hell," I turned away from him, hunching over on myself, trying and failing to cover my snort-giggles with my free hand. "I've been using Disney references to mock an elven prince, for over a month."

"Well, that was… not the reaction I was expecting," Legolas said blankly. I managed to beat down the snickering and faced him, a laughing grin still spread over my face.

"Would you prefer it if I curtsey every time you pass from now on?"

"Please don't."

"Are you sure? Maybe a courtly bow and a 'my liege' instead?"

"Manwë's breath, stop!" he huffed in exasperation, but he was smiling minutely, red faced. I started pealing with giggles again, and it felt ludicrously good. It took a minute this time, but I finally managed to get myself back under control again.

"I'm sorry, really. I'll stop now, I promise," I tried to say honestly, though the pair of us were both now struggling to hold back grins, and I was still occasionally snorting with repressed sniggers. He inclined his head to me curiously, one golden eyebrow raised.

"Am I to assume from that response that my status doesn't… bother you?"

"Aside from it meaning I've made a complete idiot of myself for the past month?" I shrugged lightly. "No, it doesn't bother me. Should it?"

He didn't provide me with a verbal answer, but his smile grew wider and noticeably warmer, and it made my insides squirm. I pointedly ignored the feeling, though it wasn't exactly unpleasant. My quiver was empty by now and my fingers were in dire need of a recovery break, so I came over and set my bow down beside where he had leaned his against the sparring ring posts.

"So, your father is the Sindar king of the Woodland realm. Does that makes you fully Sindar too?" I asked, then caught myself, glanced apologetically at him and added. "If it's not too rude to ask, I
"It's alright," he replied as I came to lean back against the fence beside him. He rolled his head back to watch the tree tops rustling above us in thought. "Technically yes, though I was born and raised among the Silvan elves of the norther Woodland Realm. The difference in our blood meant little to me growing up, and even now I still fail to see the importance of it all. Whether or not we originally came from the same place, they are…" His face fell into a conflicted frown as he searched his head for the right words. I watched him curiously, wondering if that was the kind of expression I adopted whenever I thought of Rivendell, or London. A quiet, sad little expression tugged at the corner of my mouth.

"They're your people. It's your home," I finished without thinking about it. Legolas looked directly at me, his look of surprised melting into a crooked smile as me met my eye.

"Exactly."

We sat there in surprisingly companionable silence, enjoying the calm quiet of the surrounding forest for a few minutes, just thinking while we took a break from training and talking. I thought about the meeting I'd had with Galadriel as I perched there, along with all the things she'd said about me, and the others. It felt like it had happened weeks ago, even though it had barely been a day and a night since I'd gazed into that mirror. So much had happened in the mean time, but one thing suddenly rose to the forefront of my memory, something she had said about old tales, long forgotten names, and one of my companions possibly being able to help me, if I were to only ask.

I shifted to glance at Legolas again. He wasn't looking at me, instead leaning with his head back and his eyes closed, but I had the distinct feeling he had been watching me curiously moments before. Could he have been the member of the Fellowship Galadriel had been talking about?

There was only one way to find out.

"Can I ask you something else? Not about the shooting or your fancy title I mean," I spoke up seriously. Legolas opened his grey-blue eyes and turned his head to face me with a relaxed, but amused look.

"It certainly has not stopped you yet."

"Well, you have me there," I huffed lightly, turning so my hip was resting against the post and folding my tired arms over my chest. "You seem to know a lot of elven history off the top of your head. Have you ever heard the name Rávamë before?"

The other elf's smile wavered into confusion, and his spine straightened minutely, but noticeably.

"Why do you ask about that of all things?"

"It's one of the few things Lord Elrond ever managed to help me remember, just the name though. I don't know what it means, or why I remember it," I told him truthfully. He seemed to chew that over for a moment, but I could see the cogs turning, the reluctance growing in his expression. I unfolded my arms and leaned forward just a little so I could meet his uncertain eyes very clearly with my own. "Humour me? Please?"

That one little word obviously seemed to go a long way with him, because he relented with a sigh, rubbing his neck just below his left ear — a mannerism I noticed he only ever seemed to adopt when uncomfortable, or anxious.

"Alright, though I doubt I will be much help. I have only heard it in tales from when I was still a
child," Legolas said hesitantly, crossing his arms over his chest and adopting a pensive expression. "Rávamë was supposedly a Maia, one of the lesser spirits of creation called into existence when the world was formed by Eru Illuvatar. She was originally a vassal of Yavanna, the mother of the earth, but grew to admire and learn a great deal from Oromë, the great hunter. She, like many of the other Maiar, as time went by, eventually grew to embody a certain aspect of her patron Valar's domain, helping to shape the world around them and becoming something akin to guardian spirits, I suppose. Rávamë herself embodied the wild but balanced nature of all living beasts and animals Illuvatar created. Her nature was to be untamed and wild, but peaceful and protective at the same time. She had, after all, been taught in both the ways of the hunt by Oromë, but also instructed in the art of only taking what she needed to live from the earth by Yavanna. She was in essence, both a spirit of the predatory hunt, and the natural instinct all creatures have to survive."

I listened intently as he spoke, drinking in the words as they came and letting them whirl around inside my head.

"So she was one of the lesser known Maiar?" I said, a little breathless with intrigued excitement. "Is she still there, in the West?"

"No," Legolas answered. "She left Valinor, and the protection of her patron, Yavanna. According to the stories I heard, her untamed nature meant that she grew tired of the endless hunts and feasts among naught but the elves and other Maiar. She craved the chance to see and explore the rest of the world Illuvatar had created, and that she and the other Maiar had had a hand in shaping. So, when the first Men woke in the East at the first rising of the sun, she wilfully chose to leave Aman and seek them out. According to the stories, she found them, and taught them the ways of the hunt and survival in the same way Oromë and Yavanna had instructed her," he paused for a moment, shaking his head as if shaking fog from his thoughts and looking at me dubiously. "Though it is worth mentioning that these kinds of tales are old, even for the elves, and there is much debate over their accuracy," he added as if in warning. I nodded, though I didn't really hear him.

"What happened to her after that? Do you know?" I asked immediately, honestly not caring a fig at this stage whether the stories were accurate or not. Legolas shook his head.

"No one knows for certain. She was said to have disappeared somewhere in Rhûn to the East, long before I was born," he scratched his chin and said thoughtfully, more to himself than to me. "Before even my father was born, now that I consider it."

I leaned back against the fence next to him, staring up at the trees and struggling to turn over all the information I'd just had dumped on me. Rávamë, was a Maia, or had been once upon a time. The name that had been so infuriatingly elusive in finding finally had a meaning, an identity to go with it — though granted, it was the last thing I'd been expecting. Now that I had it though, I had so many more questions, but the only one I could make sense of in the midst of all the others rattling around in my head was: is that who I had been? I'd felt it like an instinct when I'd first said the name that it wasn't mine, but could I have been wrong? Could that have been who I really was all along?

Yeah, right.

If the story Legolas had just told me was true, Rávamë had literally been one of the semi-angelic spirits of creation, called into existence by Eru Iluvatar himself before the beginning of time — one of those second only in strength to the Valar themselves. The Maiar were meant to be powerful, graceful beings of infinite wisdom, beauty and knowledge, able to bend and shape the laws of the world with only a spoken word.

I, on the other hand, had trouble getting the lid off a jar of peanut butter most days.
I was neither graceful, nor powerful, not by any standards really. I doubted most would have even believed I was an elf if it wasn't for the fact that my ears pointed so noticeably out from under my wispy brown hair. Also, according to Legolas’s story, Rávamë had supposedly vanished some time during the start of the First Age, and that was well over 7000 years ago. Even if I was mad enough to believe I could have somehow been a Maia masquerading as an amnesia struck she-elf, I only had to look in a mirror to know I wasn't even a fifth that old. Elves who where touching on that ancient might not have been marred by wrinkles or grey hairs, but time had still left its mark on them. Lady Galadriel herself was a perfect example of that — the woman didn't look a day over thirty, and yet she left you with no doubt as to exactly how long she'd been treading the earth.

I had no idea how long I’d lived before my mind had been wiped, but however long it was, it wasn’t anything close to that long. I was sure of that, if nothing else. So if Rávamë had never been my name, then why was she so important that it had been the one thing etched so permanently into my mind? Why had that been one of the first and only things to claw its way out of my buried past? And there was another question. Why had Legolas — an apparent history buff, but not much more — been able to tell me what the name meant, when neither Gandalf nor Lord Elrond had? And even more unsettling; had they known but had simply not wanted to tell me? And if so, why?

Urgh, just trying to piece it all together was making my head throb.

Something warm appeared on my arm and I looked down to see Legolas had touched a hand to my shoulder in concern. My expression must have been a sight and a half because he suddenly looked worried.

"Are you alright?"

"I'm fine. Just trying to make sense of this all, and failing spectacularly," I replied, shaking the internal waffling from my head, and rubbing at my temples to get rid of the confused aches. "You say she disappeared sometime in the First Age? What happened to her? Where did she go?"

"The tales do not say," Legolas answered, dropping his hand from my arm though he still looked concerned.

"What? Not at all?"

"Not that I ever heard."

"How can that be? I mean, I get it happened a long time again, but history like that doesn't just vanish."

"I am certain if there was any more to the tale to be found, I would have read it at some point. There were few books regarding those old tales that I didn't finish," he stated matter-of-factly. I gave him a long sideways look, one eyebrow raised. He shrugged, but I saw his cheeks colour, "Though that was a long time ago, back when I was still but an elfling."

"You liked to read? As an elfling?"

A genuinely surprised smile tug at my lip. The mental image of a pint sized Legolas appeared in my head, sitting in a regal high-backed chair with a huge tome open in his lap, his little feet not quite reaching the floor, and my grin widened. His expression turned even more sheepishly embarrassed, and it made him look suddenly much younger.

"I was somewhat reclusive as a child," he explained, rubbing the side of his neck again and glancing anywhere but at me. "I used to spend a great deal of time reading histories and old tales in
the palace library instead of training, much to my father's dismay."

"You were a nerd," I giggled quietly in delight. "A history nerd."

Though he still looked faintly embarrassed, and a tad confused, he peered at me in a way that said he couldn't quite decide to be annoyed or pleased by the reaction.

"You would not be the first to think it foolish."

I gave my hand a short wave of dismissal, still beaming.

"Feh, their loss is my gain. No one else could tell me what that name meant," I leant back against the fence again and inclined my head to him again. "Thank you for that."

Maybe it was just my abruptly high spirits, but the smile Legolas gave me right then was enough to warm me all the way through to the tips of my fingers and toes.

"You are welcome."

I hadn't quite realised how close we were until I realised I felt the warmth radiating off him against my upper arm and shoulder. I shifted away instinctively, putting a somewhat more respectable distance between us before he could notice my unease, even though — bizarrely — I hadn't really wanted to go anywhere. His eyes flicked momentarily to the gap now between us, and I cleared my throat awkwardly, trying to ignore the twisting feeling in my gut that wasn't hunger.

"I should probably head back to the camp, I promised I'd join the others for lunch," I mumbled, suddenly remembering that I'd agreed to meet Boromir earlier that morning. I also really wanted the chance to mull over everything I had just learned in peace for a while. Legolas nodded, getting up from the fence and stooping to pick up his bow and quiver.

"I'll join you shortly. I have some things to see to first. We can continue training later, if your hands are not too sore," he gestured questioningly at where I was still clutching my armguard. I shrugged and wiggled the fingers of my free hand at him.

"They're going to have to toughen up sooner or later. Might as well be sooner."

He chuckled and nodded at that, and the sound brought a warm smile to my lips again. I bent down, picked up my own bow and quiver too, and was just about to turn to head off when I was stopped by a question.

"May I ask you something first?" Legolas said abruptly. I slung my quiver over one shoulder and turned back to him.

"Sure."

"Those words on your knife, what do they mean?"

"What words?"

"Those names carved into the handle of your knife. 'Andrew. Sophia. Theo. Katie. February 10th. Don't forget.' he quoted, reading from memory the eight words carved into the hilt of my gifted knife. My expression must have changed because he tilted his head to the side in confused concern, and asked more gently. "What do they mean?"

A dull, familiar ache appeared in my chest, right under my solar plexus. I swallowed quickly before
the lump could appear in my throat. I'd carved those eight important words into the wood of my hunting knife's hilt the same day I'd been taken in by Lord Elrond, almost three years ago. I'd done it so that no matter how long I was here, I would always remember where I'd come from, and what I was working to get back to. I was getting better at masking the sadness I felt at thinking about them by now, especially now that I had confided in the hobbits at least — a burden shared is a burden halved and all that. However, that still didn't make the instinctive unease about sharing my biggest secret go away. I hadn't been expecting to be confronted with the question so soon, let alone from someone who had unwittingly memorised the names of my parents, brother, and best friend back on Earth.

I just stood there for a moment, thinking furiously about what to say. All the while, Legolas just waited patiently with a curious but concerned look in his grey-blue eyes. Finally, I heaved a heavy sigh of defeat.

"It's a... long story. One I'm not really sure I'm ready to tell. Not just yet anyway," I answered, a hint of regret tinging my words. I wanted to tell him, honestly, but I felt on some instinctive base level that now wasn't the time. Not yet. Legolas's face fell a little, but he gave me a serene little 'I understand' nod of acceptance. I felt suddenly guilty looking up at him then, for not having the courage to just tell him then and there everything I'd told the hobbits. Then a thought struck me, and I indicated to him with a small smile. "I tell you what, I'll make you a deal. I'll tell you what they mean, if you tell me what mîr nín means."

Legolas's eyes widened slightly, and I saw the colour retreat from his face in very apparent shock.

"What?"

I raised my brows in surprise at him, having not expecting that kind of reaction at all.

"You said it when Haldir was taking that arrowhead out of me. I heard you. What does it mean?"

In the past few hours I'd seen many new expressions on the face of the tall elf. Humour, confusion, sheepishness, even honest worry — but I had never expected in my life to see genuine panic set in his normally calm face. He tried to cover it, smoothing his expression into a neutral mask, but he couldn't quite keep it from seeping into his eyes.

"It was a slip of the tongue. It means nothing," he insisted, very deliberately not looking me in the face. I clucked my tongue, stepped forward and took hold of his forearm. He almost flinched as my fingers brushed the skin of his wrist, stopping him from bolting.

"Oh no you don't, your highness," I countered firmly. "I might have lost my memories, but I'm not that far gone. Tell me what it means."

He looked helplessly away from me across the empty training grounds, his gaze flicking between his only escape route, and my hand still latched around his wrist, keeping him held there. His skin was noticeably warm under my palm, and odd as it was, I was sure the tips of his ears had gone ever so slightly pink. He cleared his throat and forced himself to look at me again with obvious effort.

"You truly do not know?" he asked, as if not quite sure if he believed me. I shook my head in honest response. My Sindarin was reasonably decent by now, but there were still some pretty big non-crucial gaps in my vocabulary that sorely needed filling.

"No. Should I?"
His face relaxed a little as he looked down at me, though he still bore something of a resemblance to a spooked stag getting ready to make a run for it. He gave me a tiny, slightly crooked smile.

"Perhaps someday I will tell you, but not today."

I sighed in defeat, but smiled graciously, letting go of his arm and staring to turn away.

"If you say so, Prince Charming."

"Must you keep calling me that?"

"Oh fine, I'll stop," I agreed, stopping and peering over my shoulder at him. I pointed a finger back at him. "But only if you promise to use my name from now on, no more of this 'my lady' nonsense."

His crooked smile became something far warmer, less formal, and just a little bit devious. For a moment I saw a glimpse of the playfully boyish expression he'd worn during our encounter the day before by the Looking Pools. It was a look that, despite its irritatingly smug handsomeness, I was growing rather fond of seeing on him.

"A tough bargain indeed," he said finally. "I'll see you later then, Eleanor."

I smiled back too, if a little more shyly, quickly turning and moving away before he could see the unwilling but pleased colour rising in my own face.

"See you later, Legolas."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: There we go! Another chapter done and dusted, along with another little clue to Eleanor's mystery past revealed (and just a teeny-tiny bit of teasing L + E banter/fluff.) Also, see if you can spot the very tiny Pocahontas ref hidden in there. XD

And now for some much needed sleep, since I'm posting this at 2:00am. See you next chapter!

~Rella
- Three Weeks Later -

“Could someone please explain why I’m the only one doing this?” I asked breathlessly, ducking just as the edge of Boromir’s sword missed my head for the fifth time in ten minutes.

“Because,” Aragorn’s reasonable tone came from somewhere behind and off to my left, “You are our only trained healer, and have already proved competent at evading close range attacks. It seems prudent for you to devote some time to honing the skills that will assist in keeping you alive, rather than pouring all your time and energy into offensive and potentially unreliable ones.”

I ground my teeth and did my best to keep my focus on the Gondorian knight who was currently attempting to behead me with a blunt training sword.

Since the tentative apology Aragorn and I had exchanged almost a month ago, the air between us had seemed to clear a great deal. We’d arrived in Lothlórien in late January, and even now well into February it was obvious he still wasn’t completely on board with the idea of me barrelling headfirst into danger along with them. Still, he made no more show of it. In fact, if anything, he seemed to have jumped on the lets-make-Eleanor-marginally-less-of-a-safety-hazard wagon with gusto. The stoic (read: grouchy) ranger had taken to dropping me a lot of tips and advice on everything from defending myself and evading attacks to escaping dangerous situations. They were small things at first; how to effectively hide a knife up a sleeve or in a boot, how to break a chokehold, how to avoid or parry a knife attack, etc. Then, it had quickly escalated into “assisting” with my other lessons…

Boromir pivoted on the balls of his feet, faster than a man his size should have be able to, and tried to catch me with a surprise upper cut with the pommel of his blade. I saw it coming just in time and spun out of the way with just inches to spare. The momentum unbalanced us both, and I took the chance to hunch over on my knees and gasp for much needed breath. We’d been at this for hours now, and good as I was at running, keeping up with a seasoned Gondorian warrior in a one-sided sparring match was an entirely different ballgame.

“Faster,” Aragorn ordered without pause. I groaned, but straightened and got ready to dodge again. Boromir readied his sword and gave me an inquiring raise of one eyebrow, a silent question asking if I was ok to continue. I gritted my teeth determinedly and nodded. He came at me again.

“I get that,” I rasped out in between even more sharp pivots and close-call dodges. “What I don’t get is why I’m the only one who’s been training for the past hour straight, while you’ve all been sitting there smoking!”

Aragorn didn’t quite let out an amused chuckle, but only because he managed to turn it into a would-be-polite cough at the last second.

“The more you talk, the less breath you’ll have to dodge, lass,” Gimli informed me with an audible grin. He was sitting on a flat rock beside Aragon with his own pipe, his feet resting leisurely on a tree root.
“Urgh!” I grumbled, barely missing having the end of my ponytail severed by another close swing. “Stop distracting me with your logic!”

“Surely learning to ignore unhelpful distractions is a key part of the exercise.”

“You’re not helping, Legolas!”

The accused just chuckled, and I threw him a glare as I dodged another of Boromir’s overhand swings. He was standing beside Aragorn with one shoulder leaned casually against a tree, arms folded and a teasing smile on his handsome face — the smug git.

My archery lessons with him had continued as regular as clockwork during our stay in the wood, though considerably less awkwardly than the first time. The pair of us met every morning to practice until lunchtime, and my aim and draw speed were improving if nothing else, thanks to my stitches finally being removed. Legolas insisted that, despite my initial clumsiness with the weapon, I was improving fast — though I wasn’t 100% sure whether he was being genuinely sincere or just messing with me. He had an odd sense of humour like that. Our talks had tended to skew more and more towards friendly banter than serious instruction lately, and though Merileth was appalled by the brazen way we addressed each other, Legolas and I both preferred it that way. It was a vast improvement over the hostile glares or tense silences that had once been so frequent between us.

In that time, my curiosity had almost got the better of me. I’d been very tempted to cheat our bargain and ask either Aragorn or Haldir what the words mîr nín meant, but in the end I’d decided against it. Half of me wanted to respect the fact that he simply wasn’t ready to tell me, but the other half was really curious about the reaction the other elf of our company had given when I’d asked. His pointy ears had turned pink for heaven sake.

“Ow!” A yelp of pain came from me as my toes were suddenly flattened under Boromir’s much heavier boot.

“Sorry!” For a second, his smooth-faced combat facade dropped, leaving him looking genuinely horrified that he’d hurt me. It was almost cute — considering he’d just been unapologetically swinging a sword at my head. I grimaced, hopping on one foot for a second and waving a hand to show I was fine.

“Pay attention,” Aragorn reprimanded, and I couldn’t tell if he was addressing me or my sparring partner. “You’ll have a limb taken off if you don’t keep your wits about you.”

I gave him flat look over one shoulder, and he returned it with a raised eyebrow. I serenely chose not spit a wiseass retort in his general direction. Baby steps on the road of progress.

“You know, it wouldn’t kill you to occasionally point out when I’ve done something right.”

“Praise will not keep you alive when an orc brute is attempting to take your head off your shoulders,” Aragorn replied smoothly and without a trace of sarcasm. He heaved a long sigh as I dodged another swing, clearly still too slow for his liking. “Either way, it matters little now. We shall be departing this place soon, regardless of your progress.”

“What?” I blurted, losing focus for half a second.

The pommel of Boromir’s sword clipped my left shoulder and I spun in a flailing pinwheel, falling inelegantly onto my butt in the grass. Boromir looked alarmed and gave me an apologetic look, but I waved him off, looking expectantly at Aragorn along with Gimli and Legolas.
“So, we’re finally to leave?” Gimli asked, sounding more disappointed than I’d expected him to be. Aragorn just nodded.

“Tomorrow at first light. We will have a day and a night to prepare, but I believe we have lingered here more than long enough,” he said, getting up from his seat on the flagstones and extinguishing his pipe with an ominous hiss. “Welcome and needed as our rest may have been, we cannot afford to tarry here forever.”

The other three men glanced at one another, but didn’t say anything in response. We all knew we would have to leave the Golden Wood eventually, but it was a subject no one had been keen to bring up, save for in passing. Even so, Aragorn — our de-facto leader in Gandalf’s absence — was right as always. We’d been here almost a month, and I doubted the world outside was getting any brighter with Sauron’s power amassing. We couldn’t afford to sit idly any longer, but that didn’t mean any of us were looking forward to leaving.

I pushed myself up on the grass into a sitting position. My right hand stung a bit where I’d scraped it on some stones.

“Have you told Frodo and the others yet?” I asked, thinking immediately to how saddened the hobbits would be to depart the wood. All four of them had grown very fond of the easy, worry-free routine of life in the here and now.

Aragorn shook his head at me, his face mirroring a similar feeling to mine.

“Not yet. We still need to decide on our course after we leave the safety of the forest. I will need to speak with Lord Celeborn on the matter,” he exhaled, stuffing his pipe into a pocket with a weary expression. “I shall tell the halflings. I’d suggest the rest of us begin preparations for our departure.”

He didn’t wait for anyone to comment or ask questions. He just picked up his sheathed sword, which had been sitting beside him, and turned to head back towards the camp.

In a moment of uncharacteristic sharpness, Boromir turned away from where I still sat on the ground and started after him.

Now, I don’t consider myself a snob; I wasn’t offended that he’d not offered me a helping hand up out of the dirt, as any gentleman would a lady. Yet, his inaction baffled me. Over the past two months I’d learned that Boromir, Son of Denethor, was pathologically incapable of being disrespectful to a woman, so much so it was almost verging on a handicap. Just a few weeks ago if he’d knocked me over, stepped on my foot, or so much as said “boo” in front of me, he would have likely been apologising repeatedly for the next few days. Now, it was like he hardly noticed the slight at all, as if he was constantly distracted from what normally would have bothered him — and it had only become worse over the past few weeks.

I watched as the two men left the clearing with a pensive look, leaning on my knees. Boromir had fallen in beside Aragorn, talking in hushed but harsh tones about something that clearly had the other man on edge. I saw the line of Aragorn’s shoulders tense and his expression turn to stone, staying that way until both men were out of sight through the trees.

Worry and a creeping dread filled me at that sight, though I couldn’t really explain why even to myself. I shook it from my head, and was about to get up unassisted when a familiar hand found it’s way into my peripherals, upturned in an offer to help me up. Once upon a time I would have scowled begrudgingly at the gesture and the man offering it to me. Now I just rolled my eyes and smiled, taking the hand, and allowing my fellow elven trainer to pull me up.
Thankfully, Boromir wasn’t the only one who’d shifted gears over the past month.

“You’re getting faster,” Legolas said, hefting me up off the ground and back onto my feet with little to no effort. I returned his smile easily.

“Pretty soon, I’ll be faster than you.”

“I would not bet coin on that,” he replied smoothly, adding a deliberately patronising look down his nose at me — one I’d learned was intended to tease, not to taunt. I made a show of considering the idea, tapping my chin with a finger, then shrugged and shook my head.

“No, I really think I would.”

“Aye, the lass has become pretty light on her feet of late,” Gimli’s gruffly amused chuckle came from where he’d just finished putting out his pipe. My smile widened, and I turned back to see Legolas eyeing the dwarf dubiously with a narrowed gaze. I poked him in the chest with my index finger.

“How about it, your highness? Willing to put your money where you mouth is?”

Legolas dubiously looked back down at me, sighed, then rolled his eyes, though his own good-natured smile had returned.

“Very well, my lady,” he said with mock solemnity and what might have passed for a chivalrous bow, if it hadn’t been for the mocking note in his voice. “By Elbereth’s (I) mercy, I swear that the day you best me in any such contest will be the day I gift you with half my inheritance.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” I grinned. A rare mix of amused contentment took his expression for a moment, but it faltered as his gaze fell on my right hand.

