Summary

Ellie finds herself in a predicament. She's lost in the woods, covered in poop and the only person willing to help her is the same guy who held a sword at her throat. This practical joke isn't funny.

Wait, are those dwarves? What the hell are hobbits? Where can she buy a toothbrush and can people please use salt in the food they serve?

Trailer can be found here

Notes

Here we go. First fanfic ever. Okay, so first things first: Names. I have been thinking back and forth, unsure about whether I should use characters’ Westron names or their translated English names (As some of you may know, Westron and English are not the same). In the end, for familiarity’s sake, I decided to use the translated character names, especially because I could not find a reliable source in terms of naming the Rohirrim, and I have less than no
knowledge when it comes to Rohirric dialect of Westron and therefore, do not trust myself to translate Eowyn, Eomer or any of the other Rohirric names, and I feel it would not flow well if I used Westron names for the Hobbits and translated English names for the Rohirrim. To be safe, I decided to use everyone’s translated names instead. Please forgive me for this, for those of you who are picky with Westron/English.

Speaking of Westron/English, there WILL be an explanation as to how Ellie can understand Westron when it's supposed to be a different language. Give it time, it will be explained.

The “Girl Falls In Middle-earth” and “Tenth Walker” tropes have been done with varying degrees of success in terms of execution. Sometimes, they are complete and utter train-wrecks, and sometimes they are done well. Knowing myself, this would probably look more like a tragic car crash with no witnesses. Nevertheless, I hope you like it because I really enjoyed writing this fanfic. I plan to make this into three parts, if all goes well and if there's any interest from readers. Please be warned that this fanfic will follow the movie-verse more closely. I WILL write another Girl Falls In Middle-earth fanfic that follows the books more closely, though, written in third person which tackles issues like the Language Barrier better.

If the fanfic written below is not to your taste, I promise I will be posting another one from a different approach. This story and this character just came to life out of one drabble I made, and it grew into this monstrosity. To those of you who are still here, I hope you enjoy. I'm gonna end this ridiculously long introduction note now.

Nothing belongs to me, except for Ellie. Someone has to claim her. Everything belongs to JRR Tolkien, who I hope is not rolling over in his grave right about now. I tried my best, sir. Truly.
The Wrong Side of the Fields

Chapter Summary

Of course, she had to wake up in the fields. And of course she had to be covered in shit. Ellie is cold, tired and just wants to go home, already.

The first thing I see is a blanket of stars in a dark sky. I've never seen stars this bright before. All I can do is stare up at them in a daze, wondering how they can shine that bright even through the city lights and pollution. That's when I realize that there are actually no buildings around me. There's no noise of cars and speeding buses and irritated pedestrians. There are no attention-grabbing advertisements, no neon signs, no traffic lights. It's just dark. Just grass and rocks and darkness. That's when I realize something's wrong.

This is a dream, right? I have to be dreaming. That has to be the only explanation for whatever bizarre event is happening to me now. Because I can't just drop from the sky and land in the middle of literally nowhere.

Okay, think, Ellie. Think. The last thing I remember is crossing a street in campus. There was this bright light and--

Shit, did I get hit by a bus or a car or a truck or something? Did I die and go to heaven? Is this the afterlife? Why does heaven smell like horse shit?

No, wait. That's just me.

I'm lying in a pile of horse shit.

I'm lying in a pile of horse shit?

I shriek and scramble out of the sticky, smelly pile. God, it's squishy. I can feel it dripping down my arms, oh good God!

I still have my backpack, but all it has is my binder and a couple of heavy textbooks, as well as my gym clothes. But that's about it. I still have my clothes, as well as my phone. I can feel it in my pocket. At least whoever brought me here didn't steal anything from me.

Speaking of my phone…

I pat my pockets for the familiar, square box and I curse as I look down at the shattered screen. I try to turn the damn thing on but it won't work. Well, there goes my source of communication. I groan as I start walking. I'm in the middle of some sort of grassy field, dripping in horse shit, with a broken phone and no way of communicating with my grandfather. If this is someone's idea of a practical joke, I'm going to sue. I've never sued anyone in my life but I'm going to make whoever brought me here and broke my phone pay.

"If this is Donavan's way of welcoming me to my last year in college, I will kick his face so hard and make him lie in horse shit. Of all the brothers I could have had..." I mutter as I trudge through the soft earth. It must have rained recently. I yelp as I slip on something. The black flats I'm wearing are impractical for mud-trekking, apparently.
"I'm going to kill him. I'm going to pull his anus out of his throat and make him eat his own shit." I growl. Do I seem grumpy?

I can see now that contrary to what I thought, I'm not in the middle of nowhere. Not entirely. I can see a tiny light flickering off into the distance, like fire light. And these eyes, so used to seeing bright lights, hone in on those immediately. It does not escape my mind that moths are also attracted to light, and usually that's what leads to their death. I tell myself that it's a good thing I'm not a moth.

I trudge towards that light, hoping someone would jump out and tell me it's all a joke and they'll take me out for some pizza and let me take a hot bath.

My hopes raise with every careful step I take. I stumble on random tree roots and rocks and I think I've torn my jeans but I keep on walking. I just need to--

I feel something cold and sharp on my throat and my entire body freezes.

I hear a voice, way too close for comfort. "Move and I will slit your throat, orc spy." Spy? Who, me? I'm wearing a yellow hoodie, caked in manure. You'd think a spy would be a bit more inconspicuous. My entire body is trembling, but all I can say is, "What the hell is an orc?" In a squeaky voice.

Apparently, that was the wrong thing to say because I feel the blade press closer to my throat. So close, I'm even afraid to swallow my spit. I try to look at the man who's holding a knife at me but I can't move my head, unless I plan on getting myself killed.

He says something again, and I wince at his harsh tone. "Where did you come from? Who sent you?"

"Sent me? What are you talking about?" I hiss. My eyes scan my surroundings. What attracted me here turned out to be a camp fire. Small but enough to provide heat and illumination, and carefully hidden in a thicket of trees. If I wasn't close enough to it, I wouldn't have noticed. Now, I realize it's a trap for poor idiots like me who don't know how to leave well enough alone.

"Listen, buddy, I know how to kick-box. I took self-defense classes. If you lay a hand on me, I will not be responsible for whatever happens to you." I warn but all he does is chuckle and that's when I start fearing for my life.

"Do you have any weapons?" He asks.

Well, I have pepper spray in my bag but I'm not about to tell him that.

"No."

"Then the only injuries here will be your own." The blade pulls away a bit and I'm suddenly afraid of getting so much more than a knife to my throat. I'm panicking. I'm frozen in place out of fear. I can't even see who's attacking me. I won't be able to describe him to the police. And I know he plans on killing me.

"I'll scream. I'll scream and they'll come for you." Is the only thing I can say against him.

"Who will come for me? What are you?" His voice is low and dangerous.

"I'm a girl who's about to get robbed and murdered!" There are tears in my eyes. My vision is blurry and my eyes sting. So, this is it. This is how I'll go. Trapped in the middle of nowhere, covered in shit, and about to be a victim of a murder case. What if they never find my dead body? What if I rot
"Rob you? You think I am--" The man sounds offended. Funny how he's the one whose feelings are hurt when I'm the one who has a knife to my throat.

I think he realizes this, because he soon removes the blade from my neck. My legs, which feel like jelly, give in. I fall to my knees. "Please. Please don't. I still have to finish college. I still have to see my little brother go to high school, please don't." All I can hope for is this guy will pity me enough to let me go alive.

I feel his hand on my shoulder and I scream and jump away. I want to reach for my pepper spray. I want to empty its contents in his face but if he sees me reaching for it, I just know he'll flip his shit and gut me right then and there. I can't risk it.

"Calm down."

I scream louder. I'm not going to calm down just because he told me to!

"Get away from me, asshole!" I shriek, kicking my legs and flapping my arms at him. I don't actually know how to kick-box. I'm just flailing.

"You need to stop, woman! If real enemies come this way, we will both die!" He says and I calm down to a whimper. I stare at him angrily. It's the first time I get to look at my attacker. He's incredibly tall. I feel dwarfed. But that's all I can say about him. His face is covered by some sort of hood. He's wearing a long cloak. I have the sudden urge to disappear behind my own hoodie as well but I just glare at him.

"Maybe if you point that thing somewhere else!" I snap, motioning to his knife.

He shakes his head and mutters under his breath, then looks at me. "I can sense your confusion is genuine."

"Do you, now? I wonder what could make you sense that!" I say as sarcastically as possible.

He ignores me and takes two seconds to respond while I just sit on the ground.

"Get up." He says. I roll my eyes but I don't argue with the lumbering man with the pointy knife.

I look down at his hand and bite down a scream. He's not holding a knife. The hilt looks too big, and the tip of the blade almost touches the ground.

Who walks around with a sword? Or dresses as though they were in some fantasy video game set in the medieval times?

"What is your name?"

Do I tell the angry man holding a sword what my name is?

"Why the hell do you want to know?"

It's his turn to roll his eyes. "I am trying to be courteous."

Too late for that when he pointed a damned sword at me. We then commence a glaring contest which ends in me flickering my eyes away. His eyes are way too intense.

"Ellie." I decide if he's not attacking me, maybe he can explain where I am. Maybe this is some test
to get to the actual afterlife.

"Strange name, strange clothes, strange language. Where do you come from?" He says. I notice he's still holding his sword. We're talking, which means we're not fighting. I'd rather be talking than waiting for him to stab me or something equally painful.

"I'm from New York. You know. The Big Apple." I say.

"You live in a fruit?" He talks to me as though I'm the crazy one.

"No. That's just what they call--You know, it's a long story but do you have a phone?"

"A what?"

"Cellphone? So I can call Donovan and get out of here."

"What is a selfon?"

Now I look at him like he's the crazy one, which is the truth.

"Okay, how about a hotel or an inn or anywhere I can get new clothes?" I try again.

"Bree is not that far. The Prancing Pony will have rooms available." He says.

"Great!" I say. Finally, a bit of good news! Although I have no idea who or what or where Bree is, and I have no clue as to why I have to look for a pony, but it's civilization and they must have a phone there.

And this is the part where I ask for the man who held me at knifepoint for help.

"Could you... I mean... If you don't mind... Point me the way?" I mutter.

He takes another long time to respond, and slowly lifts the sword to his left, down another path through more grass and an even wider field. My stomach drops to my feet. He says it's near but if I'm going to be walking out there, on my own, in the wilds, I'd probably get attacked by a hungry animal. Or someone finishes this guy's job and actually kills me.

Maybe he's thinking the same thing because as my shoulder droops (And I feel some of the horse shit slide down), he heaves a sigh and mutters something I don't understand.

"I am...on my way there myself." Is this him offering to take me?

My shoulders raise slightly, though I look at him with suspicion. Do I really want to go anywhere with a man who tried to kill me?

"I will not harm you if you pose no threat." He says, as though that's supposed to reassure me.

I stare pointedly at the sword in his hand and he tucks it back into its scabbard.

"I guess I have no choice." I sigh as I take a wary step closer to him. He doesn't move, and I take another step.

"You...uh...have to get rid of the cloak." He says.

"Cloak?" I shake my head, confused once again. He points at my hoodie and I take five steps back.
"Uh-uh! No!" I panic again but he holds up his hands in a gesture of surrender.

"I only meant that you are covered in manure and the color! It would attract enemies!" He cries, and I gasp for breath. This guy will be the death of me!

"I mean you no harm." He insists.

"Says the guy who held a fucking sword at me!"

"I apologize. I thought you were a spy. I would not have raised a finger at you if I was not sure otherwise."

"So, why the sudden change of heart, huh?"

"You look lost. I suspect just a few hours out there, and all that would be left of you is a few body parts. But if you want me to leave you here, then I will." He says this with such finality as he turns his back on me.

"Wait!" I cry out. Oh, good Lord, help me now. I have never been this desperate in my life. "Please. You have to help me." I actually beg.

I'm tired. I just want to go home. This day--and this joke--has gone on too long. I just want to lie on a soft mattress and hug my pillows and sleep. I've had enough of the outdoors!

"I am lost. I don't know where I am. I don't know how I got here. I just want to go home." My voice breaks and I force myself to pull myself together. I've almost cried earlier, but my tears still haven't fallen and they never will. I refuse to cry.

"I will take you to Bree. But the cloak, it must go." He says. I sigh heavily and unzip the hoodie. He at least has the decency to turn his back on me. I take that opportunity to kneel on the ground and shrug my backpack off my shoulders. I stuff the hoodie in there, wincing as my books get coated in some of the manure. Maybe I can get it washed. Hopefully, there'd be a laundry shop in Bree, as well. I pull the small can of pepper spray from a pocket in my backpack and stuff it in the back pocket of my jeans. I'll use it if he gets even an inch too close for my comfort.

When I get up, the tall man is taking off his own cloak, and I stare at him warily until he holds it out to me.

"Oh." I blink down at it in surprise, and I take the worn out fabric from him, closing the gap between us. I can tell he hasn't had a decent shower in a while.

"Thanks." Is all I can manage.

He nods and walks away while I wrap the cloak around my neck and fasten it, following him.

"So, uh. Do you have a car?"
The Medieval Reenactment Headquarters

Chapter Summary

These people take roleplaying too seriously. Ellie finally gets to use her pepper spray. Now, if only she could find a cellphone...

I guess hoping for a car is too optimistic. Hell, even hoping for a three-wheeled bicycle is insane.

We walk all the way to Bree, silently. Him leading, with me stumbling behind.

"Shower." I mutter, but this guy's ears pick up everything.

"What?" He says.

"Shower. You know. Hot water, clean body, shampoo, soap." I make showering motions as we walk but this only makes me pay less attention to where I'm walking and I end up stumbling and punching my own gut mid-motion.

"You really are a strange one." He says.

"Hey, I'm not the one who doesn't know what a shower is." Frankly, I'm not surprised. He looks like he hasn't seen a shower in a long time. A shower that he very desperately needs. I know I'm not one to judge someone's stench when I'm carrying a shit-stained hoodie in my bag but damn does this guy stink!

Ugh. Which means I probably stink just as bad. I pat him in the back, and he grunts to acknowledge me.

"Hey. Do I stink?" I ask him. He turns to me slightly, and I can see he's suppressing a smile.

"Why does it matter?" He deflects my question with a question of his own.

"I don't want to walk into an inn and have everyone gagging at how I smell." I reason.

"You smell like the fields."

"Is that a good thing or a bad thing?"

"Whoever will be in that inn will be used to the smell of the fields."

I'm not sure if I'm comforted by the fact that people in Bree are used to stink. I bite my bottom lip and chew at the skin. There's silence between me and my guide. He's a silent fellow, but the peace is more than welcome. All I've been doing since I got here is scream profanity. Not very lady-like of me, but I got that from Gramps.

Gramps. My heart feels as though it's being squeezed. He must be worried. He must have left a dozen messages on my phone telling me to 'get home, and get Chinese'. It's Chinese night tonight and Gramps would be waiting for dumplings. I really need to get home. Where the fuck am I, anyway?
"Hey," I can tell my companion was getting settled with the silence of ignoring me, and I hear him sigh in exasperation when I speak again but I continue, "which part of America are we in? We're out of New York, I can tell, but I don't even remember being nearby countrysides that would get me to black out the entire trip."

He stops walking and turns back to me. There's something about his eyes that immediately make me think of authority and respect, for some odd reason. The way this guys looks at me is the same as when Gramps would just give me a meaningful look and I immediately know I've done something wrong. His stare makes me stop in my tracks.

"What do you mean? Where did you come from?" He asks.

"New York. How can you not know New York? Come on, dude. City where dreams die! I mean. Well. Not really. It's the land of opportunity, as they say." I start babbling because he's looking at me as though I've grown a second head.

"There is no such place here in Middle-Earth."

Middle what?

"Listen. Buddy. I'm pretty sure I took up geography in 5th grade. There's this big mass of land called United States of America on Earth. You speak English, you know what America is." I say, patiently.

"I do not know what Eeng-glich is. You speak in Westron. I am speaking in Westron right now. And I have travelled these lands all my life. I know better than any map that there is no such place in Middle-Earth." He says, just as patiently.

We stare at each other in total confusion, hoping the other would give up the joke. Oh, I get it. We're doing one of those hidden camera pranks, then? I would find this funny. Really, I would. Except I'm still covered in shit. I'm too tired to be frustrated. His acting abilities would merit him an Oscar, I'd give him that. He really knows how to convince an audience. I break the silence between us.

"You know what? Fine. Just take me to Bree and you can all laugh at me from there." I say. He just continues to stare at me but he realizes that the conversation is going nowhere, so he turns back and starts walking.

I realize he doesn't just randomly walk forward. I struggle to keep up with him. His legs are longer than mine and he knows just where to step so he wouldn't trip on some rocks or sink into mud. I could only hope to be as graceful as him. Sometimes, he'd stop, look around or bend down on the ground. I'd stare at him wondering what on earth he's doing but eventually I see the first sign of habitation, a village beneath a hill. I see stone and half-timbered houses, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

Just in time, too. It's starting to rain. I raise the hood of the cloak I'm wearing and wonder whether he's ever washed it in his life because it smells like Jesus himself peed on it. It's already cold out, and the cloak provides a bit of warmth, though I can feel the cold of the rain seeping through it now.

We're standing by a hedge that seems to surround the entire village. I keep my head down as it starts to rain harder, and I yelp as my companion pulls me down behind the hedge, into the shadows, "What, what?" I hiss at him as he peers above it. He puts his finger to his lips to quiet me and I stare at him. I mean, It's not like I don't want to get sick, anyway, standing outside at night in this weather. I hear the soft sound of footsteps, splashing against the puddles from the rain and I hear urgent whispers on the other side of the hedge.

"Please remember," I hear someone say, "that the name Baggins must not be mentioned. I am Mr. Underhill, if any name should be given."
I look at my companion sullenly, glaring at him. We're eavesdropping! Like children in the dead of night! Does this guy have no shame? He returns my look with a scowl, until I hear their footsteps come closer and I peer up. The rain disturbs my view, so I can't see anything through the mist.

"What are you, twelve?" I complain to my companion as he drags me by the cloak forward.

There's a huge, wooden gate there, with a small slot for whoever is on the other side to peep through. A piece of wood slides out of the gate, revealing a window. Whoever we were eavesdropping on is now also speaking to the Gatekeeper, who investigates the new travellers.

"What do you want?" The Gatekeeper says, harshly. I'd be rude, too if I had to stand around in this weather. Which, incidentally, is what I'm doing.

"We're headed for the Prancing Pony." The one who calls himself Underhill says.

"Hobbits. Four hobbits! And what's more, out of the Shire, by your talk. What business brings you to Bree?"

"We wish to stay at the inn. Our business is our own." Underhill says.

"Alright, young sir, I meant no offense." The Gatekeeper says as he slides the locks out of place to let the travellers in.

"It's my job to ask questions after nightfall. There's talk of strange folk abroad. Can't be too careful." The Gatekeeper says.

I turn back to my companion, "You happy now? Can we go? I'm freezing my ass off." I say to him and he nods grimly, leading the way.

He turns back to me, "Cover yourself with that cloak. And keep your mouth shut. Let me do the talking." He says, fastening the cloak around me even tighter to hide my entire body, then he pulls down at the hood to cover my face even more and I look up at him, puzzled.

As the travellers ahead of us walk in, my companion talks to the man behind the gate in hushed voices. He turns back to glance at me, and the Gatekeeper looks my way as well. I keep my eyes down, knowing that they're talking about me. Right. That doesn't make me uncomfortable at all.

Eventually, the gate opens just enough for us to step inside. My companion gently touches my back to urge me inside and I freeze. The entire place is filthy. And I don't just mean muddy from the rain. I mean like, I bet brooms and garbage cans don't exist in this place. Even worse, I doubt electricity runs here. All I see are candle holders and torches. I'm starting to doubt whether or not I would ever find a telephone here but I look around to search for a public telephone line, anyway.

It's a village of some sort. The ground is littered with animal droppings and I groan. I have had enough with feces. I've seen too much for one lifetime. I use the cloak to cover my nose as I look around me in horror, and it's a testament to how bad this place reeks that I consider this unwashed cloak a better smell than my surroundings. Even through the moonlight, I know what horse shit is. Why is there horse shit everywhere, anyway? What kind of town is this?!

"Keep close." My companion says. He doesn't have to tell me twice. I have no plans of going out to explore and I feel like even staying out here for too long might leave me infected with a disease.

By the time we reach the Prancing Pony—which turns out to be the inn my companion was talking about—the rain had really started to pour, I'm shivering uncontrollably and I need to pee. I'm completely drenched, but not as drenched as my companion, thanks to the cloak he graciously let me
have. The Prancing Pony is warm, and smells like alcohol and sweat, but I'd never thought it'd be such a welcome sight. It smells better in here than out there, at least.

Some of the guests turn to glance at us, dripping wet as we approach the bar. The man behind it smiles at us in welcome, but his face falls when he sees who I'm with. My companion starts talking to him, but my eyes wander over to some of the guests. The Prancing Pony is full to bursting, and many of the guests are already celebrating loudly, enjoying their alcohol. I think I might be going crazy here. Why is everyone wearing clothes more appropriate for a fantasy video game? Why does everyone look at me like I'm the disturbing one? Like I'm the strange person? This entire town has lived so far back! How secluded is this place?

"Is there a public telephone here?" I ask my companion, but the blank look on his face is all the answer I need. I'm amazed that I'm still disappointed by this seeing as the entire town looks like it's made straight from the Middle Ages.

Something catches my attention--or rather, someone. It's a child, drinking a tankard of beer and I'm horrified his parents aren't around to supervise him! When I take a step towards him, he turns to me and I step back, eyes wide.

He's short, sure. But that is not the face of a child. He looks like he has the face of a thirty-year-old man, round and good-natured, but definitely not the face of a child. He has pointy ears sticking through his curly hair. My eyes go lower.

And really hairy, big feet.

He turns back to his drinking buddy who, for a lack of a better term, looks like a dwarf, straight from Snow White. He has a bushy beard and a loud laugh.

Maybe this is just some sort of...cosplay event? That's in right now. Or, what is this? Some sort of roleplaying event? A medieval reenactment? Does that kind of thing still happen?

I feel a hand on my shoulder and I gasp in surprise and turn around.

"Ye look a little lost there, miss." A tall, burly man says, stepping a little too close into my personal space.

"I sort of am, actually, but I can manage." I say, taking a step back. His breath smells like rotten fruit. His teeth look like rotten fruit, too.

"Maybe I can point you to the right place." He steps forward again, so close I can smell what he ate for dinner last week. His teeth are yellow and gross.

"Maybe not." I place the tips of my fingers on his chest and push him away. His hand grabs my wrist and I hiss in pain and surprise but another hand comes out of nowhere to stop his hand from moving.

"Let the girl go." I look up and it's him, my companion, Still dripping wet but his face is contorted in a look of disgust.

The other man lets go immediately and raises his hands up in a gesture of surrender. "Don't have to start a fight. Didn't know she was already your whore."

His what.

His what?!
I proceed to pull out my tiny bottle of pepper spray and point it at his face. He screams, and pushes me away. My companion yanks me away as some of the guests around us cry out in surprise.

"Did he just call me a whore because I didn't accept his advances? That is the most backward, fucked up--" I say to my companion in a stage whisper as he tugs at the cloak on my shoulder and leads me to a corner, where there are fewer people.

"What in Arda do you think you are doing?!"

"Defending myself! You think I'm going to let that scumbag harass me?" I say, heatedly.

He sighs in frustration and begins muttering to himself.

"Jeez. It's not like I permanently damaged him. Just pour milk in his eyes." I mutter as well.

He gives me another one of his intense glares.

"This is where I take my leave."

His what.

Wait. Hold on. I wasn’t prepared for that. Is he for real right now? He’s going to leave me here just because I pepper-sprayed some asshole?

My words sputter and die on my lips. "Wait. You can't leave me here." I squeak out.

"I am...not actually leaving. I am waiting for someone. But after that, we are going our separate ways. I suspect you need to get back home."

"You're kidding, right? Toto, I don't think we're in Kansas, anymore. I don't think there's a plane or even a taxi to get me back home!" I think I sound like I'm begging for something from him but he just looks at me, confused.

"There is no village named Ken-sis anywhere near here." He deadpans. I shake my head at him in disbelief.

"Am I being Prank'd? Is that what this is? Well, good job. You got me." I say.

"What is a Pr--"

"This is a joke. You're telling me I'm no longer in the U.S.?" I feel little trickles of panic now as it starts to hit me. He's serious. He's actually serious.

"Someone kidnapped me and left me here and...and what?" Now it feels more like a flood of panic as my knees go weak.

He notices, too and I glance accusingly at him. I'm going to lose it.

I'm losing it.

"And who wears clothes like that? What is this supposed to be? Camelot? What are you supposed to be, huh? Some sort of Rogue or Ranger or whatever it is fantasy games call them? You're taking Skyrim too seriously, dude."

He walks towards me with his hands up, like I'm a rabid dog. Like I'm the insane one. And maybe I do sound like that. Maybe I have gone mad.
"I am a Ranger of the North, yes. If you know what I am, then maybe you are from here."

"I don't know what you are! That was supposed to be sarcastic! Next thing you're going to tell me, there's an evil force waiting to destroy these lands because that's not totally fantasy-game cliché at all."

He tries to hide it, but I see his hand going for his sword and I scuttle backwards, backing myself into the corner to keep him at arm's reach. Not that it matters since his sword adds an arm and a half.

"Please do not shout. We will draw more attention than we already have. The people here are the sort who likes their peace and quiet and dislikes any disruption of such." He says and my panic seizes me again. Draw attention from what? What is this guy so afraid of? If he's afraid, then maybe I should be, as well. Oh, God. Oh, God.

I can't breathe. I forgot how to breathe. His hand slips from the handle of his sword as he walks toward me.

"Breathe, girl! You are making too much noise. You need to calm down." He says as his hands hold me by the shoulder and God, those eyes are intense. It's like he's seeing right through me.

I look into his grey eyes and watch him breathe. I can't flip my shit now. I'll flip my shit later, after a hot bath and behind closed doors so no one can disturb me while I flip out. I concentrate on his hands, rough and calloused and warm on my shoulders as I copy his calmed breathing. Slowly, I settle.

Before he can take his hands away, I croak, "I'm far from home. Whoever brought me here wants to kill me. I'm going to die here and my family will never even find my corpse."

The look he gives me is one of pity.
A bathtub in a bedroom feels weird but when she has to wash off horse poop, Ellie can't really complain. Hopefully, her companion didn't pay a lot for the hospital food she was served. Seriously, where's the salt? Or the shampoo? Or the soap?

My companion is kind enough to get a room for me, but I cling to him as though I'm a five-year-old being separated from her parent in a mall. "My room will be right there." He points to the door across from me.

"Just... I know you don't really know me. Hell, I don't even know your name but... please. I need help, and you're the only person I can trust for now." I whisper to him. Hours ago, he had almost killed me but I don't think I'd have survived the journey from my pile of shit to here if it wasn't for him.

"I just need answers." I plead with my eyes, hoping he'll see the desperation behind them, and the fear. Slowly, he nods and I breathe a sigh of relief.

"There's a hot bath waiting for you, and I sent up a dress and shoes to replace your...clothes." He says and I could have sobbed into his arms.

"You are way too nice, dude. Thanks." I say. First good news I've heard since I got here. He looks at me with a slightly amused expression and steps back. I close the door to my room and look around. There's a comfortable bed in the middle of the room with simple, white sheets. The window faces out into the street, and there's a fire crackling near it.

There is a bathtub at the back of the room, hidden behind a wall. I was trying to look for a bathroom but the only thing behind the wall is the bathtub. I look at it in confusion. There's no bathroom, but I seriously need to pee. Ah. Shit. I'll have to hold it, won't I?

I pull the cloak off and make a note to wash it, as well. I strip off my shit-covered pants and deposit it on the floor, then unbutton my shirt.

Okay. My next problem would be my underwear. I'm lucky that my period ended yesterday. I can just imagine the horror of asking where I can find a tampon here. At least now, I have one more month to figure it all out. But the fact that I only have one set of underwear is alarming because that means I'll have to spend at least a day without them.
When I'm completely undressed, I step inside the hot bath and a sound of pleasure escapes from me. This is good. Hot water. Now all I need is soap and shampoo.

I look around but I see nothing. There's a pale yellow bar of...something here. I think it's supposed to be soap. I mean, it's slippery... but why does it have no scent? I test it out on my skin but it barely takes the dirt off.

I'm going to be scrubbing for a long time, aren't I?

I dip my head under the water to wash out my hair and I come back up just in time to hear the door open. I yelp and hide under the water but it's just one of the...maids, I guess? I poke my head from behind the wall.

"I apologize, miss. I knocked but there was no answer and thought to just leave these here." The girl stammers, holding up something bundled in her arms.

"No, no. It's okay." I stammer back. Thank God for this wall.

"This was the dress bought for you, miss. I hope it fits you. And the shoes." She says, laying them down on the table near the door, keeping her back turned to me.

"Um..." I whisper. "Do you sell any underwear?" I ask. She's a girl, she'd be able to relate to my feminine issues, surely.

She blinks at me while I hide my body by sinking deeper into the water, "Do you mean a chemise, miss?"

"No, I mean a bra and--no? Nevermind. Thank you." I say, quickly, as she just continues to stare at me in confusion. When she leaves, I try to scrub myself clean but the 'soap' just isn't effective. At least the horse manure and the scent that came along with it is gone but I still feel dirty. After I'm done bathing, I take all my clothes and attempt to hand wash them, for whatever good that does.

If it was ineffective before with my skin, then it's just useless with my clothes. I managed to get my underwear cleaned but I don't even attempt to put my hoodie and jeans in the water. I hang my underwear near the fireplace to get it to dry, while I pull the dress on. Without my bra. Wow, this feels weird.

I still have my gym shorts in my bag, and because I feel uncomfortable without anything covering me below, I take it out and put it on. I set aside my books and frown down at them. Even they are covered in shit. Thank God my gym clothes were shielded but these books cost two whole months of my salary. It's a shame they're ruined.

The dress I have on is uncomfortable to move in. It fits me okay, but I feel like I might trip on it. It's a moss green color, and reaches the floor. The sleeves are puffy and reaches my elbows. I keep fidgeting in it even as I pull my hair up in a ponytail--then realize I have nothing to tie my hair with and I'm stuck running my fingers through it because I can't find a comb anywhere. The brown boots I have on reach my ankles, and I have to lace it up.

I busy myself with my bag, and I'm trying to figure out where I can keep my pepper spray now that I have no pockets. By the time I'm done fixing my things, my hair has dried and I can't, for the life of me, control the fly-aways and kinks. Oh, to have a blow dryer and straightener again.

An hour or two later, a small man--no, literally, he looks like he's only 3 feet tall--knocks on my door and announces that he has brought supper, and it's the most welcome sight of all. There's tart and cheese and bread, and there's also cold meat but I don't touch it because I think I'm looking at a heart.
or a liver. I'm not sure. I just know I don't want to touch it. Where was the fried chicken? Where was the grease? Isn't cheap room service supposed to consist of a menu that offered deep-fried everything? And where the hell is the seasoning? Did their kitchen run out of salt? They didn't even had to bother with the liver, they could have just brought me instant noodles if their budget was so tight. But, beggars can't be choosers and I'm really hungry.

By the time I've finished eating, he's cleared away the bath, wondering at the clothes I keep in a heap on the floor. He's talking about the shitty yellow hoodie, up until his eyes find something else.

"No! Don't." I squeak as he looks at my underwear drying by the fire. "Don't touch that. Don't touch anything. I--um--" He turns to me and sees me blushing as I stumble towards the fire and yank by bra out of sight behind my back.

"Begging your pardon, miss." He bows to me, until all I see is the top of his curly, brown hair.

I continue to blush as he clears up the empty plates I left behind. At least I now know that the underwear has dried, and the cloak, as well. When he leaves, I step out of my gym shorts and put it on, and then the bra. The familiar feeling of my underwear makes me feel a lot better.

I hear a knock on my door, so I go and open it. My companion is there, looking dry and clean. Well, cleaner than he used to be. I still feel like his hair needs a bit of conditioner. He's wearing a new set of clothes, but he still wears his leather boots, caked with mud. He's got nice eyes, is the first thing that comes to mind. For a sword-wielding savage, he's actually good-looking. Even through the unruly hair, the square cut of his jaw and his grey eyes work together beautifully. And I should stop thinking about his looks. I should probably stop staring, as well.

"This dress is itchy." I tell him as a greeting, while I turn back to my room to retrieve his cloak, hanging in front of the fire. "It's all dry now but I couldn't find any detergent to clean it with."

He mouths the word 'detergent' as though I spoke in an alien language and I shake my head. "Never mind, just put it on."

He does so, and draws the hood up over his head. I can't help but smile.

"I have to be stuck with the tall, dark and mysterious one, huh?"

"I have no idea what you mean by that." He says, though I see a hint of laughter in his features.

"You know I haven't properly thanked you yet for leading me here. I'd probably be killed by wolves or something out there if you hadn't pulled a knife at me." I say this jokingly, but he bows his head.

"Truly, I am sorry for that."

"And I'm sorry for accusing you of being a murderous bandit." I say, bluntly and he chuckles.

"You're quite bold. Talk like that will merit a slap on the wrist from less patient folk."

"They can try, before I slap them in the face."

He laughs openly now, and I find myself laughing with him. He really is quite a handsome man. Even the grey in his hair and the stubble on his jaw adds to his appeal.

"You've never told me your name." I blurt and his laughter fades. I realized this myself just now: That I've been travelling with a complete stranger and yet trust him better than anyone I've met so far. "I can't thank you properly without knowing your name."
He gives me a look, as though thinking about whether or not he should share this information with me. I don't know why he's being so secretive. It's just a name, after all.

"I am known as Strider."

What kind of name is that? I know he can't be telling the truth. Why is he so distrustful of me? I shake my head, "Okay. You don't want to tell me your real name, fine. Thank you for taking me to safety, Strider."

He bows again, and says, "Of course, Ellie."

He actually remembers my name. I don't know why this flatters me.

"Would you like to come to the commons? You look like you could use a bit of merriment. Although, if you would rather rest, I shall go alone." Strider says.

"If by merriment, you mean alcohol, then yes. I'd like that." I have never wanted a drink so desperately before in my life.
A Germophobe's Worst Nightmare

Chapter Summary

Someone needs to invent plumbing FAST. At this rate, Ellie's afraid of getting an E. coli infection. And to top all that off, hobbits are vanishing from sight. As if she wasn't already drowning in the weirdness of everything.

Well, it's not exactly the kind of 'merriment' that I'm used to. There's a lot of singing, and a lot of...little people? Is it offensive to call them that?

"Hey." I say to Strider as we sit in a corner, trying our best to disappear. Or, well, he does. I'm just sitting here pulling at my dress that's already too long and patting down my hair.

"Stop fidgeting. You look fine." He mutters from beneath his cloak and I huff.

"Do you have to look so creepy?" I hiss because he does. Why does he have to keep his damn hood up? The thing covers his eyes and makes me feel like I'm talking to someone who's planning to assassinate a person in this room. Also, it's already hot enough in here. Does it not make him uncomfortable?

In response, he brings out a pipe and busies himself with a smoke. It seems too much of a bother just for a puff of air. All those leaves you need to stick inside.

"There's this thing called a cigarette. Wouldn't recommend it, but it's easier to light than that."

He ignores me and I cross my arms and lean back, watching the people around me. One of the little people places a tankard in front of us and I thank him, but continue to stare at him as he weaves through the crowd, handing out drinks.

They all had similar features. Red cheeks, round faces, curly hair, pointed ears and big, hairy feet they have no shame walking around on. Bare feet is apparently a fashion trend in these parts. Could they possibly all be related? Maybe they're just a really big family of proportional dwarves.

No. Wait. There are actual dwarves here, with long beards and loud, booming voices. And even they are taller than the little people. Four more of the little people walk into the commons, and find a seat near the corner. If they're trying to blend into the background, they'd have to try harder. I can tell by the way they slouch and whisper to each other that something fishy is going on.

"You stare at them for a long time." Strider says to me.

"I'm wondering," I reply as I take the tankard set before me and take a sip of the ale, "if maybe a family of...uh...I think it's rude to call them midgets? If small people own this place."

"You mean the hobbits? No, Butterbur owns the Pony. The hobbits are his helpers, his servers."

"Hobbits? Is that supposed to be slang for something?" I raise an eyebrow at him.

"It is what they call their people. In Bree, they refer to themselves as Little Folk, and they refer to the Men as Big Folk."
"I suppose they're dwarves, then?" I say nodding at the bearded, stout people.

"Indeed they are."

"Next thing you're gonna tell me, unicorns exist." I sigh.

"What is a unicorn?"

"You're kidding. You have dwarves, but you don't have unicorns? This fantasy game sucks." His eyebrows furrow at the mention of the word 'game'.

"For a Skyrim fanatic, you seem pretty clueless about RPGs." I mutter.

"What is a Skay-rim?" Did he have to roll the 'r' like that? Damn, this guy needs to get out more. Or... stay in the house and play a video game, as the case may be. The longer I stay here, the longer I realize that these people are convinced this is the actual life they live in. They've completely forgotten the real world...

My heart sinks.

That's not it. The longer I stay here, the more I realize that this actually is the real deal. That I'm the one still stuck in her ways. I'm the odd one out. I'm the one who sounds crazy.

Maybe I have lost my mind. Completely and utterly lost it.

My grip around the tankard tightens. Strider doesn't miss a thing.

"Are you ill, Ellie?" He leans toward me and I shake my head vigorously and gulp down the ale. I welcome the bitter taste and the burning sensation at the back of my throat. I never thought I'd enjoy the taste of diesel, and yet, here I am. At least it does a good job of distracting me from the sting I feel in my eyes.

"One tankard should be more than enough for you." Strider reaches out for the tankard but I pull it out of his reach.

"I can hold my damned alcohol." I hiss, a bit too venomously.

"You are a strange one."

"Thanks. I needed to be reminded of that for the fifty-seventh time tonight." I say through gritted teeth and drink again. I don't stop drinking until every last drop of ale is gone.

"What is the matter?" Strider says next to me as I call for another tankard. I laugh derisively, a single sharp exhalation.

"Well, for starters I'm completely lost. Home is too far for me to reach, and I'm stuck in an inn that smells too much like people who haven't showered in days, with no idea where I'm supposed to go next and a man with a false name is the only person I can remotely trust. I think I've earned a drink or two." I rant.

"You truly have no idea where you are or how to get home?" He asks.

"I woke up in the middle of nowhere, swimming in horse shit. You were the first person I saw. I don't know how I got here and I don't know who brought me here." I lean forward and rest my elbows on the table in front of me and cover my face with my hands. I'm trying to hold it together but all this talk about hobbits and dwarves and wild fields and the lack of electricity and baths in the
middle of the room and unscented soap and uncomfortable dresses are slowly taking a toll on me.

I sigh, heavily.

"These things do not happen without reason. You will find the answers you seek." He says in a surprisingly gentle tone.

But I, ever the pessimist, don't believe him. I need to breathe. I can't stand the celebration around me, it only makes me feel worse. And I really need to pee now.

"I can't even find my way to a bathroom. Where do I go to pee?" I ask him.

"The latrines are not far. I could take you."

"No! No. I don't want to be escorted to the bathroom like a child. I can find my way!" I say, getting up from my seat and moving for the doorway to my right.

"The other way." I hear Strider call and I turn on my heels and make my way for the doorway to my left.

Of course I get lost, so I had to ask for directions from one of the female 'hobbits', who was kind enough to give clear directions. I like them. They have friendly smiles and kind voices. Far more welcoming than anyone I've come across, which, admittedly, isn't a lot but still.

When I find myself following her directions, I get even more confused and even more lost than before because the closer I get to the place she's saying, the more it smells like the sewers. Even worse than sewers, it smells like stale pee and--I've been using this word a lot now--shit.

I come across a small structure, like a portaloo only bigger, and a woman is just getting out. I stop her with a hand on her shoulder and an apologetic look, "Excuse me. I'm sorry, but is this the latrines?" I ask, careful to use the word Strider said.

"It is." She gives me a look as though I only have one brain cell and she stomps on ahead. I push the door open and peek inside. The stench is even worse here. I gag and cover my nose with my hands.

"Oh, Christ. Oh, sweet Jesus." I moan as I look around. There are no toilets that I can see. Just a hole in the middle of a box. I pull the skirt of my dress up so it doesn't get caught on anything unpleasant. They call this a bathroom? What the fuck, I am not risking a yeast infection for this!

I look around for a toilet because there has to be one, there's just not enough light from the damned torches. But I'm grasping for straws. There's nothing. Just the hole and the box and some leaves. If I sat my bare ass on that box, will it make it easier for the snakes hidden in the hole to bite me? I'd probably thank them, if they did.

God, but I can't hold it anymore. Of all the things I've had to go through, this is the most disgusting of all. Swallowing my fears, I squat down and do my business as quickly as I could. And then I run like hell the moment I am finished.

When I find my way back to the Prancing Pony, I find it's gotten even rowdier than usual. I see Strider, still sitting at the very back of the room, smoking his pipe and from this angle, he looks more menacing than ever. I would have ran to his side immediately, but I'm distracted by a loud voice in the middle of a crowd. There's a particularly boisterous hobbit that most of the guests have gathered around, and I pass by him on my way back to the corner Strider hides himself in.
The hobbit I passed by is sharing tales about his hometown. He talks about an apparently famous hobbit named Bilbo and he went on about a great party with even better food. Even though I have no idea what he's talking about, the way he tells the story is entertaining. I laugh as he speaks in an exaggerated imitation, "I don't know half of you half as well as I should like. And I like less than half of you half as well as you deserve." Oh, how I wish I was clever enough to make up those kinds of insults! This Bilbo dude and I would have gotten along real well if I'd met him.

Encouraged by the attention he's getting, the hobbit goes on, "Baggins? Sure, I know a Baggins. He's over there. Frodo Baggins! My second cousin, once removed on his mother's side and my third cousin twice removed on his father's side, if you follow me."

I give an astonished look at the hobbit, impressed by how he can keep up with all the family connections. I can barely remember my youngest cousin's name. My family is not really close to extended family members.

Just as I am about to sit back down next to Strider, another hobbit, one of the four that I noticed walk in, runs for him and grabs his sleeve, "Pippin!" He cries.

"Steady on, Frodo!" The one called Pippin says, pushing him away and Frodo falls back, or at least I think he does. Something gold flashes in midair.

I must have blinked because one second the hobbit called Frodo was there and the next he just vanished.

I think the entire inn blinked simultaneously because a quiet dread settles on the entire room. Some of the guests gasp. I'm standing, frozen in shock. Everyone in the entire room is frozen in their spots. The only sign that Strider gives of his disapproval is his mouth, set into a frown. He points at a couple of men near the bar with his pipe. I tear my eyes away from the crowd that now whisper to each other to look at what he's pointing at.

"They have been watching our Master Underhill for some time." He says of the two Men who had just turned around to leave, muttering to each other under their breaths.

"What just happened?" I ask, turning back to Strider only to find him charging towards the hobbit.

"What are you doing?" I hiss as I try to keep up with his long legs. It's hard to move in this dress. The hobbit that vanished has reappeared under the table, and Strider is quick to pull him by the collar. He pushes people aside, dragging the frightened hobbit after him with me at his heels.

"You draw far too much attention to yourself, Mr. Underhill." Strider says in a dangerous voice, and I realize it's the same name we heard behind the hedge, just as we were entering Bree. Why hide under a false name unless you're afraid of someone finding you?

"Dude. Overdoing it, much?" I say as I look around. He drags the hobbit to a corridor, but it's far from private. Prying eyes follow our movement and I suddenly wish I have a cloak to cover my face with as well.

Aragorn notices as well, so he drags the hobbit to a room with a round door. Inside, the windows are round as well and the ceiling is low. He pushes Frodo(since that was what the other hobbit called Pippin said his name was) inside and I close the door behind us as he looms over the hobbit. I didn't realize how tall he was until he drew himself to his full height and removed his hood.

"What do you want?" Frodo says, glancing at Strider and me. I give him an apologetic look because even I don't know what's happening.
"A little more caution from you. That is no trinket you carry." Strider says, harshly.

"I carry nothing." Frodo says, a little too quickly.

"Indeed?" Strider says. I've used sarcasm enough times to know what it sounds like. He walks around the room, snuffing out candles, God only knows why.

"I can avoid being seen if I wish," Yeah, like that time we hid behind a hedge to eavesdrop, "but to disappear entirely. That is a rare gift."

Frodo swallows and looks up at Strider with big, blue eyes. He turns to me, pleading silently with those eyes of his.

"Are you frightened?" Strider asks in a voice that invokes fear. It's the same voice he used on me when he accused me of being a spy.

"No, I bet he's delighted to be dragged around like this." I snap, motioning at the obviously frightened hobbit.

"Well, he's not nearly frightened enough." Strider says to me, then he turns back to Frodo, who retreats closer to me, "I know what hunts you."

The door bursts open and I pull Frodo away from the door while Strider deftly pulls out his sword and points it at the intruders, who turn out to be Frodo's companions. One holds a candlestick, and the other holds a chair. The one in front holds his closed fists up.

"Let him go! Or I'll have you, Longshanks!"

Longshanks? Was that supposed to be an insult? A small smile plays on Strider's lips, but he sheaths his sword.

"You have a stout heart, little hobbit." He says to the hobbit, "But that alone will not save you."

He turns back to Frodo, "You can no longer wait for the Wizard, Frodo. They are coming."

Wizard? Everything just confuses me even more. I can barely wrap my head around the fact that hobbits and dwarves exist, let alone wizards.

Frodo joins his friends, who put down their 'weapons'.

"You," I whisper, approaching Strider, keeping my back turned to the hobbits, "you need to explain to me what I just dragged myself into."

"I will. Later. I am sorry you have been dragged into this. I imagine you are already troubled enough with getting home, but this is important. I will try to explain."

"Later?" I repeat the word back to him and he nods.

"Later. But first we need to find a safe place. This room is no longer safe. They will look for you here." He says this to to the hobbits.

"My room." I offer immediately. "If they realize the hobbits have moved, the next person they'll turn to is you. They don't know who I am, I practically don't exist here. My room is safer. We can watch the road from my window." I reason to Strider but he's reluctant.

"I do not want to involve you in this any more than you already are."
"Too bad, dude. You're stuck with me now."

I turn back to the hobbits, who look up at me with suspicion. When your friend is dragged somewhere by strangers, they tend to not trust those strangers. Which means I have to make myself appear friendlier to make things less awkward.

"Hi. May I know your names?" I say to the four hobbits, a bit too cheerfully. The four exchange glances.

There's an awkward silence in which the hobbits decide if they should respond, but eventually, one of them speaks up.

"You may call me Merry."

"And I'm Pippin. That's Sam." Another one says, and points to the hobbit carrying frying pans, who nods at me, but still holds me with suspicion.

"And you've met Frodo." Frodo smiles at me, but I feel that it's forced. It's the kind of smile that people who have a lot of problems give their friends to say that nothing is wrong when, in fact, they can hardly handle the problems themselves.

"I'm Ellie."

"What a strange name!" Pippin exclaims.

"Yeah, I've been getting that a lot lately." I mutter under my breath.

"This is Strider." I motion to Strider who nods his head once.

"Come. We should leave this room. Get your things." Strider says to the hobbits and they begin packing.

"The people who are after them. What do they want? They don't look like they're a threat to anyone." I ask Strider as we watch them gather their things.

"They are now. They are the worst threat to the most powerful evil in Middle-earth." Strider mutters under his breath so the hobbits wouldn't hear.

"That's a bit extreme." I say, glancing back at the hobbits. How can they be any threat to anyone? They're harmless! Those kind eyes and friendly smiles... Those are not the faces of anyone who would be a threat. If anything, Strider looks more like a threat than they are.

"And yet it's the truth." Strider says.

"Then we need to protect them."

"'We'? You need to go home. Before you are completely taken by this." He motions to the hobbits.

"I don't know how to get home! I fell from the sky and now I'm stuck here, remember?" I try to say this jokingly, but it comes out bitterly.

"Perhaps I can take you to the same place I will take them."

"Which is?"

"A safe place. And, hopefully, someone there will know how to take you home."
"You really want to get rid of me, don't you?" This time, it does come out as a joke, and I turn to Strider with a smile.

"I want you safe. A woman such as yourself does not belong in this kind of time." He says, and I narrow my eyes at him.

"I can't tell if that's an insult. It feels like an insult. Do you want me to kick you now?" I say and he chuckles.

"I only meant that you are different. You are fiery and stubborn, but brave, in your own way. Yet, it feels as though you have seen things common women in Middle-earth have not, and at the same time, the women here have seen and done things which you have not." He says, kindly, and I nod slowly. I'm still wondering if what he's saying is a good thing or a bad thing, but Sam swings his pack over his shoulders and says, "Well. That's that. Let's go." He says.

"Wait." I say, approaching their tiny beds and arranging their pillows on the bed, throwing blankets over the pillows.

"An old trick I used do whenever I snuck out. This should throw off nosy people." I say with a wink towards the hobbits and they beam at me. Then, I lead them to my room.
Ellie finds out the real meaning of fear and that whatever she's going through is no dream. Now... Who's Merry?

The moment we walk in the room, I kick my backpack under the bed, and Strider sniffs as he walks in.

"You still have not rid yourself of those garments?" He points to the dirty hoodie and jeans on the floor.

"I have an attachment to those garments."

"Burn them. They stand out too much. And that is a ghastly color."

"But..." I whine as he picks the hoodie and my jeans from the floor and throw it in the fire place.

"What are you doing, you big, lumbering jerk?!" I screech as I watch my clothes go up in flames, and a strange smell fills the room. Burning shit is a smell I would never forget. "Those were my favorite jeans!"

I gasp as he moves toward my black flats. "Don't! Don't you dare touch my shoes!" I yell, pulling him back by the cloak to stop him from taking my shoes, and I kick them out of his reach.

"I'll be wearing dresses that cover my feet! No one has to see them!" I say as he laughs at my efforts while the hobbits stare at us in bewilderment.

"Don't. Touch." I tug at his cloak with each word and he raises his hands in surrender, still chuckling.

"Alright. Alright." He says and I snatch my flats and stuff them in my backpack, which I kick back under the bed.

"Okay. I think we can push the beds so you can all fit in there. Get some rest." I say to the hobbits.

"Where will you rest?" Frodo asks.

"I'm sure the floor will be just as comfortable." I lie.

"We can't do that! We wouldn't want to intrude!"

"I offered the room, didn't I? It's perfectly fine." I smile as Strider and the hobbits push the beds together.

I turn back to the fireplace, where my old clothes are reduced to ashes and I feel a pinch in my heart. They were dirty and covered in shit but they were from home. To watch it burn down... It's like watching my last connection home burn into nothing.

Pretty soon, Frodo, Sam, Merry and Pippin have settled on the bed, and they sleep soundly. I sit on a
chair, looking out the window. Strider takes a seat next to me.

"What troubles you?" He asks me.

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe I'm slightly bothered by the fact that my clothes were set on fire." I snap, but all he does is smile.

"Yes, I'm sure burning a woman's clothes is entertaining for you." I grumble.

"I'll make sure to replace them." He says.

"You've done enough helping, dude." I say, only half-joking.

"What does that word mean?" He asks.

"What word?" I furrow my eyebrows, since I've been talking to him in English this whole time.

"Dood." He says and I snort.

"What?" He says, trying to hold in his laughter.

"Say it again. I didn't quite catch that." "Dood." Strider obeys and I can't help the laugh that bursts out of me. I cover my mouth with my hands but his deep chuckle makes me laugh even more. He sounds ridiculous. A big, scary man saying 'dude' just sounds so funny right now. It's a testament to my sanity (or lack thereof) that I find it so funny.

"What did I say?" He laughs.

"Oh, God." I gasp for breath, "Ah. Please don't ever stop saying it. It sounds so weird when you say it."

"But what does it mean?"

"Nothing, teenagers make words up to sound cool."

"Why would they want to be cold?"

"No, I mean, they want to sound more impressive to their friends. Dude is a term of endearment for friends." I explain.

"Is it? You consider me a friend?" He smiles.

"Well, you did lead me to civilization, paid for my food, clothes and this room and put up with me. The least I can do is call you a friend." I say, honestly and he looks outside, the smile on his face growing wider.

"You really are quite the character, Meril."

"Who the fuck is Merryl?" I say and it's his turn to laugh at my expense.

"Meril, indeed." He says.

"I don't get it. Who's Merryl?" I demand.
"Perhaps I'll tell you one day." He gives me a devilish grin, and I punch his shoulder, only making
him laugh.

"It is a crime to laugh this much at such dark times." Strider says in a low voice as he sobers, completely destroying the mood. I sober up as well, until we're both just silently looking out the window. He pushes a strand of hair behind his ears, and I see an intricate ring on his index finger. My gaze is fixed on his ring. There are gems set in the middle that seem to glow a brilliant green in the faint light of the moon outside. Strider tucks his hand beneath his cloak again, and the ring is lost from view.

This one is hot and cold. One minute we're having an almost normal conversation, the next he's quiet and brooding. I'm temperamental myself, so I would like to think that I understand him, but it's different with him. It feels old and worn. Like he's just gotten so used to keeping his guard up: this cold, quiet demeanor he refuses to bring down. We stay quiet afterwards, facing the street, for God knows how long. And right when I'm about to drift into sleep, a blood-chilling shriek echoes through the streets, followed by the sound of hooves.

Five black horses stop right in front the inn. An air of dread settles on both of us. Strider leans closer to the window to watch the riders, who wear long, black cloaks that completely cover their faces, walk inside. We wait for a painstakingly long time as we hear the black riders walk in. It's not that they make any noise, it's the painful silence that follows them. People are too terrified for their lives to react to them. Their shrieks of fury echo through the silent inn. They must have found the empty hobbit beds.

I freeze. If I had known fear before, it's nothing compared to this. I'm as still as stone but my heart pounds in my chest painfully as though I've run a marathon. I wasn't even aware that my entire body had grown rigid where I'm sitting until I feel Strider squeeze my shoulder reassuringly.

That's when I hear the hobbits stir from their sleep, and we both turn around to see Frodo walking towards the window. I pull away from Strider immediately as we all look out the window to see black, hooded figures on black horses speeding away. The hairs on my arms raise, and merely the sight of them gives me the creeps.

"What are they?" Frodo whispers, the fear evident in his voice.

"They were once men." Strider glances at Frodo, before looking back out. "Great kings of Men. Then Sauron the Deceiver gave them nine Rings of Power. Blinded by their greed, they took them without question. One by one, falling into darkness and now they are all slaves to his will."

That didn't sound good. Whoever Sauron is, I'm definitely staying away from him. To be able to corrupt people so much that he can turn them into willing slaves... I've seen a lot of weirdness today, but that's one I'd rather never have to experience.

My gaze follows the hooded figures as they mount their black horses, and ride off until they disappear into the night. Strider turns back to the hobbits, "They are the Nazgûl. Ringwraiths, neither living nor dead." Because there wasn't enough to fear about them, they had to be unbeatable, too, "At all times, they feel the presence of the Ring, drawn to the power of the One. They will never stop hunting you." He says the last part to Frodo, who looks up at him helplessly. I'm guessing these are who Frodo's hiding from.

I sigh and look at my small friend, "What have you got yourself into?" I whisper, though I ask this to myself as well.

Just how deep is the shit I've stepped on?
"I did not choose this." He whispers to me, grimly and all I can do is give him a sad, little smile because, I think, I empathize with his situation. Being thrown into danger with no knowledge of what's ahead is frightening, and I admire that he hasn't broken down yet.

"Neither did I." I say, as I get up from my chair and kneel down in front of him.

"You need to rest." I say to him, gently, and he nods once as he goes back to the beds where Sam, Merry and Pippin are settling back in.

I get back up on my feet, and I turn to Strider, "You need rest, too."

"I could say the same to you." He replies and I stretch my arms.

"That I do. Go to sleep." I order him as I settle down on the blanket I've laid out on the floor. He turns back to the window, "Worry not about me. Take your rest. We shall leave at first light." He says.

I fall asleep with my arm tucked beneath my head and wake up with someone shaking me awake, "Ellie. Ellie, it's time to wake."

I respond by flipping on my stomach and burying my face in my arms, muttering, "Go away, Donovan."

That was the strangest dream ever. And even stranger is the fact that I remember everything in detail. The short people, the horse shit, the tall, handsome stranger who calls himself Strider.

I can't say if it was a good dream or a bad dream, but I feel so tired. I just want to sleep some more.

"Ellie, you must eat before we go." Go where? Why am I lying on the floor? Ugh, did I fall off my bed?

"Uhhhh." I groan stupidly.

"Come." I feel a hand on my shoulder and I shake that shoulder to get the hand to come off.

"Donovan..." I wrench my eyes open to peek out from my arms but my blood turns to lead and I'm suddenly so tired again. It wasn't a dream. I really am stuck in this place. God, what I'd give to see Donovan's ridiculous face right now.

Strider's face looms over me, but even that doesn't make me feel better. When he sees that I've woken up, he straightens himself up, and I'm left feeling horrible again. I guess this is my reality now.

I sit up to find the hobbits feasting on breakfast that could serve a dozen people. I also find that I have a painful crick at the back of my neck and my arms are sore from lying on it all night. I join them at breakfast, while I watch Strider pack.

"Has he eaten anything?" I ask Pippin and he shakes his head as he shovels eggs in his mouth.

"Hey." I call to Strider. He pauses what he's doing and turns to me. "Good morning."

"A good morning to you as well, Meril."
"You're never gonna stop with the Merryl thing, are you?" I roll my eyes but force myself to smile, anyways, "Eat your breakfast."

"I will. I just have to finish packing."

"Did you even sleep last night?" I ask as I lay eggs and sausages on my plate.

"He was sleeping on the floor, his head on the window sill." Pippin says.

"And now he's packing." I sigh, then turn back to Strider, "You need to eat. I'll do the packing." I say and Strider gives me an amused grin.

"If you insist." He gives in and puts down the pack, and sits on the table across from me. I give him a victorious smile and he shakes his head.

"God, what I'd give for some coffee..." I say as I take a drink of water.

"What's that?" Merry asks and I gasp in horror.

"Don't tell me coffee doesn't exist here!" The hobbits shake their heads at me.

Of all the news I've received, this is the worst. I feel my shoulders sag, and I spend the rest of breakfast in silence. I can't believe I miss home, with the rude, impatient New Yorkers, fighting for cabs, and coffee! I glance down beneath the bed where I stored my backpack. My textbook is still there, along with my binder where I remember writing down my notes.

I find I don't have much of an appetite this morning, so I get up from the table (and the hobbits are all still eating) to pack. I feel Strider's gaze follow me as I fold clothes and stuff it in some sort of pouch that he left on the table. I used to fold Rory's clothes for him because he would just throw his things in the drawer and he'd wear it when it's rumpled.

Silent as a cat, I feel Strider next to me, and he helps me with the packing as well.

"You have not had a good morning, then?" He asks, softly and I shake my head, and give him a weak smile.

"I'm not a morning person." I say.

"When we get to Imladris, Lord Elrond must have some answers. You will find home again, Ellie, I swear it."

I don't want to believe him. I don't want to get my hopes up if only to be disappointed again, but I'd be lying if I said his words don't bring me comfort. I look up at him and meet his grey eyes. "Thank you." I say, hoping I can put all my gratitude in those two words
Chapter Summary

Ellie deals with being the only female in the group, hobbit-eating midges and the crush she's starting to develop for her smelly companion.

Butterbur was glad to see the back of us. We couldn't get out of Bree fast enough for him. I try not to take offense. After all, if strangers bring about horrible things called Ringwraiths to my home, I'd be relieved to see them go as well. Still, he was gracious, and even managed to lend us a pony, which he paid a man named Bill Ferny for. Nob, the hobbit who brought me dinner last night, had said that all the other ponies had run off in terror when the Ringwraiths arrived last night. And the pony that Bill Ferny wanted to sell us was old and frail.

It disgusts me that there are people who would take advantage of other people's fear for money. But we're desperate, and we need at least one pony to carry all our things. I doubt the pony Bill gave us would be able to carry even half of our packs because it looks malnourished. Poor thing would probably keel over and die if anyone approached it with anything larger than a coin purse. Even I figured that the money Butterbur paid him was more than what the pony was worth.

But nothing has been more terrifying than the crowd gathering around us to see us off. "What's going on? Why is there a mob?" I say, glancing behind me as I swing my backpack over my shoulders. Strider's mood darkens.

