Into the Abyss

by NeverDyingRose

Summary

Everything Elisa Red has left is in a title- hunter. Born out of one of the most secret and powerful kingdoms in middle earth, Elisa soon discovered her fate might yet be intertwined with the King Thranduil's. All she wants is revenge, to kill the monster cursing Middle Earth and who stole her family from her, but soon she will discover how far she is willing to go for justice. How much does revenge cost?

Rating for serious violence, brief mentions of torture, sexy times, and other non PG13 things.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
The hunters waited till nightfall.

The woman and two men had already battled a group of orcs which had crossed their path that day but it was nothing compared to the hunt which waited for them. The small team had fought together for years, long before they became infamous hunters, and knew their routine well.

Elisa Riding was 20, barely, with shoulder length crimson hair, a pretty face, bright turquoise eyes and a slender figure. It helped in her business to be charming yet lethal and Elisa Riding was as good as they got. Darren Barlow was a few years older and, though he was a dwarf, her best friend. Well, besides the other hunting partner- Leon Ferros. The elf was a towering dark haired man who was 500 years old.

The three cut an odd but a powerful force. They set up camp in a cave barely a mile away from their target and waited. It wasn’t long before the sun cowered behind the night sky and the moon became their guiding light. Elisa chose the time to attack. It was their routine, their order, for Elisa to lead and the two men to follow. It kept them alive. Elisa was the most powerful hunter there was and was unquestionable the best person to lead. It was why their contact in their homeland always diverted missions to her. She had a gift for leadership.

She seemed to fade into the shadows too. Wearing her signature corset and close fitting pants plus leather riding jacket, Elisa wouldn’t have fit in anywhere except there on the hunt. Tucked into leather shafts inside her jacket, her favourite bowie knives waited faithfully. Strapped to her hip was an elven sword which had been a gift from Leon. Where she preferred knives, close contact, Darren worked with brute force and chose a sword kept perfectly clean. Leon worked best with his bow and arrows though he could wield a sword just as well as Elisa and Darren.

“I’ll take first watch.” Elisa volunteered as she stretched out.

Darren hit her shoulder hard enough to cause her to wince. “After the way you got tackled by that orc, I think you need the rest.”

“Now that’s just rude. For the record, I was taking on 4 orcs at once and just 1 of them managed to get in a good hit. Excuse me but I was amazing back there. I was like lightning.”
She rubbed at the bottom of her back where she was sure a massive purple bruise would be showing tomorrow. Darren shook his head and chuckled into his beard.

Leon took the opportunity to move closer to her and spied out at their target.

“What do you think is down there?”

Elisa shrugged. “We’re getting paid to kill whatever is it. We’ve taken on a dragon before, Leon. This should be a training exercise.”

Leon didn’t hide his concern. “Something stirs in the darkness this time, my friend. I worry that we run into the abyss’ mouth too often.”

She rolled her eyes and shot him a playful grin. “You brood too much, elf. I was thinking, we should take a holiday after this. Just for a short while. Are you not tempted to return to Mirk… whatever the elf place is called?”

Leon chuckled. “I doubt they would have me back.”

She gave him a smile which could have melted ice. “Their lost- our gain.”

It was closing in on midnight when they saw moment.

Leon and Darren had drifted off to sleep while Elisa had kept watch. They hadn’t lit a fire in case they alerted their prey to their location but the cold was something they had grown used to. Elisa sat with her legs crossed at the mouth of the cave and watched the looming forest spread out before them. Scaling up the mountain was definitely worth the effort considering the perfectly vantage point. It gave her chance to see the sudden still set into the forest.

Immediately Elisa nudged the other hunters awake and signalled them to silently come to the mouth of the cave. They watched patiently as the disturbance became clear.
Something had terrified the entire forest into silence. The birds’ song ceased. The call of wildlife silenced. The wind quietened its howl. Even the trees seemed to pause in their gentle sway.

“Look, there.” Darren whispered as he pointed to the middle of the forest.

Elisa had to study the scene before she laid eyes finally on her monster.

The three hunters lay on their stomachs, watching in silent, as they saw the terrifying creature they had been hunting for the past 5 months. The monster that had left death everywhere it passed. They had only caught up to it after it had destroyed a human village two days ago. Elisa hadn’t arrived in time to save a single person but she could avenge their deaths now.

“What is that creature?” Leon gasped.

“It doesn’t deserve a name. It’s dead.”

“We should wait and-”

Elisa cut off his sentence. “I want to get closer.”

Without another word, Elisa leapt over the edge of the cave’s mouth and began scaling the mountain down. Leon followed the woman he had loved from a distance for years without either of his pack knowing. She had a light to her, a joy that never ceased despite their grime duty, and Leon thought it impossible not to love her.

Elisa moved effortlessly through the forest shadows. She recognised every movement and sound the forest made. Darren and Leon moved less quietly but no one would spot them unless they knew where to look.

They already had the layout of the forest. They knew the path well and took every twist and turn in their stride. There was still no noise and nothing stirred in the forest. Everything was going to plan yet Elisa couldn’t slip the feeling that something was wrong. That she was missing something right in front of her eyes.
She scanned the area around her. Darren and Leon were close to her tail. The hunt would end here. After 20 minutes fleeing through the forest, Elisa had barely breaking a sweat and her focus was keeping her breathing even and quiet. She ducked behind a tree and signalled for the other hunters to do the same.

The creature was close now.

It stood in the middle of a grassy patch next to a fallen log. She could make out its repulsive features clearer. Adrenaline pumped in her veins till she was sure the creature could have heard her heart thumping. Slowly, she removed the sword from its shaft and clutched it in her right hand. The cold touch of steel felt familiar in her hand. Still her nerves were on edge. A voice at the back of head screaming at her to see the danger right in front of her eyes that her brain wasn’t registering as a threat.

She spied past her cover. Sword outstretched, Elisa stepped closer to the creature.

Her footsteps were silent on the grass. Her breathing was slow and rhythmmed. Her hand steady as she pressed the tip of the sword to the back of the creature’s neck.

*Look what we have here.*

The voice shocked Elisa. In that split second, she made the worst mistake a hunter could make- she took her eyes off her prey.

It was only for a second. She spun around distracted by searching for the origin of the voice. It seemed to be behind her, in front of her…

The voice came from everywhere.

Quickly, she turned back to her prey but it was too late.

The creature had vanished.

*Some silly little girl wants to play. Who was it who told you monsters were nothing to fear? You*
want to return to the terror I was so generously to hide from you. Well, who I am to deny?

In a flash, Darren and Leon were behind her. She didn’t notice. The dark was heavy and thick and completely in control- a living, breathing thing.

Something was wrong. Where were the creature’s followers? His kin? No monster cursed the world alone.

“Ambush!”

The words were barely out of her mouth before they were attacked.

Pain blossomed throughout her shoulder as steel pierced through her armour and skin. She bit back a scream as she was thrown to the ground. Shadows danced around her in swirls of darkness and shapes. Her enemy moved faster than she could see. Suddenly every corner held a danger. She groped blindly for her bowie knife and felt the cold leather handle in her hand fast enough for her to spot her the flash of silver behind her. She spun around without warning and thrust the blade into her attacker’s neck.

It was then she saw the true meaning of terror.

Pain blossomed as steel pierced through her armour and tore into her shoulder. Her sword slipped out of her grasp and landed on the floor with a clatter. From the darkness, a strange yowling cry echoed out to them. A second and third cry answered the first. Before she could take another hit, she dived onto the floor and grabbed the knife. One of her arms was completely out of use. She didn’t know her attacker. She was fighting, one handed, against probably a few enemies in the dark. The situation didn’t look good.

She rolled onto her back and searched out the blurred shape of her first enemy. The hairs rose at the back of the seeker’s neck as she felt warm breath touch her skin. She stared into the creature’s red eyes and it stared back. When she finally tore her eyes away from its pinning glare, Scarlett noticed in horror its glistening pointed teeth.

The blade weighed like solid lead in her hand, reminding her of its value, but she didn’t move. The fanged man launched at her with teeth ready to tear into her. She leapt out of the way and barely missed its filthy long claws. The first move shook her out of the trance and she scrambled to her feet. She flung her body to the left in time to avoid a grasping hand, but something clawed into her ankle.
She held her arms up in defence of the face so her elbows took most of the fall’s blow. Needles ripped into her ankle and the sudden pain bought tears to her eyes.

The man (if it could still be called that) was as pale as death. Black veins poked through his skins and pumped violently trying to escape the compounds of his body. Eyes of coal that looked through Scarlett and drool dripped down from his crooked and cracked lips. His hand was scratching at her ankle and the filthy long nails easily ripped through her skin. Another bolt of pain threw the seeker’s attention back to trying to escape. The beast was gruesome but she had to focus. The shock had already cost her time and sent her mind into a tangle of thoughts. Bare instincts moved her arm and she stabbed the knife through the soft exposed lump in his throat. She jerked the blade free and kicked the assailant in the face.

Leon and Darren weren’t spared from the assault. The enemy fought with a furious speed and anger that they had never faced before. They were faster, stronger, and more prevailing. In the fuzzy reflection of the blade, she caught the shadow of the monstrous man crouching behind her. She threw her fist around the blade and aimed. As soon as she could hear his laboured breathing, she slit the knife across his throat.

Despite her injury, her hit was straight and left a crimson smile across his throat.

“There is no way the Gods can be that angry at me.” She muttered, spitting out blood at the same time she spotted three more set of beady red eyes.

She rolled off the first creature’s corpse in time to strike her second attacker in the face. It scrambled to its feet fast but not as fast as Scarlett. She threw the knife into the exposed neck and followed by attacking it’s throat. Instead of the typical hands are the entire neck, she pressed her thumb and fingers around the knife stabbing into his large Adam’s apple. She drove and sank her fingers into the notch. The third creature didn’t care about the animalistic cry of his partner and choose to attack Elisa from behind. That was it’s first mistake. With her hands still wrapped around the creature’s neck, she brought the ball of her foot forward and forcefully slammed it into the area of the third creature’s leg between their ankle and mid-leg. A successful crack echoed as the bone in its leg cracked. Another set of eyes appeared almost floating in the air a couple feet away from her.

“Run!” Elisa ordered. They were in the open and the battlefield had quickly turned against them. They had no choice. She saw a flash of silver as Leon scrambled to his feet but Darren was nowhere to be seen. Panic clawed as her heart.

His body was barely held together when she finally saw the creatures still tearing at him. His lifeless eyes stared at her: eyes full of judgement. The sight burned into her memory. She silently promised her friend she would never forget. But time was short. She would grieve later. Leon dragged her quickly in the direction they had come from. If they could just escape the forest…
Perhaps I should be afraid. Should I fear the most powerful hunters in Middle Earth?

Elisa fled besides Leon. They had no path but knew they had to keep running. The voice still seemed to be besides her, inside her mind.

Your poor dwarf friend. Do you feel guilt, Elisa? Do you feel dead inside knowing you led Darren to his death? He’s still alive. Barely. If you turn back now, you can save him.

How did the creature know their names? Had it been a trap along? While they believed they were hunting a monster had the monster really been hunting them? She shook away the doubt from her mind. Darren was dead. She had seen the life drain from his eyes. But what if she was leaving her friend to die at their hands?

Ah, Leon. The exiled Captain from the Elven paradise. There’s nothing like a hero and you are nothing like a hero. You're going to die here in the cold and dark and you shall be forgotten.

She could hear laughter behind her. She could have sworn on it. A cruel mocking laughter following her. She ducked underneath a low hanging branch and leapt over a dead log without breaking her stride.

But what of the fearless leader? Elisa the dragon hunter, the orc slayer, the peacemaker, the dark saviour… the murderer. I’m going to make you watch as I kill him. You’re going to hear his screams. I know what you fear. I’m going to bring back the fear you thought you would never face again after your lovely parents were murdered. I'm going to make you survive.

It all happened too fast.

One second she was running and the next she was thrown off her feet. She landed hard on the ground and the air rushed out of her body. An iron band wrapped around her wrists and her arms twisted at an unnatural angle. Her attacker twisted her arms behind her back and locked it in place with what felt like metal. The bones in her arms weren’t supposed to move into the rigid position and it wasn’t long before she heard a snap and a steering pain ripped a scream from her.

Defenceless, the hunter was hurled to her feet and forced to stand on unsteady feet. She wasn’t sure how many her attackers were. They seemed to disappear in and out of the shadows around her. Three lots of hands gripped her arms and forced her to remain conscious despite the flogging pain
begging her to accept sleep. Grim fingers crushed her jaw and yanked her head upwards so she had no choice but to face her friend. Leon looked as hopeless as her. He was in a kneeling position with a dirty machete held up to his throat by one of those creatures.

Finally the creature’s leader strolled out from the forest. The creatures made a giddy howling noise as the appearance of their leader and held out their prizes for It’s approval. Elisa was clinging onto consciousness by a dangerous mixture of fear and revolt. The leader closed in on Leon. One large claw shaped hand wrapped around his head.

“No!” Elisa screamed out as she struggled pointlessly. “Stay away from him! It’s not his time! Please! Please, it’s not his time!”

The creature ignored her pleas. It’s claws descended brutally into Leon’s skull.

He screamed in agony for the longest minutes of Elisa’s life. Then there was silence.

The creature strolled in front of Elisa. It stroked Leon’s blood down her pale cheek.

_Such a pretty little thing. You will be wasted on death. No, I’m going to make you a survivor. The pretty little survivor. That is all you will ever be. Others will die around you but you will survive. You will _never _know the sweet bliss of death._

“I’ll find you!” She promised bitterly. “I’ll kill you.”

_Yes, this one will survive. But I will leave you a reminder. A reminder that your best wasn’t good enough. A reminder that you were touched by a fallen God and survived._

Elisa tried to move, to fight, as the creatures turned her around and held her broken arms up. The strain was so much she didn’t feel the leader rip open her jacket and tear her shirt in half so her back was exposed.

But she did feel the agony which came next.

It felt like branding irons were piercing into her flesh and burning through her skin. Blood blossomed
from the fresh wounds and soaked her clothes. She screamed her throat hoarse and tears flowed freely down her cheeks.

Finally the darkness consumed her and she welcomed sweet oblivion.
*3 months later*

It had taken time to heal.

True to the creature’s words, Elisa had survived but it had been a close call.

She had awoken damaged and broken next to the corpses of her friends. On her back, she felt the deep indentations of the creature’s three claw marks buried underneath her shredded skin. She found her sword and knives still encrusted in the black blood of the creatures. They were the only things she took with her besides her memories.

She had walked for days surviving of the land and tending to her own wounds with what little she knew of healing. She travelled during the night and healed during the day. Walk then heal. She barely slept because of the seizing night terrors.

It went on for a week till she stumbled into a small clearing where a small cottage offered comfort. Her healing powers were weak at best and the journey had worn her down till she was close to death. She had passed out on the cottage doorstep.

For 3 months Elisa walked the line between death and life. She slipped in and out of consciousness. When she was awake, she was struck with delusions and fever. She dreamt of a mist- a shadow that darkened the entire world. In this mist were terrifying insects with a painful hunger which ate at the land and murdered everyone in its path. But the worst was the nightmares where she would see visions of the creature.

She imagined her saviour was a crazy wizard who took care of hedgehogs and talked to animals. When she was finally strong enough to stay awake for a few hours, she found out her delusions were mixed with reality. The cottage she passed out in front of really did belong to a wizard. He was a funny elderly man who took the time to help her recover. They talked for hours though the wizard talked too fast for her to make out half of what he said. He told her of the forest and his home.

“Nasty scars you have. I did what I could but the scars on your back are deep with dangerous black magic- dark, blood witchcraft.”
Elisa winced as the mention of the ugly battle scars. Darren and Leon… her only friends were dead. They were dead because she led them into the abyss’ mouth one too many times. Sweet Leon who cared for her when she was too proud to admit she was hurt and Darren who never failed to make her laugh.

She was alone.

She was a survivor.

She wanted to die.

The wizard sensed her and the happiness vanish from her. He turned and began mixing a sour potion into a bowl while he talked happily to himself. When he felt she was ready to talk again, he placed the bowl next to her bed.

“It’s good for you. Magic can hurt more than it can heal in the wrong hands but you need not fear with me, Neotis.”

Elisa cringed at the sour odour coming from the paste type food.

“What does Neotis mean?” She asked as she took a mouthful of the paste. It wasn’t as bad as she imagined. Kind of tasted like milk and peaches.

“Neotis. It’s an old word from an old wizard back from the days before darkness. It means ‘wonderer.’ That’s what you’re doing, yes is it. You’re not lost any more but you’re scared. What happened?”

Elisa held back the tears. She was stronger than that. She was crueler than she realised, more powerful and goddamn it she was more deadly. She would kill the monster that slaughtered her friends.

The next day, the wizard returned to find his home empty and the Neotis disappeared.

It took Elisa Red 6 months to heal completely. She only stopped for a couple of days at villages
during her hunts. She never took to having hunting partners again. She gave her enemy a name-Locus. The survivor, the woman who appeared cold and distant, never stayed away from the hunt for too long.

Her hunt on that spring day was stray pack of orcs. A dozen of them had cornered her in the hills near Lake Town. It was their bad luck. She had cut through them without mercy. Monsters deserved only as much mercy as they showed. Her blades was coated in orc blood by the time a dozen corpses lay at her feet.

“They’re getting bolder.” She commented. She rested her hands on her knees and took a second to catch her breath. It was only when the adrenaline was wearing off that she noticed the sticky crimson liquid dripping down her chest. She gingerly touched the wound on her stomach. One of the orcs must have got in a lucky hit. Clutching the wound with a protectively grip, she mounted her raven black horse and kicked her heels. Malicious was a pure breed horse who had found her a day after she had left the wizard’s home. She wondered if the wizard had sent the horse after her on purpose or if fate had decided she would need at least one friend. With the only things she owned safety in a bag, Elisa let the horse lead. Malicious was loyal and knew the way before she did. Knowing Malicious would take her where she needed to be, Elisa closed her eyes and drifted off into a dreamless slumber.

It was dawn when Malicious woke her owner up by easing to a stop. Elisa yawned and took the reins again.

“Where are we, Malicious?”

The horse didn’t reply which she was grateful for. It meant she was keeping her sanity for one more day. The sun was touching the sky with lazy shades of blood orange and dim blue. She could tell she wasn’t far from a human settlement. Malicious didn’t stray too far from human settlement after an orc fight. She was led to the side of a lake where two men sat in a fisher boat.

She glanced down at her outfit. Her black tunic and pants hid her armour perfectly, plus her leather jacket covered her blades. Her sword hung on the belt around her waist. Damned if the humans wouldn’t be suspicious but the gold rattling in her purse could silence answers faster than her blade.

“Good morning.” She greeted, jumping off her horse.

The two fishermen narrowed their eyes at the sullen looking woman.
“Morning.” One of them gruffly greeted. The other kept his head down.

“I don’t suppose you could tell me if I’m close to a town?” She revealed the drying blood on her hand and the wound cut into her stomach. “My horse bucked me off and I could use a tavern with good ale. I’ll pay you, of course.”

“You’re in luck, little lady. No one enters or leaves Lake Town with the Master’s permission but you don’t look the dangerous sort. As long as you’ve got the gold…”

Elisa nodded sharply. “That’s not a problem.”

He nodded over the side of the boat. “Come on then. Best get you to a healer.”

“Thank you.” She led Malicious over to the boat and hopped on. The journey was pleasant even when the fishing boat negotiated past a death trap of rocks in the middle of the frozen lake.

Why did she always end up in the freezing cold places? There were ice caps, for crying out loud! She breathed warm air into her shivering hands and stroked Malicious’ thick mane. The horse’s appearance was intimidating- jet black from her eyes to her coat and the fearlessness of a dragon- but she wouldn’t hurt anyone using they threatened Elisa. Fate had looked kindly on her with her companion.

Lake Town was as expected- a tiny village in the middle of a lake. Elisa paid the fishermen with interest and helped Malicious out of the boat.

“You won’t get far with the horse, little lady.” One of the fishermen called after her.

“I don’t intend on staying long.” She muttered back.

The only Inn in the village wasn’t far and she didn’t have to travel by boat to get there. She tied her horse to a wooden beam outside of the Inn. Malicious snorted and huffed.

“I know, sweetie, but I need a moment to make sure I’ve not been poisoned and I’m not going to bleed to death. Please don’t kill anyone. I don’t want to be chased out of another village.”
She turned on her heels and strolled into the busy Inn. The brightly lit place was booming with customers. Two haggard looking waitresses tried to serve 5 people at once. Thankfully, the hastiness of the place made her less noticeable.

“You’re not from around her, are you?” A brunette waitress cocked one eyebrow and placed a hand on hip.

“Well guessed. Do you have any rooms free?”

She examined Elisa from head to toe. “If you have the coin.”

With a great deal of effort, Elisa finally got to collapse in an uncomfortable bed in a guest room. She could still hear the too loud laughter downstairs but she wasn’t stayed for comfort. She sat up in bed, wincing at the stabbing pain in her stomach, and examined the wound. She had seen worst. She undressed careful of the cuts and bruises decorating her pale body. Her fingers ghosted over the open cut and began what simple healing she had been taught by Leon.

Once she was convinced the blade that caught her hadn’t been poisoned, Elisa opened her bag and dumped the contents on her bed. Everything she owned- a large purse full of gold, a change of clothes, food, a pouch of water, simple wound dressing and her prized armour.

Her fight alongside Leon, Darren and another lost soldier named William the Beast had led them to a dragon sleeping in a gold mine. All of them had their scars from the battle despite Leon’s best healing spells. William had been a master crafter and taken 3 weeks to create armour from the hind of the dead dragon. The breastplate was a work of art alone but together the armour suit was beauty. She thought about dressing the wounds but decided to against it.

She dressed in her dragon bone armour with a simple blue tunic plus her boots and began cleaning her weapons with the corner of the bedding. She wasn’t sure when exactly she drifted off or how long she had been sleeping when she heard the horrified screams.

Elisa grabbed her weapons before she even had chance to sit up. Confusion crossed her features as she searched the room for the sign of danger.

Another scream. From downstairs? The bar, yes! But it was early morning and the Inn’s customers
had long left for their homes and families. It was the scream of someone facing death. She rushed to her feet and was out of the door within seconds. She ran down the creaking wooden stairs and leapt over the bar. The waitress who had given her the room, the brunette, was kneeled on the floor crying over a limp form. Elisa pushed the woman away firmly and examined the body.

It was a man no older than 40. Black oil trickled from his split lips and his deadly pale face was cut beyond recognition. He lay curdled up in a ball and sweat hung his clothes to his body. Though he lay on his back, Elisa already knew what marks scarred his back.

Still, she rolled him over to see for herself.

Her fear was right. Sliced into his back were the three claw marks which also marked her back. Locus had been here. Locus was close. Her monster was hunting her as much as she was hunting It.

“Where had this man been?” Elisa demanded, turning her attention to the waitress. She was trembling and scared senseless. If there had been time she would have comforted the traumatised woman. Instead, she stormed over and slapped her hard across the face.

“Where was he?! Tell me where he had been!”

The waitress looked at her with fear in her eyes. She didn’t know whether to be more worried about the dying man on her Inn floor or the violence in the stranger’s eyes.

“He… he was hunting n…near the Enchanted R-river.”

Without another word, Elisa turned and gathered her items from her room in one quick sweep. Ran down the stairs again. Kneeled next to the man. She placed her warm hands on his still chest and closed her eyes. Whispering the words she had heard the wizard speak when she was in a similar state, Elisa forced her concentration onto healing. Ironically, an elf would have been better in this situation. Elisa’s healing skills were barely useful when she was trying to keep herself alive.

So she did the only thing she could think of: she tunneled the pain from the man to herself. It was the same piercing pain she had experienced when she first received the mark of Locus. When the pain became so bad it felt like it was about to tear her apart, the man shocked awake and a gentle pulse starting pumping his heart again.
“Tell your master, your king, whoever governs this village to treat this man with care. In the next months, he won't be himself.”

The bitterly cold air bite at her exposed skin. What the armour didn’t cover- her neck, hands and face- felt the sudden drop in temperature. She swung around to the wooden beam Malicious was attached to and released her. Not that she had needed releasing. She doubted anything could hold the horse in a place she didn’t want to be.

“This ends now.”

She couldn’t have been more wrong.

Malicious ran hard sensing the hunt as strong as her master. Death had no place in such a beautiful forest. Elisa had been 17 years old when she had first heard of spiders in the forest. She had been attacked once by them when she had first begun hunting with her father. She wasn’t in the mood for a repeat performance and made sure to listen to the forest’s song as she travelled.

She left Malicious a good mile away from the Enchanted Lake in case Locus did show. She wouldn’t watch her horse die too. Malicious protested at Elisa jumping off and leaving her behind.

“Shush, girl. I will be back.” She promised even though she knew the odds were always against it. She swung free her sword and watched the shiver of glowing metal glisten in the middle of the blade. She didn’t have time to stand around and think of the memories the sword bought with it.

She moved silently on the path, watching every corner and every shadow. She wouldn’t be taken by surprise this time. She heard the gentle sound of water paving its way down the stream. She was so close to the Enchanted River.

Was Locus waiting for her like It had been before? Its back turned to her and an attack waited in the shadows?

No, the figure waiting for her at the Lake was definitely not the vicious creature which had murdered her friends. The ears were pointed and stuck out from under his hair. Sat besides the Lake was an elf. He wasn’t tall or handsome but not ugly either. He had long brown hair and dull brown eyes. He was instantly forgettable.
Without looking up, the elf spoke: “Our Master was beginning to think you wouldn’t come. Vengeance is a powerful motivator, isn’t it?”

The tip of her sword pressed into his back yet the elf did not move.

“Where is your Master?”

“Our Master is everywhere. He sees everything. He sees your pitiful attempts at righting a world full of evil. He’s laughing at you, whore.”

“Tell It to stop hiding behind puppets then and come fight me.”

The elf laughed humourlessly. The blade dug deeper into the back of his neck.

Before either could take another step, a flicker of moment caught their attention. Both shot around at the same time.

“Do not think I will hesitate to kill you.” Spoke a voice from behind her.

Elisa slowly turned around. For what she wished was the first time, Elisa stood facing dangerous end of an arrow held by an elf. This elf was a tall, slender elf looking at her. His eyes were a cold turquoise colour. Elisa knew who that was. The king’s son- Legolas. A dozen other elves surrounded her too.

A good look at her situation told her why the arrows were aimed at her. A human on elven land holding a sword as a defenceless elf- it didn’t look good.

“You have caught me at a bad time.”

“Drop your weapon, human.” He spat the name out in disgust.
“I’m not the one you should be worrying about. A bigger threat is at your doorstep… you look really angry so I’m going to put down my sword now.”

She let her weapon fall to the ground and put her hands behind her head. Thankfully the elf under the control of Locus was hustled along too. Disarming Elisa took a little more time. Legolas took her sword and held it up to the light.

“This blade is elven made. Where did you take it from, thief?”

Elisa raised an eyebrow but didn’t take the bait. “A friend gave it me.”

“And where is this friend?”

“Gone.” She replied curtly. If Legolas was more curious, he didn’t show it. He took away her sword and knives, even the dagger she kept tucked in her boot.

As they led her away, she spotted the black coat of Malicious. She clicked her tongue twice, the signal for her horse to follow at a distance.

She didn’t want Malicious being dragged into The Elven King’s palace too. It was worst enough Elisa being stuck there.
A king to save a queen

Despite all her travels and hunting trips, Elisa had never dared to step into the elven lands for very long. Her parents had warned her from an early age of the Elven king’s cruel nature and immortal life span. Needless to say, she hadn’t been keen to anger him by killing monsters on his doorstep.

The gate opened before her and she drew a shaky breath and slowly walked inside. Another guard approaching her, gesturing her wordlessly to the path among the trees.

She had heard about the beauty of elven realms but even then she could not imagine something so beautiful. But the guards on either side of her made her feel on display. She wanted to hide in the shadows and watch the scene without being part of it. She would have liked to explore the palace. The silver light on the trees, the fine decoration and architecture... But there was no space for adoration in her mind at that moment. Legolas led her up on the paths and bridges clinging to the trees until they entered a hall bathing in dark and shadows. She looked ahead, noticing the silhouette of the soaring throne, made in the form of tree branches and giant antlers.

She saw the King from a distance, sitting on his throne. He was absolutely not what she was expecting. The Elven King was picturesque and an aura of power surrounded him. She was escorted up a short set of stairs By Legolas, passing two more guards. Elisa noticed another half a dozen guards standing around the edge of the circular floor. The stone floor was carved in different shades of earthy brown, matching the forest outside. Elisa looked at the short staircase that led up to the great antlered throne of the Elven king before laying eyes on the King himself. Elisa watched as the King looked down at her. His crystalline eyes stared through her, searching for an answer. A guard forced her to kneel.

“We found an intruder along our border, your majesty. She was holding a sword to this silvan’s throat.”

Elisa sighed and rolled her eyes. The elf under Locus’ control hadn’t been made to kneel. No, the ‘silvan’ elf was stood to her left and looked perfectly at home. She would have to keep an eye on his next moments. Something told her he wasn’t going to stay at peace.

Elisa bit her as she looked up to see Thranduil watching her. His gaze made her squirm inside and she took several deep breathes. He rose from his throne with a great flourish of his cloak. He let it fall to his seat before he descended the steps. He kept an unreadable face as he came down towards Elisa and his son, but kept a fierce eye contact with Elisa. His boots hit the platform that Elisa kneeled on
and his gaze broke from hers. He sauntered over to his son and examined Elisa’s sword in his hand before they both started speaking elvish. She strained her ears at the sound of them both speaking in elvish. She could not understand a single word they uttered. Leon had always been the elven language expert because he was raised in Riverdale. Without him, Elisa only knew basic phrases. So far, she knew the conversation hadn’t mentioned ‘hello, my name is…’ or ‘help, I am on fire’.

Soon enough their voices had dropped to angry whispers before they abruptly stopped speaking.

They both looked to her and motioned that she came forward. She stepped closer to them, her heart racing with each step. Her time window was narrowing.

“Come to me.” Thranduil instructed.

Her feet moved forward automatically, his words held so much power.

“What is your name?”

"Call me what you wish. My name is not important."

“Where did you come from, human?” Thranduil asked.

“I walked, I got lost, I don’t remember.”

No one could come so deep in the forest without being harmed, even less noticed. Magic could explain her presence, but she didn’t look like having any talent in magic. So, she must be lying, hiding something, or mad. She had to think of a better lie fast if she wanted to continue her hunt.

The guard besides her looked ready to strike her. “You shall respect your King!”

“He is not my King.” She scoffed with a smirk curved along her lips. Legolas commanded something in Elvish to the guard which Elisa didn’t care about anyway.

“You are in elven lands. Where did you wonder from? Or do you have darker intentions I should
know about?”

Elisa narrowed her eyes at the King. His voice was controlled and unreadable, just like him. She opened her mouth to reply with her signature aggression but managed to bit down on her tongue.

The King smirked as if he knew how much effort it took her not to object.

“Little girls who venture away from their homes get hurt. What were you doing in my forest?”

Elisa remained silent. They wouldn’t believe her anyway. Elisa caught a glimpse of the silver ring on his finger and somewhere deep in her memory she was sure she recognised the ring.

“You will speak, one day or another. I am patient. I can wait for you to break.”

“Other people would ask if I was okay.”

“Other people would care.”

Elisa paused for a moment to take in the coldness of the King sat on the great throne. “You know,” She mused. “This is why people don’t like you very much.”

She was sure he smiled briefly but it vanished before she could be sure.

“Take her to the dungeons.” He ordered with finality.

“I’m afraid I do not have time for your power play.”

In a flash, the King was in front of her. Elisa fought the urge to cower back and instead stood her ground. He leaned over so he was next to her face. The close contact sent a shiver down Elisa’s spine.
“I could kill you right now, human. Do you not fear death all?”

“Not really. You have such pretty eyes.”

He tilted his head to the side and smirked. “It is a habit of mortals to die. Your body is fragile, easily broken, and your time is short. This demon you talk about… you cannot kill it.

Anger lit in Elisa. “Yes I can! You know why? Because this is what I do and I am the best.”

She was dragged to her feet by two guards on either side of her before she could spit out another word. As they led her away, the silvan elf spoke in a laughing unnatural voice.

““The Master told me of the marks he left on you!”

Elisa froze along with the entire room. Legolas turned and scrutinised the talking elf. He looked mad, driven to insanity by the voice speak in his mind, and a large smile carved his mouth.

“The Master sees you. Oh yes, he sees you and your suffering. **Stay away from him! It's not his time!** He calls you the survivor.”

The words haunted Elisa. They had been the last words Leon had heard. This elf had shown his hand and revealed himself as a servant of the monster… why?

“The girl who stood her ground against a dragon, only to watch her friends die in front of her eyes. Do you remember the dragon?”

He twisted his head around at an impossible angle and faced the King.

“She saw dragon fire too. They laughed and celebrated when she stuck her blade into its eye. They called her a hero. The body crashed into the earth and then William the Beast carved out that armour for her. Friends,” He curled around the word like it was a bad taste. “That she got killed. Or would you like to hear about the King she murdered? A King and his entire household died at her blade because of revenge.”
Then he faced Elisa. “What about your parents? While you slept, the darkness came into your home and slaughtered your parents in their sleep!” He giggled manically at the horror on Elisa’s face. “But you survived, dragon hunter. Orc slayer. Darkness seeker. The survivor. Everyone around you will die and then our Master will come for you.”

“This elf is tainted with darkness.” Legolas stated.

“You don’t say.” Elisa muttered.

Suddenly, the King revealed a delicately carved sword and swung the blade across the elf’s neck. Elisa watched with growing horror as the messenger elf’s head was freed from his shoulders. The execution was swift and merciless. It was also the death of the only lead she had.

“What was you looking for in the forest?”

The King questioned, his anger barely contained.

“Looking for water. My horse was dying of thirst.”

“Take her away and keep her safe, until she feels inclined to tell the truth, even if it means waiting a hundred years. I can be patient.”

A prisoner. Elisa was definitely, without a doubt, a prisoner.

The hunter spent the first hour of her imprisonment exploring her room, searching for any way of escape. With only one door and the window leading to a straight drop down, the room had been designed for unwilling guests of the King. No one left without his royal highness knowing about it.

Elisa released a string of curses and collapsed onto the bed. She felt vulnerable without her weapons and an uncomfortable feeling sat in her chest. She paced restlessly around the room trying to remember every word the possessed elf had spoken. The creature knew more about her than she ever
imagined. Her little band of warriors hadn’t shared their dragon hunting experience with another. It had joined them together, made them a family. Elisa had almost expected them to carry on hunting together forever.

She shook the memories away. Now wasn’t the time. She had to get out of the palace and continue her hunt. She was so close to Locus. So close she could sense it.

A few hours later, Legolas strolled into her room without knocking and found their prisoner sat at her small wooden table playing chess against herself. She hadn’t changed into the gifted elven dress draped across her bed though she had to admit it was beautiful. The maid, sent gracefully by the King, stood by her looking defeated. She bowed respectfully to the Prince before standing aside.

Elisa didn’t take her eyes of the board. An hour of having to deny the she-elf’s pleas to change into the dress the King had chosen for her had left her bored sinless. She stubbornly refused to part with her armour which was her only sense of security left.

“My father taught me how to play when I was little.” She said as she moved a knight across the chess board. “He told me it was a game of patience. If I could read my enemies, I could predict their next move. Well, patience and luck I suppose. Do you play?”

“I did not come here to play games with you, human.”

“I am shocked and disappointed.”

“Why has she not dressed? The King has demanded her presence down at the feast-” Legolas began lecturing to the maid.

“Do not get angry at her. I refused to change and there was nothing she could do to change my mind.” She smirked across at him. “Does his Lordship not find my appearance pleasing?”

Legolas muttered something under his breath too quiet for Elisa to hear so she ignored it.

“I’ll make a deal with you, Prince. Come play one game with me and I’ll get changed into that ridiculous dress.”
She shuddered at the thought.

“The feast has already begun.” Legolas objected.

“Then they won’t notice we are a little late.” She reasoned. "I can hear the noise from here. Believe me, they’re not waiting anxiously for us.”

With a defeated sigh, Legolas sat down opposite her. Elisa hummed happily as she set the board.

“Your father taught you?” The human word for ‘ada’ sounded foreign on his tongue.

She hummed yes. “He taught my brothers first. I had to beg him just to get the occasional lesson.”

“Who was your father?” Legolas asked with a hint of curiosity. He leaned forward, his hands on the table, and watched her pick up a black pawn to make the first move.

Elisa's instincts not to use names or places kicked in. “A wealthy man but he was not greedy. He bought us everything we desired all the while he taught us the value of kindness and humility.”

“He sounds like a good man. I see the lessons of humility did not stick.”

Elisa scoffed. “He was always a stupidly optimistic man and he thought the best of everyone. I’m afraid it came as a great shock to him when he was murdered.”

“What happened to the murderers?”

“They were never found.” She replied vaguely as she captured his knight.

“What is your name?” The prince asked.

“Elisa. Elisa Riding.” She shook her head as she took in the sorry sight on the board. “You play like
I used to. My father was so passionate about the game I used to practice for hours just to impress him on my next lesson. I lost every time but that wasn’t the point. He used to laugh and tell him I should have seen this move or predicted that sacrifice. But he wasn’t teaching me just a game.”

“‘What was he teaching you then?’”

“He taught me sacrifice –how to give up something valuable for something else of more importance. It’s sacrificing your pawn for a knight; a rook for a bishop.” She glanced up with darkness in her eyes. “A king to save a queen.”

With one final move, she announced checkmate.
Thranduil sat at the head the dining table facing the gathering. Legolas had return from his meeting with their ‘guest’ unnerved and suspicious. There wasn’t a doubt that she was hiding something but she was not mad. If what the possessed elf said was true, he had in his company a very powerful element. She was powerful but desperate. It wouldn’t take much to break her.

“She spoke of her kin. Merchants, I think. A wealthy family but she didn’t say from what land they came from. Do you think we can find out where she came from? A settlement from the North, perhaps?”

Thranduil tapped his middle finger against his lip. “She does not know herself.”

Legolas opened his mouth to ask more but a sliver of colour in the corner of his eye caught his attention. He had to look twice to make sure he was seeing the same thing.

“It seems our guest of honour has arrived finally.” Thranduil noticed.

Elisa held her head high just to annoy the many heads turning as she strolled into the dining room. The silk sky blue dress flowed down her hips and left her shoulders bare except for a scarf that trailed down to her elbows. Despite her protests, the maid had negotiated her hair into a loose bun and dozens of stray hairs framed her face. She smiled at Legolas’ confused glances back at his father.

“I’m assuming neither you nor the maids were harmed in the dressing.”

“I’m assuming neither you nor the maids were harmed in the dressing.”

“Only my pride is hurt but thank you for caring, my prince.” She curtsied dramatically before the king.
“I had almost lost hope of your bowing before me.” Thranduil hummed.

“I will surprise you yet, King.”

“Sit down.” He ordered. She raised an eyebrow but complied. Play their game, she reminded herself strictly as she slide onto the high back chair next to Legolas. Once again, she frowned at the silver stone ring on his left middle ring. She was positive she had seen it before many years ago.

“My son tells me we have a name for you now. So, Elisa, how are you enjoying your stay in Mirkwood?” Thranduil’s voice echoed across the hall.

When she found her voice she replied coyly. “I am finding it lovely. I thank you for your hospitality. If I close my eyes, I can almost pretend I’m here willingly.”

Thranduil nodded his head in recognition of her comment, before he engaged his son in a discussion. She only picked at the food in front of her. She hadn’t had an appetite for the past 6 months and only ate when it was necessary. The growing sense of apprehension in her didn’t help. She desperately wanted out of the hall, away from the glances, even if it meant being locked in her cell.

“This is the first time I’ve ever been to an elven ball… where is the child sacrificing?”

“After we eat.” Legolas promised.

At the night progressed Elisa was finding harder and harder to hate the prince. Drunken Legolas was easy with the laughter and jokes.

Soon enough Legolas coaxed her onto the grand dance floor through the persuasion of wine and jokes. With each sweep around the hall she would find her eyes drawn to a particular king elf. Thranduil sat with a perplexed look, and he seemed to look away each time their eyes met. She bit her lip throughout the complicated dances Legolas led her through. Suddenly she was thankful for all the miserable hours her mother had spent teaching her elven dances. She considered the prince now he wasn’t pointing an arrow at her face. He was handsome in a clean innocent sort of way. She chuckled lightly. Legolas looked down at her with his striking eyes again. He smiled thinking she
had laughed at something he did. She closed her eyes as he turned her in a circle for the hundredth
time that night. It had been a while she had laughed and it not full of mockery.

He was growing on her. On the other hand, the King only shot her the occasion unreadable glance
before talking to someone else. After their early discussion, they hadn’t said two words to each other.
It gave her the chance to meet Elrond, who introduced himself as Elrond of the White Council. She
had danced with him, laughing and whispering into his ear, till another elf intruded and took his
place again. For a little while, she put Locus out of her mind and promised not to think about the
creature. It had tormented her for 6 months but for one night she wanted to be normal.

Exhausted, Elisa collapsed back into her seat. Legolas had taken up another dancing partner, a pretty
and young looking elf called Tauriel. She seemed nice enough. Far be it from her to come in
between the two when, judging from the looks they were giving each other, there was clearly
history.

“Are you tired of playing your pathetic games now?” Thranduil asked. The question was posed
calmly enough to almost fool Elisa.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about but I’m sure if I did I would be insulted.”

He turned towards her and once again Elisa was hypnotised by his searching stare. His drowning
cold blue eyes were too beautiful to hide the wisdom behind them.

“Do you think I did not notice? While you have been throwing yourself at every man, you have also
been mapping out the hall. Some would call it plotting for treason. I could have saved you the
trouble- no one leaves without my knowledge.”

She challenged, “There is always time.”

Well, that did it. He’s certainly not going to release me and tell me to be on my merry way now! She
cursed her quick temper and even quicker tongue.

But the King didn’t immediately throw her into a cell. If anything, he was humoured.

“Did your parents not teach you to silence your tongue?”
“My parents taught me how to fight, your majesty. I beg your forgiveness.”

“You will do, little girl.” He said slyly. “How much do you think you can take before I break you?”

“Better men have tried, King Thranduil. Better men have failed too.”

“Where is your home, girl?”

The sudden change of subject caught her off guard for a moment. She quickly recovered and replied, “Wherever I am commanded to go.”

“Yet you must hail from some land.” He insisted.

“I must disappoint you. My homeland was wiped out long ago.” She added quietly. “It was a beautiful place.”

“Tell me about this homeland of yours.”

“No, thank you.”

“Tell me,” His eyes once again staring through her and a smirk across his face. “Or I will send you out to dance once again except without your dress.”

“You would not dare.”

The King tilted his head to the side, still his smirk still glued to his lips. Thranduil wouldn’t hesitate to push her down onto the table, rip her dress open and push her back onto the dancefloor. They both knew it.

“I'm not sure where it was but I remember a village full of life. There were elves and humans living together peacefully. It was so beautiful…”
Her eyes drifted closed and she could see the village in her mind’s eye. Children running around in the maze of grass, ages old trees tall and proud swaying in the breeze, a song carried in the wind. She remembered the sky painted shades of orange and yellow.

“My mother was an elf, what you would call a Silvan elf, and my father a human. They were hunters so they raised my sibling and me to be the same. I became… distant when I was 16 and I didn’t return home for 2 years. When I did, I found the place deserted. There was blood everywhere- it painted the walls and the furniture and the ground- but no villagers. Everything was in place at my home- clothes, furniture, food, gold, jewellery- no signs of a struggle or my family. 7000 people just vanished. The same thing happened to every village I found while hunting Locus.

So, your majesty, forgive me if I seem to be in a rush but like you said: human lives are short. I need to find this monster before this happens again. I know you do not care because it will not happen in your kingdom but I protect them all. Elves, human and dwarves alike. Some of us have to care about others.”

Their conversation was halted by a blonde haired guard running up to the King and bowing. The guard looked dazed and panicked, sweat trickling down his face. Thranduil sensed the guard’s panic, as did Elisa.

“My Lord! A creature has been found in the cellar, my king. It… it is not like one we are familiar with.”

“It appears like a man but with fangs of a wolf. There is no pulse, no life in this creature.” Elisa described. The guard didn’t answer, he didn’t have to. Elisa had seen these creatures and knew what horror they would bring.

“My king, I know you do not care for me or my warnings but please listen if you want to save your kingdom.” Elisa said in a rush. “Your palace is about to be attacked.”

“Get her out of my sight.” The king ordered.

She didn’t object. She needed out of the hall anyway if she would have any hope of stopping the attack. She let the guards drag her away from the King and his guests. Thranduil was already issuing commands when she was shoved out of the hall.

Well, this is much better. She only had one act of treason on her long list. Why not add to it?
“Party time is over, I guess.”

There was no time to react before Elisa slammed her fist into the first guard’s throat and twisted him around to use him as a shield while she stole his sword. She launched him towards the next guard who tried to attack her. Armed with two stolen swords, Elisa dodged past the two unbalanced guards.

She was almost free, well as free as she could be considering she was in a full length dress and trapped in Thranduil’s palace.

Now she needed a plan that hopefully didn’t involve her getting killed. The elves wouldn’t come to harm but, the dark and methodical part of her added, if Locus did come she would be ahead of him for a change. She could meet It before the destruction and death. She disregarded the thought immediately. Even if Locus didn’t kill her, the King would charge her with treason. She didn’t know which one’s anger would be worst to face.

Figuring out a plan would be easier said than done. With no armour, only carrying weapons which felt too heavy and in a place she didn’t know immediately put her at a disadvantage. The heavy landing of boots followed the prisoner as she fled down the staircase. She leapt over a bannister, landed on her feet and hit the ground running.

Thranduil’s kingdom was in chaos.

Half of his guards led by Legolas were turning the palace upside down looking for the prisoner who had quickly and brutally escaped her guards. Led by Tauriel, the other half of the guards were clearing out the creatures from Rivendell. They had moved silently during the night, slaughtering the dozen night watchers, and creeping until they were on the King’s doorstep.

“Elrond!”

The commander appeared next to Thranduil as he marched out the hall. Elrond had been evacuating guests when the King summoned him.
“The prisoner is from a human settlement somewhere in the north. The entire village was wiped out without a single survivor and no bodies. Does this sound familiar?”

“That it does, my lord. It was many years ago though and none that have happened in this girl’s years. I would call her tale madness—”

“The maid I sent to her informed me the scars on her back still pain her. Three claw marks bigger than those of an eagle. She sensed dark magic deep in the wounds.”

“It could have been an animal attack that she herself tainted with dark magic.” Elrond suggested.

“There is not a single drop of magic in that human.”

Thranduil was beaming with anger. A human had trespassed on lands and had led this Locus into his Kingdom. When he captured her, it would not go unpunished.

Elisa sadly had to slice away half of her dress so she could run quicker. She liked dresses but on display or on other women. They were no good for armour and concealing weapons. She tossed the ruined fabric away from her and pushed open another room’s door. She needed a window or some sort of exit. Damn wood elves sure knew how to build a tight palace.

"Damn this place." She grumbled, finding another bedroom with no windows.

How did they cope without seeing the starlight before they went to bed? She cursed and continued down the corridor. Desperation was creeping in fast. She had heard screams but when she had ran towards them, there was no victim. She was being led further and further into the palace like a mouse with string. Locus was taunting her. Still the king sent guards after her! Meanwhile his kingdom was under attack by creatures he knew nothing about! Any reasonable ruler would have realised the bigger threat… Elisa was shocked by how much she hated the prideful elf king. Would he really risk splitting his forces in half just to find her?

Her thoughts were interrupted when she came face to face with one of Locus’ ‘creatures’. She came to an abrupt stop.
She could remember the creatures that had attacked her 6 months ago as clear as day. The claws, the black lips and the lifelessness were all the same. The creature in front of her was one of Locus’ creatures. There was no doubt now that Locus had found her. The creature had its grimly claws wrapped around a she elf’s throat, dragging her kicking and screaming down the corridor. It stopped when it saw her and tilted its head to the side as if examining her.

Without a second thought to her escape, Elisa revealed her sword and ran across to the creature. An awful animalistic sound came from its lips as Elisa twirled around, narrowly avoiding its searching claws, and slit its throat.

“Are you hurt?” She asked in her most calming voice, helping the elf to her feet.

“I… I do not think so.”

“Good. Bar yourself in a room until morning. Do not leave until first light, do you understand?”

She nodded eagerly and left in a furry of skirts. Elise continued her search down the many corridors, searching up and down for a means of exit, but she didn’t last long. Around the next corner, Elisa came upon a dozen of the creatures attacking a single fighting male. She recognised the blonde head and ran to join the fight.

After one swift movement, the sword returned to her side, the tip of it visibly black, slick blood dripping from it. Elisa didn’t have to watch to know her aim had been true and she twisted around to thrust her blade deep into another creature’s chest. With her sword still stuck in between the creature’s ribcage, Elisa swung her second sword around to catch the third creature’s throat. A black smile appeared on its exposed throat. After a two gasps for air, the creature collapsed. Elisa yanked her sword free and spun around, blades flying through the air, severing the heads of two creatures which were unlucky enough to be too close.

“I guessed you would not stay our prisoner for long.” His voice was tight with anger.

Elisa chuckled and ducked barely in time to avoid Legolas’ arrow. She shot around to see the arrow pierce the forehead of a creature she hadn’t heard creep up behind her.

“If you think I would let you have all the fun, my prince, you are sadly mistaken.”
When the last creature fell by Elisa’s blade, she found herself once again staring at the dangerous end of one of Legolas’ arrows.

“Well, this is getting too familiar.”

“You will be executed. My father will not tolerate this.”

“I plan on taking on Locus. Frankly, I think I stand a better chance of survival.”

“Drop your weapons.”

Elisa did, grumbling and cursing under her breath.

“Look around you, Legolas. Your home is under attack by the same creature I have been hunting for a very long time. These creatures only answer to one leader. It is coming. No one knows better than me the destruction Locus will bring.”

He had to see reason. If he locked her up in the dungeons she would be as good as dead. Locus would find her and she would be at It’s mercy.

“Wait.”

Legolas slowly released the bow’s string and placed the arrow back into the pouch on his back. Elisa released the breath she didn’t realise she was holding.

“It sounds like the main battle is outside. I cannot protect you the whole way and I would not expect you to be defenceless. Will you come with me?”

“Always.” She said without hesitating.

Legolas turned his back on her and ran expecting her to keep up with his pace. Elisa knew the trust he was placing in her. It wouldn’t be betrayed- at least not while he still had arrows left.
“What does it seek here?” Legolas had been shooting her questions none stop since she agreed to fight alongside him. She had answered to the best of her knowledge, withholding only the most personal details. She hadn’t told him about her scars. She had been wondering the same thing. Locus had previously only shown interest in human villages. To attack the elven lands, let alone the most fortified cattle perhaps in Middle Earth, was completely out of It’s habit. Truthfully Elisa didn’t know how to process the attack.

“It wants, it needs, something here. Locus had plenty of opportunities to kill me and I don’t think it would spill all this blood on a battle it knows it cannot lose just for fun.” She mused. “I would be flattered if it had come all this way for me.”

“Do all humans use humour at times like this?”

“It works best. I fight better while I am thinking of witty comments.”

Half a dozen guards had remained to man the gate. All of them pointed their arrows in Elisa’s direction when she approached the front gates. She sped up and kept safety behind Legolas.

“Who ordered the gates to be closed?”

Legolas said in confusion at the solid massive wooden doors blocking their exit.

“They were closed by orders of the King.”

Elisa’s head shot up. A million questions ran through her mind, making and breaking alliances. Why would the King order the gates shut when his soldiers were out there? The enemy was already inside so why lock them inside? Unless…

“Oh, By the Valar.” Elisa ran through a colourful amount of cursing that would have made a sailor blush. “How could I be so stupid?”

She grabbed Legolas’ arm, ignoring the twitching fingers pointing arrows at her head, and pointed back in the direction they had come from.
“The attack is just a distraction! It is here for the King!”

That caught the attention of the remaining guards.

Elisa continued, “Your father has a ring and I remembered seeing it many moons ago. I did not think at the time but I hadn’t seen it up close. I had only caught a flash because… I was preoccupied at the time.”

“Where did you see it?”

Elisa shook her head. “On Locus’ claw. The one he used to rip open my back.”

“Where is my father?” Legolas demanded from the nearest guard.

A young elf dressed in full battle armour answered.

“He was with Elrond and a full company of guards leaving the great hall.”

“Take me there. I need, and I cannot believe I am uttering the words, to warn the King.” Elisa said, hating every word that came from her mouth.

Legolas had never seen anyone fight like the human. She was as fast as him and even more graceful on her feet. She danced around the creatures, cutting them down like wheat, while staying out of their reach. The more of the creatures they slayed, the harder she fought. He studied her from the corner of his eyes. She was busy taking on 8 of the creatures which blocked their path to the throne.

With a side kick off the wall, Elisa kick a creature in the face. She landed on her feet and jabbed her sword into another creature’s heart. Its partner was faster but Elisa had already seen its shadow move. She slit the blade across its arm, causing the rusty sword in its hand to drop to the floor with a clatter, and sliced its throat open. She freed both swords easily and flew down a set of stairs for her next attack. The creature screeched and launched at her. She caught it’s neck and slammed it against
the wooden bannister. It gurgled, still fighting, so she slammed it again. And again. Then she wrapped both hands around its head before twisting with all her strength. A satisfying and sickening crunch responded. Elisa let the limp body fall and jumped straight to the next kill.

It was insane. Her movements faded into one another. The hunter laughed happily as she tossed another creature’s body to the side. She was in her element—covered in blood, surrounded by enemies and racing against time. She fought like an elf—graceful, beautiful, precise and deadly. It was the hunt she desperately craved. She caught Legolas’ concerned stare and no longer laughed.

He saw it though—her eyes glistening black. Then she smiled. Trying to hide her demon with her angel.

Gently, she ran the bloody swords against her sides, leaving huge blood smears across her dress.

“Do you plan on just staring?”

She was playing her games again, he was sure. Legolas quickly snapped out of his thoughts and pushed ahead.

The pair didn’t have to travel far. From below, the sound of fighting echoed. Elisa peered over the bannister without stopping her pace. A flash of silver against the endless black bodies and golden armour told her the King was still alive and fighting. Even better, he wasn’t alone. At least 13 elves were still alive plus a dark haired elf that fought with the air of a commander. She remembered dancing with him… Elrond! They were impressive fighting together. She hadn’t had many experiences fighting alongside elves, besides Leon, and the stories hadn’t done them justice. If Elisa had had more time she would have hung back to admire the skill.

But the smell of a fight was laced into the air and she was already intoxicated with the scent.

“I want more.” She stated with malice dripping from her words. Legolas turned around only to see her vanish over the side of the bannister.

Elisa dropped like a stone from the staircase, giving her about 3 seconds to brace her body for the landing.

*The silly little girl has grown. There is anger, madness, to your killing now. Quite a woman you*
Locus was close! It’s vicious words pierced into her thoughts and Its voice surrounded her like mist. Thranduil and Elrond both raised their heads and sought out the voice’s owner but only Thranduil saw Elisa. The King did his shock well if he felt any at seeing her free. Elisa watched in awe as he quickly eliminated 4 of the creatures.

Are you more concerned about dying at my hand or the King’s? She is a force to be reckoned with, king of the woodelves. It will not be long before she turns on you. Broken pets often turn on their masters. I will make you a deal, your majesty: return my whore to me and I give you my word that I shall never return to your lands again. I will continue to plague the human lands but the elves shall survive.

“I would not take the word of a demon.”

Elisa wouldn’t help the slight respect she had for the King’s reply. She knew more foolish men would have rushed to accept the offer if only to save their own skin.

A cruel laughter echoed around the throne room. A frozen shiver crept up Elisa’s spine and she struggled to keep her arm still while she fought. It was the laughter that had given her sleepless nights. The laughter had been burnt into her memory while scars had been burnt into her skin.

Why is that, my king? Have you already claimed her for yourself? Do you think you can tame, mould her, into your wife? She is like a wild animal ready to strike at every provocation. I suppose even wargs can be broken in with enough beating.

Where was it? Why was it hiding? When would it go for the King? Between the archers raining death from above and the small army including Elisa, Legolas, Thranduil and Elrond, the enemies’ numbers were hastily decreasing. Locus would have to make an appearance soon.

Elisa was yanked carelessly out of the way of a falling blade. She yelped as the blade came too close for comfort. An iron band held her in place against the throne, forcing her against the cold wood. Thranduil’s gown was barely spotted with black blood while Elisa’s dress was torn in half and was completely ruined beyond repair. It hadn’t been that nice anyway.

The king would have appeared unreadable as always had his eyes not held murder.
“Did I not order you to be imprisoned?”

A tint of fear melted some of the hunter’s determination. His words were laced with anger and the underlying threat was clear. Offering her sweetest smile had no effect on his icy exterior. So she did the only thing she could think of - she stood on her tiptoes and pressed her lips against his. When he didn’t instantly recoil, Elisa wrapped her arms around his neck and ran her tongue along his bottom lip. She caught his lip in between her teeth and bit down hard enough to taste blood on her tongue.

An animal draws blood while it toys with its prey! I will have her! I shall beat her into submission and I shall have control!

The voice boomed with something Elisa recognised too easily. She had made Locus angry. It had revealed it wasn’t completely a demon then. Demons were always furious creatures, creating from fire, and it was impossible for them to have different levels of anger.

Which raised another question- what was the creature she had named Locus?

The pause must have helped Thranduil realise what he was doing and he pushed away from her. She gave him a deceivingly calm smile before she turned away.

Ah, but not today. No, my little survivor, we shall not fight today. Today I leave you with a parting gift: a shadow of things to come. You will know my fury, hunter. You will feel the wrath of a Valar, venomous harlot.

Suddenly, a tremble ran underneath their feet. Those left of their attackers left in a rage. Every creature screeched an inhuman sound and abandoned their wounded.

That was never a good sign.

The beast’s claws were the first thing Elisa saw.

Huge claws larger than those of a great eagle. They looked capable of tearing apart a man just by one scratch. Then Elisa’s eyes fell upon the gigantic size of the beast. It’s sharpened teeth blackened and carved into daggers and filthy fur caked with dried blood. It seemed to crawl out the ground but Elisa knew it was impossible. There was no ground beneath the staircase the beast appeared on. It thundered a terrifying roar. It was ready to attack.
Legolas braced an arrow into his bow ready to join the archers but Elisa held his arm. He glanced down at her hand as if it produced venom.

“Save your arrows, my prince. This one is mine.”

Elisa took a running jump and leapt upon the protruding arrow shaft which had landed in the wall opposite. She was using the arrows as stepping stones! Legolas stood back and watched in amazement as she sailed through the air and grabbed onto the staircase’s edge. Her legs dangled in the air for a moment before she pushed up and crawled onto the stairs.

“Daro!” Thranduil’s order was barely said when the elven archers responded. The hail of arrows halted immediately.

“What are you doing? That beast will kill her!” Legolas quietly demanded, gesturing to Elisa’s tiny figure dancing up the stairs.

“We will see if she is as skilled as she claims. If the beast claims her, well it will save us the trouble of an execution.”

Chapter End Notes

Daro-elvish for 'halt'

I swear I'm going somewhere with this! Oh the title is based of a picture I once saw that I now have no idea where from but if you know or it's yours please let me know :)
Red

The hunter had chosen the staircase for a reason—overhead and barely out of reach swung a golden chandelier glowing with candles. Elisa grabbed the staircase in a white knuckled grip as half her body dangled uselessly in the air. The beast had already noticed the tiny human climbing and had set off to meet her.

She dragged her body up onto solid ground seconds before the creature charged head first for her. The hunter slid across the floor and ran her sword across the beast’s stomach. It released a pained screech and kicked its back legs out. She narrowly avoided the blow aimed for her head and let it clip her shoulder instead. Behind the beast, Elisa hurled across the floor and loped up to the top stair. Her arms were shaking with the effort. It made it even harder to launch forward and grab at the chandelier’s edge.

A pained grunt escaped Elisa as her fingertips grasped the hanging chandelier. Another claw scratched her ankle, the dagger tips piercing into the soft skin, as she forced her legs to stand on the narrow edge of the chandelier.

The beast screeched and stood on its hind legs to swing its massive claws at Elisa’s landing. The chandelier rocked and swayed under the pressure. Elisa sliced through the elaborate rope attaching the chandelier to the roof.

With a massive crash, the chandelier—with Elisa still stood precautious on the edge—crashed below. The mess slammed on top of the beast. Candle wax scattered in a million directions. Droplets of the scorching liquid caught Elisa and she hissed at the sudden pain. The blow and the burns crippled the beast. It lay on its back, not moving, wax malting its charcoal fur.

But the hunter wasn’t finished yet. She rolled onto her feet and straddled the beast. She dug her knee into the beast’s scorched back. She curled her fists around her swords and impaled them into the beast’s claws. The beast released a blood curling bellow and tried to claw her face but both were speared to the stair.

She coiled the long frayed rope around its thick throat.
“No one controls me—**I** control me! **I** am my own venom.”

She whispered into the beast’s ear as she tightened the rope around its throat. Its roar of pain was cut short by Elisa renewing her strength choking the last life out of the beast.

The last thing the beast heard was Elisa’s cruel soft voice. “I will always fall and rise above. Your master may have beaten me down once but I will never give in. It has no power over me.”

The beast’s struggles stopped. Elisa released the rope. Her body trembled with the last droplets of adrenaline leaving her body. Her arms were battered and bruised. The gashes sliced into her body from her fight were just waiting to be infected. Blood still hummed in her veins but the wounds were stinging already. The best news was that only a quarter of the blood covering her dress was hers.

Slowly, Elisa strolled back down the stairs with her head held high. She was struggling not to limp. The beast’s claws must have torn deeper than she imagined.

A small army of elves waited for her, led by Elrond and Tauriel. They stood stolidly guarding the King and prince. Arrow and sword alike were trained on her.

“But that is what I call a party.”

Thranduil’s lips curved up into a smirk.

“The creature did not lie. You are a force to be reckoned with.”

“He got one thing wrong too: I shall never be controlled.”

Thranduil placed a cool finger under her chin and tilted her face up so she had no choice but to stare into his drowning eyes.