“Eleanor, you’re bleeding.”

I glanced down, only to find the scrape I got on my palm wasn’t so much a scrape as a moderate graze. It barely hurt, but it had broken the skin deep enough to seep a significant amount of blood down over my fingers without me noticing. I made a half impatient, half disgusted noise as it dripped onto my boot, and tried to wipe some of the mess away with my other hand.

“Do you need a gauze, lass?” Gimli asked, spotting my small but rather bloody cut as he came over.

I didn’t need one, but before I could say so an idea occurred to me. For the past week I’d been practicing, re-practicing, and building upon my healing routines that had been drummed into me by Lord Elrond, as well as replenishing all the remedies I’d used up in Moria. Merileth had been sweet enough to gain me access to Galadriel and Celeborn’s house library, and I’d been doing a little bit of extra homework on my healing studies in an effort to ready myself for when we left. It had paid off too, and in a few new ways I hadn’t shared with them yet…

I probably shouldn’t have done it; I could practically see the disapproving stare Lord Elrond would have given me for doing something so frivolous with my healing skills, but it was just too tempting.

“No thanks,” I smiled at them both, and held up my hand with a little flourish like David Blaine. “Watch this.”
Both elf and dwarf gave me a strange look, but focused their attention on my upturned hand. I did too, my body relaxing as my mind strained to focus on what I was trying to do. I’d done it before, albeit on smaller and less messy cuts and bruises, but it was a little trickier to do with an audience.

I concentrated on the feel of my entire body, and all the complex pieces that made it up. Then I focused on the steady beat of my heart, on the well of energy stored within me in the form of a billion chemical reactions all happening at once. Then, using my *fëa* (2) as a guide, I concentrated on my injured hand, trying as hard as I possibly could to focus on the natural healing processes that were already at work. It was a similar technique to the one I’d used on Frodo during the *limifëa* (3) back in Rivendell, only this time it was working in my skin rather than in my mind. I could feel the network of all the supportive energies and reactions that made up my *hröa* (4), and felt it as a warm tingling sensation as I concentrated a fraction of all that power into the palm of my hand.

At first nothing happened. Then, slowly, the bleeding began to slow, before stopping entirely as the inflammation of the skin around the shallow cut began to recede. It was like watching a time-lapse movie of a recovery, the tissue of my palm very slowly knitting itself back together again at about 10x the natural speed. Within seconds, the wound had closed entirely, and after a minute what would have otherwise taken a week to heal left only a tender, pink mark in its place.

“That is quite the trick,” Legolas said, something like real interest in his voice. I shrugged, trying not to look too pleased with myself.

“Something I’ve been practicing. I doubt it will be much help on anything deeper than small cuts and bruises, though.”

“Why’s that?” Gimli cut in, peering somewhat suspiciously at my half-healed hand. I gently rubbed the last of the blood from the fresh little scar, and lowered my faintly wobbly arm to my side again.

“Rapid healing like that uses up a lot of energy, even on small wounds, because the process is being accelerated beyond its natural limit. Speed-healing anything severe, like a deep wound, broken bones, or internal damage would take up too much crucial stored energy,” I poked my stomach, which was noticeably flatter and tougher now than it had been when we’d left Rivendell. “And I don’t know about you, but I’m not exactly packing much in the excess fuel department anymore.”

“You best look into putting some meat back on those bones then, lass. Just in case,” Gimli quipped without missing a beat. I gave the dwarf a narrow look, but he only smirked at me through his beard, slung his axe over one shoulder, and moved off to catch up with Aragorn and Boromir.

For a moment I was tempted to run and catch up with them too, but changed my mind at the thought of being there when Aragorn broke the news to the four hobbits. Merry and Pippin had taken to practicing with Aragorn and Boromir with their short blades in the afternoons while Legolas, Gimli, Sam, Frodo and I watched. They rarely woke early enough to come along to the morning training drills, and would likely only just be getting second breakfast underway back at the camp, merrily chattering the morning away.

My stomach growled at the thought. Just that little bit of accelerated healing had left my stores from first breakfast entirely depleted, and my metabolism was now demanding that I top off the tank posthaste. However, with the news that we were going to be leaving soon, there was something I wanted to do first. Or rather, someone I wanted to talk to.

I turned around to find that Legolas had stooped to gather the last of our training gear, both my bow and his slung casually over one shoulder.
“I’ll meet you all back at the camp. There’s something I have to see to,” I said to his back. He nodded and peered at me over his shoulder, that familiar half-smile pulling at his lips once again.

“If you run into Gweredir or Colion on the way, please ask them to put my sleeping mat back where they found it,” he called as I left. “I’d rather not have to climb to the top of that mallorn tree to retrieve it.”

~ ♕ ~

Merileth was working in the Water Gardens when I found her, a small but beautiful section of Galadriel’s own personal gardens that was almost entirely devoted to sprawling canals, clear fish ponds, water lilies, and a few little grassy islands with wooden bridges linking them. Several of the handmaidens had settled themselves on a few, chattering away and gracing me with polite smiles as I passed them.

I hadn’t seen much of Galadriel herself in the past few weeks, but I was actually alright with that. Instead, I’d been spending a great deal of my spare time with Merileth and a few of the other handmaidens. Despite my first impression of them, there were actually several who enjoyed talking about things other than gowns, gardens, and gossip.

Merileth had one of the smaller islands to herself while she worked, and as I crossed the bridge to reach her I saw why. Gweredir and Colion were playing by the side of one of the fish ponds, leaning over the water to see the bright gold koi while their big sister watched them with a small smile. It was a warming sight to see, and the thought of having to say goodbye to it so soon made my heart sink a little.

Merileth set down her needle and looked up from her work as she heard me coming, and we smiled at each other in wordless greeting as I approached.

“What are you working on this time?” I asked immediately, spotting the garment draped over her lap. It was made of an odd looking elven material in a shade of dark green, too heavy and warm to be a gown and the wrong colour to be part of any of the Galadhrim’s uniforms.

“You shall see later, my lady,” she said, still smiling knowingly. She patted the grass next to her and I plopped down comfortably as she returned to her work. For a moment we just sat there in companionable silence, listening to the soft chatter of the other handmaidens nearby, or the occasional laugh of the two boys. I chuckled at their antics, watching as Gweredir attempted to show is brother how to catch a fish with his bare hands. Merileth’s smiled again as she set down her work and turned to me, the expression turning a bit hollow.

“I hear you and your company are to depart soon.”

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“I hear you and your company are to depart soon.”

“Word gets around fast,” I said mildly, but nodded, unable to keep the dread at the thought out of my smile. “The others are making preparations now. Sounds as if we’ll be leaving tomorrow.”

Merileth’s face didn’t quite fall, but it was plain to see she was almost as saddened by the idea as me. She shook her head as if to banish the morose thoughts and graced me with another warm smile as she returned to her stitching.

“Gweredir and Colion have scarcely stopped talking of you and your companions. I trust they have been behaving themselves while in your company?”
A nervous cough escaped me.

Gweredir and Colion had been frequent spectators to mine and the others’ training sessions, much to Boromir’s and Gimli’s disapproval — something about innocent children being influenced by violence at a young age. I might have been inclined to agree, if I wasn’t privy to exactly how not innocent Merileth’s two little brothers really were. For all their good manners, polite words, and fierce desire to make their big sister proud, they were both mischief incarnate, and had become well known for their “games.” Games from which no one was exempt.

“It’s a noble effort to keep the morale of you and your company high!” Gweredir had assured me solemnly, right after I’d caught him slipping live beetles into Gimli’s boots while he was asleep.

“Oh, of course! Perfect little gentlemen, the both of them,” I lied, trying hard for her sake to sound sincere. Merileth paused in her sewing and gave me a skeptical sideways look. I gave her a sheepish shrug in return and she sighed, abandoning her needlework.

“I shall have to speak to them, again.”

“It’s alright, Merileth, really,” I said, giving her a gentle nudge and an earnest look. “They’re only trying to help. Keeping us cheerful, you know?”

She exhaled through her nose, but a small twinkle graced her brown eyes.

“I know. They once did the same for me whenever I grew sad or afraid, after my parents departed.” She set aside her needlework and turned to face me properly, her warm smile gaining a vaguely teasing edge. “You seem to enjoy doing the same for your companions, too.”

“What? Pulling pranks?”

“No,” she answered, chuckling. “Making them smile, even when it might otherwise be inappropriate.”

An unexpected laugh escaped me, and it caught Colion’s attention. He spotted me, grinned, and waved, almost falling face-first into the pond before Gweredir could catch him.

“I suppose I do,” I chuckled. “God knows we could use more smiles and laughs, what with…” I bit down on the words as I realised what I’d just been inches from saying. No one had specifically said not to talk about the true nature of the Fellowship’s task — the Ring, a journey into the firepits of Middle Earth, all that — but it had always seemed like a sensible idea to share that knowledge only on a strict “need-to-know” basis. I trusted Merileth enough myself, but I couldn’t speak for the others, and the Fellowship’s secrets weren’t mine to share.

Merileth tilted her head curiously to the side. She opened her mouth to ask something, then seemed to think better of it, sweeping the conversational hiccup away with a casual flick of a graceful hand.

“How goes the archery training?” she asked, seamlessly changing the subject. I didn’t quite exhale in relief.

“Fine, as far as I can tell. I’m not skinning my forearms with the bowstring anymore.”

“And what of your handsome instructor?”

I eyed her.
“What of him?”

“You both seem much closer now than when you first arrived,” she commented with a nonchalant smile and an elegantly casual shrug. “Or, at least, that seems the case on his part.”

Well, she had me there. My ‘handsome instructor’ and I had been training together every day for almost a month now. There wasn’t really any way to do that without getting to know someone well, and Legolas and I talked — a lot. It was actually a surprise how easy it was to talk to him now, considering how much we’d loathed each others company when we first met.

Still, I really had absolutely no dignified response to that kind of comment.

“I guess we have…” I continued to fail at sounding unconcerned, so I changed my tactic. I leaned an elbow on my knee, rested my chin on a fist, and gave her a fox-like smile. “So you think he’s handsome, huh?”

The regal elven woman looked at me serenely down her nose, one pale gold eyebrow raised.

“You do not?”

I shrugged.

“I do,” I said, hoping to sound indifferent. “But so what? Just because someone is pretty doesn’t make them interesting, or kind, or good company.” I deliberately neglected to point out that, since arriving in Lothlórien, I’d begun to find that he was in fact all of those things. Where I’d once had an only barely tolerable travelling companion in the blond elf, I now had — dare I say it — a friend.

Merileth giggled, and it sounded like wind-chimes.

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard anyone dare refer to the son of the Elvenking as ‘pretty.’”

I grinned at her, “And yet, you’re not denying it, either.”

She threw her head back and laughed at that. It was a light, honest laugh, one that rang just a bit too loud to be lady-like but was filled with so much genuine warmth that it didn’t matter. It was a beautiful sound, one that instantly brought a smile to my face along with the two boys and the other handmaidens who were nearby enough to hear…

It was pretty easy to see how Haldir had become so smitten with her.

I sat there grinning at that thought as she regained herself and wiped her eyes with the edge of her sleeve.

“If it is not too bold to say, my lady, I shall be sad to see you go. I have enjoyed your company these past weeks.”

I chuckled through a grin too, though mine wasn’t nearly as musical.

“It’s not too bold at all. I will be sad to go, too.”

We shared a quiet, faintly sad smile and looked out over the calm waters of the fish ponds, the surface occasionally rippling as a fish jumped at Gweredir and Colion’s antics. I chewed my lip at the sight of them, then turned once again to the lovely elven woman who’s become what seemed like my only female friend in a long time. “Merileth, I have to ask. What has been going on with
you and Haldir all this time?”

Her smile vanished instantly, her expression stuck somewhere between startled surprise and careful neutrality. She didn’t exactly blush, but I could see the beginnings of colour creeping up her pale neck from under the collar of her dress.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean we’ve been here almost a month, and every time I see you two together the air all but turns to sunshine and rainbows. But neither of you say anything beyond polite niceties,” I answered, displaying my masterful knack for subtlety. It had been a question that had been nagging at me for weeks, but I’d been too worried about offending her to ask. Now however, I was asking as much to slake my own curiosity as to hear Merileth’s reason for not pursuing anything with the Marchwarden, whom she so obviously adored.

She looked away from me, almost despairingly down at her discarded sewing.

“I-I don’t think… I mean, I simply…” Her voice faltered, and she sighed in defeat, not finishing the sentence.

“You’re in love with him, aren’t you?” I said gently, though it wasn’t really a question. Her shoulders slumped and she shrugged weakly.

“I believe he is my other half, yes.”

I furrowed my eyebrows at her, waiting for clarification. It didn’t come.

“You say that like you mean it literally.”

“I do,” she looked back at me, her dismay momentarily eclipsed by curious confusion, eyebrows pinched. “Did your parents never teach you of how Eldar find their intended?”

“I’m, well… having some issues with my long-term memory. Very long-term,” I answered feebly.

She just stared at me, and I shrugged helplessly. “Long story.”

She looked for a moment as if she wanted to question me further, but decided against it at the last second. I’d shared a lot with Merileth over the past few weeks, but there were still things I didn’t feel ready to try and explain to anyone unless I needed to. Instead she fiddled with a strand of her long pale blond hair, considering her words and regarding me pensively.

“It is not a precise science, but all elves can instinctively sense when they find one whom they have the potential to become close to, be it a friendship, or something more. Similar personalities and such, they’re drawn to one another, and the sensation is translated into our physical senses. Often, it is at first sight, sometimes by hearing their voice, or by feeling their touch,” she explained.

I raised an eyebrow at her.

“Love at first sight? Really?”

Merileth continued to look at me with perfectly seriousness, and I had to force the sceptical smirk from my face.

Slightly clichéd and soppy as it might sound in practice, when I stopped and really thought about it, it actually made sense. Elves were supposed to be much more in tune with their emotions and feelings than humans were (present London girls excluded). I guess it wasn’t all that big a surprise
that when they found someone they just ‘clicked’ with, the instinct spilled over to their dominant physical senses too.

“And that happened for you?”

“For me, yes,” Merileth said, her gaze drifting from mine as her cheeks coloured. “I knew the moment I heard him first speak my name. And though I know he feels something, I do not know if he feels the same as I do in return.”

It took all my self control not to slap a palm against the middle of my face.

“Oh for the love of…” I broke off suddenly and stared at her, eyes narrowed. “Wait a second, you mean he doesn’t know? You haven’t told him how you feel?”

Merileth’s cheeks upgraded from rosy pink to valentine red. She shrugged, and I lost the ability to restrain my face-palm.

Smack. Groan.

All this time I’d been labouring under the assumption at least one of them had owned up to how they felt. Emotionally repressed Haldir I could understand saying nothing — sort of — but Merileth? How she had managed to keep her painfully obvious feelings under wraps from him all this time was beyond me. Were I in her shoes, I think I would have suffered an aneurysm by now.

“I admit, I have not addressed my feelings to him as bluntly as you just did,” Merileth reasoned, utterly failing to mask her disappointment, “But he has never made any show of… reciprocation.”

I wanted so, so badly to slap her upside the head. For the life of me I couldn’t understand how the woman had failed to see exactly how much Haldir did want to be with her. Everyone else in the forest seemed to.

"What a delightful pair of love-sick idiots they make," Tink commented dryly.

"Preaching to the choir, Tink," I replied with an internalised sigh. I looked back over to where the two boys were still playing, mulling over the whole bizarre situation. That was when a thought struck me, a memory of something Legolas had told me about Haldir. It had been weeks ago, back when we had first started training together — were it not for our girly conversation about men I might not have even remembered.

The thought began to snowball the more I let it roll around in my mind, and as it grew, so did my grin.

"Eleanor?"

"Boss?"

I ignored both Merileth and Tink, catching Gweredir’s eye from across the pond. He looked up upon noticing me, and gave me a questioning tilt of the head. I smirked, and gave a tiny sideways nod of the head at his sister, who was still blushing furiously and eyeing me suspiciously.

Gweredir looked between her and me for a long moment. Then he got it.

From across the pond he mirrored my grin, and gave a very subtle nod for one so young.

“Perhaps the Marchwarden in question just needs a bit of a push,” I said only just loud enough for
the boys to hear.

"What are you…?" But Tink trailed off as she followed my train of thought to its conclusion. “Oh — oh wow, boss. That’s kind of harsh and manipulative, even for you.” I could all but feel her grin on my own face. "Let’s do it!

Merileth, meanwhile, had been watching me with puzzled eyes and a faintly concerned tilt to her head the entire time.

“A push?” she asked nervously. I nodded.

“Someone very wise once told me that some men fall in love, and some need a shove to get them moving,” I told her sagely, wondering briefly how Katie would have reacted had she known I was quoting her relationship advice to a love-sick elf maiden. Probably laugh herself sick.

Merileth’s concerned look only deepened at that statement, bordering on fearful.

“Said like that, you make is sound as if you plan to push him over a cliff.”

I gave her my sweetest smile, and got quickly up off the grass, heading straight towards Gweredir and Colion.

“Something like that.”

~ ♦ ~

Lothlórien, as far as forests went, really didn’t seem to care much for adhering to a strict seasonal protocol.

It still wasn’t quite spring yet, with the gold winter leaves still lingering on the trees, yet the days were getting longer, and noticeably warmer, by the time we were to leave. It was warm that morning as I stood there in the empty camp site on the day of our departure, staring around at the sunbathed clearing where we’d been camped, and unsure of what exactly I was feeling.

It had been decided the evening before that we’d be journeying down the river instead of on either the West or East banks. Several male elves, including Rúmil and Orophin, had been along earlier to help Legolas, Gimli and the hobbits carry the last of our supplies to the forest’s dock. I’d elected to stay behind to ‘make sure we hadn’t forgotten anything important.’

It wasn’t quite a lie, but only just. I had wanted to make sure I hadn’t forgotten any of the salves or remedies I’d been replenishing since Moria, but more than anything I had wanted to enjoy one last, quiet moment alone with my thoughts.

One more moment to remind myself of what, against every kind of better judgement I had, I was willingly leaving behind.

My thumb ran absently over the worn engraving on my knife as I stared up through the golden leaves, patches of watery blue sky growing brighter with the early morning sunlight. Ever since my meeting with Lady Galadriel and her handmaidens, it had been very quiet inside my head. Tink had been unusually quiet the past few weeks — peaceful even. She did, of course, occasionally chip in with her usual brand of subtle advice and snarky commentary, but for the most part she’d seemed
content to simply remain quiet, and watch the world outside from the depths of my subconscious. Just like she was now. I could feel her there as we both watched the gradually lightening sky. The ‘sound’ of her sad sigh echoed up through my thoughts.

"You ok?" I asked.

Tink didn’t reply for a good few moments, then seemed to exhale as the saddened sensation I felt coming from her deepened.

"It is beautiful here," she said quietly, as if that was explanation enough for her weeks of silence. "I’ll be sad to say goodbye. I feel as if this may be the last time we’ll ever see it."

The words had an unexpected effect on me, too. I’d expected to feel nervous about leaving the safety of Lothlórien, but all I felt at those words was a profound sadness. The kind of sadness you feel at leaving home, and knowing you’ll be gone a long time.

"Maybe, but I hope you’re wrong."

"So do I, boss."

I wanted to ask if there was something else eating at her, to say that there had to be more than just that as a reason for her weeks of voluntary silence, but in the end, I chose not to press her — not yet. She’d sounded so tired as she’s said those simple words, looking up at the gold-leaved canopy of the elven forest through my eyes. I’d take that over a confrontation with my survival-focused alter ego any day.

The memory of mine and Tink’s dreamscape standoff from a month ago had come uninvited to the forefront of my thoughts frequently. I still didn’t fully understand what had happened on that beach, what I’d experienced when I’d felt the pressure of her gaze on me, but whatever it was, it had left our strange mental alliance rather strained. Something had changed between us. I could feel it, even if I couldn’t put it into words. Whatever Tink was, beyond the primal personification of my survival instincts, I still wasn’t 100% sure. She had displayed so much more than just the raw desire to survive; she’d shown a desire for answers, for knowledge, and not just a willingness, but a want to speak with and listen to me.

Something about that was still bugging me. It didn’t add up, but I couldn’t work out why…

“Are we ready?”

A month ago I might have flinch-jumped at the sound of Aragorn’s voice appearing from nowhere behind me, but even the jumpiest of scaredy-cats learn eventually. I made myself remain relaxed, and turned to find him standing at the foot of the stone steps that lead down into the glade. His arms were folded and he was watching me with that sombre mask he always wore. I nodded with a small shrug, taking my hand off my knife hilt.

“Just about,” I said quietly. The camp site felt too quiet and too void of good smelling food, and I’d had my fill of reminiscing. The place didn’t feel the same without the hobbits, or Gimli, Boromir and Legolas, and I didn’t want the feeling of loss to linger. I drifted over to Aragorn’s side, glancing one last time over my shoulder at the long extinguished campfire. “You think we’ll ever come back here again?”

Aragorn breathed deeply before answering.

“We may.”
I chuckled, but it came out hollow as I looked up at him.

“You’re a terrible liar.”

“But not nearly as bad as you,” he smiled down at me weakly, giving up on trying to look unaffected by our leaving. He gestured with his chin for us to go, and we both left the empty camp without looking back.

It didn’t take us long at all to walk to the docks, especially at the speed of Aragorn’s strides. By the time we got there, the others had almost finished loading the boats down with our restocked supplies, having received plenty of help from several members of the Galadhrim, including Haldir and his brothers. At the behest of Lord Celeborn — Galadriel’s husband and near equal in the mystically cryptic department — we’d been gifted with three small boats that would be easy to hide whenever we needed to abandon them and carry on our journey on foot. The question of where we’d be leaving them was clearly still undecided, because Lord Celeborn was there in person, speaking in serious tones with Legolas and Boromir.

I say speaking; the elf lord was, for the most part, just standing there observing the man, elf and dwarf arguing, serene and noble with his silver blond hair and regal blue robes. Legolas, as per usual, looked unruffled and calm about whatever was being spoken about, Gimli was staring to look irritated, but Boromir looked by far the least happy of all. He was arguing in sharp tones and gesturing with his hands to the boats.

“… river cannot be crossed on foot! Osgiliath port is the nearest pass, and it has been overrun for weeks!” Boromir was saying, his tone a hair’s breadth away from exasperated.

“Your brother has been unable to retake it in your absence?” Gimli asked, raising a thick eyebrow at him.

“Despite my father’s expectations, Faramir is not a warrior captain. His strengths are not in direct confrontation,” Boromir replied without malice or judgment, merely as a statement of fact.

“If you are so determined to return to your city by a safer route, what is stopping you from turning back and taking the road via the mountains?” Legolas asked, a polite inquiry to anyone else, but I saw the tension in his hands and shoulders that gave away his annoyance.

I felt both my eyebrows raise. I knew from first hand experience by now that it took quite a lot to piss him off that much.

“I would advise against that,” Celeborn spoke for the first time since we’d arrived. He had a strong, gentle baritone, similar in temperament to Galadriel’s but lower and far less imposing. “That path is no longer safe. Captain Haldir’s scouts report that the way you took to arrive here is now all but overrun with orc packs still searching for you.”

Boromir visibly deflated at the news.

“Then we all have no choice but to take the river. We will have to choose a side before we reach the Falls of Rauros,” Legolas said.

“The Eastern bank will lead us closer to Mordor, even if I don’t relish the idea of venturing through Emyn Muil,” Gimli added with an almost invisible shudder, and Legolas gave the dwarf a slight wince of agreement at the idea.

“The Western bank would be safer, and easier on the hobbits,” Boromir started to argue again but Legolas cut him off mildly.
“And would also take us within a crow’s flight of Minas Tirith, coincidently.”

Boromir gave the elf a scathing look.

“Regardless of whether you wish to use my city as a sanctuary, the West bank would be…” he started, but broke off as he spotted Aragorn and I coming straight towards them.

Aragorn had a good pokerface, but Boromir’s wasn’t much better than mine. I knew there was something they had been arguing about earlier that I hadn’t heard, but from the sudden silence I was willing to bet a limb that it was about which road we would take when the river could take us no further. Neither man said a word to each other as we came to a stop, but the tension was so thick I was reasonably sure that if I stuck my knife into the air, it would have stayed there.

“My Lord Celeborn,” Aragorn greeted the regal looking elf lord with a formal incline of the head which he returned. “We must thank you again for your hospitality and shelter.”

“Your need was great and necessary, Estel, there is no need for formalities.” His dark blue eyes drifted over us all, lingering for a brief moment on each of us, me last of all, before returning to Aragorn. “However I must ask you delay your departure by a few moments more.”

Aragorn, along with Gimli and Boromir, gave the elf lord mixed expressions of confusion, surprise and mistrust, but Celeborn just chuckled, the sound a deeper pitched reflection of his wife’s wind chime laugh.

“You did not honestly think that the Lady of the Golden Wood would let you depart without tokens of our good will for your journey?” he asked, smiling so minutely it was barely visible. I glanced between the Lord of Lothlórien and the boats, where Sam and Merry had just discovered the lambas bread loaves, while Frodo and Pippin reluctantly rationed out the last of their pipeweed.

“I was kind of under the impression that we had three boat loads of generous good will already,” I said pensively. That garnered a true smile from Celeborn as he turned his gaze on me.

“True, but I believe the Lady wishes to be a little more specific in her gifts to you all than mere supplies,” he said, and tilted his head towards the entrance to the clearing where Aragorn and I had just come from. All of us turned to find said Lady of the Wood in all her golden haired splendour gliding towards us, garbed from head to toe in white. She was flanked by all her handmaidens, all of who’s arms were ladened with small bundles and rolled garments of the same fabric I’d seen Merileth working on earlier.