He urges us to move quickly. The morning is so peaceful, I almost forgot that the Ringwraiths are still after the hobbits. Which means, in order for us to remain hidden, we have to be out of the road. But we can't hide our tracks if people are going to be seeing us off and point out our directions.

"Are they coming with us, too?" I ask, sarcastically, motioning at the crowd.

"Be gone with you!" Someone in the crowd yells and it's still too early in the morning for me to just brush that off. "Oh, go fuck yourself!" I call, which causes Strider to grab me by the arm none too gently to make me stop.

"Well, look what we have here! Longshanks and his little whore have found themselves some friends. Are they going to be sharing you on the way, then? How much could a Ranger possibly pay you?" It's that guy again from last night. He's uglier in the daylight.

"Can I tell him to go fuck himself?" I ask Strider who is rigid next to me. I take that as a yes, so I raise my hand to give the asshole a good view of my middle finger. The guy has bushy black eyebrows I'd love to shave off. Sam throws an apple at the man to make him shut up, while Strider leads us through the main road until we are out of sight from the crowd. And then he leads us out of the road and into the woods.

"Where are you taking us?" Sam huffs as he tries to keep up, weighed down by all his frying pans and pulling the pony named Bill. I have my backpack on my shoulders, weighed down by my textbooks, which have been cleaned of horse shit. College textbooks are expensive, and I plan on catching up on my studies when I get back home.
"Into the wild." Strider responds. Sam and I groan.

"Great. More animal shit." I have had enough of the wilds.

Strider leads ahead, with me jogging behind him. This freaking dress is the most inconvenient thing I have ever had the displeasure to wear.

"How do we know this Strider is a friend of Gandalf's?" I hear Merry mutter behind us.

"I think a servant of the enemy would look fairer, but feel fouler." Frodo responds.

"He's foul enough." Merry says and I giggle. I actually giggle, and I cover my mouth when Strider tips his head in the direction of the hobbits.

"What about Ellie, then? She's certainly fair." Pippin sighs, and this causes me to trip on my dress.

"But she doesn't smell quite as foul as Strider. Could do with another bath, though." Merry says, and my face crumples into a look of indignance, and it's Strider's turn to laugh at my expense.

"Oh, shut your mouth." I snap at him.

"We have no choice but to trust them." Frodo says.

"But where are they leading us?" Sam pipes in.

"To Rivendell, Master Gamgee." Strider answers, "To the House of Elrond."

"D'you hear that? Rivendell! We're going to see the elves!" Sam says, excitedly.

I turn around to him, "Elves?" I say.

"Aye. The fairest of all folk. And the wisest." Sam says to me with a dreamy sigh.

"Seriously? Elves? Like Santa's Little Helpers?" I snort in my laughter but Sam looks at me in confusion.

"Right. You don't know who Santa is. Never mind." I mutter, and look forward.

Well, we've got dwarves, we've got hobbits, we've got evil undead, why not add elves to the list of impossible things that are normal in this world?

I look down at Frodo, and notice his hand is inside his pocket. I see him do that a lot when he thinks nobody is looking. Probably a mannerism of his.

"You always have your hand in your pocket, did you know?" I say to him in an attempt at conversation, which makes him remove his hand immediately, and look up at me with distrust.

I raise my hands in a gesture of surrender, "I was just saying... Donovan used to stuff his hands in his pockets whenever Gramps asked him why he comes home late. He stuffs his hands in his pockets whenever he's nervous." I say, as I remember my mischievous brother.

"Donovan?" Frodo asks.

"My irresponsible, annoying, big brother." I can feel my heart tugging, calling out for Donovan. I never would have thought it was possible to miss Donovan. He abandoned me and Rory and Gramps. I despise him and how selfish he is, but he had his good moments.
Frodo nods, and after a moment of silence he says, "I miss Bilbo. And Gandalf."

"The Wizard you were supposed to meet?" I ask.

"Yes. He is a good friend. He used to tell me, 'A Wizard is never late'. Which makes me worry about him even more." I look down at him, this innocent, sweet hobbit. And I wonder how the world can be so cruel, that it would burden someone so small. I see it on his face. He always looks like he's carrying the entire world on his shoulders. And there's me complaining about the clothes on my back and the lack of luxuries that I have taken for granted. I want to ease Frodo's burden, if only I could.

"Donovan used to tell me, 'I'm not late. You're just early.' whenever he makes me wait. Maybe that's what Gandalf would say. Maybe you're just early." I smile at him, and he looks up at me and smiles graciously.

We continue to walk, and I realize that we're walking up the hill where Bree is settled on. The hobbits stop to pee behind the trees and I'm stuck there, blushing furiously, because nothing reminds me more of being the only female in the group than this moment. And currently, I need to pee. Badly.

"Shit." I hiss.

No, not shit. Piss.

I turn to Strider and I'm blushing all the way down my neck.

"I need to pee." I announce, which makes him take a step back in alarm.

"Uh."

"Turn around!" I don't need to prolong this embarrassment. It's bad enough I have to do this with them around.

He blinks at me, and he calls the hobbits forward, so their backs are to me. I hurry behind a tree while Strider distracts all four hobbits, steering Pippin away from me when he attempts to turn around. I bunch my dress up and squat down behind the tree.

Of course, nothing comes out.

"Are you not done?" Strider asks, nervously.

"I have stage fright." I say.

"What?"

"Stop listening!"

"I'm not--"

"What's going on?" Pippin attempts to swivel around and I make a choking sound.

"Don't you dare turn around, Pippin!"

"Just go! We do not have all day!" Strider sounds irritated.

"Now you're pressuring me."
"Ellie..."

"Jesus Christ."

I would like to bash my head against a tree and forget this entire thing. But, eventually, I manage to pee. I hear the boys coughing nervously.

With that embarrassing situation done, we continue on our way until my legs are sore from walking and my feet hurt from tripping on rocks. Two hours later and I swear to God, I feel like I'm climbing Mount Everest. Looks like it, too, the ground is covered with snow at some parts.

Strider pauses at the top of the hill and looks around. I lean forward, bracing my hands on my knees as I pant for breath.

"Dude..." I gasp, "Have I mentioned how much I hate the outdoors?"

I can hear the hobbits busying themselves behind me. Strider and I turn to them at the same time, and we exchange astonished glances when we see them bringing out frying pans.

"Gentlemen! We do not stop 'til nightfall." Strider calls to them.

"Nightfall? What?" That's more than twelve hours of non-stop walking!

Pippin, however, has more concerns, "But what about breakfast?" He asks.

Strider looks at him, dumb-founded, "You've already had it."

"We've had one, yes," Pippin nods, "but what about second breakfast?"

Strider looks at Pippin blankly, then shakes his head and catches my eye. We exchange glances again as the others repack their cooking utensils. Then, he marches on forward and I groan and follow after him.

"I don't think he knows about second breakfast, Pip." Merry says.

I catch Pippin's horrified expression, "But what about elevenses? Luncheon, afternoon tea? Dinner? Supper! He knows about them, right?" He says, frantically.

I turn back to Strider, who gives me an amused smirk. "Listen to the poor guy." I say to him, although we wear matching grins.

He deftly pulls out two apples from his pack.

"I wouldn't count on it." Merry says, giving Pippin a clap on the back. Strider throws an apple over his shoulder, and Merry catches it. He gives it to Pippin, who looks down at the apple sadly.

Strider throws another apple and it hits the side of Pippin's head and we both snort in our laughter as Merry calls for Pippin.

He deftly pulls out two apples from his pack.

"I wouldn't count on it." Merry says, giving Pippin a clap on the back. Strider throws an apple over his shoulder, and Merry catches it. He gives it to Pippin, who looks down at the apple sadly.

Strider throws another apple and it hits the side of Pippin's head and we both snort in our laughter as Merry calls for Pippin.

The air grows colder the higher we climb, and it rained half the time we climbed the hills, which means I'm soaked. Again. Only this time, I have Strider's spare traveling cloak to protect me. It's thicker, and less worn, which means he took the thin, worn out material. Will he ever stop being nice?

I don't understand how the land transforms here. We travel for two days, walking through the woodlands, until we start walking downhill and the trees disappear until all that's left is dry wood,
mud and water. The land grows flat and soft and before I know it, we're making our way through marshlands with annoying, flying pests Sam calls 'midges' coming towards us, and biting us. By then, all thought of hygiene and second breakfasts are thrown out the window. We're all stinky and hungry. My dress is drenched from the knees down, which makes me extra grumpy and moody.

"Get off me, you little fuckers." I grumble as I swat at the midges on my arm and neck. Strider just keeps on trucking forward. This man is a machine, I swear to God.

"What are they eating when they can't get hobbit?" Sam complains. My stomach grumbles in response.

"You barely ate anything for breakfast today." Sam says to me, and I'm touched that he's concerned about me. Of all the hobbits, he's the one I've barely spoken to. I think it's mostly because he doesn't trust me or Strider yet, despite the fact that it's been days and we haven't gone off with his frying pans yet.

"I'm fine." I lie but my stomach grumbles in protest. Pippin slips and falls into the water, and we stumble forward to help him.

"Okay, dude. Time to stop for camp. The sun's going down, anyways." I call to Strider and he stops and nods, while the others wrap Pippin in their traveling cloaks.

"Alright. We have to find a hidden spot." Strider agrees.

When we've finally settled and found a dry enough spot of land, we drop to the ground and I lean against a dead tree trunk. Everything is cold and uncomfortable and these fucking midges will be death of me.

"Stay here." Strider says as he goes deeper into the wilds.

"Wait," I say, getting back up on my feet, but he holds out his hand.

"Stay. Rest." He says, not unkindly and I frown as I settle back down on the ground, reluctant to part with him. I've been so used to the safety and familiarity of his presence now that being separated from Strider feels wrong. I watch him until he disappears behind the trees. This goes on for two more days, and each time, I worry when he's not in the immediate vicinity. It's not only me that is comforted by his presence, even most of the hobbits have started to trust him at this point.

"Have you known each other for long?" Frodo asks me one night in camp as Strider runs off again. Frodo's watching me. I shrug my shoulders at him, "We've only known each other for five days, to be honest." I confess. "And we got off on the wrong foot. I met his sword before I met him." I say, jokingly.

"Where do you come from?" Merry asks, and I look down.

"Far." Is all I can say, because thinking about home makes me feel worse.

"Do not worry, Ellie. I'm sure you will find yourself home again in no time." Frodo assures me, and I give him a small smile.

"As will you, Frodo, I promise it." I say, and that sad, burdened look is back on his face. I think I said the wrong thing but before I can ask him what's wrong, Sam interjects, "So how did you and this Strider meet?"

I laugh, recalling our meeting just days ago, leaving out the fact that I was covered in shit because I
do not want to relive that memory. In fact, I could do well with forgetting it for the rest of my life.

"I was stumbling near the fields, not far from Bree, with no idea how I got there and no idea how to go back home. If it wasn't for him, I'd probably be dead in a ditch somewhere. He helped me." I say, smiling as I look back in the direction where Strider has gone.

"You are fond of him?" Frodo asks, and I laugh and shake my head. "Don't be silly. I've only known him for barely a week. I'm thankful for him. He's done so much for me, without asking for anything in return. He's a friend."

Although, truthfully, from the very beginning, I've always thought he was attractive. If you like the dirty, dangerous kind, which turns out is my type, anyway. But to say I'm developing feelings for him? It's absurd. After all, I've known him for a short amount of time, less than a week. I don't even know his real name. It's not possible.

Right?

I shake my head again and turn back to Frodo, who smiles at me understandably. "Why are you looking at me like that?" I say but his smile only widens, before he turns back to Sam, Merry and Pippin, who wear the same smiles. I shoot all of them a questioning look, but they start talking about elves and I find myself intrigued.

They talk about the elves in awestruck voices, and they tell me stories about the Elven skill of healing, and the beauty of Rivendell. It all sounds too good to be true. And, if the elves really are as powerful and wise as the hobbits make them out to be, maybe they can help me get back home.

Later, Strider returns with a deer. He's covered in sweat and dirt and I look at the dead animal he's brought with an open mouth. Up until this point, we'd been eating the provisions and meat given to us by Butterbur. I guess that must have run out because now, we're actually considering this deer as...

"Dinner." He announces and I look down at it in horror.

He and Sam work on the deer. They cut it open and pull out the guts, and skin it with knives. The look of horror never leaves my face and I blanche as Sam throws the intestines to one side.

I think I just turned vegetarian then and there. "Oh, God. Oh, God." I gasp as I back away from the grisly sight in front of me.

"Are you well?" Merry asks me and I just shake my head vigorously, a hand clapped over my mouth as my throat tightens. I think I'm going to be sick.

"Have you never seen animals being skinned before?" He asks me and I can see Sam pulling the deer's skin back to reveal the organs in my mind's eye. I shake my head again.

"You're turning green." He points out and I nod and clamp my hand to my mouth tighter. I don't trust myself to open my mouth as my stomach churns in discomfort.

I tried to refuse eating the deer that they later cooked into a stew, without any seasoning whatsoever, but Strider insisted on shoving the deer at me, and my own nausea made way for my hunger until I eventually gave in.

It tastes horrible. Like eating burnt rubber bands, but I force myself to finish my meal and make up for it by drinking plenty of water. By the time we're done eating, my hands are greasy and I find myself empathizing with vegans. The very thought makes me shudder.
When we've cleaned up, we lay out sleeping packs on the ground, with the moon shining above us. Strider takes watch as we rest. Or rather, the hobbits rest. Mostly, I just squirm as I lie down on the ground, rocks digging into my skin. I can't find a sleeping position that doesn't become uncomfortable after a few minutes.

"You must rest, Ellie." Strider says to me after a while of my tossing and turning. I huff.

"Trust me, buddy, I'd love to. If only these rocks could be a bit softer." I mumble.

"I can sing you to sleep, if you wish." He says, and I look up at him, wondering if he's joking but he looks at me seriously.

"Okay. Sure." I say, suspiciously, still wondering if he's joking. Until he opens his mouth and I realize he can actually sing. I try to make out his words, but I realize he's singing in a foreign language that sounds beautiful to my ears. It works. As Strider sings, I find my eyes getting heavier.

In the twilight between consciousness and sleep, I hear Frodo say, "Who is she? This woman you sing of?"

He was singing about a woman? My heart leaps involuntarily, irrationally thinking that he was singing a romantic lullaby. My head is drunk on fatigue.

"'Tis the Lady of Luthien. The elf Maiden who gave her love to Beren, a mortal." Strider whispers. Is that longing I hear in his voice? I struggle to listen as I fall deeper into sleep, until their voices sound as if they are buried underground.

"What happened to her?" Frodo asks.

There's a painful silence, and just before I completely lose consciousness, Strider's voice is but a whisper.

"She died."
The Fallen Kings

Chapter Summary

Ellie's first encounter with Ringwraiths and an elf. The Ringwraiths finally catch up, and leaves her with a painful reminder that this is all too real.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I should be used to waking up with half my body feeling stiff and sore, but I'm not. And the lack of coffee only darkens my mood some more, but at least we're getting off the Marshes. I would like to never come back to that place again, if I could help it. The only good thing about traveling by foot is that I'm getting some exercise.

I don't even know which direction we're heading anymore, and even I will admit that I really do need a proper bath now.

As we're walking up yet another hill, I poke Strider's back, "Hey." I say.

He turns to me with a quirked eyebrow.

"Do I stink?"

"This question again?" He says, amused.

"It's just...are the elves used to stink the way the people of Bree are?" I continue.

"On the contrary. They hate anything dirty. They are a very clean people." Strider says with a smile.

"Great. That just gives them another reason to hate me." I groan.

"Oh?" Strider asks, "What would be the other reason?"

"My overall foreign-ness." I say, which makes him laugh.

"The Rivendell elves are welcoming people. I am sure you will be making friends in no time." He says.

Yeah, with my luck, people would want to be rid of me within five minutes. I'm not a very likable person, I'll be the first to admit that. I don't think my sarcasm will be well-received.

The trek is tiring but the hobbits fill in the silence with stories from the Shire, their home. They talk about great feasts, and their neighbors, and how they celebrate birthdays.

Which leads to the story of Bilbo Baggins, whose name seems to be popular even among the hobbit folk of Bree. It turns out, Bilbo is Frodo's uncle, who adopted him as the heir to Bilbo's fortune--which turns out to be quite a lot of treasures.

"Treasures that Frodo gave away, mind." Merry adds.
By then, I'm already aware of the hobbits' strange custom of giving gifts on their birthdays instead of receiving them.

"Next thing you'll tell me, you've given away your house." I joke, but none of the hobbits seem to find this quite as funny, and my face falls.

"I didn't give it away. I sold it." Frodo says.

"Oh. Then, where will you stay when you go back?" I ask.

This time, he doesn't answer. A strained silence falls over the hobbits, which Sam covers up by talking about gardens and flowers and cabbages and the Gaffer--his father. Strider remains silent during conversations until night arrives on our sixth day of travel, and we stop beneath a hill.

It's the first time I get to fully appreciate the view. It's dark, and the pale light from the moon paints the surroundings a surreal color. But in the distance, there are stone ruins of what used to be a great tower of some sort sitting on top of the hill.

I'm left staring at it, a picture of fallen beauty, but beauty nonetheless.

"This was the great watch tower of Amon Sûl." Strider says to me as he looks up at the ruins, as well. He turns to the hobbits, "We shall rest here tonight."

I realize I've been useless at camp. The moment we reach the tower and make camp, I fall to the ground. I try helping with the fire because it's starting to grow cold, but I can't even start a flame. Sam tries to teach me, but Strider calls us to him before we can strike the stones together.

Strider lays out a pack of weapons before us, "These are for you." He says, and I look down at the blades. They are all sharpened blades. I am terrified of touching them but Strider holds out a dagger for me, as long as my forearm. I back away from it.

"If I hold that, I might kill someone." I say.

"That's the point." He says and a laugh escapes from me before I can help it. I laugh when I'm nervous. I laugh at the most inappropriate times.

"I'm sorry, it's just...'Point'." I say, looking back down at the blade he patiently holds out for me, "And by someone, I mean me. I might kill me with this." I add, rambling once again.

"The idea here is to aim it at your opponent, not at yourself." He says. Easy for him to say, he's pointed a sword at me whereas the only thing I've cut open is store-bought meat.

"If I cut myself with this, I'll blame you." I threaten as I reach out for the dagger and a small smile appears on his lips.

"I'm serious." I say, widening my eyes at him to prove how serious I am.

"Keep them close. I'm going to have a look around." Strider says after we're all armed. He stands up, and I stand up automatically.

"Stay here." He points a finger at me and I frown at him and sit back down while he heads off into the night again.

I look back down at the weapon I'm holding, my heart pounding in my chest.

Why do I have a bad feeling about this?
"He'll be alright. He's a Ranger. They go out on their own for weeks and still come back." Sam says to me. I nod absent-mindedly.

"Hey, Sam," I say, "weren't you teaching me how to light a fire?"

What I would give for a lighter. Or even matches. I've been hunched over the pit for thirty minutes already, and I still haven't made progress. Frodo sleeps in a corner, while Sam, Merry and Pippin kneel on the ground next to me.

"I give up." I say through gritted teeth as I strike the two stones together, with no effect.

"You almost have it. Go on, try again." Sam encourages, and I sigh in exasperation and strike the two stones, hard.

Finally, there's a spark! And it catches on the leaves the hobbits have laid down. The four of us whoop and clap each other on the back.

"Alright!" I clap while Sam, Merry and Pippin start bringing out their cooking utensils again. My spirits drop as I look around.

"Shouldn't we wait for him before starting a fire?" I ask, turning to where Strider had gone off to. He still hasn't come back, and I don't like being up on this hill. I feel exposed.

"Eh, it's already lit. It would be a shame to not put it to use." Pippin says as they begin pulling out their packed meats and tomatoes.

"Guys, seriously. This isn't a good idea." I say but Merry waves a hand, "Begging your pardon, Miss Ellie, but you're always nervous when Strider is not by your side. No harm will come from cooking."

Well, there's a reason for that. Mainly because he's the one trained in handling threats. I'm the one trained at screaming and swearing, which isn't much of a help if we get attacked but the hobbits continue what they're doing.

I wring my hands but they're already cooking...

"Is that bacon?" I gasp, wondering how on Earth they've managed to hide it. Bacon is a precious find, man! I need bacon in my system right about now. I bite my bottom lip as they start frying the bacon, and the sound of bacon sizzling on a pan is better than if I imagine Zac Efron asking me to marry him. I give in. They know this world better than I do. And what harm does come from eating bacon? Lord knows I deserve it after what I had to suffer through in the Marshes.

Mere minutes later, my face is stuffed with bacon, sausages and tomatoes. And the hobbits continue to cook more.

"My tomato's burst!" Merry exclaims.

"Can I have some bacon?" Pippin asks.

"Want a tomato, Sam? Ellie?" Merry passes us a plate of tomatoes. I reach out to get some but Frodo has woken up and looks at us, aghast.

"What are you doing?!" He cries. I put down my plate as he gets on his feet.

"Tomatoes, sausages, nice, crispy bacon." Merry is oblivious to the look of panic on Frodo's face.

"Put it out, you fools! Put it out!" Frodo yells, stamping the flames from the pit out.
"That's nice! Ash on my tomatoes!" Pippin complains.

"I'm sorry. I should have made them stop--" I stammer but I am cut off by a blood-curdling shriek.

The five of us freeze, because we all know what that sound is. My heart begins to pound, and my breath shortens. The Nazgûl. Only, Strider won't be around to protect us.

"Oh, shit." I hiss as we scramble for our weapons. Frodo crawls to the edge of the Watch Tower, and I don't need to look down to know it's bad news. The look of terror on his face is all the warning I need. He brings out his sword as he faces us.

"Go!" He cries and we run, until we realize we've gone the wrong way. We're at the top of the tower, weapons raised, as we hear the screech again. Closer, this time. Much too close.

One of them walks out from between two pillars, holding a long sword before it. As if that wasn't terrifying enough, it towers over all of us, its face completely shadowed by its hood. It's wearing black robes that look ancient. Even his boots are terrifying! One swipe from his foot and it could slice someone's legs off.

I pant for breath, and the hobbits and I clump together as another appears behind that one, and another, and another, until five Ringwraiths have surrounded us.

"Oh, shit!" My, how eloquent I am!

"Back, you devils!" Sam yells as he swipes at the Ringwraith closest to him with his sword, but it merely dodges him and throws him across the tower, right on a rock. Sam groans in pain as the three other hobbits and I group closer together.

"Stop!" I scream and charge at the Ringwraith that threw Sam back. My bravery is rewarded by a tight hold around my neck. I drop my dagger as my hands go for the one around my neck, trying to pry them away.

I'm choking. I can't breathe. I feel my feet leave the ground and I can see from the corner of my eye, Merry and Pippin being thrown aside.

I feel the hand tighten around my throat and my head feels like it's about to explode. I yank at the hand around my throat feebly, and I'm terrified thinking, This is it. This is how I'll die.

And just when I think I can't take anymore, the Ringwraith throws me aside and I fall on a heap on the floor. I heave and gasp for breath and cough, on my hands and knees. It all happened in less than five seconds, and yet it feels like I was choking for hours.

I take in deep lungfuls of air and I look around, trying to recover. "Frodo..." My voice comes out hoarse, and it's painful to speak. My trembling hands roam the floor for the hilt of my dagger.

I look around and see Sam, Merry and Pippin stirring feebly. But Frodo... Where is he? I can't find him anywhere! I look around frantically. Did they throw Frodo off a cliff?

I see the Ringwraiths crowded together, swords held aloft. I see one of them bending forward, reaching out for something I can't see. And then it pulls back with a furious screech. He brings his sword down and I hear Frodo yell in pain but I can't see him.

I turn around as I hear a shout, and Strider runs towards the Ringwraiths, sword in one hand and a torch in the other. He waves it at them, and the Ringwraiths screech and move away from the flame.
I hear Frodo scream in pain again, and I turn back to see him, lying on the ground, clutching his shoulder.

"Frodo!" Sam yells, running to Frodo's side immediately. I gasp for breath again, but it's still painful. Who knew breathing could be so hard? I get up on my feet unsteadily as I attempt to run to Frodo's side but I'm weak. I fall to my knees just as I take a step forward.

I hear the clash of steel against steel. Strider is fighting all five Ringwraiths by himself, and succeeding. Four of them, their robes erupting in flames, run from the tower. The last turns to me and I feel my throat burn from the memory of its touch. But Strider hears its footsteps, and before the Ringwraith can even react, Strider throws the torch in his hand and it hits him right in the face.

Its pained screech makes my hair raise and it runs away. I get back up, and my legs are stronger this time as I run to Frodo's side.

"Strider!" Sam yells in panic, and Strider is there immediately. "Help him, Strider!" Sam pleads. Strider picks up a broken sword nearby.

"He's been stabbed by a Morgul blade." Strider says, as the blade burns up and turns to ash. He throws it aside in disgust as he looks at Frodo's wound. "This is beyond my skill to heal. He needs Elvish medicine." He says, gathering Frodo in his arms as he slings the hobbit over his shoulder. Frodo screams in agony and I wince. Merry, Sam and Pippin create make-shift torches as we reach the woodlands, but Strider urges us to move without delay.

"Go! Run!" Strider says to us and we do.

I run as fast I could, ignoring the pain around my neck, ignoring the difficulty I feel from breathing. This is my punishment for being so careless. Frodo is dying because I'm too stupid to build a fire and too greedy for food.

"Hurry!" Strider calls as we run across the woods. My dress catches on bushes and twigs, but when I stumble, I shake it off and continue. The Wraiths are still following us, I can hear their screech.

"We're six days from Rivendell! He'll never make it!" Sam calls out.

"Gandalf..." Frodo moans, feverishly.

"Hold on, Frodo." Strider urges.

"Gandalf!" Frodo calls out, desperately.

My legs are screaming for mercy and I have difficulty breathing more than usual. I stroke my neck, remembering the Ringwraith's tight grip on it. There's gonna be bruises here, I guarantee it.

We run for days, stopping only to eat, sleep and relieve ourselves, and then running off immediately after, but even Strider has his limits. One night, he makes us stop to catch our breath near three intricately carved stone sculptures of some kind of monster. Why anyone would even consider wasting time on such ugly things is beyond me but beauty is in the eye of the beholder, as they say.

Strider lays Frodo down on the ground as he pants for breath. I can barely look at him without feeling guilt. He trusted me with the hobbits, and I let him down.

"Look, Frodo. It's Mr. Bilbo's trolls." Sam says, trying to distract Frodo, who gasps in pain. He's looking worse and worse by the day. His clear, blue eyes have gone cloudy, and he's white as paper.
"Sam." I whisper, as I brush back Frodo's hair from his face. I was expecting him to be hot with fever, since that's how the body naturally fights off infection. But I recoil as my fingers brush against his forehead. Sam's own hand feels Frodo's forehead as Frodo gasps for breath. "Mr. Frodo?"

Merry and Pippin exchange worried looks with me, as Sam calls out to Strider, "He's goin' cold!"

Strider looms over Frodo, holding up a torch.

"Is he going to die?" Pippin's voice cracks and my hand protectively wraps around his shoulder. He leans into me gratefully but when I turn to look at Strider, all I see is dread. "He's passing into the Shadow world. He'll soon become a Wraith just like them." He says, and I close my eyes because I can't look at him any longer than that. My guilt weighs me down.

My stupidity and ignorance led us here and now Frodo is suffering because of me. Because I was careless and complacent. I should be the one who was stabbed, not him. He's gone through enough already without me bringing this to him.

Frodo gasps in pain again, his breath rattling in his throat. Behind us, the Wraiths seem to answer his call, their shrieks mixing in the dark. And Pippin retreats further into my arms until he's half-hidden under my cloak.

"They're close!" Merry whispers, fearfully.

Strider holds his torch up, "Sam! Do you know the Athelas plant?" He asks. Sam stands up dutifully, but he shakes his head, "Athelas?" He asks.

"Kingsfoil."

"Kingsfoil! Aye, it's a weed."

"It may help to slow the poisoning. Hurry." Strider gives Sam his torch and takes the one Merry holds.

"Stay here. Look after them." Strider says to me and I freeze. The last time he left, Frodo got stabbed. How could he trust me with them after the disaster at Weathertop?

He sees the look on my face, my eyes wide and my mouth opening wordlessly like a gaping fish.

"Stay here, Ellie." He says, placing a hand on my shoulder firmly as Sam charges for the woods. I nod at him. I don't want to be any more of a burden. If I have to stay here and kick a Ringwraith in the face to keep Frodo, Merry and Pippin safe, then that's what I'd do.

He turns around and follows Sam to the woods and I turn back to face Merry and Pippin, who are kneeling next to Frodo.

The Ringwraiths shriek in the distance and I jump at the sound. Frodo moans and wheezes for breath and I kneel next to him.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry." I whisper, helplessly as I feel his forehead. The thought comes unbidden: He's as cold as a corpse.

I don't know how long it's been. It could have been five minutes or an hour. Time goes by agonizingly slow as Merry, Pippin and I wait for Sam and Strider to return.

But we get on our feet when we hear the sounds of an approaching horse. I bring my dagger out, for
all the good that will do. But I put it down almost immediately when I see the white stallion galloping through the trees, and my eyes go to the rider.

I lower my dagger as I stare at her. It's impossible for anyone to be that beautiful, and yet, she is. Her skin is creamy and without blemish, and her long, dark hair flows behind her. She is immaculate. I stare at her in wonder, and realize belatedly that her ears are pointed, sticking out from behind her hair.

I feel like a rat next to her. I put the dagger away as Strider comes running after her. She unmounts the horse and kneels next to Frodo.

"Who is she?" Merry gasps next to me.

"Frodo." She whispers, and even her voice is perfect. What the hell.

"She's an elf." Pippin sounds breathless. Good to know I'm not the only one who's been completely taken by the vision before me.

"He's fading." The elf whispers anxiously as Strider grinds some leaves I assume is Kingsfoil and places it on the wound. I wince as Frodo gasps in pain.

"He's not going to last. We must get him to my father." The elf says as Strider carries Frodo and they approach the white horse. My eyes follow their movement, since my legs have completely forgotten how to function.

"I've been looking for you for two days." The elf says, her round, blue eyes focused on Strider.

"Where are you taking him?" Merry calls out as Strider and the elf stop in front of the horse. Frodo moans in pain on Strider's shoulder.

"There are five Wraiths behind you. Where the other four are, I do not know." The elf continues, ignoring Merry's question.

Strider lifts Frodo on to the horse, and Frodo groans as he unsteadily stays up. Strider whispers to the elf, but I can't make out the words. I'm left, standing there, confused. This has been a running theme for me. I'm confused all the goddamn time. It's frustrating, being so useless but what can I do that won't make things worse? The elf whispers back to Strider, and I realize they're talking in a different language.

"What are they saying?" Pippin asks, but no one answers. The elf continues to speak, until I finally understand her last words, "I do not fear them." And Good Lord, do I admire her courage because everything about this situation terrifies me.

There's a painful silence, as Strider reaches out and places a hand on top of hers.

Oh.

I feel my gut twist uncomfortably, unexpectedly, and I blink at their intertwined hands. Strider whispers to her in another language, and a small smile appears on the elf's lips as she mounts the horse, with Frodo secured between her arms.

"Arwen." Strider says, looking up at her, "Ride hard. Don't look back."

And so perfection has a name.
Arwen nods at him, and she leans down to say to the horse, "Noro lim Sirdal."

The horse gallops away, and my eyes go to Strider. He watches the elf go with a pained expression, and I realize that must be how I look whenever I follow him with my eyes when he goes out on his own in the wilds. I look down at my hands, which I've been wringing for the past two minutes.

"What are you doing?!" Sam yells angrily at Strider's back, "Those Wraiths are still out there!"

Strider wrenches his eyes away from the trees where Arwen has disappeared to, and turns back to us. I find myself unable to meet his gaze. "She will save him." He says.

"Come. Rivendell is a few more day's journey." He says to us, and so we follow him, with me dragging my feet behind, my heart heavier than ever.

Chapter End Notes

In which I swerve away from the books. Some of you are probably furious because we all know how awesome Glorfindel is. I'm gonna blend the books and movies together and hopefully make this work. Our favorite Balrog-slayer will be making an appearance in the near future, don't worry!

As for Arwen's horse... Yes, I purposely changed the name. I feel protective of Asfaloth. He's Glorfindel's horse, and Glorfindel's only. Plenty of other horses in Rivendell. Arwen could just as likely have taken one of them.
Rest, At Last

Chapter Summary

Ellie continues to feel guilt, realizes she really does have a crush on Strider, and finally arrives at Strider's "safe place".

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I wrap my cloak around me as we walk through the lands. It's been a day's journey, and the sun beats down on us, painfully hot.

The hobbits are uncharacteristically quiet, and I know Frodo is on everyone's mind. The journey is miserable and slow, and I find that I don't even care that I haven't bathed in almost a week now.

"You have been quiet." Strider says to me as we stop for camp, while Sam cooks the rest of the bacon and sausages.

I shake my head and try to smile, but I think it comes out more as a wince. He leans toward me, and his fingers brush against my chin, tipping my head up. I might be blushing, or I might be on fire. Either way, my nerves flare up where his skin touches mine.

"How is your neck?" He asks, inspecting said body part.

"Oh. Fine, I guess?" I'm lying, I feel like whenever I turn to my left or right, my head might fall off and swallowing is painful, as well. "It's nothing compared to what Frodo's going through." I look away from Strider, and he pulls away slowly.

"It's my fault." I croak out and he sighs. Tears spring into my eyes and I blink them away furiously.

"If I hadn't been so stupid, if I didn't insist on lighting a fire, if I had stopped them when I could, Frodo would never have been hurt." I blurt out, but he wraps a hand around my shoulders gently. I recoil from his touch, because I don't deserve to be comforted.

"It was not your fault. You should not think--" He says.

"Don't. Don't try to make me feel better, it's not working. You trusted me with them, and I led them to danger." I say, looking down at my hands. Dirt has dug under my nails, and there are cuts on my exposed skin, so unlike the smooth, fair skin of Arwen, who did better in fifteen minutes than I ever did in the days I've been here.

Strider pulls back and my eyes follow the movement of his hand, the memory of those hands touching Arwen's burns into my mind.

"You and the elf..." I start and he turns sharply to me, "You love her, don't you? That's what the song was about. The elf-Maiden who fell for the mortal."

He sighs deeply, "I thought you were asleep by then."
He's avoiding the question. It only makes me even more curious. This dumb crush needs to stop before I hurt myself.

"I almost was." I say, "So, you do love her?"

"I do, though I know I should not." He says, and I feel my guts twist again. Maybe I shouldn't, but I find myself asking more questions.

"Well, why not?"

"If she stays, she loses her immortality."

Elves are immortal too, huh?

"Oh." Is all I can find myself saying, "But... What's wrong with that? What's wrong with choosing a life with the person you love most? Forever is a long time to be alone." I say, trying to be encouraging but when I look at him, he's staring at the ground, as though wishing he could be swallowed by it. I certainly wish I could be swallowed by the ground right about now.

"Miss Ellie." Sam calls for me, holding out a plate of sausages and bacon. I give Strider a small smile, and get up to join the hobbits around the fire. Before I sit down, I turn back to him.

"Oh, by the way." I say, and he looks up at me, "I want to learn how to use this. I realize there's more to it than brandishing it in front of myself like an idiot." I pat the dagger that I've strapped to my waist with a leather belt. He gives me a smile, and says, "Of course. When we get to Rivendell." He says.

Well, at least I had that to look forward to. Swinging a sharp blade at something should relieve some of my stress. We continue our journey, and my clothes are stained with mud and grass. The bottom of the dress is torn and it gets caught on low branches, which makes me miss my jeans even more.

But finally, finally, we cross the borders to Rivendell, to the Bruinen River. And waiting for us on the other side of the river is a man so beautiful, I refuse to believe he's human.

He has to be another elf. It's impossible for anyone to be that beautiful. His armor shines, and his blonde hair flows down his back. He's tall, too. Taller even than Strider, who has to be at least six feet tall.

"Ai na vedui Dúnedan! Mae g'ovannen."

I'm not ashamed to admit I stared for a long time. Strider greeted him as well, and the two began a conversation while the rest of us catch our breaths and look around. Ahead, I see something black bobbing in and out of view as the river bears it away. I squint to look at it.

"It's their horses." Pippin exclaims as he notices what I'm looking at. "The black horses."

"Thank God they're dead, then. I didn't enjoy a single moment with those ugly Ringwraiths." I say.

"They are not dead. Only their horses are. They fled back to their master when the river flooded. You can thank the Lady Arwen for that." The elf said as he and Strider joined us.

"What of Frodo?" Merry asks.

"Lady Arwen rode hard towards Imladris. I found her healing him. Her ministrations bought Frodo precious time. I was tasked by Lord Elrond to ride against the Nine. I have been following your trail
for days, but it seems the Lady Arwen was on her own quest herself and found you first.” He says. "However, I did pursue the three Riders who had been posted on the Bridge of Mithladel. I understand it was near the bridge that you met Lady Arwen?"

Strider sighs in relief, "Yes. You bring good news, Glorfindel. We had been worried about how Frodo is faring. Is there news of Gandalf?"

"He was not in Imladris when I left, but that was nine days ago. I was pursuing the remaining Riders when Lady Arwen and I crossed paths here. I was given orders to wait for your return and to fend off any remaining Rider should more decide to pursue them."

"I do not doubt more did follow them." Strider says, grimly.

"That they did. Lord Elrond flooded the Ford, and I intercepted Lady Arwen. Three of the horses were caught in the flood. The others jumped in, and let their Riders fall."

"They just jumped in? Just like that?” I ask, shaken out of my stupefied staring at this bit of news. For the unbeatable undead, they sure were pretty easy to beat.

"Well, they needed a bit of... convincing." Glorfindel flashes me a knowing smirk and I blink several times. It's like being baptized or something. Why does he have to be so beautiful? His gentle face is a stark contrast to the powerful warrior he probably is. If he could face down several Ringwraiths and 'convince' their horses to jump into a river to their death, he has to be more dangerous than he looks.

"Come now. Lord Elrond would be waiting for you." Glorfindel says and he leads us through a path with a great view of the mountains.

"We are close." Strider whispers, looking above him at the valley and as tired as I am, when Rivendell comes into view, I slow down to a stop. It is the most majestic sight that I have ever seen. Trees with leaves that fall as the wind shakes their branches and a great, curved bridge that leads to intricate houses, set on the valley. It's as if the houses were naturally part of the mountain-side.

"It's beautiful." I gasp, looking around me at the clear water that seems to glitter in the sunlight. It's better than the skyline view that I'm used to. It's better than anything I've ever seen.

"Is this heaven?" I whisper, because I remember when I first came to Middle-earth, I thought I had died. Maybe I really did journey to heaven.

However, Frodo's white face contorted in pain, his eyes cloudy, appears in my mind again. Heaven wouldn't be so cruel to such a kind soul.

"Frodo is in there right now." Sam says, as he gazes up at Rivendell.

"Imladris. I grew up here." Strider says as we walk forward.

"Jeez. I feel so underdressed. This place looks like it could house a king." I say and Strider jerks next to me. Before I can even ask him what's wrong, we're greeted by another elf and I'm staring in wonder again.

It's another male elf and my God is he gorgeous. And also, incredibly tall. I can't help but stare at him with slackened jaws. Are all elves so disturbingly gorgeous?

"Lindir." Strider greets him with a wide smile. The elf smiles back and that is the smile that could cure cancer. They speak in another language again, with Glorfindel joining in and the elf called Lindir calls out, I'm assuming, to make fun of us ugly Mortals. He holds his hands over his nose but
he, Glorfindel and Strider laugh about it afterwards.

Then, he turns to us and I have to resist the urge to get on my knees because I feel like I'm being greeted by an angel of God.

"Welcome to Imladris. Please, rest here with us. Lord Elrond welcomes you all." He says. I'm still staring.

"Has Mr. Frodo arrived?" Sam asks, ever the loyal friend.

"He is with Lord Elrond at this moment. He arrived just in time. Please. Rest. Bathe." He side-eyes Strider with a small smile and Strider shakes his head as Glorfindel chuckles under his breath.

"Elves." He mutters as more elves arrive to take Bill the Pony and take us to our rooms.

I stare around me because their beauty is overwhelming. I cast a look of helplessness at Strider as they lead me away from him and he laughs at my expression, "You'll get used to it." He calls after me. I highly doubt it.

I'm led to a room with a wide window and a breath-taking view of a waterfall that leads down to the river. They've also prepared a bath, and the female elf who led me to the room hands me a glass bottle of something that smells sweet, "For your hair." She says.

Shampoo!

Or as close to shampoo as it can get but still. I take the bottle graciously, "Thank God! Oh, sweet baby Jesus! I can be clean!" I exclaim and she laughs.

"You are different from other mortals. They insist on smelling foul." She says.

"Not this mortal. By the end of this bath, my skin will forget the meaning of 'dirt'." I say, and she laughs again.

"I shall leave you to it, then. There is also a dress on the bed for you. Lady Arwen has informed us that a woman was travelling with the other guests, as well." She says and I bow, because that's what's appropriate to do when you have an angel taking care of you.

"Thank you." I say and she looks at me with amusement and turns to go.

"Wait. Um." I call back and she looks at me, patiently.

"What day is it?"

"It is October the 20th."

"Oh."

Oh shit. Well, there's a mood dampener. Oh shit. I begin wringing my hands.

"Um." I say.

Because my period starts around the 24th of the month.

"How..." I ask, blushing, "...do I deal with...you know...my cycle? It's near." She's the first friendly female I've come across, and just in time, too. Because if there isn't even electricity here, then I doubt they have tampons or pads.
"Oh." The elf exclaims, realizing what I mean. She taps her bottom lip, "I forgot that mortals could
not control their cycles. I will come back later, and I will show you what to do when it arrives."

"And, uh... How do I remove unwanted hair from my body?" This is getting more and more
embarrassing by the minute.

"Mortal women who care so much about that kind of thing are rare!" She beams, and I think she's
complimenting me. I'll take it as a compliment.

"I shall come back." She says and gets out of the room while I wait there, shifting from foot to foot. I
just asked a flawlessly beautiful creature how to shave my underarms and how to deal with my
period. I feel like I just committed a crime. She comes back with some sort of belted contraption and
spare cloths and a small blade that could fit in the palm of my hand.

"This is for the hair." She says, handing me the blade and I hold it out because how the hell am I
supposed to use what looks like a butcher knife on my underarms and legs? I'm exaggerating, of
course, but this thing looks like it could cause me a lot of self-inflicted pain.

I haven't even had time to comprehend how I was going to pull off shaving my underarms with a
blade this large without cutting off several inches of skin when the elf raises the belt she's carrying.

"And this you put around your waist..." She begins to hold out the belt in front of me and shows me
how to secure the belt between my legs and how to use the cloths, how to secure the cloths to the
belt and how I should clean it. By the end of that little lesson, I'm speechless with embarrassment.

"Worry not. It is natural. As a woman, you are blessed with the gift of life!" She says.

"I can't believe I'm talking to a stranger about this." I mumble, still wringing my hands.

"Well, we shall not be strangers for long, I hope. I am Salabeth." She says.

"I'm Ellie." I smile.

She nods, "I shall take my leave, Ellie."

When she leaves, I take off the ugly, green dress I've been wearing for almost three weeks and step
into the bath. It's the most amazing feeling, being clean. I can actually see the real color of my hands
now and I keep smelling my skin because I smell good. I brave the butcher knife and I find it's not
actually that bad. I did nick myself, but after a few well-thought-out profanities, I got the hair off. I
don't dare touch my leg hair, though. Maybe some other time. The hair on my head is now smooth
and shiny. I think there's something in the shampoo that does wonders with hair that managed to
wash out three weeks worth of dirt and oil.

My problem now is my lack of underwear. There is no way in hell I'm touching the ones I just shed
again, unless to clean them in a sterile, quarantine room wearing a hazmat suit. They smell of sweat
and something Satan concocted. I mean, for all I know, they're probably radioactive. I can't even tell,
anymore. Maybe I should throw them at the next Ringwraith I see and observe if there'll be any
chemical reactions.

There's a white, sleeveless linen dress of some sort in the pile of clothes that Salabeth left. A chemise,
from the looks of it. I shrug. Screw it, new underwear is new underwear. Oh, and there's even
drawers here, made of linen and they look like boxers. I'll take it!

Salabeth comes back to check on me while I fix my hair with some sort of comb made out of bone.
She nods in approval as she sees the actual dress on me. It's a long, flowy, dress of a light purple
color. Unlike the green dress, it doesn't weigh me down. In fact, I feel like I can run in this dress—which, I don't plan on doing. I've had enough of running. I wear my black flats, since the boots I've been wearing are worn, and muddy.

"Good. It fits. All that dirt was hiding a lovely face." She says and I hit my hand at the corner of the vanity table in surprise.

She is calling me lovely? The tall elf with beautiful, dark hair and piercing grey eyes is calling me lovely? You know, usually I have a smartass remark, and sarcasm is my main weapon but these elves have thrown me off my game.

"I...uh..." I stammer. I've been doing nothing but blush and stutter around these people. I need to pull myself together.

"Supper has been prepared for you. I am sure you would like to join your friends. And Estel is waiting for you." Salabeth says and I nod. Yeah, I'd love to eat. All I've been eating is roasted rubber band that Strider calls deer. I'd trade my left arm for a chicken leg right about now. Deep fried, golden, juicy, crunchy chicken... My eyes glaze over at the thought. The hobbits are probably laying out a feast right now.

My blood runs cold at the thought of the hobbits.

"And Frodo?" I ask, pain in my voice. Guilt still weighs me down. I don't think he's in any state to eat fried chicken.

"He is resting. Lord Elrond is still trying to heal him but now, he is confident Frodo will make it through."

I breathe a sigh of relief. Frodo's okay. Frodo's recovering, and he's alive. That's wonderful news! I feel a weight lift from my shoulders, and a small smile spreads on my lips. Salabeth smiles back and steps back from the door to let me pass.

Chapter End Notes

Ellie finally reaches Imladris. I hope I brought our favorite Balrog-slayer to justice. I liked the part of the movie they did with giving Arwen a more significant role. I've always thought she was a badass. She has Elladan and Elrohir for brothers and Galadriel for a grandmother, after all. There's some fight in her, I just know it.

In the books, Glorfindel was the Hobbits + Aragorn's guide, and he was the unwavering white light Frodo saw. I think I made the adjustment for Glorfindel and Arwen to be together in one scene work out, but if not, please tell me how I can improve!
I'm glad Salabeth is with me. I definitely would have gotten lost on the way to the dining hall, mostly because I get distracted by all the interesting pieces of art that I see. There's open windows wherever I pass, and I get to look down and see elves riding horses and training with bows.

It is a safe haven. And here, I will find answers. Here, I might know how to get home.

When I get to the dining room, I thank Salabeth and find myself a seat. Strider is already there and God, he looks gorgeous. His hair is clean and brushed and he wears clothes of a rich fabric. He's reading a book, already sitting on a chair.

"You clean up well." I say to him and he looks up from his book.

"I did not recognize you." He says as he stands, like the gentleman he is. He needs to stop being so nice. I need to find a puppy for him to kick if he doesn't want me to develop feelings for him.

"When you met me, I was covered in shit and my hair was a mess. I don't think even I would have recognized myself at that point." I say as I take a seat across from him. There are already plates laid out in front of us. He sits back down and puts the book aside.

"Well, your hair looks lovely." He says, with a wide grin.

"Oh, shut up and pass me the potatoes." I roll my eyes at him. Nothing deep fried here. Just the thought of deep fried potatoes makes me painfully aware that there's no McDonalds here. Fries and potato chips don't exist yet. This is quickly becoming the saddest dinner I've sat down to.

Strider distracts me by passing me a plate, a teasing grin on his face. I narrow my eyes at him.

"I thought there'd be some guy named Estel eating with us." I say as I pile potatoes and meat on my plate.

Strider flinches and says, sharply, "Who told you that?"

"Salabeth. She helped me get dressed. You know who he is?" I ask.

He looks uncomfortable and lowers his eyes to his plate.

"What?" I stop with a piece of meat--I think it's beef?--halfway to my mouth.

He shakes his head once.

"What?!" I demand, putting the meat down.
He sighs heavily.

"What, is that your real name? It's not anything to be embarrassed about." I say, jokingly as I pop the beef in my mouth. While I'm chewing, he avoids my gaze.

He seems to be thinking something through in his mind, I can see the gears turning in his brain. "The elves gave me that name."

My chewing slows down as I see him looking more uncomfortable by the second. "I was kidding." I say.

He finally looks me in the eyes, and I say, "Why hide your real name?"

"Protection. Both yours and mine." He says, "It is a name of a hunted man."

Oh, God. What did he do? Did he kill a whole bunch of people and got exiled or something? He does look like a dangerous man, and he held a knife at me with no hesitation. I was looking for a flaw, but did it have to be so extreme? Quick, change the subject!

"When we were in Bree, you told me that you would explain some things to me. I think we're safe to talk now." I say, softly, as I eat. I have to tear the meat apart with my fingers because forks don't exist here, and while the pain around my throat has reduced, swallowing solid food is still painful for me, damn that Ringwraith. I haven't had a proper meal and while there's not a hint of deep fried anything on the table, these elves know how to cook. I wish I could savor it and be able to eat without feeling like I'm swallowing a rock. The meat is tender, and the potatoes are cooked perfectly.

"A long time ago, when the Dark Lord Sauron was at the height of his power, he spread malice and terror through Middle-earth, and elves and Men fought for freedom, led by The High King of Elves, Gil-galad, and King Elendil. Elendil was defeated by Sauron, but his son Isildur took up his father's broken sword, Narsil, and cut the Ring from Sauron's hand. His body has fallen, but his spirit lives on in the Ring, for he poured into it his cruelty and malice, most of all, his will to dominate all life.

It was that will that corrupted Isildur. He fell to its power. He called the Ring precious to him, and he swore his descendants will be bound to its fate."

"And...you're one of his descendants?" I ask. So, he's not a mass murderer. He's a descendant of a King--He's a fucking prince. He's literally Prince Charming. I just had to like the guy who's completely unavailable and out of my league.

"That Ring was the downfall of my ancestors. I refuse to be an heir to that curse."

And an heir to a throne, apparently.

"My mother brought me here to Imladris after my father died, to be raised by the elves. Lord Elrond hid my true name from me, and gave me the name Estel, in fear that those who killed my father will hunt me as well. But when I turned twenty years old, he revealed to me my real name. My true name, given to me by my father, is Aragorn."

"Aragorn is a pretty badass name." I nod, and he looks at me in confusion. I don't like that pained look he gives me. It makes him look so much older.

"Look, dude. You aren't Isildur. Until you're actually there, staring at the Ring, you don't know what you'll do. Who knows, maybe you're actually better than that?" I try to smile, and he smiles back at me, weakly. That's better. Now that I'm eating, Frodo's okay, and I now know Strider's real name, it makes me feel a hell of a lot better. A bit of my spirit comes back.
"I'm pulling this out of my ass, by the way, I just wanted to make you stop moping. You're ruining my appetite." I joke and his deep laugh echoes through the hall.

"Speaking of appetite, where are the hobbits? I thought they'd be the first to get here." I say.

"They will eat after us. They went immediately to Frodo's bed chambers. I thought it best we give them privacy."

"Good idea, Aragorn." I say, testing the name out. He looks at me, amused and I scrunch my nose at him and continue eating.

I think I'm at my third helping when he asks, "Who is Donovan?"

I choke on a piece of meat.

He gets up from his chair but I wave my hands frantically at him as I reach for a goblet of water.

"Jesus, warn me next time when you're going to ask unexpected questions!" I gasp.

"But then, it will not be unexpected." He teases.

"I will strangle you."

"How is your neck?"

"It's fine!" I say, a bit too loudly.

"You did not answer my question." He's enjoying this, the little shit.

"I just did!"

"I meant about Donovan."

I sigh, slowly, as I close my eyes. My heart feels like it's being squeezed. And then I realize.

Gramps.

He's been waiting for me to get home. He's probably so worried about me. Gramps has a heart condition, he's not supposed to be in any kind of stress. I'm going to make it worse. Without warning, tears spring into my eyes. I keep them shut so the tears wouldn't fall out while I try to breathe slowly. I can't lose it. Not now. Not when I've just started to feel better.

"Meril." Aragorn whispers. I didn't even realize he had stood up. I open my eyes, and a tear betrays me. He's standing next to my seat. I crane my neck up but it hurts to look up too long. He's just so freaking tall. I look back down and more tears start flowing, along with some snot because I'm very ugly when I cry.

"Who the fuck is Merry?!" I gasp out, trying to keep my shit together but I'm falling apart. I'm crumbling. I sniff and put a hand to my nose. Aragorn kneels next to me.

"Meril is the Elvish word for rose. I found you in the wild, as beautiful as a rose, whose thorns will prick any who tries to harm it." He's telling me this to distract me and I sniff again because it's working. "I thought the name suited you."

The smooth motherfucker.
"I'm sorry if I have upset you."

"I just...I miss Gramps. And Rory. And even Donovan." My heart squeezes again as I say my big brother's name.

"You do not have to speak of them if it makes you uncomfortable."

I sigh, and I look over at Aragorn, who waits for me patiently to collect myself. He opened up. Maybe opening up will make me feel better, too.

"Donovan is my older brother. He was supposed to pick me up the night I...the night I came here." I say, because it's easier to let it out of my chest now. It helps ease the pain.

"We have a complicated relationship. We were okay, on the surface, but there were days when our arguments would become too much, even when we were just kids. We seemed to find a way to argue about everything. He walked out on us when I was eighteen, just moved out of the house and for a time, the rest of us could barely make ends meet. I went to community college and got a part time job to earn more money because Gramps is too weak to work but insists I have to finish my education. When he heard that Gramps was getting weaker, he started contacting me again but refused to talk to Gramps." My voice is shaky and I hesitate on some parts of the story but Aragorn listens. He waits patiently, and the only movement he makes is getting up to take a seat on the bench next to me. I'm facing the table, hands wringing on my lap, and he sits facing the wall behind me, long legs stretched out in front of him, crossed at the ankles.

"He earns a lot of money, I don't really know how, although I have my suspicions. He says it doesn't matter how he gets the money as long as it's helping. He even gives me and Gramps allowance." I spit the word out like venom, remembering having to budget our money, how I have to work after classes just so I can afford to buy Gramps' medicine. And then in strolls Donovan with a suspiciously large amount of money to our rescue. "At first, I refused to take it but he insisted and we were desperate. He meets me every two weeks, that's when he was going to pick me up, to give me the money and to pretend to give a shit about Gramps."

"He just left you? I ought to drag him back by his feet. How could one be so dishonorable and leave a family that needs them?" He asks, and I shake my head.

"I've been asking that question myself. We used to have a good life. A happy life, before Rory came along. When Rory was born, he became more distant. He barely spared Rory a glimpse. All he had for that sweet kid was a look of contempt until even Rory stopped pretending to like him. But he was a protective brother, I'll give him that. At first, I thought it was because he actually cared but now I feel like he only did that because he felt entitled to be the only one who can make me miserable."

"He would torture you?" Aragorn says, aghast.

"Not physically. He never harmed me. He just teased me a lot and he never hesitated to blame me when something went wrong but I guess I have him to thank for my toughness now." I say, with a small smile. Even as the words leave my mouth, I know I'm lying to myself. I was never tough. I'm like a hollow statue. I put up a front of braveness but if I crack, even just a little bit, I fall apart. Like now. I sigh heavily.

"I'd be lying if I said I didn't miss him. Despite everything, he's still my brother. He's still the guy that carried me in his arms when I was too drunk to even walk straight and he protected me from all those people who bullied me when we were kids. It was only him I talked to when my parents...when they..."
Aragorn's hand falls on mine, and I stop wringing them.

"I promise, you will find your way back home. And I will knock some sense into this Donovan for being a dishonorable rat."

I smile at him, and turn my hand around so his hand rests on my palm and I curl my fingers around his. My hands are like a five-year-old's compared to his. "You're a good friend, you know. Arwen is a very lucky girl to have you." I say and he pulls away with a smile.

"I am lucky to have her." He says, and that smile just plucks out the pieces of my heart that are forming around him. He is off-limits. I have to remember that. He and Arwen are in love. The kind of love that lasts a long time. The kind of love that willingly lets go of immortality to have one lifetime with each other. I will never be able to compete with that. I have to stop feeling like this around him.

"Hey," I say after a few minutes of silence and when I've calmed down and my tears have dried. I nudge him with my elbow, "Thank you, Aragorn. How do you say 'thank you' in Elvish?"

He smiles. "Len hannon."

"Len hannon Estel."

"Aragorn will do just fine."

"Oh, so now I'm allowed to call you Aragorn?"

"I thought you were hungry."

"Yeah, I was. I'm so done with eating rubber bands."

"Rubber bands?" He stares at me in confusion, and he says the words with a thick accent.

"That's the English term for the flavor of your cooking." I say with a mischievous grin.

"I will assume that is a compliment." He says and I burst out laughing.

"Okay, dude. Don't stop believing." I snort.

He nudges my arm with his elbow just as I am about to bring a piece of food into my mouth, making me miss my mouth and the food falls on my lap.

"You little..." I pick up the potato and throw it at him. Somehow, from twelve inches, I miss him because he stands from the bench just as I throw it his way. I doubt he was even aware of my attempt until I see the small smirk on his face.

"What are you, twelve?" I say, half-exasperated and half-amused, remembering what I said to him when we eavesdropped on Frodo back in Bree.

We finish our meal, and he tells me he'll walk me to Lord Elrond's study. I freeze half-way through getting up from the bench, caught completely off-guard. "He's ready to see me?" I say, breathlessly and he nods.

This is it. I get to ask questions and I can get answers. I can go home. They'll get me home. A huge smile spreads on my face. "Let's go."
I really liked what they did in the movies by making Aragorn hesitant to take the throne of Gondor. It showed his humanity and I just had to go with that because it brings more depth to his character.

And I'm sorry if this chapter took so long. Midterms just ended for me. It was a nightmare but I'm back now and I'm planning on editing a trailer for this fanfic to attract more readers.

PS: Don't listen to the movies. 'Len hannon' is the correct Sindarin for "I thank you." not *shudders* 'Hannon le'.
This Isn't Fair

Chapter Summary

Ellie meets the Lord of Imladris and the Grey Pilgrim. She doesn't like the answers she's getting and her only outlet for venting her frustrations keeps getting interrupted by a certain blonde Elf.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"How do you say 'my lord' in Elvish?" I ask as I wring my hands in nervousness.

"Hir nîn."

"So I bow and say hir nîn when addressing Lord Elrond. Okay. I'll be fine." I ramble.

"You will be fine." Aragorn assures me.

When we reach Lord Elrond's door, I turn to him, "Is it rude if I throw up in front of his door?" I squeak.

"I imagine it is." He says, facing me.

"I'm nervous." I say.

"You have nothing to be nervous about. Lord Elrond is very wise, he will know how you can get home." He says, placing his hands on my shoulders.

"Don't do that, I feel like a child." I mutter and he lets go and knocks on the door.

"Enter." A voice from inside says and Aragorn opens the door and steps back. I trip on my dress on the way inside. Thank God whoever is inside is facing the windows. Just as I straighten up, the door closes behind me and the person looking out the window faces me.

There's an old man, with a long beard and bushy eyebrows. His hair and beard are silver, and he wears a grey cloak and a tall, pointy hat. He's holding a long, wooden stick and he smiles at me warmly.

A week ago, I would have easily believed he's a Dumbledore cosplayer but I've seen too many things that are only too real. I bow to him, "Hir nîn." I say.

"Ah, I believe the girl has mistaken me for you." The old man says, looking to my right. I turn and see a handsome elf, clothed in fine, intricate robes. He's sitting behind a desk, fingers intertwined before him. He has kind eyes, and features that are very similar to Arwen, from the kind eyes to the dark hair.

I bow again and call him 'my lord'.

"I am Elrond, Lord of Imladris and this is my old friend, Gandalf the Grey." He says. I bow again at
him and at the old man. My neck hurts.

"I'm Ellie, hir nîn."

"I understand you wanted to talk to me. You travelled from Bree all the way here." Lord Elrond says.

"Travelled from farther, actually. I woke up in the woods, with no recollection of how I got there. I'm lost." I say.

"Well, you certainly got yourself even more lost if you've found yourself in elven lands." Gandalf says.

"Please, I can't be any more lost anywhere. This...this isn't where I'm from." I plead.