“We will see how bad your bite is. Venomous creatures need to be tamed, least they poison themselves.”
For two days Elisa was locked into her room. This time her guards did not leave her any chance of escaping. She wasn’t exactly making their jobs any easier either. She refused any healer to look at her wounds. They weren’t serious and she could take care of them herself. Besides, after her battle she would be damned if she then had to let her jailors take care of her. She had saved their King and in return they had locked her up like a criminal. She hadn’t even had time to warn the King before four elves had dragged her off. Apparently her punishment was to be slowly driven insane by boredom.

At some point during her first day imprisonment, she didn’t remember when exactly, she had been so frustrated that she had screamed and turned up her table. The few outfits in the wardrobe had been torn up and the fabric showed the tears of her hands. The room had been completely destroyed by the second day.

She longed for the road, the hunt, the freedom. How had she even lasted before becoming a hunter? She didn’t remember sitting around quietly reading or watching the never changing scene outside her window. She shook her head wildly as if she could shake out the tormenting thoughts.

What she needed was to stay calm. She had once tracked an orc pack for a fortnight and had slowly picked them off one by one; surely she could handle being stuck in a room for a few more days. She took a cynical look at her destruction. There wasn’t much left of her room. One dress remained hanging from the broken wardrobe and the bed was intact though the soft bedding was rolled into a ball in the corner. The dressing table was shattered along with near enough ever other piece of furniture. Plus she didn’t look healthy either. She had barley eaten anything from the offered dishes since her appetite was completely gone and her armour could only hide so many injuries left untreated. Maybe she had lost control a little bit.

She had calmed down a fraction by the third day. Tauriel had smuggled to her a book on elvish culture which she found sinfully boring but she delved into anyway. She was sat on the bed, knees tucked under her chin, absorbed in the book when the door opened for the first time in 3 days.

Legolas took one confused scan of the room before he said, “I thought we could play chess again.”

Elisa almost leapt up and kissed Legolas. Of course, the first thing the King had done when she was bought back to her chambers was to take away her chess board, as if she didn’t already know she was a prisoner.
She smiled brightly and Legolas couldn’t help but smile back.

Linking her arm in his, Elisa walked alongside the Prince as he showed her to their private gardens. Half a dozen guards followed as a distance but Elisa easily ignored them. She tilted her head up to the sun’s gentle touch like a flower searching for heat. Her eyes drifted closed and happiness made her feel alive again. Whatever madness she felt during the battle and the days that followed quickly fell away.

The gardens were beautiful. Flowers of every kind spotted the grass with colour and trees hung gracefully in the corners of the garden. Birds graced her with their song. In the middle of the tidy garden was a rustic gazebo waiting for the prince and her. Two high back chairs sat around a two legged low wooden table holding the precious chess set. Elisa took her seat facing the chess board and examined the oddly carved chess pieces. They were made from glass, one side white and the other black, and were carved into characters she didn’t recognise.

“They are birds of prey. It is my personal set.” Legolas said noticing her confusion. She shrugged and took the black side.

“Thank you for getting me out of the room. I thought I was going mad.”

“My father thinks you a danger to the kingdom. I am hesitating to agree with him.”

“Oh, I am a danger but not to you. What has happened in the outside world while I have been gone? Tell me everything.”

Legolas chuckled softly. “Nothing has happened in the three days, I can promise you. There has been no sign of Locus or any of the creatures which attacked the palace. The most interesting thing was watching how furious my father was at seeing the mess they left. No one was killed. I suppose we should be grateful for small mercies.”

“Mercy had nothing to do with it. Locus would have decimated your numbers if the Kingdom had been weaker or your king less wise. If this monster has spread to other lands…”

“Do not fear. I have been to the lands surrounding and there has been no sign of Locus.”
Elisa tilted her head to the side and paused with a chess piece in mid-air.

“I thought other lands were not your concern.”

“My father has strong views but Tauriel and I insisted on the matter.”

She nodded and made her move on the board.

“How long does the King intent on keeping me captive?”

Legolas didn’t have to answer. She already knew. She was there until the King grew bored and executed her.

“When the elf you met on the riverbank was bought in, he mentioned a dragon battle?” Legolas said in an obvious attempt to change the subject. Elisa gave him a slight smile.

“About a year ago I was on a hunting trip alongside three others- Leon, Darren and William. Leon made archery into an artwork, much like you. Darren was… a loyal dwarf but, by Valar, did he make a lot of noise! I used to wonder sometimes if he made all the noise on purpose to make the hunt harder for us. William was a swordsmith and also the angriest dwarf you would ever meet. I received a contract from some noble man, though we never found out whom exactly, and given a map with a location of a gold mine on. This contract simply stated that the land had been rumoured to be the hunting ground of ogres so the noble did not want to risk his own neck. Understandable, of course, but inside this gold mine was a gem he wanted. What the noble failed to mention was there was a drake inside who also wanted to keep the gems.”

Legolas raised an eyebrow. “A drake?”

“Yes, a female dragon which hasn’t fully grown yet. It was about half the size of an adult dragon but she packed all the fire. So, my company and I run blind into this gold mine- see the dragon- and immediately run in 4 different directions. We spent 2 days and nights trapped in that mine battling and then running. We were exhausted, famished and ready to just lie down and die when I found a sword upon the gold pile. It was clutched in the hand of a skeleton. The hold was still tight even have all those years and I had to break the fingers just to get the sword. It was a beauty, Legolas. It was an elven sword carved from pure black iron and the most delicately made sword I have seen. I was honoured to strike the final blow. The way she roared right before the world was set on fire around us…” Elisa closed her eyes and savoured the memory. “It was a sight to behold. William
carved my armour out of the dragon’s scales. It took him 3 weeks and we had to keep bringing him food and water because he refused to leave the mine till he had this armour but he did it. Ah, it appears I have this round.”

Legolas frowned at the chess board in confusion at how Elisa had won exactly while she had been telling her tale. Nevertheless, he was in checkmate. Legolas reset the board and they started again.

4 hours later

"So Leon and I are still hanging off this cliff, barely holding by our fingertips, Darren is running down screaming ‘just keep running: the key is so keep running’ and the pony is on the other side still clutching the bag with the orc’s head inside. Leon, covering in grime and soaked to the bone, looks at me and just begins crying with laughter. He looks at me with tears in his eyes and says ‘it appears we have fallen out of the Queen’s good grace.’ To this day, I have no idea what happened to that spell book.”

Legolas tipped his head back and laughed. Elisa was balancing a flute of wine while she tried to mimic Leon’s accent. The guards had bought them out a tray of green food and wine so they had continued to talk and played chess into the night. Lit lanterns glowed around the gazebo.

He was nice enough. A comforting listener with a dry humour she adored. It was possible that she actually meant what she said about always following him.

“I mentioned to my father about what you said about his ring.” He blurted out. “He appreciates what you tried to do.”

“Really? I did not get that from his attitude. By the way, I am thinking of taking up the nickname ‘venomous harlot’. It has a nice ring to it, don’t you agree?”

“Well, you did respond with ‘you have pretty eyes’ when he threatened to have you killed.”

“And I stand by it. Your ada does have pretty eyes and I will go to the grave saying so.”

He closed his eyes and laughed into his wine glass. Suddenly he was staring behind her. He quickly placed his wine back onto the table and stood. Elisa scrunched her eyebrows up and a frown creased
her pretty face.

“Ada.” Legolas greeted with a slight bow.

Elisa bit down on her bottom lip and stood up too. Her fun was over.

“Your grace.” She stated with an unusual amount of humility.

He smelled of cedar and mulled wine; an earthly smell that Elisa barely resisted leaning forward to smell better. Still, he held the aura of a commander and his presence commanded attention like that of a giant. A pregnant pause waited until he finally spoke.

“Are you enjoying the company of our prisoner, Legolas?”

“Ahh, so I am a prisoner. I'm glad we got that firmly confirmed.” Elisa mused.

“Elisa.” Legolas warned, his eyes begging her not to say anything more. She rolled her eyes and nodded regretfully.

“Tauriel is waiting to give you her report on the spiders. Leave us.”

Elisa closed her eyes as Legolas’ footsteps echoed on the wooden platform.

“I will visit you tomorrow.” He promised before he left. Elisa sighed heavily and turned on her heels.

And then Elisa looked into the exquisite coolness of the King’s eyes.

The hunter hesitated in leaving. The Elven king hadn’t changed since she had last seen him yet she
was still struck by his attractiveness. His hair was neither golden nor silver but something in between and was flowing down his broad back and chest. He was completely dressed in a silver-blue fabric, which was just as translucent as his hair. She couldn’t begin to guess his age.

“I should return to my quarters.” She said when she finally took her eyes off him. He chuckled darkly.

“Sit, An ngell nín.”

She obeyed. “May I take a guess that you are still unsatisfied about my intentions here?”

The king shuffled his long robes to sit in the seat Legolas had previously occupied.

“Some would call it a noble cause- hunting a creature determined to cause harm. I call it foolishness. One little girl battling a beast capable of commanding an army? The only reason you are alive is because you are good entertainment.”

She scoffed. “Do you greet all your guests this way, my lord?”

Thranduil arched one of those impossibly magnificent brows and stood, going to a table and pouring two glasses of wine. He handed one to the hunter and held his glass up in a mock toast. “Welcome to the Woodland Realm, my lady.”

“Will you play?” She uttered carelessly. Her hands worked to reset the chess board, anything to keep from staring at the King.

“Peditham hi sui vellyn?”

“I’m afraid the language of elves is lost on me.”

“May we speak as friends now?” Thranduil clarified.

She glanced up from the board and grinned. “Are we not already?”
“I see isolation has not dulled your tongue.”

“Would you prefer I speak my mind or offer an empty apology?”

“Both.” He replied. “But your apology will not be empty.”

By a great deal of self-restraint, Elisa resisted the urge to smack his smirk straight of his face. She dropped her head and tried to focus on the game until she regained some of temper. The game was lasting longer than she had thought. Thranduil was a good match to her but both were using the opportunity to study their opponent.

“You must be very proud of yourself, your majesty.”

“Until you state what you’re suggesting, I have nothing to respond to.”

“My presence here? You don’t need me here.”

“You’re right. I don’t.” He brought the cup of wine to his lips, his eyes never leaving hers.

He’s cunning, Elisa thought grimly, he has no intention of letting his guard down. He was as calculating and battle hardened as her. She didn’t like the cunning look in his blue eyes. She could have to watch her words more carefully than when she was in Legolas’ company.

“I’m surprised you trust me enough to only be here with a handful of guards.” She pointed out.

Thranduil replied casually without taking his eyes of the board, “There are a dozen archers lined up on the roof above our heads. Did I not order you to see a healer? Tell me, Elisa, is your refusal part of some childish act of disobedience?”

“My wounds were not extensive, your grace. I can heal myself.”
“I would not doubt it. All the same, you will see Elrond about your injuries.” He raised a hand to silence any argument she had. “Be glad I am allowing you out of these gates for a while.”

She bit her tongue. Why bite the hand that was feeding her? If it meant she had to see a very attractive elf and listen to him tell her she was fine then so be it.

“Far be it from me to question your authority, your majesty.”

“Yet that is all you see to do.”

Scarlett’s eyes lit with humour and she snickered. “That’s… very observant.” She said, just managing to hold in her laughter. Even Thranduil couldn’t resist her smile.

“The attack on my kingdom was not the first time you confronted the creature. It knows you and you know it. My assumption was right. It was so.”

Elisa said nothing. For the first time she felt afraid of this stolid man with expressionless eyes.

“I don’t believe you had a chance to tell me of your first battle with the creature.”

“I don’t believe you told me of your connection to the creature.” She shot back. “See, I agree with you that Locus only sees me as ‘good entertainment’. I am hardly worth attacking the most powerful army in Middle Earth over. Locus was not here for me- he was here for you.”

The hunter leaned closed and locked eyes with the King. “If we are to be friends, then surely I deserve to know the truth.”

Thranduil matched her fierce stare with one of his own. He at least knew the direction to point her in, she was sure. She was also sure she was on the line’s edge of being thrown in jail.

After a still muteness, during which Elisa was sure she would be dragged away by a dozen elven guards, the king’s lips twirled into a smile and he chuckled.
“You play well.” He directed his attention back to the chess board. “The sacrifices you make are calculated yet irregular. I have no met a human quiet like you. Who was your tutor?”

“My beloved father.”

“He must have been a shrewd man.”

“Not as shrewd as you would think considering he didn’t see himself being murdered.”

“You have my condolences.”

“I don’t need them.” She said harsher than she meant to. The king raised one of his impossibly perfect eyebrows but didn’t comment. So the hunter had a soft spot after all. He would have to remember her reaction.

“You are too predictable, Elisa.”

She opened her mouth to reply but cut short when she saw what had happened on the board while she had been distracted. The white knight was directly two places next her black queen and she had no piece to sacrifice in time. The knight leaned back and watched her proud expression sink. She scoffed, searched for any option, scoffed again, and swore under her breath.

“Checkmate.”

“I will burn this entire garden down before I admit I lost. There must be another move you didn’t see…”

She was so focused on not admitting checkmate, that she barely heard the King laughing. The sound was foreign and out of place. Confusion scrunched her up her eyebrows.

“How… what… but…” She stuttered.

Leaving her wondering what on Middle Earth had just happened, Thranduil stood up in a twirl of his
“Join me for dinner tomorrow. Good night, Elisa.”

She was still staring at the chess board with confusion and hatred.

“But…”

“Good night, human.”
When the fire came

When the Fire Came

“Nathaneil, Darling, I wish you wouldn’t push her so hard. She’s just a girl.”

Nega Riding glanced down at her daughter with pity in her golden eyes.

Elisa’s 13 year old body was on the brink of exhaustion. She lay on her back gasping for air. She was so very tired. She had been fighting for hours without rest and if she could just lie down for a little bit…

“Get up, Elisa. Harder! Get up! You are not weak! Do you think your enemies will not push you so hard? Get up!”

Her father’s harsh voice demanded. He loomed over her, grabbed her by her collar, and yanked her to her feet. She stumbled before quickly correcting herself.

"Maybe you are weak. A weak little girl. I should go back to training your brothers. I’m wasting my time with you."

“Nathaneil, please.” Her mother’s words were weak even to her child’s ears.

“No! I can do better, I swear.” Elisa promised as she grabbed her daggers off the floor and spat out blood. It stained the floor.

Her father nodded in approval.

“If you can last another 3 rounds, you can rest.”

Elisa braced herself for a blow that never came.

Then she was running. She wasn’t sure what she was running from but whatever it was wanted to
hurt her. She was just 15 again. The evil monster chasing her was better than she and faster. She ran down a snow covered path till she saw a figure on the road. The figure swayed for a moment before she pressed a bloody hand against the invisible glass separating them. She clutched her stomach with one arm. The figure collapsed to her knees. Raven curls covered her face. The bloody handprint left a trail of blood down the glass.

Suddenly she was in her room, older this time but still waiting for a hit. She was in her room except it’s not hers anymore. The walls were smeared with blood. It wasn’t blood spatter. No, it was as if someone had painted the walls with streaks of the sickly liquid.

Her family wasn’t there. And she had a home no longer. She walked out the door and into Thranduil’s throne room. It was different… there was two thrones. On one sat a shadow. A mist larger than a giant.

She knew it was Locus.

On the other sat a woman who could have been beautiful if not for her black empty eyes as dark as her floor length dress and snake like smile. There was something familiar about the woman. Her dark red curls stopped at her shoulders, her pretty face....

It was her.

A cruel, evil and dark woman with her face and her body but her mind tainted with too many shadows. She smiled cruelly.

“I wondered when you would come, survivor. I am glad we can finally talk.”

Elisa shook her head in confusion. “Who are you?”

“I am you.” Her lips twisted into a sly smile. “Or I will be when you surrender to the Darkness’ will. What is it you call him? Locus? For now, I am simply a communicator between him and you.”

“Where am I?” She demanded.
“Dreaming. You will awaken shorten, rest assured.”

“I will not play this game.”

“Of course you will. You will do anything your master demands of you. I thought I would gift you memories of your past life before our master was kind.”

“Kind?” She scoffed. “What has It done that is kind?”

“Everything!”

The dark woman snapped. Flames glowed in her black eyes. In a blink of an eye, she was in front of Elisa.

“Our master watched over us. He watched us grow in strength and beauty. He watched us, you know! Killing our tutor, burning our pretty dresses, destroying the big house, and killing Mol. Our master gave us a gift, do you not remember? He showed us darkness, showed us how much more power we could have if we only surrender to him.”

“I will never give in!” She said more to convenience herself than the shadow of her stood in front of her.

Swiftly, the woman’s harshness left and was replaced with desperation. A brief glimpse, a crack in the illusion, and Elisa was swearing into her own youthful eyes.

She gripped Elisa’s shoulders in her hands and begged, “Please, he will come for us soon. This isn’t what we want. You have to run. This is one battle we can’t win. We have to run.”

“When? Where is he?”

Elisa tried to reach out for the woman, for her, to save her from the madness coming over her. Her
leg's wouldn't move. Her arms didn't reach out to help. The woman tipped her head back in a silent scream as if battling just to be able to talk.

“He’s everywhere. He sees everything. You have to run! Darkness was everywhere. It was consuming, infecting, everywhere around me. Sinking, drowning, another village full of life near the caves and waters that healed and cleansed now runs with blood…”

She weakly stepped away from Elisa, her head rocking to the side.

“There is fire and blood everywhere! Please, father, I am so cold! Please, father, come save me! He’s here... He’s here to kill me! Tormenting my soul, haunting my dreams, hiding in every shadow- I couldn’t survive it. Father, you knew I was dying! Please, father, I am so scared! Faster, harder! You can do better, Elisa! Your enemies won't be gentle! Fight harder! Be unstoppable! Not yet, please! I can be better than them- all of them! I will hunt evil and feel flames! I can't fear death anymore, I've wished for it too many times. Frozen yet flames scorching, burning, and destroying everything! I saved everyone but I couldn’t save myself and now… please, just save me from this darkness!”

The shadows surrounded her. She reached out for the dark woman but the cruelty had returned to her. She laughed, a malicious crackle, and kneeled before the throne.

Elisa woke to the sound of her own scream. Her body was trapped in a web of silk sheets. The bedroom was too small, too overwhelmingly catastrophic, and it was closing in on her. A hoarse scream bubbled from her lips before she could stop it. Her fingertips were drenched in a sticky thick liquid. Sweat dripped down her forehead and made her nightie stick to her body like a second skin.

The bedroom door was flung open and crashed into the wall. Two iron bands bound her arms to her waist, cutting off her fight against her nightmare.

The girl was left shaking, breathless, wrapped in her bed sheets and with dried blood flaking from her neck. She sobbed silently. The figure whispered empty comforting words as he rocked her gently. The first rays of daylight touched the figure’s silvery blonde hair.

“I… I can do better. I am better than them.” She buried her tear stained face into the crook of the stranger’s neck. “I’m so sorry. You were too sweet and you didn’t deserve to die.”
The stranger inhaled sharply. Elisa closed her eyes and let the tears fall.

“I couldn’t save them. I was not strong enough. Never again.” She promised.

Elisa was awake long before sun graced the sky. She had bathed, cleaning away the blood from the scratch marks on her neck, and dressed in her armour. She cringed as the candle wax dripped onto her skin but didn’t move her hand. Since she had awoken alone at dawn, Elisa had been writing down everything she knew about Locus. Pieces of paper filled with her writing decorated the floor she kneeled on.

She wasn’t sure how long had passed before her bedroom door was flung open.

Still, she didn’t grant whoever had entered her attention. Besides, she had a fairly good idea who it was.

“Is it necessary to always come in so aggressively? Is it just your manner?”

Legolas crossed his arms over his chest and silently stared at her, glaring daggers. The only sound was his steady breathing.

“Stop brooding and ask. I know you are dying with curiosity.”

“Your king ordered you to see Elrond for your injuries. Disobeying a royal order-”

“Spare me.”

Legolas said something in Elvish under his breath and rubbed his eyes. Elisa beckoned him to sit down next to her on the floor.
“Have you eaten?”

“Sit down. I want to tell to tell someone about what I dreamt of and I refuse to look up to you.”

His curiosity won over his stubbornness and he sat down next to her. His fingers ghosted over the abused papers scattered around him.

“What are these?”

“Everything I have gathered on Locus since I first received the contract. My ‘employer’ did not share much… and now I understand why.” Elisa smiled tightly. “Darren, Leon and I investigated the dozen villages that Locus had left destroyed first but there was no hint. Finally we found a track. We managed to catch an orc, of all things, savaging what was left of one of the villages. It gave up its information with a bit of persuasion. That was when… when the hunt turned sour.”

“Were there casualties?”

“It matters little now.”

To all his credit, Legolas didn’t push the subject. Instead, he picked up the torn sheet of parchment she had written everything she remembered from her dream.

Without meaning to, Elisa found herself leaning closer to Legolas and sharing his space. He was fun to tease and she didn’t fear death while around him- unlike his father. She briefly wondered what her punishment would be for not going to see a healer. She had lost her chance at getting out but her dream had left her too unnerved to focus on anything else.

“The hunt left me hurt bad. It left me banging on death’s gates. It was then I started to have these strange nightmares about Locus. I dreamt of it destroying villages, kidnapping stray elves, humans and dwarves alike. By the time I figured out where It had struck, I was too late. Locus did it on purpose. Lured me to these places so I would know I was not strong enough or fast enough to save anyone again.”

He sensed she didn’t need his apology, which she was thankful for.
“I had another one last night. This one was different though, Legolas. I… felt something shift as though a piece of me had broken free of Locus’ hold just for a moment. I saw a darker vision of me, one that had given into Locus, but the hold loosened enough for her to get a message across to me.”

“What did it say?” Legolas hinted. Elisa pointed down to the scrap of parchment he held in his hands. Quickly, he took in every word of the woman had said to her. Elisa studied his handsome face as he read. The shock and confusion in his expression made her want to laugh.

“Were you here last night?” She asked, remembering the stranger who had comforted her after her night terror.

“No, I was guarding the border along with Tauriel. This woman speaks of a village near the caves and healing waters. If your vision spoke the truth… I may know this place.” He said finally.

Elisa counted back from 5 to hold in her excitement. Or tried to. She got to 3 before she burst out, “Where is it?”

Legolas wasn’t falling for it though. In a flash, Legolas was stood up and by the door.

She peered over her shoulder to see who the prince had gone to talk to. The red haired captain stood half in the room and looked ready to put an arrow in Elisa’s head if she made the wrong move.

“I am sensing tension.” She muttered to herself. She gathered up her papers while the two whispered in the strange language of elves. “Yes, I am sensing a lot of tension.”

“Elisa.”

The hunter turned and smiled at the prince. He was stood upright like a statue and though he wouldn’t allow it to show, he was worried. Elisa quickly stood and searching her brain for any of the Elvish she had been patiently taught.

“Mani marte?” The pronouncing was sloppy at best but she hoped Legolas understand she was asking what happened.
“The king is displeased to put it mildly. He has ordered you to be sent to the dungeons.”

Elisa cursed several shades. Tauriel didn’t blink at her language or her pacing the room rubbing with her hand covering her eyes.

“My lord, this village is in danger. I don’t either of you very well but I do know that neither of you would want the blood of innocents on your hands. I have too much blood on mine.”

From down the corridor she heard the sound of boots hitting the stone.

“My lord,” Tauriel stated. “I was clearing the spiders nest not long away when they suddenly fled downstream. It was unusual to say the least. What the cause is, I cannot say, but something caused the spiders to retreat. Also, a pack of orcs were scouted further down the lake too. They have not moved from the border and appear to be following the spiders’ trail. Something is happening now.”

Elisa scrunched her eyebrows. “They’re savages. Locus will wipe out the village and then the vultures will pick the bones clean. Good Valar, It will kill them all.”

“We cannot allow a prisoner to go free! Say we did, would you stop this creature by yourself?”

“I am not going by myself.” Elisa said with a smile at Legolas. “The two of you are coming.”

“What?” Tauriel demanded. “If you are going to destroy yourself, you can do it alone.”

“I think I would like some company.”

“This is insanity-”

“I have seen the destruction and angst of Locus. I would not wish it on my worst enemy. Besides, how long do you think it will take Locus to return to this kingdom? He is counting on you being submissive to the King. He is counting on you being obedient.”
“Then what are you? If you’re not submissive what are you?”

Elisa curled her lips into a smirk. “A hunter. Now, are you coming? Or do I have to escape again?”
The prisoner, captain and the prince fled to the stables. There was a joke in there somewhere, Elisa was sure. Tauriel was a somewhat unwilling accomplice but Elisa had been right to think she wouldn’t want the guilt. But disobeying the King’s orders didn’t end well. Something told her that it would only make matters worse if they survived.

From the far stable, familiar stomping hooves caught her attention. An impatient neigh and snort could mean only one thing.

“Malicious!” She said too loudly and skipped to the end stable. She stroked Malicious’ soft mane and whispered reassuring words to calm her.

She couldn’t believe it had only been 4 days since she had seen Malicious’ glossy black coat. The last time had been in the forest moments before Legolas had 'found' her. The horse could be vicious when she wanted to be and could have escaped without Elisa. She could have easily hid in the forest too. Malicious had chosen to be captured by the elves to be close to her master.

Elisa was struck with a sudden burst of loyal towards the horse.

“Your horse is named malicious?” Tauriel said.

“Of course she is and she is the most beautiful horse in Middle Earth, aren’t you?”

The horse neighed in agreement. Elisa swung open the gate and straddled the horse. Legolas threw a pack towards her which she caught with one hand. Inside she felt the cold touch of metal.

“You can work better with your own weapons at your side.”
Elisa’s smile died. She released her sword from the bag and swung the holster into its usual spot over her back. Next she tucked her knives in their leather shafts and swung the belt around her waist. The rub of the belt fell on the same spot it usually did.

“If you try to escape-” Tauriel warned.

“Then you are more than welcome to put an arrow through my neck.”

“My Lord, I have news.”

Lord Elrond was the unlucky one to break the news of the sudden departure to Thranduil. He kneeled before the throne and bowed his head. He cursed his stars for making him the chosen one to tell the king how his son and captain of guards were seen accompanying the prisoner. The king’s wrath was something to behold even for Elrond.

“Well, my friend?”

Elrond swallowed. “The prisoner has escaped.”

Thranduil didn’t move or show a single sign of emotion.

“An unarmed woman escaped from under the watch of my guards?” He said simply.

“Your son and captain, Tauriel, were spotted near the stables… along with the human.”

The only signal Thranduil gave him that he was furious was slightly widened eyes.

“My son?”

“Yes, my lord.”
“And the Captain of my guards?”

“Perhaps she is a servant of witchcraft? I have heard of witches able to lure elves under their control.”

“She does not need witchcraft. She knows how to entice without magic.” He stopped mid-sentence and rose. “Where are they going?”

“We do not know, my king. They were seen following the river down.”

“Ready your company. Stop them, even if it means separating the prisoner’s pretty head from her shoulders.”

Harsh winds pounced upon Malicious as she rode furiously across the hillside. Her stride was unbreakable even by the worst of the weather. A brewing storm hung in the air. A downpour would drop from the sky soon. Miles of greenery surrounded Elisa without a single building in sight. Legolas had refused to tell her where the village was so she was relying on his direction.

Without warning, the prince pulled in his horse’s reins and forced the group to a stop.

“What the-”

Legolas hushed her quickly and pointed at the tiny figures dancing across the hilltop.

“How could they have found us so fast?” Elisa snapped.

“I don’t know.” Tauriel replied calmly. “No one knows where we are going.”

Elisa closed her eyes. The prince hadn’t been out of her sight long enough to tell anyone where they were going and Tauriel didn’t even know where the village was. Had someone followed them? No,
Elisa had too much respect for hunting to not know when she was being followed. The group had lost their pursuers easily within the forest.

It was then she saw the second group on top of the hilltop. The elves were battling a group of pale skinned orcs. The fight looked vicious, even from where Elisa was sat. There were dozen orcs and only half that number of elves.

“Why this?” Elisa sighed. She kicked her heels into Malicious’ sides. The horse leapt into a sprint without care of the combat she was throwing her master into. Her hooves tore up the damp grass as she galloped up the hill. She took the journey in her stride.

The sound of battle grew closer. Metal crashing into metal, the battle cries, and the screams of injured orcs. As soon as the first orc came into sight, Elisa withdrew her knives and jumped over the horse.

She was in the middle of the battle now. She stood in front of the elves. A sword immediately clashed with hers.

She slid into her routine almost immediately. Legolas fought exactly as Leon had and it was easy to fall into their pattern. Tauriel was just as fast and fierce. Leaping across the conflict, she shot arrow after arrow and cut down those who got too close. Elisa swung left and sliced her blade across an orc’s throat before it could get too close to Legolas.

But she saw the elfs' reinforcements too.

The King, riding his magnificent elk, surrounded by maybe 20 very serious looking soldiers was approaching. They must have seen the battle already.

“Elisa!”

Tauriel’s warning came seconds in time. She swung around with her bowie knife and twisted the blade into an orc’s gut. Its filthy fist slammed into her cheek. The fact that it was bleeding profusely didn’t deter it. Elisa tasted metallic blood in her mouth. A huge hand gripped her throat. Elisa was abruptly lifted off her feet. The taut grip sliced off her air supply. When the orc lifted her higher, Elisa gripped onto the dagger still lodged in his gut and yanked the blade up with her.

Black dots danced across her vision. The orc roared in pain at the blade carving through his stomach. He released the hunter who fell on her side. Coughing and greedily taking in mouthful of air, Elisa stumbled to her feet. An arrow broke through the air besides her ear and hit directly in between the
orc’s eyes.

Elisa rubbed at her already bruising neck. The elves she fought besides had done better than she imagined. A couple had some minor cuts and bruises but no bodies littered the ground except those of orcs.

When it rains it really does pour, Elisa thought grimly. The downpour came in the form an uncompromising prideful King whose prisoner had escaped. Twice.

But he walked straight past her to his son.

“Where was this human harlot leading you?” He demanded. “Do you not know the danger she poses to our kingdom? She appears with a connection to an ancient demon, an evil designed to bring nothing but death, and you allow her to lead you into its jaws! Did you think to question the possibility of her being in league with the creature?”

By the end of his rant, Thranduil was heaving with anger. His sword, still dripping with orc blood, swung dangerously in his hand.

“If you still doubt her then have your guards follow us! Have her bound but you cannot do nothing while a village is slaughtered!” Legolas retorted. “We shall take her back in chains if it pleases you.”

“Thank you, dearest friend.” Elisa grumbled.

“Ignore her. She has had too many hits by the orcs.”

Thranduil shot around to her. Damn her loud mouth. Now the King’s fury was directed solely on her.

“Do you presume to dictate to me in my own kingdom?”

“Good gracious, no. The only thing I want with your kingdom is to leave it. I know there is no love lost between elves and humans but let us leave that political nightmare for another day. An entire village will be wiped out, your majesty. It surely will not improve the relationship between humans
and elves.”

“I want her in chains.” Thranduil ordered. Two armour plated elves rushed to follow his orders.

“Okay, now you are just being unreasonable.”

Elisa saw a flash of jewels seconds before the harsh hand collided with her cheek. Her hand swung to the side and she cradled her cheek in shock rather than pain. Her turquoise eyes widened and her mouth was set in a thin line.

Thranduil leaned closer and wrapped his fingers around her neck in a cruel grip. Elisa coughed weakly and struggled against the iron band tightened around her throat.

“Do not presume I do not know who pulls your strings, Neotis.”

The word flickered something in her memory. It sounded Elvish yet ancient… the wizard had called her Neotis! It meant wonderer! But how could the King possibly know the name? She barely remembered it since she was half dead the entire time the wizard was healing her.

Elisa couldn’t have replied if she wanted to. If she thought the orc’s strangling was bad, it was practically gentle compared to the King’s hold.

Legolas was the only one brave enough to stop his father before he killed Elisa. He shot around to stand in between Elisa and the furious ruler.

“If you kill her,” He stated deceptively calm. “You will be killing a lot more people.”

Thranduil glanced back and forth from Elisa to his son. The choking grip around her throat loosened enough for her to gulp a lungful of air.

“And what is your knowledge, Tauriel? Does she hold any sway over you?”

All eyes turned to the captain, except Elisa who couldn’t. She answered carefully, “I believe a group
of orcs and spiders were scouting the same location. Spiders do not venture out of their nest with due course. Orcs do not hunt during the day. The two are too irregular to be coincidence."

Thranduil gave Elisa’s neck a last threatening squeeze before he let her fall into Legolas’ waiting arms.

“Ride with Elrond’s company to this village.” Thranduil commanded as he climbed gracefully onto the elk’s back again.

“And the prisoner, my king?” Tauriel asked.

“The prisoner is no longer any of your concern. Leave before I change my mind.” Thranduil snapped.

Legolas and Tauriel departed on the horses.

“Are you willing to risk your son’s life rather than send me? If there is anything there-”

Elisa stopped mid-sentence. If there was something there it would be Locus. Her only two friends in the strange elven lands would be killed like dogs. The King was stealing what could be her only chance to beat Locus! All because of his pride and selfish nature!

“Do not make me beg. I do not look good begging.”

He barely acknowledged her with a raise of his eyebrow.

“Please, my lord!” The desperate plea tasted worse than poison on her lips but it caught Thranduil’s attention. A brief hint of smugness flickered in his eyes.

“This- this is not right. Those people will die if I fail here! Please, they did nothing to you or your kingdom. I swear, I will bow before you in chains if you let me save one village.”

He tilted his head to the side. “Your pleas sound like the sweetest song. Get down on your knees and
Horror and humiliation flooded through her, turning her cheeks red a shade brighter than her hair. She had never bowed to anyone. She swallowed the injustice like a bitter potion and slowly lowered to her knees. Damp grass kissed her armour.

“Let me save a village full of innocent people.” She added through gritted teeth. “Please, my king.”

The elven curved blade held by the King caressed her throat column. Elisa looked up at Thranduil with barely contained disgust. Perhaps after Locus was dead, she would try her hand at royal assassinations.

“Are you willing to die for your mission?”

Elisa didn’t hesitate. “Yes.”

“I do wonder about humans. How charming it is to see someone not held back by minor matters such as reality.”

“Thank you.”

Thranduil smiled. A curl of his lips unnerved Elisa more any orc or blade. There was no warmth in his smile.

“Subjects end their pleas by addressing their master as lord.”

*I am no one’s subject, you pretentious fucking bastard.* The image of Locus’ carnage made Elisa bite her tongue. Not this time. She was determined to stop Locus from claiming a life while she could help it.

“My lord,” Her chest was heaving with anger and she swore she was about to vomit. “I will do anything. Please, just allow me Elrond’s company. If only to ensure no harm comes to them.”
“Anything?” He slyly purred.

“Anything.” She nodded her head eagerly despite shaking with resentment and embarrassment.

Satisfied for the moment, Thranduil lifted his sword from her.

“Do you know what direction the village lies in?”

“No, my lord Thranduil,” She replied as she stood up. “Your son did not feel the need to trust me with it.”

“I see he still possesses some sense.” The king jeered.

His unreadable expression and keen eyes infuriated her. She counted to ten in her head and tried to erase the insults her tongue was begging to spill.

“The settlement is called Tear’s Crossing. We shall see for ourselves this destruction you prophesied.”

“We? I thought the welfare of other lands were not your concern.”

“Elisa, consider it as a precaution. This way, if you try to escape, I can strap you in chains myself and drag you back on a leash.”

Any plot Elisa had disappeared. She retreated back to the safety of Malicious and thanked her stars for letting her trusted weapons stay at your side. Something told her she would need them.
Tear's Crossing

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tear's Crossing

Tear’s Crossing was a straggling village set along the side of a hill. It consisted of straw roofed houses set in rows. The Mayor’s house was the highest house just at the top of the rise. The only redeeming sight was a winding river flowing at the back of the village and streamed from the hilltop.

“Humans choose to live here?” Said Tauriel shivering.

The villagers shuffled around the strangers without so much as a second glance. Blank faces and hands tucked into their pockets, the villagers didn’t seem to notice or care about anything around them. They stayed focus on the world three steps in front of their feet.

Tauriel hopped off her horse to confront one of the villagers. She found an elderly woman with her head bowed and a worn black cloak covering her features. Tauriel’s questions were met with silence. Legolas’ luck didn’t fare any better.

A couple shuffled past, heads bowed, and a young child holding their hands. They held the girls’ hands in a white knuckled grip.

“Look at their hands.” Legolas warned.

Tauriel eyes dropped to the mother’s hand clutching her daughter. And then she looked at the child. Her eyes were puffy as though she had been crying for a while. The quiet steps were hesitant and her body sagged with exhaustion.

“She was right.”

Tauriel withdrew her blade. The couple and the child disappeared around the corner of a house.

“We will split up. Elrond, take your company and search the village for any survivors. Tauriel and I will find out where the villagers are going.”

Elrond bowed once and left with the soldiers. He fully trusted the two to be capable of fulfilling their duties without assistance.

Despite the number of villagers trudging along the streets, Legolas and Tauriel couldn’t find a single person willing to talk to them. At first, they suspected it was because they were elves. However every villager they passed held the same empty expression. They stared with dead eyes. The silence unnerved Tauriel the most. No birds graced the sky with their song. There was no murmur of chatter in the streets. Tauriel stalked through the village ready for an attack.

“You don’t belong here.”

Tauriel cast her eyes down at the small child sat by the lake. A boy with shockingly bright yellow hair and green eyes looked up at her. He was sat cross legged by the lake’s edge, fidgeting with something in his hands.
“I have never met an elf before. What are you doing here?”

Tauriel kneeled next to him but kept her sword drawn. Legolas let her do the talking while he kept watch.

“Can you tell me where your parents are, child?”

“Did you not hear the noise? They’re at the church. Everyone is at the church.”

“Then why are you here?”

He shrugged. “The voices are too loud. They scare me. Anyway,” He said clearly proud of himself for using such an adult word. “I’m big now. My pa told me I did not have to go.”

Tauriel’s theory of the boy being a beggar was shattered. If not, then where was his parents and why had they left him alone? His hands were clear of the black marks which Legolas has spotted on the other villager’s hands.

“When is Mol coming?” The boy suddenly asked.

“Is Mol your parent?”

“Mol is my best friend. She said she would meet me here. The voices scare her too. Her ma and pa were angry at her because she didn’t want to go to the church. Is isn’t bad not to want to go, is it?” The boy asked with pleading eyes.

“No, it is not.” Legolas reassured. The boy stood and looked up at the prince.

“Can you keep a secret?” He slowly uncurled his fist and held out the item he had been fidgeting with. “I found it in Mol’s house when the adults started getting angry and quiet.”

Tauriel’s eyes widened. “It cannot be-”

“Where is the house you found this in?”

The boy pointed at a small cottage at the edge of the village.

“Elves live in the wood kingdom, don’t they? You should go back. The voices are louder now. I should go find Mol.”

“No!” Tauriel lowered her panicked voice. “It would be better if you stay here and I will find Mol for you. She will not know where to find you if you leave.”

She was an adult even if she wasn’t human and her words were final. The boy needed adult reassurance. The voices confused him. He wished they would go away. He sat back down besides the river. When he turned around again, the elves were gone.

A sharp snap of twigs rustled in the bush behind him. He sat back on his hunches and narrowed his eyes at the woman who appeared. She was pretty, with long red hair and bright eyes. Her dress was fancy, like what the Master's wife owned. Maybe she was with the elves. Her smile comforted the boy. He relaxed.

“Why are you not at church with the rest of your friends?” She purred gently.

The boy shrugged in response. “Who are you? I don’t know you.”
“Mol sent me to ask why you have not met her in the church. She has been waiting for ages, sweet thing.”

The boy was sure Mol and he had agreed to meet by the lake. But the woman sounded friendly and honest. She wouldn’t hurt him; she was too beautiful and young. And he was getting bored. Maybe he could just see what was happening inside the church…

“Are you going to tell my pa that I did not want to go to church?”

The woman held out her hand and the boy accepted grateful of her help.

“No, sweet thing.”

“The voices don’t scare you, do they?”

“The voices are nothing to be scared of, sweet thing. And do not worry- your parents will not be mad at anything.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the super short chapter but I needed this part by itself so I can add a warning that the next chapter will briefly have scenes of a torture scene. It'll pass quick but just in case anyone is sensitive to it.

-Al
Thicker than Water

Chapter Notes

Please be warned there's a slightly graphic depiction of a murder.

-Al

Thicker Than Water

Tauriel kicked open the front door of Mol’s cottage. The place was not the home of a child. Light struggled to break in from the doorway. The floors were bare and creaked even under Tauriel’s light footsteps.

The first thing she noticed was the smell.

It slammed into her as soon as she stepped inside. Burnt flesh and blood mixed with jasmine. It was vile. A sickening smell that surrounded her, choking her. Her eyes fell on the cause of the offensive smell.

She gasped in horror. She couldn’t stop her eyes from staring at the sight, despite Legolas’ calls. The prince came to a dead stop besides her.

“What kind of monster does this to innocent people?”

Tauriel got no answer. There was no answer to explain the horrifying image burning into her memory. The mutated body had been burnt past recognition. It had been a woman once, maybe even a beautiful woman. Her pale body clothed in burnt dirty rags swung lazily from the rope dangling from the roof beam. Her death had been merciful compared to those of the two men. On each side of her, a man had been impaled to the wall and covered in a million little cuts.

Tauriel backed away from the horrifying scene. It would be imprinted on her memory for eternality; she need not stare any longer.

Something glistened in the corner of Legolas’ eye when he turned to leave. He stepped closed to the hanging corpse. Something silver shone from inside her mouth. Legolas cringed as he forced open her jaw. The jaw snapped with a sickened crunch and her black tongue rolled out. A silver necklace was spat out onto his hand.

The elaborate designs were revealed in the light. It was a slim silver chain with a glass key charm. Care had been put into carving the simple piece of jewellery. It had been wedged into the woman’s
mouth after death. Whoever had put it in her mouth had taken care not to break her jaw in the process: a clue wrapped and waiting for the elf.

Legolas breathed easier when he stepped outside again. A bitter mist had descended upon the village. He expected it often happened considered the village had been placed far up a hill but when had it turned to a biting cold?

“Tauriel?”

There was no reply. The villagers were nowhere to be seen. His breath hovered in a cloud in front of him.

“Tauriel!”

His feet moved forward of their own account.

He spun around. A child’s laughter froze through the mist. To his side? In front of him?

He was sure he heard it again. An innocent giggle behind him this time.

There was someone there, mocking him. He called out her name a dozen times before he came to the daunting realisation that she was not there.

Tauriel had disappeared.

He was alone.

From inside the mist, a child happily laughed.

Elisa watched with trained hunter instincts as the sudden mist descended on the village. There still looked to be life on the tiny land. Where there was life, there was hope. Malicious neighed in a silent threat and ground her front heels into the dirt. Elisa patted her mane and whispered soothing words but they did nothing to calm the horse. She refused to step onto the land. In the end, Elisa had to leave her trusty horse with Thranduil at the village entrance.

“I will be back soon, Malicious. I will be safe, I promise.”

The promise was hallow. Elisa slipped into the mist. Half a dozen soldiers followed her, since Thranduil still didn’t trust her, and thankfully had the sense to bring torches.

A figure wearing a familiar green tunic and light armour came into view.

“Legolas?”
The prince shot around, arrow already focused on Elisa’s head.

“Tauriel is missing.” He explained. “I think we can stop pretending this is a normal village now.”

“Where are the humans who belong to the village?” A soldier questioned.

Legolas pointed to the black towering building further up on the hill.

“A worshipping place is where they seem to be gathered. I believe we will find Elrond’s company inside.”

Elisa shook her head. “Like sheep to a slaughter. Where did you last see Tauriel?”

“We were led to a house north of the lake. Inside were… bodies. I found this piece of jewellery inside the mouth of one.”

Elisa didn’t hide her shock at seeing the elegant necklace. Trembling fingers ghosted over the glass eye. There was recognition in her touch, along with sadness.

“This was meant as a message for me.”

“How do you know?”

“The bodies you found were of a woman and two men, right? Or they used to be. The woman was burnt beyond repair, her face destroyed completely. Her left hand would have been sliced off. The two men were impaled to the wall with wooden stakes. They had been tortured, cut with a poisoned blade, for hours just so the woman could hear them scream.”

Legolas instinctively reached for his blade and Elisa grabbed the necklace. The hunter looked entranced its dull shine.

“Do you know the monster who did this?”

She hesitated and then nodded. “Yes, I do. It was me.”

He saw it wasn’t sadness in her eyes, but regret.

She said, “The murder… the torture… it was how I killed my sister.”

Elisa’s toothy smile shone up at her father. Though he was crossing 60 years old and grey was starting to creep into his black hair, her father was as sharp as ever. He patted her head affectionately, like one would with a pet dog, and returned her smile.

“My dearest one, I have some unpleasant news.”

“What’s wrong, pa?”

For being on 15, Elisa was flourishing at her destiny. She could read people like a book and knew when something was wrong.

“I am afraid it is about your sister.”
Elisa tilted her head to the side and frowned.

"I can fix whatever she had done wrong."

Her objection was met with a sharp slap across her face.

"She has disappointed me for the last time. I want you to find her, my dearest one, and I want her dead."

The hunter remembered the steps leading up to her sister’s murder as if it had happened yesterday. She took the street’s twist and turns in her stride, her hands guided by the rough wood houses.

“Did you truly murder your sister?”

“Yes.” She answered simply.

Every step took her closer to the church. A low chant echoed out from the stone walls. The murmur, a hymn of voices, became clearer till she could trace its origin.

“Can you hear that?”

“It is coming from the church.” Legolas answered warily.

“Now we know where everyone went. Hopefully Lord Elrond’s company will either be inside or will meet us here. The villagers are not yet hostile but I worry how much sway Locus will have over them.”
Shadows and demons

Shadows and Demons

It made quite a sight.

The entire village- men, women, children and elderly- all gathered under one roof giving their devoted attention to a white haired man. The priest was dressed in jewelled blue robes with fur around the collar to show his status. He stood proudly at the front of the church, head held high as he continued his sermon.

“…And now, my brothers and sisters, we shall bow our heads in prayer to our beloved Maker and God. For it was He who grabbed our hands tight and led us out of the sin’s darkness. It was He who anointed us. We have proved our worth by following Him out of the fire and vowed our loyalty by blood bonds.”

The doors burst open at that moment.

The mist dared not touch the warmth of the church. A figure guarded by black armour appeared by the doors, her pretty face distorted with bloodlust and determination. She separated herself from the night, a male elf on her right side.

The priest smiled as Elisa stormed up the aisle.

“Forgive me, Father, for I have killed quite a few men.”

She loudly announced as she strutted up to him, her movements gracefully despite her armour.

“Ah, so our guest has finally arrived. How are you enjoying our little village?”

“We have seen the bodies. We are past believing this village is normal.” Legolas said obviously tired of the both the priest and Elisa’s casual tone.

The priest addressed his bewitched audience:

“Do you see why we do not allow outsiders in? They break into our homes and threaten our children! They do not know our ways. Tell me, who are you that you would demand an explanation of God’s chosen ones? Tell me what right you have to violate a sacred place!” He smiled at Elisa. “I have been mistaken. How could I not recognise our Master’s whore?”

“Where is Tauriel?” Legolas demanded.

“I owe you no explanation, elf!”

Legolas was only caught in between the fire. Elisa circled the priest like a predator toying with it’s
food. A cruel smirk curved along her ruby lips.

“Call upon your God.” Elisa ordered in a boisterous voice. “Call down It’s wrath on me. Summon your Maker and have It strike me down where I stand. You cannot, priest, because your God has no power. It is just a monster: a thing to be cut down by my sword.”

The priest’s smile did not waver. “We are in service to a fallen God. He seeks only to return to his rightful place and to guide mankind to glory. He does not hide. It is you who are not worthy to see His face, whore.”

“Call me whore one more time…” She warned.

“The Master knew you were coming. He has left you a surprise. Do you see the villagers? Each one of them is bound to the Master. Our hearts and souls belong to Him. He comes now out of the gates of fire and riding a pale horse.”

He pointed a thin finger at the open doorway. A sudden drop in the temperature left goose-bumps on her arms.

"He knows you and you know Him. You stole His dragon from Him."

From outside came the cries of a battle. No doubt Elrond’s company finally paying a visit and slowing down the damned creatures as they tried to attack the church.

Locus was bringing the fight to her.

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Elisa has never been so angry in her entire 16 years. The other hunters had been sure to warn everyone when they returned to stay out of her way. It was the most furious she had ever returned from a hunt, which was saying something because she spent the majority of her time angry.

She landed a solid punch at her wall. The wooden panels kept the crimson shape of her cut knuckles. Her sister had cost them the entire hunt! 6 months’ worth of work, time she would never get back, was wasted. All because Amelia had disobeyed their father’s commandments and showed up trying to overtake her hunt!

“I am sorry.” Her sister’s meek voice said. She cowered by the doorway. Considering she was 3 years older than Elisa, Amelia had never fully learned not to fear her sister’s temper. She had the damsel in distress act down but Elisa was not in the mood to show pity.

She spun around to her. “There are 5 corpses, Mol! 5 people are dead because of you! Do you expect me to tell their families that ‘you’re sorry’? What the hell were you thinking?”

“I-I…”

“No, in fact I know exactly what you were thinking! I can tell you now, dearest sister, our father’s blessings are not given at a whim. Everything I have, I have earned! While you were busy prancing around like a goddamn fairy, I was working myself into the ground becoming a hunter! The reason you will never be one of us is because you are weak. It is pathetic.”

In a flash, Elisa was across the room. She twisted her sister’s arm behind her back and slammed her
against the wall. Amelia gasped in pain.

“*One of these days you are going to push father too far. He will send someone to kill you- he will send me.*”

Elisa placed the memory to the back of her mind. In front of her the insane priest’s lips mouthed the same chant the villagers sang.

“Enough of this.” She spat out.

With a quick swipe of Elisa’s blades, the priest’s head was separated from his body. A gruesome amount of blood sprayed across Elisa’s cold armour. She kicked the head up in the air and launched it down the church’s hallway. The separated body part slammed into Locus’ yelling creature with amazing accuracy.

This time, Legolas knew he saw it. Elisa whirled around with the speed he had never seen in a human or even an elf.

In a flash she was outside. She leapt straight into the battle outside without a second thought.

The villagers were safe enough in the church without Elisa’s protection, Legolas decided. The company was fighting bravely and with the skill only Thranduil’s army possessed but their opponent had the advantages of the mist and numbers.

“Recall your soldiers into the church, Lord Elrond. Protect the villagers. Locus is coming and I have some unfinished business with It.” Elisa ordered as she pushed an elf out of the way of two clawed hands.

“My lady-”

“Go now or we will all die!” She finally snapped.

“One human cannot keep this legion of creatures at bay!”

“Do as she speaks, Elrond.” Legolas appeared behind her.

Elisa mouthed ‘thank you’ and he nodded.

“These old churches were built with priests’ holes- tunnels that led away underground in case of flooding or such. It should be under the altar. I am placing my trust in you to get the villagers out without harm.”

Her heavy breathing left her chest heaving and sweat formed on her brow.

“The creatures-”

She kissed the prince’s cheek softly. “Everything will be okay. Go now, Legolas. Bar the doors after you and do not open the doors regardless of what you hear.”

With a last smile, Elisa stepped back to join the shadows and demons.
The villagers were full of conversation. Now free of Locus’ control, every villager desperately swapped pieces of memories and attempted to patch together what they had experienced. They were more responsive but with it came the confusion. Panic quickly set in. A few still were distant, but it was put down to their shock. Parents cuddled their traumatised children and looked like they didn’t have any intention of letting go. Legolas couldn’t blame them. The children had suffered watching Locus’ spell turn their parents into people they didn’t know while they were powerless.

“Do you remember what happened?” Legolas asked an elderly woman staring in horror at the beheaded corpse. She curled and uncurled her crooked fingers into fists while she answered.

“Th-there was voices. I could h-hear whispers in my mind for two days.” Her sentence was broken up with sobs.

“What did they say?” Elrond demanded.

“It told us to stay calm. It said we were too uncontrollable, too wild, it did. Next thing I knew, I saw that girl kill Father Petroi. The voice, I beg your pardon, ser, but it called her the whore. Forgive my manner, my lord, but that is what it called her. Thank Valar the voices are gone now. I can think for myself again. I don’t know how long I could have lasted.”

Legolas was already walking away. He negotiated past the mass of confused people in his way to the altar. With the help of two soldiers, he heaved the gold lined altar aside.

There, as Elisa had promised, was a set of stairs leading down.

Legolas peered down. Clumsy movement caught his eye. A heavy sight and mumbles in a woman’s voice came from the darkened pathway.

“Tauriel!”

He leapt down the stairs faster than he should have and ran to the figure crouched against the grimy wall.

Tauriel didn’t look the same as he had left her. Legolas binked fast allowing his eyes a moment to adjust to the darkness before he kneeled down in front of Tauriel and placed a gentle hand on her cheek. She was leaning her entire weight against the wall. One hand was wrapped around her stomach.

Her eyes flicked behind him.
Another woman leaned against the wall.

Legolas instinctually pressed his sword the figure’s neck. She froze and raised her hands.

“Who are you?”

“Legolas do not—” Tauriel groaned.

“Call me Jaces. Your friend is bleeding on my jacket.”

“You are bleeding on my leg!” Tauriel hissed back. Her attempt at getting up was rewarded by a fresh shot of pain and she collapsed to her knees.

“I should be insulted that Elisa has not mentioned me. Is she still hunting with that beast of a dwarf and the love-struck elf?”

“Elisa is here but who is this dwarf and elf you speak of?”

“I guess not. Something must have gone atrociously wrong.”

The sentence was said quiet so Legolas wasn’t sure if he was supposed to have heard it.

He wrapped his around Tauriel’s waist, trying to ease the wince she gave, and helped her to stand. A soldier soon hopped down the stairs and held a lit lantern out for Legolas. He took in a long look at that stranger.

She didn’t look past 20 years, a human, and her hair cut completely off leaving the two metal circles at the side of her temples exposed. Legolas spotted several other metal circles in her arms, both left bare due to her pants and piece of fabric that barely covered her breasts. An ugly scar ran down her stomach and disappeared past her pant’s waist line.

With one hand, the stranger picked up her stained jacket and swiped it on.

“Are you a hunter like Elisa?”

The woman tipped her head back and laughed.

“No one is a hunter like Elisa. Speaking of which, where is she? I have news and it is not good. I just hope she will take the blow gently.”

Elisa took the blow hard.

The dagger sharp teeth stabbed into her arm instead of her neck and the sudden puncture sent her reeling back. It didn’t look like much but a hurt arm was better than a ripped out throat. With the creature’s teeth firmly latched on her arm, Elisa speared her dagger into its exposed throat. She ripped the mouth off her arm, the teeth taking skin and a good deal of blood with it, and twisted to throw her elbow into another creature’s face. A dozen of the creatures lay in a pool of blood at her feet. For every one she killed, two took its place.
She was surrounded.

She might be able to out-fight them but they outnumbered her. If she could buy Legolas enough time to lead the villagers to safety…

“I can make it.” She gritted past the pain and twisted her blades in her hands.

It dawned on her how carefully she toed the line between madness and suicidal. In the constant battle, she had drifted further and further away from the church. She didn’t have time to think about it. Two creatures released an inhuman cry and launched at her. Elisa shot down and let the two fly over her head.

_I see you got my invitation._

Elisa tensed. Her sword hung like an extension of her arm.

The creatures slowly retreated back into the mist, hissing and howling the entire way.

Their master had called them back.

She slide her blood soaked sword out of a creature’s chest. It spat up black blood onto her boots as its body collapsed on the ground.

“Are you finishing hiding now, filth?”

_Ah, there is entertainment in watching your futile struggles. It is always amusing to predict your next move. What do you intend to do now?_

“I always say bite off more than I can chew, and then chew it. Is this why you recreated my sister’s death? Was it entertaining for you?”

Elisa spun around making less noise than the wind. She scrutinised her surroundings. Her invisible attacker had to be close.

_Merely games, my sweet one. Picking wits with you._

“I think it is pitiful. Come out and let me how fearsome you are.”

_The whore challenges her God! Do you remember the last time? Shall I kill the brave prince so I can hear the dying pleas of an elf again? I could cut and burn him the way you did to your sister. Would she have liked to have known how you suffered too?_

“You know nothing about her!” Elisa spat out.

_Nevertheless I do know you. Tell me, little whore, did Mol suffer terribly at your hands? Did you show sympathy or did you enjoy her pain? I feed off your fear. I devour your hatred, lust and bloodlust. I had a feast when you tortured your poor sister and every time afterwards when you sought out pain to ease your doubt._

"Who said I doubted?"

_You doubted everything around you! Tell me, hunter, are you grateful for your father beating you_
into submission? Are you grateful to be able to withstand such hatred and pain inside of you? You are extremely persistant to survive the death of your people. Are you afraid, Elisa? I can help you if you let me in.

"Is that all you got? I have heard worst from my father."

*When the next demons comes, will the elves curse your name? You could not even protect your family or your homeland! Death always strikes around you but never you. Did you think you mattered? Every creature you struck down did not matter.*

The voice mocked her. It came from every direction, sending her in circles, taunting her. She saw every shadow hiding a predator. She didn’t fear the darkness, she feared what it concealed. Something with the potential to kill her standing right before her eyes and she wouldn’t register it as a threat.

*I have an offer for you- a last kindness. There are two doors I offer you. Door one-I shall give you the battle you long for which will no doubt end with your blood running down the street. It will give you the bloody death you always wanted. However door one also lead to your friends the elves dying.*

Elisa’s eyes widened. It was more lies. It had to be! Legolas was leading the villagers out of the church. There was no way! But hadn’t she said the same thing several times over when confronted with Locus?

*I have put the will of murder in the heart of a villager. One of the villagers you have the prince and the captain escorting to freedom. If you surrender now, you can save them. The further they get away from you, the louder my will shouts to them. My words are going stronger in their mind.*

“No! How could you? This… witchcraft does not exist!”

*Door two- you do not get your confrontation but you save the elves. Perhaps you guilt over your sister will be soothed.*

“I did what was good for everyone! For my land and my kin! She was going to reveal us! She went to the elves to reveal us! If they had discovered us, it would have been a bloodbath!”

Damn it! Locus was baiting her into revisiting the murder of Amelia. She was not going to be drawn down that path again.

*The clock is ticking, my sweet one. What is your choice? Will the do-gooder and slayer of dragons survive another day or will the streets run with elven blood? Will you have life or death?*

Elisa could see the imposing dark figure of the monster a few steps away from her. Memories overflowed from her before she could stop them.

His claws piercing into her back and the enormous pain which had come next.

Leon’s screams of terror.
Darren’s dead eyes pinning her down with guilt and blame.

Every nightmare she had awoken up from screaming and convinced she was dying.

The cause of all her pain was stood in front of her, taunting her, daring her to step forward. She had spent countless nights thinking of how she would make the creature suffer. Glistening at its side swayed its massive claws. She could have sworn the tips were still wet with Leon’s and her blood. Her hatred for the creature burned like flames in her heart.

Hadn’t she spent the past 6 months hunting for this exact moment? No one would blame her if she left the elves to die. It was more blood on her hands but how many lives would she save if she killed the atrocious monster?

Elisa Riding held dozens of lives in the palm of her hand.

*Leave them to their fate. Come to me, hunter.*

Her head shot up. Through gritted teeth, Elisa Riding replied:

“I am not your puppet anymore.”

She made her choice.

Chapter End Notes

In case anyone recognises the end sentence, it's from the song 'puppets' by Motionless in White. I don't own the song... but I do own a signed poster of the band members.

-Al
A dozen soldiers of Elrond's company led the way. Legolas balanced Tauriel with one arm and a sword with the other. Ahead, the mysterious Jaces scouted out the tunnel and shouted back directions.

A shadow moved at his side. Two marble black eyes caught his and the figure pushed past him. The scent of blood and cinnamon waved past him. He would recognise her scent anywhere. Did she try to cover up the sweet smell with the scent of blood or the other way around? It wasn't an unplesant smell despite it all. It was oddly comforting to know she was back again.

“Elisa?”

She grabbed the nearest villager, a blonde haired boy with trembling hands, and caged him against the floor. He fell in a mess of limps. The hunter straddled the terrified boy’s waist and pressed her wrist against his mouth.

“This will not be pleasant for either of us.”

That was the only warning she gave before a terrified scream left the boy’s lips. The wound around her wrist bled into the boy’s open mouth. He coughed and choked at the sickly liquid dripped down his throat. Panic infected the previously silent villagers but none dared to go near the black eyed woman. Her bloody nails easily ripped his skin and dug into his chest. Legolas nearly dropped Tauriel in his attempt to rush to Elisa. Finally, after silence filled minutes, Elisa released the boy and stood to her full height.

“If that is the worst Locus has to offer, he better take some advice from Mordor. Sorry I was delayed, my prince.”

She kneeled to examine the open wound of Tauriel’s leg.

“It is barely a flesh wound. I had worst cuts learning to dine with dwarves.”

She stated but still wrapped Tauriel’s other around her neck and helped her walking.

“Is the creature dead?” She groaned as she limped.

She only had to notice the still look in Elisa’s eyes to know she hadn’t killed it.

“Not today.” She quietly replied.

The boy scrambled to his feet and rushed ahead to the villagers at the front.

“I am assuming that... display was not just for your entertainment?”
Elisa shook her head. “Locus would have had some sort of control over these villagers the further away from me you got. It was another test. I’m unsure how but Locus had this all played out. I might not have passed.”

“Can it still control them?” Legolas asked with a suspicious glance around.

The villagers seemed normal enough though they were giving Elisa plenty of space.

“My blood is mixed with the boy’s now. Hopefully, keeping a few droplets of me here will be enough to keep Locus at bay.” She sighed. “The wizard would be more help here than me, ironically.”

Legolas raised his eyebrow.

“He found me bleeding on his doorstep after my first meeting with Locus. He can work wonders with healing. Did one of the creatures attack you, Tauriel?”

Tauriel hissed at the mention of her wound. “I did not see my attacker. It appeared out of nowhere and dragged me into this tunnel. Something dashed my leg along the way. If Jaces had not been there—”

“Who the hell is Jaces?”

Legolas grinded to a halt, much to Tauriel’s annoyance.

“She is not with you?”

Elisa gave him a pitiful look. “If I had someone with me, they would have shown up a bit sooner!”

“Then if she is not with you,” Legolas said. “And she is not with us…”

Legolas didn’t finish his sentence before Elisa broke into a run.