Galadriel graced her husband and my companions with a bright smile as she came to a stop, while each of her handmaiden in turn approached each member of the Fellowship with their respective bundles.

“Indeed I do,” she said with a near-mischievous glint in her eye. She gave her handmaids an imperious wave, and each of them carefully unfurled their bundles into long cloaks that had been made to fit each one of our heights perfectly, even the petite hobbits. “Myself and my ladies have crafted these for you and your company. Though they will not shield you from arrows or blades, they are formed from fibres of the trees of Lothlórien, and will help shield you from unfriendly eyes.”

Merileth approached me with a knowing smile, and I couldn’t help but smile back as she brought the moss coloured cloak to wrap around my shoulders, her sisters doing the same for each other member of the company. I held still as she carefully fastened the pin at the collar for me, so the delicately wrought metal of the leaf rested against the skin of my collarbone. Unable to help
herself, she straightened the fabric around my shoulders — a tad informal, but a familiar habit from when she’d helped me dress during my recovery.

“Not a gown this time I’m afraid, my lady,” she whispered sadly when she was satisfied with my appearance. I glanced down at the cloak, running a hand over the soft, but sturdy fabric. It felt odd to be back in my hunting greens again after so long. Ever since I’d agreed to let her dress me for dinner one night, she had insisted on garbing me in a dizzying array of beautiful handmade gowns at any opportunity. It had become something of a secret joke between us, and thinking of it made me realise how much I really was going to miss her.

“No, I suppose it’s not,” I replied quietly. When I looked back at my friend, she still looked saddened, but there was something else in her expression as well — something she was trying to hide, brightening her features underneath the solemnity. Curious, I inclined my head a little closer and whispered, “You’re smiling again. Any reason why?”

The pale elf maid’s cheeks flooded with colour, but she didn’t seem at all embarrassed about it like she had mere hours ago. She flicked her hazel eyes very slightly to the left where Haldir and the rest of the Galadhrim where watching the entire proceedings solemnly from a little way off.

I knew better than to assume the warm look in Haldir’s eyes in our general direction was a mere coincidence.

“I suspect you may know already, my lady,” she whispered back with a touch of accusation, but not bothering to mask her smile anymore.

I gave her my widest, beaming grin, and said nothing.

When each of the Fellowship had been garbed in their respective cloaks, Galadriel signalled another trio of her handmaidens, who stepped forward bearing not bundles, but several different objects of varying sizes. Galadriel took the second largest from the youngest maid and turned to Aragorn.

“Here is the gift of Celeborn and Galadriel to the leader of your Company,” she handed Aragorn a beautifully made sheath, inlaid with gold patterns that resembled both flowers and flames, and crafted perfectly to fit his sword. The ranger took the gift from Lady Galadriel with a half baffled and half awed look behind the formal facade. He dipped his head in a short bow of thanks, and Galadriel’s smile grew as she added quietly, “Though I doubt there is any greater gift I might offer than the one you already possess.”

Her crystal blue eyes lingered very deliberately at the base of his neck, and for a moment I had no idea what she was looking at. Then Aragorn shifted, and I caught a faint glint of silver. I’d never really taken much notice of the necklace he constantly wore there, usually covered by his shirt or cloak, but I recognised it now as the same one I’d seen Arwen wear so often back in Rivendell.

Aragorn’s face drew from confused into a neutral mask, but his eyes showed a flicker of deepest longing. He thanked Galadriel again and stepped back as she turned from him to Legolas.

“My gift for you, Legolas, is a bow of the Galadhrim. Worthy of the skill of our woodland kin,” with those words, she presented him with potentially the most beautiful bow I’d ever seen. It was carved from silver-white wood of the mallorn trees, and bizarrely looked both lighter and sturdier than his original dark-wooded Mirkwood bow. It must have been a real marvel of craftsmanship, because even Legolas looked hugely impressed and thanked her graciously in Sindarin. She graced him with a warm smile before moving on to Boromir.
To him she presented a large, but elegant looking double edged dagger with a wrought gold hilt, along with a sheath for it to lie in.

“The knife is weighted so that no matter how it is thrown, or from what distance, it shall always strike with the blade first. May you use it to defend that which you hold dear, Boromir of Gondor,” she told him seriously without breaking gaze, tapping a fingernail gently against the polished flat of the blade. Boromir looked at the towering elf lady with an expression I couldn’t interpret, something lost between uncertainty and mistrust. He managed after a moment to bow respectfully and offer his thanks, though his voice sounded croaky.

I eyed the elegantly made knife as Boromir attached the sheath to his belt and couldn’t help but feel a twinge of envy for its design. I’d lost count of the number of times I’d hit a target with the blunt end of my own knives when I’d still been learning to use them.

Finally, Galadriel came to the four hobbits, the first of which were Merry and Pippin, both of whom looks rather nervous standing before the regal elven lady. Their nerves were quickly banished, though, when she presented them both with identical, silver, belted sheaths for their short-blades and assuring them quietly that they would both find their courage when the time came. Both belts were beautifully wrought with gold buckles made to resemble the gold flowers that grew in the wood, and the two hobbits thanked her profusely with reddened faces.

Next, Sam was gifted with a length of incredibly strong, silvery elven rope, along with a small box with the Sindarin letter “G” carved into the lid. Galadriel explained without any question that the box contained a small amount of earth from her personal orchard, and that when Sam returned home to his own beloved garden, the flowers of Lothlórien would grow where he chose to sprinkle the soil.

“Thank you m’lady,” he said sincerely as he took both with reverence, then glanced between Merry and Galadriel sheepishly. “I don’t suppose you have run out of those nice, shiny daggers?”

Galadriel beamed fondly at him but gave no reply. Then she turned to me.

“And for you Eleanor, my gift comes as two halves.” She took a small leather pouch from a nearby handmaiden and offered it to me. I took it gingerly, and when I gave a questioning glance she nodded in encouragement for me to look. Inside were six different types of dried flowers, neatly tied off and perfectly preserved for medicinal use. A few I recognised, but several I’d never seen save for in the books I’d been assigned during my apprentice training.

“The flowers of Lothlórien are not only a balm to the eyes, but also to the body, when in the hands of a talented healer and tea brewer,” she said, and a note of amusement slipped into her tone. “May you use them wisely when you venture beyond the borders of this wood.”

She met my gaze warmly, but her eyes held mine for a moment too long to mean nothing. I swallowed at the nervous anxiety in my throat.

“Thank you,” I said, giving a nod of thanks since I still had no idea whether I was meant to bow or curtsey, and carefully tucked the pouch into my medical satchel. “But, what did you mean by ‘two halves?’”

“I mean this,” she said simply, taking my hand palm up in hers and withdrawing something very small from within one of her long, bell-like sleeves. The object she pressed into my palm turned out to be a tiny, cut-crystal vial, about the size of a thimble. It was so tiny you might not have noticed the pale, cloudy, liquid inside if you weren’t looking closely, held inside by a delicately wrought silver stopper dangling from a long, thin chain. For cut glass and silver it felt warmer than it should
have in my hand, like it had been left in direct sunlight for a little too long.

“What is it?” I asked, looking at it with interest.

“An extremely rare poison.”

My curious gaze flicked up to her.

“Poison?” I blurted, somewhat shocked. “This kills?”

“Not precisely,” Galadriel explained patiently, a peculiar mix of amusement and sadness on her face. “It is a poison, but it does not take the life of the drinker.”

I looked up at her blankly, trying to read the expression on her face.

“What does it take then?”

“Memory.”

“Memory?”

She nodded.

“One hour’s worth, prior to the time of its consumption.”

I blinked stupidly at her, then looked at the tiny vial nestled in my hand.

“Seriously? Her gift to you is a magic roofie?” Tink whispered in my head, sounding both confused and unimpressed. Lady Galadriel took one look at the baffled expression on my face — a look that Tink I likely both shared — and started chuckling. I felt my cheeks warm a little and cleared my throat to try and scrape back some of my dignity.

“No offence intended, my lady,” I stated as politely as I could. “But I can blame half my current problems on self-induced amnesia. How is having a one-shot memory scrubber going to help me, or anyone for that matter?”

“Having it will not change anything, child. It is what you choose to use it for that matters,” she told me simply with a light shrug. Then, just for a moment, her expression turned deadly serious, and it added the weight of her inhuman age to her features. “Just as you chose to take your own memories.”

My stomach did an odd flip-flop manoeuvre and my eyes widened before I could stop them. I stared from her down at the vial, and had to resist the urge to drop it like it would burn me.

“You mean… this is the same thing I took when…?”

She didn’t give me a direct answer. She only pointed to the vial’s lid with an elegant finger.

“Read the inscription.”

I peered closer at the beautifully crafted pendant and saw that tiny letters had been carved into the silver of the stopper — what looked like a proverb written in Sindarin.

“‘Orthor goth nín, orthor im nín. (5) ‘Defeat my enemy, defeat myself?’ I read aloud, though quietly, then looked back at her. “I don’t understand.”
“I know, child,” she said gently, taking the little vial of memory poison from my hand and draping the chain carefully around my neck so it hung safely over my heart. “And that is the point. When you know enough to understand what those words mean, you will know what to do with it.”

I immediately opened my mouth to say more, to ask more — but something in Lady Galadriel’s eyes in that moment stopped me. She didn’t look unfriendly or unwelcoming, but there was something her expression that left no doubt she could not, and would not, say anything more, and that for me to pry would be unwise.

So I shut my gob, thanked her again for her generosity, and watched as she turned regally upon Frodo. The dark haired hobbit seemed strangely calm as he stared up at her, the elf lady all but towering over him. The she wore a strange expression of calm as she took a velvet pouch from a handmaiden, and withdrew from within a cut crystal vial a great deal larger than mine. Unlike mine, it had been sealed shut, and held inside what looked like clear water — but instead of mirroring the light coming through the trees, it seemed to be giving off a gentle light all on its own.

“And to you, Frodo Baggins of the Shire, I give the light of Eärendil, our most beloved star,” she said with reverence, handing him the softly glowing bottle. “It has been captured in water from my own mirror fountain. May it be light for you in dark places, when all other lights go out.”

Frodo didn’t say a word. I’m not entirely sure he could. He seemed awestruck by the sheer beauty of what he now held in his hand. His thanks was considerably more eloquent than mine had been, and Galadriel gave him a sad smile, pressing an almost maternal kiss to the crown of his head.

“Namárië (6), Frodo Baggins,” she said sadly.

Then, finally, she turned her ancient blue eyes on Gimli.

The red-haired dwarf warrior had remained utterly and unusually quiet since she’d arrived, resting a scarred hand on his axe, his helm tucked under one arm, and refusing to look up at her face as she towered over him.

“And what gift would a dwarf ask of the elves?” Galadriel asked him seriously, almost curiously.

“Nothing,” Gimli answered immediately, his roughened voice quieter than normal. He paused for a second, and then looked up to meet her crystal blue gaze down at him and said quietly, “Except the privilege to look upon the Lady of the Galadhrim one last time, for she is fairer than all the treasures and jewels beneath the earth.”

Galadriel threw her head back a laughed. It was obviously a shock to more than just me, because a couple of the handmaidens visibly jumped. The rest of the Galadhrim just looked puzzled by their Lady’s reaction, while Celeborn only smiled and Gimli’s face turned nearly the same shade of red as his beard.

“Let it never be said that dwarves cannot be sincerely charming!” Galadriel stated warmly when she had finally regained herself. There was no trace of irony in the smile she gave the dwarf. “Yet, there must be something I may offer you, Gimli, son of Gloin.”

Gimli shook his head and mumbled something incoherent, but then he hesitated, toying with a thought.

“Actually, there was one thing. No, no, I couldn’t. It’s quite impossible. Stupid to ask…” he broke off into embarrassed mumbles that only Galadriel was near enough to hear, but as he spoke I saw her warm smile brighten even more. I might have been able to hear if I’d been given the chance to
really concentrate on indulging my eavesdropping habit, but Legolas chose that moment to put a warm hand on my shoulder, drawing my attention away from them.

I turned to see him staring past me, his new bow clutched in one hand and his expression both surprised and confused.

“Something wrong?” I asked quietly, eyeing him. He opened his mouth to reply, then closed it and resigned himself to simply indicate at what had obviously drawn his attention. I followed his gaze past where Aragorn was now speaking with Celeborn, and where Boromir and Rumil were helping the hobbits load their gifts and packs the boats.

Immediately I saw what — or rather, who — had caught his attention.

On the other side of the clearing, apart from the rest of the Galadhrim and the handmaidens, stood Haldir and Merileth. They were speaking quietly and with fond gazes as they usually did, but there was something very different about them now. This time, instead of that awkward formality I’d seen before, I could see quite clearly that the fingers of both their hands were intertwined. They were speaking in the quiet, soft tones of those sharing secrets. After a moment Haldir lowered his head to whisper something to her. She smiled warmly, her eyes twinkling with joy, but before he pulled back entirely, he left her with a soft kiss on the cheek. I half expected Merileth to float off the ground, her face all but glowing as she smiled up at him.

There was still the tiniest trace of that shyness between them from before, pink staining both their cheeks, but now it was more for proprieties sake rather than out of uncertainty about each other.

They both looked blissfully happy.

“Oh, that,” I said cheerfully, unable to keep the massive grin off my face.

“How did—? I assumed they…” Legolas just shook his head, rubbing his temple as if trying banish an oncoming headache, and I tried not to chuckle at the sight. “I feel as though I have missed the climax of a particularly unusual jest. When did this happen?”

“About three hours ago, if my sources are as trustworthy as they claim,” I said with a shrug, looking back at the happy couple with a sly smile.

“Your sources?” I could all but hear Legolas’s eyebrow raise. “Tell me, when did you acquire sources?”

“Since I decided that the both of them deserved a little extra leaving gift in return for saving my life and helping me recover, respectively,” I stated primly. I received silence in reply, and when I looked back I found Legolas giving me the flat look of an annoyed predator, or an impatient A-level teacher. I sighed in defeat and put both my hands up. “Fine. I may have taken steps to give Haldir the impression that it was a certain elf prince of full Sindar decent who was interested in pursuing Merileth’s affections.”

My companion’s jaw fell open. I just smiled sweetly at him.

“I also may have suggested that he’d better make his move fast, lest his beloved maiden be swept off her feet by another man.”

Legolas just shook his head and groaned.

“No wonder he has been sending me such hateful looks this past day. How did you even…?” But he broke off, narrowing his eyes down at me as I smiled innocently. “The two brothers, Gweredir
and Colion?”

I put both hands out to either side of me innocently.

“They were apparently very convincing. Utterly distraught over the idea that their beloved sister may one day be whisked away to live in a strange land in the North by an equally strange elf princeling,” I couldn’t help but add just a little dramatic flair, placing the back of my hand against my forehead in the typical ‘fainting damsel’ pose. Legolas covered his face with his hand.

“I cannot decide whether I am impressed or horrified. That mind of yours is a dangerous thing.”

I chuckled merrily and poked him in the middle of the chest through his hunting leathers. “Consider this restitution for that scene you on me pulled back at the Looking Pools.”

A quiet laugh I recognised as Merileth’s came from behind me, and I turned to see my friend trying to cover her laughter at something while Haldir tried and failed to hold back a fond smile. I beamed at them.

“You have to admit, they do look very happy together.”

Legolas exhaled, but I could hear a smile creep into his voice as we both watched the new couple.

“That they do.”

The two of us stood there for a long silent moment, just enjoying the sight. Eventually I found myself turning to glance up at the elf standing next to me, only to find him already looking at me with a peculiar expression. He was still smiling, but it was a different kind of smile to the one I’d seen only seconds before. I still can’t really say why, but in that moment I suddenly felt incredibly self conscious under that grey-blue gaze.

My face went uncomfortably warm, and despite my efforts to look unaffected, my pokerface just wasn’t any good. I bit my lip and looked away.

Out of my peripherals I saw Legolas’s smile vanish. He cleared his throat a little awkwardly and also looked away, apparently suddenly fascinated by the texture of a nearby tree stump.

“I’m going to go. Make sure Merry and Pip aren’t making sandwiches out of the lambas,” I mumbled quickly. Legolas also muttered something about bidding the Galadhrim a proper goodbye, but I was already striding away before I had the chance to do or say anything like, well, me.

Merry and Pippin hadn’t gone and made sandwiches, thank God. Though that hadn’t stopped them for eating four lambas loaves each.

“One bite will fill the stomach of a man, my arse,” Tink clucked her tongue in a noble effort to distract me from my awkward moment with Legolas. "Clearly they never planned on catering to hobbits."

I laughed silently inside my head, but didn’t try and reply.

When Aragorn had finished speaking with Celeborn and the last formal goodbyes had been made, we all took to the boats. Frodo and Sam were in one with Aragorn, the two significantly lighter hobbits sitting up front while Aragorn paddled from the back. Boromir, Pippin and Merry had the same setup in their boat, while Legolas, Gimli, and I had the last. Gimli had been less than sanguine about getting into such a small raft with such a high chance of it tipping, but he’d
managed to settle down after Legolas had helped him in to sit just in front of me, while Legolas steered from the back.

The entire Galadhrim, Galadirel, Celeborn, and all the handmaidens remained on the shore to see us off. As we cast off from the dock I spotted Merileth with her brothers along with Haldir close by. I’d said my official goodbyes to the boys and their sister earlier, but that didn’t stop me returning their frantic waves and calls of good luck as the current carried us away from the shore.

Gimli grumbled at me halfheartedly to stop rocking the boat, but I politely ignored him until the current caught us, and my friend and her family were well out of sight. When they were, the smile fell from my face. I was about to turn and face ahead when I caught Legolas’s eye, he was looking at me again, only this time his expression was concerned rather than, well, whatever that had been before. I tried to give him a reassuring smile to show I was fine, but gave up halfway through and looked away.

I’d always been terrible at hiding my emotions, and Legolas had had more than enough time to learn to read my expression during our month’s training.

Pity it hadn’t worked as well likewise. To me he was still about as easy to read as a rocket science manual written in ancient Babylonian.

“Little did I imagine I would endure such a wound without ever entering battle,” Gimli’s grisly voice sounded more morose than I’d ever heard it before as he stared out ahead of the boat. “For I have looked upon that which is fairest in this world, and yet know what I will never gaze upon it again.”

I inclined my head curiously to him.

“You wished to stay? But you chose to journey onward with us?” I asked, surprised to hear Gimli of all people was as sad as the hobbits and I were to say goodbye to the Golden Wood. He sighed sadly.

“Aye, lass, I did some,” he answered softly, turning his head slightly towards me. “I doubt I shall ever call anything fair again, unless it be the Lady’s gift to me.”

“What was her gift?” Legolas asked quietly from behind me. Gimli turned his head away to look ahead so we wouldn’t see his face, but we could both hear the joy mixed with sadness when he answered.

“I asked for a single thread from her golden hair,” he told us quietly after a long pause. “And she gave me three.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
(1) Elbereth — directly translates to “star queen” in Sindarin, and is the elves’ name for Varda, the greatest of the female Valar.
(2) fëa — “soul” (Quenya)
(3) limifëa — lit. a “soul link” (Quenya)
(4) hröa — “body” (Quenya)
(5) Orthor goth nín, orthor im nín — lit. “Conquer my foe, conquer my self.” (Bit of trivia: Tolkien never invented a single word for “myself” in elvish. He did however invent other unique words for obscure things like “wolf-howl,” “body of orcs,” and “shaggy hair.”)

(6) Namárië — “Goodbye” (Quenya elvish, an older and more reverential form of farewell than any Common speech version)

(7) For the non-Tolkien nerds among us — the significant of this is a reference to Feanor and his request to Galadriel during the First Age. He, one of her own kin, asked her three times for a single strand of her golden hair (the original inspiration for the forging of the Silmarils), and each time she rejected him, seeing through her abilities that there was nothing but pride in his heart. Yet thousands of years later she willingly gifted three to Gimli, a dwarf, when he humbly asked for only one to remember her beauty by. Make of that what you will. :)

A/N: Well it’s been a long old wait for this update, but I have good reason! This past month and a half has been a riot of things going on, the biggest of which is that after a long time searching I landed an internship in London! The past few weeks have been spent moving down there, getting started, and dealing with several ensuing work related dramas (none of which are serious, but have left me with limited free time.) All of which has left me with very little time to write. It’s been a long time coming, but we are finally out of Lothlorien! It’s the block-trap of all LOTR fanfic writers, I swear. Everyone I know who’s ever written something like this always gets stuck here. Glad we can finally move on, I’ve been dying to get to the next few chapters.

Next chapter is already in the works! Check my profile page for updates and news on my progress if you’re impatient. Promise I’ll try not to keep you waiting so long this time. Oh, and for those of your who were curious, the micro-Pocahontas ref in the last chapter was the “both eyes open” line. XD Still, there were a load of really good guesses!

Much love and thanks! See you next chapter lovely readers!

~Rella
“What do you call a psychic hobbit that has escaped from a dungeon?” Pippin yelled over the gap between the boats, and I could hear his grin even though I couldn’t quite see it.

We’d been floating down the River Anduin in the elven boats for three days straight, though it felt much longer. For all the drama and regal goodbye, the trip since we’d left Lothlórien had been, and there’s no nice way to say it, kind of dull — and had gone some way to showing me why film directors chose to use time-skip montages. Honestly, the whole thing was starting to feel like some bizarre parody of a road trip; one in which we had been spending an average of four hours at a time floating down the river, only stopping to eat or sleep on the banks.

Naturally, this meant the hobbits and I were bored out of our mined within the first few hours, and in the absence of a decent book or an iPod, this of course meant we had to resort to other means of keeping ourselves sane. During the first few days we’d told stories, each of us taking turns to pass the time, though I somehow ended up telling more than the others. Then it had somehow escalated to raunchy pub songs, provided mostly by Merry, Pippin and even Gimli — who’d clearly had enough practice with drunken singing to become rather good at it even when sober. Eventually Sam and Frodo had pitched in with some less vulgar ballads, which in turn had pulled the rest of us into the fray.

We’d been cruising comfortably downstream for about three hours on the fourth day, by which time the conversation had deteriorated thus:

There was a beat of ‘um’ing and ‘ur’ing as everyone thought about Pippin’s riddle for a moment. Then, finally, Frodo caved first and called back from the boat several feet ahead.

“We give up! Tell us!”

Pippin’s grin widened.

“A small medium at large,” he answered cheerily. Laughter erupted from all directions over the sounds of the water and the creaking of the boats. We were quite spread out, but still close enough together for me to see wide smiles on Frodo’s, Sam’s and Merry’s faces, and the amused quirk of Aragorn’s lip.

“Point to Pippin!” I announced, having been tasked with keeping track of who was winning the ‘how-many-bad-jokes-can-I-come-up-with-that-no-one-has-heard-before’ game. “My turn now! What do you get when you cross Middle Earth with the Silvan elves?”

There was a collective spattering of thoughtful sounds, but no guesses. I grinned slyly, then answered.

“About half way.”

Aragorn actually laughed a deep rolling chuckle at that, though there were only puzzled sounds from Merry, Pippin and Gimli who all seemed to have not quite understood the punchline. Legolas had got it, though.

“That was low, Eleanor,” he chided from where he was steering the boat behind me, but I could
hear his laughing smile without turning around.

“You have a better one, your highness?” I asked primly over one shoulder.

He paused for a moment, thinking, then said:

“What do you call a beautiful woman on the arm of a dwarf?”

No one knew, and I could practically feel Legolas’s self-satisfied smile against the back my neck.

“A tattoo.”

Gimli made a sputtering sound and spun to glare at the elf. His outrage was rather spoiled by a cry of panic as the boat suddenly lurched, and the hobbits crowed with giggles.

“Now that was low!” I snickered as Legolas tried to steady the boat, still chuckling.

“Anyone want to challenge that one?” Merry asked with theatrical seriousness. There was a seconds paused before Sam — who had been working mostly on conquering his fear of boats rather than jokes this whole time — raised his voice from a little way ahead of us.

“I think I might have one. Heard it a while back in the Green Dragon. Though it might be a bit inappropriate…” he trailed off, going a bit red and glancing between po-faced Aragorn, a still grumbling Gimli, and serenely smug-looking Legolas.

“There’s no way it can’t be worse than that one Merry had about the Troll and a lace apron, Sam,” Frodo reassured him with a kind smile. “Tell us.”

Sam hesitated for a moment, then finally relented with a nervously reluctant smile of his own and spoke up in his distinctive Somerset — excuse me, Shire — accent.

“An elf, a human, and a dwarf walk into a tavern. The elf orders a wine, the human orders a beer, and the dwarf orders an ale. The barkeep sets their drinks down before them, and each one notices a fly in his drink. The elf frowns, turns up his nose, and pushes the glass away. The human frowns, flicks the fly out of his beer, and starts drinking. The dwarf frowns, carefully picks the fly out of his ale, and yells, ‘SPIT THAT OUT, YE WEE BASTARD!’ * * ”

Legolas threw his head back and laughed behind me in the boat along with the hobbits, and I tried to ignore the pleasant shiver the sound sent up my spine. Gimli, on the other had tried for a gruff snort, but even he couldn't quite keep an amused twinkle from his eyes.

“Keep that laugh going, wee masters. I’d love to see any of you try and out-drink a dwarf,” he shot a look past me at Legolas. The elf only smiled pleasantly at him, before directing his attention to Aragorn. The man hadn’t said a word (save for the rare chuckle and even rarer laugh) in the several hours since we’d started the silly game.

“I believe it’s your turn now, my friend.”

Aragorn frowned and narrowed his eyes back at the blond elf.

“I think not.”