Lord Elrond turns to Gandalf, who examines me with piercing blue eyes.

"I don't know how to say this without sounding insane." I mutter, looking down at my fidgetting hands.

"Try with something smaller." Gandalf says, gently.

"I'm not from here. I mean, here as in this country. I'm not from Bree, I'm from somewhere...far." I say.

Gandalf nods in encouragement, "There are customs here that are considered...archaic in my times. Just these clothes are too outdated for my tastes. And how people talk. It feels old, different." I continue, my eyes darting between the two of them. There is no easier way to say this, so I just do.

"Prepare yourself for crazy talk." I sigh, because what I'm about to say is going to sound insane, "I'm sure I'm from a different time, a different world."

Complete and utter silence is their response. The words pour out of me. I don't want to think about it, because if I stop, I'll realize how completely and utterly delusional I sound.

"I come from a land called United States of America. Things are different there, where I come from. We no longer use horses, but fast vehicles. We have electricity, which harnesses lightning and energy to power our lights and equipment. We have tall buildings, that reach a hundred storeys and more, made of glass and something stronger than stone." I say, breathlessly.

"There is no war that would affect the entire world. At least, not anymore. There are no hobbits, elves, dwarves or magic. There is no Sauron trying to take over the world. The only evil in my world is that which man brings to his fellow man."

"What you say... It is hard to accept." Elrond whispers, slowly, and I catch him and Gandalf exchange looks.

"But it is the truth. I don't know how I got here. I was walking home when I saw a bright light and the next thing I knew, I was lying on the ground in the middle of the woods."

"Why have you come to me with this?"

"They say you're wise. That you have answers." I say, desperately and he sighs and turns to Gandalf. I turn to Gandalf as well, pleading for him with my eyes, "Please. I know I sound insane but I'm not lying." I insist, as Gandalf meets my gaze.
He looks at me for an unbearably long time before he slowly nods, "I believe that she believes she's telling the truth."

Elrond shakes his head in exasperation, and he begins talking to Gandalf in Elvish, which frustrates me because I'm right here. I know they're talking about me. At least Gandalf continues to speak in a language that I understand.

"I do not understand her story, but I do understand that she does feel like the people I have met after thousands of years had passed. Only, it is different with her. Her time is yet to come." Gandalf says.

"I cannot speak for those whose Powers surpass even my understanding. They work in ways that we will never understand. And currently, two armies are forming beyond the borders. Saruman's gaze is fixed on Rivendell." Elrond says.

"If the girl was brought here to us from another time or another world, there is a reason. She may yet have a purpose that she must fulfill here that will lead to the Enemy's defeat. Need I remind you of Glorfindel." Gandalf says.

"Glorfindel is a noble and powerful warrior who defeated a Balrog."

"Then, perhaps this girl has done another noble and brave deed herself that earned her a new life."

"She said there were no wars where she is from, anymore."

"I said there were no longer wars on a worldwide scale. But war still happens within countries." I butt in because I think they've forgotten that I exist.

"Did you fight in those wars?" Elrond asks, and I'm sure he doesn't mean to offend. In fact, he looks hopeful, like maybe he really is expecting me to be some great and noble soldier. Boy, is he in for a surprise.

"No. I have only ever been a daughter and a sister." I say. Elrond's face falls. He turns to Gandalf and speaks in Elvish again and my heart drops. Why are they talking about me as though I'm not here?!

"She has no idea the danger that lies within a war, and this war will certainly be larger than any of us has ever experienced."

"She would not be sent to us for no reason."

"And I agree. But she is a young girl. To take her from her home and expect her to do great things is asking for too much. That is putting too much pressure on her when, for all we know, she was sent to us for a different reason." Elrond says.

"Look, I don't know anything, okay? I'm not destined for greatness, I just want to go home. I want to go back to Gramps. I want to see my family again. There's nothing I can do here!" I plead, tears springing into my eyes. I don't care if these people think I'm not good enough or heroic enough to be sent to wherever here is. My family needs me, and that's all that matters. It's enough for me to be a hero in my little brother's eyes. I don't need to be a hero for these people.

"My dear," Gandalf approaches me and places a hand on my shoulder, "we all wish that we were not burdened by expectations and responsibility and yet, we cannot question our destiny. You were brought to us for a purpose, and maybe only then will you be able to go home."

Why is Gandalf being so confusing? I told him already. I'm not a powerful, important person. I'm
"What am I supposed to do?" I say, helplessly, turning to him and Lord Elrond. "I don't belong here. I can't fight. Why me?"

Lord Elrond looks deep in thought as he looks out the window. The silence is unbearable. When he turns back, his eyes fall on Gandalf first, before I see his posture change slightly. "It is no coincidence that you travelled with the hobbits. It is no coincidence that you were there, to be found by Estel. I am truly sorry to say that I do not have the answers you seek. But I can tell you that we might need you yet. You were meant to be here. Nothing happens for no reason." Lord Elrond says as he gets up from behind the desk and stands in front of me. "Sometimes, it is necessary for us to find the answers for ourselves. To help us truly understand the path that will lead us to our destiny."

I sniff, trying to hold back my tears.

"This isn't fair." I complain because I didn't ask to be here. I didn't ask to wake up in a pile of shit and to flee from monsters. I didn't ask for any kind of responsibility. Gramps is my only responsibility. He needs me. And Rory will have no one to take him to school or make his lunch. These people will do fine without me, but Gramps and Rory...

"How beautiful life would be if the world was fair to any of us." Lord Elrond says, giving me a sad smile.

"I do not know why you are here, but Gandalf is right. You were sent to us for a reason, but I fear that reason is beyond my understanding." Tears stream down my face, but Lord Elrond and Gandalf wait for me to finish.

"I am truly sorry to have disappointed you, Ellie." Lord Elrond bows his head in apology, but he is apologizing for something beyond his control. It's not his fault. I can't blame him for not being able to understand why the gods would curse me by bringing me to this place. But that doesn't help to relieve the ache in my heart.

"Can I...Can I go, please?" I ask. I want to be alone. I want to sob without anyone interrupting me.

Lord Elrond notices my distress, and he nods in understanding. "If you need anything else, I will be here."

I nod as well, because I just want to get out. Gandalf gives my shoulder a reassuring pat and I walk as quickly as I can to the door. Aragorn waits, sitting on a bench, reading his book. When he hears my footsteps, he looks up from his book and when he sees the look on my face, he gets up. I walk in a daze toward him, and he places his hands on my shoulders.

"They...they don't know. They don't know how I got here, they don't know how I can go back home." I can't hold my tears back anymore, and I feel his arms wrap around me, surrounding me in warmth and comfort. His hand cups the back of my head as I sob into his chest.

He shushes me and tells me it will be alright, but I don't believe a word of it. I'm forced to stay here, to fulfill some sort of duty that even I don't know. I'm stuck. I'm stuck here and I don't know how to get home.

And to add insult to injury, I'm crying in public. I hate that I can't hold it in. I'm supposed to be a tough girl. But all I seem to have done is cry, and that frustrates me. I wipe my eyes with my hands. "I'm a fucking mess. God damn it all." I say, frustrated at everything. I pull away from him and sniff. "Well," I say, "I'm not going anywhere, apparently."
"Do not lose hope yet."

"I guess I should have known from the beginning not to get my hopes up." I say, miserably.

"Meril."

"And now I'm gonna have to put up with stupid dresses and belted pads." I continue.

"Ellie." Aragorn says.

"What?" I say in a monotone.

"There will always be hope. There is hope still for you." He comforts me and I look down.

"This is stupid. I didn't ask for this." I whisper, shaking my head.

"Ellie..."

"You know what? I'm gonna go watch people hit things. I'll see you later." I say, loudly and he lets me go. He nods at me, realizing I want to be alone and I set off through the halls by myself, passing by more tall and beautiful elves as I try to find my way to the training grounds.

Of course, I get lost. I look out the window to find my bearings, and see a few people on horseback arrive. Rivendell has a lot of guests. I watch a blonde elf as he swings off his horse gracefully and looks around, and I swear he sees me looking at him because his head stops in my direction. I blink, because I can barely see his face from this distance, and it's rude to stare so I move on and find a door that leads outside to the training grounds.

Eventually, I hear the sounds of blades whizzing through the air, and I find a door that leads outside. Several male elves are holding up bows, aiming their arrows at targets that are impossible to see from that distance. And yet, their arrows find their mark. It's amazing watching them move. Even the way they fight with swords is graceful. I watch two of them sparring with each other with blunt swords, and I watch another as he makes a dagger dance in his hands.

He throws the blade at a target as he hears me approaching. Unsurprisingly, it finds its mark. He turns to me and speaks to me in Elvish.

"I don't understand." I say, shaking my head.

"Would you like to try?" He says, which makes me laugh, wryly.

"If you give me a sharp, pointy thing, chances are I'll drop it on my foot." I say, and he smiles as well.

"The first thing you must keep in mind is that you must always trust that you will hit your mark." He explains, picking up another dagger. I watch as his fingers pick up the hilt of the blade deftly and he throws it at another target.

I used to play baseball with Donovan and Gramps when I was young, all the way up until high school. Gramps always said I was born for pitching a ball, to which Donovan would say, "She's a girl. Girls can't pitch as good as guys." It was the one thing I can do better than him, and he hated knowing that I was good at something he couldn't do.

We stopped playing baseball because Gramps's back and joints started to ache and Donovan refused to play with me. But I still know how to pitch a ball. I doubt throwing knives is anything like it,
"Try it. You may use a stone, if it would make you more comfortable." The elf says.

I do want to release some stress. Maybe throwing rocks at something would make me feel better. He steps aside as I pick up a rock and throw it overhead. Of course it misses several feet.

"I'm awful."

"Throw with your entire body, not just your arm." A voice from behind me says. I turn to see the elf I was looking at before, the one who had just arrived.

The elf beside me bows and the blonde elf smiles at him. He whispers something to the elf, and the elf bows again and leaves.

"You're crashing my impromptu throwing lessons." I say to the blonde elf, who releases a laugh.

"I'd hardly call that a productive lesson, anyway."

"Oh? And you can do better?" I quirk an eyebrow at him, annoyed at his interruption.

"Perhaps." He looks at the target, and picks up a knife. He moves so quickly and fluidly that I barely even see him until the knife sails from his hand and stops right in the middle of the target.

He turns to me and I scowl at him. He ignores the expression on my face as he says, "You are not from here."

"Do I look like an elf to you?" I say, sarcastically and he quirks an eyebrow.

"Obviously not. An elf would hit their target from this distance easily enough."

"Oh, well, I'm sorry if I've been preoccupied with having an actual life instead of throwing things at blocks of wood."

He breathes out a short laugh, "And yet, you choose to come here now."

He takes two more knives, and I roll my eyes as he releases them at the same time. I don't even want to know if he hit the target, it would just annoy me more.

"You already know how to throw hard, now you just need to learn how to throw properly." He says.

I look at his right, pointy ear, squinting and pretending to think very hard. Finally, I say, "Hm. Yeah. Now that I think about it, I do." He nods in agreement, but I look him straight in the eye and say, "But I think I'd ask someone who's actually interested in teaching me instead of showing off."

I spin on my heels, making my dress twist around my ankles and I stumble as I try to walk. I hear the blonde elf's muffled laughter behind me but after I adjust the bottom of the dress, I stomp ahead.

"I meant no offense. I was only trying to lighten your heart. You looked troubled." He says, walking next to me.

I give a single breath of derisive laughter, "Well, I'm definitely troubled now."

"I meant... when we first met." I promptly stop walking, and so does he.

"Technically, we didn't meet until you decided to interrupt." I wave my hand in the general direction
of the throwing knives.

"When we first saw each other."

"You couldn't have seen me from that distance, I could barely even distinguish your face. Your hair, however..." I continue walking again.

"What is that supposed to mean?" He says. After a short pause, he follows me again.

"Nothing." I shrug.

"Elves can see and hear for a hundred leagues." He says.

I shake my head, "Of course you do."

I stop near a tree with low branches and trip on a tree root and I turn on my heels to face him when I hear him cough. He stops before he can even bump into me, barely managing to wipe the smirk from his face.

"What do you want?" I snap because I don't have the time nor the patience to play with arrogant elves. I am not in the mood. I am in a horrible mood. Given any other chance, I'd probably be stupefied that such a gorgeous specimen is following me around, but I don't want to deal with him. I want to hit things and get angry and cry.

"Goheno nîn." He gives a small bow and I sigh. My expression softens as his face falls with a sincere look of...something. It's less annoying than his stupid smirk, at least.

"I don't speak Elvish." I say, realizing how dumb I must sound.

"Forgive me." He says and bows again. Why is he bowing? Why do people bow all the time here?

"It's fine. I'm sorry for snapping. I'm just not in the mood." I shake my head and lean against the tree. He keeps a respectable distance, at least.

"I have never seen you in Imladris before." He says. "Are you one of the Dûnedain?"

"No." I'd rather not say I'm American or a New Yorker. That will raise more questions.

"Oh? Where do you come from?" Of course, he asks more questions. I can't shake this guy off.

I shake my head, "I'd rather not say." I have a policy of not trusting strangers. Aragorn is an exemption. Besides, I can barely explain where I'm from to Aragorn, how will I say 'I'm from the future' casually without sounding crazy?

"I came here to distract myself from my problems." I continue, trying to change the subject.

"Ah, and I ruined that for you?"

"Yes, actually, you did." I say and he's starting to look just as annoyed as I feel. Good. Maybe he'll go away.

"You are quite the fierce one, are you not? You have a warrior's heart."

I can only wish. The irony doesn't escape me: one elf says I'm not ready for war, another claims I have the heart of one born for war.
"Do you not have someone else to bother?" I ask.

"Oh, I will, in time. Truthfully, I came here to prepare myself for confrontation." He says, raising his arms to hang on to a branch just above his head. Despite my annoyance, I can't help but stare. Damn, I swear, God himself sculpted those arms to perfection.

"Oh?" I cross my arms, "Maybe you should go confront whoever it is you need to confront. Get it over with. Like a Band-Aid." Shit, no one here knows what a Band-Aid is.

He hesitates, and I pray to God he assumes I merely mispronounced 'bandage' or something but instead he says, with a small smile, "I'd rather not."

Someone from the doorway raises their voice and says, "Ellie!"

I look to see Merry and Pippin beaming at me.

"Merry, Pippin!" I call. God, those hobbits are a welcome sight! A small smile appears on my face as they approach. The elf turns to them as well, before looking back down at me.

"Go to your friends. We will see each other again, Ellie." He says, backing away. I nod at him and he passes between the two hobbits, who part as if Moses himself parted them like the Red Sea. My eyes follow him until he turns a corner. I step forward to meet the hobbits.

I don't know if I should hug them. We've only known each other for less than a month and I'm not sure if they would like that. They're so small, that sometimes I forget they're not children. They're strong and resilient, and care-free. Whenever I wallow in my guilt over what happened to Frodo, I only have to look at their determined eyes, set to look at an optimistic situation. My heart pangs in agony as I remember Rory again, who had the same outlook in life.

"Is Frodo okay? Have you eaten anything? Where's Sam?" I say, breathlessly to them.

"Sam is with Frodo now. I'd never seen him turn down a meal before but he insists on staying with Frodo." Pippin says. The smiles on their faces lighten my heart.

"You can come visit Frodo, too. He would like the company." Merry chirps.

I step back, "Would Sam let me be there?" I say in a hushed voice.

"Of course he will. Why would he not?" Pippin asks as they lead me to a bench, watching the elves train.

I shrug, "I just... I can't help but blame myself."

"What happened to Frodo was not your fault. We should not have been so eager to give away our position. Sam puts no blame in you. If we are to start blaming ourselves, we will all go mad." Merry says, giving me a comforting smile. I smile back, hesitantly. I guess he's right. We're all going to blame ourselves but Frodo is safe, that's what matters. Torturing ourselves will benefit nobody.

"You're a smart guy, Merry." I say.

"Oy. What about me?" Pippin exclaims, and I giggle.

"I guess you're okay, too."

His mouth gapes open and Merry and I both laugh at him. "Alright, you win. I'll visit him tomorrow morning. I'll let him rest now." Truth is, I'm just being a coward. I'm avoiding seeing Frodo because
while I may have convinced myself now, I may start blaming myself again when I see him. It's become a knee-jerk reaction for me to take the blame. I shake myself back to reality and beam at Merry and Pippin.

"You didn't answer my question about whether or not you ate." I say.

"Well, we did. But we can always eat again. The elves make the most wonderful food. A bit too much cabbage and leaves, but their mushrooms are delightful." Pippin says and I get up from the bench.

"It's settled then! Let's go eat some more!" I say, and they are both only too happy to oblige.

Chapter End Notes

Sindarin translations:

Hir nîn - My lord
Meril - Rose

I can't believe I've had 200 people reading this. The kudos left also blow my mind. That any of you would read my fanfic is amazing. Thank you for the kind words from my readers and thank you for putting up with me. Honestly, I don't know how you do it. But just thank you!
Ellie's memories are resurfacing at an inconvenient time, Legolas is confusing and Aragorn fulfills his promise of teaching Ellie how to handle a knife. Maybe it would have hurt less if Arwen had driven one at her gut instead.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

I run through a stark white hospital hallway, panting. Snow still clings to my hair. I stop just outside the emergency room, and Gramps is sitting on one of the chairs, looking slumped and defeated. The moment Rory sees me, he begins to wail.

"Shut up. Shut up!" Donovan paces, and he gives our four-year-old brother a shove, making him fall to the floor.

"What is wrong with you?!" I yell, stooping down to gather my hysterical brother in my arms.

"Make him shut up!" Donovan yells back.

"You shut up! He's a baby! He's scared! Get a grip, Donovan!" I snap. I am aware that there are people around us, and I bounce Rory in my arms, making shushing sounds as he buries his face in my neck, whimpering. "Donnie's mean." He says.

"He's not a baby. He's four."

"And you're sixteen! Act like it!" Gramps snaps, which sobers him up.

There's a strained silence before Donovan announces, "Dad's dead."

And I swear, my whole world shattered then and there. "What?" I gasp. I begin to shiver violently, as though the cold outside has finally seeped into my skin. I shake my head, refusing to believe it.

"No. No. They were shopping for--"

"Christmas gifts! For this brat!"

"Don't you dare blame Rory." I hug Rory tightly as he becomes agitated. My eyes sting. Rory leans back and his small hands touch my cheeks, wiping my tears away.

"Do you have a boo-boo, El?" He says, his wide, blue eyes looking innocently into mine. I shake my head, because I don't want to scare Rory. I feel like I'm floating, like my feet aren't touching the ground anymore. Dad was my compass. He was always the person I turned to for advice, for help. I feel like something inside me has snapped. He was the string that kept my feet grounded. I feel like I'm being swallowed by the world, like the sky is going to eat me.

"Do you need a kiss to heal the boo-boo?" Rory says and I breathe in a ragged gasp as I feel him press a wet kiss to my cheek.
"Gramps has a boo-boo, too?" He glances over my shoulder and I see my grandfather crying silently behind me. Rory squirms to get down from my arms and I let him go as he runs to Gramps, scrambling to the seat next to Gramps and giving Gramps a kiss on the cheek.

He turns to Donovan and juts out his lower lip, "Donnie's mean."

"And you're a fucking brat." Donovan mutters. That's it. That's what really makes me snap. I stride towards Donovan and slap him across the cheek, breathing hard.

"Stop it." I hiss. He stares at me with an open mouth. He's stunned into silence. The emergency doors open and I feel sick. The woman looks at us, and I don't need to see the pity in her eyes. I know, because my heart drops to my feet.

"Mr. Grayson." She says.

"Yes?" Both Gramps and Donovan answers. The woman first looks at my brother, and then my grandfather.

"I'm sorry."

I can't take it anymore. I sink to the ground next to Donovan, leaning against the wall as I grip my hair. I'm openly sobbing as I shake my head, refusing to accept it. She can't be dead. Mom can't die. Dad can't die. This isn't fair. My sobs drown out the soft voice of the woman who has come to announce that we are now orphans.

"El." Donovan sounds so broken as he leans down and wraps an arm around me. And even after everything he did just this night, I bury myself in his chest, and he lets me sob.

I wake up covered in cold sweat and gripping my neck, which suddenly burns. For a moment, I blink at my surroundings, wondering where I am this time. Before I realize that I'm no longer in the cold, white hospital floor. It was just a dream. A memory. One I would have liked to erase from my mind forever.

Salabeth finds me coughing violently. She comforts me by rubbing my back as the sick feeling in my stomach passes, whispering in Elvish, and making me drink some kind of herbal medicine that tastes sweet and eases the pain. Eventually, I calm down and I tell her it was probably just my stomach acting up from eating too much yesterday. I don't think she buys the lie, but she doesn't push me for answers.

I force the dream into the recesses of my mind. I was at my friend's house when Gramps called me, saying that mom and dad got into a car accident in Williamsburg Bridge on the way home. I take a shaky breath. Of all the things I had to dream of, it had to be that. I don't need to remember it again. I have to focus on what's happening now. I distract myself by touching the intricate comb made of bone and the ribbons strewn on the vanity.

I don't think anyone else knows where I'm really from. Nobody asks, anyway, but Salabeth just has spot on maternal instinct and knows that I'm unfamiliar with how things are done. She's patient with me when I ask questions, and she fusses over my hair. She fusses over me in general. She offers me a tonic to relieve the pain in my throat in case it comes back, but so far the first dose she gave me is enough. Now, the only marks of the Ringwraith's attack on me is an ugly, hand-shaped bruise that is already starting to fade.

"These Dúnedain, they are a brave and noble people but I will never understand why they do not find bringing combs necessary. You have lovely hair. You must take care of it. At the very least, you
should braid it or tie it back." Salabeth tuts as she gently pulls my dark hair back into a half-braid. She even has this trick of gathering strands of hair together and tying them into a knot, and after leaving it for some time, when she pulls the knot free, the strands curl.

"Ugh. You should see the state of Aragorn's clothes. He smells as if he hasn't washed in months!" I complain and we both laugh.

"I think it is safe to assume that what you say is true. I say this not to offend but you humans have little care for hygiene." Salabeth says.

"Hey!" I protest and she laughs.

"I did say you were an exception."

"Thanks for the new underwear, by the way. Who owned them? I'd like to thank them for their sacrifice." I say.

"Ah, you mean the chemise and drawers? I did not know if you actually did wear drawers. As far as I know, only the Rohirrim women and noblewomen of Gondor wear drawers to protect themselves when riding a horse." Salabeth looks pleased with herself for being able to guess that I wear underwear. What, are the humans here generally viewed as unsanitary? The lack of plumbing in Bree makes more sense now.

"To answer your question: It was owned by the women of the Dúnedain. Most of the leaders of the Dúnedain would come to Imladris to live, and they would bring their families. After a few years, they would leave for the Angle, where most of the Dúnedain settle and sometimes, their wives or daughters leave behind clothes they have outgrown."

"You keep mentioning the Dúnedain. Who are they?"

"You have not heard of the Dúnedain where you come from?" She stops fixing my hair in surprise, her eyes finding mine through the mirror.

"Er...no." I feel like an idiot. Salabeth smiles kindly at me.

"They are the last remnants of a race of Kings, descendants of the Númenórians, and close friends of the elves. Their home used to be Númenór, an island in the West, far out into the sea."

"And they stay here?"

"The descendants of Isildur do. Sometimes, mothers or sisters would stay for days. Mostly, though, the Dúnedain wander the wilds."

"Do their women also wander the wilds?"

"The men do not bring their wives and children. The wilds are a dangerous place, but there are female Rangers who go off on their own or with a small group. Mostly maidens, though. Young women who do not have husbands or children to take care of."

"Damn. I need to take notes from them." I say, and she laughs.

"What of your home? What are the people there like? I imagine it is truly far away, if the Númenórians are not known to you."

I see my own reflection in the mirror change, as my expression transforms to that of pain and
longing. Home is out of my reach. Thinking of it now hurts too much. She notices my silence immediately.

"Ellie, I..." I meet her eyes through our reflections in the mirror. I see that my eyes are glistening with tears. Fuck. No. Enough with the crying. I blink away the tears. "Home is far out of reach." I mumble, the thought of my conversation with Lord Elrond and Gandalf yesterday is a wound that is still fresh.

Salabeth hesitates as her hands twist my hair. "Ellie, if you ever need anything, if you need to talk to someone, I am here for you." She says, and I can't help but smile. She has no obligations to take care of me like this, or be this nice and yet, she is. She's a blessing on this land.

"Thank you. Really. It means a lot to me that you would care so much." I say.

"Humans can be so resilient, sometimes. They like to be independent, but we are women. We lean on each other, share in each other's strength. Men have their pride, but we have each other, no matter what race we may be." She says.

My smile widens, "Girls have to stick together." I say, and she giggles. "At the end of the day, it is us who can understand each other, no matter where we come from." Salabeth tugs at the knots of hair scattered all over my head.

My hair tumbles and drapes over my shoulder and I pat the half-braid that Salabeth has finished. "Where are you going?" She asks as I lace up the ankle-length brown boots she brought for me this morning. The shoes are surprisingly comforable and supple. It feels good on my feet.

I take one last look at the outfit I borrowed from Salabeth, the sleeves of which comfortably settle around my wrist. It's easy to move in and best of all, it doesn't have a long train. I wear brown leggings beneath a red tunic that I secure with a belt around my waist because it's too big on me. I'm not wearing a chemise anymore, but Salabeth has taught me how to wear a band around my chest that feels like a strapless sports bra, which she explained were worn by female elven warriors for support during physical activity or a battle.

"I'm going out to let loose." I say.

"Let loose?" She asks as she follows me out of my bed chamber.


"Why?" She asks, slowly as her eyes narrow in suspicion. I laugh at her expression and take both of her hands, "I'll be fine. If anybody asks, I'm in the training grounds."

I jog backwards as Salabeth goes her own way, looking at me with raised eyebrows. I wave goodbye to her before twisting around and running into a wall.

"Oof!" I rub my face and take a quick look at my surroundings. I'm thankful that the sun has barely risen yet and not many people are around. It makes this less embarrassing. I hear a soft cough, and realize the wall was actually a tall person.

Specifically, a tall elf.

Aw, crap.

"It's you." I gasp, as I take another step away. It's the elf from the training grounds, the arrogant one who liked to show off.
"Good morning." He says, stiffly.

"Uh. Good morning." I reply.

"Are you going out?" He motions to my outfit and I nod. He offers his elbow and I look at it, stunned. Does he want me to take it? I think he wants me to take it.

He raises his elbow slightly and I reach out and slip my hand through the crook of his arm. We start walking. He smells really nice. Like the oils that Salabeth gave me for my bath, but it smells more earthy with him. He matches his strides with mine, because I have shorter legs. Seriously, these people are massive. I'm 5'4 and a half. Everyone else that I meet, aside from the hobbits and dwarves, are at least a foot taller than me. They do nothing for my neck.

"How are you?" He asks. I don't know why he suddenly cares. He seemed pretty cold to me yesterday with the way he spoke and his very cold greeting today, so I'm dumb-founded that he would even offer to walk me this morning, and care about how I am.

"Okay, I guess? I was planning on hitting things while no one was looking." I say, as we weave through hallways. The view from the open windows are gorgeous. There's something beautiful about the trees and hills outlined with the soft light of a sun that has barely risen yet, making the trees seem to glow.

"I think you will be disappointed. Elves do not need as much sleep as you mortals do," He says.

"Of course you don't." They're immortal and apparently they're superhuman. Or... Well... Superelf.

"Are you still troubled?"

"Am I that obvious?"

"You hide it very well. At first glance, you look as if you are getting used to Imladris. I am just...more observant than most."

"You've been observing me?" The thought of it makes me flustered. Why in the hell would I even catch his attention? I'm practically being swallowed up by the beauty of the other female elves around me.

"Not like that." He says, hastily and with a nervous laugh. I want to kick myself for even assuming anything. "I just see it in your eyes. There is a smile on your lips, and yet your eyes show pain and longing. And anger."

"I just miss home." I sigh. Okay, but how much does he observe? Will he be able to tell I'm not from here? As in Middle-Earth?

"Tell me about your home."

How do I explain New York to him without giving away where I'm actually from?

"Lights. There are lights everywhere. Beautiful, big lights wherever you turn. At winter, it's especially magical. The streets and trees are decorated with little lights that make the trees look like they're housing fireflies. The people are impatient and busy, but they're strong. Independent. They know how to take care of themselves." I say this first with a small, sad tone but as Times Square and Central Park come into my memory, I start to smile. New York is imperfect, but it's home.

"It sounds beautiful." He says. Ha. He should see the trash all over the city. I never thought I'd miss
the rats and muggers in Central Park.

We slow down as we hear footsteps approaching and Aragorn appears from the corner.

I light up immediately.

"Aragorn!" I say. I didn't realize how much I needed to see him until now. He's a familiar face in this unfamiliar world.

"Ellie? Awake before the sun is up? We have been blessed, indeed!" He jokes as I slip my hand off the elf's arm and take both of Aragorn's hands.

"I'm sorry about yesterday. I feel horrible for being mean to you." I say. He squeezes my hands, "Think nothing of it. I am glad to see you back to yourself." He says and I smile like a groupie being complimented by a rockstar.

I pull away from him and he notices the quiet elf beside me.

"Legolas." They do this manly handshake where they grip each other's arms. It's very macho. But it's only then that I realize the name of the elf I've been talking to this whole time. How the hell did I forget to ask his name?

"Thank you for accompanying Ellie. She needed the distraction."

"Don't talk about me in the third person. I'm right here." I say, jokingly. "But yeah. Thanks for accompanying me. I needed the distraction." I say this to Legolas, who bows with a smile. He's being suspiciously nice.

"It is my pleasure." He says.

"Where are you off to at this hour?" Aragorn asks.

"The training grounds." I says.

"She had the need to hit things." Legolas answers.

"At least she is not hitting people." Aragorn says. "I did promise to train you."

"And you are yet to fulfill that promise. I guess the show off can come, too." I wave a hand at Legolas, who raises an eyebrow in indignation.

"Legolas can help with your archery. None has surpassed the Elven mastery with the bow." Aragorn say and I stare back at Legolas.

"Is there anything elves aren't good at?" I ask.

"We do not smell quite as badly as humans." Legolas smirks as Aragorn and I exchange offended expressions.

"And you smell too much like flowers." I say, which is only half-false.

"Says the woman who may have put too much rose oil in her bath today." He says, and I blush furiously.

Aragorn's words from yesterday echo through my conscience, "Meril is the Elvish word for rose."
I stammer and stutter as I avoid looking at Aragorn, who coughs nervously. The damned elf is just staring at me. Probably to make me feel more uncomfortable than I already am.

"Fucking dipshit. God!" I mutter as I stomp away, positive that my face is still enflamed.

"Man?" Legolas whispers to Aragorn.

Aragorn responds in Elvish. I turn around and walk backwards as I say, "Someday, I'm gonna learn Elvish and then I'd know what you people are saying behind my back."

I twist back around and they continue to mutter in Elvish.

"I can hear you!" I call and they laugh. They laugh, these two unbearable jerks.

We've reached the training grounds, and true to Legolas's word, a few elves have already set up and are practicing. I pick up the nearest stone and throw it in the air a few inches, catching it when it falls. It feels like an uneven baseball.

I turn back to the two of them. They stop in their tracks just as the stone drops back in my hand. "What?" I say, innocently before throwing it at the target I've been aiming at since yesterday.

It still falls a few feet short and Aragorn and Legolas cough. I turn slowly to them, narrowing my eyes.

"Your form is wrong. You slouch, for one thing. And you do not want your arm to go across your body. You want your arm to move vertically." Aragorn says, stepping forward to get a throwing knife from the stands.

"Like chopping wood." Legolas adds.

I feel Aragorn's hand on my back and shoulders as he readjusts my form, so I'm standing with a straight back. I hear Legolas' amused chuckle as he notices me blushing.

"Now, put your left foot forward and put all your weight in your right." Aragorn's foot gives mine a gentle nudge, and I step forward.

"Not that much." Legolas says. I can hear amusement in his voice.

I glare at him and he raises his hands in surrender as I readjust the distance between my feet.

"Twist your body so your left shoulder is facing the target and hold the handle of the knife like this." Aragorn continues, giving me one of the knives and showing me where to put my fingers.

"When you throw, keep your wrist stiff. Your arm should be level with your back. Do not pull your arm back so far, like you were doing before. And when you throw, keep your arm straight and shift all your weight to your left foot. Follow through with your throw, let your body move." He demonstrates this with such fluidity and makes it look way too easy.

Also hot.

He makes it look very hot.

Of course he hits his target. He was raised by elves, he's practically as perfect at everything as they are.

"Try it." I give him a look of doubt as he offers the handle of a knife to me.
"Worry not. Knives used in practice are duller compared to those used in combat." He says to me and I try to copy his movements but the handle hits the target instead of the blade, making it bounce back and fall to the ground.

"Keep your arm here." Aragorn says as I raise my arm to try again, and he tugs my arm forward. I've been so used to pitching with a baseball that it's become second nature to me to pull my arm back far.

I try again, and this time, the blade hits the wood.

And then it falls to the ground.

"You almost have it. You are a quick learner." Aragorn smiles.

Throwing is easy for me. I've got this.

By the time the sun has finally settled in the sky, my right arm is sore, and of the thirty blades I threw, eight were successful hits, in the sense that they all managed to stick to the wood instead of bouncing off. I still can't hit my actual mark, but I've gotten close to it four times, and those were purely out of luck. Not much, but good enough for a first-timer.

And then Legolas struts towards me with a couple of bows in his hand.

"Bows are more reliable, if you truly want a ranged weapon." He says, handing one of the bows to me.

"What I truly want is breakfast." I say, handing it back to him.

"Are you afraid to find out your aim is as bad as I believe it to be?" He pushes the bow back in my hand and I pull it to myself.

"Oh, you're on, pretty boy." I say.

"Pretty boy?" Aragorn chuckles under his breath as Legolas blinks, probably working out whether it was an insult or a compliment.

"Hold out your arm. You have to wear a bracer so you will not skin yourself."

Oh, that sounds nice. Skinning myself early in the morning. What a lovely way to start the day. He slips a leather arm band on my forearm, and shows me how to secure it. I have no idea why he's suddenly so keen on doing this. He holds up his own bow and begins to explain how to stand, how I should pull my arm, how to aim. He tells me to keep my bow vertical, but he holds his at an angle, and I point this out to him.

"I am, however, not a beginner."

I stick my tongue out at him when he turns back to the target and pulls the string back. When he releases the arrow, it sings and lands dead center.

I fumble over how to nock the arrow, because the bow has a small ridge to set the arrow on in the middle and pulling the string back actually requires effort because it strains and pulls against my grip.

Legolas moves fluidly as he readjusts my arm. He keeps a respectable distance, tapping my elbow to make me raise it. My arms shake as I release the arrow. It lands four feet away. I sigh in defeat.

"Aragorn is right. You are a quick learner." He says and my laugh is wry.
"Yeah, I just have to aim at anywhere but my target to actually hit it." I say.

"You would do better if you exercise."

I look at the two of them, suspiciously. They're wearing identical innocent expressions.

"You're going to turn this into a thing, aren't you?" I say, slowly.

"Such a strange way with words." Legolas says, just as slowly, ignoring my statement, and my suspicion grows.

"Keep your elbow straight." Aragorn pretends nothing conspiratorial is going on.

My elbows are shaking with fatigue. And more importantly, I know what they're up to.

"Ha. No. I think I'll go see Frodo. Thanks for this...lesson. You two kids have fun with your knives and your arrows." I say, handing the bow back to Legolas.

"We should focus on archery tomorrow!" Aragorn calls after me as I walk away and I shake my head as my suspicions are confirmed. They're up to something.

I nearly run into another wall of flesh.

Except this time, it's soft. Really soft. Gentle hands steady me as I attempt to not run into the person.

"God! I'm so s-sorry..." I stutter to a halt as clear, blue eyes look at me with concern.

Arwen.

"That is quite alright."

I feel like dirt that dared to ruin such pure beauty. I feel immediately conscious of what I'm wearing and how messy my hair is and how sweaty the skin over my upper lip is and how sweaty my underarms are. Ugh. I wasn't even thinking about it until I saw Arwen, with her long, dark hair cascading down her back like waves and her silver silk dress. I don't know what to do so I wring my hands together again before I remember my manners (Or what little I have of them).

"It's...um...hir nîn." Shit! Hir nîn means 'my lord'? I don't know what 'my lady' is in Elvish. Shit. Fuck. I want to punch myself but I bow because it's the right thing to do. Or at least, I feel like it is.

She smiles at me, "Hiril nîn." She corrects and her voice is like satin.

"Hiril nîn." I repeat, dumbly. Elvish sounds beautiful on her lips. It sounds awkward on mine.

"I am glad you are well. Aragorn has told me many things about you, Ellie." She says.

Aragorn talks about me? To Arwen?! My chest swells with irrational pride.

"Oh? Like how I keep making things more difficult for him?" I try to brush it off with a joke, and she laughs.

"He says it is like taking care of a child."

Oh.

My heart shatters.
Arwen is quick to notice.

"He means it well. He feels protective of you, he calls you his 'meril'. The flower he tended to in the wild. Something akin to a daughter."

Ouch. Stop. I know she's trying to make me feel better but Jesus. It's like she reached into my chest, yanked my heart out and proceeded to crush it between her fingers.

And I am totally considered a daughter. Not even a sister, but a daughter. Christ.

I don't know how to respond.

"Oh." Is all I can manage to say. I'm blinking. I feel like I'm in a daze.

Arwen's face glows as she looks past my head. She's taller than me. Everyone here is taller than me. It only makes me feel all the more inferior. I don't need to turn around. I know she's looking at Aragorn. I know she's watching him as his hair falls over his eyes, and he carelessly brushes it away with the finger that has a ring with two snakes on it, where one snake holds a crown of leaves in its jaw, and both of their eyes are brilliant emeralds. I never got to ask him where he got that ring.

"He is an honorable man, and a warm-hearted one." She says, almost dreamily. The look on her face is so gentle, so soft. And also, so private. I feel like I'm watching something I shouldn't be.

I shrug and glance behind me as Aragorn picks up the practice knives I was using earlier, pretending not to see what she sees, "Eh. He's okay. Quite the gentleman, at least."

She laughs again and takes both of my hands, "In the short time you have met him, you have earned his affection. It is rare to see him open up so. He considers you a friend. And any friend of his is a friend of mine. If you need anything, just come to me." She smiles, and I smile back—or rather, I wince and pretend it's a smile. There's no malice in her eyes. I don't have it in me to hate her for holding Aragorn's heart.

"Oh, I am sorry. You were going somewhere? I did not mean to get in your way." She pulls her hands away from mine.

"I was just on my way to Frodo's bed chamber."

"You know the way? I can take you, if you wish."

I wave my hands frantically. "No. No. Please. I can find my way. I've taken up enough of your time already. I'm sure you miss him." I start backing away and she nods in understanding.

I flee.

Just before I turn the corner, I see in the corner of my eye Aragorn looking at Arwen with the same glowing expression. That private, gentle look of love. I wrench my eyes away because I can't bear it anymore.

I immediately get lost. Particularly because I've never actually been anywhere near Frodo's room. I'm just walking through the hallways, feeling miserable when I realize I'm retracing my steps back to Lord Elrond's study. I only realize it when I'm standing right in front of the door.

"Great." I mutter, before turning back around to try another hallway. The door opens behind me, "Ah!" A cheerful voice says from the doorway.
When I look back, Gandalf is standing there, a smile barely visible beneath his incredible beard. Like everyone else, he towers over me, even though his back is stooped and he grips a long, wooden staff to keep himself upright.

"Hi." I say, dumbly.

"What brings you here, my dear?" He says.

"I was trying to find Frodo's room." I feel dumber by the second.

"You're in luck! I was just about to go there myself. Poor Samwise has barely had enough time to rest." He strides forward as he talks, so I follow him.

"How are you finding Imladris?"

"The food's better than what they serve in Bree, that's for sure. It also smells better than Bree. And it's cleaner and beautiful. The people are welcoming. But it's..." I shrug, because as beautiful as Rivendell is, I feel so out of place. It's so isolated and quiet. I'm used to the rush of traffic, and the huge crowd. I'm used to huge buildings, not mountains, rivers and trees. It's all so unlike busy New York.

"Not home." Gandalf finishes for me and I smile sadly at him. He gives me this look, as though I'm a crossword puzzle he can't solve.

"What has Aragorn told you? About the situation of Middle-earth?"

Where'd that come from? That was a complete change of subject.

"He only told me about the Ringwraiths. They used to be kings but now serve Sauron after he tempted them with the One Ring."

"Ah, I see. Men are very easily seduced by the Ring's power. The Nazgûl were Númenoreans. They used to be great and ruled powerful kingdoms, now they are no more than slaves to evil." He explained, and I have no idea why he's telling me this. I can barely comprehend the fact that hobbits can eat as much as four grown Men can, let alone the power of the One Ring.

"People really want this Ring, huh?" I ask.

"It has managed to ensnare the minds of noble men, and instilled fear and discord among the people of Middle-earth. And it has a will of its own. Sauron poured into that Ring his own malice and power. As such, that Ring can never be used for good. It controls all the other Rings of Power. With it, Sauron ravaged Middle-earth with no mercy. If he finds that Ring now, I do not think he will stop."

A chill runs through my body. Won't stop? What if...

"Do you think it will reach home?" My voice comes out hushed.

"Well, if you really are from a time ahead of us, and you do not know anything about the Ring, then I believe that someone has managed to destroy it before your time. And that is indeed good news."

"Then why am I here? Why now?"

"I wish I could tell you, my dear Ellie, I really do."

I hang my head in disappointment.
“It is strange.” He continues, staring straight ahead. There’s that word again. ‘Strange’. It feels like a curse word when used to describe me. "That Aragorn, of all people, was the one who found you. He has become protective of you very easily."

“It's not my fault.” I say, immediately.

Gandalf has stopped walking, and so have I. He turns to me slowly, sensing the defensiveness in my tone. Gandalf stares at me keenly, watching my expression. I've been greeted with suspicion before, and been called strange. It's like I always have to be on the defensive whenever the people here question me, like they're blaming me for something.

"My dear, I am not blaming you for anything." This old man can read my mind.

"I am merely telling you a story. I have been around a long time." Yeah, I can see that. How old is this guy? "I have seen many things, heard many stories. The one you told me is not as strange to my ears as you would believe. But one cannot help but wonder why you were chosen, why Aragorn was the one who found you. When something as unique as your experience happens, there is always a reason. I have my suspicions and my guesses, all quite fantastical but also quite plausible."

Guesses? Does he believe we're soul mates? The thought of it makes me laugh. "What, you think Aragorn and I have some sort of connection or something? He has a girlfriend."

Gandalf chuckles. "As I said, fantastical ideas. I may have one about you, but that is a story for another time." He waves his hand, but now I can't help but think of how this conversation has taken a turn. I'm taken aback that Gandalf would even spare me two thoughts. I feel insignificant compared to Kings and hobbits and elves.

"I will say, however, that I believe the force that brought you to us is trying to send us a message. Perhaps to give us hope that we may survive the coming war, or to bring balance back to the land. I cannot say for certain. What I can say is that any power that brings you to us is good. For if they had evil intentions, you would be a servant of Sauron at this moment."

He gives me this smile, of knowing and patience as doubt makes my head hang. What if I'm unconsciously doing exactly what Sauron wanted? What if Frodo getting stabbed really is on me? Gandalf places a gentle hand on my shoulder, and I look up at him.

"Do not ever lose hope, child. You are young and have much to live for. Do not let doubt and the evil from the East reach your soul, for yours is pure and good. It would be a shame if it was corrupted."

While Aragorn's words had made me pessimistic and cynical before, that smile on Gandalf's face warms my heart. I am a complete stranger to him, but his trust fuels a spark in me that has sputtered out the moment I accepted that I was stuck in Middle-earth. Maybe because all this time, doubt and negativity and fear ate at my heart and I desperately need to believe in something right now, but that was all the comfort I needed.

Chapter End Notes

Man? - What?

I hope the length of this chapter makes up for the time between posting them. I'm so
sorry for making you guys wait.
Chapter Summary

Ellie admits her feelings of guilt to the Lord of Imladris and the Grey Pilgrim and both Lord Elrond and Gandalf has some wise words for her.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Frodo is thinner than I remember, or maybe it's simply because the large bed he lies on is practically swallowing him up. He is buried beneath soft sheets and pillows. He's pale but not nearly as pale as when Arwen rescued him. My hand finds his forehead and I can't help but smile. He's warm. He's alive. Sam is curled up in an armchair by Frodo's bed, fast asleep.

"Samwise." Gandalf's voice is gentle as he shakes Sam awake. Sam starts and mutters, "'Sokay. I can watch him."

"You need to sleep, Sam." I say and he blinks up at me.

"Miss Ellie? I'm sure Mr. Frodo will be glad to know you visited him." I highly doubt it when it was my stupid fire that got him stabbed in the first place.

"And I'm sure he'll be glad to know you've been by his side all this time but you have to eat and sleep." I say to him and he smiles, "I've been eating here. The ellyth bring me trays of food. And this chair is very soft and comfortable. There's no trouble with sleeping here." He says.

"Okay, how about a bath?" I raise an eyebrow knowingly at him, the corners of my mouth tugging up in a smile.

Sam blinks at me, "I think I'm getting used to not bathing."

His determination to stay by Frodo's side is admirable.

"Samwise Gamgee, it will do Frodo no good if you start neglecting your own health." Gandalf says, and I'm reminded so much of Gramps. I'm stunned by the similarity they have. Gramps was the kind of old man who had iron beneath his thin, aging skin and authority in his voice. He's not afraid to be strict, but he prefers not to be. Gandalf seems like that kind of old man.

Sam looks at Gandalf with a bit of panic in his eyes. "I--I guess I should bathe, at least." He says.

"And eat. Where are those two other troublesome hobbits?" Gandalf asks.

"They said they were going to drink tea with Bilbo."

How come there's tea here but no coffee? How is that fair?

"Then perhaps you should join them. Take a break, Samwise. Were you not so excited about getting to see the elves of Rivendell?"
Sam smiles, sheepishly. "Begging your pardon, Gandalf, but Rivendell will not be going anywhere. Frodo needs my attention more than Rivendell does at the moment."

Gandalf and I exchange pleasantly surprised smiles. I think Sam just became my favorite person then and there. Eventually, we coax Sam out of the room, but he promises to come back as soon as he finishes tea. Gandalf assures me that would take a long time, as hobbits do love their tea.

Gandalf settles on the chair that Sam had been sleeping on, and I sit at the foot of Frodo's bed. I can't help but think back on how he came to be in this situation. And I can't help but remember Frodo's fevered words.

"He called for you, you know? For three days, before Arwen found us, all he did was say 'Gandalf'." I say and I bite my bottom lip. Maybe I shouldn't have said that. I steal a glance at Gandalf, and he looks like I just punched him in the gut. I definitely shouldn't have said that. Why can I never just keep my mouth shut?

"Sorry." I add, hastily because I really don't want Gandalf to repeatedly hit me with his stick.

There's a long pause before Gandalf sighs, and when my eyes find him, he's stooped, his back curved, making him look tired and older, if that was even possible. "No. I am sorry. I let him wait."

"Sauron's reach is longer than I imagined. I watched a friend fall to the lure of greed and power." He says.

"He...he sided with Sauron?"

"Not necessarily, but his desire for power made him forget his sense of right and wrong. He forgot that our duty is to guide, not to rule. He tried to turn me to his side, to see it from his eyes."

"I don't suppose he took rejection well."

Gandalf winced, "No, indeed."

I look back down at Frodo. The two of us are quiet, and the silence makes thoughts creep into my head. Treacherous thoughts, of how different things could have been if I was found by Sauron's servants. How they could manipulate and corrupt my will. How awful it must have been for Gandalf to watch a friend fall to the lust of power.

"Was it hard?" I asked.

"Hmm?" Gandalf's eyes are clear beneath his bushy brows.

"Watching someone turn against you for selfish reasons?"

Donavan.

Was the pain I felt when he left us valid?

Gandalf gives me a knowing, sympathetic look. "I have a feeling you already know the answer to that."

I blink in surprise at him. Either he just has really good instincts or he actually can read my mind. It's starting to freak me out. It's like he's Dumbledore... Only less manipulative.

The door opens and Lord Elrond steps in the room, holding a bowl filled with green liquid. "Hir nûn." I stand and bow. I've been bowing a lot lately. It's starting to give me cramps.
"Ah, Ellie." He says as he places the bowl by Frodo's bed.

"Gandalf." Lord Elrond turns to the Wizard, who grips his staff as he pulls himself to his feet.

"How are you, Ellie?" Lord Elrond asks as he checks Frodo's wound. I catch a glimpse of the wound that used to look festered, black and dead. The swelling has reduced significantly and while the wound is still open, at least there isn't any congealed blood anymore.

The question takes me by surprise, and I look up at him with wide eyes.

"Oh. Um." My cheeks feel hot. The last time we talked, I sounded like a lunatic. I just dumped all that information of cars and electricity on him barely a minute into our conversation, proceeded to demand for him to bring me home and ran out of his study in tears when he didn't believe me.

"I'm better." I say, averting my gaze in shame.

"Have you been having strange dreams? Any trouble while here in Imladris?"

The memory from nine years ago swims to the surface of my mind.

"No, my lord. In fact, I haven't had such a good night's sleep in a month." I don't know why I feel the need to lie but I do anyway, and the words are heavy on my lips. He nods, "Good, good."

I step back to let him tend to Frodo's wounds. Frodo moans in his sleep as Lord Elrond pours the green liquid on his wound.

"Will he wake up soon?" I ask.

"Hopefully, he will be awake in two days. He was so close to becoming a wraith when he arrived here, it is a small miracle that he is still with us. But he will need time to find the light once again."

Find the light? I remember what Aragorn said, about how Frodo was passing into the Shadow World. I shiver at the thought of him becoming a wraith. That would have been a horrible fate for such a good person.

"Do not worry about him, Ellie. He is in capable hands." Gandalf says as my hands start wringing again.

"If I hadn't started that fire, he wouldn't be lying here." I say, guilt overcoming me once again. My problems are piling up. Sooner or later, I won't be able to take all these worry and fear.

"Aragorn told me about that. It was a foolish idea but you could not have known what would happen." Gandalf says and I wince.

"But I should have."

"It has passed, Ellie. What's done is done. Nothing will change what happened, and wallowing in your guilt will not make things any better." Gandalf says, sternly, and I look up at him. Though his tone is harsh, his eyes and mouth are gentle and I think...here. Here is someone I know I can trust and respect beyond anything or anyone else.

"Has Salabeth given you the tonic to sooth your throat?" Lord Elrond pipes in and I blink at him in surprise.

"Yes, she did. Thank you, my lord."
"She is talented with herbs, young Salabeth. Barely three hundred but already has a thousand years worth of knowledge on every flower that grows in Imladris and beyond." Lord Elrond says. Young? Three hundred? That's still young to him? Damn. I wish I looked as good as Salabeth at that age. I wonder how old Lord Elrond is. He looks so ageless, both young and yet he also looks like someone who has been through too many things. Despite that, the smile he gives me is kind and radiant "I am glad she has helped with your pain. That you even survived getting choked by a Ringwraith is remarkable enough."

Got that right. I've been too close too many times. Cats should be jealous of me, I've definitely passed the whole nine lives mark.

"The Ringwraith let go when Frodo brought out the Ring." I say, which means Frodo might have just saved my life. How ironic that it was from my mistake that he is here now, lying in pain.

"Do not be so hard on yourself. I see it in your eyes, there is guilt. What you did was reckless, it is true. But I think you have learned from your mistake now?" He says.

"Always think before you act? A butterfly's wings could one day cause a hurricane?" I inquire and he nods in approval.

"Ah, I like that. Yes, exactly. You have a responsibility not just to yourself but to all those around you. So, always think before you act or speak." Lord Elrond says, "You were both lucky to have survived an attack like that. A small price to pay, considering what other things might have happened."

"Lucky that Aragorn was there, you mean. He fought all five of them single-handedly." I say, because people need to know how brave and skilled that man is. He's so determined to stay in the shadows and pretend he doesn't exist. He's afraid to be the strong king I know he can be. I know Lord Elrond knows about Aragorn's heritage. He has to, if he had raised Aragorn himself.

"Fate is a curious thing, don't you think?" I don't know if Gandalf is talking to me or to Lord Elrond, as he is staring out the window, but Lord Elrond and I both look at him.

When he feels our eyes on him, he shoots both of us a wide smile.

"Oh, do not mind me. I am simply an old man lost in his thoughts." Something tells me his age does nothing to dull the wise mind behind those blue eyes.

Lord Elrond speaks up in Elvish again and the smile slowly fades from Gandalf's lips. When Lord Elrond stops talking, he sighs heavily and turns to Frodo, and then to me.

"Ellie, I believe the Lord Elrond wants to have a private word with me." Gandalf says and I stand up immediately.

"Of course. My lord." I bow to Elrond and look back at Frodo one last time before I take my leave.

Lord Elrond is motioning to the wound on Frodo's shoulder and shaking his head. And the dark look that takes over Gandalf's face tells me it's terrible news indeed.

I know many people have said I shouldn't feel guilty... And maybe someday I'll forgive myself for what happened to Frodo. But it won't be today.
Short chapter for now. Going to make up for it in the next one, I promise!
Suspicious

Chapter Summary

Ellie's hot head gets the better of her as she back-talks a certain blonde elf.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

I toss and turn in frustration as I look out the window. Moonlight streams into the room. Everything is so peaceful, but my thoughts are at war. I'm afraid to sleep. I'm afraid of closing my eyes and seeing Donovan walking away, or reliving the nights when Rory would cry himself awake and nobody would be able to soothe him. I'm afraid of watching Donovan turn his back on us once again.

I kick the blanket off my feet and roll off the bed in frustration. I put on a dress, because it's easier to put on than securing a belt and lacing up a shirt.

I wander through Rivendell, familiarizing myself with the hallways and rooms that I pass. There's always music here. There's always the faint sound of an elf's sweet voice, comforting and haunting.

Yet again, I find myself going to the training grounds. On the way, several elves nod at me in acknowledgment. I smile at them and notice Salabeth in the group. She stops to address me. "Do you still wish to hit things?" She asks me in surprise.

I shake my head at her. "My arms are sore from this morning and I'm not dressed for it."

She stares at me for several seconds, "If you wish, I can make you a drink for dreamless sleep."

Her instincts are spot on but my eyes find her companions. They wait patiently, probably because they're immortal and time means nothing to them but I don't want her to leave them just because I'm having bad dreams. I know she said I could always talk to her, but I don't want to trouble her any more than I already have. I just need air. Air and some peace and quiet.

"I'm okay. Just appreciating the view." That is the lamest excuse I have ever made, and Salabeth is too smart not to notice. She steps closer to whisper, "You are sure of this?"

I nod. "It's okay. I'm fine. Really."

"If you insist." She steps back and she and her friends walk away.

When I arrive in the grounds, however, I'm not alone. The moonlight makes Legolas's hair shine, and his arm pulls the string of his bow back. I stop by the doorway, leaning against the stone frame to watch him fire arrows at his target.

"Are you just going to stay there?" He calls without turning.

"And here I thought I would sneak up on you from behind." I joke as I step closer. He steps back and looks at me and his icy stare makes me stop in my tracks. "Humans are incapable of 'sneaking'. Your footfalls are too heavy."
"I was joking. Lighten up. Besides, your footfalls are probably heavier than mine, pretty boy."

"Is that a challenge?"

"Maybe, hir nîn. Maybe."

"I am not exactly a lord, you know."

"And I'm definitely not a lady. We're on even ground, then."

He only raises his bow again in response.

"Why are you practicing? Aren't you supposed to be a master at this?" I motion towards his bow.

"You are not the only one who needs to hit things to release frustration."

"What are you frustrated with?"

"So many questions." He shakes his head, "Why are you here? Are you not cold?" He asks me, his eyes grazing over my shoulders before they flick back to the target. The spot where his eyes found my skin heats up, and I cross my arms.

"I can't sleep." I say.

"Oh? Is your bed not as comfortable as the ground of the Midgewater Marshes?" He says, sarcastically as he nocks another arrow.

"How do you know about that?"

"Aragorn and I know each other well. He is a good friend. He tells me many things."

For a second, I'm terrified that Aragorn might have blabbed about me but then I realize: It's Aragorn, not a silly gossiping teenager. I can trust him with my secrets. He would never betray the trust I gave him. He's too honorable for that.

"He's been good to me. He had every reason to leave me in the woods, but he took me in and helped me, anyway." I say.

"He cares about you." Legolas says, just before he releases the arrow he's been holding.

"I care about him, as well."

"I wonder about that. You do not seem to know each other for very long and yet you greet each other with such informality. It makes me question if you are merely trying to get close to him to spy on him and cause trouble." He says, bluntly and I cannot believe this conversation is happening.

"That's why you're being an ass." I realize and he lowers his bow with a look of indignance.

"Excuse me?" His voice is low and dangerous.

"You heard me. Is that why you've been 'observing' me? You think I'm going to run to Sauron when no one is looking? You actually think I have the capacity to betray Aragorn, who I owe my life to? I would never do that to him." I'm shaking out of hurt and frustration.

Legolas's eyes are filled with anger. "He is the rightful King of Gondor. Sauron's spies are looking for every way to destroy Isildur's line. I will not let a small, foreign girl be the reason for his demise."
"Don't worry. The small foreigner will make sure he won't be falling to his demise anytime soon. And I'm twenty-two. Don't call me a girl."

He laughs, but there is nothing warm about it. "You are little more than a child."

"Must be nice being immortal and lonely." I say, coldly.

"It is better than being mortal and impulsive. I have lived for two thousand years. Those years come with wisdom. Do not believe, for a moment, that I do not see the way you look at him. Love makes mortals do terrible things."

My insides turn to ice. I'm reduced to staring at him, eyes wide and mouth open. There are times when I get mad and run my mouth. And then there are the times when the things I'm hearing make absolutely no sense whatsoever and my anger goes beyond words that I'm just left standing there, unable to respond. This is one of those times. This insufferable elf!

"You have no right--" I start, shakily, but a voice behind me says, softly, "Ellie?"

Legolas's eyes flicker to a spot past me. I take slow, deep breaths to still my trembling arms and pounding heart. The voice calls my name again and I turn around.

It's Salabeth.

"Mae l'ovannen." Salabeth bows to Legolas.

Legolas nods, stiffly.

"Ellie. Are you not cold?" Salabeth asks me gently.

"Actually, I am. Shall we go inside, Salabeth?" I say, glaring at Legolas, who glares right back.

Salabeth's eyes dart from me to Legolas.

I stomp back to the doorway, and Salabeth follows close behind me. Salabeth and I don't talk. There's only me fuming and letting out frustrated hisses because I cannot believe the nerve of that elf! What, he thinks just because he looks like freaking Apollo or something that he can talk to me like I'm a criminal?! I'm not a criminal!

"And you'd think I was actually being polite to that jackass." I have been exceptionally civil these past few days because I'm grateful to the elves for taking me in. He's been judging me from the moment he met me! And the knife and bow lessons! He was probably 'observing' me with Aragorn. "And he calls me the spy." I mutter.

"What are you doing?" Salabeth whispers to me when we near my room.

"Going to my room." I grumble.

"No! Ellie." She takes my hand and makes me face her.

"What were you doing with the son of the King of Eryn Galen?"

Hold the fuck up.

Back up for a second.

"Huh?"
A prince. A fucking prince. I've been arguing with a prince, of course. That's what made him think he had any right to talk to me in that condescending way of his. I should have known. Now, I look like an idiot, a bitch and an ingrate. Oh, that's just wonderful.

I groan and cover my face with my hands.

"I was arguing with him."

"I could see that!" I don't blame Salabeth for scolding me. I deserve it.

"I didn't know he was a prince!" I cry, desperately.

"There are a lot of things you do not seem to know. Wherever you come from, it must be far away that your customs are so different from ours."

Oh, if she only knew. I hang my head and wait for her to calm down. She recovers quite quickly. "I am sorry. That was out of place."

What is she apologizing for?

"No, please. I should have known better. I'm sorry." I say and she takes my hands.

"If it would make you feel better, Legolas is more patient than his father."

"Argh. I don't think I can face him again, ever." I bury my face in my hands.

"Ai, Ellie, but you do have such a brave heart." Salabeth says, patting my back in comfort.

I bring my hands down. "You don't have to try to make me feel better."