The mist had returned to where it belonged and dusk had set when they reached the hill surface. Elisa had overtaken everyone except Elrond. She ran as if a dragon was chasing her. She climbed up the steep stairs and took the offered hand. Elrond’s hand clasped hers and he helped her up the final step.

The strange woman stood an arm’s reach away.

Time paused for Elisa. She stood, statue still, head tilted to the side, and eyes wide.

“What did I tell you about working with elves? It never ends well.” The woman dropped her false accent and her true clipped accent came out in her words.

Elisa didn’t move or speak. She seemed to stop breathing entirely.

What happened then happened too for Elrond to follow. Elisa’s form flew past him, grabbing the iron chains he held on his belt in a flash of nimble fingers, and wrapped them tight around the
Elisa, pressed against the woman’s back, forced the iron chains tauter around her throat. The woman’s struggles only outraged Elisa further. The skin broke and the irons dripped bright red blood onto the grass.

“Jaces?” She chuckled darkly. “I should have realised it was you. The only problem is that you’re dead.”

“I could say the same for you.” She coughed out.

“Elisa! Released her!” she hadn’t noticed Tauriel limp out of the tunnel after Legolas. An audience gathered around her that included a familiar haunting king seated on a magnificent elk. They stayed a healthy distance away from her.

“Ask me something.” The woman begged in a huff. “Ask me something only I would know.”

Elisa loosened the chain to let her breath but not enough for the woman to slip her fingers under to protect her neck. She thought after the question for a second.

“Two years ago, Jaces and I were contracted to kill an elf. Something happened that day, something that changed the kill.” She tightened the chin threateningly. “What happened?”

“We were hired to kill an elf who had committed treason by stealing a golden crown from the dwarf king! We camped outside for 3 days in some hole and the 4th day we got a letter sent by raven. It was from the elf we were supposed to be watching. He asked us if we wanted some tea bought out! The elf’s name was Leon and he took my place hunting besides Darren and you!”

Elisa let the chain fall from her hands. Jaces stumbled forward a few steps, choking and desperately gulping down fresh air.

“How…. You’re still alive?” Elisa stuttered.

She glanced down at the angry red marks lining her palms. Would she have killed Jaces if she had got the answer wrong?

“You first! What in Valar’s name are you doing with elves? None of those self-righteous bastards rushed to our aid when our home was destroyed!”

“None of them knew we existed!”

“Well, they certainly do now! Did you tell them about us?” A sharp nod in Legolas’ direction. “Did you tell him all about us?! All the sacrifices we made to keep it secret-”

Elisa’s fist slammed into the woman’s cheek, cutting off her sentence.

“What do you know about sacrifices? There is no home for us to return to! I have no family left! I have been kidnapped, beaten, imprisoned, scarred, accused of being a hunter and accused of not being a hunter! I gave up everything! I watched everyone and everything I loved burn! They taught me to put the fear of God into traitors’ hearts and I was terrifying. You asked me to lead and I did! What more do you want from me? What am I not giving?”

Elisa stood straight and screwed her eyes shut. She hadn’t meant to reveal so much in her anger. At some point the crowd had split down the middle: an entrance fit for a king. Oddly enough, Elisa couldn’t have cared less.
Let them know she was evil.

Let them know she was no one’s hero.

Let the King execute her because she was terror and fear and lust and pain.

“The creature is not dead.” Thranduil stated rather than asked.

Disappointment washed over Elisa’s pretty face. “What gave it away?”

“Locus had control over the villagers. If she would have fought the creature, the villagers would have attacked.” Legolas rushed to explain. “The streets would have ran with human and elves blood.”

If Thranduil was going to say something it was cut short by a blonde elf, the same soldier who always seemed to be within walking distance, running up to Thranduil’s side. He looked young, maybe 20 in human years, and Elisa made a reminder to ask his name.

“My king! A dozen orcs have been spotted approaching the village gates.”

Jaces raised an eyebrow. “My king? I refuse to bow.”

“And you are?”

“Leaving.”

“Good, maybe some of his hatred will roll onto you.” Elisa hummed, seconds before Jaces’ curled fist slammed into her cheek.

Black dots danced across her vision. She blinked back the stars and rubbed the red mark swelling on her pale skin. Legolas thought Elisa would attack the woman again, if not go to strangle her.

Without a break, Jaces grabbed Elisa and pulled her into a tight embrace. Elisa smiled and hugged her back.

The limping Tauriel and baffled Legolas watched the interaction in confusion.

“Perhaps it is a human custom.” Legolas said, watching Jaces then push Elisa away as if the sight of her was disgusting. She curled her lip upwards and flung her arms away from Elisa.

With a cruel scoff the woman announced, “I would have let you all die.” She glanced at Elisa. “Fool. A bleeding heart will only slow you down.”
Elisa was then, again, thrown onto the front line.

The orcs lashed against them with brutal speed, riding on powerful wolf beasts. But this time Elisa Red was not fighting alone. She had forgotten how uncontrollable her old friend was when facing down her enemies. Just for a moment, she could pretend the precisely aimed arrows were shot from Leon’s bow instead of Legolas’. The prince was not bad either. The three cut down the orcs without the help of the soldiers. It was another test, she was sure. This time set by the King. He was watching them fight together, holding back his men, waiting for something. But what?

Blood pumped in Elisa’s ears. Another orc fell by her blade. In one fluid movement, she whirled forward and stuck her dagger into an orc’s skull. Jaces was in front of her. In her hand she clutched an orc’s head cut at the neck, dead eyes rolled to the back of its skull. A leer curled along her thin lips.

“Look, Elisa!”

“Hm?”

“Look what I can do with the heads!”

She pulled her arm back and launched the still bleeding head at Elisa. It flew towards her like lightning. She yelped and ducked. The orc’s body part went sailing over her head and hit the charging orc behind her with enough force to send it crashing backwards.

Jaces mouthed out enough cursing to make a soldier blush and mumbled something about missing Elisa all without missing a single stroke of an orc’s sword crashing against hers.

The last orc fell by Legolas’ arrow seconds before its blade could split Elisa’s head in two.

Elisa, chest heaving and resting her hands on her knees, tried to stop the tremble in her blood covered hands.

Jaces slapped the hunter’s back hard. Elisa winced but didn’t look up.

Bodies lay at their feet. The scent of a battle clouded the air. That blood, sweat and burning scent Elisa knew too well.

“You are bleeding.” Jaces commented.

Elisa touched her side. “Hm.”

“Profusely from multiple places.”

She hummed again.

“There are some uncomfortable questions.”

“Hm.”
“Locus lured us here.”

“Sure did.” She agreed. "Played us like a flute.”

“You are about to be arrested.”

Elisa nodded solemnly. “Yes, yes I am. I think it is time you disappear.” She raised a hand to silence any argument Jaces could make. “If I fall, someone will need to finish Locus.”

“No. That is your battle and I… I cannot follow you this time, Elisa. Things have changed. I have my own mission and I cannot give it up to join the old hunt.”

Elisa nodded disappointment clear.

“Just keep breathing. Oh, and I am not breaking you out of prison again.”

“But the first time was so much fun?”

Her smile was contagious. Jaces lips tipped up into a smile too.

“I will see you in a brave new world, my friend.”

Elisa face shone with childish grin. She looked a girl again, young and innocent, despite the blood drying on her hands.

The beautiful king found his prisoner surrounded by orc corpses. His son was examining a large scratch across her pale side. Seeing him touch her even to see to her wound gave the king a strange boiling anger. He wanted to tear them apart. He wanted to make sure Elisa would never go near his son again. He told himself it was because the woman was threat and his son should know better. She had killed with fear or care for her own life. Yet his son didn’t hesitate in closing the distance between them.

Elisa Red beamed with a smile and a sparkle in her eyes when she saw the king approach.

“Well, this certainly was not the best outcome but it was the most probable.”

Legolas removed his hands as if she had scorched him.

“Where is the other woman?”

Elisa shrugged. “Why ask me? You know I will only lie.”

Whatever heated argument was planned was halted by a little boy with a mop of blonde hair tugging on Elisa’s arm.

“Is it safe now?”

“What on… someone please claim their offspring!” She said, desperately searching for the parents. Tauriel choose that moment to jog over, trying to cover up her limp but not her face scrunched up in pain.
“This was the boy who pointed us in the direction of... of the house with the bodies.”

“Is it safe now?” The boy repeated. “You told me not to come until it was safe and it looks safe now.”

“I have never seen you before in my life.” Elisa huffed.

“Are you sure it was her, child?” Legolas said softly.

Doubt flickered over the boy’s young face. “I ‘pose she was dressed fancier. She had a funny accent too and she was really pretty but she looked just like you. She asked me to give this before she left. I think she meant you. I don’t know. I don’t want to talk to you anymore. Going to find Mol.”

The boy opened his hand and placed the slim object into Legolas’ open hand before running off. Elisa shook her head muttering ‘no, no, no’ under her breath. The King didn’t see the shocking effect on Elisa. Legolas passed his father the little glass bottle. Inside sloshed a thick black liquid. A wooden cork stopped any from leaking.

“No not that.” Elisa muttered to herself. “It is too soon.”

“What does this do, pa?”

_Elisa tapped her fingers up the small vial and watched with wide eyes as the black liquid swirled inside. Her father’s chuckle was a deep rumbling sound in his chest and snatched the vital from Elisa’s searching hands._

“Dearest one, you must never to touch these vials without permission. It can be very dangerous. It is a poison you will use someday. It is used on traitors when they are too dangerous.

_Elisa’s curious eyes followed the vial as her father threw it into the air and caught it again._

“Do you mean hunters use it on hunters who have been bad?”

“Yes, my dear. The day will come, soon if you continue your brilliant progress, when you will use it. In tiny doses it makes hunters faster and stronger. All hunters are required to swallow a tiny dose every full moon.”

“If it will make me better, can I take some? I will be a hunter soon and I am already at the head of my class.”

“But you are good already.”

_Elsa looked up at her father with wide pleading eyes. “I want to be the best. I want to be the best hunter in Middle Earth.”_

_Her father poured a drop into the cork. She took the poison. It tasted bitter and burned down her throat. But behind the disguising taste was something... powerful. Elisa’s father patted her head._

“I am proud of you, dearest one.”
The poison stained her lips black.

The king palmed the vial and held it up to the breaking daylight. Elisa followed the movement trying to hide the dread in her eyes.

“This holds meaning to you, Elisa?”

“It is a poison, your majesty. I was quiet fond of using poison a few years back.” It wasn’t a lie, just not the whole truth. “I would not linger with that particular poison.”

“Could it kill by touch?” Legolas asked.

“It depends on the touch.”

“Are you familiar with the antidote?”

Elisa cringed. “Somewhat.”

The poison looked the same, even if Elisa did not. She was 16 and knew too well why her father had warned about widow 32. Now, as with any weapon, she used it with care and respect. She tipped the vial slowly over her knife’s blade so only a few drops slithered onto the metal. The two other hunters in the room were inferior to her despite her young age. She was best of hunters and every hunter knew that, including her sister. Elisa had a terrifying reputation, which was only heightened when Mol died under ‘questionable’ circumstances. The agent strapped into the large oak chair knew it too.

He was beaten within an inch of his life. The poison had worked its way into his blood by the thin crimson cuts decorating his arms, neck, chest and face. He wasn’t recognisable.

“Do you renounce any power you possess as a hunter?”

The bloody hunter nodded and choked on a sob. He longed for death after Elisa had finished with him.

“I am sorry it has come to this, my friend, but you know the punishment for betraying your kingdom.”

Elisa ran the poisoned blade across his throat. A crimson smile appeared across the agent’s neck. His head rolled back. Elisa stayed perfectly still watching the scene without a trace of emotion. The poison corrupted a hunter’s blood faster than any knife. Her father once told her that too high a dose and it would steal a hunter’s soul. She held the blade to the bleeding wound till her blade was good and coated in blood.

She held the blade to one of the hunter and pressed the metal to his lips.

“Hunter?” She purred, the knife leaving a red imprint on his lips. The hunter opened his mouth and ran his tongue along the edge of her blade. The other edge she gave to another hunter and she licked clean the tip of her knife. The hunters’ eyes glowed black.

Elisa’s father had watched the interrogation from start to finish. He watched her with prise as she took in the tainted blood. He beamed with arrogance with every cut she made.
Of course what her father didn’t tell her about was the side effects. All addictions had their downs. The King didn’t know he held enough poison to gain her undivided submission or to kill her. She had to get the vial and destroy it. The vial was passed from the King’s hand to Elrond’s who placed it in his satchel.

“I believe I made a deal with you. Do you consider my half of the deal complete?”

“Locus is still alive.” She pointed out.

“The villagers are saved. Locus is not dead because you failed. Now the demon’s further pursuit we shall discuss once you are down on your knees again.”
Thranduil rode besides Lord Elrond. He had allowed Elisa to ride back on her horse though the reins were attached to the reins of a guard in case she changed her mind. Her hands were bound with rope too. But the king knew she would not try to escape. As much as she tried to hide the sparkle in her eye, Thranduil had seen her reaction to the poison. He would get the truth from her. He would rip away every secret and use them to break her stubbornness. Twice she had escaped his prison, both times with assistance from his son. She had disrespected and disobeyed him all while smiling and manipulating with careful words. Execution would be a reward for her. Perhaps the demo had warned him right about her being venomous.

No, he would not kill her.

He would rip off her fangs.

“The creature is more powerful than she imagines.” Elrond spoke quietly. “This village was spared because it was the demon’s will for it to be.”

“I do not doubt it. Nor do I doubt the village would have been slaughtered if Elisa had not followed her course.”

Is she touched by madness?”

“Not yet.”

Malicious wasn’t as unhappy as Elisa was about the situation. If anything, the horse seemed happy riding alongside Thranduil’s elk. The two loyal animals had bonded. For the brief moment Elisa had left Malicious alone, the horse had bonded with Thranduil’s elk. She didn’t need any chains to follow, unlike her owner.

“Traitor.” She grumbled.

“Do you always talk to your horse?” Tauriel asked.

“Only when I need expert advice, Captain.”

Legolas chuckled from besides her.

The friendliness died as soon as they reached Thranduil’s palace. Elisa jumped off her horse despite the limitations of her binding. She winced. Her body went rigid as a sharp burning pain punched her side. Once of Locus’ creatures must have got in a lucky hit. She shook off the brief stabs.

Soon she found herself stood in front of Thranduil’s throne, looking up at the King. It was difficult to
hate the man sat upon the throne. If only he had been a bitter old ugly man with a thick gut. There was a certain attraction to his cold insolence and smug smirk.

It took her a minute to realise everyone was waiting for to kneel. With what remained of her restraint, Elisa kneeled before the throne. She didn’t miss the relieved sigh from Legolas.

“If I am not mistaken, this is the second time you have disobeyed my orders to put your life, and my only son’s life, in danger.”

“And to think we only met a few nights ago. Sorry, King-”

She gritted her teeth to stop a groan. The wound growing in her side sent a fresh wave of pain straight up her side.

“I am curious to how you manipulated my son and my Captain of guards.”

“They have more honour in their little fingers than you do in your entire royal body!”

Her words sounded forced even to her ears. Her fingers were shaking uncontrollably and blood was creeping through the cracks in her armour.

“Yet here you are kneeling before me, begging for my help. I have the power to put you through unimaginable pain or to release you to continue your doomed hunt. Do you not value your life?”

Elisa lifted up her head and blinked through the pain. She smirked. “Not all at. It will not be the first time I have diced with death. Locus has backed into a corner for the last time. Did my vision not prove true?”

“Would you have me believe you have no involvement with Locus when it appears to be leading you on a wild goose chase?”

Elisa scoffed. “You got me: it was really my intention to be tortured and watch all my friends brutally murdered. That is how I get my entertainment.” Her voice was brittle and weak but held her anger fine. “I do not care what you believe. I must wonder, and forgive my abruptness, what I am actually doing here. Locus led me here by poisoning a human. It knew I would rush into the elven lands without a second thought.”

“It was foolish-” Tauriel began. The king held up a hand that quickly silenced her. She couldn’t have stopped Elisa from speaking her piece now anyway.

“I am down- you can stop kicking. No, I was not thinking of the consequences. All the same, you should have executed me by now. I believe Locus knew you would hold your hand for some reason. It knows you as well as It knows me. I was led here for a reason and I believe you know why.”

She choked and coughed on something wet and metallic tasting. Before she could get her answer, a shot of pure agony unbalanced her. She paused with her mouth slightly open, words still posed on her tongue. A frown creased her forehead. She bent over and coughed out blood.

Gingerly, she touched three fingers to her back where the pain radiated.

Her fingers came back slick with a crimson liquid. Heat welled in her throat. With a strangled choke, Elisa spat out more blood. Her face grew pale. The world around her tilted and the king’s figure grew blurry.

“If it is all the same to you, I will take you up on the offer of a healer now.”
She didn’t hear the King’s reply. The stabbing torment burnt down her spine like a poker. Locus’ claws ripping to her back all over again.

Sudden and familiar, a tortured scream pierced into the air.

She didn’t recognise it as her own.

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“I am concerned about our daughter, Nathaneil.”

Nathaneil Riding rolled his eyes at his wife’s comment. Since their daughter had begun hunting Nathaneil had heard nothing but complaints. Elisa was thriving in the hunter world and he didn’t see any reason to be concerned.

“What worries you, my dear?”

“She refuses to come home. I have heard from Darren that he worries about her too. She has a growing… obsession with seeking out dark creatures, monsters, and dragons.”

Nathaneil chuckled. “It is what hunters do! She will return home when she is ready. She is trained to return home when called and to do as her superior orders.”

“You cannot train our daughter like a dog!”

Nathaneil raised an eyebrow. “Actually, it turns out I can.”

“Something is wrong here. I do not know what is it but there is a darkness growing inside her. This… desire is not like her.”

Nathaneil glanced up at the portrait after his fireplace. The beauty of his family was immortalised in that portrait. His only daughter (since Mol’s corpse was rotting in a casket) stood proudly staring straight ahead, a coy smile on her ruby lips and her crimson locks tied back in a red ribbon so the painter could fully grasp her beauty. The gruelling months hunting had not lessened her prettiness. Nathaneil studied proudly the portrait painted only a year before. It was how he saw his daughter—strong, forceful, proud, beauty, and obedient. As long as her loyalties stayed with the hunters, and her submission to her homeland, her father didn’t believe any darkness could claim her.

True, she had been hurt by Jaces’ departure not long away. She had sent letter back that her friend, who her father had always viewed as a tormented soul, would be gone for months if not years. But that was all he heard of her pain. She was stronger than her mother imagined.

Still, he worried if the Elisa who returned from the hunt would be the same one who left.

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The warmth of the morning sun eased Jaces’ eyes open. She yawned and stretched out like a cat. The night camping underneath the stars had been peaceful for a change. The slightest noise would
have awoken her—from the tap of spider legs or the hum of an arrow being pulled back into a bow. She changed her dirty bandages around her arm for fresh white cloth and cooked her breakfast of rabbit. She had managed to wash the grim and dirt off last night in a steam not far back while watching out for pursuit. Surprisingly, no elves had chased after her. She supposed Elisa was keeping them busy.

She stomped out the dying ambers of her campfire and set off riding. It was a long trip to the dwarf kingdom.

While Elisa had been chasing after Locus, Jaces had been hunting her own monsters. Her hunt was for something much more powerful than one demon. Elisa was a good hunter, one of the best, but she was narrow-minded. She didn’t see past her own problems. It was why Jaces was better than her. Why her goal was more worthy.

Jaces stopped outside the towering kingdom doors long shut and locked. It was hard to believe a dragon slept inside the halls. News about the kingdom falling prey to Smaug had arrived at the hunters’ homeland too late for them to act. Not that they would have been much help anyway. Jaces took a detour to the back of the palace carrying a large cloth sack. She counted 60 steps from the back and kneeled to examine the hidden stepping stone. It looked like an ordinary stone overgrown by grass. She eased the top of her dagger into a slot no bigger than a coin.

Immediately the stone rumbled back. Jaces leaned forward and glance down the darkened passage. There was no way to tell how much further it went down or if it even ended. She jumped down.

The space was tight and the air thinned as she crawled through the entrance, pushing the weighted sack ahead of her. Once at the edge, she put her hands down on the floor below and tipped her entire body over. She landed on her feet gracefully and pulled the sack in after her. She paused inside the once magnificent building.

A lost image stuck her mind. The walls should have been decorated with gold and the cracks in the floor would have acting as a drain from the altar flooded with blood. She indulged in a moment of respect before she got to work.

She opened the sack and peered inside with one eye shut. She cringed and closed the sack quickly. She didn’t bother with lighting the lanterns. It was pointless letting the beasts know she was there before she was ready. They would know soon enough. Without the guide of light, the explorer moved throughout the altar room. She focused on how many steps she had taken instead of the cold breeze at the back of her neck and the isolation feeling. She took two turns and past a narrow hallway. She caught traces of paintings on the wall of an empire once strong under the blessing of their Gods. Jaces opened the sack and peered inside. Regretting the decision immediately, she cringed and squeezed the sack shut again.

Finally, she found light. The flickering flashlight left carelessly on the floor shone a dim glow on the bloody outstretched hand of an unfortunate explorer. It was hard to tell if the damage done to his face had been done before or after he was murdered. Jaces turned away and shone the broken flashlight ahead. The flashlight dropped from her hand and smashed against the floor. The light died and she was pitched into a thick dark again.

She had seen the monster and it had seen her. It glared at her with blood red eyes. She sensed its presence watching her, wondering why she wasn’t running, tracking her slow movements across the room and toying her up as its latest prey. Her next actions would determine if her life was spared.

_Deep breaths, she reminded herself. Don’t look up. No sudden movements. Not even when cold fingers trail at the back of your neck._
“The sacred place has been violated.” A disconnected voice spoke finally. “Why have you come here? Speak now.”

Jaces gently lowered to the ground while keeping her eyes trained on the grass creeping up the cracks in the floor.

“I have come to offer penance. They did not know they stood on sacred grounds.”

“It is too late for penance. We gave your people gifts, hunter. We allowed you to use these gifts to murder and corrupt. We watched as you slaughtered your fellow man and kin for gold. Could you curse us for not answering your prayers as fate dealt you cruelty in return?”

“I have no quarrel with your actions, Guardian. I simply came to offer penance.”

“It is too late for penance.” The voice repeated.

Jaces’ grey eyes narrowed. “The site has been undiscovered by dwarves. It’s impossible-”

“A woman tainted by poison stands before us as testimony to the impossible yet she doubts what she sees with her own eyes.” the voice paused and added solemnly. “What a strange creature she is.”

Jaces’ mind was running overtime. It didn’t help she could feel tiny insect legs crawling up her pant leg.

“I humbly request clarification.”

The voice began again, “Others, ones who do not possess your taint, first entered the sacred place. They were searching for something that was long gone. They did not sanctify our God but nor did they dishonour the grounds.”

It had elves stamped all over it. But how had the elves discovered the place so careful hidden underneath the dwarf lands? It must have been years before the dragon attack, entered the place with enough knowledge not to get killed but careless enough to anger the residents.

“Those men were apostates. Forsaken ones. They turned against us and our God.” Jaces said, making sure to emphasise that it was her God too. “Would you have me kill them?”

“Our Creators will have their vengeance. I would not like to see it when they do.”

“Tell me what you wish of me and it shall be done if we can keep a peace.”

The creature scoffed. “Is it not peace you seek, is it? Make your offering, Child.”

Jaces liked to think she had heard every request, from being asked to wipe out entire villages to contacting dead loved ones, but something told her the creature’s statement meant she wouldn’t like what was asked. She would do it dutifully. Whatever it took to put the creatures back to rest and fix whatever the intruders did. If it took poisoning a village’s water supply, killing every villager within 3 hours, she would do it without hesitation.

The creatures didn’t make any demands. The cold touch against her throat left, along with their presence, yet the hunter stayed for a few minutes till the cold stones left indentations on her knees. Still carrying the sack, Jaces retraced her path into the offering room. She cringed as she stood into a puddle of what she hoped as just oil and not blood. She was being watched. Studied was the better word, like a bug under a microscope. The last time she had felt the cold chills at the bottom of her stomach was the night she had first tasted the taint. Her mentor a hard-faced dark haired man in an
expensive looking suit, had approached her in a inn while she was celebrating her promotion. She hadn’t been frightened by anything back when she was a contact killer. No death could touch her. While she had killed anyone who had got in her way, Jaces thrived on torture. It was her calling. It was her talent, psychologically tearing a man down till he begged for death.

Her foot stubbed the vase holding the offensive smell. She stumbled in the dark to find the outline of the vase while she grabbed blindly in the sack. After a deep breathe, she grabbed a handful of matted hair and released the head from its container.

“I do not get paid enough for this.” She muttered.

The sliced tendons still dripped blood though it had been a clean cut. She could still recognise the head’s features from that night in the inn. Only now, her mentor’s face was carved in horror instead of smug glee. Thankfully the jaw had been wired shut and the eyes removed. She stroked a few loose strands of hair away from the head’s empty eye socket before gingerly lowering it into the offering vase. As did the others who came before her, Raven bowed before the vase and closed her eyes.

She prayed in a low murmur. “Feared be those who serve Pandora. Those who granted with eternal life in her servitude and those who find their way in the dark. Blessed be she who breathed life into us and created us in her love. She will answer her servants’ calls and they will grow to fear her name.” She rose from her kneeling position and placed a cold palm on the vase. “Forgive us, Pandora, for we have forgotten your will. Forgive our trespasses and flee our wrath.”

“You offer us your Creator’s head.” The creature suddenly spoke from behind her. Jaces spun around and searched the empty space around the altar room.

“I give you that which gifted me my taint.”

“It is an odd symbol. There are so few tainted with manipulation it seems a waste.” It continued. “There is a light. A gift we thought we thought lost years ago.”

“Where is this light now?”

The voice seemed to come from nowhere yet surrounded her at the same time.

“It was shielded from those who wished it harm. Now we can sense is it in the protection of an abomination. It sings to us, as it will sing to you.”

“Who is this abomination? I can bring the light back to you if you tell me.”

“How many abominations do you know?” The creature said patiently. “A tainted with two faces, two names, two voices screaming to be heard, two souls struggling to be contained.”

“A tainted… I’ve only heard of one where the ritual has not killed the vessel. Are you sure it was her?”

If the creature didn’t approve of being questioned it didn’t reveal it. “This child, are you familiar with it?”

“I will get the light back to you.” She said quickly to stop the subject before it delved any deeper.

“Yes you will but not through your own will. The Light will drive you and other servants mad before it is put to rest.”
She was used to creatures rambling but something about Light flickered in her memory.

“The abomination has not been driven mad yet then?”

“Perhaps she was already mad or simply doesn’t care enough to be driven mad. She is a mystery to
us as she is to everyone. The taints ensure it. Do not trust her, child. She is in every way an
abomination. Also, I need you to stop leaving body parts in our home.”

She waited till she was sure she was alone again and reached into the clay pot. Her fingers curled
around a soft leather cover. She gingerly lifted the book free of its container. It always surprised her
that something as fragile as an ancient spell book had the power to cripple Middle Earth.

Jaces crawled back out to freedom and took several deep breathes of the clean day air. She carefully
eased the stone cover back and rolled the grass over the top. It wasn’t long before any trace of the
discovery was hidden once again. Her job was done.

She strolled back to her horse and untied the leather sack which held her few belongings. Inside were
three books exactly the same as the one she carried. It was the hunters’ story, their origins. The book
Jaces held in her hands was written in the original hunter language. On its cover was 7 bloody
fingerprints that still seemed wet after all these years. Elisa’s father had taught Elisa the language but
no one had bothered to teach Jaces. She had heard the story from her beautiful best friend.

Their ancestors had split the books fearing their book and buried them in the four corners of Middle
Earth. They feared the hunters and their power. As the story goes, hunters were the offspring of
demons who fell in love with beautiful humans. Their children could not control their nature. They
took in the traits inherited from their demon parents- greed, doubt, manipulation, vengeance, sloth,
lust and envy-and bought terror upon Middle Earth. Seeing the monsters their children had become,
the human parents promised to act. In desperation, they bound the power of the demons and their
offspring into 4 books. They stole their children’s powers leaving them human.

The ritual required 7 hunters. The only ones who survived had been on hunts while their homeland
had been under attack. It was anyone’s guess where they were now. But she did know where the
only hunter who could read the original language was. When Elisa called, the others would answer.
They always did.

“What did they want?” A hired guard mumbled from behind a thick moustache. Jaces hadn’t
bothered to learn their names and no doubt her answer was going straight back to the anonymous
figures that had hired her. She shook her head.

“They want a war.” She added quietly. “They always do.”
Elisa covered her eyes away from the offensive sunlight streaming in from the balcony and rolled onto her back. The soft sheets welcomed her into a cocoon of warmth. She yawned and leaned up on her elbows. The usual numbed pain in her back was gone. Her eyes shot open.

She wasn’t in her room and definitely not at a camp. The room was decorated with gentle wood colour, the balcony overlooking a magnificent view of Rivendale, and the elaborately carved wooden furniture clearly belonged to a Lord or Lady. She swung her legs over the side of the bed and glanced down at her unfamiliar clothes. Her armour was nowhere to be seen. Thick white cloth covered her knuckles. She was wearing a delicate white dress that drew out her pale skin and bright eyes. Crimson curls trailed loose down her back.

“It is a lot of scars for a young body. Each one has an interesting story, I am sure.”

Lord Elrond strolled into the room holding two full wine glasses.

“They are not as interesting as you would think.” She said as she gladly accepted the offered wine. “You have my thanks for healing me. All I remember is the marks on my back bleeding and then darkness. I am afraid I am no help when it comes to healing. I know how to put people into those situations but how to bring them back.”

Elrond placed a hand out for her and she took it, following him out onto the balcony.

“It was fortunate the King sent for me immediately. When he carried you into my home you have already close to being claimed by death. A trail of your blood drenched the path leading to my door. I have managed to close the wound but I doubt the scars will ever leave. They were created with a magic I am afraid to say I have not seen in my years.”

“I have bigger issues than my beauty.”

“The beauty you have been blessed with will not lessen with a few scars, I can assure you, Neotis.”

Elisa gave a smile worthy of a temptress. “How do you know that name, my lord?”

“You are not the only one who keeps the company of wizards.” He answered cryptically. “It is a fitting name for a wondering soul such as you. Now, the guards will be sending word to the King as we speak. It will not be long before we will not be able to communicate as freely.”

“He’s really angry?” She scrunched up her face.

“Your disobedience will not go unpunished, surely you knew this?”
Elisa scoffed. “Now you sound like my father. I must return to the hunt soon. I felt… out of control when I was near the demon. I do not like being out of control, Lord Elrond. This must end soon or I fear what it will do to my sanity.”

He put his wine glass down, the sudden seriousness catching Elisa off guard for a moment but she quickly placed an unreadable expression on her pretty features.

“What was Rivendale attacked?”

She tilted her face up to the sun. “It was attacked because your king allowed it to happen.”

“What of your homeland?”

Elisa smirked. “I never told you of my departure from my homeland, did I? Someday I will and I will tell you about the soul stolen from my people. The woman you met in the village, Jaces, will tell you anyway when she decides to return. I hear there is a dragon occupying the Kingdom under the hill.”

“Forgive me but I do not see how the two relate.”

“They probably do not. My homeland favoured dragon hunting as a sport. When I left, it was for many reasons but the main one was to hunt cold-drakes. Your king has been dragon fire, as I have, has he not?”

The conversation dropped without warning when three knocks banged on the door. A soldier with long golden hair and a lithe frame like all elves stepped into the room and bowed dramatically.

“Your lord Elrond, the king has requested—”

“Yes, I know the routine by now. What is your name?”

The soldier smiled slightly.

“Timaleos, my lady.”

“It’s a terrible name. Please,” She said with her signature smile. “Call me Elisa.”

She put down her empty wine glass. Elrond took her hand in his and placed a ghost of a kiss against her knuckles.

“I will see you as soon as Valar allows it.”

He dropped her hand and she spun around to the blonde guard.

“Then am I going in chains or just under the supervision of a dozen guards? Might I recommend both? I am awfully unpredictable.”

Elrond patted her shoulder. “Even I have heard the story of your escape. I think chains would be advisable.”

“I… fair enough. I do not suppose I would trust me either.”

Obviously Thranduil thought the same thing because her hands were soon clasped in irons. Timaleos walked besides her as they made their way to the palace.

“Timaleos… did your parents hate you? Or does your name hold some cryptic meaning?”
He chuckled under his breath, much to the irritation of the other six guards.

“I was amongst Lord Elrond’s company during the village siege. It was an honour to fight besides you. You are nothing short of amazing. I heard you are a hunter. I thought they only excused in stories.”

She brightened as his comment and raised her eyebrows.

“Flattery will get you everything.” She purred. “Tell me, what do you know of hunters?”

“My ada used to tell me of demons who came to Middle Earth and parented children who spent their lives hunting monsters. Is that what you are? The way you fought was surely not human.”

“Depends on what you think monsters are.”

They stopped outside the throne room. Elisa held her head high refused to allow the King to see her weak.

She said, “The real monsters walk in human skin and on two legs. I can only hunt the ones who reveal their true nature. You will be surprised how many monsters hide behind pretty smiles.”

Elisa strolled into the enormous hall. The King was sat with his long legs draped over one side of his throne watching the feast with little interest. Food in all colours lay displayed on the massive wooden table. A brunette she-elf dressed in a golden dress pinching her waist painfully small sashayed to the throne. She plucked a ripe purple grape from a platter of fruit and offered it to the king. He bit the grape and licked the juice from each of her fingers. The other woman clambered with jealousy and rushed to bring the king fruit.

As soon as he saw her, he pointed to the seat on his left.

Timaleos released her from her chains. The metal slipped off her wrists. Did the king still not realise she could kill everyone in the room without a weapon? Was this some other frustrating test?

She spotted Legolas sat next to her empty chair. He was busy deterring the advances of the she-elf sat next to him. She strolled behind him, ghosting her fingers along the back of his neck, and sat down. Her seat had the King on her right and the prince on her left. The politics hung in the air sour despite the happy faces around the table.

“I trust you are feeling better.” Legolas said leaning closer to her.

She nodded. “Lord Elrond is a magnificent healer. Were my injuries severe? I do not remember much.”

“Our King took care of you. I only saw you being carried away, dead to the world.”

Elisa hadn’t thought the king would have cared if she bled to death on the floor in front of him.

“And you, my prince? I trust you are well after the battle?”

“Your concern is appreciated but I am fine, thank you.”
She risked squeezing his hand in hers. He looked confused but didn’t stop her.

“I am glad, my prince. I would hate to see an orc ruin your handsome face.”

He coughed weakly. “Your friend, Jaces, disappeared before we could question her. It was… good fortune that she appeared when she did.”

She smirked across at the King who was still staring at her with something akin to dismay.

“As you will soon learn, nothing Jaces does she does because of ‘good fortune’. She was led there for the same reason I was.”

“Do you ever wonder why it chose you?”

“No, it must makes me wonder why me and not the other thousands of killers out there! Besides, I like to think it was simply ill timing.”

She was lying and he knew it.

She turned towards the King who was whispering something to a blushing she-elf.

“Your majesty, I suppose I owe you my thanks for taking me to a healer.”

He barely nodded as a sign he had heard her. She sighed and collapsed back into her chair.

“You have not eaten anything. Lord Elrond said you must recover your strength.”

“I have had something- I have had plenty of wine. As soon as I am out of her, I shall feast on chips and orc blood.”

Legolas scrunched up his eyebrows and dropped his fork.

“It was a joke.” She clarified before taking a plate of fruit. She lazily ate a piece of meat which she had to admit tasted pretty good. As soon as the food touched her tongue, she realised how hungry she was.

“Do all humans bleed all the time?”

Elisa glanced up at the brunette she-elf sat opposite. Her scowl and angry eyes clued Elisa in that she was jealous.

“That is just my signature. I like to claim things by bleeding on them.”

“Like a dog?”

Legolas choked on a piece of lettuce and hit his chest trying to dislodge the hazard. Elisa didn’t pay any attention to him.

“I am surprised you know what dogs are. Is it true that elves are not permitted to leave this one kingdom?”

“It is for our own protection.” She defended immediately.

“Like prisoners?”

“It protects us from the messy human world.”
Her face showed that to be scant consolation.

“Do you allows obey orders to sit and stay like a dog?” She said using her own example against the elf. “It is a brave new world outside these doors. Perhaps one day you will be allowed to stray outside the borders. Well, as long as the king keeps you a leash.”

Legolas, red faced and mouth hanging open, squeezed her knee under the table.

She had certain got the king’s attention now.

He blinked twice, opened and closed his mouth, and asked calmly:

“Why were you hunting dragons?”

The truth hung on her tongue. “Why were you?”

He sighed defeated and casually waved his hand. Two hands gripped her shoulders. The wooden legs scraped against the floor as Elisa was dragged off her chair and shoved out of the room.

Timaleos was on her left, shaking his head.

“Was that necessary?”

Elisa smirked. “No, but it certainly felt good. What is the worst that can happen?”

“Someone will die today.”

Elisa glanced up at the roof as if searching for the heavens.

“Please, Valar, let it be me.”

He stopped outside a large charcoal oak door, unlocked it, and dragged her inside before closing the door behind them. When Elisa’s eyes adjusted to the darkness, her heart stopped cold. A single black chair was sat proudly in the middle of the room, surrounded by metal tables containing lethal torture instruments. In front of it dangled two chains attached to the roof.

Elisa didn’t let her eyes stare at the weapons. An elf wearing all black right down to his long hair turned to her with a cold, vicious smile, before wrapping her hands in the daggling chains. She was forced on her tiptoes just to avoid strain. Elisa swallowed.

“The King sent word to be expecting you. Did someone misbehave?”

“I got bored. Do you know what is interesting about elves, torturer? Nothing.”

He tipped his head back and laughed. “Keep the sense of humour for what comes next.”

An hour later
Elisa heaved with the effort just to stay awake. Her throat was hoarse from screaming. The wound on her side had torn open again and blood stained the entire back of her dress. Bowed head, eyes closed, sweat dripping beading on her forehead, Elisa had a brief moment to catch her breath. Something told her the torturer was just warming up. Her legs and arms ached too.

“Before we get started on the… knives, can I ask what it is you want to know?”

The words were weak and broken up by desperate gasps for air.

“The king has questions for you. I am merely making sure you are in a talking mood.”

“Consider the mood set.” She groaned trying to lift up to ease the burden on her arms. It didn’t work. Her shoulders burned.

“Splendid. His lordship will be beside himself with joy.”

Under her breathe, Elisa said: “I highly doubt it.”

A clang of metal and the torturer’s alarmingly calm face appeared in front of hers.

“The king told me of your sharp tongue.”

“He is a charming soul. What else has he said about me?”

“He was so complemental that I am almost certain he wants you dead.”

He steps back. She heard the door open and close. Alone, in the dark, Elisa renewed her efforts to escape the chains. The metal bit at her wrists causing tiny wet droplets to drip down her arms. She struggled until she heard the door open once again. The lanterns hung around the room were lit, giving her a chance to take in her surroundings. The floors, roof and walls were grey and there were no windows. They weren’t taking the risk of her escaping or finding comfort here.

The source of her torment stood in front of her dangling body. If the King got joy out of seeing her bloody and helpless he didn’t show it. He wore an elegant silver robe and his crown despite the place. She could only imagine how she looked.

The torturer stayed back the doorway out of her line of sight.

“I shall just be out here… watching you… Elisa.”

With that, Elisa was left alone with the King.

“For what it is worth, I am really, really, sorry for escaping twice. Your security is really lacking here but I am sorry.”

“That, Neotis, was treason.”

Elisa cringed. “I hate that word.”

“Did you not trust my word that this kingdom would be protected from the creature?”

“Why should I trust you?” She spat out harshly. “Locus came after that village and you would have done nothing! You are selfish and arrogant!”

“I am your King! You shall learn to show respect!”
Gripping the front of her dress, he ripped the fabric easily in half displaying her breasts.

Reaching for the leather flogger, he folded it in half. Elisa visibly shuddered. Wrapping the leather in his hand, he brought it down across her nipples with a soft crack. She screwed her eyes shut and bit down on her lip hard enough to draw blood. She swallowed down a scream. She would not cry out in front of him. The leather smacked against her skin again, the edge catching the cut on her stomach. She grunted in pain but did not scream.

The leather cracked against her hard nipples. He evened out the blows to strike her across her stomach and breasts till red marks decorated the soft skin. She couldn’t take it anymore. Tears flowed freely down her cheeks and a sob left her lips.

Then he moved onto her back. He changed hands with the flogger and took one of her nipples in between his fingers and pinched hard.

“Please… please no more…”

She heard the leather break through the air seconds before a searing hot pain burnt up her spine. On the fifth hit, she felt a warmth liquid flow from the wounds. The fresh stitched broke, drawing blood from Locus’ marks.

The King paused, flogger in hand, and watched the blood stain the ripped white dress. He dropped the flogger on the floor. Elisa’s arms burnt and strained under the effort to keep her up.

"I have wanted you naked and chained up for a long time." The King sneered. "Admittedly, I had hoped it would be under different circumstances. Have I told you that your beauty suppresses anything in Mirkwood?"

"No. But then again, you are full of surprises." She groaned

"Then how about another? I had the poison recovered from the village examined by a healer. In small doses, it is not fatal. How much did you take?"

She kept her head down and didn’t answer. He gripped her chin in an iron grip and yanked her head up so she had no choice but to meet his furious glare.

“When your king asks you a question, you answer immediately.”

She spit in his face.

“I answer to no elf.”

The King calmly wiped her spit from his handsome face and reached down for the small vial lay on the table. He squeezed her jaw till she opened her mouth.

“We shall see.”

His grip was too strong and she was weakened from the torture. She struggled to close her mouth but it just made his grip tighter. His fingers bruised her skin. Tears sprung to her eyes.

The poison slithered down her throat. She gagged, trying not to swallow, but the King slammed her mouth shut and held her nose till she swallow every drop of the sickly poison. He stepped back and studied her.

The hunter hung by her arms, feet barely touching the ground, dress torn and spanked breasts on
display for him. Her head hung low. It took him a moment to hear the faint words she was whispering.

He bent his head down to put his ear next to her ear.

“Dra… dragon fire…” She whispered.

“Tell me, Elisa, what do you know of dragon fire?”

He grabbed her hair in his fist and lifted his face up. Her lips were stained black.

“Do not tell me of dragon age! I have fought the Serpents of the North. I have seen their wrath and ruin.”

“So have I.” She grunted and coughed weakly. “That is why Locus bought me here.”

“Tell me why! Now!”

She didn’t reply. Her body went still and her eyes rolled to the back of her head.

Thranduil released her and let her head roll forward.

He signalled to the guard Timaleos who called in Lord Elrond outside.

The Lord’s face grew pale but he didn’t say anything about the prisoner’s condition. Gingerly, he lifted her hair away from her face and felt for a pulse in her neck.

“Is it weak but she breathes. My lord, if you want her to continue living please allow me to see to her. She has been through enough.”

He shook his head. “I will get the truth from her.”

Nathaneil watched his daughter strapped into the chair. A man in a white coat and bottle glasses hovered over her. She was heaving and her head rolled back and forwards as if she was possessed.

“Widow 32 agrees with her. She is improving in the hunt and she has yet to suffer the side effects. Your daughter is one of the strongest subjects I have seen.”

He didn’t reply. He stroked a stray curl away from her face and smiled down at her unconscious daughter.

“Send in Andrew. I want the truth beaten from her.”

Andrew was already stood by the door waiting for Nathaneil’s command. He was older than Elisa by 10 years. He was handsome with a chiselled tanned face and one of the few hunters without scars. He had risen steadily through the hunter ranks till he sat on the Director’s advisor table at his right hand side. Andrew was the ‘right hand of God’ as the rumour went. The only one he would trust with him daughter.
“Put her to the test.” Nathaneil instructed before he left the room alongside the white coated doctor. Andrew pulled up a chair in front of Elisa and waited till she opened her eyes.

“Do you remember my name?”

She nodded. “Andrew Fentios.”

Her head felt as if it was stuffed of wool and her throat was suddenly dry. She only realised her hands were bound to the chair when she tried to stand up. Her eyes widened.

“Do you know what I do here?”

She nodded again. “You torture people.”

“Top marks. Now, when I undo your restraints you will kneel in front of me. You will not kick, scream or bite like last time.”

Her body was still indented with the marks and bruises he had left last time. She wondered if her father knew what the torturer did to her. No, he wouldn’t. He couldn’t know. Andrew released her hands.

Elisa’s feet refused to listen to her brain screaming for her to run. She stood up on wobbly legs. Andrew observed her sway and stumble forward. He sat back down and Elisa kneeled obediently in between his open legs.

“Take off your dress.”

Her fingers rumbled with her straps and the fabric slide of her pale body. Andrew’s eyes examined her slowly. She was left in only a corset and thin camisole underdress.

“Do you know what Widow 32 does? In large doses it grants a slow and painful death. I once spent 2 days drawing out a hunter’s death using Widow 32. However, in small doses it makes a hunter more submissive: like clay waiting to be moulded by the right hands. You can feel it in your system now. I have never had to use Widow 32 on a hunter so many times. Perhaps I will teach you to kill with it when you are more controllable.”

He twisted her nipple painfully, earning a hiss from her.

“Who are you?”

“Class A hunter subject 32 of the Compendium project.”

“What’s your name?”

“Elisa Riding.”

“How old are you?”

“Old enough.”

“Do you know Erica Booth?”

“No.”

“Do you know Erica Booth?”
“I just told you- no.”

“Think very carefully, 32. We both know you’re in a lot of trouble and I can make this one of the most traumatic nights of your life but you can help yourself here. Now, do you know Erica Booth?”

She hesitated. She didn’t like his smile. “No.”

The interrogator leaned back and examined the girl kneeled in front of him. He cupped her breast and rubbed his thumb over her nipple.

“What about subject 75- Jaces?”

“I know her as subject 75- Jaces.”

“And how do you know me?”

“I know you as someone whose sole purpose it is to ruin the day.”

His eyes glowed with amusement and laughter slipped from his lips.

“They told me you’d be uncooperative but you have yet to lose your bite.”

“Go back to Mordor, Andrew.”

The laughter died and his eyes flickered down to the girl's exposed breasts.

She didn’t like that.

“Do you know when you were five, you suffered from severe nightmares?” He stated after a few moments. “On your sixteenth birthday, your mother took you away for three days to... where Your mother is good, we lost track of you in a matter of hours. Did you have a nice time?”

“Wonderful.” She muttered in reply, despite the growing fear tearing into her.

“I assumed so. Jaces and you are close, are you not?” He didn’t give her chance to reply. “Closer than any lovers Jaces has ever taken. We know every one of them and, believe me, you need a personal assistant to keep track of all of them and yet none touch your place at her right hand side. It’s caused a little controversy in your family. Not everyone thinks that... ‘Relationship’ is appropriate.”

“What do you want from me?”

“Hold your hair up away from your neck... yes, like that. Now put one hand in between your thighs. Good girl. Obviously Jaces is a touchy subject for us so we will move on... ah... this is interesting...” He leaned forward and laid an open mouth kiss on her neck. Then he smiled a sweet, sickening smile. “You know what I’m going to do, sweet one? I am going to make you scream. Then you’re going to beg me to take you to bed and to take you till you cannot walk. You see, Widow 32 has side effects. But do not fear, I will teach you to gain pleasure through the pain.”

The fear tightened around her heart till she doesn’t think she can breathe any more. She shivered but not because of the cold room. Suddenly she realises why her father warned her away from Widow 32. Too late, she realises how wrong she was in thinking they could no longer hurt her.

Within ten minutes, she’s screaming.
Chapter End Notes

I'm so sorry.

Not really.

-Al
Laid to rest (all of my sins)

Elisa returned to the world of the living the same way she always did- painfully and unwillingly.

King Thranduil waited for her eyes to open. He placed one hand under her chin and tilted her head up. For what it was worth, the blood rushed out of Elrond’s face when he saw what the poison had done to the prisoner.

Her eyes glowed black as the bottom of a well. Her lips were an unhealthy purple. It was if the poison was trying to creep into every crack and overcome her.

“Get away from me.” Her voice was cracked and it was an effort just to speak.

“Will she survive?”

Elrond didn’t look confident. “I suppose so.”

The King tilted her head to the side and whispered cruelly into her ear:

“I will ask you one more time, hunter: why did you come to my kingdom?”

“I came to kill monsters.”

“Why did you not kill It in the village?”

She chuckled. “My bleeding heart weighed me down.”

He released her and stepped back. Her body swayed slightly and her mouth twisted into a grimace.

“Leave us, Elrond.”

The healer didn’t take his eyes from the dangling hunter.

“My King, she cannot take much more-”

“She can take as much as I say she can. Take your leave, Elrond.”

He bowed, cast one last sympathetic glance at Elisa, and left.

The door slamming sounded like an earthquake to Elisa.

“What is it this time? Am I to suffer the flogger or knives?”

The King’s footsteps faded as he moved behind her.

“Do you have a preference?”

She shrugged, or tried to. “Whatever grants you the most pleasure?”

A small yelp escaped her lips as the chains holding her to the roof were suddenly released and she fell onto the cold stone floor. Every muscle in her body groaned as her blood returned. Her arms especially burnt and made their discomfort known. She lay curled up on the floor.

“Stand up.”
Despite the shooting pains travelling up her body, Elisa did as instructed.

“Your sister was a hunter like you?”

“No one is a hunter like me but she was a hunter if you use the term broadly.”

“Tell me why you killed her.”

She stumbled forward a step. She bit her tongue trying to stop the words from spilling out but her body was no longer under her control.

“We… we had a disagreement. She claimed to be in love with an elf.”

“Did you not trust her word?”

“She was in love with herself!” She spat out the words as if they had a bad taste. “She wanted to reveal us. She wanted you to come save her. I tried to warn her that it would not happen. When she did not listen, my father sent me to bring her head back.”

“Then?” He hinted.

She tilted her head to the side and said simply, “I did my duty.”

I loved her, Elisa thought. She just didn’t say it.

The King studied her a moment. “A few years back, I received a letter by Raven from a woman claiming to hold the answer to the murder of a company of my captain’s. The murder crept into their camp during the dead of night and murdered each one silently before they had a chance to alarm the others. The letter detailed how the murder escaped without notice, leaving behind a dozen bodies. At first, it was assumed it an orc attack. Half of the company, however, was killed with a poison slipped into their water supply. The only clue as to what the poison was laid in their lips stained black- much like yours now. The letter stated the woman would be arriving before the next full moon. When she never arrived, I assumed she had changed her mind and decided not to reveal the trust. Now I am beginning to see why she did not arrive. The letter came from your sister, did it not?”

She didn’t say anything for a beat. “I was not told about any letter.”

“So you killed her without any hint as to why your own kin had to die?”

“It was pretty low for Riding standards and let's face it, we have set the bar pretty low.”

“The journey you made before arriving on my lands- tell me what Locus meant when he stated there was madness in your fight now.”

“Is death still an option?”

His fist made contact with a deafening, CRACK. Numbing pain shot through her, black dots spotted her vision. She stumbled back with the taste of blood in her mouth. Tears stung the corners of her eyes, but she blinked them away.

She would pray to Locus to put her out of her misery but it was clearly busy laughing itself out of existence. She thought of Leon and Darren and how she wasn’t strong enough to save them. She thought of her parents- her mother quietly humming as she knitted and her father patiently teaching her how to use a sword. She thought of her land burning and Locus claiming her home. The King wouldn’t hear of her pain. Not this time.
“Do you still have night terrors?” He whispered.

Her head shot up and her eyes widened with recognition. That night she had awoken screaming from Locus’ vision… it had been the King who had rushed to comfort her? Why? So he could use it against her?

He gripped her hands and pulled her flush against his chest.

“You are stronger than Locus imagines, I am sure. Your temper does you no credit but it will be tamed soon enough."

He walked away from her. She waited till she heard the door slam behind him and finally she collapsed. Clutching her stomach protectively, she focuses on the half empty vial the king had left on the metal table. Her fingers refused to stop trembling long enough to grab the poison.

Defeated, she lay on her stomach and rested her cheek against the stone floor. Somehow her back had stopped bleeding. The King must have used elven magic to stop the flow of blood.

The door creaked open. Elisa screwed her eyes shut hoping that if she didn’t move whoever had entered would assume she was dead.

“Elisa,” A familiar voice whispered from the dark. “What did he do to you?”

The king’s son cautiously stepped closed and shook her shoulder.

“The poison…” She managed to choke out. “It needs to be bled out.”

Her strength was leaving her fast, as well as her consciousness. She needed to get the poison out of her body before it took full control. Years of accepting Widow 32 had toughened her to its influence. She could fight it for a while but will each lash of pain she felt her grip on control loosen. Legolas put one of her arms over his shoulders and helped her to her feet. He draped his jacket over her torn dress to cover her breasts.

“Does the King know you are here?”

Silence was his answer.

Elisa had to lean against him and trust he wouldn’t let her fall.

“It is a special moment when a girl watches a prince commit treason for her. Only one thing would make me happier- if you please let me die.” She said with tears in her eyes.

“My ada instructed me to help you to take you to your room.”

She didn’t have the energy to try and figure out what was going on in the King’s twisted mind.

“Is she not dead yet?”

She recognised the voice from the she-elf from the King’s table.

“Not even sick.” Elisa shot back with a bright smile made sinister by her black lips.

The brunette huffed and turned on her heels.

“You look dead.”
“That is true a good majority of the time!” She called out as the elf strutted away.

Legolas muttered something under his breath and hurried up the stairs leading to her room. He helped her into the bathing chambers where an attendant waited besides a bath filled with steaming water.

Elisa cast a cynical eye over the female attendant.

“Who is she?”

“This is Eleron, Lord Elrond’s personal attendant and healer. Elrond sent her here to help heal you.”

Elisa wavered and had to lean against the pool’s oak side.

“Forgive me but I do not trust a stranger right now. I can see to my own injuries, thank you.”

“No.” Legolas said immediately. “Allow Eleron to bath you and then I shall see to your injuries. I may not be as good a healer as her but I am not a stranger, am I?”

Elisa smiled. “If that is what you wish-”

“It is.” He said.

The attendant was petite and had long brown hair curled into a hundred rings. She winced when she saw Elisa’s back without Legola’s jacket covering the wounds. It must have been worse than she imagined. Eleron peeled away what was left of the dress, careful to remove the fabric caught in her wounds.

She would give the elves credit for one thing- they sure did know how to heal. She could feel the healing magic surround her as she relaxed in the fragranced bath water. Different soaps and oils surrounded the bath. The tension rolled out of her body slowly but steadily. Eleron began rubbing away the grim from the hunter’s body. The soap she used smelt like cinnamon. Elisa usually carried a bar whenever she travelled. The smell was sweet and bought back memories of home. She let her eyes drift closed and soaked in the water while Eleron’s hands cleansed her body.

“My Lady, would it be too painful for me to wash your back? I will be gentle, My Lady.”

“Please do not call me that. My name is Elisa.”

The attendant blushed. “Elisa is a pretty name. I could heal your wounds if you pleased, Elisa.”

She shook her head. “I would rather you not. Magic has already touched my skin too many times for comfort. I thank you for the offer, Eleron.”

She nodded though looked rejected. “Do you not like magic? I do not know of any human healing but I can try to make it less painfully at least.”

“They do not hurt any more than usual.”

Elisa didn’t recongise the words leaving her lips. She tried to say something, to scream or shout, but nothing came out. She was paralaysed. She realised too late that she was no longer in control of her body.

Widow 32 had taken control. She was merely a passanger now.

Elisa raised one hand to the sky and watched the water treacle down her skin.

"I had these soaps and salts in my homeland.” Her mouth revealed without her permission. "My
father used to bring me back perfumes from foreign lands when I was a child. Once, I beat my tutor to death after they bullied one of the younger students. In punishment, my father threatened never to bring me back a perfume. The next day, I destroyed every perfume and scent in my room to show him that no one had any control over me.”

She rinsed off the soap and stepped out of the pool. Eleron patted her dry with a soft towel and helped her into a thin green dress that trailed along the floor. She hated how she needed help just to dress. Her arms still felt useless and her back was hurting something fierce. She left her hair down, refusing to allow the attendant to fuse over her anymore. She tried to open her mouth to warn her that until the poison was removed, nothing she did was hers but her mouth simply curled into a smile, as if mocking her.

Legolas was waiting for her by the bed, as was Lord Elrond. She briefly remembered hearing his voice before Widow 32 peaked. She nodded stiffly at him.

“If you are here to give me more poison, I think you will find there is only so much I can take before it stops my heart.”

Her brain screamed at her to warn they to get the poison out of her. They didn't see anything wrong besides her black eyes and lips.

He had the decency to look ashamed. “I warned the King not to give you a high dose of the poison. He does not have a forgiving nature.”

“Well, colour me fortunate. Valar has favoured me today. I am tired, my lord, so please forgive me if I do not obey social graces.”

He sighed defeated and left. Elisa collapsed onto the warm feathery bed and absorbed the comfort.

“Do not hold lord Elrond accountable for the King’s actions. Are you okay?”

She hummed, “Do I look okay? I have just been tortured.”

“You will be fine. Turn around and let me examine your wounds.”

“Be still my beating heart.” She giggled, a nervous laughter more than anything. She kneeled on the bed and pulled down her dress straps. Legolas shot around at the sight of her bare skin marred with bruises.

“Perhaps it would be best if I called for a female healer.”

She placed a delicate finger under his chin and made him look into her eyes.

“Heal me, my prince.”

She turned around as his fingers ghosted over the deep indentations in her back. Her skin was pale and still soft despite the hard months hunting. She sighed, content, and rolled back her shoulders. Thankfully, the position stopped him from seeing her bruised breasts. It was the last thing her pride could take.

“I am sorry about your pain. The poison… was you used to it?”

Distracted by the healing touch, she missed Legolas’ hands stop at her shoulders. She placed one of his hands in hers and gently ghosted her lips over his knuckles.
“I pick my own poison, Legolas.” She purred. “My scars are quiet ugly, I am afraid.”

“They do not lessen your beauty.” He said. “What poison do you pick?”

She glanced over her shoulder and smiled sweetly. “I pick you.”

Before she knew it, his soft lips were on hers. He guided her back onto the bed, planting butterfly kisses down her neck as she twisted in his grasp and wrapped her arms around his neck. She pressed against him, desperate to feel more skin.

“Come closer.”

Her expert hands quickly removed his shirt, fingers gliding over every patch of skin she revealed.

“Say you will remember me.” She whispered as he ripped off the reminder of her dress and laid her back onto the bed. Her crimson curls sprayed out around her head like a halo.

“Who said you were going anywhere?” Legolas gently replied.

It didn’t feel right with Legolas. It felt wrong as if she was betraying his trust. He expected her to stay, to stay in the elven lands, but how could she? Her heart longed on the road—with the hunters. Yet she couldn’t tear herself away. Her body wouldn’t listen to the signals her brain screamed.

She kissed him with a million empty promises.

Legolas’ hands drifted down to cup her bruised breasts. She moaned and gently bit down on his bottom lip. The poison sang in her veins. Something primal in her screamed as her to take everything regardless of the consequences. Two voices begging to be heard.

She was almost glad when she heard the bedroom door slam against the wall. Legolas couldn’t have turned faster.

“Ada.” The prince examined.

The King had practically been cheerful before. He stared with contained fury.

“Take your leave, Legolas.” He said deliberately as if trying to compress his anger long enough for his son to leave.

Legolas looked down at the woman smiling beneath him. Her lips were black and yet the taste was addicting. He wanted to claim her lips one more time despite his father’s presence. Her smile didn’t waver as if she could read the desire in his eyes. His thoughts were clouded. Just thinking was becoming more difficult around her.

He blinked twice, trying to clear the haze from his thoughts, and stood up hesitantly.

“Leave now, Legolas, or I will separate her head from her shoulders in front of you.”

She nodded towards the door. “Do as your King commands.”

Legolas stumbled out of the door clutching his shirt. Thranduil slammed the door shut behind him.

Elisa almost felt sorry for the poor attendant who had been trapped in the bathing chambers while she seduced the King’s son and who was about to witness either a beating or a death.
The King and the hunter stared at each other silently for a moment. There was a joke in there somewhere and as soon as Elisa regained control over her own body she would make it.

“I do not wish to see my son hurt so you will dress.”

She did, sliding the dress on with her back to him. Something warm draped over her shoulders and she turned to see the King covering her shoulders with a beautiful silk coat. It was the exact same red as her hair.

“Come with me.”

He turned on his heels and led the way out of the room. She walked behind him, hands stiff at her sides and black eyes making it sure to scare anyone out of her way.

She followed him to the small garden where Legolas and she had played first. She didn’t want the place tinted by darkness. She didn’t want the poison to taint the garden. It was exactly how she remembered. Even the chess set was still sat proudly on the table.

With the last of her energy, Elisa tried to reach out from the haze of the poison and grab Thranduil’s arm. It didn’t work. She was left as frustrated and powerless.

She sat down at the table opposite the king.

“You torture me and now you want to play chess? A mixed message as usual, my king.”

He waved his hand as if to wave away her words. “I am not fooled by you. Is Elisa still there?”

Elisa’s lips curled upwards in a sly smile. “She is, though she has taken a silent role for now.”

Did the King now? Did he know the words were not hers and her body no longer under her control? She felt like a child banging against a glass widow separating her from the world. She could keep banging and banging but no one would see her.

Elisa watched as the King moved the chess piece and made her own move in response.

“What is your name?”

She scoffed. “Naming me will not loosen my control over the hunter. If you like, you may call me Widow. The hunters never cared to name me. They did not like to think of it too much.”

The king kept his composure as if he hadn’t heard her. “In her vision, the woman who was under Locus’ control was you.”

“Somewhat. Elisa would prefer not to discuss it with you. I, however, have no quarrel answering any questions you have.”

She leaned forward, the same glint in her eye a snake has while toying with its prey, and moved a pawn on the board.
“Do I want to know the truth behind her presence here?”

“I know little of your wants, my king. Her hunt for Locus has led her down a path she may not return from. I am curious about one thing, if you will indulge me?”

“How could I refuse?”

She smiled and tilted her head to the side.

“How do you see her? Once free of me, of this poison, she will only go back to trying to escape. Her hunt for Locus consumes her. Soon enough it will kill her. Do you wish to break her or simply to save your kingdom?”

The King didn’t take his eyes of the chess situation.