“Come on, Aragorn,” I chided, unable to hide my glee at the idea. “Everyone’s contributed at least one. There has to be at least one good joke rattling around in that stoic head.”
Aragorn paused in his paddling and sent me a gimlet look across the water. I smiled cheerily back at him, assured in the fact that not even he could hit me upside the head with the oar from that distance. He rolled his eyes and refocused on the river ahead, and I thought for a moment he wasn’t going to join in. He surprised us all by speaking up in a perfectly serious tone a few seconds later:

“How can you tell when an elven archer has run out of arrows?”

 Silence. I wasn’t really sure if it was because no one had any guesses, or they were too surprised that Aragorn actually knew a joke. Pippin cleared his throat, and peered at him nervously.

“How?”

Aragorn gave an uncharacteristically sly smile and glanced very pointedly over at Legolas.

“He switches to the stick up his backside as a reserve weapon.”

Gimli let out such a sudden, booming belly laugh that I almost fell sideways out of the boat. Merry and Pippin also burst into unexpectedly loud guffaws, while Frodo, Sam and I exploded into spluttering giggles which only got worse the harder we tried to stop. I could all but feel Legolas glaring at the back of my head as I coughed and rubbed at my mouth, trying to force down my grin.

Aragorn just smiled and looked pleased with himself.

A less pleased noise came from the boat just behind us, and Gimli and I both turned to see Boromir looking rather put out. He was focused intently on steering the boat, the look on his face so sour and severe, you’d have thought he’d been made to eat something that had passed through a rodent’s digestive tract. He’d been so quiet for the past few hours I was ashamed to say I’d almost forgotten he was there.

“The joviality not to your tastes, laddie?” Gimli asked, his tone gruffly jibing. Boromir’s expression didn’t so much as twitch towards something warmer. He didn’t quite scowl, but there was something lurking in his eyes that seemed intent on keeping his attention on less pleasant thoughts.

“I only presume to think it would be wise for us to keep our voices down, assuming we wish to continue travelling this river in secrecy,” he said stonily.

Actually, he had a good point there.

Fun and as good a way of passing time as the games and songs had been, they weren’t exactly subtle, and we were supposed to be travelling in secret, theoretically.

The joy gone, our convoy fell eerily silent after that, a silence that lingered even after we’d landed the boats on the bank beneath some low trees and set up camp for the night. For the past few days we’d been camping on the river banks I’d been called upon several times to tell more of my “unusual and entertaining” stories around the fire during supper. I had been just a little bit gleeful at the chance to unleash more Disney, Brothers Grimm, and occasionally Shakespeare on them all again — especially after privately letting slip to the intrigued hobbits that many of them were tales from my home world.

That night however, no one was in the mood to tales, or idle chatter to pass the time. We all ate in near silence, and as darkness started to fall, we split off to ready for the last night we’d spend sleeping on the riverside. I went about my usual habit of making everyone a small cup of tea to
help with restless sleep before turning in myself — partly as the routine was familiar and comforting, but it also provided me with an excuse to keep a lingering eye on something. Or rather, someone.

Boromir hadn’t stopped looking and sounding exhausted and distracted during the journey down the river, but at camp he looked ten times worse. He’d collapsed onto his sleeping mat and closed his eyes at almost the first opportunity, but I could tell by the set of his shoulders that he wasn’t asleep. He had looked forward to finally moving on from the Lothlórien, though he was probably the only one of us who held that particular opinion. Something about the elven wood, or perhaps its occupants, had continued to unsettle him greatly, and he had become progressively more agitated and short-tempered as his sleep became more troubled. More than once I’d found myself having to shake him awake from a frantic nightmare before he could rouse anyone else in the camp. He tried every time to brush it off as if it was nothing — but the dark circles forming under his eyes, and the chalky pallor of his face whenever he woke told another story.

He’d asked me to say nothing about it to the others, so I hadn’t, but only because I had the sneaking suspicion it wasn’t simply the nightmares that were interfering with his sleep anymore.

You only needed to see the way he eyed Frodo, who had taken to keeping the Ring around his neck at all times, out of his peripherals whenever he was near to guess, and I wasn’t the only one who’d noticed. Aragorn had seen it too, long before I had I think, but I only knew that because I recognised the coiled, spring-like posture and too-neutral stare he adopted whenever he saw Boromir get too close. It was the same posture he’d worn when I’d seen him training with Elladan in Rivendell — right before he’d been about to unleash a lightning fast counter blow that would all but knock the wind out of the elf warrior.

We’d seen the looks on each other’s faces one night and, understanding what it meant, we’d both silently agreed to keep an eye on them both during the remainder of the trip, just in case.

“Have some food, Mr Frodo.”

On the other side of the dying fire, past where Merry, Pippin and Gimli were already snoring, Frodo stared out over the murky water. Sam was offering a small roll to him, but the dark haired hobbit was shaking his head, face paler than usual in the gloomy moonlight.

“No, thank you, Sam.”

“You haven’t eaten anything all day. You’re not sleeping neither. Don’t think I haven’t noticed,” Sam insisted, coming to sit down beside him. He rested a hand on his friend’s shoulder, and I could hear the concern in his voice from across the camp. “Mr Frodo—”

“I’m alright, Sam. Really,” Frodo lied, shaking his head. He looked exhausted, even from my view by the fire, and Sam clearly thought likewise because he was having none of it.

“But you’re not,” he said quietly, honest worry creeping into his voice. “I’m here to help. I promised Gandalf that I would…”

Frodo turned to look at his friend, and there was a deep sadness in his bright blue eyes, one that I knew had been slowly growing since we’d lost our wizard guide, back in the overrun halls of Moria. He tried to smile at Sam, but it just ended up looking brittle and forced.

“You can’t help with this, Sam. Not this time,” he turned back to the water, his expression slipping back into the blank stare it had been before. “You should try and get some rest.”
Sam opened his mouth to say something more, but seemed to lose his nerve before getting a word out. He sighed heavily, his shoulders slumping, and he looked ruefully down at the remains of the food he’d set aside for him during supper.

I couldn’t help but feel an ache of sympathy for Sam in that moment. I knew full well by now from speaking with all of the hobbits that he was the one who had missed the Shire the most all this time. Yet, he was the one of our company who always seemed to go out of his way to make sure everyone was alright first — and in all the time we’d been travelling, I’d never heard him whine or complain once.

I tipped the last of my now-cold tea into the bushes and stood up.

“‘I’ll take the first watch. You guys should try and get some sleep,’” I announced quietly, stepping over Merry towards them. Sam looked up at me in surprise, but Frodo only turned his head slightly in my direction.

“Miss Eleanor, you really don’t have to—,” Sam went to protest, but I waved away the argument.

“It’s fine, I’m not tired,” I lied, eyeing the growing dark circles under both their eyes — Frodo’s most of all. I stooped and picked up both their empty travelling mugs and gave them a small smile that probably gave away my weariness even more than my words had. “Both of you, get some rest, I’ll tell Aragorn.”

Sam gave a halfhearted noise of protest, but I turned away to finish clearing away the other mugs before he could turn it into an argument.

Legolas had finished his tea and had already sunken into the trance-like state that was the elves’ equivalent of sleep, leaned back against a stone. His eyes weren’t quite shut, but his whole body was relaxed, and he was staring out over the water with the far-off look of someone in a deep daydream. None of us in the company had been resting well since we’d left Lothlórien, but Legolas in particular hadn’t seemed to be “sleeping” as often as he did normally, and it was starting to worry me a bit.

I took the empty mug from his side, stepping around him carefully as I could, hoping I hadn’t disturbed him. Once I’d gathered the last of them, I slipped quietly away to rinse them in the river before going to look for where Aragorn had taken up the first watch. I found him quicker than I’d anticipated, rounding an outcrop of rocks by the riverside only to find not one, but both human men of the company.

I’d thought Boromir had already fallen asleep by now — God knew he’d looked knackered enough to sleep for a week earlier that day, and I hadn’t notice him rise and leave his bedroll. Instead he was standing beside Aragorn, speaking to him with a bizarre look on his face. He looked desperate, almost pleading.

“…will have to abandon the boats at some point. The river cannot carry us in secret forever,” he said, trying and failing to keep his voice down. He was clearly having a hard time keeping his emotions in check, either through tiredness, or frustration, or both. Aragorn wasn’t. He was staring out over the water with the same tense expression I’d seen him give the man earlier.

I really should have turned around and gone back to the campfire, waited until they were finished speaking, but something made me hesitate just a fraction too long. I went to take a step back, go back the way I came, but my foot knocked against a loose stone, and the sudden noise made Aragorn immediately scan around for its source.
Still holding the empty mugs, I tried to duck — though honestly it was more of a fall — out of sight behind the outcrop of rocks, almost slipping on some wet leaves as I did. I pressed my back flat to the damp stone, hoping he hadn’t been quick enough to see me lurking there. I couldn’t see either of them from my masterful hiding spot, but I was still close enough to hear their hushed voices. Aragorn had fallen worryingly silent, and I could imagine him looking suspiciously around at the surrounding trees while Boromir continued to talk in a low, urgent voice.

“The western bank would be less treacherous, and swifter on foot,” he argued, and for a long moment (in which I realised I’d been holding my breath) he was met with nothing but irritable silence from the ranger.

“If it were our intention to trek to your city, perhaps, but that is not our destination and you know it,” Aragorn answered flatly, in the tone of someone who’d been repeating the same phrase over and over. Boromir made a less than happy noise, and I could all but feel the frustration leaking into his voice like a static charge in the air.

“The Ring would be safe within Minas Tirith! We could strike out for Mordor from a place of strength. You wish it destroyed, but it is folly to send such a weapon within reach of the enemy!”

There was a potent silence, and I very nearly dropped one of the mugs in an effort to keep them from clinking together in my shivering hands.

“I know there is weakness in the hearts of Men, there is frailty; but there is also strength and honour. Have you so little faith in your own people?” Boromir said softly, pain seeping into his voice.

“There is no strength in Gondor that can avail us,” Aragorn answered quietly.

Boromir reacted to the response about as well as a cat would to being dropped into a bath of cold water.

“You were quick enough to trust the elves!” he spat. “You would so easily condemn your own people to a fate you could save them from?!”

I could feel Aragorn’s glare just as clearly as if I was seeing it.

“I would not presume to believe I could wield such a weapon, let alone remain unaffected by its influence.”

I still couldn’t see him, but I could hear the expression on Boromir’s face twist into something nasty. His reply came out biting and harsh, teetering on the edge of outright fury.

“You are afraid!” he snarled venomously. “All your life, you have hidden in the shadows. Scared of who you are, of what you are—”

“Of what I would become?” Aragorn interrupted, his voice abruptly quieter and colder than I’d ever heard it before.

Boromir broke off, shocked. He clearly had not been anticipating that response any more than I had. I risked a peek around the rocks to see the two men glaring darkly at each other. For just a moment, I saw Aragorn’s neutral mask fell away, and I caught a look in his steely grey eyes I hadn’t ever seen before: doubt, and weariness.

He turned away dismissively from Boromir and went to walk away, leaving the other man just standing there alone on the riverbank in anger and confusion.
Then suddenly he stopped mid-stride, turning his head very slightly, and added in a quiet voice made all the more terrible by its complete lack of any emotion:

“I would not take the Ring within a hundred leagues of your city.”

~ ♛ ~

I didn’t sleep that night, not so much as a blink. And because I didn’t sleep, neither did Tink.

‘Someone put thistles in your knickers, boss?’ she’d asked me irritably after I’d been tossing and turning on my sleeping matt for over two hours.

I’d tried to reassure her that it was fine, but she wasn’t buying it. My blatant fib might have gone down better if I wasn’t such a terrible liar to begin with, but it didn’t help that I now knew Tink was endowed with the ability to see, feel and sense everything I did. She knew I was becoming more worried as each day passed — about the whole journey, my lost memories, and especially what I’d heard between Boromir and Aragorn.

But there was something else too…

Something had been playing at the back of my mind for days now; the unsettlingly familiar sensation that there was something important I’d missed or overlooked. Ever since we’d left Lothlórien, it had been slowly growing in the back of my mind, but every time I stopped and tried to grasp for it, it slipped away.

I’d experienced it only once before; by the lake outside Moria, when Tink had surprised me with the most unsettling spoiler intervention ever by means of literally choking the air from my lungs. She’d sworn she’d never do anything like that again, and I believed her. However, that didn’t mean she was incapable of hiding things from me. Even knowing that, though, when I’d asked her about it, I instinctively knew she was being honest when she said she had no answers for me.

Still, there had been something about her reaction that had done absolutely nothing to settle my nerves.

She’d sounded worried. Not scared, sarcastic, or conspiratorially cryptic like usual — but honestly and deeply worried.

‘I don’t know, boss, really,’ she’d whispered quietly in my head as I lay awake, watching the moonlight and stars reflect off the river. ‘I can’t say what it is yet but… I feel it too. Something’s coming, and I feel like we need to be ready when it does.’

That mysterious weirdness combined with the barrage of my own worried, mental ramblings had been more than enough to keep me up almost all night. I’d nodded off from pure exhaustion just an hour before the sun came up and Sam shook me awake, and by the time we’d been in the boats for an hour I was struggling to keep my eyes open. I just sat there behind Gimli, slipping in and out of semi-consciousness as we floated downstream, trusting that my two boating companions would wake me up if I suddenly pitched overboard.

I lost track of how long I’d been slumped there with my eyes fallen shut when I felt a warm, familiar hand clasped my shoulder.
“Eleanor,” Legolas’ quiet tenor broke my sleepy haze. I jerked fully awake, and turned to see he’d leaned close enough for his breath to warm my cheek.

“Look,” he said quietly, pointing up past my shoulder at the cliff face, “We’re passing the Argonath.”

Blinking the sleep from my tired eyes, I followed his gaze up, and up—

Two statues, well over a hundred feet high and carved from the pale stone of the cliffside itself, stood like enormous stone guards either side of the river before us. Each one carried an axe their right hand, their left hands outstretched as if imperiously warning something equally huge and far-off away. You couldn’t see the faces of the two sentinels beneath their carved helms, but I knew from my studies that the monuments had been made to resemble Isildur and Anárion — the two original kings of Arnor and Gondor.

They also marked the northernmost border of Gondor.

Staring up at them both as we passed slowly beneath their shadow, I found myself feeling an inexplicable mix of awe and sadness that these monuments were all that remained of the great kingdom, this far from Minas Tirith. We drifted with the current between the two stone giants, and I peered curiously across the water to see Aragorn staring up at them too, with both wonder and masked sorrow, just as I had.

“The sentinels of Númenor,” I heard him say in a whisper, only just loud enough for me to hear. “Long have I desired to look upon the kings of old. My kin.”

The words sent a little shiver up my spine. Frodo glanced back at him too, and the ranger gave him a mild smile and a dismissive shake of the head, as if it wasn’t all that important.

Though it had felt and sounded important to me.

Past the enormous stone bouncers, the river filtered out into a lake the size of three football pitches combined. Aragorn led our convoy of boats towards the western-most bank, but didn’t steer the boat up against the shore until we’d come within earshot of the crashing Ruaros Falls. The sound of the huge waterfall wasn’t all that loud from where we landed, but would be sufficient to mask the sounds of hobbit chatter and Gimli’s snoring — and I knew immediately he’d chosen it for just that purpose.

I just hadn’t been brave enough to ask what exactly it was he was working so hard to keep our presence hidden from.

“We cross the lake at nightfall, hide the boats and continue on foot. We approach Mordor from the North,” Aragorn told us after we’d landed and made a start at setting up camp.

“Oh, yes?” Gimli chided from where he’d comfortably settled on some stones, smoke already rising from his pipe. “It’s just a simple matter of finding our way through Emyn Muil? An impassable labyrinth of razor-sharp rocks! And after that, it gets even better! Festering, stinking marshlands as far as the eye can see.”

He emphasised the point with a shake of his pipe, and Pippin, who was perched next to him nibbling on a leftover bread roll, looked truly alarmed.

Aragorn gave the dwarf a regally unimpressed look as he brought the last of the food packs ashore and dropped them beside Boromir’s shield.
“That is our road. I suggest you take some rest and recover your strength, master dwarf,” he said blandly.

Gimli huffed in outrage, but the would-be-haughty effect was somewhat spoiled by the little puffs of smoke that came out of his nose with each grunt. I was too tired and too hungry to give more than a quiet chuckle, more interested in getting dinner on the go than thinking about the swamps we were eventually going to have to wade through to get to Mordor.

I glanced around to see Merry and a strangely blank-faced Boromir had finishing bringing the last of the packs in from the boats, while poor Sam had all but collapsed into an exhausted nap against some boulders. Meanwhile, on the opposite side of the camp, Legolas had been stood staring into the tree line in the same spot since we’d arrived — a hard expression in his eyes as if he was trying to see something hiding amongst the branches and shadows. He’d been stood there like a tall, blond statue for at least ten minutes, and he only moved to turn his head slightly as Aragorn approached, looking grim but calm.

“We should leave now,” I heard Legolas whisper quiet enough so that I knew he hadn’t really intended for anyone but Aragorn to hear.

“No,” Aragorn replied just as quietly. “Orcs patrol the eastern shore. We must wait for cover of darkness.”

Legolas pulled a face and turned back to face the trees, his shoulders and back tense again.

“It is not the eastern shore that worries me. A shadow of threat has been growing in my mind. Something is… wrong, something here among us. I can feel it.”

Well, if there hadn’t been a shiver dancing a jig up and down my spine before, there certainly was one now.

“There’s no way we’re going to get a fire started with any of this damp driftwood,” Merry’s exasperated tone cut through my anxious haze, and I looked back to see him examining a piece of driftwood with an accusatory glare. Jumping on the opportunity to distract myself from the growing unease in my gut, I got quickly to my feet.

“I’ll get some. There’s bound to be some kindling lying around under those trees,” I offered, turning to move off towards them without pausing for a reply.

“I’ll come with you,” Legolas said before I’d taken two steps. I stopped gave him a narrowed look over my shoulder.

“It’s fifty meters that way, Legolas. I really doubt I’ll need a bodyguard,” I said, pointing in the direction of the trees.

Gimli made a show of clearing his throat through little puffs of pipe smoke.

“Maybe not, lass,” he grunted diplomatically, gesturing at the surrounding woods, “But maybe an extra pair of arms to carry all that firewood you plan on finding?”

Aragorn didn’t speak, but gave a nod and a grunt of agreement. I looked flatly between each of them in turn, Man, Dwarf and Elf — each of their expressions serious and unrelenting. I sighed, and threw up my hands in defeat.

“Fine. By all means, come along and make sure I don’t slip on a wet leaf and break my neck,” I relented tiredly.
‘You mean exactly like you almost did last night?’ Tink asked innocently. I ignored her, turning and walking away towards the tree line without waiting. Legolas’ legs were longer than mine, and it didn’t take him long to fall into quiet step beside me.

As we left the camp and moved quietly into the trees I heard Pippin ask curiously, as if he’d only just noticed: “Where’s Frodo?”

Legolas and I both moved in comfortable but persistent silence through the trees until, finally, we reached a patch of wood where the winter-struck trees had started dropping their weaker branches. I immediately started scavenging as much dry kindling at I could find, while Legolas went about gathering larger pieces that would burn longer once we got the fire going.

“You really think we shouldn’t wait until night to cross the lake?” I asked, breaking the silence. The lingering quietness between us combined with my own sleep-deprived thoughts had started to grate on my nerves. Legolas stopped where he had been hefting an unnecessarily large looking branch and snapping it into smaller pieces. He looked at me with mild surprise.

“I hadn’t realised you were near enough to have overheard.”

I gave a tired shrug, crouching to pick up a couple more dried twigs and add them to my bundle.

“My hearing is getting better. It’s getting easier to block out other voices and noises,” I told him honestly. I saw Legolas’ eyebrows raise in surprise, though there was a pleased twinkle in his eyes.

“You’ve been practicing?” he asked in interest, and I nodded without looking up at him.

“You were the one providing the tips, I just took the advice and put it to use,” I replied with feigned indifference, but despite my weariness, I couldn’t help but feel pleased he’d noticed.

Even after over two years of being an elf, I still struggled to block out the riot of sounds, sights and smells that were a constant bombardment on me, but after I started training regularly every day it had gotten even worse. My sleeping and concentration had started suffering the more I tried to take in during my lessons. When Legolas had found out — though he’d found it a little peculiar — he’d taken it upon himself to give me some tips on how he’d been taught to keep focused during chaotic close-range fights, blocking out sensory distractions and stray thoughts that could hinder your focus. At the time I’d acted as if his advice hadn’t done much to help, however when I’d tried putting it into practice on my own, sure enough, it had let me sleep much better. Not only that, but it had also helped me to sharpen a sense to almost twice its usual capacity when I stopped and concentrated on just one at a time.

That help and advice had been a Godsend most nights — not that I’d ever admit that to him. Friend or not, the man was still far too smug for his own good most of the time, and he didn’t need anymore hot air to add to that ego of his from me.

I stood and turned back to him, my bundle of twigs cradled in one arm.

“You didn’t answer my question though,” I pressed, trying to change the subject.

The pleased look slid off Legolas’ face like water. He finished breaking up the desiccated branch and gathering the pieces before answering somewhat reluctantly.

“It is just a feeling. Something has unsettled me for the past few days. I feel it would be wiser to move on quickly.”

I studied the look on his face with furrowed brows.
“What kind of feeling?”

He shook his head, lost in thought.

“It feels sometimes as if we’re being watched,” he said calmly, though the words themselves were chilling. My own anxiety stirred back to life as I remembered the dread in Tink’s voice the night before.

“You heard what Aragorn and Lord Celeborn said, we are still being tracked by those orcs,” I offered, more for my own comfort than as a plausible argument. Legolas gave me a look, but spared me the trauma of taking away my safety blanket called ‘denial’.

“Perhaps, but it sometimes feels more as if there is something already here, among us. Every time I look away, I feel as if someone is watching, but never anyone I can see. It is unnerving,” he trailed off, and the words themselves more than his unsettling tone made my insides squirm. Unconsciously I found myself clutching my bundle of sticks a little closer, and taking absurd comfort in the fact that I knew I had both my hunting knife and dagger pouch strapped to my hips — along with two smaller blades hidden up my left sleeve and in my right boot.

Paranoid? Probably, but I’d still take a good set of knives and an elven bodyguard over a therapist any day.

I had to resist the urge to kick leaves at him just to get that look off his face. Thankfully, I didn’t have to, because he shook his head firmly and forced a weak smile back into place.

“Ignore me, perhaps it is only the weariness of saying farewell to Lothlórien after so long.”

“Maybe,” I said half-heartedly, chewing my lip and eyeing him in concern. I took a long twig from my bundle and used it to poke his forehead as I passed. “Still, I think you’ve been awake a bit too long. I’ve barely seen you rest more than a few hours in four days. You really should give that brain of yours a proper break before it burns itself out.”

He chuckled warmly, batting the stick away with real smile this time.

“I’m…”

My default response was to say I was fine, even though I knew I wasn’t, but I stopped and forced myself to answer him honestly. He’d extended the same courtesy to me after all. “I’m alright, I think. As long as I don’t stop and think about things too much.”

He paused for a moment, mulling over my answer. I didn’t dare look at him.

“You do not regret your decision to remain with us?”

“No,” I said without hesitating, stooping to snatch another few twigs off the ground. “I was sad to leave Lórien, and everyone there, but I couldn’t just stay behind because it was safer. There’s too much riding on this journey now to back out because I’m scared.” A little twinge of deep-set longing slid through me at the thought of not just Lothlórien and the safety we’d left behind, but
also Rivendell, the Shire, Mirkwood, Minas Tirith. I thought about all the places and people we’d each willingly chosen to leave behind to come on this journey, and the places we were each longing to return to when all was said and done.

For the briefest moment, the image of an old, thatched house in middle of the English countryside at night flashed through my mind — warm and inviting, with lights shining through the windows, smoke rising from the chimney, and the sounds of happy chatter coming from the open kitchen window. My eyes stung and bit, and I blinked the threatening tears away fast, clearing my throat and going back to scavenging twigs off the forest floor.

“Besides, who would patch up all your bumps and bruises if I didn’t tag along?”

I didn’t look back at him to check, but if Legolas had noticed my micro-moment of emotion, he made no comment on it — though I could feel his curiosity. I still hadn’t told him about those names on my knife, and he hadn’t asked — not since that time back in the training grounds when we’d made that bargain.

“Aragorn does have a serviceable knowledge of herbs and bandages,” Legolas said after a moment, though he didn’t sound entirely convinced by his own words.

“He does,” I agreed, standing up now that my eyes and throat had returned to normal. I turned back to him and quirked my lip. “But we are also talking of the same man who once tried to remove a splinter from his foot with an arrowhead, a numbing poultice, and a bottle of whiskey.”

Legolas’ face broke into a wide smile that was one part relieved to two parts sly amusement.

“You know of that?”

I nodded, sharing the smile.

“Master Elrond told me,” I said, my mood lightening at the memory. He returned my knowing look and we both chuckled.

“I think Aragorn would prefer it if neither of us knew that particular tale.”

I grinned widely in agreement, finishing gathering the decent sized bundle of kindling into my arms and straightening.

“I realise I’ve never asked, how long have you known him?” I asked, eyeing him with interest.

Legolas considered for a moment.

“Since he was barely an adult, sixteen in the years of Men.”

I stopped dead and tried hard to imagine what Aragorn must have been like as a teenager, and couldn’t. Legolas must have noticed the expression on my face because he chuckled and went on.

“He was much less serious then. He smiled and laughed more,” he said, then eyed me with a fiendish little smirk and added: “Much like you, actually.”

I honestly laughed at the idea, giving him a short poke in the chest.