Salabeth sighs and shakes her head. "Will you be hitting things tomorrow again?" She asks.

"Apparantly, I am. Aragorn wants to train me for some reason." I say.

"Do not argue with Legolas again!" She says, pointing a slender finger at me.

"That's assuming I'll even talk to him at all." I mutter, darkly. But of course, she hears. Elvish hearing, and all.

"Ellie." She warns.

I sigh, "Yes, Salabeth. I'll be on my best behavior if I ever come across that entitled, accusing..."

"Ellie!"

"Alright, alright. I'll play nice." I say and she nods in approval.

"Can I go sleep now?" I ask, pointing to the door of my bed chamber.

She shakes her head, but smiles as she does. "Sleep well, Ellie." She says, so I retreat to my room.

Chapter End Notes
Mae l'ovannen = a more formal way of saying "Well met" (compared to Mae g'ovannen)

Okay. So. I hope no one thinks I ruined Legolas' character with this chapter. I wanted to take on Legolas differently. I'm going with the idea of him as a loyal friend, but also as a guarded person. I may have been influenced by the side of him that I've seen in the Desolation of Smaug movie. For all the years he's lived, I think there will be some distrust between him and Ellie because he's just learned that being careful is a good thing. Mirkwood elves liked to live in isolation, after all, and were distrustful of strangers. Imagine Legolas' surprise at seeing one of his good friends--and the heir to the throne of Gondor--suddenly getting close to a girl nobody even knows.

Rest assured, Legolas will still be the youthful, kind elf we know and love. I just wanted to explore the more guarded side of him.
Chapter Summary

It was inevitable. Had to happen at some point. At least it didn't arrive when she was out in the woods with five guys. Ellie and Legolas also sort out their differences.

This night's dream is a memory from years ago, again. It's the night I hear Gramps and Donovan arguing, right after I tucked Rory in bed for the night. The night when everything changed for us.

"How come you notice my every mistake? That little brat has been nothing but trouble for us. For four years, mom and dad focused on nothing but him. It was bad enough that they used to dote on Ellie so much but when that kid arrived, I was practically invisible."

"That kid is your brother. And I am your grandfather. Show a little respect, young man." Gramps says. I can tell from his voice that his patience is wearing thin, and fast.

"Yeah, and now Ellie treats him like some prince."

"Would you like me to read you a bed time story as well? Give you a glass of warm milk and kiss you good night?" Gramps says, drily. Gramps did say that while I look more like my mother, I definitely take after him.

"You're missing the point, Gramps." Even from the other room, I can feel Donovan rolling his eyes.

"No, I think you got the point across perfectly well. You're jealous that a four-year-old is getting more attention than you."

"That's not it! I just want to be given a bit more recognition here! I had straight A's in high school. I'm acing all my subjects right now!"

"Congratulations! Your parents' hard work was not wasted on your education."

"How come it's okay for Ellie to get a B minus? How unfair is that?!"

He did not just bring my name and my grades into that conversation. My grades are perfectly fine! So what if I got a B minus? No one actually pressures him to get straight A's.

"Everything I do gets brushed off. Nobody cares that I'm working my ass off to make mom and dad proud, as long as Ellie can throw a ball across a field, right? It was hard enough with her around, smiling her way out of trouble! Now, I have to put up with Rory's temper tantrums!"

Okay. I've heard enough. I step into the kitchen and cross my arms. I didn't realize I was shaking with anger.

"You sound like a two-year-old." I say. Donovan shakes his head.

"Unbelievable. Of course. You're going to gang up on me. That's always been how it is. The two of you against me. I'm sick of this." Donovan kicks the fridge door and strides to the door.
"Donovan..." Gramps warns.

"No, Gramps!" Donovan yells, "We all know who your favorite is, and we all know how much shit Rory would be allowed to get away with in the future, you both treat him as though he's a fucking prince. Honestly, I'm okay with that. I'm used to it. But dammit, I'm working hard! So what if I go out with my friends? Let me live!"

"You were smoking pot." Gramps points out. This makes me stop. I turn to Donovan, my mouth hanging open. Pot? My older brother. Smoking pot?! That's what Gramps was mad about? That's what Donovan is trying to get away with? He's bringing me up into a conversation that involved him smoking pot?

"It's not harming anybody!"

"You were smoking pot?!" I gasp and Donovan glares at me.

"You have no right to judge me, you lazy bi--"

"Is pot all you're taking, Donnie?" I whisper, horrified. He stuffs his hands in his pocket, and shifts from foot to foot. It's his tell. He's going to lie, I just know it.

"Donovan, you are twenty years old. You have your entire life ahead of you and you're telling me you're planning to waste it all away on drugs?" Gramps says, his voice raising.

Donovan glances from me to Gramps, shaking his head. "I'm out of here." He says and turns around, bumping into me on the way to the front door.

"Donnie..." I'm scared for him, and I tug at his arm but he shakes me off and stomps ahead.

"Get back here, young man!" Gramps barks but Donovan ignores him and slams the door.

My eyes fly open. Someone is knocking on my door. I wake up to something else that arrived while I was asleep.

"Shit." I pull the blanket up and I think I want to die right then and there.

The knocking continues.

"Shit!" I cry, louder as I stumble off the bed and check the back of the nightgown I slipped into last night.

Suffice it to say, I've been sleeping in a pool of my own blood. This is a problem I wasn't expecting until at least tomorrow.

"Ellie?"

"Salabeth?" I yank the door open and pull her inside.

"Help." I say, pointing to the bed. All it takes is the look of embarrassment on my face for her to get what's happening. "Go clean up. I will take care of the sheets." She says, and for the rest of the morning, I do as she says. After I take a bath, she helps me into the belted contraption that feels more like a diaper than anything. It's embarrassing to stand in front of a tall, beautiful elf naked from the waist down as she buckles and secures a diaper around my waist but I have no choice. And at least now I actually do know what to do with the belt so I can do it by myself next time.

"You're a life-saver. I don't know what I'd do without you. Len hannon, Salabeth." I say, gratefully.
I'm wearing leggings again and a long tunic that thankfully hides any evidence of a belted diaper with a few layers of clothing and yet another belt to secure the tunic around my waist.

"It is no trouble, Ellie. Whatever I can do to help you." She gathers my blood-soaked sheets and motions for me to follow her out to the hallway. "If you ever need anything for pain, tell me and I will do what I can to help."

"Thank you but you really have done so much for me already. I can't ask for more." I say as she leads me out. "Besides, I can handle the cramps. As long as I'm moving, I can ignore it." I say.

"Ah! There you are!" I'd recognize that voice anywhere. It's Aragorn. And he's about to see my bloody sheets. I turn to Salabeth, distressed but she nods in his direction.

"I will take this to be washed. But if you need me, do not hesitate to call for me."

"Thank you, Salabeth. Thank you so much." What did I do to deserve this kind of friend? She smiles at me, before retreating to another hallway.

"Hi." I say, walking towards Aragorn to intercept him before he notices what Salabeth is carrying.

"Ready for your training?"

"More training, really?"

"It would benefit you if you learn how to wield a blade."

I sigh. He really is determined to get me into training. He acknowledges this as his victory, and leads the way to the training grounds.

"Why do you want me to train again?" I ask.

"Honestly, I just wanted to keep your mind off...your problems." My problems?

He's been distracting me from thinking too much about home. It's actually really thoughtful of him to waste a good portion of his day just to teach me this stuff.

"You don't have to do that, you know. I'm dealing with it." I say, only half-lying. Gramps and Rory are always in the back of my mind. I'm always worrying about them, but at least I'm not as much of a wreck as I expected to be.

"I know you are. Your heart is strong." Aragorn says, "But I might as well help the process along." I smile sheepishly and nod. When we arrive at the training ground, he hands me a practice sword.

"How is the balance?"

"It's heavy as fuck, that's how the balance is."

"Good. You need to develop your upper body strength. You look underfed."

"I look underfed." I repeat in disbelief as I glare at him.

"In case you haven't noticed, up until a few days ago, I was running for my life and eating squirrel meat." I say. Aragorn ignores my last comment.
"Lift the sword up with one hand." He orders, and I do as he says, holding the sword with my right hand.

"Now what?" I say as I hold the sword in front of me.

"Hold it."

I look at him, aghast. "For how long?"

"For as long as you can." He says, simply.

"You call this training?"

"If you cannot hold a sword up for long, you will never be able to swing it twice." He says.

So we stay that way, with me holding the sword up until I give up, merely a minute in. At least I'm not having cramps. He walks around me until I drop the sword. And then he makes me run lapses around the entire training ground. I like jogging as much as the next girl, but the ground here is uneven, which means it's harder to navigate and the belted pad feels weird, and I hear Aragorn laugh once or twice when my legs move awkwardly. I'd like to see him run with a diaper between his legs...

By the end of the session, I'm sweaty and shaking with exhaustion. I don't miss the times when we were in the wild, running from Ringwraiths.

"We shall work on your strength and endurance first. That run was..." He's trying to find the right word for my performance. I supply it for him.

"Pathetic?"

He doesn't argue.

"We all have to start somewhere." He says.

"Apparantly, I start at the pathetic stage. Can I go eat now?" I ask, pointing to the doorway back inside.

He nods, "I shall see you later." He says.

"Yep."

He retreats inside, and I nearly run into Legolas. I step back before I could barrel into him and cross my arms.

"We have to stop meeting like this." He says.

"I wasn't trying to assassinate my best friend, if that's what you came here for." I say as I step around him. His hand clamps around my forearm and I hiss at his iron grip.

"Good. I would not want to disrespect Lord Elrond and tell him one of his guests is putting the life of Isildur's heir in danger." Is this son of a bitch threatening me?! If he was talking to me this way a month ago, I would be wetting my pants. His gaze is cold. Hard. But I've been through enough shit for the past four weeks. I've had my fair share of fear. I do not feel it now. Instead, I'm indignant that he would judge me so harshly, despite the fact that he barely knows who I am and nobody else treats me with such distrust.
"What is your problem with me? I've done nothing to you!" I say, half-furious and half-pleading.

"I do not trust strangers. Especially ones who are constantly in the company of important people."

"Jesus Christ, there are better ways to get to know a person than accusing them of being a spy!" I yank my arm from his grip and he lets go.

"My name is Helen Grayson but I prefer Ellie because it's the name my Gramps gave me when I was young. I'm twenty-two years old. I'm not an infiltrator trying to sabotage the man who kept me alive when I was lost and confused. I just want to go home, and I came here to ask Lord Elrond for help. Once I find my way home, I'll leave and you never have to see me again." The words pour out of me because I'm tired of arguing endlessly with him.

I just want to eat. I haven't eaten breakfast and my stupid pad/diaper is making me self-conscious. I hate that I have to explain myself to Legolas but if that's what it takes for him to leave me alone, that's what I'll do.

He looks dazed, like he was expecting me to fight back with snark and has no idea what to do with all the information I just heaped on him. "I have to go now. I'm sure the smell of human sweat offends your senses." I give him a stiff bow and leave before he thinks of another clever remark.

When I come out of my room, I've readjusted the belt and replaced the cloths. I handwash the ones I used and hang them to dry near the window. Afterwards, I braid my own hair, but clumsily. My fingers aren't as skilled as Salabeth when it comes to braiding myself.

And then I notice my backpack, lying forgotten in a heap on the floor. Those things belong to someone from another life. I reach out for it and find that my binder and all my books are still there but someone has cleaned everything. Salabeth, probably. Because she's just caring and thoughtful that way. The day she stepped into my life was probably my luckiest. She helped me adjust, and is continuing to help me adjust without asking for anything in return.

I walk back outside to appreciate the view because I haven't really stopped to look around me before. Rivendell is beautiful. Fresh air does wonders to my lungs, which are so used to smoke from cars. The water in the river and waterfalls are cool and clean. And the unobstructed view of the blue sky, especially from the valley where Rivendell is built, is breath-taking. I want to take my time in observing it. To appreciate Rivendell's beauty.

That's when I find Merry and Pippin, talking to an older hobbit.

"Ellie!" The two young hobbits cry in unison, motioning for me to join them. I beam and sit next to them, in front of a huge breakfast that could fill the bellies of a dozen men.

"Ellie! This is Bilbo! Bilbo, this was the woman we were telling you about. The one with travelled with!" Pippin exclaims excitedly and the older hobbit smiles warmly at me.

"So you're the legendary Bilbo Baggins? I've heard great tales. I feel like I'm meeting a celebrity." I say as I lean forward to shake Bilbo's hand.

"Aye, that's what he is! Bilbo is famous in The Shire!" Merry says as he piles food on my plate.

"I'm not that famous, lad, don't get ahead of yourself."

"Oh! Everyone knows the tale of Bilbo's treasures." Pippin says.

"The tunnels are nothing more than a myth, Peregrin, and you should know that!" Bilbo shakes his
head, but that warm smile never leaves his mouth.

"You, however, my dear...Ellie, was it? Yes. I've heard quite a lot about you as well. Not many hobbits have found the pleasure of travelling with such a beautiful woman like these two have."

"Ha. Beautiful. You must not have seen an elf yet." I joke and he laughs, openly. It's the kind of laugh you can't help but join in. Hobbits are now officially my favorite people. They're just so carefree and friendly. They're the kind of positive energy I need right now, especially after that unpleasant encounter with Legolas.

Here, I'm welcome and my company is not held with suspicion or judgment. We just talk, all four of us. Just eat and talk and drink tea. Hobbits make wonderful tea. I decide right then and there that I'll be spending my breakfast with them every day I'm here.

Bilbo has plenty of stories to tell. His eyes light up whenever he remembers an old adventure he had, even dangerous ones that involved trolls.

"Wait, so those ugly troll statues we saw were alive and moving at some point?" I giggle.

"Of course they were! Did you think anyone would spend any minute of their lives sculpting such ugly things in the middle of nowhere?" Bilbo waves his hand in front of his face to brush off my silly remark.

"Do you want some more?" Pippin offers me probably my third slice of some sort of bread, like toast but with garlic and cheese and butter on top. A sort of breakfast pizza which I adore. I start to shake my head but Bilbo tuts at me.

"Eat, child! You look underfed."

"Do I really?" I say, and Merry and Pippin laugh.

"No, actually, but one could always have another slice of this marvelous bread the elves bake." Bilbo says, thoughtfully and I grin and take my third slice of the breakfast pizza.

And after what I feel is a long time, I actually feel good. Not weighed down by problems or whining about what's wrong with my life at the moment. Bilbo tells me stories, Merry and Pippin joke, and I guess what I needed all along was just hobbit energy.

The next day happens very much like the last. I'm slipping into a routine: I get down to the training grounds with Aragorn to exercise, I take a quick bath and after that, I eat breakfast with Bilbo, Merry and Pippin.

In the afternoon, Legolas joins me and Aragorn during target practice. Usually, he just hangs around. Sometimes asking how I am, sometimes telling me not to pull my arm back so far. I ignore him every time he speaks. I ignore him during dinner, even when he asks if I want more potatoes because he noticed that I like to pile my plate with potatoes every night. And when the company retreats to the Hall of Fire, where a great hearth burns all day, I just listen to the minstrels because the elves are wonderful musicians. I'd rather give their calming music my undivided attention than get frustrated by talking to Legolas. I told Salabeth I would behave, but ignoring him is easier than explaining myself to him.

Still, he persists. Yesterday, after my time with the hobbits, we focused on throwing knives. Today, we focus on archery because Legolas volunteered to train me. I still haven't spoken a single word to him since the unpleasant incident two days ago, which is why I'm surprised he's still trying to talk to me, even starting to be more polite than usual. I'd say it's because Aragorn is in the immediate
vicinity but merely five minutes into the lesson, Aragorn chuckles.

"Stop glaring at him, Ellie. Really, this animosity between the two of you is getting rather ridiculous." He says as Legolas corrects my arm and elbow.

"There's no animosity." I say, defensively and with as much animosity as I can muster.

"And Orcs smell like flowers. Come. Smile." Aragorn urges, showing his own set of teeth in an effortless grin.

"What's there to smile about when a pretty, blonde elf is scowling at you for no reason?" I mumble as I let the arrow fly. It hits the target's chest.

"What is there to smile about when a stubborn girl just glares at you and refuses to speak to you instead?" Legolas says as I nock another arrow and aim.

This causes me to laugh, wryly, "What's there to be friendly about when a pretty, blonde elf accuses you of being a spy?"

"Ellie." Aragorn's voice is a warning.

"I am sorry I judged you too harshly." My hand slips. The arrow flies off behind some shrubbery and I turn to stare at Legolas, unable to believe what I just heard.

He looks like he can't believe the words came out of his mouth as well. Legolas looks as shocked as I am.

"Sorry, didn't quite catch that." I say, enjoying the red tinge to his cheeks. I just made a majestic, graceful elf blush. That's an achievement right there.

"I...apologize." He is hesitant, unsure if he wants to continue now that he's talking to me. I refuse to make this easier for him.

"Still think I'm a spy?"

"Ellie." Aragorn warns again. The lesson is forgotten. I am entirely focused on the elf in front of me, his jaw set and his shoulders square, clearly prepared for a verbal battle. I need him to say it out loud. Hurtful words are hard to forgive and forget once they've been spoken. They lodge in someone's heart, forever tattooed in their mind, and an apology won't make that go away, no matter how sincere. But what he says afterwards to make up for the hurtful things, that's what I need from him.

"Well?" I urge.

"I do not. That is why I came here. I was wrong. If you were a spy, you would have been long gone by now, with information given to the Enemy."

"Took you long enough to figure that out." I say, coldly and we stare each other down. Aragorn is silent between us. The air is tense, and I look into Legolas's eyes but for once there's no ice beneath his gaze. Just sincerity and humility. I soften up immediately.

I know I judged him harshly as well. He was only looking out for Aragorn. If I was in his place, I would have reacted the same way he did. What he said hurt but what he did was not unforgivable, especially because he did it out of loyalty. I can never actually hate him for that.

"How do I aim this thing?" I turn back to the target and nock another arrow. The tension in the air
slowly fades and we're back to training. Only this time, it's less rigid. This time, when I hit the target, he tells me I'm doing better. And when I miss, he laughs with me and not at me.
When Guests Arrive

Chapter Summary

Frodo is awake and Imladris is celebrating! Ellie meets the Captain of Gondor and has her first interaction with dwarves. Legolas opens up to Ellie, and they take a walk in the gardens of Imladris.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

After our lessons, Aragorn, Legolas and I walk back inside to find the halls are busier than usual. Salabeth spots me and walks toward me, excitedly. "Ellie! Come, the Captain of Gondor has arrived!"

I stare blankly at her because I have no idea what she's talking about but she slips her hand through the crook of my arm and practically drags me back to the entrance, where Aragorn, the hobbits and I were welcomed four days ago.

"You coming?" I call over my shoulder but Aragorn merely winces and shakes his head. He and Legolas wave at me goodbye as they go off on their own way, and I find myself smack-dab in the middle of a welcoming committee. The elf I recognize as Lindir is there to greet a man and dwarves who have just arrived, and they brought the stench of unwashed body odor with them.

I freeze when I catch a whiff of the nearest dwarf, who grumbles as he and several others walk past me. I move closer to Salabeth.

"Jesus, I can't believe you resisted the urge to push me in the bath when you first met me." I mutter to her and her shoulders shake from suppressed laughter.

"I did not wish to trouble you any more than you already were at the time." She whispers to me.

"I did not wish to trouble you any more than you already were at the time." She whispers to me.

"You'd have done me a favor." I mutter and she bites her bottom lip to stop herself from laughing. We sober up immediately when the man climbs the steps. He was greeted more warmly than the dwarves, which I thought was a bit unfair since he smelled just as bad.

The man passes, and I catch his eye. I believe he only notices me because I'm shorter than everyone in the vicinity, and I'm also lacking pointy ears. He nods at me, and I nod back. He's quite handsome. Broad-shouldered, with a square jaw and dark hair. Although, he looks at me with suspicion. It's getting easier to recognize that look on people's faces.

"That is Boromir, Captain of Gondor and eldest son of Denethor, Steward of Gondor." Salabeth whispers.

"Gondor?"

"The White City, where Elendil and his sons ruled as King, until the last King of Gondor disappeared and Gondor was left in the care of the stewards."

"Wait..." I say as I stare at the back of the tall Man who just passed, "That's where the throne is?
Where Isildur used to rule?" Aragorn is the first person to come to mind, and his ancestors. That's his city. That's where Aragorn could rule. That's his birthright, which means those people could be his subjects. That man—Boromir—is someone who would bow to him if only he took the throne. It's jarring to think about, but now I realize why Aragorn didn't want to go.

"I have to go." I say to Salabeth, who helps another elf with Boromir's horse. I back up into the hallway as she waves at me goodbye. I slip past the busy elves who gather the horses. The dwarves refused to give their belongings to the elves.

I look around for Aragorn. He couldn't have gone far but I have no idea where to look for him now. Dammit, I'd just have to catch up with him later during dinner.

"Ellie!" I whip around at the sound of my name and it's Sam. He's waving at me, his hair is messy on one side and there are dark circles beneath his eyes but his smile is radiant.

"Mr. Frodo has woken up! He's fought off his injury!" He announces and I can't help the squeal of delight that bursts out of me.

"That's wonderful news!"

"I'm so relieved, Miss Ellie, so relieved."

"We all are, Sam. Oh, thank God!"

He sighs contentedly, "I was just on my way to his chambers."

"Don't let me keep you. Go to Frodo. I'm sure he's excited to see you!" I beam.

"You're not coming to see him?"

"I'll catch up. Give me a moment to change into something less sweaty." I say.

"Alright, Miss Ellie. I'll see you later." He bids me goodbye as I walk further into the halls.

I find Arwen just as I enter an unfamiliar hallway.

"Ellie." She smiles as she sees me. Why do I have to keep meeting her when she's immaculate and I'm sweating like a pig?

"Lady Arwen." I bow. "I saw our guests arrive. There are dwarves!"

"Yes, I heard them complaining about how Lindir could have at least been less obvious about his displeasure with how they smelled." She grins, and I giggle.

"To be fair, they do stink." I say.

"Come, walk with me." She motions for me to follow her, and I shift from foot to foot. I stink, too but her smile is warm and inviting, so I fall in step next to her, careful not to step on the train of her white dress.

"How is Imladris?" She asks.

"Beautiful beyond compare. I've never seen anything as beautiful as Rivendell. Everyday, I still find myself in awe of what I see."

"I am glad you like it here. Salabeth speaks highly of you. She is one of my close friends."
"Salabeth is like Wonder Woman. She has done so much to make me feel welcome and comfortable."

"What is a Wonder Woman?" She stops in her tracks, and gives me a quizzical look.

Oh, shit. I slipped. I was getting too comfortable. Damn, it's really easy for me to let my guard down around Arwen. There's just something so real and gentle about her that overshadows the sadness that lies just beneath the surface.

"She's a, uh, a female hero. A symbol for strong women where I come from. Wonder Woman is a representation for all women who care for and defend others, especially those in need." I explain.

Arwen beams. "Salabeth truly does care for others a great deal. She is beautiful, but more importantly, her beauty comes from her heart."

"So are you, hiril nîn." I say, without thinking. She blinks at me, and a slow smile appears on her face.

"That is kind of you to say."

I blush, but her smile is radiant and comforting. "You truly are different from those of your kind. And that is not a terrible thing, Ellie. Extraordinary people can make extraordinary changes, so long as they have faith in themselves." I feel her hand squeeze my shoulder and I smile at her, thankful for her kind words. I can see why Aragorn fell in love with her. She has a gentle and caring heart.

"Len hannon." I say.

"You have been learning Sindarin." She beams.

"Oh... no." I laugh, nervously, "That's the only Sindarin I know. Along with hir and hiril nîn. I want to learn, though. It's a beautiful language, for a beautiful race."

"Maybe when everything is quiet, I can teach you." She says. I gape at her.

"My lady, that's...That's really thoughtful of you but I'm sure you have more important things to do than waste time on me." I stutter.

"It would help me as much as you if I had something to occupy my time. And teaching one who appreciates my people is a worthy task. Come. The beauty of Imladris is also in the works of the elves. I will take you to a room filled with paintings and statues made by the elves of Imladris!" She says with a smile and I nod, enthusiastically. I would like to see more pretty things, please.

"It is just through here. There is a statue that holds the shards of Narsil in the center of the room. Narsil is the blade that cut the Ring from Sauron's hand, that was wielded by Elendil, father of Isildur." She explains, leading me towards grand double-doors of white wood. Just as Arwen is about to open the door, however, she stops.

Her head tilts toward the door, and she gently tugs me out of the way as it opens and Boromir steps out, leaving the door open behind him. He does not look happy. I see Aragorn stooping down to pick something off the floor. Something doesn't feel right.

"Lady Arwen." Boromir bows when he sees us, his eyes briefly flickering in my direction before returning to Arwen. I don't blame him, she's definitely easier on the eyes.

Arwen nods at him as well. "Is everything alright?" Arwen asks.
"I...yes, my lady. If I may, Lord Elrond has summoned me." Boromir says, backing away. Arwen and I catch each other's eye in concern.

"Go to him. He needs you right now." I say, nodding towards the door. She nods in agreement, "I will take you here another time." She says and she slips into the room.

She would ease his mind. I'd rather not interfere. I have to accept the fact that I will never be at the top of Aragorn's priorities. Though he may be the person I trust the most and I would not have survived without him, the truth is, he could do fine on his own without me. In fact, he'd be less burdened without my weight and the time he spends training me could be time he can give Arwen.

So I just go on ahead with my usual routine, except this afternoon, instead of training with weapons, I help Salabeth and the other female elves wash laundry. It's a welcome distraction, to be surrounded by female energy. Being surrounded by males with all the testosterones and formalities can be tiring at times.

Also, laundry is tiring. Not to mention, slightly violent. Who knew washing clothes was another great way to release pent up rage? Salabeth teaches me how to clean my dresses by bashing them against a rock. At first, I thought she was kidding but when I see everyone else doing it, I just shrug and do what they do. When in Rome...

At least I'm getting a work out and at least now I have five more cloths to use for my monthly friend. The good thing about my cycle is that it only takes two days of heavy flow and three to four days of light flow. And I actually can put the belt on myself without needing Salabeth's help. So, there was at least one less problem to deal with.

There's talk of a great feast upon Frodo's recovery. The elves spend the rest of the day decorating the Hall of Fire. Salabeth insists that I wear a dress that she once again lets me borrow for the occasion. It's a simple, silver gown with sleeves that hang just off my shoulder, loose from the wrist down, which I've come to call curtain sleeves. The fabric is light and airy, and she's even tied my hair up in curls and wove ribbons through my hair just for the occasion.

When I arrive at the feast, Merry and Pippin are already there, talking to Sam.

And beside him, smiling just as brightly, alive and well, is Frodo.

Frodo.

Standing. Smiling. I can't help but call out his name. He laughs as I run to him.

"You're okay. You're okay." I say, still not believing what I'm seeing. I touch his shoulder and his cheek.

"You're warm." I say, and he laughs.

"Sam said the same thing." He says.

"You must be hungry! Oh, Bilbo would be so happy to see you!"

"You've seen Bilbo?" Frodo's eyes widen in excitement.

"I've been taking breakfast with him and Merry and Pippin in the garden. That's his favorite spot. He said the view reminded him of when he first came here. It helps him think and inspires him to continue his book." I say, fondly.
"That sounds like Bilbo. He loves Imladris. He would want to stay outside as he writes his book." Frodo muses.

"The feast is about to begin." Pippin announces as elves come in holding platters of food, and we find our seats.

I notice Aragorn is not in the company of those in the table, although Arwen looks more breathtaking than ever. The dwarves are boisterous and loud, but are fun to be with. Their stories are rich with detail and adventure. They definitely know how to capture the attention of their audience.

Legolas isn't there as well. He didn't seem like the type to want company, anyway.

The dwarves are entertaining, and are exciting story-tellers but as Glóin, one of Bilbo's old friends from the way he and Frodo greeted each other, continues to share tales, my attention span decreases because the names and places he mentions are unfamiliar to me, and the food before me takes all my attention. Frodo asks Glóin how the Dwarven Kingdom is doing and the conversation turns to that which only people who know the Dwarves well will understand. The other hobbits are exchanging animated conversations with other dwarves, and I'm too busy stuffing my face with the delicious meal to participate.

Luckily, Boromir looks about as hungry as I feel. We converse through sighs, shared smiles when the hobbits or dwarves joke, and passing dishes. At least now I know he's aware of my existence.

After dinner, Lord Elrond leads us out into the Hall of Fire, where they usually spend their time singing and reciting poetry. I love it here at night. The Hall of Fire is filled with music and the fire that burns all day in the hearths are comforting. More songs and tales are shared between the hobbits, dwarves and elves.

Frodo finally meets Bilbo, and Aragorn finally makes an appearance. I find out that Aragorn would be helping Bilbo write a song and by the end of the night, they recite their verses, after asking the company to guess which were Aragorn's verses and which were Bilbo's. Lindir insists that Bilbo recite again because he couldn't tell who wrote which part. There's a lively discussion with Lindir before Bilbo retires with Frodo.

Arwen and Aragorn stand side-by-side, looking like a king and queen from fairytales. Arwen's face glows with happiness whenever they talk. It makes me happy to see years fade from Aragorn's face whenever Arwen smiles at him. It's like watching a really cute romantic scene from a movie. Although I can't deny the pang of jealousy I feel whenever he leans forward to whisper something in her ear. I turn away and look for a distraction.

Merry and Pippin insist on teaching me a few lively songs from the Shire, but our fun, little lesson turned into entertainment for those who could hear, and Merry and Pippin both steal the spotlight until the elves started singing again and I'm still amazed by how beautiful their music is. It's what I can only describe as the clear voices of angels. I've never heard anything like it.

At the end of the night, Boromir and I find ourselves walking out at the same time.

"Heading to bed?" He says, politely.

"Training grounds, actually. I didn't get to train when I was supposed to this afternoon."

"Training at night?"

"I'm mostly just going to be standing there, holding a sword up to develop my strength. Not very exciting."
He looks surprised, even admiring. "What?" I say, self-consciously.

"It is rare to find women who would willingly commit to such training."

Damn. Did everyone here think women were weaklings? Do they not know how innately skilled with knives women are? All those kitchen jokes men throw at women's way, and yet they still don't see it...

"If I didn't, I'd have died of boredom days ago." I say and he laughs.

"Pardon me, my lady, I forget my manners. I am Boromir." He bows.

"I'm Ellie. Just Ellie, I'm not a lady." I say.

"Oh? Interesting. A common woman in the House of Elrond is rare, indeed."

"What can I say? I'm a gem." I wave my hand and he laughs again.

"It is good to see a friendly face here. I hope we get to speak again soon." He says as we near the doorway to the training grounds.

"I hope we do." I say as he stops just by the door.

"I shall take my leave. Good night." He smiles, and then he's off.

I wasn't expecting to see Legolas in the training grounds at this time of night but then again, he's an elf with super eyes. I don't think the lack of light bothers him at all. He's practicing with his bow again. What is it with him and shooting arrows with only the light of the moon to guide him? I approach him, taking a practice sword from the rack. The best thing about this exercise is I don't even have to change out of my pretty dress.

Legolas glances at me, "It has to be unhealthy to have so much frustration that you would rather train this late at night than rest." He says to me as I raise the sword at arm's length.

"I could say the same to you." I say.

And for a while we're quiet, with me watching his fluid movements as he reaches for an arrow from the quiver on his back, his fingers quick and sure, his eyes focused and determined.

"Your sword is dropping." He says and I jerk my arm up, not even realizing I was getting too distracted.

"Your training will go even more slowly if you overexert yourself, Ellie." He says, not unkindly for once.

"Do you know, I think that's the first time you've said my name since the first time we met." I point out. This makes him lower his bow to think.

"So it would seem." He says. He fires another arrow and after a few minutes my arms get tired so I lower the sword to the ground.

"Wait, what are you frustrated with this time? Is it still about me?" We both may have decided to be more polite with each other, if anything for Aragorn's sake, but first impressions die hard and I'd be a fool to think that he'd trust me instantly. Trust between the two of us will have to be earned. The situation I am in is not the same as when I woke up at the borders of Bree, where I had no choice but to trust a stranger to bring me to safety.
Here, we are both as safe as can be. And our natures and personalities war with each other. He does not trust easily, and neither do I. One thing we can rely on, though: We are both honest with each other. And maybe that will be the foundation of our friendship.

Legolas must have been thinking along the same lines. He shakes his head and says, "No. Not at all. I just... cannot help but blame myself."

"For what?" I ask, now forgetting the sword I'm holding altogether.

"The true reason I came to Imladris was to report the creature Gollum's escape. Aragorn had captured him and sent him to my father to be detained in our dungeons." He explains, his bow is lowered and he hangs his head.

"Gollum?" It's the first time I heard the name.

"He possessed the Ring before it came into Bilbo’s hands. He has lived long, far longer than is natural. He is a creature unlike any other, vile and treacherous. But he is not a servant of Sauron, and it's this reason why he was sent to Eryn Galen for...safe-keeping, shall I say?"

"But if he escaped, that would mean he can hunt Bilbo down to get back the Ring." I exclaim but Legolas shakes his head.

My heart drops. I can't even imagine how painful it must be for Legolas to lose his charge that way. His grip tightens around his bow. He laughs, wryly.

"I was arrogant to believe he would not be able to escape. Gollum is clever and full of tricks. A band of orcs came too close to the borders, and I went with the others to dispatch of them. I did not expect the creature to take this into advantage. In the fighting and chaos, he slipped out and went into hiding." He takes another arrow, nocks and fires it quickly as frustration changes his tone to something harsh.

"Someone must have found him, eventually." I say, trying to comfort him. It feels odd, watching Legolas, who is usually cool and stoic, to vent like this.

"He was captured by Sauron's minions and tortured for information not long after."

Oh. That explains a lot of things. And suddenly, it makes sense now. Why Frodo had to leave the Shire and why he was hunted down by the Nazgûl. It was all because of Gollum.

I don't know what else to say. I'm not good at handling these kinds of situations. All I can do is give him silence, and he uses my silence to focus on emptying the quiver of arrows strapped to his back. By then, I had retreated to the weapons rack, to put the sword I was using back. And I keep my distance to give Legolas time to let go of his frustration.

When he's done, he joins me by my spot, and he places the bow back in its place.

"So..." I start, awkwardly. He just gives me this little smile. It's the first genuine smile he's ever given me.

"You are a good listener."

I snort, because that's completely untrue and I was only silent because I didn't know what to say. My snort makes Legolas bark out a laugh, which makes me laugh as well until we're both laughing over nothing. But our laughter is short, and dies down almost instantly.
"It is late. You must rest." He says to me and I snort again. Oh, if he only knew how staying up past midnight has become second nature to me.

"I'm not tired." I say. Actually, I am but nightmares loom over my head. I don't want to sleep yet.

"How about a walk? Imladris has beautiful gardens. And I can teach you how to speak Sindarin."

"I'd like that." His effort to keep me company is appreciated. And learning a bit of Sindarin means I'd make less of a fool of myself in Rivendell, at least while communicating. He offers his elbow to me again, and my hand slips into the crook of his arm. Damn, these are nice biceps.

He leads me through the path from the training grounds to the gardens, where many flowers grew. Beautiful, pure white flowers that seemed to glow in the moonlight and flowers whose petals close during the night and will open up when the first light of day touches them again. I've never seen anything like it. The path is littered with leaves from the trees.

"Imladris was beautiful once." He remarks as he gazes up at the leaves.

"It still is." I say. Rivendell has been the most beautiful place I have ever been in. Nothing back in my world could compare to it.

"It is but a shadow of what it used to be. The elves are fading, and already, the leaves are not as green as they used to be. Neither does the water rush loudly like it did. The threat of Sauron further diminishes it." He says.

"If this is how...Imladris looks while it's fading, I can't imagine it when it's in full bloom." I say, looking around in appreciation, and testing out the Elvish word for Rivendell.

Legolas, ever observant, notices this and smiles.

"Ithil." He says, pointing to the full moon above our heads. "And with the moon are the elen. The memories of a glorious time that has long passed."

"Stars?"

He nods. "When the First elves awoke, before the Sun and the Moon were created, they gazed at the beauty of the stars and the sky. And they were given the name Eldar. The People of the Stars."

"Jeez. Elves have been around for an incredibly long time." I remark, half-joking. Although I can't imagine what that must be like, to be there before even the sun or the moon, and to be immortal and watch the world change. It must be tiring and lonely to watch as everything around you slowly withers and dies while you remain unchanged. Wisdom does come from pain, and I wonder how much pain elves had to go through in their long life spans.

"I fear our time is coming to an end. Elves are departing to the Grey Havens to sail West and never to return again."

"What, why?" I exclaim, turning to him.

"It is time for Men to watch over Arda. The elves have taught you what you needed to know, and our numbers lessen while Men multiply. It is simply what must be. I do not doubt that a time will come when there will no longer be an elf left in Arda and Men will forget our existence entirely." He whispers, sadly and I know he's right. I'm proof of that.

I didn't know any of this could be real, and I never had the pleasure of learning about the history or
language of elves until I was thrust into a situation that demanded for me to meet one. The world will lose a lot if it loses the elves. Imladris's beauty here and the destruction of nature in my time shows that.

"Meril." Legolas says, after another moment of silence between us. He points to a rose bush. 

"It's so ordinary compared to all these other beautiful flowers." I say as he stoops down.

"I think the fact that it is so ordinary makes it stand out. When she is surrounded by all these other beautiful flowers, one cannot help but notice her first." He says, carefully picking one of the roses that had fallen to the ground.

"Is that why you noticed me first when you saw me? I'm flattered." I laugh, and he offers me the rose, still red and beautiful despite falling off its bush.

"I would have noticed you first from anywhere. You are very unlike that of any other of your race that I have seen." He smiles.

"And here I thought it was because I looked like an assassin." I take the rose from him, carefully, and one of the petals falls off. Legolas laughs, and his laughter is like music on a summer night, warm and free.

"There was that, as well."

We walk around the garden, with him pointing at things and translating them in Sindarin. The sound of the river rushing below us reminds me that Rivendell is situated on a valley. From the terraces that we walk through, I can see far and wide, the loud-rushing Bruinen River all the way to the peaks of the mountains that touch the clouds.

Just as we're about to turn a corner into a path that turns into a stone bridge to another part of Rivendell, Legolas steers me back to the direction where we came from.

"What's wrong?"

"Come. I will show you something over here."

"What?" I break away from him and peek from the corner. My mistake hits me hard.

Oh.

Aragorn and Arwen are standing on the bridge, probably there to find a hidden, quiet place away from prying eyes. They speak in hushed voices and their silhouettes are outlined by the moon. He holds her hand, tenderly, and leans down closer to her.

They kiss, and I throw myself backwards to escape the sight of it. I end up crushing the delicate rose in my hands. Legolas steadies me by holding my shoulders. When my eyes find his, the look he gives me is that of pity.

"I want to go to bed now." I say, softly.

He nods in understanding, and we walk in complete silence all the way back to my bed chambers. Legolas' next words to me are, "Losto vae. Sleep well."

I don't think that's possible, even in normal circumstances. But I appreciate his way of making me feel better. "Len hannon." I mumble, "For opening up. For keeping me company. And for this."
say, motioning at the poor, crushed rose in my hand.

He gives me a small smile. "Of course." He bows and waits for me to close the door before he leaves. I've never been more tired in my life.

Chapter End Notes

Hir nin - My lord
Hiril nin - My lady
Len hannon - Thank you

There we go! A long chapter to make up for the short ones. Ellie and Legolas get some bonding time at last. Thank you to everyone who is reading and leaving kudos! I'm glad you all enjoy my writing. It's an honor!

EDIT: Franzisca has brought to my attention that I got the timeline wrong for Gollum's escape *smacks face* There's another swerve away from canon. I got it all backwards. In fact, Gollum was first tortured by Sauron's minions to interrogate him of the Ring's whereabouts. That is when they let him go, and Aragorn found him afterwards and brought him to Mirkwood. You'll notice I got it backwards in the chapter: Him getting captured first and tortured later. I apologize for that!

I thought about editing the chapter but I don't want to confuse the timeline even more than I already have. So there. Add that to my list of non-canon. Sorry, guys!
The Secret Council

Chapter Summary

Ellie attends a secret meeting and is swallowed up by the overwhelming amount of testosterone. Now that she knows what the Ring can do, she will not sit by and watch.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I wake up, as tired as I felt the night before and with my arms screaming for mercy. Salabeth walks in on me that morning moaning into my pillow, already holding a glass vial for me.

"I thought to bring you something for the pain in your muscles." She says and I take the vial gratefully and remove the stopper. The oil inside has a pungent odor. It doesn't stink, but rather overwhelms the senses. It smells very much like the modern liniment used for pain. I think I remember what this is from a lesson in one of my classes...

"It is oil of wintergreen. We create plenty of salves for our hunters or the younger elflings who are starting training. If you run out, just come to me." She says, and I hug her because she's a true blessing.

Instead of sword training that morning, Aragorn makes me run instead, and I notice an intricate jewel on his chest that I've never noticed before. The memory of last night returns to my mind.

"You are quiet today. Are you tired? Do you want to stop?" He says to me as I stop running to catch my breath.

I shake my head, "No. I'm okay. Let's do another lap." I take off before he can protest. I don't want to be affected by what I saw last night. I'm not even supposed to have seen what I saw, it was a disrespect to their privacy and I should have just left well enough alone but damn it, I didn't and now I feel weird. It only hurts more because I thought I was doing a good job of letting go of any romantic notions I have of him. "He is unavailable" has become my mantra. And I have to repeat this to myself because I refuse to get in between his and Arwen's relationship.

When breakfast comes, we go our separate ways, with me on my way to join the hobbits in the garden. But I'm intercepted by Gandalf almost immediately.

"Ah, there you are!" He says, and I smile at him.

"Why do I get the feeling you knew where I would be?" I say and he chuckles.

"Forgive me for saying it, my dear, but your schedule is quite predictable. I suspect you are about to head to breakfast but alas, you are needed elsewhere."

"Me? What could anyone possibly need from me?" I ask, confused.

"All in due time, Ellie, all in due time. Now," He says, "When you hear a bell, go back inside the house and take a turn through a winding path, where you will find Aragorn and Lord Elrond." I look up at him, bewildered, but he's dashing off before I can ask him what's going on.
I turn back inside and try to remember any place that has a winding path nearby. I find myself in some sort of courtyard just as the bells ring.

I've never been here before, and for a second, I think I'm lost but then I notice the setting. There are seats arranged in a semi-circle, all of them facing Lord Elrond, who is already seated at the head of the group. Between him and the seats is a pedestal of some sort, made of stone. Aragorn is already there, but the other seats are empty. An elf sitting next to Lord Elrond looks up at the sound of my footsteps. I recognize him but I've never spoken to him. He's always looked busy and was always talking to someone. Erestor is his name, and I believe he is a close confidant of Lord Elrond.

"Ellie. Come." He says, motioning towards the chairs.

"Are you quite sure I'm needed here?" I ask, walking slowly towards him.

"Quite." He places a hand on my shoulder and I look at Aragorn, who is now on his feet.

"Why is she here?" He asks.

"I think I'm the water girl." I joke to cover the hurt I feel at his disapproval.

"Gandalf and I have spoken about it. Ellie is needed here. Her arrival was not a coincidence. Perhaps her fate is connected to the Ring. Its destruction may be her only way back home." Lord Elrond says, patiently. So that's what this is about. It's the Ring again, and about Sauron and the War.

"Hi. Third person." I point out, now getting a bit annoyed that they're talking about me while I'm literally standing between them.

"You should not be here." Aragorn says, now addressing me.

"Do I have a say about what I want to do? Maybe I want to know what's going on. Maybe I want to know if Sauron and the Ring actually has anything to do with me."

Aragorn looks at me, and I'm surprised to see distress in his features.

"I promised you safety." He says, "I do not want to bring you into this."

"And I told you before. I'm already here. I'm already part of this." I don't even know why I'm arguing with him in front of Lord Elrond, of all people. I feel like he's rejecting me. That he's treating me like a child that needs to be sheltered. I step closer to him.

"You promised me home. Maybe being involved here is the only way back." I say, both to reassure him and myself.

I don't like it either. I don't like the confusion and the wild speculation of my real purpose here. But I believe Gandalf and Lord Elrond when they say that I'm needed here.

"Meril." He whispers but I hold out my hand and squeeze his forearm.

"Relax. It's just a meeting, right?" I say and he shakes his head at me, but doesn't say anything more and just sits back down on his chair.

"Make yourself comfortable. We will be here for a while, I believe." Lord Elrond says, motioning towards the seats.

"Len hannon, hir nîn." I say. I sit next to Aragorn, because I relax more when I'm around him. He's my safe place. Lord Elrond smiles at my use of Sindarin.
"There is still time. You can still go back to the garden. You do not have to be here, Ellie." I first note the use of my real name. And then I note the frown on Aragorn's mouth and the creases on his forehead. He's not letting this go and I refuse to back down.

"I want to be here. If that stupid Ring has anything to do with why I'm here, I want to know." I say through gritted teeth. He gives me a stern look. I stubbornly look him in the eye.

"You can't stop me, Aragorn." I say with finality. He's quiet, and we stare each other down until he shakes his head very slightly.

"Somehow, I did not believe I could." He says, and leans back on his chair.

My back is straight as I try not to grin at this small victory. Well, that's Aragorn won over. He still looks worried but resigned to the situation, so I try to distract him. "Stop worrying so much. Jeez, dad." I say, faking annoyance. A small smile appears on his face, and I actually do grin in triumph this time.

I want to make an effort not to act all weird around Aragorn. I want our friendship to continue. I don't want my own personal feelings to hinder that.

Glorfindel arrives, and he initiates a conversation with Elrond as he finds a seat. "Ah, Ellie is here too, I see." He smiles. "It is good to see you adjusting well."

I smile, although I feel like he's saying something else, like there's a deeper meaning behind his words but I don't have time to clarify because more people come in, Boromir included. I'm reminded of my first encounter with him and realize I forgot to ask Aragorn about it.

"Boromir didn't look too happy yesterday."

"How do you know?" He says, avoiding my gaze.

"He ran into Arwen and me on the way out of the room of Narsil yesterday." I shrug.

"It is nothing for you to worry about. He is his father's son, and he is merely loyal to his family. I cannot blame him for that." He says.

I bite my lip to stop myself from smiling but he notices it, anyway.

"What?" He inquires.

"Nothing. I just noticed it now, but you have that Elven thing..."

"What Elven thing?"

"The thing with vague words."

"Elves are not vague. Merely cautious." An amused voice retorts. Legolas has just arrived, fresh and clean and making me realize that I haven't even changed out of my training clothes.

"Is that what they call it these days?" I feign surprise. And then I actually am surprised when I see the arrival of the dwarves, and other elves, as well as Frodo and Gandalf.

"Toto, I'm definitely not in Kansas anymore." I mutter in surprise as I look around at them, all settling comfortably in their seats as Elrond introduces everyone. The dwarves look at Legolas and his companions with distrust. Legolas glares back at them. Boromir raises an eyebrow at me, noticing that I am the only woman in the group sitting next to Aragorn, as Lord Elrond introduces me simply
as "Ellie, of a distant land who comes as a messenger".

Frodo looks even better this morning, refreshed and energized. It's good to see him recovering so quickly and able to appreciate the beauty of Rivendell. But as he walks in and takes in the group and the somber looks of those around him, he hesitates. It pains me to see the smile slowly vanish from his face. He's just recovered from a near-death experience. He deserves a break.

Frodo and Gandalf find seats. When everyone settles down, the dwarf Glóin begins to speak. He speaks of his kin, and about the mines of Moria, which had been empty for years and which they wanted to inhabit again. He reports that some of their kin had entered Moria thirty years ago, and it's been a year since they last communicated.

Most troubling of all was the arrival of a messenger. A messenger of Sauron, looking for a hobbit who had stolen something from his lord. The dwarves have refused to answer to the messenger, but they had sent Glóin and his son to Rivendell to seek counsel. Lord Elrond assures him that it was a wise choice, for their problems have been but a part of the greater threat to the western world and the growing doom.

He begins to tell the history of the Ring, and for once I realize how grave everything is. How truly malicious and powerful the Ring is. How, if taken by the Enemy, it could destroy the land of Middle-earth entirely.

Elrond recounts everything, from the creation of the Ring, and the lesser Rings of Power. He tells us of how the elves hid the Rings given to them and the great battles that came as Sauron rose to power. He recounts the death of many noble Kings and Lords in what he called the Battle of the Last Alliance. It took an entire morning to recount, but no one fidgetted in impatience. Everyone listens to him with wonder.

I sit here, my heart beating furiously as I take it all in. This is some deep shit I've gotten myself into. Everything rides on the destruction of the Ring. The future as I know it could be destroyed if the Ring falls in the wrong hands. After his tale, he addresses us once more.

"Strangers from distant lands, friends of old. You have been summoned here to answer the threat of Mordor."

The group is alert, all eyes are on Lord Elrond as he speaks.

"Middle-earth stands upon the brink of destruction. None can escape it. You will unite or you will fall."

It's really happening. My future--my home--depends on this secret meeting right now. If this goes sideways, Middle-earth will be destroyed, along with what might be my home.

"Each race is bound to this fate--this one doom."

You could cut the tension in the air with a knife. Everyone is silent. Lord Elrond motions to the pedestal in the middle of the courtyard. "Bring forth the Ring, Frodo."

Frodo blinks up at the tall elf, his hand in his pocket. He looks nervous, but not surprised. Whatever's happening, he looks like he's been expecting it. Dreading it, even. He takes something out of his pocket, the very same pocket I catch him fondling. He approaches the pedestal and sets something on it, and goes back to his seat with a sigh.

It's a ring...
It's the Ring.

"I was expecting a large diamond on it or something." I mutter to Aragorn, because it's baffling to see something so simple be the cause of such destruction.

I expected it to be glittering with gemstones but instead, it's a simple, gold band. It doesn't even have a single gem on it. It's just shiny and gold and I want to reach out and touch it because I want to find out what all the fuss is about. It seems like it wants me to touch it, even, "Helen..."

My blood turns to ice.

I swear to God I heard something hiss, right in my ear.

"So it is true..." Boromir's voice floats through the air, as he gets up from his chair and slowly steps toward the pedestal.

"In a dream, I saw the Eastern side grow dark but in the West a pale light lingered." He says, "A voice was crying: 'Your doom is near at hand. Isildur's Bane is found.'"

I see Aragorn grip the armrests of his seat tightly. Lord Elrond and Gandalf exchange looks as Boromir reaches out for the Ring.

Lord Elrond jumps up from his seat, "Boromir!" He warns but Gandalf stands up as well, drawing himself to his full height as he begins to speak in a powerful and terrifying voice.

"Ash nazg durbatuluk, ash nazg gimbatul, ash nazg thrakatuluk agh burzum-ishi krimpatul."

And I don't know if it's simply my imagination but the sky seems to darken at his words. Glóin's son, Gimli, growls and reaches for his axe and the elves look most distressed. Lord Elrond raises a hand to cover his face, wincing and Legolas closes his eyes, as if in pain.

I lean back into my chair because the words strike a primitive fear in my heart, and I know although I don't know how that this is evil speech. Boromir seems to have gotten a hold of himself and has stumbled back to his chair. As the darkness dissipates, the group collectively sighs in relief, although most are still shaken.

"Never before has any voice uttered the words of that tongue here in Imladris!" Lord Elrond says, sternly but Gandalf holds his ground.

"I do not ask your pardon, Master Elrond, for the Black Speech of Mordor may yet be heard in every corner of the West!" He says, gruffly and turns to Boromir with a hard look, as he takes his seat again. "The Ring is altogether evil."

But Boromir doesn't budge. "It is a gift! A gift to the foes of Mordor!" He's back on his feet and he speaks, insistent as he paces and addresses each of us. "Why not use this Ring? Long has my father, the Steward of Gondor, kept the forces of Mordor at bay. By the blood of our people are your lands kept safe!"

He points at those in the circle. Aragorn, beside me, is agitated as Boromir continues. "Give Gondor the weapon of the enemy. Let us use it against him!"

Right, because he's a sure candidate to control the damn thing. By now I know the Ring has a will of its own, and by now I know how persuasive it can be. Boromir is being too idealistic about it.

"You cannot wield it! None of us can." Aragorn bursts out. I think it's incredibly patient of him to
hold it in for that long. "The One Ring answers to Sauron alone. It has no other master."

Boromir doesn't like being told off. "And what," he snarls, "would a Ranger know of this matter?"

I'm indignant for Aragorn, "Now hold on just one second--" I start but Legolas is on his feet and I see the same cold look I've come to associate with his dislike for something, or someone.

"This is no mere Ranger! He is Aragorn, son of Arathorn." He says, dangerously, "You owe him your allegiance."

I hear Aragorn's tired sigh, but for once I'm on Legolas's side. No one talks to my friend that way.

"Aragorn?" Boromir gasps, turning back to Aragorn. "This is Isildur's heir?"

"And heir to the throne of Gondor." Legolas presses.

"Havo dad, Legolas." Aragorn says, softly and Legolas settles back on his seat, though still looking angry.

Boromir glares at Aragorn, and his eyes briefly flicker to me, perhaps wondering just who I am and why I'm sitting next to the rightful King of Gondor. I sit up straighter and lock my gaze with his, not backing down until he walks back, slowly, to his seat.

"Gondor has no King." He says, sharply. "Gondor needs no King."

"No, Ellie." Aragorn whispers to me as I open my mouth to protest. I snarl and resolve myself to glaring at Boromir. He was perfectly polite and charming last night. So why is he being so antagonistic towards Aragorn today?

"Aragorn is right. We cannot use it." Gandalf pipes up.

"You have only one choice, then." Lord Elrond says, "The Ring must be destroyed."

Total silence follows his words.

"What are we waiting for?" Gimli growls, once again reaching for his axe as he charges towards the Ring. He brings the axe down on it.

The axe shatters, and Gimli is thrown back.

I gasp as he hits the floor, and I turn to see the Ring is in the exact same spot it was before, completely unharmed.

As Gimli gets back to his feet, Lord Elrond says, "The Ring cannot be destroyed, Gimli, son of Glóin, by any craft we here possess."

A little late for that now that Gimli's axe is in pieces.

"The Ring was made in the fires of Mount Doom. Only there can it be unmade." Lord Elrond continues, "It must be taken deep into Mordor and cast back into the fiery chasm from whence it came."

"One of you must do this."

The rest of us exchange puzzled looks, because I don't think anyone believes they heard him right.
But the dead serious look on Lord Elrond's face confirms it.

Walk into Mordor, where hordes of Sauron's deadly servants hide? How about no?

"One does not simply walk into Mordor."

You know what, Boromir, I actually agree with you.

"Its black gates are guarded by more than just orcs. There is evil there that does not sleep. And the great Eye is ever watchful." Okay, Mr. Sunshine, we get it.

"It is a barren wasteland. Riddled with fire and ash and dust. The very air you breathe is a poisonous fume. Not with ten thousand men could you do this. It is folly!"

Legolas has had enough of Boromir's pessimism, and he's back on his feet. "Have you heard nothing Lord Elrond has said?" He looks around at us, imploringly, "The Ring must be destroyed!"

"And I suppose you think you're the one to do it?" Gimli roars, also getting on his feet.

"And if we fail, what then? What happens when Sauron takes back what is his?" Boromir cries and I can't help myself anymore.

"Hold on, let me get this straight..." I start, while Gimli's voice overlaps with mine.

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

Which, of course, incites chaos as the elves fly to their feet in indignation and the dwarves rise to agree with Gimli. I have to stand to be heard above the roaring crowd.

"Wait. So, you don't want to destroy the Ring because you want to use it against Sauron but you're bitching about what happens if he gets it? Because waving the damn thing at Sauron's face won't incite him to use every effort to take it back, huh?" I sarcastically address this to Boromir, who seems more shocked than anything that I would be speaking to him in such a manner.

Gimli's voice is heard over the crowd, "Never trust an elf!"

"What do you know about the Ring? You are little more than a foreigner!" Boromir says to me and I scoff.

"I have enough sense to know that using the Enemy's best weapon against him instead of destroying it is going to bite us in the ass!"

"Oh? And what do you know about warfare and strategy?"

"Absolutely nothing but I do have this thing called common sense!"

"Ellie, enough of this!" Aragorn has gotten on his feet as well, and he's urging me to sit back down.

"Do you not understand that while we bicker amongst ourselves, Sauron's power grows?!" Gandalf shouts and I shake my head and raise my hands in exasperation as I let Aragorn pull me away from Boromir, who in turn argues with Gandalf.

"I'm sorry, okay? I'm sorry. My patience is non-existent right now." I say, sharply, as Aragorn practically drags me away from the shouting match. I sit back down, fuming as I drum my fingers on the armrest impatiently and Aragorn sits next to me, scowling. Lord Elrond has resigned to looking at his feet in frustration as everyone else yells at each other.
It's complete and utter chaos, but a voice from within the crowd shouts and Aragorn and I blink at each other in bewilderment.

"I will take it! I will take it!"

We aren't the only ones who heard. The shouting quiets down as everyone looks for the source of the brave voice.

"I will take the Ring to Mordor!" Frodo says, firmly until all eyes are fixed on him.

"Although," his voice is soft now that he has everyone's attention, "I do not know the way."

Gandalf steps forward immediately, "I will help you bear this burden, Frodo Baggins, as long as it is yours to bear." He stands next to Frodo and gently lays a hand on his uninjured shoulder.

Aragorn gets on his feet, "If by my life or death, I can protect you, then I will." He says, kneeling in front of the hobbit. "You have my sword."

Legolas, ever loyal, steps up as well. "And you have my bow." He joins Gandalf and Aragorn next to Frodo.

"And my axe." Gimli pipes in. I can see Legolas physically restraining himself from rolling his eyes.

The dwarf looks up at the elf stubbornly.

"You carry the fate of us all, little one." Boromir says, walking towards Frodo as well, "If this is indeed the will of the Council, then Gondor will see it done."

I look up at Aragorn first of all, and I see him shake his head, once. But something inside me wakes. Determination and hope and longing for home. I want to join them, as well. I want to do something.

"Ha!" A voice hidden in the bushes exclaims, and out runs Sam, making a bee-line straight to Frodo, right beneath a bewildered Lord Elrond.

"Mr. Frodo is not going anywhere without me!"

"No, indeed! It is rather hard to separate you even though he is summoned to a secret council and you are not." Lord Elrond says, amused.

But if I join them, what will I do? How can a stranger like me do anything against Sauron? I'm a twenty-two year old woman, not even finished with my college education. What can I do to help?

"Oy! We're coming, too!" Another familiar voice pipes in, and by now Lord Elrond looks more exasperated than anything as Merry and Pippin join the group.

"I had hoped that Glorfindel would be one of the companions as well." Lord Elrond says.

"I would gladly go if my lord commands it, but I believe you know there is a wiser decision." Glorfindel says, bowing as he motions at Merry and Pippin.

"You'd have to send us home tied up in a sack to stop us!" Merry declares.

"Anyway, you need people of intelligence on this sort of...mission. Quest. Thing." Pippin says, as he nods in agreement to his own words.

"Well, that rules you out, Pip." Merry mutters.
I turn my gaze to Gandalf, and he's looking at me as well, waiting for my next move. I look at Frodo, small and brave. I can't chicken out now. Not when the world I care about is at stake. Not when Gramps and Rory's safety is threatened, because I know if this Ring isn't destroyed that I'll be seeing a dark and cruel future. And Gramps will never forgive me if I don't even try to do anything.

"Nine Companions..." Lord Elrond says.

I harden my resolve. "Ten." I say and I rise from my seat as well. "Make that ten companions." I stand next to Boromir, who looks down at me in surprise. There is a small smile on Lord Elrond's lips.

"Very well. The Company of the Ring shall be ten. It is only fitting, as there were ten Lords and Kings set out in the Last Alliance of Elves and Men to put an end to Sauron, so too shall there be ten Companions to be set out for his destruction once more. As the Alliance brought together the Free Peoples, so, too, shall you represent those whose fates lie in your hands. May friendship and loyalty succeed in the task which Kings with mighty armies upon their command have failed to do." He glances at me for a split second as he says, "This is what you have all been led to. This is the task for you all."

He looks at all of us individually and I nod my head. I'm doing something. I'm no longer sitting around, wallowing in self-pity. If this Ring's destruction is my ticket home, then I will fight for it. Even if I never go back, at least I know that I did everything I can to make sure Gramps and Rory will be safe.

"You shall be known as the Fellowship of the Ring."

And so it begins.