“I see a warrior who has lost her way because of grieve and hatred. I see a woman fighting a noble but doomed cause. I see a human trying to hold the fridges of Middle Earth together while battling a demon. She is not someone I would treat lightly. I would not have hurt her if it had not been... necessary.”

With one last move, the King announced checkmate. Elisa smiled and leaned back in her chair.

“It appears this one is yours, my king. I shall be departing soon, unless you want to bleed me out. It would not be the wisest course considering how much blood she has already lost, but the decision is yours.”

“I find her company more pleasurable when she is not using her double edged tongue.”

Elisa tipped her head back and laughed. She could feel the poison slowly losing hold over her. It wasn’t enough for her to join the conversation but she almost had a say in her words before they left her lips.

“It is an old habit, my lord. She cuts men apart with words almost as well as she plays the harp.” Her smile dropped and was replaced by a sudden seriousness. “Her sister was very dear to Elisa. When Mol sent word to you over revealing the murders, it was not done out of kindness. If you had bought your army to the hunters’ homeland to strike justice, it would have resulted in a bloodbath. Hunters detest anyone who claim to hold power over Middle Earth. It is why they hunt dragons and demons passionately. They would not have compromised. The streets would have run with elven and hunter blood. When Elisa killed her sister, it was to save the lives of hundreds. Mol would have bought only ruin so Elisa… she did a curious thing for love.”

The king placed a hand over hers. “Why are you telling me this?”

“I do not wish to return to the cold, my lord. If she fails to kill Locus then I fear we all shall suffer. With no one to carry my poison in their blood, I shall die too.”

“I will protect her even from myself.” He promised. His hand was cold and his fingers curled around hers.

“Goodbye, my lord.”

Elisa’s eyes drifted closed. When she opened them again, her youthful turquoise eye colour glistened in the moonlight. She curled her hand into a fist several times just to make sure she had control over her body again.
Tears sprung to her eyes. She was in control again. Her smile was her own, her words hers and she couldn’t describe how thankful she was to be able to move again.

“Are you satisfied of the poison’s effect now, your lordship?”

He ignored the bitter bite to her words. “Your company was agreeable when you were no longer at the reins.”

“Do not make a saint of a sinner! Next time it may not be as agreeable.”

“There will not be a next time, Elisa.” The king reassured. He reached out to stroke her cheek and she had to force herself not to shy away from his touch. "You will never endure that again. I... I apologise."

“You are infuriating, your majesty.” She said, crossing her arms over her chest.

“And you, Elisa Riding, are stubborn and prideful.”

He had hurt her as much as Locus had but she couldn’t help her slight smile. She resisted the urge to lean into his touch.

“May I retire? It has been a long… and disappointing day. I would like to get some sleep if I can.”

“I shall have the quarters next to mine assigned to you.”

“That is unnecessary-”

“This disagreement between us has gone on long enough, yes? I have yet to hear your tale. We will discuss it in the morning, when you are feeling better. Good night, Elisa.”

The King thought about his hunter while he summoned an attendant to ready the room besides his. She hadn’t broken under his beatings or Locus’ torture. Even drugged, she kept her firm stand. Perhaps her shield could be broken by kindness instead: a gentle hand rather than chains.

Elisa lay, upside down, propped against the wall. Her dress had been thrown off the second she entered the room and she was stood against the wall in her underdress and corset. The blood rushed to her head but she didn’t care. She crossed her ankles and scrunched up her eyebrows.

The room didn’t seem as bad upside down. If anything, it looked comfier. Yes, upside down was where she needed to be. The meeting with the King had played out differently in her mind. First, it wouldn’t have happened after he had tortured her. Second, she wouldn’t have tried to seduce his son while in a drugged haze moments before. Third, she wouldn’t have been drugged the entire time but beggars couldn’t be choosers. At that point, Elisa wasn’t sure how long she would survive. She was breathing because the King wanted something from her.

She wasn’t sure what or why but she knew he wanted something. She was grateful he hadn’t taken advantage while she had been under the influence of Widow 32.

“Small mercies.” She mumbled to no one.

Tomorrow, she would escape. She was tired of the game. She was no one’s puppet. Not the hunters’, not her father’s, not Jaces’ and certainly not King Thranduil’s puppet.
It's embarassing how long this took me to write and it's super short but I'll carry on tomorrow. I hope you like it!

*whispers to Leonopteryx and cons_less* I told you there would be more love and I'm getting there, right?

-Al
Elisa strolled along the rough dirty path separating the forest in half. Trees towered over her on either side, their swaying leaves protecting her from the sun’s heat. She stepped off the path and dove underneath a long hanging branch. She negotiated further and further into the forest. She couldn’t remember her way back to the path. She didn’t know where she was going. But it didn’t matter.

It didn’t matter because Leon and Darren were by her side.

And on her other side were Legolas and Tauriel.

They stepped into a small clearing. A large fire blazed in the middle and the trees shielded the sight from all sides. Dancing excitedly around the fire, were the hunters. There was madness in the dancing. They howled and screeched as they danced wildly. She saw her mother, dressed in a black dress that covered her ankles, waving her hands in the arm while jumping up and down.

It was insane. She wanted to be part of it. All the voices. Shadows. The people she had failed along the way.

Her sister, black lips and her left hand sliced off, smiled and held out her only hand for Elisa.

“Come home, sister!”

A hand grabbed hers and took away her choice. She was thrown into the growing crowd of bodies swaying, jumping and dancing. They were chanting something but she couldn’t make out the words.

She threw her hands into the air and twirled around, jumping around the growing fire pit like the other hunters. She twisted and turned while laughing uncontrollably. The fire spat flames out. No one cared about the flames growing uncontrollable.

A shadow pasted by. It wasn’t a hunter’s shadow. It didn’t feel right… she turned quickly and paused in her dancing. The other hunters passed by without a second glance to her.

Elisa searched the area. Something was wrong. It didn’t feel right.

Her sister’s disfigured face stared at her from across the fire.

Leon waved at her- three bleeding holes in his skull.

Daren no longer laughed happily. His lifeless eyes pinned her down.
She spun around. The hunters were kissing and dancing and living their lives regardless of her. One of the hunters got too close to the flames and the entire left side of his face went up in flames.

Locus’ taunting voice whispered cruel words in their ears—pegging them on.

Telling them it was okay. They still had time. They should eat, kiss and dance because tomorrow they would die.

“Come home, sweet one!”

Her father’s voice this time. Yet he was nowhere to be seen.

“It is okay, Elisa. He knows you stole his dragon and he is willing to forgive. You can come home now!”

He was close but never close enough for her to reach him. She reached out for the dark figure hovering just out of her reach.

Only it wasn’t her father she found.

Locus’ cruel snarl grinned at her from the dark. He reached out for her, claws ready to tear her apart.

“When you are ready to save your hunters, you know where to find me.”

Elisa settled that she just wasn’t going to sleep anymore. After dreaming about her friends’ death, her home on fire, herself being under Locus’ control and now hunters having a wild party she decided she didn’t need to sleep that bad. If she just slept when she collapsed from exhaustion, surely her brain would be too deprived to dream.

She shook the sheets away from her body and stood up. Her wrists still showed the marks from her imprisonment. The King had trusted her not to be bound but had, as she discovered last night, locked the door and posted a guard. Apparently his trust had limits.

For a prison cell, it wasn’t half as bad as what she was used to.

Her bed had no chains on, the floor was grey stone and tiled in the pattern of a blooming tree. A harp stood proudly in the corner along with a stool. Dresses in all colours hung in the wardrobe along with jackets, robes and shoes. She ran her fingers along the soft fabrics. She touched something hard against the fabrics: her armour. It glistened without a signal mark. She hugged the hard material to her face and breathed in the polish.

“Now this is better.”

Elisa tied up her leather boots and stretched out in her full armour. She plaited her hair into a simple braid, a smile on her face the entire time. Her escape plan was already forming in her mind.

It was a watertight plan. She could taste freedom. There was no way Elisa would end up back at the elven kingdom.
Sometime Later

King Thranduil studied the drenched woman stood before his throne. Her armour clung to her like a second skin and had pieces of moss stuck to it. Her crimson hair was soaking wet. Water still dripped from her pale skin into a forming puddle at her feet. On his right hand side, Legolas was barely containing his laughter.

“At this point, should I still be disappointed?” He sighed.

Elisa shrugged the movement heavy and awkward due to her drenched armour. “I am disappointed in myself, your lordship.”

“Does this situation amuse you?”

“It is not as bad as it looks.”

She said, untangling a reed from her hair.

“My guards found you in a lake fighting a dead spider. Apparently, the captain of my guards had to be relieved of duty because he was struck by a laughing fit.”

Legolas had to step away from the throne and look up at the roof instead of the dripping wet woman just to contain his laughter long enough.

“I will not lie- this one got away from me.” She took in a deep breath. “There’s a point in this war between us where it has to be said that if I have to jump into a freezing cold lake of waste and battle with a spider’s corpse trying to drown me, you have won. Well played, my lord.”

“We have yet to discuss the damage you have caused to my palace.”

“Would it help if I said I was really sorry? I got taken down by a dead spider; surely I have been punished enough.”

He sauntered down from his throne. Even then he towered over Elisa and she had to look up just to meet his eyes. She could have sworn she saw humour in his smile instead of its usual malicious intent.

“I instructed you not to leave this kingdom without my permission!”

“Those words never left your lips and either way, I said I was sorry.”

A silence descended on the massive hall. She examined the roof, wall, stairway- anything except the fury she was sure was in the king’s eyes.

He yanked her arm and turned away from the throne room, dragging her with him. He launched her into Timaleos’ waiting arms. She stumbled forward ready to meet the unforgiving ground instead of the guard’s warm embrace.

“Have her cleaned and sent to my chambers.” He ordered.

Elisa hummed quietly as she was led away, undeterred by the King’s anger. The threat of torture and death didn’t darken her mood either. She skipped along as Timaleos chuckled.

“After defeating orcs, defending an entire village, standing your ground against a demon, facing an
otherworldly beast and laughing in the King’s face the great hunter’s streak was bought to an end by a dead spider.”

“I want that exactly sentence written on my grave stone.” She nudged the guard’s shoulder. “Did the captain ever recover?”

“Captain Allenos faced the King’s temper. I fear he shall not be laughing for a while now.”

“I would have laughed too if I was not being dragged down by those creepy spider legs. It was terrifying. The only help I got was the elves standing and laughing.”

He shook his head, laughing the entire way. She bounced into the King’s room and sat down besides the wooden harp.

“Please, Elisa, allow the attendant to bathe you. The King—” He stood by the door, hesitating to enter.

She ignored him and positioned her fingers over the harp’s strings. She waved over the neck and higher strings, memorising every curve of the instruments before she began to play.

It was not like Timaleos had heard. The only time he had heard a harp played as magnificently was by lord Elrond’s attendant. Yet Elisa had a way of manipulating the instrument and drawing out every emotion as she strummed the higher strings.

She closed her eyes and sang as she played. She sang well and Timaleos could feel the anger in her words.

_I don't need you to save me_
I don't need you to cure me
I don't need you
And your antidote
For I am my disease

I don't need you to free me
I don't need you to help me
I don't need you
to lead me through the light
For I will always fall

And rise again
Your venomous heroine
I am a survivor
Yes, I am a fighter

I will fall and rise above
And in your hate I find love

I will not hide my face
I will not fall from grace
Walk into the fire, baby
All my life I was afraid to die
But now I come alive inside these flames
She paused in her song and opened her eyes, her usual smile on her lips.

Somewhere along in the song, she had gained an audience. Timaleos stood to the side to give the king room to watch her performance. Tauriel’s red hair peeked from behind Thranduil. Elisa coughed weakly and tore her eyes away from the King’s piercing glare. He only had to cast one look at the crowd behind him and they quickly dispelled. He ordered Timaleos to stay and he did, standing statue still by the door.

The King walked into the room and shut the doors after him. Elisa kept her head down and found fidgeting with her fingers was the most interesting thing in the room.

“Play for me.” It wasn’t a request (she doubted the king ever had to request something), it was an order from the King.

“I do not know many songs appropriate for a royal audience—”

“All the same, play for me.” He ordered again.

She sighed and began strumming the strings again. The only one she could think of was the one her mother had taught her as a child.

*Black clouds are behind me, I now can see ahead*

Often I wonder why I try hoping for an end
Sorrow weighs my shoulders down
And trouble haunts my mind
But I know the present will not last
And tomorrow will be kinder

Tomorrow will be kinder
It's true, I've seen it before
A brighter day is coming my way
Yes, tomorrow will be kinder

Today I've cried a many tear
And pain is in my heart
Around me lies a somber scene
I do not know where to start
But I feel warmth on my skin
The stars have all aligned
The wind has blown, but now I know
That tomorrow will be kinder

Tomorrow will be kinder
I know, I've seen it before
A brighter day is coming my way
Yes, tomorrow will be kinder

A brighter day is coming my way
Yes, tomorrow will be kinder
She dropped her hands and rested them in her lap. She waited for the King to say something.

When he didn’t, she blurted out the first thing that came to her mind to break the tension. “It was my mother’s song. She always used to say things will get better.” She added in a mumble. “They never did.”

“Was your mother much like your father?”

It took Elisa a few moments to process the question and realise Thranduil was asking in all seriousness. She couldn’t hold in her laughter anymore.

His eyes flashed with anger. She raised her hands in defence. “I am sorry, but my parents could not have been more different. The question bought back memories I have not thought about in a while.”

She glanced around at the King’s chambers. She had been distracted before but now she noticed how vast and stunning the room was. An enormous bed was pressed against the wall, a huge wooden desk opposite, a table and four matching chairs, plus a deep pool-like cleansing bath.

The king turned away from her and walked toward the three waiting attendants.

“You are to wait here.” Timaleos whispered, tugging on her arm while the King’s back was turned. She whispered her thanks and stood looking at anything other than the attendants disrobing the King.

“Do not fidget.” He nudged her shoulder. Elisa nudged him back harder.

“You may leave us now, Timaleos.” The king ordered.

Elisa turned back toward the King. He laid in the pool-like bath with his arms resting on the sides and his eyes closed. The two attendants were stood by the bed as if trying to making themselves invisible.

“Undress and join me.”

She didn’t make a move. One of the attendants turned to her with widened eyes silently begging her to do as he said. She sighed heavily and carefully took off her armour piece by piece. She tested the water with her toes. Looking satisfied, Elisa stepped into the pool.

The attendant rushed to take Elisa’s armour away.

“Where is she going with my armour?” Elisa asked alarmed.

The king responded without opening his eyes. “It is to be cleaned again and will be placed back in your room.”

Elisa nodded but stares longingly at the door, wondering if she could escape.

“You would not get far.” The King says. His eyes are suddenly open and pins her down with his glare. “I would enjoy chasing you down the hallways without your clothes to hide you.”

She gulped. “One torturous evening was enough.”

As she spoke, she inched closer to the King and traced down his chest. He didn’t take his eyes of her the entire time. His eyes wondered down to the exposed bruises decorating her breasts and stomach.
Something akin to regret flashed across his face. She would call it guilt if she thought he was capable of feeling such an emotion.

“I would ask for your forgiveness for… last evening.”

She inhaled sharply and would have pulled back if his hand had not been on her back guiding her closer.

“If I stayed mad at everyone who tortured me, I would have no friends.”

She touched the side of his neck with a gentle kiss.

“What would you ask of me?” The King groaned low in his throat as he stroked down her arms. She smiled against his skin.

“Only what you are willing to permit.”

“Name your wish, my light.”

“I wish to return to my hunt.”

He pulled back suddenly. She frowned at the change and tried to draw him close again.

“Does your interest waver as quickly as a storm? Overflowing and consuming for the briefest of moments before you are drawn somewhere else?”

“I… I do not know what you are talking about!”

He gripped her wrist, bruises already set to rise.

“My son is under the impression your interests lie with him alone. I am drawn to you, Elisa, yet I find you underneath my son? If you are to be mine, if my trust is to be earned, you must belong to me alone. Your… hunting will no longer be the reason for living.”

The king was ready to accept her but all of her. Elisa would no longer be able to hunt. He wanted all of her and she wasn’t even sure what would be left without hunting.

“My lord, you do not know what you ask.”

“You will give all of yourself to me. Perhaps you have the material of a queen if you are willing to make a choice.”

She gulped. She didn’t want to be queen! She didn’t even want to be seen! She was Elisa the hunter, the wild one, the lone soldier. She was fear, terror, lust and pain. For a centuries old king, he should have known better.

Panic raised in her stomach. He would take away her only opportunity to kill Locus! She hadn’t even thought of what she would do after killing Locus.

If she said no, she would risk being thrown in jail. Then her hunt was over.

But if she said yes, if she gave the king what he wanted…

“The poison had control over me. Control I did not give up easily. If you had not forced me to take that vial thing, I would never have laid a hand on your son. But the hunt is all I know, my lord. It has cost me everything. Please, do not take this away from me.”
He paused, their bodies close enough that she could feel the heat radiating from him. She ghosted her fingers over his chest, feeling the smooth muscular body. He took one of her fingers in between his lips and bit gently.

“Your injuries healed?” He asked as she rested her head in the crook of his neck. She smiled and guided his hands down to her breasts. Her nipples hardened into pebbles under his hands.

“Are you referring to these injuries?”

She moved his hands to her back so his fingers dipped into the claw marks.

“Or do you worry about these wounds? They are nothing. A battle scar to show I was touched by a fallen God and survived.” She quoted Locus' words with a grim humour.

The king contemplated the beautiful mad woman pressing her naked body against hers. Her body was too thin and the bruises he had left still painted her skin angry shades of brown and blue. She had an hourglass figure, breasts full and fit perfectly in the palm of his hands.

With a wild growl, he grabbed a fistful of her hair and punished her with a brutal kiss. There was nothing tender or kind about his kiss. While Legolas had been patient and gentle, Thranduil’s mouth was hard and his kiss demanding.

He had the touch she needed. Every part of her body came alive and tingled. Thranduil was the first to pull away. Elisa whimpered at the loss of contact and warmth. He smirked and ran his middle finger along her slit. Her eyes widened and she tensed immediately.

“T-thranduil….”

“Hush, my light.”

He pulled her back violently, ignoring her shudder, and claimed her lips again. He was surprised when his fingers met resistance.

“Are you untouched?” He asked in between kisses on her neck.

She shook her head. “It was a long time ago before… before Locus.”

“Who was it?”

She smirked and teased his earlobe with her teeth.

“He was…. a skilled hunter. He was worth one hundred of you.”

Her deliberate provoke did the trick. The King growled and forced two fingers inside of her. The kiss was hard and punishing, not that she was surprised by it. Except this one seared.

His mouth slanted across hers, and when she would not grant his tongue entry he nipped her bottom lip so that she gasped. He took instant advantage. He plundered her, swamping her senses with his sensual onslaught.

“When I am done with you,” He vowed, “You will not want any other man.”

His fingers curled inside her and she dug her nails into his back, leaving angry red marks in his skin. Thranduil hissed but didn’t stop her. He had left his own marks on her too.
The hunter lay in Thranduil’s embrace. They lay in an entanglement of pale bodies and tangled sheets, both offering lazy creases and exhausted from their lovemaking. Lying in the King’s arms felt safe. She could stay there forever, listening to his soft breathing and trying to figure out which delicate shade of blue his eyes were.

“My light?”

“Yes, Thranduil?” She replied with her eyes closed and her head resting on his chest.

“Your markings… they hurt you.”

It wasn't a question. It was more of an observation.

“We all have our scars. I was fortunate to escape for as long as I did without scars. Afterall, I escaped unharmed from a drake-”

Without warning, he spun them around and caged her underneath his body. Anger flashed in his eyes seconds before the entire right side of his face seemed to dissolve. Horrific scars and burns left most of his cheek exposed. His milk white eye appeared blind. Instead of being repulsed, Elisa stared in fascination. She reached out attentively and stroked his scarred face.

“I warn you, Elisa, do not speak to me about dragon fire. My wife, Legolas’ mother, was killed a dragon attack many years ago. The subject is still a delicate one. I will not lose you to the creatures’ wrath.”

She nodded and let the subject rest for now. His face restored back to his usual handsomeness and he kissed her gently.

“It is more likely you will lose me to your own wrath.”

Elisa awoke before the King. She waited by the widow for early morning light. She buckled her armour, securing every strap and dragon bone piece to her body. Not even an orc blade could pierce the armour. She rolled her shoulders back and made sure her leather boots were tied. The king gently snored, his rhythmed breathing a song Elisa could have listened to all morning. He had no idea of his lover’s plan. He hadn’t even noticed her steal the ring of his finger away during the night.

She had awoken hours earlier from a night terror. It had been the same dream that had struck her in warning of the village attack. The same possessed woman on the throne, the same home covered in blood and the same god forsaken warning.

She pressed the king’s ring into her palm.
When you are ready to save your hunters, you know where to find me.

That had been Locus’ invite.

When the king had revealed about his wife’s death, Elisa knew what immediately what she had to do. Locus had given her the first clue right at the beginning.

She had been too blinded by loss to recognize it. On its claw when it had scarred her had been the same ring Thranduil possessed. She had a good idea where it had come from.

In her dream, her father had told her that she had ‘stolen his dragon’ but she had never hunted a dragon except for once and it was not a dragon worthy of a demon. He had spoken of a fallen God.

She scoffed. Some God it was.

She wished Jaces was there. She would offer a joke and have enough self-confidence to convince even the elves that the situation would be handled. But she wasn’t there. At usual, Elisa had to handle it alone.

She slipped the ring into her pocket and buckled it in place.

She ghosted a kiss over Thranduil’s forehead.

“I am sorry.” She whispered.

Then the hunter was gone.

Chapter End Notes

The song's aren't mine. The first one is called 'The Fighter' by In This Moment and the second is 'Tomorrow Will Be Kinder' by The Secret Sisters. All credit for the songs go to them and all that. Hope you like the chapter :) 

-Al
Few saw the lone figure making her way out of the palace. It was still early. The nobility still slept soundly and she knew how to avoid unwanted attention. She had risked journeying into the kitchen for a few supplies. A kind smile and an excuse of going feeding her horse was enough to convince the cooks to let her into the food storage. She quickly packed enough food and drink for two people for a couple of days. The armoury was easier to sneak into. She stole back her weapons and tucked them into their leather shafts held in the belt around her hips.

She crept past Legolas and Tauriel talking in hushed whispers outside the dining room. She stopped outside the stables where Malicious waited patiently. The horse huffed from the insult of not seeing her master in so long. Elisa quickly shushed her. Thankfully, it didn’t alert the guard posted outside the stable doors.

Elisa climbed in by the widow and rushed to free her horse. Her past escape, though ending in humiliation by a dead spider, hadn’t been a complete waste. She had mapped out the guards’ positions and the times they changed.

She untied the rope holding shut the stable door and saddled Malicious ready for riding. She tightened the rope around her hands to make the space in between suitable to strangle around someone’s throat.

She crept around the widow’s edge and counted the seconds till she heard the guard’s footsteps. Without second thought, Elisa shot up from her hiding spot and wrapped the rope around the guard’s neck. She yanked him over the widow’s ledge and into the stable.

Malicious ground her heels into the ground and neighed impatiently. It covered the sound of the guard gurgling. The guard’s body went rigid and his struggles ceased. when his hands dropped from their effort to loosen the grip, Elisa released the rope.

She led Malicious out of the stables.

She cursed under her breath when she saw the two armoured elves stationed outside the forest entrance. It was too late to go back. She had no time to make a detour. If her mapping was right, it wouldn’t be long before the elf’s unconscious body was found in the stables. She stepped closer, signalling Malicious to stay hidden behind a stone column, and spied the two guards.

A familiar head of long yellow hair caught her eye: the guard who had escorted her from Lord Elrond’s care. The only one who had laughed with her and spoken to her. Timaleos.

“Who goes there?”
Elisa froze to the spot. Timaleos turned around with suspicion in his eyes. When he saw it was her, a small smile appeared.

“It is just I.”

The other elf was more suspicious.

“On orders of our fair and high King, it is forbidden to leave the Kingdom.”

“I have authority.”

“Whose authority?” Timaleos questioned.

“Thranduil gave me permission.” She lied.

“I am sorry, Elisa, but this fact will have to be check with either Prince Legolas or our king.”

She nodded but her disappointment clear. She couldn’t let them alert anyone to her leaving the king or it was all over.

Timaleos placed a hand on her shoulder to guide her back. It gave her the perfect opportunity to throw a solid punch to the underside of his jaw. Her fist went straight to connect with flesh, and Timaleos’ head snapped up. She didn’t pause to see his body drop to the ground. She twisted her body around and landed a side kick to the second guard. She only knew she had aimed too high when she heard the guard gurgle. He collapsed clutching his throat. Several curses left Elisa’s lips and she bent down to move him onto his side. Blood leaked from his mouth. Her ankle had caught his neck and the severity of her kick might have caused damage to his windpipe.

From the distance came the alarmed shouts. They had discovered the elf’s body.

She whistled sharply and Malicious came striding towards her. She straddled the horse and kicked her heels. They fell back in their usual routine of Malicious leading and Elisa watching their back.

She fled deep in the forest, leaving behind the injured guard. Once the king found it, one injured guard would be the least of her problems.
The sun had halfway completed its lazy journey across the sky when Elisa had to stop to rest. Mirkwood was a huge place and it would be easy to lose her way if she was not on her full guard. The woodlands were a haunted place polluted by dark and savage creatures, the least of all being spiders. Light peered through the thick trees and the gentle breeze comforted her. She jumped off Malicious and led her to a stream.

“There you go, girl.”

She stroked the horse’s mane and stayed while she drank greedily from the lake. Malicious would look out for her while she slept and Elisa returned the favour.

She sat in a huff besides the lake and prepared a simple dinner of cold meat and vegetables. Malicious stole the only carrots in the pack but she couldn’t really be mad at the horse. It’s owner was a fugitive, the lover of the King of the Woodland Elves, and currently bleeding again. Malicious had to cope with alot.

Elisa, with very little patience, left her armour on while a warmth dripped down her back. While Legolas’ healing had helped, the wounds were anything but fine. The King had torn open the wounds in his anger. They still felt as raw as the day it had happened.

When the numbness had returned, she striped off her armour and quickly bathed in the lake. She watched around her for any movement and listened to the music of the forest. Part of her missed the bathing chambers in the elven palace. Alone in the dark forest, she was tense and ready to attack at any moment. She washed the blood from her back and dressed quickly again.

An abrupt snap of twigs bought her hand to her sword. Malicious’ head shot up and she stared at a spot in the distance. Elisa scrutinised the spot too. She patted Malicious’ mane and silently moved forward.

Another twig snapped. The forest continued with its daily sounds so it wasn’t Locus. All life died when the demon was around. She treded closer to the source. She pushed aside branches in her way which weren’t as quiet as she would have liked. A voice raised above the others just ahead of her. Quickly, she ducked underneath a bush and peered out at the three orcs arguing with wide gestures and angry voices. Their sallow skin, wide mouths and slant eyes repulsed Elisa more than the sour odour coming from the Warg beasts they rode.

She crept forward enough to eavesdrop on their argument. Her experience hunting had thankful taught her the basics of the orc language, though she was still from being able to speak it fluently.

“What of the dwarf scum?”
“We ride to Azog!” One of them growled.

“The line of Durin survived! With the prince, Azog will wipe out the line finally!”

They rode away, the growls and beating paws of their Wargs drowning out the conversation, and Elisa crawled back out to her camp.

The orcs had been in service of the pale orc commander. She had heard of the dwarves’ attempt to reclaim their kingdom but how they had arrived too late. A pale orc, Azog the defiler, had beaten them there with an army of orcs. Elisa had been too young to understand the bravery of the dwarves. Their army had been decimated and their king beheaded yet they stood strong.

“So the line of Durin survives. That is spectacular.” She said in respect.

Nightfall would arrive soon if she was not careful. Camping in the forest in the dark was risky even for an experience hunter. She packed up her things again and set off with the direction of malicious.

The sun completed its journey across the sky and was soon replaced by the glow of the full moon. She rode determined for hours. Malicious didn’t tire or stop until they saw the tips of the grey mountain pierce the skyline in the distance. The towering mountains disappeared in a haze of grey and stone in a jagged line.

The hunter stepped down and landed on her feet. She threw her dagger in the air and caught it again. Outside of the forest and protection of the elven kingdom, Elisa fully expected to be attacked by a gang of orcs at any given time. She would have to trust Malicious to keep guard for what she next had to do. True to her nature, the horse stood watch while her master kneeled in the short swaying grass. The green land went on as far as the eye could see before fading into the mountains.

Elisa took her blade and slid the sharp edge across her left palm. The crimson line left droplets of blood on the grass. She painted the symbols she had drawn all those years ago. Some were delicately joined words in the original hunter language and some were symbols she drew with the tip of her fingers. Her brow furrowed and she bit her lip in concentration. She continued until several lines decorated both arms and a circle of symbols were drawn around her.

In a low voice, the hunter prayed:

“Melkor, we beseech you.

Allow us the dream instead of the terror and part our souls to reveal to you and your dark power. I pledge you loyalty and submission in return for your embrace. Varda, Queen of the Valar, grant me your forgiveness. Namo, judge our souls and our deeds but show mercy.

I pray, part to me illusions and storms. I gift you light from the world created by you and your brothers and sister. Reveal my home to me. Let the cover of darkness bear witness to your punishment.”

She continued, her words fading into her mother tongue. With one last swipe across her palm, she drew the last symbol to complete the circle. Nothing happened a long moment. Elisa prayed more
feverously and desperately in a near whisper until finally the air shifted around her.

The view twisted and rippled like a water reflection being struck by a pebble. The skyline disappeared and grey clouds hid the moon’s light.

Two huge wooden doors appeared before Elisa’s eyes. Despite the years, the gate to the hunter’s homeland was faded and cracked in such distinctive ways. The tough wood was smooth to the touch and a golden handle placed on each door. These entrances leading to hunter lands were in several places. One lay in the marshlands outside of Mordor. Another resided near the sea of Rhun. She had never been to either of them. The hunters near the fires of Mordor were vicious and had been driven mad many centuries ago. The colony near the sea of Rhun enjoyed their isolation and had never revealed their actual location to the original and most powerful hunters. Perhaps it had saved them from the wrath of Locus. None of the hunters’ homeland had been discovered by dwarves, elves or men simply because they had not been there. The ritual to enter a hunter homeland was complex and had never been revealed to anyone outside of the hunters.

Elisa stood and dusted the dirt from her armour. She went to open the gates.

Malicious neighed in warning. The hunter paused, her hand hovering over the golden handle. Her horse stared at a point behind them. Elisa narrowed her eyes. Something had changed. She was being watched.

“Come out!” She called, sword outstretched.

Malicious was one step ahead of her. Before Elisa could take her first step, the horse charged into the bushes. Her hooves didn’t touch so much as skim the grass. There was a single bound, a coiling of flanks and legs, and then 400 pounds of horse went airborne.

The result was a terrified yelp and loud crash. Malicious reared back and violently shoved the intruder out into the open. Elisa shot forward and pressed the tip of her sword against the intruder’s throat. With Malicious at his back ready to trample him to death if he made the wrong move, the stranger had no choice but to meet Elisa’s cold blade.

The lanky man, if he could be called that since he looked only 16 years old, had wide eyes the colour of the ocean. His brown hair was pulled back in a messy pigtail and his skin was a pasty pale. Something clicked in her memory.

“What are you doing here?”

“I-”

He scanned around as if just noticing where he was. “What am I doing here??”

“I do not know!”
“Where are we?”

“We are on the outskirts of the grey mountains. The hour is late and we are close to home. The hunter grounds are beyond these doors. Petvog, how did you get here?”

“I… I do not remember.”

Another rustle of leaves and Malicious was on it like lightning.

“Your steed still rides like a bat out of Mordor, I see.”

Elisa didn’t need to turn around to recognise the voice. Jaces’ fist collided with her cheek and Elisa felt her bottom lip split. Seconds later, two muscular arms engulfed her in a fierce hug.

“Can we stop with the hitting?” She hissed, patting the cut on her lip with her gloved hand. Jaces nodded in the direction of Petvog.

“Is that… is he that child who used to follow us around?”

“Petvog.” He clarified.

Jaces muttered something under breath.

“Well, well. It has been a while, Elisa.”

All three hunters turned to the new intruder. Elisa was the first to see him.

The years had been kind to Aidan Snow. His raven hair was swept back from his handsome face and his deep brown eyes shone with pride. His muscular frame was hidden behind black elven armour but his chest still looked like two slabs of stone his shirt struggled to contain. He walked straight past Jaces and Petvog and took Elisa’s hand in his. He kissed her knuckles gently and offered a sweet smile which bought a bright shade of pink to her cheeks.

“It has been a while, Aidan. It is good to see you too. Yes, you look great as well!” Jaces muttered sarcastically with a roll of her eyes.

As quick as it came, the affection left. Aidan turned towards the other hunters.

“I was halfway across Middle Earth when I was dragged, quite literally, down a tunnel which threw me out at this place. Dare I ask what is going on?”

“I believe we shall know shortly. Where have you all been this past year?”

Jaces turned away. “I was… preoccupied. I was denied entrance to my home after I saw the destruction so I went hunting for the creature responsible.”

A chill went through Elisa and she shivered involuntarily.

“Did you find it?”

Jaces paused and Elisa could have sworn she saw hatred flash in her eyes.

“No. A creature found me instead. I was tracking a group of orcs just south of the Ash Mountains when I was ambushed.”

“By the orcs you were tracked?”
Jaces gave Petvog a look which could have hardened water.

“Do you think I would allow myself to become the hunted by a group I was hunting?”

“N-no.”

“N-no is right, little man. I was ambushed by some sort of demon. It appeared out of nowhere. I could have fought it but its minions caught me by surprise. There must have been a dozen of these fanged fucking corpses jumping out of every corner.”

“The demon,” Elisa spoke slowly. “Did it have claws?”

“Yes.”

Elisa’s worst fears were confirmed with a simple answer.

“It let me live, Elisa. I have no idea why but I lived. It branded me like some animal- ripped open my back with its claws.”

The hunters shared a knowing look.

“Same thing happened here.” Petvog said grimly.

“And here.” Aidan stated.

“So there is a reason we are all here.”

This time, Elisa cursed loudly when she saw the new addition.

Daethel Arboarn, the only female elf hunter who had hunted with Elisa, strutted out from the shadows. Her hair was dark, as was her skin, and her lithe figure hadn’t changed since she had been 16.

“I assume you carry a similar story, Daethel?” Elisa said in between gritted teeth. The years hadn’t lessened the bad blood between the two women.

“Elisa… you looked tired.”

“Keen observation.”

She turned on her heels and slid her dress down to her waist. Elisa opened her mouth to say something but quickly shut it again when she saw the three gruesome claw marks on her dark skin.

“I was sleeping when the demon came into the village and slaughtered my hosting family. Unlike you, I was more than happy to give up the hunter live. I never liked all the death and I cared little for revenge. The demon came into my friend’s home and killed her and her family while they slept. I woke to the sound of her daughter’s screams. I did nothing to prove this demon yet it came for me all the same. Now I want answers.”

Elisa cradled her head in protest of a potential headache.

“Elisa?” Jaces hinted. Each hunter was staring at her, waiting for her to say something.

“3 nights ago the demon attacked a village. The village you were in, Jaces.”

Daethel shook her head, curls spilling from her plait. “No, 3 nights ago the demon was pursing me.”
“No,” Adrian objected. “The demon struck a village 3 moons ago near where I was camped.”

Elisa stayed silent while the hunters argued. Her mind was running overtime considering every possibility.

“Clearly your retirement has slackened your sense!”

“As if she had any in the first place!”

“Shut up, Jaces! You know nothing besides being Elisa’s lapdog.”

Elisa spun around. “Enough!”

Silence descended on the hunters. They turned to her with widened eyes. Good. Their time apart hadn’t had them forget who the lead hunter was. Now she had a grip on the control, the leadership, she just had to lead them right.

“We have been fooled. All of us!” Jaces opened her mouth to object but one glance from Elisa kept her silent. “This is no demon. A demon cannot be in two places at once, let alone plague us all. If you would stop arguing for one fucking moment, you would see the only answer: there was more than one demon. I had triggered something by summoning the gates to our homeland. Now, I suggest we get our act together and enter the wasteland we used to call home so we can take our revenge on the creatures which murdered our kin and made us flee. It is their time to bleed.”

Each hunter nodded silently. Jaces cast a venomous glance at Daethel who returned it. Elisa had to hold back from slamming their heads together.

Petvog's hands were shaking. "I do not want to be alone again." He whispered.

Elisa placed a hand on his shoulder. "No matter what they told you, you are not alone. I will be right besides you."

She gave him what she hoped was a reassuring look and opened the doors to the hunter homeland.
“You were merely wishing for the end of pain, the monster said. Your own pain. An end to how it isolated you. It is the most human wish of all.”
— Patrick Ness, A Monster Calls

The Hunter Homeland was a beautiful town of lush greenery and thatched roofed houses that went on for miles. The village was set in a circle maze type structure created by the first hunters. The sky above was grey and rain clouds hung over their heads like an axe yet it did nothing to lessen the beauty of the village.

Elisa stepped through the doors first. Then Jaces, Petvog, Adrian and Daethel followed.

They were on top of a grassy hill. A clear stone path led down into the village.

“It does not feel right being here.” Daethel said. “It feels as though I am disturbing a grave.”

“A mass grave.” Elisa corrected more harshly than she meant.

She shook her head and followed the worn path down to her village.

“Elisa!”

“What, Jaces?”

“Look what I can do with the potatoes!”

Elisa glanced from the corner of her eye at her best friend’s attempt at juggling. She swirled a piece of hair around her finger as she propped her feet up on the kitchen table.

She was finally 10 years old and had to prove to everyone how hard she was to impress. Jaces was a few years older than her and everyone knew she didn’t care about anything other than herself. And maybe Elisa.

“Do you think one day my father will let me go on a dragon hunt with him?”
Jaces yelped as a potato landed on her head and bounced onto the stone floor.

“I would but you are only 10. I am 15. I will get to go dragon hunting before you.”

“What do you think it feels like hunting a dragon? I bet I would be the best dragon hunter ever to be born?”

Jaces crossed her arms over her chest. “No, you would get eaten by an orc before you even got to the dragon’s cave. Besides, I hear dragons can only be killed by elves.”

Elisa pulled her tongue out at Jaces. “No orc could touch me. My tutors said I will be the best hunter. I will get my first hunt soon.”

“Well, I will have to come with you. Not to protect you because I do not care but if you get eaten by an orc, I will avenge your death.”

“I would not get eaten by an orc!” Elisa whined.

“Yes, you would if I was not there.”

“Then will you come with me? If I get eaten, you have to cut open the orc’s belly and get me out. I will do the same for you.”

“Now I will have to come. You clearly could never survive on your own.” Jaces sighed heavily and went back to her juggling attempts.

Even Legolas had been forced to avoid his father’s company for the first hours after he had discovered Elisa missing. It was the fourth time she had escaped from under their noses. Fury did not quite cover what the King was experiencing. The third time had been humorous but now she had severely injured one of the guards. He was sure it had been an accident. She had obviously gone out of her way to remain undetected and not harm anyone in her escape attempts. His father’s wrath was something to be matched. As soon as he had discovered her missing, he had sent the order that no one was to enter or leave the kingdom. It came seconds too late. One of the guards, an eager elf named Timaleos, had tried to prevent her leaving, and thus resulting in the incident with the guard.

His father had been stewing in his anger ever since. Legolas did not think he had ever seen him as furious. Two dozen guards including Elrond and his company were searching the land looking for her. It wasn’t enough.

“Tauriel!” The she-elf captain appeared at the king’s side in a heartbeat.

“My lord, no one has seen sight of her. She appeared at the border and vanished again like a spirit.”

He waved his hand impatiently. “I know exactly where she had gone. Ready your company. We leave now.”

She followed on his heel as he marched down the hallway. Soldiers dodged out of his way and Tauriel had to jog to keep up with his pace.

“Did she tell you know where she was going?” Tauriel asked.
“I have known from the day she stumbled onto my lands where she called home. She may have thought any evidence of her sister’s treason burned with her but she was gravely mistaken. Her sister had the sense to send a messenger with a letter on the instruction to deliver it to Lord Elrond in case of her death. She anticipated the hunters would retaliate without delay and send Elisa to contain the matter. She was wiser than they predicted.”

“If Elisa not say invading the hunter homeland would result in a massacre?”

“She is chasing after ghosts and shadows in a pathetic attempt to reclaim a lost cause. She will get herself killed because of her foolish pride. This is why the hunters were destroyed. This is why her line dies with her.”

He stormed to five guards who had returned exhausted from searching the forest.

"Have you completed my command?" He demanded.

"I am, sorry-"

"Return to the forest immediately! I do not care if you have to storm Mordor itself! You will find her and bring her to me! If none of your return without a hint to her location by the time the sun sets, I shall send an army to retrieve her and your heads on pikes to be displayed around my throne! Now get out of my sight, Nadorhuanrim!”

Chapter End Notes

Elven phrase translate:

Nadorhuanrim- cowardly dogs
Jaces kept the twist of her hips as she walked behind Elisa. She commanded like breathing. Leadership came easily to Elisa, the way torturing came to Jaces, but she half put it down to her upbringing. It was well-known that the director had been moulding his daughter to take his place when he passed out. He had been plagued by a vision of united the hunters once and for all under the domain of his daughter. He would live on through her. Of course, the vision had gone up in flames the same time their homeland did.

The hunters ghosted down the path, retracing the steps they had taken years ago. Each had seen the destruction. They had taken their turn looking for survivors, for their families, before realising the bitter truth. Elisa might have been the first but she hadn’t been the last. The four hunters had been allowed into their homeland once after the massacre, only once, before the doors had been slammed in their faces.

Elisa strode past the village houses like a ghost. She reached out and touched the wooden structure of the village healer’s house. She had seen a good majority of her childhood at the healer’s house. The healer had been a wise elderly unmarried woman with green hair. Elisa had laughed and called it grass hair.

Jaces saw where she was staring.

“Do you remember the-”

“Please, Jaces, no more memories.”
She huffed, slightly rejected. “Memories are all we have.”

Elisa moved past the house and took a sharp left. “You are here with me now. That is all that matters.”

Aidan took the opportunity to ask where they were going. Elisa simply pointed to the mansion situated at the head of the village. It was a towering structure separated from the other houses by a spacious garden full of blooming rose bushes and overgrown with weeds.

Aidan nodded in approval. “So there is method to your madness”

“It is where we will find whatever we are here for.”

“How do you know?”

“Because it wants us to come home.”

Elisa’s hopes for silence were broken by Daethel’s mournful voice.

“I looked for you after the attack.”

“Well, how thoughtful.” She replied in a bored deadpan tone.

“Were you hunting alone?”

“No. I was with two other hunters… Leon and Daren.”

“Where are they?”
Jaces shot her a look to silence her but it was too late.

“They are dead. They were killed by the demon.”

Daethel gulped. “I… I am sorry.”

“So am I.” Elisa replied without a hint of emotion.

They stayed in an uncomfortable silence until they reached the front gates of the mansion. The two iron gates had veins creeping up, as did the red pathway. At the back of the mansion had once been a small labyrinth of tall bushes. Elisa’s father had built it for her on her 9th birthday.

Elisa pushed open the creaking gates and stepped inside mansion's front garden. Her boots clicked on the cobbled pathway. Daethel had been right. It felt like she was disturbing a tomb. Sickly green weeds were creeping over the path and the small garden pond was covered in slime. A small popping sound came from the pond, as if something was somehow still alive in the mess. She knew it was impossible. Nothing could survive that long in a wasteland.

“To be what tomorrow needs.” Jaces quoted the words engraved on the gates. “My tutors used to say that was the reason they beat me. I was being moulded to be ‘what tomorrow needs’. Did they say the same to you- Elisa, daughter of Lord Nathaneil?”

“My father told me to hit back anyone who beat me.”

She didn’t like the bitterness in Jaces’ tone. She seemed different than the stubborn fugitive who had once held back a dozen orcs from the elven border alongside her all without the elves ever finding out. She stared at her, hollow cheeks and narrow throat straining with the effort of swallowing, and Elisa no longer saw her friend.

Aidan broke the silence. “Well, Elisa, you know the way better than anyone.”

The dreariness of the house dawned on her. She remembered it as a home bustling with life.

Elisa led the way and the hunters followed, as they always did.
Inside the mansion was as neglected and abandoned as outside. The walls, once whitewashed, were a dark sinister colour. Cobwebs hung over the doorway. Elisa’s footsteps echoed throughout the entire house.

Elisa took to searching the place she had once called home. The floorboards creaked and groaned under her boots.

She took two steps at a time up the stairs and stormed onto the second floor landing. Each room was branded with the number 12 to 34. She stopped outside room 32 and eased open the door.

Dust lay over every surface like dirty snow, pristine dust layer, not a foot print anywhere. A massive table took up the majority of the space. Scattered around were 12 chairs. They were set as if people were just getting ready to sit for a meeting. Old tea cups lay abandoned on a table top thickly encrusted with dried up mould. A pipe sat at the head of the table. Underneath the dust was an even thicker layer of dried blood.

Elisa walked straight past the table, lingering only a little at the seat at the head of the table, and focused on the breaming bookcases decorating the entire back wall of the room.

“It has to be here.” She mumbled to herself as she picked up a heavy leather book. She saw the cover, huffed, and threw it away from her. Jaces narrowly dodged the flying books she threw in disappointment.

“May I ask what you are searching for?”

Elisa didn’t reply. She yanked out a red dyed book thick enough to be used as a weapon. Looking satisfied, she hauled the book onto the table. An explosion of dust resulted but none of the hunters cared. Elisa heaved open the book and flipped through the pages.

“This is it.”

“You will have to help us along here, Elisa. The hunter language is as foreign as the orc language to me.”
“It is a book of spells. This one is for a binding. Our biggest weakness is we could not be one step ahead of demons. It is impossible if we do not know where they are. This… spell will bind them to one place. Then we can level out this battlefield.”

Petvog examined the writing over her shoulder.

“Does it tell us what the demons want with us?”

“We can ask them when we have them impaled on our swords.” Elisa stated.

“Is it wise summoning demons without knowing their motives?” Aidan questioned, sharing an easy look with the she-elf hunter.

Elisa raised an eyebrow. She wasn’t paying attention to the boy. She had found the spell which would finally give her the confrontation with Locus she wanted. Finally, It would not be able to hide from her anymore.

“Besides, I do not know any hunter who knows how to cast spells, do you?” Daethel pointed out.

Elisa stood up, clasping the book firmly to her chest. “I do not need a hunter. All I need is someone who practices magic. Any elf will do.”

“Since when did we become ‘you’? When did this become ‘your’ mission?”

She was close enough that Elisa could smell jasmine on her tanned skin.

“Move out of my way, Daethel.”

“Will he help? The wizard?” Petvog said in obvious attempt to defuse the tension. It didn’t work.

A frown creased her forehead. She spun around. “Where is Jaces?”
Neither had noticed the hunter sneak out of the room. Elisa cursed under her breath.

“What is she thinking?!”

She went to move but Daethel refused to move out of her way. Anger flashed in Elisa’s eyes. In the time it took Daethel to regret her action, Elisa had her head slammed down on the filthy table and her arm twisted behind her back.

“I hope you can fight one handed.” She hummed as she twisted Daethel’s arm to an unnatural angle.

She pulled it further back, seconds away from hearing the bones snap. Aidan’s unmistakeable firm body pressed to her back and two arms wrapped in an iron hold around hers. He tore her away from Daethel who scampered to the opposite side of the room.

“Well, this is familiar.” Aidan said with a hint of humour. Elisa’s feet kicked off the ground and she fought brutally to break free of Aidan’s hold.

Under the illusion Elisa was restrained, Daethel took the opportunity to spit out,

“Do you think you can control everyone? Hunters think they have so much power and have the right to decide who lives and who dies. You are not the creators! What gives you the right?”

“No one gives us the right.” A cruel smile curved her lips. “We take it.”

Aidan had to drag her out of the room and into the adjoining bedroom. He carried her out screaming and kicking, holding onto the book with one hand and trying to claw Daethel’s eyes out with the other. She stumbled into the room and Aidan slammed the door shut behind them.

“I hate her! I hate everything about her! She cares nothing for anybody besides herself!”

Aidan gripped her arms and pulled her into a constricted embrace.

Aidan held her until her breathing returned to normal. Eventually she stopped beating his chest with
her fists. She pressed her face to his chest and breathed in the familiar scent.

“Why are you still here?”

He placed a quick kiss on the top of her head.

“I promised you after... we separated that I would never abandon you again. I spent the year wondering if you were even alive. Do you think I would let you go now I have just found you again?”

He didn’t have to say anything else. She let him hold her and for now it was enough.

“Jaces is missing.” He whispered as he stroked her hair.

She nodded. She was the leader again and their roles returned to normal.

She took one last deep breath and allowed Aidan to lead the way back into the library. Daethel tensed at seeing her. Elisa helped her hands up in truce.

“Why did you and the other hunters never like me?” The she-elf questioned.

“Well, I cannot speak for my brothers but I hated you because you were uneducated, unqualified, practically useless at every task my father set for you, stubborn, foolish, prideful, unintelligent, and younger than me. But like I said, I cannot speak for my brothers. Now, shall we get back to the task at hand?”

“Please do.” Petvog begged.

“We should split up.”

Petvog made a sound which Elisa took to mean fear.
“We will find Jaces faster if we split up and we can move quicker on our own.” Aidan agreed.

“Aidan, take the training rooms and the children’s quarters. Daethel, search the interrogation rooms and the prison cells. Petvog, go back the way we came and see if you can find anything in the healer’s house. See if you can find anything, a symbol or a painting maybe, that might be linked with this ring.”

She held up her finger wearing the King’s stolen relic.

“Wait.”

They turned to Elisa. She tossed the book onto the table again and opened it on the same page.

She read the page again, her eyes skimming over the words faster and rereading them again. Her mouth hung open. She read the words again. With a shudder, she threw the book at the wall as if the words had scorched her.

“I… I had no idea.”

“What is it?”

Elisa covered her mouth with her hand.

“I had no idea… I am so sorry. I… I am sorry.”

Aidan grabbed both of her shoulders and shook her. It should have provoked her to hit him or at least for her to knee him in the groin.

She did nothing.

“You were right, Daethel. We had no right. I am so sorry.”
Stepping forward, Daethel reached down and placed a hand on the book’s ancient words.

“What does it say?”

“It… it is not a binding spell. It is a warning. It is a warning to us.”

The room suddenly seemed too small and the dark surrounding. Elisa scrapped her hair back. It was a nervous habit Aidan hadn’t seen her do since they had been children.

“I was too blinded. I wanted revenge enough to allow it to blind me!”

“Then what is it for?!” Petvog demanded.

“It is a warning. I am sorry. I am so sorry that I was not good enough to see it.” She looked up with tears shining in her eyes. “It is a binding, yes, but not a demon binding.”

What does it bind then?"

"It binds us."

Aidan was the first to recover from the shock. “Are you telling me that it is a spell which could keep us locked in one place?”

She nodded.

“That is good news, right? As long as we have the book, we keep the spell away from anyone else?”

Elisa shook her head sadly. “It has already been used.”

“When?” Petvog asked, regretting the words as soon as they left his lips.

“Do you not remember how you got here?”
“No! I told you…” He stopped midsentence.

Aidan finished for him: “Someone cast the spell to get us here. Someone used Elisa to lure us here like sheep to a fucking slaughter.”
The Sickly princess

The Sickly Princess

Ignorance is bliss when it’s not fatal

The rain was pouring freely when the hunters stepped out of the mansion.

"Ah, look. The hunters have gathered around their playing field. Now they fear for they have become the hunted."

Elisa didn’t stop. The voice had become something she savoured. It meant the demon was close and soon she would be thrown into the hunt. In another life, she would turn around and warn the others. She would get them out regardless of if it meant giving up her fight.

“Not this time.”

She stalked through the village veiled by the rain downpour. She checked every corner waiting for the first time of Locus’ shadow corpses. Petvog followed close on her heels.

Locus’ taunt was all the motivation the boy needed to follow the hunter leader. Daethel hadn’t needed to be told twice to examine the interrogation rooms, happy for the excuse to avoid Elisa. Aidan had followed her orders too.

"Shall I tell a story? It will take your mind off trapping your friends in my web. There once was a kingdom. The people were happy and joyful. There was a princess. No, there were six children, four princesses and two princes. When each baby was born, the king rejoiced and showered them with gifts."

“Wh-what is that?” Petvog asked shivering.

“The demon I hunt.”

“The demon which attacked me did not sound like that!”

“How nice for you.”
The most precious was a little girl with red hair. The King loved her dearly but the girl was born ill with a disease that infected her blood. Soon the girl fell into a deep sleep no healer could bring her back from. The king prayed for hope while the others gave up on her. One day, a demon came along with fire and cured the girl. He breathed fire into her lungs and awoke her. She was the most beautiful creature ever born. She walked the land with a grace no one could copy and princes lined up to ask for her hand in marriage. She grew up with her mother’s empathy, the king’s intelligence and a demon’s determination. The demon gave each of the king’s children a gift.

The sickly girl he gave desire.

The youngest boy he gifted gratitude.

The other girl he gave effort.

The smiling girl got justice.

The eldest girl got to want.

The eldest boy he gave pride.

The demon was not without mercy either. He warned the king, 'when the child has her twentieth year, she will be corrupted by fire and vengeance.' The king, fearing the demon's power, taught the children to strike terror in the hearts of their enemies. He raised the sickly child to be loyal and to kill traitors.

Elisa kicked open the front door of the healer’s house, sword in hand. Medicines, moulded from years of not being used, in glass jars lined the dusty shelves and loose pieces of wooden furniture had been shoved around the floor. The demon’s tale did not die down and its voice pierced through the walls. She didn’t question the purpose of the tale. Locus’ only purpose was to distract them and fill them with doubt. Aidan and the other hunters would hear it too.

But the most powerful was the sickly daughter. She grew jealous of the beautiful children, though she was the most beautiful.

The smiling girl was passionate and ethical. Though it’s true she was an outsider.

The eldest girl was independent and forgiving. Though it’s true she was full of lies.

The youngest boy was lively and intelligent. Though it’s he was powerless.

And the boy was handsome and capable. Though it’s true he often got lost.

The sickly daughter, she was none of these things, for she had been given life from a demon. Her strength came from anger and dark magic. So she went to the children when they were scared and alone and lured them with promises of justice. For their kin had been murdered and the children were thrust into a world they feared. The king was no longer able to warn the children away from the sickly child’s flames. The jealous girl bought her toxic, hateful self into the children’s lives once
again in the form a beautiful maiden.

The maiden seduced kings and princes. She kissed them and told them they were safe. She sang and told tales. She dripped her venom into their open mouths and told them it was sweet.

Then she gave the children some of her flames.

Elisa pushed her hair back out her face and stomped out of the house.

“Elisa, your back is bleeding!”

“I know, Petvog.”

"Why are you bleeding?"

"I keep getting stabbed. Now, move on."

The children were entranced, for their entire lives they had seen the sickly child as their leader and saviour but they had not seen her fire.

Go on, take the fire, said the sickly child, smiling. Fire is beautiful. I will protect you from the flames.

Go on, for you are independent thinkers and do not need the king to keep your secrets.

Go on, she said. What is this life we lead, if we value our lives more than freedom?

And they listened.

They took her fire. Then the sickly child watched their beauty burn. The desire corrupted into lust. Gratitude became greed. Effort turned into manipulation. Justice became wrath. Want became envy. Appreciation turned into the dreaded pride. The children were no longer beautiful. They were demons, like the sickly child.

The beautiful sickly watched them burn and asked: why did they cry? Did they not want the flames?

“E-Elisa?”

She ignored the boy. The clouds shifted and the wind howled like a wolf. She searched the sky with desperation. The signs were there. She was only looking for confirmation.

“Elisa, please!”

She turned towards Petvog and grabbed his hand tight in hers.

“When I say, you have to run back to the mansion. Do you understand?”

“W-what is that? What is happening?”

The rain ceased, leaving the land damp and misty. Elisa’s eyes never left the sky. The houses
creaked and groaned. A whip of crashing sound like a hurricane stormed through the village.

“What is happening?” Petvog begged once again, pulling on her arm like a child.

“Run, now!” She shoved him back down the path seconds before flames licked the skyline. “Dragon!”
The smoke entered Aidan's nostrils before he saw the fire.

His legs were running before his brain had chance to figure out which direction he needed.

Fire raced down the houses, swallowing anything in its path. A giant shadow swarmed over his head.

Aidan slide out of the training house and swerved out of the way of the collapsing building opposite. He didn’t regret his decision to leave because seconds later, a burst of flames devoured the training house. The blast threw him into the side wall of a creaking house. He coughed and choked on the black smoke that tasted like razor blades. Crawling on his hands and knees, Aidan looked up at the dark sky.

“Valars help us.”

He scampered to his feet and set off running away. He had only heard stories of the cold drakes haunting the skies. The dragon swooping over the hunter homeland was humongous. Its wingspan cast a shadow on half the village.

But the cold drake dragon did not breathe fire. Its iron-hard snow white scales, wicked claws and piercing fangs made it a terrifying sight but the dragons had lost their fire long ago. Regardless of what Aidan thought was impossible, the dragon rained down fire upon the land.

In his haste around a corner, he ran straight into Petvog. They collided in a flailing of arms and legs.

“I thought cold drakes lost their fire long ago!”

He shouted above the roar of burning and collapsing buildings.

“It is not just a cold drake!”

“Then what in the Valars’ name is it?”

*Are we having fun yet, survivor? You wanted to come home, did you not? Here is your home. Is it you, Elisa? For a second there, I thought I thought you were your father.*
“That was a low blow.” Elisa said from behind gritted teeth.

The demon chuckled, an evil sound if Aidan had ever heard one.

*What are you going to do now, hunters? Are you going to hunt my dragon like hunters of old? My whore likes the flames but, then again, so do all sickly children. Will you allow her to lead you to your deaths like she did to poor Darren and Leon?*

Aidan pulled Elisa out of the way of a path of flames. The entire world seemed alive with fire. The heat was unbearable yet Elisa showed no sign that she was affected. She nodded in silence thanks to Aidan and leaned against the alleyway’s wall to catch her breath.

“What is Daethel?”

“She was going for the prison last I saw here, on the other side of village. I doubt she will still be there now.”

Elisa nodded, balling her hands into fists and peeked around the corner.

“She will go for the armoury!”

“How do you know?”

“Because that is what I would do! The quickest way-”

“Is if we keep to the left.” Aidan remembered.

The dragon’s shadow grew closer. Elisa gave Petvog a harsh shove out of the alleyway. He wasn’t responding well, but then again Elisa was the only hunter who had seen a dragon’s wrath before. She guarded their back as Aidan and Petvog ran ahead of her. The path blurred below her as she felt sudden warmth in her bones. The steady thump of her footsteps echoed in her ears and a bead of sweat rolled down her forehead. Death gave chase and Elisa felt heat lick her back.

A crash of fire scorched the path between her and the other two hunters. She had a second warning to grind to a halt before flames claimed the road in front of her. The sudden stop almost sent her crashing.

Petvog stared at her through the flames.

“Get to the armour! I will find another way!”

She shouted. The boy didn’t move, glaring at her with a mixture of fear and desperation. His arm was outstretched as if waiting for her to jump through the flames and join him.

The distance between them might as well have been never-ending.

A roar bought them both out of their private worlds. Elisa’s head shot up as the dragon’s shadow swept along the sky.

“Go! I will meet you there!”

“Find us again!” The flames spat out at both of them. When Elisa looked over her shoulder as she
ran, there was no sign of Petvog.

She didn’t know why she felt alone as her home was on fire.

The king’s scouts saw the flames before they saw the massive open gates.

A massive mushroom cloud of smoke bellowed from the village guarded by the gates. It was impossible to see the houses through the smoke and flames. The world past the doors was on fire. A terrifying screech came from beyond the gates. The scouts hurried back to the king’s party. The dozen soldiers had already seen the flames.

King Thranduil, riding his fierce battle elk, listened to their report without interest.

“My lord, two gates mark the path onwards. The village inside is burning.”

“So it would seem. Can you tell me anything I cannot already see? If not, then move out of my way before I separate your misery head from your shoulders.”

The scouts hurried out of the king’s line of sight.

*My game does not involve you, king of the Woodland elves.*

It was the same voice which had claimed credit for the attack on his kingdom.

The demon Elisa hunted.

The hunt she had betrayed him to follow.

*Would you like to see how far the mighty have fallen? Come see the corpse of your lover’s home. See the destruction she has bought.*

The only thing Elisa could hear was the roar of a blazing fire and her harsh breathing. Her legs pumped and her arms stayed tight by her sides. The fire was everywhere. Her homeland was in ashes and beyond redemption now. The only thing she could do was survive.

Then an idea struck her. Still trembling, she staggered to the closest house and stumbled onto the wall. Sweat stung her eyes and she wiped her face on her arm. The wall was scorching to the touch
and she instinctually shot away from it. Her face burned yet her arms were icy cold. She swiped her sword back into its holster. She dug her fingers into the bricks, trying to ignore the hiss of burning, and launched up the wall. Fear quickened her step. The jagged bricks tore her skin and pressed against her armour. Her fingers didn’t move right and a sickly amount of blood trailed down her arms and dripped off her elbow. A faint cry left her throat sore from the smoke. She gripped the edge of the roof and hauled her body up, rolled onto her side and coughed violently.

Her legs gave out on her twice before she managed to continue running on the slanted roofs. She leapt from one house to another where the fire had yet to touch. Ringing refused to leave her ears. A distant, muffled scream came from down below. She through the air and landed on the roof opposite.

The dragon’s shadow swooped down.

Elisa twisted her sword free of its holster. She waited, chest heaving and entire body shaking, till the terrifying dragon came into sight.

With a strangled cry, Elisa ran to the edge of the roof and leapt through the air. Her arms and legs flailed through the air. She stayed suspended in the air until gravity kicked in. She was thrown down, landing on the dragon’s moonstone coloured wing. She thrust her blade in to the hilt. Her arm grieved under the effort. The muscles coiled under the scales and the dragon released a savage shriek which made Elisa want to curl up and press her hands into her ears. The heaving mass of flesh and scales danced in and out of its destruction as it struggled to shake off its attacker.