“Don’t ever let him hear you say that. His head might implode at the comparison.”

We both grinned like morons, simply taking a moment to enjoy the laughs and smiles that came so easily now whenever we spoke. It wasn’t until I finally stopped my giggling that I realised how
close we suddenly were, or that my companion’s expression had changed again, warmed. It was a strikingly similar expression to the one he’d worn just before we’d left Lothlórien days before — only this time he didn’t look away from me.

Unsure of why, I took an instinctive step back, clearing my suddenly parched throat.

“I, um — I think we’ve got enough wood now. We should probably head back.”

‘Before the others start getting ideas about why we’re taking so long,’ I almost added, but snapped my mouth shut over the words before they could escape. Quickly turning away to hide the faint colour I could feel rising up my neck to my ears, I started to move back the way we’d come.

“Eleanor,” Legolas said quietly.

His warm hand appeared suddenly on my shoulder, so gentle it was barely there, but more than enough to make me stop where I stood.

It was difficult to recall sometimes that those same hands had been strong enough to accidentally leave a band of bruises on my upper arm just two months ago — but not any more. Now it seemed like he was constantly afraid I’d crumple like tissue paper whenever he touched or came near me. An odd sentiment, seeing as he’d primarily been the one teaching me specifically how to _not_ get crumpled for the past few weeks, and I didn’t really know wether to be insulted, confused, or worried by it — or all three.

I turned my head to look up at him, hoping I didn’t look as nervous as I suddenly felt.

“Mmm?”

His expression was carefully neutral, but there was something I saw playing in his eyes that looked almost like frustration mixed with hesitant warmth. He paused, seeming to search his head for the right words. He swallowed and his gaze softened very slightly.

“May I… ask you something, please?”

He was standing awfully close now. I could feel the warmth coming off him against the back of my arm and shoulder.

My mouth went dry.

“Sure?”

But I never got to find out what his questions was.

At that exact moment, a furious shout and a scream tore through the wood, shattering the calm stillness that had surrounded us only seconds before. The noise had come from somewhere through the trees up the hill, and Legolas’ head whipped around so fast it was a wonder he didn’t give himself a neck sprain.

I recognised the voice instantly.

“That was Boromir!”

The both of us moved at exactly the same time, dropping our armfuls of firewood to the forest floor with a crash and flying off into the trees like a couple of deer.

A second shout, higher in pitch and frantic, which I recognised as Frodo’s split the air and Legolas
and I redoubled our speed, hurtling through the trees in the direction of Boromir’s continued shouting and cursing. There was a thump and sudden silence, and I spotted a flash of auburn hair barely ten feet up ahead.

I made it into the clearing first, bursting through the trees with Legolas only half a step behind me.

Boromir looked, at first glance, as if he’d just slipped and fallen into the leaf-strewn dirt. He’d clambered to his knees, and there were leaves and dirt in his hair, but the second saw his face I knew what was wrong. He wore an expression that mixed confusion, shock, and horror all in one terrible mix.

My mind, for once, put the pieces together instantly, and I whipped my head around, searching for the Ringbearer.

“Where’s Frodo?” I rasped, only just realising how hard I’d just pushed myself to move so fast so without warning. Boromir didn’t react, as if I wasn’t even there. He just shook his head, staring at the spot I knew Frodo must have been moments ago and shaking his head. Legolas strode past me and gave the mortal man a firm shake by the shoulder.

“Boromir!”

No reaction.

“Boromir, where is Frodo?!” Legolas demanded, and something hard in his voice snapped the other man out of it. He turned to gape at us both with stunned bafflement. He looked lost.

“Disappeared. Just vanished, right in front of me—,” he managed, though he sounded as if he wasn’t fully sure of what was coming out of his mouth. Then he stared down at his hands, dirt covered and scratched as if he’d just been struggling with something, or someone.

“Eru have mercy, what have I done?” he breathed, and Legolas looked momentarily as if he wanted to shake him out of it. Without thinking, I immediately came over and put a hand on the elf’s shoulder, hoping it was enough keep him from something impulsive — like slapping the other man until he spat out a coherent answer.

“Which way did he go?” I asked Boromir, calm but sharp, attempting to mimic the tone Master Elrond had used when giving me instructions. It must have worked somehow, because Boromir answered almost immediately, though he still had the shellshocked sound of someone who’d just woken from a horrific nightmare.

“I have no idea. One minute he was there, and then…”

Legolas got to his feet again and scanned the tree line with sharp eyes, searching for any sign of where the hobbit might have fled.

“He must have run to find somewhere to hide,” I said, anxiety slipping into my voice at the idea of him wandering alone through the woods without anyone as backup or protection.

“We need to find him, and quickly,” Legolas agreed, looking with a narrow gaze down at Boromir who seemed to finally be coming back to himself, but was still unable or unwilling to speak. I couldn’t be completely sure, but judging by the way Legolas was glaring untrustingingly at the man, he had worked out what Boromir had just tried to do as well.

I forced down the urge to go to him, try and snap him out of the shock, but I made myself turn away. Instead, I looked in the direction I guessed Frodo would most likely have fled in — uphill,
following a small path through the trees relatively clear of leaves and twigs that could have given him away.

“He can’t have gone that far, and we can’t leave him out there. We’ll cover more ground if we both split up,” I said, pointing in up the slope towards the tree line in two different directions, then looking pointedly back to him and Boromir.

Legolas went to protest, but then closed his mouth over the words, understanding what I was implying. He nodded shortly, looking back to Boromir and visibly grinding his teeth. Finding Frodo and the Ring was more important than either of us, and one of us needed to stay and stop Boromir in case he tried it again. He knew it as well as I did.

I tried hard to ignore the sinking feeling I got looking at the frustrated expression in Legolas’ eyes, and the twisting one I got at the look still haunting Boromir’s.

“If I can’t find him in five minutes, I’ll go straight back to camp and get Aragorn or Gimli, I promise.”

Legolas looked hard at me, two parts extreme disapproval to one part real worry.

“And if something finds you in that time?” he asked quietly, not looking away. I gave him my best effort of a reassuring smile.

“I’ll do an impression of a terrified screaming girl and run like hell,” I replied with feigned confidence, and took off back into the trees before either of them could try and stop me.

~ ♛ ~

I ran uphill through the trees without stopping, only slowing down every few meters to call Frodo’s name into the woods, spinning in a circle and scanning the trees for any hint of movement.

I knew he had to still be wearing the Ring. It was the only explanation there was for how he had — as Boromir said — vanished into thin air right in front of him. I was also willing to bet Frodo wouldn’t be in a hurry to come out of his hiding spot any time soon, not after seeing Boromir, one of his protectors, snap so suddenly under the Ring’s influence.

I hadn’t dared let myself stop and really think about that until now.

The Ring had taken Boromir.

My insides writhed in guilt and worry for him — that I hadn’t remembered it was going to happen sooner, or that I hadn’t reacted to the signs of what I knew, subconsciously, was happening to him. Up until now, I had almost forgotten about the Ring. We all had, its presence a constant, though subdued, reminder of the journey ahead while we’d been lingering in Lothlórien — but the moment we’d left, it had been as if all that pressure had come rushing back tenfold, slamming down on Frodo and Boromir the hardest of all.

I’d seen what was starting to happen. I’d seen the subtle changes in them both, and the way Boromir had looked at Frodo and the Ring, but...

I ground my teeth.
Regardless of Boromir behaviour change in the past month which had caused the growing rift between us, he was still my friend — both him and Frodo were. I wasn’t sure what exactly I could have done or said to help if I’d been brave or attentive enough, but it still should have been more than nothing.

Moments later I burst through the trees at the top of the hill and found myself in a clear patch of grassy hilltop, with a weatherbeaten stone ruin sitting right in the middle, basking in the early afternoon sunlight. It rose up like a podium over the dried grass and budding wildflowers, what looked like an ancient stone throne perched atop — as if it had been built there specifically so its occupant could look out over the Argonath and lake.

“Frodo!” I called, ignoring the impressive sight and spinning in a circle, looking everywhere for any, tiny sign of the hobbit. I couldn’t hear or see anything moving in the surrounding trees or bushes, not even birds.

Strange…

“Frodo!” I yelled again, a little louder this time despite my uneasy feeling, and still turning. “It’s Eleanor! Please, come out! You’re safe!”

Frodo appeared literally out of nowhere.

One moment there had been absolutely nothing in my peripherals at all, save for some dried grass and bushes. The next, the dark haired hobbit all but fell into view a few feet away, gasping for breath and wide-eyed as if he’d just run a mile. I almost jumped, but caught myself, pretending I hadn’t just seen him spontaneously appear out of thin air.

“There you are!” I exhaled in relief, but the relief was short-lived, vanishing the second I saw the expression on his pale face.

He looked — there was no other word for it — terrified.

I took an instinctive step toward him, trying to see if he’d been injured in the struggle with Boromir.

“Frodo, are you alright? What’s wrong?”

He shook his head, mirroring my movement and taking a shaky step back, holding a hand up to point right at me. He was trembling.

“What are you?” he demanded, his voice high and thready with real fear. I stopped, stunned by the question and the reaction all at once. My mouth fell open in confusion, and for a second I couldn’t get a word out.

“What?” I asked, flummoxed. He just continued to shake his head at me, eyes wide as if he was seeing a ghost. I moved towards him. “What do you mea—?”

“What?” he yelled, scrambling back from me over the stones. I had no idea what the hell was happening, but I instinctively went to go to him, looking for any sign of him being hit on the head.

“Stay back!” he shouted, reaching for Sting, a look of complete, wild-eyed terror in his face that left me with no doubt he would use the blade on me if I took another step. I blanched.
“Ok! Ok…”

I threw up both my hands in alarm and backed off, stunned. Frodo stumbled backwards away from me until his back hit the ancient stone of the monument, his elvish short-sword still pointed directly at my chest from six feet away. I didn’t try to move forwards this time, instead remaining rooted to the spot with my hands still raised. I might have felt silly standing there like that, if it weren’t for the fact that apparently I’d managed to scare the blood from my friend’s face without any explanation as to how, or why.

“Frodo, it’s me,” I said as softly as I could, the petrified look still on the hobbit’s face stinging as if someone had just slapped me. “I’m not going to hurt you, I swear. Can you at least tell me what’s wrong?”

He didn’t move to flee from me again, though he did put a second, steadying hand onto Sting, not taking his wide, blue eyes off me. He was still shaking badly, but when he managed to speak, his voice was steady, if very quiet.

“When I first saw you, back in Rivendell when you healed me, there was only one of you. You were pale blue and ghostly when you helped heal me,” he said almost silently, still staring at me like a terrified animal which had realised that it had just fallen into a trap with no escape. He started shaking his head, back flat against the stone wall behind him. “But now — now there’s two of you.”

Were I not standing literally with a blade aimed at my chest, I might have assumed this was a prank and laughed. However, the truly terrified gleam still lingering in Frodo’s eye said, plain as a road maker, that this was nothing close to a joke. I stumbled over my response, still too stunned and tired to really think clearly.

“What? You’re not making any sense. How can there be two of me?” I blurted, confusion and a rising feeling of unease that I couldn’t pin down making me jittery. We needed to get out of the open and back to camp. I very nearly went to move towards him, but stopped when he flinched away from me. It was only then that I saw his left hand clenched tightly around something glinting gold.

My insides went cold.

“The Ring,” I breathed, my throat suddenly tightening as I understood what must have happened. “You saw something when you had it on, just now, didn’t you?”

Very slowly, he nodded, still clutching a brandished Sting as if it were a lifeline.

“I saw you, but you were ghostly, and shining a faint blue, like you were made all of a pale star,” he told me slowly, carefully, as if he was afraid I’d take a lunge at him. I just stared at him. He must have been talking about my fëa. The Ring must have allowed him to see it clearly when he put it on.

Frodo took a steadying breath and went on.

“But there was someone else, something else too. Burning bright gold like flames, walking right where you did, stepping where you stepped. Like you were two people in the same place.”

His head was shaking again, his pupils shrunken and his face pale as marble.

“You called and searched for me, but you couldn’t see me. Then it — she looked right at me,” he
breathed almost soundlessly. “You couldn’t see where I was. You still called for me; but she looked right at me.”

My insides had turned to water, and I couldn’t speak. I just continued to stare at him with my lips ajar as he very reluctantly lowered Sting. He didn’t look ready to take a swing at me, but his eyes were still wide, and his grip on the elvish blade was white-knuckled.

“What was that?” he whispered.

I couldn’t answer him. I wasn’t even sure I could remember how my own voice worked. My heart was suddenly beating way too fast.

“I — I don’t…”

I didn’t have so much as a breath to try and work out what in nine circles of hell was going on before there was a rustling in the trees behind me. I’d barely had enough time to spin and draw my hunting knife out of its sheath before Aragorn came hurtling through the trees and almost ran me over.

His eyes widened in relief as he saw us both there, intact and fully visible, if a little pale and resembling extras in a slasher movie.

“Eleanor, Frodo, what are you—?” he started breathlessly, but he broke off the second he saw the expression still on Frodo’s face, and an unsheathed Sting at his side. “Frodo?”

“_it has taken Boromir,”_ Frodo told him almost silently, and despite his earlier terror at the man, I heard real, honest sadness in those words. I didn’t move as Aragorn took a step past me towards the hobbit.

“Where is the Ring?”

“Stay away, both of you!”

Aragorn looked as if someone had just slapped him. He froze for a single, shocked moment as Frodo scrambled back around the wall and further from us both. I just continued to stand there like one of the nearby stone statues, stunned, staring after him and unable to move. Aragorn sent me a confused glance, but kept his attention on trying to calm the still panicked Frodo.

“Frodo,” he said calmly, moving forwards but still keeping his distance, both hands up. “I swore to protect you. We both did.”

Frodo’s gaze stayed on Aragorn, then shifted to me. I’d be lying if I didn’t feel a pang of hurt at the poorly masked mistrust in his eyes when he looked at me.

“Can you protect me from yourselves?” he asked in a small, but eerily calm voice. Aragorn gave me a puzzled sideways glance, but nodded solemnly. Frodo didn’t take a step towards us, but he held out his clenched hand in Aragorn’s direction, palm up, and uncurled his fingers.

The Ring — the innocent-looking, little gold band that had started this whole thing rested in the centre of his hand, extended out like a gift towards the mortal man.

“Would you destroy it?”

My eyes widened.
‘What the hell is he doing?!’ I cried within my head, unable to get the words out of my mouth. I took an instinctive step backwards, away from the demon wedding band, my eyes going straight from the Ring to where Aragorn had also become a living statue. Every muscle in his body was suddenly rigid, and I was fairly sure he had stopped breathing, steel grey eyes fixed on the Ring in Frodo’s hand.

It was only for a moment, but something flicked deep in Aragorn’s eyes for a split second — something disturbingly similar to what I’d been seeing in Boromir’s for weeks.

He took another couple of steps closer, reaching out with an ungloved hand as if to take it. The feeling of terrified dread wriggling through me tripled as I watched helplessly — knowing exactly what was happening, and that there was nothing I could do to stop it. I could all but feel the Ring’s presence now, as a chilling pressure against all my senses simultaneously, as if it was pushing me back and keeping me rooted all at once.

But apparently Aragorn knew what was happening just as much as I did, and knew what needed to be done.

Taking one last step and closing the distance between him and Frodo, he dipped onto one knee. Very deliberately he curled his fingers around the hobbit’s hand with both of his, closing Frodo’s fingers back tightly around the Ring until it was out of both our sight. The strange, cold pressure on my head instantly subsided.

“I would have gone with you to the end. Into the very fires of Mordor,” Aragorn said so quietly, I barely heard him, pressing Frodo’s fist back against the hobbit’s chest and leaving it there. Frodo looked as if he was torn between relief and crushing sadness.

“I know,” he tried to smile gratefully at the ranger, then looked to me. The unease hadn’t left his eyes, but mercifully, he didn’t look terrified anymore — just uncertain, and just a little bit mournful.

“Please, look after the others. Especially Sam. He will not understand.”

I realised what he meant and finally managed to take a step forward, throat tightening as we looked at each other.

“Frodo, I—” but my eyes widened as they landed on Sting, still gripped in his right hand. It was glowing a brilliant pale blue.

The uneasy stirring in the pit of my stomach lurched into a panicked storm, and my heart bounced off the roof of my mouth. Aragorn saw it too, and had stood and unsheathed his sword before I’d even finished drawing breath to speak a warning.

“Go Frodo, run,” he ordered, frighteningly calm despite all three of us knowing what it meant. Neither Frodo or I moved, both of us frozen there in the clearing with wide eyes and faces drained of blood.

“Run!” Aragorn bellowed again, an order this time, not a request.

Frodo obeyed. He turned and bolted back down the hill, his small legs carrying him shockingly fast into the trees.

From either fear for him or some other base motive I didn’t dare think about, I had the sudden urge to run with him — or possibly after him. I felt my body turn as if to break into a sprint, but my blood froze and my feet locked in place as the unholy sound of what had been tracking us these
past few day, what had made Frodo’s blade start glowing, met our ears in the form of dozens and dozens of bone chilling howls echoing through the trees.

The howls of monsters walking in daylight.

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Chapter End Notes

Quotes/Jokes (most of these jokes have been picked up all over the place online and adapted):
* This little gem of a joke is one I’ve seen several times on tumblr. No idea who originally came up with it, but it was just too good to leave out. Let me know if you recognise it. :)
** ** I cannot claim complete credit for this one, sadly. I adapted it from one I heard a long time ago, and according to one of my commenters it’s from Mass Effect (courtesy of Garrus and Joker). Cheers anon for finding this for me!

Translations:
(1) fëa — “soul” (Quenya)

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A/N: Omg it’s an update! I bet no one saw that coming! :D

This chapter comes with both good news and bad (depending on your perspective and patience level). The good news is that this chapter is a long one! The bad news is that the wait for the next update will likely be well over three weeks. The reason for this? Because we are very, very nearly at the end of Book 1 (Huzzah!) and I plan to drop the final two chapters on you one right after the other!

Whether or not you’re a fan of the idea — or you’ve already start plotting my gruesome murder because of it — I hope you don’t mind the wait too much. I have a very good reason for releasing the chapters this way, which you’ll understand better when you eventually read them.

In the mean time, please, please, please give me your thoughts. I’d be especially intrigued to hear your theories about what Frodo saw, and your predictions for what will happen next. Once again, thank you so much for sticking with me for so long. It has been, and will continue to be the most fun I’ve ever had writing an online story! :)

Much love, and see you next chapter,

~Rella
A/N: Hail! (I’ve been playing a bit of ESO, could you tell? XD)

Alright, this update has been a long time coming, but I’m finally in a position where I feel like I can post it properly. After a literally hellish day of travelling (that involved running full speed through Gatwick airport in heeled boots with a stuffed hiking pack on my back) I am now safely with my folks in France for the holidays. Makes a really nice change from the insanity that is London at Christmas.

And speaking of Christmas, I have a gift for you all dear readers…

I know a few months back I promised the last two chapters of LM would be posted one after the other, and I have neglected to update for a long while due to a multitude of problems at work. Well, you’re not getting that after all…

You’re getting three of them. :D

This first chapter of this triple bill is being posted (technically by London time) on Christmas Eve, and the following two will be posted tomorrow on Christmas Day - one in the morning, and one in the evening.

Be warned! Because my lovely Beta reader is on holiday and I wouldn’t dare ask her to correct my grammar when she’s spending time with her folks, these three chapters are going to be raw un-beta-ed until further notice (so please, no comments on spelling errors, grammatical mishaps, or minor inconsistencies just yet - they’ll be cleaned up in good time).

Now enough of my rambling, this author’s note has gone on long enough as it is. All I’ll say is: Merry Christmas to every one of you, I hope you have an amazing, happy, and peaceful time wherever in the world you are — and I really hope you enjoy my gift to you all for being so wonderful to me and my writing this past year. :)
Fear is strange, insidious thing.

Everyone has it, in one form or another. It lurks inside you constantly, even when you can’t tell it’s there, influencing your choices and actions, and occasionally springing up out of the depths to cause you grief. More often than not, in people my age, it manifests in the form of crippling social anxiety at college parties, or those nasty little jump scares you get while watching bad horror flicks at 2am with your best friend.

A little dash of fear, a little dash of adrenaline — you know, just in case you need some help mustering up the courage to ask that guy to dance with you, or to hypothetically run away from a madman wielding a chainsaw. Once upon a time, those had been the kinds of fears I’d been most familiar with.

A very tiny, weirdly calm segment of my brain wondered — to the sounds of a horde of bloodthirsty monsters charging through the trees towards us — what I would have said had I know that only a month later, I’d find myself longing for the days when Katie would insist on watching all three versions of The Ring in one night.

You heard me. The Ring.

The wondrous irony of that particular memory would not normally have been wasted on me, were I not suddenly neck deep in such bone-chilling fear that, for a few seconds, I almost completely stopped thinking. I couldn’t remember backing away from the trees towards the stone monument, or drawing my hunting knife — but it was suddenly in my hand and held at the ready in a reverse grip guard, prepared to at least make an attempt at defending myself.

The howls and snarls were growing louder, accompanied by the sounds of dozens of heavy foot falls. I tried to move, but my body couldn’t seem to decide wether to hide or flee — or even in which direction to do either.

Thank God Aragorn did.

Without a second’s hesitation, he seized my arm and tugged me behind the ancient stone wall of the monument, pulling me back against it beside him, and pressed a hand over my mouth. I didn’t resist. Were he not there, I would have likely done the same with my own hand, keeping the sounds of my sudden, shallow breaths from giving us away.

A crackle of branches and the clear sound of angry growls and snarls rumbled from right around the corner. We both held perfectly still against the stone wall, and I silently thanked God we were down wind of them rather than the reverse, meaning they hadn’t caught our scents yet. Although that still meant we could smell them, and the scent of the beasts hit me in a wave of rotting meat, body odour and raw sewage. I almost gagged and felt Aragorn carefully release his hand from over my mouth. He shifted just enough to get a look around the corner, and as a result, I got one too.

There were dozens of them, dark-greyish skinned, human shaped monsters and all over six feet tall, more beast-like than the orcs we’d encountered in Moria, and garbed in roughened, black armour of metal and thick leather. Each of them carried wicked looking blades that would have made a serial killer turn pale, and each of their helmets had been adorned with a large handprint — the mark of Saruman, I recalled — in stark white paint.

From the depths of my memories, the name of the creatures hunting for us floated to the top of my consciousness like a piece of driftwood off a wreck.
I felt bile rise up my throat, and pressed the back of my head against the cold stone. I shut my eyes, smothering the urge to vocalise my panic. Beside me, Aragorn took a gentle, but firm hold of my wrist just above my hand, and leaned close enough to whisper as close to silent as was possible.

“When I tell you, run back to the boats. Find Merry, Sam and Pippin, hide yourselves, and do not come out until one of us calls for you. Understand?”

It was a struggle to concentrate on what he was saying over the sounds of the Uruk-hai snarling incoherently to each other in the search for us. I nodded, biting my tongue hard to keep my voice steady and quiet.

“Yes.”

He gave my wrist a soft squeeze and let go, his hand going to the hilt of his sword as he turned towards the corner the creatures would have to come around to see us.

“Get ready.”

I obediently crouched down close to the ground, bracing my foot against the stone wall like a starting block, forcing my shaking hands to the ground to support me. I could hear my heartbeat quickening and fought back the instinct to break into a sprint right then and there.

“Eleanor,” Aragorn breathed hesitantly. I looked up and saw his stark grey eyes for a moment. He clenched his jaw and looked back to the monsters hunting us. “Whatever happens, do not let them take you alive.”

I didn’t say anything. I couldn’t. No jokes or tension breaking sci-fi refs came to mind or from my mouth this time, involuntary or not. I was terrified to the point of near thoughtlessness, but at the same time, I was vaguely aware that it was a very different kind of fear that ran through me this time. I could feel the adrenaline surging into my blood at those words, clearing away my panicked thoughts and sharpening all my senses, rather than pulling me down like lead weights on my limbs.

Aragorn unsheathed his sword in a single, swift movement, the sound deafening right next to my ear. The Uruk-hai went silent, and I knew they’d heard it too.

“When I tell you,” Aragorn whispered once more, and stepped out from behind the wall, sword raised to the sudden roars and snarls of gleeful monsters who’d finally spotted their prey. Then, they howled and screeched as Aragorn showed them that just because you’re big, ugly and scary, doesn’t mean you’re invulnerable to cold, sharpened steel.

The following sounds of the fight were horrifying, and I shifted to adjust my starting position, ready to break into a sprint the second I heard Aragorn’s voice. I only realised I still hand my hunting knife in hand when I felt the scrape of the metal against my leather wrist guard, and I looked down at it.

My knuckles were white, dirty and stained, but my hand had steadied. It was only then that I really realised it wasn’t just the feeling of fear that was different this time, it was me. I was different somehow. Something in me had changed since the last time I had felt this scared back in Moria. Since the last time I’d gripped my knife so hard my hands had shook and my body had refused to obey. Now, instead of the haze of confusion and panic clouding my head, my legs practically burned with the urge to run — the instinct to either fight and defend myself, or run like hell.

“Eleanor, now!” Aragorn bellowed, through the clanging of swords against swords.
I shot out from under the stone platform like a hare, racing for the trees so fast I barely felt my feet making contact with the ground.

One of the Uruk-hai gave a bloodcurdlingly livid roar, and I didn’t dare look back, no matter how much everything in me desperately wanted to turn and see if Aragorn was still alright. I just bit down hard on the frustrated stinging in my eyes and ran faster, disappearing into the tree line. I didn’t dare slow down even when I reached the bottom of the hill where the trees thickened…

…and slammed face-first into something tall, and very solid.