"Great!" Pippin says, "Where are we going?"

Gandalf rolls his eyes at the young hobbit.

No one answers Pippin.

Chapter End Notes

Those who have read the books will note that Elrond chose nine companions because they were basically the counterparts of the Nine Ringwraiths. Since Ellie would be joining, I had him counting something else that had significance in the War against Sauron: the lords and kings who fought against Sauron. Namely: Isildur of Arnor, Anárion of Gondor, Elendil, Gil-galad, Oropher and later Thranduil of Greenwood(now known as Mirkwood), Ámdir of Lothlórien, Durin the King of Dwarves, Círdan of Lindon and of course, Lord Elrond of Imladris himself.

Numbers have significance in Tolkien's world, and I wanted to make sure that wasn't messed up. I hope Tolkien isn't full on doing a hurricane spin in his grave right now.

As for the translations:

Len hannon, hir nîn - I thank you, my lord
Ash nazg durbatuluk, ash nazg gimbatul, ash nazg thrakatuluk agh burzum-ishi
krimpatul - One Ring to rule them all. One Ring to find them. One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them.
Aragorn leaves Imladris in preparation for the Fellowship's journey and Ellie is left in the care of two blonde elves. The company is appreciated, the painful training leaves much to be desired but she did want this, so she can't complain.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"I told you--"

"And I told you!"

"I advise you against this. It is simply too dangerous!"

"I don't care."

"You will have to let go of all luxuries."

"There weren't many luxuries in the first place..."

"You will be running, all the time, constantly pursued by forces that want to kill you."

"Good. Cardio work-out."

"Ellie."

"Aragorn."

"Stop that."
"You stop!"

I'm so sick and tired of this. The moment the Council ends and we're invited to lunch, Aragorn intercepts me. He's trying to make me back out, but I refuse to budge. It's not that I'm frustrated with him for wanting to protect me, but I'm not a child. I can make my own decisions. I know what I'm putting myself through. I know it will be dangerous. That is not going to stop me from wanting to do whatever it takes to protect this world, because protecting Middle-earth meant protecting my family's future.

"Look." I say imploringly as he opens his mouth to argue, "I refuse to sit by while you and Frodo and everyone else sacrifice yourselves. No! Listen to me!" I take both of his hands in mine when he opens his mouth to protest again.

"This is my future, as well. My family, my entire world that's being threatened. I may not know much about Middle-earth but one thing I'm sure of is that I wasn't sent here just to hide. If I can fight for my family, then it's what I'll do. And you can't stop me from doing that. Please understand."

He sighs in resignation and squeezes my hands as well. He looks down at our joined hands, his jaw set. When he looks back up at me, he shakes his head. I'm getting used to that certain movement of his. I've come to associate it with, 'Oh, fuck it. I'll just let this bite her in the ass.'

"Stop looking at me like that. It's unbearable." He says.

I stare at him, stubbornly.

He sighs. "You will train everyday until Lord Elrond declares it is time to leave for the journey to Mordor. If, by then, you still do not possess enough skill to even disarm me, then you will stay behind."

"What?!" I pull my hands away from him in outrage.

"It's a fair deal, Ellie. And this way, at least I will know that I tried my hardest to stay true to my word that I will protect you."
I glare at him, and this time, he glares back. I can never win a staring contest with this guy.

"Fine!" I snap.

"Do you promise?"

"I said fine, Jesus Christ!" I exclaim, raising my arms up in frustration.

"I will be going with Elladan and Elrohir to scout. We cannot make a move until all the Nazgûl have been accounted for."

"And when will you be coming back?"

"Not until winter, I expect."

"Winter? How am I supposed to train without you?" I say, my eyes widening.

"Legolas has volunteered to help with your training before. I will ask him to help you."

I purse my lips and breathe out a sigh through my nose. I don't want to pressure Legolas, of all people, to do something when he probably has better things to do than train a complete novice how to use a sword, but I need to train, so I give in.

Aragorn and I walk to the Hall of Fire. The place is full and everyone is there, getting to know each other. Some elves are armed, and I bet these are the scouts that Lord Elrond will be sending out to scour the lands.

The hobbits, charismatic as they are, easily make friends with the dwarves, especially given Bilbo's friendship with Glóin.

Legolas and the other elves distance themselves, though. But that's nothing new. I've realized that wood-elves like to be isolated, or at least that they enjoy music and arts better than dealing with us rowdy mortals.
"So this is how the elves of Eryn Galen mingle." I say, sarcastically as I approach Legolas.

"The dwarves and the Wood-elves of Eryn Galen do not have a good relationship."

"Why not?"

"I can tell you that myself, lassie." A rough voice interrupts. Legolas' face turns stony as Gimli steps towards us. "See, this pretty elfling captured and imprisoned my father and his companions, not to mention Thorin Oakenshield himself and locked them up in cells."

"Then, would you believe it? Their prisoners escaped, although that's no surprise. They seem to lose their prisoners easily. And King Thranduil later marches an army upon Erebor to claim Smaug's treasure, threatening our king with war for gems."

"The dwarf fails to mention that his people butchered Thingol. Or did you forget that? How our people used to be good friends until greed led to the slaughter of our King." Legolas' voice is low and deadly.

I look between the dwarf and the elf, both looking like they're ready to tackle each other.

"Okay, boys." I step in before more than words are exchanged between them, "The two of you will have to sort out your differences. You'll be travelling together, you'd better be ready to defend each other's backs."

The two blink at me and Aragorn coughs.

"She's starting to sound like you." Legolas says to him, amused.

"Oh, shut up." I roll my eyes and clap Gimli's shoulder.

"Food, my dear Gimli. Food will make you feel better." I tell him as we walk towards the long table where most of the guests are already eating.
His laughter rings through the walls. "You and I will get along just fine, Ellie."

I also notice Glorfindel in the crowd. I haven't properly talked him since he led us to Rivendell almost a week ago. The Council wasn't really the best place to catch up with each other. He's talking to two dark-haired elves, who have their backs turned to me. He looks up and catches my eye. I almost run into Gimli.

Thankfully, I'm saved from explaining my reaction when Gimli lets me sit in front of him on the long table where the food is being served, and he introduces me to his companions. I'm distracted by the tales of the dwarves about Erebor. Glóin recalls his adventure with the famous Thorin Oakenshield. I didn't even realize that I was sitting next to Boromir until he asked me if I wanted some grapes.

Shame trickles from my neck to my cheeks.

"Uh..." I stutter as I reach for the bowl of grapes. He smiles, and I take that as permission to talk to him.

"Listen. I'm really sorry about yelling at you this morning. I meant no offense. At least, well, now I don't. I sound dumb. Wait. Okay." I sigh and he releases a breath of what is unmistakably laughter.

"What?" I say, self-consciously.

"Nothing to forgive, sweet girl. We were all caught in emotions at the moment. I apologize as well if I had offended you."

I grin, "Sir, you're going to have to try harder than that to offend me."

This time he laughs loudly. "Let's just not offend each other at all, if that can be helped." He says.

"Deal." I smile.

"Is your training going well?"
"Mm. I've heard it's going to get tougher, especially with an elf training me." I say as I pop a grape in my mouth. The grapes here are divine. Perfectly round and the flavor bursts in my mouth as I sink my teeth in them. There are few luxuries in Middle-earth but this is one I'll sorely miss.

"Well, you're not wrong. If you were to join us, you would need to be in fighting condition." He says.

"So I've heard. I'm going to have to go through 'real training' now."

He snorts in amusement as I use my fingers for air quotes. "I wish you all the luck."

After lunch, Aragorn takes me aside to say goodbye, and introduces me to Elladan and Elrohir, who I realize were the two elves Glorfindel was talking to. You know, at some point in my five days of stay in Rivendell, I thought I'd get used to the beauty of elves but whenever I'm introduced to someone new, I revert back to the gaping idiot I was when I first arrived.

"I finally get to meet the enigmatic Ellie herself."

I stare at Elladan, non-plussed.

"You know who I am?" Dude. Hot elf knows who I am. It's like I'm being greeted by a celebrity.

"It is hard not to hear about you when both Aragorn and the hobbits speak fondly of you." Elrohir says.

My heart expands in my ribs as a smile lights up my face.

"Do they?" I turn to Aragorn, who gives me a small smile.

"It is good to see you again, Lady Ellie." Glorfindel says.
"You too, Glorfindel. Today was the first time I've seen you since the Fords of Bruinen."

"The borders needed watching, wolves needed to be driven out. But I will be here for most of the time. Perhaps I will help young Legolas train you." He says.

"Oh. Um..." I stutter. One attractive, blonde elf is enough. I don't think I can handle two.

"Ah, now that is a good idea! Glorfindel is a skilled warrior! Skilled more than the three of us combined, even. You are in very capable hands." Elladan says.

"Oh. I don't want to take up your time, though." I say to Glorfindel.

"I need a distraction, anyway. And perhaps..." Glorfindel says, giving me a knowing look. I vaguely remember my first conversation with Gandalf and Lord Elrond, when they talked about Glorfindel when I mentioned I'm from the future.

"You will make excellent friends!" Elrohir says, although the identical smirks on the twins' faces make me suspicious.

"We will take our leave now, Ellie. When I come back, I expect you to not only be able to hit things, but hit them with skill." Aragorn says, a suspicious smirk on his face, too.

I squint at him. Okay. If he wants to play, then I'll play...

"Have you said goodbye to Arwen?" I ask, innocently. Aragorn glances at Elladan and Elrohir, whose smiles don't falter, although I do note Elladan's slightly wider grin.

"I have."

I can't help it.

"Did you at least kiss her goodbye? You'll be away from her for a while."
Elladan is now consciously and physically struggling to keep a dignified expression.

"Goodbye, Ellie." Aragorn says, quickly and I giggle at the look on his face.

Legolas later finds me and he and Glorfindel take me away to the training grounds, not even for target practice but for exercise, especially in the upper body department, which mostly just involves keeping a sword parallel to the ground.

As training goes on for the next few days, the two mercilessly control my diet. Every morning, we jog and work on a part of my body that wasn't sore from the day before. At afternoon, it's target practice, mostly with knives—which is the only thing I'm acing now that I've got the handle of it—but Legolas is also teaching me how to use a bow because it's 'more reliable' when it comes to ranged combat. I now realize what Aragorn and the twins were smirking about. Legolas tries to be gentle, but man is Glorfindel aggressive. Twice, I've been driven either to tears or both of us had a shouting match. It's him who takes over my exercise. Apparently, we needed to make up for the short amount of time that we have for my training. The vial of oil of wintergreen that Salabeth gave me ran out within a week. Now, whenever I think of 'intense', Glorfindel pops up in my mind.

Arwen, who joins us at breakfast now, is highly amused at the sight of Legolas and Glorfindel arguing with me over what and how much I should eat. It's a constant struggle between what kind of bread I should eat and the vegetables I need to eat more. Arwen provides a distraction by taking me around Rivendell, and shows me the paintings of The Battle of the Last Alliance, as well as the shards of Narsil. I'm glad I can keep her company and give her reason to smile. Ever since Aragorn left with the twins, she's been quiet. She would look out the window and this painful look of longing would take over her face when she thinks no one is looking.

I try to distract her and keep her from worrying too much by simply talking to her and getting to know her. I tell her as much of New York as I can, from pizza to the strong, independent people. I keep cars and technology out of our conversations, and she in turn tells me stories of Lothlórien, where she grew up. Every afternoon, after target practice and before dinner, she would invite me to the garden and teach me Sindarin.

On top of my training, there's also the laborious laundry with Salabeth, who at first disapproved of my joining the Fellowship, if only because she doesn't like the idea of me being the only woman in the group, with no one else to sympathize with my feminine concerns.

"How will you bathe with men surrounding you? And how will you relieve yourself or change clothes? How will you deal with your monthly cycle?" She worries too much. It's actually quite touching.
"I was caught up in the heat of the moment! I wasn't thinking about my period when I volunteered. And I'll find a way, okay? I'll manage. I'm among honorable people. I'll be as safe as I can possibly be with them.” I reason.

Gimli insists on feeding me more meat. Two weeks into my training, he piles more chicken on my plate.

"Your arms are too skinny to hold a sword up for long, lassie. You need to build up your muscles!"

"I don't want to look like She-Hulk, Gimli. I have a tiny head. I won't be able to pull that glorious body off." I counter and he looks confused.

"Do not ask what a She-Hulk is." Arwen warns, and I snort in my laughter.

"You could always wield a light Elvish blade. It would be easier for you and would be proportional to your size." Legolas suggests. Right, like I needed reminding of how I'm shorter than everyone here.

And so, my routine is set. Time flies by much quicker when you're busy. The hobbits spend their times together, and I barely get to talk to them at breakfast before I'm whisked off for more training. Gandalf and Lord Elrond informs us of any new developments and tell us news of the Ringwraiths' whereabouts in order for us to plan the course we will be taking. Somehow, I'm not surprised that they're not gone. Evil doesn't go away that easily.

Training is exhausting but oddly satisfying, even more so when I start my actual sword training. Legolas cheerfully announces a month into training that I can start hitting things, and my knife throwing skills have vastly improved. He tells me I'm a natural when it comes to throwing, which I'd say is about the only thing I'm good at. Using a bow has been slow but steady work.

As I continue to improve at target practice, he makes me step farther and farther from the target and makes me hit it from different angles. I am more than grateful that Legolas is willing to take over my weapons training, even after we got off on the wrong foot.

"You don't have to do this, you know. I thought we've both gotten over our Dark Days. You don't have to be so nice." I say, one morning during sword practice as he teaches me how to parry and block. It's one of those rare days where Glorfindel was away on border duty and it's just the two of
He smirks at the term 'Dark Days', and I know he knows what I'm talking about. The days when we were both fighting because of distrust and suspicion.

"I know. But I do want to get to know you better. It has been a month since I've known you and trained with you and yet, I barely know anything about you." He says as he moves slowly, taking a step towards me and jabbing his practice sword towards my waist. I step back and twist away, pressing my sword towards him.

"Maybe that's because I'm just uninteresting."

"Someone whose home has trees that are filled with light at winter is someone I find very interesting." He feints and I block him just in time.

"Oh? You think I'm interesting?"

"I am an elf of the woods, Ellie. Trees are a part of who I am. I would like to see these trees of light of yours someday."

"Assuming we'll succeed." I mutter, swinging my sword to his shins but he jumps out of the way.

"We will. The thought of anything less chills me to the bone." He counters with a flurry of two quick jabs, but I block and duck.

"Such melodrama. Of course we'll succeed, we're awesome." I say, getting back in position. His laughter is infectious.

"When the time comes, your skill better match your confidence."

"When the time comes, I'll be kicking ass. Both literally and figuratively." I say and he lunges for me, unexpectedly. I don't have enough time to react.
"Hey!" I snarl as he twists my sword from my hand. He deftly catches it and looks at me with nothing less than smugness.

"You will have to keep a better grip on your sword if you don't want others to kick yours, first." He says, smirking.

"Oh, it's on, pretty boy." I say in a low voice as he hands me back my sword. And this is basically how most of our training goes on. Back and forth banter in between swings or push ups.

Of course, there are still down times, when I have to rest so I don't overexert myself. Those days, I spend with Arwen and Salabeth, who is also now teaching me about basic herbalism. Some of the plants, like athelas, are unfamiliar to me. Others I've come to know from college. It seems taking Pharmacy in college is paying off now. Salabeth is delighted to know I have some knowledge on healing medicine, and we bond over making salves and other medicine that Lord Elrond needs. I suspect she's now stocking up on analgesics and antibacterials. She doesn't tell me, but I think even the elves of Imladris are afraid even their safe haven won't be spared from Sauron's wrath.

At night, there are still dreams of my brothers or Gramps that I don't want to face. There are memories that keep bringing up in my mind, making it impossible to forget them, making the pain of missing them less and less bearable. The dreams no longer come every night, but when they do, I find myself wide awake.

Legolas and I just sort of had this non-verbal agreement to walk in the gardens at night when I can't sleep, and he helps with my Sindarin, on top of Arwen's lessons. Within a month, I've known basic Sindarin thanks to them, mostly greetings and questions but also battle commands.

"I pray you do not have to hear those words." He says one night as we sit by a bench carved from stone, overlooking the valley and the Bruinen River.

"How are you, Ellie? Truly? I have suspected for some time that you are having trouble sleeping. You may not have long to sleep on a soft bed." He says.

"I don't know... I kind of miss the rocks of the Midgewater Marshes." I sigh, dreamily, which makes him smile.

"And yet, you do not answer my question."
"Am I pulling an Aragorn? He never answers my questions unless I prod him." I am aware I'm avoiding the question.

"Do you need me to prod you?"

"With what?"

"I am sure I can find a stick nearby."

"Or you can just push me off the ledge. No one will ever think it wasn't an accident."

"But then, you will not be able to answer the question."

I roll my eyes. It's impossible to steer him away from a topic. This elf is too smart for his own good.

"It's nothing. It's...just. It's stupid." I say, looking down at my lap.

He turns his entire upper body in my direction.

"Would you tell me what troubles you now, mellonenîn?" He asks, and our eyes find each other. Mellonenîn. Friend of mine. It's come to the point where we can call each other friends now.

And friends do open up to each other.

"I keep thinking about Gramps and Rory. How they are, what they're doing. I miss them and... sometimes, I dream about memories I had with them, or Donovan or my parents, and it's too painful to be reminded of what I used to have. I'm scared that if I close my eyes and dream of them, there'd come a time when I would forget the sound of their voices or the color of their eyes. I'm scared they'll forget me." It's a relief to let this out, to let someone know what my unspoken fear is. The fear I've been trying to run from.

Legolas is silent for a while.
"Ellie, you must not let these dreams get to you. Sauron thrives on fear and despair. You must not let him win."

"Easier said than done." I mumble.

I see a smile slowly spread across his features.

"What?" I say.

"You are stronger than you realize, Ellie. I want you to know that."

I smile as well, and I bite my cheek because I look like a chipmunk when my smile is this big. He stretches out his long legs in front of him and looks up.

"Look up at the stars." He tells me, and I do.

My mouth hangs open.

I've been so focused on myself and my problems here that I've forgotten to look up. I'm used to smoke and artificial light drowning out the stars but here, from where I sit, millions of stars wink down at me.

The sky is dark velvet sprinkled with beautiful, shimmering lights. It's like getting lost in a sea of beauty, and it makes me feel safe. It's breath-taking.

"See those stars? The three brightest stars?" He leans closer to me to point the three stars out. "Those are your family. Your brothers and your grandfather."

The thought of them make my heart constrict, but it's an ache that makes me feel alive. It's an ache that reminds me I'm fighting for something other than myself. "As long as those stars are shining down on you, their memories will not be lost."
I close my eyes, to burn the exact position of those three stars in my mind and heart.

"As long as those stars shine, there is hope."

I don't feel the tear that slides down my cheek until Legolas' hand wipes it away. I open my eyes and turn to him just as he's drawing his hand back. His eyes are blue. So blue. It's not blue-grey, or blue-green. It's pure crystal, as beautiful as the morning sky. I've never noticed how beautiful they were until now.

"Len hannon." I whisper. His smile shines brighter than the moon. When I go to bed that night, he tells me to 'sleep well' in Elvish. All I have to do is think of three stars and clear blue eyes, and for once, I sleep peacefully.

Chapter End Notes

I have a tiny, little crush on Glorfindel. I can't help it, he's glorious. I think Glorfindel is someone that Elrond would trust enough to open up Ellie's situation with. I still firmly believe that Glorfindel the Balrog-slayer is the same Glorfindel we see in the Ford of Bruinen. He was powerful enough to keep Nine Ringwraiths at bay, after all. So, I think Glorfindel is both wise and powerful enough to figure out Ellie's situation.

Also, I didn't realize I've forgotten to update the publication dates of my chapters. I'll go and fix that now.
Ellie finds out if she learned anything from her training, teaches a captain, lord and prince the "F-bomb" and spends her final moment of peace with a friend before they go off on a perilous journey.

It's December, and my training has been going really well. Handling a sword has become much easier for me, I can now confidently throw a knife and use a bow, and I don't tire as easily as I used to. I thank Glorindel for that, and his victorious grin makes me shake my head.

"You were not as troublesome as the twins, I will give you that."

"Dude, you yell at me too loudly! My ears are sensitive." I tease.

"Your ears? Your screeching is very close to the sound bats make. Or wargs." Glorindel teases back.

"Oh, shush, you. Or you'll find yourself with green hair again." I warn.

Glorfindel stops in his tracks.

"How did you know about that?"

"I have my sources." I say, conspiratorially as I pick up my practice sword. Legolas faces me, and I swear I hear Glorfindel behind me muttering, "It had to be Salabeth. I knew she had a hand in it..."

I smirk. I hate to break it to you, Glorfindel, but the correct answer is Arwen. She told me all about how it was her that placed the green dye in Glorfindel's hair oils and managed to blame it all on the twins because Glorfindel refused to let her borrow his horse when she was very young.

"I'm telling you, you were meant to be a warrior." Boromir says as he watches me spar with Legolas. He doesn't usually come to our sessions, as he handled the hobbits' training, along with Gimli but today, our training session is extended, and with free time in his hands, Boromir comes to watch my progress. I'd like to say I've impressed him.

"I'd be happier if I can disarm the elf in front of me." I snarl as I charge towards Legolas with ferocity.

He dodges me easily by spinning around me and grabbing my arm and locking it behind me, making me twist my upper body in discomfort.

"We're not doing the cha-cha, pretty boy." I say as I stomp on his foot. Legolas's grip loosens as he exclaims in pain and I elbow his chest to escape from his arms. I sweep my sword for the handle of his but he recovers quickly and blocks my swing.
"What's a cha-cha?" He asks as he advances. I take a step back.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" I block his swing and duck under his arm as I aim to flank him but he mirrors my movement.

"What is a cha-cha?" Boromir asks.

"It's a dance, guys."

"What's a 'guy'?" Glorfindel's eyebrows furrow in confusion.

"Jesus fucking Christ." I roll my eyes as he attempts to trip me. I hop over his foot and push him playfully.

"Who's Jesus Christ?" Boromir asks.

"What's a 'fuck'?" Legolas says, chuckling as he locks his arm around my waist and arms, his sword to my neck. I'm thankful we're only practicing with wooden swords or he'd have killed me fifteen times by now. I pant for breath, struggling to get him off but he lifts me off my feet.

I yelp in surprise, feeling like a child. It still surprises me how strong he is. Given the chance, he could probably throw me over his shoulder and carry me around all day and not get tired.

"It's a bad word. Don't say it." I say as I get back to the ground. I whirl around with my sword but he expects it and dodges.

"But what does it mean?"

"Something to do with a woman and a man when they love each other very much and want to show each other that love." I say this as though I'm explaining to a child. "Or it could be used to describe a word or action for emphasis. Or just when you're angry. In fact, you can say 'fuck' in any situation and it will fit."

"Oh." He feints to his left and I step back to keep him at arm's length.

"You certainly look like you're dancing to me." Boromir side comments.

"I'm not fucking dancing." I say, as an example on the use of one of my favorite words. I charge towards Legolas again.

"Don't say that! It is not very lady-like of you." Glorfindel says.

"Listen to the Green-Haired Monster, Ellie." Legolas laughs.

"Hey!" Glorfindel protests. I take advantage of Legolas' momentary distraction as my foot goes up to kick him, and he dodges just in time for my foot not to reach his balls.

"Damn it!" I curse.

Boromir chuckles at the sight of us exchanging blows.

"Gentlemen, Ellie." A clear voice calls, and we all turn. I know that voice.

"You're here!" I drop my sword and run towards Aragorn. He chuckles at the sight of me as I practically collide with him when I hug him.
I pull away, a huge smile on my face. "You smell like wet horse." I tease and he messes up my hair.

"Hey!" I whine, batting his hand away.

"You sound like an elf."

"Probably because I've been spending two months with them." I say as we join Boromir, Legolas and Glorfindel. Legolas is holding my sword in his other hand.

"Mae g'ovannen, mellonenîn." Legolas says and Aragorn smiles. They exchange pleasantries and Boromir and Aragorn greet each other with nods.

"Estel, I am now sure of who made the dye prank." Is Glorfindel's greeting.

"Glorfindel, I am sure that whoever you think it is, you are wrong." He gives me a knowing smile. Of course, Arwen would have told him about that. Glorfindel's eyebrows furrow in confusion.

"How has your training been going?" Aragorn asks me.

"She learns quickly. I've never seen anything like it." Legolas says, with a bit of pride in his voice.

"Good girl." Aragorn says, patting my shoulder. I glow with pride.

"What news?" Boromir asks and Aragorn sighs, suddenly tired.

"We have found no trace of the Riders. Seven of their horses were found dead in the Bruinen River and we have scoured all of the North. We cannot account for the Ninth Rider, but Gandalf, I think, would like to plan our journey now." He explains.

"We're going?" I gasp.

"We are." He motions to himself, Legolas and Boromir. "You however, would still need to show me you have even the slightest chance of surviving in a battle."

I quirk an eyebrow at him as he takes a practice sword from Legolas.

"She is quite aggressive with a sword." Legolas warns.

"Shouldn't you be resting? You must be tired. This would hardly be a fair fight." I say as I take the other sword from Legolas.

"You're right. I should cover my eyes to give you an advantage."

"Ohoho. Oh, it's on." I warn as he chuckles and swings the sword around to test its balance.

"I'll go easy on you." He says, breezily, and I charge.

Sparring with Aragorn feels different. It's like I have to prove myself, and I don't know if that affects my fighting style or not but I definitely watch my flank more, because the man knows how to find a weak spot that I'm not guarding. He tries to disarm me twice, and the second time, I almost lose my grip on the sword. The advantage to being smaller in size compared to him is that I'm a smaller target, and I can now see what Boromir means when he says I look like I'm dancing because what I may lack in skill, I make up for in being quick and elusive.

I make a daring move of stepping closer to him and when he swings his sword forward, I duck beneath his arm, move behind him and kick the back of his knees. Aragorn cries out, more in
surprise than in pain, as he loses his balance and I use my sword to knock his away from his
loosened grip as he tries to stay on his feet.

His sword flies a foot away from him and I aim the tip of my sword to his neck.

"I feel like we've been here before." I say, thoughtfully, unable to keep the pride in my voice.

"Except the roles were reversed." He agrees and Boromir, Legolas and Glófindel clap as I pull my
sword back and help Aragorn to his feet.

"And this is the part where I thank my brilliant trainer." I say as I approach Legolas who gives me a
pat on the back, proudly.

"We had an agreement. I shall honor it. We would still need to wait for Elladan and Elrohir's report,
so you have time to pack. They may not yet come until the morrow." Aragorn says and I sigh in
relief.

Now, it's really starting.

When Elladan and Elrohir finally arrive, they would speak of their reports only to Lord Elrond, and
when Lord Elrond gathers the Fellowship, he tells us we will be leaving in seven days, which I try to
use by squeezing in more training, although by then Aragorn tells me that I should conserve my
energy and let my body rest for the long journey ahead, so I spend my last four days walking around
Rivendell with either Merry and Pippin, or at night in the gardens with Legolas. He says he wants to
spend as many of the last peaceful days in Rivendell just appreciating its beauty.

Salabeth now insists on doing my hair everyday, even when there is no occasion. I think it's her way
of telling me she'll miss me.

"I have lived for three hundred years. I have outlived many mortal lives, as have all the elves. But it
still pains me when one I have grown fond of has to leave again. You have become like a little sister
to me. You made me feel younger, less worried, more hopeful for the world." She tells me, the
morning of our departure.

I turn to her in surprise after she's done with my hair, and I hug her, tightly, trying to convey how
much I appreciate her, how thankful I am to her for putting up with me, for taking care of me when
she didn't need to. She hesitates, and I hear her sigh before she hugs me back.

"You are a good friend, Salabeth. Truly. You put up with me and taught me many things." I say, and
pull away from her. Her smile is warm and lights up her beautiful face.

"I packed extra cloths for you in case you do not have the time to wash the others for your cycle.
And I included an extra set of clothes. But what shall I do with your old pack?"

Still a mother figure until the very end. I'm going to miss Salabeth so much.

"What old pack?"

"The strange, one. The one with the teeth."

I give her a puzzled look.

"The one that contained all your dirty clothes."

"Oh!" She meant my backpack.
"Wow. I forgot all about that. I kept it in the wardrobe." I smile at her and take her hands, "Hold on to it for me. I'll take it back when I return."

She smiles and nods. "Then I shall wait for your return. I have something for you." She says, taking the parcel she held when she first came into my room this morning. She opens it and holds up a brown long-sleeved shirt with white details that laces up at the front. The fabric is light but supple and it looks like it would reach just past my thighs. She also holds up a white cloak lined with fur that is secured with a silver clasp. There's also a pair of brown pants and brown ankle boots.

"Where did these come from?" I gasp as I hold the clothes up in awe.

"Lady Arwen had them made for you, but I said I would make it myself. You would travel in comfort, at least."

"Salabeth... I don't know what to say. You've been so kind to me." I say and hug her again.

"Take care of yourself, Ellie." She says as she returns the hug.

An hour before we're expected to leave, before the sun has even come up, I stay in the garden, just for old times' sake. I'm alone in a gazebo, leaning against one of its pillars as I take in the stillness of my surroundings. The only noise I hear is the sound of the rushing river and the chirping of birds in the trees. The morning is cold, and I'm reminded that it must be around Christmastime back in New York. The thought sends a pang of longing to my heart.

It's peaceful today, and I look back on the quiet nights with Gramps, the first few weeks after my parents' death, both of us looking out the window at the dead of night, when the streets are unusually quiet (well, as quiet as New York can get) and the streetlight in front of our apartment flickers on and off. Gramps would read a storybook to Rory, who had trouble sleeping in his own room and would often wake up in the middle of the night and move to the couch. A car or two would pass by, and the sound of the wheels on the gravel would make Rory look up, expecting our parents to arrive. But they never do, and I'll always be the one telling him, "Go to sleep, baby." and kissing his forehead.

I wonder if he looks up whenever he hears a car at night and expects me to return. I wonder what Gramps tells him when I don't walk in, or if Rory just sleeps through it all now that he's older. I wonder how they're spending Christmas without me, if Donovan joins them now that I'm not there to drag him.

I lean against the railings of the gazebo and look down. I'm gripping on to the railings tightly. I'm doing this for them. One day, I'll come back, and I'll make sure that they're safe. I'll make sure that there's a home I'll come back to.

"Ellie." Legolas' voice is soft from behind me, and I turn to him, trying to wipe away any sign of distress on my features.

He blinks at the sight of me and my new clothes. He's gotten used to my old clothes that I think seeing me dressed for travel takes him by surprise. I look down at the cloak. "Do I look like an adventurer now? Off to fight evil and save the world?" I say, jokingly and he seems to snap back to reality.

"When I first met you, you looked lost, confused and sad. Now I see a woman full of strength and determination." He says and his words make my stomach twist, but not out of discomfort. He approaches me, and that's when I notice what he's holding.

"Glorfindel asked for me to give you this. You would need a blade, and this one is light and sturdy. I
believe it is a good fit for you." He says, extending a scabbard to me. I take it and pull the sword out, testing its balance.

"I'm gonna kick ass with this." I joke again, and he smiles.

"That's exactly what I was thinking." He says as I secure the scabbard to the belt around my waist.

"I also brought these from the armory." He takes an extra bow and quiver from his back.

"Thank you." I say as I strap the quiver and bow to my back, "You didn't have to do this, you know." I add.

"I know. I wanted to see you in private, to be in the garden just one last time." Legolas says and I lean back to sit on the smooth, stone railing of the gazebo we're in. My feet swing above the ground, and he leans forward, planting both hands on the railing.

"Peace and quiet before we march to hell?" I say.

"It would be a long and perilous journey. Allow me a few moments of peace with you. It may be our last." He says and I blink at him in surprise.

"With me?" I repeat, and I think my cheeks are in flames.

"We have spent the last two moons enjoying Imladris together. There is every chance we may never see it again."

I'm currently enjoying Legolas' profile. That calm, serene look on his face as he gazes at his surroundings, with the pale light of a sun that has barely crept up to the sky illuminating his features. Strands of his blonde hair fall over his shoulder.

"May I braid this?" I say, brushing the strands back. He straightens up and looks at me in surprise. My eyes widen in disbelief. I can't believe I just said that.

"I mean--um--it's just...uh..."

For the love of holy God. My nervousness makes me lose my balance as I lean back, trying to put as much distance between him and me so he won't see my embarrassment, but I forgot that I'm sitting on a railing.

He pulls me back to stop my fall, his hands around my waist. There have been plenty of times before when his hands would be on me, whether it's because we're sparring or because he's correcting my form or my hand is on the crook of his arm as we're walking through the gardens so I don't know why it's this touch that sends my heart leaping into my throat.

"It was stupid. Ignore me. I just thought... Salabeth does it to me a lot. It just seemed normal to me... But it probably isn't. Forget I said anything." I say, waving my hand in front of his face.

"It's alright. You may do it, of course." He says, and he leads me to the lone bench inside the gazebo so I can braid his hair. Salabeth has been braiding my hair so much that I can now imitate her movements. Legolas' hair is soft and sleek, and my fingers brush through the strands without any tangles. I pull back the hair that covers his ears into two small fishtails on both sides and secure it with hair ties from my own braids.

My hair tumbles to my shoulder and when he looks back up at me as I finish, he brushes away a curl from my cheek. The sun has finally burst out from the sky and I look up as sunshine makes his hair
glow and his blue eyes shine.

"Last moment of peace." He says to me, and the bells start ringing.

I release a breath I didn't even know I was holding. He offers me his elbow, as though we're just going to take another stroll through the terraces.

And my hand finds its place in the crook of his arm as we go to depart from Rivendell.

Everyone is ready to leave as we stand to the edge of the Last Homely House of Lord Elrond. The Fellowship is armed and packed, and the elves of Rivendell are there to bid us farewell. Arwen looks lovely, and I remember that it's her who had my clothes made for me, so I approach her before I join the Fellowship by the courtyard.

"Thank you, my lady. For this and for being so kind to me." I tell her. She smiles, "Stay safe, Ellie. I hope to see you again. I will never forget the effort you made when I got lost in thought and worry."

It seemed such a small gesture on my part. I can't believe she remembers the conversations we had and appreciates them. I bow to her, and move on to say goodbye to Salabeth. All we have to do is hug, and her smile is both sad and encouraging.

"Harthon gerithach raid gelin a melthin." She says. It's a testament to how well Arwen has taught me Sindarin that I understood Salabeth's words.

I smile at her, "I hope so, too. Until we meet again." I tell her as I go to Bilbo. "Bring tea with you, dear girl. And feed yourself. Feed Frodo, too, the lad hasn't been eating as much as he should." Is his greeting to me. I laugh, "Of course, Bilbo, of course. And don't forget about your joints. I think I still have some oil of wintergreen left in my chambers."

"I don't need pain medication, I'm as strong as a troll."

"Just in case, though."

He hesitates for a moment. "Come back safe, Ellie."

"Of course, Bilbo." I reach my hand out and he squeezes my hand for reassurance before he lets go to say goodbye to Gandalf.

Glorfindel then approaches me, "Remember. Proper breathing while you run. Grip your sword, find your balance, be alert." He says and I giggle.

"You taught me well. Don't worry." I say.

"I am not reassured."

"Such faith." I sigh, dramatically. Glorfindel places a hand on my shoulder. "Guard your right side. You always focus on your left side and forget..." He says this so seriously that it makes me stop. I know it's his own way of telling me to be careful. He knows I'm reckless. It's his way of telling me he's worried about me.

"I will, Glorfindel. I promise." I say and he nods.

"Ellie, know that whatever happens, whatever you find out along the way, know that you are meant to be here. Know that you coming to us is not a curse but a gift." He whispers. I look up at him, baffled, as I step back with the Fellowship for Elrond's last farewell. Before I can ask him anything
about what he just said, he retreats to join the crowd and Lord Elrond begins to speak.

"The Ring-bearer is setting out on the Quest of Mount Doom. On you who travel with him, no oath, nor bond is laid to go further than you will." He says.

I don't need an oath. I will stay with the Fellowship until my last breath if it meant the destruction of Sauron. If it meant keeping my future safe.

"Farewell. Hold to your purpose. May the blessings of Elves and Men and all Free Folk go with you." Lord Elrond says.

Gandalf speaks up, motioning towards Frodo, "The Fellowship awaits the Ringbearer."

And with those words, we turn towards the road, with Frodo leading the way.

I hesitate as I notice Aragorn lingering behind, and I see a look of pain on Arwen's face from afar. She's trying to hold herself together, and looks down as Aragorn turns away.

"You'll see her again." I whisper as he falls in step next to me.

"Mordor, Gandalf, is it left or right?" I hear Frodo whisper.

"Left." Gandalf whispers back.

Yes, this shall be a memorable journey indeed.

Chapter End Notes

Glorfindel hinting at what Ellie might find out in the future.

Translations:

Harthon gerithach raid gelin a melthin - I hope you will have green and golden paths.

Also, in case anyone was wondering why I use "mellonenin" - there is a common misconception of saying "mellon nin" among the fandom but you only use "[thing] nin" for objects or persons you don't know well. It's impersonal, I should say. Which is why one would say "hir nin", because it's a formal way to address someone.

"En" means "of" and "nin" means "mine", and it's more personal when you refer to someone as "friend of mine".
Chapter Summary

The Fellowship is met with their first major decision and have to make a detour to avoid Saruman's spies, which of course end up almost killing them.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

We cross the bridge and wound up the steep paths that led away from Rivendell. It's ridiculously cold by then, even with a fur-lined cloak, I can still feel the bite of cold. We leave the road when we come by the Ford of Bruinen, with Gandalf and Aragorn leading us. Aragorn knows the land better than anyone, having spent most of his childhood learning how to hunt here with Glorfindel, Elladan and Elrohir. We travel during the night to remain hidden, and Aragorn leads us with the knowledge of a skilled Ranger.

The first few days are gloomy, and consists mostly of a drastic change of sleeping pattern as we rest during the day and travel during night, camping uncomfortably in hallow lands or hidden under thickets.

And when we have our meal, it's cold and dreary because we can't risk a fire. With Bill the Pony to accompany us once more, it's almost like the trek from Bree to Rivendell again. It feels like forever before we reach what Gandalf calls Hollim, overlooking the mountains, and the heat of the sun is welcome. There's only so much wind a girl can take before it becomes too much. My upper lip is red from wind burn.

"We must hold this course west of the Misty Mountains for forty days. If our luck holds, the Gap of Rohan will still be open to us. From there, our road turns east to Mordor." Gandalf explains as well all stop to rest.

Boromir is training Merry and Pippin to sword fight. It's a rare instance for us to be able to settle down like this.

I remove my cloak and sit next to Sam by a fire we risked to put up. I hand Sam my water sac, and he smiles up at me and takes a sip.

"Thank you, miss Ellie."

"We've known each other for three months now. I think it's about time you start calling me 'Ellie'." I say, tucking the sac back on my belt. I stand up and move to sit on a large rock with Aragorn, watching the hobbits and Boromir.

"Two, one, five." Boromir chants the different positions he taught the hobbits and Pippin swings and blocks.

"Good!" Boromir compliments.

"Looking good, Pippin!" Merry says as Boromir brings the sword up again.
"Thanks." Pippin beams.

"Faster!" Boromir says and he swings his sword towards Pippin.

"Move your feet!" Aragorn calls.

"Use your other arm for balance." I say.

"Listen to the lady, boys." Boromir says, teasingly and I snort.

"If anyone was to ask for my opinion, which I note they’re not, I’d say we were taking the long way round." Gimli exclaims from the rock he's sitting on.

"Gandalf, we could pass through the Mines of Moria. My cousin Balin would give us a royal welcome."

"No, Gimli. I would not take the roads through Moria unless I had no other choice." Gandalf says, shaking his head.

"I thought you didn't have contact with Moria at all?" I say and Gimli waves his hand.

"Moria has been producing gold and steel. Perhaps they are busy."

"If they're too busy to send out messengers, they'd probably be too busy to receive us."

"Sometimes, my dear, I forget you're a foreigner. You must not have heard of how the dwarves welcome their guests. Fire and beer and roast pig for everyone!" Gimli exclaims.

I giggle, "I'd expect nothing less, Master Dwarf."

Legolas catches my attention--like he usually does nowadays, God only knows why--as he climbs up rocks to get a clear view of the sky and the lands below us.

"Sorry!" Boromir exclaims and I whip around as Pippin cries out in pain. I burst into laughter as Pippin kicks his shin, making him yelp in pain as well.

"Get him!" Merry shouts as he and Pippin charge at Boromir, who falls to the ground. Aragorn joins my laughter as I watch Boromir get drowned in a sea of limbs, hairy feet and curly hair.

"For the Shire! Hold him, Merry!" Pippin yells and Boromir is too busy laughing to push the hobbits away.

Aragorn gets up from the rock, "Gentlemen, that's enough." He says as he tries to intervene but Merry and Pippin push him back and I laugh loudly as he falls to the ground.

"He's got my arm! He's got my arm!" Merry shouts as I slide off my rock to help Aragorn to his feet, dusting away the dirt from his clothes as he chuckles. We help the hobbits and Boromir up and I hold Pippin's shoulder to steady him.

"What's that?" Sam asks and we all turn to the direction he's looking at. It looks like rain clouds to me.

"Nothing," Gimli dismisses it quickly, "it's just a wisp of cloud."

"It's moving fast against the wind." Boromir points out and suddenly, everyone is quiet.
"Crebain from Dunland!" Legolas cries and everyone snaps into motion.

"Hide!" Aragorn yells. I pull Merry and Pippin back, even though I have no idea what crebain are, and push them towards a thicket, below the rocks.

"Hurry!" Boromir shouts, pulling the hobbits to his hiding spot. I hop over them to where Sam is putting out the fire to grab my cloak.

"Take cover!" Aragorn shouts as Sam takes Bill the Pony's reins and pulls the animal out of sight behind some rocks.

Legolas pulls me toward him behind a bush, his arm around my shoulder, keeping me down.

There's complete and utter silence before a flock of birds breaks off from the main host to fly down towards the ridge. So, crebain are birds. Ugly, black birds that squawk instead of chirp. Like parrots, only evil and ugly. And they look like crows. I can feel Legolas breathing next to me as we both keep our heads down, neither of us making a sound until the birds pass.

When we come up from our hiding spots, he squeezes my shoulder and I nod at him to tell him I'm okay.

"Spies of Saruman! The passage south is being watched." Gandalf announces, looking up at the mountains.

"We must take the Pass of Caradhras. We move in the night. We cannot light a fire again."

Pippin groans, "And I was looking forward to a hot meal at last."

"Well, you can keep on looking forward, Peregrin." Gandalf grumbles.

So, we spend three more days, the air growing cold around us once again as we trudge towards Caradhras. By then, I'm starting to feel the effects of a long journey and bathing has become a luxury we can no longer afford. Legolas still looks immaculate, though.

"You have been stealing glances at him for a while now." Aragorn says to me as we start a climb up the mountainside, where the snow reaches my ankles. Our journey has been going slowly, ever since we came up on the steep side of the mountain, which makes for long conversations if the Fellowship can bear it.

"I merely glanced at that direction once, and no more." I say, determinedly looking ahead. "He just so happened to be there."

"Who?" Speak of the devil and he shall come forth.

I wave away Legolas' question, "Gandalf's pointy hat is distracting me."

"Do not use me as a scapegoat, my dear Ellie. It is most unbecoming." Gandalf calls from the front.

"I'm not--you just--" Gandalf just threw me under the bus. I shake my head in exasperation and stomp forward to avoid the curious look Legolas gives me.

Frodo cries out as he loses his footing and begins to tumble down the mountain, knocking right into me. I manage to keep my balance, although Frodo is now lying in the snow. I lean down to pull him up.

"Frodo!" Aragorn is there to help him up immediately but Frodo clutches at his neck and chest,
frantically looking around for something.

The Ring.

I look around in case it fell anywhere near me but up ahead, Boromir stoops down to take something. He holds a thin chain up, where the Ring gleams in the sunlight. He's gazing at the Ring, transfixed.

"Boromir." Aragorn calls out in warning as I feel his arm move ever so slightly next to me.

"It is a strange fate we should suffer so much fear and doubt over so small a thing." Boromir says. "Such a little thing."

His hand reaches out for the Ring, and I feel Aragorn's hand move again.

"Boromir!" Aragorn says, louder and stronger this time.

Boromir seems to come to his senses as he looks up at Aragorn.

"Give the Ring to Frodo," Aragorn says, softly. A dark shadow passes over Boromir's face, and I wonder for a split second if he's going to take the Ring for his own then and there. But he walks forward, stiffly, holding out the Ring at arm's length.

"As you wish." He says, just as he's approaching us and my grip on Frodo's shoulder tightens protectively. "I care not." Boromir says, breezily, forcing out a smile.

Frodo makes a grab for the Ring immediately and after a moment's hesitation, Boromir laughs and messes up his hair. Frodo looks up at him sullenly. My eyes fall to my side, where I see Aragorn's hand loosening its grip on his sword.

We exchange dark looks, but say nothing.

Caradhras proves to be cruel indeed. By nightfall, the snow is merciless. I can't feel my body. I can't even speak because my teeth are chattering too much. The cloaks we wear may as well be made from tissue paper.

We're leaning against the cliff while snow falls angrily on us. I thought Gandalf was joking when he said we'd be resting here for the night.

"You're kidding, right? By the time we wake up, we may as well be buried!" I shout to be heard over the howling wind.

"It is that or go back." Gandalf answers. I sigh in frustration. I'm covered in a blanket of snow but unlike a blanket, it's not warm. It's not warm at all.

"Caradhras is called the Cruel." Gimli says.

"I wonder where it got that name. It seems so charming and scenic." I say, sarcastically. He laughs, despite the cold and I snuggle closer to him. We're all snuggling. Like one, big, loving family. I'm sitting between Gimli and Boromir, who pulls a sleeping Frodo up from a nest of snow. Frodo jolts awake.

"Are we to just sit here and wait for the storm to go over our heads?" Boromir says.

"But are you not enjoying the charming view? Look at those snowflakes! Each one has a unique shape and no two snowflakes are ever the same!" I say, injecting as much bitter sarcasm into my words.
"They all look the same to me." He grunts as he hugs himself tighter. "And I curse them all."

I loop my arm through his and pull him closer, "Okay, Sir Grumpy. Let's get you warm. Or...less cold, as the case may be." I don't know the meaning of the word 'warm' anymore.

"That is highly unlikely." Boromir mutters although he moves closer to me.

"Such negativity." I shake my head.

"Have this." Gandalf searches in his pack and pulls out a leather flask, holding it out to Boromir. "A mouthful each for all of us. Lord Elrond gave it to me as we said our farewells. It is miruvor, the cordial of Imladris."

Alcohol! That's excellent!

I get the pleasure of drinking first. There is at least one benefit from travelling with a company of gentlemen. The hobbits drink after me, followed by Aragorn, Boromir, Gimli, Legolas and Gandalf. It's sweet and fragrant, unlike any kind of alcohol that I've tasted before. It has no bitter aftertaste and it fills me with warmth. "Miruvor is now my favorite thing in the world." I sigh.

"What do you say to a fire now? Who would care if we lit one? If any spy is here, they would already know where we are." Boromir says.

"If you can start one, then by all means." Gandalf agrees.

We all try, each of us, but a flame gets blown out the moment it is started. It was Gandalf, with the use of magic, that finally managed to create a flame that would burn. We huddle around the fire and warm our hands. But too soon, the wood burns down again, and we're stuck deciding what to do. We try to push forward, but there are already paths by which the snow reaches above the heads of the hobbits, and drifts that are impossible to move.

"If Gandalf goes ahead with a bright flame, he could melt a path for us," Legolas suggests.

"If elves could fly over the mountains and fetch the Sun to save us." Gandalf answers. "I'm afraid I cannot burn snow. I must have something to work on."

"If magic will not work, then let us use bodies. If we could get to the rock where we first encountered heavy snow, we may have a chance." Boromir says.

"We could force a path ahead." Aragorn suggests.

And so, our two able-bodied men went ahead to shovel through snow. Aragorn is the tallest of us all, and Boromir, though shorter, is heavier and more stocky. Together they force their way forward to make a path.

"They say the strong men must make way. But when it comes to running light over grass or snow, an elf is what you would need." Legolas says.

"Don't rub it in our faces." I say, motioning at his feet as he runs forward, his footsteps are light and barely leave a print.

"I go to find the Sun!" He calls over his shoulder as he runs lightly and swiftly over the snow. I shake my head in disbelief.

"Show off." Gimli mutters next to me. When Aragorn, Boromir and Legolas arrive an hour later,
they find us shivering and huddled together. Nothing like standing in a blizzard to bring people closer together.

"Our strong Men have grown weary but they have managed to clear a path ahead. Come, friends. Have hope!" Legolas says.

"Easy for you to say." I mutter as we trudge ahead.

The snow reaches my waist, and the hobbits struggle to keep their heads above the snow, with Aragorn and Boromir helping to carry them.

Legolas, however, has no trouble walking on top of the snow, which makes my struggle all the more frustrating. Gimli, next to me, grunts as he also has a difficult time keeping his head above the snow.

The wind roars, and I whimper at the stinging bite of the cold.

"There is a fell voice in the air." Legolas announces and I try to listen for a voice but all I hear is my chattering teeth and the howling wind.

"It's Saruman!" Gandalf yells, looking up. Gimli pulls me back against the wall of the mountainside, and I gasp out as my back hits the cold stone. An avalanche of snow falls where we were standing mere seconds ago.

"He's trying to bring down the mountain!" Aragorn cries out as he struggles to pull Sam and Frodo up. "Gandalf, we must turn back!"

"No!" Gandalf shakes his head and draws himself to full height. He holds out his staff and begins to chant. Maybe I'm just desperate but the snow seems to tame for a second, before returning with a vengeance.

A bolt of lightning hits the side of the mountain above us and I catch a glimpse of Legolas pulling Gandalf away from the edge to throw him against the cliff before we are buried beneath the snow.

I struggle for breath as I claw my way out, my entire body numb with cold. I don't know what my hands are doing, I just want to breathe. Everything is muffled. The roar of the wind, the voices of my companions. There's just a short, terrifying moment where all I hear is my struggle for breath before I feel a slightly warmer hand pull me up. I gasp for breath and look up at Legolas gratefully. My teeth are chattering too much for me to thank him.

"We must get off the mountain!" Boromir cries out as he pulls Merry and Pippin up, "Make for the Gap of Rohan and take the West Road to my city!"

"The Gap of Rohan takes us too close to Isengard!" Aragorn argues.

Gandalf is silent and I feel Legolas lean towards me. I am grateful for the warmth of another body as his arm wraps around my shoulders and I lean on him, panting for breath.

"Gandalf. This is impossible, we can't keep going this way. There has to be another road." I say, imploringly.

"If we cannot pass over a mountain, let us go under it." Gimli pipes in, "Let us go through the Mines of Moria."

Still, Gandalf is silent for a second too long.
"Let the Ring-bearer decide." He finally announces and I turn towards Frodo, whose eyes widen. "We cannot stay here!" Boromir shouts, "This will be the death of the hobbits!"

But Gandalf's full attention is only for one, "Frodo?"

Frodo takes a moment to weigh his decisions, before finally saying, "We will go through the Mines."

Gandalf nods, solemnly, "So be it." He whispers.

And so, we turn back, struggling, shaking and tired as we make way for the Mines of Moria.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is too short for my liking. I'll post the next one soon!
The Deserted Mines

Chapter Summary

Ellie contemplates the mystery of their ever-immaculate companion, meets a kraken for the first time and sleeps in a tomb.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It's another day's journey to the West Gate of Moria. Gandalf allows us another mouthful of miruvor, and we sleep huddled together while Bill stands over us, shaking in the cold wind. We continue an incredibly slow but steady trek down the mountain, and my fatigue gives way to relief that I can feel my fingers again. I'm amazed that Bill the Pony is still alive after everything that's happened. When it's my turn to take watch, I like to stay close to him. My pack is light, only including an extra set of clothes, a comb, a strange twig with bristles at the end that I assume is a toothbrush (I use it as a toothbrush, anyway), and the cloths I would use every month, so I don't burden him with them, not that he won't be able to carry it. The pony has completely transformed with the care of the elves. He's become strong and his coat is shiny now.

I wonder if a similar transformation has occurred on me, if I had improved at all, became stronger and less miserable. I'd like to believe I have. I'd like to believe I'm no longer the uncontrollable mess I was three months ago who fell apart the moment things went wrong.

"I can't believe it's been three months already. We clean up good, Bill." I say to the pony and he swishes his tail.

When I wake the others up from their rest, we continue our journey and I join Legolas in the rearguard, "You know, there's one thing I still don't get about you." I tell him.

He smiles as he turns to me, "And what would that be?"

"How do you remain so clean?"

"I have a comb."

"So do I, and yet I look like an animal and you're still immaculate."

"You don't look like an animal, I assure you." Legolas says.

"Is this your way of trying to make me feel better?" I raise an eyebrow.

"I speak the truth. Although I will note that you and Aragorn look remarkably alike now."

"What, smelly and dirty?" I punch his shoulder, playfully.

"Was that meant as an insult?" Aragorn's indignant voice pipes in.

"Nah. We're all smelly and dirty at this point. It's not even a proper insult, it's just a fact."
"Except for me." Legolas smiles, widely.

"Don't even start." I say as Aragorn shakes his head, laughing silently.

"Is it the beard?" Aragorn asks, stroking the uncontrollable animal on his chin.

"How many woodland critters have you stashed in there, anyway?" I smirk.

"If you are hiding little animals there, Estel, I suggest you let them go and put them back in their rightful homes." Legolas says, going along with the joke while Aragorn ignores us. He's too self-disciplined to show he's being affected, which in turn only makes me and Legolas snicker.

"Frodo, come and help an old man." Gandalf calls and the hobbit approaches the Wizard.

"Help an old man' he says. Gandalf has more endurance than the lot of you combined, I believe." I point out, admiringly.

But Legolas doesn't react this time. He's frowning, his eyes wandering to where Frodo and Gandalf are huddled together, speaking softly to each other. I smack his shoulder to bring him back to reality.

"Eavesdropping is rude." I tell him and Aragorn chuckles next to me.

"Of course, you'd approve, Mr. Hide-Behind-A-Hedge." I scold the Ranger next to me.

"The Ring is growing stronger, and Gandalf fears someone from the Company may try and take it from Frodo." Legolas lowers his voice so only Aragorn and I can hear.

Well, that was sobering. Neither of us say anything, but we all think of one person: Boromir. The look of distrust on Aragorn's face is plain and I touch his shoulder to get his attention.

"He won't do it. He's a man of honor. He won't jeopardize the quest because of greed." I assure them, but deep down we all know what the effect of the Ring has on people. Even Isildur had been so corrupted by it that he couldn't bear to destroy it.

Gimli points us down an old, narrow road, beside which was dark, murky water.

"The river Sirannon used to flow loudly." Gimli comments.

"This is what remained of the Stair Falls. There used to be steps going up to the level ground above, and a shallow valley here that led up to the Walls of Moria. Let us see what has become of it now." Gandalf says as we continue up the steps.

We stop as the West Gate of Moria comes into view, and we realize why Sirannon doesn't flow anymore. The river has been dammed, and beside us is a lake. I get my first look of Dwarven architecture as I look up at the Walls of Moria. The Walls are high, and sturdy. It's something I'd expect a strong and proud people would create. Built to outlast a strong attack from the outside, to guard the treasures inside.

"The Walls of Moria." Gimli gasps, in awe.

We approach the wall, keeping as far from the edge as possible for fear of falling into the lake next to us. The water is dark and perfectly still, but after what happened at Caradhras, I would like to stay perfectly warm and dry, thank you very much. We stay away from the water because while the lake is shallow at the edge, there's no telling how deep the stagnant water could go.

Frodo makes a grab for my hand when his foot slips into the lake and I pull him back. "You okay?" I
say as he finds his balance and he nods.

We pass by dry and dead trees, until we reach two that stand apart from each other, taller than any of the others.

"Here we are at last. Holly was the token of the elves of the land, and they planted these trees here to mark the end of their domain. The West Door was used for traffic with the Lord of Moria, in a time when even dwarves and elves were still close friends." Gandalf explains.

"It was not the fault of dwarves that the friendship waned." Gimli says.

"I have not heard it was the fault of elves." Legolas interjects.

"Play nice, boys." I say, because I know where this is going and in-fighting will do none of us any good. Gimli grunts and turns his back on Legolas.

"Dwarf doors are invisible when closed." Gimli says as he and Gandalf inspect the wall.

"Yes, Gimli, their own masters cannot find them if their secrets are forgotten." Gandalf nods.

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" Legolas says, sarcastically as he quirks an eyebrow. Gimli looks at him sideways, with a cold look in his eyes.

Gandalf traces his hand against the wall and mutters, "Ithildin." He turns to look up at the night sky, "It mirrors only starlight and moonlight."

As he says it, the moon engulfs us in pale light and the outline of the door lights up.

"Whoa. Unreal." I gasp as the door reveals itself in front of my eyes. Months in Middle-earth and its surreal beauty still surprises me. A strange sort of script that I recognize as Tengwar from all the books in Arwen's room forms in an arch around the door, and below that, the symbol of an anvil and a hammer, with a crown and seven stars above it. Below that were two trees. And in the middle of the door, shining brightly, was a star with multiple rays.

"It reads "The doors of Durin, Lord of Moria. Speak, friend, and enter." Gandalf announces.

"What do you suppose that means?" Merry asks, looking up at the writing.

"Oh, it’s quite simple." Gandalf says, cheerfully, "If you are a friend, you speak the password and the doors will open."

He places his staff against the door and begins to chant. I'm waiting for something to happen as he finishes, and I look around in case his spell did anything but everything remains still and quiet.

"Nothing's happening." Pippin points out.

Gandalf sighs and he tries again, and again and again, in different languages. I sit on the ground, leaning against the boulder that Legolas is sitting on. I use his leg to cushion my back and we both watch Gandalf resort to physically pushing the stone wall.

"I once knew every spell in all the tongues of the Elves, Men, and Orcs." Gandalf mutters in frustration.

I sigh and look down at my knees.

"What are you going to do, then?" Pippin asks.
"Knock your head against these doors, Peregrin Took!" Gandalf roars, making everyone jump, "And if that does not shatter them, then I am allowed a little peace from foolish questions."

Pippin, chastised, keeps his mouth shut and looks down. Gandalf sighs, recollecting himself. "I will try to find the opening words." He turns to the door again and begins a new chant.

We all hold our breath, but the doors remain closed. I sigh in frustration and look over to where Aragorn is helping Sam. They're taking off Bill's bridle, and Sam looks like it's someone's funeral. I can't believe they're letting Bill go. I've grown an attachment to that pony. Aragorn mutters something comforting to Sam, who runs his hands over Bill's coat one last time.

"Are we going to be carrying those packs from now on or do we leave them behind?" I turn to Legolas.

"They are merely blankets. Aragorn and I have done with much less, so if need be, we will leave those behind as well."

"As long as we don't go climbing up Caradhras again." I mumble.

In their boredom, Merry and Pippin have begun to skip rocks on the lake. But Aragorn promptly stops them by grabbing Pippin's hand, "Do not disturb the water." He warns. And right when I was just about join them.

Gandalf throws his staff to the ground and resigns himself to his spot on the boulder.

"Oh, it's useless." He says, frustrated.

"You think we're gonna have to go back? It's obviously a dead end." I say to Legolas, motioning towards the unmoving door.

He shakes his head, "We have already lost a day to the journey here. We could go back, risk going through lands that are watched by spies of the enemy, or we could go back to Caradhras. None of our paths are pleasant, either way."

"We'll have to wait for divine intervention, then." I say.

"It's a riddle!" Frodo gasps, and we all look up at him as he approaches the door, his eyes wide. "Speak friend, and enter! What's the Elvish word for friend?" He turns to Gandalf.

"Mellon." Gandalf answers.

The ground shakes, and I straighten up as the Doors of Moria slowly slide open. I whoop and clap in delight while Gimli's laughter echoes through the stone walls. I get up from my spot on the ground and Legolas gets on his feet.

We take our packs and walk in a single file to Moria.

I immediately feel that something's not right. For one, the torches that line the walls are unlit, and we walk in darkness, with only the moon shining from the doorway as our source of light. The tip of Gandalf's staff lights up to bring in more light.