Flames spat out at Elisa’s face and arms but she held tight to the sword hilt. She dare not loosen her grip. The drop would cripple her, if not kill her. She prayed a silent thanks to William the beast who had carved her armour and also taught her the weakness in cold drakes armour.

The dragon glided through the sky in an awe inspiring display of vicious grace. The tiny figure riding its wing was hardly visible. A smudge of black on the vast moonstone display.

Elisa held tight with all her strength. Then, as the dragon shuddered, the sword loosened enough that she dragged it down the wingspan.

The pained cry it released was deafening.

The sword tore across the dragon’s wingspan. The beast lurched the its side and Elisa saw its plan. Narrowly avoiding the healer’s house now alive with a blaring fire, Elisa’s tiny form was thrown into the air. Her sword still lodged in the dragon’s wing, Elisa was thrown through the air like a ragdoll. She quickly fiddled with her belt trying to grab her daggers. The dragon realised too late the launch had sent her further up its back. She felt the cold touch of her blades as she straddled the dragon’s spine.

Using the knives as grips, Elisa climbed along the tough scaled back torturously slow.

She focused on breathing, on avoiding the flames as much as she could, anything except the daunting task ahead of her.

The world beyond the gates, like the scouts had predicted, was on fire. All life had murdered in the
smoke and flames. In the distance, he could see thick grey smoke billowing into the skies. The once pale blue sky was shielded by a veil of darkness as the smoke swallowed up the whole sky. A glorious village reduced to ash. He had only seen this much destruction when he had fought the great Serpents of the North. His hand ghosted over his ring finger looking for the ring he knew was no longer there. It was no mystery who had stolen it. The only person who could have had shared his bed the night before.

He covered his mouth and nose with a handkerchief drenched in alcohol and glanced up at the sky, where every other set of eyes seemed to be looking.

It was then he saw the bloodcurdling serpent crashing into the village.

He didn’t see the tiny figure struggling to keep her balance.

He didn’t see her stab her dagger into the creature’s glaring eye over and over again till the creature plummeted into the fire it had created.

He only saw the result. The burning. The devastation. The final destruction of the hunter homeland.

The blood red eye made a sickening squashing sound when Elisa pierced her dagger into it. She kept stabbing, grunting from the stain, until the beast released one last boisterous roar and collapsed from the sky. Her best efforts to stay upright failed and soon the hunter was flying through the air again.

Only this time, she didn’t land gracefully. The dragon was pummelling to the ground as an alarming speed, the only thing to break its fall the burning roofs of destroyed houses, and Elisa was falling with it.

Her only choice was to choose one of the burning buildings.

Petvog had seen the entire slaying. He stood frozen to the spot, jaw slack and eyes widened.

“Wow.” He finally gasped.

The word didn’t seem to cover the event he had just witnessed. Elisa had been a force of nature. She had torn the dragon apart like it had been a target practice. He had never seen anything as unbelievable in his entire life.

But he had seen her crash into the centre of the burning village too. The weakened buildings and blazing fire absorbed the dragon as well as Elisa’s tiny form.

“Sh-she is okay, right?” Petvog turned towards the senior hunter. Aidan didn’t say anything but he knew Petvog wanted to say yes.

The corpse of the dragon parted the fire. To make matters worse, he saw the first glimpses of an entire army marching through the open gates at the hilltop of the village.

He knew little of the elven kingdom but could take a guess what they would think of hunters. He
grabbed a handful of Petvog’s shirt and dragged him away from his staring.

“Wait! I think I see something!”

The younger man struggled out of Aidan’s hold.

Both turned towards the flames raging in front of them.

If he had heard it from someone else, Aidan would have laughed and called them insane.

Yet, there she was.

Walking out from the inferno as if the flames couldn’t touch her.

The tiny figure strolled out of the fire and stopped in front of them. Cuts decorated her hands and arms in tiny red welts. Her fingers were scorched, armour covered in soot, hair dyed black from charring. Still gripping her daggers in each hand, Elisa Riding stood alive despite the odds. In one hand, she held her sword still coating in dragon blood.

“Shall we go before I get arrested?” She smiled. Her bottom lip was sliced open but her smile was still as disarming as always.

Petvog could only point at the army gathering on the hillside.

“Oh, look! The elves are here! Are they here to help us?”

His brain couldn’t gather the words to say anything intelligent. A brief flicker of pain crossed her features and she doubled over choking. She spat out a mouthful of blood and was right back to being untouchable.

“I saw them, my friend. I believe I am about to be arrested again. Shall we go kill a demon instead?”

Petvog opened and closed his mouth. He was still staring at the elven army.

“I do not think they are here to help us. Y-you just killed a dragon!”

“Now you want to kill a demon?” Aidan finished as much as awe as worry. “Most people would space out those activities.”

“We pop in, kill the demon, and tell the King we did a wonderful job because we are on his side.”

“B-but you killed a dragon! A huge dragon! You killed a dragon that breathed fire!”

Elisa ignored him and began running again. Petvog continued trying to understand what had happened and what was happening. It was harder not to focus on the fire raging around them now they didn’t have a dragon to distract them. Locus had remained suspiciously quiet the entire time.

“I have seen the resistance of the human spirit, but by the Valars, how are you alive?” Aidan asked as they dodged by the ruins of houses and buildings.

“By great determination.”

They stopped dead in their tracks.

A crackling fire blazed where the armoury once stood. The dragon’s death had not come in time to prevent it from destroying everything in its path. The building was mess ready to collapse at any
second. There was no way anyone breathing could still be inside.

“Daethel.” Aidan whispered.

Elisa looked down at her ruined hands rather than the gloomy wreck of a building.

“There is still hope. She might not have made it here in time. She could still-”

Aidan turned round to her and with as much venom as he could manage, spat out:

“Do not tell me about hope! This was not the demon that I was hunting. This was not our fight! Why did you bring death here? This land had seen enough despair.”

Elisa kept her head down. “I am sorry, my friend. I thought I was giving us freedom.”

Aidan scoffed cruelly. “Freedom is chaos with better lighting. I hope your revenge was worth it. Daethel's blood is on your hands.”

Elisa couldn’t take their judging stares and hate filled words any more. She swirled around and wiped away the pathetic tears that threatened to spill.

Petvog was the one to place a hand on her arm.

“I do not blame you, Elisa. As far as I am concerned, you saved us. You just killed a dragon for us.”

She choked on half laughter, half sob. “Are you not going to get over that?”

“Are we about to be taken by elves?” Aidan interrupted.

“I do not presume to know the minds of elves, Petvog, but I would rather not be here when they come.”

“What about Jaces? Now Daethel is… gone.”

“We do what we do best- we hunt. The army will split into two. They will keep only a few guards on the gate. Kill them if you must but you leave now. I will provide a distraction. Do not wait for me. The elves will show no mercy to you.”

Aidan met her eyes. Something akin to regret flashed in his beautiful eyes. In an instance, Elisa forgave his harsh words. She could perish in the flames and she would not die angry at one of the few hunters alive. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed a gentle kiss to his cheek.

“If I do not see either of you again, please stay safe. I fear this land will see more death yet.”

She kissed both hunters and watched them disappear into the flames.

Chapter End Notes

Please forgive this, I haven’t had time to edit it and the details might be a bit sketchy. I
hope you like it :)

The Pure Ones

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Elisa couldn’t stop her hands shaking.

She kept her arms at her sides but the shaking, the gentle taps against her thighs, wouldn’t stop. At least the blood had stopped. She didn’t want to examine her wounds till she was finished. She had bigger problems, judging by the buildings burning on either side of her.

The pain got worse as she neared the mansion. She gritted her teeth and pulled her left arm against her chest protectively.

*Your King is here. It appears your sister had more sense then you gave her credit for.*

“It would appear so.” She said trying to hold in her surprise.

*Do you want to hear another tale, Elisa?*

“No.” She spat out.

*No? Not enough your own tale? Do you not want to know why I chose you, my sweet one? I know how many sleepless nights you spent wondering why you survived and not them.*

“I would not believe a word of your filthy lies!”

*Then would you, king of the Woodland elves? Good, then I shall tell you. I do enjoy telling stories. Many years ago, before dwarves were even created, the Valar created Pure Ones. There were 12 beautiful and perfect humans who served their Makers. Each Valar made one in their image. They were immortal and created in the image of the Valars Unfortunately, as is in human nature, the*
Pure Ones began to want more. They wanted more power. They wanted to become Valars instead of serving under them. So they were cast away from their makers and forced to live the rest of their immoral lives forever stumbling in the dark.

“Yes, tragic.”

The Pure Ones became known as the Dark Ones. They consorted with demons under the cloak of night and conspired to bring death upon the elves, who had gained the favour of the Valars. Namo, the judge of the dead, listened to the stories of their victims. He saw the tortured victims and the monsters the Pure Ones had turned into. Unable, or perhaps unwilling, to kill his beloved creation, Namo sentenced the 12 to sleep eternally buried at separate corners of the world. If they ever awoke, they would raise their offspring, hunters, to their original purpose - to bring death and destruction. I could not allow this to happen, Elisa.

Elisa couldn’t ignore the haunting voice as it followed her past the mansion’s gates. Somehow, the building had avoided the dragon’s wrath and remained completely intact, besides a few scorch marks on the grass.

She shouldered open the front door and stepped into the house.

The sound of desperate fighting echoed down the stairs. Her head shot up to the dancing figures on the third floor.

Daethel, I believe. She is useless. Go show her how a true survivor fights.

Elisa laughed in relieve at seeing the familiar head of brown hair. Her arms were flying around as she fought and if Elisa had been less happy to see her she would have lectured her about it. She fled up the stairs, taking two at a time, and slide to a halt besides the she-elf.

“Daethel! I thought you were dead!”

“Your conclusion might prove to be right yet!”

She ducked under the flying fist of a pale skinned creature with slashing claws. There must have been half a dozen of Locus’ creatures. It was obvious Daethel hadn’t been practicing her hunter training. Her punches were sent wide and her body was straight instead of twisted, providing the creatures more room to aim.

Elisa grabbed one of the creatures before it could get its claws on the she-elf and twisted its neck to an unnatural angle. There was a limp to Daethel’s steps.

Seeing the she-elf injured more than she was, Elisa took the brute of the fight and grabbed most of the attention. She easily defeated the creatures. Halfway through the fight, Daethel tripped and knocked into her, letting a creature get in a kick to her stomach. She was sure Daethel was working against her. She flipped to her feet and in a blur of movement threw Daethel out of the way and
punched the creature in the throat.

Once the creatures were dead, Elisa turned to Daethel. The elf ripped off a piece of fabric from one of the creatures and tied it tightly around her knee.

“You should sit down and apply pressure.”

“I could say the same for you.”

She leaned against the bannister before her legs gave out and she fell with an ‘umph’. Elisa kneeled and examined the wound on her knee.

“You are in good fortune, my friend. The wound is a puncture but does not appear deep or infected. Did a creature bite you?”

“No.” She paused as if the memory of it hurt more than the actual wound. “I tripped on the stairs and one of them caught me with a knife.”

Elisa raised her eyebrow. “Well, these stairs are treacherous.”

She groaned, face red with embarrassment. “Was that the King of Mirkwood I saw looking rather angry? How did they even enter our homeland?”

“I would guess Locus, the demon here, would have something to do with their presence. As for the King looking angry, that will be because I may or may not have committed treason before coming here. I am willing to say this day has been a disaster.”

Daethel closed her eyes and shook her head. The two hunters, both damaged and scarred in their own right, shared a brief moment of companionship. The hunter bonds went deeper than any hatred or jealousy.

“I will hold them off for as long as I can. Go do what needs to be done.”

She took Elisa’s place applying pressure to the wound and hobbled to standing. Elisa held out her hand to help but Daethel shook her head.

“Do not let our homeland’s sacrifice be for nothing.”

Jaces sped out of the room and ran down the hallway faster than a human should be able to move. She wiped the thin cling of sweat from her forehead and ducked underneath grabbing cobwebs. She bounced off a wall and took a sharp left down an identical hallway. The mansion’s labyrinth had been imprinted on her childhood memories. She ran past the rooms unwanted ‘guests’ had been kept. Finally, she found the room she needed. The hallway branched off with several narrow pathways. The corridors were too narrow to fit two people through at once. She closed her eyes and swallowed her doubt.

Jaces’ frame barely fit down the corridor. She shuffled along slowly. She waved the cobwebs and unsettled dust out of her way without a second thought.
The corridor spat her out into a massive library. The books were unrecognisable through the layers of grim and dirt which covered them. Dust concealed mirrors besides the smell of mildew and the stale air being overwhelming. It had been too long since someone admired the glory of the hunter history.

In the middle of the floor, a glass case stood proudly on display. Shafts of light seemed to stream past the heavy velvet curtains guarding the library and cast shadows on the glass. Under the protection of the case was the object Jaces had risked everything for. She had abandoned her hunt for vengeance once she discovered what power lay abandoned in her homeland. Looking for vengeance had been selfish and pointless.

Around the glass case was the ritual Jaces had already set up. The bloody symbols in a circle and the necessary ancient books she had killed for. The only light came from the candles lit, giving the room an otherworldly feel.

Jaces took her place standing before the glass case, in the middle of the ritual circle.

A sharp cut through the air directly in front of her stopped her movements. The glistening blade pressed against her throat. She closed her eyes as the cold weapon kissed her skin. The hold was tight enough to draw blood but not enough to do any serious damage.

Only one person could creep up on Jaces. She chuckled darkly and ran her middle finger along the glistening blade. It was a fine sword, worthy of its owner."

“Do not make me do this, old friend.”

“Is this what our kingdom has resorted to? Our home, our once powerful empire, is the home has fallen to neglect. Our kin slaughtered by demons.”

A thin trail of blood dripped down Jace’s neck as the blade pressed closer.

“You are my oldest and dearest friend. How could you betray us like this?”

Jaces scoffed. “How can you speak of betrayal, king’s mistress?”

The hissed insult served its purpose and Elisa flinched.

“Was this your purpose all along? The village was clever, I will give you. It almost led me astray. I forgot how hunters used manipulation. Tell me, friend, what did the Guardians have to say?”

Jaces eyed the glass case suspiciously. She could see the outline of the last needed piece of the ritual. It would fit perfectly in her hand but she knew one wrong movement would lead Elsa to slitting her throat. Hunters were not good with sudden movements.

“So you know about the Dark Ones. Our ancestry was not as simple as our tutors would have had us believe.”

“Nothing good could come from awaken those monsters.”

“We are all monsters!” She curled back her lip in a sneer, revealing bloody gums. “All creatures, races, have their monsters. We are Middle Earth's monsters. What happened to you? Did your demon turn up after all?”

“You should know. You were the one who bound us here, were you not? Tell me, friend, how many lives did you take to use the spell?”
"Not as many as you would think. They were all weak humans anyway." She casually shrugged. "How many have you killed, Elisa? Do you remember that village that sheltered the traitor hunter? How many women and children did you kill simply because they got in the way? The only thing that has changed is you. These weak human lives still mean nothing."

Elisa let a single tear roll down her face, cutting a path down her pale skin and landing on the floor. "This is not you, Jaces."

"You hardly know me! We spent all our childhood together but we had completely different childhoods. Your father allowed you everything! All you had to do was bat your pretty eyes and you could have the world served to you on a silver platter! Your tutors did not withhold anything from you that you wished to learn. I did not have parents to dot upon me, nor did most of the other hunters. The tutors beat us down like animals and made us into whatever hunter we were 'destined' to be." Jaces pressed forward but Elisa didn't move. A trickle of blood ran down her skin. "After we were beaten, you would come to us like a spirit made of light with your tales of freedom and hunting monsters. You were held on a pedestal as the perfect hunter. But it mattered not when the demons came for us. Not when they came for you too. They have beaten us down but they cannot kill us."

Elisa kept her sword pressed against her friend’s throat. "I am not willing to sacrifice everything good about hunters to save them."

"Look around you, Elisa!" She boomed. "Our homeland has been destroyed! Elves are in our home! Our kin, your parents, have been murdered by demons to prevent us from awakening those who wish to return us to our former glory!"

Footsteps fell behind them. The corridor was too narrow to fit the entire army down at once but they were quickly flooding the room. "Examine the markings." Jaces calmly announced, keeping her eyes forward.

Elisa pressed her dagger into Jaces back in case she decided to try anything while she scrutinised the markings scattered around the room. They were words, in the original hunter language she knew Jaces could not read. They were engraved in the floor long before Elisa and Jaces had arrived. They glowed slightly underneath the layer of dust. Jaces knew just enough magic to activate the wards. And, like anything to do with hunters, they didn’t react well to anyone besides hunters.

"Stop! Do not move."

"Do you think your voice holds authority still, whore?"

The harsh bite to Thranduil’s words sent her reeling back as if he had psychically hit her. She wanted to run to him, to tell him she was sorry she stop Locus and sorry she had caused nothing but devastation but the emptiness in his eyes told her she would not be welcome in his arms anymore.

I should have given up when I had been rescued by the wizard, she thought grimly.

The man she thought could heal her finally looked at her with disguise. Her sword felt heavy in her hand. The tip of her dagger bit into Jaces’ skin.

She swallowed down her dread. She didn’t turn around. If she did, she feared she would give up all together and willingly submit to whatever punishment the elves had for traitors if it meant she had a chance to earn the King’s affections back.
“The markings circling Jaces and I are ancient wards. If anyone besides a hunter steps into the circle, they will be killed. If you do not believe me then step in yourself, your majesty.”

Jaces rolled her head back despite the blade pressing into her throat.

“I will never understand your bleeding heart, Elisa. I would have let them learn by trial and error. Elves always irritated me.”

“They are no part of this.”

“Join me, Elisa. We can easily wipe out the king’s army here. After all, no one kills like us.”

“You will not touch them!” Protectiveness crept into her voice.

“I see why you like him.” She tilted her head back to meet the King’s glare. “You are beautiful. Not Elisa beautiful but still beautiful.”

The hum of bow strings being pulled back rang through the library. Amongst them was Legolas’ arrow aimed at her head and Tauriel’s arrow aimed at Jaces.

“The same script, different characters.” Jaces hummed. “if you join me, Elisa, we can reclaim our homeland. Do you not see it? We can be among the Valars! Our creators are waiting for us! We need to do this, Elisa!”

Elisa didn’t realise she was crying till she felt the fat wet drops on her cheeks. She couldn’t stop them. It made her look weak and if her father had been there he would have beaten her. But he wasn’t. He was dead because demons had discovered the plot to awaken the Dark Ones.

Elisa shook her head. “So much death.” She whispered.

“There has been too much death. But we can correct this. You can still make it right. You can help me. Elisa, my dearest friend, stay here with me and help me awaken the Pure Ones.”

“They will not help us.” She insisted. "They will bring with them only death. They have been buried for ages, stewing in their own madness. Even before then, they consorted with demons and wanted to slaughter the elves. This place turned us bloodthirty. I know what you went through, Jaces. I know what it was like being alone without someone to help control the violence and the nightmares but you cannot condone consorting with the creatures which devastated our homeland.”

“The demons did that because they feared the Pure Ones’ power! How can you not see what I see?”

Elisa shook her head, unable to see what her friend had become. Her chest ached and tingled like a stone was crushing her heart. Her hand shook and every urge in her just wanted to put the dagger down. It felt betraying to hold a knife to a hunter's back. Worse, it felt cowardly.

“You used to be the one true thing in my world. My dearest friend, do you not trust me?”

“How many more sacrifices would you make to awaken the Dark Ones?”

“As many as it took!” She snapped. “Sacrifices are necessary: you used to know this before you grew weak and submissive.”

She dropped her sword, and desperation was in her voice now. The blade still wet with the blood of a dragon and Locus’ creatures clang on the stone floor. It spun for an unreasonable amount of time before it fell.
“I beg of you, my friend, come back off this course. It is not too late. I still remember the girl who insisted on going on hunts with me in case I was eaten by orcs, even though you could have led your own hunt. The hunter I know would never kill innocents.”

“It was always going to come to this, Elisa. You do not believe your own words. Unless someone cares an awful lot, it is not going to get better. It is not.”

“Please, Jaces. I cannot lose another friend.”

The woman did not hear Elisa’s words anymore.

“I do this for us. I wish you could see that everything I do is for the hunters.”

She closed her eyes and bowed her head. Words left her lips in a drill tone. Her chanting stringed together poison words. The w symbols around the women began to warm and glow. Jaces’ chanting became louder.

Thranduil issued an order to Elisa but it didn’t go far. It would not be long before they broke the magic preventing them from entering the circle. A sob caught in Elisa’s throat.

Her chanting was memorising; vile words spoken in a language only Elisa knew.

Words which had been drilled into her as a child. When she would cover her ears and cry, the words would get louder.

She saw Leon, the sweet boy who had picked her flowers and danced with her under the moonlight to music only they could hear. She saw Darren, who had head-butted her the first time they had met and had nursed her back to health when she had been ill.

Then she saw her homeland covered in blood and dust.

She saw demons laughing and blinding spirits of light tearing hunters apart limb by limb.

“I am sorry, old friend.”

It was odd how the room seemed to freeze in time. The things she noticed in the end.

Jaces’ chant ceased mid-word.

Thranduil didn’t command anything.

Elisa’s fist didn’t loosen around the knife.

The blade hung in between Jaces’ ribs but Elisa did not release her grip.

Her friend frowned and glanced down at the crimson flower blooming on her shirt as if she didn’t believe it was actually her blood.

Elisa collapsed to her knees, knife still in her friend’s back, and let the tears fall freely.

Jaces’ eyes glassed over. Life slipped through her fingers like grains of sand. She gasped desperately for life, to whisper the last words of her chant, but her body no longer responded to her calls. She hovered, her body swaying lightly. She crawled around and turned to see the tear stained face of her murderer.

She opened her mouth but no words came out. Jaces never said anything ever again.
Elisa sat back on her hunches and cradled Jaces to her chest. She held her friend’s body, crying silently, and rocked. Her blood stained her armour and hands. She rocked backwards and forward, whispering that she was sorry.

The knife was still in Jaces' back when the circle's wards were destroyed. Two soldiers tried to take the body away from her. She didn't care who it was. She growled and clutched Jaces' body closer.

"No! No, you do not get to touch her! You do not get her! She... she just wanted someone to save her from the darkness and I could not save her. She was my only friend and I could not save her. Please, tell me this is all another bad night terror. I will wake up any moment now and she will be in her bed next to mine." She cried out loudly. "Why did you do this, you silly girl?"

She stayed with her until Thranduil ordered three gaurds to take the body away. Elisa cried and fought them. She punched and kicked, anything to get her friend away. She hated elves. she would not want her body handled by them even...

It hit her hard that her friend was dead.

She collapsed to her knees completely spent. A warm set of arms wrapped around her and she cried in the King's embrace. He stroked her hair as she buried her head in his chest. And he let her cry. He let her grieve. For then, it was all she needed.

Chapter End Notes

It's bad that I cried writing this but it's 2 am so forgive me.

-Al
"You look like an elf."

"I am supposed to look like an elf. That is the entire idea."

"Well, it is a stupid idea. It will never work."

*Elisa crossed her arms over her chest. She didn’t think she looked so bad in her latest disgust.*

"Jaces, it will work. Have I ever been wrong in my plans?"

*The 15 year old girl rolled her eyes and sighed heavily.*

"The time you tried to steal a manuscript from the archives."

"That was a complete success." Elisa insisted.

"We had to jump from the roof into a frozen lake and then were on the run for two days until our tutors found us and had us beaten to within an inch of our lives."

"Did I get the manuscript? Yes so I count that as a success. Are you coming or not?"

"Fine but I am not happy about it and will complain the entire way."

Elisa’s tears soaked the King’s cloak. He held her against his chest, silently accepting her grieve. Elisa clung desperately to him as the ritual was taken apart piece by piece.

Two rough hands grabbed her and yanked her away from the comforting embrace. She was taken back by the sudden emptiness and tried to lean back into the King’s arms. He could piece her together again, she was sure. He could make the dreadful feeling at the bottom of her stomach do away.

Thranduil, alarmingly calm, searched her tear stained eyes for something she could not name.

“I warned you what would come if you did not listen.”

She broke away from his grasp and kneeled next to her friend.

The woman, so troubled while alive, looked peaceful in death. Her eyes were closed and if Elisa tried, she could pretend her friend was just sleeping. She placed Jaces’ hands in hers and placed a
warm kiss on her palms.

“May you find the peace in the next life you could not find here.” She whispered before folding her friend’s hands over her still chest.

She stood up and strode over to the glass case.

“She led me here because I am the only hunter still alive who knows the original hunter tongue.”

Legolas separated himself from the crowd of soldiers and stood next to her. The open book under the cover was made from dry animal skin. Or she hoped it was animal skin. In neat lines across the pages were elegant words in a language the elves had never seen before. He couldn’t help his curiosity.

“This language is known to you?”

She blinked slowly as she scanned the pages. “You would not want to hear it and I would not want to taste the words.”

“I did not know her but she give us aid once. Any friend of yours would have been a noble warrior. I am sorry I did not know her the way you did.”

Elisa nodded in acceptance of the empty condolences. She glanced over her shoulder as her friend’s body was taken away.

“Please, my lord, do not move my friend from her homeland.”

Thranduil refused before the words were fully out of her mouth.

“I have no more favours to give you. The human’s death is regrettable but predictable.”

“Jaces.” Elisa turned to face the king. “The human’s name was Jaces.”

_How sad to see one little princess dead. That makes two now._

The soldiers, much to their credit, no longer seemed fazed by the booming voice of a demon. Elisa was only tired.

“Daethel is alive. The hunters escaped. You failed, demon.”

_Did I? Where are your hunters now?_

She bit her lip and turned towards Thranduil.

“On the way here, there was a she-elf. Did you see her?”

“We did not pass anyone.”

“That is impossible! She was injured but she was alive!”
When you are ready to save your hunters, you know where to find me.

Elisa pleaded, “I have to save them, Thranduil.”

“Do not dare to address your ruler in such manner!”

The coldness in his voice was unmistakable. She would not be laughing her way out of there. The elves would not help her this time.

“The demon called and its harlot came running.” Thranduil scolded. “Behold, the consequences of disobey your king.”

She looked up and he caught a last flicker of sadness before she it was hidden behind a stolid mask. The venom returned. Her smile was sardonic, yet her eyes held a glint of humour.

“Do what it right by your people, your majesty, but I warn you not ignore the threats of the demon.”

She spun on her heels and was back again at the glass case.

“These books contain the spells, history, family lines, and training of the hunters. Every hunter born has their name written in this book. My name is here too besides Aidan. The spells were too powerful, too dangerous, so they were locked away. My father boasted hunters did not resort to spells. Magic was the tricks of elves and wizards. Hunters used the shadows instead of enchantment and blades rather than magic. The hunters did not have healing powers. They knew dark magic. They knew blood rituals.” She smile down at the book. “They knew demon bindings.”

When she lifted her head again, Thranduil was not looking into his lover’s eyes. Her eyes held no warmth or sadness, only emptiness and cruelty.

She curled around words in the foreign language he could only guess was her mother tongue. In a flash of movement, Elisa dropped to the floor and grabbed her sword. She twisted the blade across her pale wrist and launched the sword through the glass case.

The glass shattered in a web of shards and exploded in a million pieces. Two guards captured her but it was too late.

A breeze swept through the room. The candle light flickered in an attempt to plunge the rom into darkness.

Elisa held her hands up in mock surrender to the guards surrounding her position. Regardless of her peace offering, the first guard slammed her head against the book’s display covered in broken glass. The sharp shards dug into her skin but she had bigger worries.

The king of the woodland elves and Elisa’s personal worst nightmare took a long look around the destroyed room before he turned his attention to her. Immediately, she felt her insides go cold.

“What have you done?”

Her tongue cut on a small piece of glass that had somehow worked its way into her mouth. The salty and bitter taste hung behind her teeth. “I am sorry, your majesty, but I not let my friend’s death and my homeland’s destruction be for nothing.”
He stroked a loose curl of hair away from her cut cheek which was pointless because one of the guards still held her face pressed into the glass shards.

"Stop for a moment. I think she has an explanation." He ordered calmly to the guard. Elisa felt the pressure release slightly but she still wasn’t getting anywhere soon.

“What have you done, little temptress?” He pronounced slowly, the threat in his words clear.

“I have levelled out the battlefield.” She stated. “Jaces only knew the spell to bind hunters to the homeland but my father taught me to treat spells with respect. I have taken away the option of negotiation for you, your majesty. I bound Locus and his creature here with my own blood. I am bound here with them. Now, either one or the other can leave. If I am to die here, I will take the demon down with me.”

On her words, savage howls echoed down the corridors. The calls of Locus’ creatures. The sound of fighting. Elisa’s humourless laughter.

“Is has a certain desperation to it, does it not? I do not wish harm to the elves. If you permit Locus to live this day, it will certainly strike Mirkwood again. Are you willing to risk the lives of your kin?”

“What would you have me do?”

“Throw me to the demon instead. I know where it will be.”

“This will not end well for you, Neotis.”

“It was never going to end any other way. I will fight till it is over. It is getting cold in here: Locus is closing in on us. The closer he gets, the more time you allow it to plot. What will you do, my king?”

Chapter End Notes

It's such a short chapter, but I need to figure out how to put the next one in words. It's in my mind somewhere, I swear. Bear with me here lol!

-Al
If Elisa had had any inkling as to what a demon plotted in its spare time, she wouldn’t have been surprised to have been attacked the moment she was shoved out of the library.

Thranduil had the sense to leave a couple of guards stationed outside the narrow corridor leading to the library but they were quickly overwhelmed. Elisa would have helped but her hands were bound with rope and a sword prodded her back.

She recognised the deranged look of the half dead creatures, fangs like daggers and rags hanging over their dangly frames. It was odd to think that somewhere along the line they had been human. She almost felt sorry for them until one launched to rip her throat out.

While leading the attack, Legolas also had Elisa unceremoniously thrown at him. Since witnessing her grieving bitterly over her friend’s betrayal and death, Legolas wasn’t sure what to make of her. She looked to be on the brink of tears again but she remained frustratingly coy. Legolas was a skilled fighter, one of the best besides Thranduil, but even he was amazed by the hunter. Taking her out of the battle was not because of protection. Thranduil was punishing her. He didn’t join Elisa as she was taken away, instead choosing to stay in the library and examine the foreign spells and ritual.

“I can *feel* your eyes burning into my back, my prince.” She said pointedly without turning around.

“Are you well, Elisa?”

He wasn’t sure how much of the blood on her armour was hers but the burns on her hands couldn’t have been comfortable.

“I’m annoyed and slightly ill.” Dear Valar, the day was verging on ridiculous. She might have been stubborn, but she knew when she was outnumbered. Legolas quickly freed the two guards from their attacker, after pushing Elisa out of the creature’s sights.

She had taken Thranduil’s option away, yes, but she had also taken away her own. It was strange seeing Thranduil, who she had last see staring down at her with raw desire, look only disguised and concerned. He was worried about his people’s welfare. Good. She hoped he left her there amongst the burning memories of her home. She was home. It would only be fair if she never left.

“I will just stay here then.” She said, clapping her hands together as much as she could despite her bindings. “Because apparently we just ignore the fact that a demon is roaming the village, which is still burning in case you missed it, and corpses are attacking us. This is the routine now.”

Legolas missed the irony and ignored her humour. The group stopped when they reached the stairs’
banister. Elisa peeked over the edge and smiled. There must have been a dozen creatures waiting to attack. She waved and went back to her escort of guards. She counted the guards and compared them to the creatures.

“14, 15, 16, 17… armed and against only a dozen creatures. Good.”

In the final seconds, Elisa took a moment to smirk across the prince.

Then the explosion rocked the mansion.

Guards swarmed by a whistling Elisa to escape the shaking building and dispatch the attacking creatures before they had a slim chance to reach the king. She had seen it too many times. People rushed to panic, to run and escape the heat. People swarmed past him to run away, the wind from the smashed windows hitting them as they battled. She could ignore the first sound of the blast though it was unnaturally loud for one moment, but the panic that responded caused her ears to hurt.

As soon as a soldier went to rush past (she had noticed all elves thought her less of a threat when her hands were bound which was a mistake they never learn from) to guard the king’s position; Elisa forgave tripping over her own feet. The soldier instinctually steps forward and placed a hand on her shoulder: his first mistake.

With a sickening crunch, the back of her head smashed into his nose. The sudden pain caught him and his nose splutters blood down his shiny white armour. She twisted around quickly and wrapped the rope chain attaching her hands together around the second soldier’s throat. In a split moment she knotted the chain around the back of his neck and dragged him forward directly to the banister. She slammed his head hard on the wooden banister and slung him to the floor.

With a swipe of her hand, she relieved him of his sword and let his crumpled body collapse.

She grabbed the first creature from behind in an iron grip around its chest, binding its arms tight against its body, and stabbed the creature in the throat for a quick kill. She let its body drop to the ground before kicking the creature down the stairs into the elf charging up. The soldier dropped, locked underneath the creature and blood drenching his armour.

With only a skeleton prisoner escort, it was almost too easy for Elisa to escape. She wiped around and took a running jump out of the nearest shattered window. The heat made the remaining glass burning hot. She turned and waved to a stunned Legolas before she dropped.

And she was flying through the air. Her arms and legs flaying around trying to slow her fall. The breath is knocked out of her completely but it doesn’t matter because she has forgotten how to breathe. She was falling faster than she imagined. She was going to crash into the burning roof of a burning house! She shielded her arms around her head to protect her skull and screwed her eyes shut. It doesn’t stop the crushing, heart breaking pain that stabbed through her when she collided with the unforgiving wooden roof. A strangled scream broke through her lips and a few tear escaped her eyes. The entire left side of her body took the impact. A shattering splinter pierce into her side was all the warning she was given before the entire roof caved in.

Her entire body mourned the impact. She shook her head and remained winded on her back, staring at the sky she had fallen from. A gaping hole in the roof proved her entrance.

The only person who would enter a burning building rushed to her side. Daethel grabbed her burnt hand, ignoring her wince, and yanked her to her feet.
“Things did not go well with the King?”

Elisa groaned.

“Never mind. There is always next time.”

"I know a distraction was necessary, but did you have to blow up my home?"

Her armour hissed but thankfully dragon bone could take the worst fire had to offer. However, her hands weren’t fairing as well. Burns and scolding marks lined her palms and welts were showing on her neck from where the flames had lashed her.

Daethel half-carried the wounded hunter out of the building. Elisa, still trying to cough out her lungs while desperately gasping for air, accepted help up to the end of the street. Her insides felt as if they were ready to explode.

“Where is Jaces?”

Elisa leaned off Daethel and tested standing on her own feet.

“She will not be joining up from here on.”

Daethel studied the scorched ground. “I am sorry. The elves will pay for taking her away, I swear.”

Elisa scoffed. “The elves did not kill her.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I did.”

Elisa glanced behind her shoulder when she realised Daethel had stopped following her.

“How could you?” She whined in her deep mournful voice which reminded Elisa why she hated her. “How could you kill you after everything she did for us?”

“It had to be done. She was trying to awaken the Dark Ones! She would have killed us all.”

She recognised the regret in Daethel’s eyes immediately. Her sister had given her that exact look after ruing her hunt. The look of someone whose secret had got people killed.

“You already knew.”

It wasn’t a question.

Daethel hesitated and then nodded.

Elisa walked further, more to get away from anyone holding the name hunter than to follow any path.

“This is what we have come to, is it? We lie to our own kin. We do not hesitate in betraying those who lead?”

“Jaces was going to bring back those who would finally lead us out of the darkness!”

“She was going to bring nothing but death and ruin.”

“She only wanted to right the wrongs.”
“The cost would have been too high!” Elisa didn’t stop. Out of all the things, she was angrier she hadn’t been told. How long had they plotted behind her back? Did they snicker and think themselves smarter than her? Yet, when it came to the fight, they gave her leadership and pushed her ahead of them.

They were pathetic. She wanted to be far away from any hunter.

“Your father wanted this. He was planning it for decades before the demon came. Jaces was serving as his second in command, gathering subjects who were suitable to be used for the ritual.”

“Shut your filthy mouth!” Elisa snapped. “My father would never have condoned such slaughter. He would never have killed innocent people!”

“Elisa, I do not know what childhood you are remembering but your memories of your father are warped. Do you truly not remember him as he was?”

“My father was a kind and fair leader who protected his people as well as he could!”

Daethel bit her tongue but it was obvious she remembered things differently than Elisa’s.

“I am sorry we did not tell you our plan. We feared you would try to stop us.”

“Your apologies are meaningless now my friend is dead. I need to know now, hunter Daethel, whose side you will fight for.”

She stopped dead in her tracks and turned to the she-elf. Flashes of gold spun in and out of the flames. With every second they wasted the elves crept closer. Elisa would rather take her chance with a bloodthirsty demon than an elven king holding a grudge.

“I am with you, Elisa, to the end.”

Elisa turned her back on her and continued her hike. Daethel followed close on her heels, trusting her to know where she was going. She trusted her not to lead her too close to the flames.

Chapter End Notes

I'm so sorry this update has taken a few days. I've been trying to figure out how exercise works and if it should put me in pain. Hope you like the chapter! I'll work on uploading the next one today! :)
Tame your demons

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Title and lyrics from Arsonist's Lullaby by Hozier.

All you have is your fire...
And the place you need to reach -
Don't you ever tame your demons
But always keep them on a leash

The village was halfway to being raved to the ground. The once beautiful land had been devoured by flames. Overwhelming clouds of smoke stung Elisa’s eyes and clogged her throat. She couldn’t see five steps ahead of her feet but it didn’t matter. She was close. Her father had taught her the way. She had walked the grounds with him every chance she could.

Thoughts of her family haunted her as she hiked through the burning village.

She thought of her mother’s meekness and wondered if it was actual terror.

Her sister’s slyness, had it really been desperation to survive?

Had her father not been a Leader but a Dictator?

Her father used to beam with pride whenever she told him of her violent hunting trips and how her reputation was growing as an unstoppable force. She stopped in the middle of what used to be the market place and crawled beneath a fallen wooden beam. She searched the ground till her fingers caught a cold metal handle. She yanked on it and hauled the cellar door open. She stumbled down the narrow staircase, pulling Daethel down after her, and slammed the door shut.

Free now of the choking smoke and fire, both hunters took a moment to catch their breath. Elisa was the first to move. She carefully stepped down the stairs using the wall as a guide.

“Do you believe it?”

Daethel’s voice was even quieter in the dark.

“I believe in few things but I will give credit to all. What believe do you mean?”

“How our ancestry began. How the hunters were the first creatures of the Valars.”

“One moment I was trying to prevent the world going bad and a demon from overcoming Middle Earth, which was a handful already, and the next I get kicked in the head by a cold-drake. All I know is I have faced down a dragon twice now and I am done.”

Daethel pressed the handle of her silver bladed sword into Elisa’s palm. She ran her hand over the foreign weapon, puzzled at the gift.

“The demon is not here for me. It did not attack me with a dragon. Its name is Ethetis.”

Elisa’s eyebrows knitted together. “Do you even know what that means?”
“Well, it is the hunter language and I was never taught. My tutor gave me it.”

“It means compassions.” Elisa smiled despite herself. “It is not too late to change your mind. You could give up the hunter life and go somewhere warm where you will never have to worry about demons or rituals. This life does not own you the way it does me.”

Daethel chuckled. Elisa couldn’t tell if it was genuine or if she was uncomfortable.

“A life without a hunt would be boring.”

Elisa’s boots hit solid ground and she silenced her footsteps.

In the middle of the huge spacious room was a glowing light. Nothing surrounded it, no walls caged it and the dimly lit room seemed to stretch on for miles.

Daethel stared unabashed with her mouth open. Elisa tapped the bottom of her jaw and her mouth snapped closed.

“What is that creature?”

Elisa gripped both hands behind her back, hiding the sword, and bowed before the glowing light.

“It is a Guardian of the North. Do not meet its eyes and do not speak unless spoken to. They can be temperamental creatures.”

Another figure appeared on the opposite side of the room. a figure made of shadows weaved into a man’s form yet claws like an eagle’s.

“Elisa!” Daethel hissed. “The demon-”

“I see it, Daethel. Do not move. It hangs in the balance right now.” She ordered carefully, never taking her eyes of the Guardian.

By their side further to the left were two friendlier faces. The hunters she had warned to run clearly had not got far. Petvog’s face lightened and he made to run for her. She held up her hand to stop him. Right then, she couldn’t offer shelter.

“Everyone needs to stay where they are.”

“Elisa, there is something else here! Please, you must know-” Petvog fumed.

“What else do I not know?” She laughed. “Were you part of the plot to awaken the Dark Ones too? Did you bargain with demons under the cover of night while your kin was slaughtered?”

Their attention flickered from the demon’s presence and Elisa.

“Where is Jaces?” Aidan asked.

“Okay, I am saying this once and for all- she is dead. She could not get any more dead. Now focus on the living.”

At that moment, the guardian decided to reveal itself. It curled, making an odd human form made of pure light. It was blinding and Elisa had to shield her eyes until the Guardian dimmed.

“Thank you for joining us and welcome to the Sanctification. It is my wholehearted pleasure to inform each and every one of you that you have departed from your physical bonds and are now
seekers of the truth. You are an exceptional few. You are in a place your ancestors called ‘the harvesting’. As many of you have already realised, your memories of previous battles have left you marked for a purpose. Although you may not understand, I can assure you that each one of you is connected by the taint in your blood and nature. You have been chosen as guides. You have been given a special opportunity most sols do not have the good fortune or determination to be given. The opportunity to reclaim your place. My purpose here amongst you, hunters, is to help you come to terms with the events which have bought you here. I am here to guide you to peace. My purpose is to help you regain your immortality.”

On the opposite side of the room, twelve more shapes appeared.

The first was a scaled goblin with green skin, pointed ears and dagger shaped fingers. His mouth was set in a thin line.

A grossly obsess man stomped to the place besides Locus. Around his thick neck were chains of gold and silver. Rings with uncountable amounts of gems covered his fingers. His clothes were stretched their limit and struggling to contain his bulging belly but made from silk. He growled low in his throat and scratched behind his ear with his gigantic fist.

Next was a human woman but with horns on top of her head. She was beautiful even by Elisa’s standards. Her thick wavy raven hair was flowing down her shoulders. Her skin was porcelain pale and a royal crimson dress cut dangerously low highlighted the swell of her breasts and her tiny waist. Her lips were stained the colour of fresh blood, making it impossible to miss the blackness of her eyes.

The next was a dwarf who looked no older than Aidan. Her skin was a waxy pale colour and pulled back over her face like it was being held back by pegs. It left her too large brown eyes bulging out of her head and her thin lips continually pursed. Her black armour was dotted with dried blood. In one hand, she carried a human bone and in the other a sword.

“I apologise I could not reveal myself sooner.”

Elisa could have mistaken the mournful tone of the Guardian as pity if she didn’t know better. They showed no pity. Everything they said or did was to provoke a reaction.

“Do what is right by you.” She replied, every careful of her words. “Guardian, we are in the presence of demons. Of otherworldly spirits corrupted by evil. Would you have me rid you of their presence?”

A deep rich laughter echoed throughout the room. Locus’ mocking laughter. The sound made her want to run her blade through her regardless of the Guardian.

“Please, child, hold your anger. I understand you have experienced pain and suffering at their hands but do not be hasty in drawing your sword.”

Elisa hissed but didn’t object. For now, the Guardian was offering her a choice. Its mood wouldn’t stay as sweet.

“That demon was the one I was hunting.” Aidan said, pointing at the obsess man dressed in shiny objects. “Jaces had been attacked by the dwarf. She told me it had kissed her before her fist went straight through her chest and squeezed her heart. Ever since, Jaces had suffered with terrible chest pains. Her heart would stop for seconds and she would think she was dying.”

Elisa hadn’t thought of what the demons had done to the other hunters. She had thought herself
wounded the most, having lost the most, but her friends had been tortured as well.

“What would you ask of us, Guardian? My father viewed here as a safe place but I am beginning to think he was mistaken. Was he mistaken?”

A smile curved along the Guardian’s blank face. “A rash child forced to leave behind her bright view of the world too soon. You have lost your fire. Elisa, daughter of Nathaneil Riding, you do not have to be angry at the dead anymore. Aidan, son of Bernail Snow, you can come home from the cold. Daethel, daughter of Adamar Arboarn, you are not alone. Petvog, son of the René Quin, you will not be left behind in the dark. Come now, my children. Let me show you the light.”

“And what do you know of dealings with demons, Guardian of the North?” Daethel stepped forward and pointed an accusing finger at the goblin demon. “This demon slaughtered innocents. These wounds are killing me!”

She lifted up her top, revealing three angry red slashes on both her sides. They were as deep as the ones on Elisa’s back but were green with infection. She hadn’t been as lucky as to fall on a wizard’s doorstep. She let her top fall back in place.

“With every day that passes, the wounds grow. They are killing me, Guardian. Allow me to take my revenge before I suffer the painful death of poisoning.”

The guardian glided forward, seemingly walking above the ground. She placed a fingerless hand on Daethel’s shoulder and smiled down at her. Immediately, Elisa rushed to her side and stepped in front of her. Her sword stretched in front of them.

“You will not touch her.”

Daethel stayed silent behind Elisa.

“I took away the poisoning, child. She is healed.”

The Guardian stepped back, ignoring the sword pointed threatening at her back.

Elisa spun around and lifted up Daethel’s top.

Sure enough, the red scars were gone. Her tanned skin was smooth and free of any imperfections.

Daethel looked just as confused as Elisa. On que, the gashes on Elisa’s back sent a fresh shot of throbbing up her spine. She swallowed down the pain and turned towards the light figure.

“Step forward, child. Your kin, Jaces, bought me an offering of one of her kin’s head. You bring a much more worthy gift.”

She glanced down at the king’s ring, still on her ring. She removed it and held it just out of reach of the Guardian.

“Tell me why my kin died. Tell me why you allowed these demons to hurt us. I humbly beg for an explanation before I gift my offering.”

Locus glided forward. Up close, the demon’s form took that of a man. Its face was covered by a hood, all except its devious grin.

“You were such a sweet child.” The demon hissed. “It was a shame you were not going to reach your third year. The illness which cursed you could not be cured by simple magic or potions.”
“Shut your mouth, demon. I refuse to talk with scum of the otherworldly.”

Elisa’s words were clipped and spat out like venom. Locus’ head twisted around, its grin never leaving.

“The spirit’s words then.”

It gracefully stepped back and the Guardian shook her head.

“The hunters fell out of their creator’s grace because they were corrupted. Surely, you recognise the demons which hunted you. Their taints are in your blood.”

“Whatever taint Locus possesses, it is not in me.”

“That is for certain. Your taint was not that of a demon. I shall reveal your nature when you are ready to accept my words. Your mind is clouded by doubt and anger. I will not waste my words on a child too haughty to accept truth if it does not please her.”

Elisa huffed and refused to give the Guardian eye contact. Instead she focused on the vile demons. Aidan stepped closer to the Guardian, staring at the man clothed in rich fabrics.

“Do you see the truth, child?”

His answer was whispered too low for Elisa to hear. The Guardian nodded, satisfied, and whispered something in Aidan’s ear.

“I… I could not see.”

“Greed has a way of blinding even the holiness of men. Do not fear, child, for darkness has been lifted away from your eyes.”

Petvog was next. The Guardian took his hand in hers. All Elisa could do was watch as the boy was lead forward to face the horned woman.

“What does it mean, Guardian?”

The beautiful demon answered for the spirit.

“I am lust, child. I offered you my taint when you were simply a babe. You have grown into quite a man, have you not?” She purred, stroked her long fingernail across his cheek.

Petvog didn’t move away from the sickening caress. The demon took his silence as permission to continue.

“We do not lust for mere bodies to warm our beds. We give people what they lust for most. It can be friendship, a follower, a shoulder to lean on, or a loving caress. We merely want to gift what the lonely traveller wishes for.”

“And I?” Daethel finally stepped out from Elisa’s shadow and joined the others. The goblin hobbled forward, hold its left arm against its chest protectively.

“Do you not see you own envy in the creature’s envy?”

Elisa still didn’t move. “Then which am I, Guardian? Does Locus possess something other than madness and cruelty?”
The Guardian looked at her with kindness, despite her reproach. “You do not possess a single taint. You were ill as a child and it was not expected for you to live. Your father bargained with the creature you named Locus. He struck a deal for your life. In return, you were not given a taint.”

“So I am the sickly princess?” She laughed cruelly. “Tell me what you would ask of me so I may leave this place.”

“I yearn only to see the hunters regain their immortality. In order to please the Valars, a sacrifice must be made.”

Elisa stood rigid, sword hanging at her side. The other hunters appeared entranced by the demons which had harmed and killed dozens. They would not have her. She would not let the Guardian fool her with sweet but empty promises. Everything out of its mouth was a lie. It had to be because if it wasn’t lying…

“What sacrifice?” She jeered. “What have we not given you?”

“Those who wish to dominate you must be silenced. Those who would call themselves lords over the world must be beaten down.” The Guardian said in a loud booming voice. “Finish the Age of the Elves and you shall be immortal.”

The hunters flinched as if the Guardian had struck them. Each stepped away from the demons. Suddenly, their suspicion fell on each other. A dagger glistened in Daethel’s fist. A silver engraved sword balanced at Aidan’s side. Even Petvog carried two swords, one in each hand. Elisa strolled around the room, slowly making her way closer to the Guardian. Every movement she made was watched with beady eyes.

“The elves do not have our anger or obsessions. They have odd ways of showing their affection and they treat their prisions appallingly but they do not kill without good reason. I have grown quiet fond of the elves. I refuse your offer.”

A silence thick and heavy descended on the room. Elisa feared it would alight if someone rubbed their hands together too fast.

“We can be immortal.” Aidan repeated slowly. “Why so determined to save one race, Elisa?”

The hunter looked at him with narrowed eyes.

“No reward is large enough to cover the shame of killing innocent people.”

Daethel spoke in a shaky voice. “But if we are immortal, we can right the wrongs done to our people!”

“Would you want to live forever on a land built on the bones of a massacred race?”

“Elisa… Elisa is right. We could not kill an entire race just to live forever.”

“I did not say immortality would be granted to you, children.” The Guardian said patiently. “The other hunters, yes, but you are seen too much darkness.”

“So what would happen to us?”

The lust demon rolled her head back and released a chilling laughter.

“You are the sacrifices. Why do you think you were marked like animals to a slaughter?”
The ground beneath them began to shake. At first, Elisa thought the structure had taken too much damage. But the shaking was not that of a building collapsing.

The thundering noise echoed through the darkness; the cacophonous sound of stomping, snapping wood, and an inhuman screech made her realize what was happening.

“What is that?” Daethel panicked.

“I will need your answers now, hunters.” The Guardian said. Whatever was making the deafening noise was no threat to the Guardian.

“I will not give my life for anything!” Aidan spat out.

Petvog shook his head wildly. “I do not even know the other hunters but I do not trust them if they are anything like us.”

Daethel placed a steadying hand on Elisa’s shoulder. “I would protect these hunters with my life. There has been too much hunter blood spilt today.”

Elisa spun around. The hunters would stay by her side, even if just for one day.

The Guardian was not angered by the rejection. She held out her hand one last time. No one took it. With a sigh, the figure curled in on itself once again and disappeared in a sudden burst of blinding light.

“What is making that noise?”

Daethel asked as Elisa shoved her away from the stairway. Aidan and Petvog followed her lead but didn’t take their eyes of the demons.

“Wrath.” Elisa simply stated.

Locus’ smile widened till it took over stretched up to its pitch black eyes.

“Go!” She ordered, giving Daethel a finally shove down the hallway at the other side of the room. She checked out her shoulder. The demons had not moved but nor had the shaking or shrieking stopped.

Elisa stumbled. A searing but cold pain hit her side. She instinctively put her hand on her side as if she could grab the pain and rip out. Her hand came back slick with blood.

She looked down. A thick claw protruded from her chest. It was coated with blood- her blood. Time slowed to a stop as Daethel watched powerless as Locus impaled Elisa on its claw. She screamed and clutched to her friend, yanking her away from the demon. The claw slid out of her chest. It left a gaping hole in her armour.

Elisa gagged, tasting the salty liquid in her mouth. Daethel half dragged her away. Elisa focused on her breathing. She had to keep breathing, just keep breathing…

“Go… down the hallway.”

Daethel turned to Elisa. She gripped her hand as if scared she would be dragged away from her.

“What are you doing?”

“Follow the hallway down. Bar the door behind you. I will keep them away from you.”
“Elisa, you will be killed! There is a massive hole in your armour!”

“It is just a scratch. It was not meant to kill me, only slow me down.”

She tried to smile, to offer the reassuring gesture which always soothed, but worry creased her face.

“Find the Guardian and stop it from awakening the Dark Ones. If you do not, there will not be much of a world left for me to return to. Please, Daethel, you must promise me.”

“Are you sure, Elisa?”

“Go now!”

Petvog lurched towards her. “I will stay.” He didn’t give her time to object. “You’re wounded already and you will need someone to watch your back.”

She nodded, resigned.

Aidan and Daethel ran ahead.

The shaking stopped, but the silence bought with it a new terror.

By the stairway, a great shadow burst into the room. The beast was hideous. It had made entirely of flames and had large red eyes and demonic horns on its head. Its entire face was scrunched up in anger and its hands balled into fists.

Six demons in a sealed off room. Two swords in either of her hands. A dagger strapped to her belt. A hunter by her side. She felt the demons’ eyes pinned her down, blood thirsty and wanting.

“Ready?” She said calmly.

She arched her arm back and launched at the clawed demon.

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Chapter End Notes

I've not had chance to properly edit it because I'm halfway through the next chapter and my computer wants to restart. Hope you like the chapter!!

-Al
“There was once an invisible man who had grown tired of being unseen. It was not that he was actually invisible. It was that people had become used to not seeing him.

And if no one sees you, are you really there at all?”

— Patrick Ness, *A Monster Calls*

Daethel had never so much darkness. It surrounded her, confining and consuming. The barred door blocked off any light from the room. Her only guide was Aidan’s footsteps ahead of her. She could only follow the sound. She hadn’t barred the door after them, just in case Elisa and Petvog did escape with their lives.

Guilt weighted her down. She hadn’t wanted to leave Elisa and Petvog behind. True, they had given her no choice but she still didn’t want to think of them dying to secure her escape. She didn’t hear Aidan’s footsteps stop. She slammed into his back. A pathway carved away from the stones, a candle besides the door struggling to fight past the darkness. The staircase groaned and creaked from lack of use but eventually gave a doorway.

“I lead the way so it is your go.” Aidan bowed dramatically and pointed at the pitch black stone outlet. Daethel nodded and took the first step into the darkness. It immediately consumed him.

The steep stairs descended down a narrow corridor or pathway as far as he could tell by the rough texture of the walls. Their boots hit the stone stairs in quiet thuds.

Aidan didn’t use the wall as a guide. He’d take the risk falling to his death than rely on anything other than his own two feet to guide him down the harrowing staircase. Finally, he landed on a smooth surface.

Daethel, dearest one, did you ask Elisa which pathway to take?”

Daethel cursed underneath her breathe.

“Which direction does it go in?”

“It’s either left or right.”

“Take the right.”

Aidan stepped to the right, colliding straight with a stone wall. Daethel held back her laughter at the dull thud sound of Aidan meeting the wall.

“Then it is the left.”
They took the left to an identical corridor.

“Did you think about the Guardian’s offer?”

“Yes.” Daethel admitted. “Did you?”

“I would have taken it if it only involved killing the elves. I would have done that for free. I do not know what has possessed Elisa into thinking those woodland sprits are worth dying for.”

“She is willing to die for us. If only to give us a chance to finish this, Elisa has put her life on the line along with Petvog.”

“But immortal life—”

“-Is not worth the cost.” Daethel finished for him.

“Can you see anything yet?”

“We are in what appears to be a dark tunnel.” He followed the path as it forked left. “Yes, my suspicions have just been confirmed- it is in fact a dark tunnel.”

Daethel rolled her eyes and slammed her palm on his back. An icy finger traced its way down her spine and across her bare arms. The air smelt damp and musky. The path was slowly grinding uphill and she hoped it would lead them to daylight. She hated the darkness. Every corner held a danger she couldn’t see. Trust Elisa to send them down the only path where a demon could be stood right in front of them and their brain wouldn’t register it as a threat.

A fist slammed into Elisa’s stomach. Another hit and she tasted blood. The lust demon grabbed her head, fingers digging into her scalp, and lifted her until her feet dangled inches from the ground. She reared back her head, ready to head-butt Elisa. The hunter locked her eyes on the demon’s deep black eyes and jammed her palm under its chin. She hissed and dropped Elisa. In a flash, Elisa sliced the creature’s throat. Wrath’s fist came down on her and missed. Instead, its burning fist went through lust’s stomach. The demon released a sickening gurgle.

Advancing. Surrounding. Always advancing. The goblin charged at Petvog with a hooked blade held upright. He arrived seconds too late. From behind, Elisa tackled him to the ground.

Petvog, do you want to die here in the dark? She will not be able to save you. See, she is already dying.

True enough, Elisa was slowing down. Her movements were becoming sloppy and her hits missing more times than they should have. The wound on her side was causing her to lose balance and favour her uninjured side. The demons were taking advantage of her weakness. She didn’t seem to hear the voice.

The goblin clawed and scratched her arms. She gritted her teeth together and aimed her next punch at the goblin’s head. It connected. She threw punch after punch until the goblin’s head snapped to the side. A piece of bone spiked its throat.

If you complete the ritual, she will live. You have proven yourselves worthy of immortal life. Come to me, child.
She swung around effortlessly and fought the towering beast made up of flames. Never staying in one spot long enough for its fists to reach her. Swords clashing with Pride’s.

*You know what you have to do. You know how to find me. Come to me or your friends embrace their deaths.*

Pevtog had his own problem. Locus appeared at the corner of his eye while Greed launched at him. The demon aimed his foreswing and following it with a backswing. The hunter dodged the first and met the second with his sword. The opposing metal sang.

It wasn’t their only problem.

A dozen elves, glistening armour and unreadable faces, appeared by the staircase.

Thranduil had never anything like it. She had only used her skills while alongside his son or the Captain of his guards. She had been a powerful opponent while she faced down the beast who had invaded his kingdom but there was only humour and determination in her movements then. Now, there was desperation. Seeing her graceful movements, her speed and her sword work made his heart beat faster. The hunter took every blow and strike in her stride but he could sense the toll it was having on her.

*You know how to find me.*

From across the room, their eyes met.

Time paused for a moment. She glanced across at the elven ruler who thought himself ruler over her too. It would be a cold day in Mordor before she surrendered. She grabbed Petvog’s shoulder and shoved him down the hallway, following close on his heels. She arched back her arm and threw her dagger into Pride’s head. Her aim was true despite her wounds.

“I know how to stop the Guardian!” Petvog shouted above the sound of swords striking flesh and battle roars.

“What do you mean?”

“Daethel and Aidan will not be able to stop it! It wants blood! All it needs is hunter blood to complete its ritual! We can make it-“

“No, you can make it.” She glanced over her shoulder. "I will only slow you down at this point. There is not much fight left in me."

Footsteps stormed the corridor. They were too close. Another couple of twists in the corridor and the elves would find them.

“Are you sure you can finish this?” She said as she clutched her side.

“Yes!”

She sighed heavily. “I hope you are right about this. I will hold them back. From here on, you are on your own. Do not trust the other hunters.”

Pevtog didn’t need telling twice. He set off in a sprint, leaving Elisa behind.

A figure appeared on the opposite side of the corridor. A few footsteps and they would be face to face.
She didn’t have to look behind her to know who it was.

*Are you ready for this, survivor?*

“Yes.” She bit out. She turned and faced the demon.

A grin revealed two rows of sharp white teeth.

His claws glistened with fresh blood she knew had come from her wound.

In a collision of shadows and blades, the hunter and the demon collided.
You are not much appreciative considering I saved your life.

“Then come and take it back!” She hissed.

Drawing her arm back, Elisa slashed at Locus’ neck. She missed badly but managed to kick the lethal claws before they could reach her. It didn’t need a sword. Every claw was sharper than her blade and cut as deep. The claws hissed through the air aiming for her face. Immediately, she executed a blocking motion with her sword. Metal clashed against claw.

“Elisa!”

Her eyes widened and her breath caught in her throat. Locus reared back and drove his claws at her neck. She moved fast, using her speed against his size. The air besides her ear hissed. Blood trickled in a teardrop down her neck.

It appears your prince is here. Would you like to run to him?

Its claws grabbed at the space next to her. Instead of turning, she leaned into its grip. Immediately, Elisa felt the claws tightened around her throat. Their tips dug into her skin. The breath left her and stars danced across her vision. She took aim and plunged her sword into the thin web in between its claws.

It reeled back, throwing her against the wall like a ragdoll, and shrieked in pain.

Elisa stumbled to her feet. Her head spun and pounded. She struggled to even stand without the support of the wall.

But when she looked up, there was no demon. Only Thranduil stood at the end of the corridor, surrounded by soldiers.

She spun around, examining every corner, waiting for Locus to go for the killing blow. It never came. She saw flashes of shadows but in every direction. She stood blocking the corridor. There was no way it had gone past her. She screamed, frustrated, and held her sword out in front of her.

“Where are you, creature?”
Each of you hunters will leave behind a loved one. How long do you expect them to live on? Confess to me your sins. I will grant you immortality.

“I am not your puppet! You do not control me!” She screamed out at the darkness. It took her a moment to hear the voice trying to talk to her above the sound of her own heartbeat.

Thranduil stood picturesque in front of her. Her blade pressed against his silver armour.

“Put down your weapon.” He ordered calmly.

The treat underlined his words was clear.

She swallowed, hating the way her hand shook from either shock or blood loss.

“You cannot pass.”

“Move out of my way.”

His eyes looked through her rather than at her. His sword clashed against hers. He slowly pushed her back further down the corridor.

“If you go, Locus will kill you.”

“If you do not move, I will kill you.”

Her sword arm was shaking uncontrollably. She didn’t have the strength to keep the king and an army out. She searched his eyes for something familiar. Something hopeful she could cling onto. He remained as unreadable as always.

“I do not believe you will, my king.”

“Elisa…” Legolas’ voice of reason spoke. “We are here to help.”

“You cannot help. Too much blood has been spilt for me to give up here. If you go after them, you will have to step over my corpse to get there.”

“No, no, no…. this is wrong. All wrong.”

The elderly wizard listened patiently to the bluebird. His hands gathered up dead mushrooms as the bird whistled away.