Shrieking, I tried to twist out of their grip, but strong arms bound around my waist, trapping me against them before I could escape. I kicked and thrashed, taking a panicked overhand strike at their vulnerable points with the knife still reverse-gripped in my hand. A restraining hand caught my wrist mid-swing, and the familiar scent of pine, grass and rain hit me.

“Eleanor, stop! It’s me!” Legolas cried sharply, though I didn’t quite manage to snap myself out of it until he forced me to look at him. My limbs went boneless with relief at the sight of those familiar blue-grey eyes and that ridiculously handsome face — drawn with confusion and alarm now. My knife nearly slipped from my slackened hand and Legolas carefully let me go, but kept a steadying hold of my upper arm as I took in gulps of air. Gimli had been only a few steps behind him, barreling through the trees like a short, redheaded battering ram, axe in hand and looking frantically around the second he saw me safe but alone.

“Araborn?” he demanded sharply. I forced my ragged, panicked breathing to steady enough to speak and pointed back up the hill they way I’d come.

“Top of the hill. He told me to run,” I got out, my throat tightening, though I wasn’t sure whether it was from the run, or out of fear for whom I’d left behind. I could still hear the distant sounds of crashing metal, and heavy footfalls through the trees suddenly appeared not far away. I fought down the urge to break into another sprint in any direction as long as it was away from those sounds.

“The hobbits, where are they?” I managed, remembering what Aragorn had told me to do. Legolas on the other hand, looked like he was resisting the urge to sprint towards the sounds of the fighting, but his eyes kept flicking back to me.

“Still at the camp,” he said with complete calm that belied the tension I could feel radiating off him. The forest around us went suddenly, eerily silent, and he abruptly let go of my arm and stepped past me towards the direction I’d come from. “Go, now. We’ll come back for you.”

When I hesitated just a second too long, Gimli gave me a reprimanding growl and a gentle, but firm, push in the direction of the camp.

“Hop to it, lass. We’ll keep th—

The three of us had less than half a second’s warning before an Uruk-hai came barrelling out of the trees to our left with a snarl. Its blade slashed through the air right where my neck would have been if Gimli hadn’t seized my forearm and all but thrown me out of the way down the hill. I instinctively dropped into a roll — one of the first things Boromir had insisted I learn while training — and came up in a clumsy crouch with my back against a tree just in time to see the dwarf take his axe to the Uruk-hai’s shoulder with a furious shout. The creature howled, and two more flew out of the trees just in time to see Legolas draw back his bowstring.

It was the last thing either of them saw before two arrows found homes buried in each of their
skulls.

The bodies had barely hit the forest floor when six more came charging through the treeline from different directions this time, trying to surround us. Gimli was fast, especially for a dwarf. So was Legolas, but they were both much heavier than me, and having to carve their way through viciously attacking monsters. I didn’t. I barely let myself look directly at any of them as I dodged around and under the blurs of howling Uruk-hai and their slashing blades, like I was avoiding swings in a bar brawl. For once, my small stature was a real blessing. I was too quick for them as they rushed us, too small a target to hit with their heavy swings.

I dodged, and the moment I saw an opening, I ran.

I ran so fast away down the hill that I left them both behind as I sprinted towards the camp.

I could hear Legolas shouting my name, but I didn’t dare stop to hear if he was yelling for me to slow down or run faster. I went with the latter and kept running like my hair was on fire. A look over a shoulder showed me the sight of couple of Uruk-hai not weighed down by so much heavy armour managed to split from the attacking troupe, slip past Gimli and Legolas’s defence and gave chase after me.

‘Oh, shit. Boss, I strongly advise you to run faster!’

‘You think?!’ I fired back silently.

I could hear their heavy footfalls and guttural snarls within spitting distance right behind me, and they were only getting closer as I forced my legs to move faster. Thinking fast, I veered sharply to the left between some narrowly spaced trees. It bought me a few seconds as my two pursuers had to swerve around to keep pace, but it wasn’t enough.

‘Any ideas?’ I asked frantically, scrambling for a plan. I could feel Tink furiously searching for an escape rout through my eyes, but we both only saw more trees, fallen leaves, and nowhere we could run or hide. But then…

‘There!’

We both spotted it at the same moment — a second bit of ruins raised up out of the hillside slope just a little further down the hill. I charged towards it, my feet barely seeming to hit the forest floor or stone as I raced over the ground and up half the weather beaten stairs; half expecting to feel the Uruk-hai’s rancid breath on the back of my neck as I reached the top. They were catching up.

Being the more motivated (and possibly the less sane), I didn’t slow down even a little as I sprint over the ruin’s top. I felt the scrape of one of the monster’s finger’s graze the back of my neck, just as I took a full-speed leap feet first off the platform edge like I was doing the long-jump — minus the sandpit at the bottom.

A blurred glimpse of the two furious Uruk-hai screeching to a halt on the ledge flew by my vision as I plummeted down, then the ground rushed up to meet me. I tried to keep my momentum moving forward, falling into another roll, but it might have worked better if my legs hadn’t got tangled on the way down this time. My ankle twisted, my shoulder banged into something hard and I grunted with pain — but I managed to clamber to my feet again and keep going, barely slowing down.

The Uruk-hai chasers howled their frustrations as they watched their prey escaping, and I grinned ferociously along with Tink through laboured breaths as I flew down the hill out of sight. I didn’t
dare slow down until I finally reached the clearing at the bottom, and my smile gone and my
breathing laboured by the time I did.

I could see the half set up camp and the unlit fire, the boats and packs just a little way ahead — but
there was no sight or sound of Merry, Sam or Pippin at all.

I spun in a frantic circle, called out each of their names into the trees, my voice hoarse from the
shock and long sprint. No one answered. I called louder, my throat tightening with panic.

“Sam! Merry! Pip!”

Nothing. Then another sound answered me.

The low, loud blare of an unfamiliar battle horn coming from not too far away. For a long moment,
I couldn’t understand what I was hearing. It made my insides go cold with dread, even more than
any of the bloodthirsty Uruk-hai roars had, but I didn’t understand…

In a rush, I finally realised what it was I was hearing.

It was the horn of Gondor. It was Boromir.

The realisation of what I’d been trying to remember all this time suddenly crashed down on me —
the understanding of why I had never been able to remember Boromir’s place in the rest of the
story no matter how hard I tried. Every drop of blood in my body froze, and for a terrible fraction
of a second, I couldn’t move or breathe.

“Oh God, no…”

The horn sounded again, more frantic and desperate this time. It wasn’t a battle sound. It was a cry
for help.

‘Boss, don’t…’ Tink pleaded, though she sounded far away as time all but slowed to a crawl around
me while my mind raced. I could all but see the metaphorical fork in the road appearing, and knew
I had only seconds to choose.

What could I do? I wasn’t a warrior. I wasn’t a threat. I was barely capable of defending myself, let
alone anyone else. If I were to charge heroically to the rescue, I would be likely be doing nothing
more than signing my own death warrant.

It would have been the smarter to hide. To ignore the sound of the horn, of my companion’s call
for help. To just run and hide myself. To cover my ears and not come out until I knew it was safe.
It’s what Aragorn had told me to do. It would have been sensible, smart, and…

The horn blared through the trees again, one last time.

And as it did, I understood then that there are times in life when the only thing you can do is
choose between doing what is smart, and doing what you can live with. So I chose.

“Screw smart.”

‘Eleanor, no! Stop—!’

But I wasn’t listening anymore. I didn’t stop to think, to plan, or even to consider what I was about
to do, or why Tink was trying so desperately to hold me back. By the time the final blast of the
horn of Gondor fell silent, I was already running.
There was no thought involved in the moments that followed. There was no hesitation or so much as a flicker of a plan in the hour long seconds it took for me to sprint back up the hill through the trees, following the echo of horn of Gondor that had gone suddenly and terrifyingly silent. I was still dimly aware of Tink all but screaming at me to stop, to turn around and hide. To save myself and leave Boromir to what I knew now was coming for him.

I didn’t listen, or think, or stop.

I just kept running, until finally I heard the sounds of what I’d been dreading up ahead. The sounds of feral growls, snarls, and heavy footfalls.

And shallow, painful rasps — as if their maker was struggling to draw the breaths that created them.

The world around slowed even more as I hurtled out of the trees, skidding to a halt into a clearing littered with the bodies of mauled Uruk-hai. There were dozens of them scattered over the slope, leading down towards a small clear patch of forest like a trail of breadcrumbs — all of them bearing the distinctive horizontal slash wounds of a sword blade.

I already knew who had made them, but my insides still plummeted as my eyes finally found him just on the other side of the clearing.

Boromir had collapsed to his knees in the dead leaves. He was struggling to breathe, his chest heaving from the two wicked black arrow shafts jutting out, one in his middle and the other in his shoulder, but still stubbornly refusing to pitch over. I could almost hear the blood in his lungs from twenty feet away, and I wanted scream even though my voice had left me.

His sword had fallen from his hands and been kicked out of reach by the monster that had done this to him. Another Uruk-hai, bigger than the others and not bothering to shield it’s head with a helmet, stood before him, towering over the fallen man with a distinct heir of triumph. It was faced away with it’s back to me, but I was still at an angle to see it’s blackened bow — the same one it had used to shoot those two arrows into Boromir’s chest — was drawn back, a third arrow nocked, and aimed at the middle of his head.

“No!”

I can’t remember if I actually screamed the word aloud or not, because all I do remember doing was yanking a knife from the pouch at my hip, and flinging it with all the strength and speed I had in me — barely taking time to aim.

It blurred fifteen feet in a pinwheel of silver, and hit the Uruk-hai chief squarely in back of the hand with a wet thunk. The bow snapped back from its deadened fingers and caught it across the nose with a sharp crack that I heard from across the clearing.

It howled, and the arrow fell harmlessly to the ground at Boromir’s knees.

Shock painted itself over both the man and monster’s faces, but it was Boromir who was at the correct angle to see me. We met gazes, and I had little doubt that the look of horror and realisation on his was a direct mirror of my own.
“Elea…” He managed to choke out, his hand instinctively going to his punctured chest, and something in my own chest cracked and broke at the sight.

He looked directly at me from across the forest floor, his mouth formed the order for me to run, but the words never made it past his mouth. He collapsed to the ground on his side, choking and gasping on the blood in his lungs, just as the Uruk-hai I’d attacked finally turned to face me.

Master Elrond had once explained to me what orcs were. They had once been elves, tricked and taken in by Melkor, the Great Deceiver — the Valar’s very own Lucifer — who had twisted and corrupted them until they’d turned on their original nature and became… something else.

I never truly understood what Lord Elrond had meant until that moment as I met the thing’s fiery yellow eyes, unhidden by a helmet.

If this creature had once been descended from the elves, there was absolutely nothing left of it now. Technically the Uruk was male; but something deep inside me absolutely refused to acknowledge it with the same pronoun that I did my male companions. There was nothing humane left in it. Nothing but malice and sadistic joy in it’s eyes as it looked at me past the white painted handprint covering it’s face, leering with it’s blackened teeth exposed, like a rabid dog that had just spotted a rare piece of meat.

This thing wasn’t a person, it wasn’t anything close.

It had just killed one of my friends, and I knew now looking directly into it’s eyes, it was going to kill me too — if I was lucky.

The Uruk-hai chief raised it’s hand, still run all the way through by my throwing knife, and without breaking it’s gaze from mine, it yanked the little blade out as if it were nothing but a bee-sting, letting it fall to the ground.

It smiled widely at me, baring a carnivore’s teeth.

Then it came at me.

~ ♛ ~

It’s probably with mentioning at this point; real fights aren’t anything like fight scenes in movies. They happen much faster for one, and they don’t last half as long. They’re also far messier, far less fair, and far less pretty, thanks to the lack of decent choreographers on standby.

Tink and I reacted at exactly the same time, and in exactly the same tone of utter horror as the Uruk-hai chief rushed us in a huge blur of jagged armour and snarling teeth:

‘Shite!’

The bright thing to have done at this point would have been to dodge elegantly to the side as the armoured monster drove a mammoth fist directly at my face, just as I’d been practicing for weeks with Boromir and Aragorn. Alas, as we’d established only minutes before I’d gone charging off into the trees after my friend’s cries for help, smart ideas designed to save my own skin were not my strong suit — and I was beginning to believe they likely never would be.
Instead, I shrieked and fell straight over backwards onto my behind just as the Uruk-hai’s gauntleted fist sailed right over my face, barely clipping the tip of my nose. I hit the leaf strewn ground with a thud, and immediately rolled to the left. It was a bloody good thing I did too, because the Uruk-hai chief’s foot came down on the spot where my head had been with enough force to leave a small crater in the earth.

It spun after me, snarling and spitting incoherently, but I was already back on my feet again, scrambling back.

You never, ever, stayed on the ground in a fight, Aragorn had repeated endlessly, not unless you wanted to stay down there forever. I could almost hear him drilling those words over and over as the Uruk-hai chief came at me again, its swings and punches suddenly far more precise and calculatingly.

It had obviously realised that I was not as easy prey as it had first thought, but that wasn’t saying much. I was small a fast it was true, but the towering Uruk-hai chief had a long reach, and when it did manage land even a glancing blow on me it was enough to rattle my bones. I slipped on a dead leaf spinning out of the way of another punch, and it was just enough to slow me down. The Uruk-hai’s knuckle clipped my chin, sending a spike of pain through my lip and face, and I instantly tasted blood in my mouth.

Somewhere deep inside my head Tink was shouting at me, trying to yell out warnings and commands, but I was having a hard enough time surviving each swing, with no chance to slow and think about what I could do to escape, let alone win. I hadn’t gone into this fight with a strategy, or a plan of escape like I’d been taught. There hadn’t been time to plan or weigh the consequences — only react as best I could.

Yet, despite that, it still might have been too late, Boromir might already be gone. He’d collapsed and I hadn’t seen him move.

It had been fool hardy and rash to charge into that clearing without a second thought — I knew that. But even as the Uruk-hai landed another blow, this time against my left shoulder, and I screamed as pain speared down my arm, I knew that I could never have willingly turned away. I couldn’t left him there to this monster’s mercy any more than I could have severed one of my own limbs. I’d had to do something.

But if I couldn’t figure out a plan of survival within the next few seconds, I wasn’t going to live long enough for Aragorn to give me an earful about it.

‘Aragorn…What would he say in this situation? What would he tell you to do?’ A disjointedly calm part of my brain asked through the pain and panic. I didn’t have time enough to ponder an answer before I found myself being thrown backwards against a thick tree trunk. My spine rattled as I slammed into it, the back of my head cracking painfully against the bark, and for a second my vision swam with a hundred stars.

‘He would say you’re not strong enough to win this, and you’re not quick enough to escape this time. So what do you have left to help you survive?’ I asked, answering my own question with another question. My vision came back into focus just in time to see the Uruk-hai lunging for me again, both massive hands raised to latch around my comparatively tiny neck. I dropped as quickly as I could into a rather clumsy forward roll past it’s thick legs, and I heard it’s fist slam into the tree trunk with a dull crack.

I came up on the other side into a staggered crouch, and as I did my hand latched around the hilt of my hunting knife at my hip, pulling if from its sheath and slashing it across the Uruk-hai’s exposed
calf with as much strength as I could. It howled furiously as the steel bit deep into thick skin and muscle, but I was already stumbling back out of the way by the time it spun to take another swing at my head.

‘I have my mind, the one weapon that can never be taken from you,’ I found myself saying inside, answering my last question with something I’d heard years ago from Master Elrond.

If I couldn’t overpower, or outrun the Uruk-hai brute on my own, I’d have find a way to outsmart it.

In a bizarrely euphoric rush of hope, I realised suddenly that I didn’t actually need to beat this monster. I just need to survive it, just long enough until one of the others could arrive with help. Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli couldn’t have been all that far away, and I knew Legolas would be able to hear the sounds of the fight from a mile off if he was paying attention.

They’d come. They had to.

The Uruk-hai was coming after me again, and I with a surge of determination and gritted teeth, instead of running away, I turned and ran straight towards it at full speed with a snarl all my own. For a split second I honestly thought I caught a glimpse of surprise in the creature’s fiery eyes, but it was quickly replaced with fury as it took a grab at me. I ducked at the last second, going into a baseball slide right between it’s legs, raking my knife across the inside thigh of it’s uninjured leg. I’d been hoping to nick the femoral artery, but I’d been moving too fast to aim correctly, and it only left a gaping but non-fatal gash on the Uruk-hai’s thigh. It’s howl of furious pain blasted through my ears, and the shock of the sound momentarily disoriented me as I came out of the slide onto my feet.

It was all the creature needed. I might have slowed it down with my feeble attacks, made it harder for it to stay steady on it’s huge legs, but it still had it’s massive arms. It spun in a furious half circle on it’s less wounded leg, it’s fist coming around like a wrecking ball.

I didn’t have time to get out of the way.

The Uruk-hai’s bare fist slammed straight into my cheekbone and the world flew sideways.

For what felt like minutes but must have only been a couple of seconds, I knew nothing but pain. My vision had gone, my ears rang with white noise, and its took several moments of mentally curling into a ball and whimpering feebly before I was able to finally come back to myself. I’d landed about a dozen feet away, sprawled on my back with my legs twisted awkwardly beneath me, though not broken, thank God. My left arm on the other hand — no pun intended — had somehow become wedged underneath a heavy dead branch as thick as my waist. From how the entire left side of my body felt, I realised I must have hit the tree hard enough to cause it to break off, falling straight down onto me and effectively pinning me in place against the forest floor.

Bleary and head still spinning, I tried to tug my arm free, but the heavy branch had trapped my wrist and elbow between some thick roots, and I couldn’t move either without breaking something.

The Uruk-hai’s howls of furious pain turned abruptly to snarls of rage, and I twisted my head to see it staking towards me, livid eyes locked on my terrified face.

I abandoned all decorum and frantically tried to push the branch off with my free arm, but it wouldn’t budge, and I was already shaking with fear and fatigue. The Uruk-hai growled low, closer, and I almost sobbed, trying again to lift the branch with my shoulder to no avail.
‘Dig!’ Tink’s voice splintered through my panic, her own voice terrified but just about holding together. I didn’t question or stop to think, I just sank my fingers into the dirt under my arm and hurriedly started pulling the earth back from my trapped limb.

Another snarl only feet away, and I had to force myself not to look.

Gritting my teeth, I braced my free hand against the branch, and pulled as hard as I could. A scream of frustration and pain came out through my clenched teeth as I twisted my arm enough to make the joints burn and wrenched it out from under the log. Bark and splintered wood scraped through the fabric of my sleeve, leaving long scratches down my arm — but my hand came loose and I was free.

I just hadn’t managed to do it quite fast enough.

I barely had the foresight to roll sideways out of the way as a heavy armoured boot stomped down right next to my face. Frantically I tried to roll the other way, but the Uruk-hai’s huge fist came down in my path, it’s horrible face snarling only inches from my own — and now, instead of being trapped under a branch, I was caged between its leg and its fist.

Whether it was God, karma, or my own dump luck that was responsible, I still don’t really know; but in that split second my hand suddenly closed around something familiar I’d dropped in the leaves when I’d been thrown against the tree. I gripped it with white knuckles, my arm moving so fast I didn’t have time to think about where I was aiming. The tip of my hunting knife’s blade found a gap in the plates covering the Uruk-hai’s torso, and sank deep into it’s side between the ribs.

The monster roared like an animal straight into my face, and for a moment I thought I’d managed to wound it badly enough that it would release me. It didn’t. Instead, it jerked back, pulling my blade free of the wound, and sent another furious punch straight down at my head. I choked on a shriek and twisted sideways, the punch hitting only earth and missing my head by inches.

Screaming in fear and frustration, I took another desperate stab at it’s face, aiming for the exposed jugular that was just close enough to reach…

But I bobbled it, the blade hitting the blackened shoulder armorer at an awkward angle, and my knife went skittering out of my hand into the fallen leaves.

My heart sank to rest somewhere around my feet, and the hideous face of the monster staring down at me stretched into a triumphant grin.

I wasn’t given a chance to shout or scream before the chief of the Uruk-hai picked me up by the front of my riding greens, and hurled me backwards like a rag doll into a tree. I tasted blood in my mouth again as I crumpled into a heap at the base, sure I was in agony but my mind and body to stunned and disjointed by the impact to feel much beyond a dull ache from everywhere.

My vision flickered like a broken tv. One moment I saw my attacker limping towards me, the next it was looming over me. It kicked me in the stomach, hard, and I heard ribs crack and my own cry of pain.

They weren’t going to make it.

I wasn’t going to be able to keep myself alive and keep the monster distracted long enough. By the time either Aragorn, Legolas, or Gimli got here it would be too late — for me and Boromir both…

If it wasn’t already too late for him.
The Uruk-hai kicked me again, snarling, and I whimpered, slipping and rolling backwards down the slope. I landed hard on my side in the dirt, the damp earth and fallen leaves cool against my bruised cheek. My eyes swam with pain, going in and out of focus, but I could see just enough to catch a glimpse of Boromir lying only feet away. He was sprawled on his side in the leaves, those two hideous black arrow shafts jutting from his chest, eyes half-shut, not moving…

Pain that had nothing to do with any of my injuries lanced though my chest, and I wanted to scream, but only a choked sob found it’s way out.

Shaking with pain, I tried to push myself up onto all fours, but my weight was suddenly taken off my arms, and I was being lifted up off the ground. The sight of Boromir’s broken body vanished from my blurring vision, only to be replaced by the fiery yellow eyes and predatory teeth in a blackened face, bared in a triumphant leer. The Uruk-hai leader had picked me up by the neck, but it was only when my brain started frantically reporting the lack of oxygen that my body acknowledged the problem.

I started kicking and struggling frantically, grasping and scratching, trying to pry the Uruk-hai’s thick fingers from around my throat. I might as well have been kitten struggling against a lion for all the good it did. I tried to scream, but all that came out was a strangled choking rasp. The Uruk-hai snarled, and even though I couldn’t breathe, its breath was still enough to make my stomach turnover.

I’d been wrong. This was no Disney film. No one was going to come charging in heroically to my recuse, not in time to make a difference. Either I found a way to save myself, and fast, or I was going to die one of the more horrible deaths I could have imagined.

The chief of the Uruk-hai’s terrible face stretched into a horrible, lecherous mockery of a smile, and drew me closer, still holding me several feet off the ground. I was close enough to smell the rotting flesh on its breath.

“What are you going to do, little she-elf?” It all but purred at me through the blood staining his teeth, it’s growling, grinding voice somehow the most horrible thing about it. A strangled choking sound came out instead of a scream as I kicked frantically at it’s wounded side, but I couldn’t reach.

It laughed. It was laughing.

It had just murdered one of my friends, it was going to murder me… and it was laughing.

Rage boiled through my blood, completely eclipsing my terror. The feeling made no sense, but it didn’t matter. I was dying, being asphyxiated to death by a monster, but it didn’t matter. The feeling came so suddenly and so irrationally fierce that for a moment I completely forgot that it was still holding me by the throat. I felt heat building in my belly and pressure behind my eyes as lack of oxygen started to make my vision blur.

I opened my mouth to hurl one last curse at the thing, or maybe just spit in its face. But the word that surged though my head and came shrieking up my throat was no curse. It wasn’t even my voice.

The sound tore through my head like a surge of lightning, charring my thoughts to cinders as it did. It wasn’t a word. It was a force all it’s own, and the only thing it left in it’s wake as tore it’s way out of me was a simple meaning — no, a command — left seared into my thoughts like a brand.

‘Burn.’
The sound of that one simple yet unfathomably complex word in a language I didn’t know howled through my head and out of my mouth in a storm. It cracking and booming like thunder, and sent a shockwave of force through me that was so strong it shook the hand still clamped around my throat, turning the world red, then white…

And the Uruk-hai’s arms and face burst into flames.

It shrieked, a high pitched howl like an animal in sudden, agonising pain, it’s entire body convulsing into a spasm of pure shock. It dropped me at once, and I fell onto my back in the leaves, heaving and gasping for air as the world tilted like a capsizing ship.

For a long moment, I couldn’t see. I could only feel the swaying of the ground beneath me, hear the frantic sounds of the Uruk-hai agonised howling, and smell the nauseating scent of burning skin and hair.

‘Boss, get up! You need to get up, now!’ Tink screamed through my head. She sounded suddenly weaker than she had before, far away, even though I could finally hear her clearly again. My thoughts and head swam once again, and I had to fight to stay above the blackness. I tried to move, but my limbs felt heavy — far too heavy to be purely from shock or lack of air. It was deeper than that, and while I could slowly feel the effect of whatever had just happened receding, it wasn’t going fast enough.

Tink’s voice turned to a frantic, almost sobbing plea, and I could feel her desperately trying to pull me back from the edge of unconsciousness.

‘Eleanor, please get up! Please!’

I got up.

It was hard, so bloody hard, and it took far longer than I can remember it ever taking. But I did it. I slid clumsily onto all fours in the dirt, shoving myself back up onto my knees with almost all the strength I had left in my arms. My whole body wobbled drunkenly, the world still rocking and I dared not stand properly for fear of falling again, looking up through foggy vision to face what I’d done. And at the same time, reaching with trembling fingers into my left sleeve…

The Uruk-hai was still howling in agony just four feet away, swatting at it’s horribly scorched face and chest and head. It’s burning skin and matted hair had died down to soldering cinders, leaving it’s already black armour charred with soot, and it’s greyish skin patched raw with back and red. It was still obviously in huge amounts of pain, and still furious.

And still alive.

It saw me only a moment after I saw it, and with a surge of utterly insane rage I’d never seen on any creature before, it rushed at me — battered and broken and smouldering, and no less intent on killing me horribly.