I look around, uneasily, and try to let Gimli distract me. He's talking to Legolas, his voice filled with mirth, "Soon, Master Elf, you will enjoy the famed hospitality of the dwarves. Roaring fires, malt beer, ripe meat off the bone!" Just the mere thought of roast meat makes my stomach grumble, and I don't need that when my insides are already twisting in discomfort. "This, my friend, is the home of
my cousin Balin. And they call it a mine. A mine!" Gimli repeats the word, chuckling as he does.

The next thing I'm aware of is how uneven the ground is, and I don't know if this is just because I'm a klutz and I can't find my footing or the dwarves like their ground bumpy. I look down to watch where I'm stepping on and my foot sinks into a hole in someone's skull.

I freeze.

I'm stepping inside someone's fucking skull. The light from Gandalf's staff exposes the corpses around us. I can't believe I never noticed them before.

"This is no mine." Boromir says, "It's a tomb!"

I try to calmly yank my foot out of the skull but the more I tug, the more I panic until I finally manage to get it off.

"Oh, no." Gimli's voice is a horrified whisper as he, too, starts to take in the corpses of his dead kin. "No!"

My heart goes to him. It must be hard, and heart-breaking, to expect a safe refuge with your family's home and see that home destroyed and your family massacred. The corpses around us no longer have skin--they've long decomposed. And here is the answer as to why the dwarves here have not communicated with anyone from outside in almost a year. The hair on my arms raise. This is exactly why I'm on the Quest for the Ring. This is what I do not want to come home to. The evil that walks in Middle-earth is growing bolder, and more ruthless.

Legolas approaches one of the dead bodies to pull out an arrow and observe its tip. "Goblins!" He hisses.

Everyone around me cries out in surprise, and we automatically bring out our weapons. My sword sings as I pull it out of its scabbard.

"We make for the Gap of Rohan." Boromir says next to me. "We should never have come here."

The hobbits, huddled together, begin to panic. Truth is, I'm starting to panic as well. My heart is beating quickly and I just want to move. I don't want to stay here any longer than we have to. Whatever killed these dwarves could come after us next.

"Now, get out of here. Get out!" Boromir commands and the hobbits back out of the mines. My eyes are trained on Frodo, but I don't react fast enough when something yanks him back and he falls to the ground.

Sam, Merry and Pippin, who are closest to him, cry out his name and run after him.

"Strider!" Sam roars.

"Help!" Frodo's terrified voice shouts from outside.

The rest of us snap into motion and we go out to see what grabbed him. I find myself looking up at something large and slimy in the water.

"What the fuck!" I scream as tentacles thrash around me. 'What the fuck' is right. The thing is massive. How the hell did it manage to stay so quiet in the water?

The tentacle holding Frodo pulls him, by the foot, above us and I hack at the tentacles to get closer to
him. The brilliant thing about Elvish blades--they could cut through a car and are still just the right weight.

Frodo screams. Aragorn and Boromir bring out their swords to cut down the tentacles, and I dodge one that makes a grab for my leg. An arrow whizzes above my head towards the monster's black eye. At least, I think it's an eye. I can't really tell, I've never seen a kraken before. Boromir has found the tentacle that's been holding on to Frodo.

"Ellie!" Boromir calls and I swing my sword at it. The tentacle falls off, and Frodo falls into Boromir's arms. The monster thrashes ferociously, its tentacles swinging around in fury and Aragorn watches my flank, slashing at the tentacles that get too close for comfort. Cold water splashes around us, drenching us. Aragorn grabs Merry and Pippin to get them away from the monster.

"Into the Mines!" Gandalf shouts as he yanks Sam, Merry and Pippin in through the doorway.

"Legolas!" Boromir calls from somewhere to my right. More arrows whiz past my head and I feel hands pulling me out of the water as tentacles reach out for us.

"Ellie! Into the caves! Run!" Aragorn yells, pulling me into the caves as I struggle to wade through the waist-deep, cold water. Something wraps around my leg and causes me to fall into the water, drenching me in murky water. I manage to slice whatever it is off and break the surface of the water, coughing. Legolas extends his hand towards me and I take it, letting him pull me inside. Boromir, holding tightly to Frodo, runs in after me. I manage to get back on my feet, groaning in disgust as I shake a tentacle that is still wrapped around my ankle and run backwards.

"Get away from the door!" I shout as the tentacles slither through the doorway. The ground shakes as rocks fall from the ceiling, and everyone clears out of the way. I knock into Legolas, who is still holding me and I give a startled scream and turn to him. The rocks fill the doorway and buries us in complete and total darkness.

I grab on to Legolas's hand, panting for breath. I'm shaking uncontrollably from the cold and his arm automatically goes around my shoulders. I lean into him, and heat radiates from his body. My hair is dripping wet and something green and slimy has coated my left boot.

I blink, waiting for my eyes to adjust to the darkness and a light emits from the tip of Gandalf's staff, bathing us all in a pale while glow.

"We now have but one choice. We must face the long dark of Moria." He announces. Anything to find warmth again. "Be on your guard. There are older and fouler things than orcs in the deep places of the world." Not that, though. I've never seen an orc but I've heard they're quite evil and disgusting, so I'd rather not meet one so soon and yet I don't want to meet anything older and fouler than that, either.

I extricate myself from my cloak and sigh as I look down at it. On the one hand, it's been washed of the dirt and grime that has accumulated on it over time but on the other, it leaves me shaking from the cold.

I'm not as important as the Ring-bearer, however. Frodo's safety must always come first.

"Frodo, how are you?" I say kneeling down to him as everyone catches their breaths. His teeth chatter as he looks up at me.

"Here, Mr. Frodo." Sam says, appearing by his side with a warm blanket. Frodo gratefully wraps it around himself.
"The Ring. It's safe?" I whisper and his hand goes to the chain around his neck to check. He nods and I smile at him.

"Good." I say as Gandalf leads us out. "Don't let it out of sight."

"Quietly now." Gandalf warns as we begin to move, "It's a four-day journey to the other side. Let us hope that our presence may go unnoticed." Those are words of foreshadowing, those are. How come I feel like he just jinxed the whole journey? And has no one really been alerted by all the screaming and falling rocks at the front door?

Moria is dark and has a lot of stairs, but I am not blind to the majesty of the halls around me. The ceilings are incredibly high, and the pillars are strong and solid. It's nothing like the intricate carvings of Rivendell. Moria is grand and tall and proud. I wonder how it used to look like. Thinking about how dark and dreary it is now makes it painful to keep looking around, so I keep my eyes on either Gandalf's glowing staff or my feet to see where I'm going. I do not want to step on anyone's head again. We are silent the rest of the journey, with only our footsteps echoing through the empty stone halls.

We stop to rest after two hundred steps and it's Gimli's turn to keep watch tonight. I'm worried about Gimli. He's unusually quiet and it's unnerving. I know he must be worried about Balin and his other kin, and I can't imagine how hard it must be for him to be walking in Moria's empty halls after seeing the corpses of dead dwarves at the front door. "Hey," I whisper to him as he sits down while the others set up bedrolls nearby.

"Hm?" He glances up at me.

"We'll find your cousin, Gimli. Don't worry." I try to be optimistic for him, because even a mighty warrior like him feels despair when they lose their family this way.

I see him smile through his bushy, red beard. "I hope you are right, lassie. I hope you are right." I place a hand on his shoulder, and his hand goes on top of mine. I find a pillar large enough to hide behind, which is no hard feat as the pillars here can hide three Men, easily, and I change quickly into another set of travelling clothes. The others apparently had the same idea as I did, because when I come back out, they're wearing dry clothes. The problem now is that our old clothes are all laid against rocks in an attempt to dry them.

I find my sleeping spot next to Pippin, who curls his body inwards, like a ball.

"Lord Elrond was right." He whispers, sleepily.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"Maybe I am too young. Maybe I am foolish. This Quest is too big for me." He says and I scoot closer to him.

"Don't." I say, because I know what that feels like. I know how it feels to be swallowed by doubt and insecurity and self-pity. I've been there. "Nothing is ever too big for a heart and spirit like yours."

His heavy eyes look up at me and a smile slowly spreads across his features. "Thank you, Ellie." He says, and his eyes fall shut.

I watch his breathing even out, and I turn to lie on my back.

"That was kind of you." Legolas says next to me.
"Anyone would do the same." I reason.

We don't look at each other, we just stare straight ahead, at the ceiling above our heads.

"I'm being swallowed by everything." I say.

"What do you mean?"

"I've been in Rivendell for two months and I fell in love with the place and the people. The more I see the rest of Middle-earth, the more I care about it."

He stays silent for a few moments.

"The more you want to stay?" His voice is a mere whisper, and I turn to him in surprise. He's looking at me. I thought the darkness of our surroundings will dim the color of his eyes but I see them more clearly than ever before. My focus is on him but I don't know what to say. Do I want to stay? Yes. Middle-earth is a magical, beautiful place with kind and honorable people. But I need to go back home. I will not abandon Gramps and Rory.

He sees the look on my face, and he nods to himself before turning back to look up at the ceiling. I fall asleep with the memory of the look of disappointment that flashed across his face. It was brief, but it was there.

Chapter End Notes

Ah! I'm so excited about the battle scene coming up. Who's ready to see Ellie finally kicking some ass?
First Blood

Chapter Summary

The Fellowship goes through ups and downs, but mostly downs. As in, they go lower and lower in the Mines and they find out exactly what happened to the dwarves of Moria. Ellie goes through her colorful vocabulary of swear words and sees an Orc for the first time. Things are only going to get worse from here.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Heights.

I don't like heights.

And yet here I am, scaling a wall keeping my eyes locked in front of me. Not at my feet to see where I'm stepping on or to my side to see the golden glow everyone is looking at. Aragorn notices, like he always notices when I'm afraid or upset, and he lets me cling to his shirt as we walk.

The Fellowship slows down as they look at whatever's below us. "Shit, shit, shit." I hiss as I lean my head on Aragorn's shoulder. It's not heights, exactly, that scare me. It's the possibility of falling down. It's looking down from an edge and seeing how far you can go before you break into pieces. Worse still is looking over an edge and not knowing how far you'll fall. When we were up at Caradhras, my vision was blocked by snow and my focus was on staying alive. Now, my focus is walking and that's less of a distraction from the pit of death right next to her.

"The wealth of Moria was not in gold or jewels--but mithril."

Gandalf has stopped, as well as the rest of the Fellowship, to look down. I tug at Aragorn's sleeve. "What's mithril?" I whisper as he leans his head back to hear me better.

"See for yourself."

"I don't wanna die."

"You will have to face worse things than this, Ellie."

He's right, of course, like he always is. If I can't even look down from an edge, I have no hope of surviving Mordor, or even Moria. I take a deep breath and look at him, sullenly.

He gives me a nod of encouragement and I wrench my head to look down over the edge. It's not as bad as I thought it would be, especially when a strange sort of metal winks up from me from along the walls of the Mines. I feel a bit nauseous but I focus on the mithril. I focus on the shiny things. I focus on the beauty I would have missed because of my fear.

"Bilbo had a shirt of mithril rings that Thorin gave him." Gandalf says as we start walking again.

"Oh, that was a kingly gift!" Gimli says, his tone filled with awe.
"Yes. I never told him, but its worth was greater than the value of the Shire."

"What's mithril?" I ask Gandalf.

"The best kind of armor there is. No sword nor spear could pierce it."

I wonder how mithril would stand against a bullet.

We continue for two days, and a growing uneasiness begins to stir within us. Legolas is alert for most of the day, and he tilts his ear to listen for something I can't hear. I don't think I would have noticed if I wasn't looking at him so much, or noticing the slight change in his composure.

"What's wrong?" I ask him before we all retire at camp on the third night. Or at least, I feel like it's the third night. We may have been walking for more. It's hard to tell when walking in pitch black.

"Something is shadowing us, though I cannot tell what it is. Or whether it is friend or foe." Legolas whispers.

"As long as it's not attacking us."

"That is what I fear most. If they were a friend, why do they not reveal themselves? What are they waiting for?"

"Have you told anyone?"

"Of course. I've said as much to Gandalf, but he says I should not let the others know. Not yet, not when they are already worrying so much. It would just cause distress."

Well, now, I'm certainly going to be paranoid about who or what is observing us. As long as it's not attacking, though, it isn't any immediate concern. But what if it's just waiting for us all to be weak and tired? What if it kills us in our sleep? Ugh. My head hurts. I sigh, and rub my temples.

"Rest, Ellie. Losto vae." That's how he always says good night to me. And that brings me comfort, even just a little bit.

"Good night." I say to him as I settle down on my bed roll.

Our journey continues with only Gandalf's staff as our light source. I've lost count of the steps we've climbed. When we stop at a corridor with three doorways that lead to different directions, I thought we stopped only to take a break.

"I have no memory of this place." Gandalf says.

Well, I wasn't wrong. We are resting. And once again we're waiting for Gandalf to figure out the way.

"I have realized," Aragorn says as I sit on the ground next to him, "you and Legolas have become close friends. I am glad you two have looked past your differences."

"Hard not to when you have to spend most of your day with him."

"You look at him a lot." He says, and we both turn towards the elf, who is patiently looking at Gandalf.

"I do not!" I say, too quickly.
Oh, my God. I'm blushing, I know I am. I'm thankful for the darkness around us. It makes this less embarrassing.

"I used to be your closest companion. Have I lost your trust while I was gone?" He sounds hurt, and I blink in surprise. He thinks I've lost my trust in him? Him? Aragorn? I'd trust him to lead me to hell and back.

"I'm still your Meril. I still need you. You're the person I trust most, and no one can change that." How do I explain to him that I've not been trying to avoid him? That I've been trying to avoid the feelings I've been developing for him?

I thought I've been doing a good job of not acting weird around him. I had no idea that I've begun to push him away and that I've been using Legolas as an excuse to not be around him. But the times I've spent getting to know Legolas have been genuinely good times. I have enjoyed his company and how easy it is to talk to him. Legolas understands me as much as Aragorn does. He doesn't need to ask me if anything's wrong, he just knows and he knows how to make me feel better. Like Aragorn does.

I had no idea that I've started to avoid Aragorn so much that he thinks I trust someone else more.

"Jeez, dad, I'm still the terrified little girl from Bree that you raised." I say this jokingly, nudging him with my elbow and he smiles.

"You're not a terrified girl at all. Imladris was good for you. I do feel like a proud father." He says, going along with the joke and I lean my head on his shoulder.

"You're so dramatic sometimes." I sigh and he chuckles.

Just like that, we're back to normal. And maybe, just maybe, we are better this way. Platonic, and caring for each other like family would. Because that's how we've always been. Maybe the feelings I've been developing were simply misplaced, or my admiration of him got the better of me. But I know now that Aragorn is a father-figure, or the big brother I wished Donovan could be. I'm not falling in love with him, but I do care a lot about him.

I think I may have fallen asleep, but I don't know for how long. When I wake up, I find myself lying on Aragorn's shoulder, and his head is lying back on the boulder where we're resting our backs on.

I look around for the reason I've woken up and I hear Merry and Pippin whispering to each other.

"Merry?"

"What?"

"Are we lost?"

Merry hesitates. "No."

"I think we are."

Sam interrupts them. "Ssh! Gandalf's thinking!"

Merry and Pippin stop talking.

I raise my head from Aragorn's shoulder. He breathes in deeply and wakes up when he feels my weight lift off him.
"Merry?" Pippin starts again.

"What?" Merry sounds annoyed this time.

"I'm hungry."

"Throw him an apple." I mutter to Aragorn.

"I would, but we've long run out." He says, amused.

Frodo gets up to approach Gandalf and the two of them strike up a conversation.

"You look remarkably alike in the dark." Boromir says and Aragorn and I blink at him in surprise. That was completely random.

"It's the chins, I think." Boromir continues, as he touches his own. What, he means our cleft chins? My cleft chin isn't even as noticeable as Aragorn's. Lots of people have cleft chins. He has a cleft chin, hidden beneath his unmanaged stubble. I've seen him shaved before, I know it's there.

"When I first saw the two of you together, I thought she was your sister."

Aragorn and I exchange bewildered looks, and I squint at Aragorn. "I don't see it." I say after a while and Boromir shrugs.

"Perhaps it is only the darkness." He says, rubbing his tired eyes.

"I have mentioned before that you two looked alike." Legolas pipes in.

"I thought all mortals look the same to an elf?" Boromir says.

"Fortunately, I can tell the difference between a man, a woman and a dwarf."

"My father told me a very interesting story when you threw him in his cell." Gimli speaks up, and Legolas sighs in frustration.

"He could never quite forgive you for mistaking my beautiful mother for his brother."

"Ah, yes. I remember that." Legolas looks up thoughtfully, and I notice the look of mischief that flashes in his eyes. "I also had you mistaken for a goblin mutant."

I snort in my laughter and cover my mouth with my hands as Gimli's jaw hangs opens in indignation.

"That was a perfectly accurate drawing! My father made it himself!"

I'm trying my hardest not to make a sound which only makes me want to laugh harder, and I fall against Aragorn, who is covering his mouth to hide his grin as I clutch my stomach and Gimli glares at me, and at Boromir, who determinedly looks away and finally at Legolas, who pretends not to see the distress in Gimli's face. We calm down a few seconds later, with Gimli muttering something in his mother tongue.

"Oh!" Gandalf exclaims and the rest of the Fellowship turn to him in surprise. "It's that way!" He motions toward the left-side passageway, and we all turn to look at the doorway.

"He's remembered!" Merry says, excitedly, and we all get on our feet.
"No, but the air doesn't smell so foul in here."

All I smell is sweat and unwashed body odor. I can't believe I've gotten used to that scent.

"If in doubt, Meriadoc, always follow your nose." Gandalf says as he walks down yet more stairs.

It's a straightforward path, just walking down a flight of stairs and I fall in step next to Gandalf.

"It doesn't smell any different." I say to him.

"Instincts, my dear. Follow your instincts. What your heart tells you. Sometimes, the mind can be unreliable. It can be corrupted by doubt and fear but your heart will lead you well." He says and I smile up at him.

"All my life, I've been taught differently. The heart, they say, is foolish."

"That it is, but it always has good intentions. It is your brave heart, I think, that made you stand up to follow this Quest." He says.

"Why do I get the feeling you already knew I was going to stand up before I did?" I ask. I have been wondering about this, about how Gandalf looked at me as though he was expecting me to join the Fellowship.

"Because you are a good person who wants to protect those you love. And I had a feeling you were never one to stand by and watch."

How could Gandalf be so sure? Back in Rivendell, he knew me as the girl who doubted myself. And I've always been one to stand by and watch. I've gotten used to just floating through life, doing what is necessary to survive but not enough to truly live. What did he see in me?

"How could you tell?"

He pauses, thinking before he answers me.

"Aragorn used to tell me of his concerns about your state of happiness. He knew, more than anyone, how much you truly missed your home."

Just the thought of home makes my heart ache.

"And when I spoke to you, I knew then that you would do anything to keep those you love safe."

He's right. The only reason I stood up was because I wanted to make sure Sauron's reach never stretches to my home. But how Gandalf knows all this is beyond me. I've only ever had one long conversation with him in the past. I've always thought he was too important to worry about the likes of me.

"How could you tell I wasn't an evil spy? At some point, even briefly, everyone I met thought I was." I say, because he has always been kind to me. He has always convinced me that I am a good person, even when I myself thought I came to Middle-earth to be just a pawn in Sauron's plans.

"My dear, evil doesn't worry about not being good."

He smiles at me, and all the wisdom in the world is reflected in his eyes.

I smile back, graciously, and we continue our journey in silence.
When we finally reach the end of the steps and come to an open space, Gandalf holds his staff higher.

"Let me risk a little more light." The tip of his staff shines brighter and everyone looks around.

I gasp as I look up. The ceilings are higher than ever and row upon row of strong pillars line the open hall, grander versions of the pillars we came across near the entrance of Moria. It's breathtaking.

"Behold! The great realm and dwarf-city of Dwalin's Hall." Gandalf announces as I crane my head up to look at the arched ceilings.

"Now there's an eye opener, and no mistake." Sam gasps next to me. Even Legolas looks impressed with the architecture of Dwalin's Hall.

We continue to walk forward, towards a chamber with another open light.

"Oh!" Gimli gasps as he runs forward.

"Gimli!" Gandalf scolds but Gimli ignores him, and the rest of us take off running after him.

When we finally catch up to him, his entire body is shaking with sobs as he kneels in front of a crypt, with bodies and skeletons of fallen dwarves are spread around the chamber. My heart drops to my feet.

"No. No!" Gimli wails as Boromir places a hand on his shoulder. I approach Gimli, strong, resilient Gimli, and the tears flowing from his eyes break my heart. I kneel next to him and take both of his hands, and he clutches me tightly. So tightly, it almost hurts but I let him. I want to ease his pain, or share in his sorrow so he wouldn't have to face this alone.

"Here lies Balin, son of Fundin, Lord of Moria." Gandalf reads the runes on the crypt, and my eyes close as Gimli sobs harder.

"He is dead, then. It's as I feared." Gandalf looks around and hands his staff and hat to Pippin. He bends down to get a tattered, old book from the corpse of a dead dwarf.

Gimli's sobs subside to silent tears, and his hands ease their hold on mine as we both get on our feet. "Hey. I'm here. We're all here for you." I whisper to him, and Boromir's grip on Gimli's shoulder tightens.

"We must move on. We cannot linger." I hear Legolas behind me whisper to Aragorn, and Gimli's grip on my hands tighten again.

"They have taken the bridge, and the second hall." I look behind me to see Gandalf reading from the tattered book he picked up. Gimli looks up to see what he's reading from, letting go of my hands so he can glance over Gandalf's elbow at the book.

"That's Ori's writing, if I've ever seen it!" Gimli says, pointing at the writing on the pages.

"These are dark tidings from a fair hand. I am afraid he bears ill news. Look: We have barred the gates, but cannot hold them for long. The ground shakes. Drums, drums in the deep." Drums? Them? That sounds more than just a bunch of goblins. How many goblins and orcs does it take to overrun an entire dwarf city?

Gandalf is still reading. "We cannot get out. A Shadow moves in the dark. The Watcher in the Water
has taken Óin. We cannot get out... They are coming.”

Who? Who are coming? What does he mean, there's a Shadow? What happened here?

Boromir and I both exchange nervous looks.

This doesn't feel right. I stand closer to him and just as I do, a loud, deafening noise emits from where Pippin is standing.

The poor hobbit looks terrified as the chain from the corpse near him falls in the well it's sitting on, and then the body falls and Pippin winces with every loud clank, until the noise dies down as it falls farther and farther down the well. Jesus, how deep is this thing, anyway?

There's complete and utter silence. My heart is pounding in my chest and I completely freeze up. When the noise dies down and we're all still standing and unharmed, Boromir sighs in relief next to me. I turn towards Gandalf, who slams the book shut.

"Fool of a Took!" He yells as he yanks his hat and staff from Pippin, who looks up, looking like a kicked puppy. "Throw yourself in next time and rid us of your stupidity!"

Ouch. Harsh. Pippin looks down but we barely have time to recollect ourselves from the fright we just had before a faint sound is heard from outside.

It sounds very much like drums.

Oh.

Oh shit.

Oh fuck.

My thoughts run through every profanity in its disposal as the drums come nearer and nearer. Gimli is completely frozen next to me. I'm shifting from foot to foot as my panic grows.

"Frodo!" Sam gasps as he points at Frodo's sword, which glows blue. What is that supposed to mean? What does a blue sword mean?

The answer comes with the sound of hair-raising shrieks and gurgling.

"Yrch!" Legolas cries.

Orcs.

That's what an orc sounds like.

Oh, holy fucking shit.

Boromir runs forward and pushes the doors close. His head yanks backwards just in time as two arrows embed themselves in the door, right where his head was two seconds ago. The shrieks of the orcs come nearer and Boromir, successfully closing the doors, leans on them to keep them closed.

"They have a cave troll." He says, breezily, but beneath that, there's a hint of panic in his voice.

Wait. Trolls?! As in the big, ugly ones Bilbo encountered that got turned into stone? There are more of those?!
"Get back!" Aragorn herds the hobbits backwards, "Stay close to Gandalf!"

Legolas and I run around the chamber, prying axes and spears from the corpses of dead dwarves and giving them to Aragorn and Boromir, who barricade the doors.

We bring out our weapons, with me pulling out my bow and an arrow. Gandalf throws his hat to the ground and yells as he brings out his sword. Boromir handles his sword in his right hand and his shield in the other. Gimli snarls and jumps on top of Balin's tomb, a fearsome look of fury on his face, "Let them come! There is one dwarf yet in Moria who still draws breath!"

I try to steady my heart by taking in deep breaths. Time to see if my training is of any use to me.

There's complete silence, and my eyes flicker to Legolas, whose posture is perfect, and who stands so still as he draws his arrow. I draw my strength from his calmness, and from the presence of Aragorn a few feet away.

A part of the door breaks and the ugliest monster I've ever laid eyes on appears through the hole. Legolas's arrow finds its target but another creature replaces it instantly. My arrow flies right in its face. A face that not even a mother could love.

I've just taken a life.

Aragorn, Legolas and I continue to shoot them through the hole but to nobody's surprise, our improvised barricade gives in and the orcs come swarming in. I quickly change weapons, pulling out my sword to block an incoming blow from one of the ugly creatures.

The orcs fight dirty, as I expect they would. But if they think they can fight dirty with a New Yorker, they've got another thing coming. I kick low and move around them. I run my sword through an orc's throat.

More lives that I've taken.

I can hear the others yelling, and I see Aragorn as a formidable, terrifying warrior for the first time. I've seen him moving fluidly with the Nazgûl before, but now he fights with precision and a gleam in his eyes that I've never seen before. I'd hate to be on the receiving end of his sword at this moment.

Gimli yells as he charges at an orc to my left, bringing his ax down on its head. The sight is gruesome, but I have to focus on staying alive. Focus on my hands, where my body is, where my body should be.

Don't think about the black blood that's staining your hands, Ellie. Don't think about the flesh that clings to your sword. Don't think about the broken body parts around you, no matter how ugly and evil they might be. Think about staying alive.

A deafening roar echoes from the doorway, and I see a real, moving troll for the first time in my life.

It has a chain wrapped around its neck that drags behind it, held by an orc. I sneak around and drive my sword through the orc holding the troll's chain and it gasps and falls to the floor. The troll slashes wildly towards Merry and I grab hold of its chain and pull.

"Come and get me, shithead!" I shout as I tug at the troll's chain with all my might while Merry runs out of its reach. The troll's beady, black eyes find me and it closes its fist and brings it down. I let go of the chain and throw myself to my left, gasping in pain as I fall into a dwarf's skeleton.

I disentangle myself from the bones and get back on my feet just as another orc charges towards me.
I step back, using my sword to block its blow before I step closer to stab it through the chest. I can hear Legolas's bow singing, I can hear Gandalf telling the hobbits to get back and Boromir and Aragorn calling to each other to watch their backs.

The troll groans above me, and I run behind a pillar to dodge its attack. The only good thing about this troll is that it's taking out the rest of its little friends with its wild blows from the mace it's holding. "Legolas!" I don't know where he is, but I hear his answer in the arrow that embeds itself in the troll's tough hide.

I notice something running between the troll's legs. It's holding a sword in one hand and a frying pan in the other.

"Sam!" I scream as he rolls beneath the troll. The troll notices him, too and he stomps toward Sam, who is lying in a corner. The troll raises its foot, as if to squash the little hobbit beneath his foot.

I run forward, but I'm surrounded by three orcs. I back away, and jump to the side, slicing one. The remaining two move behind me and in front, and I find an opening by jumping out of the way just in time as the orc in front of me jabs its sword, causing it to stab its companion instead. I run my sword through its neck before it can recover and I push both of them away in disgust.

Boromir comes flying backwards behind me and falls in a heap on the floor. Two orcs charge towards him. I'm standing near him, on a pile of dirt and rocks on higher ground. I jump down and land on one of the orcs. A dagger flies over my head at the other, thrown by Aragorn.

I jam my foot up the neck of the orc I'd landed on, which causes its neck to break. I help Boromir to his feet as he shakes his head in a daze. He looks back at Aragorn, who nods at him before turning back to kick more ass.

Boromir looks up at me, gratefully, and I give his shoulder a firm clap before turning back and kicking more ass myself.

I can see Gimli has taken the troll's attention now, but he dodges its attacks quickly until he falls on his back and the troll raises its mace. Two more arrows fly and hit it, making it growl. Gimli uses that as an opportunity to get on his feet and drive his ax through an incoming orc's neck.

The troll has now focused on Legolas, who has somehow managed to climb up to a ledge to have a better field of view. He circles around the orcs, slashing with his knives.

I block and parry the attacks of two more orcs and I think my hits have more to do with luck than actual skill. I back away and grab an orc by the quiver on its back. I take a handful of its arrows and shove them in his face, then I throw his dead body at another orc and I slice the head off the one approaching my flank.

I look up and see Legolas standing on the troll's shoulders, aiming two arrows at its head.

What the fucking hell is this idiot doing?!

I almost have a seizure as he lets the arrows go and the troll grabs for him. His foot slips off its back, but his recovery is flawless and he jumps off, landing on his feet. Sam, meanwhile, has recovered from the troll's attack nicely.

He's taking out the orcs around him with his frying pan, and even manages to say, "I think I'm getting the hang of this."

Two orcs engage me at once and I'm too busy to notice the third one coming from behind me until
Boromir comes charging at it, his shield in front of him. I turn just after I slice down the two orcs, and I hear him grunt as he runs into the orc behind me, bashing it with his shield.

"I owe you one!" I say as I slice another orc beside me.

"Consider that payment for earlier." He grins and charges at another orc again.

"Frodo!" Aragorn yells.

Where is Frodo? I look around frantically for Gandalf, expecting Frodo to be near him, but Frodo is nowhere to be found, and the troll has been distracted by something.

"Ah, fuck!" I shout as I realize just exactly where Frodo is. I find Aragorn fighting furiously forward, and I intercept an orc that attempts to attack him from behind.

"Go! I've got your back!" I shout over my shoulder as I steal the attention of the other orcs. Block and parry. Just block and parry. Legolas' arrows fly into the throats and chests of the orcs near me. Behind me, I hear Frodo yelling, "Aragorn! Aragorn!"

I do not dare look back, not even as the panic in his voice chills my bone. I have to keep guarding Aragorn's back. When the orcs in front of me are taken care of, I turn around to follow Aragorn and intercept the orcs in his path. He picks up a spear lying on the ground, as Frodo lies in a heap in the corner. The orcs I'm intercepting charge, and I step back to keep away from their swords.

"Pretty girl." One growls, reaching for my neck with his bare hands.

"Ew!" It talks?! I feel like I just contracted an infectious disease.

I slice its hand off and it shrieks and throws itself at me. I lose my balance, as well as my grip on my sword, and fall back. It uses its remaining hand to grab my hair and yank it back painfully.

I scream and my hands hold it by its chin. It tries to snap at my fingers with its rotting, black teeth. Oh, God. It smells foul. I could just throw up in its face in complete disgust to distract it. He yanks my hair again, pulling out some of my hair in the process and slams my head to the ground. I see white dots dance in front of me as a blinding pain radiates from the back of my skull.

I grab onto its face again and twist, as hard as I can. The resulting snap sends a flood of relief through my body and I push the orc's dead body off of me as I force myself back on my feet, feeling the back of my head. I gasp in pain as my fingers find a tender spot.

I look around for my sword but when I turn back again, I see the troll has picked up the spear that Aragorn was holding mere seconds ago.

Where's Aragorn?

Where's Frodo?!

I see the troll raising the spear, and I hear Merry and Pippin yeling as they throw rocks at it. My view is blocked by the pillars, and I run forward, blinking away the dizziness I feel, only to find the troll drive its spear into Frodo.

There's a second where everything is frozen and I have to take it all in before I realize what has just happened.
A little bit of a nod at Legolas’ goblin mutant comment from Desolation of Smaug there. And we're slowly starting to get bits and pieces of how Ellie looks.

In case anyone was wondering, the face claim I had pictured in my mind as Ellie is Sarah Bolger. But if you picture someone else as her in your mind, feel free to leave it in the comments!
Darkness and Fire

Chapter Summary

The Fellowship loses an important member before they escape Moria. Those left deal with this heavy loss.

Time seems to slow down as Frodo falls to the ground. It's unreal. It happened too quickly and too slowly at the same time.

"Frodo? Frodo!" Sam's voice sounds like it's from far away. Merry and Pippin climb up to a ledge, and they both jump on the troll's head, stabbing it furiously. I move to a backstab position, hacking at the back of the troll's knees and ankles to weaken its legs. Gandalf and Gimli surround the troll while Boromir fends off the remaining orcs.

The furious troll grabs hold of Merry, and throws him aside. I jump to catch him, and we end up on a heap on the floor, but at least I cushion his fall.

"Are you hurt?" I gasp as we get on our feet. He shakes his head and turns his attention back to the troll. Legolas fires two more arrows at the troll's neck and Pippin sinks his sword into its head. The troll groans and finally, finally, it collapses, sending the ground shaking and dust falling on us.

Everything quiets down, and I see Aragorn crawling towards Frodo's body. I don't dare walk forward. I don't want to see the mangled remains of his body.

"Oh no." Aragorn whispers, turning Frodo's body.

The hobbit gasps for breath, and that alone makes me run forward to confirm that I'm not hallucinating. Sam falls to his knees next to Frodo and confirms it is not a dream.

"He's alive." Sam's words come out choked, as though he's holding back tears.

"I'm okay." Frodo pants, "I'm not hurt."

I don't dare question this miracle.

"You should be dead! That spear would have skewered a wild boar!" Aragorn gasps, his eyes wide.

"I think there's more to this hobbit than meets the eye." Gandalf says, a small smile playing on his lips.

Frodo reaches down and reveals a shirt made of fine rings of silver.

"Mithril?" Gimli says, in awe, "You are full of surprises, Master Baggins."

"You never scare us like that again!" I say, letting out a huge breath of relief. I feel woozy, and my head is throbbing, but Frodo is alive and that's what matters. He smiles up at me, sheepishly.

Our relief is incredibly short-lived, however, and we've barely caught our breath before more orcs shriek in the distance. They've called their friends.
"To the Bridge of Khazad-Dûm!" Gandalf commands and we take off, back to the grand hall.

We don't even sheath our weapons, we just bolt. I see orcs climbing down the pillars. There are countless of them, and I don't have to look back to know we're being pursued.

We're surrounded almost immediately. Gimli growls menacingly at the orcs, but I whimper. I don't want to die like this. I don't want to die in an abandoned mine in the hands of these loathsome creatures, only to be forgotten forever.

Right before any of them could strike, however, a loud growl echoes from a hallway to our right, and a burst of orange flames reflect from the stone wall.

Is it just me or are the orcs around us panicking? They start to back away, and another growl makes them scurry back to whatever hell hole they came from. Gimli laughs, tauntingly, at them but I have a horrible feeling about this.

I doubt orcs know anything about mercy. They didn't let us pass, they got scared off by whatever is coming from that hallway. If it could scare orcs, shouldn't we be running from it as well?

We all turn in its direction. My eyes seek Legolas, and for once the expression on his face is something I have never seen on him before: fear.

Another loud, unnatural growl and I close my eyes in fear. I don't want to see the monster that's approaching. I feel a small hand gripping mine, and I look down to see Merry, who nods at me in encouragement. He's telling me to face my demons.

I look up, wondering why we're still not moving.

"What is this new devilry?" Boromir whispers to Gandalf, who is looking straight ahead.

"A Balrog."

What's a balrog? Is that like a troll? Is it smaller or bigger? I need to know what I'm facing! It's more terrifying when I don't know what it is.

"A demon of the ancient world. This foe is beyond any of you." At that, Gandalf turns to us. "Run! Quickly!"

I do not hesitate. I run as fast as my legs could carry me, through a passageway and down a flight of stairs. Boromir is ahead of us, followed by Legolas, the hobbits, Gimli and me, with Aragorn and Gandalf bringing up the rear.

Boromir cries out in surprise as he skids to a halt. The stairway we're taking has a chunk of stone missing, and below us is hot, molten lava. Boromir teeters on the edge, and Legolas grabs him and pulls him back. The hobbits follow after Boromir, and I help Gimli pull them away from the edge.

I look around for an alternate route, "Move!" I feel like an asshole for pushing the hobbits towards another set of stairs going down, but if Gandalf tells us to run from an ancient demon, I am going to make sure they're the first ones out of these mines.

I turn back and do a quick head count. Where are Aragorn and Gandalf? I look behind me and see Gandalf place a hand on Aragorn's shoulder.

"Lead them on, Aragorn. The Bridge is near." What? What is he doing? I stare at him in confusion, and so does Aragorn.
Aragorn understands the meaning of his words faster than I do, and he resists and tries to go forward, but Gandalf pushes him back roughly.

"Do as I say! Swords are no more use here!" Gandalf roars. Aragorn hesitates, but he moves and falls in step next to me as we take off after the others. There's another chunk of stone missing from the stairway, but Legolas easily jumps across.

"Go!" Gandalf commands me and I jump. Legolas is ready to catch me, but my fall is less than graceful and we both grunt as my hair gets in his face and mouth and I land on his foot. I pull away, and he turns back to the others.

"Gandalf!" He says, motioning at the Wizard. Gandalf turns back as another menacing growl echoes from the stairway behind us. It's getting nearer.

Gandalf jumps after me, and Legolas catches him. He places a hand on my shoulder and an arrow whizzes between us, making me jump back.

So the orcs have decided to come out of their hiding place to strike when we're vulnerable. Typical. I quickly wipe off the blood from my blade on my shirt so I can sheath my sword and bring out my bow. I can see little black dots moving on the ledges above us. This is farther than I've ever practiced, but I take my chances.

I aim a bit to the right of my target and let the arrow fly. The impact of the arrow sends the orc backward, falling into the lava below. I may not be able to hit all of my targets, but Legolas cleans up after me with perfect shots.

"Merry! Pippin!" I hear Boromir shout as he jumps the gap, carrying Merry and Pippin with him. More arrows fly by my head. I think it's mostly due to the fact that I'm moving around so much that they can't get a clear shot. Legolas taught me to never let my opponent get a clear target on me.

"Sam!" Aragorn says, and tosses Sam across.

He moves for Gimli, "Nobody tosses a dwarf!" Gimli says, and jumps. He falls short a few inches, and he teeters dangerously over the edge. Legolas grabs him by the beard.

"Not the beard!" Gimli protests. Legolas ignores him and yanks him forward. The orcs have scattered, yet again and now only Aragorn and Frodo need to cross. I put my bow away.

Why are Frodo and Aragorn not jumping yet? When I turn to them, I see what the problem is. The gap has widened. They're crawling back up the stairs, and all the rest of us can do is watch them in horror as they both get on their feet.

"Steady! Hold on." Aragorn says, encouragingly to the frightened hobbit beside him. The Balrog's growl is louder than ever, and some of the stone from the ceiling falls on the stairs behind Aragorn and Frodo, weakening the stairs even more.

"Forward! Lean forward!" Aragorn commands and Frodo does as he is told. The stairs wobble at the shift in weight, and it slides forward, across the gap.

"Come on!" Legolas motions for Aragorn and Frodo to jump just as the stairs slam against our side and in the midst of the dust and stone, Aragorn and Frodo are caught by Legolas and Boromir.

"Run!" I pull Merry and Pippin after me, down the stairs. I can see the Bridge. It's near. We're so close.
"Over the Bridge! Fly!" Gandalf roars and we all do as he says. We run to the other side of the Bridge. The rest of us manage to cross it but another head count tells me there's one missing.

Gandalf.

"What's he doing?!!" I shout. Gandalf stops halfway across the Bridge to turn back. I see what a Balrog is now.

It's massive, and made entirely of flame and lava. It growls menacingly and I may have just had a mini aneurism. What the hell is Gandalf doing?

"You cannot pass!" Gandalf shouts at it, this wise, old man wearing grey robes. I am terrified for him, but he faces the Balrog as though he was merely facing another orc, without fear or hesitation.

"Gandalf!" Frodo yells, and I pull him back. His safety is the first priority. He cannot face a Balrog, none of us can.

Gandalf's staff glows brightly, illuminating the Bridge and his surroundings.

"I am the servant of the secret fire, wielder of the flame of Anor." Gandalf says as his staff glows brighter. "The dark fire will not avail you! Flame of Udûn!"

The Balrog strikes with a sword of flames, but Gandalf blocks with his own sword, shattering the Balrog's sword.

"Go back to the Shadow!" Gandalf says, dangerously. The Balrog growls in fury and brings out a flaming whip, lashing it about.

"You shall not pass!" Gandalf roars, striking his sword and staff on the bridge. The Balrog hesitates for a second before it moves forward, and the Bridge collapses from where it stands. It falls backward, to the chasm below and it growls yet again.

I hold my breath. Gandalf leans on his staff to watch the Balrog fall. I can't believe he managed to defeat it single-handedly. I'm staring at him, awed. He turns back around to follow us and I'm relieved. The sooner we get out of here, the better.

I'm just about to turn and continue walking up the staircase when something wounds around Gandalf's ankle and drags him back. The Balrog has not given up yet. I watch, paralyzed, as Gandalf falls over the bridge. He hangs on the edge, gripping tightly to the stone.

"Gandalf!" Frodo screams, charging forward to help him but Boromir pulls him back. "No! No!" Boromir grunts and he drags the hobbit, who kicks and flails.

There's a brief second where Gandalf looks at all of us, and his gaze pierces me. I shake my head, begging him not to do this. Begging him not to do what I think he's about to do.

Cold dread fills me, and I'm shaking. He's going to do it. I can see it in his eyes.

"Fly, you fools!"

Those are his last words before he lets go and falls over the edge. My heart has stopped beating.

"No!" Frodo's anguished scream stuns me. I can't believe that just happened. I don't even react. I can't. I'm frozen. Boromir heaves Frodo in his arms, but the hobbit fights against him furiously.

"No! Gandalf!"
I stumble backwards in a daze while Boromir runs up towards the gate.

"Aragorn!" Boromir shouts and everyone seems to stir into motion again.

I don't think I'm breathing. An arrow flies past my head, and catches a strand of my hair. I blink up at the ledges. The orc archers have returned. Aragorn dodges the arrows as he backs up as well, and he takes my hand. His hold on me is gentle but he tugs me forward, urgently. More arrows pass us and my mouth is still open in disbelief. He pulls me out of the mines, urging me to move quickly.

"We just left him." I whisper, over and over until we see the first glimpse of sunlight. We go through the Gate, and into the open world. The air is cool on my face, drying the tears I didn't know had fallen on my face. I'm still in shock.

I'm standing just outside the Gate, frozen. The hobbits are sobbing in anguish. Sam grips his hair, tears falling from his eyes. Merry holds up Pippin, who is sobbing in his arms.

"Gimli." My voice comes out choked as I hear him growl. He tries to charge forward, back to Moria, but Boromir holds him back.

"Gimli, please." I whisper. Gandalf did not fall so we can waste the opportunity he gave us to escape by charging after the orcs inside. Gimli calms down, bowing his head in exhaustion. I reach out for his hand. This time, it's me gripping tightly to him.

Legolas is looking around in a daze, as if he's expecting Gandalf to run after us. But Gandalf won't be coming back. Our eyes meet, and tears blur my vision. He steps toward me and places a gentle hand on my back.

"We could have helped him." I whisper and Gimli sighs, "We could have done a lot of things to avoid this." He mutters.

Could have is not enough.

I shut my eyes tight, and my last conversation with Gandalf surfaces in my mind. It was his words that comforted me, most of all. When I doubted myself, he trusted me. I feel lost without him to guide us now.

"Legolas. Get them on their feet."

I give Aragorn a disbelieving expression as he sheaths his sword. He's been cleaning it. He alone looks unaffected.

"Look at them, Aragorn. They're exhausted." I say, motioning at the mourning hobbits. They're suffering most of all. They knew Gandalf better than any of us. They love him, deeply. My grief is nothing compared to theirs.

"Give them a moment, for pity's sake!" Boromir shouts.

"By nightfall, these hills will be swarming with orcs!" Aragorn shouts back, and that's how I see that he's also suffering. Aragorn never loses his patience so quickly. Gandalf wanted him to lead us on. He's being strong for us.

"We must reach the Woods of Lothlórien." He says as he steps toward us. My hand slips from Gimli's. I back away, and I feel Legolas' hand steadying me.

"Come, Boromir. Legolas." Boromir gives me a look of apology and pulls Pippin and Sam up to
their feet.

"Gimli." Aragorn approaches us and we exchange looks. Up close, I can see his tired eyes. He takes my hand and gives me the cloth he'd been using to clean his sword.

"Meril." He whispers, and I can see him now. See him trying to hold in the pain, for us. "Get them up."

I nod, several times, to let him know that I will not fall through the cracks. Not when the hobbits are already suffering. Not when the Fellowship is so fragile that any sign of weakness could destroy our spirit completely.

I look down at my sword and wipe away the blood and flesh, as much of it as I can, and put my sword back in its sheath.

Merry and Pippin look up at me, with all the sadness of the world.

"Gandalf would want us to continue." I tell them.

"Frodo!" Aragorn calls. Frodo is walking in the distance, and when he looks back at us, there is nothing that would erase the look of pain on his face from my memory. He looks like he's barely hanging on.

I walk towards him, slowly, as he looks back at the hill. "Gandalf. He's..." He can't say it. He looks down and his fists clench to his sides.

My hands go to his shoulders. "He would not want you to give up now." I tell him.

He turns his back on the hills and walks back towards the rest of the Fellowship, his back stiff. I give one last look at Moria, and I turn my back as well.
The Golden Woods

Chapter Summary

In which the Fellowship stop to catch their breath before walking right into the territory of some Elven Sorceress, or so Gimli claims she is.

We run. We run and don't stop until we are as far from Moria as possible. We follow the path of a stream, and I have never wanted to bathe so much in my life, to wash the stain of orcs off me, but Gimli warns against even drinking from the water.

"Here is the spring from where the Silverlode rises. The water is icy-cold. Do not drink from it!"

I look at him mournfully but Gimli knows these lands better than I do. When he says something isn't safe to drink, it's better to just follow his instructions.

"We'll follow the path Gandalf chose, into the woods ahead. This spring runs into the Great River." Aragorn says, pointing ahead at some golden haze in the horizon.

"The woods of Lothlòrien. The fairest of all dwellings of my people. There, the leaves do not fall. They turn gold, and only during spring do they fall to make way for the new leaves and yellow flowers. And the ground is laden with golden leaves." Legolas sighs, looking ahead. "The bark of the trees are smooth and grey. The Silvan elves sing songs of the beauty of the Golden Woods. My heart would be glad if we could see it in springtime."

"My heart would be glad even in the winter." Aragorn says, "Come. We have miles ahead of us, still."

This man does not know the meaning of the word 'rest'. I feel light-headed, both from exhaustion and the pain I feel throbbing at the back of my head, as well as the soreness in my arms and legs but I endure. We need to reach Lothlórien. I'll rest when I'm dead. Or safe, whichever comes first.

We rush on ahead, but it's clear Moria took a toll on everyone physically. And it doesn't take before Frodo and Sam had begun to lag behind. Only Aragorn, Legolas and Boromir continue ahead without so much as slowing down. Merry and Pippin are trying their hardest to keep up, and I can hear Gimli's heavy footfalls beside me.

I look back to see Sam falling to his knees.

"Legolas!" I cry, stopping in my tracks and running back to where Sam is struggling to get back on his feet. Legolas looks back, and calls for the others to stop. I'm glad for even a second to catch our breaths. Aragorn comes running back, full of concern.

"I am sorry, Frodo. Hold on just a little bit more. There is a place ahead of us where we can rest. Boromir and I will carry you, if need be." Aragorn says.

Boromir willingly lets Sam on his back. "Give me your pack." I say to Boromir, but he shakes his head.

"I can manage." He says, although the sweat covering his brow and the exhaustion in his eyes say
otherwise. He runs ahead before I can protest.

We soon come upon a stream that runs down and joins with Silverlode and flows down into a dell, where trees and a level space through which the stream passes can be found. That's where we finally stop to rest. I throw my pack to the ground and fall on my hands and knees to drink from the stream.

Cool, clean water at last. I pull off the bracers around my arms and pull my sleeves up to my elbows to wash my hands, and splash water on my face and hair.

"Thank God." I say, leaning back. I have never felt more relieved in my life. Speaking of relief, I find a bush where I can hide behind, as far from the rest of the Fellowship as possible, so I can relieve myself, using soft leaves from the bushes to clean myself and later covering it with dirt. Aragorn taught me this, an embarrassing time ago when we were travelling from Bree, and after a month's journey with a bunch of guys, I think they know by now what I do when I distance myself from them. I miss plumbing and toilets, and bathrooms in general, but at least I know what I'm doing when I'm out in the woods. I knew what I was getting myself into, personal hygiene-wise when I decided to join this Quest. And I do what I've always done when faced with the unfamiliar: I freak out for a while, and I adapt.

I clean my hands in the river again while the boys settle down to tend to their wounds. Aragorn cleans Sam's scalp, which has a gash from the fight in Moria, and covers it with athelas.

He moves to me next, and inspects the tender spot at the back of my head. "How bad?" I ask. He pours water over it and I gasp in surprise, cool water trickling to the back of my neck.

"It needs to be cleaned, and there's a cut but the wound is not deep." He says. He crushes some athelas between his fingers and soaks it in the water which Gimli, Merry and Pippin are boiling over a fire. He squeezes the extracts from the athelas to the lump forming on my head. I hiss as another stinging pain radiates from my head, but it fades to a dull throb.

"Are you hurt anywhere else?" He says, bending down in front of me.

"I don't think so." Unless you count my tired limbs and aching heart, but everyone is suffering from that now. I don't need to burden him with that.

"You did well for your first battle." He says.

"Not well enough if I got this." I say, motioning at my head.

"A small price to pay for taking a life." I look down and sigh. As usual, he knows what's bothering me without me having to say anything. "I know they're foul creatures but I still felt horrible for killing them." His words are comforting, and eases the burden of my heart if even for a little bit.

After he's done with me, Aragorn moves on to check on Frodo. He bounds soft cloths to Frodo's side, where the spear had struck him. He did not get cut, but a large, ugly bruise has already started to blossom on his side. I take care of the food, because I need to distract myself. If I settle down, I'd feel so tired that I might not get up.

Aragorn steeps the rest of the athelas in the boiling water and the pungent odor clears my head. I distribute the onion and radish soup I made, which was all that we could spare, as we had eaten most
of the meat we packed in Moria, where there was no animal to hunt.

Pippin's stomach grumbles in protest when I hand him a bowl of the soup, but he finishes it all in three gulps with no complaint.

After eating, while the boys do their business in the trees, I help Gimli put out the fire, making sure to leave no traces that one was even built. We still fear that we're being hunted by the goblins, although Frodo's sword no longer glows blue. We continue at a steady pace onwards. When we arrive at the eaves of Lothlórien, Legolas looks up in wonder as he touches the trees.

"Mellyrn. My people would have loved to climb these trees and see the world from high above its branches."

I myself get taken by the beauty of Lothlórien, with strong, high trees of smooth wood and golden leaves. I don't know if the woods really are cursed, but the trees are so beautiful, I'd believe they were magical themselves.

We walk near a stream, whose water rushes with the symphony of many changing tunes. Even the rivers here rush with their own beautiful music. It's like the sound of a woman singing has mixed with the rushing waters of the stream. I can see why Legolas would be in awe.

"The Silvan elves sang songs of Nimrodel, of the rainbow that touches its waters and the golden leaves that float on its foams." Legolas says. "They still sing songs of the maiden Nimrodel, who bore the same name as the stream she lived beside. It is a long song, fair in the tongue of my woodland kin, but full of sorrow, for it tells of the evil that the dwarves have awakened in the mountains."

"The dwarves did not make that evil." Gimli says, defensively.

"I did not say they did. But evil came, anyway." Leglolas says.

We walk in silence after that, with only the sound of golden leaves crunching beneath our boots and Nimrodel rushing nearby.

It's Gimli who breaks the silence after a long while, "Stay close, young hobbits!"

Merry and Pippin look at him with curiosity, as he continues, "They say a great sorceress lives in these woods. An elf-witch of terrible power."

I see Aragorn roll his eyes next to me. But Gimli keeps talking, "All who look upon her fall under her spell and are never seen again."

So dramatic.

"Mr. Frodo?" I turn at Sam's voice. Frodo has stopped walking, his eyebrows furrowed, but he steps forward again at the sound of Gimli's voice.

"Well, here's one dwarf she won't ensnare so easily. I have the eyes of a hawk and the ears of a fox."

I'm too distracted by him to notice the movement in the trees, and I only realize that an arrow is pointed at my face when Merry yanks me backwards. I look around, alarmed at how quietly the elves of Lórien move. Even Legolas was quiet. I didn't notice that he'd drawn his bow.

"The dwarf breathes so loud we could have shot him in the dark." An elf steps forward. He is fair, in a way only an elf can be, with blonde hair that falls down the length of his back.
Gimli mumbles incoherently behind me.

Aragorn steps forward, and says something in Sindarin.

"Aragorn! These woods are perilous. We should go back!" Gimli says, loudly, and the arrows press closer towards us.

"You have entered the realm of the Lady of the Woods. You cannot go back." The elf says.

Okay. Enough.

"Hi." I say, and everyone looks at me in surprise. Rarely do I speak up in the Company, opinionated at less important things I may be. "We're tired of fighting. Could we, maybe, just talk this out, please?"

The elf gives me a long look, and he nods his head, subtly. Those that follow his command lower their bows and I sigh in relief.

"Tolo." He says as a ladder falls from above a mellorn tree. He climbs it gracefully, and we follow after him. The elves of Lorien build their homes on the tree tops, on branches that spread wide and upwards. The ladder, which looks slender and delicate, proves capable of handling the weight of the Company and we come up to a wooden platform, from a round hole in the middle where the ladder is let down from.

Have I mentioned before that I don't like heights?

Legolas and Aragorn wait at the top, already speaking to the elf who commands the rest. The rest of us shuffle behind them.

"Mae g'ovannen, Legolas Thranduilion." The elf says in greeting to Legolas. That is Sindarin that I can understand: Well met, Legolas son of Thranduil.

Legolas smiles and responds, "Govannas vîn gwennen le, Haldir o Lórien." Our Fellowship stands in Haldir of Lórien's debt.

"A Aragorn in Dûnedain, istannen le ammen."

Aragorn is known even to the elves of Lothlórien, which doesn't surprise me at all since he is an important person, both among Elves and Men.

"Haldir." Aragorn nods, with a smile on his lips as well. We're all smiling. That's better than the arrows pointed at our faces minutes ago.

"So much for the legendary courtesy of the elves." Okay, so not all of us are smiling. Gimli in particular seems most grumpy. "Speak words we can all understand!"

Haldir rewards him with a cold glare.

"We have not had dealings with the dwarves since the Dark Days." He says in the Common Tongue.

"And do you know what this dwarf says to that? Ishkhaqwi ai durugnul!" I don't know Dwarven language, but I'm guessing that wasn't a compliment. My hand goes up to cover my face in exasperation. I meant it when I said I was tired of fighting. I'm tired, period. Gimli's spirit never falters, but I wish he dialed it down just a little bit. The night has already fallen, and it wouldn't do us
any good if we're left to fend for ourselves in the dark woods.

Aragorn turns to Gimli, impatiently, "That was not so courteous." He says in a low voice.

Haldir turns to me. "A woman. The only woman in your group, it would seem." He says.

"Someone has to be the gentle touch in the Company. They'd starve without me." I say, jokingly, and the corners of his mouth quirk upwards.

He bows to me, and I put on my most charming smile. "*Im Ellie.*" I say, introducing myself in Sindarin. His smile widens.

"*Mae tollen, Ellie.*" He says. Welcome.

We're back to being in a good mood. Good. Progress.

Haldir turns to Frodo, and the smile fades from his lips.

"You bring great evil here." He says to Frodo.

Well... So much for a good mood. Haldir turns back to the rest of us, "You can go no further."

Fuck it all to hell.
Up High and Through the Woods

Chapter Summary

Ellie is faced with her fear of heights and walking around blindfolded while traveling through the forest. And there's also the unexpected compliments courtesy of one Elvish princeling.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I fidget uncomfortably from where I'm sitting. I don't want to look down from the platform (Legolas calls it a talan, I call it lazy construction) where we're sitting on, but at the same time I don't want to turn my back on it in case I lean back and fall to my death.

Legolas is more than comfortable from this high up, while the hobbits look about as sick as I feel. He stands on the edge of the talan, his back to the Company while I'm huddled with Merry and Pippin in the middle, who shiver in the cold wind of the night. Legolas turns towards me, and we both exchange concerned glances. The wind carries Aragorn's pleas to our ears.

Aragorn and Haldir are arguing in hushed whispers. They speak in Sindarin, too quickly for me to pick up what they're saying but I can see from the way Aragorn holds his hands up in front of him that he's trying to make Haldir understand our situation.

I turn to look at Frodo.

It's not his fault, but he's taking the blame, as he always has. He looks helplessly at me, but at this point, we're at Haldir's mercy. I give him a look of apology, and disappointment paints his face. I look down, unable to bear the guilt of looking at him anymore. Boromir is the one who gives him words of encouragement, instead.

"Gandalf’s death was not in vain. Nor would he have you give up hope. You carry a heavy burden, Frodo. Don’t carry the weight of the dead."

And he's right. If we lose hope now, that's when we fail Gandalf. He would want us all to continue, with our heads held high despite our weariness. Aragorn and Haldir have finally stopped arguing, and Haldir speaks to us in the Common Tongue again.

"You will have to rest here for tonight. We have cloaks and blankets to spare, and we would give you a meal to fend off the cold of the night. Rest. Tomorrow, you will follow me." He says, and he climbs back down the ladder to call for the meal and blankets.

Aragorn sighs in exhaustion, sinking down beside me.

"You did good. We even get a free meal and a place to rest." I tell him.

"The elves of Lórien have little trust in strangers, but they have agreed to help. Perhaps you charmed him into thinking twice." Aragorn says.

"Or you're just very persuasive." I say, nudging him with my elbow.
"What is important is we can rest now. I'm sure the others are thankful for that."

"Hey, Gimli," I say, patting the dwarf who grunts as he turns to me, "you're thankful they're giving us food and lodgings, right?"

"I am, indeed." Either he's really good at hiding his sarcasm, or he has suddenly had a change of heart. Either way, it's good to know he won't be picking any more fights.

"What did he mean we can rest here?" Pippin asks. "Surely, he did not mean up here on the trees?"

I really don't like heights. Especially when there's no railing and only open air around us. The talan has only one wall, which can be moved depending on the wind. Nothing I would trust to protect me from falling to my death.

I look at Aragorn with wide eyes, but he just stares back at me. "Oh, I might throw up a bit now." I say when I realize that we really are expected to sleep up in the trees. The elves return with hot food, and serve us wine that fills us with warmth all the way to the tips of our fingers.

"The hobbits may stay here with us—we do not fear them. There is another talan in the next tree. The others may take refuge there." Haldir says, and we breathe a collective sigh of relief and thank him. We make our way down through the rope-ladder.

"I pray when I wake, I would not have rolled to the very edge in my sleep." Pippin says, he watching the rest of us climb down the ladder.

I pray I'm still alive in the morning.

"Will the lady need a separate talan?" Haldir asks once we're all back on the ground again. I cling to the nearest arm I could find, which happens to be Boromir.

"Uh. No. I've camped with these guys long enough. I'd feel safer knowing I'm with them." I say. No way am I sleeping alone and accidentally fall to my death while I sleep. Haldir doesn't protest.

The talan we stay in is larger, enough to host two grown men, a lean elf, a muscular dwarf and a tiny woman. I lie between Legolas and Aragorn, but I still can't settle in my sleep. The open air makes me uncomfortable when I know I'm high up on a tree.

I toss and turn while Gimli's snore fills the air. The dwarf can sleep through a nuclear bomb. Aragorn and Boromir easily drop off to sleep next to me and by now I've gotten used to the open-eyed sleep of Legolas to know he has no trouble sleeping up here as well. In the trees is where he feels most at home.

I stare up at the golden leaves of the mellorn, trying to count them to distract myself. I didn't know I'd begun counting out loud(I was at forty-six) until I hear a soft voice beside me.

"Ellie?"

Legolas's eyes are focused on me. He's awake.

"Sorry." I whisper, hurriedly.

"You must sleep. Is it another dream?"

I shake my head. I haven't had any dreams recently, good or bad, which I'll take as a blessing.

"It's heights." I say, pointing down to the ground below.
"I see." He says. There's a moment where we're both silent, and in the darkness, I see his silhouette moving. He scoots closer to me.