“No, it cannot be! Oh, no. Oh, dearest me. This is not good.” He muttered it to himself several times over as he marched through the forest, stopping to examine the decay setting on the beautiful trees.

He yelled at the Rhosgobel rabbits pulling his sled to go faster. He had to get to Gandalf the Grey before it was too late. He had best the Witch-king of Angmar but a dark spirit resided in the fortress.

Every outcome and choice had played in Radagast’s mind when he finally saw Gandalf’s full head
of white hair.

He jumped off the sled and told the elder wizard everything. Gandalf listened which was rare because the council had never listened to him. He was in the company of dwarves who looked at him suspiciously. He presented the Morgul-blade to the Grey wizard.

“Oh! There was something! It’s right at the tip of my tongue… Neotis! Oh, dear. Neotis, you must warn her! It is not as she thinks!”

“Who is it you speak of, Radagast?” The wizard asked tolerantly.

“The Neotis! The hunter I found in the forest. She was touched by dark magic, witchcraft I thought, but it is something more much and now she is hunting a creature and she really should stop.” His speech muddled and his words faded into each other he was talking so fast. “The elven king will know!”

The black bearded dwarf spat at the name.

“That dishonourable elf can help you with nothing, wizard!”

“Oh, no then that is not good. You must warn her.”

“I cannot if you do not tell me her name.”

So Radagast told her everything. Gandalf missed half of what he was saying but what he did hear, he didn’t like.

He was more determined to go to the elven lands when Radagast finally paused for breath. He had to warn the King. The elves had no idea what they had let wonder their lands.

Confess your sins, hunter. Tell me what you have done.

She couldn’t block out the voice. It was different from Locus’ but no less grating. It was sweet and purred its words. She couldn’t say she preferred it to Locus. There was never doubt in Locus’ intentions.

“You do not control me.” She repeated, more to herself than the Guardian. She was beginning to doubt everything. The Guardian had planted doubt in her mind and it consumed her worse than Widow 32. The king was there to stop her.

Did he know about the Guardian?

“Elisa-”

“Shut up! It’s in my head! I cannot get it out of my head! Get out of my mind!” She shouted and backed up further.

“She is ill, ada.” Legolas spoke.
“Locus… I must get to Locus. He will kill them and then it will all be for nothing! Jaces is dead. They are all dead!”

“Elisa, which way did the demon go?”

“Legolas, I cannot hear you right now because there are too many voices in my head!”

She clutched her head, her fingers grabbing her hair in chunks.

You could fit in my palm when you were born.

Locus’ voice. It was hard to tell. The voices fighting for control in her mind was overwhelming over own.

“Remember what is true.” She muttered. “I am human and a hunter. I have 20 years. I have the blood of a demon… do I? Which demon? Is it true?”

She couldn’t remember. She couldn’t think. Is this how the villagers felt like while under Locus’ control?

“Locus! I must stop him!”

She took off running down the corridor, fleeing in the same direction the hunters had gone. Her steps were unrhymed. She knew the corridors better than anyone but even she had a hard time finding her way. The pain was subsiding, which was worse. She knew numbness was a bad sign. It meant she had lost too much blood. A tingling in her fingers and toes was all that was left. She stumbled over her feet, took a corner too fast and nearly ended up on flat on her face.

“Elisa!”

She wasn’t sure if the voice was really or it was one of the many battling to her heard in her head. The ritual binding should have had that effect.

“No more.” She shook her head wildly as if she could shake out the voices screaming. “I am Elisa Riding. I am human. I am a hunter. I have 20 years. I am the daughter of Nathaneil Riding. I like cinnamon. My horse is named Malicious. I must find the light.”

You know nothing of light. You were born in the darkness, you live in the darkness and you will die in the dark.

“You have no power over me! I do not fear you, Guardian.”

Words hunters often scream into the abyss. Domain over the hunters has always rested with the Guardians. You are still a child wanting to play war.

“You really are temperamental creatures.”

Those who have been forged in fire should be grateful. You wanted for nothing while you were under our care. There is much to be grateful for.

“My lord Thranduil, I see her!”
Brazens blazed from down the corridor. The elves’ armour glistened in the fresh light.

“Elisa.” It was him. The man she had shared a bed with. It felt like a lifetime ago, before she had seen her home burn. “Elisa, halt.”

She didn’t stop. She didn’t imagine she was getting far. In fact, she was sure she had gone past the same corridor twice. She placed a steadying hand on the wall. Her breathing was wheezing and her vision blurry.

“Should we stop her?”

“She is not going anywhere fast.”

Elisa had to agree with them.

“What do you think I am trying to do?” Elisa hissed.

“I think you are trying to save your hunter kin. I admire your determination but you are leaving a blood trail for us to follow. If I am not mistaken, these are the hunters you fought demons to protect.”

Thranduil’s voice had never sounded so sweet. She struggled to hold onto the sound, above the demonic whispers.

“Thranduil, you must help me. I would have their lives spared if I can.”

His steps fell in line with hers.

“You are injured, my light.” He said tenderly.

“Locus had its fun. It does not hurt and, oddly enough, I miss the pain. I must get to my kin…”

“I do not think you will make it. The wound runs deep.”

“I like to think positive. You know of a hunter’s determination.”

He chuckled, a deep rumbling in his chest. “That I do. How many times have you disobeyed my orders now?”

“I have lost count, along with a great deal of blood.”

“Are your kin as mad as you?”

“They are loyal and fierce warriors. I think I am the only one touched with madness, although Aidan might be a close second. You will love them. I really must introduce you some time…”

Her words died and Thranduil wrapped a protectively arm around her waist which also propped her up.

“Did you get your confrontation with the demon?”

“I got a few fights. My one with Locus was incredibly short but I did behead a different demon. We must take our little victories.”

His fingers touched her cold armour, wet with blood.

“Is all of this your blood?”
“I am not sure. The odds are for it.”

She stumbled forward half reliant on Thranduil for support. She scrapped her knuckles on the wall. There wasn’t even a tingle of pain. It wasn’t a good sign at all.

*This land is burning. The streets run with blood. Did your prophecy come true? The elven leader stands next to you. Kill him. Kill the woodland spirit and claim your immorality.*

She needed more facts. She needed something more personal, to remind herself that she was still her.

“My name is Elisa Riding. My sister was Amelia Riding. She is dead now. I used to tell Jaces tales I had heard of elves and dwarves and live behind the hunter lands. She is dead too. My homeland has been razed to ashes. My friends need my help. I like cinnamon. I must help the hunters.”

*Will you chose death again, survival?*

“I will stand by the hunters in life and death but I will not kill the elves and I will not sacrifice my friends.”

Thranduil held her close. No matter how much he tried, he could not shield her from her own thoughts. She pointed to the end of a corridor. It opened up to a room no larger than the previous one. From inside came the familiar sound of fighting.

Elisa groaned, reminding the king of her injuries. He touched the fringes of the wound on her side. She hissed and tried to break his grip on her.

“Do not struggle. It will only make matters worse for you.”

“Let me go. I hear Daethel! She is in trouble.”

“Daethel… I do not hear anything.”

She broke free of his grasp, cringing at his fingers pressing into her wound on purpose, and stumbled into the room. But she focused on it. She focused on the pain because it was better than numbness.

Inside the room the battle went on regardless of the newest guess.

Locus’ creatures surrounded the three hunters. She spotted Daethel’s figure run up the wall and twist through the air, taking off the heads of four of the creatures.

She ran the nearest creature through on her blade and kicked out the legs of another.

“Daethel!” She examined as she hastily separated a creature’s head from its shoulders.

“Elisa!” The she-elf yelled back. “Where have you been?”

It was then she noticed the blood coating Elisa’s armour and the gaping hole in her side.

“Nice wound.”

“It is better than yours!”

“I like it. Red suits me.”

She spun around, catching a creature’s throat open on her blade.
“Elisa, they were trying to awaken the Dark Ones!”

Aidan head-butted a creature and sent me sprawling along the floor.

“She is lying, Elisa! She has betrayed us all! She was with Jaces!”

“Do not listen to his lies! Petvog agreed to the Guardian’s offer!”

_Betrayal runs in your blood. It is hard to believe they are telling the truth when you know you would lie in their place._

Petvog had been tackled to the ground by a creature and was fighting on while lay on his back.

“Wait, you led the elven king here? This is our home!”

Elisa gave Aidan a look which suggested he was insane.

“Our ‘home’ is under attack!”

“Why would you… did you plan on accepting the offer? Is that why the elves are here?”

Aidan pulled back away from her. The elves were taking care of the creatures without the hunters’ aid. Each of the hunters’ swords was pointed at another hunter.

Elisa’s sword tip pointed at Aidan’s chest and other sword stolen from the king she kept pointed at Daethel.

Aidan’s returned the suspicion and pointed one golden sword at Elisa and the other at Daethel.

Daethel copied their actions.

Petvog appeared seconds later. Confused, he looked backwards and forwards from the hunters.

“Did something happen?”

“Daethel is accepting the Guardian’s offer. She is going to kill us all.” Aidan spat out.

“Aidan is playing us all for fools and Elisa is wrapped around his finger.”

“And I love you all.” Elisa said in between gritted teeth.

“Is no one going to accuse me of something?”

Two new blades faced the hunters. The king had joined the fight apparently. He had the respect to even aim one at Petvog who remained unarmed. Death and smoke hung sour in the air. Elisa’s sole focus was keeping her hand steady.

"This... this is insanity!" Petvog stuttered. "This place is turning up against each other! We are kin! We are all we have left in Middle Earth!"

"I have no intention of taking up the Guardian's offer! I was the one who refused in the first place!" Elisa objected.

"That would have been just to earn our truth. How do we know we can trust you after you bring an elf into the hunter lands?"

"I object!" Daethel said. "And might I remind you that Elisa's mother was an elf?"
"Do you think I do not know her family line? We were going to be married!"

Thranduil's sword hissed through the air and lined with Aidan's throat.

"Let me make one thing clear- she is mine now."

Daethel glanced at Elisa. "You never had intended to take the Guardian's offer! Oh, thank goodness. I never suspected you for a moment."

She still kept one sword pointed at her and the other at Aidan.

"Put down your swords." The king ordered.

"I take orders from no elf." Aidan replied bitterly.

"Do as he says, Aidan. Please, let there be no more blood shed today."

The Guardian strolled into the room. The elves made a path for the light spirit. In her hands, was a leather bound book. Legolas followed her, sword pointed at her back.

"If a hunter reads from the book, the bindings will break. Prove your loyalty."

"The books are written in the original hunter language! You know no one-"

Each hunter looked to Elisa. Aidan narrowed his eyes and playfully smirked.

"You are the only one here who knows the language."

"I could be happier to talk to you, Aidan, if you did not have a blade pointed at my neck."

"Consider it motivation."

Elisa breathed in through her nose. The numbess had returned. She couldn't even feel her grip on her sword but she hoped it was tight. Keeping one sword focused Aidan, Elisa pressed her other sword against her own throat.

"You are right. I am the only one who can read the hunter language. Everyone put down their weapons or I will kill myself."

Each hunter looked at her with a new sense of urgency. Her grip was tightest on the grip held against her throat. None could reach her in time to stop her from slitting her throat.

"Are you willing to die just to keep from pleasing the Guardian?" Daethel said in a high pitched tone.

"If my actions have not suggested I care little about my own life, then I do not know what will. I know what you are thinking, Aidan. You cannot reach for me without being impaled on my blade."

The king spoke in his booming voice, "Hunters, is this always how you negotiate?"
I'm thinking about doing this so, way in the end, the Age of Humans never comes. I don't know how it's going to work but, lets face it, humans are just there to fuck things up. I imagine that years after the Age of Humans begins, it basically leads to Dragon Age. I'm telling you humans should not be allowed to rule unchecked. It will never end well. Anywho.... I hope you enjoyed the chapter and I am sorry about my rant.

-Al
None of the hunting party noticed the tiny figure watching them. She was balanced perfectly on a tree branch high above the elves' line of sight. They were panicking. Two members of their company had gone missing. None had spotted the figure sneak into their camp during the dead of night and sip the poison into their water supply.

“Danger lands to wonder into.” She hummed.

Their heads shot up. The woman was laid on her back on the highest branch. The sun shone directly down on her, making only her outline visible.

“Who are you?” One of them demanded.

“You can call me Elisa.” She grinned widely and scaled down the tree. She dropped and landed on her feet. The elves meet her with swords drawn. She raised her hands in mock, a grin still on her lips.

“These parts of the woods are dangerous. It is uncommon for elves to be here. What brings you here to the dark of the woods?”

“We are searching for a missing child.”

“There are no children here. Turn away now and return to your own lands.”

“We will not return without the child.”

“Then I am afraid,” the woman purred. “you will not return at all.”

“I am starting to loose feeling in my hand. My fingers could slip and the sword could run across my throat…”

“Maybe we should all put down our swords.” Petvog reasoned. “This place is messing with our heads. We should leave and if everyone wants to kill each other afterwards, we can get back to it.”

Elisa’s eyebrow arched and she nodded at Aidan. “You first.”

“No, thank you.”

“Do hunters not value their lives?” Legolas asked.

“No.” The hunters answered in union.

He glanced across at the light spirit as she placed the thick volume on the middle of the floor. The Guardian tenderly stroked the pages.

“There are rituals here from the beginning of the hunter’s time. Your ancestries had more to live for,
obviously.”

“May I ask what kind of rituals?”

“The hunter language is as foreign to me as it is to you, son of Bernail Snow. I have seen few put into effect.” An elegant finger pointed down to the open book. “This one is a demon binding. It is dangerous but effective. It is the one which spared your life, Elisa.”

“I suppose I should thank my good father for bargaining with demons.”

“He was a good man but desperate. You were going to be the Queen who ruled over all hunters. A symbol to bring about peace. He had created a force to unite the distant lands of the hunters. Had he known what you would become, I am sure he would have reconsidered his deal.”

“That was a low blow.” She muttered.

“The binding does not require much: one person to read the ritual and another to choose what the demon is bound to. Your father chose to bind the demons to you. He knew little of consequences. If you die, Elisa, it will not end well for Middle Earth.”

Elisa wiggled her fingers around trying to get some feeling. Blood dripped down her neck from either her sword or Locus’ claws. She didn’t know.

“Elisa, you look terrible.” Aidan said with concern laced his voice.

“Well, I feel great.” She replied. “Is everyone else hearing a low ringing in their ears?”

Petvog wasn’t looking at her but directly at the silver reflection in her sword. Elisa glanced down too, expecting to see The Guardian hovering in the middle of the room. By the Valars, that wasn’t the Guardian’s face. Who the hell was in the room? It looked a bit like a child with long tangled hair, except there was something very wrong with that face.

Then Elisa realised she was looking at a reflection, that the child- the girl- she could see what right behind them peering at her and Petvog from across the room. She spun around. Nothing there. Back again to the sword. The reflection was gone.

“Petvog…” She said, burying down her pain. “Go to the book.”

“What?”

“You are the only hunter I trust right now.”

“I am charmed.” Daethel huffed.

The ringing intensified. This time, Aidan winced too and Daethel went to cover her ears with her hands.

“Locus is here!”

Aidan was already moving. “Finish the binding. Daethel and I will buy you time.”

"For the record, I am hardly wife material."

Aidan chuckled and shook his head.
Elisa rushed past Thranduil, grabbing Petvog’s arm and pulling him towards the book.

“Brace yourself.” She warned.

The hunter kneeled before the book and teased her fingers around the wound on her side. Fingers coated in blood, she began to draw the familiar symbols in a circle around her and Petvog.

“El carpion kel timere.” She read quickly from the book, fingers trembling and leaving blood stains on the ancient pages. “intrabit in abyssum irentqui vocaret domino nostro.”

“Elisa!”

“Keep it away.” She ordered, hands dangling uselessly at her sides.

He nodded and launched at the fierce demon. The flamed claws swiped across the room, knocking Legolas off his chest.

“ligatis pedibus ingeri Nostro refusus pectori cum monstri.”

She dragged her hand off the floor and caught Petvog’s sleeve, dragging him into the circle with her. She slashed his forearm and held it up. She drew another symbol, one of a circle surrounded by four stars.

The words of the book blurred in front of Petvog’s eyes. He squinted and traced his finger along the bottom sentences. They faded and alined into words he could make sense of.

“Elisa, I can understand some of these words!”

He looked behind him but the hunter was no longer there.

She had left the circle.

“Finish it, Petvog!”

*She no longer cares for hunters. If you complete the binding, you will die. She only cares for elves now. Do you trust the blood ritual she has left uncompleted?*

“Someone has to trust someone else.” He curled his tongue. “daemonium reditum ad abyssum irent.”

His pronunciation was shocking but Elisa could understand the words. She lined her blade with the demon’s chest and dodged out of its fist’s reach.

“How long does the binding take?” Legolas demanded as his blade went straight through a deranged creature.

“Redeo ad tenebras dominabitur tui. non est locus pro vobis quia manifestaturus es daemonium.” The words felt wrong on his tongue but he continued. “ligabit ad draco.”

He repeated the last sentence, clutching the book against his chest. He repeated it again and again. The words were foul and sick. They were not meant to be spoken by anyone other than the higher hunters. He choked on the words as if they didn't want to leave his mouth.

Then suddenly, the fight was over.

The demons vanished.
Thranduil paused, sword still ready to cut through the air, but his enemy had gone.

The ground was littered with the corpses of Locus’ creatures. A few bodies had pointed ears and wore glistening armour. The hunters laboured breathing echoed around the room. Elisa gently touched the hole in the side before Thranduil had to steady her.

“What did you bind it to?” She asked, halfway to falling unconscious.

Petvog looked uncertainly at the book he held close to his chest.

“A dragon?” He replied as if uncertain of his answer.

That got Elisa up. The other hunters looked at each other.

“Petvog?”

“Yes?”

“Do you see our land?”

“Yes.”

“Do you see how there are no dragons here?” Elisa fumed. Her eyes widened and mouth hung open.

“I… I panicked!”

Aidan slapped a hand on his shoulder. "Any particular dragon?"

"I do not think so."

"I do not know any dragons, do you?"

"Well, no."

Elisa crossed her arms over her chest and took several deep breaths.

“I do.” Daethel quiet voice added from the corridor. She peaked around the corner. “The Lonely Mountain.”

Something flashed in the king’s eyes and his grip tightened on Elisa’s waist.

“You shall not step near the kingdom of Erebor.”

“There was not a plan to, Thranduil.” Elisa replied patiently. “One dragon is enough for today.”

Whether it was because of the battle aftermath, the scent of death and blood in the air, or her growing wound, Elisa began laughing. An uncontrollable, contagious laughter racked her body. It left her breathless and happily exhausted. It echoed in the room, causing the elven soldiers to search for the cause.

“Did everyone see me then? I was like lightning.” She laughed hysterically, with tearing running down her face. She laughed with pain, laughter full of suffering and loss, the sound malicious but hopeful.

“I think she has lost a lot of blood, your highness.” Daethel said.

In response, Thranduil picked up Elisa as if she weighed nothing and tucked her against his chest.
He smelt of woodland, leather and well… elf.

“I would have you as guests in my halls, hunters.” Thranduil invited.

“Thank you, my lord, but I must refuse. I have a family that are waiting worried about me.” Daethel replied.

“I do not think Elisa will tolerate my presence anymore.” Aidan stated. “I will go to the West and will send for help. Hunters are not as fortunate in our friends as you, king Thranduil. I will need to go to the Hunter lands and request assistance. Hopefully, they will be less on fire.”

“And you, master Petvog?”

Petvog had to jog to keep up with the other hunters. He had taken a fair number of cuts and bruises like the other hunters but Elisa had taken the brute of the blows.

Of course she did. Elisa survived everything. She was the best of the hunters.

“She must live.” He blurted out.

They shared the same thought. It did not have to be said because each one knew the truth deep down in their hearts.

If Elisa fell, so did the hunters.

“Could I stay in your halls until she is well, your majesty? I… I would like to stay by her side, if I could.”

“You have proven yourself a friend of Elisa and a loyal companion. It would be a pleasure to have you in my halls. I am sure she would appreciate your presence while she heals.”

“Thank you.”

“I know healing, my lord. If you would allow-”

The king refused Daethel’s offer because she had fully made it.

“Lord Elrond will see to her.” “I apologise for my words earlier on…. and Aidan is sorry too. Our thoughts were not our own.” “Take your leave, hunters.” The King replied tensely.

Daethel took the hint that the politeness was over. She bowed before the king and prince.

“Please give my apologies to Elisa for holding a sword to her throat and also for Jaces. She was a brave and misguided warrior.”

She placed her hand against her heart and said goodbye to an unconscious Elisa.

Aidan left last. He said, “Her and I never would have worked out well. We are both too suspicious. Will you tell her of my plan?”

He nodded stiffly.

The prince gave a half-smile. “I wish you a safe trip.”

He left for the hunter lands that moment. It would be a long trip and he would need to take a good look at his injuries.
The land outside was as he remembered it. The dragon had laid waste to the village, leaving only burnt memories of homes and the corpse of a fire breathing beast.
The prince helped Petvog mount Malicious who they had found waiting loyalty outside the hunter gates. The horse ground its heels into the ground in protest. It took the sight of Elisa cradled safety against the king’s chest to make the horse obey.

Thranduil placed a cool hand on Elisa’s forehead. She didn’t move. Her breathing had slowed and her eyes fluttered closed.

“My lord.” Elrond dismounted his horse and rushed to the king’s side.

“Allow me to see to her. I fear she will not make it if she does not receive healing.”

Begrudgingly, the king placed the hunter in Elrond’s arms. They found a path of grass outside of the hunter’s homeland. The trees overshadowed them, granting them a break from the sunlight. Elrond gently laid the wounded hunter on the ground. A thin layer of sweat clung to her forehead and she was shaking. All colour had drained from her face. She was left looking sickly pale.

Elrond called for an attendant who came with a pouch full of healing herbs. He placed a handful of herbs around the biggest wound on her side.

Elisa gasped and her eyes shot open. An ear-piercing scream bubbled from her throat.

The king never left her side. He stayed, holding her hand in hers, as her skin slowly stitched itself together again. Elisa saw stars dancing across her vision. Darkness threatened to consume her. She gripped the king’s hand till her knuckles went white.

“I am as unhappy about this as you are.” Petvog said, awkwardly holding the reins of Malicious.

The horse huffed and reared her head. She followed close to the King’s elk. Elisa had not awaken but colour had returned to her cheeks and her breathing was, if only for the time being.

“My lord.” Legolas rode ahead of the group and besides his father. “A few items were found in the Master’s house. A vile of the poison was discovered along with the spell books. It is not a language I have seen before, nor do the words make sense.”

“It will be the hunter language.” Petvog added helpfully.

The prince turned towards the hunter. “What do you know of it?”

“Well… not much. When Elisa cast the binding spell, someone else had to finish it. It allowed me to see through her eyes. I think that was just the spell though. Elisa’s father, the Commander and Lord of the Southland hunters, was the last of the family line who knew the language. He passed it onto
Elisa but I do not think she likes to speak it. Even when I spoke a few sentences, it sounded wrong. It was almost as if the words did not want to be spoken. The language is called *prohibituingua*.”

“Forbidden tongue.” Elrond translated. "Is Elisa of royal blood then?"

"It works differently for hunters. There are Commanders, which I suppose are the kings, and-"

“Tell me of the engagement between Elisa and the other hunter.” Thranduil demanded.

Petvog was suddenly regretting speaking out. The prince looked forward and Elrond slowed his horse so he rode at the back of the group. Petvog weighed up his chances of drifting away without the king noticed.

“Well, erm, it was a long time ago.” He stuttered pathetically.

The short and doomed relationship between the two hunters was a sore subject at best. It was part treated like a bad cold- ignored till it was forgotten about.

“Elisa would want to tell you herself. I mean... erm...

“Do not stutter and share the tale, Petvog. It is impolite to refuse your host.”

Petvog sighed. The king wasn't going to let it go unless he knew the full story. “Lord Nathaneil arranged the marriage of his daughter to Lord Snow’s firstborn son. Lord Snow is, or was, the Commander of the Westland hunters. I do not know how Elisa or Aidan viewed the agreement but they seemed happy enough in public. They could have been in love, I think.” Seeing the look on the king’s face, he quickly changed his tune. “Or, it was probably just to be united by the hunters. You know how arranged marriages are. Besides, they both were dedicated to hunting-”

Now he had done it. For Elisa’s sake and his own, Petvog cut short and slammed his mouth shut.

“I take it the engagement came to an end.”

Petvog scoffed. “You can say that. Turns out, Aidan preferred... to keep the company of Elisa's sister.”

Both royal elves spun around. Petvog bit down on his tongue.

“Do continue, master Petvog. You were doing well.”

“It... there was a rumour Aidan and Elisa's engagement came crashing because he... I really should let her tell the rest.”

“Petvog.” The king hinted with an underlying threat.

“Aidan had ‘other’ interests. When Elisa found out about them, well you can imagine. She thought they would be happier with her out of the picture so she stepped aside. They went their separate ways. Obviously, it ended differently for Amelia. I was a child while this was happening. All I knew was they were no longer friends and Aidan stopped joining Elisa when she came to tell us stories.”

He had already said too much. Elisa, half in and out of the dream world, heard enough to guess the King’s reaction. She had hoped the doomed engagement would have been forgotten or gone unnoticed. Petvog had been a child who had dug for worms and hunting for fairies in the woods while Elisa had been engaged.

She uncurled and leaned closer into the king’s warmth.
“Petvog?” She said, wrapping her arms around the king’s neck.
“I’m back here.”
“Shut up.”
“Okay.” He grinned. “I am glad you are well.”
“I want it on record that was the second dragon I have taken down. I also killed two demons and eighteen of Locus’ creatures. What was your count?”
“One demon but it was really fast and twenty-eight of the creatures. I think you won this one.”
She hummed a reply under her breath and rubbed her eyes.
“How many were lost?”
“Seven.” Legolas answered.
Elisa sighed. “I am sorry. I should—”
“There was nothing you could have done to prevent those deaths.” The king left no room for argument.
They were met at the eleven gates by a handful of soldiers. Elisa recognised Timaleos in his armour and helmet. He stepped forward and bowed respectfully before the king.
“My lord, there has been reports of spiders nesting in the forest.”
“Alert Tauriel and have her ready the guards. Did I not order the nest to be destroyed two moons ago? Go at once.”
“I will join her.” Legolas said.
He squeezed with his right leg, flicking the leather whip and his horse set off in a steady trot.
“I saw orcs in the forest before I arrived at my homeland. Could the spiders have something to do with that?”
She tried to hide her wince but her hand automatically curled around her stomach as a shield from another shot of pain. Thranduil gave her wound a glimpse. The claw shaped hole was still tender and ready to split open again.
“Hush, my light. You are injured and exhausted.”
“I think I have used up all of my fight for today. I am sorry for the spilling of elven blood.” She added under her breathe. “Mine was the only blood supposed to be spilt today.”
She gently slid out of Thranduil’s embrace and dismounted the elk. She stroked the elk’s mane as she tested her standing. Petvog ran to her and locked her in a tight hug. Her lips briefly flicked upwards. She patted him awkwardly on the back.
“Take Petvog to the healer’s quarters.” The king ordered. Two elves rushed ahead and signalled for Petvog to follow. He did as he was told. He waved behind his shoulder before they disappeared down one of the many corridors.
“I believe this is your ring.” She said, holding out her hand.

On her middle finger glistened the ring his wife had given him as they fought the Serpents of the North. Alanna had a healer who had saved him life. She had been in tears when she had confessed she could not heal the deep war scars on his face and had given him the ring as a token of apology.

“I had to use it as a bargaining offer for the Guardian.” She admitted. “I would have copied Jaces and offered them the head of my tutor but I never found his body.”

He handed the reins of his elk to a guard and slipped the ring off her finger.

“You could have been killed, Elisa.” He stated, his voice low and gruff.

The doors slammed shut behind them. Elisa cast one last longing glance at the doors as they sealed off her escape.

“I am sorry, for what it is worth.”

The king chuckled. “Are you broken so easily, Elisa? Two moons ago you would have replied with a wicked comment and spat at my feet.”

“I am tired and lost a lot of blood. Give me time.”

On que, a burning pain stabbing her side. She stumbled and almost fell again, which would be the icing on top of her already wonderful day, but the king tightened his grip around her waist, bent lower and lifted both legs clean off the ground. Instinctively, she wrapped her arms around his neck and breathed in his scent. It was intoxicating. She her finger down the column of his throat and gently kissed the spot just underneath his ear.

He growled low in his throat. It thrilled her to get a reaction out of him. The excitement was more than she got out of any hunt.

She trailed her fingers down his neck and touched his bottom lip.

Without warning, he dropped her onto her feet and pressed her against the stone wall. A gasp escaped her lips as she made contact with the cold stone. Had she overstepped the line? She knew the king was made at her but did even her touch disgust him now?

“Do not start something you do not intend to finish, Negotis.”

His body pressed into hers and she fought the urge to reach out and touch him. Anything to remind him that she was still there. She was still with him and he could still have all of her.

His arms tightly wrapped around her waist, hers clinging to his shoulders like a lifeline. Stroked a stray curl away from her face, Thranduil lifted up her chin; their noses almost touching. She stood up on her tiptoes and pressed her lips against his. It was a different pleasure to hunting. It was… thrilling. Wild horses couldn’t drag her away from the king’s mouth. He had her face in his hands, and there was a urgent desire in the way he moved- she was pretty sure there had never been anyone kissed like that before.

His hands drifted down to her sides. Her face distorted in pain and she flinched away from his touch. Thranduil pulled away from their kiss and looked at her in concern. Then he grabbed her by the wrist and led down an unfamiliar path. They stopped outside a bedroom door. The king didn’t bother knocking and burst into the room, dragging Elisa with him.
“My lord Thranduil!”

The she-elf in the middle of the room obviously hadn’t been expecting guests. She was dark haired and looked around Elisa’s age if size was anything to go by. Her skin was still dripping wet and wearing only a towel. She clung the towel tight around her pale body and looked down from the king’s glare.

“Heal her.” He commanded simply and left.

The healer rushed about like a storm around the room trying to get dressed without revealing anything.

“My lady, I really must apologise for my appearance.”

Elisa covered her mouth, hiding her laughter.

“I am sure you were not expecting guests. Your ill-tempered king doesn’t care much for privacy.”

Something crashed in the bathroom and several heavy footsteps hit the floor. Elisa debated going inside to check she was up and breathing. She was partly responsible for the healer being in such a state. Then again, she didn’t really want to have to deal with a half-naked healer.

“Are you okay in there?”

A tiny voice replied, “Yes… I am fine.”

She appeared a moment later carrying a basket full of herbs and potions. She placed the wicker basket on the bed and checked over her room. Her lime green dress looked like it had been thrown on and her hair roughly patted down.

“What is your name?”

“Elthel, my lady.” She made a quick curtesy.

“I am Elisa.”

The healer smiled at the ground. “I know who you are. You are all the kingdom seems to be talking about.”

Concern crossed the healers face and she bent low to examine the hole in her armour. The skin was still crusted with dried blood and the colour mismatched.

“The wound is deep, my lady.”

“Please call me Elisa. Deep wounds never bother me. It is the little ones which get under my skin.”

She stood and turned to the basket of herbs. “Please take off your armour.”

Elisa unbuckled the breastplate. She cringed as the fabric of her undershirt stuck to her wound. She peeled off her armour, leaving her in leather trousers which clung to her legs. Her breasts still showed the markings of the king’s fury but she hoped they would be marked off as more battle wounds.

The healer, for her credit, barely winced at seeing the state of the hunter.

A red burn mark scolded the side of her neck, her bottom lip was split, bruises decorated her arms
purple and brown, Locus’ claw had gone straight through her side, plus her hands were covered in angry welts.

“Elisa-” The healer whispered, covering her mouth with her hand.

“By all rights I should be dead. I am not sure whether it is good luck or bad. Whatever it is, I need less of it.”

She lay down on the bed, staring up at the ceiling and an arm covered her eyes.

“How did you become a healer, Elthel?”

The healer didn’t look up from her task of repairing the burn marks on Elisa’s hands.

“I come from a line of healers. My family has been in service for the king since the Second War. King Thranduil has treated us very well.”

Elisa chuckled under her breath. “He isn’t here. You do not need to suck up. Have you ever been outside of the kingdom?”

“No, my lady.”

“If you call me that again, I will be forced to act like a lady. That won’t end well for anyone.”

The healer started to laugh, a soft, almost soundless mirth. Elisa smiled too, proud the healer had found her funny.

“Is it true you killed a dragon?”

“Is that the sole definition of my life? I didn’t do it alone. Elthel, may I ask you a question?”

The healer looked hesitate. “If you please.”

“Have you ever heard of spells, healing potions, anything that would help a human keep fighting despite being mortally wounded?”

“I do not know of anything. I could ask my grandfather? He is more familiar with spells and ancient potions. Why do you want to know?”

Elisa frowned. “Elthel, look at my wound. The demon’s claw went straight through my chest. It barely missed my heart and yet I kept fighting. Tell me, truthfully, should I be alive right now?”

The healer waved her fingers over the hole in her flesh.

“No, Elisa. The wound was mortal. I could not say how you still breathe but surely it is good that you live?”

“I feel like a puppet.” She sighed and closed her eyes. “I need to know who is pulling my strings.”
Gandalf laughed merrily as he watched the dwarves dining over the elven dinner table. Out of all the luscious food spread out, the dwarves were thinking about chips. The green food would never pass as real food. Gandalf, Elrond and Thorn Oakenshield sat at a different table. The dwarven prince had been insufferable since entering the elven lands. Gandalf had told him firmly that the only enemies in Rivendale would be the ones he made himself. Still, Thorin was suspicious at best.

“My lord, might I make a somewhat assumption?”

“Don’t you always, my friend?” Elrond smiled.

Gandalf chuckled as he smoked his pipe.

“We are not the first guests to arrive in Rivendell, are we?”

Elrond’s expression didn’t change. “Depends on your definition of ‘guest’, I suppose.”

“I am referring to a young human woman.”

“What does have to do with reading the map?” Thorin demanded.

“It could very much have to do with reclaiming your kingdom.”

“This human is a side matter. She does not concern my kin or my company.”

Elrond watched the heated exchange with a barely contained smile.

“Does she go by the name Elisa?” He suggested after the wizard and the prince paused for breath.

“So she is a guest in Thranduil’s halls.” He puffed out a circle of smoke.

“I doubt you will see her if that is what you are asking. She is a somewhat… unwilling guest.”

“A prisoner.” Thorin stated.

“Considering she has escaped three times already, I doubt it will stay that way for much longer.”

Thorn looked almost proud of the stranger.

“Does she hunt a demon?”

“I was under the impression she hunted dragons.” Elrond stated.

The company of dwarves turned to the lord, no longer pretending not to be listening in. The wizard leaned back in his chair and smoked his pipe thoughtfully.

“It is as Radagast feared.”

“Is she a threat to us, Gandalf?”
The wizard shook his head. “Of course not but her role in the coming war may yet be decided by good or evil. She bares the markings of a demon, yes? Lord Elrond, it is very important I meet her immediately.”

“As I said, that will not be possible. The king limits her contact with anyone and she was injured in her last escape. Last I saw, she was carrying another wound inflicted by a demon along with severe burns. Luck will be with her if she even survives.”

A tiny laughter caused the group to turn around. Thorin saw her before Elrond had a chance to distract him. Was that good or bad? She looked better since the last time he had seen her. Colour had returned to her face and the crimson dress she wore made her curls look more vibrant. Elrond smiled and stood to greet her.

“It was hardly as bad as lord Elrond makes it sound.”

Her voice was like velvet, soft and gentle yet sultry. Gandalf rose to greet the red haired beauty.

She curtsied dramatically.

“I trust you informed the king of your intention to leave the palace.” Elrond stated, already knowing the answer.

“He worries too much. The healer worked wonders though she was a fussy one. The king would only have me thrown in prison again and I wanted to meet the next King under the mountain myself.”

Her easy smile cast down on the dwarf prince.

“It is a pleasure to meet you. I never had the chance to visit but my father often spoke about your kingdom. He painted a wonderful picture.” She leaned closer, a teasing smile playing on her lips. “The orcs really do not like you.”

“Do the orcs like anyone?” He replied huskily.

“Not even each other.”

Gandalf shuffled past Elrond and stood in front of Elisa.

“My lady—”

“Please, call me Elisa.”

The wizard smiled. “Elisa, Radagast the brown told me of your battles.”

“I have lost count of my battles, Gandalf. Please do not say it is to do with another dragon. I don’t think my heart can take it.”

“What do you know of dragons, human?” The prince said with a bite of bitterness.

“Not enough to avoid their fire, apparently.” She replied, holding out her palms so he could see the lashes. “Also, I keep getting stabbed by demons.”

The attractive dwarf with the blonde braided beard tipped his head back and laughed.

“I like her!”
“Did you wish to talk to me, Gandalf? I suggest you do it now before the king has me thrown into the dungeons again. Thranduil is a wise ruler but cares little for anything outside of his own kingdom.”

The prince smiled. She had heard of the king refused to aid the dwarves. He had not wanted the needless waste of life on a lost cause. Still, she knew the pain of losing a homeland. She didn’t imagine the dwarves were ones for letting go off past hurts either.

“May I speak to you in private, Elisa?” Gandalf asked.

She bowed before the prince again. “We will cross paths again, I am sure.”

Elrond showed them to an alcove outside of the dwarves’ earshot. Gandalf stared at her, curious if everything prophesied about her was true. She looked ordinary enough. There was no magic to her. The dress revealed a red burn marking from her left shoulder down to her side.

“I came here with a warning from Radagast. He would have given you himself but he had to care for the forest.”

Concern flashed across her face. “Is he okay?”

“Yes, he is fine. It is you he was concerned about. Your battle with the demon, the demon which injured you, was the beginning of something much larger than you understand.”

She smiled with not quiet malicious but cruelty. She spun around so he could not see how his words hurt.

“The demon led me to my homeland.” She revealed, wrapping her arms around her waist. “It led me there just so I could watch it burn. It tricked my only friend so I would have to kill her. Do you have any idea how it feels to be a puppet and not know who pulls your strings? I know what you are going to say, wizard, and let me spare you the trouble: I do not care.”

“How long have you know?”

She laughed humourlessly. “Not long enough to save anyone. I thought ‘what has the power to command a dragon and bend it its will?’ It told me the first time we fought that I had been touched by a fallen Valar and survived. I only know one of the Valar who would be capable of evil. Do you?”

The wizard didn’t reply. He smoked his pipe and his silent presence bought an odd sense of comfort to Elisa.

“I have been blind, Gandalf.”

“Not blind. Hasty perhaps, but you have not been blind. Take council with us, Elisa. You must return to defend your people.”

“Hunters?”

“Humans.” Gandalf corrected.

She scoffed and shook her head. “I know little of the human lands. From what I gather, they are weak and easily corrupted. Besides, you would not want to me to save them.” She turned and placed a hand on his shoulder. “Where I go, death will follow.”
They turned and studied the dwarves as they died. They were cheerful and full of hope despite the circumstances.

“How can I help?” She said.

“Unite the hunter lands. Reclaim the crown your father intended for you.”

"Gandalf, if I go to the hunter lands you will like the person who returned.” She snapped, a dead calm in her eyes yet heat in her words. “The hunters have never accepted a queen or king. We do not work well with thrones.”

The wizard wasn’t deterred, much to her irritation.

“They will only accept your rule. It is prophesied the hunter lands will unite to fight back the shadow of Sauron when the ravens return to under the mountain. I will tell you the same thing I told your father many moons ago- the united lands of the hunters can tip the balance of the coming war. This is what your parents raised you to become. Take your rightful place as Queen of the Middle Earth Hunters. I fear this war will be over far too soon without the hunters’ help.”

She glanced at the towering structure of Thranduil’s palace. He would be inside somewhere, probably in his throne room, waiting for her. It had been a while since anyone waited for her.

“I have dedicated my life to hunting. I have been fear and death. I know what you want of me but I shall not give up everything to be something my father wanted. They deserve a better and fairer ruler. I cannot leave the elves to fight alone. I have lost too many friends and ran from too many burning lands to act as if I am still my own master.”

“The Necromancer will come for the hunters.” He pointed out.

“Perhaps he will.” She kissed him gently on the cheek. “He can’t kill all of us.”

“So what is next, Queen Hunter? Kick off with some blood rites before a spot of child sacrifice and grave robbing before break for a plate of salted pork?”

“Are you listening to yourself right now, Petvog?”

The younger hunter skipped down the cobbled path alongside Elisa. He had spotted her sneaking down the hallways and had made so much noise Elisa had no choice but to let him walk besides her. A massive grin stretched across his face.

“Sorry, my lady Queen Elisa.”

She groaned and slammed her palm on her forehead.

“I knew I should have left you to die.”

“That is no way to talk to your loyal subject! Are you going to knight me?”

“No one is getting knighted because no one is being queen.” She rolled her eyes. “Demons will drag
me into the fires of Mordor before I am anointed queen of anything. Everything will return to normal soon enough.

“No it won’t.” Petvog replied. His smile was still wide and a skip in his steps. “I know you do not want to be Queen but once you see the palace you will live in, you will change your mind. I heard the Westland Palace is made entirely of ice. Do you think they are so angry because they are always cold?”

“Damned if I know. What if they had a really hot day? Would their city melt?”

“They never have hot days. They scared the sun away.”

For 10 minutes, Petvog went on to make what he assumed was scary noises and jumping around corners trying to scare guards. He managed to annoy at least a dozen.

“When is your birthday?” Petvog asked.

Elisa still walked with her hands held behind her back and head held high.

“Midyear’s Day. Durin's day.”

“What year?”

“Every year. It is an annual event.”

“So your birthday is soon!”

“Assuming I live long enough to see it, yes.”

They came to a dead stop outside the healers’ room. The doorway was blocked by a dozen guards. In the middle was the king in his robe and gown. Elisa froze and swallowed hard.

“It looks like we are going down swinging, my friend.”

No reply.

She spun around. “Petvog?”

An empty space marked where Petvog had been stood.

The king pointed an accusing figure at her and stormed out of the healer’s room.

“I have the kingdom locked down! No one has been allowed in or out of this land while you have been missing! Do you have any idea how weak it makes my domain appear when I cannot contain one woman?!”

Elisa bit down on her bottom lip and tried to hide her smile. She batted her eyelashes at the king.

“Then… I suppose you better catch me!”

Laughter bubbling from her throat, Elisa raced down the hallway.
The two powerful rulers celebrated in room 32. The eldest leader, a man with salt and pepper hair and dressed in the finery of a king. The other leader was smaller and his beard took over most of his friendly face. Commander Riding of the Southland Hunters and Commander Snow of the Westland Hunter couldn’t have been more different. Commander Snow was a joyous and sympathetic man who wore his obesity like a fur coat. He was also father of 6 children while Commander Riding was known for rarely smiling. Commander Snow’s eldest son was the only one a bubble of nervousness and dread.

Years of negotiation had finally come to fruit. The piece of parchment proudly displayed in the middle of the table would change everything. Words delicately written and signed at the bottom by both commanders only waited for the bride and bridegroom’s signatures. Even Commander Riding was proud of the milestone.

The girl of the hour hadn’t shown up yet. Things had been tense between the future husband and wife lately. The commanders put it down to nerves. After all, Aidan adored the girl and spent most of his time following her about like a lost dog.

Finally, the pride of the Southland hunters slipped into the room like a shadow. Aidan immediately went to stand by her side but she held up her hand to stop him. He froze to the spot and studied her from afar. Elisa Riding was the apple of her father’s eye for a reason. She was art- there was no other way to describe her. She looked beautiful in a floor length black dress and a necklace of pure sunlight gems but she would have looked perfect wearing a sack. She didn’t smile anymore though.

“My dearest daughter,” The Commander said, taking her hand in his. “We were just discussing the feast arrangements for your wedding. It is agreed we should hold the feast in the Westland. There will be elven wine to please your stubborn mother and music-”

“There is not going to be a feast, father.” Elisa stated. “Because there is not going to be a marriage.”

Aidan silently pleaded with her but Elisa didn’t even bat an eyelid at his desperation. All eyes turned towards Elisa. She stepped forward.

“Aidan is willing to suffer a lifelong marriage to a woman he does not love for the sake of this union. His courage should not be questioned- nor should his dedication. I admire his commitment but there will not be a marriage.”

“Nonsense!” Commander Snow exclaimed in a loud voice. “You will grow to love one another. Aidan worships the ground you walk on! I have never seen a man more in love! All he does when he is away from you is talk about you! The marriage will be full of love!”

Elisa held up her hand. “Not while my sister carries his child.”

The humour drained from the room. Commander Snow’s mouth hung open. For the first time in his
life, he was shocked. They all turned to Aidan who looked seconds away from crying.

“Aidan, my son, tell me she is mistaken.”

Aidan swallowed the lump in his throat. Without meeting his father’s eyes, he replied:

“Elisa… speaks the truth. Not about me not being in love with her, because I am! But about the child… I am sorry.”

"How could you sleep with another woman while claiming to be in love with Elisa?" Commander Riding sighed. "Stupid, stupid boy. She will hardly accept you now, will she?"

“Surely the agreement can move forward. There can still be a marriage! My son loves your daughter!”

“Oh? Which one?”

“Elisa!” Aidan answered quickly. "I love Elisa. God, I love her so much! She is my soul mate! Please, if you give me chance as a husband-"

“I would not marry the father of my sister’s child for anything.”

Elisa folded her arms over her chest. There would be no changing her opinion.

“If not between Elisa and Aidan then perhaps your other daughter will see reason-”

“Be quiet, you foolish man!” Commander Riding snapped.

The other commander shut up, along with everyone else in the room. Amelia Riding, though pretty in her own way and eager to please, would never be Queen. She was barely a hunter.

Nathaneil Riding looked at his strong and beautiful daughter. Her eyes full of sadness and disappointment, Elisa looked colder. As if the warmth was gone from her.

“Father, I need you to support me. I am asking as your daughter.”

The commander took the marriage deed and tore it down the middle.

“On behalf of the Southland Hunters, I retract the offer of a union between our lands.”

He tore the sheet again, the sound violent and hopeless.

“Commander, think about this! The marriage-”

Nathaneil let the scraps flutter onto the floor. With every piece of tear of paper, the hard work of the past years dissolved.

“A union will not exist. As long as I live and my daughter holds domain over the hunters, the hunter lands will not be united.”

He tucked his daughter’s hand into the crook of his arm and escorted her out of the room. His words hung thick in the air. There was no questioning the most powerful Commander in Middle Earth.

“He is right.” Aidan’s father said with a sigh. “There will not be a union in his lifetime but his daughter will have the crown. May the Valars make it sooner rather than later.”
The Westland hunter homeland wasn’t made completely of ice. The skyline was decorated with white puffs of clouds and the sun hanging low on the horizon. The lands were twice as big as Elisa’s homeland and three times larger than any human settlement. Aidan had to take a boat to get to the palace. Lily pads graced the gentle glistening water, pure blue and clear. In the distance, the palace appeared. Its bulb shaped domes glistened with gold. The towering structure placed purposely away from the hunters’ homes.

The bargeman stopped the boat besides the golden bricked path leading to the palace. A dozen servants rushed from the palace’s doors to greet him. His father soon followed. Arms outstretched and a massive grin across his face, Commander Snow hadn’t changed much in his years. His kingly garments stretched to accommodate his growing stomach and the silver belt across his stomach hardly served a purpose. Age treated the Snow family well.

Aidan went into his father’s embrace and soaked in the brief moment of peace.

“My son returns! Slaughter the finest animals we have and ready a grand feast! He ordered hurried to a blonde she-elf servant.

“I do not bring good news, father. The Southlands have been destroyed. Commander Snow is missing, feared dead. His daughter chases the demon responsible. An army of orcs march on to attack the dwarf kingdom and I fear dark powers are at work.”

His father nodded. “Yes, yes but how was the weather?”

“The weather was peachy, father. Did you hear anything of what I just said?”

“How is Elisa? Did she look well?”

“She is surviving.”

The aged commander smiled and turned on his heels, his robe swishing against the bricks.

“She needs aid, father. It is not a battle for one hunter alone.”

“She has the power to unite the hunter lands. It is spoken so in the stars. In the meantime, tell me of this destruction. Is Commander Riding really feared dead? Was it a painful death at least?”

Aidan didn’t miss the note of glee in his father’s voice.

“The Dark One will turn his eye on the hunters soon. No gates can hide us from him. If we remained isolated, caring only for our own lands, the war will be on our doorsteps before we know what has hit us.”

“Then we must have a queen. Elisa knows her duty and will have to make a choice! No, I will speak no more of this!”

Inside the palace was grand. The windows gleamed, as did the marble floor. Gardens full of blooming roses separated the spacious room into four corners. Huge column held up the doomed roof, elegantly decorated with depictions of heroic hunters and their prey.
The sparse guests in the castle bowed before the Commander and his son.

“The dwarves are planning on retaking their homeland, son. Do you know what that means?”

Aidan narrowly avoided the king’s trailing robe.

“I will soon be taking contracts to kill dwarf princes again?”

His father either chose to ignore the bitter bite to Aidan’s words or missed it.

“It means our hand may be forced to play. I will not sit aside while darkness consumed the world. Secret or not, we have a duty to protect these lands—hunter or not.”

Aidan nodded and puffed out his cheeks. “I translate that as you want the kingdom under the Mountain.”

“To be what tomorrow needs, son.”

The motto haunted Aidan. He hated it with a burning passion. He remembered with sweet bitterness how Elisa used to mock it. She had been determined to destroy the many history lessons with humour and tricks played on the tutors.

“Are you saying tomorrow needs the hunters to be out of the shadows? Because if we take Erebor I can guarantee that we will get a lot of attention.”

Commander Snow turned to his son. “Do you know the only way to save Middle Earth?”

Aidan thought after it for a moment. “Leave?”

“By providing a ruler and a kingdom all can follow. Do not question your superiors. Never fear, we will have the kingdom. And the kingdom needs a throne.”

“And there we have the link to Elisa. Not to be the melancholic one here but why don’t we drag her back?”

Aidan rubbed the tiredness away from his eyes, wincing at the ache settling into his bones. The past few days had taken their toll on him. Trying to find the famed hunter had been draining at the best of times and Jaces’ death weighted heavily on him. He knew the path through the palace like the back of his hand but he let his father lead the way anyway. In the lobby were a series of stark black-and-white photos that each visitor or hunter had to pass each day. One showed the famed painting of a massacred human village by a rouge sect of hunters. The next one showed the blazing city of the Dales, destroyed by Smaug. The serpents of the North cutting down an army of elves like wheat. The fourth showed Elisa’s father and Aidan’s father shaking hands.

Those historical paintings continued down one side of the Palace and then marched down the opposite wall. Aidan remembered the lectures from his father reminding him never to forget what happens when freewill turns into chaos and the brave men who returned order. He wondered if the fourth spot at the top of the stairs was reserved for a depiction of the massacred Southlands.

“Father, I heard some disturbing things about Commander Riding.”

“He was a disturbed man. Do you know I once caught him eating pig tongue?” He shivered dramatically.

“He was making contracts with demons. He made a deal with a demon to save his daughter and now
that demon is slaughtering innocent people!"

“If you’re referring to greed, envy and the other twits then it’s nothing I have not heard before. The Southland hunters might have been in charge but they were merciless and unrelenting. And do not give me that look, boy. Commanders are compiled to tell only other commanders of their intentions and concerns.”

Aidan threw his arms up and puffed out his cheeks.

“He gave up his daughter!”

The commander scoffed. “Giving up his daughter does not surprise me. Eating his daughter would surprise me. The Mordor Hunterland sent word by raven. They invited us to a meeting to ‘discuss’ the boiling situation. Apparently, they want to reach an agreement.”

“What did it say? ‘You are cordially invited into a trap?’ I would only go if I had permission to wipe them out. Can we go back to this prophesied kingdom with Elisa as queen, please?”

“There are bigger issues than the girl you chose not to marry. Rest easy for tonight, my son, then go to the elven lands and take the Hidden Path. Elisa is unstable but her heart still belongs with the hunters. Tell her of our plight, our growing fear, and she will come. Without her father, Elisa alone holds the right to rule. But if she does not want to return home and to her people… if she would rather die hunting a demon, then perhaps it would be best to make sure she does not return. Do we understand each other?”

Aidan didn’t know which was worse: his father manipulating him or it working. He would see her again. If he could convince her to return with him then everything would be fine. Even if he was met with a cold stare and forced politeness, he wanted to see her. By the Valar, he missed her. If he could just get her away from the ill-tempered elves and explain what her people feared…

“Are you asking me to kill her?”

His father had the decency to look shocked.

“I would never suggest killing such an important young woman. All I am suggesting it that if the problem arises where she refuses to support us, then her influence over Middle Earth should be… shortened.”

“I will go, father. I will bring her back alive and ready to accept the crown but not for you. Her home lies in flames, her family murdered and her friends plotting behind her back and you would do nothing?” Aidan bitterly expelled. “I see now why she would want nothing to do with us.”

He marched down the hallways and didn’t stop till he reached his quarters.

A dozen servants waited in his rooms but he dismissed them all. They bowed hastily and shuffled out of the room.

Servants were usually bought from poor human families who could offer their children no better. They were easily recognised because of their shaved heads and the leather collars they wore around their necks. Aidan had ignored them until he had met Elisa. He had found the commander’s daughter sharing candied fruit with a servant girl and, being a spoilt and haughty child, he had rushed to shoo the servant away. She had stood up to him and demanded he apologised to the petrified servant.

He smiled at the memory and creaked open the plain leather box on his bedside table. He took one vital out of the years’ worth of Widow 32. He slipped a teardrop of the black liquid onto his tongue
and placed three more vitals into his bag along with everything he would need for the dangerous trip. Plus, Elisa would need some.

Aidan spent the night in his room watching the night claim the beautiful land outside his window. At dawn, left for Mirkwood.
Chapter 34- Good Intentions

Elisa’s breathing, heavy and unrhymed, was the only thing she could hear. She couldn’t stop her hands shaking. Wooden crates pressed against her back and the hiding spot left little room to move. Petvog had barely squeezed in besides her. Trying to keep completely silent, they caught their breath as they hid behind the wine barrels.


Elisa rested her head in her hands.

“I thought being charming and spontaneous would win him over. Now I’m just hoping he will go easier on me if my heart isn’t beating. Wait, why did you run?” She whispered back.

“He likes you better!”

“He called me a demon’s harlot!”

“I thought that was a term of endearment for elves.”

“Shh!”

They both slammed their mouths shut as three guards rushed past them. They looked angrier and less patient than the previous guards the hunters had run into.

Elisa’s breath caught in her throat and she slammed her hand over Petvog’s mouth. The moment they were left alone in the wine cellar again, the hunters burst out laughing.

“Should I just expect these things now I’m with you?” Petvog asked.

“I will bring you to the best fights. That much you know.”

“Not that I don’t adore hiding from the elven king but what about our home?”

Elisa’s grin didn’t fail.

“What home?”

Petvog fought back a shiver. The coldness, the distance, in her eyes didn’t match the smile on her lips.

“Elisa… you haven’t forgotten our home, have you?”

“You are better with me. Trust me.”

He did. The Riding family had never been challenged, least of all Elisa. She got into the most trouble
but then would always get out of it with a charming smile and witty joke. And he would be there besides her, finally with the infamous hunter. It was he desperately craved.

Elisa removed her hands and ruffled his hair. He grinned up at her.

“There are two guards by the door.” He hissed.

Elisa glanced around. Behind her was a trap door. She imagined it would lead to the violently flowing river underneath the cellar. She stored the location in her memory, not doubting it would come in handy one day. She wasn’t ready to give away the idea just yet anyway.

“I have an idea.” She said as she uncurled her body and stood up. “You gently hug them and I’ll… run!”

The last word had barely left her mouth before she sprinted out the door. The elves only saw a flash of colour and her insane laughter before Petvog was on her heels.

Petvog’s boots pounded on the stone floor, struggling to keep up with the other hunter, while Elisa moved as silently as a shadow. She didn’t turn around. Assuming Petvog could keep up; she took the winding route back to the king’s quarters- where the guards would check last. She burst into the room, hands shaking and struggling to breath whilst laughing.

Petvog collapsed in the piano chair and ghosted his fingers over the keys. He waited for Elisa to finish laughing. Or he thought she was laughing. It took him longer than he was proud of to realise her giggles had been replaced with sobs. Her cheeks were wet with tears and red rimmed eyes.

“What choice did you give them?
Bound to demons
An attempt to prevent further suffering
Played by the rules
Repaid unjustly

But the truth is this:
We will not hesitate
Do not allow a peaceful rage to become hate
I promise you, you’ll regret the day
A stain that won’t wash away

When it all falls down
When you're wondering
Where it all went
What it all meant
We'll have no words left

We may not be around
To see it fall into descent
We'll always be your enemy
So save your breath

What choice did you give us?
What choice?

If Petvog didn’t know better, he would have said the song promoted the rebellion the Hunters worked so hard to stomp out. Most of the hunter songs encouraged violence, revenge and lust. It was music that tore into the soul.

Elisa sat down besides Petvog and crashed her hands down on the keys. Petvog stopped and almost jumped back. Elisa took over playing a more upbeat song but one with lyrics no less prideful.

*The heart wants what the heart wants...*
When I’m standing on the edge, it’s time to make a choice.
The most repulsive one of all is if I fall, it’s all my fault
The heart wants what the heart wants,
I know it isn’t you.

Like flipping a coin, Elisa changed the song to seem cheerful and full of humour. A crowd had formed outside the door, drawn by her beautiful voice but hesitant to step inside the king’s chambers. The frowns were coaxed into smiles.

*Well, I can’t say it’s been a pleasure just a pain and quite a mess*
I’m no damsel in distress, a weight off my chest
I can breathe without your hands around my neck.
You’re mistaken if you ever think you’ll make another fool out of me! How pathetic can you be?
Smile at the crowd, take one last bow...

Petvog didn’t like the song. He didn’t like how the elves were lured into the room by her. She was no threat, right? Why wouldn’t the sick feeling at the bottom of his stomach disappear? It twisted like a knife in his gut to hear the words leave her mouth. He had heard her speak the forbidden tongue of Hunters but still it didn’t compare to the lure of her beautiful music.

*I’ve got a couple tricks of my own, a few I still haven’t shown*
When I get you alone, now you see it now you don’t!

You’ve backed me in the corner for the last time I’m taking control

Standing in the corner with a knife in my hand and I won’t fail
Standing at the edge with your life in my hands and I let you fall!

She turned to him, a grin on her lips, her eyes flashing red. Then Petvog understood why Director Riding had sent her away. Elisa was brave and beautiful but something was missing from her. He thought back to the demon’s taunt. When his homeland had been burning he hadn’t paid attention to the sick tale it spun. Now, he flicked back to the memory in desperation. What did it say about the princes and princess?

The smiling girl was passionate and ethical. Though it’s true she was an outsider.
The eldest girl was independent and forgiving. Though it’s true she was full of lies.
The youngest boy was lively and intelligent. Though it's he was powerless.
And the boy was handsome and capable. Though it’s true he often got lost.

He thanked the Valar for hunter long memory. It left him with trauma but it came in handy. The smiling girl, the outside, was that Daethel? She had spent her childhood separated from the hunters because she was an elf and more emotional than the others. Even Elisa had looked down at her.

The eldest girl? Petvog could only think of poor Jaces who was the eldest hunter who Elisa knew. Well, and Elisa’s sister. But Amelia had died years ago.

The two boys could only be Aidan and him. Petvog had never been lost before in his life. He was a follower and prided himself on following whoever looked like they knew their way- hunter or not. Aidan was handsome and capable. Anyone with sense could see that.

The commander had fruitlessly tried to keep his daughter away from the other hunters and it was always assumed it was because he thought her better than them. Elisa Riding had been perfect in the eyes of her father. The other hunters guessed he didn't want her diverting of her divine path.

But what if there was another reason?

What if he was scared of his daughter?

Petvog’s watched, frozen to the spot as her eyes turned back to their usual calm colour. She offered a last warning smile before her attention was on the piano keys.

The dark inside may control my life
Too much love, so little hate
The dark inside won't control my fate
Suddenly Elisa's song didn't sound so sweet to Petvog.

Legolas didn’t have to search far to find the hunter. It had got to a point where he could just ask the nearest guard where the laughing woman had gone and they would point in a direction. He sighed and sent the guards back to their duties. The prince stepped through a sea of guards and other visitors who he didn’t recognise. The crowd parted in the middle immediately.

Her sweet song and laughter filled the room. The song she played was beautiful even if he didn’t recognise half the words. Her arms were in the air and she was spinning around the room, her skirts fluttering around her knees. Legolas thought she had never looked so beautiful.

“It is good to know that if were attacked by orcs now, it is because the guards were being entertained.”

The voice tight with anger ended the joy. Elisa froze and dropped her hands. Petvog crashed his hands down on the keys, creating an awful noise. The crowd quickly dispersed.

“Leave us, Petvog.”

Thranduil’s booming voice filled the room. The young hunter silently waited for Elisa to reply so he could follow her league but the senior hunter stayed silent. Her elegant fingers ghosted over the piano keys and she hummed to a song only she could hear. She didn’t turn or show any acknowledgement of the king’s anger.

“Do as he says, Petvog. I will be out shortly.” She said with a casual wave of her hand.

The hunter scampered out of the room and eased the door shut behind him. It made it easier for him to press his ear against the room and hear every word the arguing couple said.

If Elisa had any notion of getting off with a warning, it flew out of the window when she saw the king’s expression.

“Are you listening?”

“Intensely.” She replied.

“How dare you make me look weak in my own kingdom? All of Middle earth looks upon my rule as a steadfast and uncompromising force yet you challenge me in front of my subjects?”

“All of Middle Earth looks upon you as a self-centred son of-”

“Do not challenge me further! I am at the end of my patient!”

“How have I challenged you, my lord?”

Thranduil narrowed his eyes.
“By your disappearance not once but twice today! If only it was the first time! I almost expect it from you after your many performances, you disagreeable and self-important child!”

Elisa spun around and pointed at the king.

“Do not think you have ownership over me. Nothing you say or do can stop me from completing the hunt I set out for. I have come too far now. And, for history records’ sake, I would have completed the ritual with Jaces if it had not meant massacring the elves!”

A harsh hand collided with her cheek. Black stars danced across her vision and tears sprung to her eyes. Part of her was glad he had hit her. Finally she had wrung an emotion out of him even if it was anger.