Just like it had killed Boromir…

I waited until it was only a foot away before I let the anger I’d had pooling inside me turn to strength, my arm shooting out like a striking snake — driving the little throwing knife I’d hidden up my sleeve hours before directly into it’s exposed knee.

The monster stumbled and crashed to the ground from its already injured leg onto it’s remaining knee, roaring in agony as the breaking bones and joints made a horrible wet sound beneath the skin.
My arms shook and my muscles protested furiously. I was all but spent and barely had the strength
to move, but I didn’t care. I was too far gone with fear, confusion, and fury to care. All I could
think of was the memory of Boromir lying still in the dead leaves with two black arrows in his
chest just feet away…

Just moments too late.

The Uruk-hai roared again, straight into my face as it fumbled furiously to pull my little knife out
of it’s leg, but before it had time to realise what was happening, I’d forced myself up onto my feet
with a livid cry of my own. The second knife I’d hidden in my boot earlier than morning left its
sheath as I tumbled forward, plunging it to the hilt in the vile creature’s left eye.

The leader of the Uruk-hai shrieked as it died, the blade twisting and jerking in the socket as it
struggled to get away. Sticky black blood erupted over my hand, but I hung on like a rabid
monkey, screaming and cursing it in every language I knew until finally it stopped moving,
collapsing back in a twitching heap to forest floor, my knife still buried in its skull.

Gasping and trembling all over, I let go and fell back into the dead leaves on my butt. My heart was
roaring a hundred miles an hour, and my breath was coming in shallow little gasps through my
burning throat.

I stared at the dead monster before me. I just stared.

I didn’t have the strength left to move, think, or do anything more. I just stared and stared at what I
had done, not quite able to believe or understand what had just happened. What I had just done.

The last of the adrenaline began to fade from my blood, and it wasn’t until my heart and breathing
had slowed that I realised I was silently crying. I blinked furiously, I lifted a trembling hand to
cover my mouth, holding in a sob, and forced myself to look away. Instead I looked around at the
forest around me, and my horror and shock was quickly replaced with confusion.

Everything within a five foot radius on the forest floor that had been green and alive minutes
before had died. There were no burns, no scorch marks on the earth from whatever had happened
with the flames; but the grass, flowers, bushes and small trees all around me had shrivelled, curling
in on themselves like blackened husks — as if they’d had every ounce of life pulled from them at
once.

I just sat there in the centre of the deadened forest, too stunned and too horrified by everything to
move…

Until a flash of auburn hair flickered at the corner of my clearing vision.

I was getting to my feet before my brain could catch up, staggering upward as quickly as I could. I
fell over twice before I was able to keep upright long enough to walk — well, stumble really —
back up the slope. It hurt, everything hurt, but I made it over to where Boromir still lay on his side
in the leaves, dropping onto my knees at his side when my leg muscles refused to take me further.

My throat was tying itself into a knots I couldn’t undo, and my chest hurt from both lack of air, and
from complete dread. He wasn’t moving, or breathing, and I didn’t want to see what I’d let happen
despite my best efforts. I didn’t want to do my usual check of the wounded only to find nothing I
could do would matter.

But I knew I needed to regardless of what I wanted.

Biting my lip and steeling myself as best I could, I took a gentle a hold as I could on his shoulder
and side, heaving with all the meagre strength in my upper body until I rolled him onto his back…

Only for the his blue eyes to fly wide, sucking in a ragged but determined inhale of breath.
"Boromir!" I all but shrieked, equal parts shock and relief.

He was alive. He was still alive.

He drew in another ragged breath, his chest heaving with the arrows still protruding, one in his lower torso, and the other just under his right collarbone. I could hear how painful and difficult it was becoming to breathe, but I was too thankful he was still breathing at all to be anything but relieved. Had he not been so badly wounded I could have kissed him.

Instead I placed as firm and steadying hand as I could on his unwound shoulder, trying to keep him from moving and making it worse. He shuddered and choked on a cough. Red stained his bottom lip as his hand came up and clutched my arm in a grip far weaker than I knew he was capable of.

"They took them!" He rasped frantically. "Merry and Pippin, they took them—"

"Lie still! Don't try to move!"

"Frodo," he got out weakly as I started carefully unbuckling his pauldrons without jarring the arrows. "Where is Frodo?"

"He's gone. Aragorn let him go," I answered quietly, trying to focus on keeping my hands and his shoulders steady. Boromir tried to exhaled in what seemed like relief, but it was difficult to tell his breathing was so strained.

"Then he did what I could not," he mumbled, stilling as I felt his eyes find my face. "Eleanor, you're bleeding…"

I felt the shaking touch of a thumb run over my lower lip, his fingers coming away red. Only then did I finally notice and feel the blood running down my chin onto my tunic. The Uruk-hai must have split my lip at some point in the fight, and I hadn't even noticed. I would have laughed were I not one tiny slip from breaking into hysterical sobs.

"Forget me! There's a bloody arrow in your chest, you chivalrous idiot! Two of them!"

"What you did… you should not have. You should have run… left me…"
"I'm sorry," I choked out quietly, trying to pretend I hadn't just heard him say what he had about himself. "I should have remembered sooner. I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry for," he spoke in such calm softness that if it weren't for the blood on his hands and mouth I might have believed he was ok. His pauldrons unclasped and moved clear of the arrow shafts, I immediately went to examine the wounds. His hand suddenly caught on my wrist, gentle but awfully unyielding at the same time. "Eleanor, please, leave it. It's over."

Footfalls appeared behind me, more than one set. I knew immediately who it was, even before I saw Boromir's gaze track to the person who's just stopped right behind me.

"Frodo, he…. I-I tried to take the Ring from him," he rasped, just as Aragorn dropped down onto his knees on the other side of him to me.

"Be still," he commanded, and it was only the sound of his voice that seemed to galvanise the fact that he was actually there to me.

For a sickening moment I wanted to hit him, claw at him, scream at him, demanding where in hell he hand been when the both of us had needed him — but the feeling died as quickly as it had come upon seeing the anguish in the other man's face. His eyes tracked from Boromir's strained face, to his wounds, and then finally to me. My jaw clenched around a choking sob as I read the same understanding in his eyes that I'd come to moment before he's arrived too. Those two wounds were likely fatal. Even if by some miracle the arrows hadn't perforated any major organs or blood vessels, they were likely barbed. Removing them without nicking something crucial and causing internal bleeding would be a fools errand, even for a healer who trained under Lord Elrond.

It was all for nothing. I'd gone through all this, we'd both gone through all this. And for what? Just so Boromir could just die right in front of us and I could do nothing but sit back and weep?

'No dammit! If there's any purpose for me being here at all, this is it!'

Boromir's hand was still on my wrist, and my entire body wracked with the urge to cry again as I felt him give my arm gentle squeeze — a ridiculously selfless act meant to try and comfort me. Me.

I felt suddenly as if I was back in that stupid stairwell in Rivendell again, standing outside the apothecary, a silly lonely young woman fumbling for words with an armful of books, relieved to simply be in the company of another of my own kind — even if he had no idea it was true. He had been kind and genuine to me in a way that no one else had up till then, honestly kind without expecting anything in return. Even after falling to the Ring, I could still see the flickers of who he really was underneath, who he still was…

A good man, and a friend. My friend.

Damn the story, and damn the consequences. He wasn't just some character in a book anymore, and I couldn't let him go like this. I wouldn't.

I forced my shaking hands to steady, taking hold of Boromir's wrist and very deliberately moving it out of the way. I felt him and Aragorn both give me near identical strained looks of confusion as I start going to work examining the wound again, biting my tongue hard and blinking my eyes to keep them clear.

"Eleanor…" Aragorn started softly, his voice painfully gentle.

"Shut up," I said quietly, not stopping.
"Eleanor there's nothing you can—"

'Boss, he's—'

"I said shut up!" I screamed at them all, my voice ringing like a lunatic's shriek through the trees and through my head.

Aragorn flinched. Actually flinched, and I didn't care. I whirled to see him, Gimli and Legolas, all of them staring at me in silent shock.

"Either help me, or shut up!" I hissed, my voice trembling, unsure whether I was closer to rage or tears. Probably both.

I could sense more than see Boromir looking up at me with a stunned, half pleading look through his pain — an expression that I couldn't bring myself to meet with my own.

"Eleanor…"

"No," I interrupted sharply, but my voice didn't sound quite so steady anymore. It trembled with the onset of frustrated tears I couldn't hold back anymore as I kept working. "Don't you dare order me to sit here and watch you die. Damn you and your honourable death, I wont do it!"

He drew in another ragged breath to say something — probably tell me to spare myself the pain of trying to save him when he was already dead — but a hacking cough took hold and more blood appeared in his mouth. I did my best to hold him and myself steady, but it wasn't until another pair of weather-beaten hands came to help that I was able to keep him still enough to minimise the damage to his already dire wounds. As the coughing slowed I looked up to find Aragorn had chosen to do as I'd ordered, holding the other man by the shoulders until he finally stopped convulsing.

I hadn't been expecting him to do that, but I felt a swell of gratitude nonetheless.

He didn't speak, but something in his expression shifted into even deeper worry, and it was only when I found the strength to look Boromir properly in the face that I saw it had contorted in even more pain than before, the rattling sound of his laboured breathing getting louder.

If I was going to do anything to help, I needed to do it fast.

"Aragorn, I-I need my medical satchel, and the salves I mixed in Lothlórien…"

I'd barely finished speaking before he was on his feet. I looked up and met his gaze with damp eyes for a moment — a brief momentary flicker of dread and worry shared — before he was running back down towards the boats without a word.

Boromir choked on a hacking cough again, though this time he didn't strain as much — which I wasn't sure whether to be relieved of terrified by. I had barely realised that Legolas and Gimli were still there in the clearing with me until I felt more than heard one of them approach and kneel carefully next to me.

"What can I do?" Legolas asked me gently.

My hands were still trembling a little against Boromir's blood-stained chest as I began cutting away his tunic with one of my clean throwing knives. There were tears clouding my eyes again, but I sniffed and beat them back enough to see what I was doing.
"I need clean water and bandages. As many as you can find. Tear up my spare clothes if you have to." I ordered, my voice quiet but firm, barely thinking about what I was saying beyond that it was what I needed right now.

"I'll get them," he answered unquestioningly, and before I could turn to look at him, he was gone from my side too.

I was left there with only Gimli at my back. I turned back down and concentrated on clearing as much space around each wound as I possibly could. I knew I should have been focusing on keeping calm, to keep my hands from shaking so much at the sight, try to distance myself and focus on what I was going to do with detached clarity — but I just couldn't.

This wasn't some cadaver, or a wounded rabbit I was practicing on in the Rivendell sanatorium. This was Boromir.

My eyes filled with tears again, and I bit down hard my tongue in frustration. No more crying, it wasn't going to help.

"Gimli," I choked out.

His huge gloved hand appeared on my shoulder, steadying and strong.

"I'm here, lass."

"I need your whiskey flask," I said, giving up trying to keep the tremor out of my voice. I didn't avert my eyes from Boromir — who was mercifully still a for the moment. He didn't respond for a second and I turned to find him shifting uneasily while looking at me, clearly hesitant about handing me such strong alcohol in my current state. I forced the frightened lump in my throat down with a slightly hysterical laugh. "Not like that. I need to clean these wounds and my hands, and I don't have my sterilising spirits."

Understanding dawned on his grizzled face, and he handed me the worn metal flask without question.

I unstoppered it and poured the whiskey over my hands first, wiping them down as best I could with the clean handkerchief I had stashed in my tunic — the same one Sam had given me back in Lothlórien to dry my homesick tears with. It wasn't anything close to ideal, but it was all I had, and it would have to do. When that was done there was a little left in the bottom, so I cleaned around each wound as best I could without causing him even more pain. I'd managed to remove all the extraneous leather armour and belts and cut away the fabric of his tunic around both wounds, leaving them both bare and as clear as possible.

The one in his lower torso wasn't as quite bad as I'd first feared, though it was bleeding quite a lot. It had hit just shy of any serious zones, and at an angle directing away from any major organs. It was also struck (I noticed with a surge of macabre humour) in almost the exact same place as my own had been when I'd been hit the goblin arrow back in Moria. Except his had gone all the way through and out the other side.

It was the second just below his collarbone that was an entire different story.

If the blood in his mouth and the ragged sound of his breathing was anything to go by, the arrowhead had clipped the top of his lung. Not only that, but it had also hit close to where I knew there were major blood vessels running down his shoulder to his arm. Unlike the first one, this shaft hadn't come out the other side — which mean the arrowhead was still in lodged in there,
literally centimetres and one bad convulsion away from puncturing his lung entirely, or nicking an artery.

Boromir took in another strained breath, more painful and strained this time, his face contorted as he did, and I knew it couldn't wait any longer. I needed to staunch the bleeding and deal with those arrows now before they could get any worse.

I rested a hand on his shoulder, prompting him to look at me.

"Boromir, I'm going to get these arrows out. It's going to hurt, but I need you to stay awake," I told him as calmly as I could manage through my own trembling voice. There was no point pretending that I wasn't struggling to hold it together, but there was also no sense in making his trauma worse with my waterworks. I wasn't sure at first he'd heard me clearly over his own breaths, but he nodded once, his eyes clenching shut again.

I gritted my teeth and made myself breathe steadily, fixing my focus on the most serious wound — the arrow in his chest.

"Gimli, I need your help."

I could feel Gimli freeze behind me, hear his gloved hands tense on his axe handle at my words.

"Lass, I can't—"

"I need you to hold him still while I get this top arrow out," I cut him off, refusing to take no for an answer. "I can't do both on my own."

Gimli shifted uneasily behind me, but I didn't turn to look at him — afraid that if I lost focus for even a second I'd go to pieces right there and then. I wasn't sure he was going to move for a moment, but then there was a soft thump and a clank of metal, and the dwarf had knelt opposite me on Boromir's other side, divested on his axe and helm.

I didn't have any numbing agents on me, and unless Aragorn spontaneously developed the ability to teleport, he wasn't going to make it back in time for them to be of any use. I hadn't been lying when I said it was going to hurt — I knew from experience — but all I could hope for was that Gimli would be strong enough to hold him still just like Legolas had me.

Carefully, I took hold of the arrow that had pierced just under his right clavicle, and braced a hand flat against where the shaft protruded from the wound so it wouldn't move. Boromir hissed in pain and his hands clenched into fists in the dirt, but he didn't otherwise move. I swallowed my nerves.

"One…two…"

I snapped the arrow in half an inch from the skin in one sharp move.

For all his other injuries and trauma, he took the pain miles better than I had when I'd been shot. His strangled cry of pain only lasted for three seconds, and Gimli and I both worked to pretend that the sound hadn't made us both winch. I tossed the fletched end of the black arrow away as Boromir's jerk of pain subsided, and reached for a small, underused pouch clipped to the back of my belt beside my knife sheath.

"One…two…"

I snapped the arrow in half an inch from the skin in one sharp move.

Lord Elrond had made me keep a secondary smaller medical pouch of limited surgical tools on me at all times, with just in case I ever needed to treat myself in a real emergency while out riding or running. I'd never really needed it up until now, but had I been in any state to do it, I would have sung thanks for my mentor's constant nagging which had resulted in the habit. Despite the most of
my paraphernalia being in my larger medical satchel, I had kept some things that were light enough to carry easily in the smaller pouch I had on me.

Some small tools, a scalpel, some gauze, and a small strip of leather to bite down on…

It was enough. It would have to be enough.

I tugged it open and began pulling out various instruments — a small scalpel, long pair of surgical tweezers, the strip of leather, and a few folded pieces of gauze. I could feel Gimli watched me with a mixture of trepidation and confusion as I started tearing off my cleaner, un-shredded sleeve at the elbow.

"I tried to take it… I tried to take it from him…" Boromir had started murmuring over and over to himself through short, painful breaths, as if I wasn't there to hear him.

"I know, I know," I murmured back, only half listening as I worked, tearing off my other sleeve too at the upper arm. I needed to keep him talking, keep him awake. Gimli was too focused on trying to stay still and keep calm to try, so I scrambled mentally for something to keep him from focusing on the pain, anything…

"Boromir, you mentioned your brother, before we left Lothlórien," I said suddenly, remembering him, Legolas, Gimli and Celeborn all arguing by the docks. Boromir's pained face flickered recognition, and his voice came out scratchy as he answered me.

"Faramir…"

"Faramir," I agreed quickly, setting out the tools I needed as fast as I could. "Tell me about him."

Boromir's face drew in an expression of pain that had nothing to do with his injuries.

"I… I only wanted to protect him, protect them all. He never deserved it… how my father saw him, treated him. He was always better than I. Kinder, wiser… better."

I was only dimly aware of what he way saying, more focused on what I was about to do than what best to say, but the bone-deep sadness it his voice made my movements falter just a little. I shook it off quickly.

"I'm going to need to make an incision to get this arrow head out. It's going to hurt but I'll work as fast as I can," I said, unsure of whether I was addressing Boromir, Gimli or myself anymore. Gimli's face had gone white enough as it was behind his beard, so I directed my gaze down at my patient. His breathing was getting steadily worse, though more through pain now than anything — but he was still able to meet my gaze clearly with his own.

I found myself hesitating in the wake of that look.

"Boromir?"

He swallowed and choked on another strained breath. His blue eyes flickered to the scalpel in my hand, and his teeth ground in unexpected determination.

"Do what you must," he rasped out.

I nodded without thought, taking the strip of leather and holding up to his face with mercifully steady hands.
"Bite on this."

He obeyed, and I took up my scalpel. It felt heavier, and sharper than I remembered it ever being before…


He did, and I lifted the scalpel to the corner of the arrow wound.

I'll be kind for a change and spare you the details of those few seconds it took to make the small puncture wound large enough to remove the arrow head — but suffice to say it would not be a memory I'd look back on with fondness, or pride. Boromir was a seasoned warrior, his pain threshold high to begin with, but a man's resistance to pain only stretches so far. I had to fight not to sob with guilt and horror as Boromir's howls of pain rattled my bones as I worked. I found myself whispered apology after apology under my breath as tears tracked down my face, but I didn't stop.

When the wound was finally wide enough and I could lift the bloodied scalpel away from his skin I almost wept with relief. He was breathing hard, too hard. His face had gone ghostly, but he was mercifully still conscious, one had gripping Gimli's steadying forearm while the other clawed at the dirt beneath us. I immediately put down the scalpel and took up the surgical tweezers, nausea roll through me at the thought, but I shoved it to the back of my mind along with the rest of my own injuries and fears and for later.

"Ok, now the arrow head," I heard myself say quietly, voice somehow still steadied than I felt inside. Boromir had his eyes clamped shut, his teeth clenched on the leather strip, but he had obviously enough presents of though to give one short nod.

I didn't let myself indulge my sudden urge to wretch, directing my attention to the incision I'd just made that was now theoretically wide enough remove the barbed arrow head. Again, I will spare you the details of exactly what happened next, but I will freely admit that neither Boromir nor I managed to hold it together after that.

Imagine playing the board game Operation, only the board is constantly moving in short pained jerks, and instead of hearing a buzzer if you twitch the wrong way, you hear the sound of one of your best friends screaming in agony right into your hypersensitive ears.

If you can imagine that, then you're pretty damned close — and I'd recommend seeing a psychologist.

The whole ordeal couldn't have taken more than three minutes, but it felt like hours, and by the time I'd pulled the wicked arrow tip free and dropped the tip into grass Boromir's throat had gone hoarse from screaming, and I was sobbing through clenched teeth.

"It's done," I found myself saying over and over, my hands taking the gauze I'd prepared and pressing it over the wound to stem the moderate but still manageable bleeding. "It's gone. Boromir it's done, the arrows gone."

He didn't try and speak through the ragged breaths, but he did roll his head in my direction as a weak assurance he'd heard. Honestly I couldn't quite believe he was still conscious, but I was relieved nonetheless. He still had one more arrow in him — admittedly a far less life threatening one — but I wouldn't be able to start treating him properly until both were out and the bleeding was tended to.
We were almost there. I could do this…

"Ok, last one," I told him, turning my focus to the final arrow shaft in his midsection, my own voice croaky from crying but hard from determination. Boromir made a weak sound, and my eyes flicked to his heavy-lidded eyes and slackening features. Without hesitating I smacked his cheekbone with just enough force to make a sound and cause a sting, just as Aragorn had done to me. "Boromir! Boromir, you need to stay awake!"

His eyes didn't immediately fly open, but he came back at least alert enough to stare up at me, as if I was just a part of a really bad dream. He was turning God awful pale, likely from shock and prolonged pain, but he was still conscious.

"Keep talking. What about Minas Tirith? Tell me, what else?" I demanded, fear making my voice harsh. He slowly going delirious, but at least he was still awake and alert enough to form words as I quickly returned to his last arrow wound.

"I couldn't stay… I… couldn't bare it… not after…" He sucked in another rattling breath, the sound going suddenly weak and slurred. "She deserved better too… they all did…"

My hands faltered as they prepared to snap the second arrow.

"She?"

He didn't answer me. My stomach sank.

"Boromir? Boromir!"

I looked up in a blur of panic to see him lying very still with his eyes half closed but still moving as if in a dream. His slightly bloody mouth was ajar, and his features gradually relaxing. I didn't try and slap him into consciousness this time, knowing it wouldn't work, but I did press two fingers into the space just below his jaw and to right of his throat — finding only a faint pulse there that was fast becoming weaker by the second.

"Lass…" Gimli's already gravely voice sounded choked, and I looked up to see the dwarf's face had paled still further and his brown eyes had gone wide. I followed his gaze down to where my left hand was still holding the gauze against the wound under his collarbone.

The fabric had soaked through entirely, trickling a bright stream of red down the side of his chest to stain his tunic.

Not waiting to let the sudden panic take hold, I pulled the saturated gauze away to see the wound — though I already knew with a sinking feeling what had happened. More blood than before had started to well and spill from the wound, and I only needed to look for half a second to know what had happened. The arrow head must have nicked a blood vessel when I was removing it, and I hadn't seen it.

Quick as I could I covered the wound with and pressed down hard. I'd barely held the pressure down for several seconds before the fabric soaked through entirely, and I was tearing off the bottom section of my tunic to replace it. Gimli was trying to say something in a frantic tone but I couldn't make out the words.

Legolas and Aragorn should have been back by now, and I cursed the both of them. What the hell was taking them so bloody long?

More blood started to soak through the shredded hem of my tunic.
'Shit!' I cried inside, hiding the panic and fear I suddenly felt stirring again at the sight of the blood welling under my hands. 'What do I do? What do I do?!'

No one answered me. Not Tink, not my own instincts, nothing.

Nausea rolled through my stomach and a knot appeared in my throat. I tried to force it down like I had before but it wouldn't go. I'd failed. I'd screwed up, I hadn't been observant or quick enough, and it had cost Boromir his life.

A choking sound found it's way out of my throat, and I raised a hand instinctively from Boromir's chest to cover my mouth — either to cover a wretch or a sob, I wasn't sure anymore. I froze at the sight and scent of my hands, stained scarlet from my makeshift surgery and trembling terribly again. The blood seemed to glare up at me from my palms and fingers, highlighting every scratch and scar I'd acquired on them over the past few months. But the one my eyes abruptly fixed upon was the one in the centre of my palm — the one I'd got from healing myself during the last day of training in Lothlórien.

I stared at it hard as the world slowed down around me.

The gears in my head wired back to life as the idea I'd just had began to take shape. It was a long shot, a really long shot, and I wasn't even sure if I was capable of doing it, but it was the only thing I could think of to try. The only chance left.

Without warning I reached out and seized Gimli's wrist with my blood stained fingers, yanking his hand over the wound.

"Hold this down, keep pressure on it," I instructed, my voice strained and hoarse. He did so but didn't look at all sanguine about Boromir's condition or what I was asking him to do.

"What are you doing, lass?" Even his voice sounded like it was turning green with nausea.

'Something my Master would expel me for, if he only knew,' I thought with grim certainty, knowing not only that it was true, but that he would likely be justified in doing it too.

What I was about to attempt wasn't so much risky, as it was bordering on insane. I was about to do the exact same thing I'd done when I healed my palm after scratching it during training, using my own hröa's* energy to speed-heal the wound — only on a much, much larger scale. Not just that, but when a healer preformed that same technique on another person's body it became something very different — an uncommon healing technique called an antacuile**. And to put it lightly, there were very good reasons why the technique wasn't widely practiced, even among elvish healers.

Excluding all the complicated Quenya words, biological and physical implications, the basic principle of the procedure was fairly easy to understand. All power comes from life, and every living creature has a set amount of power stored up within it's hröa that sustains it — keeps its heart beating, keeps its organs and brain alive and functioning etc. When a person is wounded they instinctively devotes a fraction of that power to healing the injury. It's why most people — be they Man, Elf or Dwarf — get tired when they are recovering from serious wounds or illnesses. It was also how I'd been able to speed up the healing of my own small cut, by simply diverting more of that energy into closing the wound and stopping the bleeding. For small things like bruises and shallow cuts it wasn't usually a problem, because the portion of energy devoted to healing it was smaller too. The issue came when the injury is so severe that the person simply didn't have enough stored energy to heal the wound and keep themselves alive at the same time. Say for example; when you were sporting two arrow wounds, one of which had nicked a major blood vessel.
That was where the *antacuilië* came in, and where I could help. In theory, if I got it right, I'd be able to share just enough of my own energy with Boromir to keep his heart beating, and speed up the healing process — enough to safely stop the bleeding and begin closing the wound. It was one of the many things I'd learned about through books, but simply hadn't been a healer or apprentice nearly long enough to be allowed to practice. I knew the concept, and had studied the theory enough to know the steps. I knew I could do it, but that wasn't what I was worried about.