"Hodo hí." He whispers, and I find myself using his arm as a pillow when I turn to face him. I scoot closer to him as well. I don't know how he has managed to not smell like sweat, but I instantly feel self-conscious about how I smell. He senses what I think, and he turns his body towards me to block my view of the open air, either to show me that he doesn't care about how I smell, or that I don't smell as bad as I think. Both of which are slight comforts. Now, all I see are the intricate silver details on his brown tunic. We lie down like that, our bodies not quite touching save for his arm and my head.

A shiver runs down my body as the wind blows gently against the rustling leaves, and he scoots even closer, until our knees are against each other. "Oltho vae ne fuin hen."

He really needs to stop speaking in Sindarin, it's making me even more light-headed than I already am.

"Losto vae." I tell him, looking up at those ridiculously blue eyes of his.

A smile appears on his lips, "Losto vae."

I close my eyes, and when I open them again the next morning, Legolas is lying on his back, and my head has moved to his chest. His arm that I've used as a pillow the night before is now closer to my head, where his hand has curled into my hair. I sigh when I wake and that wakes him up as well.

We blink at each other in the morning light that fills the trees. I can see his long lashes falling over his eyes as he blinks. I've been noticing so many details about him nowadays. His fingers slide through my hair one last time and I sit up.

"Hi." I whisper.

"Hello." He says.

Gimli snores loudly.

I turn to look at the others. They're still sleeping.

"A company of orcs passed by in the dead of night." Legolas says.

Such a lovely greeting. And early in the morning, as well.

Aragorn stirs at the sound of our voices, just as Haldir's head pops up from the hole in the middle of the talan.

"I found a creature moving around the trees last night, though I did not shoot it for fear of arousing cries that may alert the strong company of orcs that had passed by. Curse their foul feet in Nimrodel's clean waters." Haldir explains.

Such wonderful news to wake up to in the morning. I guess a good night's rest was too much to hope for. Haldir continues as Boromir and Gimli are roused by Aragorn. "We could not challenge a hundred orcs at one time. I sent my brother Orophin to warn my people. There will be elves hidden in the Northern border to intercept them. They will not be able to leave Lórien alive."

"I can't believe they followed us all the way here." I say, burying my face in my hands.
"They will hunt you no longer, now that they have crossed our borders. Come, we have still a few miles to travel. I will guide you now." And with that, Haldir climbs down.

We pack our things and continue our travel, the pale light of morning making the leaves of the mellyrn seem to glow.

"Farewell, Nimrodel." Legolas sighs, looking over at the stream. I look at it one last time, savoring the sweet music its rushing waters made and I turn back to join with the Company.

We soon come across a harsher, louder stream. Haldir whistles, and another elf on the other side of the stream appears. "Celebrrant is already a strong stream, and it runs both swift and deep. You would not be able to swim through its icy waters. But in these suspicious days, we do not make bridges."

"How are we to get across, then?" Merry asks.

Haldir answers by pulling out a rope and throwing it to the other side of the stream, where the elf on the other side catches it and ties it to a tree.

"We have two more ropes, and you may cross using those as a bridge."

"Wonderful." I mutter, glancing down at the rushing stream below. Walking across a rope bridge--literally, it's a bridge made of three ropes tied to trees and nothing more--proves easy for Legolas, as well as Pippin, but I'm a klutz and with my luck, disaster is bound to happen.

My legs tremble with every step. "I'll take those hundred orcs now, please." I say, gripping tightly to the rope when I slip. I make a mental note that for all of Glorfindel's intense exercises, this wasn't part of my training program.

"Lassie, if you pull like that again, we will both be bathing in the cold waters of Celebrant." Gimli warns from behind me as he teeters with my sudden movement.

"I'll take the cold waters of Celebrant, too." I grunt as I inch forward again.

"You and me both." Boromir says while he moves in front of me.

When we finally manage to get across, I'm surprised I'm still dry.

"You have now entered the Naith of Lórien." Haldir says, "We allow no stranger to spy on the secrets of the Naith. As we agreed, the dwarf's eyes must be blindfolded from here."

"I agreed to no such thing!" Gimli exclaims, resting his hand on his ax. "I will not walk blindfolded like a prisoner. My folk have never had dealings with the Enemy, nor have we done anything against the elves. I am no more likely to betray you as the rest of my companions."

"It is law. I am not the master of law. I must obey them, and as long as you are within our borders, you must obey them as well." Haldir says.

"I will go forward free or I will go back to my own land, where I am known as true to my word." Gimli growls.

"Behind you are sentinels that you cannot pass. You will be slain before you even saw them." Haldir's voice has taken a harsher tone, and this makes Gimli draw his ax, which in turn makes Haldir and his companion draw their bows and we're once again staring at the arrows they point at our faces. Why can't we have nice things? Or a peaceful journey? Just once.
"A plague upon the stiff neck of dwarves." Legolas mutters.

"If I am still to lead this company, then you will have to do as I say. It is hard for Gimli to be singled out. Why not bind all our eyes?" Aragorn suggests.

"And look like a bunch of fools? I'd be content with just Legolas beside me sharing in my blindness." Gimli says, which makes Legolas stiffen his back.

"I am an elf and a kinsman here!" He snaps.

"Enough! We go in blindfolded, all of us, together or we don't go in at all!" I raise my voice, and Gimli and Legolas stare daggers at each other. I glare at them both.

"I shall claim full amends for every fall and stubbed toe if you do not lead us well." Gimli warns, putting away his ax.

"I am to walk blind in the woodlands while the sun shines on leaves of gold." Legolas shakes his head in disappointment.

"The Enemy's power is most evident in the estrangement of all those who still oppose him. Yet we have little faith in those outside Lothlórien, save those in Imladris, and we do not dare endanger our lands with our trust." Haldir says as he and his companion begin to tie blindfolds over our eyes.

I look ruefully at Haldir's companion as he holds up the cloth for my eyes. "I'll let you know that I trip on my own feet with my eyes unobstructed." I say.

"She only does that when she is embarrassed." There's amusement in Legolas's tone. If I wasn't blindfolded, I'd narrow my eyes at him. I feel something move over my shoulder, "Like if you tell her she has never looked more beautiful than in the glow of the Golden Woods." Legolas mutters, so close that his breath stirs my hair. His voice is soft so that only I(and the two other elves) can hear. I whip around to find where his voice is coming from, only to elbow Haldir's companion in the gut.

That dancing, Elven princeling!

"Goheno nîn!" I say, immediately, drawing my arms in to prevent any further injuries while Gimli laughs somewhere near me as the elf groans.

"No more sudden movements, please." The elf says, and there's annoyance in his tone.

"Sorry." I say again as we are then led down a path. I'd bet my life I'm actually flapping around looking like a drunk penguin until I feel someone steering me back on the right path. "You really are not very coordinated." It's the elf I punched.

"You try walking around blindfolded." I mutter, under my breath just as Haldir decides to tell us a little tale to distract us.

"The rivers have long defended us, but they are no longer sure guards. The Shadow has grown over the mountain and while some speak of departing, I fear it is too late." Haldir guides us with his voice as we slowly walk, in a single file, holding on to the companion ahead of us to not be separated. I think it's Boromir in front of me. His shield is what I'm holding on to.

Haldir continues to speak, "The mountains to the west are growing in evil, and the lands to the east are filled with Sauron's creatures. It is even rumored that the passage southward to Rohan is no longer a safe path, and the Great River is watched by the Enemy. It is said that there are still havens of the High Elves, but they are all the way North. Past even the borders of the halflings, I believe. The Lord and Lady will know. I, however, do not."
"There are indeed elf-havens beyond the Shire, where hobbits live." Merry says. He's the one holding on to the quiver of arrows on my back.

"Ah, you dwell so near the Sea! Our folk have not seen its shores in a long time, though we still remember it in song. Tell me of these havens." Haldir says, with a wistful tone.

"I'm afraid I can't. I have never been outside my own land before. And if I had known the world outside would be so dark, I never would have left." Merry says.

"Not even to look at Lothlórien?" Haldir says. "It is true that darkness has grown in the world, but there is still much that is fair as well. Some still sing that the Shadow will draw back, but I fear the world will never again be as it once was. It would be as a truce for the elves to leave Middle-earth in peace. Alas for Lothlórien that I love. It would be a poor life for a land where no mellorn grows."

"And no elves to care for the lands." I add, sadly.

A sinking feeling starts in my gut, because Haldir is right. The world that I was born in, the world I grew up in, has filled with smoke and industry. Nature has all but died back home, and still people grow more cruel.

I can't help but wonder how Earth would flourish in the 21st century if elves were still around to preserve the beauty that I see now.

The moment we step over the far bank of Silverlode, I feel strange. Like I'm stepping on old and greater land. Night has begun to fall, I think, because I no longer feel the sun's kiss on my skin. The Company's walk slows to a halt, and I can hear the voices of elves speaking in Sindarin, though I'm not really sure because it sounds different.

Haldir announces the destruction of the host of orcs that had pursued us, and that the elves who have arrived bear a message from the Lord and Lady of the Galadhrim.

"You are all to walk free now, even the dwarf. It seems our Lady knew exactly who would be in your company. Perhaps she received another message from Imladris."

I feel someone reaching for the knot behind my head and I blink as my eyesight returns, blurry at first until I take in the grey-clad elves surrounding us.

Gimli is frowning up at Haldir, who smiles and says, "Look on us now with friendly eyes. You have been the first dwarf to see the trees of the Neith of Lórien since Durin's Day!"

I turn to my left, and my mouth hangs open. On a mound of grass, two circles of trees grow. The outer circle is made of trees of pure white, beautiful despite the fact that they have no leaves. The inner circle is of mellyrn, taller than any of the others that I've seen in the woods. It's beautiful. If anyone asked me what paradise looked like, I would point them to this.

"Behold, Cerin Amroth."

Paradise is named Cerin Amroth.

"I know the elves are all for moon and stars, but this is more Elvish than I have ever seen or heard!" Sam gasps next to me as we continue down the hill.

"Niphredil." Legolas says, bending down at the flowers that scatter among the ground. He picks one up and gives it to me. The flower is pure white and blossoming, like snow in my hands, but with a sweet scent, and I think back to the rose he gave me when we were in Rivendell. He has a habit of
offering me pretty flowers that have fallen to the ground. He needs to stop, because someday, it will be the sun shining in the sky instead of the stars and everyone will see just how red my face can turn.

We continue down the hill and past the circle of white trees into Cerin Amroth. I look back when I notice Aragorn is not with the Company, and I see him standing at the foot of the hill. I see years of age disappear from his face as he stands, so still it's as if he is one of the trees, holding a golden flower in his hand. He's lost in his memories, I can tell from the faraway look in his eyes.

_Arwenvanimelda, namárië._” He whispers. I don't dare interrupt his reminiscing, but he finds me lingering behind and for the first time, I see what the others mean when they say Aragorn and I look alike.

I see his face, seemingly young, with a soft smile on his lips and a look that makes his eyes shine, and it looks so familiar. Like one of the blurred faces I vaguely remember from a dream. Like a face I've gotten so used to seeing that it's jarring to finally notice them.

"Let us go forth, Ellie." He says, taking my hand and leading me forward.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

_Hodo hí - Rest here_
_Oltho vae ne fuin hen - May you dream well tonight_
_Losto vae - Sleep well_

EDITED BECAUSE I DID NOT REALIZE THAT ENDING CUT OFF SO AWKWARDLY LIKE THAT. I THINK IT WAS BECAUSE I COPY/PASTED WRONG FROM WORD.
Ellie meets the Lady of the Woods herself and is not at all happy to know the Lady can read minds.

We're getting closer now. I feel the change in the surroundings, as if everything around me is much older, and the leaves truly are greener. We pass through thickets until we come to an open space with a wide, treeless space that forms a ring, with trees that bend away from the space. Ahead is a fosse, like what I imagine would surround castles except what I'm seeing before me is even grander. Beyond that are tall mellorn trees, greater in size than anything we've passed before, easily as high as the skyscrapers in New York.

"Caras Galadhon. The heart of Elvendom on earth. This is the city of the Galadhrim, as well as the realm of Lord Celeborn and of Galadriel, Lady of Light." Haldir announces, "We would have to go round to the south side, as the gates do not face northwards, and it is no short distance." We could have gone well enough without knowing that last part. I think by now, I've developed strong leg muscles from all the walking and running and climbing. There's a path that leads around the fosse, and we climb and climb until I've lost track of time and the sun has set. The trees and hills light up with silver lights from lanterns, and we come across a gate. Haldir knocks, and the gates swing open to let us pass.

The city of the Galadhrim is beautiful. The mellorn trees all have lamps strung up on their branches and everything is quiet on the ground, but I can hear soft laughter from above us, and the haunting melody of singing elves. I look up at the leaves of the mellorn trees that we pass, and on each wide branch, a talan can be found, and platforms serve as stairs between the talans. We walk up the long and winding steps, with the echo of Elven laughter around us.

A bell rings above as as we climb higher. My nausea gives way to wonder as we pass by branches, and elves turn to look at the company of strangers that pass by them, until at last we come to a large lawn, with white pillars and intricate arches. There's a fountain that spills into a silver basin, which overflows to make a small stream. There are steps leading down to where we stand, and two figures appear at the top of the stairs.

A light shines from behind them, bathing them both in a white glow. They walk down, slowly and gracefully with their hands intertwined.

I finally get a glimpse of their faces when they get close enough. When the light fades, I gasp. Standing before me is the most beautiful elf I have ever seen, more beautiful than anyone or anything on Middle-earth. She's incredibly tall, her skin as white as snow. And her hair... it's like woven gold. It's like the sun kissing the waves of the sea. Her eyes are a piercing shade of blue.

It almost hurts looking at such perfection, and I look down because my heart is racing in admiration and a bit of fear. Gramps always said too much of something is dangerous, and I happen to agree with him in this instance. Lady Galadriel's beauty does not detract from the powerful aura that she brings with her. And Lord Celeborn, tall and fair and looking every bit as majestic as a King, does nothing to reduce the intimidation I feel. It's Lord Celeborn who addresses us first.
"The Enemy knows you have entered here. What hope you had in secrecy is now gone."

Great. We go on a journey with a small group to make sure we'd be able to keep our mission secret and here we are being told we've failed. Add that to the heaviness I feel from Gandalf's death.

"Nine there are here, yet ten there were set out from Rivendell." Lord Celeborn continues, his eyes falling on each of us individually. "Tell me, where is Gandalf? For I much desire to speak with him. I can no longer see him from afar."

I keep my gaze down as I feel Frodo stiffen beside me. The loss of Gandalf is a wound that is still fresh in his heart.

"Gandalf the Grey did not pass the borders of this land." The soft, deep voice of Lady Galadriel makes me look up at her. Her eyes are focused on Aragorn. "He has fallen into shadow."

Lord Celeborn turns to her with a look of disbelief.

"He was taken by both shadow and flame." Legolas speaks out, and Lady Galadriel looks away from Aragorn in understanding as Legolas continues, "A Balrog of Morgoth. For we went needlessly into the nets of Moria."

I feel Gimli shift uncomfortably near me, but my eyes find themselves looking up at Lady Galadriel as she speaks, "Needless were none of the deeds of Gandalf in life. We do not yet know his true purpose."

At those words, her eyes find me and pierces into my very heart and soul. I swear to God I can hear her voice in my head.

And what of you, Helen Grayson? Lost you were and lost you are still, but what if you found your true purpose? Would you stay to protect your family but never see them again?

I gasp and blink, winded, and I tear my eyes away from her. It couldn't have been more than a second, and yet I still hear the echo of her voice in my head. What the fuck was that supposed to mean? I'm shaking, I can feel my fingers trembling, and I close my fists to control them but Lady Galadriel continues as if nothing has happened.

"Do not let the great emptiness of Khazad-dûm fill your heart, Gimli, son of Glóin. For the world has grown full of peril." There is a small smile on her face as she says it. Gimli sighs next to me, gazing up at her in awe.

"And in all lands love is now mingled with grief." She turns now to Boromir, standing to my left and I would not have noticed the movement of her eyes had I not been watching her so closely and Boromir gasps as well.

Did he hear her voice in his head as well? Are none of our thoughts sacred anymore? Boromir is shaking and my hand moves slowly to hold his. He welcomes the comfort, and our trembling fingers steady each other. I let him know without speaking that I am here. He is not alone. And with a squeeze of my hand, he tells me the same thing.

"What now becomes of this Fellowship? Without Gandalf, hope is lost." Lord Celeborn says.

"The quest stands upon the edge of a knife. Stray but a little and it will fail to the ruin of all." Lady Galadriel says and slowly, as her focus moves to someone else, Boromir's hand steadies, though I can tell by the way he holds on that he is still shaken. "Yet hope remains while the Company is true."
Lady Galadriel turns to Sam with a smile, and even if it wasn't directed at me, and she just completely disregarded my privacy by going through my head, it's a comfort to know that someone still has any hope in our broken, weary Fellowship.

"Do not let your hearts be troubled." She says to us, now giving us all a glowing smile. My eyes shoot downwards when they move to me, because now I'm really scared of her. But she continues in a gentle tone, "Go now and rest for you are weary with sorrow and much toil. Tonight you will sleep well, in peace and the song of the Galadhrim shall be your comfort."

At this, my body sags. I had no idea how tired I actually am until sleep is mentioned. I just want to put my pack down, eat, maybe bathe without having to constantly worry about being hunted down by a pack of orcs.

The Lady Galadriel smiles at us all one last time, and Lord Celeborn nods at Haldir, and then at us, "Lay down your burdens, for you shall be protected here." He says, and the Fellowship sighs as we all finally allow ourselves to be tired.

Lord Celeborn calls for some elves to help us, and when we are dismissed, we are taken back down to soft, firm ground much to the delight of the hobbits. The elves help with our packs and lay blankets on the ground for us to lie on. We rest for a while and Boromir shakily drops to one of the blankets.

"That was not right." He says, his voice thin. I sigh and drop next to him.

"I know what you mean. If our own minds have to be invaded as well, I'm going to go insane. I can take on orcs. I can't take on telepathy."

"Tel-what?" He gives me a confused look. I wave my hand dismissively.

"Nevermind."

"Will you be okay?" He asks.

"Me? Look at you, you look like you've seen a ghost."

He's silent for a beat too long.

"Did I say something wrong?" Open foot and insert mouth.

He shakes his head and tries to smile. "No. No, not at all." He says.

I give him a meaningful look. Boromir has always been the easiest for me to decipher in the Fellowship. His emotions are written all over his face. And he has always been honest, despite the fact that his honesty can be a bit aggravating. Even when he lies, his face gives it away—and he only lies when it concerns the Ring.

"Do not worry about me. I'm fine." He says, his smile widening, although that does nothing to convince me he is.

"You know me. I'm an eternally-worrying, nervous chipmunk."

"I can believe that with these cheeks." Boromir teases, pinching the left side of my face. I bat his hands away.

"I've battled orcs! You can't treat me like a kid!" I whine.
"I cannot help it. You are, perhaps, the youngest in our little group. Perhaps that is why Legolas and Aragorn are protective of you."

"Oh, shush, you." I warn, although I am about as intimidating as a daisy compared to him. He snickers, and I kick his leg before getting up. He chuckles behind me.

"I feel stinky." I announce. Frodo looks up at me, bewildered.

"I am never prepared for the things that come out of your mouth, sometimes." He tells me.

I take a second to absorb that. "I'll try not to take that as an insult."

"If it is any comfort, you smell just as bad as the rest of us."

"That is no comfort at all!"

He cracks a smile. This is an achievement for me, but the smile is too small and soon fades. He goes back to sit with Sam on the blankets and wraps his cloak around himself.

"The elves will arrive shortly and we will have the ellith take you to the bath houses." Haldir says after everyone has settled and the blankets and food have been arranged. "We have separate bath houses for men and women."

"We... Kind of don't have any clean clothes."

"The Lady anticipated that. She has already called for clean clothes to be brought for your Fellowship. Worry no longer. Rest. Be well." He says, kindly.

And so, we do. We rest, we sit. And it feels like an eternity since we've had some peace, but we let the tranquility of Lothlórien settle on us and leave us to our own thoughts. Haldir, his brothers and their companions take their leave.

And what is left of the Fellowship is silent for a long time.
Chapter Summary

The Company takes the time to recover in Lothlórien, Ellie feels herself growing distant from Legolas and Lady Galadriel gives her an offer she cannot refuse.

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

As Haldir promised, one of the female elves is kind enough to point me to where I can bathe. They even help me with my dirty set of clothes while the boys are taken away for their own baths.

I'm taken to a sort of communal bath house, that looks more like an indoor pool than a bathroom, which connects to a river and with the leaves of the mellorn trees above us serving as a roof. When I first walk in, there are other female elves walking around, butt-naked and I trip on the way inside.

Jesus Christ, they're all perfect. Fair, smooth skin, no body hair. I feel like evolution left me behind. I feel like a cavewoman.

"Um. I don't... I can come back." I squeak to the female elf who led me here. I lower my eyes to the ground in embarrassment. Okay. So, I'll never be able to erase the memory of female elf genitalia from my mind. Good God.

I've always had a private bath in Imladris, which I now know I've taken for granted. I'm not as affected by the naked bodies around me so much as the thought of them seeing me. Every single elf around me has flawless skin and meanwhile there's me who hasn't had a proper bath in weeks and cuts and bruises and scars and hair. How embarrassing would it be to have to shave in front of these immortal images of grace and perfection?

The elf who led me here, however, doesn't speak any language that I understand. She's talking in rapid Sindarin, but she has a strange accent that makes her Sindarin harder to understand. I don't even know if she's still speaking in Sindarin. I remember Arwen once saying there are other dialects for Elvish, perhaps she's speaking a dialect. She urges me inside, using comforting tones to make things less awkward until I am forced to disrobe in front of them and get in the pool.

I'm not gonna lie, I got some nasty looks when they saw the state of my hair, some even went as far as making disgusted noises and getting out of the pool. Oh God, I probably stink so bad right now.

The female elf next to me motions at my dirty clothes and says something in Elvish.

I stare stupidly at her and say, "Ú-chenion."

I don't understand. Those were one of the first words in Sindarin that I was taught and I bet I'll be using that sentence a lot during our stay here in Lothlórien.

She smiles patiently and speaks slowly, "Do you... need new robes?" She speaks with a heavy accent. I don't think she speaks the Common Tongue all that well. Makes sense, considering they probably rarely run into other races here. They have guards who let no strangers through and the people who enter Lórien most likely knew how to converse in their language.
"I just need to clean my old clothes up."

"We shall help." She says, gently, motioning to a group on the farther side of the river, who hold woven baskets filled with laundry.

"No, really, please--" Because it's not embarrassing enough that they have to watch me shave my armpits, they have to clean my almost a month-old clothes.

"You came with the Company. You must rest. We will help." She insists and I sigh, blushing furiously as I do.

They take my dirty clothes for cleaning, and lend me a simple grey gown that is light and easy to move in once I'm done with the bath. They momentarily look at my bra and my drawers in confusion. My eyes widen in horror. Apparently, they've never seen such things because oh look at that, they don't wear anything beneath those long gowns.

I can just imagine the chaos if a particularly strong wind blew through the place.

They help me into the gown, and I fidget self-consciously at the breeze I feel where I'm not used to feeling a breeze. My boobs look like sad traffic cones, to which the elves around me probably agree with, as another elf lends me a chemise to wear under the gown. Great. As if I needed another reason to get naked in front of these people again.

But the change in wardrobe and the fact that my nails are now free of dirt again immediately lift my spirits. My hair now hangs over my shoulders, straight and shiny after a thorough wash and the boys have cleaned up well. When I come back to them, they're all fresh-faced and wearing comfortable clothes. Legolas is no longer wearing green and brown but a silver, high-collared tunic.

"Food, Miss Ellie!" Sam says, the moment I join them, and he offers me a bowl of what I can only describe as oatmeal, with fruits mixed in. The elves of Lothlorien are all about the healthy lifestyle, apparently.

"Rest, at last." I sigh as I lean against the trunk of a mellorn tree next to Aragorn.

"We get to have a good night's rest, and I intend to take full advantage of it." Gimli says. He moves to the blankets and promptly lies down. As we clean up our meal, the sound of Elven voices from the trees float down to us, and everyone freezes to listen.

The melody is haunting, and speaks to the heart. I find myself looking up, searching for the elves with the fair voices but I can't find them. Their music, sweet and slow, fills the camp. I don't understand the words, but the message they convey is that of sadness and grief but also of hope. Music will always be the best kind of elf-magic for me. Nothing can capture emotions the way Elven song could.

"A lament for Gandalf." Legolas says softly, stopping in his tracks.

"What do they say about him?" Merry asks, gazing up at the mellorn trees that surround us. Legolas turns to him, and I feel the pain in his eyes and hear it in his voice when he says, "I have not the heart to tell you. For me, the grief is still too near."

His eyes find mine, and I want to reach out to him. Maybe now, we can mourn for Gandalf. The thought of the elves lamenting his loss hits me unexpectedly. He was a man loved by many, and a guide and leader not just to us. Of course many people would cry for him.

"I bet they don't mention his fireworks. There should be a verse about them." Sam says as he, too,
gazes up at the trees. He then stands up, hands tucked behind him as he recites,

"The finest rockets ever seen
They burst in stars of blue and green
Or after thunder, silver showers…"

I never got to see his fireworks. Gimli snores loudly, and Aragorn, who is right next to Gimli, gives the dwarf a shove.

"...Came falling like a rain of flowers." Sam continues and he blushes as he sits down, "Oh, that doesn't do them any justice by a long shot."

Gimli snores again.

I look around, noticing those around the camp.

"Where's Boromir?" I ask. I worry about him. He'd been quiet after the meeting with the Lord and Lady of Lothlórien and he never gave me a straight answer about what was bothering him.

Aragorn nods over to a lone figure, sitting alone on a tree root in the distance.

"Do you want me to talk to him?" I ask, but Aragorn shakes his head.

"Stay here. Rest. I shall talk to him." He says, getting up and approaching Boromir.

Gimli is still snoring loudly. At this rate, I won't be able to get any sleep, so I find myself another blanket to settle on. I see Legolas looking around him, up at the trees.

"Why do I get the feeling you want to climb up?" I say to him and he gives me a small smile.

"The trees of Lothlórien are beautiful. Long have I wanted to come here and look upon the white trunks and the golden leaves of the mellyrn." He says.

"Well, now's as good a time as any." I say motioning to one of the lower trees. The voices of the elves above us continue their song, and the smile from Legolas's face slowly fades.

"It does not feel right that Gandalf is not with us." He says.

I sigh, heavily and play with the fabric of my dress. "I know what you mean. He always knew what to say or do. I didn't know how much our stability depended on him until..." I say as I sink down on the blankets nestled between tree roots. If Gandalf was here now, I'd be able confide in him. He always had the right words to say. Now, it's like I'm scrambling in the darkness for answers again.

Legolas gives me a knowing look, "The Lady spoke in your mind, did she not?"

I can never hide anything from Legolas. He needs to stop being so intuitive.

"She asked me if I could bear to leave my home forever if that meant saving it." I whisper and he sits on the ground next to me.

"And what if you were given a chance to go back home?" He asks. I shrug and hug my knees to my chest.

"I'm already here. I'm fighting. I don't want to dwell on the 'what if's. 'What if's are useless and bring false hope and I don't need one right now. I'm taking it all day by day." I say.
"You do not know if going back is the right choice." It's not a question, it's an affirmation. He's answering the question in my heart: Is there even a way for me to home at this point?

"I don't know if going back is even an option for me anymore. And if it's no longer an option then..." I swallow, unable to continue. "I don't belong here in Middle-earth. After everything, I'll have nowhere to stay."

I look at him, helplessly but his eyes are focused on the rest of the Fellowship, who are comfortably lying down on their blankets, preparing to sleep.

"Take it day by day, mellenenîn." He says after a long time. I give him a weak smile.

"You're right. I'm feeling sorry for myself again." I shake my head as Legolas stretches his legs in front of him.

"Let me distract you, then." He says, "Turn around."

"Why?" I say, but I do as he says anyway. The back of neck tingles when I feel his fingers touch my hair, as soft and gentle as the wind.

"I do not understand how your hair can remain soft after all we have been through." He says and it's a damn good thing I'm not facing him because I'm blushing all the way to my neck.

"The female elves who helped me gave me some sort of oil for my hair."

"Ellith."

"What?"

"Ellith is Sindarin for female elves. Elleth is the singular term. Our Sindarin lessons stopped abruptly when we came on the Quest."

His fingers comb through my hair and I have to control the shiver I feel when his fingers brush against my upper back. Quick. Distraction. Distraction!

"Um. What about male elves?"

"Ellyn. A single male elf is ellon."

He's twisting my hair together into a braid. Why does this feel so intimate all of a sudden?

"What's Sindarin for leaf?" I say, spouting out random words just to stop myself from focusing too much on the contact of his fingers on my neck while he gathers my hair together.

"Las."

"Like Legolas?"

His fingers stop for a second before continuing. I wouldn't have noticed the pause if my nerves weren't hyper-aware of his touch.

"Exactly. My name means greenleaf."

"Legolas. Greenleaf." I hold my wrist out for him, because what's left of the hair ties that Salabeth gave me are all around my wrist for easy access. They look like leather straps, with a loop at the end where a stick is inserted to keep the hair in place. And there's a ribbon that can be used to cover the
leather hair ties. His finger brushes against my skin and I freeze as he slips the hair tie off my hand and secures my braid with it. I can still feel his touch, can feel my nerves singing for the brush of his fingers again even when he pulls away.

"Ellie." Oh God. I feel light-headed, like I may not be getting enough oxygen. Shouldn't being surrounded by trees mean I should be getting a lot of oxygen? The soft voice Legolas uses when he's saying my name is so unfair. "Shall we go for a walk? A walk in the light of the stars will remind us of happier times, I expect."

He doesn't need to ask twice.

"Sure." I say, and he takes me through the woods. It's different, walking around Calas Galadhon. In Rivendell, we followed a clear, straight path through a garden but I bet if I walked alone around here, I'd get lost. There are no paths to follow, just trees and grass. Golden leaves rustle above us, and stars wink down at us through the branches of the mellorn trees. Hanging from the trees are lamps of white light to illuminate the way, adding to the ethereal feel of the place. It's like walking through a land of fairies.

"You know, when I was a child, I used to pretend I was a princess who owned a castle in the clouds where the trees were pink and there were rainbows visible all day." I burst out as I look around me, "But this is better than anything I could have imagined."

"Pink trees?" Legolas repeats, amused.

"My mother would see me drawing trees and she'd tell me that leaves were green and I'd throw a tantrum. I'd scream, 'It's my kingdom! I want pink leaves!'" I giggle at the memory. Oh, what I'd give to be six years old again when my only problem was drawing pink trees. Legolas laughs at the thought, "I can definitely see you doing something like that." He teases.

I push him, playfully. "Are you calling me a brat?" I laugh, and he chuckles. "Well, to make you feel better, you are not the only one who was a handful as a child."

"You? Graceful, quiet Legolas being a brat? I can't picture it." I snort.

"It's true! There was a time when I was younger, much younger, and I drove my father insane." Legolas says, smiling at a fond memory,

"Why? What did you do?" I ask.

"My father wears long robes, and they would trail along the floors. I was told when I was but a child that I would sit on the end of his robes and he would drag me across the floor."

Just the thought of a baby Legolas playing with his dad makes me grin. "Okay, that's adorable." I say.

"Not quite adorable when a decade or two afterwards, during one of my father's many parties, I got carried away with Dorwinion wine and was so intoxicated that I was told I lay facedown on the ground, holding on to the end of adar's robes and I refused to let go until he spun me in a circle." He tries to keep a straight face but I burst out laughing.

"I would pay to see that, oh my God!" I gasp as he covers his face with his hand, "Okay, one time, when I was fifteen, I got so drunk after sneaking out to go to my friend's party that I woke up in Gramps' bed and I was told I kicked him out of his room and claimed it was mine."

"How much trouble did you get into?"
"Not a lot. I was Gramps' favorite grandchild, if I do say so myself."

"But where were your parents? You never mention them in your tales."

The smile fades from my lips, remembering the dreams I had, memories from my life in New York.

"They died nine years ago." I was fourteen. Donovan was sixteen. Rory was four.

Legolas slows down to a stop, and I stop a few steps behind him. "Goheno nín." He says after a few seconds of silence.

"It's not your fault, Legolas." I say, and he turns to face me.

"My mother. She died as well, fighting orcs in Dol Guldur." He says, softly. "I never knew her. She died when I was a very young child. All I remember is golden hair and a kind smile. My father never mentions her. I think, even after all this time, his heart is still healing from the pain of her loss." I notice his hands are clenched into fists, and I slowly approach him from behind, taking one of his hands into both of mine. He relaxes his grip, until my hand is gently nestled in his.

He's never opened up like this before. It's a vulnerable side of him that I've never seen. And for once, I can acknowledge his agelessness. I've always seen him as a quiet and solid but youthful elf, one who still has much of the world to see. But I see him now, with two thousand years' worth of pain and experience on his shoulders.

"Hey." I whisper and he faces me, "Remember the stars? As long as they shine, your mother won't be forgotten."

We both look up. It's impossible to make out a constellation through the thick leaves of the tree above us, but a single star shines brightly, right above our heads. His hand squeezes mine, and he looks down at our feet, taking a deep breath.

"Would staying in Ennorath truly be horrible for you?" Why is he whispering? Why is he not looking at me? Why do I need him to look at me?

"Ennorath?"

"Middle-earth. I have seen your eyes when you look upon its lands, and I see you fall in love with the rivers and trees. Would staying here truly be a bitter fate?"

"No. No, absolutely not." I shake my head, "It's just that... Gramps and Rory. They need me. I have to get back to them."

He's quiet for a few moments, and slowly he nods his head. "Of course. Of course, you are right."

"Legolas."

I see him wince as I try to move closer towards him, and I back away, hurt. Our hands fall to our sides.

"Let's go back. You should rest." He says. I have no idea what just happened. I blink up at him, confused.

"What about you?" I ask.

"I would like to explore. Go above the trees and speak with the Galadhrim." He says.
"Oh." I say, my fingers curling into each other. For the first time in three months, the silence between us is uncomfortable, the kind of silence between two people who are keeping words from each other. He takes me back to the camp, and the whole time, he's quiet. Too quiet. And when we get there, the others had all fallen asleep.

"Well. Have fun with your exploring. Good night." I mumble as I settle on the blankets.

"Losto vae, Ellie."

After that night, Legolas barely stays with the rest of us except to eat. Most of the time, he takes Gimli away on his little adventures and I suddenly feel this rift between us. I have no idea what I did or said that night when we spoke, but he's starting to distance himself. Sometimes, when we're eating, I'd ask him to pass the miruvor, and he'd manage to do it without our hands making contact. It's strange how used I've been to his touch and I feel odd now that I notice its absence.

At least it gives me a reason to be closer to the others. Pippin has gotten particularly close to me. And to that extent, because the two are inseparable, I've gotten close to Merry. I think it's because we're the youngest in the group. We share a special kind of resilience that's a mixture of both care-free and stubborn.

When I wake up with a stain one day, and they see me trying to clean everything up, Merry and Pippin cleverly distract the rest of the Company until I manage to slip away to the bath houses where, after taking a bath and putting my belt and cloths on, I join the ellith by the riverbank to wash everything. I've never felt more isolated than doing laundry with the ellith in Lothlórien. My Sindarin is less than basic, at least when it comes to speaking. It's a kind of language easier to understand and listen to than actually speak. I can recognize words that Legolas or Arwen has repeated to me often, but the ellith speak too fast for me, and they speak with a different accent than I am used to. They'd talk to me in clear, smooth voices and then there would be me just going either "huh" or "what".

On top of that, we have other concerns at camp. Frodo isn't speaking to most of us, and he's always tired and sleeping, but he refuses to eat. It takes way too long before Frodo begins to come out of isolation again, with a lot of prodding from Sam and myself.

"Mr. Frodo, here. Have some more." Sam gently offers Frodo the bowl of whatever food we have.

Frodo shakes his head.

"Frodo. You need to eat more." I urge.

"I'm not hungry." He mumbles.

"Please, you need to regain your strength."

He'd take the food we offer him looking like we're forcing him to drink acid. But one night, when the Fellowship are all together, he accepts the food we give him without any protest, for once.

"Thank God. I don't think Gandalf would have approved of you losing more weight than you needed to." I sigh and he nods.

"I thought so, as well." He says.

"He can eat as much as a hobbit, Gandalf." Merry says.

"And celebrate as enthusiastically as one." Pippin adds.
"He once set off wonderful fireworks, Miss Ellie, I wish you could have seen even just one. They were magical." Sam sighs.

"The old Wizard was a fighter, as well. There was quite a number of times when I almost got myself killed in Moria and he was the one guarding my back." Gimli pipes in.

"He was like our badass grandfather, wasn't he?" I say and the group laughs, but there's pain behind it, and longing. A silence falls over the group again. A silence that can only be filled by Gandalf.

"I wish he was here." Frodo mumbles.

"We all do." Aragorn gently places a hand on Frodo's shoulder. I look down at my bowl, feeling a hole in my heart. Gandalf would have loved it here in Lothlórien. Peace and quiet after all our running and fighting. Or maybe even if we're resting, he'd be formulating a plan to throw Sauron off our trail. Now that I think about it, he never took a proper rest. He was always moving, always on the lookout. Now, it's Aragorn taking the reins and I can see how tiring it is for him. Still, I'd be lying if I said he isn't a natural born leader.

He and I have been walking around the woods whenever we had time and Boromir would often walk with us. And we would talk, the three humans. We don't talk about the Quest during our walks. We use the time to relax, to clear our minds, to ease each other's burdens. I think all three of us can just sense it in each other. Aragorn is tired, Boromir is paranoid, and I'm worried all the damn time. We try to help each other out, and sometimes that involves talking about silly, little things to distract each other. It gives me an opportunity to get to know Boromir.

"I bet after all this, you'd be greeted as a hero in Gondor." I say, as we stop to rest under the shade of one of the mellorn trees after our walk.

"There is nothing heroic about getting lost for a hundred days or so. Faramir will never let me forget it if he ever finds out."

"Damn," I snort, "no wonder you smelled so bad when we first met."

"I cleaned up when I could!" Boromir says, defensively.

"Relax. I'm sure destroying Sauron would have all the girls lining up for you, regardless of how badly you may smell."

A small smile lights up Boromir's face.

"I only need one woman's attention."

"I knew you were in love with me." I snort and he gives me a playful push.

"He just assaulted me! Defend me, sir!" I say, in an airy voice as I swoon against Aragorn. He snorts and pushes me as well.

"You're not gentlemen. I hate you both." I say, giving them both a shove.

"You can defend yourself, I'm sure." Aragorn says.

"Well, if you're not in love with me, then who are you in love with? What is she like?" I say to Boromir.

"She refused the help of more than one hand maiden. When she arrived at court, she was constantly
bored and sought to explore the city, much to her father's dismay. She saw me ride in the city after a battle and demanded for my horse so she can escape her father's guards."

"You rescued her, that's so romantic!"

"Not so romantic when she yelled at me afterwards for getting her in more trouble. Arguing with her was impossible. I tried to apologize by sending food up to her room in the morning."

"And what did she say?" I ask, earnestly.

"I don't think she liked the idea of me sending food to her. She despises the idea of being thought of as weak and unable to care for herself." Boromir mutters the last part more to himself, "She's a remarkably independent woman, very strong-willed and opinionated. My brother is amused most of all when she and I talk. I had a hard time convincing her to take me seriously when I started courting her, if you would believe it. But that's a noblewoman for you."

"Why am I not surprised to find out you fall for the stubborn ones?" Aragorn remarks.

"I like women who keep me on my toes." Boromir grins.

"Well, maybe when you get back home to Gondor, you can surprise her with breakfast in bed again." I suggest and Boromir chuckles.

"I look forward to seeing her smile. I miss her. I miss my family the most. I trust Faramir to command our soldiers, but there is nothing quite like the feeling of fighting next to your little brother."

"We'll have to continue our journey soon. We'll get you back to your family." I say, encouragingly as I pat his back and get on my feet.

"Okay, boys. Time for me to freshen up. I'll see you at camp."

"Do you need us to take you?" Aragorn gets up, as well.

I wave my hand, frantically, "No thanks, dad. Seriously. I'm a big girl."

He's really taken on this protector/leader role of the Fellowship. But, this is something I can do on my own. I turn around and find my way to the bath houses.

I always pass by the fountain near the arch where the Lord and Lady of Lothlórien greeted us on the way to the bath houses. The fountain has a silver basin in the middle of a secluded area of the forest. I don't normally pay too much attention to it, but something catches my eye this time. Something I haven't seen in a month.

"Helen Grayson." The voice is deep, and as smooth as satin. Standing tall by the fountain is Lady Galadriel, clothed in white and radiating with beauty.

Of course I trip over a tree root. My reflexes have gotten slightly better, so I straighten up before I make a complete fool of myself. But of course, she notices. I see the ghost of a smile on her face.

"Hiril nîn." I bow immediately, and keep my eyes down.

"Come closer, Ellie. Let me give you the answers which you seek."

Holy. Shit. Months of looking for answers and explanations and now it's being offered to me. Nothing could have prepared me for this. My entire world stops. I still can't believe it. She must be joking. This has to be some cruel joke. After everything I've been through, after the confusion and the
distrust, suddenly what I want to know is being offered to me. It feels too good to be true. But Lady Galadriel nods and motions at the basin to reassure me that she is, indeed, very serious.

My mind goes blank, and I find that my feet have found their own will. I walk forward, slowly at first, and then I'm almost running.

"Here is the Mirror of Galadriel. Look into it, if you wish, and perhaps the questions in your mind will finally have their answers." Lady Galadriel says.

"What would I be looking at?" I say, breathlessly.

"The mirror shows many things. Things that were, things that are and things that are yet to be."

I look up at her, looking into her eyes with my own wide-eyed stare. A mirror to the future! A mirror to my world. I am not about to pass up this opportunity.

"I have heard the questions in your mind, and felt the confusion in your heart. But knowledge is a difficult burden to bear. If you look into the mirror, it will tell only the truth, and the truth can be harder to accept than a sweet lie or promise." Lady Galadriel says.

"I want this." I say, immediately, unthinkingly. "Please."

I'm begging her now, to ease my mind and give me answers. I need this. No matter what I see, I need this.

"Very well." She picks up a silver pitcher and begins to pour water from the fountain to the basin.

"Look now into the mirror." She says.

I take a deep breath, climb the steps up the pedestal and look down at the dark water reflecting the pale sky.

I blink at the still water in the basin, and the Lady stands in front of me, looking only at me. Slowly, the images form into something and my mouth hangs open at what I see.

Everything makes sense now.

Chapter End Notes

I hope this makes up for the rather short chapter I left you with last time. I was suffering from writer's block. Next chapter, Ellie's past will be unraveled and the answer to how she arrived in ME will finally be given.

Edit: I had to edit this chapter after doing some research. I first went with The Hobbit version of Legolas' mother's death, which is that she died in Gundabad. But then it boggled my mind that the Queen of Mirkwood would go that far out of the realm at what would have been dangerous times, so I changed her death place to Dol Guldur, which is closer to Mirkwood, and where it would make more sense for her to be found. Sorry for any confusion from previous readers!
How It Came To Be

Chapter Summary

Ellie finally gets the answers to her questions, and has to find a way to cope with what she has found out.

Chapter Notes

This chapter makes me nervous because it's venturing into Mary Sue territory. Lord, I hope I pulled it off and it isn't too distasteful.

I was hit by a car while crossing the street. The bright light I saw before I woke up in the fields at the borders of Bree was the head lights.

Ripples form on the water, and the image changes. I'm being taken to the hospital, my broken body lying still on the bed that the paramedics are wheeling to the emergency room, and the images change to me in a hospital bed, with Donovan bent over me. Gramps' shoulders shake with suppressed sobs, and Rory is sitting on the ground, leaning against the foot of my bed, his knees drawn up to his chest. He's rocking back and forth.

"I'll take care of them, El." Donovan whispers. I've only ever seen my brother cry once before, during our parents' funeral. But I've never seen him so broken. Not like this, with his eyes puffy, his handsome face red and splotchy and his hair a ruffled mess. There's a continuous noise, a heart monitor announcing a flat line. My heart has stopped beating. Donovan clutches my lifeless hand. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

A bright, white light covers the entire scene. The light is almost blinding, and I squint to cover my eyes until the light recedes, and lying in the middle of that white space is me, in the clothes I wore before I died. "Awake." The words aren't spoken. Hell, I don't think there were words at all. Just beautiful melodies and harmonizing. Music that forms words. It speaks in English, and then another language I've come to recognize as Westron. I recognize it now, because the whole time, I'd been unconsciously speaking the Common Tongue of Men. Whatever brought me to Middle-earth gave me the ability to understand the language of Men. English and Westron has blended into my mind. I never stopped to wonder about the words coming out of my mouth but I realize it now.

The Ellie in the mirror breathes deeply, as though I was simply sleeping and the light recedes. Trees and grass form around me and I am lying on the pile of horse shit again. Of all the places The Powers That Be could put me, It had to put me there.

The image dissolves and another ripple forms on the water, and it's my brother holding a bundle of pink blankets in the hospital, but he's changed. He no longer has the mischievous glint in his eyes, and his back is straight and proud. He beams down at the baby in his arms, "Ellie would have loved her." He says. A teenager looms over his shoulder. Rory is all grown up and completely changed but that easy smile is something I would recognize from a mile away.
"What's her name?" He asks, excitedly. Insatiable curiosity and bright, blue eyes. Yes, this is Rory. All grown up.

"Helen." Donovan answers.

"Here." Gramps has lost his hair. His back is hunched and he holds a cane but he is still full of life and excitement. He gently pats Donovan's shoulder and slips something into my brother's hand as Donovan gives his daughter to a nurse, who slips inside the nursery and places the baby in a crib near the glass window that separates the newborn babies from the world outside. He looks down at what Gramps gave him. In his hand, something glitters brightly, and I realize he's holding the very same jewel that I've seen around Aragorn's neck.

"This was supposed to be for Ellie. The eldest daughter in our family has always had it for as long as time itself. I had no right to keep it from her when your mother died," Gramps says. "It was wrong of me to hide our family's past from you and Ellie. Don't make the same mistake I did." Gramps gives a little smile to the baby sleeping in the crib.

"Hear that, El? You're descended from noble kings and queens. Don't ever let anyone treat you like anything less." Donovan presses a hand to the glass window and beams at his daughter, and the image fades.

I lean away from the mirror of Galadriel, and look up at the Lady. It's jarring, to see my family's future that doesn't include me. To see them move on after I've...

I died.

My entire body is numb, too stunned to acknowledge what I have just found out. I died and I ended up here. I died. I have to repeat this over and over again in my head.

"There's no going back, is there?" I whisper, so softly, I can barely hear the words coming out of my own mouth. Lady Galadriel shakes her head.

"It's good to know they'll live a good life." I say, monotonously.

"It is the life they will lead if the Ring is destroyed."

I want to cry. I want to curl up in a ball and sob. I will never see my family again. I would never see Rory grow up into the gangly teenager in the mirror. I would never see little Helen grow up. So why are the tears not flowing? Why am I not more surprised? Why am I not angry?

"You have already accepted your fate. In your heart, you know. This is a sacrifice you were willing to make. You accepted it when you chose to join the Fellowship." Lady Galadriel says, and I nod.

She's right, of course. In my heart, I've always known there was no going back. But it doesn't make goodbye easier. Nothing ever makes goodbye easier. I hang my head, and it isn't my past that flashes through my head. It's the future I won't get to see. Rory's smile, Gramps' gentle hands, Donovan's laugh. The pink bundle in Donovan's arms. Rory would graduate without me. Donovan will get married and I won't be there to meet her bride. And this is what makes me cry. These are shards driven deep into my heart.

I feel Lady Galadriel's hands on my shoulders, "You are strong. You always have been. It is time for you to find that strength in yourself. For them. For you." She says. She tilts my head up with one hand, and wipes the tears from my eyes. "Go now, and fulfill your quest, Helen Grayson."

I straighten my back, and nod. "Thank you, My Lady. You've calmed my mind when no one else
could. I would always be grateful for the answers you gave me." I bow, low, and back away.

At first, I'm walking, aimlessly, going through the images in my head. And then I'm running. I'm trying to escape the hurt and the pain but every step adds a thorn that stabs my heart. And when I'm unable to take the pain, I gasp for breath and lean against a tree. I fall to my knees. The soft earth and grass cushion my fall. And here, I sob. Here, I let out the anger and frustration about the fate that has been given me. Because this is the last time I will allow myself to be so vulnerable. This is the last time I will pity myself. My family needs me to be strong. My family's future and happiness depend on the fulfillment of this quest. I will not show weakness.

But now, with no one around to see me, and where my only comfort is myself, I weep for the people I have lost, and the memories I will never have again. For never fixing my relationship with my older brother. For never making more of my life in New York because I shouldered all the responsibility out of pride and stubbornness instead of seeking Donovan's help. For all the mistakes I made that I will never be able to fix, or apologize for.

And I tell myself that I've been given another chance. I've been given a chance to do something important, to do something for the benefit of the world. That if I was never going to see my family again, at least I can give them the happy future they deserve. And this is the thought I hang on to. This is what will keep me going. I close my eyes and let my tears recede. Let the breeze that passes by dry my tears and the rustling of the trees above to lull me and comfort me.

I didn't even realize I'd fallen asleep until I feel someone touch my shoulder. "Ellie? What in the world are you doing here?" I blink up through puffy eyes at Pippin. Oh, God my head hurts. I groan and cover my face with my cloak. Pippin calls over his shoulder, "Merry! Oy, Merry! I found Ellie!"

"Smack the back of her head for me, Pip! I've been worried sick!" Merry calls from somewhere farther.

"I can't! She's too tall!"

"She's lying down, you idiot!"

"The first hobbit to touch the back of my head will find they won't have functioning fingers for the next few weeks." I grumble.

"I don't think she likes being woken up from her nap." Pippin calls again. I hear Merry's footsteps just to my right, where Pippin is.

"We've been looking for you! You've been gone for hours! We were worried." Merry squats down next to me.

"I fell asleep." I shrug, still covering my puffy face from him.

"Why did you not go back to camp?" He asks.

I shrugged. "The grass was soft here."

"The blankets at camp are softer." Pippin points out.

"I got lost." I lie.

"On the way to the bath houses?" Pippin says. Of course they don't believe me. I'm a terrible liar.

"Let it go, Elsa." I sigh.
"No, no. I'm Pippin. This is Merry. Are you alright? Do you feel ill?" Pippin leans forward and places a hand on my forehead to feel if I have a fever.

"I'm fine! Sheesh!" I wave his hand away but now he's seen my face.

"You've been crying." He states.

"Well done, Captain Obvious." I say, defensively. Pippin leans back and gives me a look as if I slapped him in the face and I wince. I have no reason to lash out at him.

"Sorry. Just. Bad day." I sit up and lean back against the smooth wood of the mellorn tree. The two hobbits sit next to me.

"We'll be leaving soon. Perhaps the change in scenery will make you feel better." Merry says.

"I hope so. I'll miss the bath houses and the hot food, though." I say.

"Well, then, why are you sitting here instead of enjoying those?" Pippin says.

"I needed some time to myself. Collect my thoughts."

"Is that why you've been crying?" He asks. I can't help but smile. Pippin is so curious all the damn time, it's become part of his charm.

"I just miss my family, that's all."

"Well, we're on this quest so we can protect everyone. After all this, we can all take nice, long baths and eat an entire chicken all by ourselves and no one will stop us because we deserve it." Merry says. I smile, because he's right. We're all in this together for the same purpose. I'm not alone in this goal.

"Just the one chicken?" I raise my eyebrow, skeptically. I've seen the two of them eat. I doubt just one chicken will be enough for them.

"Maybe two." Merry nods

"Or three." Pippin says, wistfully.

"We've still got to save Middle-earth first." I say.

"Mordor can't be far from here, right?" Pippin says, hopefully.

"Only way to tell is by continuing our journey. Come on, let's go back to camp." I say, getting up. Okay, time to face the world with new eyes.

"There you are!" Aragorn is the first to greet me, and he looks both worried and angry. I stop in my tracks. I've been so caught up in the fact that I died that something else slipped past my mind. Something very important.

The jewel on his chest glimmers, the same jewel that was passed down from generation to generation in my family. The jewel Gramps gave little Helen.

I am a descendant of kings and queens. More specifically, I am a descendant of Aragorn. I see it now. The square jaw and the grey eyes that my grandfather had. And maybe my other ancestors have lost those similar features, but I see it in Gramps.
I see now what Boromir meant when he said we looked alike. Maybe the old blood of a king resurfaced in me.

Shit. I've been hanging out with my ancestor and I never even realized it until now. And... ew! I had a crush on him. Okay, now, that's gross. I want to kick myself for even thinking about it.

Wait, Aragorn's been talking. I completely zoned out.

"Huh?"


"Sleeping."

"In the afternoon?"

"I wanted a nap."

"You wanted a... Have you been crying?" Aragorn leans down, and that makes me back away.

"Later." I whisper, because I notice Boromir raising an eyebrow behind him. Aragorn nods in understanding.

"There are potatoes here, Ellie." Sam announces, cheerfully. "We saved a bowl for you."

"Thanks, Sam." I squeeze Aragorn's forearm and step around him to sit next to Frodo to eat.

That night, Legolas joins us at camp for dinner, with Gimli in his tow.

"Lassie, there you are. You never came back after you went for your walk." Gimli exclaims.

"I needed some peace and quiet. You snore too loudly." I tease and he snorts.

"Your elf princeling here was worried--" Gimli grumbles, but Legolas interrupts, "Gimli, mellonenîn! There are oats!"

"You're suddenly so interested in oatmeal." Gimli says, letting Legolas pull him away.

I try to catch Legolas' eye but he turns his back on me, which makes me blink at him several times. I must have done something that really offended him, although I don't know what I could have possibly done.

"Meril." Aragorn's voice is soft, but it still makes me jump. "What happened to you earlier?"

"Nothing, I'm fine!" I say, too quickly. Aragorn knows me well enough to know that I'm a terrible liar. He gives me a knowing look but waits, patiently. He also knows me well enough to know that I can never hide anything from him.

I sigh, heavily. "I found out that I'll never be going home." My voice breaks, and I clear my throat, fighting back tears. *No more weakness, no more weakness.* I repeat this mantra in my head. "Lady Galadriel helped me figure things out."

He takes my hands and makes me face him. "It's alright." He says, and I nod. "Yeah." I say, weakly, but it's not. Not yet. I'm still devastated that I won't be going home. The pain won't go away that easily but I don't want to break down. Not when the Fellowship is already broken enough as it is. I can do this. I can be strong.
"I hold on to the hope that when this war is won, Sauron will be defeated and my family will be safe." I say.

"You looked in the Mirror?" He asks.

"I saw my family's future. They were happy. That brings me comfort." I say, truthfully. It's bittersweet, but the Graysons have always endured, and I truly believe Donovan won't abandon Rory and Gramps. I judged him too harshly, and I wish I could tell him how sorry I am for pushing him away. But I don't believe he'll abandon what's left of our little family to fend for themselves. They'll have each other. They'll move on. They won't have to suffer Sauron's malice.

"Good. That's good. That means you are fighting not in vain. You stay for the love of your family."

"You are my family, too." I say, and I hope he knows that I mean this from the bottom of my heart. Aragorn has been a close friend and confidant. He took me under his wing, comforted me when I cried, gave me words of kindness and wisdom when he didn't have to. We may have only known each other for five months, but the bond we formed will not be easily broken. The Mirror showing me that we actually are of the same blood just strengthens my affection and loyalty to him.

"So are you, Meril. I will be here for you. Always." He squeezes my hand, and I pull him in for a hug.

"Thanks, dad." I tell him.

I find it hard to sleep that night. Whenever I do, I imagine myself never waking up again. It's so odd, knowing that I had died. That somehow, I was reincarnated in Middle-earth of all places. I have never been a religious person. Who could believe in God when so many injustices has happened in the world? Innocent men and women get killed for the color of their skin, people driven to desperation and loneliness simply for loving the wrong gender, crimes that are blamed on the victim. It's hard to believe the world was once so beautiful, that it was once full of compassion and people are still genuinely selfless and honorable.

But seeing Middle-earth, experiencing it, breathing it in, how could I not believe in some sort of higher power? Hell, being alive is a miracle in and of itself. I was sent here, and maybe I'm being reminded that the world is still beautiful, that it's still worth saving. Maybe that's why I'm here.

I just wish... "Look. God. I've been using your name in vain for a really long time but if you're really there, I beg you to let my family know that I'm okay. That I'm in a good place. That I'll always love them and miss them. Please. I never asked anything from you. Just this." I whisper, looking up at the sky through the leaves of the tree hanging above my head.

"Ellie?"

"God? Is that you?"

I sit up, looking around for the source of the voice, and I almost scream when I see Legolas sitting by a low branch a few trees away.

"Who are you talking to?" He asks, his eyebrows furrowed in confusion as I get up to stand by his tree.

"Nothing. Nobody. Ignore me." Hey, he's been doing a pretty good job at doing that, after all.

"The stars are beautiful tonight." Legolas says and when he gets up, his movements are light and nimble. The branch doesn't even twitch.
"Oh. Great." I say. An entire month of awkward small talk and inability to look me in the eye and now he's talking about the fucking stars. Give me a break.

I lean back against the tree and cross my arms as I look around the pavilion where the camp is located. Frodo and Sam had been gone for a while, probably out exploring the woods. Boromir and Aragorn are hunched together, and Gimli, Merry and Pippin are eating again. There's a rustling of leaves and Legolas drops to the ground in front of me like a cat, his feet barely making a noise.

"You are angry." He says.

"I'm not angry."

"Upset."

There's a short pause, before I answer.

"Yes."

"Goheno nîn."

I laugh, dryly, "I'm not upset because of you, pretty boy."

"You are angry. You don't call me that unless you are angry."

"I'm upset because of a lot of things and honestly, you aren't being any help." I try to keep my voice in a stage whisper, so as not to alert the others. Not that they'd care, because from where we stand, Legolas and I are hidden from view farther into the woods.

"I am sorry, Ellie. Truly. I was... It was wrong for me to avoid you. It only made things worse, I see." He takes a step closer to me, and I press my back closer to the tree.

"Why were you avoiding me, anyway? What did I do?" I thought I'd be more angry with him, instead I'm hurt. He just distanced himself and I don't even know if it's my fault. As if I needed to feel more isolated from the people I care about.

He takes a moment to answer, as though he's trying to find the right words.

"You did nothing wrong." He sighs, "I have become used to always having you near. I was afraid if I got any nearer that I would care for you too deeply. I thought if I put some distance between us, it would be easier for both of us to say goodbye after the Quest. I thought I was doing us both a favor."

"Goodbye? Already? Legolas, the Quest is far from over."

"To you, maybe. But I have been alive for a long time. Everything in the world fades. It is inevitable, and yet it is still hard to accept."

He looks down, "I had a close friend once. Her name was Tauriel. I cared very deeply for her but she loved a mortal... A dwarf, if you would believe it. Thorin Oakenshield's very own nephew. When he died, she was never the same again. All light had faded from her eyes and she walked as if in a trance. She went to the Grey Havens sixty years ago. The pain of loss is something an elf may never recover from."

I understand what he means. I've always seen elves as untouchable beings, powerful and immortal. But I see the vulnerability behind Legolas' eyes. I see the sorrow of years past that he has endured. It must be hard, to see the world and care for mortals who are doomed to die in the end. Maybe elves
believe that alienating themselves from us mortals would make the end easier to accept.

He sighs, and looks down at his feet. "The end will come too quickly. I was afraid that when the time comes, saying goodbye to you will hurt too much."

I don't want to give myself false hope and read too much into his words, but it still touches me that he's willing to admit I am one of the things that hurts to say goodbye to.

I reach my hand out for him, and he looks at it. He intertwines his fingers with mine, and I pull him closer.

"I learned something today." I say, softly.

"And what is that?" He asks. He's close again. I didn't know how much I missed being close to him until this moment.

"That when you care for people, you cherish every moment you can have with them because there will come a time when it will all end, and you will regret rejecting the opportunity to get closer to them."

He releases a breath of laughter. "I see that now."

"So," I say, smiling at him, "what were you doing up on that tree?"

"I told you, the stars were beautiful. Would you like to see them?" He takes advantage of our locked hands and gently pulls me towards him. I shake my head, only too familiar with the look of mischief on his face. I look up at the tree branch, warily.