“You are a testing creature.” He hissed.

She jeered, “And a restless one.”

Thranduil wrapped a cold hand around her throat and lifted her so they were eye level. She began choking but he didn’t care.

“Silence your tongue and perhaps you will keep it. Any ritual the hunters had planned would have only bought death and ruin. Your homeland was destroyed for a reason and I tempted to believe the demon’s words that your kin was plotting to raise the dead. I will not allow you to become a sacrifice because of your kin’s ambitions. I will not hear of it, especially when it involves the halfwit dwarves. Yes, your presence was noticed outside these walls. If you value your life, it shall not happen again.”

He gave her one last threatening squeeze before releasing her. Elisa collapsed in a heap on the floor, gasping for air.

“I would have thought,” She said as she struggled to her feet. “That your main concern would have been demons hunting us.”

“The hunters concerns are not mine. I know little of your people and what I do know does not build confidence.”

“Do not be blind! I think there is something plotting as we speak. When I was hunting Locus, every village I tracked it down to was deserted in the exact way my homeland was. The Guardian said about there being sacrifices in order for hunters to regain their immortality. There are two other hunter lands out there. The ones near Mordor are mad and we have no dealings with them. I fear they were involved in this long before I was.”

If Thranduil knew how much hatred she held for the Mordor Hunter lands he wouldn’t doubt her suspicions. The hunter stumbled to her feet so she could face him with some dignity.

“Everything the hunters had done, they have done without thought to consequences. Perhaps the demon’s will was more pure than the hunters’ will!”

“How could you justify the death of hundreds of innocent people?” She screamed back.

“I doubt any hunter is innocent.”

She turned around so he couldn’t see the foolish tears wetting her eyes. Her memories were not off a violent and bloodthirsty race. Her memories were of a people determined to keep Middle Earth safe. Something had changed in the short years she had been away. Something cruel and evil had slowly bubbled to the surface. She had a feeling it revolved around the Dark Ones.
“I need to know.” She whispered.

A hand, no longer cruel, rested on her shoulder.

“Leave it be, my light. No good can come from pursuing demons. Answers will not bring your family back and neither will revenge.”

His calm voice made her anger boil over any sense she had.

“Why am I alive?” She demanded, turning back to him. “Why am I alive and they aren’t? Why did the demon spare me and not Leon or Darren? Why am I here and not another hunter? There were better hunters than I.”

“There wasn’t.” A small voice protested.

Petvog shrunk by the doorway and waited for permission to enter. It didn’t come but he stumbled inside anyway.

“After Jaces and you left, it left a hole in everyone’s life. Everyone had got used to seeing you. Your father hardly ever came out of the mansion. We never saw your mother. Your brothers were always out hunting. All I knew was that the stories came a lot less when you left. You held us all together. I… I think that is why you were meant to be queen.”

The king turned on his heels to face Petvog.

“A stubborn and reckless child could never be queen!”

With a cruel sneer, he turned to Elisa again. She stood her ground and refused to look away from his piercing glare.

“It is a mystery to me what convinced me of your suitability here. If you want to leave, then leave. I tire of your childish ways! You are nothing but a girl searching for home. You are tiring, wild and wicked. By the Valars, you are not even of elven blood.”

The king shook his head one last time.

Then he curled his fist and punched straight through her chest. She was standing on the floor and fell. The fist opened wide and her heart rolled out of her rib cage and underneath the bed. Blood gusted rhythmically from her open wound.

He left her bleeding and hurt. And she let him.

The blood poured from her mouth. It tasted like smoke and failure. The burning shame of being unloved soaked the wooden floor. To be needed, desired, but not wanted.

She heard her father’s voice snap. He ordered her to get a hold of herself. She wasn’t weak. So she let the king crush her heart and smiled coyly while she covered the bleeding hole in her chest.

Because she was hunter.

Because she was the daughter of Commander Riding.

She smirked and shrugged despite the fact that he had taken away her light.

Petvog dodged out of the king’s way when he marched out of the room like demons themselves were on his tail. Suddenly the floor became the most interesting thing in the room for him.
Elisa squared her chin high and sat back at the piano.

“What do you think,” She said softly. “My father would do?”

“I did not know your father well.” He mumbled.

“What?”

“I never knew your father.” He said louder so she could hear.

“But you know me. What should I do?”

“You will do whatever is best. I trust you. You always know the right thing to do, even if it does not seem that way at the time. Do you think we can go home?”

She sighed and rubbed the back of her neck. Her skin was paler than it had been in a while. She didn’t like her hands shaking the way they did. Petvog looked at her with hope in his eyes and she didn’t have the option of dismissing him with a shrug.

“There is no home left.”

Petvog nodded and looked down at the floor again.

Elisa opened her mouth again and her voice was free from any emotion.

“The hunters were powerful once. We were a shadow that crossed over Middle Earth. The puppet masters. I believe we can create a new home and still claim what belongs to us.”

“You will make a good queen.” The boy promised and his eyes were full of hope.

Elisa shook her head. “The hunters will never have a queen. I will be surprised if anything about them can still be saved.”

“Do you really think they had something to do with the demons?”

Elisa bit down on her bottom lip. Her fingers ghosted over the piano keys.

“I do.” She said quietly. “And I intend to punish them for it.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm really giving her a hard time, aren't I?

Sorry it's been so long since I last updated! I've just started a new job and it's been riding me hard. I hope you enjoy the latest chapter and I've already got the next one on it's way :) 

-Al
The hunter wiped the grim off his silver sword and onto a piece of cloth. He threw the rag onto a spider corpse in disgust. He put his hands onto his knees and paused to catch his breath. The spiders were getting bigger and braver every time he dared enter Mirkwood. His partner didn’t seem affected by their fight. She stood off in the distance, barely an outline in the dark. She was probably preparing herself for what came next.

He spat on the forest floor and kicked the corpse of the nearest spider. He expected the elves to have better domain over their own lands. No dark creature would dare enter the hunter domain. The idea of his future queen held captive here made him sick.

The hunters journeyed into the forest for the rest of the night. His fellow hunter had been born in this sick land and knew the layout better than any home. Plus, he had long since adjusted to hear every sound out of the ordinary and react faster than he could breath. They saw no signs of life until they reached the edge of the forest.

The elven palace was a wonder to look at. Even compared to the many magnificent sights in his homeland, the works of the elves was amazing to look at. The only sound came from the front gates. He frowned and crept forward. It wasn’t predicted for anyone else to be at the gates besides guards…

Besides the two guards who were easily identified by the shining armour was another small figure. The guard on the left tipped his head back and laughed at something the third figure said.

“Elisa.” He whispered out loud before he could stop himself. Sat on the floor with her legs crossed and her arms in the air making large gestures, Elisa couldn’t have looked more out of place. He recognised the guard’s reaction before he saw her. Only one woman could distract an elf from their duty.

The elven hunter besides him shushed him and stepped back into the shadows. He took one last look at his future queen before he joined the shadows.

It was time finally.

Aidan felt the cold metal of a blade press into his palm. He couldn’t see her tears and he was glad of it. A shiver ran up her. The blade glistened.

They both ignored everything around them except Aidan’s steady hand.

“Forgive me.” He begged.

She didn’t reply. It took all her energy to keep breathing.

They stood opposite each other. She flinched away but he forgave her brief moment of weakness. They both knew what had to be done.
The first cut was the worst. The gash seemed to separate her entire face. The blade skimmed the surface of her cheek, sliding down from the bottom of her eye to the corner of her pert lips. Crimson streaks stained her skin. The second and the third cut were easier. Cut after cut left her face in ribbons.

The hunter bit down on her bottom lip to stop the scream threatening to leave her throat. She refused to scream or whimper during the pain. Slash after slash and she didn’t scream. On the fifth cut, her legs gave out from underneath her. Aidan held her close and guided her to the floor before he continued. He shushed her faint whimpers. With a healer’s care, he performed a torturer’s work. Despite the blade’s handle being slick with a sickly liquid, his hand remained steady.

Soon her pretty face was unrecognisable. Aidan leaned back on his hunches and studied his work. Blood stained the hunter’s dress and since she wore no armour, the hunter shivered from the chill. With her elven features, simple clothing and sever injuries, the elf looked as far from a hunter as one could look. The last thing was the worst. He snuck the glass vile out of jacket pocket and guided the black liquid to her lips. Before she could have second thoughts, he tipped the entire contents into her mouth.

Satisfied, Aidan took her hand and led her to the edge of the forest. It took them longer than it should have because the elf was reliant on Aidan to lead her. They were footsteps away from the pathway leading to the gates when he released her.

He was glad to see Elisa had already left. He didn’t want her to see what he had done to another hunter.

Timaleo watched Elisa slip silently back inside the palace. He waited till she was out of view before he signalled for the gates to be closed. The hunter had a way of creeping around and catching him unprepared. The last thing he needed was her escaping again. The king still looked at him funny whenever he passed by. If Tiamelo focused, he could almost hear the hatred. Thankful, Elisa had only left the palace to apology to him and stayed to entertain him with stories of her colourful past.

Suddenly the guard besides him stood to attention and withdrew his sword. Timaleo straightened and searched for the threat. Ahead, a figure ran out from the dark. The figure stumbled and swayed from side to side. Whoever it was didn’t look like they had any intention of stopping.

“Halt!” He demanded.

The figure didn’t respond. Closer, it was easy to see it was a citizen she-elf. Her dress was stained dark and her hands desperately clutched her face. Faint screams bubbled from her lips and gasps of pain. The figure ran straight into Timaleo. He barely had time to move his sword to the side so the stranger wasn’t impaled. He caught the elven woman and yanked her hands away from her face.

He regretted his decision instantly.

“Call a healer!” He shouted at the top of his voice as he supported the woman’s entire weight. “Open the gates now!”

Taking a deep breath, he looked upon the woman’s injuries again. He had to know if it was just an
animal attack or if someone had done this to her in the forest. What had she been doing out alone at night? Everyone knew that dark creatures haunted the forest. She wasn’t recognisable but her simple clothes made me think she was not from the palace. Her face was sliced in ribbons of fresh blood and cut flesh. It wasn’t a mystery what the wet patches on her dress really were. She clutched his arms desperately, silently begging for help.

Distracted by the brutally injured woman, no guards noticed the shadow enter the palace after them. Not that they could have even if they had been looking. The dark powers of the hunters involved more than summoning demons.

It wasn’t the only thing working to Aidan’s advantage. The elves had no idea how far the hunters would go. They couldn’t imagine the extent the hunters would give up to recover their power: even if it means sacrificing a king to save their queen.

Elisa heard the commotion before she saw it. Half a dozen guards swarmed past her, the urgency sketched in their faces telling her not to get in their way. She was walking into the kitchen with Petvog when Legolas found them. Elisa was halfway in her conversation with the other hunter about the Mordor hunters but the worry on Legola’s face cut the conversation in half.

She bowed politely before raising a quizzical eyebrow in question. He shook his head and placed a hand on her elbow to steer her in the opposite direction. Petvog followed loyally.

“What is the matter? Did I set something on fire?”

The prince didn’t blink at her humour attempt.

“A elven woman was found outside the palace gates. She had suffered injuries at the hands of someone. The guards have taken her to a healer but her injuries…” he paused. “They are not like what we have seen before.”

“Why are you telling us?” Wheezed Petvog.

“The woman keeps muttering the same thing. I thought you would want to see her. Perhaps you could offer assistance. The healers are doing what they can but she is plagued by something you have knowledge on.”

Elisa frowned. She could barely keep her body from falling apart when she was healing herself. Handling someone else’s injuries sounded like a job for an actual healer… and prayer.

“I am sorry, Legolas, but I do not know what help I could-”

“She keeps repeating the same thing. Despite her injuries, the woman seems transfixed on delivering a message: ‘to be what tomorrow needs’. Do you think you can help now?”

The words had barely left his mouth before he saw Elisa fly by him. Petvog sprinted after her as she fled down the corridor. Her shoes barely touched the ground and her hands balled into fists. She tracked down the sound of shouts and stomping feet. It didn’t take her long to find the healer’s room.
The same healer who had helped Elisa now had another woman dumped on the hard cot in the centre of her room. The doorway was blocked by a dozen guards all trying to crowd into the room. Elisa elbowed her way into the room, pushing away the blonde haired guard blocking her view of the injured woman. Petvog had caught up to her by the time she stumbled in front of the cot.

The words caught in her throat. The breath left her lungs. She shoved the guards away so Petvog had room at her side. The smell of blood hung sour in the air. The hairs on her arms rose despite the overwhelming heat in the room.

Any hope she had of recognising the woman vanished as soon as she saw the extent of her injuries. She couldn’t help but pity the stranger. Her face was cut to shred, leaving odd zigzag patterns cut with obvious care. But what cast dread into Elisa’s heart was the black veins bulging out of the woman’s neck, arms, hands and legs.

She forced open the woman’s eyes, much to the healer’s protest, and examined her pupils.

She bit down on her bottom lip and cursed under her breath. The stranger’s eyes were a sickening black.

“Widow 32 poisoning.” Elisa declared.

Determination marred her features. She rolled up her sleeves and pushed back her hair out of her face.

“She needs space!” She ordered, pointing at the prince. “Order your men away if you want her to survive.”

The prince looked abashed by her forceful tone but did as she needed. The room’s occupant dwindled in the blink of an eye so only the healer, hunters, prince and two guards remained.

“Petvog, check her heart.”

The boy was already moving to the side of the cot.

She pointed at a guard. “I need surgery instruments. A knife or something sharp I can use to pierce the skin. Something I can use to bleed her. Healer, magic? Good. You will lessen her pain. There will be a great deal of it.”

The healer looked horrified.

“I have never bled anyone!”

Elisa didn’t turn away from her task of pressing on the black veins.

“Then you are about to have your first lesson. Legolas, send for your father. Tell him it is urgent he comes. Go now!”

With one hand propping the girl’s injured face to the side, Elisa pressed her fingers to the underside of her jaw.

“The poison is in her throat already. There is too much here to let it run its course. Petvog, how is her heart?”

“It is too fast. We need to bleed it out now!”

Elisa shoved past him and grabbed the glass vile from the healer’s bedside cabinet.
“That is for healing the skin!” The healer protested.

She ignored her. She grabbed the vile by its beak and smashed it against the wall. Green liquid left a trail dripping down the wooden panels. The edges of the beak pricked her thumb and crimson smears stained the sharp glass.

“Hold her down! Healer, do anything you can to lessen her pain.”

The elven healer looked seconds away from fainting. Elisa ran back to the cot now holding the stem of glass. She snatched a rag from the healer’s pocket. Petvog held the woman’s shoulders down till his knuckles went white. Without hesitation, Elisa sliced the glass across the woman’s wrist. She pressed the rag to the wound as soon as she made it but it did nothing to stop the bleeding from spraying her clothes.

“We’re losing her, 32.” Petvog said from behind gritted teeth.

“I know!”

Elisa slashed the glass shard up the woman’s arms. Twin marks identical on each arm left a red stream staining the cot.

The guard appeared, cradling several knives. Elisa threw the glass shard away and snatched a knife from him. She eased the blade up the woman’s arm till she caught the first bulging black line.

“32-“

Petvog’s warning fell on deaf ears. She cut the vein in half. She wasn’t expecting just how much of the poison the woman had been given. Black slime mixed with blood sprayed her dress and created a pool on the floor. The healer gagged and turned her head. With one hand, Elisa covered the wrist cut and with her other hand she worked the blade across each vein.

“Healer!”

Elisa yanked the small elven woman forward and forced her to place her hands on the woman’s damaged forearms.

“Elisa, do something!” Petvog yelled.

“It is too deep! I cannot bleed it out without killing her!”

“Whatever you are doing, do it now!”

She pointed at the guard. "Get me healing herbs. Something to draw out venom!"

The guard sprinted across the room and grabbed a bowl of herbs. She snatched it out of his hands and shooed him out the way.

The King strolled into the room, looking as unreadable as ever. He took one look at Elisa furiously mixing herbs, blood covering her dress and a black streak across her forehead. He didn’t question that she was struggling to save the woman’s life.

She glanced up before returning throwing the herb bowl into the healer’s hands. The woman released an air shattering scream that drew everyone’s attention except for the hunters. They had seen it all before and Elisa knew how much pain the woman was experiencing.

“What do you require?” The king asked.
“Blood.”

Thranduil was already refusing before she could offer an explanation.

“There will be none of the hunters’ rituals while you are in my lands.”

Elisa bunched her fists while trying to hold the woman’s wrists together. She was always moving. Never did her hands stop working to bleed out the poison.

“Widow 32 Poisoning can only be cured by the blood of a ruler. If you do not, this elf will die: that I can promise you. Do you want that?” She demanded.

He took his time examining the elf as she convulsed on the cot. Her body was rocking side from side. Her eyelids fluttered open, revealing soulless eyes and black tears stained her cheeks.

He held out his pale wrist. “Take what you will.”

Elisa nodded and seized a curved blade from her collection. With the delicacy of a healer, she made the first shallow cut across his soft skin. Petvog took the blade Elisa gave him and did as she said.

“Make the incessant on the side of her neck. Watch for real blood. Biggest risk is of her bleeding out-”

“I will deal with it.” He snapped.

Elisa wiped the sweat from her forehead and used the knife to point at the healer.

“Do not stop easing her pain but focus on stopping her bleeding. As soon as the ritual begins, the poison will flood her.”

“I…I am not certain-”

“Find a way!”

She snatched the bowl from her hands and held the king’s open wound over the herbs. She used her two forefingers to mix the green herbs, white powder and blood into a paste and began coating the woman’s open wounds with it. She nodded thanks to the king and rushed to the other side of the cot. She thrust the empty bowl into a guard’s chest.

“Mix more.”

She placed her bloody hands over the victim’s chest and closed her eyes. Petvog could barely hear the words leaving her mouth. Her chant rose till it could be heard over the elf’s screams.

He cringed and would have covered his ears if he hadn’t been busy creating little red slits on the elf’s neck and easing the paste over the wounds. The hunter’s mouth twisted around vile words as she strained to remember the ritual. With every word spoken in the hunter language, the room grew colder. It was as if a cloud had suddenly covered the sun and stopped the joyful streaks from lighting the room.

The effect was torturous.

The woman’s eyes shot open, pure black and void of life, and her body lifted completely off the table.

“Hold her down, Petvog! Everyone, step back now!”
The victim’s mouth open and Elisa braced herself for another scream. The words that left her mouth were worse.

“Please, father, I am so cold! Please, father, come save me!”

The woman clawed at her stomach as if the poison was so object she could rip out of her body. Elisa struggled to hold her bleeding wrists together in one of her hands at the same time she passed two knives to Petvog. The woman thrashed against the hunters’ hold. The healer, to her own credit, didn’t stop the magic flowing from her. Petvog made brief eye contact with the other hunter before he thrust the blade through the woman’s hand impaling her to the cot. Elisa did the same with her other hand.

“Father, it is so cold! Darkness was everywhere. It was consuming, infecting, everywhere around me. Burning yet freezing and underneath my skin like insects!” The woman’s head shot to the side so she was facing Elisa. “To be what tomorrow needs.”

Elisa didn’t look up. The knives were in deep and there was no way the woman could take them from her hands.

“That’s right, hunter. We have to be what tomorrow needs.” She said as she worked the paste into her wounds.

“But the darkness is everywhere. It is consuming and hateful! I can feel it underneath my skin!”

“Fight it.” She replied. “Fight it because you are better than the others. Show them how true killers work.”

“What are you doing?” The healer screamed, hands covering her cheeks. Two red handprints were left on her skin.

“In a second she is going to try clawing her eyes out. Everything we do is to keep her alive!”

The healer spun around searching for someone to help her. The king tilted his head to the side but didn’t stop her. There was something about hunters’ healing which made it violent but artful. The healer rushed forward and grabbed the knife out of Elisa’s hand. Her mouth hung open and she stepped away from the hunter.

In the time it took the healer to regret her action, she was forced against the wall with Elisa’s arm pinning her throat. The sound of her head smashing into the wall echoed throughout the room.

“This is my domain.” Elisa ordered. “Do not get in my way.”

Horror flashed in the healer’s eyes at the sight of the fierce hunter. Her eyes, like the victims, were black. She flashed her teeth like a wild animal and pulled back her fist. Flesh smacked into flesh.

Elisa walked away from the healer’s crumpled form. Guards rushed to protect the royal but one look signal from Thranduil and they fell back.

“Heart?” She asked Petvog.

“She is coming back.”

They were the most precious words Elisa had ever heard. She placed her hands over the woman’s face and chanted in a deep tone. The words were still in the hunter’s language but were softer and easier to say.
Finally the woman’s screams quietened. The blood stopped flowing. Elisa propped open her eyelids and sighed in relieve. The darkness was finally subsiding and her eyes appeared a murky brown. The lump under her throat disappeared.

“She is back.” Elisa said with a heavy sigh.

She propped her hands on the cot’s side and rested her weight against it. petvog released his grip on the woman and sunk to the floor. He tucked his knees under his chin and wrapped his arms around himself. Slowly, the black left their pretty eyes. Elisa eased the two blades out of the girl’s hands and lazily coated the wounds with what was left of the paste.

“I suggest you find a conscious healer and finish her recovery. If she is a hunter, her healing will be faster than most. The poison is out of her system and she is not leaving the living anytime soon. I… I did what I could. I have experience putting people into those conditions but not getting them back out. All I can do has been done.”

She said to the king. She was covered in what looked like black oil and blood stains. Her face was pale as snow and her lips were an unhealthy blue.

“It will be done.” The king agreed, standing aside so an elven woman with a head of white hair could enter the room. She ignored the last healer still unconscious and bloody. Elisa moved aside so the healer could finish.

She helped Petvog to his feet despite the fact that she wasn’t too steady either.

“We could use rest, my lord. Healing.. is tiring.”

“What do you mean?” The new healer asked.

“It involves drawing energy from the healers, usually from at least 7, to draw out the poison. I have seen it go wrong once and the victim returned to the living in such incredible pain that their heart gave out. We were fortunate.” Elisa yawned and turned back to the king. “Though your healer will have to do something about her face.”

“Step back and we shall talk about this.”

The king might as well as asked her to perform the healing all over again. The past minutes have exhausted her in every way but her heart still hurt at the king’s previous words. There was something underlined in his request that told her she would be left even more tired by the end.

“Everything has already been said. Please, I need to rest.”

The king showed mercy and let her leave besides Petvog. The elves, the curious guards and royals, who had witnessed the scene from the safety of the doorway looked at the hunters with a mixture of fear and fascination. The younger hunter had to stop outside his room and prop against the wall while he caught his breath.

“Was it supposed to hurt that much?”

Elisa shrugged. “I have only seen my father do it once before.”

The boy’s eyes widened and his jaw dropped. “Are you telling me that you have never done it before? What if it had gone wrong?”

“The elf would have died in great pain and no doubt we would have too.” She explained in a casual
Petvog shook his head but couldn’t help a smile on his lips.

"I have no idea how you did that but you saved her life."

"For now." She replied in a clipped tone.

"Who was she?"

"We will know soon."

"Could she really be a hunter like us?"

"If she is, she was either sent here as a trap or she did something to anger the wrong person."

Seeing Petvog’s puzzled expression, she sat down on the cold wood floor and explained:

“There was a torturer in our lands called Andrew. He was an expert at drawing out a hunter’s death— or so he bragged. After… we disagreed on something, Andrew took me to a torture chamber and showed me what happened to hunters who deserted. Their faces were melted off or sliced to ribbons. Then they were given an overdose of Widow 32. It was his favourite method of punishment.”

Petvog swallowed loudly and rubbed his arms. When he spoke, the confidence he had possessed moments ago was gone.

“Could he still be alive?”

He was never happier to see her shake her head.

“If he is, he would have found us sooner. There was no trace of survivors. Believe me, I looked.” She tucked her grimy hands into her pockets and puffed out her cheeks. “Andrew didn’t do this but a hunter who knew his methods did.”

Considering she has been nothing but trouble, the elves sure did treat her well. When she returned to her bed quarters, a bath waited for her. On the side were perfumes and soaps in elegant glass bottles in a multitude of rainbow colours. She soaked into the steaming water and shivered at the change of temperature. In her hast to get the poisoned blood off, she was pretty sure she scrubbed off a layer of skin. The water was a murky grey colour when she got out.

Elisa slept soundly for hours. Oddly enough she did not dream of demons and fire.

It was dawn when she woke up paralyzed.
The guards were the first to react. The sudden stomping of horse hooves woke Timaleo from the half daze he was in. He had been stationed at the stables since Elisa’s previous escape. He was sure it was punishment for letting her escape. Despite the prince’s reassurance, he was sure the king now had it out for him.

He had spent days avoiding the royals because of it. Elisa still sought him out occasionally, which he was grateful for. She was easy company and her laughter was free despite the circumstances she was in. Being stationed at the stables meant he could take care of the horses too, a job he always enjoyed.

If he hadn’t been there, if the king hadn't moved him, Timaleo wouldn’t have been the first to smell fire.

A thunder of hooves beat the ground and panicking horses neighed. Timaleo ran into the stables followed by another nameless guard he hadn’t bothered to get to know. He stroked and hushed the pure white horse in the first stable. No reassurance would soothe the animals. With every stall he passed the smell of smoke and something else he couldn’t recognise grew closer. Every horse he passed didn’t look hurt. Yet they reared their heads and made horrible noises of panic.

Till he got to the end stall.

To the horse named Malicious.

Elisa’s spine could have cracked in half and it wouldn’t have compared to the pain she was already in. Her scream got caught in her throat. Her lips refused to open. Tears rolled freely down her cheeks but that was the only thing she was in control of. She screwed her eyes shut, trying to block out the pain but it did nothing.

“Elisa…”

The sing song voice pierced through her thoughts. Her fingers, arms and legs didn’t answer her brain’s signals. She couldn’t even open her eyes. The voice owner could be a threat to her, stood in front of her, but she would be unable to do anything about it because she couldn’t see.

“Elisa…”

The voice shot straight out of a nightmare. Its sound and pitch was painful to hear. It was so calm
while pain raked her body. It was everywhere, the kind of pain which had no origin but she could feel it breaking her bones and soaking in her blood.

“Elisa…” The voice hummed. “Are you hurting?”

Her body wouldn’t respond to her yelling at it to move. Her arms wouldn’t leave her sides. Her legs wouldn’t kick the sheets away.

“I can make all the pains go away.” The voice promised. “Just listen to my story.”

The pain was too much. Her mind was shutting down but refused to allow her to fall unconscious.

The voice moved closer, singing her name. A rough hand stroked her tears away from her cheek.

She didn’t, couldn’t, reply.

“There once were 4 wizards.” The voice hummed. “The Valars created them to be kind, beautiful, wise and strong. A great beast roamed Middle Earth that frightened the Valars. So they sent the first wizard, who was the wisest, to the beast to beg it to leave. The beast ate the wizard. The valars sent their second wizard, who was the strongest, but the beast ate her too. The third wizard, who was the kindest, was eaten too. Now the fourth was the most beautiful and knew she could not convince the beast to leave. So she went to the beast and promised she could lure the Valars out of their hiding so the beast could eat them. “For the Valars killed my brothers and sisters”, she cried. So she went to the Valars and convinced them the beast was dead. As soon as they left their hiding, the beast ate them one by one. While the beast was gobbling down the last Valar, the wizard slit it’s throat and killed the beast. Now, which one was to blame for the slaughter? The beast for killing the Valars and their creation? The wizard for betraying the Valars? Or the Valars for teaching the wizard that it was the only way?”

Then, as fast and unearned as it had arrived, the pain disappeared.

Elisa stayed in the same spot but forced her eyes to examine the room. She was barely clinging onto consciousness. The sheets cocooned her body. She rolled onto her side, desperately trying to breathe normally, and ghosted her hands over her body carefully.

She was at least expecting a limb to be missing. Yet there was no blood or missing limbs. There was nothing to show for her pain. If it hadn’t still be at the back of her head like a nagging headache, she would have been tempted to say she had dreamt up the pain. Her body remained exactly the same… till she reached for her back.

She had grown used to her fingers dipping into the deep indentations Locus had left her. Added to the flogging she had received, she knew every scar on her back. But her fingers didn’t find any marks at all. She drifted her hands over what skin she could reach. Nowhere did they find deep scars.

She leapt up from the bed and peeled off the short nightie. She scrutinised her back in the mirror. There was nothing but smooth skin and a slight bruise on her left shoulder.

Her scars were no longer hers.
Elisa dressed as fast she could in her armour. She clipped the last buckle in place and raced down the hallway. She banged her fist against Petvog’s door twice, loud enough for the entire palace to probably hear.

“Petvog, get your act together! We have a hunt to follow!”

She kicked out the door, the sole of her boot colliding hard with the door, and swung inside the room.

The anger softened on her face when she confronted the empty room. His bed was still unmade and the wardrobe doors hung open. The young hunter had left in a hurry like her.

Ignoring the puzzled looks of the elves she passed, Elisa ran out to the courtyard. She grabbed the nearest guard by his arm.

“Where is the other hunter?”

He pointed at the stables where a half a dozen guards were gathered. She dropped his arm and ran across the grass.

“My lady-”

The guard called after her but she was already at the stables.

She knew, somehow she knew before she arrived at the stables, what had happened.

The sun gave her skin a glow but she didn’t feel warm. The hunter’s black armour and crimson hair gave her a harsh and severe appearance. She stormed past the elves with their haughty air.

Deep down, she knew the tranquillity of the elven lands would lead to something unbelievably cruel.

Petvog was down by the end stall along with Timaleo. If she didn’t know better, she could have sworn there were tears in Petvog’s eyes. But why would he cry? He hadn’t been alone for months, silently dealing with his pain, never knowing if his wounds would kill him. His only companion hadn’t been a horse who had always known where she needed to be.

The guard Timaleo stood and moved in an attempt to stop her. She spun around and gave him a look which could have discouraged a dragon.

They moved away from the end stall.

“Elisa, please-”

She pushed the young hunter away.

“Is this what it has come to?”

The whisper was quiet and bitter on Elisa’s lips.

She kneeled down on the straw covered floor. The stale air smelt of fire and blood- something she was too familiar with.

Her mane was still soft under her fingers. She stroked the matted hairs and the gentle tip of her head. Elisa’s hand touched something wet. She pulled back but already the blood of her horse coated her fingers. When she looked down, bile burnt at the back of her throat.

Three long claw marks pierced Malicious’ strong body. She couldn’t help but ghost her finger tips
over the scars. Identical ones had once decorated her own body. But the scars hadn’t been lethal.

The horse lay on her side, legs sprayed out and eyes closed. She would have missed the delicate cut if there hadn’t been a small pool of blood surrounding Malicious’ throat. But she wouldn’t have missed the side effects of a Widow 32 poisoning. The worse was the blood now slick and covering her hands.

Elisa bowed her head.

No words came to her which made much sense.

Betrayal, yes, but underneath she felt something fierce. She placed her hands on the ground. Heat surrounded her palms. She was struck with a need to burn.

To destroy.

To scorch those who had hurt her.

To make everything clean by the flames.

The first sparks appeared on her fingertips. She looked down at the fire growing on her hands yet it didn’t burn her. A mumble of questioning voices hit the air and every set of eyes stared at her hands now balancing flames on her palms. She glanced in shock at the demon’s gift to a child.

Another figure appeared to her side. He looked radiant in his silver gown and crown of twigs and jewels. She turned to him and tilted her head to the side.

“If they want fire,” She said with her voice full of promise. “I will show them fire.”
The guards gave the human her space.

The lifeless eyes of Malicious held no warmth for Elisa. There was no comfort for her, nor was there any direction. There would never be any direction again. But Elisa didn’t weep anymore. She had wept enough.

Thranduil dismissed the guards trying to protect him and wrapped his arms around the girl without any hesitation. For a second, she was confused. Did the king not fear being burnt? Flames still danced on the palms of her hands and her eyes were pitch black and soulless.

He refused to let her go. She struggled and tried to get him away from her but his arms pinned hers down.

“What did I do to them besides give them everything?” She whispered harshly.

The king didn’t answer. She doubted he knew what she was talking about. He assumed the murder had been committed by the demon but she knew different.

She stood to her full height and the flames wavered on her palms. After a moment, they extinguished completely.

She tilted her head to the side and said, chest heaving with anger, “They had no right. They want their queen to return? I will and I will bring death with me for anyone who challenges me! How dare they! I am more powerful than any of them! I could have killed them all...”

The king took her by the hand and led her out of the stables. She was boiling with rage and resentment. She didn’t notice, didn’t care, about the beautiful of the garden around her. The king led her to his own private gardens, the same gardens in which they had played chess many moons before. The anger, hot and raging, blinded her to everything else.

“Elisa.”

His soft voice full of concern drew her attention briefly away from her own thoughts. She turned to him and searched his eyes for any hint of concern. They mirrored her coldness.

“I will have blood for this.” She promised. “I will have blood for everything they have done.”

He nodded as if he had expected her answer.
“There is more to you than vengeance.” He said softly.

She scoffed and flicked her hair away from her shoulder.

“There is anger… so much anger. It will kill me unless I beat them at their own game. This is not about vengeance. This is about justice and destroying the monsters who think that striking from the shadows will make them immortal.”

She turned on her heels and held her head high as she walked away. As she walked, she called over her shoulder:

“No one is immortal. Even immortal blood can be spilled over a blade.”

The figure didn’t have much trouble creeping along the elven palace. The hunter knew what he had to do and there was not to be witnesses. The past night had given him all the time he needed to memorise the elven palace’s layout. With Widow 32 flowing through his veins, the hunter could slip into the shadows with ease. Still he kept close to the walls, disappearing into the shadows when he spotted life, and listening to the now familiar sounds of the palace. He paused outside the healer’s bedroom and pushed open the large wooden door.

The other hunter wouldn’t be awake. The injuries were sever and poisoning wasn’t something easily recovered from. Yet, after everything he had done to her, he had to see her once before he left her alone forever. She must be healing well or Elisa wouldn’t have left her in the hands of an elven healer.

The hunter stepped into the room and blinked away the darkness. The window was covered, shutting off any light trying to enter the room and the candles were all extinguished.

He froze by the doorway. A figure stood by the window, back to him, a form in the dark. The figure didn’t move at the sound of him entering the room. He considering turning around and leaving before they realised his intrusion.

“Hello, Aidan.”

His plan went up in smoke. He closed his eyes for a moment and sighed. When he opened them again, his queen was opening the wooden shutters and allowing a few stray streaks of light into the room. There was no point in trying to disappear. Elisa knew every hunter trip, every slip of the shadows and dark magic twist. He wondered if she wore the tunic on purpose since it left her most of her back exposed and showed her pale skin free of any scars.

“The elf is Deathel, right? It takes something special to fight off widow 32 poisoning.”

Her words lacked any warmth or feeling. He didn’t answer. She already knew the truth.

“A year ago, demons came into my homeland.” She announced. “They slaughtered every person in that land. The demons killed every person because a sacrifice was promised. I spent a long time finding the demons responsible but, Aidan, how did the demons get into the lands?”
It was the question he had been asking since he discovered the capital hunter lands destroyed.

“\(^{1}\)I was focused, blinded, by anger. It was foolish and I never stopped to ask where it began. Only hunters know how to enter a hunter land. Even if the demons were summoned inside the lands, the Guardians would have expelled them immediately because of the wards. So,” she smiled cruelly. “I’ll ask you again: how did the demons get inside my home?”

A shake of his head was the only answer he had for her.

In the time it took him to blink, she was in front of him. He flinched away in shock but she placed a reassuring hand on his cheek that somehow soothed him.

“You must have questioned it yourself. That is why you came here, is it now? Did you not come here for your queen?”

He nodded eagerly, leaning into your touch. Her drowning eyes, the colour of the bottom of a well, didn’t scare him. A small smile touched her lips.

“Only the hunters know how to enter a homeland.” He admitted.

“How betrayed us, Aidan?”

He focused on the ground and shook his head again. She removed her hand, leaving him longing for her soft touch, and turned on her heels. She strode back to the side of the cot and stroked a stray curl of hair away from Daethel’s ruined face.

“Did they tell you to do this? Did they tell you to do this to distract me so then you could kidnap me while I wasn’t prepared?”

“I-”

“Did it not occur to you that it would never work? That your father simply wanted you out the way while he did the exact thing he did to my lands?” One look at Aidan’s face told her it was news to him. She tutted and dug her fingers into Daethel’s cheeks. “Silly boy.”

“My father would never-”

She spun around and pointed a finger at him.

“Face reality, Aidan! My homeland was a sacrifice for yours! The Guardian said as much when we confronted them! My father only trusted two people- your father and me. The demons could not get my father to give up half his people to make the other half immortal so the demons went to someone who would take them up on the offer.” She added underneath her breath. “My father never saw the betrayal coming.”

He placed his hand around her arm.

“I understand you are upset about Director Riding. He was a good man-”

She shook off his hand like it scorched her.

“He was not good.” She said slowly. “He was great.”

Aidan clenched and unclenched his fists.

“And I am sorry for your grief but you cannot seriously accuse hunters of betraying you!”

Aidan stepped closer and gently closed his hand around hers.

"How can you say that?"

"I was never supposed to go on the hunt which took me away for so long. My father urged me to come back. He was nervous about something. When he wrote to me, he said he hadn't been sleeping and he'd been having such horrible nightmares when he did. He knew, somehow he knew, what was coming. He trusted me and I betrayed him!" She screamed and hugged her arms. "Now I can't trust no one."

"Trust those who love you."

"Love me or love their hunter queen?" She hissed.

"Being queen would not change who you are. I know your loyalty still lies with us, the people who belong to you, and it’s true we have lost our way but we can recover. Our purpose remains the same."

“What purpose?” Elisa scoffed. “We never asked exactly what tomorrow needs.”

“We are what tomorrow needs.”

The words sounded hollow and impossible. They had led her father to summon demons, her best friend to murdering innocents to use their blood for filthy rituals and her home destroyed by dragon fire.

Elisa didn’t think hunters were what tomorrow needed.

“Where were you last night?”

“By the gates.” He replied too quickly.

“This morning my horse was murdered. It was not Locus because the demon is bound to the soul of a dragon.” She looked at him and he resisted the urge to shy away from her glare. “Aidan, what demon have you bought here?”

“They offered me more power than you can imagine.” He justified as if it actually meant anything to Elisa. “All the secrets, all the lost glory, of hunters revealed to us again! Everything the Pure Ones were supposed to be before they became the Dark Ones.”

Elisa laughed humourlessly. “There is a reason why your demon is envy.”

Aidan said nothing. The only sound was the bitter crash of metal striking metal from floors below. Neither took much notice. The guards were being kept occupied and would hold the fort without the hunters. For now.

“The woman is Daethel, right?”

He nodded, realising how pointless it would be to lie to her now.

“If you are willing to go this far then you must believe your homeland had nothing to do with the decimation of mine?”
“Course I do.”

“Then you believe you are not immortal? You believe the lives of my kin were not sacrificed for your kin?”

In the corner of his eye, he saw something glisten. He noticed the object shine in her hand but paid no attention till he felt something pierce into his body.

His mouth dropped open. He gasped, the breath caught in his throat. The knife’s handle protruded from his ribs but the rest of the knife stayed jammed in his flesh.

Elisa was still close, so close, and for the first time he wanted her away. Her touch was harsh, unnecessarily hard, and reminded him of a snake's bite. Her body pressed against his in a sickening embrace as she pushed the dagger in further. With one last twist, she thrust the blade free of his flesh and turned the knife on herself.

“See what envy has wrought.” She hissed.

Aidan watched, paralysed, waiting for death to claim him finally. He clutched his chest desperate but powerless to do anything as his queen thrust the bloody blade into her stomach. She twisted the handle, sinking the blade fully into her body.

Aidan sank to his knees. He looked up at Elisa. She didn’t blink or stumble. With a shake of her head, she slid the blade out of her stomach and threw it aside like a toy she no longer wanted.

“Look down, Aidan. Do you notice how there is no blood? It is because you are not going to die.” She announced. “Not now- not ever.”

He removed his trembled hands and looked down with dread. He expected, almost felt, his hands slick with blood. He wouldn’t fight it. But there was no blood or gaping wound in his chest. His heart thumped a steady beat still.

On shaky legs, Aidan stood up. He didn’t take his eyes of the small cut in his shirt- the only sign that Elisa had tried to kill him. If he hadn’t known better, he would have said it was his only imagination. A nightmare he could control and wake up from.

But the knife still laid on the floor an arm’s reach away from him. Elisa squeezed his shoulder and placed a gentle hand, a hand which had previously forced a dagger through his chest, on his cheek.

“How could you doubt me?”

He kept his focus on the tiny cut on Elisa’s dress- the only mark left on her.

“No one wants to think the worst of their father.” He said quietly.

Elisa’s expression softened. Then they both understood each other in their own way. Two hunters, leaders, wanting to believe the world was as their parents told them it was. Elisa wrapped her arms around his shoulders and pulled him into a warm embrace.

“What are our mistakes, if not human?” She whispered. “You are a different man from the boy from my youth. I have been crafted by dark magic, fire and blood. Hunters do not need another leader like my father and yours. I will not take the throne but you, my friend, would make a great king.”

The words were barely out of her mouth before a shrill bell rang. They could no longer ignore the sound of swords clashing and flesh being torn apart. Without warning, the door was flung open and
slammed into the wall.

“"The kingdom is under attack."” Legolas’ panicked voice filled the room.

He stopped in his tracks, mouth still open as if he had more to say but forgot, and narrowed his eyes at the stranger.

“"Your kingdom is under attack by his demon."” Elisa said, gesturing with a nod at Aidan.

“Out of the hunters, you have more experience slaying demons.” Aidan stated.

She pointed at the injured elf lay on the cot. “Fix this, Aidan. We are going to see what your demon is made out of.”
Petvog met her carrying her favourite gifts. He narrowly avoided running her through the swords he bought but she was happy enough to see he had noticed the attack too. She gladly took the weapons and wrapped the leather scabbard around her hips. She tested the blades’ weight as she hurried down the hallway. A couple of noble she-elves hurried past her in their jewelled dresses, the elegant designs stopping them from running full speed. Elisa shoved them aside. The creatures came chasing but their focus soon shifted to the more powerful targets.

They were goblin in appearance. Different from Locus’ pets- slower and less eager to attack- but they carried weapons too. With rust covered swords in their grips and teeth bared in a snarl, the creatures launched at the hunters.

Elisa didn’t hesitate in her actions. She thrust her left sword straight through the first creature’s bare chest, dodging out the way of the creature’s rusty tipped blade, while clashing her second sword with the creature’s partner. She left her sword buried in the creature’s chest and reached out to grab the second creature’s face. The creature’s screams were muffled against her skin as fire scorched its way down Elisa’s arms. Smoke and the smell of burning flesh hit the air as soon as flames burst from Elisa’s palm. She shoved the creature aside and twisted her blades back into their scabbards.

Petvog barely bit back vomit as he took in the sorry sight of the creatures that got in Elisa’s way. Their faces were burnt completely off or their throats ripped out, leaving a mess of blood surrounding the corpses. Some got mercy deaths at the end of her blades. She didn’t break her stride as she tore apart every creature which made the mistake of stepping in front of her.

“What was that?” Petvog whispered as he watched Elisa’s hand devoured by flames rip across a creature’s throat.

“A gift from a demon to a child.” Came her simple reply.

Tiredness crept into her voice as if she was done with repeating herself.

The hunter bounced of each other’s fighting. Elisa took the lead and Petvog matched her vicious fighting like a dance partner. The slashing, burning, beating brutal heat and the heavy scent of death seemed to sink into her bones and spurred her on. Her actions became faster and the flames stronger. She straightened her arm and on command, at the tips of her fingers, a whip of flames appeared the length of two broadswords. She swiped her arm across the air without warning to Petvog.

The younger hunter barely managed to dive to the dirty floor in time to avoid having his head removed from his shoulders. The dozen goblins surrounding them didn’t get that chance.

“Come on up, little girl.” The voice of the demon was clipped and the words drawled. “I will show you how your father died.”
“Sit tight, demon, because I’m coming for you.”

Elisa knew the creatures’ brutality would be nothing compared to that of their master. The hunters hurried down the stairs. All the while, Elisa tracking the number of elven bodies compared to the number of inhuman corpses. Thankfully, there were few innocent lives lost so far. But she could hear the voice still. Below, the main battle was struck on the throne room.

She leapt over the banister, landing on her feet, and shot back up to full height.

Madness surrounded her. The elves, sparse in their reaction to the surprise attack, were fighting back fiercely. Tauriel was amongst the soldiers, her red hair making her stand out from the dozens of figures. The creatures were being held back but their numbers were increasing as more leapt from the walls. They were coming from somewhere. Some part of the palace was open to attack.

*Not for long*, Elisa resolved.

She spun her flames around the metal so the fire danced along the metal. Then she joined the fight.

She pushed past the elves and grabbed the nearest creature by the back of its head while twisting her blade into another. The flames pierced straight through the creature’s grey throat. Flames shot out from her palm into the back of the creature’s head.

With one clean swipe of flames, she tore out the throat of another. She didn’t watch the sickening flow of guts and blood which resulted in the carnage but she felt it dripping down her clothes. She felt it on her skin and face. But she didn’t stop until the bodies surrounding her were in the dozens.

There was no envy for the woman as Elrond watched her cut down the army of monsters. Her movements were fluid and she took every attack in her stride. When blood wasn’t being split on her sword, the vicious flames flowing from her hands were raging. Suddenly, her head shot up like her name had been screamed.

It was then the demon was found.

“Call back the company quickly! Take the injured to healers and seal the throne room!”

The order shocked his second in command but he rushed to obey all the same. It was how Gandalf had predicted. Everything was happening as he foretold- the demon’s form and the fire. But what shocked the most was not the girl’s fire. It was the demon. The demon just as Elisa’s dream had foretold.

Elisa threw a creature’s corpse from her as if it was a ragdoll she was tired of playing with.

The demon sat upon the throne, pride and desire etched into its pretty features.

But it didn’t take the form of a demon.

On the throne was a girl.

A girl with crimson hair. A flowing black dress covered her petite body and the neckline revealed the valley between her breasts. Her eyes were covered by stray curls and three long claw marks scarred
the side of her face.

Elisa stared at the demon and saw herself.

“Even immoral blood can be spilt.” The demon mocked.

The demon wearing her figure, her face, her clothes, glanced up with a wide smirk on its face. The one thing not replicated was her pretty blue eyes. The demon's eyes shown black and showed no emotion.

“Only cowards hide behind masks.” Elisa accused. “Show your true form.”

She outstretched her arm and fire raged forwards at the demon. It copied her movement and a shield of flames surrounded it. Elisa forced the fire further until the heat was suffocating. The demon’s knees buckled and the shield grew weaker as Elisa’s flames overwhelmed.

Elisa felt the energy dripping from her. The fire was burning deep within her but draining. If she could just weaken the demon enough...

Finally, she changed focus from the demon. She spun around and slammed her hand on the ground. Without warning, the floor was lightened in a line of fire leading from the hunter to the demon. The few creatures left were caught in its path… their pained screams weren’t contained by the hall’s walls.

The demon stood, no longer able to maintain Elisa’s form.

“No more shadows then. Just you and I.” The demon purred.

The creature demon stepped out of the flames to reveal its hideous face. Tight purple skin stretched over a mock female body. But Elisa only cared about the two demonic horns on its forehead and a mouth wide open to reveal glistening fangs.

“I like the dirty rhythm you play.” Elisa urged.

And she threw her swords to her side. Metal clanged on the floor and the sound seemed to ring throughout the palace. In a flash of movement, Elisa dropped to the floor and braced her hands on the stone. Heat soon scorched everything on the palace floor. The scent of burning flesh filled her nostrils.

The hunter spun and stood to her full height. A shadow strode straight through the fire, untouched by the heat and death.

“Now you know your purpose.” The creature stated simply.

Elisa wiped the blood from her hands onto her tunic and smirked.

“Your purpose is to bring fire and death. These elves,” The creature announced. “Do not understand the beauty of death.”

“Do not speak to me of beauty.” Elisa hissed. “Let me show you something about death.”

And, as Elrond dragged out the last elven guard with burn marks sizzling on his arms and sealed the throne room’s doors, Elisa launched at the demon.
“Where is she?”

The king ignored the ignored elves, even the limping soldier whose leg was covered in painful red welts. He strode towards his son who was there with the two hunters. His suspicion rose every time the hunters whispered to each other. If Legolas caught the glances in his direction then he didn’t let on to them.

“Father, Elisa insisted on battling the demon alone. She set the room on fire. There was no chance anyone could have stayed and fought besides her without being claimed by the flames.”

Thranduil didn’t acknowledge his son. Instead, he focused as much a hatred into a look as he could and directed it at Aidan. If looks could kill, Petvog feared the hunters would be missing a prince.

“You allowed your queen to throw herself into danger?”

“There is no challenging Elisa’s will.” Aidan replied slowly. “Surely you know this by now.”

Thranduil’s eyes narrowed but he didn’t say anything different.

“The gates had to be secured.” Petvog offered. “If your son had stayed, not only would he have got in Elisa’s way but she would have cut him down. Elrond’s company has been recalled and the wounded taken by healers. The casualties have been minimised.”

“Your son made the right choice.” Aidan admitted. He ignored the irony in the fact that he was defending a man who moments ago he had been prepared to execute.

“If she is harmed by a demon brought here by another hunter,” The king stated. “I will turn the full wrath of my armies against the hunter lands. We shall see then if your demons come to your rescue. Do we understand each other, hunters?”

“Elisa’s fascination with elves is not one all hunters share. It benefits us all if our people remain… isolated from each other.”

Thranduil smirked and nodded.

The power raging in his veins begged to be released. Not just the poison but the demon’s gift waiting to be surrendered into. But dark magic would not get him his queen. He knew Elisa held the elves in high regard. Perhaps because their lifespan was immortal or their culture was so different from what she was used to, but it was obvious Elisa was fascinated with the elven race. If it took playing by their rules and bowing before their ruler to get Elisa back, then so be it. They would be gone soon enough.

The heat was overwhelming. The flames spat out from the walls, confining Elisa in a suffocating coffin of fire. But the flames seemed to bounce of her skin. It tamed her fear knowing that the only thing that could touch her was a creature.
And the creature was weakening.

Elisa curled her fist and threw a hit wide, missing the creature’s face, but providing the perfect opportunity for her to swing a whip of flames curling around its long legs.

The demon released an inhuman screech. Elisa’s fingers were damp with blood, whether hers or the demon’s, she wasn’t sure. The sound touched Elisa’s ears and was all she needed: a sign of weakness.

Suddenly, a force hit like a fist to the chest. The breath caught in her throat and refused to leave. Her chest tightened and a weight pressed against her body. In a mess of tangled limbs, Elisa was thrown off her feet and across the floor. Her body slide and rolled uncontrollably. She scrambled for solid ground to hold and stop her fall before she fell off the bridge. Her fingers dug into the wood finally but seconds too late to stop her body dangling off the bridge. Her legs swung in the empty space. Her entire weight rested on her arms. The strain hit her immediately and she gasped in pain.

She groaned, gripping onto the wood like a lifeline, knowing that if she fell it was all over. She scrambled, clawing and elbowing her way further onto the bridge till she had both arms planted firmly on the bridge.

Two purple legs stopped in front of her face. Elisa took delight in seeing the skin burnt off in most places.

"Darkness comes for you, girl."

Elisa released a choked laughter. "I was born in darkness. It was always inside me."

Thranduil burst into his throne room seconds before two bodies, limbs tangled so it was impossible to tell them apart, tumbled off the edge of the bridge and into the stream below. His heart caught in his throat when he recognised one of the figures as his lover. They landed without mercy on the harsh ground below. A pained scream filled the air same time as the sound of bodies colliding with water.

The king rushed to peer over the edge. Below, neither body moved. Elisa’s tiny body lay on its side, arms outstretched, one arm twisted at an unnatural angle. The horned demon had been tossed to the other side of the stream, a horn missing from its forehead and face down. Neither was showing any sign of surviving the horrifying fall.

“Elisa, I have a surprise for you.”

The little princess glanced up from her book. A wide grin broke on her face, revealing gaps in her mouth where she had lost baby teeth. She leapt up from her seat and rushed to meet her father at the doorway of her room. Her father kneeled down and engulfed her in a warm hug with one arm. He smelt of whetstones and home. His beard tickled her neck but she didn't mind.

Behind his back, he held a box wrapped with red ribbon.

He held out the box to her and she ghosted her fingers over the delicate ribbon. She was growing cautious about gifts from her father when they hadn’t been earned. After all, she had been locked in a room, isolated, the only company being her books for the past fortnight.
“What is it, father?”

Her father smiled at her restraint.

“I know you were scared when you struck out at your tutor. However, I gave you instruction not to use fire. It scares the other children.” He shook his head. “It makes them think you are a monster. Do you want to be a monster, little girl?”

Elisa shook her head. She’d heard of monsters from the older hunters. Monsters were orcs, man-eating spiders and dragons- Elisa didn’t want to be a monster.

Her father smiled softly and placed the box in her tiny hands.

The girl unravelled the ribbon and slipped off the lid. She was curious what gift could possibly stop her from being a monster.

The glisten of a silver blade reflected in her blue eyes. She gripped the cold metal hint. The dagger looked odd in the little girl’s hand like it was too big and heavy.

She dropped the box, hypnotised by the weapon she had seen the older hunters use and the warming touch of the metal hilt.

“If you ever feel scared or threatened, use your blade inside of your flame. You see, daggers are a weapon you can control. With it you can tip the balance between life and death. You can choose mercy or renegade. Loose your flames, daughter.”

So she did.

Elisa’s body didn’t move. Her bottom lip bled profusely and the crimson liquid mixed with the crystal blue stream. Her heart beat steadily but the pain clouded over a sense of relief she might feel for being alive. Her body wouldn’t break but every twinge of pain still stabbed her. She knew her arm shouldn’t be at the angle it was. She blinked away the dots dancing across her vision and grinded her teeth down. Spitting out a mouthful of blood, she struggled into a kneeling position.

The bone preventing her shoulder from moving definitely shouldn’t have been at a straight angle. Breathing deeply, her arm dangling uselessly by her side, she rolled back her shoulder. She gripped shoulder in a tight grip and, without giving her body time to react, twisted the shoulder back into place.

Even she couldn’t contain her pained scream. It came out more of a choke and she had to focus on breathing to avoid blacking out. She crawled to her feet.

The demon retreated on its hunches, stumbling backwards like a threatened animal finally cornered. Elisa didn’t take her eyes off it’s hesitate movements as the flames came alive on her hands once again.

The demon hissed and swiped a clawed hand in front of her face. It cowered back to avoid a unnerving ball of fire aimed at its head. It didn’t stop Elisa’s hand from wrapping around its horn and
pressing one flaming hand to its cheek. The demon stretched and clawed at Elisa’s face.

The hit caught the hunter by shock and she dodged out of the creature’s arms reach.

“If you kill me, others will come.” The demon threatened pathetically.

“Good.” Elisa replied. “It saves me hunting them down. Let every demon come and get me. I will make an example out of you for them all to see!”

“I can bring your father back…”

“I would not want him back.” Elisa said. “The man demons stole from me a shadow of who he really was. My father was gone long before demons came.”

Elisa attacked- fists and fire flaring.

The demon charged with a roar like a bull. Elisa easily sidestepped, whirled to face it. Her opponent lunged. Dirty claws scrapped her arm. The demon avoided one flying fist, only to collide with another.

The blow glanced off its ribcage as it managed to get in a swipe at Elisa’s stomach. Blood was drawn but it was a sharp sting fading fast. Elisa touched the small droplets of blood dripping down her cheek. She rubbed the liquid between her fingers.

Then she grinned.

Legolas froze at the stream’s side. Opposite, the bloody and beaten women kneeled beside her conquest. The demon’s neck was twisted and its eyes bulged out of its head but it was impossible to tell what had killed its first. Its body was covered in burns and blood.

Soon enough, the elves came back. Aidan pounced ahead of the soldiers and even Petvog fell behind Aidan’s rush.

“You did it!”

Elisa bowed dramatically. “No one kills like we do.”

She didn’t think she had ever seen a hunter look as proud as Aidan did.

“I have never seen anything like it. This might not be a good time to tell you this but…” He stopped and he glanced behind Elisa’s shoulder. “The king is here.”

Elisa rolled her eyes and dropped into a curtsy as heavy footsteps splashed across the steam.

“Here he comes to ruin the day.” Elisa whispered in a sing-song voice.

Behind her, Aidan kicked over the demon’s corpse and winced at the full extent of the injuries.

“Your tunic is on fire.”

The king helpfully pointed out.

Elisa cursed under her breath and smothered out the last flames with her palms. The burn left a
gapping tear in her side, the edges frizzed and black, revealing unblemished pale skin.

“I tried to tell you but you refused to listen.” She signalled to the corpse. “This is what happens when you leave murderers under the reign on a dictator. It should not have reached this point.”

Aidan peeked up from his examination.

“I did this.” He admitted without a hint of guilt. “My father told me they could be used and harvested for their knowledge. He told me that we would always remain in control. The Pure Ones seemed like the only way to regain our stance… he told me it was the only way and I believed him!”

Elisa didn’t blink at the sudden aggression in his voice. He stayed kneeled beside the corpse as if expecting it to spring back to life. He stayed in the same position as Elisa quietly led the king to one side.

She leaned closer to the king so he could smell the burnt fabric and the underlined scent of jasmine on her skin.

“He cannot be king if he continues in this state. The demon offered his father knowledge of the Pure Ones which, if I know him and I think I do, he will use to slaughter his own people.”

The king’s eyes widened. “Did you not kill your kin so he could make his only people immortal?”

She shook her head and scrapped her fingers through the tight knots in her hair.

“Everything that man does is for the Pure Ones’ cause. I cannot claim to know what he plans but it will not end well for anyone involved. We need Aidan on the throne sooner rather than later.”

“This… mentality will hardly improve for the better if you kill his father.” The king argued. “Did it make you want to submit to the hunters when your kin was slaughtered?”

Elisa winced at the use of her father’s death being used against her. She jabbed her middle finger into his chest and narrowed her eyes into slits.

“My father was the only person standing in between the hunters and war. Despite everything, his only focus was the hunters which are a damn sight better than the Pure Ones. He prevented this. For years, the hunters were needed in the shadows. We were needed to protect Middle Earth not with battles but with poisons and assassinations. The Pure Ones might have been cast into the darkness by the Valar but it was the hunters who choose to stay there.” She said, spreading out her arms as if to gather all the destruction the demon had caused. “But now tomorrow needs something different.”

Chapter End Notes

Please forgive any errors but I’m so tired I can feel it in my bones! The title is based on a song by Motionless in White called wasp which fits into the chapter perfectly (wish I could play it right now and everyone could agree its perfect). Hope you enjoy reading and as always please feel free to comment or even to say hi (I love it when people say hi)
-Al :)
The following days were agony for Elisa. They were filled with preparations and meetings and whispers in the hallways. The days were she wasn't locked in politics, she spent them with Thranduil. He showed her the kingdom (or at least the parts she didn't see during her many escapes) and pratted her in sword play. In her few hours spare, Aidan taught her the dark magic the demon had taught him. Despite the method he had recieved it, even Elisa couldn't deny the powerful appeal. But she could sense time running out. Her meetings with her fellow hunters were in short conversations in dark room where no elves could know what they discussed. She knew as well as Aidan and Petvog did that the more time they spent in the elven lands, the more likely it was that the Southlands was being destroyed.

It was on the third day the treaty was written. It was hard enough to keep Aidan and Thranduil in the same room together without it coming to blows or imprisonment but Elisa did it. And she got her treaty finally.

The palace was sober and the air was tense. It reminded Elisa of the times she would witness the politics between her father and the directors. The king’s advisors, some wearing armour which had never seen battle and others in fine silver or royal purple robes, gathered around an oval polished oak table. At the end of the table, the king stood in his royal robes and impatience written on face.

When the guests of honour did finally arrive, there couldn’t have been more of a difference between them and the elves. The king entered first, dressed in polished black armour over a grey robe. A few of the advisors bowed in respect but most remained impassive and statue still. But the Queen had their full attention. A floor length black dress clung to her curves. Her loose crimson curls left her pale neck exposed and swept attention to the glistening white jewel hanging on a silver chain around her neck. The regal aura already surrounded her like a halo and her smile was kind not haughty. She curtsied politely before the elven king. He placed her hand in his and gently kissed her knuckles. Aidan released her arm and let her stand her place besides Thranduil.

“Hundreds of years in the making and our people can finally have a tolerance of each other… if not a peace.”

Elisa strolled around the table, her eyes glistening with joy as the sight of the dozen scrolls. Something tingled at the base of her spine. It was as it was supposed to be and yet something about it didn't feel right. Her father had been the one to set the groundwork for the union, the one who had insisted that war not be raged, who had kept hunters in the shadows were they belonged. He should have been able to see his plan come to action. His daughter glanced down at the scrolls. To anyone else, they would mean nothing. Scraps with ink on and long words. On one scroll was words Elisa had scribed herself in the hunter language. A promise all hunters would honour until death claimed the last hunter.

“This is a truce for 400 years. It states that until all of us here who can die,” The king said with a directed look at Elisa. “Have died there will be a peace.”
“Is it a mutant benefit- hunters have allies and elves have the protection of hunters… plus they no longer have to fear the woods.”

Elisa tapped her middle finger against her lip. This is how it was supposed to be- this was what the future needed. Yet she couldn't settle the uneasiness haunting her.

“Of course, the entire treaty is dependent on there being no other ruler to interrupt our plans.”

Aidan opened his mouth to protest but Elisa squeezed his arm.

“Now is not the time for weakness.” She whispered.

He closed his eyes and released a heavy sigh.

“My father will not be a problem for much longer. I will soon become the first chosen king of the united hunter lands. If anyone protests the union then their opinion will be heard but, I assure you, nothing can stop the future.”

“And what if the future you intend does not please some hunters?” An advisor questioned.

“Then those who kill by the sword will die by the sword.” Elisa answered.

She stepped forward and signed her name at the bottom of the first scroll. In neat, flowing writing she signed it as Hunter Queen Elisa Riding of the Southland Hunters. Besides her name was the tiny signature of Hunter King Aidan Snow of the Westland Hunters. The elven king took the inked quill from Aidan’s outstretched hand. he hesitated above the line.

“Wait!”

All three heads shot up to the third hunter in the room. Petvog sat rigid in the corner, his nails digging into the wooden chair’s arms.

“Will you be married?”