Energy wise, getting the faucet running was easy. Getting it to stop once I'd started? That was the dangerous bit.

Master Elrond would have howled bloody murder if he knew what I was considering. Performing a supervised *limifea*** on Frodo was one thing — but this was entirely was different. I didn't have a safety net this time, and if I screwed *this* kind of link up I could potentially flood Boromir's already traumatised body with an influx of more power than he could deal with. It would be the equivalent of giving him a shock from a defibrillator that was set a hundred volts too high. I could stop his heart, stop his breathing, or stop all his brain activity with one tiny slip-up. Not only that, but if I left the link open too long, I could potentially drain myself of all my energy, leaving me just as bad off as him.

However, I also knew that if I didn't do something to help now I'd never leave this forest.

Oh I might leave physically. I'd have Aragorn, and Legolas, and Gimli there to tell me that I'd done all I could, and that it wasn't my fault, but in my heart of hearts I would know that it wasn't true. I'd be back here every time I shut my eyes, seeing Boromir bleed to death right in front of me, and knowing that I stood by and let him…

My choice already made, I didn't bother to give warning before snapping the second arrow off, rolling Boromir just enough so I could pull it through and out, throw it away and pressing another wad of torn fabric over the bleeding. There couldn’t be any obstructions in the way — once this started there was no stopping.

Recalling the words I'd read describing the steps, I slipped my right hand past where a confused Gimli was still putting pressure on the bleeding wound in Boromir's chest as I'd instructed, and rested it of where I could still feel a very faint heartbeat. My left hand found his, and took a gentle but firm grip on his hand, forcing my whole body to go still and relaxed — every muscle still buzzing with adrenaline from the top of my head to the tips of my toes and fingers. It was difficult to calm myself. The last thing I wanted to do was sit still doing nothing, trying to block out the rest of the world enough to concentrate on finding what I was looking for deep within myself.

I found it after maybe a minute's steady breathing, on slowing the pace of every life-supporting reaction in my body, and the sensation of what I'd just started happening inside began in the pit of my stomach. It began as faintly uncomfortable warmth that steadily growing into what felt like a fever the more I made myself focus, spreading slowly up my body, lingering in the left side of my chest over my heart, before creeping down my arm towards where my hands. As it did, the uncomfortable feverish heat began to subside, leaving a cold, numb sensation creeping in to take it's place.

My heartbeat was beginning to slow a fraction, and I could feel myself going a bit lightheaded as my blood pressure began to fall — but nothing else happened.

Was it working? Was I too late?

Suddenly Boromir sucked in a ragged breath of unexpected shock, his back arching off the ground into a bow. I felt his heartbeat surge under my palm and he choked and wheezed, his hand
unconsciously locking around mine — as if he could sense the lifeline I was trying to providing him with.

If I hadn't been so focused on what I was doing my jaw would have hit the forest floor.

I'd done it. I'd actually done it. It had been such a long shot, a desperate stab in the dark I honestly wasn't sure if I'd really believe it was going to succeed.

But I also knew I couldn't keep it going much longer. The coldness in my limbs was getting stronger. I was getting weak, and my arms going sluggish as my body swaying like a reed in a gale. I could dimly hear Gimli's confused utterance of awed shock, but couldn't draw enough focus away to pick out the exact words. His hand had slipped away from the wound a little with Boromir's sudden animation, and I could see the bleeding of the wound subsiding, and the tissue of his chest wound slowly beginning to knit itself together from within.

I surge of triumph and hope momentarily eclipsed my shock, and I tried to give a cry of elation, only to find my voice wouldn't work.

As I stared down at what was happening under my hands, the sight began to blur, colours and shapes of everything I could see spinning together into a constantly shifting mess.

At first I had no idea what was happening. The more I looked, the faster the blurred shapes began to move, and it was only after a couple of second that I realised I was seeing things that shouldn't be there. Silhouettes of people and places I didn't recognise, little flashes of faces and I didn't know, and voices I'd never heard. They flew by, vivid and fast as rapids flowing down a mountainside. At first I thought all the trauma and exhaustion had triggered another surge of memories, but in a rush of confusion, I realised I could feel — on the same fundamental level that I had when I first heard Rávamë's name — that whatever I was seeing didn't belong to me. They were indeed memories, those blurred images flashing past me, but I didn't recognise any of them.

They weren't mine, I could feel it. None of them were mine.

Which meant they could only have been…

A smiling human boy with sandy auburn hair and no more than seven was suddenly before me, swinging a wooden training sword at me. I easily parry the strike away with one of my own; though not as hard as I knew I could have. The boy's sounds of effort mingled with two sets of laughter — his and my own. We laugh easily, and without fear of repercussions or criticism, knowing and trusting each other entirely. It was a simple happy moment, and one I knew was all too rare, and wouldn't last as soon as our father returned…

Then I was holding the hands of a young woman, barely into her late teen, but lovely far beyond her years. She smiles up at me through dark eyes, her delicate tanned hands clasped timidly in my calloused ones — hands that felt far too crude and clumsy to be holding something so beautiful. I told her so, and she disagreed with me, with a smile as warm and sunlight, and a gentle brush of her lips on mine…

Then I was in a hall made of intricate arches and tall statues made entirely of solid black and white marble, their regal faces blank and hard and seeming to stare down at me in judgement. I stand before two thrones, one grand, white, and raised high on a dais — one that has remained empty for far too long. The other is grey, less imposing and sits at floor level, seating a man who is as unsettling as he is familiar. A middle aged man worn away with years of grief and neglect to look older than I know he is. He speaks to me in a stern, unyielding tone, with hard grey eyes and no willingness relent. I hear my own voice argue with him — familiar but far younger than I ever
remember it being — no older than a teenager. The outburst is only met with a roar of sudden anger from the man on the throne, his thin veneer of calm vanishing and then returning just as quickly…

Then I'm standing at the top of a high white tower, leaning heavily on a supporting pillar, looking down as a wedding precision takes place far below. I'm too far up to pick out any faces, but I spot her anyway — dressed from head to toe in white and gold, her dark hair spun up atop her head in an elegant coil. I can't see her expression, but I see the hesitant, stiff way she moves on the arm of her new noble husband, more than a decade older than she. I don't need to be able to see the face I'd grown to know and care so much for to know the same anguish on my own face is mirrored on her own far below…

Years pass in seconds, though I refused to think on exactly how many, and finally I am standing opposite the boy who had been play fighting with me all that time ago — now grown almost as tall as me. He has the same auburn hair as mine though he wears his shorter, but where I know I bear our mother's blue eyes, his are stormy grey like our father's — though infinitely kinder. I'm so grateful for that. He wears the hardened leather armour on the captain of the guard, with the white tree insignia pressed into the breastplate and pardons. His face looks saddened and uncertain as he clasped hands with me, the both of us pulling into an embraced of farewell. I recognised the feeling pulling as my insides as homesickness that I know will grow and never fade the moment I leave the White City's walls.

"Remember today, little brother."

Faramir says nothing, but he doesn't need to.

"I will return," I hear myself say quietly, and continued saying it silently to myself as I ride out of the city without letting myself look back. "I will return."

Then the hallucinations dissolved back into another confusing flurry of random shapes and colours that make no sense, all moving too fast now to be distinguishable.

Enough. This was going too far, becoming too much. I could feel myself being pulled down, slipping away. I couldn't keep this up any longer. I had to let go, now.

But I didn't have the strength left in my hands to pry Boromir's fingers from around my wrist. I tried, fumbling at his grip on my wrist, but my hands had gone clumsy and weak as a newborn's, my head spinning until the world stared to rock like the deck of a ship. Gimli was calling my name frantically now, asking what he should do. I tried to speak, to say something to convey what was happening to me, but my tongue was like a wad of cotton in my mouth.

Two sets of running footfalls appeared suddenly behind me, dim and fussy among the blurs of the waking and dreaming worlds all swirling all around. One was light and swift, while the other was heavy if no less hurried.


"Eleanor?!!" Legolas' shocked voice pierced through the rising haze. I tired to drag up enough will and concentration to speak, but Aragorn got there first.

"What is Iluvatar's name are you doing?!!" He yelled, his voice horrified and echoing around the inside of my head as if I'd heard him from the bottom of a well.

There was a gust of moving air, the crackle and rustle of displaced leaves, and the next this I knew
the ranger had seized me non-too gently but the forearm and jerked me back, my arm coming away
from Boromir's death-grip on my wrist.

The connection broke in a cold sharp shock up my arm, and I fell backwards as the forest
cartwheeled over me. The waking world snapped back into focus again but didn't stop moving, and
for a long moment I just lay there, able to see again, but unable to move or speak. It was a strangely
claustrophobic feeling, having my mind still running at full speed while my body couldn't react. I
tried to move my arms so I could roll over and see him, to see if he was ok — but I didn't have
enough energy left in me to twitch my fingers.

My heartbeat had stabilised again, though it was still far too slow. My head felt light, as if had been
filled with cottonwool. On some base level, I knew I was alright, I was still breathing and my heart
was still beating, though just barely. Another few seconds and I might have…

Darkness was starting to creep in at the sides of my vision, and I knew that any moment I was
going to pass out from sheer exhaustion.

"Is he alive?" I managed to rasp near silently, not enough strength left to speak any louder. than that

A familiar face with grey-blue eyes and blond hair appeared in my line of sight half a second later,
hefting me up off the forest floor to rest supported against his knees. A bizarre look of shock,
confusion and awe was etched onto his face as he searched me for life threatening injuries. I
wanted to shove him back, but I couldn't manage anything beyond a pathetic twitch of my head.

"I'm fine… I'm alright…"

The shock in Legolas' perceptive eyes didn't relet and they flicked between a dozen different places
around us — to where Boromir was, to the Uruk-hai corpse lying several feet away, to the
deadened wood around the body, all of what I had done in an effort to save my friend's life. I could
hear Aragorn and Gimli's raised voices as near where I knew Boromir still lay but couldn't hear
them clearly enough to know what was going on.

A surge or frustration gave me the strength I needed to raise my voice.

"Is he alive?!!" I choked out more forcefully, the effort taking almost all I had left.

Legolas' face was pale as he looked slowly from the man back down to me. He opened his mouth
to answer his lips moved, I felt his warm breath on my face, but no sound came out. I realised then,
that it was because the creeping darkness had taken my hearing as well.

The shadowy haze around the corners of my vision crept in, and with no strength left to keep me
there, I willingly let myself fall backwards into the blackness.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
* "hröa" — the body (Quenya)

** "antacuilë" — the sharing of energy that makes up the entire body to heal another.
Extremely dangerous for both involved, and only ever used by experienced Elvish
healers (lit. "give life" in Quenya)

*** "limifea" — a soul link (Quenya)

A/N: I would say I'm sorry for ending it there, but I'm really not. :3

The next and final chapter of Book 1 will be posted later tonight, then it's onward to Book 2 in the New Year! See you all then.

Much love,
~Rella
I fell through the darkness, my dream-self’s hair and clothes flying up around me as cool air gusted upwards. I’d been fully prepared for utter exhausted unconsciousness, so it was a bit of a surprise to find I still had enough presents of mind to see the ground of my subconscious rushing up towards me.

I didn’t scream, but I did brace myself for the impact of hitting the earth. Instead of a hard crash and a painful landing though, I fell lightly straight down onto a bed of grass as soft as an etherial feather pillow.

Admittedly, I landed face down, but you can’t have everything I suppose.

I stayed there for what seemed to me like a long while before rolling myself onto my back, my mind surprisingly calm despite everything I knew to be going on outside. I felt like my thoughts should either be running at full speed still, or too exhausted to even be aware of my surroundings. Instead I was somewhere in between, staring up at the impossibly beautiful star covered sky my mind had created as a safe haven wondering whether I’d managed to save Boromir, and what on earth it was I’d seen through his mind’s eye while preforming the antacuilë…

I’d never imagined when all the medical texts talked about risking yourself as well as your patient they’d meant potentially getting lost in your subjects memories as you attempted to save them. I still wasn’t entire sure what it was I’d been seeing through him, but as much as I wanted to puzzle it over, I couldn’t right now. There was something more, something bigger that was preying on my mind now, and it was gaining momentum fast as I lay there.

As if she’d sensed my train of thought drifting in her direction, I blinked and Tink was there. She stood over my head looking down, a perfect upside down mirror image of myself with liquid gold eyes and better kept hair. She didn’t speak, and I couldn’t read her expression clearly as I looked up at her lying flat on my back — it was lost somewhere between awed, impassive, and maybe a little worried.

Without a word she smiled tiredly, and offered me her hand. I took it, letting her pull me easily back to my feet.

As I straightened, I realised with a spark of recognition that we were standing in the same plane where I’d first encountered her over two years ago. Rolling hills surrounded us in ever direction, blanketed with soft grass and shifting yellow flowers, spread beneath an inky night sky scattered with billions of far off stars and a full moon as bright as a floating lantern.

“I think I could grow to like this plane the best,” I murmured softly, unsure of what else to say as we stared up at the rolling nebula and far off galaxies. Tink’s weary expression shifted into the shadow of a smile, brushing a hand over the head of the yellow flowers around us.

“Me too,” she answered in the same quiet tone.

“Though the method of entrance could be improved upon,” I chuckled airily, trying to inject some humour I couldn’t bring myself to feel.
I needed have bothered, Tink clearly knew what I was feeling, probably better than I did. Her expression didn’t chance, though her eyes glinted with repressed words. I bit my lip, looking away from her unsettlingly searching stare. Silence drifted between us before I worked up the nerve to ask the first on my list of questions — a list that was growing steadily in the wake of what had just happened outside the safe haven of my head.

“Did it work?” I asked, almost inaudibly though I know she heard me clear as day. “Did he survive?”

Tink took a moment before answering with the same reverent solemnity I had.

“I don’t know.”

I nodded, accepting the response, endlessly frustrating as it was.

“What about us? We’re still alive, right?”

She answered that one quicker, and with more strength.

“We are,” she said firmly, and I heard the familiar notes of disapproval and sharpness mix with the more unusual weariness. “Though that’s relatively speaking. You knocked us down pretty good with what you did, boss. That fight, that heroic shambles of a rescue, and I’d be amiss as a survival instinct if I didn’t point out that was a hell of a lot of power you poured into that antacuilë. We’re all but running on fumes now.”

I turned to regard her thoughtfully at that, an eyebrow slightly raised.

“You think I should have done it differently? Let him go without trying anything?” I asked without malice or anger. I was too tired for that, and so was she I think.

Tink didn’t answer me immediately. She sort of shifted beside me, swaying like one of the hundreds of yellow flowers swaying in the gentle breeze. I watched the conflict on her face with an odd soft of fascination and narrowed eyes, waiting for her to respond.

She wasn’t behaving how I’d been expecting, or how I’d known her to react to my past rash decision making before. Anger, sarcasm, a lecture stuffed to the gills with biting wit — any of that would have been perfectly within her character. But this…

Her gold eyes met mine again as she chewed her lip — a nervous mannerism I recognised as one of my own.

“Boss, what you did…” She began in a voice that was unsettlingly sombre, and faintly nervous as she looked at me, “you must know that letting that much energy into a antacuilë should have killed you. It would have killed anyone else. You know that.”

I hadn’t know that actually.

Oh I’d suspected that might have been the case, but that hadn’t seemed all the important at the time. There had been a chance to save Boromir, and I’d taken it. Nothing else had mattered. However, now that I was hearing it said aloud, it sounded as if there was another point she was trying to make by telling me that — beyond how foolish it had been of my to try. There was something else I wasn’t seeing…

I looked around at the bobbing heads of the flowers, and up at the swirling constellations overhead, as if to remind myself of where we were.
“But it didn’t,” I murmured slowly. “We’re still here, you said it yourself. We’re still alive.”

“We are.”

“Then how? If what I did should have killed us, how are we still here?” I asked, looking back to her, as if her face could provide me with the answers that she couldn’t. But her expression and bright gold eyes were a mask, one behind which I knew there was something struggling to get out. I continued to watch her, feeling as though there was something in her expression I should be looking for.

“Was that you? The reason the antacuilë worked and I didn’t die?”

Tink didn’t quite shake her head, but she did incline it slowly but pointedly in a negative gesture.

“That was all you, boss,” she told me soberly, and sounding honestly just a little impressed — that was definitely a first. “I just… gave you a little extra help powering the battery, I suppose.”

“You… how?” I asked again, not fully understand how something like that was even possible, let alone doable. “You’re meant to be a part of me Tink, a survival instinct. Anything you draw upon, power or knowledge, it’s supposed to come from me… doesn’t it?”

I was met with only a blank stare. A half exhausted half frustrated sigh escaped me and turned to face her squarely, almost nose to nose.

“Please Tink, try and help me out here. What are you really trying to tell me with all this?”

She shifted uneasily again, a pained look shadowing her face as she obviously struggled with some barrier or verbal leash I couldn’t see.

“You’re asking the wrong kind of question, boss.”

I groaned half heartedly, more out of weariness now than frustration. The message in that response was clear; she wanted to tell me but she couldn’t, not directly anyway. Just like always.

I ran a hand down my face, wanting badly to do something to vent all the frustrations that were swimming through me, but I was just too tired.

“I’m tired of questions and no answers,” I said softly. Tink’s fingers found their way to mine, and she gingerly took my free hand, squeezing it gently.

“I know.”

I drew my hand away from my face and looked at her, her gold eyes so entirely different to my green ones, despite us being nearly identical in every other way, in both appearance and knowledge.

She knew what I knew. She was me, or at least a part of my. That’s what she’d told me over two years ago, and ever since then I’d been labouring under that nonsensical rule between us — having her subconsciously know something without being able to simply tell me. It had always been like that but something seemed different about the way she was showing it now, as if she was struggling to show me something without breaking that stupid rule of subconscious spoilers. She wanted to tell me badly, I could see it in her deliberately blank face, but something was holding her back — and she was desperately trying to work around it using anything but her words…

The memory I kept at the back of my mind of Galadriel’s words in the garden rang suddenly
though my thoughts, back when she’d asked me if I’d choose to look into the mirror.

‘With no small amount of luck, and if you choose to ask the right questions, and choose the right person to ask,’ she’d told me

I hadn’t said the words aloud, but Tink seemed to know what I was thinking from simply reading my face. She gave a wry smile, her left cheek dimpling just like I knew mine did.

“You already have all the pieces, boss. Time to put them all together,” she told me softly, tentative hope lacing her voice. “I know you can do it. You’ve done it before.”

I’d done it before? Was she talking about Moria? When I’d figured out what she’d done to trap us in there?

I couldn’t be sure, but it felt like that was what she was referring to — prompting me to question her in the same way I had back then. To ask her something I hadn’t already.

I thought furiously as I stared hard at her, thinking back quickly over everything she’d said and done in the past few months. Every little thing that had nagged at me, annoyed me, made me laugh, every small detail that kept telling me she was more than just the personification of my survival instinct. She was more than just a primal reflection of myself. She was aware, conscious, had shown she felt more than just the drive to stay alive. She had shown she was capable of making decisions independent of my will, and had shown a willingness and want to talk with me even when she didn’t need to.

I looked at her. Really looked at her.

“What are you, Tink?” I asked simply, then stopped, thinking again. Then I added in a much quieter tone, hoping I wasn’t just taking a wild, useless stab in the dark: “Who are you?”

She didn’t answer immediately. She just smiled, the expression lost somewhere between childishly playful, and frustrated — but her amber eyes glittered with sudden, hidden excitement when I’d said ‘who’.

“You tell me. What, or who, do you think I am?”

“A pain in my arse,” I joked weakly, with a dry laugh. She smiled again with a soft chuckle, though the humour in it was thin.

“Besides that,” she said softly, the sudden excitement not leaving her eyes, and it was starting to border on unsettlingly intense. “Ignore everything you think you know. About me, about us, and look at what you actually know. What you’ve experienced, what you’ve seen. Then you tell me. What am I?”

I saw what she was getting at, though the words were strangely chilling despite their unhelpful vagueness. She was trying to get me to follow the train of logic — exactly like I’d done when I’d first figured out what she’d done to me outside Moria.

She was right, I had done this before. I could do it again, I could work it out. All I needed was to follow the train of logic: She couldn’t tell me who or what she was, not directly — but she’d already told me I had all the pieces to this huge messed up puzzle that was in front of me. She wouldn’t have been prompting me to think through all this so hard unless she knew I’d be able to figure out the answer. And the only reason she’d know that I’d be capable of that would be because…
Understanding hit me harder than any of the Uruk-hai’s sledge-hammer punches or kicks to my body.

She knew I’d be able to figure it out because I already knew who she was.

I already knew her name.

She had been right. I already had all the pieces in front of me — I just hadn’t been able to see past my own assumptions and prejudices to put all them all together as see what was in front of me.

I could feel more than see Tink’s watchful, sharp gaze on me as my mind raced, going back over every conversation we’d ever had, every word, detail, and unspoken hint she’d ever given me. My physical body might be unconscious, and I was only ‘awake’ in a dream world, but that didn’t stop my entire body from going cold with what was literally staring me in the face. It couldn’t be. It didn’t make sense, there was no way it was possible. But there was no other explanation, no other reason that fit all the pieces together. Even so, I couldn’t let myself relent now.

I had to be sure. I had to know.

Doing my best to keep my expression blank, I swallowed the frightened lump that had appeared in my throat, and I looked at the creature I’d so flippantly named ‘Tink’ all those years ago. The silly nickname was almost laughable now in the knowledge of what she truly was, or who she truly was…

“What happened during the fight, with the flames,” I spoke quietly, less for dramatic effect and more because I was scared my voice would give away exactly how terrified I was of being right, “that was you, wasn’t it. That was your voice I heard when I tried to scream.”

She nodded. Just once, and without speaking, her expression utterly unchanging.

“What was that exactly?” I pressed reluctantly further.

“A command,” she answered simply, though the look on her face told me that was a perishing over-simplification. It was small, but it was yet another little piece of this puzzle clicking into place. I kept my gaze fixed on her face, reading every twitch or subtle glimmer of a reaction as I plugged on, not daring to chicken out now.

I swallowed thickly.

“It killed the plants, everything within a few feet of where we were when it happened.”

Her lip twitched in the tinniest of smiles, tinged at the edges with a sliver of pride and a dash of bitterness.

“A fire needs fuel. Fundamental law of the universe, boss. You can’t create something from nothing. Only Uru Illvatar can do that.”

She spoke the last part of that statement with such reverent respect that I might have blinked were I not watching her so closely, my insides writhing and my mind racing.

“True,” I agreed softly, still not looking away as my metaphorical heartbeat quickened and my mouth went dry, “…but a Maia can, quote: ‘shape the world around them with a spoken word.’ That’s what they were created for. It’s what you were created for.”

I’d seen cadavers with less convincing poker faces than Tink had, but I knew my face and her eyes
within them well enough to see what was stirring behind them. She didn’t look away, and neither did I.

“That second soul Frodo saw when he put on the Ring, it was different. Every time I saw a mortal’s fëa* through a link or through healing, it was pale blue just as he described. But the other…” I allowed my voice to trail off as we stared at each other, still unable breaking gazes.

It hadn’t quite sunk in until I spoke those words aloud, but now that I had it was clear as daylight after a storm — her silence hadn’t just been forced upon her by some unseen force, it been a hint. It had been her only way of prompting me on, encouraging me to pursue the one real clue to her identity she’d been able to give me all this time.

The name I’d heard whispered in the depths of my memory, the one she’d left for me where she knew I’d see it.

I took a deep breath I know I didn’t need here, but felt was important for these words regardless.

“The name of the Maia who disappeared in the First Age, the one you wrote in the sand, you wanted me to remember it. Not because it was mine. It was never my name…” I said firmly with complete certainty, the words not a question, but a statement of fact I could feel in my bones was true.

“It was yours. Rávamë is your name.”

I felt the change in the being I’d named Tink more than saw it. She didn’t move, or transform, or anything so dramatic. She didn’t even blink, but I felt everything around her shift in that moment, as if a long-locked door had just been allowed to creak open…

“Finally,” she breathed as if whispering an age-long secret, her golden eyes glittering with excitement from the reflection of my own face, “she’s got it…”

- To be continue in Book II: Compos Mentis -

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

* “fēa” — soul (Quenya)

A/N: Good God, I can’t believe I actually did it. I finished the first book. Trust me, no one is more shocked that I actually pulled this off than me. XD

For those of you who don’t know, I started writing this fic around this time last year — and as I’m posting this, I’m actually sitting in the exact same spot I was when I first started writing the first chapter. :) Originally I planned this whole project just for fun. For nothing more than my own amusement, and to help me though a rather tough time in my life. It started as something small and silly, and now it’s something else.
Something I’ve found myself loving to working on, editing, posting, and making others laugh with.
So thank you, to all of you who helped support this and make what started as an embarrassing guilty pleasure into something so much more (my mother included — that was a twist I never saw coming!) Your feedback and encouragement hasn’t just helped me keep me going in my writing, it’s helped keep me upbeat at a time when I could have easily slipped back into depression. That means more than I can possibly put into words.

The next book in the series is already mostly planned and the first chapters are well underway. I’ll be posting the first two or three together within the next couple of months if all goes well. But first I really need to go back over Lapsus Memoriae with a fine-tooth comb (and my gorgeous Beta reader Kitzie — who has not only helped me tackle my grammar and spelling, but has given me some of the best reactions to plot twists I could have hoped for!)

Thank you so much again, all of you who have stuck with me from chapter one. I’m so happy you decided to click on my story, and even more so if you decided to read this far. I hope you continue to enjoy it and stick around to see where Eleanor, Tink and their weird and wonderful story leads.

Until next time, and with much love,

~Rella

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!