"I will be there to catch you when you fall." He teases.

I laugh, and the sound that bursts out of me makes him laugh as well, and I give in. "Fine. We've got a lot of catching up to do, anyway." I say. I am not the most elegant person while climbing the tree, but Legolas' hold on me is firm. We spend the rest of the night talking about his time with the Galadhrim and with Gimli. I'm glad they're finally getting along. It's a ray of sunshine in the dark times the Fellowship has been going through. Gandalf would be pleased to know they're becoming close friends.

I try to keep the focus on Legolas' stories, but because he's always been aware of everything around him, he knows something's bothering me. It's impossible for me to hide my feelings from him. He just instinctively knows.

"You are distracted tonight. What troubles you?" He asks.

I swing my legs in the air, trying to stall for time.

"I won't be going back to New York." I say, softly.

"I do not believe this was a decision you made yourself. You love your family too much to just turn your back on them. What happened today?"

I shrug, and realize that my shoulders are shaking.

"Lady Galadriel and I spoke today. She answered the questions I've always had on my mind and more. I found out that I can't go back home. It's impossible. Home is too far for me to reach now. I'll be all alone after this Quest, with nowhere to go." I say, and he places an arm around my shoulders. I
lean into him, gratefully.

"Ennorath can be your home, Ellie. There are people here who care for you. Never think that you are alone." He says, and I rest my head on his shoulder.

"Do you remember the three stars?" He asks me and I nod, trying to find the three bright stars in the vast sky.

"Right there." I say, pointing to where I remember seeing them.

"Your grandfather and your brothers. The family you love. The family you fight for." He says, and I smile at the thought. Yes, love is mingled with grief, Lady Galadriel had said. And though it pains me that I will never see them again, my love for my family is something I can fight for.

Chapter End Notes

For those still wondering about how Ellie understood Westron, I was inspired by Percy Jackson, actually. How the characters could just innately understand Ancient Greek because of their demigod status, except here, Ellie has help from the actual God of Middle-earth.
The Fellowship leave Lothlorien behind and for many who leave, this will be the first and last that they see the beauty of it. Lady Galadriel gives her parting gifts, and the Fellowship continue their journey down the Anduin River.

That night, Lord Celeborn summons the Company to his chambers. The Lord and Lady of Lothlórien greet us, before speaking of our departure from Lothlórien. Lord Celeborn discusses the course we would have to take, and the paths laid before us.

"It is time." Lord Celeborn says, "Those who want to continue this Quest must harden their hearts to leave this land, and those who no longer wish to go forward can stay here, for a time. Here, those who wish to stay must wait until the time that all the roads are open again, or we summon them to the last need of Lórien. Then, they may return home or go to the long home of those who have fallen in battle."

We don't even need to speak to each other, we all come to a silent agreement. No one is staying. No one is abandoning the Fellowship.

Lady Galadriel answers for us, as she sees the determination on our faces, "They would all go forward."

"Gondor lies onward, not back." Boromir says, softly.

"Would all the Company go with you to Minas Tirith?" Lord Celeborn asks.

I look up at Aragorn, our leader, but he shakes his head, "Beyond Lothlórien, I did not know what Gandalf had planned. We still have not decided our course. I doubt even he had a clear purpose."

"When you leave these lands, you cannot ignore the Great River. You know it cannot be crossed from here to Gondor by travellers with baggage, save by boat." Lord Celeborn says, "Will you sail for the West shore, where Gondor will be found or will you sail for the darker shores of the East, for a direct path to your Quest?"

"If my advise is heeded, I would seek to go to Gondor and fulfill my duty to my people. But I am not the leader of the Company." Boromir says.

"I see you are still undecided. It is not my place to tell you what to do, but we shall help you. I shall furnish you with boats that are light and small, for there will be places where you will be forced to carry them. Boats may make your journey less tiresome, but in the end, you will have to leave them and choose whether to go East or West."

Damn. These people are generous. I can feel relief flooding into the Company. It's good to know we'd have a few days of a slightly better journey than one on foot. It would give us time to choose which way to go. I can feel Aragorn sigh in relief next to me. It's a great comfort to know we won't have to take the long way for a while.

"We will prepare the boats and have them ready by tomorrow." Lord Celeborn says.
"For now, you shall rest. Do not think too much on the road tonight. Perhaps the paths that each of you must tread is already laid before your feet. But tonight, you shall rest and sleep," Lady Galadriel says in a soothing voice.

After that, the Fellowship come together to discuss our plans, and for once, Legolas joins us in camp. We're split between going East or West. Some of us, including myself, vote to go to Gondor because they have armies. The only reason we escaped from Moria was because of dumb luck and Gandalf's sacrifice. We were vastly outnumbered then, how much more if we walk straight into Mordor? It's suicide! I'd go with Frodo to the ends of the Earth, but I'd feel better knowing we have back-up. I'd feel better knowing we aren't entirely alone in this fight.

"Forward and East is the way to go to finish this Quest." Legolas suggests.

"If and when Sauron strikes, it will be Gondor that will take the first and hardest blow." Boromir announces. "If we are to walk into Mordor, would it not be better to walk with an army?"

"And declare a war in Sauron's own lands?" Gimli says. "The Quest relies on secrecy. We cannot win this by strength and numbers. We need to be discreet."

"I think we're past secrecy now. The bad guys know we're up to something, they know where we're heading and they'll be expecting us. I'd feel better being followed by an army that's watching our backs than an army ready to tear our limbs off." I say.

"If we could summon help from Minas Tirith, maybe we actually have a chance to go into Mordor and get out, alive." Pippin says, always the optimist.

"What would delaying the Quest do for us? Turning away from the path to Mordor would only serve Sauron, as he grows more powerful. The Quest must be completed quickly. That was why Lord Elrond sent ten companions and not ten armies."

"That was before Saruman and his spies interfered. We could go into Mordor and walk to our doom and the doom of the Quest." Merry says.

"So we are to abandon the Quest for fear of failure?" Gimli snaps.

"We're not abandoning anything, we're simply looking to be better prepared when walking into Enemy lands." I say, evenly.

"I see your point. I, too, would want to go to Minas Tirith for help but no strength of an army can help us destroy the Ring." Gimli says.

"I just... I feel like we'd be walking into Mordor naked if it's just us. I'm scared, okay?" I sigh.

"Minas Tirith would be the right choice if we were to face the might of armies, that is true. If we were to go into battle, then West would be our destination. But what of the Ring's destruction?"

Legolas says.

I sigh. "My head hurts. I thought you were against Minas Tirith."

"Neither against nor for. I see the advantage of both paths, but I also see the danger." Legolas says.

"Whichever way we choose, we would be going into peril." Gimli grunts.

"Strider, what are we to do?" Sam asks.
Aragorn shrugs, "I had planned to go into Gondor to call up arms. But that was before we lost Gandalf in Moria. We could continue East if Frodo so desires it for I will not forsake him now but walking blindly into Enemy lands, I feel, would do us no good." He says.

"So we paddle our butts through the Great River and...what?" I say.

Nobody answers me. Nobody knows what to do. We keep going around in circles, but we just can't agree to one decision. The only thing we do agree on is that we'd follow Frodo's wishes, whether it is to go West to Gondor or East to Mordor, but Frodo is quiet the entire time. Both Merry and Pippin eventually get tired of ceaseless arguing and go to sleep. Sam tries--and fails--to keep attention, but he nods off to sleep every so often. I'm dead tired, as well. I've been hearing nothing but indecision in everyone's arguments, and even I admit that whatever our decision, something is going to go wrong.

"I would go into Minas Tirith, alone if need be. I will not abandon my duty to my people." Boromir says after a long silence. He stares hard at Frodo, as though trying to read his thoughts the way Lady Galadriel does.

"If your sole wish is to destroy the Ring, then the Men of Gondor will be of no help. But if you wish to destroy the armed might of Mordor, it would be folly to go forth with no forces. And folly to throw it away."

I sit up straighter. Throw what away, exactly? Frodo turns to Aragorn, but he is too deep in his thoughts to discern the meaning of Boromir's words. He turns to me next, and we exchange knowing looks. Boromir has always wanted to use the Ring against Sauron. I thought he'd gotten over the idea of using it after Lord Elrond and Gandalf spoke against it but I think back on all the little things, the little changes that would come to Boromir whenever the Ring is within arm's reach, or even when it is simply mentioned. I see the hunger in his eyes. I see it now. But Boromir shakes his head, as though coming back to his senses.

"I only meant... To throw away this chance. I see it as a choice between defending a strong place and walking blindly and with open arms into certain death." Boromir mutters, hastily.

"This is going nowhere. We need to sleep. Maybe after a good night's rest, we can make a decision with clear heads." I say, stretching my arms.

And so, we put it off until the next morning. And the next morning, I take a nice, long, pampering bath because this is likely going to be my last one for a while. Lord Celeborn and Lady Galadriel invite us to eat with them for a parting feast, and the haunting voices of Lady Galadriel and the Galadhrim bid us farewell.

It'll be a long time before I hear such wonderful melodies, I realize, sadly. Elves greet us in the Common Tongue, and present us with cloaks and hoods as Lord Celeborn stands before us. The cloaks are comfortable and well-made. I also realize they change color, depending on the light. Sometimes, they're grey, sometimes they're green or brown, reflecting the colors of nature that the Galadhrim love so much. The white cloak that Salabeth gave me is stowed in another pack, along with the tunic and leggings that I wore at the beginning of the Quest. Now, I wear the gifts of the Galadhrim. Brown and green garb, meant to be worn for long travel, and sturdy leather boots.

"Never before have we clad strangers in the garb of our people. May these cloaks help shield you from unfriendly eyes." Lord Celeborn announces as the Galadhrim elves clasp the cloaks with brooches shaped like silver-veined leaves.

Lady Galadriel steps forward, and holds out a bow for Legolas, stouter and longer than his first bow.
"My gift for you, Legolas, is a bow of the Galadhrim. Worthy of the skill of our woodland kin."
Legolas takes the bow slowly, with wonder in his eyes. It's like watching a child receive an early Christmas present. He pulls back the string to test it out as Lady Galadriel gives Boromir a belt of gold.

"There is yet a greater challenge that lies before you, Boromir of Gondor. And what you do when faced by it may determine if this Quest will succeed or fail." Lady Galadriel says to him, and she moves to me next.

This time, I meet her eyes, and I see in them both sorrow and hope. She hands me a sturdy, square pack, small enough to be hung from my belt. When I look inside, I see a set of fifteen daggers, all of which are the perfect size and weight for throwing. The pack itself is specialized to separate each dagger by keeping them in individual pockets and sheaths so one can easily be drawn safely. I look up at Lady Galadriel gratefully, and she smiles at the surprised look on my face. "Trust in yourself and your strength, and these daggers will always find their mark."

"Thank you, hiril nîn." I say, taking one of the daggers out to test the balance in my hand. The handle is carved with vines and leaves.

She lifts my chin up so I can look her in the eyes again, "Time will heal the grief in your heart, if you allow it. You are capable of honorable deeds, as those of your bloodline have always been capable of doing. Look to those around you, who love and care for you." She says and I nod in understanding. I thank her again as I strap the pack to the belt around my waist.

Lady Galadriel gives Merry and Pippin their gifts, a dagger for each of them, "These are the daggers of the Noldorin. They have already seen service in battle." Pippin looks down at the dagger in his hand with wide eyes, but Lady Galadriel gives him a comforting smile. "Do not fear, young Peregrin Took. You will find your courage."

She hands Sam a silver rope, "And for you, Samwise Gamgee, Elven rope made of hithlain."

Sam takes the rope, shyly, "Thank you, my lady." He says, "Have you run out of those nice, shiny daggers?"

Lady Galadriel smiles at him, amused, and hands him a box. "In this box is earth from my orchard. It will not defend you from any peril, but should you ever find home again, then you may sprinkle this upon your garden and you will find that few gardens will bloom as yours will. Then, may you remember Lórien and its trees in the Winter, for our Spring and Summer had gone by, and they will never again be seen on Earth save in memory."

She moves to Gimli, and for once, I see Gimli stammering, unable to look the Lady in the eye.

"And what gift would a dwarf ask of the elves?" Lady Galadriel asks, softly.

Gimli waves his hand, "Nothing." He says, "Except to look upon the lady of the Galadhrim one last time, for she is more fair than all the jewels beneath the earth."

Legolas and I share amused looks as Lady Galadriel laughs, and Gimli starts to turn away. Even beneath his bushy beard, I see his cheeks redden. "Actually, there was one thing." He starts, and stops himself, shaking his head "No, no, I couldn’t. It’s quite impossible. Stupid to ask…"

And he whispers something that none of the rest of us could hear. Legolas smiles at me as we both watch Gimli transform into a distrusting dwarf to one who is taken so by Lady Galadriel. Maybe all those days they spent together made Gimli realize that Elven magic is in the beauty of their homes.
and their people, and not in sorcery as he first believed. Legolas can charm anyone into seeing the beauty of the elves.

She moves on to Aragorn, and she touches the Evenstar around his neck, "I have nothing greater to give than the gift you already bear." She says.

They speak, softly to each other in Elvish, and she sets upon Aragon's cloak a clasp made of a green stone, set in a silver brooch shaped into an eagle with its wings outstretched.

"It was left in my care to be given to you, should you pass this land. I gave this Stone to Celebrían, my daughter, and she passed this to hers."

It may have been a trick of the light, but I see Aragorn now, standing in front of the most beautiful elf I have ever seen, looking like a great king. I see years fade from his face as pride shines from him.

"Thank you, Lady of Lórien, of whom were sprung Celebrían and Arwen Evenstar. What greater praise could I say?" Aragorn says, gratefully.

"Arwen has yet a choice before her. You have your own choice to make, Aragorn. To rise above the height of all your fathers since the days of Elendil, or to fall into darkness with all that is left of your kin." She says, "It is time for you to take the name that was foretold to you, Elessar, the elfstone of the House of Elendil."

Aragorn bows to her, and I feel a special kind of connection with Aragorn at this moment. I see my ancestor claiming a title he was always destined for. I see a tall and honorable Man, a Man I am proud to call both my friend and family. And if Arwen really is my maternal ancestor, then before me I see the two most important people in my family line. It's surreal, and I am honored to see history unfolding before my eyes.

"Namarië." Lady Galadriel says to him, and whispers her last words of farewell to him in Elvish before moving on to Frodo.

"Farewell, Frodo Baggins. I give you the light of Eärendil, our most beloved star, set amid the water of my fountain." She hands him a clear phial, and when she moves, the phial glitters and her hand glows with white light. Frodo takes the phial, and the Lady leans down and kisses his forehead.

"May it be a light for you in dark places, when all other lights go out."

And that was that. Before we say our final farewell, Lord Celeborn takes Aragorn away to talk. They speak in hurried tones, and when Aragorn returns to the Company, he has a look of worried contemplation set upon his brow. After thanking the Lord and Lady of Lothlórien, we are guided to the river by none other than Haldir, himself. Him and a few elves help us pack our things and prepare the boats.

The boats themselves are light and small, with the paddles of the oars shaped into leaves. I've never been on such a small boat. Every small movement feels like it could topple the entire thing over. I worry about the river, and instantly imagine the worst-case scenario of getting swept away by the currents of the river. I shudder at the thought. Thank God I won't be doing any paddling. Legolas hands me one of the packs that contains some sort of thin bread. I look at it suspiciously.

"Toast?" I ask him as I place the pack in the boat where Merry and Pippin are sitting in. Gimli takes a piece of the bread, and he squints at it. "Cram." He says.

"Lembas! Elvish waybread. More pleasant than cram, and more strengthening than any bread made by Men." Legolas explains, excitedly, as he takes the bread from Gimli's hand. He bites into the
bread, "One small bite can fill the stomach of a grown man." He says, and gives me the lembas to try, which I split for me and Gimli.

When Legolas leaves to collect more of the pack, I turn to the two hobbits beside me.

"Have you tried this?" I ask them. Merry and Pippin both nod.

"How many did you eat?" I ask them, suspiciously.

"More than one bite, that's for sure." Merry says.

"Four." Pippin answers, truthfully with an innocent smile.

"Unbelievable." I chuckle as I take my half of the bread and take a small bite. It tastes like chocolate chip cookies, only better. To me, at least. It's sweet but not dry and crumbly. The bread itself melts in the mouth and my eyes widen as I chew.

"Why, this is better than even the honeycakes of the Beornings!" Gimli exclaims, taking a bite of the lembas. Legolas wasn't lying when he said a small bite could fill the stomach. I feel like I just ate an entire tray of cookies.

I give the rest of the lembas to Merry, who happily bites into the bread. Aragorn inspects the boats and all the packs inside. He looks conflicted, most likely because he still doesn't know whether we should head East or West.

"You okay?" I ask him as I walk towards him. His eyebrows are furrowed and his arms are crossed. He turns to me with a shrug. "Mordor Orcs hold the eastern shore of the Anduin, and strange creatures bearing the white hand of Saruman have been seen on the borders of Lórien. Orcs do not walk in the sun, but Lord Celeborn tells me these do not fear the sun at all." He says.

"Then we stay on the river until we have absolutely no choice but to go on foot. We'd have a chance of outrunning them." I suggest.

"Some of the Galadhrim scouts also heard them speak of their plans. They're looking for a halfling." He says, under his breath so the others wouldn't hear. My face crumples in worry as I look at Frodo, already sitting in one boat with Sam. "And a young woman."

My head snaps up in his direction, "What?" I gasp.

What did I do this time?

"He knows you are travelling with us." He glances down at me so his eyes meet mine. "We will not let them take you, or any of the hobbits, Meril."

"Why me? I'm not anyone important! I'm not even supposed to exist here." I whisper, frantically.

He blinks at me, "What do you mean, you are not supposed to exist here?"

Shit. I've never stopped to tell Aragorn where I'm actually from, have I? Everything happened so fast, and so many events have gone by that I didn't have a chance to sit him down and tell him exactly where I'm from, and finding out I'm actually his great grand-times-a-thousand-daughter would only complicate it further. Now doesn't look like a good time to explain to him, either.

"Nothing. I just meant... I wasn't even born into Ennorath. He shouldn't know about me." I lie.

He considers this for a moment, before turning away. "Regardless, he is looking for both the Ring
and you. We should be on our guard, even in the river."

"Aren't we always?" I say, patting his forearm, reassuringly before going over to the boats, where we take our places. Aragorn sits in one boat with Frodo and Sam. Boromir is with Merry and Pippin, and in the last boat is Legolas, Gimli and myself, with our packs evenly distributed between all three boats.

With a cry of farewell, the elves of Lórien pushes our boats out into the open stream. Nobody says a single word, but we raise our arms in farewell to the land of Lórien. As we slowly move away from the bank, Lady Galadriel's voice pierces the silence with her haunting song. And while I don't understand the words, the song itself brings a heavy feeling. I'm not comforted at all. It feels like someone saying "Goodbye. We will not meet again."

Lady Galadriel raises her hand in a final goodbye, as the currents of the Silverlode join with the swifter Great River, until she is a small speck of white in the distance, like a precious jewel set upon a leaf. Lothlórien slowly shrinks into the distance, and I hear Gimli beside me sniff.

As I have always done to comfort him, I offer him my hand to hold, and he takes it gently into his own. It's a small gesture, but the comforting hand of one person calms him, if only a little bit. The River sweeps around a bend, and the banks rise higher on either side of us. The land of Lórien is lost from view, and we look ahead to our journey.
Row, Row, Row Your Boat

Chapter Summary

The Fellowship take their boats down the Anduin River, Boromir still wants to go to Gondor and Ellie confides in her friend about her history.

The River flowed ahead, and those handling the boats have little trouble steering them in the right direction. I try to keep as still as possible, so as not to topple the boat or accidentally influence it to move in another direction. Gimli sighs longingly beside me.

"I have taken my worst wound at this parting, having looked my last upon that which is fairest." He says, "Henceforth, I will call nothing fair unless it be her gift to me."

"What was her gift, exactly? I didn't notice she gave you anything." I ask.

"I asked her for one hair from her golden head. She gave me three."

Legolas smiles at him, and in the light of the sun in the open sky, his smile radiates. "The memory of Lothlórien shall remain clear and unstained in your heart, and shall not fade or grow stale." He says.

"Thank you for your words, but they are are such cold comfort. Memory is not what the heart desires." Gimli sighs, "I have heard that for elves, memory is more like to the waking world than dreams, but it is not so for this dwarf."

"Come on, Gimli, you may yet see Lothlórien." I say.

"Aye, but that day will not come too soon. Come. Let us talk no more of it. Let us look ahead on our journey, my friends." He says.

Traveling by boat can leave a person feeling cramped after a while, but the surroundings distract me enough for the discomfort to be ignored. On either banks of the river are woods, but it's impossible to get a glimpse of the land behind them. The Great River takes us southward. The breeze dies away, the River makes no sound. Everything is silent. We continue our journey even in the grey, cloudy night. The River is surrounded by mist. We journey under the shadow of the great woods in the bank.

We stop for camp deep into the night, and just in time because when I distance myself from the Company to relieve myself, my monthly friend decides to arrive a few days early. After a quick trip back to camp to get my belt and cloths, I retreat back into the woods, and when I come back, Aragorn is sitting by a fire, and Frodo is sleeping. I wrap him up in one of the grey blankets that we have before I prepare our dinner.

The good news about travelling by river is that it's easy to clean up, do laundry, and keep up our water supply as well as hunt fish for our meal. The bad news is there's no way to completely bathe in the river because the water rushes too quickly and too deep, but we're thankful for the ready source. As the night deepens, everything is still and nothing attacks us once. That's what everyone is worried about most. It's too quiet, too peaceful, like the Enemy wants us to let our guard down.

Boromir, most of all, looks anxious. Especially when he's on watch duty. I hand out bowls of food to
everyone and I notice him and Aragorn in the distance, away from camp where we hide behind shrubs and trees near the west bank. I see a log floating down the river, and I would have passed it off as driftwood had I not seen movement. I approach Boromir and Aragorn, and Boromir puts a finger to his lips at me. I freeze in place, and a pair of luminous eyes blink at me from the log.

My own eyes widen, and I see the outline of a crouched creature on the opposite side of the river, crawling on its hands and knees.

"What the fuck was that?" I hiss. Aragorn pulls me behind the cover of leaves.

"Gollum. He has tracked us since Moria." He whispers to me.

"Wait." I say, recalling a conversation I had with Legolas while we were in the mines as well as a passing remark Haldir made when we were at the borders of Lothlórien, "Legolas said he could sense someone following us back in Moria. And there was the creature that Haldir saw on our first night in the borders of Lothlórien."

"He can't have been following us for that long without being noticed." Boromir murmurs.

"I had hoped we would lose him on the river." Aragorn shakes his head, "But he’s too clever a waterman."

"What are we to do with him?" Boromir asks.

"Nothing, for now. Gollum cannot attack ten people at once when nearly half of them know how to handle a fight. He is no immediate threat." Aragorn replies, "However, I would like for him to lose our trail. It is tiresome enough that we are being pursued by Saruman's orcs and Gollum is not trustworthy. He would betray us to our enemies without hesitation if he had anything to gain for it."

"I could use practice for my dagger throwing. Maybe I could scare him away with a warning throw." I suggest, hand already inching towards the pack strapped to my waist. Aragorn grips my arm to stop me.

"It would be a waste of a fine blade, and would only serve in giving him a weapon. No. For now, we do nothing." He says, "We have more pressing concerns to worry about."

"East or West?" I prompt.

"Minas Tirith is the safer road. You know that. From there we can regroup. Strike out for Mordor from a place of strength. " Boromir pipes in. I can't help but silently agree with him.

"There is no strength in Gondor that can avail us." Aragorn says, which I openly disagree with.

"They have armies." I point out.

"You were quick enough to trust the elves. Have you so little faith in your own people?" Boromir snaps, and I shrink back while Aragorn stiffens beside me. "Yes, there is weakness. There is frailty. But there is courage also, and honor to be found in Men. But you will not see that."

Aragorn starts to turn away, placing a hand on my back to steer me to camp but Boromir yanks him back. I whip around to them as Boromir hisses, "You are afraid! All your life, you have hidden in the shadows. Scared of who you are, of what you are."

Aragorn leans toward him and growls, "I will not lead the Ring within a hundred leagues of your city!"
And with that, he strides back to camp, and my presence is forgotten. Boromir turns in the opposite direction. He stoops down to pick up a stone and throws it carelessly into the water with a loud grunt.

"Boromir." I whisper as he bends down to pick up another stone. I lean down to touch his shoulder, but he shrugs me away, impatiently. I draw back, hurt, and his expression softens fractionally.

"He would have me abandon my city because of pride. He would see Gondor razed to the ground instead of using it to save my people." He sounds more desperate than angry. There he goes again. I don't have to guess what he means by 'it'. The Ring is slowly taking him in, and it's chilling to watch stouthearted Boromir trusting the Ring's power too much. It's taking a toll on him, and he's not even the Ring-bearer. This Ring is a menace, and has continued to destroy lives and strain friendships. I'd be glad to be rid of it.

"I understand how hard it is to want to go home so you can save it and the people you love. But the Ring can't be used for the purpose you intend." I say, fervently. "I'd go to Gondor to gather armies, but if Aragorn and Frodo would rather continue this Quest as intended and head East, I won't question them. We have to trust that Frodo will be able to destroy the Ring, and therefore save everyone."

"What do you know? Your city is not here! Your city does not stand on the doorstep of the Enemy. You do not know the sacrifice my people make to keep other lands safe."

"I know what it's like to feel helpless! I know you want to follow what your heart desires most and go home but we have a responsibility to destroy this stupid Ring."

"The only stupid one is you, for believing them that the Ring can't be used against the Enemy!"

"Listen to yourself!" I almost shout, and I glance behind me at the rest of the Fellowship. Legolas is the only one who seems to hear our angry whispers, who hears the frustration in Boromir's voice and the plea in mine. Aragorn is also observing us, and he makes a move as if to intervene but I shake my head, very slightly. If Aragorn joins in now, it will only drive Boromir further into hostility. I've always been the one in the Fellowship to speak from the heart, and that's what Boromir needs now. Someone who can calm him down and understand him, not argue with him.

He covers his face with his hand and takes deep, steadying breaths. "Look at me, please." I step closer to him and his expression softens, his grey eyes mournfully meeting mine. He looks so tired.

"I am sorry, Ellie."

"Ssh. Just listen." I take both of his hands, "We all want to protect our homes and the people we love. Isn't that why we all accepted this Quest? We will protect Gondor. But we don't have to use the Ring. I beg you to trust Frodo. Trust that our Fellowship will do the right thing."

He is silent for a few seconds, his breath slowing down as he calms himself.

"Forgive me for insulting you. You are wise for someone so young, Ellie."

"Again, you'll have to try harder than that if you want to insult me." I snort. He expels a breath of laughter.

"And I bet you're hungry from all that rowing. Come on. I made fish soup." I say, and we join the Fellowship by the fire to eat. He sits as far away from Aragorn as possible, but he gives me a nod as if to say, 'I'll be okay'.
After dinner, while everyone prepares to retire for the night and Boromir takes up his post, I sit next to Aragorn in silence. He's been quiet, more so than he usually is. I take this as an opportunity.

He has laid his past before me bare, now it's my turn. After everything we've been through together, I owe him the truth. And after what I saw in the Mirror, he deserves to know. Not just for honesty's sake, but to restore his faith in Gondor, in the race of Men, and in himself. "I never told you," I start, "where I'm actually from. Too many things happened, and my past didn't seem as important as everything else."

He looks at me, patiently, "You do not have to speak of it if it makes you uncomfortable."

"No," I say, firmly, "We've been travelling together for nearly half a year, we've gone through an attack by the Nazgûl, we've lost a friend, we're journeying to sure death towards Mordor. The least I can do is tell you who I really am. All I ask is that you listen with an open mind."

He looks at me, contemplating my words, until finally, he whispers, "Alright..."

And so I tell him, and the words flow out of me. It feels good to release all the little secrets of my heart, to let go of my past. I tell him about what New York is really like, what Lord Elrond and Gandalf told me in my very first meeting with them. I tell him what I saw in the Mirror of Galadriel. Of course, at first, Aragorn thinks I'm delirious. He thinks I'm too tired to think clearly, but I continue to talk, and his face slowly transforms from that of mild amusement to open-mouthed wonder, until at last I come to our connection.

When I finish, he looks at me, stunned into silence.

"So a selfon is a device that allows me to communicate instantly with someone even from a hundred miles away?" Is what he says to break the silence.

I blink at him, bewildered. "Yes." I wasn't expecting this little tidbit to stick in Aragorn's mind, but it's a pleasant surprise that he would remember that from our first of many conversations.

"And you are of my blood?" He whispers. I nod, a small smile creeping on to my lips. He scoots towards me, and touches my chin.

"We do have the same chins." He says, and a giggle bursts out of me.

"You are of my blood." He says, again, as though expecting me to say I'm joking. He touches my cheek this time.

"You have Arwen's eyes." He says, breathlessly.

"My mother had the same eyes. So do my brothers. My grandfather has grey eyes, though."

"And they are also of my blood."

I smile, "We're of your blood. A king's blood. You are destined to take up the throne of Gondor, Aragorn. Your line will go on for a long, long time, if the Quest is fulfilled. I'm proof of that."

He looks over at where Boromir is sitting, a short distance away, his mouth slightly open.

"You're his king. Gondor is your city, and the people of Gondor are your people."

"Ai, Ellie, not you as well."

"I'm not saying we should take the Ring to Gondor. I'm saying Gondor is your city. Have a bit of
faith in them. I think they'll serve their king loyally."

"It is not them I doubt, but myself."

"Well, I happen to believe you're a good leader. And I know you'll make a great king. You may doubt yourself, and I may be ignorant about many things in Middle-earth, but I'm sure of that." I say. He sighs, and looks down at his lap.

There is silence again, with only the crackle of the fire to accompany the sound of night.

I'm shaken out of calm stillness when Aragorn's hand suddenly touches my shoulder. "This is why Saruman is looking you. He might think you know what shall happen, and he seeks to change the future." Aragorn says, eyes wide.

The thought had crossed my mind but I dismissed it because I didn't think that was a possibility. My true past has never been revealed to anyone else but two people--three, just now--all of whom I trust. Besides, it's impossible for me to predict the future. If I could, I would have saved Gandalf. I shake my head. "I told you, I didn't even know Middle-earth was a real place until I came here. I couldn't possibly know what would happen! Even the Quest is an uncertainty. Sauron's fall still depends on everyone's decisions. On Frodo's decision, most of all."

"But you are here."

"I'm here." I nod, "But every decision we make changes the course of the future."

He grips my hand, tightly. "Your life is tied to the destruction of the Ring."

"Which only gives us more incentive to destroy the damn thing." I say.

"You are here. That is enough to comfort me. It means we are making the right decisions."

I smile. It's a comforting thought, indeed. I never really thought about my life's connection to the Ring and its destruction. I was too focused on getting home to worry about it. But the fact that I'm still in Middle-earth, breathing, must mean we are on the right track towards the fulfillment of this Quest.

Aragorn pulls back, smiling at me. It's such a gentle smile, and it lights up his whole face. I've never seen that look on his face save when he looks at Arwen, but he looks at me now with radiant pride. "Go to sleep, Ellie. It is late, and we shall journey early tomorrow." He says.

"Okay. I will." I say, and get up to move to my bed roll.

"Meril," Aragorn says, and I turn back around to him, "Thank you for telling me. I am glad you trusted me with your story. I did not know I needed such reassurance until you did."

"And I'm glad you didn't call me crazy." I smile, before I join the others to lay my head, while he stares into the river, looking deep in thought.
Chapter Summary

The Fellowship is reaching the end of their journey through the Anduin. A fell beast attacks them in the night.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The night is eerily quiet. We see no sign of enemies, which only makes me worry some more. I've become so used to running away from something that any sense of security has all but vanished. We're still being pursued, Aragorn is clear on that, which is why we travelled until early morning and plan to start our journey as soon as the sun sets and the air becomes chilly.

I rise earlier than everyone else, and upon seeing me wake, Aragorn, who replaced Boromir overnight during watch duty, catches some fish in the river for breakfast. I go to the riverbank on the opposite side of camp so I can clean the cloths I used yesterday and hang it over a hidden tree branch to dry, and when Aragorn returns with a bunch of fish, I busy myself with preparing breakfast because Aragorn makes awful food. I used to cook for Gramps and Rory, so taking care of nine boys comes almost naturally for me. I imagine the Fellowship would be forced to eat rubber band-flavored meat or soggy vegetables if I wasn't around. I like taking care of them. Food, I've come to realize, is a way for them to lift their spirits. The hobbits most of all look forward to it. It's amazing how well good cooking can affect a journey. When everyone is tired, good cooking would make them feel better. And I'm a good cook, if I do say so myself. Dad taught me well.

By the time breakfast is done, the boys have already woken up. The morning air is chilly, and we eat as quickly as possible. I'm suspicious of the entire day's rest until Aragorn announces we'd be traveling by night again.

We travel in miserable cold, following the same routine of early morning camping stops and journeys in the night. For three days we all barely make any sound, as everyone is preoccupied with their own thoughts. The lands on either side of the river are slowly transforming. The trees begin to clear away, until all that's left is cold and vast lands. To the East, the land looks unwelcoming, dry and empty. To the West is flat lands with lands of grass. We let the stream of the Great River take us at its own pace, delaying as much as we can afford to. No one wants to admit, but we are all afraid of certain doom ahead, however bravely we face it.

Boromir, most of all, looks restless and it's starting to affect me, as well. I can't help but be paranoid. I keep looking over my shoulder and I swear to God, sometimes when I sleep, I see a pair of luminous eyes glaring at me. The entire surroundings make me nauseous, not because of the rocking motion of the boat, but rather because of the openness of everything. I feel like the whole Company is exposed. Vast, open land on either side and floating along a river, is not exactly out of sight.

For three more days, we continue our journey southward, and by then the sky has cleared, the grey clouds have scattered to reveal the moon. By then, we are all sick of eating fish, and Gimli tells me he feels uncomfortable, "I feel watched, lassie, and I don't like it. I'd rather whatever is following us to reveal itself."
"Watched?" I sit up straighter. Legolas and I frown.

"I thought Gollum would give up the chase by now. What the hell does he need?" I say.

"I have told Aragorn of Gollum. He tries to throw the creature off our tails, or capture it so that we may use it but Gollum now knows how to slither away and hide well." Legolas says, bitterly.

"The little creep needs to get a life." I try to use humor but I check my surroundings, paranoid.

I try to stretch my legs, but we're cramped in the boat and the only way I can stretch is if I use Gimli as a foot stool. Why do nights stretch on for so long?

"Are we there yet?" I whine, dramatically, figuring humor is the only thing that would keep me sane around here and Gimli chuckles at my tone of voice.

Aragorn heard, though. "We will travel one more night. I have not traveled these lands by water before, but we are still a few miles from the rapids of Sarn Gebir. Still, there are dangers we must face before reaching it. We must keep our eyes sharp." He says. Jeez, way to blow the mood. I need to tell him a good knock-knock joke.

Sam is appointed as watch man, as he's at the leading boat with Aragorn and Frodo. We float on without any event. The night is quiet, the stars are bright and we're barely paddling as the River carries us ahead.

So, of course, Murphy's Law takes effect.

Sam cries out, but it's too late. We're swept by a current, towards the East and I squeak as our boat bumps into Boromir's and rocks violently. Legolas and Gimli grunt in an effort to control the boat, and I hang on to both sides, looking up to see the River's white foam crashing against jagged rocks.

"Aragorn!" Boromir shouts as his own boat bumps into the leading boat. I'm reminded of bump cars. This would be fun if not for the jagged rocks of death ahead of us.

"We cannot dare the Rapids by night! It's too dangerous!" Boromir cries.

"Back! Turn back if you can!" Aragorn commands. "Anduin flows faster than I thought. Sarn Gebir must be near already!"

There's the silver lining, at least.

"Paddle! Paddle or we shall be driven into the shoals!" Boromir shouts, but already, the Eastern shore draws nearer.

"Dammit. Dammit." I mutter as I try to find my balance and just as I finally manage to sit up, I see figures moving on the Eastern banks. "Guys!" I scream as I lower myself into the boat again, just as arrows fly over our head and shrieks and gurgles can be heard from the shadows.

"Yrch!" Legolas announces.

"That little rat!" I shriek, because I'm sure this is Gollum's doing. He really needs to get a life. I take a paddle as well, and everyone is soon straining to go back to the Western shore. Thank God for all the arm-strengthening exercises Glorfindel made me do because the river did not want us to go back to the Western bank. By the time we do manage to get to the West side of the river, I'm amazed that the orcs haven't hit any of us. The orcs shriek in frustration as we hide behind bushes. Legolas takes his bow and climbs higher into the bank.
Something else catches my attention, flying in the sky, a dark shape slowly bearing down on us and I am immediately filled with dread. My mind draws back to the memory of primitive fear and confusion that I felt back in the Prancing Pony, and if I thought the utter silence was frightening, then it was nothing compared to the gleeful cries of the orcs on the other side of the River.

Frodo gasps, crying out in pain as he clutches his shoulder. I immediately move to his side. Is he not wearing his mithril shirt? Did an arrow get him? On closer inspection, I realize he's clutching the exact place where the Nazgûl had stabbed him. I try to shush him, but my efforts to comfort him are drowned by the shrill shriek of the creature flying above us.

Legolas nocks an arrow to his bow and aims high. I see fierce concentration on his profile, his eyes steady on the target. He lets the arrow go, the bow sings and the winged creature flying above us shrieks and spirals down to the East. On the Eastern banks, the orcs cry out in frustration and anger, cursing. Beside me, Frodo relaxes as whatever pain he was feeling subsides. "What happened?" I whisper.

"The pain. The wound. It felt as if I had been stabbed again." He winces.

"Did it get infected?"

He shakes his head. "It faded when the creature above us vanished to the East."

"You feel the stab of the Morgul blade again." Aragorn says.

"Has the wound not healed yet?" Pippin asks.

"I suspect it never will." Frodo says.

After some time, when everything is quiet again, Aragorn leads us back to the boats so we can find a place to rest, and we stop by a shallow bay. We don't even get out of the boats. We just flatten ourselves down. Cramped and cold once again.

"That was a fine shot in the dark, Legolas." Gimli says minutes later as we struggle to all fit in one boat, and Gimli brings out some lembas for us to eat.

"But who can say what it hit?" Legolas says.

"Who cares? It's gone now. And good riddance." I say as I bite into the lembas, staring up at the stars.

"I, for one, am glad it came no nearer. It reminded me too much of Moria, of the Shadow of the Balrog. I never want to remember Moria again." Gimli mutters.

"It did not seem like a Balrog. It felt colder." Frodo says, from his boat.

"What did you think it was?" Boromir says, leaning over his boat to get a glimpse of Frodo, but Frodo doesn't answer. Instead, he says, "Whatever it was, it is gone and its fall has discouraged the enemies."

"Nonetheless, we must remain on our guard. Keep your weapons out." Aragorn says.

"Hey," Sam piped in, looking up at the sky. "The full moon."

I look up at it. I guess I haven't seen the moon in a long while. The skies in Lothlórien were either filled with just stars or the sun.
"It is a beautiful moon." I start to agree.

"It is, but... When we arrived in the Golden Woods, I was sure it was a full moon and I know we stayed for at least three days."

"What are you talking about?" I ask, eyebrows furrowed.

"It can't have been a month already." Sam says, wonderingly.

"Could you seriously not tell?" I prop myself up on my elbows to see him. I've been able to tell that a month had passed simply because I got my period during and just after leaving Lórien. I just assumed everyone knew that a month had passed as well.

"I can certainly recall three nights in the Woods, maybe even several days, but I could swear we did not stay there for an entire moon! Why, anyone would think that time did not matter there!" Sam says.

"Maybe it was so for that land. Maybe we had stayed in a time that has long passed, and not until we returned to Anduin that we were taken back to the same time that flows through mortal lands." Frodo says.

I feel Legolas sit up as well, "No. Time does not stop flowing, not even in Calas Galadhon, but change is not the same in all places." He explains, "For elves, time moves both swift and slow. We do not change, but we watch the world transform and become something else before our very eyes. It is our curse, to remain the same while all else changes: slow, for we need not count the years, not for ourselves. The passing seasons are but ripples repeated in a long stream. And yet, beneath the Sun, all must come to an end eventually."

I hear the wistfulness in his voice, as though the passing seasons are a pain he has no choice but to endure. I feel as though even when he got used to it, it still surprises him when suddenly, he realizes that the trees have grown taller than they were fifty years ago. That suddenly, yet another generation has gone by.

I lean back.

I'll be just a blink to him. The memory of me would be too fleeting. He'll probably forget me in a hundred years, and I'll just be another one of the mortals he knew that lived and died. Why does this make me feel heavy?

"The wearing is slow in Lórien. The power of Galadriel is on it. In Calas Galadhon, where the Lady weilds the Elven ring." Frodo says, making me snap out of my thoughts.

Did he just say ring? Galadriel has a Ring of Power?

"That should not have been said, even in this Company! Speak no more of it." Aragorn exclaims. "The Enemy has eyes and ears in all places. We have lingered in Calas Galadhon, where change happens slowly, much like it does for the elves. But outside, the new moon waxed and waned. Winter is almost over. Tonight, we must rest. We have already tarried too long."

Rest? After the ambush we just went through? Ugh. I feel like we've painted ourselves with big, red targets just begging for orc archers to take a shot at us. I fidget the whole time, but I do manage to sleep for what feels like two seconds. I'm informed that I was actually asleep for five hours and what a blessing that is. I didn't think we'd have lasted two hours without someone from the eastern shore following us. But when I get up, I realize that we're surrounded by fog.
"At least we have some protection from those cursed orcs." Sam says as he sees the 'I'm so done with this river' look on my face.

"The fog would have to lift if we are to find our way past Sarn Gebir and to Emyn Muil." Aragorn says. Everyone is awake now that the sun has crept back up to the sky.

"If the Emyn Muil lie before us, then we can abandon these boats and make our way to the Entwash and towards my city." Ah, ever so insistent Boromir.

"I would not abandon these boats until I must. The River is a sure path, while the Entwash is deadly to those on foot." Aragorn is equally stubborn.

Watching these two argue has become unbearable. They've never looked eye to eye, but they fight well together. If they could just stop arguing, maybe a clear path would reveal itself to us. But Aragorn still refuses to go to Minas Tirith, and Boromir is adamant about his duty to his city.

"And say we pass through the Argonath, what then? Do we leap off the Falls and into the marshes?" Boromir's words are injected with sarcasm.

"We will bear our boats until the Rauros-foot and take to the water again." Carry the boats?! I side-eye Gimli, who looks just as shocked as I am that we'd have to carry boats. Great. As if we needed to draw more attention to ourselves. Aragorn doesn't seem to think that nine guys and a girl carrying a boat through the woods would look suspicious.

He's still arguing with Boromir, "Have you forgotten Amon Hen? It was made in the days of the great kings. I have a mind to go there, perhaps we would find a sign to help us to our course when we are there."

Boromir sighs, and in desperation, he turns to Frodo, who pointedly avoids his gaze. Boromir rolls his eyes and turns to me next but I shrug. I am not getting in between an argument involving the path we should take when in the first place, I know nothing about Middle-earth's geography. I think Boromir believes I can control Aragorn. If only he knew, it's actually the other way around.

Eventually, he gives in. "It is not in the nature of the Men of Minas Tirith to abandon their friends, and you would need my strength. I will go with you to Amon Hen, but no further. I would go back to my city, alone if my help has not earned the reward of any companionship."

And with that guilt-tripping statement done with, we move again. Legolas and Aragorn go off to find a path we could take that would allow us to carry our boats and baggages to another part of the River, where the waters are calmer. I almost have a heart attack when Aragorn says goodbye by saying, "Wait a day for us. If we have not returned by then, you will know that we have died, and you will have to find another leader to guide you to your path."

So, of course, while they're gone, all I do is stare at the spot where I last saw them heading, and wring my hands. Thankfully, they come back within three hours. The moment he's within arm's reach, I smack his arm and say, "Don't scare me like that."

He explains what we have to do and where we have to go. "We would have to leave the River now. Our hardest task will be to bring our boat and baggage to the old portage-way. The track is serviceable, but the portage-way lies far back from the water-side here, and runs under the lee of a rock-wall, a furlong or more from the shore."

"That would not be so easy, even if we were all Men." Boromir says, to which I narrow my eyes.

"We'll try, though, such as we are." I say.
"Aye, we will. The legs of Men will lag on a rough road while a dwarf goes on, even with a burden twice his own weight, Master Boromir." Gimli says.

So we set along to carrying the baggage while Aragorn and Boromir pulled the boats out of the river. I help bring out our packs and set it by a level space. We had to go back twice from the portage-way to the River again to get the boats and all the packs, which involved a lot of slipping on moss and a bit of rock, but we find the calmer water and by the end of all of it, even my eyeballs are sweating.

At least we had a good work-out. Unfortunately, it took the entire afternoon for us to get here, and everyone agrees: We're too tired, especially for a night journey. And so we stop there for the rest of the day and night, with the promise that by morning, we will sail for the Argonath.

Chapter End Notes

Can you believe there's only one more chapter left until this part is over?
The Battle of Amon Hen

Chapter Summary

The Fellowship is at a dead end. They must agree on their next path, but an ambush delays them and tears them apart.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

We journey on ahead, the fog thinning the further we went ahead, until the water grew faster and the boats were taken along, unable to turn back. Ahead, I can see two tall pillars in the distance on either side of the narrow passage, carved from the mountain stone. The closer we get, the more I realize they're actually carved in the shape of Men. Of Kings, it looks like, with their left hands raised, palm outward, standing proud and majestic over us.

I don't like this.

"That's bad juju right there." I whisper, because if ever we were looking for a sign that says 'Turn back, wrong way.' this has to be it.

"Behold the Argonath." I hear Aragorn say from the boar ahead, "Long have I desired to look upon the kings of old. My kin."

Currently, his kin are frowning at us and raising their hands as if to stop us from going ahead. This is the first time I'm ever truly nervous for something. Ugh, my paranoia is getting the better of me again. Despite the obvious warning of the gigantic statues towering above us, we pass beneath them and Aragorn leads us forward, to the right side of the river where Amon Hen can be found, until we stop at a green lawn. We start to make camp and I am only too happy to finally get out of the boat and stretch my legs. I carry as much of the baggage as I can and drop down next to Gimli, leaning on a tree as I stretch my legs before me.

"This is the lawn of Parth Gelen. We will cross the lake by nightfall." Don't we always, Aragorn? "Hide the boats and continue on foot."

On foot to where? I thought we still didn't have an exact destination.

"Oh, yes? It's just a simple matter of finding our way through Emyn Muil?" Gimli says, "An impassable labyrinth of razor-sharp rocks! And after that, it gets even better!" By now, I'm not even surprised that we'll be leaving one dangerous place to go to another. Pippin looks up in alarm, though, as Gimli continues his rant, "Festering, stinking marshlands as far as the eye can see."

"That is our road." Aragorn says, oh so calmly, as if he'd forgotten the misery we went through when we crossed the Midgewater Marshes. "I suggest you take some rest and recover your strength, Master Dwarf."

"Recover my--?!!" Gimli growls, indignantly. I snort in my laughter and he glares at me. I exchange amused smiles with Pippin.

"We should leave now." Legolas announces.
"We just got here." I point out.

"Orcs patrol the eastern shore. We must wait for the cover of nightfall." Aragorn says.

"It is not the eastern shore that worries me. A shadow and a threat has been growing in my mind. Something draws near. I can feel it." Legolas says.

"Oh, calm down. We already have one drama queen to worry about, right, Boromir?" I turn to my left where I thought I'd seen Boromir laying his shield down. My smirk vanishes when I realize he's not there.

"Where's Frodo?" Merry asks.

Oh, shit.

Commence the scrambling. Everyone is on their feet. "Sam. Where did Frodo say he was heading?"

Sam looks up at Aragorn, terrified, "He-he said he was going off for the woods. I'd assumed--" He stammers.

"Find Frodo. Boromir's been acting not like himself, lately. I'll knock some sense into him. Hopefully, he didn't do..." I stop for a second, as the thought comes into everyone's minds. I see the rest of the Company, how their faces darken at the mere thought of Boromir forcibly taking the Ring from Frodo. "...What we're all thinking."

"Are you sure that's a good idea, lassie?" Gimli says.

"Boromir is a good and honorable Man. He won't hurt Frodo and he certainly won't hurt me. Frodo, on the other hand, is being hunted by the Enemy. He's the priority here." I say and I glance at Aragorn. He shakes his head but he knows he has no way of stopping me now. And he knows I'm right. Orcs are still looking for the hobbits. We have to protect them.

"Be careful, Meril." He says, and I grin.

"Aren't I always? Meet you back here, if all goes well." I say as the rest of them disperse to find Frodo, while I head off alone to find Boromir.

Okay, so maybe I didn't think this plan through. Me, with my clumsy feet, running through woods I'm not familiar with, isn't a very good idea. Pair that with my poor sense of direction. I get lost in Rivendell, for crying out loud. But, apparently, I don't have far to go before I hear Boromir yelling.

"Frodo! Frodo, I'm sorry!"

Oh, God. What did he do? I run in the direction where I heard his voice. It's not as easy as it sounds, there are a lot of fallen branches, mossy rocks and soft dirt that I have to go through but I see Boromir, on his hands and knees as he gasps for breath on the ground. I kneel down next to him.

There's no blood and no dead Frodo so at least the worst hasn't happened, but God, he looks horrible. He looks up at me, his eyes red-rimmed and tears leaving tracks along his cheeks.

I give him a good slap in the face.

His head rocks to the side and he turns back to me in a daze, blinking.

"Pull yourself together, man!" I snap.
"Ellie?" He whispers.

"Snap out of it!" Boromir acting restless and fidgeting I can handle. Lethargic Boromir scares me. It's like all hope had suddenly drained from him. Shame casts his eyes to the ground, unable to meet my gaze.

"Hey." I say, putting my left hand on his cheek to wipe the tears from his eyes.

"Snap out of it and tell me what happened."

"I--I tried to take the Ring from him." He says, drawing back from me.

I sigh in disappointment.

"You are not surprised?"

"We'd have been blind to not see your desire for it."

"I have failed him. I have failed the Fellowship."

"You failed no one. You didn't take it. That's what matters. And you wanted it only to save your people."

"I said such horrible things. How would he ever forgive me?"

"Stop it!" I say, firmly, leaning towards him. "You are Boromir, Captain of Gondor. Are you just going to sit here feeling sorry for yourself or are you going to get up and do something to make things right?"

His grey eyes meet mine. "Would you forgive me?" He whispers.

"For wanting to defend your people? Yes. For endangering the Fellowship, probably not." I say, bluntly. "But I'm not Frodo. The only way to know if you'll be forgiven is to ask him yourself. Where did he run to?" We get on our feet and he turns around, shaking himself back to his senses.

"He put the Ring on and disappeared. I could not tell where he ran to."

"Probably ran back to camp, then." I say as I trudge back. I feel Boromir's hand yank me by my shoulders and I stop to turn to him, afraid for a split second that the Ring had completely taken him. But I see his alert eyes as he stands so still. And in the distance, we hear it at the same time.

The clash of metal against metal. My stomach drops to my feet.

"Orcs." I whisper.

"Frodo!" Boromir calls as he brings out his sword. I pull out my bow and we make a run for it. Adrenaline makes me run faster, and we run past trees and over rocks until we're faced by a few stragglers.

These orcs don't look like the orcs we encountered in Moria. They're taller, larger, almost Man-like. Their teeth are long and sharp, and their eyes are yellow. They are terrifying.

"Get the girl!" One of them roars. "Saruman wants her alive!"

"The first jackass that touches me gets an arrow to the head!" I snap as Boromir pushes me behind him. I pull an arrow from my quiver and aim as the large Orcs charge. Aiming is easy. The targets
are large and the distance is something I'm confident I can make up for.

Hitting my targets, on the other hand, prove more difficult as I make sure to aim where they'll be moving next. Some are easy to drop as they just run forward, practically begging me to shoot them, while others have enough of a mind to circle around us. I've fought in close quarters before. Compared to Moria, I have more freedom to move here. But that just means my opponents have more room to dodge my attacks, as well.

Boromir hacks down those who get too close, while I cover his back by firing arrows at those who are still at a distance. Something moves next to me and I twist to my right and release the arrow right at a charging orc's face. Too close. Too damn close.

When everything has calmed down again, my arrows have almost run out, and we have no time to salvage the ones I could still use.

"What do they want from you?" Boromir pants.

"What are you asking me for? I don't know!" I lie. The whole 'I'm from the future' talk is too long and complicated to tell him now. He shakes his head and runs ahead again.

"Hey, you! Over here!" I almost run into him as he stops in his tracks and turns to me in surprise.

"That's Merry's voice." I gasp.

"They would be slaughtered if we do not help them."

"What are we standing here for, then?!" I say and we turn to the direction of the voices. Why in the hell would they taunt the orcs like that?! Boromir, whose legs are longer than mine, is ahead of me.

We hear the growls of the Orcs, and right ahead are two tiny figures, standing frozen as a horde runs toward them. I nock an arrow and fire at the orc closest to them, staying hidden as Boromir charges forward.

Merry and Pippin snap out of their shock and they bring their swords out as well. I kneel to stay hidden and for stability as I aim. Hold, aim, release.

We're actually doing a good job of keeping the orcs back up until the point where I run out of arrows.

"Shit." I hiss. I unclasp my pack of throwing knives and get on my feet. I aim and throw a knife at an orc that charges toward Pippin. Fourteen knives left.

"Get the halflings and the girl! Kill the Man!"

One of the over-large orcs shouts. I throw my dagger, aiming for its forehead. I hit its neck instead. Dammit, I haven't practiced in a long time.

This frustrates me. But Legolas has taught me never to let anger cloud my mind when in a fight. Anger makes the fighter short-sighted. Makes the fighter reckless. I unsheath another knife and throw it to my left, at an Orc charging towards Merry. Twelve knives left.

I turn to the hill, where more orcs are pouring from. No choice but to use a sword. Close combat is inevitable.

Boromir pulls me by my cloak backwards, "Get back! Run!" He says and I herd Merry and Pippin
behind us. The two hobbits are only too happy to oblige as they run back.

"There's too many!" I shout, and Boromir brings out his horn and blows two blasts from it. I didn't expect that tiny thing to let out such a loud noise.

"Great! We needed more orcs to know where we were, anyway!" I snap as I run after Merry and Pippin while the orcs charge towards us.

We're outnumbered. We have no other choice but to stay away from their reach. It might be that the only reason we're still alive is because of their lack of ranged weapons.

The only thing I can hope for is that Frodo has managed to get away, unscathed.

As the orcs circle us, we have no choice but to scatter so we won't be herded together and get cornered. I see Boromir to my right, but orcs flood around me, soon blocking my view of him and the hobbits.

I'm positive the only reason I'm still breathing is because they need me alive. I use that to my advantage. While the orcs find a way to injure me without killing me, I aim for heads, hearts and stomachs. They're larger than me, but I slip beneath them and dodge their swords.

One orc sneaks up behind me and locks its arms around mine in an iron grip.

Man, this guy stinks! It smells like a dead rat and its breath is even worse, like stale blood. I shriek as I drop my sword and the large orc behind me pulls me away. I try to struggle and wriggle out of its grip but another one of its friends yanks at my legs, and they lift me off the ground.

I scream again, but from the corner of my eye, I see Boromir, surrounded by orcs and too distracted to notice the ones bearing me away.

I struggle against my captors as they carry me further away from the battle. Boromir blasts his horn again, momentarily distracting the orc holding my feet. One foot slips out of the orc's hand and I use that to kick him away. My feet fall back to the ground, and I dig my heels in the dirt. I kick the orc behind me in the knee, but it refuses to budge.

"Boromir!" I shriek before I feel the orc behind me put his grimy hand over my mouth. I'm probably going to regret this, but I bite down at its hand, and yes. I absolutely, truly do regret what I just did because it tastes horrible. It growls and digs its own teeth into my shoulder. My pained scream is muffled by the hand over my mouth, and my ears are ringing from the pain as I hear the orc beside me whisper, "You're a tasty little girl, aren't you? Do that again and I'll rip your skin off." Ahead, I see Boromir turn to my direction. He calls out my name as he runs his sword through the orc who held my feet.

I hear the orc behind me growl tauntingly, and there are tears in my eyes both from pain and fear. I wriggle my hand to find the knife pack still strapped to my waist. I manage to unsheath one and I bury it to the hilt in the orc's thigh. It growls angrily as its grip loosens. That's all I need to turn to it and stab it right in the heart. I spit in its face as it falls to the ground and I lean forward on a tree for support, feeling my shoulder throb in pain.

Oh, I hope these guys don't have rabies. I feel like I've just been infected with an STD. I turn back around to look for my sword but just as I turn, an arrow buries itself in Boromir's chest.

His eyes meet mine. The memory of Gandalf catching my eye back in Moria seconds before he died surfaces back up in my mind. The same fear and cold dread makes me freeze. With a great effort, Boromir heaves his sword to fend off more orcs. Behind him, Merry and Pippin stumble backwards...
in a daze, but already other orcs close in around them.

"No!" I scream, bending down to get my sword and charging towards them. I unsheath another knife from my pack and throw it at the only orc holding a bow. He dodges the knife and releases another arrow, right into Boromir's stomach.

By then, my ears are buzzing. My heart pounds in my chest as other orcs close in around me, blocking me from the one orc that has shot two arrows at my friend. I slice ferociously, not knowing what else to do except to fight for my life.

I am overwhelmed almost immediately. I feel a blow to the back of my head, and I fall to my knees. From here, I can see Boromir, unsteady on his feet but still gripping his sword, two arrows lodged in his chest. I try to call for his name, but instead a sob bursts out of me.

His eyes are dull. Every breath he takes makes him wince in pain.

"Ellie! Ellie!" Pippin screams, but I can't find him. Someone has kicked my sword away from my hand. I have never been more terrified before in my life. I've never before felt this desperate, like a cornered animal. It's like being trapped in a box that is getting smaller and smaller and there's nothing I can do to make it stop.

I feel nails dig into my scalp and someone drags me back by the hair. I scream, and I kick, and I flail, and I push away the hands that grab for me until the hand holding me by my hair yanks me to my feet. My head stings, and my ears are ringing from the pain, but it does not hurt as much as my heart, which constricts painfully in my chest.

Tears swim in my eyes, and I helplessly reach out for Boromir. I don't want him to die. Not alone. Not when I can save him. Not when the woman he loves is waiting for him back in Gondor. Not when his brother and father await his safe return to them.

He was so hopeful that he would return to them. He was so determined to protect his family and his city. And yet here I am, watching the life slowly seep out of him. There is so much blood. He's so pale.

The last thing I remember is Boromir's valiant battle cry as he swings the sword towards my attackers. He holds his hand out for me. His fingers almost touch mine until he staggers backward, thrown by the force of the third arrow embedded in his chest. His name barely leaves my lips before I feel another blow to the back of my head.

Then, everything goes black.

Chapter End Notes

Well, that's it for this part of Ellie's story. There will be a delay between this and the second part, but rest assured, the second part will come (I'm already on Chapter 26 on it, which is waiting in my drafts).

If anyone asks why I did not choose to save Boromir, it felt too much of a Mary Sue thing to do--and I've already struck out twice on the Mary Sue clichés and barely pulled those off(If I did, at all). There really was nothing else Ellie could have done to save Boromir, realistically. His part in the story is done, and he was brave until the very end,
defending his friends. Boromir was not an evil man, though he was tempted by it, and his sacrifice for his friends shows that while he may have been tempted, he never truly fell for the Ring's power.

I really enjoyed writing this fic and I'm thankful for the good feedback I've received. It's encouraging and it gives me more reason to write! Especially to Aryanna, for her enthusiasm and love for Ellie and Legolas. Love you, bb!

For those wondering about the delay, I promised at the start of this fic that I will write a third-person, past tense fic with a more original plot of the Girl Falls In Middle-earth trope, and that is what I will be posting next.

The main character of my next fic, Lost Lives, is Olivia, and her story focuses more on culture clashes, the language barrier, and the story behind the scenes. She will not be joining the Fellowship, so her story will be focused on how the War of the Ring affected the common people. Please give her story a look if you liked Ellie's!

I will post the second part of Ellie's story, titled To the Black Gate, after I finish Lost Lives.

Until then! And I hope to see you guys over at Liv's story as well!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!