Elisa frowned, opened her mouth, and laughed.

“No, sweet Petvog, we will not be married.” She said with a grin that reached her eyes.

“But-”

“If Elisa pleases,” Aidan explained. “I will be placed as king and she as queen but she will not rule from any throne.”

“Elisa will be the shadow behind the throne.” Thranduil stated.

Petvog opened and closed his mouth, half words leaving his lips and then being cut in half by a stutter.

In the end, it was Thranduil who explained fully.

“Aidan would be the ruler the hunters can see. If our experience with hunters has taught us anything, it is that hunters need a ruler they can see an fear. So they will have a king but Elisa will be the director and the ruler from the shadows. This way, she can continue as a hunter and as free as she pleases.”

Elisa placed a hand on Aidan’s shoulder. “Aidan and I were groomed from an early age to become
rulers. Aidan is as fit to be ruler as I am. We will make joint decisions. I will be… a commander of hunters and an advisor more than a queen.”

Thranduil finally signed his title besides the hunters’ and the treaty was sealed. With the last signature, the union between hunter and elf was sealed.

And with it, so was Director Snow’s death.

Elisa didn’t notice the doors open until Timaleo’s voice interrupted the tranquil moment. She bowed before the advisor she was talking to and rushed to the guard.

“My lord,” He began, hastily bowing. “Your son sent word ahead that a company of dwarves has been captured in Mirkwood- amongst their number is Oakenshield.”

Elisa’s eyes widened at the name. The last of the line of Durin was in the elven lands… if there was ever a time she needed to witness a meeting. If she hadn’t been paying attention, it would have been impossible to notice the subtle stiffening change in the king’s posture.

“Order Oakenshield bought before my throne for judgement.” He demanded.

Timaleo nodded and left without closing the doors.

“I believe our business is done.” The king announced. “I will discuss anything further with Elisa.”

“I would like meet this dwarf, Thranduil.” Elisa stated.

“Not this time, my light.” His hand posed next to her arm. He didn't reach out for her and she didn’t have to shrug away his hand. Instead he took her hand in his and kissed her knuckles gently before leaving..

The advisors shuffled to follow his lead and filed out of the room in a hurry. Only one stayed behind to gather the treaty scrolls together. As soon as he left, Elisa closed the doors behind him and turned toward Petvog and Aidan.

“I have a task for you two.” Elisa stated as Aidan leaned against the table. “Go to the Mordor hunters. They will be expecting you. Even isolated as they are, their spies would have gathered that something has changed amongst the hunters. Go to them and tell them that it is time our lands are united.”

“Are they not mad?” Petvog asked.

Elisa shook her head. “No, though they certainly aren’t as sane as they used to be. They will not be… welcoming. That much I can tell you. I was forced to confront a pack of their spies a few moons before Locus’ attack and they made it clear that they would not appreciate any intrusions.”

“They will say the same to us then.” Aidan sighed, rubbing the lines knotting his forehead.

“No doubt but they have no choice in the matter. They will be obliged to answer the call of their rulers. Somehow they will learn to accept the new rules.” She smiled. “Or I will burn their kingdom
Aidan nodded solemnly. “It is better than the alternative. Can I ask where my queen will be during my absence?”

She looked at the closed doors, hiding whatever was going on outside. The usual shuffling daily life was left silenced.

“Something tells me I need to witness what happens with the dwarves.”

The first sight Elisa caught of the dwarf prince he was in chains.

She moved with flexibility now, free of the limits of her dress and in her repaired dragon bone armour. The elves had repaired it with ease, using the bone of her latest conquest to fix her armour. She stayed leaning against a wooden pillar out of sight from either the king or his guards. But she could watch the events unfold. She crossed her arms over his chest and studied the prince.

For someone who had seen so much death and battle, the prince didn’t look older than 40 years. His beard and hair was tangled with white spider webs. His clothes, though not tatty, looked worn and his hands were hard and dirty but he held himself with certain… pride which Elisa wouldn’t help but admire. Now there was the making of a good king. She wondered where the rest of his company was.

Thranduil was saying something too quiet for her to catch. Whatever it was, Thorin looked uninterested. She stepped closer and hid behind another pillar. There she could hear fully.

“Some imagine that a noble quest is at hand.” Thranduil stated. “A quest to reclaim a homeland and slay a dragon…”

So it was true! The dwarves were taking back their home! Elisa covered her mouth with her hand and hid her smile. The dragon inhabiting the palace must be slayed… the very dragon which Locus was bound to! Elisa couldn’t help the spark of excitement in her chest.

“I myself suspect something more prosaic about it: attempted burglary or something of that ilk.”

Elisa shook her head and gritted down her teeth. Thranduil had no idea how it felt watching a homeland desolated and to have no choice but to abandon home to the care of a monster.

“I offer you my help.”

Thorin finally spoke. “I am listening.”

So was Elisa.

“I will let you go if you but return what is mine.”

Elisa narrowed her eyes. From what she knew, backing a dwarf into a corner and then negotiating with them hardly ever ended well. And it turned out right seconds later.
“I would not trust Thranduil, the great king, to honour his word should the end of days be upon us!” Thorin roared, pouring as much venom into each word as he could. “You lack all honour! I have seen how you treat your friends. We came to you once, starving, homeless, seeking your help but you turned your back. You turned away from the suffering of my people in the inferno that destroyed us!”

Even the hunter winced at his words. The king stepped back, shock showing clearly on his face. Then there was anger. He towered over the dwarf, forcing the Thorn to take a step back, and his voice boomed across the palace.

Elisa shot forward, regardless of how many guards might see her. The same scars she had marvelled over were visible on his beautiful face. With no magic, the flesh showed the ruin.

“Do not speak to me of dragon fire! I know the wrath and ruin!”

She blocked out some of the king’s aggressiveness and grimaced at the hatred written on his face. It was something she had seen too often.

“So go, stay here, and rot. One hundred years is a mere blink in the life of an elf! I am patient! I can wait!”

Thorin was hauled away by two fierce looking guards. Elisa crept forward and paused on the bridge. The prince was led past her with his head held high but he caught sight of her sudden appearance. She knotted her hands behind her back and nodded at the dwarf.

The king glanced up at the woman sashaying across his throne room. Pure fury was in his eyes but Elisa took comfort in the fact that it wasn’t directed at her… for once.

“Did I not request that you do not make your presence known here?” He complained.

Elisa smiled and strolled up to his throne so she stood at the bottom of the stairs leading up towards him.

“Why does this need your attention, my light?”

“Am I your light now?.” She said simply. "Previously I was an ignorant kid. That is a discussion for never though so you know why I am here.”

“I know no such thing. Speak your mind then.”

She took careful steps up the throne’s stairs till she stopped directly in front of the king.

“There is no love lost between elves and dwarves but you should help Thorin and his company.”

He sighed heavily and signalled for her to come closer. He wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her onto his lap. She was torn between fighting him and listening to his reasoning. In the end, curiosity won over. As he knew it would.

“I understand you sympathise with them. Their… plight is different from yours though, my light. The dwarf kingdom was claimed by a dragon not because of demons but because of the king’s greed. I warned Thorin’s grandfather what would happen if he continued with his course but he did not listen. I will not see elven blood spilled because of dwarves.”
“Then allow me to go. Hunter blood is not so easily spilt.”

The king swung her around so she stood up. He straightened and was stood in front of her in the time it took her to steady herself.

“You will not go leave the kingdom until this danger has passed. I would have you here... in my company.”

Elisa shook her head and grinned up at the king.

“We will see how long that will last, shall we?”

She turned on her heels and walked away with her signature sway to her hips.

Elisa!” The king yelled after her.

She waved without turning around or bothering to stop walking.

Thorin wasn’t sulking, contradict to appearance. He paced around his cell, chin jolted out and arms crossed, refusing to give up on Biggins. He would come. His comrades believed they had lost their only shot to get out of the elven lands and continue with their quest but Thorin had more faith. Bilbo Biggins would find a way to free them without compromising to the woodland sprits.

And he did.

Elisa watched silently from the shadows as the tiny hobbit appeared out of nowhere. He hadn’t noticed the woman tracking him down. The hunter knew little of the magic rings fabled and made into legends but she knew magic when she saw it. She had witnessed a hobbit reappear out of thin air like a spirit. No thief could have stolen from underneath the king’s guards’ noses without the aid of something supernatural.

The feast was in full swing. She had excused herself early on from the king’s side and made her way to prison cells, curious to see how the dwarves would work their way out of elven prison cells. While Thorin brooded and cursed the king, the hobbit was at work.

Elisa shock her head and stepped out of the shadows without making a sound.

“I had a feeling you would not have a problem escaping.” She said.

The shocked dwarves shot around and glared at the intruder. She didn’t go to move. She stayed at the top of the staircase with her hands folded in front of her. She tilted her head to the side and smiled gently.

“What do you want, witch?” The prince demanded.

She faked wincing. “Someone is in a foul mood.”

“Your lover imprisoned us!”

“That is what you get for trespassing, dear prince.” She held up her hands, fingers sprayed. “But I mean not to cause an argument between us. I only wish to offer my assistance.”
Fili scoffed. “Why would a human help us?”

“Why would you turn down the help?” She asked back as she dropped her hands.

“Because we don’t know you!” Kili pointed out.

“That is true and I don’t know you. However, we do know two things—you have a kingdom to reclaim and,” She smirked. “I happen to know a thing or two about slaying dragons.”

“So it is true what Elrond said about you!”

”Depends what he mentioned.”

Thorin narrowed his eyes. ”He said your homeland was destroyed by a dragon.”

”The actual land was, yes, but my people was murdered by a demon which I believe you can help me kill.”

Biggins hummed a signal to hurry up. He danced from one foot to the other, clearly unhappy about staying so long.

“If anything, we should take her along so she doesn’t go running to the king.” Borin stated.

She winked at the dwarf. “I like this guy. He has common sense.”

Thorin curled his upper lip and looked seconds away from punching her. After a pregnant pause, he held out his hand and shook hers.

“If you slow us down, you will be left behind.”

She smiled and nodded.

“Go. Eventually the guards will notice their charges have gone and this silence will not last. I will meet you out of the gates. Good luck, my prince.”

Thorin turned around and whispered to Biggins that it was time to leave. When he turned back, Elisa was gone.
Our Queen

The party was in full swing when Elisa strolled back into the grand halls. It lasted for a full minute, long enough for Elisa to be disappointed, before a guard came storming into the party. The guests separated down the middle to make room for the intruder. The elves politely whispered to each other but the panic was clear on their faces. After the recent attack, everyone was on edge. She wondered if anyone remembered her personally saving them. She doubted it. Elisa picked up a wine glass and tasted the sweet liquid as she leaned against the doorframe.

The guard whispered into the king’s ear.

Immediately, he scanned the room for her. Once he had her pinned in his glare, he raised his eyebrow quizzically. She ran her finger along the rim of her glass, knowing exactly what the soldier was telling the king.

The king saw the glint in his lover’s eyes and knew instantly that she had done more than had a say in the dwarf matter. He shook his head and raised his hand, palm out.

Elisa didn’t wait to be imprisoned in her own room again. She would see the dwarven kingdom reclaimed and Locus slaughtered before the fortnight passed.

She smirked and twisted the glistening ring on her forefinger. The king hadn’t even noticed her steal the elven ring from him while he was busy with his politics. She could have twisted black magic around him while she stole it. Yet she had stolen it the honourable way. She would need all the black magic she knew to survive the oncoming attack.

This, she swore, would be the last time she saw dragon fire.

It was getting easier to lie till she reached compliance.

Thranduil immediately ordered Elisa to be followed as soon as he heard the news that his captives had escaped. To his guards’ credit, it wasn’t until the orcs attacked that they lost sight of her. He had never had such a troublesome lover. As least, he knew where her compass would lead her. Despite everything that had happened, Elisa was determined as ever to have her final battle with Locus.

The orcs attack was sudden and fierce. Elisa leapt across rocks and sprinted along the path as she guarded the dwarves’ escape. On the opposite side, Tauriel was her own protection. Armed with her bow and arrows, the elven captain quickly caught up to Elisa’s body count. She caught Elisa’s eye once and frowned but her attention was quickly drawn away by a massive orc charging at her.
It gave her time to disappear into the forest. The dwarves were safe, the gates closing seconds too late to stop them and the guards were distracted with the loss of their prisoners to notice the woman.

The escape was nearly neat till Finn was injured.

She cringed when she saw the unlucky dwarf get shot in the leg. The arrow pierced straight through, missing the bone. She knew as well as any experienced hunter that orcs didn’t fight fair. If the dwarf survived the blood lost, the poison laced in the arrow would get to him. Her thoughts travelled through every spell and healing magic she knew which could combat the poison. Hunter spells were not designed for healing- they left that to healers or wizards- but she knew of something which might slow it down. The same spell she had used on Locus’ poisoned claw marks in her back.

“You there!”

Elisa spun around at the intrusion. Seeing her time was up, she left the stage and disappeared into the forest.

The quiet chant disappeared in the echoes of the forest. To anyone watching, it would seem like the girl was crying. She knelt in the mud, surrounded by grass and dead tree branches. Hair head was tied back in a sever bun that must have been painful. Her pants were dirty and her shirt plastered to her back. Head bowed and hands braced on the floor, the girl chanted something so quiet it was impossible to hear. She kept her eyes open and pushed her shoulders back. She wiped her cheek, streaking mud across her skin.

Her mouth moved faster, words spilling out and the chant growing louder.

The patter of feet behind her didn’t stop her.

“Did your elders not warn you of summoning things you do not understand, little girl?”

The voice was booming yet creaky. It was cold yet caressing. The chant silenced.

“My ancestors made a bargain with you.” The girl said without turning around. “I call on you to honour it.”

The voice gave a crackling laughter. She resisted the urge to look behind her. She needed all her confidence and if she looked, she feared she would run. Running was not an option.

“You must be truly desperate to call on ancient dealings.”

“There is a creature that threatens every hunter in middle earth.”

The same crackle. The girl scrunched her hands into fists. She rubbed the jagged scar on her stomach and ran her fingers along the circle inked into her side.

“It was my kind which slaughtered yours. Now you call upon me to stop the death of your kin?”

“I ask nothing, beast. You are bound to.”

The creature hissed but the girl knew she was right.

“What creature is stronger than you? Has the dealings you made with demons finally backfired? Has Saron’s shadow sent you running to cover? What powers does it have that overrule yours?”
The girl shook her head.

“It is no creature.” She stated. “It is our Queen.”
There was something about the causalities of a hunt which always amazed hunters.

When she was a child, Elisa had been fascinated with the stories her father had told her about famous hunters who fought great monsters that had torn about villages. There was something dangerously exciting, even thrilling, about the moment when the hunted is cornered. The need to survive is primal for both hunted and hunter. When she had grown up and become one of those famous hunters, she had seen those torn about villages. She had seen the orphaned children and the burnt homes. She had stood her ground in front of monsters which had destroyed everything in their path. She had seen a hunter become the hunted. Just as she had seen humans walk awake, seemingly unhurt, only to collapse moments later from blood lost.

In the end, no one wanted to die.

That primal instinct was not what she saw in the small fishing village.

They hadn’t noticed her—another tired looking woman in their small town—so she had fit in a lot easier than the dwarves. She covered up her attractive features with a cloak and watched them smuggled in by fish barrels. The entire time she had guarded their entrance from a distinct. If they were captured, it would be the end for them all. Her only comfort was the fact that her ability to disappear into shadows had meant she didn’t smell of fish.

The humans appeared to be drinking up every word the bard said. All he had to do was bribe his way in, a trick he had obviously preformed before.

She wondered if anyone thought to question if gold coins was really worth it.

Thorin invited her to travel with them but she refused. She was tired and weak from the long journey. The last thing she needed was to be cramped as well. Instead, she walked through the long winding streets and familiarized herself with the town. The last time she had been in the fishing village she had just been hunting a demon. She had Malicious, a trusty horse, by her side... no, she wouldn’t think of those thing.

She paused outside Bard’s house. She doubted she would be welcome but she knocked all the same. After all, she had traveled separately from the dwarves and Bard hadn’t even seen her before.

As soon as he cautiously answered the door, Elisa offered her most charming smile.

“Are you Bard, by any chance?” She smiled. “If they had told me you was so handsome, I would have arrived sooner.”

He frowned and held the door that extra bit tight.
“Who are you? You’re not from the village.”

“I’m here to help. My name’s Elisa and you’re right about me not being from around here.”

She held out her delicate hand for him to shake. He glanced down in suspicion but Elisa knew how to make herself look defenseless. With a sigh, he shook her hand and allowed her inside his home. She winked at Bard and strolled past him, making sure to grace her body as close to his as she did.

“How… cozy.” Elisa observed.

Bard’s home was just that but small and cramped. It amazed her how it managed to house 12 dwarves and the little children she had seen running around the place.

“There’s a spare blanket in my room.”

Thorin glanced up from his task of polishing a rusty sword.

“I almost expected you to have abandoned us.” He grumbled.

“I have no idea what I have done to earn that distrust. I have never done anything wrong in my entire life.” Elisa said with a flicker of fake horror on her face.

He didn’t back down from her stare and finally she stepped back. She came to make friends not enemies and she wasn’t on her way to a good start.

“Well… aren’t you a sight for sore eyes.” Elisa exclaimed as she gracefully sat down beside an ill looking Kili.

The dwarf scoffed but it came out as a choked cough.

“I was on a hunt once with a dwarven warrior.” She said at the same time as she gently put her hand on his forehead. “We were hunting orcs which had terrorised this forgotten village. We tracked them to this village which only had about twenty humans in. These orcs shot this family with poisoned arrows and left them as a distraction for us. Ironically, Thranduil would probably be more help for you here.”

“Yeah?” Kili groaned. “What happened to the dwarven warrior?”

Elisa winced and shook her head. “He’s gone. I am sorry I can’t help more. I have experience poisoning people- not so much healing them.”

She excused herself and started her own task of polishing her twin swords.

It wasn’t long till the little girl gave into her curiosity and sat down on the bed besides Elisa. The hunter didn’t stop stroking the loose piece of fabric along her blade but she smiled at the little girl.

“You have very pretty hair, princess.” Elisa said.

The girl giggled and hid her face behind waves of brunette hair.

“I’m not a princess! My name is Tilda.”

Elisa placed down her sword and cloth. “My father used to say that all girls are princesses until they choose to be queens.”
“Then are you a princess?”

“No. I was made into a queen not long ago.”

The girl nodded, as if it was a perfectly acceptable answer.

“Why are you with the dwarves? You don’t look like them and you sure don’t smell like them!”

She smiled at the child’s innocence.

“I’m going to make sure no monsters come.”

A protective shout of Tilda’s name called the little girl away.

“Tilda! I told you its bedtime.”

The girl opened and closed her mouth in objection before she stormed off.

Elisa waited till Bard’s frame filled the doorframe till she stood up.

“I didn’t mean to cause any problems. She’s a very smart girl.”

“She’s too smart for her own good. I am sorry if I seem… suspicious.”

Elisa shrugged. She eyed the Bowman from his worn boots to his mop of black hair. He was handsome in a weathered way and his years of outside work showed in his strong hands. With his chiselled jaw that looked like it belonged on a statue and a body made from endurance, Bard was not what she expected from Laketown.

“I can understand a father’s protectiveness.”

“She has no sense when it comes to strangers.” Bard explained anyway. “She will talk to anyone without thinking twice.”

“Are we strangers?” She asked with a coy smile. “Perhaps we should get to know each better.”
I week ago

Elisa noticed Petvog and Aidan’s absence more than she thought she would have. Considering she had been hunting alone for so long, she had quickly grown used to having someone who understood the hunter. She waved them off at the gates, stood alongside Legolas.

“Those vultures had better welcome them with open arms.” Elisa muttered as she watched the hunters ride away.

Legolas frowned and narrowed his eyes.

“Are they not your kin?”

“They chose to live net to Mordor and cut away any association to the other hunter kingdoms. They eat their young and have orgies around statues. So I would not go so far to call them family.”

She tucked her hands away into her dress’ pockets and turned away from the open gates. Legolas followed though they both knew she didn’t know where she was going.

They both silently agreed not to join the feast which Thranduil was throwing in the ballroom. The magic still ghosting her skin made Elisa edgy. Most nights she spent with nightmares of mass murders and fire, often waking clutching a knife to her chest with blood dripping from her fingers. Sleep deprived, sometimes she had walking visions of hunters disappearing around corners, just out of her reach. Legolas, in turn, was growing more concerned over the increase of spiders and orcs spotted on the woodland borders.

She paused so suddenly Legolas nearly walked into her.

“Do you smell that?” She asked with her head tilted to the side.

Legolas didn’t have time to answer. In a flash of skirts, she twirled down the nearest corridor and disappeared down the long hallway. Legolas rushed to follow. In one hand, he clutched his bow and in the other was his sword, ready for whatever trouble Elisa usually found.

The hunter’s mouth was set in a snarl. The smell grew stronger as she marched down the empty corridor. Her pace sped as the source got closer.

She should have noticed how slippery the floor had become. She should have watched where she
was running. It wasn’t till her foot slipped too far and she landed on her hands and knees that she saw it wasn’t dust on the floor anyway.

The marble floor wasn’t visible through the thick coat of crimson liquid. The decay wafted to her nostrils, making her cringe and scramble to her feet. Her shaking hands were covered in blood but not hers.

From behind Elisa, she heard Legolas gag and shout for guards.

She remained motionless. Her skirts were still wrapped around her legs, making her feel even further caged.

The blood dripped off their tiny legs and arms and landed with gentle patter sounds on the floor.

But they were missing their eyes.

That was the first thing Elisa screamed.

As first she thought they were scarecrows. Tiny scarecrows left to hang from roof attached to the roof. But the tiny fingers and bare feet looked too real.

And the blood.

Even the Pure Ones couldn’t fake so much blood.

Tiny little bodies left to hang like criminals.

Only Elisa knew they had done no crimes. After all, they were only children.

“I suppose their bodies had to turn up eventually.” She whispered as she took the hand of a hanging girl. “Shame it had to be here.”

From behind her, she heard Petvog gagging and shouting for the guards.

She held onto the little girl’s hand tighter until she started to ache. Guards circled her and a gentle hand tried to guide her away. Still, she kept hold of the girl.

She wasn’t surprised to see it was Thranduil trying to stop her from hurting herself again. He didn’t look surprised to see her refuse.

“They need their last rites. It was my father’s duty.” She stated as she locked eyes with the king. “When a hunter dies, he told me that their bodies haunt their murderer until they are given last rites. I… I can do it.”

He slowly nodded.

“It will not hurt you?”

“It’s supposed to hurt me.” She hissed.

Petvog dropped his stare to the floor. She could see the hope in his eyes though he was desperately trying to hide it.

Petvog was too young to fear what came after death.
She, on the other hand, didn’t remotely believe hunters ever truly got to rest. Violent deaths and massacres all made for restless spirits. The only thing she clung onto was her father’s stories of the eternal peace which welcomed all hunters at the end of their lives. It was supposed to be a land full of honey and milk, a land were hunters would never have to spill another drop of blood.

She gently eased the girl’s neck free of the rope and laid her body down on the floor. The skin was stone cold like the girl had never been alive. Elisa wasn’t sure why that upset her more than anything else. She kneeled down besides the tiny body and planted her hands down on the blood floor. The sickly liquid slipped in between her fingers but she ignored it as usual.

The words which she had heard her father speak so many times at pyres rushed from her mouth. They were spoken in the tradition hunter language so only the commanding family knew the rites. It didn’t take long but every word drained her.

As soon as her voice began to waver, Thranduil barked at his guards to leave. With only the hunters, his son and him left in the room, Elisa felt the heavy presence lift just enough for her to continue. She didn’t expect Thranduil to kneel down beside her and softly place his hand over hers.

Eventually, she clasped the girl’s fingers in one hand and Thranduil’s hand in the other.

“Find peace in the embrace of the Riccza golden land.”

She felt their spirits leave before she saw it. Their presence had hung heavy in the air like mist. When it lifted, it left her even more alone. Yet keeping her grounded, reminding her that she wasn’t leaving too was Thranduil’s simple embrace. She didn’t need to look at the girl’s body. She knew it was gone.

“Where will they go?” Thranduil asked in a quiet voice.

He stood first and helped Elisa to her feet. She wiped her hands on her dress and left blood smearing the cotton white fabric.

“My father told me hunters go a land of peace where we life out eternity happy and never at war. They’re just children… they’ll have a place in the golden lands. Our Gods will help them find peace.”

“Do you think that is where everyone else went too?” Petvog asked.

Despite trying to hide it from his voice, his eyes beamed with hope. Every hunter was promised a place within the lands as soon as late rites were performed. There were conditions on being found worthy though. A hunter could never betray the hunter name or abandon their lands or the Gods would leave them to wonder Middle Earth forever- lost and in the dark.

“I hope so.” I replied. “Dear Valars, I hope so.”

“I thought you knew. I thought all the Commander’s family knew.”

“You thought a lot of things about the Commander’s family.” She bit out with her face set in a snarl. “While we are revealing secrets, we also did not love each other unconditionally. We did not care who we trampled out in our rise to authority. We tore and beat down each other and we never forgive our enemies.”

Thranduil never let go off her hand. Her eyes flared up purple and she didn’t realise until Thranduil gripped her hand tighter that she was shaking.
He forced her into his arms and she instinctively leaned into the crook of his neck.

“I am a Commander- we always do our duty. But I will remember what this demon has done to my people. I will remember *everything*.”

The fury in her eyes was unmistakeable. For a moment, Petvog could have sworn he was looking into the eyes of Commander Riding- a man who had scared him at the best of times. But then she blinked and the anger was gone.

Replacing was a darkness he had never seen before- not even in the Commander.

For the first time, Petvog wondered if it was Commander’s daughter who really scared him after all.

Chapter End Notes

I'm so sorry it's been months since I updated. I just lost where I was going with the story and I honestly couldn't think what I wanted to happen next! But I've got it now (hopefully). If I play my cards right, I should have the story completed very soon. I hope you guys are ready for a massive ending!
It was the smallest thing which awoke her. If it had happened 10 minutes later, or if Elisa had been a heavier sleeper or if the birds had been just a little louder, she would have missed it completely. Elisa had camped in many places- ranging from filthy caves to glistening palaces- but none compared to the noise of a human village. There seemed to always be something going on. Whether it was crying children, the wind trying to break in through the slate roofs or boots banging into the harbours, there was always some sort of noise for Elisa to try and sleep through. But none of them woke her up suddenly before dawn. Dagger clutched to her side, Elisa shot up and scanned the room.

The two children she shared the room with slept peacefully on.

The sleep of the innocent, she sighed.

The intrusion was barely a whisper but even to wake up the assassin. She stretched out her limps and tiptoed out the room, careful not to disturb the sleeping girls. She followed the whimper out of the crowded house and into the chilly night. Her bare arms were immediately bitten by the frosty air while the whimper rose into a hum. It reminded her of a song a mother might hum to their baby. It wasn’t one of the hunter songs that Elisa remembered. But the sound was so familiar, floating through the air, luring her closer and closer to the frozen lake’s edge.

“Show yourself.” She demanded into the heavy mist. “I know that song. You needn’t be afraid of me.”

The hum stopped without warning. The hunter’s legs froze as she stared at the disfigured face from beneath the water’s tranquil surface.

Two beady eyes stared back at her.

“I knew it was you. Somehow I knew you would come back.”

The soft words were barely out of Elisa’s mouth before a solid grip coiled around her throat. Stone dragged her legs down, crippling her before she had a chance to react, forcing her into the freezing water. Her strangled scream was cut short by a gust of water forcing itself down her throat. A sharp burning pain stabbed up her arms.

Then the cold hit her like a thousand knives. With panicking eyes, she saw the ripple break in the water from her impact. Her arms where twisted behind her till the pain got so much she thought they were going to break. Every struggle dragged her deeper into the water and every kick was rewarded by something yanking her further down. Her lungs felt like they were about to burst. Her body was stiff and refused to try any more.

I’m drowning.
Water surrounded her, invading her lungs and slipping in her mouth. Slowly, the light died and the surface disappeared.

Finally, she took in a breath.

“Should we... you know, wait for her?”

Bilbo glanced around nervously into the excited crowd which had gathered to see them off into the lonely mountain. There was no sign of their hunter’s red hair or her signature way of cutting through the crowd. She hadn’t been there when the group had woken and the brief search they had was unrewarding. As far as Bard’s children knew, she had been asleep on the flor next to them. For a moment, Bilbo suspected she had spent the night sharing Bard’s bed. They had shared enough secret glances and whispers for him to ask face the embarrassment and ask the bowman if she had kept him company.

But Bard had laughed and said he hadn’t seen her.

“She is a dragon hunter, Thorin. Even Lord Elrond said she is the best fighter he had even seen.” Finn reasoned as he helped load the boat with food supplies. “Should we really be trying to reclaim dragon treasure without having someone who knows how to kill a dragon?”

“For all we know, she has returned to her elven lover.” Thorin spat out. “There will be no more delays.”

Bilbo took one last sweep of the crowd, a last hope of seeing her running to them, before he joined Thorin on the boat. As the crowd slowly faded into the distance, the hobbit could have sworn he saw the dragon hunter standing on a house’s low roof. When he looked again, she was gone.
The Commander's Daughter

The Commander’s daughter was known for pushing her limits. It was why she was popular but also the servants only whispered rumours about her in the hallways. She was successful, smart, beautiful, skilled and the Commander’s daughter.

So it didn’t matter too much when she slaughtered 10 elven scouts who were searched the woods for a missing kid. They should have known better than to trespass. It didn’t really matter that her fiancé had cheated on her. Within a week, she had 17 different marriage proposals. It definitely didn’t matter that she was the main suspect in her sister’s brutal torture and murder: surely the charming Elisa Riding would never do anything like that.

So Elisa was puzzled by her father’s messenger insisting on her coming to her father’s study. She was fresh from a successful hunt and there was blood still drying on her clothes. Unfortunately, orders were orders: even for the Commander’s daughter.

Elisa burst into the room and plonked down in the large chair opposite her father before planting her muddy feet on his table and balancing the chair on its back legs.

“Are you just going to stare or did you want something, father dearest?”

Her father sighed and closed his eyes briefly. “I wish you would refrain from calling me that. I know you are only doing it out of mockery.”

“Oh, your observant powers dazzle me, father dearest!”

For once he didn’t rise to her taunt and pushed a bulging paper folder into her hands. She didn’t bother looking inside it and threw it on to the table. Why would she need to look at something she had helped write?

“Are you here to lecture me on my ‘growing insolence’ or my ‘bordering on reckless risk’?” She laughed. “Apparently they have both become an issue for anyone stupid enough to try and teach me.”

“Your tutors tell me you are no longer following orders.”

“Why would I follow the orders of someone who is not half as good as a hunter as me?”

“They are tutors for a reason, Elisa.” He reasoned.

“Because they failed at being hunters or they tire of the death.”

The commander tiredly pulled out his desk drawer and reached for the amber brandy she knew he kept there. When he poured out his drink, it was the first time she noticed the wrinkles on the back of his hand.

“There was no details withheld about your sister’s-”

“She was only my half-sister.” Elisa harshly corrected.
“He continued regardless. “There are rumours, Elisa. People whisper that there was monsters circling our kingdom. This is monstrous.”

“Is it?” She asked in a bored tone. “You ordered me to kill her and you are, after all, in charge.”

“I never ordered you to cut open her throat and rip off her hand!”

Elisa jolted up. Despite being in his seventies, never had her father raised his voice at her in anger.

“It is the death every traitor deserves. Why should she be an exception?”

He gulped down his drink in one and slammed the glass down.

“As hard as it is for you to believe, I was once your age.”

“Really? I thought you came out the womb with grey hair and wrinkled hands.”

After 18 years he was used to ignoring her sarcasm otherwise he would never get around to finishing a sentence.

“I was raised in my father’s shadow, training to become Commander once he passed on, just like you. I was showered with praise, attention and gifts like the people do for you.” He sighed and rubbed his creased forehead. “I know what it is like to have all those people look to you for guidance despite being a child still.”

Elisa snarled at her father, a growing anger in the pit of her stomach and showing through her eyes.

“Get to the point, father. There’s blood in my shoes and its making me itchy.”

“Will you please be quiet for once and listen to your elders!” He snapped. “I have given you everything! You are next in line to have the Commander name! Bodies are being dragged to the pyres baring your dagger marks! I have reports of your men torturing anyone who dare speak against you! I have allowed this because you are my daughter… I did nothing because I did not think you were capable of this.”

Elisa, still smirking, tilted her head to the side.

“Did you really not?” She said softly. “What have I done that you didn’t teach me?”

“I did not teach you to torture your sister!”

“Yes, you did.”

Elisa huffed and stood to leave.

“I command you to sit down!” He raged. “As your father, you will listen to me!”

“You will just have to send assassins after me for disobeying your orders. Please, go ahead. Let me show you what a monster is capable of.”

She bowed dramatically and turned on her heels to leave.
Even in death, the Queen was beautiful. She had a kind of pretty which belonged in art rather than in a human. Hidden beneath a sheet of ice, the Queen’s body gently floated along the still water. Blue eyes and pale skin, the body was frozen when the scarred woman cracked through the ice. Despite the damage to the Queen, the scarred woman didn’t hesitate in holding the body close to her. Among the chaos, it was easy for the scarred woman to go unnoticed. To the panicking villagers, she looked like just another villager carrying someone wounded by the fight. It was only when she lied the body into the small boat that someone finally noticed her.

“Hey! You can’t leave them there. I’m sorry but-”

She turned towards the dwarf and placed her finger to her lips in a hush notion. The blonde dwarf must been shocked because she let her tuck the fabric a thin blanket around the body. With a tender touch, she stroked a loose piece of hair away from the Queen’s face.

“I can get bandages?” The dwarf softly offered.

“Thranduil will come looking for her and I will not be here when he does. By the Valars, he is going to be angry.” The scarred woman stated as she sat down on the edge of the boat and took the woman’s frozen hand in hers.

“Why would the Elven king come? Wait, please do not tell me that is…”

The blond dwarf opened and slammed his mouth shut twice before he peered into the boat. A shiver ran through the body. The woman held the frozen hand tighter as a shot of warmth entered the fingertips. Fili stood, wide eyed and mouth agap, as he recognised the frozen body. The scarred woman ignored his calls to the other dwarves and pressed her lips to the woman’s knuckles.

“All we have as hunters is the hope we will get to the Golden Lands once our duty is done. For her, well, the duty is never done. She will never get to go to the land of milk and honey. She is stuck here, fighting and killing, for the rest of eternity. I know you wanted to be free.”

Slowly Elisa’s eyes fluttered open. At first, all she could do is gasp and choke, clawing at her throat and trying to breath. Murky water was spat at the scarred woman's face but she didn't flinch.

“Did I miss the party?” She gasped.

The scarred woman chuckled and shook her head. “Yes but from what I hear, you have already fought enough dragons to last you several lifetimes.”

Fili couldn’t keep his mouth closed. There was still icicles hanging from her fingertips and there wasn’t an inch of her that wasn’t freezing cold but she had come back.

“How… what… how…”

The hunter smiled and shrugged. “I am immortal, noble dwarf. A little drowning could never keep me down.”

Her entire body was trembling as she leaned up in the boat. She kept her grip tight on the blanket wrapped around her despite Fili rushing into the boat to wrap her in a hug. The body heat was good but did nothing to warm up her frozen body.

Fili came running up to Elisa with a bright grin and a new bounce to his steps. She even ignored the
“I just never got chance to ask. You let me leave… or run and you never said how you did it or what it cost you.”

“Besides having to cut off her hand to make up for your gimpy left hand, it was fine. Knowing what I did though… I couldn’t stay there.”

Instinctively, Mol’s hand went to her tiny stomach.

They had both lost a lot getting her freedom.
“Her name was going to be-”

“Please, Mol, I don’t want to hear it.”

The elder sister handed over Elisa’s swords and helped her strap their scabbards around her shoulders so they rested across her back.

They both turned away, a silent and hard understanding flowing between the sisters.

It didn’t take long for Elisa to spot the elven prince. His long flowing hair and rich garments made me stand out like a sore thumb amongst the fisher villagers. She winked when he caught her eye and ran into his arms. Though shocked at first, he eventually wrapped his arms around her too and hugged her fiercely.

“When I saw Kili was cured, somehow I knew I would find you around here.”

Pressing his lips to her cold cheek, he pulled away and smiled sadly.

“I cannot claim responsibility for saving the dwarf. It was Tauriel who did the honourable thing. If she had not refused to leave the villagers, I would have left before the dragon fell.”

She grinned and glanced across at Tauriel. She was standing with Kili, talking in whispers with their heads bowed and their hands joining. It didn’t take a hunter to see the hurt on Legolas’ face.

Elisa gently turned him away from the scene and walked with his through the villagers as they tried to gather what was left of their homes.

“Where did you go?”

“One of the Guardians thought it wise to try and drown me. Please, do not tell your ada. Missing the dragon fight is enough of a punishment.”

After everything he had witnessed he wasn’t shocked that she had thrown her life recklessly away. If there was no death to fear, he supposed he would be the same way.

“My father will not be happy to hear of this.”

“But there is no change.”

That brought a small smile to his lips. Despite everything that had happened, the destruction around them and the war yet to come, Elisa was happy to make the prince smile.

“Where will you go?” He asked finally.

“Hm… I think I will go the lonely mountain. I hear the scenery is beautiful this time of year.”

“Temptress, what are you planning?”

She winked and pulled him into a last hug.

“I meant it when I said I will always follow you.”

Whatever he was going to say was cut off by Bard spotting the pair. As soon as he was close enough for him to see her smirk, she curtsied dramatically.
“Master Bard… it has quiet the ring to it.”

“I am no Master.” He immediately objected which sure seriousness it almost made Elisa laugh.

“Have you tried your hand at it yet? You might like it.” She purred. “Besides, these people will be lost without a leader. Considering the other… candidates, you certainly look like the best option.”

“I will leave you both. Hopefully, I will see you soon.” Legolas stated as left the couple alone.

“You should not tempt men in that way.” His husky voice whispered. “….Especially when you belong to another.”

She grinned wickedly and chewed her bottom lip in a way she knew would draw his attention to her lips.

“Do I tempt you? The last I checked, I was alone. Well, not for long I guess. The dwarves will need company.”

Bard frowned and glanced across at the dwarves as they stocked up their small boat with supplies.

“Why must you go with them? Surely the Lonely Mountain holds no treasure for you.”

“Can you not tell? Winter is coming. Your people look to you for guidance and there is only one place you can lead them.”

“Dale.”

“Dale.” Elisa agreed.
The hunter didn’t say bye as she left on the small boat along with the dwarves. Mol watched the boat leave shore and then she was gone. There was no forgiven between the sisters even 2 years later and Mol hadn’t expected a miracle to happen because she repaid some of her debt. There wasn’t anywhere for the hunter to go except to Dale with Villagers. Still, any idea she had about taking Mol with her was out of the question.

“Kili! Fili! Other dwarves who names I cannot remember! I see shore.”

Elisa jumped out the boat before it had landed on solid shore. She helped Kili out and

He laughed and shook his head but she could see the blush rising to his cheeks. A memory flashed before her eyes of Mol’s kind smile and gentle hands. She had always had the softest ember eyes and she was her only living family.

Kili was running ahead before the last dwarf had even stepped onto land “Come! Let’s join the others!” He exclaimed. “There’s going to be wine and flowing laughter waiting for us!”

There was no laughter waiting for them. The halls of the dwarven palace were silent and dead. They stormed through the halls with little care about enemies or being heard. Elisa couldn’t blame them: they wanted to find their kin alive.

“I was expecting… more.” Elisa confessed. “Where are the others? Did we-”

Her sentence was cut off midway by a hobbit running straight for her.

“Stop! Stop! Stop! You need to leave!” He warned.

Elisa awkwardly placed her hand on the hobbit’s back as he tried to catch his breath at the same time as bumbling out a hazy explanation.

“Tell me what happened.” She hinted gently.

“Thorin. Thorin… he’s been down there for days. He doesn’t sleep. He barely eats. He’s not been himself. Not at all. It’s this place.” He cleared his throat and leaned up. “I think a sickness lies here.”

“What kind of sickness?” Fili asked.

Elisa didn’t have to hear anymore. She ignored Thorin’s call to his kin. Bilbo stayed by her side, eyes full of dread.

“Can you do something?” He asked the hunter.

Elisa didn’t answer for a long time. When she did, her voice was barely a whisper.
“My father had something similar. Believe me when I say the war is just beginning.”

Elisa couldn’t watch the dwarves rip apart the palace. She curled her lips in disgust at the memories of her father behaving the exact same way. The power moves, the demands for more sacrifice and the many sleepless nights of listening to his screams for his enemies to be cursed to Mordor still rang in her ears. Except Thorin couldn’t blame a demon’s threat hanging over him or the knives hiding behind his throne.

The drain of the king’s behaviour was showing with every faltering footstep and heavy sigh from the dwarves. As much as she tried, no one would dare question Thorin besides Bilbo and even the hobbit was starting to show fear.

Full of frustration, Elisa stormed up to the King. Even surrounded by gold and sat on a massive throne, Elisa had never someone less satisfied.

“All this gold is not enough for you?” She demanded. “You are working your kin to death. You have not slept since you got here and you refuse to let in the villagers of Laketown despite your promise. This is not the noble dwarven prince my father told me about.”

When he spoke, his tone was deadpan and lifeless. “I am the King of Erebor and you will address me as such, human. You are fortunately I even allowed you into this palace. After all, you failed the only purpose you had.”

“I failed because you released that monster on the people of Laketown! Now their homes are destroyed, their livelihood has been wiped out and they are desperate yet you turn them away like filth!”

“They are just that- filth.” He spat out with disguise dripping from his lips.

Elisa held her head high and narrowed her eyes. The dwarven king returned her hatred glare and refused to look away.

“How could you be so dishonourable, disrespectful-”

“I wonder, how did you prefer to be taken by the woodland filth?”

The statement took her back. She hid her shock behind a smirk and crossed her arms over her breasts.

“You must be terribly mistaken if you think you can talk to me that way, your highness.”

But the hidden warning didn’t stop him. If anything, it spared him on to see how his words had shocked her.

“Do you prefer to have your legs separate and him grunting inside you? Do you force your men onto their backs and straddle them till they beg you to ride them? No… I think you prefer to be bent over and taken from behind, like a horse takes a mare.” He grinned and took his time roaming his eyes over her body. “Perhaps I will satisfy you. I will have you wear nothing but his precious Gems of Pure Starlight and I take you again and again bent over the balcony while he listens to you screaming out my name.”

There was a shocked silence between her, Dwalin and Bilbo- who had been unlucky enough to choose that moment to try talking to Thorin. Even Elisa, who had been known to make the most
wanton of sailors blush, didn’t have any words.

“My father had the same disease as you.” She finally snorted. “It destroyed him and killed his entire
kin besides me. Do not let it do the same to you.”

He let out a mocking laughter as he watched her bow and turn to walk away.

“Come back here, whore! I want you in between my legs with that pretty mouth wrapped around
my-”

“Thorin Oakenshield!” Dwalin exclaimed. “That is enough!”

He didn’t need to finish. Elisa knew exactly what he wanted to yell at her and what disguising thing
he wanted to demand from her. Even when she had walked far away from Thorin, his cruel laughter
still rung in her ears.

Bilbo found her in the kitchen. She didn’t acknowledge him sit beside her on the floor and continued
playing with the fire on her fingertips.

“Does that hurt?”

Elisa shook her head.

“Of course not or you wouldn’t be passing it from hand to hand. Fili told me you could come back
alive and you could disappear into the shadows. I suppose the company would have been better
recruited someone like you as a thief instead.”

He was filling the silence and they both knew it. For once, she let him even if it was just to soothe her
grieving pride.

“I wanted to wait for you before setting off. Thorin… well he insisted there shouldn’t be any more
delays.”

“It is probably for the best that you left. I was a corpse floating under the ice of Laketown.”

“I don’t think he meant… what he said.” Bilbo said awkwardly.

“Sickness does odd things to people.” She agreed though the king’s words still stung. “Do you need
something, Bilbo? I would like to be alone right now.”

He fidgeted clumsy with his thick fingers.

“This place has done things to him. Do you think if someone found the Arkenstone it would make
everything better? Would it help?”

She chuckled and shook her head. “Dear Hobbit, I am not such a fool as to think you have not
already found it. Your turmoil gives you away immediately.” She clicked her fingers and the flames
were gone, leaving only the hunter staring down the hobbit. “Finding it will make matters worse.
That person in there who called me a whore and said he wanted to take me like animal, is that the
Thorin you know?”

A deep red tint rushed to Bilbo’s cheeks at the memory. He had not heard Thorin so much as
mention anything in a hateful way, let alone take about a woman in that way. Speechless, he spoke
his head.

“That is because it is not him. Dragon sickness has struck and I fear giving him more will drive him
completely insane.”

Bilbo sighed and rubbed his dirty forehead. Her answer hadn’t been a surprise. It was the same thing he had been telling himself ever since he had taken the Arkenstone.

“Can you get me out of here?”

“Where would you like to go? Back to the Shire?”

Bilbo shook his head, much to her surprise.

“To Bard.”

Elisa looked up with narrowed eyes. Her mouth was set in a thin line and her eyebrows were scrunched in confusion.

“This will not end well, sweet one.”

“I know.” He said quickly. “I want you to take me anyway.”

Chapter End Notes

*deep breath* soooo what does everything think? I know it's been ages since I updated but I'm finishing it off now. I'd love to hear some feedback (good or bad) and I know the editing is awful but I hope you enjoyed reading!
Despite the Hobbit’s size, Elisa found out, he had zero sneaking abilities. She was baffled by how he managed to sneak by a dragon though it made more sense when he told her he was the one who had woken him up. With his large feet and clumsy movements, Elisa had a hard time smuggling him out of the dwarf palace, let alone in the elf and human camp.

Somehow, Bilbo had managed to mess up her perfect escape plan. It would have been easy considering her ability to disappear into shadows and simply reappear through another shadow but when she had told Bilbo to hold onto her hands and explain what she was doing, the hobbit had panicked and moved so much she had nearly twisted her ankle when she landed with him outside the palace. Limping into the elven camp, Elisa still managed to sneak the hobbit past the guards.

She could hear them arguing from outside. Gandalf’s raspy voice argued with a familiar bowman. Bilbo’s eyes widened as Bard stated the dwarves would stand down. Before Elisa could roll her eyes, Bilbo pushed past her and stormed up to the wizard.

“That won’t stop them. You think the dwarves will surrender? They won’t. They will fight to the death.”

“Bilbo Baggins!” Gandalf happily announced.

Bard smiled at her and she winked in return. For a second, she thought he looked relieved, happy even, to see her.

Thranduil’s cold eyes went from the hobbit to Elisa and back again.

“If I am not mistaken,” Thranduil coaxed. “This is the Halfling who stole the keys to my dudgeon from under the nose of my guards... and in the company of my lover, as well.”

Elisa smirked and bowed dramatically.
“I know how much you love surprises, my light. Besides, I brought gifts.”

There was just a ghost of a smile but enough for Elisa to know he wasn’t mad. He held out his hand as an invite to sit on the chair next to him and she gladly accepted.

“What is this gift you speak off?”

“I brought you this.” Bilbo stated as he scrambled in his pockets to reach the Arkenstone.

As soon as the light caught the massive gem’s glistening shine, Thranduil and Bard stood up and moved closer.

“The heart of the mountain.” Thranduil gasped. “The King’s jewel.”

“And worth a king’s ransom.” Bard added. “How is this yours to give?”

“I took it as my 14th share of the treasure.”

She didn’t miss Gandalf’s little smirk hidden underneath his messy beard.

“How did you escape the palace without an arrow being shot into your head?”

Elisa huffed and narrowed her eyes at the hobbit who guilty stared down at the floor.

“The same way I twisted my ankle.” She sighed. “I disappeared into the shadows and would have reappeared on solid ground if Bilbo over here hadn’t wiggled so much I lost focused and ended up falling.”

“Yes… sorry.”

She shook her head but didn’t say anymore.
“Why would you do this? You owe us no loyalty.” Bard puzzled.

But Elisa knew. The warmth and friendship that flowed between a team when they’ve endured so much was hard to break. She would have done anything for Leon and Darren.

“I know that Dwarves can be obstinate and pigheaded…”

“And rude, stubborn, foolish…” Elisa added for him.

“… but they are also brave and kind and loyal- to a fault. I’ve grown very fond of them and I would save them if I can. The Thorin in that palace is that the Thorin I know. Now, he will do anything for that stone. Thorin values it about all else… even his own kin.”

“What do you mean he has changed? Has he threatened you with ill harm?” Gandalf questioned.

“No… I mean, yes. He doesn’t sleep or eat and he is concerned with nothing other than gold. And he said… things which the Thorin I know would never have said!”

“What kind of things?” Gandalf asked with concern.

Bilbo awkwardly shuffled from foot to foot while making sure to avoid Elisa’s glare.

“Just… things I would rather not repeat.”

“It is rude to withhold information from your host, master Baggins.” Thranduil ordered. “Tell us what he said.”

Bilbo looked to Gandalf for a rescue that didn’t come. The wizard glanced from Elisa to Bilbo, trying to sense what was coming. With a resigning sigh, Bilbo began to mumble:

“He… erm… asked how she prefers to be intimate with the king. He suggested taking her rather
ungentlemanly over the banister and if she would prefer that or if she prefers... something less appropriate."

The shocked silence was shared by everyone besides Thranduil. He, on the other hand, was grinning widely and struggling not to laugh.

“Well, did you tell him it was none and that you prefer to be taken against the nearest wall?”

Elisa gasped and punched him in the shoulder. He laughed at the colour rising in her cheeks and daintily lifted her chin so she looked into his eyes.

“You are shameless.” She admonished.

“Well…” Gandalf stated, interrupting the pair. “We will retire for the night if there’s nothing else, your majesty?”

Thranduil dismissed them with a wave of his hand and stood to pour Elisa a glass of wine. She took it gladly and sat down on his lap when beckoned.

“I have missed you, my light.”

She smiled and wrapped her arms around his neck.

The tent flap was barely closed before the king’s lips were on hers. She smirked against his lips and wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him closer. When he finally released her it was only to turn her around and release the armour clasps. With a clang, the dragon bone fell away, leaving her in a tunic and pants. He had fast work off the rest of her clothes, both of them dragging clothes of each other as they stumbled into the king’s private quarters.

With a smirk on bruised lips, Elisa pushed Thrandruil onto the bed and slowly straddled his waist.

“What are you doing?” He questioned, rubbing his thumbs gently against her nipples.
She leaned in and kissed him as she rubbed her hips against his. She grinned as she swallowed his husky groan.

"Pleasuring my lover?" She replied innocently.

His eyes followed her as she swirled her tongue around her finger and slowly dipped into her core.

"The king should never be dominated." He struggled to say as he watched her grab the loose belt which he had ripped off her tunic.

"Is that so?" She asked innocently as she tied his hands to the bedpost.

The sight of her completely naked yet somehow still completely in control made his blood boil. Every touch brought shivers to his skin and a growing impatience to take her hard and fast. Yet he allowed her to tie his hands and remove any option to touch her.

"You are incurable." He muttered as she licked a path down his chest.

Thranduil groaned her name and let his head fall back as her hot breath teased the tip of his manhood. Her breasts were pushed together, an open invite he was twisting to accept. Eliza's hot tongue left a damp trail on the sensitive skin as she licked along the side and tip of his erection. Just when he thought he was going to tear the bedboard off, Elisa finally took him entirely inside her mouth.

"Elisa!" He gasped and buckled his hips.

She looked up through her eyelashes and groaned around his cock, the heavenly sound sending shockwaves through Thranduil's body.

Her tongue twirled and teased while her mouth was wrapped around his heavy erection. It was a painful pleasure as he struggled against the belt, the sharp leather biting into his skin as she cradled his balls and toyed with his erection.

With a mischievous grin, she released his erection and careful ghosted her tongue on the tip a final
time before she straddled his waist.

"Neogis." He whispered in an impatient voice. "End this torment."

"Not until you beg me." She taunted.

His eyes darkened with lust and anger. Her body begged to be touched, to be dominated, and yet she refused! He buckled his hips, seeking out her heat. Elisa simply lifted her hips from him and rubbed her nipples in between her forefingers.

"Elisa, I am warning you..."

His threat fell on deaf ears as her hand travelled lower and lower down her body. With her lustful eyes glued on Thrandruil, she teased her fingers along her wet slit. She groaned while her fingers dipped into her heat, earning gasps the more she toyed.

A deep, furious growl left Thrandruil's lips. If the guards outside he tent didn't know Elisa was the king's lover, they did now. She teased his hardness by lowering her hips just enough that her wetness touched him but quickly pounced back up when he went to press further.

"Release me!" Thrandruil snapped.

Elisa tutted and grabbed her breast in one hand and rubbed her clit with the other.

"Release me before I tear this entire tent down and take you in front of this entire camp!"

An innocent look on her face, she reached for his erection and guarded him into her warm centre. She eased onto the tip, stopping before his full length was inside her.

"Is that how you beg?"

"Elisa..." he groaned defeated. "Please... I must have you. End this torment for the both of us."
The grin on her lips was enough to drive a man mad. He had to bite his lip hard enough to draw blood to stop himself from screaming as she lowered fully onto his erection.

Elisa tipped her head back and closed her eyes as she drove her hips harder against Thranduil. The king matched her rhythm even harder, drawing out every groan and gasp from the hunter.

With deft fingers, she eased the belt free, throwing away the source of Thranduil's torment. The second she had made the mistake of freeing him, Thranduil pounced up, yanking Elisa of her position. She yelped, shocked, as he forced her onto all fours on the bed.

"Your disobedience cannot continue." He growled as he positioned himself behind her.

The sound of his hand meeting her flesh echoed throughout the tent. She yelped and tried to move away only to be held in place by Thranduil's hand on the back of her neck. Powerless and defenceless, she could do little less than bit her tongue as Thranduil rained down hard spanks on her bare behind. Tears flooded her eyes from pain and frustration. He paused, chest raising and falling heavily, and suddenly dipped his fingers into her.

"This is mine." He growled.

She nodded, hoping the answer would make him happy.

"Say it!" He ordered, slapping her sensitive clit hard.

"I'm yours!" She shouted. "Thranduil, please take me!"

With a final spank, he thrush himself fully into her. Her gasp was cut short by his fingers teasing their way in between her lips. She gladly licked her juices from his pads as he forced himself deeper and deeper. The bed shook and rocked, scratching along the hard ground, till Elisa was sure the tent was going to come down.
Wizards and Shadow monsters

The noises coming from the tent didn't stop till the early morning. Gandalf stopped outside the tent only to be shot a warning look from a tired looking elf.

"I need to speak to Thranduil immediately."

"He is… indisposed."

The guards outside the king’s tent looked at the dirty wizard and barely resisted tutting.

"His majesty has asked to not be disturbed." The elf guard stated.

Gandalf huffed, "tell his majesty that it is an urgent matter of life and death and to find me when he wants to save his army!"

He turned around, white grip around his magic staff. He hadn't made it far before the tent hastily opened and Elisa came running after him.

"Gandalf!" She called out as she hastily fastened her tunic.

He huffed and stopped in his tracks.

"Is this a game to you?" He abolished.

"Of course not." She replied calmly. "Thranduil and I are not children playing at war. I would thank you to remember that we both have been through many wars."

"Bilbo is missing." He said with a heavy sigh.

"Oh?" She smirked. "Right from under the nose of Bard's trusty servant?"

"Do not make a joke of this! If he has returned to the castle, his life is in danger!"

She raised her hands in surrender. "I apologise but Thranduil is hardly going to have him shot when he gave over the Arkenstone."

He shook his head. "The risk does not come from Thranduil."

She frowned, the humour gone from her face. She cast her eyes over to the tall peeks of the mountain. They were a sight to behold but she knew the dangers from her hunting days. From hidden creaks to poisonous animals and unexpected flooding, the mountains held many ways to die.

"What do you see, wizard?"

She stated in the same direction she did except his eyes were unreadable.

"I may need your help again, hunter."
The elf army was impressive even by hunter standard. Despite the growing tension and the dwarves arrows pointed at her lover, Elisa stayed out of sight along with Gandalf. She watched the army part in the middle for Thranduil and bard. If the dwarves were intimidated, they didn't show it.

As soon as Bard revealed the Arkenstone, panic erupted. Fili yelled abuse at the bowman, shouting liar and thief.

It wasn't till Bilbo revealed himself as the thief that Gandalf panicked too.

The king looked insane. Anger flowed from his voice and his erratic threats. As soon as he laid a hand on Bilbo, Elisa moved.

In a flash of movement, Elisa vanished from her spot besides Gandalf. When she reappeared, she was in the middle of the dwarves- a sword pointed at Thorin's throat and another in the direction of his kin.

"Do not test me, your highness." She whispered bitterly, staring down at the mad king. "Do you like your odds against me?"

"If you do not like my thief then return him!" The wizard's booming voice echoed across the land.

Neither Elisa nor Thorin turned but both had no choice to listen.

"You both are not making very kingly figures are you, Thorin Oakenshield, son of Thrain and Elisa Riding, daughter of Commander Riding."

She bared her teeth at the dwarven king.

"Your move." She hissed.

"Get him out of my castle!" He exclaimed loudly.

Elisa tucked her swords back into her holsters with a flick of her wrist and placed a hand on Bilbo's shoulder. In a flash of shadows, they were both on the ground.

"That is the last time I have dealings with wizards and shadow monsters!" He shouted after them.

Elisa stormed through the crowds till she reached Gandalf. Bilbo rushed ahead of her, obvious adrenaline flooding him from the treat to his life.

The elves readied their weapons. Their sharpener arrow heads were pointed at the few dwarves. The halls of the palace would be haunted and stained with the blood of the Oakenshield line but Thranduil didn't seem to care.

Suddenly a loud rumbling paused their fire. When she turned around, Gandalf was already marching away. Looking into the distance, she understood his panic.
Ironfoot

Thranduil immediately ordered his army's focus to the large incoming force. There must have been hundreds of dwarves, their spears sharpened and their war cry echoing for miles. Elisa would have stopped to admire the army if she hadn’t been on the opposition side. And at the head of them all was a very familiar angry dwarf.

"What is happened?" Bilbo rushed, running to keep up with the wizard. "Who is that? He doesn't look very happy."


"And he is never happy." Elisa added above the clatter of elves marched past.

"Are they alike?" Bilbo nervously asked.

"I've always found Thorin’s the more reasonable of the two."

Bilbo looked up Elisa with widened eyes.

“Have you met him before? Will he listen to you?”

“We met but... it was after I killed a few members of his family.” She said, a soft apologising smile on her lips. “Poor Bilbo. As if your life wasn’t complicated enough.”

He tried to laugh but the nerves made his voice shiver.

She wished there was some dark magic or assassin spell to wish him out of danger and back to his home. But no such magic existed. Or at least, no such magic had been given her by the demon.

So she revealed her sword instead.

Ironfoot left the humans of LakeTown terrified. They trembled with their makeshift weapons and tried to back away from the intimidating figure. If it wasn't for Bard, Elisa didn't doubt that they would have fled back to the small village.

"Ironfoot!" Gandalf called out, strolling out onto the open battlefield.
"Gandalf the Grey." The bearded dwarf shouted back. "And who is this fine piece of arse you've got with you?"

"It is good to see you again." She smirked, stepping out from behind Gandalf.

She watched his expression change from interest to recognition to finally anger. His mouth curled upwards and he pointed his large hammer at her head.

"This godless filth massacred my uncle's entire household!"

"Your kin threatened the commander of the Hunters. What did they suspect would happen?" She accused, pointing her finger at the dwarf.

He growled and bared his teeth like a wild animal.

"Do not stand in my way, demon."

She smirked and bowed dramatically. “Go on- bare your teeth at me. I will pull them out one by one.”

Elisa ignored the narrowed eyes from Gandalf as he nearly dragged her away.

“What do you think you’re doing?” She demanded, ripping her arm out of his grasp.

“You cannot fight!”

“Oh no, I would never kill those random dwarves who I do not care about and have no significant value.”

He huffed and gave her the same disapproving look her father used to give her.

“Do you not think I do not know there is dark magic flowing in your blood?”

“What you do or do not know doesn’t concern me. This is what I am here for! This is what everyone died for!”

“They will never bleed enough to fulfil your version of justice, Neglos.”

“I have to try and make this right.”

The soldiers were ready, their bows aimed for the dwarven army. Iron fist’s army looked just as ready for blood shred.

Fire spat out on Eliza’s palms as she marched forward for the front lines. Here on the battlefield, Thrandruil couldn’t turn down her help. If the dwarves were alarmed at the fire balancing woman at the head of the elven army, they hid it very well.

The sight of her seemed to give the humans the comfort they needed and they stayed on the battlefield.

The army lined up, arrowed pointed in the direction of the dwarves. The sharp snaps of bows made Elisa’ fists curl. She watched in sadistic satisfaction as the front line of dwarves fell.

“This will be a short battle.” She said, shaking her head.

She was almost ready to turn away when suddenly a massive gush of air knocked her onto her
knees. She scrambled to her feet and turned to watch a massive flying machine twirl through the air and wipe out a massive group of elves.

Thranduil looked across to Gandalf but even the wizard was horrified. One of the twirlies, as Ironfist had glibly called the machines, was almost on top of his people. The massive metal machine ripped through the distance, so close to Thranduil he could feel the harsh shift in the air. The ground shuddered before the massive twirly froze in the air. Fire engulfed the entire structure. He had only time to stare before the twirly was thrown through the air like an arrow and destroyed the other twirlies before they could harm any more of his people.

He didn’t have to look to know who was marching onto the front lines with his warriors.

His love and light framed by flames and smoke. She was shaking whether from anger or exhaustion he didn’t know.

“You do not hurt my king!”

Fire roared in front of her in a massive blazing ball of heat.

Before a single arrow had chance to fly, a great tremor caused the world to stop. Elisa froze, flames dying immediately, and tried to keep her feet on solid ground.

The mountains.

The orces.

Gandelf met her eyes at the same time she realised.

She had heard those tremors before.

Suddenly, a huge monster the size of a building charged out of the solid mountain, spraying a thousand rocks in every direction.

“Worms.” Elisa whispered.

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End Notes

This will be an ongoing work since I have so many directions I want to take it in! Don't worry, I'll be posting a new chapter every couple of days hopefully! Let me know what you think you know where the box is :) 

-AI

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!